

Traditional Beliefs and Sea Fishing in Selected Coastal Communities in the Western Region of Ghana

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Abstract

Fishing is the single most important and accessible economic activity along the coastal settlements of Ghana. This paper argues that in spite of the introduction of western ways of life along the coast of Ghana by the European colonialists, which were subsequently spread through diffusion, fishing activities are greatly influenced by traditional beliefs. Using a qualitative approach, this study explores the traditional beliefs associated with fishing among inhabitants of some selected fishing communities in the Western Region of Ghana. A hundred and thirty-two (132) participants were recruited and interviewed. Among other findings, the participants revealed that the sea is a god that protects and oversees fishing activities. Women are still prohibited from sea fishing due to traditional beliefs that they are physically unfit for such work. Fishing on Tuesdays which was considered a taboo is still adhered to by contemporary fishermen/ fisher folk. Serendipitously, autism was found among members of the fishing community and it was attributed to punishment from the sea gods due to violations of fishing taboos. While not discounting all the traditional beliefs, the study recommends intensive education on modern fishing practices and their impact on modern fishing communities in the face of modernity.

Keywords: *fishing, modern, traditional beliefs, diffusion, coastal settlements.*

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Introduction

The mainstay of Ghana's economy continues to be agriculture which focuses mainly on production of cash crop, food crop, livestock, and fishing. Together, these sectors employ over 60% of Ghana's labour force (Kwarase, 2017). Along the coast of Ghana stretching from Keta in the Volta Region to Axim in the Western Region, sea fishing is the single most important and accessible economic activity. Deservingly, increasing mainstream attention is being paid to the study of traditional and community fisheries management in an effort to learn from fishing activities that have survived the test of time. Unfortunately, not much attention has been paid to traditional beliefs and practices among fisher folks in some parts of Ghana's coastal zone. Thus, whilst many current studies about fishing communities are paying much attention to social factors and other related issues (See Overa, 2011; Walker, 2002), there seems to be a missing link between introducing modern ways of life and fishing equipment to fisher folks, on the one hand, and dealing with the traditional beliefs that influence their fishing behaviour, on the other.

This paper argues that in spite of the introduction of Christianity and Islam by European colonialists aimed at changing the traditional belief systems along the coastal settlements of Ghana, the general perception about fishing communities is that they continue to transmit, imbibe and practice traditional beliefs about the sea and fishing activities are still influenced by such beliefs. For example, though Christianity frowns on praying to the gods (pouring of libation), most fishers continue to do so before a fishing trip, with the belief that without such supplication they will not be protected by the gods while they are at sea.

Coming from a perspective of cultural relativism, this study's main objective is to explore the nature of traditional beliefs and practices in the selected areas and their effects on fishing practices against the backdrop of the introduction of major change agents, such as education, Christianity, Islam and modern administrative systems, into coastal settlements. The study seeks to answer the following questions: What are the traditional beliefs about the sea in the study areas? Do the traditional beliefs influence fishing practices of fishers? The paper contains six major sections including this introduction which is followed immediately by the conceptual underpinnings of the study. The theoretical perspectives and study context follow. The next sections provide an elaborate discussion on the data collection procedure and instruments. Major themes derived from the data analysis are also discussed. Finally, the paper draws conclusions from the findings.

Conceptual Underpinnings

The nature of study communities is of prime concern to researchers. This is because there is a link between what communities do and the belief systems held by its people. Fishing communities have their own knowledge about fish stocks and other marine resources including information on the location of resources, migration patterns, movements and seasonal abundance of species of economic importance, and details on their reproductive and feeding behaviour. Local people often also have a good understanding of how resources and the environment have changed over time and possible causes of such changes (Beltran, 2000). These are woven together as local or traditional knowledge which is generally viewed as the knowledge held by individuals generated from their own observations, experiences, beliefs or perceptions rather than from scientific research (Beltran, 2000). This study was conducted in traditional societies. It is imperative therefore to briefly describe the basic characteristics of traditional societies and their beliefs as a part of the profile of the study area to sharpen the focus of the study. Indeed, fishing communities in Ghana - and for that matter the study communities in this paper - have subcultures, that is, cultural traits that deviate from the country's mainstream cultures. Thus, though the selected communities in this study are located in Akan environments, fisher folks deviate, to a large extent, from mainstream Akan dialects, funerals and marriage processes, among many others. Also, while most societies in Ghana organize funerals on weekends, these fishing communities do so on Tuesdays, especially if the deceased is a fisher. This is because they claim that Tuesday is sacred, and they are prohibited by the sea god from sea fishing. Though these may be described as occupational and social subcultures (which exist in all societies), fisher folks in this study work in societies largely classified as traditional. What then is a traditional society?

Jary and Jary (1999) delineate traditional society as a non-industrial, predominantly rural society which is presumed to be static and contrasted with a modern, changing, industrial society. No doubt, this definition is in close affinity with Durkheim's mechanical solidarity or simple society (Durkheim, 1964). Members of such (traditional) societies live similar lives, with little specialisation or division of labour beyond that associated with age and sex. In other words, the social organisation of a traditional society is highly undifferentiated, characterised by similarity of functions, resemblances, and a common consciousness (Hale, 1990). Religion permeates the society and it is critically important because it tends to regulate all details of social life. In fact, in typical rural communities of Ghana, the choice of a marriage partner, where to make a farm, and where and when to engage in fishing and hunting activities, among others, are all determined by the spirit world (Nukunya, 1992). Thus, nonconformity in such communities constitutes a threat precisely because uniformity of beliefs is the basis of solidarity. If such beliefs are allowed to weaken through tolerance for nonconformity, then the very cohesion of the community is threatened. Consequently, law is repressive or penal, expiatory and diffuse, functioning not through specialised institutions such as law courts and public tribunals but the whole society (Durkheim, 1964).

