

Food Taboo: An Exposition of Fish Taboo in Hausa Cultural Practices

Musa Fadama Gummi, PhD^{1*}

¹Department of Languages and Culture, Federal University Gusau, Zamfara State, Nigeria

Abstract: Fish and fishery products have been utilised as a food source, providing protein and amino acids that enhance human growth and development. This has, therefore, from time immemorial, made fish one of the essential ingredients necessary for the preparation of delicacies and dishes among the Hausa people. Fish consumption became paramount not only for its nutritive value but also because it is believed to be efficacious in the treatment of some ailments and diseases that afflict the human body. Despite its wholesomeness, fish as food has been avoided by a certain group of Hausa people due to their cultural beliefs and practices. It is therefore the thrust of this paper to examine the reasons behind the abhorrence of fish species as food among the Hausa people of Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara states, North-West Nigeria. A survey research methodology using one-on-one interviews with a sample of people who observe the culture of fish taboo both across and beyond the Hausa fisher folk residing in the riverine areas where fishing thrives was conducted. The area was selected because the major cuisine consumed in these areas is prepared with fish as an ingredient. The area was also characterized by high consumption of fish due to its abundance and affordability, year-round. The data collected showed that the reasons behind the avoidance of fish consumption in Hausa culture are not religious in nature but mostly related to cultural beliefs in the form of myths, which have no bearing on Islam, the predominant religion of these communities. This, therefore, forms the major reason that the prevalence of fish taboo is declining among a significant proportion of the younger Hausa population. The resultant effect of global warming, amongst others, significantly affects the volume of rainfall received in Hausa land. This has led to the overwhelming drying up of both natural and some man-made lakes, which consequently results in the fall of fresh fish supply and makes it too expensive, beyond the reach of most people. This has also, to some extent, affected the observance of the cultural practice amongst a certain population.

Keywords: Food Taboo, Fish Avoidance, Hausa, Culture.

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*Corresponding Author:

Musa Fadama Gummi

Department of Languages and Culture, Federal University Gusau, Zamfara State, Nigeria

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Hausa land is blessed with abundant man-made and natural water bodies that are filled with fresh water, in which fresh water fishes inhabit. A few examples of man-made lakes include, but are not limited to, the Chalawa dam in Kano, the Bakalori dam in Maradun, Zamfara State, the Goronyo dam in Sokoto State, and the Kainji dam in Niger State, which spans parts of Kebbi and Niger states. Natural lakes with which Hausa land is endowed include the Nato, Kalale and Saru lakes in Bakura, Maru and Gummi Local Governments, Zamfara State, respectively. Others are in Kalmalo and Gumaru lakes, which are located in the Illela and Tambuwal Local Governments of Sokoto State. Abundant fish species abound in the water bodies. A section of the populace does engage in fishing activities year-round.

The major catches include Mudfish, *tarwada*; tilapia *karfasa/gargaza*; moonfish, *faliya*; silver catfish, *shambani*, *doza*, *ragon ruwa* and *dinko*; butterfish, *harya*, *balo*; silversides but *shemani* and *kawara* in Hausa; Alestes nurse called *rajiya*; electric catfish, *mijirya*; tigerfish, *tsage/zawai*; trunkfish, *yauni*; grass-eater, *shawarware/ci-haki*; puffer fish, *talibamban*, sail-fins, *gwando*, stoneheads, *farin wata*; Nile perch, *giwan ruwa*, lungfish, *gawo/gaiwa/bodami* and many more.

It is important to note that the availability of the discerned fish species made choices of which to consume, considering cultural traits. Cultural considerations have made certain fish species not worthy of consumption, which brings about fish taboo amongst the Hausa people. It is the thrust of this paper to examine

the fishes culturally avoided and the reasons behind the avoidance. However, research findings glaringly point to a decline in the fish avoidance practices among some of the Hausa population. This is necessitated by the reduction in the volume of catch due to the low volume of water collected in lakes and man-made reservoirs. The resultant effect of global warming, amongst others, significantly affects the volume of rainfall in Hausa land, which has led to the overwhelming drying up of both natural and some man-made lakes, the consequences of which are the dwindling catch, resulting in a shortfall in fresh fish supply. This makes fish expensive, beyond the reach of most people. This has, to some extent, led to a reversal in the observance of the cultural practice amongst a certain population.

