

Aspects of Obolo (Andoni)-Ibibio Relations in The Lower Imo River, 1800-2000

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Abstract

It is an historical fact that both Obolo and Ibibio are two distinct ethnic groups with little or no trace of history of ancestral origin but the Obolo (Andoni) and Ibibio established contacts and relationship since the remote past through inter-ethnic marriages, cultural assimilation and economic activities. Besides, the Lower Imo River, and the Andoni River were other sources of Obolo and Ibibio contacts and relationship. This study explored the various aspects that strengthen their relationship. Such aspects were the era of domestic and trans-Atlantic slave trade, legitimate trade and post-legitimate trade as well as colonial rule and post-colonial era. The forces of the trans-Atlantic trade pulled the Obolo and Ibibio together especially, as the Ibibio area became one of the major centers where slaves and palm oil were purchased by trade merchants including the Obolo people. On the other hand, the Ibibio also acquired marine resources from Obolo and sold their farm goods to them. Their relationship spanned the three phases of Nigeria history. This study relied on primary and secondary sources to interpret this historical past. The finding of this work is that, the foundation of their relationship was laid by the forces of social and economic developments. The paper therefore, concluded that their relations was instrumental to the growth of international commerce in the Lower Imo River.

Keywords: *Aspects, Obolo, Ibibio, Relations, Lower Imo River.*

Introduction

The Obolo (Andoni) people on their part occupy a territory stretching from the Andoni River to the Qua Iboe River. To the North, Obolo is bordered by the Okrika and Ogoni; Ibibio to the Northeast; Bonny and Kalabari to the West; Nembe to the extreme West; Ibeno to the East and in the South by the

Atlantic Ocean. Obolo is broken into island by network of salt water, creeks and estuaries, the most important of the latter being those of the Imo and Andoni Rivers. The Imo River divided Obolo into two; Western Obolo and Eastern Obolo.¹The Ibibio speaking people of Akwa Ibom State occupy the territory in the extreme Southeastern part of Nigeria. It is bordered in the North by the Igbo people of Abia State; Ogoni and other ethnic groups in Rivers State; while in the East they are bordered by the people of Cross River State and in the Bight of Bonny (formerly the Bight of Biafra) to the South.²

Historically, Ibibio is the major or largest ethnic group in the present day Akwa Ibom State. There is no acceptable history of origin, migration and settlement of the Ibibio. Many scholars have traced their history of origin, migration and settlement to several disputed sources. E. A. Udoh, traced the origin of the Ibibio to the Central Benue Valley. From there the Ibibio people migrated to settle at a place named Ibom in Arochukwu. In Noah's account as cited by Okon Edet Uya, indicates that the Ibibio are the Afaha people whose original homeland was at Usak Edet in the Camerouns. According to him, the Ibibio seem to have migrated from Camerouns to the present location in two major directions. One group reached Nigeria perhaps by overland route and settled at Ibom probably about 800 BC. He stated that, what seems quite clear is that Ibom was the major dispersal centre of the Ibibio. Koko Ete Ina regarded both the Cameroon and Igbo origins of the Ibibio people by different scholars as mere speculations as the bases for the assumption are not all clear. He asserts that, what is popular among the Ibibio today is their strong belief in a common ancestor, Ibom, who is believed to have originated from Abasi Ibom (the Almighty God) and landed at Ikot Oku Ikono in Uyo Local Government Area where he established his own home. Their settlement at Ikono occurred after several centuries of dispersal and migration. At Ikono, they grew in population and further spread to occupy large expanse of land which made them the dominant ethnic group in Akwa Ibom State.³

The Ibibio occupied both upland and coastal areas which greatly determined their occupation and relationship with other ethnic groups. Thus, the upland dwellers engaged in farming as their traditional occupation while the coastal dwellers combined farming and fishing to eke out a living. Another dependable source of their occupation was trading which became an avenue of establishing inter-ethnic relationship between the Obolo and Ibibio. Trading and other economic activities comprised trade by barter, long distance trade, slave trade and legitimate trade, fishing, craft and transportation. Being the inhabitants of the Qua Iboe River and the Lower Imo River, they have established relationship with the core coastal

ethnic dwellers such as the Obolo, Ibani (Bonny and Opobo), Okrika, Ogoni and others.

On the other hand, the Obolo who inhabits the Eastern Niger Delta of Nigeria are predominantly fishermen and women. They did little subsistence farming and so depended on their hinterland neighbours (Ogoni and Ibibio) for their supply of foodstuffs since man is not self-sufficient. So, based on the concept of interdependence, the Obolo people through the Lower Imo River had contact with the coastal and hinterland Ibibio, especially Egwenga (now known as Ikot Abasi)

With the knowledge of the Ibibio environment, some men from Western Obolo migrated to establish independent communities close to the coastal Ibibio territory. Obolo documented evidence records that Okurube from the Enwe lineage of Unyengala, Ikowaile of the Efuya lineage of Unyengala and Nte Ogwuile of the Ede lineage of Egwede and Agana were the progenitors of Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State. These leaders established the new settlement of Okoroete in the Creeks between the Imo and Qua Iboe estuaries. Their migration was necessitated by the highhandedness of the ancient Obolo leader, Nnah Biget. They escaped from his punitive attacks.⁴ This migration laid the foundation of a segment of the Obolo extraction in the present day Akwa Ibom State commonly called Eastern Obolo. Population growth and expansion culminated in the founding of several other towns, villages and fishing settlements which comprises the Eastern Obolo now a Local Government Area. They occupied the coastal area where they embarked on their creek, river and high sea fishing. Thus, Eastern Obolo becomes the major and dependable source of fish supply in Ibibio area. It is the fish basket in Akwa Ibom State and source of other marine resources. Their relationship was strengthened as both ethnic groups consummated marriages, Obolo married their wives from the Ibibio communities and also acquired domestic slaves.

Origin of Obolo-Ibibio Relations

The relationship between the Obolo and Ibibio ethnic groups predates the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the legitimate trade. Obolo and Ibibio relationship is traced to the remote ancient past when the Obolo men and women embarked on exogamous marriage for social and economic reasons. The Obolo who practiced endogamous marriage were faced with the social and economic challenges. Their wives lived with their parents and husbands became guests to their in-law. For this reason, they began to consummate marriages with the non-indigenes, especially the Ibibio, Efik, Annang, Oron and Igbo. These places became attracted to the Obolo where

they married wives for themselves, adult sons, brothers, wards, male servants and the apprentice in their master's fishing company.

