

Industrial Fishing in Obolo (Andoni), 1970-2020



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ABSTRACT: The paper explores the impact of industrial fishing on the Obolo (Andoni) people. The Obolo people sometime called Andoni are among the various ethnic groups found in the Niger Delta region precisely, the Eastern Niger Delta. Presently the Obolo speaking people are found in two local government areas, namely; Andoni local government, administered by the Rivers State government, while the Eastern Obolo Local Government is in Akwa Ibom State. Traditionally, fishing is the main occupation of the people. Other occupations of the people include, commerce, farming and marine transportation. The Obolo people are artisanal fishermen and women who engaged in fishing in the creeks, rivers and later in the open sea (Atlantic Ocean). The emergent of industrial or mechanized fishing which probably began in Nigeria in the 1950s has led to an increase in both Nigerian and foreign fishing trawler vessels; which ultimately led to what is described in fishery as “by-catch” and “discard”. Ukpatu (2012:3) defines the “by-catch” as anything the fishermen does not intend to catch namely; sea turtle, fish, crabs, shrimps, sharks, weed and sea debris; while “discard referred to the sub-set of the by-catch or portion of the catch that is thrown over into the sea, Andoni Forum, USA (2004:1). The by-catch is a new trend in fishing among the Obolo in particular and the coastal communities in general. The new trend is described in Obolo language as “Kpokpoben” meaning “don’t select” or “just carry” or “trawler”. The Kpokpoben provides employment, food, boast economic activities of the people of the coastal communities. In spite of what seem to be the advantages, its adverse effects include, depletion in natural fish stock, damage to fishing gears, loss of lives and property. Other adverse effects are increase in sea piracy and water pollution. The study recommends among others, the review / overhaul of the fishery laws in Nigeria, equipping the Nigerian Navy with modern security gadgets and mounting an enlightenment campaign in English and Local languages to create an awareness on the adverse effects of the kpokpoben on the Andoni environment

INTRODUCTION

The Obolo inhabit the extreme corner of the Eastern Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. The territory has between the Bonny river to the west, Bonny to the South west, Ogoni to the North west, Ibibio to the northeast, Cross River to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the South. Andoni Forum in (2004:2). The Obolo territory is divided by the estuary of the Imo River to the Atlantic Ocean into Eastern and Western Obolo (Andoni). The Obolo settlement stretched originally from the estuary of the Cross River to Inyong Okpon / Nyamkpo – the precursor of Finima and Bonny today. As a littoral community, her predominant occupation is fishing, salt making (in precolonial) trading and marine transportation. The Obolo people are famous creeks/rivers fishermen and women. They also engage in open sea fishing, usually in groups of five or more. Many of the fishermen now use outboard engines.

Our area of study, politically comprised the two local government areas of Obolo speaking people administered by Rivers State and Akwa Ibom State respectively. These local government areas are, Andoni local government with its headquarters at Okoroete administered by the Akwa Ibom State government. They speak the same language “Obolo”.

It is not certain when mechanized fishing began in Nigeria. It may have started in the 1950s. The emergence of industrial fishing has tremendous effects on the artisanal Obolo fishermen and women. The industrial fishing has increased “the-catch” and “discard” with its implications on the Obolo environment. Despite what seem to be an economic advantages of industrial fishing on the people, the trend if not check may adversely affect the people in no distant time.

FISHING IN OBOLO (ANDONI)

Obolo is geographically located in the Eastern Niger Delta, presently in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Naturally the people’s occupation are affected by the area in which they live. The environment is vast and congenial network of creeks, waterways and myriads of mangrove clad dictate their occupation. The people derived their main livelihood in farming, trading and marine transportation. Fishing activity in the area could be divided into two, namely; traditional or subsistence and

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commercial. Ama-Ogbari (2009:20) classifies fishing in the Niger Delta into three-subistence or domestic, pond and extensive commercial fishing. The Obolo do not engage in pond fishing but rather in subsistence and later commercial fishing.

Traditional fishing was an age-long economic activity and occupation of many people in the Niger Delta Ama ogbari (2009:20) including the Obolo people. The Obolo adopted various traditional fishing method which include, "Edek" "Aloru" "Ugbu" and "Oket". The first two were restricted to the men folk while Ugbu involved both men and women and "Oket" specifically restricted to the women.

The materials used for making traditional fishing gear include raffia bamboo and locally produced ropes. The method of fishing was the damming of the creeks and this was common among the women. The "Aloru" fishing trap were common among the men and was done in the rivers – like Imo and Andoni. Ama Ogbari (2009:20) describes the damming of the creek as "screening method". According to him, this involve the construction of fences along the mudflats to trap the fishes at the ebb tide. Some of the fishing activity was done at the fishing camps/settlement locally called "Elekpon" or "Okwaan Mbon". Canoes and paddles were bought from Nembe, Opuoko (Ogoni) and Oron for fishing.

