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Obolo (Andoni) Women in Overseas Trade and Traditional Politics, 1400-1800 (*Pp. 148-161*)

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Abstract

This write-up focuses on the activities of Obolo (Andoni) women that contributed to the political and economic growth of Nigeria in the pre-colonial times. They were found in the traditional politics and external economy of slave and palm oil trades with the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English. They were also the bulwark of territorial defence and the organization of War Canoe Houses. The paper also attempts to analyze the implications of the Trans-Atlantic Trade and pre-colonial politics in Obolo (Andoni) and the international communities that traded with them.

Keywords: Defence, economy, Obolo (Andoni), overseas, palm-oil, politics, slave, trade, women

Introduction

In the pre-colonial times, women were a decisive factor in the development of their various ethnic groups or kingdoms that later constitute Nigeria. Being part of the traditional governments, they lost their independence to colonial rule from 1900 when Britain colonized their areas and named it 'Nigeria.'

According to Dike (1956), there were trade and politics in these kingdoms in the period of our study.

Prior to the international commerce or Trans-Atlantic Trade, the area now Nigeria which Obolo (Andoni) is a part had kingdoms with centralized politics and economic organizations to develop themselves and their immediate environments. It was dynamic and affects all facets of life of both sexes. Such circumstances led Queens Karibasa (Kambasa) to rule the Bonny Kingdom in the sixteenth century and Ikpakiaba to found the Bille Kingdom (Ejituwu and Gabriel, 2002: 218-224). Similarly was the role of a wealthy Kalabari woman, Orupumbu Tariah, in the nineteenth century palm oil trade (Orugbani, 1988). Others include two Andoni women married to the Ibani kings, Queens Okuru (Agala) of Bonny and Osunju Jaja of Opobo Kingdoms, whose diplomacies advanced these monarchies into modern times. Their giant strides proved that women add politics and economy to home management and constitute the fundamental process for societal growth (Ejituwu and Gabriel 2002: 295, 297).

Going by the Obolo (Andoni) example, the latter are found in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Their names, Obolo and Andoni, are used interchangeably to identify the group. But the second name, Andoni, is of Ijo origin (Owonaro, 1949). They speak Obolo language that was classified by Williamson (1988: 68-71) as a member of the Lower Cross sub-branch of the Delta Cross of the New Benue-Congo languages spoken in the Niger Delta. With their rivers running eastward from the Atlantic and the Niger Delta, oral account of Iwowari stated that the early Europeans traded with them on the Rio Real, Asaramatoro and Andoni Rivers that enabled the area to be fringed by the mangrove forest. How their women went about the international commerce and traditional politics in the pre-colonial times could be viewed in the following pages.

Women in Obolo Pre-colonial Politics and Territorial Defence

Ancient Obolo (Andoni) society was matrilineal unlike the patrilineal system in the present. Chief Igbifa in an oral account noted that women were considered from the earliest times as stakeholders in the administration of Obolo. For this reason, political power was not concentrated in only the male level of authority. Women were involved and their role was never undermined. In many instances, Andoni male rulers were consulting their wives, mothers, daughters and sisters on sensitive issues which they could

not resolve at the community meetings. The women's input communicated through their husbands, brothers and fathers were translated into the final decisions which affect everybody in Obolo (Andoni) society. Such decisive intervention of women in pre-colonial politics demonstrates their importance in the development of Obolo (Andoni) in particular and Nigeria in general (Sara 2006).

Although men were installed chiefs and monarchs more than women, there were exceptional cases of women in high positions in the politics of Obolo. Eneyo (1991: 53-54) recorded the case of an Unyeada woman, Princess Ariaunwa Okpok-Ogbolikan, who became the Queen of Unyeada on the death of her father, King Ikana Okpok in the 1700s. Prior to this development, Princess Ariaunwa had married Prince Ogbolikan of Agwut-Obolo Town (Alabie) and begat Otuo. As soon as Prince Otuo came of age, he succeeded his mother as the crowned king of Unyeada before 1792. Ejituwu (1979:26) remembered how he later became the monarch of the entire Obolo (Andoni), *Okan-Obolo*, ruling two hundred towns and villages in the early nineteenth century.

Andoni women were also noted in the territorial defence of their communities, which demonstrated their active participation in the pre-colonial politics of their areas. One of them from Unyeada was Asakala whose bravery saved Obolo (Andoni) in a war between Bonny and Unyeada in the first half of the 1800s. According to Ejituwu (1991: 113-114), Asakala, an elderly pipe-smoking woman, was at the water front at night when the Ibani came for war. Without alerting anybody, she ignited the cannons with the fire from her pipe. This sent the enemy packing. In the process, she saved Unyeada from the danger of a surprise attack.

