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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

DOCUMENTING FISHING METHODS AND TERMINOLOGIES: A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL STUDY OF THE OBOLO COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Language documentation plays a crucial role in preserving endangered linguistic and cultural heritages across the world. This study examines the documentation of the Fishing Methods and Terminologies. Fishing is a traditional activity among the Obolo people of Rivers State, Nigeria. The research investigates the linguistic and cultural features embedded in the methods and activity of fishing in Obolo. Through participant observation, interviews with native speakers, and audio-visual recordings, the study documents the Fishing activity as an example of cultural-linguistic expression and a tool for language preservation. The findings of this paper reveal that documenting traditional activities such as fishing methods provides a valuable framework for revitalising endangered language and preserving intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Language Documentation, Obolo, Fishing Activity, Linguistic, Endangerment, Cultural Heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The main goal of documentary linguistics is to keep records of and sustain the endangered linguistic and cultural life of a people. By this, the threatened real life practices of the people are collected, processed, described and preserved for generations to come to be able to see them and continue to practice and pass them to forth coming generations. Through multifaceted means such as texts, word lists, songs, stories, recordings of conversations, pictures and videos, the world view of the people are captured and documented.

Fishing is a unique and timeless tradition of the Obolo people in Rivers State. Obolo is the name of the speech community. They are also known as the Andoni people or community. The river plays an important role in the culture of the Obolo people, mainly because they live beside the river which also serves as the primary means of their livelihood. In the Obolo community, men, women, and children are all involved in fishing. Fish is a source of food and is also an item of trade. It is further used for sacrifice in traditional worship.

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Emenawaji or Ibeji is where fishing activities are done by the Obolo people and the women fish in the creeks because of the roughness of the ocean which the women cannot bear. The Obolo people commence fishing in the Emenawaji when the sea is calm and gives way when it is rough or during hurricane...Emenawaji and lake fishing is usually celebrated as a festival which the whole community and the kingdom take part in the fishing activity between June-July every year. The Obolo fishing activities can be done throughout the year. However, there are three major seasons for fishing namely; dry season fishing, rainy season fishing and flood season fishing. The dry season fishing has different pattern of fishing namely; net fishing (casting net and dragging net), hook fishing, bailing of natural and artificial pond, lake fishing, prawn and crab trapping.

The rainy season fishing also have different fishing pattern (drift net fishing), all patterns of hook fishing and a type of fishing basket with a trap door made with raffia palm sticks. In the flood season, fishing from lake, pond fishing, and every other pattern of fishing in the dry and rainy season is adopted.

Some sea creatures are available all year through, some during the dry season (from November to March) and others during rainy season (from May to August). The people are familiar with the fishing seasons of the different types of fish and the fishing activity usually happens at night because that is when one is likely to have a big catch. The people build houseboat s that protect them from adverse weather conditions and enable them to live on the sea for days.

The language and its Speakers

The Obolo people are about 100,000 inhabiting the extreme South East corner of the Niger Delta, who call themselves and their homeland, Obolo through the name Andoni of foreign origin is also used. The Obolo homeland consists of more than twenty islands that lie at about 4°N 30' latitude and 7°E 30' longitude. The largest island of the group faces the Atlantic Ocean to the South, the Andoni River to the West, and the Imo River to the East.

Most of the other islands lie to the North of Western Obolo, and are separated from it and each other by an intricate network of saltwater creeks. It is on these islands and on the fringes of the mainland to the North that the Northern Dialects of Obolo are spoken. The remaining Obolo islands lie to the East, across the Imo River. The dialects spoken on these islands may be designated the Eastern dialect of Obolo, while the dialects spoken in Obolo itself may be referred to as the Western dialects. Smaller Obolo speaking settlements are to be found in Ijo (Okrika and Kalabari) Ibibio, Eket, and Igbo-speaking areas. (Ejituwu, N.C. (1991). A History of Obolo Andoni of the Niger Delta).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Obolo people dwell in the extreme South East, Rivers State, Nigeria, where fishing is the primary occupation and fishing activities form part of their traditional heritage and culture. Despite the pollution from oil and gas activities, civilization and politics in the environment, they still maintain their primary occupation. Most species of fishes and fish products are endangered or are going extinct. Even with the civilization of present day, the cultural value of the Obolo kingdom is still maintained. However, there is no proper and adequate documentation of certain linguistic and cultural activities from the community. In addition, there is a decline in fishing activities due to factors such as migration, western education, and urbanization which has translated into a loss of the associated vocabulary in the fishing domain. This leads to the fact that there is the need to describe and document the fishing activities, methods and linguistic terminologies of the people.



