

## **Trade Relations between the Annang and the Aro of South-Eastern Nigeria in the Pre-Colonial Period**

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### **Abstract**

The thrust of this paper is to examine the inter-group relations between the Annang of present day Akwa- Ibom State and the Aro, a sub-Igbo group in South-Eastern Nigeria during the pre-colonial period. The paper argues that the Aro oracle, *Arochukwu* significantly influenced the course of interaction between the two groups. The oracle was not originally owned by the Aro, but by the Annang who called it *Ibritam*. But because of long time trade contact between them, the Aro adopted *Ibritam* as their god of trade, hence the name *Arochukwu*. The Aro were not only agents of the oracle, but also great traders. They were the main organisers of slave trade throughout the South-Eastern region. To extend the sphere of influence of the oracle and the trade associated with it, the Aro established widespread colonies along their trading routes throughout the South-Eastern region of Nigeria. Through these colonies, they won clients for the oracle and dominated the local markets from which they supplied slaves to the Niger Delta city-states and major towns like Calabar, Kalabari and Bonny. The Aro, therefore, established a hegemony based on religious and commercial domination which in some degrees embraced some form of inter-group relations with the Annang people. As trade constituted an

integral aspect of communal relationship between the Annang and the Aro people in the pre-colonial period, there is a need to examine how it fostered good and conflictual relations between the Annang and the Aro people. This study highlights how the principle of accommodation was managed by them during this period against the practice of discrimination and exclusion that prevails in contemporary Nigeria. The data for this study derived from both primary (interviews and archival materials) as well secondary sources, especially books. They were subjected to historical analysis.

## **Introduction**

Inter-group relations could be referred to as various forms of relations among and between people, especially of differing cultural, linguistic and even racial background, which is as old as human society (Abubaka, 2009). Such interactions could be peaceful through trade, migrations, cultural exchanges or marriages. They could also be violent in nature through wars and conquests (Dioka, 1997). In the opinion of Okpalaeke and Usoro (2017), inter-group relations is an intercourse that transpired between two immediate neighbours just as it was between the Annang and the Aro people. The determinants of these relations include economic, political and cultural factors. It is argued that although trade between peoples of diverse ethnic and cultural background often lead to either conflicts or integration, Nigerian scholars have paid more attention to inter-groups conflicts rather than integration in Nigeria. In doing this, they have focused more on the mega groups as if the whole spectrum of inter-groups relations in Nigeria was always conflictual, and as if it was only the mega groups that existed in Nigeria during the pre-colonial period. However, from our investigation, the history of inter-group relations of the Nigerian people is also replete with instances of harmonious relations as it was with the Annang and the Aro, a greater part of the time.

In tandem with this view, this paper focuses on how trade relations among the pre-colonial Annang and Aro people encouraged accommodation

between them rather than discrimination and exclusion. Although many factors have played important roles in bringing the people together, economic variables, especially trade, were critical to Annang-Aro connection. Therefore, this paper examines the inter-group trade between the people and its implication for the wider spectrum of cultural exchange.

### **Area of Study: The Annang and the Aro**

The Annang is a cultural and semi-Bantu speaking ethnic group that inhabit the coastal end of South-Eastern Nigeria. Annang is the second largest ethnic group in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, occupying an area of about 2,331 square kilometres inhabited by more than one million people (Essien, 2013). At present, the people being the second largest ethnic groups in Akwa Ibom State occupy eight of the thirty-one Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom State, namely; Abak, Essien Udim, Etim Ekpo, Ika, Ikot Ekpene, Obot Akara, Oruk Anam and Ukanafun (Ineme and Udondata, 2014). It is bounded on the West by Ngwa and Ndoki people of Abia State, in the East by Isuogbu; in the South by the Ibibio and in the west by Adoni and Ogoni people of Rivers State. The area is situated in the middle of the Southern half of the tropical oil palm belt upon which its economy was almost completely dependent and is enclosed by latitude  $4.25^{\circ}$  and  $7^{\circ}$  North and longitude  $7.15^{\circ}$  and  $9.30^{\circ}$  East (Toby, 2017). The land scape is generally flat and low-lying, with no point rising above 300ft and no part less than 100ft feet above sea level. It has a level landscape covered by relatively low vegetation and myriads of palms. There is a mean annual rainfall of 2030-2540mm. The rainy and dry season are well marked in the area. . While the former lasts from April to October, the latter begins from November and ends in March. The harmattan wind occurs between December and January. During the rainy season, however, a break occurs in August called the "August Break" (Ennang, 1979). The area is generally humid.