1.1 METHODOLOGY

Data gathering for this research was through a survey, which follows procedures and methods believed to yield reliable and relevant information leading to the extant outcome. Sampled areas were randomly visited. These areas were mostly known for fishing activities in North-West Nigeria. These include Gamji village located on the shores of Nato Lake in Bakura Local Government Area, Zamfara State; Falam Tsibiri located close to the shore of Saru Lake in Gummi Local Government, Zamfara State; Kebbe town, a home to over one hundred (100) lakes, whose major inhabitants are fishermen, Kebbe Local Government Area of Sokoto State; Romon Sarki, a town which hosts the Gumaru fishing festival in the Tambawal Local Government also in Sokoto State; Gungun, Hoge village, an island whose inhabitants are migrant fishermen from the Ka'inji Lake, in Ngaski Local Government of Kebbi State; and Zakuwa town in Suru Local Government also from Kebbi State. In these places, a stratified sampling technique was used in selecting respondents based on age. The first stratum consisted of respondents 60 years and above, while those from 20 to 59 years formed the second stratum. A total of 30 respondents were selected, fifteen from each stratum. Verbal interviews were conducted using the Hausa vernacular, being the local language spoken in the vast area under study. The consent of the respondents was sought before the conduct of the interview. Responses were recorded, and the data were analysed.

2.0 Definitions of Terms

Before embarking on how Hausa people culturally avoided the consumption of certain fish species and the myth surrounding the practice, it is worthwhile to delve into the definitions of the keywords drawn from the title of the paper. The scholarly expositions regarding the terms run thus:

2.1 Food Taboo

Food taboo is a cultural practice observed by a number of societies across the globe. Meyer-Rochow (2009), cited by McNamara and Wood (2019, p. 3), opined that food taboo refers to intentional avoidance of

a particular food type for reasons beyond personal choice or preference. In concurrence with the above, Abere and Azene, (2023, p. 1) opined that "Food taboo is any unacceptable food items in the society that arise mainly based on religious, cultural, historical and social principles." It is a situation in which individuals or groups avoid or exempt themselves from consuming certain foods or substances due to religious or cultural prohibitions. However, the health status of some individuals might be the motive for not partaking in the consumption of certain food varieties. Religious injunctions may sanction the consumption of certain foods (such as pork, false-mutton, and carrion are sanctioned for the Muslim faithful) as do cultural beliefs and considerations. Culturally, people tend to abstain from consuming such food or substances for reasons like the high toxicity of the substances or the traditional understanding of their harmfulness to the health and well-being of the consumer. The avoidance of certain fish species as food is noticed among the Hausa people due to cultural considerations. This abstinence from eating certain fish species is examined critically.

2.2 Hausa Culture

The Hausa people are found largely in the North-West of Nigeria and the Southern part of the Niger Republic. They are a distinct cultural group whose culture and ways of living are significantly influenced by Islam, which is the predominant religion with large followers. A minority of Hausas are practitioners of African traditional religions (Gobir & Sani, 2019 p. 25). The Maguzawa, for instance, are Hausa people who adhere to the traditional faith; they neither practice Islam nor Christianity. The ways of living which a people subscribe to remain their culture. It includes their thoughts, beliefs, aspirations, manners, customs and costumes, practices and above all, their worldview. Though Islam has significantly assimilated the Hausa ways of life, there remain certain traditional practices which the people adhere to, possibly because religious injunctions are silent on them, or the people deviate from the Islamic principles or still mix Islamic faith, a monotheistic religion, with traditions which are often fetish practices that aid and breed taboos and myths. The fact remains that, though Hausa people are predominantly Muslims, a certain section of the Hausa population does subscribe to the use of traditional medicines that includes the acquisition of tradi-magical powers, which often breeds taboos and dictates its strict practice. The term Hausa culture as used in this paper refers to the beliefs and practices of the Hausa people, inclusive of taboos which are often not in tandem with the Islamic religious practices.

3.0 Fish Taboo in Hausa Culture

Mythically, the Hausa people strongly believe in the notion that what one eats or consumes has an exact relative impact on one's health and behaviour. Andreoni, (2016 p1) have postulated that "Depending on the

different cultures and historical periods, vultures have been considered both as impure or sacred.” For instance, the African vulture, though a bird, does not form part of the menu of the Hausa people, not only because Islam forbids its consumption but also for fear that the reproductive pattern or behaviour of the bird may afflict the consumer. It is generally believed that the vulture lays only two eggs, one each for a male and a female chick, per its reproductive cycle. The average Hausa man is polygamous in practice. Added to this, occupying a position of high esteem is traditionally adjudged, among other factors, based on the large size of one’s family [1]. For fear that eating vultures will lead to low breeding in terms of reproduction, vulture consumption is culturally abhorred among the generality of Hausa people both for religious and traditional reasons.