Objectives

The study is aimed at doing a documentation of the fishing methods and terminologies for fishing and fishing activities in Obolo. The study has the following objectives which are to:

Examine the fishing methods used during fishing activities in Obolo.

Identify the fishing equipment used during fishing activities in Obolo.

Outline the terms of fish and fishing products got from fishing activities in Obolo.

LITERATURE REVIEW**Language Endangerment**

The issue of language endangerment has been a subject of global concern for decades. According to Krauss (1992), up to 90% of the world's 6,000 languages may disappear within this century if current trends continue. An endangered language is one that is no longer being transmitted as a mother tongue to children (Fishman, 1991). Brenzinger et al. (1991) define an endangered language as one with fewer than 5,000 speakers or one that has lost intergenerational continuity.

The endangerment of African languages has been attributed to several factors, including urbanisation, migration, intermarriage, economic pressures, and negative attitudes toward indigenous languages (Crystal, 2000; David & Nambiar, 2003). In the Nigerian context, English and major regional languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo exert strong influence, leading to the marginalisation of smaller languages. Some Obolo lexical items fit within the category of a severely endangered language, used primarily by the elderly and in ceremonial contexts.

Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) further categorises language vitality from "safe" (spoken across generations) to "extinct" (no remaining speakers). Documenting the methods and lexical items used within fishing activity is therefore, critical for revitalisation efforts and scholarly preservation.

Language documentation is a relatively recent branch of linguistics that emerged in the 1990s as a response to the global crisis of language loss (Himmelmann, 1998). It involves the systematic collection, preservation, and analysis of linguistic data, particularly in endangered language contexts. Himmelmann (2006) defined language documentation as the creation of "a lasting, multipurpose record of a language," encompassing spoken, written, and multimodal materials within their social and cultural contexts.

Austin (2006, 2008) and Woodbury (2003) emphasized that a comprehensive documentation project should include recordings, transcriptions, translations, annotations, and metadata. The aim is not only linguistic description but also archiving data for future access and interdisciplinary use. Bird and Simons (2003) proposed the portable data model, advocating for digital preservation standards that ensure accessibility and longevity of linguistic corpora.

In the context of the Obolo community, documentation of the Fishing Methods aligns with Himmelmann's principles. The fishing lexicons constitute primary linguistic data embedded in cultural methods. Recording and transcribing these materials contribute to both cultural preservation and linguistic revitalisation.

Several studies have explored related themes of language documentation and cultural preservation in Nigeria in languages, Pepple (2016), documented ceremonial songs in Ibanji, demonstrating how traditional performance can serve as a repository of linguistic heritage.

Similarly, Osuagwu and Udofia (2021) also documented Palm Oil Production and Processing Terms in Ibibio. These works underscore the need for comprehensive ethnolinguistic studies that connect cultural practices to language preservation.

The present research extends these studies by focusing on the fishing Methods in Obolo as both a linguistic and cultural artefact. By documenting its language use and



symbolic structure, the study contributes to a growing body of work demonstrating how traditional methods can sustain endangered languages.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative ethnolinguistic approach grounded in the principles of language documentation and sociolinguistic fieldwork. The design integrates participant observation, oral interviews, and audio-visual recording methods to capture the linguistic and cultural dimensions of the Obolo fishing activity.

The aim of this design is twofold: first, to provide a systematic linguistic record of the Obolo as used in fishing contexts; and second, to interpret the social meanings and cultural values encoded in the Obolo fishing activity. The qualitative approach allows for a holistic analysis that accounts for both linguistic data and their ethnographic context.

The study employed purposive sampling, selecting participants based on linguistic competence and cultural knowledge. Only individuals proficient in Obolo were included to ensure reliable elicitation and interpretation of linguistic data.

Multiple instruments and tools were used to collect, store, and analyse data, in line with contemporary documentation standards:

Field Notes: Used for jotting down lexical items, contextual observations, and cultural explanations.

Audio Recorder (WavePad Software): Captured songs, chants, prayers, and conversations during interviews and ceremonies.

Video Recorder (Samsung SM-T211): Recorded visual aspects of the Fishing Methods, including equipment used.

Digital Camera (GT-19500): Captured still images of participants and cultural objects.

These instruments collectively ensured a multi-modal record of linguistic and cultural data, consistent with Himmelmann's (2006) emphasis on the inclusion of visual, audio, and textual materials in documentation projects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on the presentation and description of data on fishing methods employed during fishing activities, fishing equipment used during fishing activities as well as the terminology associated with fish and fishing products during Obolo fishing activities.