The Aro are an Igbo sub-group, who occupied *Arochukwu*, a town located at the Southern end of present day Abia State. It is a community of more

than 300000 inhabitants, and covers 250 square miles (Stuart, 1966). It is positioned on the east bank of the cross river, and lies 74 kilometres through Bende and 102 Kilometres through Uzoakoli, southeast of Umuahia, the Abia state capital Okoro, 2000). Arochukwu is bounded on the North by Ihechiowa and East by Ututu in Abia State and on the South by the Ito of Cross River State, on the West by the Ikpanja, Iwerre and Makor of Akwa Ibom State. The soil is light and sandy and the area is well watered. There are outcrops of sand stones and laterite in the area, but these are of no commercial value. The Southern part of the area is low-lying and swampy during the rainy season. The Aro people are generally referred to as the Cross River Igbo because of the ethnic, cultural and language affinity between them (Onwuka and Ekejuba, 1978). Arochukwu is made up of 19 villages; Amannagwu, Agbagwu, Amasu, Atani, Amukwa, Assga, Amankwu, AmobaUbom, Isinkpu, Oror, ObinkitaUjari, Ugwuakuman Utiehugwu, Ugwuavo and Ugbo. Each village Chief Eze Ogo is responsible for administering the village and reports to the Eze Aro of Arochukwu.

Apart from the Aro living in the homeland, Arochukwu (*Aro-ulo*), there are a large number of Aro communities in the diaspora, (*Aro-Uzo*). There are over hundred and fifty of varying demographic and political settlement across the Biafra hinterland, which the Aro founded between 1680 and 1890 that still exist till date (Nwokeji, 2010). Among the Aro communities in the diaspora are Ndi-Ikelionwu, Ajali, Ndiowu, Ndiokaleze and Ndiukwuenu in Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State. Aro-Ndi-Izuogu in Imo State is the largest concentration of the Aro-Uzo with five autonomous communities (Okoro, 2001). These Aro communities regard Arochukwu as their ancestral home and also owe allegiance to the Eze Aro, king of Arochukwu who remains even today, the symbol of Aro hegemony. They celebrate common observance and maintained linkage institutions, such as the annual Ikeji festival, the Ekpe society and the Ihu routine homage system. In the past, these institutions fostered and sustained a strong pan-Aro identity that facilitated Aro political interest and

commercial hegemony. The Aro people run a patrilineal social system with well-defined roles for the male and female genders. The oldest man in the family was usually the head of the family and takes decision at the family level. Traditionally, the women have no right to inheritance especially, if they do not have a male child.

Aro history predates Igbo migration and founding of the kingdom of Arochukwu. Before the Igbos started arriving to the Aro region in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Ibibio had already migrated into the area from the Benue and Plateau axis and founded states such Obong Okon Ita and Ibom west of the Cross River. The Igbo migration led by Ese Agwu and Nnachi from the Abiriba and Edda people into the Aro region started in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. These Igbo migrants were resisted by the indigenous Ibibio. However, the Aro won the land from the Ibibio after a series of wars.

The Annang had direct contact with the Aro through Arochukwu, a settlement that had been founded as a meeting point between the two groups. Though the initial contact was peaceful, war soon broke out between the Aro and Annang people. The Aro won with the assistance of another Igbo group, the Abam warriors. The Aro then expelled the Annang from Arochukwu and took complete control of the Arochukwu oracle (also called *Ibinu Ukpabi*), extending its influence deeper into Igbo, Annang and Ibibio land (Dioka, 1997). Thus Aro influence and hegemony became a strong factor in the commerce, religion and judicial system of the sub-region. The Aro rose to prominence in the nineteenth century and wielded enormous political and socio-economic influence over the entire area. This influence was extensive, covering the whole of Igboland, Ibibioland (Annang), Igala, Idoma, Tiv among others.

### **Factors of Annang-Aro Relations**

The geographical factor and availability of resources has made impossible for any nation or ethnic group to be independent in its economic, social and

political life, to the extent of having nothing to do with its neighbours. Nations have always depended on one another for the sustenance of their social economic and political well being. This is because nations and people are not equally endowed with natural resources. While some are endowed with particular natural resources in abundance, others may not, and so, they have to depend on each other. Interdependence (on immediate and distant neighbours) necessitated trade and exchange of goods and services among the Annang and the Aro people during the pre-colonial period. The nature of exchange among them was mainly through trade, even though they also interacted in political, social, religious and cultural fronts for mutual and complementary benefits. The military alliance that was forged between them for example was to protect their economic interest against stronger groups. So, economic relations cemented relationship among the people rather than divide them.

