

Annang and Obolo Relations: A Case Study of Palm Oil Milling, 1973-2023

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Abstract: *Palm oil became a very popular product of international commerce after the abolition of trans-Atlantic slave trade. Palm oil, palm kernel and other agricultural produce eventually became the substitute trade otherwise called legitimate trade. Palm oil which was then, the leading forest product consolidated the indigenous ethnic relations on one hand and European relations with the ethnic groups in the Niger Delta on the other hand. As a lucrative product, it promoted the indigenous economy and the industrial economy of the Europeans. This trade subsequently earned the region the appellation of Oil Rivers Protectorate, which eventually culminated to the European penetration of the hinterland and later declaration of the British colonial rule in Nigeria. However, the importance of palm oil to world economy made the indigenous producers to explore ethnic locations to harvest and mill palm oil for sale to boost their economic base. Thus, the Annang who are the major producers or millers of palm oil in Akwa Ibom State established palm oil milling centres in Obolo (Andoni) from the late 20th century to 2023. Annang palm oil milling in Obolo has greatly enhanced ethnic relationship between both ethnic groups, especially in the economic and socio-cultural relations. This paper relies on oral history (mainly) and written sources to document this historical event. The finding of the paper indicate that palm oil milling became a source which cemented economic and social relationship between the Annang and Obolo people. It concluded that Obolo palm forest became another source which the Annang exploited to expand their wealth and improve the socio-economic well-being of both groups, while the Obolo has been exposed to a new economic system.*

Key words: Annang, Obolo, relations, palm oil, milling.

INTRODUCTION

Geographically, the Annang and Obolo are two distinct and distant ethnic groups situated in Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State respectively. The Lower Imo River serves as the natural boundary between the two ethnic groups. Annang is one of the six ethnic groups that constitute the present day Akwa Ibom State. They are Ibibio, Annang, Oron, Eket, Ibeno and Eastern

Obolo¹. On the other hand, Obolo is one of the ancient ethnic groups that occupy the Eastern Niger Delta of Rivers State². Significantly, economic activities transcend ethnic distance, hence the two ethnic groups engage in aged-long economic activities which are sustained till 2023. Economic activities, potentials and natural resources that abound in various ethnic territories constitute the bridge in inter-ethnic relationships. Ethnic groups did explore and exploit the abundant natural resources of other ethnic groups. Such ethnic group are not hindered by any form of distance. To achieve their economic goals, they embarked on temporary migration into area where they found greener pastures.

In this regard, the Annang ethnic group in the present Akwa Ibom State is one of the major palm oil millers and producers in Akwa Ibom area during the legitimate trade (palm produce) and post legitimate trade era. Their dexterity in palm oil economy prompted them to establish economic relationship with the Obolo ethnic group in Rivers State. This relationship was necessitated because of the economic importance of palm oil derived from palm fruits. From the period of the legitimate trade especially, palm oil became a very lucrative product of trade venture which promoted international trade between the European merchants and the West African palm oil producers and sellers. Palm oil, other palm produce and forest products became popular products of international commerce after the abolition of trans-Atlantic slave trade. These products essentially promoted industrialization in Britain in particular and Europe in general.

During the colonial period, the British colonial government introduced cash crop economic policy in Nigeria and other West African colonies. The essence is to supply the industrial needs of the metropolitan Europe and to derive stable raw materials from the colonies. The emphasis of the Europeans on the production of these raw materials further propelled the indigenes to migrate to neighbouring ethnic environment where palm tree forest abounds. Obolo people in their hospitable nature leased their palm tree forests to the Annang palm oil millers and producers. In Obolo, the Annang introduced a new platform of economic relationship with Obolo. Though the two ethnic groups had earlier established historical socio-political and economic relationship, this new economic system further created intimacy and consolidated their relationship in the Lower Imo River. Wild palm trees in Obolo grew naturally but spread out of natural circumstances such as the wind, erosion, birds, rodents, bush rabbits, monkey and squirrel.³

The Annang in Obolo Territory

Obolo and Annang socio-economic relationship could be traced to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This aged long relationship extended to the era of legitimate trade in palm oil and other palm products. Interestingly, Annang area and by extension Ibibio land are endowed with wild palm trees from which palm oil and other economic products are derived. They naturally occupy palm tree forest zone which made them engage in palm oil production. The two phases of economic development exposed the Annang people to other nearby and distant neighbours to acquire first; human beings (slave) and second, palm oil as the dominant product of the legitimate trade in the 19th century.