Freshwater fish species abound in the rivers and lakes throughout the wetland areas of North-West Nigeria. Some species are culturally avoided for consumption by some people despite their nutritive value. What are the reasons for the prevalence of fish taboo, what species are avoided, and what section of the people sanctions fish consumption? Answers to these questions follow:

3.1 Fish Taboo Related to Issues of Health Beliefs

The Hausa society had an indigenous health care delivery system long before its contact with other cultures and civilisations. There are ways of using various substances to cure ailments. Preventive measures are also put in place to guard against the human body becoming susceptible to diseases. It is in line with sustaining healthy living among the people that health-related myths and beliefs became manifest in the Hausa culture and practices. Bunza (2018) affirms that In Hausa medicine, taboos are efficacious measures of protecting the active ingredients of a particular medicine or a great feeling of solidarity to the active drugs or a precaution to escape attack of dangerous species.

To safeguard against ill health, consumption of certain fish species is either believed to be the cause of certain ailments or assumed to aggravate the situation by worsening the health condition. Culturally, the Hausa people who suffer from skin diseases like leprosy *kuturta/zafi* and carbuncle *tautau/gizi-gizo* (especially those living in areas with availability of fish due to proximity to fishing areas), do not consume the clarias or mudfish popularly known as *tarwada* in the Hausa language due to the mythical believe that it is either one of the causative agents that leads to affliction with the ailments or worsens the condition, if one already suffers

from it. These diseases cause itchy rashes on the hands or legs with constant discharge of slimy pus. However, people also hold a different traditional view regarding the cause of the disease. Drinking water in which a spider swam or enters causes the affliction, hence the name *gizo-gizo*, the Hausa name for spider. Symptoms appear as rashes on the skin, and eating a meal of mudfish makes the situation worse.

The fish, variously called *gawo/gaiwa/bodami*, due of dialectical differences, is another species whose consumption is detested due to the myth that it causes weak or even erectile dysfunction in men. This fish is none other than the African lungfish, *Protopterus annectens*. The fish typically inhabits swamps, muddy ponds and lakes. During the dry spell, it goes into hibernation by making a cocoon in which it lives for upwards of four months or beyond, until the lake or pond is flooded with water during the rainy season of the year [2]. Its body is snake-like and it swims with the aid of finger-like ‘limbs’ that serve as paddles. Unlike other fishes, the African lungfish as observed by the locals is sluggish in nature. It struggles sluggishly when trapped and uses its strong jaw to bite its prey when feeding and uses the same to repel intruders when it senses danger. It is also observed that its mouth produces slimy, watery substance that makes its body very slippery. The Hausa people have evolved several taboos culturally associated with the consumption *gawo/gaiwa/bodami*. The males are exempted from eating its central muscle because it is deemed to cause weak or erectile dysfunction. That is to say that eating the muscle affects the erectile function of the male sex organ. The philosophical thought behind the belief is not far-fetched, as the locals observed over time and believed that the lungfish do not struggle energetically with dexterity when in danger, unlike the mudfish, which is stronger and forcefully struggles when threatened. Its sluggish nature or failure to struggle with dexterity even when provoked afflicts the male consumer’s sex organ to be weak or worst still, dysfunction (behave in like manner). Secondly, pregnant women are barred from its consumption as a preventive measure to guard against giving birth to a baby that frequently salivates. There is also the belief that pregnant women who partake in its consumption will give birth to a child with the sixth finger, *cindo*, due to its long, ropelike appendages both at the pectoral region and near the anal area [3].

However, with the dwindling nature of fish catch due to inadequate rainfall supply over the years, the observance of the taboo, especially among the youth, is in the decline. Freshwater fish is in short supply, which

¹ This information is obtained from Dandi Makaxa Rijiyar fari, near Gambanda Village of Qurfa ward in Gummi Local Government, Zamfara State on an earlier interview conducted in his village on Saturday, 17th July, 2021 .

