

The Impact of Fishing on the Eastern Niger Delta People of Nigeria, 1885-1945

Odeigah, Theresa Nfam, Ph.D

Department of History and International Studies,
University of Ilorin, Kwara State
Odeigah.tn@unilorin.edu.ng

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the impact of fishing as an occupation, on the peoples of the eastern Niger Delta area of Nigeria between 1885 and 1945. Fishing was an indigenous occupation that sustained whole families long before the imposition of colonial rule and its introduction of white collar jobs. Fishing contributed to the growth and development of the Eastern Niger Delta area. It was a form of agriculture that was practised by both men and women in the eastern Niger Delta area. The fishing implements used were vestigial and crude. They included different types of traps, hooks, nets, poisonous chemicals and poisoned arrows. This paper examines critically fishing as an occupation and its contribution to the indigenous economy of the Eastern Niger Delta. The study concludes that fishing activities held sway in the Eastern Niger Delta area of Nigeria during the period under consideration and also contributed to the sustenance of the indigenous economy of the Eastern Niger Delta area.

KEYWORD: Impact, Fishing, Eastern Niger Delta, Colonial Rule, Indigenous Economy.

INTRODUCTION

Fishing was an important ancient economic activity in the Eastern Niger Delta area of Nigeria. It was a popular economic activity both in the coastal and hinterland areas, and it was of tremendous value to the people of the Eastern Niger Delta because, apart from the economic benefits, it had social and cultural advantages for the villages and communities that engaged in it. The ecology of the Niger Delta region consists mainly of swamps, creeks, rivers and waterways. These made possible an economy based on fishing and farming alongside other economic activities in the area. Fishing was paramount among the people of the Eastern Niger Delta and was dictated by the adaptability of the people to the ecology of the area. Ethnic communities in the eastern Niger Delta area that engaged seriously in fishing include the Ijaw, Efik, Ibibio and Oron who live in the coastal areas. Outside the coast, groups found in the hinterland of the Eastern Niger Delta area, such as Boki, Ojoja, Ugep and Obudu were on part-time fishing, being more involved with farming activities. In the hinterland areas fishing was based on subsistence needs, because efforts was being concentrated in farming as a result of limited seas, while in the coastal areas the people

were living in riverine areas where big seas surrounded the communities. This gave room for the coastal people to be specialist in fishing than the hinterland people.

Many different types of fish were caught in the rivers such as moults fish, electric fish and catfish, among others. Prawns, crayfish and periwinkles were also found all over the study area.¹ Fish provided a rich source of protein and, therefore, good nutrition for the body. This really ensured good nutritional outcomes of the poor people in their communities.

Different forms of fishing in the Eastern Niger Delta

There were several methods of preserving fish once caught, such as sun-drying, smoking, boiling and salting. The fishermen were adept in the construction of canoes, paddles and fishing nets. All these items were locally fabricated by indigenous skilled professional canoe builders in the Eastern Niger Delta. Occasionally, they travelled far away to settle in camps near rivers or waterways where fishermen would see and buy their canoes. For example, the Oron often travelled to Ijaw land to buy fishing equipment for effective fishing expeditions. The Ijaws with numerous rivers, seas and water way has a vibrant fishing industry and this played a vital role in the economic activities of their neighbours. The economic pursuit among the people of Ijaw encouraged fishermen from other communities like Oron and Calabar among others to trade with them. This played a crucial role in the livelihoods of the people. The Ijaws were good in canoe building and this was a centre where most fishermen travelled to buy their canoes and other equipment for fishing. ² These activities helped the growth and development of the pre-colonial economy of the Eastern Niger Delta area.