As the Ibibio women married into Obolo territory, they distinguished themselves as reliable and industrious wives, mothers, home builders and improved the economic base of their husbands. Interestingly, more Obolo people were attracted to marry more wives from the Ibibio area. It is worthy to point out that, in the traditional African society, the large population of the family determine the wealth, fame and growth of the family. So, to meet up the socio-economic challenges and demands of the ancient time, exogamous marriage was one of the solutions. Through the inter-ethnic marriage Obolo and Ibibio relations was initiated and it continues through several centuries till date.

Another source of the origin of Obolo and Ibibio relations was the domestic slave trade. The Obolo slave traders bought both males and females from the Ibibio area such as Ette, Uruawak, Ukam for several reasons. The slaves will help increase the population of both families and communities at large. Others were used for domestic works and to create wealth for their masters. The purchased slaves were integrated into the Obolo political and socio-economic environment and were educated on the various types of Obolo fishing economy. Notably, some of the domestic Ibibio slaves became the source of contact or middlemen to their Obolo masters and other prospective slave buyers. This further built a strong bond of relationship between the two ethnic groups. The relationship was further consolidated by the demanding economic forces of the plantation of the New World and West Indies. The Obolo who first traded in slaves with the Portuguese in the 15th Century acquired a good number of slaves from the Ibibio area and beyond for sale to the Portuguese. As evidence of inter-group trading relationship and contribution to development of world economy, E. A. Udo in his account indicates that "Moko" were Ibibio who were sold into slavery in the West Indies. It is said that they were bought around Andoni from where they were shipped to the West Indies.⁵ Similarly, during the legitimate trade in the 19th Century, Obolo palm oil traders depended on the Ibibio as another area where palm oil and other produce were acquired and sold to the European Merchants. Noteworthy, is the fact that Ibibio area is the palm tree belt in South-South Nigeria.⁶

Market centers provide another avenue for establishing contact, interaction and relationship. This was the case of Obolo and Ibibio. Their relationship was established based on the markets they traded in the Ibibio area since the Obolo had no such markets. It could be concluded that Obolo and Ibibio relationship may have begun during the period of trade by barter

when the Obolo brought their marine resources to exchange with the Ibibio farm produce needed by the Obolo. Some of the Ibibio markets were Egwenga (Ikot Abasi), Ette, Uruawak, Ukam.⁷

By the 18th Century, another Vista of relationship beyond marriage, market and trading, purchase of slaves, was initiated as some Obolo men and women migrated from the Obolo cluster settlement; Egwede, Unyengala and Agana to settle near the Ibibio. Obolo source traced the founding of Okoroete to the highhandedness of Nnah Biget in Obolo, the opposition of some wealthy Obolo traders which resulted in civil war. Consequently, several of the wealthy traders who opposed him in the capital complex were forced to flee with their relatives and dependents. Among these were Okurube a renowned trader in hides and ivory, who hailed from the Enwe lineage of Unyengala and Nte Ogwuile of the Edeh lineage of Egwede and Agana. Joining forces, the three dissident leaders established the new settlement of Okoroete in the Creeks between the Imo and Qua Iboe estuaries.⁸

Having settled in Imo and Qua Iboe estuaries, they eventually had closer contact and interaction with the Ibibio which foster inter-ethnic relations between the Obolo of Okoroete and the Ibibio. In the circumstance, population increase led to expansion of their settlements. So, more towns, villages and fishing settlements were later founded by these Obolo people. Through these settlements commonly known as Eastern Obolo in Akwa Ibom State, the Obolo were integrated into the Ibibio territory because of proximity and with Imo River as the natural boundary. Since then their relationship has been cordial and at other times hostile. Earlier, Obolo documented account recorded that Anyamboko in Obolo (Andoni) was founded by Akparaka, an Ibibio man from Anya; and its inhabitants served the Obolo as national undertakers, burying their dead in cemetery near the settlement.⁹ This suggests that the Ibibio historiography exists in Obolo which enhances their relationship.

Social Relationship

The Obolo and Ibibio social relations stem from several sources. These include marriage, domestic slaves, friendship, linguistics, church and school; and culture. In ancient Obolo, endogamous marriage was the traditional form of marriage, coupled with the matrilineal system. Matrilineal system allows married women to remain in their mother's house while the husbands in most cases visited their wives in their houses. In some circumstances, some of the men did live with their wives in their Mother-in-laws's houses. This development did not guarantee the men right

over their biological children and the children have no right of inheritance in their father's lineage as such could not bear or answer their biological father's name. They rather bore their maternal identity and had full right of inheritance in their biological mother's lineage.¹⁰

This system according to N. C. Ejituwu created serious social implications for the nations.¹¹ In this regard, the Obolo men perceived the matrilineal practice as a deliberate effort to eclipse their identity and exterminate their lineages from existence. Based on this perspective, the Obolo men began to engage in exogamous marriage with the hinterland as a measure to redeem their dwindling image, sustain their lineage identity and exercise control over their wives and children. The men reaction led to the reinstatement of the patrilineal system in Obolo in the 20th Century.¹² The wives married from Ibibio and Igbo areas were regarded as their own wives even if they had indigenous wives. The indigenous wives married for them by their parents in most cases, were considered as their parents' wives. Thus, such women were not highly valued like the non-indigenous wives married from the Ibibio and Igbo communities.¹³

In another dimension, Obolo oral tradition indicates that marriage had social implication in African society. In the ancient period the status of a man was determined by the number of wives he married and how many children he had. On this basis, Obolo men who were also polygamous began to marry more wives from Ibibio and Igbo in the hinterland to enhance their socio-economic status. It is significant to state that there exists asymmetrical marriage relationship between the Ibibio and Obolo. Opuene Maxwell Amos asserts that the Obolo married more Ibibio women than the Ibibio men married from Obolo.¹⁴ Esuiku Eric Igbifa in his documented account indicates that the people of Ataba and other Obolo communities married several wives from Igbo, Ibibio, Efik, and Annang since the ancient times.¹⁵ Marriage in essence fosters great social relationship between the two ethnic groups. Women therefore became the agents of inter-group relations that linked and bonded Obolo and Ibibio ethnic groups.

