

Historical Analysis of Piracy in Oro Nation Waterways

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Abstract

This study examines a holistic historical analysis of piracy in Oro Nation waterways, from the pre-colonial period to the contemporary era. In studying the evolution of piracy in the Oro Nation, this research uncovers the complexity and interplay of political, economic, and social issues, which accounted for the unabated persistence of this maritime and coastal security threat. The study emphasises how piracy has adapted in response to shifting historical contexts, including colonialism, the pursuit of independence, and current security challenges. The research adopts a qualitative historical method weaved through an examination of primary and secondary sources. This study reveals the historical patterns of piracy in Oro Nation's waterways and recommends effective measures such as community engagement, international cooperation, and continuous monitoring to address it.

Keywords: Piracy, Oro Nation, Waterways, Maritime, Security, Historical Analysis.

Introduction

Piracy has been a persistent threat to maritime security in Oro Nation regional waterways. The phenomenon has attracted significant attention from scholars, policymakers and international bodies because of its negative impact on maritime trade, national security and stability and the livelihoods of the innocent indigenous seafarers and fisherfolk whose main source of economy remained the seas, rivers and creeks.

Despite the compact and attention it has generated from the pre-colonial era to this date, the historical activities and context of piracy remain understudied; hence, this study attempts to address and fill the knowledge gap by providing a historical analysis of piracy in Oro National Waterways.

The Oro Nation is located in the Niger Delta region of what is called Nigeria today. Oro Nation is a hub of maritime commerce, cultural exchange and oil and gas exploration concentrated in all of her five (5) Local Government Areas, which are altogether marine-bearing. The nation's strategic location and abundant natural endowments have made Oro Nation a hotbed for pirate-related activities.

Nevertheless, piracy continually developed from the pre-European era to the contemporary period in response to the evolving political, economic and social issues in the area and its environs. As a result, comprehending the historical narratives of piracy would be critical for evolving proactive methods to eliminate this age-long anti-socio-economic act of insecurity in Oro Nation. Oro Nation has long been a hotbed of both economic growth and security challenges. The area is rich in oil and gas reserves and has been the hub of traditional nautical activities and the murky underbelly of maritime piracy since the pre-colonial period. The study examines the complex relationship between maritime piracy and its impact on local seafarers, whose livelihoods rely on the sea. It sets the context by highlighting the region's historical connections to its rivers, which have been significantly transformed by criminal activities, oil exploration, and various socioeconomic and environmental challenges.

Marine piracy evolved from isolated incidents to more organised, violent crimes that mirrored broader socio-political issues such as unemployment, environmental degradation, and disputes over resource management. Since the pirates relied on Oro Waterways, which are the major routes to Cameroon, Gabon, South Africa, Namibia, and Equatorial Guinea, sailors, who are seagoing people, had to adjust to the combined threats of piracy and economic hardship by using different tactics, which shows how their methods were both changing and staying the same. In order to better comprehend the relationship between local livelihoods and global

maritime concerns in Oro Nation, the study will analyse these dynamics and provide insights into how local seafarers cope with evolving risks and the effects of piracy in the region. In 2019, the Suppression of Piracy and Other Maritime Offences Act was passed by the Federal Government of Nigeria to adequately domesticate the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the suppression of unlawful acts into the Nigeria laws.

Oro Nation: Location and People

Oro Nation is located on the South African fringe of the Nigerian state called Akwa Ibom, found in the Niger Delta region of the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Geographically, Oro Nation, which is located at the southern part of Nigeria, is bounded to the south by Ibeno, the Atlantic Ocean, and Cameroon; to the north by the Ibibio communities of Nsit Atai and Uruan;¹ to the north by the Ibibio communities of Nsit Atai and Uruan; and to the east by Calabar and the Cross River estuary.¹

While belonging to the governmental entity of Akwa Ibom State, established in 1987 and encompassing the Ibibio, Oro, Anang, Ibeno, and Obolo ethnic groups, the Oro people maintain a unique identity. Their lineage can be traced to a Usakedet (Cameroonian) ancestor, Ukpa-Abang, and they have consistently asserted that they are not genetically related to the Ibibio and Anang; conversely, they acknowledge the Ibeno and Obolo (Andoni) peoples as “blood brothers” predating their migrations to their current locales.²

