

**FISHING, FISHING FESTIVAL AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN AFIKPO  
NORTH, EBONYI STATE**

**EMEAFOR, Obinna F.**

Department of Archaeology and Tourism, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

**NWAOPARA, Jane Nwamaka**

Department of Industrial Design, Yaba College of Technology, Nigeria

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**ABSTRACT**

*The main thrust of this paper was to conduct a qualitative study of fishing festivals and fishing-related activities among the Ehugbo people of Afikpo North, with a view to understanding how fishing activities can be repositioned to play significant role in tourism development in Ebonyi State. Using coastal communities such as Unwana, Ndibe and Ozizza as case studies, the specific objectives of the study were to: (i) describe fishing festival in the Afikpo Area, (ii) ascertain the challenges confronting fishermen in their fishing endeavour, and (iii) examine how fishing-related activities can be developed as tourist attractions. The study made use of qualitative approach to enquiry where in-depth interview and field observation were employed as primary data gathering techniques. Data from primary sources were complemented by secondary sources of data from books, academic journals, unpublished theses and public library. Thematic analytical approach was used in analyzing qualitative data, and presented in the form of interpretative-descriptive narrative. It was found that Ehoma and Iyieke lakes, together with the beaches of Ndibe, Ozizza and Unwana, are among the top fishing destinations which can be developed for tourism. However, some of the challenges which may confront the promotion of tourism in the aforementioned marine places are absence of basic tourism amenities, lack of cold room for preserving fish, absence of fishermen's association, and low priority status of tourism in government's scheme of activities. Finding sponsorship for the fishing festivals and organizing the festivals as competitive events are deemed important factors in repositioning them as robust tourism attractions. It is hoped that the outcome of the study will serve as source material for policy makers, academics, students and NGOs who are interested in tourism and community development. Writers of the paper are also optimistic that the study will enhance efforts being made in showcasing Nigeria as a viable tourism destination.*

**Keywords:** *Fishing, Fishing Festivals, Tourism Development, Afikpo*

## **Introduction**

All cultures celebrate, and the things, persons or themes they value provide reasons for festivals (Graham in Jafari (Ed.) (2000:226). To gain genuine and rich experience of the cultures of folk people, festivals are always the delight of tourists. “By sharing with residents in an important local event, the visitor can capture some of the flavour of local lifestyles and traditions” (Graham in Jafari (Ed.) (2000:226). Okpoko (1990) remarks that festivals hold great promise for tourism. He argues that African countries like Nigeria have cultural festivals that are rich in mythology, which can be harnessed to generate revenue.

Fishing festivals and artisanal fishing activities form part of attractions which have the capacity to lure visitors into an area, especially those with the penchant to view and experience scenic landscapes and folk lifestyle. Puijk in Boissevain (Ed. 1996) has rightfully observed that fishing is a central element in tourism. Thus, well-harnessed fishing activities, and the festivals associated with fishing can play significant role in the stimulation of socio-economic stance of coastal communities and beyond.

Ndibe, Unwana and Ozizza are some of the coastal communities within the Afikpo area of Ebonyi State. These communities have as part of their cultural heritage, fishing related activities because of their maritime environment. However, these fishing activities require proper organization, management and promotion, if they are to attain the status of tourism attractions comparable to that of the Argungun fishing festival in Kebbi State, Nigeria. Hence, there is the need to conduct a comprehensive study on the fishing festival and other fishing related activities in the Afikpo area, with a view to understanding how these activities can be repositioned to play significant role in tourism development in Ebonyi State. Deriving from the aforesaid, the specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Describe fishing festival in the Afikpo Area;
2. Ascertain the challenges confronting fishermen in their fishing endeavour;
3. Examine how fishing-related activities can be developed as tourist attraction.

### **Methodology**

The study made use of qualitative approach to enquiry where in-depth interview and field observation were the primary data gathering techniques. Data from primary sources were complemented by secondary sources of data obtained from books, academic journals, unpublished theses and public library. Thematic analytical approach was used in analyzing qualitative data. This is concerned with examining, identifying and recording patterns or themes within data collected. Analyzed data was presented in the form of interpretative-descriptive narrative.

### **Literature Review**

Most fishing communities require social assistance to combat the problem of poverty, not just financial poverty, but limited access to the basic infrastructure necessary for human development and quality life. According to Zulkarnaini (2015), social assistance required by fishing communities are in the form of direct cash transfer, food assistance, capital, health and educational assistance. Exploring the tourism potentials of fishing heritage of coastal communities could be one of the ways to enhance social assistance.