The coming of Europeans, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries revolutionized fishing in Obolo. Nets of different sorts and outboard engines were introduced. Modern methods of fishing were adopted and commercial fishing was also practiced. Offshore fishing was embarked upon, while the traditional method is still in use. The various fishing gears introduced include, cast net, drift net, gill net, encircling net, spear, hook and drag nets. All these were used/and are still in use by the Obolo fishermen.

FISH PRESERVATION AND DISTRIBUTION

The Obolo (Andoni) like their coastal neighbours evolved various methods of fish preservation. The preservation methods depends on the fishes involved. In homes and fishing settlements, the smoke-drying techniques are used. Small fishes were smoked on a mat-like structure called in Obolo language "Ngada" or "Odidu", made from raffia palm/palm front, and nypa palm. The fishes are arranged on it and placed on the fire altar to smoke-dry. For the larger fishes, they are either cut into two or more pieces depending on the size, stick sharpened at the end threaded through the fish eyes and placed on the fire altar. However, smaller fishes like tilapia are arranged on what is called in Obolo language "akasi" (racket) and place on the fire altar.

Other methods include, sun-dried especially crayfish, and salting. The salting was usually applied to fishes, the people want to use for cooking soup or other delicacies or give as gift to neighbours, inlaws, relations and friends. Roasting was another method. The fishes were roasted for either immediate use or for cooking, or for later use. Also, electric oven has been introduced of recent, for drying fishes. Of recent cool room/refrigerators of various sizes have been built in several fishing pools powered by generator / solar. These are found at Oyorokoto fishing settlement, Down Bilo, and Elekpon Okoroete.

In terms of distribution, fishes caught were sold locally or fish traders travelled in hand paddled canoes from fishing settlement to fishing settlement selling and reselling fishes and other items. The dried fish were taken to markets in the hinterland-like kaa, (Ogoni), Egwenga (now Ikot Abasi) Ukam, Ete (all in Akwa Ibom) Aba and Port Harcourt.

HISTORY OF INDUSTRIAL FISHING IN NIGERIA

There may be no records of when industrial fishing started in Niigeira. Etim, Belhabib and Pauly traced the history of industrial fishing to the 1950s and classified Nigerian marine fisheries into coastal small-scale (artisanal and subsistence) on-shore and off-shore (distant water). The coastal small-scale fishery refers to the artisanal fishermen who operates within five nautical miles from the coastline and also within the creeks/rivers / lagoons. It is labour intensive and not for commercial purposes. Many Obolo are in the group of the artisanal fishing.

On the other hand, the industrial fishing is commercial. It is capital intensive and utilise large fishing vessels with in-board engine and mechanically operated wrenches, Etim et al 2016. Over the years, there has been an increase in the number of trawler vessels operated by– both Nigeria and foreign fishermen in the Nigerian territorial water.

Between 1950 and 2010, over three hundred and sixty-two (362) trawlers have operated Nigeria; Ukpatu (2012) put the number at one hundred and seventy-three (172) and as of November 2009. It is instructive to note that there are conflicting figures on the number of fishing trawler, licensed by the Federal Department of Fisheries to trawl in the Nigerian waters. However, one thing is certain that industrial fishing started in Europe, spread to Africa (Nigeria inclusive) .

In Nigeria, most of the trawlers are owned by Nigerians; for instance, the IBRU and GLOBE fisheries, while others are owned by foreign firms. There are also foreign fishing vessels illegally operating in the Nigerian waters. The British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC); "Focus on Africa", Wednesday 29 June, 2015 reported that there are illegal fishing activities in the West African Territorial waters by foreign trawlers from China and Korea. These fishing trawlers though have created employment and revenue to the owners and government, their activities have also encouraged illegal trade in the coastal communities.

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THE EMERGENCE OF KPOKPOBEN

The 1970 and 1980s witnessed a new trend in fishing among the Obolo people known as “Kpokpoben” in Obolo language. The researcher described this trend as “fishing without fishing- gear”. As earlier mentioned, the increase in fishing trawlers in the Nigerian waters has led to an increase in by-catch. These by-catch which is untargeted or accidental catch are supposed to be thrown back to the sea according to the fisheries regulation. The ones that are not dead will go and reproduce. The trawler crew selected fin fishes and crabs above 3cm and 10cm respectively at sea for their own use and instead of throwing the by-catch into the sea, decide to exchange it with food stuff, tobacco, Indian hemp and local gin (Ogogoro). Ememugwem (2009:140) describes the by-catch as rotten fishes and attributed it as one of the causes of water pollution.