The determinant of the social status and wealth of the traditional African man in the distant past, is how many wives, children, yam bans, fishing boat and gears he has. This prompted the Obolo men, like in every other African society, to engage in domestic slave trade. They acquired their domestic slaves from the Annang, Ibibio area as well as Igbo land. These areas were explored during the trans-Atlantic slave trade until the traffic in human beings and slavery was abolished in 1807 and 1833 respectively. Expectedly, the twist in the international trade cemented Annang and Obolo socio-economic relations. The Obolo regarded them as their source of supply of slaves and later palm oil. The Obolo palm oil traders also acquired the products in commercial quantity from the Annang areas. Those slave markets were eventually converted to palm oil markets. One of such markets is Uruawak in Annang. Obolo were accessing Annang land because of the forces of demand for the product of trade.⁴

However, the historic economic trend of the 20th century created a reversal in the Obolo and Annang relations. The inter-ethnic relations became reciprocal as the Annang explores economic potentials and natural resources of Obolo territory. They established their presence in Obolo in the late 20th century to engage in palm oil production in the area. Obolo land therefore became an attractive economic zone to the Annang palm oil producers. Though Obolo land is situated in the riverine environment, it also has forest of wild palm trees which remained untapped before the Osobo and Annang began commercial palm oil milling in the area. The Obolo being riverine or coastal dwellers and predominantly fishing folk, were ignorant of the system of palm oil milling and production. This economic opportunity made the Annang to invest in Obolo territory as they rented the palm tree forests in Obolo communities. Obolo and Annang oral history indicate that the Annang came to Obolo in the 20th century. They arrived various Obolo communities at different periods. They are Ngo, Ukwa, Unyengala, Egwede, Agana, Agwut-Obolo, Ichiama, Ilotombi, Ekede, Asarama, Iyongorong Asarama, Ebukuma, Okoroboile and Okoroete in Western and Eastern Obolo of Rivers State and Akwa Ibom State respectively.⁵

The oral account of Ufikairo Ekprikpo states that the Annang began commercial palm oil milling and production in Ekede in 1973.⁶ The date of their arrival in different communities varies. Grace Henry Ikwutukwa in her oral account records that the Osobo were the first to come to Obolo to harvest the palm fruits in the area for commercial palm oil milling before the Annang came to Ngo, the headquarters of Andoni Local Government Area for commercial palm oil production⁷. Okoroete (Eastern Obolo) oral account records that Annang palm oil millers who found that there exist wild palm fruit trees in Okoroete became interested to explore the virgin forest zone. Based on their findings, they established contact with the people of Okoroete in Eastern Obolo who granted them the lease of their forest to harvest the abundant palm fruits to mill oil for commercial purpose⁸.

In the post-colonial Nigeria palm oil remains a significant product of international trade in high demand. Thus, its relevance in world economy created a competition in palm oil production among local or indigenous producers. So, the Annang ventured out of their natural environment to harness the palm fruits in Obolo to maximise huge profits since the wild palm fruits in the territory lie fallow. This was intended to avoid unhealthy competition at home which was

already keenly contended for by the local palm oil producers. Another factor that propelled the Annang palm oil producers to explore elsewhere for commercial palm oil production was the lucrative nature of the product in Nigeria where manufacturing companies patronised the palm oil producers. To meet up the high demand, they invested in other areas such as Obolo.

Similarly, the land tenure system in Anang also necessitated them to search for places to invest in oil palm milling. According to Annang oral traditions, palm trees (palm fruits) are communally owned and preserved for a stipulated period between one month and three months before it could be harvested, even if they are owned by individuals or families. This land tenure system is called *ewuuk eyop* (ban on palm fruit harvest). In this regard, no individual or group of indigenes can unilaterally harvest the palm fruits without the permission of the community leaders. At the end of the conservation period, the leadership of the community lifts embargo on harvesting of palm fruits known as *ewuoko eyop* (lifting of ban on palm fruits). By their declaration, everyone can freely harvest the fruits to mill oil. This land tenure system has subsequently become a cultural festival in Annang. In the circumstance, those who cannot wait during the period of conservation eventually ventured into other territories to invest in commercial palm oil milling for sustainability and survival. In the same vein, land tenure system is also practiced in Igbo land and it is known as *Imachi Nkwu*, *Ituchi Nkwu* or *Nkuchi Nkwu*⁹.