In a study titled, *The Impact of Climate Change on the Bade Fishing Festival of Yobe State*, Oruonye (2014), remarks that the Bade fishing festival has the potential of serving as the engine block of tourism development in Yobe state similar to Argungu Fishing festival in the Northwestern part of Nigeria. Oruonye notes that the Bade fishing festival is very important because it serves as a unifying force amongst the different Bade communities and also creates a forum for exchange of ideas, cultural, social and economic interaction among people. On the Employment opportunities of the Argungun Fishing Festival, Asogwa, Umeh and Okwoche (2012) state that across the festival years, local people secured jobs as casual labourers, regular labourers, ushers and guards, with ushers and guards constituting the highest proportion of employees at the festival across the festival periods.

Again, Claesson, Robert and Madeleine (2005) report that the Rockland Lobster Festival in England appears to be one important factor in the growth of the tourism sector in the area. While

acknowledging the positive economic impact of the festival, they, however, remarked that tourism has also resulted in somewhat negative social impacts such as gentrification, conflict between fishermen, tourists, retirees and retail businesses, and competition for the town's waterfront space. The negative impacts of using festivals as tourism attractions have earlier been highlighted by Yusuf (1982) in his study of the Argungun Fishing Festival. Yusuf (1982), as cited from Asogwa, Umeh and Okwoche (2012), submitted that intensive inter-mixture with other people has greatly influenced the basic configuration of Kebbawa cultural patterns, specifically noting that speech behavior and dress models of the Kebbawa have been increasingly modified by influences from outside.

The aforesaid shows that there are potential problems associated with displaying cultural festivals as tourism attractions, since marketing ideologies tend to dominate decision making for planning, packaging and showcasing of cultural festivals. In Kenya, for instance, it has been reported that the Maasai handicrafts and cultural performances have been removed from their authentic social and cultural context, and have been commercialized to suit the whims of mass tourism (Akama in Akama, J. and Sterry (Eds.) (2000).

Notwithstanding the fact that tourism can impact negatively on cultural festivals, it is still necessary to consider festivals as a potent tool in the development of tourism for socio-cultural, economic and infrastructural development of host communities. Thus, in using cultural festivals including fishing festivals as elements in tourism development; attention should be placed on sustainability. The study, therefore, resonates from an attempt at examining fishing and fishing festivals in Afikpo area, and how they can be repositioned to serve as cultural tourism attractions without degrading the intrinsic value of the festivals (see, for example, Lindsay 2009).

### **Background Information of Study Area**

The present day people of Afikpo have two Local Government Areas in Ebonyi State: Afikpo North and Afikpo South. Afikpo North from where the communities used for the study were drawn is predominantly made up of the Ehugbo people. For efficient administration, the people of Ehugbo are split into sub-groups known as Ehugbo village groups as shown in the preceding table.

*Table 1: Ehugbo Village Groups*

| <b>Sub-Groups</b> | <b>Villages</b>                                      |
|-------------------|--|
| Nkpoghoror        | Nkpoghoror (Ndibe)                                   |
| Ugwuegu           | Ugwuegu Elu, Amaizu                                  |
| Itim              | Kpoghirikpo, Enohia Itim, Mgbom, Amuro, Enohia Nkalu |
| Ohaisu            | Amachara, Ukpa, Ibii, Amangballa, Egeburu, Evuma     |
| Ozizza            | Amaorie, Ameta, Imama, Amika, Amaoge etc.            |

*Source : Agwo (1999)*

Generally, Afikpo is located on the west bank of the Cross River where it turns southwards. It is a hilly region which lies in the trough of a syncline of undulating sandstone ridges in an elevation of between 250-300ft (76.2 – 91.5) metres above sea level (Aja, 1976:1-2). Afikpo North is located at the extreme south-east of Ebonyi state. It covers an area of about 164 sq. km. (64sq miles), and lies approximately on 6 North latitude and 8 east longitude (ALGON Diary, 2011).

According to Oko (1976:6), three groups of people: Egu, Nkalu and immigrants from the Arochukwu-Okigwe area are usually involved in discussions about the origin of Afikpo. Afikpo people have a handful of customs and norms which serve as guide for actions and behaviours. Following the lead by Aja (2005); Afikpo traditional society is ordered through the application and enforcement of certain norms, beliefs, rules, taboos and sanctions. Secret societies such as *ogo*, *egbele*, *ekpe* and various masquerades (e.g. okunkpo) help to enforce laws in Afikpo traditional society. In the view of Aja (2005), “the Afikpo traditional religion was bound up with the social organization and the *ogo* secret cults were the pivot around which all the other customs revolved”.

