



## **The Ibani (Bonny) Civil War of 1869 and the Obolo Response**

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### **Abstract**

The emphasis of this paper is the Obolo response to the Ibani (Bonny) civil war of 1869. The Ibani who were accommodated by the Obolo at their present location, were engulfed in a civil war fought by the Annie Pepple House led by Chief Jaja and Fubara Manilla Pepple House led by Chief Oko Jumbo. This war had both negative and positive impact on the socio-political and economic development of the Ibani. The Ibani ethnic group split into two distinct Kingdoms Bonny and Opobo. The Obolo in their magnanimity provided a place of settlement for Chief Jaja and other fourteen chieftaincy houses who fled Bonny. Thus, Jaja and other escapees established Opobo which occupied a strategic location at the Lower Imo River. Similarly, in Obolo provided land for the Ibani of Bonny in their satellite villages to cultivate their cash crop plantations to cushion the effect of economic hardship and recession. The paper explored both primary and secondary sources. The findings of this paper was that the Obolo prompt response to the Ibani civil war of 1869 eventually saved them from total political and economic collapse. This further consolidated the Obolo and Ibani (Opobo) relationship.

**Key Words:** Ibani (Bonny) Civil War, Obolo Response.

### **Introduction**

The Ibani (Bonny) were earlier accommodated by the Obolo in one of their strategic territories. This strategic location made Bonny accessible by European trading merchants in their large sea vessels. Based on this, Bonny grew into prominence and became a notable centre of international commerce. Bonny subsequently became the

slave and palm oil depot where they were exported overseas to European countries from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, respectively.

The volume of the slave trade and palm oil trade enriched mostly the Bonny political class (kings and chiefs) and the nobles. Enormous wealth derived from the trans-Atlantic trade created political tension, rivalry, tussles and intrigues among the royal houses and head of the houses. This development threatened the peace of the royal house in particular and Bonny in general. On the other hand, the oversea trade exposed Bonny people and the royal house to foreign influence in the enthronement of kings as a result of internal crises and to protect their economic interest in the Bight of Biafra. In the circumstance, the Ibani became a ready tool in the hands of the English traders who meddled into their traditional political institution. They eventually installed Dappuye and William Dappa Pepple as Kings of Bonny in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, respectively.

The economic and political rivalry between King William Dappa Pepple of Bonny and the English traders resulted in his deportation and the constitution of Regent rule in Grand Bonny. For fairness and equal representation, leaders from both Fubara Manilla Pepple and Opubo Annie Pepple were appointed by the British Consul to run the affairs of the commercial city. So, the combination of internal political crises and the interference of the English traders in Bonny political institution laid the foundation for the Bonny civil war in 1869. The Ibani civil war of 1869 had grave consequences on their socio-political and economic development. Bonny at this time experienced terrible economic hardship, severe starvation and depopulation as fourteen chieftaincy houses deserted their ancient kingdom.

Confronted with these challenging issues, the Ibani resorted to the Obolo, their ancient neighbour who accommodated them for economic salvage, refuge and security. The Obolo in their natural magnanimity and hospitality responded promptly to the Ibani plight. Obolo provided temporary land for the Ibani cash crop plantation as an alternative economic venture. This venture was intended to

diversify their economy since Jaja had blocked Bonny from accessing the palm oil markets under his jurisdiction. Jaja's economic blockade against Bonny further increased hunger and starvation in Bonny. Thus, Bonny embarked on vigorous crop plantation to revamp their collapsed economy.

Again, Jaja and the other fourteen chieftaincy houses were accommodated by the Obolo at their present settlement called Opobo. Uranta who had a face-off with Jaja was allocated a place of settlement by the Obolo which later became known as Queens Town all in Obolo territory. This strategic location contributed to Jaja's control of the palm oil trade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which projected him and Opobol to the global economic environment. People who took refuge in Obolo were also protected and defended. Bonny subsequent attack on Jaja and his group was vehemently resisted by the Obolo who provided refuge for them. Obolo therefore remain a reliable and dependable 'safe haven' for the Ibani especially in critical period.