As agents and carriers of culture, the Ibibio women married into Obolo introduced some aspects of their culture and social life into their new places of marriage. The Ibibio food culture such as *edikan Ikong*, *afang* have subsequently formed part of the Obolo menu. Consequently, the consummated marriages by the Obolo especially, contributed to the increase in the population of the Obolo. Thus, the Ibibio contributed significantly to the peopling of Obolo in two ways: One, the Ibibio were bought by Obolo men and women into Obolo as domestic slaves. Two, the Obolo people married Ibibio women into all the towns and villages of Obolo.

Nevertheless, Ibibio women were married into Asarama, Unyeada and Ngo axis, Ataba, Ekede, Ikuru Town, Eastern Obolo, Okoroboile and other Obolo communities. It is important to note that in Obolo, Asarama and Unyeada communities have the highest population of Ibibio and Efik people. The consummated marriages resulted in procreation of several children in these communities in particular and Obolo in general.

The oral account of Sampson N. Awaji, an indigene of Asarama, stated that in Asarama, children of Ibibio descent were in several occasion discriminated, disregarded and derogatively referred to as *ogu mbokor* or *ebi mbokor* especially when they were sharing family and community lands. Consequently, it generated a swift reaction from the children of Ibibio women in the area. The essence was to deny and deprive them of their entitlements, privileges and rights. As a reaction, they resolved to desert Asarama and returned to their mother's places of origin. The development exposed the reality of the Ibibio population in Asarama. To avoid the negative impact of depopulation, the leadership of Asarama were compelled to enact a law forbidding the indigenes and non-indigenes alike from calling or referring to the Ibibio women married into the area and their children respectively as *ogu mbokor* or *ebi mbokor* derogatively. Culprits were punished according to the custom and traditions of the land. The quick response of the leadership restored their social status of the Ibibio in Asarama as they apologized to them and the people stayed back and remained Obolo people till date. They have since enjoyed their entitlements, rights and privileges without further discrimination in Asarama.¹⁶ Igbifa records that *Mbokor* is a general term which the Obolo (Andoni) people used to refer to or address the Ibibio, Efik and Annang.¹⁷ *Ogu* (is singular), therefore means a person or someone and *ebi* (is plural) that is, a group of people or plenty people.

Church and School are other source of social and institutional relations. The church unarguably is a social institution that promotes inter-group relations across the world. It is a centre where people of diverse ethnic backgrounds congregate to worship God. Thus, through the church, members regard themselves as children of one father (God) who belongs to one family. Therefore, there is no segregation, discrimination, ethnic sentiments rather they demonstrate love and care towards one another. Sometimes their love supersedes the blood family love. According to G. L. Uduak and M. O. Amos, both ethnic groups enjoyed cordial social relationship as they did worship together in the church in each other's territory.¹⁸ A typical example is The Apostolic Church which exists in the two ethnic places. Historically, the origin of The Apostolic Church in the Old

Eastern Region of Nigeria was traced to Creek Town in 1931 and Calabar, 1932 respectively. The establishment of the church in the Efik area of Calabar was attributed to the Pentecostal evangelical work of Evangelist Ayo Joseph Babalola, assisted by E. N. O. Epe, J. U. Udom and many others from the region. The Church spread from Calabar to the Ibibio areas of Ikot Akpaden in the then Opobo Division (now Ikot Abasi), Ibesikpo, Etinan and other places between 1933 and 1935.¹⁹ The Apostolic Church later became the dominant Pentecostal Church in Ibibio territory.

An Obolo account indicates that The Apostolic Church Ngo established in 1960 derived its origin from Opobo. Romokere Benson Sara records that Madam Ogbodo spearheaded the establishment of the church in Ngo. She brought the church from Opobo where she took her daughter for healing from illness that defied medical solutions. After her daughter was healed, they returned home to commence prayer meetings in her house. Subsequently, Mr. Solomon Ali and others with physical health and spiritual challenges also went to Opobo to get healing in The Apostolic Church. They also returned to Ngo to join her. Thus, The Apostolic Church in Obolo was birthed.²⁰

Both Opobo and Ngo were grouped under the then Ibekwe District for administrative convenience and proximity. Then both ethnic groups were in the defunct Eastern Region and later Southeastern State. The emphasis is that the Obolo and Ibibio had contact, interacted and related with one another because they regarded themselves as brothers and sisters not only in the church or during church programmes but also extended to the secular society. Ibibio pastors as well served in the Church in Ngo and other Obolo communities. Such Pastors included Late Pastor J. U. Udoma, the pioneer pastor at The Apostolic Church, Ngo from 1968-1970. Others were Late Pastors Umoh, 1970-1972, Umoh 1974-1975, Workers (The Apostolic Church ranking of its junior ministers.) S. Akpan, 1975, and Akpan served from 1975 to 1976 when Obolo (Andoni) was merged with Rivers State. The Obolo brethren did attend annual church conventions at Okon in Ibibio.²¹ This helped to strengthen and foster their relationship. This socio-religious relationship continued till 1976 when the Obolo were transferred from the then South Eastern State and merged with their Ijaw Kith and Kin in Rivers State. With that development, The Apostolic Church in Obolo joined the Rivers Field in Rivers State. This does not suggest that the existing relationship between the Obolo and Ibibio ended.²²

Similarly, The Apostolic Church in Eastern Obolo was formerly under Ikot Abasi Area till June, 2013 when it was created an autonomous area known as Okoroete Area. Though created as an autonomous Area,