Conceptual Clarification

Piracy

Article 101 of the UNCLOS, together with Article 3(1)(b) of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery (ReCAAP) established on April 28, 2005, and Article 1 of the Djibouti Code of Conduct, defines piracy as any unlawful act of violence, detention, or depredation committed for private purposes by the crew or passengers of a private vessel or aircraft, directed against another vessel or aircraft, or against an individual or property aboard such a vessel or aircraft on the high seas. It constitutes unlawful conduct against a vessel, aircraft, individual, or property in a location outside the authority of any state. Any act of voluntarily engaging in the

¹O. E. Okpon. *The History of Akwa Ibom State and Her Thirty One Local Government Areas at a Glance* (Uyo: Robertou Communications. 2007) p.97.

² Edet Efiang Okon. *Usakedet Hypothesis in Akwa Ibom History*. An Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Uyo, Uyo. 2023. P. 89.

operation of a vessel or aircraft, with full awareness of circumstances that render it a pirate entity, constitutes participation in piracy. Furthermore, it encompasses any action that incites or purposefully facilitates the aforementioned act.³

However, the issue of piracy has evolved over the years, taking a different trajectory. Its growing dynamism seems to have extended beyond the nomenclature given to it by UNCLOS. Given the burgeoning definitions in light of the mobility of threats posed by piracy, this current research shall adopt a broader definition of piracy to include riverine criminality, coastal or low-reach piracy, and deep-water piracy. Piracy, for the sake of this study, shall be defined as all illegal acts of violence and criminality committed against individuals, boats, and vessels on creeks, rivers, coastal waters, and the high seas.

Dimensions of Piracy in Oro Nation Waterways

To fully comprehend the activities of maritime criminals in Oro Nation against the seafarers and fishermen, it is relevant to consider the aspects of piracy and how they impact the area. As asserted by Jacobson, piracy is categorised under riverine piracy as follows: coastal or low-reach piracy and deep offshore piracy.⁴ They are further expatiated as follows:

Riverine Piracy

This aspect of piracy existed from the pre-colonial era, especially from the 15th century, when slave trade began to be in vogue. They are commonly referred to as ‘pirates’ in the local community, despite the fact that their illegal acts do not fall within the modern UNCLOS definition of piracy because they operate in the waterways and creeks where local passenger boats, fishermen and other seagoing people remain their targets. Some pirates caught by Nigerian security operatives and reported by the media are most likely riverine criminals and illicit oil bunkers apprehended in the Niger Delta’s creeks. Local residents and fishermen in the region face greater and more horrible security danger from this group than multinational vessels and their crews.⁵

³ L. Bento, “Toward an International Law of Piracy Sui generis: how the Dual Nature of Maritime Piracy Law Enables Piracy to Flourish”, *Berkeley Journal of International Law* Vol.29, 2009, p.399.

⁴ Katja Jacobsen, ‘Pirates of the Niger Delta: Between Brown and Blue Waters’. Global Maritime Crime Programme UNODC, (2020) p.30.

⁵ Katja Jacobsen, 2020 p.32.

Low Reach and Coastal Piracy

This class of pirates operates up to 40 nautical miles from shore, mostly concentrating on small ships. These gangs normally operate close to their land-based hideouts or bases, and their operational range is normally limited in nature. The main targets are coastal fishing boats, as well as oil and gas support boats and tankers involved in cabotage activities. They target the local crew of passenger ships rather than foreign seafarers while equally resorting to plundering, racketeering and kidnapping for ransom.⁶

Deep Offshore Piracy

Deep offshore piracy is the most well-acknowledged type of piracy. Pirates of this class have advanced equipment, networks, and access to the Atlantic's larger flanks. Their operations extended beyond the West African coast, reaching deep into international waters where they came into contact with major maritime traffic routes. A careful study of this group of pirates shows that they have, over the years, developed sophistication and expertise, as marked by their ability to increase the number of foreign hostages per attack. These groups, known as deep offshore pirates, have expanded their presence beyond Nigerian seas into the larger Gulf of Guinea. Although the exact number has been challenged by oral sources in the field, who feel it is higher, there is widespread agreement on the growing influence and activities of deep-water pirates over the study's time.