Fishing in the Eastern Niger Delta, 1885-1945

The history of the fishing industry in the eastern Niger Delta area dates farther than 1885. Among the earliest mentions of it was the report by a Portuguese sea captain, political analyst and historian Pachecho Pereira, who had visited the Niger Delta region in 1508. ² He recalled how the communities in the region, particularly the Ijaw, exported fish to the hinterland areas in exchange for agricultural produce. ³ Fishing was such a major part of the life of the coastal peoples in the eastern Niger Delta area that the industry dominated over both farming and animal husbandry. In actual fact, the Efik, Ibibio and Oron, among others, who lived around the coastal swampland where food crop cultivation was impracticable, depended on the hinterland groups for food crops. For instance, the Obubra, known for their yam cultivation, traded their surplus to the Efik and other coastal peoples. Other groups in the hinterland notable for cultivation of other crops did as well with the surplus as did the Obubra with yam ⁴. The Efiks and Ibibios were good in fishing, trading and carving of wood. It is important to note that between 1885 and 1945 the fishing activities were the same, no visible difference was recorded.

Women in the eastern Niger Delta especially in the hinterland areas like Obudu, Boki and Ikom among others, engaged extensively in fishing as a part-time occupation. It is important to note that in the hinterland areas men were not really involved in fishing, because of farming activities. In the hinterland areas, Women took days off their farming activities for fishing because it was taken as a part time occupation, due to their major involvement in farming activities.⁵ This was as a result of the ecological system in the area. In the Eastern Niger Delta they are two types of terrains, coastal and the hinterland

areas. Among the coastal people like the Efik and the Ibibio their major occupation was fishing while places like Boki, Ogoja and Ugep were into part time fishing. That was the reason that in the coastal areas the fishing activities dominated any other occupation.⁵

Fishing expeditions were organised after the farm work by the women of the hinterland areas because of the nearness of the streams and rivers to their farms lands. The fish caught from such expeditions were mainly for family consumption, and other private family needs. Some of the hinterland areas like Boki, Ikom, Ugep, among other places, took farming as their major occupation. Production of yams, plantain, cassava, banana, maize, pepper, cocoyam, palm oil, water yam, melon and others constituted the main produce of the hinterland people of the Eastern Niger Delta area.⁶

Fishing Implements

In fishing, the most important implements required were traps of different types, hooks, spears, nets, chemicals, poisoned arrows, paddles and dugouts. All these implements were manufactured locally by the people and some of the implements were bought from their neighbours.⁷ The internal trade that took place within communities in the coastal areas of the Easter Niger Delta and it environment was mostly because of fishing market. It is generally belief that fish or cray fish from Calabar and Oron are delicious. The fishing tools that were manufactured from Ijaws land were most bought by the people of Calaabar and Oron. For example, the Ijaws were experts in the production, manufacture and repairs of fishing implements. Fishing was so important to the Ijaw people, that when a woman gave birth, the child would be taken to a river or waterway for immersion in water for about two seconds, before being taken out of the water. This ritual was said to be very symbolic to the Ijaws. This practice signified that the baby would be well acquainted with water before the attainment of maturity.⁸

Fish was used for local consumption and also conveyed to local and distant markets for sale. The coastal people, because of the difficult terrain of the area with many rivers and creeks, had canoes as their major means of transport. The people of Oron were also great canoe builders, and they built most of the canoes that were used for transportation and fishing, especially in the coastal areas.⁹ They were very skilful, and therefore were called specialists in canoe building since the work was reserved for a few skilled individuals. Those who were specialists in canoe building moved to areas where adequate raw materials where available. The biggest trees were used for the construction of canoes.



Fig 1: Canoes. www.google.com

Paddles and poles were also made by canoe builders. 10 All the sewer equipment were made from hard, matured and durable wood. It is pertinent to note that, fishermen were usually very good in paddling canoes, because they were required to undergo some training by the skilled fishermen. Canoes were owned by fishermen, and those who could not afford one would rent from the owners at a cost. 11

