Intergroup Relations: Opobo and Nkoro Two Kingdoms in the Eastern Niger Delta Fringes

By

Dame Edna Adagogo-Brown PhD
Faculty of Humanities
Department of History and International Studies
Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State.

&
Clement West Isaiah
Comparative History of Education
St Thomas-a-Becket University,
Uyo, Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria.

Abstract

Intergroup Relations: Opobo and Nkoro Kingdoms two kingdoms in the eastern Niger Delta fringes examine the relationship between Opobo and Nkoro in the Eastern Niger Delta fringes. This paper is considered very important because of the misconception that arose from the different historians of the Niger Delta. This misconception were corrected in this paper. Some of the corrections include the fact that Nkoro is not an Andoni village and that the oath supposedly taken by Jaja was not documented even though other events of the same magnitude elsewhere in the Niger Delta were documented as either treaty or conventions and with arbitration panel and witnesses from other sister-city states and the consul as umpire. The method of research was mainly the use of oral tradition, primary and secondary sources and other historical evidence. The findings of this paper indicate that there has not been any conflict between Opobo and Nkoro kingdoms in their one hundred and fifty years of their relationship.

Keywords: Intergroup Relations, Opobo, Nkoro, Eastern Niger Delta, Historians

Background

In the build up of the relationship between Opobo and Nkoro in history has lasted for a very long time. The relationship had started with Chief Jack Jaja Annie Pepple's personal friendship with king Kpokpo of Nkoro even before the 1869 Bonny Civil war.

Obviously, Jaja had travelled through Nkoro territory and the port of Olom-Nkoro as a trader several times, long before the hostility that pushed him out of Bonny commenced. Through several trading missions to the Ndoki hinterland Jaja had encountered King

Kpokpo of Nkoro and both of them became friends. It was little wonder then when Jaja left Bonny, that he fled to Nkoro for refuge. King Kpokpo knew he was coming and readily prepared a place for him.

Thus 'King Kpokpo was host to Jaja, putting him up first at Olom Nkoro, and later relocating him to settle at Nkoro-toru or Kpokpokiri (meaning the land of Kpokpo) erroneous referred to Nko toru by both Alagoa and Cookey. The site was referred to as Kpokpokiri to this date. According to the new findings, the oral tradition of Nkoro has it that King Kpokpo presented his son Tamuno whose blood was drawn to mix with that of Jaja for a covenant of perpetual peace and brotherhood. This according to them was mistaken to mean oath taking ceremony between the king of Andoni and king Jaja of Opobo. Infact oral history still has the rusty guns and cannons used by Jaja at the site of Olom- Nkoro to this day, pointing in the direction of Bonny. Furthermore a small colony of Opobo settlers are still at Olom Nkoro.

Nkoro Political Structure

The political structure of Nkoro kingdom has Pokoye-Kuno (section), Oporo-Kuno (Diepiriye section), Akpom-Kuno and Afakani (Defaka), spread into fourteen towns and villages:

1. Opu Nkoro
2. Olom Nkoro
3. Olomama
4. Iwoma
5. Ayama I (Kpokpo descendants)
6. Ayama II (Ottoni or Akpom descendants)
7. Jobama
8. Ikaato
9. Sukuama
10. Ogohama
11. Owutugboama
12. Demeama (Palm fruit community)
13. Port Alali and
14. Mkpetekiri

Nkoro war canoe political system have twenty-five war canoe chieftaincy houses with Pokoye Kuno having eight, Akpom-Kuno also having eight while Defaka and Ottoni have three war canoe houses each.