Okoroete Area is still in Ikot Abasi Field. It should be pointed out that other Christian denominations in Eastern Obolo are parts and parcel of the parent church in Ibibio Area. One typical example is the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion). Thus, all the Anglican churches in Eastern Obolo are under Diocese of Uyo, Anglican Communion.²³ Ibibio songs were introduced in Obolo including church songs used in the praise and worship of God. Here are few examples of Ibibio songs. *Ama-nam eyen Abasi ama- a yeh, ama-nam eyen Abasi ama nam so songho.* (Son of God, you have done well, son of God you have done well, thank You). *Anie owo atie nte Jehovah, ami moyom ami nkweh.* (Who is like Jehovah? I have searched, I have not seen). *Menyene enyeh o ma uyene enyeh darah.* (When you have Him, if you Him rejoice). *Ata ata ubong eyene Abasi nyin, ubong isong emi mme owo kenyanga.* (Perfect glory belong to our God, people are struggling to have/take worldly glory). *Kpukpru s'abasi anamde kuwem mi eme nyen nyor* (2 times). (The good things God did for me are wonderful). *Ima o, ima Abasi kewawa y'ami o.* (Love, love of God is plenty or great upon me).²⁴

School is another aspect of social institution that integrated ethnic groups and promotes inter-group relations. The introduction of Western education in Nigeria by the Missionaries in the 19th Century and subsequently undertaken by the colonial government laid a concrete foundation of social relations among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Obolo who were desperate in acquiring Western education explored the neighbouring ethnic areas including Ibibio because during the 19th and up to the late 20th centuries, there was no secondary school in Obolo. In that situation, Obolo parents sent their children and wards to some Ibibio communities to school there. The Day students stayed with the friends of their parents to attend school. Some of the secondary schools Obolo people attended were; Secondary Technical School Ikot Akata. According to John H. Enemugwem, the school was established by Alfred Amos Ino and he admitted most students from Eastern Obolo. Some of the indigent Eastern Obolo students who could not pay their school fees were allowed to continue learning in the school. His magnanimity was premised on the fact that he made money from Eastern Obolo to open the school.

My informant further stated that when Mr. Alfred Amos Ino returned from Overseas, he was economically stranded. To overcome the economic challenges, he ventured into producing cans from corrugated iron zinc. His cans were patronized by his fellow Ibibio who engaged in salt production in Eastern Obolo creeks during the Nigerian Civil War. They were using the cans to cook the saline water into salt. He reinvested the money generated from the can production to open the school, Secondary

Technical School Ikot Akata. Even when he was appointed Chairman, Scholarship Board in the then South Eastern State, he awarded scholarship to Eastern Obolo students.²⁵ This development indicates that there existed socio-economic relationship between the Eastern Obolo and the Ibibio.

Other secondary schools Obolo indigenes attended in Ibibio area included Regina Coeli Secondary School, Essene, was established in 1956 by the Roman Catholic Mission, Methodist Secondary School, Ette and Secondary Commercial School Ibekwe, Ikot Abasi. The school was established by Justice Udo Udoma in 1956.²⁶ The account of Benedict Eric Igbifa indicates that Obolo people attended Teachers Training College in some parts of Ibibio. According to him, he also attended Lutheran Teachers College, Ibakachi in the then Itu Division now in Ikono Local Government Area. Others attended the then Teachers Training College, Ndun Uyo in the 1970s.²⁷ The relationship was sustained beyond their years of graduation. The students themselves were assimilated into the Ibibio Socio-cultural environment. Thus, they could speak Ibibio language fluently and adapted to Ibibio cultural life.

Language, another aspect of social relations among ethnic groups. It promotes inter-group relations and foster social affinity among ethnic groups. Linguistically, the Obolo and Ibibio belong to the same language family or group. Linguistic evidence indicates that Obolo in Rivers State and; Cross River and Akwa Ibom States (Ibibio inclusive) are members of the Lower Cross Group.²⁸ As members of the same Lower Cross Group, they understand each other's language easily and communicate fluently. This cements their social relationship which promotes peaceful co-habitation and integration. They share some words in their vocabulary which enhanced their understanding and communications. The following vocabularies have the same meaning and pronunciation in both Obolo and Ibibio while some varies in pronunciation; "ubok"-hand, "ukot"-leg, "Ibot"-head, "mong"-water, "ugot/ukot"-in-law, "Ibok"-medicine, "nkpoikan"-lamp, "iko"-word, "okpo"-rubber. Other words with variation in pronunciation but have the same meaning are "Owaji", "Awaji", "Awazi", (Obolo), "Abasi"-Ibibio, meaning God.²⁹ Other words with linguistic similarities shared by the two ethnic groups are "mkpa"-death, "iyanaemi"-saved me (Obolo), "ayanaemi"- (Ibibio), "inyong"- (heaven), "Owaji inyong" (God of Heaven-Obolo), "Abasi iyong" (God of heaven -Ibibio), "kpan uton" (listen -Ibibio), "gban uton" (listen-Obolo), "uton" (ear). To this end, N.C. Ejituwu records the linguistic relationship linking Obolo, Oron, Ibeno and Ibibio. The shared percentages of basic vocabulary are Obolo-Oron 45%; Obolo-Ibeno 42%; Obolo-Ibibio 35%.³⁰

Similarly, significant linguistic relationship exists among the Eastern Obolo people who dwelled among the Ibibio. The Eastern Obolo people became bilingual and speak both Obolo and Ibibio languages fluently. They are Obolo by origin and still maintain their Obolo identity as well as their social, religio-cultural belief and practices. By living among the Ibibio, their language becomes the second language of the Eastern Obolo people in their daily communications and economic transactions. To a large extent, the Ibibio language has influenced the Obolo language in Eastern Obolo making it slightly difficult for those in the Western Obolo to adequately understand their own version of Obolo language both in tongue and pronunciation. In addition, the Eastern Obolo also bear or answer Ibibio names and become carriers of Ibibio identity since ones' name indicate the possible place of origin except for explanation which clarifies it. Names like Akpan (Adasi; first son), Uro (Osoiba; second child) Arakpan, Ikpe, Araowo, Uko-ukarayen, Akpaneyen (Adasigun; first child), Etowo (Ute-ene; one's father), Itiendiok, Etiewo, Ibanga, Akwaowo, Aqua, Uroeyen, Abasiyang, Isamgrirem, Akpaiturum, Ikpamba and others. The social status of those bearing the Ibibio names among the Obolo of Eastern Obolo was perceived as people who were well enlightened, well-travelled and those with external contacts. This made so many people in those group to name their children after their Ibibio friends.³¹