It is revealing to understand that the term 'traditional society' has come to be seen as very problematic over the past few decades. Consequently, many sociologists have avoided it and continue to do so. Jary and Jary (1999) see the following as the major problems associated with its usage: First, it is a term which has been used to describe a wide variety of societies which in fact differ markedly from each other or one another. For example, agrarian society, tribal society, ancient society and feudal society are societies with varying characteristics; yet they are all lumped together as traditional without recourse to their differences.

Secondly, whilst the rates of social change in such societies are slower than in industrial societies, it is erroneous to accept that no change occurs at all in traditional societies, given the fact that the only thing that does not change is 'change' itself. The term 'traditional' gained currency within sociology when systematic knowledge of non-industrial societies was weak, and increased knowledge made its usage no longer unpopular. In addition, it is associated with the modernisation theory which has been criticized for delineating an oversimplified contrast between traditional and modern. Finally, the oversimplifications involved in the term lead either to a romanticised or a pejorative view of such societies. To obviate these difficulties in this paper, the term 'traditional' is considered to mean age-old norms and values that continue to influence fishing activities along the coast of Busua, Axim and Apewosika in the Western Region of Ghana.

Theoretical Perspectives

Culture has been a difficult term to comprehend in both everyday and scientific discourses (Valsiner, 2007, p. 8). The reason is that "the concept of culture lacks a unanimous definition" (Rundmo, Granskaya & Klempe, 2012, p. 126). While the remit of some definitions is broad, others are less so. Hofstede (1980) delineates culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another" (p. 51). On the other hand, a society's culture, according to Goodenough (as cited in Geertz, 1973), "consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members" (p.11).

Perhaps Tylor's delineation of the concept sums up the case for culture: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morality, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1874, p.3). Therefore, culture can be delineated as the totality of the way of life of a people which distinguishes them from other groups. Clearly then, understanding the role of culture in any social context and, for that matter, in the beliefs and practices of fisher folks in the study area, is significant. There are four main conceptualizations or approaches to delineating culture that help to understand the influence of culture in the setting under study in this paper: culture as symbol of exchange (Valsiner, 2007), culture as artefacts (Cole, 1996), culture as social organisation (Douglas, 1970), and culture as value exchange (Hofstede, 1980).

This study is situated within the theory of culture as value of exchange since it focuses on the values and beliefs of a people, which in turn guide their actions. To buttress this point, Kluckhohn (as cited in Hofstede, 2001), opines that the "essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values" (p. 9). Values are broad ideas regarding what is desirable, correct and good that most members of society share. Values are so general and abstract that they do not explicitly specify which behaviours are acceptable and which are not. Instead, values provide us with criteria and conception by which we evaluate people, objects, and events as to their relative worth, merit, beauty, or morality (Zanden, 1990, p33). These values are invisible until they become evident in behaviour (Hofstede, 2001, p. 10). We approach this study with a great sense of cultural relativism, that is, from the perspective of the studied communities' own culture, what it is, but not what it ought to be. In other words, the concept of cultural relativism means that the effect of a culture trait or complex is relative to its cultural setting.

This study views the fisher folks in the four coastal settlements for this study as having imbibed values and beliefs related to the sea, sea gods, and fishing which do not only influence their thinking but also

their fishing behaviour. These values and beliefs are transmitted from generation to generation through socialisation. If one abandons them, one risks punishment from the ancestral spirits (Nukunya, 1992). Thus, in spite of modernisation, the people hold their traditional beliefs about the sea as sacred and irreplaceable.

The Study Context

The study was conducted in four communities in the Western Region of Ghana as shown in Figure 1. They were Busua, Apewosika, Lower Axim and Upper Axim.