Pre-Colonial Piracy in Oro Nation Waterways

The Oro Nation, located in Nigeria's South-South coastline region, has a strong marine heritage spanning back before colonial control. One dimension of her history is the menace of piracy during the pre-colonial period. To that purpose, this study would look into the phenomenon of piracy in Oro Nation waterways, investigating its causes, repercussions and implications for the region's growth and development.

⁶ UNCTAD: "Maritime Piracy (Part II). An Overview of the International Legal Framework and of Multilateral Cooperation to Combat Piracy". United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, (2014) <http://unctad.org/en/publicationlibran/dilltili2013>

The Concept of *Mmatang* or *Mbatang* and Origin of Piracy and Kidnapping in Oro Nation Waterways

Although colonial-era piracy in the area under study was intensified by its unique and strategic location at the intersection of national and international trade routes, historical evidence suggests that the Oro Nation people were the first in the Niger Delta region to experience piracy and kidnapping. Their coastal position exposed them to frequent attacks by Portuguese pirates and kidnappers who invaded the lower Cross River area before the formalisation of the Atlantic slave trade in the 15th century.

According to Uya, the notions of piracy and kidnapping were entirely unfamiliar to the Oro people, who endured the violent incursions of the now-extinct Portuguese raiders that once invaded the coastal areas of the Oro Nation. The raids had made the entire Oro coast terrified due to the presence of European pirates, slave kidnappers, and raiders known as *Mbatang* or *Mmatang*, which means "raiders", "kidnappers", or "pirates" and may also be rendered literally as "Whiteman" or "European"⁷. The activities of the early European pirates and raiders in the areas resulted in the displacement and migration of some Oro Nation settlements into the hinterland of Ibibioland to escape those riverine and coastal attacks.

From the foregoing, it is widely acknowledged that the primary attraction for early European pirates and kidnappers to the Oro Nation's estuary was the search for able-bodied slaves. However, the Oro people firmly rejected the European concept of the slave trade on both moral and customary grounds. Their collective opposition to human trafficking explains why the region never established or accepted a slave port during the pre-colonial period.

Uya recounted a particular event of European piracy and kidnapping in the Oro Nation area as below:

There was a case of one Mbokpu Uko Akai man named Nduebak, who was captured by European pirates and raiders. On receiving the news, the village organised and sent out two search parties. One headed for Idua and the other for Udung Uko. The Udung Uko party caught up with the pirates and raiders at Eyotai Beach as they were about to set sail with their victim. Startled by the trackers, they escaped into swamps, leaving Nduebak in chains. But luck ran out on one of them. He was caught and

⁷ Okon Edet Uya. *A History of Oron People of Lower Cross River Basin* (Oron: Manson Publishing Company, 1984).

executed. This incident served notice that Oro was not a profitable place for the obnoxious trade⁸.

As asserted by Okon, it is evident that of all the groups and people in the Niger Delta region, the Oro people were the first to see, meet and interact with the early Portuguese, whom they named *Mbatang* or *Mmatang* due to their despicable activities of coastal or riverine piracy and kidnapping. Other groups in the hinterland, like the Ibibio, Efik, Annang and even the Igbo, met Whitemen of Europe at the eve of the colonisation of Africa; hence, they named them *Mbakara* and *Baike*, respectively – those who rule⁹. Pre-colonial piracy in the area's waterways was a phenomenon driven by economic factors¹⁰. It must be stressed that Oro people and other Africans were highly morally conscious before colonialism; therefore, the idea of waylaying and taking economic advantage of a fellow brother was a taboo to African customs and traditions until its introduction by the early Europeans in the early 15th century, beginning in the Oro area of present-day Nigeria.