Theoretical Framework

The term intergroup relations describes the relation, or interactions, between two or more groups of people. Intergroup relations imply therefore the existence of mutually exclusive groups that are in contact interaction with one another. (Jaja, M.J. 2021:6) Sherif and Sherif (1969) listed areas of possible, intergroup relations as friendship, or hospitality, cooperation or competition, dominance or subordination. From this definition, we can place the intergroup relations between Opobo and Nkoro as one of cooperation and hospitality. He goes on to further list types of intergroup relations which include assimilation, pluralism, amalgamation, segregation, expulsion and Genocide. This paper will adopt the pluralism type of intergroup relations as a framework of interaction in which groups show sufficient respect and tolerance of one another as they fruitfully co-exist and interact without conflict or assimilation. He also quoted from Merriam Webster Dictionary thus; a situation in which people of different social classes, religion, races etc, are together in a society but continue to have their different traditions and interests.

He concludes that pluralism occurs when each group retain its identity while peacefully and respectively existing with other groups. Both groups have maintained their ethnic, cultural and linguistics identify at all levels of interaction (Jaja M.J. 2021:7, 9, 10). Nkoro left Okirika and settled at the Eastern Delta Niger fringe just as Opobo left Bonny and settled also at the Niger Delta fringe.

In the relationship between Opobo and Nkoro which started before 1869 showed that King Kpokpo of Nkoro had been a personal friend of King Jaja. There has not been any conflict recorded in this relationship. It has been so fruitful that the two groups had eventually found themselves in one local government Area, the Opobo/Nkoro Local Government Area of Rivers State. Opobo being the dominant group notwithstanding, the two groups have been able to retain their individual identity. The Opobo dominant group had accepted the Nkoro minority group and mutually interacts in political, economic and social relations over time. Political relations in that the Amanyanabo and the Alapu Council of Opobo had been in peaceful relations with the Amanyanabo and the council of Chiefs of Nkoro as traditional rulers of both kingdoms.

Economically, they fished in the same territorial waters, traded along the same trade routes, bringing their trade goods to the existing markets in the territory. Socially, the interaction at the local government level had been totally understandable and accepted by the two groups in terms of Opobo producing the Chairman of Local Government Council while Nkoro produces the vice Chairman of Council devoid of rancure or hostility.

Tradition of origin –Opobo

Opobo was initially known as Opubo Annie Pepple group in Bonny. It was this group that left Bonny during the civil war of 1869 and settled at the mouth of the Imo river as Opobo kingdom, the last city state in the Eastern Niger Delta fringe. At Opobo, the Annie Pepple group combined and produced fourteen main houses and fifty-three component houses (Kala wari) under the headship of king Jaja the founder of the kingdom.

Tradition of origin –Nkoro

There are different versions of the origin of Nkoro. Alagoa (1972:132) indicates that the dispersal point at Oboloma which produced Sangama (Kalabari), Nkoro and Owolomabiri (Okrika). This version captures Nkoro situating in the Ndoni area but migrated from Okrika around the sixteen century. This version regarded Nkoro as one of the state just like Bonny, Okrika and Kalabari, Alagoa (1972:164).

The second version located Gbelegleala in the Central Delta as the home land of the Nkoro that they migrated into Okrika and later left to Iyoba in the Andoni country and founded Olom Nkoro and Nkoro Town.

The third version indicated the founders of Okrika came from the dispersion of Ikibiri in the central delta. The first stop at Obiama and other places in Nembe and Kalabari from the 1200 and 1400 the found the eastern state of Nembe, Elem Kalabari, Okrika and Bonny. The fourth version is that the founders of Nkoro community notably Opu-Kurobo and his ancestors were among settlers at Akpata-Bille or Okolo-Bille in the 10th century after drifting down from Tarakiri kingdom of the Ijo due to disagreement.

The fifth version was that given by Owonaro (1948:52) which made Wakirike as a place of permanent homeland for the Okrika people. Oputibeya became the first king of the Wakirike.

Nkoro first migrated from Gbelegbelle ama in central Niger Delta and settled at Ogoloma. Because of hospitality they left Aboloma (Nkoro) and moved to their present location. Kirike (Nkoro). Their first king was Amanyanabo Otuagba 1700-1727. In the political organization of Nkoro the royal family is the Pokoye-Kuno the second ward is the Oporo-Kuno the third war is the Akpom-Kuno. The forth wards is the Afakani ward.