Fishing Methods Used during the Fishing Activities in Obolo

Among the people, fishing can be done throughout the year. However, the peak period of fishing is from November to January because it is the time of the year when the water level is coming down to the lowest point as the water from the land moves back into the sea. This can also be said to be the flood season. As a result, the fish becomes excess in the Orudonor Lake. In the rainy season, fishing is carried out early in the morning from about 4am. In the morning hours, the river is still and calm and it is believed that the fishes are awake and hungry. In the afternoon, fishing activities are carried out in deep areas of the river where big fishes swim. During the dry season, fishing activities are at its peak at night, because fishes are in scarce supply and they come out of their hiding places at night.

The fishing methods and equipment used are dependent on the site where the fishing is taking place and the individual, whether male or female, carrying out the fishing activity in the Orudonor Lake. There are two major methods employed during Obolo fishing Activities. They include bait fishing and active fishing methods.

Fig.1 Bait Fishing Method





This method involves the use of bait to attract fishes to eat from the hook called 'Nkpótukóók' on a line or a rod, or attract fishes into a basket trap called eket. This method involves the use of worms, leeches, crayfish, grasshopper, shrimp or pieces of fish as bait. The bait would be placed on the hook. When the fish comes to nibble at the hook, the fisherman drags the line to catch the fish. A basket can also be used to trap the fish. This is done by placing the bait in a trap basket for fish to enter in and nibble at the bait. Once the fish enters, it would be trapped depending on the design or capacity of the basket which may have a trap door or tight door for free entrance but makes it difficult for the fish to exit. This method is also known as passive fishing method. Sometimes, the traps can be left in place for a period of time before retrieval. This method consumes less energy and may not be significantly productive.

Hook fishing is the most common type of bait fishing method in Obolo. The size of the hook used determines the sizes of the fishes to be caught. There are many sizes of the hooks. The small size hook catches small fishes while the medium size hook catches medium fishes and the big size hook catches big fishes. The three types of hook fishing employed are:

Ukook otu uti 'hand-held hook' is used with a bait to attract fishes in the lake in a stationary position.

Ufe 'trap hook' is also used in the lake for fishing. In the trap hook method, the hook is fixed to the line, the line fixed with raffia stick and the stick pinned to the ground.

Edek 'line hook' is a type of hook used in the river or lake. The hooks are being fixed with bait and are attached to the line in a space of three meter each. Then the line is being attached with five to ten bamboo sticks on a straight line pinned to the ground of the river.

Fig. 2. Active Fishing Method



This is the opposite of the bait or passive fishing method. This method involves the use of fishing nets, basket and spears. It is done in the Orudonor Lake. The use of net involves an active motion of either throwing or casting the net to drift or setting the net to catch a school of fish.

Fishing Equipment Used during the Fishing Activities in Obolo

Fishing equipment refers to tools or accessories used in the activity of fishing. The equipment has native names and terminologies that were created and are being used by the people during fishing activities. The equipment includes canoes, paddles, nets, hooks, baskets, spears and traps, et cetera.

Fig.3. Újí úbók 'Canoe' and Úràng 'Paddle'



The basic fishing equipment is the canoe called and paddle called Újí úbók and Úràng respectively. Paddles are made in two sizes; a small and big sized paddle. There are paddles with a two-edge are called Úràng Ísí bà used by only men and those with a spherical shape called Atá Úràng used by both men and women. Other fishing equipment include fishing net, fishing hooks, fishing spears and fishing traps made out of woven baskets. The fishing equipment are usually made by the men who are local craftsmen and are skilled in the weaving of different kinds of fishing baskets. Most of the fishing equipment are not crafted on a daily basis irrespective of demand, hence, when the equipment are not in use, they are carefully stored away. The raffia palm bamboo stick called Ngwo ebeke is used in constructing fishing basket traps and fishing rods.

Fig. 4. Njin 'Fishing Net'



Many years ago, the local fishermen in Obolo used only traps and spears for fishing activities. However, after the advent of different kinds of fishing nets, the Obolo people created native names and terminologies for them. Production of fishing nets is usually done



by the men in the community. Unfortunately, most of these names are not being used again due to the decline in fishing activities, civilization and western education.

Fishing nets are like mesh bags attached to a handle used to scoop up and catch fish once they are attracted and stuck on the net. Fishing nets enable safe landing and handling of fish without losing them during the retrieval process. There are different or various sizes of fishing nets and the size of the net is determined by the fishermen by measuring the size of the net with their fingers. The depth of the lake and the size of the fish determine the size of nets the fishermen use.