Initially, the by-catch were given free to the local fishermen in the early 1970s. But as the demand for it increases, the crew decided to ice the by-catch for sell to the local fishermen. Local sources state that the Obolo fishermen started the business in the 1970s and by the 1980s made good fortune from it.

Between 1980 and 2000, the business become very popular, lucrative, and was joined by people from Ibeno and Mbo. Among the Ibeno and Mbo, it is known as “trawler”. The Obolo people started the business with local canoe without outboard engine, later used outboard engines ranging from fifteen horse power to seventy-five horse power. With larger boat constructed with planks by carpenters, high horse power of outboard engines are used.

Sigismund says that to embarked on Kpokpoben business, will require between 1 million and 1.5million naira as of 2022, that is excluding the cost of the boat engine, personnel and other materials.

The following centres were known for this business in Obolo environment: Inyong Ile, Oyorokoto, Muma, Down bilo (all in Andoni local government area in Rivers State); Elekpon Okwaan Obolo, Ogbogbo uti, Agansa, Okoroinyong and Amazaba, (in Eastern Obolo local government in Akwa Ibom State). Some of these settlements were fishing ports. Outside Obolo environment; Ibeno, Mbo and Utawa (all in Akwa Ibom State). The business has grown to a point where the trawler crew no longer accept cash but encourage prospective buyers who now make payment through the banks and present the tellers or print out for the transaction.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT

In spite of the growing emphasis on the production of food crops, fishing remains the major economic activity among the Obolo people and other coastal communities. The advent of industrial fishing in Nigeria had both positive and negative impact on the Obolo people in the Eastern Niger Delta region of Southern Nigeria.

On the positive side, industrial fishing by-catch creates employment for the Obolo people especially the youth. Many youths are involved in the Kpokpoben business though there is no statistical figure to that effect. Going by the fact that each canoe or boat is made up of at least four people, when multiplied by about hundred boats involved, that is about four hundred people, in addition to the women who are involved in buying and selling. There are many youths, men and women who also engaging in clearing and drying the fishes.

In addition, some women are engaged in what is known in Obolo language as “akasi” (racket) making for drying the fishes. Those selling planks equally enjoy patronage as these planks are used for building local boats for the Kpokpoben business. Carpenters from the area and Oron are engaged in the building of the boat. To build a boat, one needs between forty and fifty planks of about 1.75 metres each.

Furthermore, Kpokponben serves as a source of food as fish provides proteins. Ukpatu (2012:2) says that the fish provides sustainable remedy to animal protein deficiency for local people. Though Ememugwem (2009:140) describes the Kpokpoben fishes as rotten and small in size, that was at the early stage of the business, because now the trawler crews iced the fishes before selling them. The trawler crews have gone further to provide ice blocks to the prospective buyers to help preserve the by-catch. Currently, most of the fishes consumed in the coastal and urban areas are Kpokpoben. Other coastal communities have also joined the business because of the profit involved.

In addition, there is an influx of people from hinterland to the Obolo community as a result of the business – Kpokpoben. These include the Igbo, Ilaje (Yoruba from Ondo), Hausa and foreigners – Ghananians, Togolese and Sierra Leonians. The Igbo traders for instance, who migrated into the Obolo area have provided credit assistance for some of the Kpokpoben businessmen to enable them build the boat, buy outboard engines and even cash to support their business. These migrants have also established shops and mechanic workshops in the area.

Again, the influx of migrants into the area have led to cultural diffusion as some marriages have been contracted between the Obolo and some of the migrants. The Ghanaian and Sierra Leonian cloth and clothing have been introduced into the area and other coastal communities. The Obolo people have also imbibe/the Igbo and Yoruba music.

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Also, people are enrolled into cooperative societies to enable them obtain credit facilities for their business from commercial banks. The culture of saving money have been imbibed by the people. Apart from saving money, the various cooperative societies have contributed to the formation of town-unions and social clubs.

The marine transporters are not left out of the business, as they convey traders and artisans from one fishing settlement to another. They also convey traders and other people to various markets within the coastal areas and urban markets at Port Harcourt and Ikot Abasi through the waterways.

Conversely, industrial fishing has contributed to the decline or depletion in fish stock. The inshore industrial fishery operates from about five nautical miles of the coast to the edge of the continental shelf. The artisanal fishermen are affected because these trawlers have encroached into the areas of the artisanal fishing. The fishery laws in Nigerian spells out the limits of operations of trawlers but they have violated the stipulated guidelines. As Calvert (2010; 228-238) puts it, trawlers deplete even the inshore stocks that are only barriers to famine for many coastal folks. This is true because of the method of fishing adopted by these fishing companies – hauling huge trawl nets, sometimes twenty miles long, and this threaten the livelihood of the local fishermen. These fishing companies for instance, hauling huge trawl nets of various sizes resulting in more catch for them (trawlers) and less catch for the local fishermen. The Obolo fishermen like their counterparts in the coastal communities in Lagos, Ondo, Delta, Bayelsa and Cross River States are affected by industrial fishing as aforementioned.