According to Alagoa & Fombo, by the Manilla Pepple … they stopped for breath at Anyanda, Sipiri, Nkoro and Alabie among the Andoni (Alagoa and Fombo 2001:31). The lasting impression was created by Nkoro not Andoni.

Alagoa (1972:163-171) had provided details of the migration both of Nkoro and Opobo into the Eastern Niger Delta fringes, their origins and state formation and wars of occupation. What needs to be done here are observations of some errors made by both Alagoa and Cookey.

The history of Nkoro migration out of Opu-Okrika to Kala-Kirike was retained as their name until they fought with Bonny with a surprising resistance. The tradition recorded that it was after this war that Bonny gave them the name Korika-ama (the town that cannot be set on fire).

Corrupted to Nkoro

Accordingly when King Kpokpo led Jaja to Olom Nkoro to settle, it was to shield Nkoro town from Bonny. Meanwhile the other two neighbours of Nkoro, being Ogoni and Andoni were also not comfortable that Nkoro had seized part of their territory for permanent occupation. As Alagoa rightly observed, Nkoro was surrounded by enemies from all sides. That was why King Kpokpo encouraged Jaja to form an alliance with him. This alliance ended further conflict in the area. Olom Nkoro from what Alagoa revealed was standing right on the main trade route between Bonny and her markets in Ndoki country. According to Alagoa, the new site given to Jaja by King Kpokpo was "a more secure site". It was not. The founder of Nkoro would have preferred the site they gave to Jaja for better expansion but they decided to occupy the creeks for better protection against their enemies right round. Jaja not only blocked the mouth of the Imo River but also prevented Bonny from assessing her markets in Ndoki country. Jaja's settlement is called Nkoro Toru or Kpokpokiri to this day.

There were errors made by Alagoa and Fombo (2001) and Cookey (1974). Alagoa and Fombo assert that King Jaja swore an oath of protection and King Enyogo of Andoni gave Jaja a ritual necklace known as *igba.* This assertion is based on oral tradition without any historical support from European records to support it. Cookey (1974) recorded on the other hand that Chief Kpokpo was an Andoni chief of a small village of Nkoro. These assumptions are erroneous. According to Okorobia, (2009:385), Nkoro (Kala Kirike) is a sub group of Wakirike and not an Andoni village. In his book, Cookey erroneously recorded Kpokpo as an Andoni chief. Research has shown that the coastline where King Jaja founded and named Opubo (Opobo) is on the same landmass with the Nkoro, not Andoni.

Besides, there is no documented evidence of the oath-taking ceremony showing place, time, witnesses and the administrator of the oath. Furthermore, there is no treaty between

Andoni and Opobo in any history book and there are no intelligence reports in the archives indicating such ritual ceremonial activity. Either, the oath purportedly administered by the Andoni King is claimed to originate from oral tradition without confirmation by any European records such as Talbot's book of 1926. The close friends of King Jaja, Charles de Cardi and Mc Echen's Intelligence Report did not also record it. Even the Consular Reports of the 1870s did not have it. That the two very important events of oath-taking and treaty-signing in the Andoni territory with the Andoni, were not recorded at the time, even when other events of the same magnitude before them were recorded, gives the impression that the assertion were the products of imagination designed to fill gaps. Both the King Kpokpo covenant with the blood of his son Tamuno and that with the Andoni king suffered the same feat of not been recorded, no external witnesses and no arbitration panel. Although oral history has pointed to Olom Nkoro and Kpokpokiri as evidence of intergroup relationship between Nkoro and Opobo there is no written evidence or documented evidence of the oath taking ordeal between an Andoni king and King Jaja of Opobo.