Piracy in Oro Nation Waterways during the Colonial Period

The colonial era in Oro Nation, which lasted from the 19th to the mid-20th centuries, was renowned for its shifting political, social, and economic development in the region. One of the major problems encountered by the colonial government was piracy, specifically in the Niger Delta region where the Oro Nation is geographically found. As a result, piracy in Oro Nation during the colonial era was a challenging phenomenon accentuated by various factors such as economic, social and political motivations. This study examines the nature and causes of piracy in the colonial period.

Nature of Piracy in Oro Nation during the Colonial Period

During the colonial period piracy in the Oro Nation took various forms. Local pirates targeted European ships and trading vessels, disrupting trade and commerce. Pirate groups also form alliances with local rulers and communities, further complicating the situation.

It seems reasonably clear that the leadership of Oro Society did not have sufficient resources with which to build an effective power structure directly through

⁸ Okon Edet Uya. (Oron: Manson Publishing Company, 1984). p. 83.

⁹ Okon E. Okon. 53 Community Leader and Lawyer, Interviewed at Eyotai Village, Udung Uko on 27/08/2024.

¹⁰ E. J. Alagoa. The Niger Delta States and their Neighbors, 1600-1800. *Journal of Africa History*. Vol.11, No.2 1970, Pp 255-274.

the enlargement of the king's house. Economic issues altered the pattern of political relations between the several lineages of the area. The spirit of clannishness and the affectionate attachment to tradition and genealogical ties were weakened by the economic difficulties caused by a stagnant trade. Bickering and internal feuds between kin groups became rife. Since many households contributed to the prosperity of the coastal towns and communities, the chief house (*ufok offong*) faced growing pressure from the other houses demanding a larger share of the trade profits. This created tension and made it difficult to address the various challenges posed by maritime crime in the Oro area¹¹.

Causes of Piracy in the Oro Nation

Several factors contributed to the persistence of piracy in Oro Nation during the colonial period. Economic motivations played a significant role as pirates sought wealth and control of trade. The disruption of traditional trading patterns and the imposition of colonial rule created economic instability.

Social factors, such as kinship ties and communal involvement, further facilitated pirate activities. Additionally, the colonial authorities' failure to address local grievances and provide adequate security created an environment conducive to piracy.

Post-Independence and Contemporary Activities of the Pirates

The pirates' post-independence actions gained strength after the start of the Nigerian Biafra War, which took place between 1967 and 1970¹² on the waters and land of the Oro Nation. Pirate activities in the Oro Nation intensified in the years following Nigeria's independence, particularly during the Nigerian–Biafra War (1967–1970), when the region's waterways and lands became active zones of conflict and vulnerability.

Following the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1958 and resulting spillover and exploration in additional areas of the Niger Delta region, the activities of sea and river criminals, kidnapers, and pirates became more pronounced, as multinational

¹¹ Kannan K. Nair. *Politics and Society in South Eastern Nigeria, 1841-1906: A Study Power, Diplomacy and Commerce in Old Calabar*. (London: Frank Case and Company Limited, 1972), p. 159.

¹² Brigadier General Godwin Alabi-Isama. *The Tragedy of Victory: On-the-spot Account of the Nigeria-Biafra War in the Atlantic Theatre* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2013), Pp. 37-55.

corporations such as Exxon Mobil, Shell BP, Chevron, Agip, and Sinopec, among others, became targets of kidnapping for ransoms and bargains for environmental degradation and injustices.¹³

The activities of pirates in Oro Nation's waterways have become so disturbing that fishermen and travellers departing from the local ports and beaches of Oron, Ibaka, Udung Uko, Ebughu, and Enwang for destinations in Cameroon, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea continue to live in constant fear and abject insecurities. It should be noted that by 2008, Nigeria's waterways were considered the second most dangerous after Malaysia, owing to the constant reports of pirate attacks and insecurity along the waterways¹⁴.