### **Causes of the War**

The causes of the Bonny Civil War of 1869 was attributed to the internal rivalry between Chief Oko Jumbo, head of Fubara Manilla Pepple house and Chief Jaja, head of Opubo Annie Pepple house both of the royal family . Another factor was the interference of the English traders in Bonny internal political institution which resulted in the imposition of Kings Dappuye and William Dappa Pepple on the people of Bonny. So also was the inordinate ambition of Chiefs Oko Jumbo and Jaja to ascend the Kingship throne of Bonny which contributed to serious rift and struggle for political power. On this basis, the conflicting political interest of the leaders of the two main royal houses degenerated into the civil war which engulfed Bonny in 1869.

### **The Civil War**

The civil war which eventually gave birth to another Ibani kingdom called Opobo in the Eastern Niger Delta began in September, 1869. With the built-up tension, rivalry and crises, the stage was set for the war. The internal war was fought between the Fubara Manilla Pepple

house led by Chief Oko Jumbo, and the Opubo Annie Pepple house and fourteen chieftaincy houses led by Chief Jaja. Both houses were militarily equipped and ready to engage in physical combat on an agreed date. Prior to the war, the English traders carried out inspection of their armoury to ascertain the possible victor of the war. Thus, the European merchants remarked that Jaja's armoury was better equipped. The implication is that Jaja may eventually win the battle. This information inspired Chief Oko Jumbo to adopt a war strategy of diversion and destruction of Jaja's fortress at night prior to the date of the fight.

So, while Jaja and his group were prepared to engage their opponent, Chief Oko Jumbo and Manilla Pepple house struck at night. Firstly, Jumbo diverted Jaja's attention to the fire he set on Cookey's house entrusted to Jaja's care while away to Lagos on health grounds. Secondly, Jumbo extended the fire link to Jaja's armoury on the night of Sunday, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1869, which burnt down the armoury of Jaja completely. Meanwhile, the battle was scheduled to hold on Monday because of the religious belief of the Fubara Manilla Pepple house that they could not engage in a battle on Sunday; their day of worship of the Almighty God. The wanton destruction of his armoury and other property left Jaja helpless.

In this hopeless situation, Jaja abandoned the war and fled from the ancient Ibani settlement Bonny and first settled at Minima. (Jones, 1963:121-131, Waribere, 2007:47-50). The civil war rendered Jaja and his group homeless and in search of a good habitation. This condition compelled them to seek refuge in Obolo.

### **Consequences of the War**

The Bonny civil war of 1869 which caused Jaja to abandon Bonny and found refuge in Andoni territory created several consequences in Bonny socio-political and economic sphere. One, it caused the collapse of Bonny economy which led to severe hardship, starvation and depletion of Bonny population. Fourteen chieftaincy houses left with Jaja. Bonny relative hegemony and imperialist power in the Eastern Niger Delta was broken. Two, it made Bonny to diversify her

economy from dependence on palm produce to cultivation of cash crops plantation for export. The cash crops were cocoa, rubber and coconut, breadfruits. This development further brought a change in the pattern of Bonny-Andoni relationship (John, 2014).

So, it was a serious affair in Bonny to do what they could to cushion the effect of hardship on Bonny. Unfortunately to Bonny, it coincided with the period they had similar problem with the Elem-Kalabari. So they could not be allowed to benefit or access the Ahoada (Iga market), Iwofe market, Isiokpo market and few other markets in the west. So the Ibani (Bonny) decided to extend their plantation. That is the origin of the extension of the Bonny plantation. They call it “*uzu*.” They extended towards Azumini area but the nearest friendly neighbour to Ibani which is Ataba provided all they needed. The Opobo and Bonny Treaty of January 3, 1873 made Jaja and Opobo to exercise control over the Lower Imo River and Ibibio markets. Jaja consequently, mounted trade blockade against Bonny which increased their economic hardship. In this circumstance, Jaja did not run to the Okrika, Kalabari or Nembe in the Eastern Niger Delta but Obolo which he earlier explored in 1867. With this settlement, Opobo emerged as the new economic power and centre of trade in the Eastern Niger Delta.