Others even prefers to choose Ibibio names as their nick names. However, this practice has reduced in recent time due to communal crisis between the Obolo and their Ibibio neighbour. Many of such Ibibio names have been changed or translated to Obolo language to reflect the Obolo true identity in order to trace their origin and not to be regarded as a sub-unit of the Ibibio. Significantly, this cultural reawakening was aimed at protecting and preserving, not only their cultural identity but also their landed properties and natural resources. Indeed, Ibibio names in Eastern Obolo became the basis for some Ibibio claims to Eastern Obolo territories and natural resources.³² This social gesture was minimally reciprocated by the Ibibio, especially in terms of speaking Obolo language and bearing Obolo names. However, some Ibibio who resides among the Obolo or in Obolo territory understands and speak Obolo language fluently as well. Similarly, in Western Obolo Ibibio names are evident. Such names included Offong, Ukpong, Mkpanam, Arawo, Okon, Udoh, Mmaenyen Nsikak, Aria-unwa, Ukot-isang, Enyen-irem and many others.³³

Culture as an element of inter-group relations brought the Obolo and Ibibio ethnic groups together and bolster up their relationship. A typical area of cultural relationship between the two ethnic groups are the Ekpe

society and Ekpo. A. O. Anwana records that there are three theories concerning the origin of Ekpe society among the people of Southern Eastern Nigeria namely; Ibibio origin, Efik origin and Ejagham origin. From his account, Ekpe society originated from Ejagham as an indigenous cultural play. Notably, Ekpe performed social and political functions in traditional Calabar and during the era of trans-Atlantic slave trade and legitimate trade.³⁴

However, Ekpe society spread from the Efik area to the Ibibio territory. The Obolo adopted this cultural play from the Ibibio area and modified it to suit their cultural environment. Ekpe is called "Egbe" in Obolo meaning Leopard in Efik, Ibibio and Obolo. The Obolo traced the spread of Ekpe society to Obolo to two sources which were the Efik and the Ibibio. From Efik (Calabar) source, some Obolo fishermen who sojourned in the fishing settlements of Calabar were fascinated with its costume and pattern of play as well as its socio-political status joined the Ekpe society. As members, they were exposed to the secret ritual practices without discrimination. With the cultural enthusiasm and mastery of its ritual operations and pattern of play, they returned home (Obolo) and introduced the Egbe cultural play in Obolo. Obolo communities that play Egbe are Unyeada axis, Asarama and Ataba. The account on the Ibibio source indicates that the Obolo resident among the Ibibio emulated it and adopted the cultural play in Obolo. Ekpe cultural society used to be a prestigious society whose members were wealthy men in the communities; they influenced and controlled political developments in Calabar in the pre-colonial period.

In Obolo, membership of Egbe was exclusive to the wealthy class who could meet its material requirements. Women were not members of Egbe. They had socio-political influence in Obolo. The society was used in the traditional administration of Obolo in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period. One common feature of the Ekpe society was that, an initiate remained a member of the society anywhere for life. Initiates could access the inner hut or chamber where its operational and sacred apparatus or materials were kept. The Ekpe/Egbe songs even in Obolo were composed and sung in Efik/Ibibio. It was in the late 20th Century that members began to compose and translate the Egbe songs to Obolo language. The chanting of the Egbe are also in Ibibio/Efik language and it is upheld in Obolo as well.

Ekpo cultural play was emulated from the Ibibio by the Obolo. This cultural play formed part of Obolo cultural heritage. They play it periodically and in Obolo, the pattern of play is similar to the Ibibio but modernised to suit Obolo cultural environment and taboos. They also used the Ibibio

language in their communication on its outing days. Teenagers and children admiring and running after it shouts “ekpo riboko penny” meaning Ekpo come and take penny (money). In essence, Ekpe/Egbe and Ekpo adopted by the Obolo have integrated the Obolo people into the cultural environment of the Efik and Ibibio respectively.³⁵

Traditional medicine or charm was also fundamental to the socio-cultural relationship between the Obolo and Ibibio. It was an element of inter-group relations since the ancient times. To the Obolo, the Ibibio are known for possessing high spiritual and mystical powers through the worship of their perceived powerful deities. Some of the deities were known for their spiritual protection and source of fortunes while native doctors possess diabolic and mystical powers to heal people and, to kill and invoke mysterious evils on people. The knowledge of Ibibio spiritual and mystical powers attracted some interested Obolo men and women to establish social and cultural contact; and relationship with the Ibibio. So, the temples and shrines of the Ibibio native doctors were consulted regularly for spiritual protection, power and fortunes in their fishing and trading occupations.

Those people who patronized Ibibio deities and native doctors established the branch of the deities in their houses and compounds to protect every member of the family against being killed by witches and wizards, and for their unbroken successes and progress. The Ibibio traditional medicine men were also consulted by the Obolo during their inter-ethnic wars with the Ogoni, for instance. Such traditional medicine men prepared the native charms against machete-cut and bullet shots for Obolo warriors to be invulnerable during their inter-ethnic wars. There were others who belonged to some secret societies in Ibibio land. The Obolo initiates were regarded as part and parcel of the societies and could not be hurt by the Ibibio members neither did they allow them to be harmed by others on the grounds of the oath and bond of membership. The secret societies consolidated both ethnic groups social relations and guaranteed harmonious relationship.³⁶

Economic Relations

Economic activities which comprised trading, fishing, farming, and so on was one of the major sources of ethnic contact, interaction and relation. Essentially, the various economic activities converge people of different ethnic backgrounds since no society or ethnic group is self-sufficient but depends on one another for survival. Thus, economic activities promote the concept of interdependence.

On the basis of interdependence and the necessity to satisfy human needs, the Obolo and Ibibio engaged in trade by barter even when they could

not understand each other's language. The conduct of trade by barter was initially between the coastal Ibibio particularly Ikot Abasi and the Obolo. It should be noted that Ikot Abasi is situated along the Lower Imo River which is opposite the present location of Opobo Town. Interestingly, the present site of Opobo used to be the fishing settlement of the Obolo called Ikomtoro (Ikontoro) which was later allocated to Jaja and his group by the Obolo leadership.³⁷ It became the nearest centre where the Obolo people engaged the Ikot Abasi in the trade by barter and also promoted their economic relations. They exchanged their fish and marine resources with the Ibibio (Ikot Abasi) and farm produce such as garri, pepper, cocoyam, yam, coconut, fruits and other seasonal crops. Ikot Abasi is the nearest Ibibio community to the Western Obolo.