According to Okorobia (2009:358) the Ijo of the Eastern Niger Delta is composed of the Bonny, Kalabari and Okrika (Wakirike), while the Ijo of the Eastern Delta fringe is composed of the Nkoro (Kala kirike) Defaka and Ibani (Opobo). This further confirms the fact that the present location of Opobo Kingdom is closest to Nkoro as related Ijo groups and Andoni as neighbours. Okorobia states further that the Ijo of the Eastern Niger Delta are not the only occupants of the coastline. According to him, the Eastern Delta Ijo has the Igbo, Engenni, Abua, Odual, Ikwerre, Obolo (Andoni) and Ogoni as neighbours, while the Ijo of the Eastern Delta fringe has as their neighbours the Obolo (Andoni), Ogoni, Ibibio and Igbo (Okorobia 2009:358).

Bonny migrated to her present location about 1000 years ago and by the early 18th century, Perekule has established his war canoe political system. Bonny City-states controlled the sea (Rio Real of the Portuguese) during the slave trade while Opobo controlled the mouth of the Imo river referred to as Nkoro toru or Kpokpokiri during the palm produce trade.

Nkoro toru of oral tradition is the same as the mouth of the Imo River controlled by King Jaja of Opobo Kingdom from 1870 and oral history has the coastline of King Jaja water front still referred to as Kpokpokiri to this day. After 1873, the mouth of the Imo River has been renamed Opobo River (Cookey 1974). In the history of Bonny, Kalabari, Okrika and Nembe of the Eastern Niger, before the emergence of Opobo in the Eastern Niger fringe their tradition of origin had been within the Niger Delta (Alagoa and Fombo 1972, Okorobia 2009). Whether it was migration within the Niger Delta from one Ijo area to another; or from other parts of the Ijo Delta to another, passing through the non-Ijo

hinterland or migration from the Delta northward to the Western and Eastern Delta fringe as submitted by Okorobia (2009), there seemed to be no oath-taking ceremonies between one Delta settler and another. This is contrary in the case of Andoni and Opobo in 1869/1870 as expressed in Cookey (1974). Okorobia argued that "although the Ijo are the dominant indigenous ethnic nationality along the Nigerian coastline, they are clearly not the sole occupants of the sub-region. They share the area with other ethnic groups… the Eastern Delta Ijo have the Igbo, Engenni, Abua, Odual, Ikwerre, Obolo (Andoni), Ogoni and the Ibibio as their neighbours" (Okorobia 2009:358). If the above listed groups are the neighbours of the Bonny, Kalabari, Okrika and Nembe of the Eastern Niger Delta, the Obolo (Andoni), one of these could not claim the ownership of where Opobo is located. According to Cookey (1974), having formalised their relationship, Jaja and his chiefs approached the people of Andoni for aid. This aid came after oath-taking between Jaja and the Andoni at the shrine of Iyobulo deity. During the oath-taking ceremony as asserted, a man was sacrificed as part of the ritual in addition to animals and a libation of rum, poured to the ancestors to invoke them, as well as, the deities of the sea to witness the event. Cookey (1974:70) concludes that the Andoni chief closest to Jaja was Kpokpo, ruler of the small village of Nkoro.

The oath-taking ceremony appears unlikely to have taken place, considering the fact that by 1846, the Andoni had become subjects of Bonny and King Jaja would not have contemplated becoming the subordinate of the Andoni through oath-taking who were once the subjects of Bonny. The oath-taking ceremony between Jaja and the Andoni appears out of place. This is because it was not documented as a treaty between the two communities with witnesses. Such an event could have been documented by D.S. William, Jaja's secretary, and witness by the other major city states of Kalabari, Okrika and Bonny and sanctioned by a treaty prepared by Consul Livingstone who was in the habit of monitoring developments in the Rio Real at this time. Also Charles de –Cardi and Mac Echean would have accompanied King Jaja for this ceremony.