It should be emphasized that before the Annang engaged in commercial palm oil production in Obolo, they have been in Obolo either as domestic slaves or as in-laws married by Obolo men and women which strengthens their social relations for centuries. These category of people constituted the agent that informed the Annang of the abundant wild palm fruits trees in Obolo. Some of them as well explored the inter-personal contact and social relationship with Obolo to acquire the lease of the forest for their economic activities¹⁰. Accordingly, Chief Amos Okon from Ukanafun Ikot Akwa (Annang extraction) in Ukanafun Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State was linked to Obolo by an Ogoni friend. His Ogoni friend could not afford the required amount of money to pay for the forest to carry on palm oil milling in Obolo. He invited Chief Amos Okon his Annang friend to rent Obolo forest to embark on palm oil production¹¹. Being in Obolo and secured palm tree forest in Obolo, the Annang carried on palm oil production in the host communities of Obolo from then till 2023.

According to Jimmy Udourom, the Annang oil millers and producers accessed Obolo through inter-personal contact and social relations with Obolo. These Annang oil millers and traders who had earlier contact or knowledge of Obolo territory also provided the link. This source could also be attributed to the early period of domestic slave trade, Atlantic slave trade and later palm oil trade. It is therefore possible that the domestic slaves and intermarriages between Obolo and her neighbours (Ibibio, Annang and Efik) may also be a source of contact since they were conversant with the Obolo territory¹². Another possible source was friendship between the Obolo and the Annang, slave agent, marriage contact persons as well as those Ibibio long distance traders in Obolo.

They linked the prospective Annang oil millers to any Obolo community of their interest endowed with the wild palm trees. One of such communities is Ekede, an enclave of palm tree forest where they can harvest the palm fruit to mill palm oil for sell to amass wealth. The Annang provides a good example of ethnic group migration into Obolo territory where they rented their palm tree forest to carry on palm oil milling. In this regard, they established socio-economic relationship with Obolo, their host. Obolo people in their hospitable nature leased their palm tree forests to the Annang palm oil millers and producers. In Obolo, the Annang introduced a new platform of economic relationship with the Obolo. Indeed, the Annang constitute the ethnic groups that peopled Obolo up till 2023.

Palm Oil Milling and Production in Obolo

In Akwa Ibom, the Annang are traditionally the major palm oil millers and producers.¹³ Dexterity and desire to explore virgin palm tree forest to produce palm oil in commercial quantity propelled them to access other ethnic group such as Obolo. Annang oral sources state that when contact has been established with the host Obolo community, terms and conditions on the lease of such Obolo palm tree forest zone would be reached with the community leadership. The amount for leasing or renting of the palm tree forest and the duration of payment are also agreed before the palm fruits are harvested. The duration ranges from a period of three months to several years. With the conclusion and payment of the stipulated amount, the king in-council delegates people to lead the Annang palm oil producers to the leased forests to show them the land boundary as well as the limit of their operations to avoid trespass and eventual inter and intra-communal conflict or war with neighbouring border communities¹⁴. The above process and procedure was used in Okoroete when the Annang palm oil millers were led to a contact person, one Mr. Douglas who became the intermediary between the Annang and Okoroete community. After every arrangement was concluded, the Okoroete forest was leased to the Annang to commence their oil milling activities in the area¹⁵.