Fig. 5. Akra 'A type of Fishing Net'



The three major types of net are the drift net, casting net and the drag net. Their measurement can be in two, three or four fingers. Fishing nets are used to catch fishes both in deep and shallow area of the lake tied from one end to another with different fingers. The two-finger net is used to catch small fishes in a depth of two feet while three and four finger net area used to catch medium and big fishes in a depth of three and four feet respectively. As mentioned above, the three types of Njin 'net' are drift net, casting net, drag net and cane net.

Kpoyi 'drift net' is used in a shallow area of the water. Drift net has two types, one called two fingers net that can reach a depth of two feet for fishing in shallow water while another one called four fingers net for four or more feet depth reaches fishing. Njin utop 'casting net' usually reaches a depth of three or six feet deep water. It also used three or four fingers net.

Ekoon 'drag net' is used for fishing in both shallow and deep water and it is held by two or more people.

Fig. 6. Uji ubok 'cane net'

Uji ubok 'cane net' is a special kind of net made from cane and net woven around it used for catching fishes in a lake by deeping it and moving with it in shallow areas of the lake.





Fig. 7. Úkóók ‘Fishing Hook’



Úkóók is a sharp, curved hook-like device attached to the end of the fishing line to catch fish. Hooks come in different sizes and styles depending on the nature of fishing and the size of the target fish. The size of the hook used determines the size of the fish to be caught. There is a one-inch hooks called Úkóók ijá ‘a smaller hook’ used for catching small fishes, two-inch hooks known as Úkóók nkíkét íbà used for catching medium sized fishes and three-inch hooks called Úkóók nkíkét ítá used for catching bigger-sized fishes. They may be placed on a short rod called kala Òkwúkwùt ijá or long rod called Òkwúkwùt. Fishing bait called Nkpó ótúkóók are food or substances in the form of worm, crayfish or pieces of fish placed on the hook to attract the fish. The rods are made from raffia palm bamboo sticks and they are used to cast and retrieve the fishing hook. Most two-inch hooks are hung on a long fishing line to form a trotline called Úkóók nkíkét íbà. The trotline is used to catch medium sized fishes in the shallow parts of the Orudonor lake.

Fig. 8. Òkwùn Írìn ‘Fishing Basket’





Fig.9 Nkata 'Fishing Basket'



Fig 9. Okwun 'Raffia Palm Fronds Fishing Basket'



Okwun is usually woven out of cane, raffia palm fronds or raffia palm sticks. These fishing baskets come in different shapes and sizes and may be used as a trap to catch fishes or to store fish. Okwun is used by women and children to carry fishes and other fishing tools when they are done with for the day or period of time. The trap baskets usually have wide openings and narrow bottoms which makes it easier for fish to enter into the basket and difficult to get out. While fishing, a big basket known as Nkata, is used to store any big fish caught while small baskets known as Eket, is used to store small fishes, prawns and crabs. Another basket called Efie is used for storing fresh fishes from the lake.

After the fisherman returns from fishing, the fishes caught may be preserved by drying them over the fire. The dried fish is then stored in yet another type of basket with a cover called Efie uben.

Otunwa ile 'Fishing Spear'

There are two main types of spear used in catching fish: Otunwa ile or Oraan 'single headed spear' which is used for catching middle and big-sized fishes from the Obolo lake in deep or shallow areas of the lake. This type of spear is used by Obolo men only.



Fig 10. Òtùnwà ílé or Oraan 'single headed spear'



Òtùnwà ílé or Oraan 'single headed spear'

Fig. 11. Òtùnwâ ótú jààbà 'multi-headed spear'



Another is the Òtùnwâ ótú jààbà 'multi-headed spear', used for catching small fishes in a shallow area of the lake and it is made especially for men. However, women use these spears for fishing in this present day.

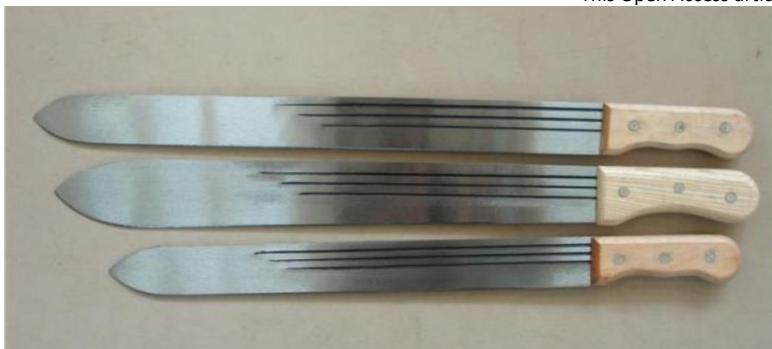
Fig. 12. Úti ìbèn ìrìn 'Fish Carrier'



This fish carrier is used to carry fishes and other fishing tools when they are done with fishing for the day or a particular period of time. The Úti ìbènìrìn is usually reserved for use by the only men.