Eastern Obolo people on the other hand, engaged in trade by barter with the Ibibio in the present day Mkpato Enin Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Notable among the markets or trading centers were Ette, Ukam, Ikot Inyakpo, Ikot Akpauo and Ekim while the only known market in Eastern Obolo then was Okoroete market. The relationship between Ibibio and Eastern Obolo was so cordial which made them agreed on markets days. The market days were rotational and were sustained till the outbreak of Census crisis between the Ibibio and Eastern Obolo in 1991. One of the resultant effects was that, the Okoroete market was shut down because the Ibibio were the suppliers of goods and services needed by the Obolo. During the period of the crisis, Eastern Obolo diverted their trading activities or transactions to Ikot Abasi market since the only access road to those Ibibio markets earlier mentioned were blocked by the Ibibio. The severed relationship was restored in 1994 and the Eastern Obolo people resumed their trading activities in those markets till date.³⁸

The Obolo who are renowned fishermen sojourned in Ikot Abasi fishing settlement called Utaiwa. At this fishing settlement, Obolo fishermen did embark on sea fishing expeditions at regular and favourable water tide. They remain the major suppliers of fish in Ikot Abasi and its environs while the Ikot Abasi became the major producers of farm produce which the Obolo were in serious need.³⁹ The interdependent and complementary economic activities fostered their economic relationship. Trading relationship between the two ethnic groups continued during the domestic slave trade and subsequently the trans-Atlantic slave trade as well as legitimate trade. The hinterland areas of Ibibio were the major source where the Western Obolo in particular bought slaves for both domestic use and commercial purposes. The slaves the Obolo purchased from the Ibibio area were sold to the Portuguese during the early years of trans-Atlantic slave trade in the 15th Century, which began first in Andoni in the Eastern Niger Delta.

So, the Obolo slave traders accessed the various Ibibio slave markets and bought large number of slaves they sold to the Portuguese slave traders. N. C. Ejituwu, identified some slave markets in the Ibibio area. The markets included Ibekwe, Essene, Ubium and Ndio.⁴⁰ He also records that the Obolo traded with the Ibibio and Igbo in their various slave markets where they got their slaves to sell to the Europeans.⁴¹ The Ibibio on their part did paddle their male and female indigenes in a canoe to the Western Obolo area for sell. Indeed, the Obolo bought them and used some as domestic servants, wives and others were sold to the European slave merchants. Meanwhile, during the Nigerian Civil War, (1967-1970), Ibibio girls and boys were conveyed in their canoe house to the Western Obolo for either sell or marriage because of the attendant consequences and severe hardship of the Nigerian Civil War.⁴²

By 1807 and 1833 trans-Atlantic slave trade was abolished and legitimate trade was introduced as an alternative or substitute trade. During the period of legitimate trade or palm oil trade, the Obolo palm oil traders depended on the Ibibio for the purchase of palm oil for sell to the European palm oil merchants at the Bonny and Opobo beaches respectively. The Ibibio area was one of the forest zones with abundant wild palm trees from which palm oil was derived from the palm fruits. The earlier mentioned slave markets were converted to palm oil markets as well. Ibibio and Obolo sources affirmed that the Obolo traded in the various Ibibio markets such as Egwenga, Ette, Ukam, Kefe, where they bought large quantity of palm oil.⁴³ The palm oil purchased from the hinterland Ibibio was not only sold to the European palm oil merchants but also used at home for domestic uses. Similarly, when Port Harcourt city was established in 1913, the center of trade shifted from Bonny and Opobo to Port Harcourt as the new center of trade and economic activities.

The development increased the demand for palm oil. Thus, more Obolo men and women engaged in the palm oil trade which they sold in Port Harcourt. Obolo oral history by Ugbana Maclean Felix, one of the female traders in Ataba in Obolo asserts that, in Ataba and elsewhere in Obolo they were compared to Agip Oil Company Staff because of the lucrative nature of the Palm oil trade and the wealth derived from its sell. However, the palm oil trade boosted the Obolo-Ibibio relations. Both ethnic groups have perceived each other as the source of their wealth. Their acquired wealth was invested in human capital development (education) of their children, relatives and wards. The traders re-invested their resources from the palm oil trade in other economic ventures and expanded their financial base while others invested in structural development such as building of houses.

Obolo and Ibibio sources stated that the Obolo Palm oil traders were not only buying Palm oil from Ibibio areas but took their marine products such as periwinkle, oyster, whelk, fish and crayfish to the various Ibibio markets earlier mentioned. In return, they bought the agricultural produce from Ibibio areas such as garri, chewing stick (Ibibio specie-agok ebi mboko, agok egene), yam, cocoyam, plantain, coconut, and other products.⁴⁴ Market as the center of information dissemination and culture contact, Egwenga (Ikot Abasi) market became a center of political influence and activism. During the later part of the Colonial rule, there was high level of political sensitivity and nationalism, the political activities and agitation of Late Mrs. Margaret Ekpo was popularised in Egwenga market. As an activist, the political life of Margaret Ekpo influenced some Obolo women who were regular traders in palm oil and other agricultural produce at Egwenga market. Such women from Ataba were Madams. Augusta Ariakpe Alexander and Ikpoko Agnes Daniel. The women returned home more politically conscious and provided political leadership for the women and by extension the community. The resultant effect was the formation of the Women Association called "Ntitin Ebibanra Ama" in 1950.⁴⁵

When money economy was introduced in Nigeria by the colonial government in the early 20th Century, the volume of trade and commercial transactions increased tremendously. Many people therefore engaged in various trading transactions and other businesses which took them to other ethnic areas. Thus, the 20th Century witnessed a turning point in the economic relations between the Obolo and Ibibio. During this period, the Ibibio men brought farm produce and food items to Obolo area. They usually stock their house-canoe with food items and other produce with economic potentials. The house-canoe was constructed with a roof otherwise called "Uji offong" in Obolo. This canoe doubled as carriers of goods and as well provided accommodation for the Ibibio while on long distance trade on the river and at anchorage at waterfronts of trading communities. N. C. Ejituwu also recorded that Obolo huge catches of fish made them magnet to the Igbo, Ndoki, Ogoni, Ibibio and even Hausa traders who adapted themselves to riverine modes of transportation. Such traders came down with cargoes of yam, garri and other vegetable products which they sold to the Obolo indigenes and then bought dried fish which they took back to the hinterland.⁴⁶