Earlier than the above, in 1600, a similar incident occurred at Old Asarama settlement in a war between them and the Ibani of Bonny (Alagoa and Fombo 1972:74). The conflict arose over the control of the Trans-Atlantic Trade. According to the oral testimony of Chief Edam of Asarama Town and other informants, in this war an octogenarian woman in Old Asarama at the Rio Real, Gwung Enenwang, saved them from the secret attack by Bonny in a similar manner to the one of Unyeada. This bravery was celebrated and immortalized with the title, Jiawaoreakon, which she was given. Thus, Jiawaoreakon implies that seven of this woman could have fought that war, salvage and forestall the enemies' invasion of Old Asarama Town. But she

did it single-handedly and successfully. She was then regarded as an equivalent of seven men and women.

Ataba Town experienced a similar feat in their first war with Okrika Kingdom. According to the oral sources of Ogbidor and Ugong, the Okrika invasion of Ataba was forestalled by an aged pipe-smoking woman called Orior. While at the water front, she saw some strange floating calabashes and quickly suspected their movement on the sea to be Okrika invaders. Conscious of the prevalent war, she ignited the cannon which exploded in chains and killed several of the enemies. Her bravery salvaged Ataba from this sudden attack by the Wakrike.

This background information of the Obolo pre-colonial political history brought three things into focus. One is the fact that women played significant roles in the political administration of their various areas. From here they contributed to the development of the entire Obolo (Andoni) and the Nigeria before 1900. Lastly, their political will-power defended the territorial integrity of Obolo through warfare. Owing to the changing roles of women, the same will-power was experienced in the internal long distance trade and the Trans-Atlantic Trade that contributed to their recognition in the political administration of Obolo because of the material wealth and experience they acquired.

Andoni Women in International Commerce

Kalabari tradition, recorded in Erekosima (1986:10) and Ejituwu (1991:71), mentioned the Obolo (Andoni) Kingdom as the pioneer Niger Delta group in the Trans-Atlantic Trade. Andoni oral tradition and documentary evidence in Eneyo (1991:36-41) gave the specifics of three Andoni communities namely, Old Asarama at the Rio Real, Old Ilotombi and Unyengala at the Andoni River (San Domingo) estuary that had the first contact with the Portuguese. They were followed by Elem Kalabari, Bonny, Old Unyeadaa areas in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

The Old Asarama and Ilotombi women who were in the long distance trade started the external trade with the Portuguese in the fifteenth century. The involvement of these Obolo (Andoni) women did not start with human cargo. When the early Portuguese came, the first articles of trade demanded and supplied were spices (*ada-oron*) of different kinds, local crafts like brooms,

baskets and other things. Not long afterwards they demanded for human cargo with which the trade blossomed (Utong 2000: 73-80).

According to Chief Gwende and Madam Mark in oral accounts, the initial slaves supplied by these women to the Portuguese were acquired for domestic and economic purposes. The male slaves were for their traditional economy of fishing, internal local trading and canoe pulling to and from the long distance trade. The female slaves were given as wives to the male slaves for slave breeding and the procreation of children to venerate the names of their owners. They became members of the immediate families and villages of their owners in particular and Obolo (Andoni) Kingdom in general by acculturation.

With the men as the trading and war brigades, the Obolo were unsurpassed both in internal trade in the Niger Delta that was their economy before the Trans-Atlantic Trade and in the security of their territory (Chief Ngbrigbor and Madam Mark, 2005). This active way of creating War Canoe Houses and increasing family population in the case of barrenness, death of children and single child birth, became a custom in the pre-colonial Andoni.

But as soon as the Portuguese started to demand human cargo in the fifteenth century, Obolo women were among the pioneer participants in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. They had slaves for the trade more than their male colleagues because they were already in acquisition of domestic slaves, as well as breeding slaves, before the external trade. In fact, slave breeding, among other things, sustained the Portuguese slave trading ventures in Obolo (Andoni) for over two centuries. Their economic age, enough male and female amongst them, and ability to procreate and work in the plantations attracted Europeans most. As such, the products of slave breeding were the most needed article of the early Trans-Atlantic Trade (Chief Ngbrigbor, 2005).