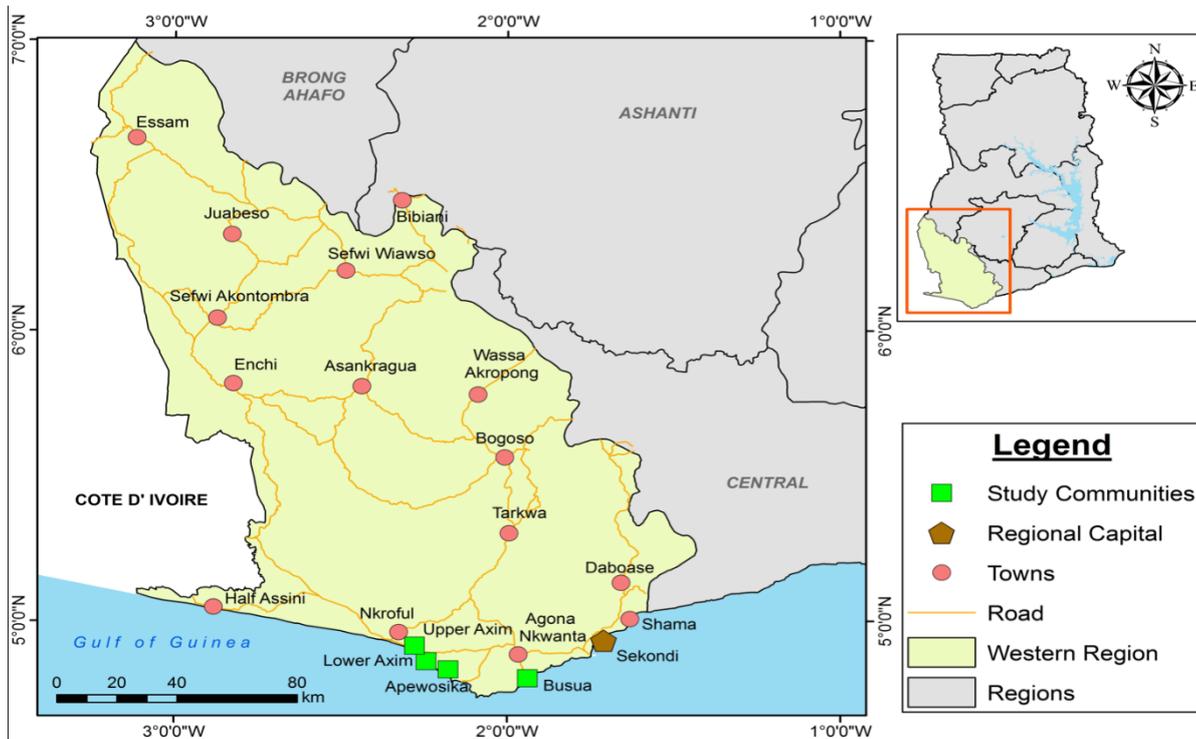


Figure 1: Map of the West Coast of Ghana showing the Study areas
Source: Cartography Unit, UCC (2016).

Busua is a fishing village and beach resort sandwiched between Butre and Dixcove in the Ahanta West District of the Western Region in Ghana, about 30 kilometres west of the regional capital, Takoradi (Ghana Statistical Service[GSS], 2014; Obeng-Odoom, 2014). Busua is very touristic – and has been so for a long time. Compared to the rest of Ghana’s West Coast, Busua is quite well developed for a community of its size. The inhabitants speak Ahanta, but almost everyone at Busua understands Twi, the most widely spoken language in Ghana. The population of Busua is about 1,667 (GSS, 2014). The mainstays of the people are fishing and farming. The rest are petty traders who operate at the Agona market. Tuesdays are observed as fishing holidays in this community. This day is used for maintenance and repair of fishing gear. Fish is mostly smoked and sold by fishmongers at the Agona Nkwanta market.

The three other communities (Apewosika, Upper Axim and Lower Axim) were all captured as part of Axim during the 2010 Ghana Population and Housing Census. As a result, the population of Axim, including the three communities, is 25,446, comprising 11,855 males and 13,391 females (GSS, 2014). The people of Apewosika trace their ancestry from Elmina and Dutch Komenda in the Central Region of Ghana and initially settled at Akyenim, now called Anto-Apewosika in the Western Region. They claim that the land on which they live was given to their ancestors by the chief and people of Axim, who continuously harassed

them for taxes and compensation. The community shares boundaries with Anto-Apewosika to the west, Domunli to the east and Dr. Beamish School to the north. The community is dominated by Fanti speaking inhabitants. There are a few Nzemas in the community who are from Lower and Upper Axim. Apewosika is also a fishing community, as almost the entire community is into fishing-related activities (Coastal Resources Center/Friends of the Nation, 2010). Most of the men are fishers and the women, fish processors. Like the inhabitants of Busua, fishermen in the Apewosika community regard fishing on Tuesdays as a taboo; hence no one goes fishing on that day of the week. Marketing centres for the smoked fish are Kumasi, Accra (Agblobloshie market) and Obuasi.

Lower Axim, also located in the lower part of Axim, shares boundaries with Boka-Kokole to the North, Fante Line to the east and Upper Axim to the west. It is relatively a low land. The community is ethnically mixed, comprising Nzemas, Gas and Simpas (people from Winneba). There are more Nzemas than the other ethnic groups (Coastal Resources Center / Friends of the Nation, 2010). Lower Axim and its adjoining Fante Line community can be termed the real commercial hubs of the Nzema East District where brisk business activities of all kinds take place. The majority of the residents rely on the fishing industry for their livelihood. A few women are however into petty trading of all sorts. Again, Tuesdays are reserved as non-fishing days in Lower Axim. Fish brought from sea is usually smoked or fried, and marketed at Bogoso, Kumasi, Techiman, Agona and some settlements in Sefwi such as Wiawso and Sefwi-Bekwai.

Our last study area was Upper Axim which is a large and lively coastal community in the Nzema East District. It shares boundaries with Lower Axim to the east and Amanfukuma to the west. The people of Upper Axim are Nzemas and speak the Evalue dialect. Like the other study communities, the majority of the people in Upper Axim are into fishing (Coastal Resources Center/Friends of the Nation, 2010). The men go fishing and the women buy from them, process and sell the fish. There is however a handful of farmers in the community. The fish is mostly smoked and sold locally in the Axim community, at Agona Nkwanta, Bogoso and Wassa Akropong markets.

A critical examination of the study communities shows that they all exhibit what the renowned sociologist, Emile Durkheim (Ritzer, 2008), calls mechanical solidarity in that they engage in similar economic activities and lifestyle. Hence, the selection of these communities was purposively done because they are traditional fishing communities.