### **Trade**

Trade was one of the major aspects of economic relations between the Annang and Aro. The Annang exchanged their farm produces with the Aro. So agriculture played a major role in the economic relations between the two ethnic groups. Agricultural among the Annang and Aro people embraced farming, fishing and pastoralism (animal husbandry). Both groups usually converged at a common market where agricultural products were marketed. The markets included Urua Utu Etim Ekpo, Urua Azumini, Urua Idim, Abala Market and Urua Akpa where they traded in palm produce. The Aro served as middlemen for the trade in Palm oil, fruits and kernels. Abala and Urua Akpa Adak and Urua Idem were smaller centres and most of Ika traders went to Utu which was nearest and the rest to Azumini. Palm fruits collected at Utu were sent down by canoe on the Qua Ibo River to Ibagwa crushing mill. Oil and kernel were taken direct to Opobo or Eket. From Azumini the palm produce were sent down by canoe on the Aba River to Opobo. Paucity of data makes it impossible to compute the volume of trade that was carried out in the area, though it was quite

considerable. It would appear that hundreds of men purchased bicycles through thrift collection (*osusu*) and carried their oil over a considerable distance to Utu and Azumini. The trade routes stretched from North to South (by River) and West to East (by road), the greater volume going South to Asumini and Utu. The important roads were from Ikot Ama to Utu Etim Ekpo which branched to Achan and Urua Idem. There was an extension from Ikot Ama through Urua Obo Osukpon to Urua Inyan. Two routes linked Urua Inyang (South-West) to Azumini through Imamam in the South-East. Urua Ekpon and Urua Ekpo down South were also connected, with a branch going East wards through Otomo to Utu Etim Ekpo (Dewhurst, 1935).

Other economic activities that facilitated Aro-Annang relations were mining and local handicrafts. The processing of these materials involved many hands and in most cases labourers were recruited across local boundaries which in turn, facilitated inter-group relations. The items produced included diggers, machetes, hoes, arrow tips, gun pipes, axes and knives, which were exported far beyond their production point through trade involving different groups. Items like neckline, horses, cowries and beads were some items the traders bought from Aro area to Annangland.

### **Participation in Slave Trade and Slavery**

One area that dominated economic relations between the Annang and the Aro was the slave trade. The Aro dominated this trade. They purchased slaves from the Annang chiefs, and sold them to the Igbo, Andoni-Ibeno and Efik middlemen in the coastal region, who in turn resold them to the Europeans (Messenger, 1987). In terms of inter-group relations, this was very consequential as slaves who were obtained from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds were forced to live together. Slaves were acculturated and integrated into their new homes. They were utilized in domestic chores, farming as well as human portorage. Among the Aro and Annang, slaves were procured in a variety of ways. The major sources of

slave were war captives and those who breached taboos, traditions or found guilty of witchcraft. But a substantial fraction was made up of victims of violence who were either kidnapped or captured in wars. Kidnapping was also an important source of slave. Though frequent, it did not supply as much as outright war. Unlike the Aro who operated open slave markets and maintained settlements in several localities, the Annang procured theirs on a house-to-house basis and sold to the middlemen. The reason the people adopted this method instead of an open market was to avoid a possible discovery of victims by parents or relations.

The slave trade and the resultant intermingling of persons impacted significantly on Annang identity, economy and genealogy. A key debate concerning the trajectories of the slave trade is the extent to which the number of slaves exported from Calabar and Bonny can be accounted for by slave raiding, kidnapping and judicial penalties (Messenger, 1989). Another way the slave trade impacted on Annang-Aro relations is that, it opened the hinterland of the Annangland to the Aro's traders. It was the Aros who were seeking trade monopolies, who were responsible for keeping the interior closed to direct European contact until the end of the nineteenth century (Messenger, 1989). Igbo-speaking Aro middlemen dominated the trade across the hinterland, including the western Ibibio (Annang) markets and they were known by the Annang people as the "children of the white men" *"nto afaiowo"* because of their close association with the Portuguese. It must be noted however that, even though the Aro enjoyed military superiority over the Annang, owing to the weapons obtained from the Portuguese, they were not slave-raiders of the Annang society.

One of the key factors contributing to the Aro's dominance in slave trade in the area was the flexible structure of the Aro commercial organisation. They established overland trade routes, first with temporary shelters, then through arrangements made with Annang villages which became more



permanent through marriage and kinship ties. The Aro did not constitute a centralised state, rather their commercial success was based on a network of settlements in the Western Ibibio (Annang) speaking region. The Aro traders were known to the Annang as *inokon* and came from the Aro community of Obinkita (Patterson, 2007). Of the five Obinkita lineages, Ndi Akwake operated among the Northern Annang and Ndi Chioka among the Southern communities.