By this time Jaja had consolidated his relationship with the Andoni and the English traders. Economic activities and relations with the hinterland was under the sole control of Jaja. Jaja’s control of trade on the Imo River and blockade of Bonny traders not to access the hinterland markets projected Jaja as the ‘Merchant King’ of the Imo River and the Eastern Delta rivers Jaja blockade of the Imo River did not affect the Obolo because Article V of the Opobo and Bonny Treaty of January 3, 1873 guaranteed Obolo free access to any market they like, unmolested or hurt (Alagoa and Fombo 1972:115).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Andoni which served as trade route to Bonny and others became an attractive environment for Bonny traders to establish trading outpost. So, when other cash crops were introduced into Bonny economy to complement the dwindling palm oil trade, they quickly converted most of the trading outpost to plantation sites.

They also established new plantation settlements in Obolo. The new economic trend in Bonny created a turning point which facilitated a sort of symbiotic relationship between Andoni and Bonny. As fishermen, Obolo people populated the fishing settlements of Bonny. Equally as traders and cash crop farmers, Bonny people became the dominant ethnic group in some Obolo villages and fishing settlements. This ushered in preventive diplomacy which consolidated their relationship.

However, Obolo oral source, according to Igbifa (2012), attributes the influx of Bonny people in Andoni to the Bonny civil war of 1869 which brought attendant hardship and starvation in Bonny. Jaja who left Bonny in company of others and were accommodated by the Andoni people succeeded in establishing his Opobo kingdom on 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1870. He made sure that he prevented Bonny from the Ibibio markets. This trade blockade seriously paralyzed the economy of Bonny which compelled them to evolve an alternative economy. So, it was not so easy for the Ibani of Bonny to survive because of the blockade.

### **Obolo Response**

The Bonny civil war of 1869 which split the Ibani ethnic group into two independent kingdoms became a precursor to the consolidation of the Andoni and Opobo relationship. While in search of a permanent settlement, Jaja and his group settled at different places in Andoni. Documentary evidence by Alagoa and Fombo (1972:31), Cookey (1974:69-70) and Ejituwu (1991:137) indicate that Jaja and his group took refuge at Ayanda Sipiri (Unyeada), Nkoro, Isiodum, Ekede, Ngo, Alabie all are Andoni. Jaja's request for a place of settlement and Obolo acceptance culminated to the oath taking by Jaja at the shrine of Yok-Obolo at Agwut-Obolo. In swift response, after the oath of allegiance, the Obolo accommodated Jaja and his group at their present settlement called Opobo. He formally established Opobo Town on 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1870. By the Obolo gesture, Jaja emerged the king of Opobo kingdom which he could not have been in Bonny. Interestingly, he promised peaceful relationship with the Obolo. The

swearing of oath was sealed with *Nfi Yok-Obolo/Igba* fastened on Jaja's neck.

At this point, it should be noted that oath-swearing as a diplomatic technique, was a fundamental element in establishing inter-ethnic relations. Thus, the oath taken by Jaja with Obolo further cemented the relationship between Obolo and Ibani, Opobo extraction. So, with the oath of allegiance and peace, payment of token annually and the ultimate settlement of Jaja and his group in Obolo territory, created a new stratum of relationship between the two ethnic groups. It had established "a landlord-tenant" bond between Obolo (landlord) and Opobo (tenant) at the initial stage. This tradition sustained the peaceful relationship among the two ethnic groups as against the antagonistic relationship between Obolo and Ibani (former Bonny). This singular act by Jaja seeking refuge and demanding area of settlement from Obolo was a clear demonstration of the fact that the 1846 Andoni-Bonny Treaty was a forged document. The document which Bonny claimed made Andoni their subject is questionable and absolutely lack merit. It rather underscores Obolo great victory over Bonny with its lasting impact on Bonny political dynasty till date.