Ilotombi tradition given by Evangelist Utong stated that amongst the first slaves supplied by the wife of the King of Ilotombi, Her Royal Majesty Queen Urangijok Ado-Ene Mbi, to the Portuguese in the fifteenth century were persons prone to vices like stubbornness, robbery, adultery and murder. Even when the entire Andoni went into the trade, women's trading canoes plied to and from Ibibio and Akwette markets to buy slaves. They were selling them to the Portuguese and later the Dutch and the English. The good health of their well-fed slaves made them to be considered at their ports of

Old Asarama at the Rio Real, Unyengala, Old Ilotombi (Opuwari) and Caramanteen Towns on the Andoni River before those of their male colleagues (Mr. Benjamin Uraka and Mrs. Bibi James, 2005).

These commercial ventures prompted James Barbot and Grazilhier from England to visit Ilotombi between 1699 and 1704 (Barbot 1732). They also visited other places in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria that were in the Trans-Atlantic Trade. Earlier before them and at the beginning of the trade in the fifteenth century, one of the early Portuguese merchants in Andoni was Domingo. The Andoni River of the Old Ilotombi and Unyengala Towns became known to the Portuguese as San Domingo, the Dutch as River Loitomba and the English as River Andoni because of the Obolo (Andoni) prominence in the trade. It was in the 1600s and 1700s that the Dutch and the English entered the trade (Dapper in Hodgkin 1975: 174-176) with the Obolo (Andoni).

Nonetheless, evidence of the prosperity of the Europeans in the Atlantic Slave Trade abound. At first they were in Andoni with small vessels. But due to the prosperity they enjoyed from the trade, towards the end of the 1700s they developed large ships that could not penetrate the shallow entrance of the Andoni River. This inability sent them away to the Bonny River whose estuary was deep enough for it. Hence, the Ilotombi lost their principal roles, as primal traders in the Trans-Atlantic Trade and went into alliance with the Bonny. The Unyengala and Old Asarama, too, lost their prominence to Bonny. The Old Asarama lost because of fracas with the Ibani over the control of the Trans-Atlantic Trade. As a result, they moved eastward through the Asarama River (Asaramatoro) and founded the present group of Asarama towns and villages, off the centre of the trade (Charles de Cardi, 1899:538-540).

According to Jeffreys (1930:92), it was within the waning period of Old Asarama, Unyengala and Old Ilotombi that Old Unyeada entered the external trade. This became possible because of their location on the trade route that links other routes to the hinterland markets. Then, Old Unyeada was a confluence town between the tributaries of the Rio Real, Asarama River (Asaramatoro) and River Andoni.

Princess Ariaunwa led Old Unyeada in the external trade in human cargo with the Dutch and the English in the 1700s. She was also among the earliest Niger Delta monarchs that started the transformation of the trade from slave

to palm oil which her son and successor, King Otuo Ogboloikan, inherited. In the views of Fombo (1963:132), the Atlantic Trade made Old Unyeada “the most prosperous town” in Obolo (Andoni) then. The evidence of the trade, documented by Alagoa (1978), is “the factory made imported smoking pipes found on the site of the settlement.”

All together, the external trade in slaves was immense in Obolo (Andoni) Kingdom from the second half of the fifteenth century to the first half of the eighteenth century (Ejituwu 1991:77). The Trans-Atlantic Trade in palm produce was also experienced, though not in the same degree of seriousness seen in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The medium of exchange within the different periods of these trading ventures in slaves and palm oil were European goods, iron bars and the manila currency (Utong 2000:73, Sara 2006).

In the era of the international in palm oil, women also participated. According to Mrs. Ikwutukwa, Mrs. Ngere and Evangelist Utong in oral accounts, Ilotombi, Ekede and Ngo towns are examples of Obolo women participation in the palm oil trade. Ilotombi, for instance, had women Trans-Atlantic traders in palm oil like Madams Nwanyi Waribo and Ekechakmka Utong whose parents and grand parents were foremost in the international trade in human cargo. Their acculturated domestic slaves established oil palm plantations for them, took charge of the harvesting of the palm fruits, oil milling, kernel production and supply to the European supercargoes. Other Obolo women who were not living along these routes and had no oil palm plantations buy palm produce from them. They increased their supplies by going to Akwette, Annang, Ibibio and Ogoni markets for more oil (Sara 2006). Generally, it attracted much impact.

Impacts in the Obolo (Andoni) Kingdom and the International Communities

There are positive and negative consequences of women participation in the pre-colonial politics and international commerce. These impacts fell on both the Obolo (Andoni) and the international communities, especially the Portuguese that traded with them for about two centuries and half.