Notably, the Annang palm oil millers and producers in Obolo have established another dimension of economic culture, culture contact and culture blend between the two ethnic groups, particularly the Obolo people. Naturally, the Obolo are predominantly fishing people, while the Annang people are predominantly farmers. In Obolo economic culture, palm fruit produce such as palm oil, palm kernel oil, kernels are of little or no economic value to them since they are naturally and traditionally fishermen and women. Obolo source further asserts that, their daily harvest of marine resources such as fish, crayfish, periwinkle, oyster, cockle, whelk and shell razor makes them wealthier than the palm oil producers. The simple reason is that marine resources are easily harvested and sold out to people while the palm oil producers' income is seasonal. Palm tree takes a longer period of growth, maturity and fruiting. Even when it is mature and harvested, it requires more time to mill the palm oil and the process is also tedious. Based on the Obolo fishing economic culture, they have nothing to do with the fallow palm trees and its products. To them, though it is economically relevant, the palm fruits were left to rot away. Hence, the consideration to rent or lease the wild palm tree forests in Obolo to Annang palm oil producers to explore and mill palm oil, palm kernel oil and produce kernels¹⁶.

After acquiring the palm tree forest zone in Obolo, the Annang palm oil producers engaged some men and women to provide manual labour. Among the people, there are men who are harvesters or cutters of the palm fruits. Family labour is also utilized. Their wives and children are engaged in manual labour services for economic growth, wellbeing of the family and to reduce cost as to maximise profit. The harvested palm fruits are gathered by the young men and women for the owner. These palm fruits are carried to the oil milling location or site where it is processed. As part of the terms and rule, palm fruit from the harvested bunches that falls on the ground belongs to them (labour) as part of their reward¹⁷.

The local oil milling industry also involves the use of indigenous methods of producing palm oil. This required a hut, big size metal drums and cooking pots. Annang oral source states that milling of palm oil undergoes a rigorous process. Firstly, the harvested palm fruits would be left for some days before it is cut off and removed from the bunch because it produces more oil than the ones processed immediately after harvesting.¹⁸ At this stage, the men cut the palm fruits, then the women remove it from the bunch. Secondly; the palm fruits are washed and boiled for about four hours, pounded in wooden mortars until a hot crushed pulp of more or less even constituency is obtained.¹⁹ The process to obtain oil palm involves manual labour by the men and women. After boiling/steaming the palm fruits; men did the pounding in large mortars, sometimes buried in the ground. Thereafter, the pulpy pericarps are separated from the nuts. Subsequently, the pulp was squeezed to produce palm oil.

In the same vein, the palm kernel nuts are washed with a little quantity of water and picked out leaving the fruits that palm oil will be milled from. The next stage involved washing and squeezing of the substance that palm oil is derived. Then the liquid content is boiled for a period of time until palm oil is extracted.²⁰ This indigenous palm oil milling industry is usually dominated by the women. The final process of palm oil milling and production is the duty of the women in most cases. They as well filled the containers with the oil. They use tins and rubbers which serves as storage facility, standard of measurement and price determinant.

Annang traditions indicate that twenty bunches of palm fruits as at the year 2022 cost about ₦15,000 during the peak period (high production) and at the odd season (low productivity) it costs about ₦20,000. Meanwhile, the twenty bunches can produce more than 30 litres of red oil especially during dry season and less than that in wet period. The price of palm oil also varies from season to season and from year to year. Thus, 20 litres of oil palm in the peak period was sold between ₦10, 000 and ₦13, 000 while during the odd period, it costs between ₦15, 000 and ₦18, 000 or more respectively²¹.

With the invention of oil milling machines, the prosperous palm oil millers had acquired these machines. Like the era of industrial revolution which aided mass production of goods in Britain and subsequently Europe, palm oil milling and production are facilitated with the use of modern machine and equipment. The modern equipment helps to increase the quantity of palm oil produced for commercial purpose. The same process is adopted but the machine does the milling after cooking the palm fruits. The machine selects the palm nuts and milled the palm oil. This process is less rigorous and mill larger quantity of palm oil.

Thus, J J Asiedu records that new improved technologies are being introduced in the processing chain to minimize losses, achieve optimum process efficiency and produce palm oil and palm kernel oil of good quality. The production processes in a modern mill consist of steam and power generation, sterilization, mechanical stripping, fruits digestion, oil extraction and oil clarification.²²

In the late 20th century some Annang men who invested in the palm oil production in Obolo forests are Chief Amos Okon from Ukanafun Ikot Akwa in Ukanafun Local Government Area, Chief Okon Uyo Enang was in Obolo till 2020 when he returned to his village. Others are Mr. Nkereuwem Dan (also known as, I am sorry), Mr. Friday Udoudo Umo, Mr. Ezekiel Marcus Udotong, Akpan Ekerete and many others²³.