Study Design

The study adopted an exploratory design within the qualitative framework. The exploratory design is useful in studying under-researched topics such as this phenomenon being investigated (Cresswell, 2003). In Babbie's (2010) view, three purposes of exploratory studies influence the researcher: to satisfy the researcher's curiosity, to test the feasibility of a more extensive study, and to develop methods to be employed in future research. For this study, the motivation was the researchers' curiosity to find out how traditional beliefs affect fishing in the four study areas through empirical research.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, 132 members of the study communities were selected as

participants of the study. Purposive sampling is useful in selecting individuals, places or items with peculiar characteristics which in this case referred to the various communities and their categories of leaders. They constituted chiefs and their elders, chief fishermen, canoe owners, boatswains, chief priests and priestesses, and other religious leaders. These community leaders were selected purposely because it can be assumed that they have in-depth knowledge about the subject matter. Besides, they are seen as opinion leaders whose opinions hold sway in their communities. The snowball technique, on the other hand, was adopted in selecting the fishermen in the communities selected. This technique was very appropriate because data on the accurate number of these participants was non-existent. The snowball technique therefore aided in identifying the fishermen until saturation was reached. The first few participants were accessed through some community leaders, and this facilitated the snowballing approach. Strict ethical considerations such as informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity (Reinharz, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994) were followed and all the 132 participants were interviewed. The categories of participants distributed according to their sex and study communities are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of respondents by community and sex

Category	Community								Total
	Busua		Lower Axim		Upper Axim		Apewosika		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Chief	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	4
Elder	2	1	1	1	4	1	3	0	13
Chief Fisherman	2	0	4	0	1	0	1	0	8
Traditional Priest/ Priestess	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	3
Canoe Owner	3	0	4	0	2	0	2	0	11
Boatswain	6	0	15	0	1	0	1	0	23
Ordinary Fisherman	20	0	30	0	10	0	5	0	65
Christian Religious Leader	2	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	5
Total	36	2	59	1	18	1	15	0	132

Source: Field work, 2015

As many as 60 out of the 132 participants were interviewed in Lower Axim alone; the remaining were distributed among the other three communities, with Apewosika recording the least, 15 participants (See Table 1). However, only two traditional priests and a priestess were interviewed. Of the 132 participants, only four were females (Three Elders and one Traditional Priestess). The disparities in the number of participants were due to the availability or unavailability of participants and their willingness or unwillingness to participate in the study. However, few females participated in the study because the study targeted the community leaders and the fishing profession, both of which are groups heavily dominated by men.

Data Collection Procedure and Instruments

Data for the study was collected using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observation in view of the depth of data needed to answer the research questions. Besides, the study sought for perceptions, experiences and life stories of the communities as far as fishing activities were concerned, and these were properly captured using the qualitative techniques. Three guides were developed based on the literature and

the research objectives: an interview guide, a focus group discussion guide and an observational guide. The guides were made up of questions pertaining to the research objectives. The questions covered areas such as knowledge and perceptions about the sea, women and fishing; taboos about the sea and the consequences of violating them; and various changes in traditional practice related to the sea. The in-depth interviews were administered among the leaders of the selected communities (chiefs, elders, chief fishermen, fetish priests/priestesses, canoe owners, boatswain and Christian religious leaders). A total of 13 focus group discussions were conducted, with six fishermen in each group. The distribution is as follows: 2 each at Apewosika and Busua, and 4 and 5 at Upper and Lower Axim respectively. All the focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted at the beaches for the convenience and availability of participants. Observation was carried out in a non-participant fashion as we observed the phenomena of interest during the fieldwork activities. With regard to the individual interviews, focus group discussions and recordings of proceedings, consent was first sought from participants.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data were coded and analysed with the support of NVivo10 (QSR International), a qualitative data analysis computer software for coding, storage, indexing and retrieval. Four major themes guided the analysis: nature and knowledge about the sea, women and fishing, taboos about the sea and changes in traditional beliefs about the sea.

Results and Discussion

Socio-demographic characteristics of Participants

Participants' ages were categorized into three groups, with the majority (65.9%) aged between 30 to 39 years. Participants aged 40 years and above formed the least age category of approximately 17 percent of the total. The majority of the participants were married (74.2%), with approximately two percent being divorced. The remaining participants were either cohabiting (12.9%) or single (11.4%). Formal educational level was quite low in the study communities. Of the 132 participants, only three had attained some vocational or technical level of education; as many as 58 had no formal education at all. A considerable proportion had some basic education (Table 2). The recruited participants were categorised according to the various roles they played in the selected communities. They were categorised as chiefs and elders (12.1%), fishermen (56.1), religious leaders (6.1), canoe owners (8.3%) and Boatswain (17.4%). These categories were very important as their perceptions on the subject mattered.

Table 2: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Frequency (N =132)	Percent
Community		
Busua	38	28.8
Apewosika	15	11.4
Lower Axim	60	45.4
Upper Axim	19	14.4
Age		
20-29	23	17.4
30-39	87	65.9
40+	22	16.7
Marital Status		
Married	98	74.2
Cohabiting	17	12.9
Single	15	11.4
Divorced	2	1.5
Education		
No education	58	37.5
Basic education	61	45.8
Senior high	10	12.5
Vocational/Technical	3	4.2
Employment categories		
Chief/elder	16	12.1
Fishermen	74	56.1
Religious leaders	8	6.1
Canoe owners	11	8.3
Boatswain	23	17.4

Source: Field work, 2015

Nature and knowledge of the Sea

Participants were asked to describe the sea. This was to ascertain their view of what they viewed the sea to be. This was important because The expressions varied from one category of participants to another. For most fishermen in the study areas, the sea constitutes a ‘big mass’ of water with fish and it is inhabited by a god called “*Nana Bosompo*”, literally, a god that lives on a mass of water. For the opinion leaders, the sea is an amalgamation of rivers where fishermen go for fishing. In addition, both traditional and Christian religious leaders agreed in their independent responses that the sea was a big water body created by God and it is different from rivers. Some of their expressions are presented in the following dialogue:

Interviewer: How would you describe the sea?