To start with is the political leadership of Princess Ariaunwa Okpok-Ogbolikan in Old Unyeada group of settlements which left a lasting impression on this part of Andoni. At the time under review, Obolo (Andoni) Kingdom was matrilineal. By the close of the nineteenth century when they became patrilineal the dynasty was in the hands of the maternal grand

children of King Ikana Okpok, the father of Princess Ariaunwa. Having Princess Ariaunwa on the throne in the eighteenth century, the monarchy simply shifted to her son, Otuo, whose father is from Agwut-Obolo Town, not Unyeada. And since then, the generations of Otuo have been ruling Unyeada till the twenty first century when this research was conducted. Eyewitness accounts of the authors authenticate the negative impact of it. It is the cause of the present rift over the monarchy of Unyeada that the ruler, Otuo, who are matrilineal, suppose not to have been ruling at the detriment of the patrilineal descents of King Ikana Okpok.

However, Eneyo (1991:54-55) recorded the demise of Old Unyeada Town in about 1826 owing to war with Bonny Kingdom because of the Trans-Atlantic Trade. Although the Unyeada settlements under King Otuo Ogboloikan later engaged the Bonny in another war in 1846 and defeated them, he decisively founded the present Unyeada Town within this period. This innovation is a direct positive impact of the pre-colonial political leadership of his mother, Princess Ariaunwa.

Another positive implication from women participation in traditional politics when Obolo political history witnessed a turning point from 1600 is the advent of chieftaincy stools to venerate the heroines that proved their mettle in territorial defence. Oral accounts of Mrs. Ngere, Chief Ekpirikpo and Eneunye emphasized that it brought about the creation of the chieftaincy stools of Asakala of Unyeada, Gwung Enenwang (Jiawaoreakon) of Asarama Town, and Orior of Ataba Town. The spectacular and exceptional exhibition of courage, bravery and astute military prowess of these women in defence of their communities is ever remembered through this political recognition that immortalized their good works. For this reason, these chieftaincy stools exist in Obolo (Andoni) till date and they are occupied by the male members of their families (Owuirekene 2005).

Oral tradition given by Eneunye and Ekewek stated that thereafter Asakala was permitted to eat the head of animals and big fish killed in Unyeada. This brought further positive implications. Since she was a first daughter of her parents, all first daughters in Obolo (Andoni) from henceforth were accorded this privilege. Before then they were not entitled to it.

Obolo women also brought the concept of war canoe houses to Andoni during and after the slave trade. The first war canoe house created in Ataba to immortalize a woman was the 'Horsfall War-Canoe House' established by

Madam Ibanran Esikpa of Egwe Aja. According to an oral historian, Chief Igbifa, it was established out of the parent compound, Egwe Aja. It was first of all under the chieftaincy stool of Ogbologugo in the early 1800s. The proprietress, Madam Ibanran Esikpa, was a first class cook and had domestic slaves that helped her in this regard. Her good services earned her the nickname, 'Nwanyi Osifolor', meaning 'a woman who cooks food.'

This name, Osifolor, was further corrupted to Horsfall in the colonial and post-colonial times. For this reason, her war canoe house is called 'Horsfall War-Canoe House', populated by her relations and domestic slaves that had formed her trading brigades in the internal and external trade. Oral evidence of Chief Ngrigorbor revealed that Chief Daniel Bara Horsfall was the pioneer chief of this War Canoe House, recognized by the Andoni *Orou*. Thus, Horsfall War Canoe House is still in existence and is contributing positively to the development of Ataba.

The above events reminded us of the increase in the population of Obolo through the acquisition of domestic slaves. Although these slaves were initially for internal economy of the people and later for the external trade, they increased the population of the existing houses. New houses were also created to accommodate many of them and their offspring. As a result, the population of Obolo (Andoni) became dense. According to an Okrika ritual testimony rendered by Chief Opuogulaya in Ejituwu (1991:69),

Idoni kobiri aka abila some - Andoni population was such that if put together would make a large nation.

Because of how thickly populated Andoni was before, during and after the Atlantic Trade, she became the homeland of many ethnicities in and outside the Niger Delta.

Nevertheless, there was positive impact in Obolo and the international communities that were in the Trans-Atlantic Trade with the Obolo. Maritime Museum documentary in Liverpool shows that the international communities' emulated slave breeding, which arose from the Andoni women who were slave breeders, and from there prospered enormously. The Portuguese slavers that first came across this innovation in the fifteenth century introduced specie of dwarf banana for feeding these newborn babies in Andoni. The Ogoni calls the dwarf bananas *ebue-bono*, meaning "Andoni

banana” (Kpone-Tonwe (1987). Other foodstuffs brought by the early Portuguese into Andoni include orange, rice and manioc, which the Andoni and the Portuguese call *ulaja* and *laranja*; *orosi* and *araz*; *mbitaka* and *mandioca*, respectively (Faraclas, 1985). These crops increased the dieting of the Niger Delta peoples.