Ekede and Okoroboile oral history records that, the Annang men who deals on palm oil milling and production rented the vast forest in Obolo with abundant wild palm trees to establish local or traditional palm oil milling industry²⁴. They moved down to Obolo communities earlier mentioned and rented forests to commence palm oil production. Some of them also came with their wives, children and relatives to provide the needed labour in the palm oil production for commercial purposes. On the other hand, some of the hired labours are engaged as apprentices for a specific duration to serve their masters until they graduate and are established by their respective masters to own their personal milling industry²⁵.

In this regard, Mr. Nkereuwem Dan served Mr. Torch and Okon Uyo Enang in Obolo for twelve (12) years and eight (8) years respectively. Similarly, when he established his own palm oil milling industry in Obolo too, he engaged six (6) persons who served him. Mr. Friday Udoudo Umo from Ikot Udodia has been in this industry for seventeen (17) years. Earlier he served Mr. Ezekiel Marcus Udotong for four (4) years and later served Mr. Akpan Ekerete for three (3) years before establishing his own oil milling industry in the area.²⁶

Ekede source states that, the Annang began palm oil milling in Ekede in 1973 and are still in the palm oil milling till 2023. Notably, after milling large quantity of palm oil, they loaded it in hired flying boats which conveyed the products to their home town where they sold it and make huge profits. They also sold little quantity of the produced palm oil in Ekede to palm oil retail traders and for home consumption.²⁷ The oral account of Grace records that, that Annang men came to Ngo forest to harvest palm fruits to mill palm oil in commercial quantity. The Obolo women bought palm oil in addition to the ones purchased from the Ibibio, Annang and Akwete markets which they sold within their locality.²⁸

Sampson N. Awaji asserts that palm oil milling centres are also established in Asarama for over four decades and in Iyongorong Asarama which began in the early 1990s. It equally exists in Ebukuma for a long time. At Iyongorong Asarama, the idea of palm oil milling was introduced by two Annang/Ibibio women who married there. They started milling palm oil after the death of their Obolo husbands.²⁹ Ogronte Ishmael noted that Annang palm oil millers explored Okoroboile and Okotiko forests for palm oil production.³⁰

This venture was undertaken not only to explore palm tree forest of the Obolo for greener pasture but to avoid unnecessary competition for the palm fruits at their home front. They were in Obolo to maximise profit from palm oil production and remain one of the major producers of palm produce such as palm fruits, palm oil, palm kernel oil and palm kernel, since the forests are leased to private individuals and especially, as the Obolo are not natural palm oil producers.³¹

The palm fruits use in milling oil is seasonal. The output is influenced by the dry and rainy season. The boom period is usually during dry season which begins from January to April, while rainy season is the period of low productivity. It begins from May to the end of rainy season. The two seasons determined the price of palm oil in Nigeria, in addition to other factors. Palm oil is relatively cheaper during dry season and more expensive in the rainy season because palm trees do not bear much palm fruits during the wet period. Again, the harvesters or cutters are always prevented by rain to access the forest to harvest the palm fruits. It is worthy to note that not all men can harvest palm fruits, due to the tall nature of the tree (height phobia) and harvesters are trained to use skilful tool, mainly rope and machete. Not only are the harvesters hindered by rain but those who carries (carriers) the harvested bunches from the bush or forest to the milling site or location.³²

In every business there are challenges. Palm oil milling and production also has its peculiar challenges. It ranges from the starting capital outlay to lack of trusted people that would endure throughout the period of apprenticeship. Some of them are in a haste to establish their oil milling industry in Obolo too. Before 2006 there was no network of roads that link Obolo directly to the hinterland areas. This posed a serious challenge to the Annang palm oil producers in Obolo. It was difficult for them to convey the finished products to Akwa Ibom State where they have huge market for palm oil. On the contrary, some managers do not keep to the terms of agreement with the apprentice especially, when it is not the peak of production.³³ Okon U. Ennang in his oral account indicates that another challenge is that many Annang people refused to come to Obolo for fear of saline water. They fear the possibility of drowning in the river. The few that went, were quick to set up their own milling industry in Obolo as well.³⁴