From 1970, when the Nigerian civil war ended, the Oro Nation's waterways up to Calabar Creeks and parts of Bakassi were heavily terrorised by sea pirates of the Ijaw and Okrika ethnic nationalities of Rivers State. They pretended to be fishermen, the same as Oro's innocent victims, but were completely armed with bows and arrows, which they used in subduing their victims, whose belongings were seized forcefully. Following the modernisation of their notorious trade of piracy, those Ijaw and Okrika pirates began to use guns because the same innovation was applied in their attacks against the emerging oil companies' facilities at sea¹⁵.

Offong Efiang Okon claims that pirates have also moved into riverine creeks, rivulets, and even major streams leading to popular beaches and fishing settlements such as Esuk Eyotai/Usung, Ine Okong, Esuk Eniongo, Uteh Esuk Anwang, Issa, Mberekpa, Uti, and Mberekpa, among others. Along the various creeks, pirates would invade and seize all the fishing gear and outboard engines and either beat the innocent seafarers up mercilessly or kill their victims after extorting whatever available amount of money and valuables from them¹⁶. Pirates have militarised the whole coastal territory of the Oro Nation and its surroundings, causing serious economic and social problems for vulnerable fishermen and sea and river travellers.¹⁷

¹³ Odumayak Okpo. Moral Obligation of Multi-National Oil Companies (MNOCs) in Host Communities: The Case of Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Ibom Journal of History and International Studies (IJHS)* (Vol. 16, No.1 March 2017), p. 121.

¹⁴ NDES, Niger Delta Environment Survey Report, 2019. Pp.41-52.

¹⁵ Edet Okon Ekpo, 66. Clergyman. Interviewed at Eyotai on 27/8/2024.

¹⁶ Offong Efiang Okon, 83, Retired Fisherman and Family Head. Interviewed at Atak Ibang on 27/8/2024.

¹⁷ Udeme Efiang Idua. 48. Resident of Bakassi, Interviewed at Abana on 27/8/2024.

According to Nkoyo Ephraim Nyong, who was kidnapped and later released after a large ransom was paid, pirates operating around the Bakassi area and parts of the Cross River estuary have built makeshift huts in the dense mangrove forests near fishing settlements. As a result, the sea route to Ikang through the Akpa-Edok creeks has become extremely dangerous and nearly impassable.¹⁸

Significance of Oro Nation Waterways to Nigeria's Economy

The area located in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria holds immense significance for Nigeria. These waterways have been a vital component of the nation's development and growth. Below are the aspects of the significance of the Oro Nation's waterways to Nigeria's and Africa's economies:

Economic Significance

One of the primary economic significances of the Oro Nation waterways is their roles in fishing and aquaculture. The waterways have supported the livelihoods of a large number of fishermen and aquaculture practitioners, thereby providing sources of income and employment opportunities to the people and outsiders from the pre-colonial period¹⁹.

Equally, the waterways have contributed to West Africa's fish production and the protein needs of the population through exports. Oil and gas exploration and production in the area are of great importance to the overall wellbeing of the Nigerian state. For decades, the waterways and surrounding regions have served as a hub for petrochemical activities, generating substantial government revenue and providing numerous employment opportunities²⁰.

Before the arrival of the Europeans, the Oro waterways played a vital role in facilitating maritime trade and promoting tourism in the region. People who live along rivers, in cities, and in foreign markets at Oron Town and Ibaka can all connect to the waterways. This promotes tourism, economic growth, and national development.

The economic relevance of the Oro Nation Waterways has consistently been undermined by the political and clannish tendencies of successive Nigerian and Akwa Ibom State governments. Additionally, the area's potential for international economic

¹⁸ Nkoyo Ephraim Nyong.71. Victim of kidnapping. Interviewed at Eyoating Osung on 27/8/2024.

¹⁹ Anonyms. Niger Delta Environment Survey Report; 2019, p.50.

²⁰ NNPC, Anndal Report and Financial Statements. 2020. Pp 303.

engagement has been constrained by persistent insecurity and severe environmental degradation, which together have hindered sustainable development.

Historical Significance

Following the arrival of Western colonisers and slave traders, the waterways of the Oro Nation emerged as a significant route in the trans-Atlantic slave trade²¹. Nonetheless, the indigenous Oro people refrained from participating in the trade²², which neighbouring kingdoms such as the Igbo, Efik, and Ibibio regarded as a crucial component of their economic sustenance and expansion²³.

