

# Taboos as cultural challenges encountered by women fisherfolk in some coastal fishing communities in Nigeria

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*Nowadays, our local traditions and cultural beliefs are being ignored and regarded as obsolete because of civilization.*

Fishing, fish processing and marketing are some of the most important economic activities that women fisherfolk do in Nigeria. Women's engagement in fishing activities, however, are enormously affected and influenced by local taboos and traditional beliefs. Extant cultural taboos and patriarchy institutions strongly reinforce gendered norms and relations in small-scale fishing communities of developing countries. Despite Western civilization's influence, reverence in value systems and beliefs in traditional spirituality have continued to sustain prevalent cultural taboos. Therefore, the context and roles of cultural taboos as gender issues in fishing communities need to be sufficiently understood, researched and documented before any relevant economic empowerment programme or project is initiated.

Taboos are unwritten rules based on cultural norms that are transmitted from generation to generation through socialisation, and which regulate the way people interact with the world around them by prohibiting certain activities or actions by considering them dangerous or sacred. In traditional fishing societies, the observance of taboos in the context of local fishing communities are used to: 1) maintain subsistence fishing pressure within sustainable production; 2) conserve nature and maintain ecosystem balance; and 3) protect fish stocks. Inevitably, these taboos are also used as cultural adaptations by fishers to avert unchangeable risks or dangers associated with fishing in a hostile natural environment such as the sea. However, local taboos in fishing communities are often gendered. It is imperative to note that highly gendered divisions of labour and prevalent gender relations are influenced by prevailing tradition and cultural taboos, rather than by biological limitations. Patriarchy is also a very strong force that complements traditional beliefs, value systems and customs shared by both men and women in communities where influences of secularism, globalisation and modernisation are not fully embraced. Patriarchal traditions and gender relations have been institutionalised over time and remain deeply embedded in the social fabric of some African societies. Local taboos affect and influence women fisherfolk perceptions that certain activities and natural phenomena are controlled by traditional deities or spirits. This insinuates the way their environment is being controlled and governed. In turn, this exerts a potent influence on local women fisherfolks' socioeconomic activities, and for these reasons, women tend to concentrate on the postharvest pursuits.

This article illustrates some of the cultural taboos that shape the activities of women fisherfolk in certain parts of Nigeria. The narrative here focuses on the role and influence of a water deity in the lives of women fisherfolk. Despite their diverse ethnic origins and vulnerabilities, women fisherfolk are increasingly proactive in confronting these daunting challenges. Some of the challenges encountered are outlined below. Among the Ilaje and Egun fisherfolk occupying the country's Atlantic coastline, the sea goddess, Malokun is a water deity highly revered for her supernatural power to give wealth and inflict punishment on individuals who violate or abandon local, traditional sociocultural beliefs or taboos. Very prominent among the taboos against Ilajes women fisherfolk, is the prohibition of sex before commencing fishing activities. This is traditionally attributed to the sacredness and unblemished nature of the sea goddess and the strong belief that having sexual intercourse angers her. This taboo is strictly adhered to in order to avoid misfortune during fishing. In some rare situations, the few fisherwomen who came in direct contact with the sea goddess while fishing revealed that she is very beautiful and spotless. The majority of the fisherwomen, therefore, purify themselves by bathing before they go fishing to avoid infuriating the goddess. A women fisherfolk nursing a baby of less than three months is also prohibited from fishing. It is believed that a time frame of 90 days is required for absolute purification and cleansing of the woman after giving birth. This is strictly adhered to in order to avoid the untimely death of the child and the mother. Egun women are culturally prohibited from fishing. They are active, however, in the post-harvest sector where they process and sell fish. If an Egun woman violates these fishing ethics, she experiences severe calamity, which is believed to be caused by the sea goddess. She might also be killed and buried near the extensive coastline. This scenario is mainly attributed to a popular traditional taboo that a woman cannot be an occupant of a fishing boat because she could desecrate the sea and pollute Malokun with her menstrual blood. This is regarded as a taboo because such women are perceived as being unpurified.

Furthermore, it is forbidden for fisherwomen to carry or possess charms in fishing boats. A situation where the violator refuses to own up to carrying a charm but then throws the polluted item away, may result in the boat capsizing and causing death. If, however, deaths are averted, poverty, calamity and sickness will be experienced. Malokun also prohibits eating coconut before fishing. A considerable majority of the Egun fisherwomen also believes that Malokun is the local sea goddess of social justice; this is attributed to the reporting of defaulters and debtors to her. According to traditional beliefs, defaulters or debtors will lose property, become lunatics or die if their outstanding debt is unpaid. To

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avert these unfavourable consequences, debtors are strongly warned before reporting to the sea goddess. Debtors instantly appease the sea goddess after paying the debt. If the debtors persistently refuse to yield to warnings, they face unpalatable consequences. Religious beliefs also play a factor. Muslim fisherwomen are forbidden to venture into the sea but are allowed to fish the whole day while fishing in inland waters because of family responsibilities, socioengagements and domestic chores.

Most women fisherfolk in coastal parts of Nigeria are limited by these taboos, which restrict them to artisanal fishing activities in lagoons, creeks and rivers. Their exclusion from fishing at sea is institutionalised in gender norms and traditions. Women's predominance in the post-harvest sector is acceptable due to the perception that such activities are an extension of their gendered roles in the domestic domain. Although it may also be plausible to explain that fishing is a very difficult activity because it requires perseverance and muscular strength, it is cultural taboos and patriarchal systems that determine and reinforce the gendered norms in fishing communities.

## References

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