One particular good impact in Portugal abounds till recent times. Having spent over two centuries trading with the Andoni, the latter’s culture became a proven badge on the former. Till date Andoni (Andony) became a personal name of the Portuguese. Enemugwem (2000:149) documented two Portuguese footballers, Andony Itsebech and Andony Zubezzereta, in the World Cup marches of 1998. This mnemonic device proves that both the Obolo (Andoni) and the Portuguese once associated with each other.

Not only that. Oral and documentary evidence supported the fact that most of the healthy slaves sold from Obolo (Andoni) contributed to the building of the West Indies for the European imperialists. According to Patterson (1975:133),

until about 1775, approximately 65 per cent of all the slaves exported from the region of the Niger and the Cross deltas were Ibos; about 20 per cent were Ibibios; about 10 per cent were Chambers; and the rest came from among the other tribal groups of the area, particularly the Andoni.

This evidence demonstrated that slaves from Andoni were among the early ancestors of the West Indies. Patterson (1975:143) related this positive impact to the Jamaicans. The Andoni participation in the Atlantic Trade, first with the Portuguese and later with the Dutch and the English also brought the Niger Delta and its hinterland to the knowledge of Europeans and contributed to the birth of Nigeria.

The medium of exchange of these slaves such as cannon guns, iron bars and later the manila currency, brought by the Portuguese in 1500 are among the most ancient relics in Obolo (Andoni) today (Ejituwu (1991: 63). Almost all the major settlements at the Andoni central cluster, including Old Ilotombi (Opuwari), Asarama, Unyengala and Old Unyeada that were in the Atlantic Trade have it.

The negative impacts from it are many. The cannon guns acquired from the Trans-Atlantic Trade were used for intra and inter-community conflicts. Secondly, the Atlantic Slave Trade contributed to the underdevelopment of Obolo (Andoni) in particular and the Niger Delta in general but developed Europe and the Americas. It also gave demographic cost and became the greatest migration of the Obolo to foreign lands. Thirdly, the less usefulness of the manila and iron bar currencies kept the Andoni and the Niger Delta economically poor without good socio-economic foundations for posterity. Economic growth which involves growth in all sectors of the economy eluded them because of their external trading activities from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Owing to this fact, they could not develop their local resources.

In spite of the above, a positive impact of the international trade in palm oil exists. After the era of the external trade, palm oil production became an added economy to the Obolo (Andoni) and other Niger Delta peoples. The oil palm plantations established by the women but worked by their domestic slaves were the source of this new wealth. From this feminist example, men went into establishing oil palm plantations and acquired more domestic slaves from neighboring ethnicities to work it. Today, it is one of the dependable economies that supplemented fishing and trading in Obolo (Sara 2006).

Conclusion

The paper examines the role of Nigerian women in the international trade and pre-colonial politics, using the Obolo (Andoni) as an example. In their contributions towards pre-colonial politics, Princess Ariaunwa Okpok-Ogboloikan became a monarch in Unyeada group of villages of Obolo (Andoni). They and their male colleagues played significant roles in the Trans-Atlantic Trade that prompted Britain to colonize Nigeria. Women were also noted in territorial defence. Asakala of Unyeada, Gwung Enenwang (Jiawaoreakon) of Asarama Town, Orior of Ataba town were heroines in this regard.

There are positive and negative impacts of their activities. Since the period of Princess Ariaunwa in 1700, Unyeada settlements in Andoni are being ruled by her generations. Chieftaincy stools, too, were created in Obolo to venerate the women that proved their mettle in territorial defence. On the Trans-Atlantic Trade, more houses were created to accommodate the domestic

slaves that increased the population of Obolo (Andoni). Not the least was the new food crops introduced by the early Portuguese. Because of the trading relations between them and the Andoni for over two centuries, Portugal embedded 'Andony' (Andoni) in the personal names of her citizens. The medium of exchange in the Trans-Atlantic Trade which was cannon guns, iron bars and the manila currencies could not be used to lay good socio-economic foundations for the people. With these examples, the pre-colonial Nigerian women of Obolo (Andoni) origin participated in trade and politics in their different communities.

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