However, with the construction of Ogoni/Andoni/Opobo Unity Road, they could conveniently convey the milled oil and other palm produce from Obolo to Akwa Ibom State for sell. The unprocessed palm fruits are also transported home for sell, if there is limited labour to process them for oil milling and production.³⁵ This flourishing enterprise has integrated the Annang into Obolo socio-economic, cultural and political environment. In essence, palm oil milling and production becomes the 'bridge' that promoted inter-ethnic relationship between the two ethnic groups. According to Mfonobong Jimmy Udourom, in a month, millers can harvest palm fruits up to a full lorry of 911 from each Obolo community. The lorry load is between 700 and 800 bunches depending on the size. About sixty (60) drums of palm oil could be milled within a month from the different milling centres during the peak period. The quantity produced during the odd period is usually less than the above quantity.³⁶

Obolo-Annang Relations

Historically, inter-group relations are established through varied variables depending on the potentials endowed in the various ethnic environments. In this context, the variables which constitute the fulcrum of relationship between the Obolo and Annang ethnic groups is palm oil milling and production. This booming venture in Obolo attracted more Annang people to the area, since the people are accommodating, peaceful and hospitable. It is imperative to point out that, the foremost Annang palm oil millers became the agent that promotes inter-ethnic relations between the Obolo and the Annang people. The people at home were influenced by the wealth derived from palm oil milled from Obolo territory. Again, they were motivated as the palm oil producers trained their children up to higher institution, built houses, married wives, raised children and contributed to the development of their communities.³⁷

Earlier, the Annang who found economic potentials in Obolo had established economic contact and social interactions with the leadership of Obolo. Consequently, the Annang palm oil millers use their resources to marry wives from Obolo as well. The consummated marriages and informal relationship with Obolo women creates a bond of social relationship between the two ethnic groups. Similarly, some Obolo men established conjugal relationship with the Annang girls and ladies who were employed by their fellow Annang men in their palm oil milling industry. Some of such relationships resulted in procreation of children which serves as the link or bridge that consolidates their relationship. In this regard Chief Amos Okon and Mr. Nkereuwem Dan in their oral accounts states that they have married wives, built houses, and trained their children in higher institutions. Some of their children born in Obolo acquired their basic education in different Obolo communities. They as well made friends with Obolo children. One of such examples is Imabong Uduak, a daughter of a palm oil harvester, attended primary school in Ekede in the 1980s.³⁸ These achievements are attributed to the lucrative palm oil milling in Obolo territory. So, there exists inter-ethnic marriage between the two ethnic groups.

A notable impact of the Annang palm oil milling and production on Obolo is that due to the lucrative nature of the business, some Obolo indigenes who understudied the Annang/Ibibio women earlier mentioned began to mill palm oil in commercial quantity. The Obolo palm oil millers engaged the services of the Annang palm fruit harvesters/cutters to harvest palm fruits for them to mill palm oil. Similarly, in Asarama, a woman called Oruru Ekenere-Awaji ventured into palm oil milling/production. The indigenous palm oil millers complement other sources of oil milling and supply in Obolo. It has become a reliable source of income generation and employment in Obolo. According to Uduak, a female palm oil miller resident in Ekede indicated that an indigene of Ekede Mr. Ngozi established a palm oil milling centre in Ekede. Imabong Oduak milled her harvested palm fruits from Ekede forest at Ngozi's milling centre. She sells her palm oil in Ngo where she has patronage. Some of her customers come from Oyorokoto to buy the palm oil from her in Ekede.³⁹

On the part of the Annang palm oil millers, there are several enduring impacts emanating from palm oil activities in Obolo. Through the palm oil production in Obolo they have developed themselves, their families and communities. A good number of them diversified their

businesses as they made enormous wealth from palm oil milling from Obolo territory. Others invested their resources in acquiring skills and trade, especially the young men and ladies who served as labour to the owners of the palm oil milling industry. The ladies returned home to learn trade such as sewing while the men engaged in carpentry, mechanic and electrical apprenticeship. Their outstanding achievements attracted more Annang people to Obolo area.⁴⁰