² See Reed, W., Buchard, J., Hopson, A.J., Jennes, J., Yaro, I. (1972) *Fish and Fisheries of Northern Nigeria* page 9

³ Ibid page 9.

makes it expensive for an average household. Youth of nowadays hardly remove the spine muscle of the fish before it is consumed. During a visit to a joint where fried fish is sold, it is observed that even the skin that has tiny soft scales is not removed before frying, and the buyers consume it just the way it is fried. This and the data obtained significantly shows that people, especially the youth are not keen or rather indifferent in the observance of the taboo, unlike the case with the middle-aged and the elderly who religiously adhere to upholding it.

Generally, the Hausa people hold the belief that fish are unintelligent creatures. They attribute the belief not to the scientific proof but rather to the cultural analogy and perceived nature and life pattern of the fish. The juvenile fish is observed to migrate to low-current water for spawning when the water tide is high. In doing so, it moves in very shallow water or even on a muddy surface. A clear example of fish exhibiting the behaviour is the mudfish (*clarias*). The juveniles move at night in a line, especially after a downpour. This makes its capture so easy and cheap even with bare hands; it is called *gala* in the Hausa language. The Hausa believed that the fish exposes itself to danger due to its shallowness and unintelligent nature. The tigerfish called *tsage* in Hausa is another fresh water specie whose nature resonates with Hausa perception of emptiness, shallowness and unintelligence. The tigerfish is mostly found to cohabit the rivers and lakes with clean water free of grasses. It is mostly not found in the swamps. On several occasions, the tigerfish is observed jumping high out of its habitat and sometimes falling to the land surface, which makes its capture so easy and free of stress.

Due to this instinctive behaviour, the Hausa hold the belief that the consumption of fish head leads to retardation and shallowness of one's brain, which results in dullness and unintelligence. This is more prevalent among pregnant women who fear that consuming the head of fish of whatever species leads to the birth of unintelligent children. The abhorrent practice also extends to children of school age who are mostly barred from eating fish heads to avert the retardation of sharp memory and critical thinking ability. This taboo is still relevant and prevalent even among a large number of Hausa adults.

3.2 Fish Taboo Related to Hausa Medicinal Practices

The Hausa traditional perception of the concept of medicine *magani* differs from the Western or modern conceptualisation. In the Hausa cultural perspective, medicine has an extended meaning far beyond cure and prevention. Hausa scholars have posited that the term is used to denote medicine of all categories (Bunza, 2008, p.7). It does not only refer to the work of destroying, suppressing or even making the illness causative agents weak or preventing illness from occurring. Medicine from the Hausa traditional perspective goes far beyond the above. It also entails the use of supernatural power to

secure a person's desires and needs, like protection against evils, inviting good luck, or even securing immunity against the evil machinations of one's enemies to ruin or cause havoc or hardship to one's life (Bunza, 2008, p. 8; Sani & Jaja 2019. p. 260-261).

The traditional Hausa man will be all out to seek traditional medicine so that he stays afloat above his enemies. Always wishing to gain the upper hand against the enemy, becoming victorious in fights or contests. *Basanyi* is a native medicine that weakens the body of an enemy or opponents. Bunza, (2006 p.88). This is one of the reasons why the charm *basanyi* is sought after by men who partake in masculine games and crafts like the local boxers, '*yan dambe*'; the wrestlers, '*yan kokawa*'; hunters, *mafarauta*; artisanal fishermen, *sarkawa/masunta*; etc.

Whenever the medicine or charm is used against an enemy, it gives the possessor an advantage over the enemy by way of inflicting shock in his body, a shock that makes one's body very weak, lackadaisical, inactive and lazy over a minimal period of time. The charm or medicine is prepared using the skin of a fish species, *Malapterurus electricus*, commonly called electric catfish, *mijirya* in the Hausa language. To ensure the efficacy and potency of the charm, the body of the fish (electric catfish) must be caught without being beaten to avert its shock. This undoubtedly means that it should be caught with bare hands to ensure its shocking instinct is in active state to derive strong efficacy and effective potency of the charm to be made. The logic behind this is that if the fish is beaten, the mechanism that allows its electric shock is dead with it. It must therefore be skinned alive to ensure the virility and potency of the charm (Fadama, 2015, p.149).

The fishermen and hunters acquire the charm on their gear and weapons so that no matter the nature and prowess of their catch, it will be taken ashore without the usual persistent resistance and struggle to escape. The secret of the charm lies heavily on the fish *Malapterurus electricus*, the electric catfish. For this, a taboo is traditionally attached to its consumption by whosoever possesses, utilises or derives benefit from the charm. Individuals who have the charm must refrain from eating the fish. This is perhaps in veneration of the fish for the continuous derivation of the charm's vigour. Otherwise, its consumption affects the virility and vim of the charm. It renders the charm weak, impotent and of no effect.