Fig. 13. Ògè 'Fishing Machete'





The Ògè 'machete' is a common fishing tool used for different purposes before, during or after fishing activities. It is used for clearing, killing and preparing or processing. Before fishing activities, the machete is used for clearing water hyacinth on the lake for people who are fishing to be able to move freely. During fishing activities, it is also used to kill fishes in shallow area of water while observing the movement of the fish. After fishing activities, the machete is used for preparing the killed fishes mainly for smoking and drying. It is also used to remove scales, gills and intestines of fishes at this point.

Fig. 14. Úbèn 'Fish Grill'



The Úbèn is a fish grill used for drying and smoking killed fishes from the lake. The grill is used when the fish scales, gills and intestines have been removed.

Terms of Fish and Fishing Products Got from Fishing Activities in Obolo

This section presents an outline of terms and their gloss associated with the fishing activities of the Obolo people. It includes fish names, fish baits, fishing equipments and fish products.

Table 1. Term of Common Fishes

Term	Gloss
Írìn	Fish
Úgbá	Catfish
Óbù	golden catfish
Óyá / Àkrákát	small catfish
Ólá	Mudfish
Íkót Íbòtílé	Prawn
Íkòp	Tilapia
Íkòp ófífít	black tilapia
Íkòp údùńg	rainbow tilapia
Íkót	Crayfish
Írìn ile	giant fish



Úkà	Crab
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Table 2. Terms of Common Baits

Term	Gloss
Ñkpó ótúkóók	Bait
Àkùkòók	Earthworm
Átát íbòtílé	soldier ant
Mbük / Mkpút	Maggot
Únwáán	pieces of small fish

Table 3. Fishing Equipment Terms

Term	Gloss
Újí úbók	Canoe
Úràng	Paddle
Átá Úràng	spherical paddle
Úràng Ísíbà	two-edge paddle
Òtùnwà	Spear
Òkwúkwùt	Rod
Ùkóók	Hook
Òkwùn	Basket
Ñjìn	Net
Úbèn	fish grill
Ògè	Machete
Útì íbènìrin	fish carrier

Table 4. Fishing Hook Terms

Term	Gloss
Ùkóók nkíkét gè	half or one inch hook
Ùkóók nkíkét íbà	two inches hook
Ùkóók nkíkét ítá	three inches hook
Ùkóók nkíkét íní	four inches hook
Ùkóók nkíkét gò	five inches hook

Table 5. Fishing Net Terms

Term	Gloss
Ñjìn	drift net
Ñjìn chíèèn íbà	two fingers net
Ñjìn chíèèn ítá	three fingers net
Ñjìn chíèèn íní	four fingers net
Ñjìn útòp	casting net
Àkrà	drag net

Table 6. Fishing Basket Terms

Term	Gloss
Òkwùn	trap door basket
Éfíè	small basket
Éfíè ílé	large basket
Éfíè úbèn	basket for storing dry fish
Ótúkpóók	basket for storing fresh fish



Table 7. Fishing Spear Terms

Term	Gloss
Òtùnwâ ótú gè	single-headed spear
Òtùnwâ ótú íbà	double-headed spear
Òtùnwâ ótú ítâ	tripod-like spear
Òtùnwâ ótú jààbà	multi-headed spear

Table 8. Fish Product Terms

Term	Gloss
Áráng ìrìn	fish oil
Írín ñchat	dry/smoked fish
Írín ñkálá	spiced fried fish

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have been able to document and explain the methods employed in carrying out fishing activities, the equipment as well as a lexicon or terminologies associated with fishing activities.

The objective of this research served as a guide and includes to: examine the methods adopted by during fishing activities, identify the fishing equipment used during fishing activities, and outline the terms used in the register of fishing domain.

We observe that fishing activity remains a vital repository of Obolo linguistic heritage and documentation of such activities is essential for language revitalization and cultural continuity.

Fishing is the primary occupation of the Obolo people and fishing activities form part of their traditional heritage and culture. However, civilization and shift to lucrative jobs in the oil and gas industry have led to a decline in fishing activities which translated into a loss of the associated vocabulary in the fishing domain.

Furthermore, the paper underscores that language and culture are mutually reinforcing. The erosion of vocabulary associated with fishing activity corresponds with a gradual decline in the practice and understanding of traditional activity.

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