From the foregoing, it is abundantly clear that Obolo and Annang have a cemented ethnic relationship through economic and social activities. This pre-disposed the Annang to the Obolo linguistics and dressing pattern which is entirely different from their indigenous dressing culture. Linguistically, their general language which is Ibibio has similarity with Obolo word list. Therefore, it was not difficult for them to understand their host; Obolo language. On the other hand, the Obolo can easily communicate with them since they share some words with the same meaning and have interacted with them for several centuries. Some of the children of the palm oil millers speak Obolo language fluently as they grew up among Obolo children. They (children) indulged in Obolo fishing economy. Most of them born in Obolo regarded the area as their first home since they have not been taken to their native homes by their parents and they rarely go home.⁴¹

Interwoven socio-economic relations that exist between the two ethnic groups are visible in patronage of each other's product. The Obolo palm oil traders established trading relationship with the Annang palm oil millers. Obolo women purchased palm oil from Annang producers in Obolo to augment the quantity bought from the hinterland areas of Ogoni and Ibibio.⁴² They became the immediate suppliers of palm oil to the Obolo palm oil traders and for domestic use. The Annang palm oil millers facilitated the economic development of Obolo people, particularly in the area of transportation and small scale business. The Obolo marine and land transporters convey them and their goods to and fro Obolo to carry on their economic activities in the area. They as well patronised the petty business transactions of the Obolo which increased their financial income.⁴³

With the construction of the Ogoni/Andoni/Opobo Unity Road, Obolo witnessed the influx of non-indigenes including the Annang palm oil producers into Obolo territory. The road which links Obolo; a riverine area to upland further foster the Obolo relationship with her immediate and distant neighbours. This network of road enhances not only the movement of people and services but goods from different parts of neighbouring states and beyond. Notably, the economic importance of road cannot be undermined in a distributive economy. It should be recalled that during the British colonial rule in Nigeria, construction of railways, roads, seaports, waterways and other means of transportation was paramount to the rapid growth of the colonial economy and infrastructural development in Nigeria. Roads were used to convey goods from the source of raw materials and production to various places of export and local consumption.

In essence, the Ogoni/Andoni/Opobo Unity Road promotes the Annang palm oil milling. They conveyed large quantity of palm oil produced in Obolo to Akwa Ibom State where there is larger market and higher demand. Notably, the Hausa from Northern Nigeria are the buyers of

palm oil in Akwa Ibom State. At other times the harvested palm fruits that are not milled are transported home to either mill palm oil or are sold raw to the millers at home. So, those who may not have the required resources to set up palm oil milling industry in Obolo did harvest the palm fruits and sold it out to other millers. These categories of investors became suppliers of the palm fruits which was also a lucrative venture.⁴⁴

From the social aspect, the church as an institution of inter-group relations enhanced their social relationship. Some of them who are Christians comfortably worshiped and served God in Obolo to sustain their spiritual fulfilment. As Christians in the body of Christ, the two ethnic groups regarded themselves as members of the same family. Therefore, they relate as “brothers and sisters” of the same father; God. The Obolo and Annang palm oil millers worship predominantly in The Apostolic Church and other church denominations such as Assemblies of God Church in Obolo without any reservation and ethnic segregation (unlike the white missionaries and Christians who demonstrated racial discrimination and segregation in the church or Christendom). The Annang Christians in Obolo also contributed financially and materially to their church development such as church building and other projects. They felt at home among Obolo Christians. Through this institution both ethnic groups are conversant with their native Christian worship songs. In contrast, they have adapted to the Obolo methods of worshipping God.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

Economic activities are essential determinants and vital element of inter-group relations. One of its essential benefits is that, it pulls immediate and distant neighbours together who establishes contact and interaction which foster ethnic bonding. So, economic transaction is a precursor to inter-group relations. It is on this premise that the Annang ethnic group, Eastern Obolo both of Akwa Ibom State and Western Obolo in Rivers State cemented their long existing relationship. The Annang palm oil millers explored the economic potentials in Obolo to expand their source of income generation. Through the commercial palm oil milling in Obolo, an enduring socio-economic ethnic relationship existed between them till 2023. To the Annang, Obolo area becomes the centre of wealth generation. On the other hand, Obolo was exposed to another form of economic activities obtainable in Annang home place.

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