The people of Afikpo are endowed with rich cultural festivals which have been held fairly intact even in modern times. Such festival include *iko*, *ikeji* (new yam celebration), *egwu mbe* and *nri nsi omumu* (fertility festival), as well as the various fishing festivals associated with the coastal communities.

## **Data Presentation**

Proximity to marine environment makes fishing an important activity in Afikpo. Among the Ehugbo of Afikpo North Local Government Area, two fishing lakes - Ehoma and Iyieke - are very important in the cultural life of the people. Ehoma and Iyieke fishing lakes are located off the bank of the Cross River towards Ndibe Beach.

Ehoma fishing festival comes up between January 10 and 12 annually, this is about the period when water recedes to the normal height level. Some weeks ahead of the festival, the footpath to the lake is cleared and various parts of the lake that have been overgrown by grasses are also cleared through community effort. In anticipation of the festival, fishing participants weave conical baskets (*utuhu*) made from palm trees; the basket is used to scoop small fishes. Other participants prefer using casting net locally known as *ntofo*.

The festival lasts for four days beginning from an *orie* market day. Within these four days of communal fishing, children and some other adults who are not partakers in the fishing activity always stand along the track road leading to the lake. They sing songs of praise for the fishers returning from the lake, and as a way of acknowledgement, the fishers give their praise singers some of the fishes they caught. At the end of the four day fishing festival, people are still allowed to continue fishing in the lake until the commencement of the second fishing festival known as Iyieke. Iyieke fishing festival begins at the end of seven market weeks (*izu essa*) from the time within which Ehoma was celebrated. The Ehoma fishing festival is also the period during which final burial rites for adult men who died between February and November of the previous year are performed.

The Iyieke fishing festival is always preceded by a sacrifice to the crocodile which inhabits the lake. Through the sacrifice, the crocodile is requested to leave the lake within the period of the communal fishing festival. The Iyieke fishing festival has some cultural significance to the people; for instance, the celebration of the festival marks the end of the dry season in Ehugbo cultural Calendar.

While fishing at Ehoma and Iyieke lakes has cultural/religious significance and is restricted within particular periods of the year, fishing at the various beaches in the Afikpo area is basically business oriented. Afikpo is blessed with a handful of beaches such as Unwana, Ndibe, Enohia and Ozizza; these beaches are part of the wide-ranging golden sand beaches along the Cross River basin. Fishing is at its pick during dry season, this is the time when water level drops thus making it possible for canoe and boat crew to move on water without much difficulty, and also to live on the sandy banks which emerge during the period. The fishing nets are of various types and sizes depending on water depth of the fishing area, and the size of fish to be caught. Some of the nets as identified by a fisherman, Ogbonna Nkama Irem, include: *owoina, mkipirimkpiri, nchilaka, ntofo, ekubi, nkonye and ituanda*, etc.

The fishermen interviewed at Ndibe beach were of the opinion that developing the beach into organized tourism destination will largely bring about economic benefits such as employment and improved fish sales for fishermen, and those who buy fresh fishes for retail. On the negative side, the fishermen expressed fears that tourism may lead to increase in crime such as robbery and kidnapping, and possible denial of access to the deep areas of the beach where they make their catches. As we know, disagreement over access and use of resources is a frequent phenomenon that threatens sustainable use of resources at local, regional and international levels (USAID 2005, Kiss 2004 as cited in Gagoitseope et al 2013). No doubt, introduction of tourism in and around the beaches will lead to conflicts in the usage of the beaches. However, the problems can be surmounted where tourism is introduced in a sustainable manner; this will entail defining property rights.

Tourism development in the beach areas will no doubt provide additional source of income for local fishermen where necessary arrangements (such as adequate rescue mechanism) are put in place so that fishermen can safely run tours on their boats and canoes. Fishermen can as well be assisted to build relationship with tour operators, hotel/restaurant owners to enhance their livelihood through fishing.

However, the fishing endeavour is not without its problems. For example, the absence of a cold room where fishes can be preserved in a situation where fishes are not immediately sold is a main challenge. As a result of the non-availability of a cold room, fishermen are sometimes compelled to sell off the fishes at meager sum. Another difficulty is the absence of fishermen's association which can provide the platform upon which problems are made known to government. As one interviewee remarked, "everybody is on his own, corruption and bribery smothered our former fishermen's union".