Despite the position of Islam, the predominant religion of the Hausa people, sanctioning the use of charms coupled with modernity and globalization, the acquisition and use of *basanyi* is still prevalent among a section of the Hausa people most especially the local boxers, wrestlers, hunters and above all, the fishermen who at certain instances experience confrontation with hostile aquatic mammals like the hippopotamus and dangerous reptiles like the crocodiles. A good number of respondents interviewed still use the charm for

protection purposes, and for them to be able to subdue large and powerful catches they make.

3.3 Individualised Fish Taboo

Human behaviour is said to be so complex that it is beyond determining or predicting what it does at a certain point in time. This has made humans different at individual level. What is good for the goose may not necessarily be good for the gander. This research has encountered individuals who at their individual level, took upon themselves the habit of abstinence from consuming certain species of fish not on grounds of health hazards but for personal preference. It is worthy to note that individualised taboo may take two forms: at the personal level and, for some, at the family level. Some respondents do not consume the lungfish simply because it resembles a snake due to the absence of spines on its body. Except for the presence of barbels or whiskers around the mouth, one may likely mistake a lungfish for a snake. Some people do not accept the fact that the lungfish is a fish; as such, they refrain or rather abstain from its consumption.

There are also individual family members who take it upon themselves not to eat a certain fish species due to an unpleasant encounter or experience a family member has had with the fish. There is a family whose entire members abstain from consuming a certain variety of *Clarias spp*, the mudfish called *hana noma* in Hausa. The reason for their abstinence is the unpleasant encounter their grandfather had with the fish. He was struck by the dangerous pectoral fins of the fish. The hand was swollen to the extent that he suffered for over six months. He could not participate in the year's farming season and eventually died from the wound. The entire family went into grief, and henceforth, all family members resolved not to partake in the consumption of the fish *hana noma*. The younger members of the family were not abreast of the history as to why the taboo is observed within the family line. They met their parents upholding it, and they follow the family tradition without questioning why.

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The paper found that despite Islam being the predominant religion and the intense way by which the religion assimilated the culture of the Hausa people, mythical beliefs that breed taboos still exist. There still is the prevalence of taboo related to fish abhorrence among the people, most especially the elderly living close to areas where fishing activities thrive due to the availability of rivers, lakes and streams. The taboos that continue to stand the test of time among the elderly are those having to do with medical considerations.

However, interaction with the youth reveals a drawback in the acceptance and practice of such beliefs and taboos. Such taboos relating to non-consumption of certain fish varieties is now tenable mostly among the

elderly who insist on upholding the culture and traditions which was passed down unto them by their ancestors.

Regarding taboo, which emanates from traditional medicine having to do with 'medicine' for protection against enemies of whatever sort, however, despite the modernity and its influence on Hausa cultural practices, people still patronise traditional medicine that is magical in nature, like the *basanyi*, which is for protection against opponents. Adherence to the taboo is more prominent among the people who engage in macho-related artisanal crafts like hunting and fishing, including traditional sport players like the local wrestlers and boxers.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This research has strived to bring to the fore a section of the taboo practice of the Hausa people as it relates to abstinence from fish consumption due to certain mythical and personal choices and considerations. The myths range from the fear that consumption of the lungfish leads to affliction with an ailment or aggravation of already existing diseases like carbuncle, known in Hausa as *tautau/gizo-gizo*, which affects the skin around the legs or the hands. Likewise, the fear emanating from the myth that eating the muscle of lungfish causes impotency in men, and for the pregnant woman, giving birth to either a child with a sixth finger or an imbecile child. This research has concluded that these traditional beliefs, which breed fish taboo, have now begun to wane due to a deeper understanding of Islam and its injunctions, as well as the shortfall in the catch level of most fishermen, due to environmental degradation and global warming, which leads to the drying up of natural water reservoirs, the natural habitat for aquatic fauna, including fish. This, in essence, reduces the consumption of fresh water fish in favour of seafood and the fish bred in the modern fish farms.

However, taboos related to magical charms produced with fish parts, like the skin of an unbeaten electric catfish is still in practice and the taboo associated with it is striving among the local wrestlers and boxers as well as the hunters and professional fishermen who need the charm to win over their co-contestants, in the case of the former and subduing dangerous catch whose resistance may likely cause harmful consequences.

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