K. E. Ina documented that the Ibibio also engaged in long distance trade. They traded on the Kwa Iboe River with Andoni, Ogoni and other peoples of the Niger Delta. Such Ibibio traders conveyed their cargoes through the Lower Imo River to the Andoni River where they accessed

different Obolo communities.⁴⁷ Similarly, J. H. Enemugwem records that the Andoni were known for their trading rapport with the Hausa, Efik, Ibibio, Ndoki and Ogoni in the hinterland.⁴⁸ These Obolo communities include Ngo and Obolo mainland communities, Ekede, Akradi, Isiodum, Egendem, Unyeada, Asarama, Ataba, Okoloile and Ikuru Town.⁴⁹ At the arrival of the Ibibio traders, the Obolo buyers and sellers converged at the waterfronts for periodic buying and selling of goods. In addition to the agricultural products, they also brought stalks from the Palm wine trees, fiber (Ikoot and Iduru) and mattress. The stalks were used by the skilled craft women to weave their fishing gear called Oket in Obolo. Oket were weaved into an oval shape and used to trap crayfish and prawns in the creeks.⁵⁰

It was split into tiny long pieces that were weaved together with the fibre called Ikoot in Obolo, to form the oval fishing equipment. Another specie of the stalk brought by the Ibibio was called nkanran in Obolo. Obolo fishermen used it to prepare a mat-like fishing gear for trapping fish, prawns and crabs. The fishing equipment was called ewen in Obolo. On the other hand, the stalks are used for construction of local sleeping bed called *Okporkpor* that use the mattress brought by the Ibibio. It was also used to construct two and three-in-one chairs for sitting, relaxation and comfort of the people.⁵¹ Fishing in Obolo would have been difficult if not for the Ibibio supply of the materials used for the preparation of the fishing gears since the Ogoni alone could not meet up their demands.⁵²

Similarly, after selling off their agricultural goods, they bought the marine resources that are in abundance in Obolo. Some of it included; periwinkle, oyster, whelk, fish, crayfish and prawns. The major marine resources they usually bought from Obolo is periwinkle. It should be emphasized that periwinkle is a favourite edible of the Ibibio, used in virtually all their native foods. So it becomes a lucrative venture in Ibibio land since the ancient times. Hence, the Ibibio engaged in periwinkle trade transaction and established customer relationship with the Obolo based on trust system, exchange system and cash payment. Based on their existing relationship, the Obolo customers and host accommodated the Ibibio long distance traders for the duration of their transactions which lasted for one week and above. Both ethnic groups complement each other's food and material needs especially in area of comparative advantage.

This economic relationship was frustrated by the activities of the sea pirates, militants who attacked the Ibibio long distance traders on the river enroute to Obolo and Bonny. Their goods were ceased and money collected.⁵³ The 1993 Ogoni-Andoni war was another factor that hindered the Ibibio economic activities in Obolo territory. With these developments, the Obolo women from Ataba, Egendem, Asarama, Unyeada, Ekede, Ngo and

Ikuru Town were taking their periwinkle to the Ibibio markets especially Ikot Abasi and other markets for sell. The Obolo women thereafter bought food items such as garri, palm oil, fruits, yam, cocoyam, cassava, palm kernel, plantain, coconut in commercial quantity for home consumption and for sell in their various communities. Ikot Abasi becomes the alternative source where Obolo indigenes acquired foodstuffs, especially during the Ogoni-Andoni wars including the 1993 war. The closest market Ataba-Ija/Kaa to the Obolo was shut down because of the Ogoni-Andoni war in 1993.⁵⁴

Again, the Ibibio wood sawyers came to Ekede to saw woods from Ekede forest in 1960 which continue till date. The resultant effect of this relationship is that, the Ibibio wood sawyers trained the indigenes of Ekede including other Obolo indigenes in wood sawing. Thus, by 1960 the Ekede indigenes began to saw woods in their forest. Indeed, some of the Ibibio wood sawyers contracted marriage with some Ekede women and had children. For those who came with their wives, they gave birth to their children in Obolo host communities. Some of these children have not known their native home towns. They could also speak Obolo language fluently.⁵⁵

The woods served different purposes including roofing of houses in Obolo. Some of the Ibibio who were skilled in furniture and carpentry work opened their workshops in different communities in Obolo who also patronized them. Some of their furniture included kitchen chair, kitchen ware, wooden cupboard, table, chairs. In addition to furniture, they provided carpentry services such as roofing of houses, repair of canoes, canoe building with boards, preparing of wooden frames for windows and door and wooden doors and window. The furniture making and carpentry became an attractive source of income to some Obolo men and interested Obolo men learnt it from the Ibibio in Obolo as apprentice in training. The Ibibio are known for their expertise and creativity in furniture and carpentry. The successful Obolo men depends on it to earn their living.⁵⁶

In the late 20th century, Obolo witnessed the influx of the Ibibio into their territory to engage in other economic activities. This group of Ibibio were the motorcyclists who engaged in land transportation in Obolo; a riverine territory.⁵⁷ They plied on the Ngo mainland axis which spans from Ngo to Ilotombi. Their transportation services enhanced economic activities in the Obolo communities where they were operating. It facilitated the movement of people, goods and services from Ngo waterfront to the various adjourning towns and villages on the mainland which stretched to Iwogoni; an Obolo fishing settlement. An Obolo source records that, the Ibibio introduced commercial motor cycle system of transportation in Obolo. This opened another venture to earn a living. Interestingly, this means of transportation led to the emergence of mechanic workshops for

the repairs of both commercial and private motorcycles in the communities of operation.⁵⁸ With the construction of the Ogoni-Andoni Unity Road by the Rivers State Government there was increase number of Ibibio motorcycle riders in Obolo. The Obolo as well indulge in the motorcycle transport system on the Unity Road. Through this venture, there exists a symbiotic socio-economic relationship among the motorcycle riders on one hand and on the other, the commuters who patronize them.