Cookey misunderstood the issue of Opobo settlement ownership between the Andoni and Nkoro. The first error is the identification of Nkoro as an Andoni village. This is because at this time, the whole area of the Eastern Niger Delta fringe was considered Andoni Territory which was not the case. The second error is the identification of Kpokpo as an Andoni chief. The third error is the mention of "Ekom toru", which should be reconstructed as (Nkoro) Toru also known as kpokpokiri of the King Jaja water front in Opobo Town.

Research findings had shown that Nkoro is not an Andoni village. Nkoro is Kala Kirike (Small Okrika). Through migration, the Nkoro people left Wakirika (Okrika) in the Eastern Niger Delta to their present location in the Eastern Niger Delta fringe (Okorobia 2009:358). In the same way, the Annie Pepple group left Bonny in Eastern Niger Delta to the fringe of the Eastern Niger Delta merge. On the ownership of Opobo settlement, no other community in either the Eastern Delta or Eastern Delta fringe can claim the mouth of the Imo River than Opobo Kingdom (Dike 1956, Cookey 1974, Alagoa 1972). It was from here that King Jaja sent various military expeditions into the Igbo and Ibibio hinterland (Cookey 1974). Cookey (1974) referred to this area as King Jaja's sphere of influence, militarily, politically and economically. He described Jaja as the Lord of the Imo and Kwa Iboe Rivers. Between 1875 and 1881, King Jaja sent punitive expeditions to Okpu-uro Nkpirikpo and Ibuno. Furthermore, Cookey traced the movement of Jaja and the Annie Pepple Group to Olom Nkoro where they settled for some months in order to complete the construction work at the new site. It becomes difficult to reconcile the fact that Nkoro people gave King Jaja a place to settle, while the Andoni administered to him an oath of peaceful co-existence. Olom Nkoro, Jaja's first settlement on leaving grand Bonny, still exists as evidence of intergroup relations and bears the name of Jaja's section to this day in Olom Nkoro.

It should be noted that by the 19th century, all issues of importance or significance were properly documented. Among these was the treaty between Andoni and Bonny in 1846 and the first article of that treaty stipulates that the natives of Andoni shall be considered as subjects of King Pepple and shall be entitled to the same rights and privileges as the Bonny men (Alagoa and Fombo 1972: 100). Another is the treaty captured by Alagoa and Fombo (2001:113) following the hostility between Bonny and Kalabari. The hostility ended with "Perpetual Treaty of Peace" on 27th October 1871 between the two kingdoms adding that in the event of further disputes, the two would seek the arbitration of the British Consul. The king and chiefs of Bonny were assigned the right to "take steps to ensure at all times the due observance of all the articles of this treaty". In the month of November 1871 another treaty of peace was signed between Kalabari and Brass. In this treaty, the Consul also assumed "the right of arbitration and enforcement of the terms…" (Cookey 1974: 75 – 76). Considering the treaties already in place, it becomes questionable that Cookey did not capture this all important treaty of oath-taking between Jaja and the Andoni and no arbitration. Besides no king of Bonny or Kalabari or Okrika was invited as witnesses and the British Consul Livingstone was not given the right of arbitration as done in the case of the other treaties between 1871 – 1873.

The presence of King Jaja at the mouth of the Imo River, offered both Nkoro and Andoni the needed protection against external attacks.

According to Alagoa (1976:348) many of the settlements of the Kalabari group claimed original migration from the central Delta eastwards, to the Andoni country, followed by a return West wards into Kalabari territory. This migration east and then west may not have been a thing of few years. Their settlements in the Andoni country would have lasted at least in the neighbourhood of half a century before the return to the west, yet the Andoni did not administer oath to the Kalabari as they purportedly did to Opobo. Although it was not stated what caused their return to the west, it is also possible that the Kalabari population had become too large in the Andoni country which led to return to the west. This has gone to confirm that the migration in and out of the Eastern Niger Delta areas occurred as a result of finding a lasting abode for settlements.