It is instructive to note that both Nigerian and foreign trawlers trawling the Nigerian territorial waters employ modern technology to fish which also results in over fishing and increase by-catch. They trawl for about twenty-two hours in a day and don't adhere to the prescribed gears for trawling.

Another adverse effect is drainage done to the fishing equipment/ gears and canoes of the local fishermen. Sometimes these trawlers will over run the canoes of the local fishermen resulting in canoes mishap, loss of lives and fishing gears. Enemugwem (2009:140) says that on weekly basis, two or three out of five persons in speed boats lost their lives while trying to buy from trawlers. In some cases, the whole five persons will lose their lives. For instance, Chief Isaac Mboh from Okoronboko in Andoni local government area of Rivers State and Elder Clifford Atairet from Okoroete in Eastern Obolo local government area of Akwa Ibom State, in a separate oral interviews narrated their ordeals with two fishing companies stationed at Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital. They sued the Globe Fishing company to court in Port Harcourt and Calabar respectively for damage done to their boats/fishing gears, and lost their suits probably due to their inability to secure a good lawyer. The aforementioned case is one out of a hundred. The local fishermen alleged intimidation and harassment from both Nigerian and foreign trawlers. For example, some of the trawlers, sometimes threatened them (local fishermen) with guns, when the latter complained of damage done to their fishing gears.

The industrial fishing has stimulated crimes especially sea piracy. The upsurge in activities of sea pirate in Obolo area may be attributed to Kpokpoben business. The Obolo territory was not known to be infected by sea pirate but now it is a den of pirates. Pirates have made the Kpokpoben businessmen and trawler crews (both local and foreign) their target. Sea pirates attack and rob the Kpokpoben businessmen of money and other belongings and where money is not available, collect their fuel/fuel tanks, and outboard engines. For the foreign trawlers, foreign currencies, fish, food items, arm and ammunitions are their target. Same goes with the Nigerian trawlers.

Sea pirates have extended their activities to the creeks in the area. In October 2016, pirates killed two Yoruba fishermen at Agansa, a fishing settlement in Eastern Obolo local government in Akwa Ibom State. The story is the same at other fishing camps – like Oyorokoto, Down bilo, Ogbogbo uti, Utawa in Ikot Abasi, Ibeno and Mbo all in Akwa Ibom State. Sea pirate activities in the area is also a threat to foreign investors especially shipping companies. There is also an increase in teenage pregnancy and HIV in the area as a result of influx of migrants. This has resulted in high mortality rate among children and adults who could not assess HIV treatment.

Apart from sea piracy, there are threats to marine biodiversity and ecosystem as the sub-set of the unutilised by-catch are thrown into the sea. This has contributed to water pollution which is dangerous to human health. Also, used plastic water bottles, canned drinks, plastic bags, water proof, cigarette packets by the trawler crews are usually emptied into the sea and this also is a source of water pollution. This may be responsible for environmental diseases suffered by the people.

The trawler crews by selling by-catch and other fishes meant for export by their companies to the fish mongers, have not only robbed their companies of the revenue but also starve the government of the needed fund for development. According to Nte (now a village head of Emeroke 1), a former accountant with one of the fishing companies in Port Harcourt, "the trawler crew, bribe their way so that they could be sent on board especially deckhand workers; and attribute the retrenchment of workers in the fishing companies to the illegal activities of the trawler crew who were in the habit of selling fish and shrimps to fish mongers at sea.

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Moreso, effective planning for the fishery sector may be hindered for lack of data and adequate information. Accurate and authentic catch may not be known by the Federal Department of Fishery (FDF).

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that industrial fishing (by-catch) had created employment, provide food (protein) and boost the economic activities of the Obolo people in the coastal region of the Eastern Niger Delta in Nigeria. Other advantages include, formation of cooperative societies, reduce youth restiveness and crime.

On the contrary, the adverse effect on the people is enormous. These are depletion of natural fish stock as a result of the use of under-sized nets by both local and foreign trawlers. This increase by-catch and reduce the catch of the artisanal fishermen.

Again, it increases sea pirate activities in the area, which has crippled economic activities on our waterways and may discouraged investors from coming to the area and by implication the Niger Delta region. Therefore, the people's hope lies in government overhauling the fishery laws, increase naval patrol to arrest and bring to book, those involve in the Kpokpoben business, pirates and encourages the coastal people to establish fish farms.

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