Response: *The sea is a big river in Ghana along the coast, and it is in the sea that ‘Nana Bosompo’ lives, so the sea is a god along the coast (A fisherman, Busua). I would say that the sea is big water in which fishermen go to catch fish (An Elder, Axim). The sea is a big water body created by God and named by Adam. It is God’s creation, looking at Gen. 1:1-3, (A Christian Religious Leader,*

Axim). *The sea is a god that lives along the coast. Our ancestors have been worshipping him all this while. He is called Nana Bosompo*(A Traditional Religious Leader, Busua).

Thus, there are varying views about the nature of the sea depending on one's belief. Non-Christians viewed the sea as a god while Christians attributed its creatorship to God. What runs through the descriptions is the fact that the sea is both a water body along the coast and a god.

Sex of the Sea

Most of the participants (over 90%) believed that the sea is male. This belief had been handed down to them by their ancestors through oral tradition. The chief of Busua expressed this as follows:

Our ancestors say the sea is male. According to them, they went to sea for fishing on a Tuesday which was forbidden, and the sea revealed itself to them in a male form; as a result we refer to the sea as a male.

Another fisherman at Apewosika added:

To me, the sea is a male; we have been told from childhood that it is a male, that is part of the reason why only males go for fishing.

A fisherman in Axim, however, believes that the sea is female. For him, it is females who reproduce children and since the sea harbours children in the form of fish, which it gives to fishermen and the public, it is a mother:

I believe the sea is a female who produces children and she is generous enough to give us some of her children as fish to feed us all. That behaviour shows it is a mother.

On the part of both traditional and Christian religious leaders, the sea is neuter, that is, it is neither male nor female. A narration from a Christian leader in Apewosika epitomizes some of the views expressed by those in that category:

The sea has no sex; it is just a creation of God, so it is neither a male nor female, just sea, like other inanimate creations of God.

These varying views about the sex of the sea traverse the line of the male-female-neuter argument into how fishing is done in relation to the categorized sex of the sea. In fact, the depth of awe accorded the sea and adherence to age-old fishing processes differ from fisher to fisher depending on the perspective of the individual fisher on the sex of the sea. For those who believe that the sea is female, they address her as “ye maame pa oma yen edziban”, that is, ‘our good mother who feeds us’. They argue that the fish represent milk from the sea’s breast to feed her children just as human mothers do. Thus, any fish caught by fishers with this perspective is greeted with “maame ye da wase”, literally, ‘thank you, mother’. On the other hand, those who view the sea as male conceptualise it as a responsible father who feeds his children with his resources. The third group, that is, those who believe that the sea is neither male nor female, liken the sea to any of God’s creation such as the forests, farm lands, the sky and many others which provide resources

for the exploitation of humans. Thus, culturally, the fishers in the various communities have imbibed values and beliefs related to the sea, sea gods, and fishing which influence not only their thinking but also their fishing behaviour.

Sea creatures

The rationale for this sub-theme was to explore respondents' depth of knowledge about the varieties of creatures in the sea and traditional beliefs associated with them. The general view was that the sea was replete with various creatures. They mentioned the whale, the shark, mackerel, herrings, lobsters, crabs, sea horse and sea snakes as some of the creatures of the sea. Are all sea creatures edible? The general response to this question was that all sea creatures are edible except the whale. This is because the whale is regarded as sea god. A traditional leader at Axim reported that anybody who ate the flesh of the whale (*Bonsu, believed to be a sea god*) would suffer the wrath of the sea gods. He reported, however, that a traditional priest or priestess could intervene by performing specific sacrifices on behalf of the culprit. The nature of the sacrifice is determined by the spirit of the dead whale. Humans have no hand in it. He also mentioned that whenever a dead whale is discovered, the whole community organizes a funeral for it. Traditional leaders and priests perform special rituals which involve libation and an inquiry into the spirit world about the cause of its death. Thus, the whale is one of the exceptional creatures in the sea.

Knowledge about Sea gods

All participants were quick to mention the whale. The chief of Busua, Nana Badu Bonsu, traced his clan's ancestry to the whale; hence, his last name is the same as that of the sea god. As a result, his clan holds the whale in high esteem as a powerful god. To him, the whale can capsize boats on the sea if it discovers that a fisherman in a boat has been cursed. Participants also added that the sea has a goddess popularly referred to as *MaameWata*, literally 'mother of the sea,' but only a few have seen the goddess. A queen mother at Apewosika, Axim, who is also a fisherman's wife, said she and her brother had had an encounter with "*MaameWata*" once. She claims that the creature is a mermaid. This was how she put it:

My brother and I have had an encounter with her before. Her upper part is human and very beautiful, whereas the lower part is in the form of a fish.

Thus from this description, *MaameWata* is a Minotaur, a creature which is half-human and half-fish. It is also an amphibian. A fetish priestess of the royal clan at Busua recounted her experience with *MaameWata* about forty years ago when she was an adolescent.

I have personally seen and interacted with 'MaameWata' on a number of occasions. It all started about 40 years ago on one sunny Wednesday afternoon when I went to a secluded part of the beach at Busua in search of crabs – a seasonal economic activity of the youth at Busua. On my arrival at the beach I saw a beautiful white woman sitting on a stone and holding a small stick in her left hand. She had a very long hair with part of it hanging loosely and covering both her face and back. Under her direction, I caught a lot of crabs within a short time. She also promised to visit me sometime later, which she did. On her visit, she promised to give me two of her daughters, which manifested later when I gave birth to two beautiful daughters resembling the woman. When I made an inquiry, the spirits revealed to me that it was the woman I had met at the sea shore while looking

for crabs who visited me at home and that the two children were a fulfillment of her promise to send two of her children to me.