Cultural Significance

The Oro Nation Waterways for centuries have been a centre of great cultural significance. The waterways harboured sacred spaces and hosted numerous indigenous and traditional festivals and spiritual ceremonies. The area's enviable cultural heritage and potentials are reflected in her intricate boat carvings, aquatic crafts and rich oral traditions²⁴.

Consequences of Piracy in the Oro Nation

Piracy has had far-reaching consequences for the Oro Nation area: trade and other economic activities were disrupted with adverse effects on indigenous local businesses and livelihoods²⁵. The negative effects of this maritime crime on the social and economic wellbeing of the communities within the area were of severe significance, leading to an increased and unabated rate of insecurity and violence.

²¹ Nzewunwa. The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Niger Delta. *Journal of African Studies*. Vol. 44, No.1 2013, Pp. 33-46.

²² E. J. Alagoa. The Niger Delta City-States and the European Powers, 1800-1880. *Journal of African History*. Vol.11, No.2. 1970. Pp. 309-322.

²³ Okon Edet Uya. *A History of the Oron People of the Lower Cross River Basin*. (Oron: Manson Publishing Compabny. 1982). P.79.

²⁴ I. S. Ibaba. The Impact of Oil Spillage on the Livelihood of Fishing Communities in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. *Journal of Environmental Science and Technology*. Vol.8, No.2 2015. Pp.143-154.

²⁵ Robert Horton. The Niger Delta: A Study of the Economic and Social Development of a Nigeria. *Nigeria Institute of Social and Economic Research*. 1969.pp.59-90.

Piracy has contributed to the displacement and migration of individuals and communities from the pre-colonial period. For example, most communities of the Oro nation are today found in the Ibibio hinterland, such as Ekim in Mkpato Enin and Unyenghe in Nsit Atai Local Government Areas, among others.

Conclusion

Piracy has been an uncontrollable crime in Oro Nation's maritime zone with its unabated rate of insecurity and other unaccounted consequences to the indigenous economy, communities, environment, and politics. The historical analysis and incursion of piracy in Oro Nation dates back to the pre-colonial era due to various economic, social, and political factors. Also, the causes of this hydra-headed illicit activity in Oro Nation are complex and multifaceted. Economic instability, poor governance, environmental degradation, and social inequality have created an environment conducive to piracy, thereby resulting in a devastating situation which would disrupt trades and cause human rights abuses, environmental degradation, and regional economic instability.

To combat piracy in Oro Nation, it is essential to address its root causes. Strengthening institutions, promoting economic development, protecting the environment, and addressing social inequality are crucial steps towards reducing piracy. Effective policies, community engagement, international cooperation, and continuous monitoring are necessary implementation strategies. The Nigerian government must take proactive measures to address piracy in Oro Nation. This includes establishing a robust maritime security framework, enhancing international cooperation, promoting economic development, and protecting the environment. The government must also engage local communities in piracy prevention efforts and provide adequate support to security agencies.

Furthermore, regional and international cooperation is critical in combating piracy in Oro Nation. The Nigerian government must work closely with neighbouring countries and international organisations to share intelligence, coordinate efforts, and develop effective strategies. The international community must also provide technical assistance and support to Nigeria to combat piracy.

In addition, research and development are essential in identifying effective piracy prevention strategies. Scholars and experts must conduct research on piracy in Oro Nation, identifying its causes, consequences, and solutions. This research will inform policy decisions and ensure that efforts to combat piracy are evidence-based.

Piracy in Oro Nation requires a multi-faceted approach to address its root causes. Implementing effective policies, promoting economic development, protecting the environment, and addressing social inequality are crucial steps towards reducing piracy. The Nigerian government, the international community, and local stakeholders must work together to combat piracy and ensure maritime security in Oro Nation.

By addressing piracy, the Oro Nation can enhance maritime security, promote economic growth, protect the environment, and improve livelihoods. It is imperative that proactive measures are taken to combat piracy and ensure a secure and prosperous future for the people of Oro Nation.

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