Fishing was a highly skilled profession among the people of the Eastern Niger Delta area, and those who took this as their main occupation travelled several kilometres away from their immediate environment to fish. For instance, the fishermen from Oron could travel to Calabar on fishing expeditions. Most times, the fishermen had camps and settlements, where small buildings were put up for their accommodation. The settlements or houses were mostly located in mangrove swamps by the river banks. Some of these small houses were built with cheap and disposable materials. Clay soil was used to mould the blocks and they were kept to dry up for a period of time, in preparation for the laying of the blocks. The houses were roofed with raffia or palm leaves.¹² Some of the fishermen and migrant canoe builders could be away from home for more than six months, or even a year, before returning to their families. Canoe was a lucrative business among the men and those who were specialist were seen as wealthy and hard working men. They were highly respected by their communities.¹³

Techniques of Fishing in the Eastern Niger Delta

Open sea fishing was very common in the Eastern Niger Delta. There were many different techniques used in fishing, and one of the major techniques is the use of fishing nets. 14 Fishing nets were made usually by knotting with relatively thin threads or wires woven across each with other regular spaces between them. There were nets of different sizes and shapes, such as hand net, bag net and trawl net, among others.¹⁴ Hand nets for example, were held open by a hoop, and had a long stiff handle. Hand nets had been known since antiquity, and were used for sweeping up fish near the water surface. The trawl nets, most times,

were kept inside the water for days before the harvest time.¹⁵ Another method employed for catching fish is by using hooks. Fishhook is a device for catching fish either by impaling them in the mouth or in the body of the fish. This was used centuries ago by the fishermen to catch fish. Hooks were made of hundreds of different hooks attached to a line of ropes, and after attaching the several hooks to the real line, the end of the lines were anchored to a big tree beside the river. There are enormous varieties of fish hooks in the area, there are fly hooks, lure hooks and bait hooks.¹⁶ These were all used to enhance the efficiency of the occupation.

Fencing technique was also a common fishing method that was used in the hinterland areas, where there were small rivers and waterways. This technique was in the form of a semi-circle fence by the river bank fully tied with nets. The fences were made up of nets and raffia palm leaves. This technique prevents the fish from going back to the sea after entering the fence. This method of fishing was common to the people of the hinterland areas, who took fishing as a part-time job.¹⁷ There was also another form of the fencing method. This was a method whereby a portion of the stream was divided into two, and completely fenced off from the other half with thick wood, leaves and soil. The water left in the centre was then scooped off to reveal the fish for the individuals to catch.¹⁸ This technique was mostly carried out by the hinterland women and children.

Digging of holes by the river banks was another technique most individuals used in catching fish. This was mostly carried out by the men. During the dry season most fish found their way to the hidden holes to stay. Fish were also caught through poisoning of streams and pools of water by the use of chemicals. This was usually done by some desperate individuals secretly, after which within a day or two, the dead fish will float on top of the water.¹⁹ This technique was not encouraged, because of its inherent health hazards on unsuspecting human beings who consumed the fish, and also because it contaminated the water and the environment generally. Baskets were also used for fishing in the streams and waterways. The fishing baskets were made with materials from the palm tree.²⁰

Preservation of Fishing in the Eastern Niger Delta

Fishes were preserved in different ways. Fish preservation is the method of extending the shelf life of the fish, and other aquatic animals. There were different methods used in fish preservation in the Eastern Niger Delta. The most common method was by smoking the fish. The process involved erecting platforms of different dimensions. The fishes to be smoked were placed on platforms, which were then placed on the open top of a mud oven. The oven had fire placed at the base, where firewood was burnt to produce the heat. Fishermen smoked their fish on these platforms in their backyards.²¹ The firewood fetched usually by the women and children for drying the fish were laid under the platforms. Different sticks were laid across the top of the platform, and the fish were placed on top of the sticks. A long stick could also be used to pierce the head and the tail of the fish, before placing it on the platform to dry.²²