This narrative was a testimony to the existence of *MaameWata* - a sea goddess. Other participants at Axim and Apewosika also mentioned that *MaameWata* was a sea goddess, but perceived the whale as more powerful. The general view was that the exact location of the sea-goddess was unknown, though a few said her abode was deep down the sea. The effect of the existence of sea gods on fishing in the communities is that fishing activities are generally dictated by *MameWata* and other gods that are held in high spiritual esteem.

Knowledge about other gods

The study revealed that apart from *MaameWata* and the whale, other gods existed in all the communities studied. Participants in Busua mentioned a *NanaBokwa* – a lesser god (*bosom*) that lives on an island about 200 meters from the seashore. Annual rituals are performed to honour and thank *Nana Bokwa*. In performing these rituals, the core element is the sacrifice of a monkey (*efuor*) to *Nana Bokwa* for protecting fishermen and the entire community of Busua. The chief and his elders, together with the traditional priestess and chief fishermen, lead the annual rites. A chief fisherman corroborated the existence of other gods. What sets *Nana Bokwa* (the island god of Busua) apart from the other gods is that while all other gods are pacified with sheep or cows, *NanaBokwa* is pacified with monkey.

The people of Axim and Apewosika believed that the closest god to them was *Nana BeboArizi* who also is believed to live on an island about 150 meters from the main fishing beach. This god's name is derived from an encounter a native of Axim, Arizi, had with him. According to participants, Arizi defied the order not to go to the island on a sacred day. As soon as he stepped onto the island, he was beaten mercilessly by dwarfs – believed to be invisible little creatures – who serve as security agents and messengers to the god. Since then, the island god has come to be known as 'Bebo-Arizi' literally translated in Nzema language as, 'Arizi has been beaten' by dwarfs on the island. From the general knowledge espoused by the communities about their gods, it can be concluded that gods are localized by the communities. While the people of Axim and Apewosika believed in 'Bebo Arizi' as their deity, the people of Busua saw 'Nana Bokwa' as their god. This is a clear case of a community's collective consciousness based on their beliefs and value system. The belief in water bodies as deities had been reported widely in the literature (Turaki, 2000; Ntiamoah-Baidu, 1995; Sarfo-Mensah & Oduro, 2007). For instance, most ethnic groups in Ghana have beliefs related to the majority of water bodies as deities, since it is perceived that rivers symbolize the gods of the people (Ntiamoah-Baidu, 1991, 1995; Sarfo-Mensah & Oduro, 2007). Some ethnic groups around these water bodies worship them as these protect and serve other purposes for the community. Some people even regard the sea as a source of life and fertility, so that barren women go for cleansing in it in the hope of getting fertilized, according to Ohemeng Boakye (1980), cited by Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro (2007). In most traditional African societies sacrifices, offerings and prayers are offered indirectly through divinities and ancestors to the Supreme Being. The study therefore can be situated in the available literature as its findings confirm those of many other researchers.

Importance of the sea

All the participants indicated the economic importance of the sea to them. They reported that the sea

provides employment and serves as a source of income to them. The employment it provides is in areas of fishing, salt extraction and tourism. Some fishermen and traditional believers also believe that the sea offers spiritual protection to the people along the coast.

The Sea enables people to get money from selling stocks of fish caught from it [sea]. It serves as a source of employment for people to get money for many things including tithes. It gives salt and also oil. It also serves as a source of tourism; and traditionally people believe the sea protects them. The sea is important because it gives us fish. It is the main source of employment and protection for us along the coast.

Women and Fishing

As one of the major themes of this study, participants expressed their opinions on the engagement of women in fishing activities. Participants from all the study communities were agreed on the notion that going to sea to fish had been an occupation for men. In explaining why this was so, the participants reported that women were allowed to fish in the sea in the past but are now forbidden to do so. In response to the reasons behind the ban, traditional religious leaders mentioned history and greed as the reasons for banning women. This stance is illustrated by the comments of a traditional religious leader at Busua:

History has it that some women went fishing in the past and had a bumper catch which their boat could not contain. The basic rule in fishing is that when your boat can't carry a load, you leave it behind. So, the women should have thrown part of their catch into the sea to free their boat of the heavy weight for a safe passage back home. Unfortunately, because of greed, they kept all their catch in the boat. Consequently, the boat capsized under the heavy weight and all the women drowned. Since then, women have been prevented from going to sea even though there are no strict rules prohibiting them.

Some fishermen in Axim were also of the view that fishing is a very difficult and exacting venture which requires muscular strength and courage. Generally, women are not as strong and courageous as men; hence, they do not go to sea. To the fishermen:

Women are not allowed to go fishing because fishing is a very difficult task that requires a lot of strength and courage. The women are not very strong, you look at the work we are doing here, and you can see that only strong men can do such work. Women are not strong enough for such work.

However, when traditional leaders were asked those same questions, they added that women were banned from going to sea because they are likely to desecrate the sea with menstrual blood. According to these leaders, if women go fishing, they can have their menses at sea and this is an abomination since the sea god hates menstrual blood. This is how one traditional leader puts it:

Going to sea for fishing is not a day's job. Some fishermen spend weeks at sea. If women are allowed to engage in fishing, we will have some of them having their menses at sea. And this is a taboo against the sea god since such women are seen as unclean. This is therefore the reason why women are not allowed to go fishing.