Igbifa (2012) debunked the provisions of the 1846 Andoni-Bonny Treaty. He questioned that if the Obolo were defeated by the Bonny people, how could Jaja come to Andoni for harbouring. Jaja knew that in Andoni, the Bonny could not venture retaliation. Jaja could not go to Elem-Kalabari or other Eastern Niger Delta ethnic groups because he knew and had implicit confidence in the military prowess of the Andoni people. If the Bonny had succeeded in maiming the Andoni militarily, Jaja would not have come to Andoni for refuge, protection and settlement. Jaja's decision to desert Bonny was not only motivated by economic reasons in which DeCardi and McEachean encouraged him to relocate to the Andoni area. It was intended also to secure their (Annie Pepple) identity, establish a kingdom in which Jaja will assert his curious political leadership and above all for the security of their collective entity in Obolo territory. However, the refusal of Opobo to continue the payment of the annual token pledged by Jaja to Obolo as a symbol of the historical tie established between Obolo

and Opobo generated discontent among the Obolo. This was one of the reasons that prompted Obolo to petition the British Administration.

It is interesting to note that Obolo magnanimity did not end with Jaja's settlement but extended to Uranta, one of the leaders of the group that deserted Bonny during the Bonny civil war of 1869. Uranta who had a face-off with Jaja, ran to Obolo again for refuge to escape his wrath. On this note, Chief Ikuru of Ikuru Town provided a place of permanent settlement for Uranta. Edubio, (2014) asserts that having been given the piece of land for settlement by Chief Ikuru, Uranta needed the protection of the British. This was intended to avoid any possible outbreak of hostility between Andoni and Jaja on one hand and for protection against Jaja's action. This diplomatic approach resulted in the application by Uranta through the British trader (Johnston) to Her Britannic Majesty for her protection from Jaja's punitive act against him. The appeal received the express approval of the Queen. Thus, the place was named Queen's Town and declared a Protectorate of Britain. Uranta and his family further relocated to the new settlement and lived freely without any harassment or molestation from Jaja.

Like every other wars, the Bonny civil war of 1869 caused severe economic hardship and recession in Bonny and Jaja forced emigration. Confronted with the socio-economic and political challenges, the Ibani resorted to the Obolo territory for refuge and to revamp their ailing economy. During this period, the Bonny were also at war with the Kalabari who blockaded their access to the Iga and other markets. To salvage the collapsed economy of Bonny, Ataba, one of the Obolo communities granted the demand of some Bonny notable chiefs such as Wariboko Manilla Pepple, Squiz Atubobara Banigo, Omoni Brown, Hart etc. They demanded for land in Ataba satellite villages for cash crop plantation as an alternative economy to palm oil trade. On this basis of diversifying their economy from palm oil trade to agriculture, they planted breadfruit, coconut, cocoa etc.



Supportive of this fact is the Bonny oral account by John (2014) who stated that when the Bonny civil war of 1869 came, there was a great loom, a kind of depression. So the Bonny chiefs in their wisdom decided to open up plantations, to go into agriculture to cultivate export crops like cocoa, coconut, rubber, breadfruit and some other crops as an alternative source of Bonny economy. Prominent among the chiefs were Chiefs Squiz Atubobara Banigo and Oko Jumbo. They got these crops through the oversea trade and Chief Squiz A. Banigo also brought crops like cocoa, breadfruits from West Indies when he traveled to that place. Like Chief Squiz Banigo had rice plantation at the place popularly called Orosikiri in Bonny. His monument in the royal cemetery is decorated with short prawns. Evidence abounds in Andoni and Bonny traditions; that Bonny traders established trading outpost and plantations in Obolo territory. These places include Opuwari, Otudong, Iwogoni, Muma, Okorkiri, Uyonoba (Iyoba), Okuka (Amanku) Orongokobon, Otute (Okumakiri ulor Ada), Emenokwan (Opukiri), Otuafa, Okpojo etc (Utong, 2011, Akpankpa, 2011, Igbifa, 2012, Edubio, 2014, John 2014,).