*Plate 1: Iyieke Fishing Lake*



*Plate 2: Ndibe Beach, Afikpo*



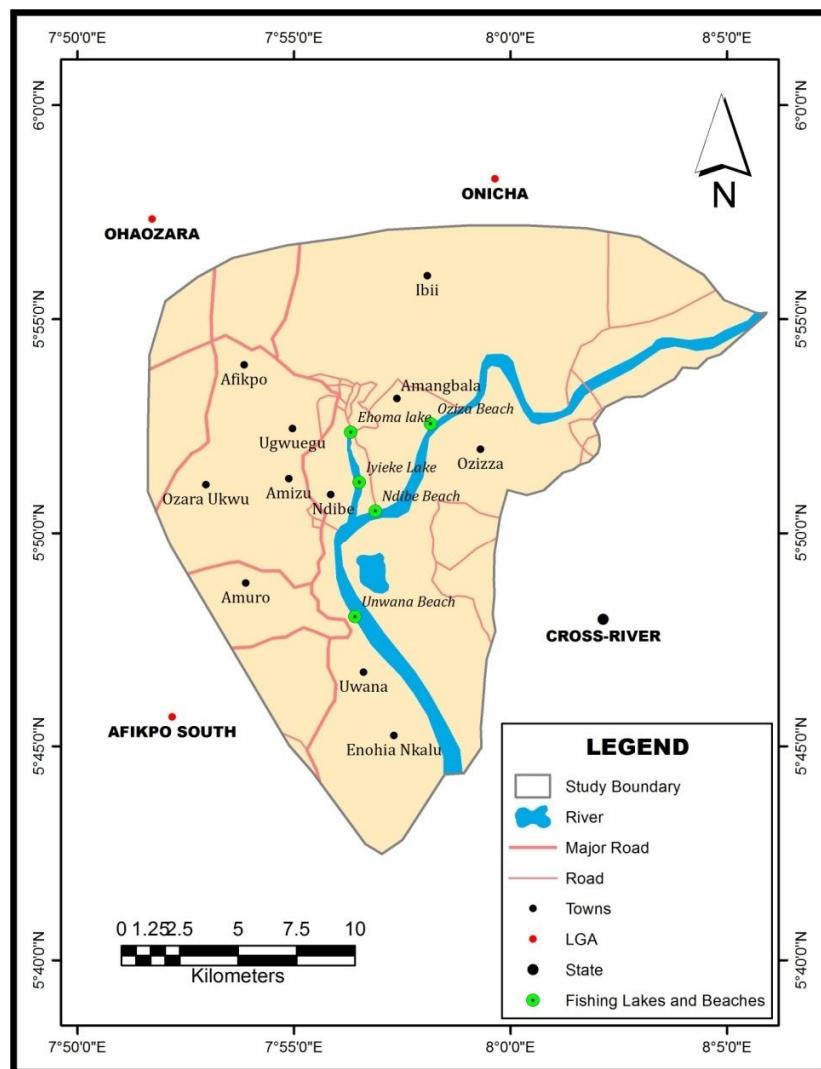
*Plate 3: Ozizza Beach, Afikpo*



*Plate 4: A casting net locally known as ntofo.*



*Plate 5: Nkoye is used for catching small fishes.*



*Fig 1: Map of Afikpo North showing the fishing lakes and beaches*

## **Discussion**

Ehoma and Iyieke fishing festivals can be developed as tourism attractions by repackaging the festivals as competitive events. The fishing festivals can take a cue from the Argungu fishing festival in Kebbi State, where there are prizes for those who take various positions in the fishing competition. By doing so, contestants will have something to look onto, a sought of motivation for their efforts. On their own part, those who go to witness the festivals will have more fun and quality display of fishing and swimming skills; these can attract more visitors to the fishing events.

Puijk in Boissevain (Ed. 1996) has rightfully observed that fishing is a central element in tourism. Indeed, fishing activities in and around the Afikpo beaches constitute attractions on their own. This is to say that apart from the scenic beauty of the beaches and their environs (such as hills falling in gentle undulations to the sea); local people who go fishing in their canoes provide additional excitement and attraction. The captivating movement of canoes and boats, the intriguing scenes of catching and unloading fishes, the body movement of fishes once they are hauled out of their aquatic habitat and of course, the various fishing gears employed depending on the task are all fascinating.

Furthermore, fishing festivals and fishing related activities can be packaged as part of cultural tourism products in the Afikpo area. As cultural product, the festivals can provide the opportunity for visitors (tourists) to interact with local communities thereby gaining rich experience of the uniqueness of the culture of Afikpo. Festival-induced visits by tourists will lead to stimulation of economic activities through tourist spending in form of local transport to festival spots, lodging, communication services, purchase of souvenir, snacks and drinks, etc.

