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TRADITIONAL LAKES AS SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS: INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE, FISHING FESTIVALS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE IN ISOKO LAND, DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Traditional lakes in Isoko Land, Delta State, Nigeria are not only ecological resources but also social-ecological systems governed by customary law, spirituality and communal identity. This study examined Urie Lake in Igbide Kingdom and Eni / Ezozo Lake in Uzere Kingdom using a convergent mixed-methods design, combining field observation during fishing festivals, oral interviews, and visual documentation of catches and market activities. Results show that lakes provide food, income, transport and cultural identity, while customary institutions regulate access through seasonal closures, taboos, ritual permission and elders' authority. Fishing festivals, notably the Urie Fishing Festival and the Ezozo Uzere Lake Fishing Fest, function as mechanisms for opening the fishing season, redistributing access, reaffirming authority, and sustaining livelihoods. Women dominated processing and marketing, while men dominated capture. Catches included large catfish (*Clarias spp.*) and other bony fishes, indicating continued productivity despite perceived siltation, sand encroachment, declining depth and overfishing. The study concludes that indigenous governance remains relevant but is weakening under commercialization, religious change, youth migration and environmental degradation. Integration of traditional ecological knowledge with scientific management is recommended for sustainable lake conservation.

KEYWORDS: Traditional lakes, Social-ecological systems, Indigenous governance, Fishing festival, Isoko, Niger Delta.

INTRODUCTION

Wetlands and inland lakes provide water storage, flood regulation, nutrient cycling, wildlife habitat and support for aquatic biodiversity. They also sustain human populations through fishing, transportation, agriculture, food processing, trade, cultural practices and tourism (Choowaew,2007; Bhowmik,2022). In the Niger Delta, settlement and livelihood systems have historically developed around creeks, rivers, swamps, ponds and lakes (Onu, 2025).

In Isoko Land, traditional lakes are more than physical water bodies. They are embedded in systems of customary law, spirituality, social organization, historical memory and communal identity (Ogorode & Vincent-Akpu, 2023; Ayeni et al,2026). Their meanings are expressed through festivals, origin narratives, ritual practices, taboos, seasonal restrictions and customary institutions. Consequently, ecological damage to a lake affects not only water quality and fish abundance but also livelihoods, cultural continuity and collective identity (Ayeni et al., 2026).

Urie Lake in Igbide Kingdom and Eni / Ezozo Lake in Uzere Kingdom provide two important cases. The Urie Fishing Festival is associated with the opening of the fishing season. Available accounts describe a three-day event, with the first day reserved for elders and chiefs and the remaining days opened to the wider community, linked to the history of Eru, regarded as founder of Igbide. Eni Lake is remembered as a fishing and wetland resource and as the historical setting of the Eni Oracle, an indigenous institution associated with adjudication, abolished under colonial administration in 1903. However, these lakes face siltation, sand encroachment, pollution, vegetation loss, land-use change, overfishing and weakening of customary restrictions. This paper examines how indigenous governance and fishing festivals shape the use, conservation and changing condition of Isoko traditional lakes (Oghi,2014)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design. Field observation was conducted during fishing festival activities at lake landing sites in Igbide and Uzere. Oral interviews were held with elders, fishers, women processors, traders and festival participants. Visual documentation of catches, canoes, sorting and marketing was used as primary evidence.

Species were identified to common group level in the field. Data were analysed thematically under:

(a) Ecological and livelihood functions,

(b) Customary governance

(c) Festival as governance, and

(d)Environmental change. Ethical principles of informed consent and respect for sacred knowledge were observed. Sacred or restricted information was not published without permission.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ecological and Livelihood Functions: Observation showed that the lakes remain productive and central to household economies. Catches were sorted at the lake bank in metal trays and plastic basins (Plate 1). Large-bodied fishes were present, including catfish with reddish and grey coloration and several bony fishes (Plate 2). The diversity and size of fish indicate that despite degradation, the lakes still support food security and income.



Figure 1-5: 1: Women sorting/selling Fishes at the lake.

2: Eni Lake, Uzere, 3: Urhie Lake at Igbide. 4: Male Gender Selling fish by the Road side.

Fishing supported a chain of activities: capture, sorting, smoking, drying, transport and sale. The festival landing site functioned as a temporary market, attracting traders, food vendors, buyers and visitors. This confirms that small-scale fisheries in the Niger Delta support not only protein supply but also employment, exchange and social relationships (Udong,2011; Akintola & Fakoya,2017; Ojo et al,2025).

Customary Governance

Customary governance was expressed through seasonal closure before the festival, ritual permission from custodians, and control of access by elders and chiefs. Fishing was prohibited until the official opening, a rule with both spiritual and ecological implications. Spiritually, it recognizes the lake as a sacred entity. Ecologically, a closed period reduces fishing pressure and may allow fish to reproduce and grow. Taboos prohibiting pollution, use of unapproved gear and fishing in sacred portions were reported. Sanctions included social condemnation, fines and exclusion. These findings align with research on sacred natural sites in Nigeria, where taboos and spiritual sanctions produce conservation outcomes even when not framed in scientific language (Anwena et al,2010; Cinner et al ,2019; Ogorode & Vincent-Akpu,2023).

Fishing Festivals as Governance and Identity: The Urie Festival and the Ezozo Uzere Lake Fishing Fest (Plate 3) connect ecological cycles with social life. The festival marks the opening of the season, redistributes access, reaffirms the authority of elders, attracts visitors and preserves oral history. Dozens of wooden canoes were observed on the water, with fishers wading, paddling and landing catches collectively (Plate 3). The event was also a period of reunion, celebration and intergenerational learning.

Gendered division of labour was clear. Men undertook canoe fishing and capture, while women dominated sorting, display, processing and sale (Plate 1). Women possessed specialized knowledge of species availability, preservation and market prices, confirming the need to disaggregate community responses by gender in environmental research (Benson et al,2018)

Environmental Change and Threats: Participants and observation pointed to siltation, sand encroachment, reduced depth, vegetation loss and declining catches. The large number of canoes and participants during festival days also suggests increased pressure from commercialization and modern gear. Traditional ecological knowledge should therefore not be assumed to be automatically sustainable. Its effectiveness depends on population, market pressure, technology and enforcement strength. The weakening of customary authority through religious conversion, formal education, migration and reduced respect for elders further threatens enforcement. Without adaptation, festivals may shift from governance events to purely commercial harvests (Ogunkolu & Tajudeen,2025).

Recommendations: It is recommended that:

(1) Local Government and Delta State Ministry of Environment formally recognize customary lake rules in community-based management plans;

(2) Siltation and sand encroachment at Urie and Ezozo lakes be assessed hydrologically before any dredging;

(3)Women processors and youth be included in lake management committees;

(4)Festival periods be used for environmental education, catch monitoring and documentation of oral history; and

(5) Periodic ecological monitoring of water quality, depth, fish diversity and catch be institutionalized.

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