Another method of fish preservation is salting. In this process mats were kept on the platform, and fishes brought out of water were kept on the platform for two hours before they were salted. In this method, salt is applied directly on the fish and this immediately kills them, and the fish were kept in the sun for some days.²³ Boiling of fish was another form of preserving fish in the Eastern Niger Delta. This was the

fastest method of preservation. The fishes were boiled for a short period and could be consumed immediately, or kept for just one or two days, by warming them on fire on a daily basis. All these methods of fish preservation helped in extending the shelf life of the fish, and also in reducing wastage.²⁴ There were several traditional ways by which fish was stored after the preservation treatment. Specially designed clay pots were very often used for storage of the fish. Fish were also stored in baskets until a market day when they were sold. When the fish were kept for too long in the storage devices, they were brought out for further drying in the sun, repeatedly, to avoid decomposition and wastage

Calabash storing was also one of the devices used in the storage of fish. Calabash is originally part of a big fruit taken from a particular tree called *Crescentia-cujete*, and then kept on the ground for about three days to decompose, after which the fruits are cut open. The contents of the fruits are then removed and the hard outer cover which is the calabash is kept in the sun for another three days to dry. This storage device was mostly used in Boki, where the fish were kept until the appropriate market days, when they were to be sold.²⁵ Wooden boxes were another form of storage device used in the Eastern Niger Delta. Wood was constructed in the form of a box, after which the fish are kept inside the box pending later use or outright sale.²⁶

Marketing of Fishing

Fishermen in the coastal areas of the Eastern Niger Delta used canoes as the means to convey goods to the markets. In the coastal areas, the markets were established and located, most times, close to the river banks. The hinterland people brought their produce like yams, or palm oil, for sale, or in exchange for fish, with the coastal people. It should be noted that in the hinterland areas also, the markets were established in the open, usually close to the centre of the village with trees to provide shade. The markets were well organised and trading activities went on successfully. These markets were, either periodic, or daily. Periodic market days were so arranged to avoid clashes with neighbouring markets. The guiding principle was that proximity in space should imply separation in time, this was to enable people participate in almost all the trading activities in the other markets.²⁷

The market places were well laid out and some markets even had tents. Most of the fish markets in Calabar, held in the morning from 7am to about 11am, or in the evening, from about 5pm to 7pm. The Ibibio people traded among themselves, as well as with other villages and towns. The commodities involved in the transactions were fish, salt, palm oil, cassava and pottery, among others. Selling of fish went beyond the market places because fish were sold in streets, compounds and houses by children, who peddled the items all over the town.²⁸ In the hinterland areas, roads to far away markets, imposed risks because of road traffic accidents and insecurity by thieves. This occurred usually when traders were going to the markets, either to buy, or sell their fish in the neighbouring towns or villages. For example, the Calabar people regularly travelled to Oron market to buy fish.

Risks and Hazards of Fishing

Fishing, like any other economic activity had its own hazards, even during the period under consideration, in the Eastern Niger Delta. One of the hazards which affected some fishermen was the frequent capsizing of the canoes during fishing, as a result of turbulence on the seas, and rivers or, from

inclement weather conditions, like heavy fog, or havoc, caused by big fish like sharks, or other aquatic animals. Canoe as a major means of fishing and even transportation generally in the Eastern Niger Delta, was prone to accidents. Several of such accidents occurred in the Calabar area in 1889, and in other places such as Oron in the Eastern Niger Delta.³⁰

Hazards faced by fishermen

Fishermen were also exposed to very cold environment in which they operated, and as such chest infections and pneumonias were very common among the fishermen. Hot weather conditions also imposed some problems on the fishing activities, such as heart rash and boils, among the fishermen. Fishermen also faced the hazard of heavy rainfall during the raining season.³¹ Heavy downpour caused the water and waterways to be unstable during fishing, and this adversely affected the fishermen. Fishermen who lived in fishing settlements most times lost their property, because of the over flowing of the river banks. High level of water during the raining season in the hinterland area was another hazard faced by fishermen in the Eastern Niger Delta area, because during the raining season people found it difficult to fish due to the high level of water. ³²