Obinkita controlled a number of satellite settlements, the “colonies”, which were once described as Aro ordained trade centres. These settlements were established through agreements of mutual benefit and it was evident that the survival of the Aro trading network rested on these cordial relations with powerful non-Aro leaders (Dike, 1956). It was this cordial relationship that the colonial authority later misinterpreted to mean that, “the influence of Aro is great with the chiefs of the Annang who will always do their (Aro) bidding” (Northrup, 1939). A corollary of this error was the wrong notion held by some British official that the Aro were the ruling family of the Annang because of their strong trade influence on them Abak Division Annual Report (1911). This point is highlighted in the ability of Roger Casement’s Aro guides from Ndi Okoro to secure passage through Annang’s territory in 1894 (Zachenuk, 1894).

Even though their relationship, most of the time was cordial, there were occasions of acrimony. For example, that a series of separate permissions were required to secure Roger Casement’s safety was an indication of occasional disagreement between the two groups. During the period of Casement attempt to reach Esene in Annangland, it was recorded that Aro trade was blockaded by the Annang. According the Aro “Inokun” who wanted to establish a trade linked with the Opobo had trouble in passing the Annang town of Esene which was the gate way to Opobo (Patterson, 2007). Despite these isolated skirmishes, the Aro supplied the Annang markets with European goods.

### **Trade in Palm Oil and Kernel**

After the trade in palm oil replaced the Atlantic slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century, most of the people in Annangland devoted more of their efforts to the production of palm oil and palm kernel. So, the relationship between the Annang and the Aro was lubricated by the palm oil trade. More so as Aro traders served as middle men between the Annang and the Europeans (Messenger, 1989). The Aro also acted as middlemen between the Annang and their Ngwa neighbours in the supply of palm oil to the local terminus of Ohamblele on the Imo River until Azumini developed as an oil market. The Annang enjoyed a comparative advantage in oil palm production and generated surplus which attracted the Aro traders. Besides, the relatively higher population of the Annang in comparison to their Ngwa neighbours, translated to a higher production and supply capacity. As oil and kernel production expanded into the Annang hinterland, so did the Aro extend their commercial tentacles into the interior.

Furthermore, the North-South trade became more pronounced as yams from the Northern reaches of the Cross River - Ogaga, Abakaliki and Obubra were exchanged for palm oil, fish and salt from the coast. Again, the Aro monopolised both trade in palm oil and foodstuffs in Annang land. Aro traders also acted as middlemen in the sale of cows from Hausa land to Ika, an Annang town. This connection was extended to Ikot Ekpene through Umuahia market. From Ikot Ekpene cows found their ways to Abak and other Annang communities (Dewhurst, 1935).

However, by the turn of the twentieth century, young Annang men exploited opportunities afforded by safer transportation system to enter the preserve of the Aro middlemen and became palm oil and foodstuffs traders, while still maintaining their relationship with the group. Aro trade monopoly was eroded during the late nineteenth century because of their failure to shift from overland trade routes to water transportation to export

the heavy oil puncheons. The Annang became active in the new trade, giving the Aro a keen competition. These developments restructured the Aro economy and affected Aro relationships with the Annang (Nwokeji, 2010).

It is important to state that apart from trade relations between the Annang and the Aro, there were other areas of contact. For example, many Annang groups entered into military alliance with the war-like Igbo communities such as Aro, Abam and Ohafia to fight against their own local enemies. The Abam and Ohafia favoured such alliances because they helped the warriors of Igbo communities to demonstrate their martial valour through which they obtained societal recognition as members of Uffium title holders (Dioka, (1997). The Aro were also greatly influenced by the culture of the Annang and the Efik. For example, the *Ekpo* and *Ekpe* secret societies of the Annang was adopted by them. Inter-groups relations between the Annang and the Aro was also evident in the area of language as most of their names are similar, for example, Afia in Annang is Offia in Aro, Bassey is Obasi, Udo is Udo, Ofong is Offor, Ikwo is Ugwo and Mba is Mbafo among others (Okon, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

We have demonstrated in this paper that trade relations existed between the Annang and the Aro before the coming of European. The research showed that Annang-Aro relationships took numerous dimensions which included trade, migration, conflict and war. Although these factors facilitated inter-group relations among them during the pre-colonial period, the economic factor was more paramount. A series of commercial activities steered the contacts between the two groups. The study has also shown that the mini states of South-Eastern Nigeria, exemplified by the Annang and the Aro, in spite of the neglect on the study of inter-groups relations among such groups, is age-long and has continued to enjoyed a great deal of contact and exchange between them. This goes to show that

the ethnic rivalry the former South-Eastern Nigeria is experiencing is partly because of lack of understanding of the relationship that existed in the past among the various ethnic-groups in the area. Even though there were some skirmishes in the pre-colonial period, the Annang people enjoyed good trade relationship with their Aro neighbour. As shown in the study, trade was the most effective factor that sustained inter-group relations among both groups in pre-colonial period, as it aided the robust relationships that existed between them.

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