The oath taking ceremony ordeal was a strange phenomenon in the Niger Delta area. Alagoa concluded thus;

> *'pressure from Bonny and Okrika may have explained*
> *the phenomenon of the east-west rebound in the migration*
> *among the Kalabari groups in the area'*

By the time Opobo arrived the Imo river, consular activities had come under operation for twenty-one good years, that is two decades. Consul Livingstone was very much around, monitoring the movement of trade and economic activities in the river and also cautioning the super cargoes against dealing with Jaja. If the Andoni had invoked their religious sanctions on the area, (Jaja), the British consul would have been brought in to act as arbitrator and treaty maker as Alagoa observed. (Alagoa 1976:352).

Aside from claiming Opobo as part of Andonie territory, the Andoni had recently claimed Bonny kingdom as belonging to them. This claim was made according to Enemugwem by a European Trader, Charles N. de Cardi who said that "Bonny people claim to have descended from the Ibo tribe, the land now claimed by Bonny as forming the Bonny kingdom belonged to the Andoni (Enemugwem 2006:11). Enemugwem also quoted E.M.T. Epelle claiming that "Bonny was first a temporary settlement of fishermen from Andoni country, hence it was originally called Andoni and later changed to Bonny.

All we can deduce from the on-going argument is that the Andoni people are long distance fisher folks who travelled far and wide in search of fishing colonies. Like the Ilaje fisher folks of Ondo State, the Andoni could settle at a fishing colony for months and years and

at the end they would contemplate ownership right of the area. Now to corroborate this assertion, Enumugwem has this to say concerning the whole of both the eastern Niger Delta and the eastern Niger delta fringe.

> *"The Obolo people are split into four subgroups, namely, western Obolo, occupying the Imo and Bonny rivers estuaries, the Eastern Obolo that spread from the eastern banks of the Imo river to the Kwa Iboe river estuaries. While the Ibeno are located between the Kwa Ibeo and the Cross River estuaries, the Oron are in the lower Cross River Basin. Obolo is the founder of the territory. Hence, the area and language of the people are named after him. Other groups in the mist of the western Obolo are the Opobo and Nkoro that came later for protection".*

To confirm the fishing culture dimension of the Andoni, Enemugwem agreed that their economic culture of the Andoni is deep sea fishing. According to him,

> "*this enabled them to fish together freely in Oron, Ibeno and Andoni waters at the Cross, Kwa Ibeo, Imo and Andoni rivers estuaries (Enemugwem 2006:7).*

Nkoro Nation and the Treaty of 22 December 1846 between Andoni and Bonny.

This treaty was sequel to the Bonny /Andoni war which was done in the Ju-ju house of parliament house or Grand Bonny. The signatories of the treaty according to G.I. Jones represent people who were said to have been the heads, deputy heads of the principal Western Obolo villages, that is of the Ngo and Unyeada (Anyanda of the treaty) sections of the tribe; and of Nkoro… This is particularly true of Nkoro. For among the signatories from Nkoro, King Amabara was the actual head or Amayanabo of Nkoro while Chief Sanga (another signatory) was a deputy head, while Ottonigbara was a representative of his ward. In the political structure of Nkoro Kingdom, after the Amayanabo has signed, Chief Sanga came second while Chief Ottonigbara came third as principal chiefs of Nkoro. The people of Nkoro claimed that their chiefs signed the treaty of 1846 as witnesses to bring the war to an end and for perpetual peace between Bonny/Andoni. (Alagoa and Fombo 2001: 100 & 101).

Conclusion

We have redressed the long standing errors made by some historians concerning Nkoro and its identity as part of Okirika and not part of Andoni. All the evidence collected point to the direction of strong historical ties between Opobo and Nkoro, and yet each retained its political identity. On the other hand, the claim of the Andoni as owners of Bonny, Opobo, Nkoro, Okirika have been revealed that the Andoni are fisher folk and their nature is to follow the movement of fish wherever and thereby establishing their presence almost

everywhere along the coast of both eastern Niger Delta and its fringes. It is this fishing culture that enabled them to claim ownership of all the city states of eastern Niger Delta.

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