Conclusion

This work indicates that the Obolo-Ibibio relationship predates the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and legitimate commerce in the Lower Imo River. Unarguably, the trans-Atlantic trade introduced change and continuity in the socio-economic life of the various trading ethnic groups which further strengthened the earlier existing relationship between the Obolo and Ibibio. Elements or aspects of their relationship existed through socio-cultural institutions such as School, Church, Ekpe, Ekpo, marriage, cultural materials, linguistics and name bearing.

There existed also inter-woven economic relationship among the two ethnic groups up till date. Both ethnic groups engaged in Long Distance trade through which they sold their indigenous goods in each other's territory and markets respectively. Their relationship essentially fostered great socio-economic transformation in both territories. It greatly contributed to the peaceful economic transactions during and after the palm oil trade along the Lower Imo River.

Endnotes

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² Koko Ete Ina. *The Changing Faces of Ibibio History, 1885 – 1987* (Uyo, NDECO Education Publishers, 2017), 1.

³ Edet A. Udo. *Who are the Ibibio?* (Onitsha: Africana-Fep Publisher Limited, 1983), 315. See also Ina, *The Changing Faces of the Ibibio History*, 5. See also Okon Edet Uya. *A History of Oron People of the Lower Cross River Basin*. (Oron; Manson Publishing Company, 1984),

⁴ Ejituwu. *A History of Obolo (Andoni)* 92.

⁵ Udo, *Who are the Ibibio?*, 2.

⁶ Interview with Ujagun Blessing Alabo, 64 years, Ex-CDC Chairman and Retired Civil Servant in Ataba, Andoni L.G.A., Rivers State, Nigeria, April 20, 2020

⁷ Interview with Ime Edward Ekanem, 62 years, Church Women Leader and Retired Civil Servant in Choba, Obio/Akpor L.G.A., Rivers State, Nigeria, April 3, 2020. Ugbana Maclean Felix, 70 years, Trader and Church Women Leader in an oral interview, at Ataba-Ija/Kaa Waterside, Khana L.G.A., Rivers State, Nigeria, May 2, 2020

⁸ Ejituwu, *A history of Obolo (Andoni)*, 92.

⁹ Ejituwu, *A history of Obolo (Andoni)*, 20.

¹⁰ Interview with Maxwell O. Amos 79 years, Clergy man in Ataba, Andoni L. G. A., Rivers State, Nigeria, May 18, 2020.

¹¹ Ejituwu, *A history of Obolo (Andoni)*, 130

¹² Interview with Lawson Akpankpa Amos, 86 years, retired fisherman in Ataba, June 5, 2020.

¹³ Amos, 86 years, June 5, 2020, Interview with Maxwell O. 79 years, Ataba, Amos, June 2, 2020.

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¹⁵ Esuiku Eric Igbifa. *A History of the Ataba Kingdom, 1225-2009*, (Nigeria, Mind-Quest, 2015), 249, 265, 282, 291, 299.

¹⁶ Interview with Sampson N. Awaji 58 years, Clergy man in Choba, Obio/Akpor L. G.A. Rivers State, Nigeria, April 15, 2023.

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¹⁹ S. A. Isaiah. "A Panoramic History of The Apostolic Church in the Old Eastern Region of Nigeria" in S.A. Fatokun (ed.) *A Pentecost from Africa to Europe, From Europe to Africa: History and Distinctiveness of The Apostolic*

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²⁰ Romokere Benson Sara. “Women in the Eastern Niger Delta: The Case of Obolo (From Pre-Colonial Period to 1975).” (MA History Dissertation University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, 2006), 156.

²¹ Ngor N. Zebulon 48 years Clergy man in a personal communication in Ataba, Andoni L.G.A., Rivers State, Nigeria, April 20, 2020 Amos, June 2, 2020. The Apostolic Church Nigeria, Andoni Field, Ngo, Rivers State, Field Combine Worship Induction Service and Thanksgiving of Pastor Zebulon Sunday Warigbani, 1st Andoni Field Superintendent under the Distinguish Chairmanship of Pastor (Dr.) G. O. Olutola (JP), National President of The Apostolic Church Nigeria, 4th October, 2015, 7-8.

²² Interview with Zebulon Sunday Warigbani, 62 years Clergyman in Agwut – Obolo, Andoni L.G.A., Rivers State, Nigeria. Amos, June 2, 2020. Uduak, 54 years Church Leader, April 7, 2020.

²³ Interview with Efet Douglas Efet, 40 years in Okoroete, Eastern Obolo L.G.A., Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, September 15, 2021

²⁴ Interview with Emmanuel James, 53 years Ibibio man working in Ataba, Andoni L. G. A. Rivers State, Nigeria, March 19, 2023.

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²⁶ J. H. Enemugwem in a personal communication at University of Port Harcourt, March 25, 2023. See also Monday B. Abasiattai, Violetta I. Ekpo, Chukwurah Ezebube. *Ikot Abasi- The Aluminium Town*, (Germany, Bacht GmbH, 1997), 168.

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³⁰ Ejituwu, *A History of Obolo (Andoni)*, 35.

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⁴³ Felix, May 2, 2020. Ekanem, April 3, 2020.

⁴⁴ Alabo, April 20, 2020. Felix, May 2, 2020, Ekanem, April 3, 2020

⁴⁵ Interview with Lancelot Sobie Anyanya, 69 years, Community Leader and Retired Public Servant in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, May 17, 2005. Clifford Ngbrigbo, 75 years, Traditional Ruler documented, at Ajakajak, Andoni L.G.A., Rivers State, Nigeria, August 10, 2005.

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⁴⁷ Ina. *The Changing Faces of Ibibio History*, 12.

⁴⁸ John H. Enemugwem. "The Precolonial Developments in the Niger Delta Region Before 1849," *Kiabara: Journal of Humanities Volume 8, Number 2, 2002*, 19.

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⁵³ Felix, May 2, 2020.

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⁵⁵ Alabo, April 20, 2020.

⁵⁶ Interview with Ufikaiyairo Enemiyot Ekprikpo, 55 years, School Teacher in Ekede, Andoni L.G.A., Rivers State, Nigeria, April 19, 2020.

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⁵⁸ Alabo, April 20, 2020

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