On the part of local people, festivals provide them with the occasion of meeting important people, opportunity for exchange of experience and information, and also help them to develop local pride and identity. When packaged well and given the needed sponsorship, fishing festivals have an important role to play both at national and host community levels in terms of using festivals as part of destination planning process, and in terms of using festivals to link tourism

and commerce. Some aspects of the aforementioned roles include: festivals and special events as stimulus for local economic growth and as tools for promoting new products. For instance, by establishing a beer village as part of activities marking the 2014 Ojude Oba Cultural festival in Ijebu land signifying its support and identification with rich culture, the Nigerian Breweries PLC, at the same time used the festival as a promotional outlet for its new product - Goldberg Lager Beer.

Again, for the identified fishing festivals to assume the status of full-fledged tourism attractions, there is the need for sponsorship. Sponsorship can come from organizations especially private businesses who understand the role cultural festivals can play in communicating their products (goods and services) to various segments of the public, or a specific target market. Walle (1998:140) asserts that “although cultural festivals present exciting opportunities for organizations that wish to communicate with various segments of the public, potential sponsors have typically not exploited these opportunities to their full potential”. It is, then, the duty of Ebonyi State Ministry of Culture and Tourism and its agencies to engage organizations in dialogues that will convince potential tourists on the usefulness of festivals in advancing their organizational course.

Following the lead by Walle (1998: 147-149), skillfully and efficiently approaching a probable sponsor depends on having an understanding of the exact organization being targeted and a knowledge of how the organization can garner profit by sponsoring the festival. Even though the fund-raiser may be conscious of various companies that can offer sponsorship, it is likely that research needs to be conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the organization being targeted. First, the fund- raiser needs to contact the appropriate person in the organization. Second, it is necessary to have an idea of the organization's advertising/public relations financial plan. Finally, it is also essential to ascertain how the organization normally spends its promotional allocations. Armed with these pieces of information, fund-raisers are better placed to formulate strategies that will impress potential sponsors.

However, there are potential problems associated with displaying cultural festivals as tourism attractions, or using festivals as promotional exercise. When this is the case, a huge financial

return on invested resources becomes the primary target of staging festivals and special events, thus, festivals assume the status of goods and services which are packaged and marketed to potential consumers (tourists). Under this circumstance, marketing ideologies tend to dominate decision making for planning, packaging and showcasing of cultural festivals. A possible result is the distortion of cultural festivals to suit the objectives of sponsors; this raises the question of authenticity of presentation and commodification of cultural festivals.

In view of the aforementioned, it is suggested that the development of the identified fishing festivals should adopt a macro-marketing perspective for the development to be sustainable at the long run. Macro-marketing is “a contemporary sub- discipline of marketing that focuses on the total impacts of marketing, not merely benefits accruing to the organization and its clients” (Walle 1998:40). Although change is an inevitable result of development, that is to say, that any culture which significantly comes in contact with tourism must experience change, some positive, some negative; it is necessary that tourism planners and developers in the study area adopt an approach which considers all stakeholders in using the fishing festivals as strategy for cultural tourism promotion.

For the Afikpo beaches to assume the status of tourism destinations there is the need to put in place adequate infrastructure. As a basic tourist product, accommodation is a sine qua non to tourism development. Apart from Nidbe Beach Hotel and Maria Du Club Hotel along Ndibe road, the beaches are lacking in terms of accommodation which should be one of the major targets of tourism investors in the area. It is also worth mentioning that with the exception of the road leading to Ndibe beach which was recently constructed, those leading to Unwana and Ozizza beaches are in bad shape.

Another worrisome factor is the hygiene status of the beaches. The researcher’s visit to Ndibe beach, for example, revealed that a building which, according to informants, was originally meant to be a cold room is now being used as an abattoir. The result is that the beach runs the risk of being the endpoint for sewage from the abattoir.

Furthermore, security in the age of terrorism cannot be overlooked. Since the beaches, especially the Ozizza beach is a route for hard drug business, it is of paramount importance that security should be beefed up around the beach areas so that visitors can be rest assured of their safety in the destinations. Although the ozizza beach has a police speed boat for tracking hard drug dealers crossing from Cross River State into Afikpo, much needs to be done such as provision of surveillance equipment.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Fishing festivals and fishing related activities as part of cultural heritage have significant roles to play in tourism development. Where well-harnessed, fishing related-tourism could be a veritable way of supporting the artisanal fishing sector, by providing an important opportunity for supplementary income to fishermen, as well as bringing about development opportunities in the Afikpo area and Ebonyi State in general. Much depends on the ability of Ebonyi State government to summon the political will of giving serious consideration to tourism as a relevant element in diversifying the economy of the state. In doing this, it is suggested that the opinion of fishermen should be accommodated in the planning and development of fishing activities as tourism attractions, such that the outcome, in the long run, will be sustainable.

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