Bonny access to Andoni territory was built on the pre-existing relationship between Andoni and Bonny kings, chiefs, nobles, marriage, trade and fishing. One of such sources of relations was Ataba. In Andoni, Ataba is the most closely related town to Bonny than other Obolo towns and villages. Ataba had no problem (war) with Bonny until 1978 when they had little problem with the Manilla House of Bonny. All these relationships facilitated the process of handing over of a section of Uyonoba (Iyoba) to Wariboko Manilla Pepple of Bonny. The first Bonny chief to come to Ataba to ask for permission to use Uyonoba (Iyoba) village for plantation, was Chief Wariboko Manilla Pepple. It was during the reign of King Ijok Oruk XI that Chief Wariboko Manilla Pepple who had personal relationship with King Ijok Oruk XI consulted him for such permission. According to Ataba tradition, Chief Wariboko Manilla Pepple came to King Ijok Oruk XI in council in about 1871.

Another group of Ibani came to the king of Ataba in-council to seek for permission to settle a kind of plantation on the Island dotted

around Ataba and under the ownership of Ataba between 1871 and 1875. Igbifa (2012) further stated that soon after Chief Wariboko Manilla Pepple was Chief Squiz Atubobara Banigo whom the Ataba people called "Atabara" for short. In his own case he was trading with Chief Nte Ituk III of Ataba. That type of friendship facilitated a decision to give them a section of Okuka Island (Village) for plantation. John (2014) of Bonny affirmed that Chief Squiz Banigo had plantation at Okuka which Bonny called Amanku.

Similarly, about the same time, another Bonny Chief Ada Dapu Allison came to solicit permission from Ataba to settle at Orongokobon and Otute for plantation. King Ijork Oruk XI in-council handed over Orongokobon and Otute to Chief Ada Dapu Allison. Not too long after, another chief, Chief Captain Oju Secundus Hart came to King Ijork Oruk XI in-council and then solicited his permission to occupy the place called Emenokwan. Chief Oju Secundus Hart was a native of Ogu in Okrika. He was a slave dealer and became wealthy, naturalized in Bonny and ultimately became a chief of the Hart House of Bonny. The next person to come was one Chief Oruatale Green. He was given Otuafa. Then the last person to come was one Chief Omoni Brown of Finima. He was given Okpojo.

It is worthy of note, that Obolo did not only provide refuge and permanent settlement for this group of Ibani emigrants but also provided security for Jaja and his group. Jaja aware of the military might and superiority of the Obolo over Bonny, ran to the Obolo for protection. Indeed, the Obolo protected and defended Jaja and his group who took refuge in Obolo territory. After Jaja deserted Bonny, Bonny resolved to force Jaja and his group back to Bonny. So, they made spirited attempt to attack Jaja in Obolo area and force them to return to Bonny. Bonny were vehemently resisted and defeated by the Obolo. Hence Jaja and other escapee became safe and secured in Obolo territory. This culminated in the 1873 Peace Treaty between Bonny and Jaja of Opobo. Essentially; Obolo response enabled Jaja and his group to win the political and economic war even though they lost the battle to Bonny

### **Conclusion**

The Bonny civil war of 1869 was a precursor that led to the founding of another Ibani geo-political entity called Opobo and Queen's Town. This autonomous entity (Opobo) created by the Obolo for the Ibani, has since expanded to become known as Opobo kingdom. They grew into prominence in their socio-economic and political status in the Eastern Niger Delta, Niger Delta, Rivers State and Nigeria. Politically, the Ibani: Bonny and Opobo now have two legislative seats in the present Rivers State House of Assembly. They also belong to two Federal constituencies (House of Representatives and Senatorial District) in the National Assembly. The Obolo in contrast has only one legislative seat and belongs to one Federal Constituency in the National Assembly in spite of their population which is greater than Bonny and Opobo put together.

This late 19<sup>th</sup> century town would not have been in existence without the Obolo response to their settlement problem. The Ibani of Opobo became famous and gained international recognition through Jaja and palm oil trade. The land Ataba in Obolo granted to some Bonny chiefs for the cultivation of their cash crop since 1871 contributed immensely to the revamping of Bonny's economy. The plantation expanded Bonny economic frontier as they engaged in agriculture. Obolo response to the Ibani civil war of 1869 contributed significantly to the socio-economic and political survival and expansion of the Ibani ethnic group in the Eastern Niger Delta and beyond.

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