These responses portray gendered roles in fishing communities emphasized by tradition and culture.

However, this situation is not peculiar to the study areas. Working at sea in many societies is an activity reserved for men (McGoodwin, 1990; Thompson, 1983), while women mostly process and sell the fish (Hauzer et al, 2013; Zhao et al, 2013). Thompson, (1983), in his study of fishing activities in Britain, found that men considered women's presence at sea as pollution. A study by Hanson (1982) in the Pacific Islands also noted that throughout the Pacific, fishing as an occupation is restricted to men and although women are excluded from such activities, pregnant and menstruating women face much stricter proscription (Matthews, 1993). In Samoa, a woman's touch on any fishing equipment can destroy harvesting potential, and a woman's presence in a canoe or boat is considered a bad omen for fishing. Matthews' research also revealed that the bodily fluid of menstruating women is considered highly polluted and contaminating. It was also found in Tanzania that it is a taboo for a woman to go fishing due to the possibility of desecrating the sea with menstrual blood (Masalu, Shalli & Kitula, 2010). Fishing is therefore viewed predominantly as a male dominated job (Immanuel et al, 2008; Rubinoff, 1999).

Taboos of the Sea

The study also elicited from participants the taboos associated with the sea. To most of the participants (fishermen, traditional rulers and traditional priests), the sea is a sacred and unblemished entity with many taboos. The taboos mentioned have to do with practices such as fishing on Tuesdays; after sexual intercourse without taking a thorough bath; after committing adultery; or while under a curse. With regard to the Tuesday taboo, some fishermen and traditional leaders reported that this day of the week is set aside for the sea (sea god) to rest, and it is a crucial component of the laws regarding fishing. It is also a day when fishermen mend their nets and boats and replenish their depleted resources. Fishermen in Axim however noted that if one goes sea fishing overnight and stays on till Tuesday, there is no violation, and one can return to land. However, it is a violation to sell one's catch on that day. A traditional religious leader puts it this way:

Tuesdays are sacred for the sea god; if you dare go to sea, you will be cursed. However, if Tuesday meets you at sea, you can stay at sea till the next day [Wednesday], but if you decide to come home on Tuesday, none of your fish should be sold on that Tuesday, since you could incur the wrath of the sea god.

Most fishermen agreed that adultery was a common practice among fishermen. Nonetheless, they were quick to add that it had no effect on the female at sea unless her husband finds out and curses her. The following captures their responses:

The sea hates people who are not clean, so if you engage in behaviours such as having sexual intercourse, you must bath thoroughly before stepping into the sea. Some fishermen also commit adultery and when they are caught, they are sometimes cursed with the sea god, so it becomes a taboo for them to go to sea.

Fishermen in Busua mentioned that it is also a taboo for a person on whom a known curse has been placed to go sea fishing. A cursed person is seen as spiritually unclean and as such cannot go fishing on the sea.

If someone curses you, it is a taboo for you to go to sea. This is because the curse makes you unclean; therefore if you attempt going to sea without revoking the curses you might end up losing your life.

These responses portray their cosmivision about the sea as a pure entity and any act of impurity related to it incurs the wrath of the sea gods. Such beliefs seem to be common in most fishing communities around the world. A study in Tanzania reported similar findings. The study found that it is a taboo not to have a bath after having sex before fishing, whether one is married or not. This is due to a belief that having intercourse dirties the sea, in which inhabits spirits who dislike meeting with impure persons. This taboo is strictly adhered to in order to avoid misfortune during fishing activities (Masalu et al., 2010).

Effects of Violations of Taboos on Violators

Violators of any of the taboos risk some form of punishment and in some cases, death at sea. Chief fishermen, ordinary fishermen and traditional rulers were unanimous in reporting independently that the first person to invoke punishment on violators was the chief fisherman of the area where the offence had been committed. With particular reference to Tuesday fishing violators, they are made to pay specified fines. These fines vary from one fishing area to another. However, all fines include drinks that are presented to the chief fisherman, who then invites the chief priest to pacify the sea god. At times the violators are suspended from going to sea for a period of time determinable by the chief fisherman and his elders. When violators fail or refuse to comply with these sanctions the case is sent to the chief's palace for redress. If this also fails, then the culprit (or group of culprits) is handed over to the police.

There is also the possibility of a total ban of recalcitrant violators from going to sea in the area. Such a violator can however leave for another fishing area to continue his fishing activity. A chief fisherman at Busua reported that spiritually, the sea can prevent a violator from getting fish or cause the violator to go missing on the sea. According to him,

The sea can give you bad luck, you will have no fish, and also you can get missing especially when you go fishing on Tuesdays. If you are cursed, the sea could even kill you.

Such victims, under the spiritual influence of the gods, mysteriously jump off their boats and drown. A fisherman in Axim also added that violators could be involved in mysterious accidents. One of the fishermen put it this way:

If you violate the taboos concerning the sea, you can be 'knocked down' by a canoe, or drown, hit your canoe against stones or even thunder can strike your canoe. These accidents are mainly caused by curses.