High mortality among the fishermen was an obstacle to the fishing industry. Most of the fishermen were faced with the hazards of dangerous snake bites with very lethal venoms, especially with snakes like cobras and the rattlesnakes. Wild animals and dangerous reptiles such as elephants, hippopotamus, crocodiles, cowfish, sharks and dangerous vipers imposed a serious danger to the fishing industry. Some of these animals or reptiles caused the canoes to capsize in the river. Furthermore, injuries of various degrees occurred during fishing because of close contact with the fishing gear.³³

Fishing in the Eastern Niger Delta had its own hazards, one of which had to do with the health of the fishermen, because of the increased breeding of mosquitoes in the environment, malaria fever which was very prevalent, led to a lot of mortality and morbidity among the fishermen.³⁴ The terrain of the Eastern Niger Delta especially the coastal areas encouraged the breeding of mosquitoes, which eventually resulted to a lot of diseases in the area. In the pre-colonial period many people died as a result of malaria and some other infectious and parasitic diseases. In spite of this, there were medicine men that had the knowledge of botanical medicament of herbs. There were different forms of indigenous medicine that were used such as dongoyaro.³⁵ Neem known as *dogonyaro* was a well-known plant for the treatment of malaria and played a vital role in the health of the fishermen especially when malaria became a major public health threat and impediment to fishermen. *Dongoyaro* leaves were used in the treatment of malaria.³⁶ The leaves were boiled in most cases with lemon grass in water and those who were sick drank out of the water and also inhaled the aromatic vapour steam by using thick blanket to cover round their hands to induce profuse sweating. For example according to Bassey Okon, most fishermen died because of malaria, but those who survived the malaria used the treatment of *dogonyaro*. The prevalence of malaria was high in Oron because of the ecology of the area. ³⁷The *dogonyaro* leaves after boiling was also used in bathing as part of treatment. It is pertinent to note that, *dogonyaro* leaves was one of the most vital treatments used all over the area and even Nigeria as a whole during the period under consideration.³⁸



Fig 1: *Dogonyaro* tree leaves and water. www.kamdora.com

The water of *dogonyaro* was used by a patient simultaneously until the malaria was gone. This was a plant with many healing properties. Other healing benefits were in the treatment of skin disorders, its use for pain relief, anti-inflammatory properties and even in keeping bones healthy.³⁹ *Dogonyaro* was sometimes mixed with pawpaw leaves in the treatment of malaria and other health related issues.⁴⁰ Pawpaw leaves and its roots were used for the improvement in the immune system of the body for those who were down with malaria. All these leaves were beneficial to fishermen who were sick with one illness or the other. Furthermore, other water borne diseases like river blindness, urinary *Schistosomiasis*, in which the victim passes blood in the urine, were all the diseases that the fishermen in the Eastern Niger Delta region had to contend with at that time. All these hazards were common due to the peculiar environmental factors, and also a general low level of health awareness at that time in the Eastern Niger Delta.⁴¹

Conclusion

The Eastern Niger Delta as an area with numerous seas, rivers, streams and water ways, had a vibrant fishing industry that played a vital role in the economic activities of the people, during the period under

consideration. Adaptability of the Eastern Niger Delta people to the ecology of their area could perhaps explain the relevance of fishing in the Eastern Niger Delta area. Fishing was an important economic pursuit in the area, to the extent that, its influence was acknowledged by foreign sea merchants and explorers as an example of how man can adapt to his environment. In the absence of white collar jobs, the local fishing industry thrived, and despite the use of crude fishing implements, the local indigenous fishing economy was vibrant, and this contributed tremendously to the growth and development of the Eastern Niger Delta. Fishing in the Eastern Niger Delta, also brought social and cultural benefits to the people. There were occasional fishing expeditions involving many communities, and this brought the people together. The fish markets were located in various communities and market days were arranged in a way that there was no clash of market days so that every community had a chance of participation and a sense of belonging.

Notes and References

Onwuka Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria, 19th – 20th Centuries*, Second Edition, (Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers Ltd., 2014), 50-51.