Traditional rulers and most fishermen agreed that the same sanctions were imposed irrespective of the victim's age and status in society. All the participants noted that generally, the sea frowns on both physical and spiritual violations which bring about curses. These findings confirm others in work done by other authors (Aye-Addo, 2013; Barre et al., 2009; Holden, 2000; Osei, 2006). For instance, Barre and colleagues found in their study that when taboos are violated, they "produce automatically in the offender a state of ritual disability and can only be relieved whenever possible, by a ceremony of purification" (Barre et al., 2009, p. 31). Aye-Addo (2013) also found that among the Akans entities like lakes, rivers, stones and the sea are inhabited by gods and ancestral spirits, so violating taboos about them attracts serious repercussions. Taboos can therefore be seen as an obligation rather than an option, which validates punishment for breaking them since "a taboo is an offense against ancestors and Supreme Being" (Fisher, 1998). Punishment for

breaking taboos could come from the Supreme Being, ancestors or spirits (Scanlan, 2003).

Changes in Traditional Beliefs about the Sea

All the respondents were emphatic that traditional beliefs and practices about the sea had changed with time. They reported that the sacred Tuesday taboo is being violated every now and then. At Axim, some fishermen reported that some fishing groups go to sea on Tuesdays and are prepared to face the required sanctions if found out. They also reported that these days many fishermen do not regard the sea as sacred or holy. A 41-year old Christian religious leader at Apewosika, Axim mentioned that:

In the past no machine technology (outboard motors and fishing lights) were allowed on the sea. Today, these pieces of modern technology and equipment are used extensively.

Respondents blamed these changes on modernization and the spread of Christianity. They pointed out that for many fishing groups, Christian prayers have replaced the traditional libation which was poured to acknowledge and invoke the protective powers of sea gods and spirits. A 38-year old fisherman in Lower Axim put it this way:

Nowadays, people do not believe the things we say about the sea and the other practices we engage in. Most of the practices are violated and people are doing what they like without any fear. You know formerly before we go to sea, we offer prayers to the gods by pouring libation, but now Christianity is changing everything, look at that canoe (pointing to a canoe nearby), the owner has even put a cross on it. Only Christian prayers are offered these days.

The expressions of participants emphasise the enormous role modernisation and Christianity play in eroding traditional beliefs in fishing communities. This finding is in line with what pertains in the literature (see Douglas, 1989; Holden, 2000; Masalu, Shalli & Kitula, 2010). According to Douglas (1989), taboos are pervasive in traditional societies as part of the general ignorance about the physical world, but as these societies modernise, traditional beliefs and taboos get eroded. However, some traditional practices still remain in every society no matter how modernised that society becomes. Holden (2000) acknowledges that traditional beliefs erode as society modernizes; he however maintained that taboos are a fundamental characteristic of any society. According to Masalu et al. (2010), knowledge of taboos and beliefs is increasingly threatened and disappearing. Reasons for the disappearance have to do with the effects of modernisation and economic development, including demographic changes, urbanization, globalization, changes in education systems, commercialization and commoditization of aquatic resources, technological changes, the policies of external assistance agencies, and national policies for economic sectors. The current study acknowledges the effect of these factors on traditional beliefs along the coast.

The study discovered some serendipitous phenomena and activities which could provide a basis for further research. The first is autism which was quite common in all the settlements studied. Autism is a disturbance in psychological development in which the use of language, the reaction to stimuli, the interpretation of the world and the formation of relationships are not fully developed. Traditionally, people who display behavioural traits of autism come from parents cursed by the gods. Such curses, it is believed, could affect the cursed person directly, or his or her child or a close relative.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to investigate the influence of traditional beliefs on fishing along the coast of the Western Region. The main argument was that in spite of the introduction of Christianity and Islam which emphasize the belief in one God, traditional beliefs, as practiced in the communities, continue to influence fishing activities. The study focused on Busua in the Ahanta-West District and Axim and Apewosika in the Axim District. The first conclusion from the findings is that traditional beliefs are very prominent in fishing communities and among fishers in general. Consequently, fishing activities are influenced to a very large extent by these beliefs in areas such as when to go to sea, personal fortification prior to embarking on fishing, and being careful in personal behaviour to avoid curses that may be detrimental to fishing culture. The beliefs are constituted in the norms that have shaped the values and taboos of the society. For example, the fishing communities still hold the belief that Tuesdays are sacred days for the sea and no fishing activity should take place, despite the fact that some fishermen disregard this belief. Those who violate the Tuesday taboo are thought to do so at the risk of human and spiritual punishment, including death at sea. Factors preventing women from fishing, the reverence given to the whale and shark and other sea creatures, and the purity demanded of fishers, among others, are all influenced and constituted by traditional beliefs. Thus, the texture, focus and direction of fishing in the selected communities are tied to traditional culture, though traces of modernity such as the use of up-to-date equipment are present in some respects.

Also, the communities studied can be described as exhibiting a mixture of characteristics of traditional culture and modernity. This has resulted in remarkable changes in the social organization of the fishing communities. In the past, social control and sanctions for violation of norms and values regarding fishing were the preserve of traditional authorities. Laws were repressive and reflected the collective conscience. Today, modernization and the introduction of Christianity and Islam into the fishing communities have provided two worlds in which tradition and modernity either compete with or complement each other in some situations. As a result, many traditional beliefs and practices have been abandoned. For example, the Tuesday fishing taboo is often broken. Many traditional rites are also ignored or seen as uncultured by Christians, Moslems and other so-called modern religious believers. Some notable examples are the rites associated with accidents and deaths on the sea. Thirdly, the study discovered that in spite of the many changes, fishing communities have a subculture of marital infidelity, and general outlook of life. In conclusion, it can be said that though traditional beliefs are being eroded under the threats of modernization, the fishing communities in the current study have maintained certain practices that merit the designation traditional.

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