A. I. Ifediora, 'Fishing in the Economy of Pre-colonial (Ale- Iwere) Itsekiri Land', in O. N. Njoku(ed.), *Pre-Colonial Economic History of Nigeria*(Benin-City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 2002), 63-64.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Duarte-Pacheco-Pereira>

OnwukaNjoku, *Economic History of Nigeria, 19th and 20th Centuries*, (Enugu: Magnet Business Enterprises, 2001), 31.

Ibid

Ibid.67-70.

Oral interview with Eyo Etta aged 91, place of interview Oron, date of interview 26th Jan, 2017

M. Holden, and W. Reed, *West African Freshwater Fish (West African Nature Handbook Series)*, (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1972), 62-63.

J. P. Dittimi, *A Geography of Delta State*, (Warri: COEWA Publishers, 1993), 12.

Ibid.

F. J. Pedler, *Economic Geography of West Africa* (London: Longmans, 1955), 39-43.

Ibid.

Kehinde Faluyi, 'Hunting and Fishing in Nigeria in the Nineteenth Century' in T. Falola, and Ann Hear, (eds), *Studies in the Nineteenth Century Economic History of Nigeria*.(Wisconsin: Madison, 1998), 87.

G. O. Ogunremi, 'The Structure of Pre- Colonial Economy' in G. O.Ogunremi (ed) *An economic History of West Africa Since 1750*. (Ibadan: Rex Charles Publication, 1996), 20.

Oral interview with James Etim, aged 95, place of interview Calabar, date of interview 24th Jan, 2017
Harrison Church, *The Economics of Transportation in Africa*, (New York: Nok, 1946), 86-88..

Ibid.

T. Stride and T. Ifeka, C. *Peoples and Empires of West Africa, West Africa in History 1000-1800*, (Hong Kong: Thomas Nelson, 1971), 159.

Ibid.

G.O. Ogunremi, *Counting the Camels: The Economics of Transportation in Nigeria*, (New York: Nok, 1982), 24-26.

¹Shaw Thurston, 'The Prehistory of West Africa', in J. F. Ade Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds) *History of West Africa*, (London: Longman, 1971), 69.

Richard and Jon Lander, *Journal of the Expedition to Explore the Course and Termination of the Niger*, (London: Longman, 1832), 198.

A. G. Hopkins, *Economic History of West Africa*, (New York: Longman Inc, 1973), 43.

M. R. Bonavia, *The Economics of Transport*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 78.

K. O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830- 1855*, (Oxford, 1956), 89.

Ibid.

Harrison Church, *The Economics of Transportation in Africa*, (New York: Nok, 1946), 86-88..

Ibid.

T. Stride and T. Ifeka, C. *Peoples and Empires of West Africa, West Africa in History 1000-1800*, (Hong Kong: Thomas Nelson, 1971), 159.

Ibid.

E.J. Alagoa, 'Long Distance Trade and State of the Niger Delta' in *Journal of African History*, vol. xi 3, (1970), 272-276.

Ibid. ¹*Ibid.*

Obaro Ikime, 'The Peoples and Kingdoms of the Delta Province', in Obaro Ikime (ed) *Groundwork of Nigeria History*, (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980), 89.

Ibid.

M. Holden, and W. Reed, *West Africa Freshwater Fish, West African Nature Handbook Series*, (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1972), 63-64.

Ibid.

L. M. Roger, *Economic Today*, (New York; Harper Collins Collage Published 1996), 123.

Ibid.

www.kamdora.com

Oral interview with Bassey Okon, aged 90, place of interview Calabar, date of interview 30th Jan, 2017

Oral interview with Obi Owan, aged 80, place of interview Oron, date of interview 26th Jan, 2017

Ali Arazeem Abdullah, Trends and Challenges of Traditional Medicine in Africa, African Journal of Traditional Complementary and Alternative Medicine: AJTCAM. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

Oral interview with Maria Offum, aged 60, place of interview Ntamante, date of interview 22th Jan, 2017

Oral interview with Obi Owan, aged 80, place of interview Oron, date of interview 26th Jan, 2017