

**THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF FISHING ON THE ILAJE PEOPLE: A CASE
STUDY OF AYETORO COMMUNITY (2015-2025)**

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SEPTEMBER, 2025

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**BEING A RESEARCH SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **ANNE ISIUWA GARRICK**,
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.....
Date

.....
Date

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to God Almighty the creator that was not created for his mercies and provision all through my stay in the University of Benin, may his name be praised forever.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The Ilaje people are a unique ethnic group located in the Southwestern part of Nigeria, primarily in Ondo State. They are known for their rich cultural heritage and deep connection to the coastal environment. The Ilaje community has a long history that dates back centuries, with their origins linked to the migration of various groups along the coastline. This migration was influenced by factors such as trade, agriculture, and the search for better living conditions.

Fishing is not just an economic activity for the Ilaje people; it is a way of life that shapes their identity and culture. The Ilaje have developed traditional fishing practices that have been passed down through generations. These practices include the use of canoes, nets, and traps, which are often made from locally sourced materials. The fishing techniques are adapted to the coastal waters, where they catch various fish species, crustaceans, and other marine life.

In the Ayetoro community, which is one of the prominent settlements of the Ilaje people, fishing plays a crucial role in the local economy. The community is situated along the coastline, providing easy access to rich fishing grounds. For many families in Ayetoro, fishing is the primary source of income and sustenance. The community's fishermen often work together, sharing knowledge and resources to

ensure successful catches. This cooperative spirit fosters a strong sense of community and belonging among the people.

However, the fishing industry in Ayetoro faces several challenges. Overfishing, environmental changes, and competition from larger commercial fishing operations threaten the livelihoods of local fishermen. Additionally, issues such as inadequate infrastructure and limited access to markets make it difficult for the Ayetoro community to thrive economically.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to assess the economic impact of fishing on the Ilaje people, focusing specifically on the Ayetoro community from 2015 to 2025. In pursuing this aim; The study will:

1. Evaluate the contribution of fishing to the local economy of Ayetoro.
2. Identify the challenges faced by fishermen in the community.
3. Explore the social and cultural significance of fishing for the Ilaje people.
4. Recommend strategies for sustainable fishing practices and economic development in Ayetoro.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to the Ayetoro community within the Ilaje ethnic group. The research will focus on the economic impact of fishing from 2015 to 2025, examining both the positive contributions and the challenges faced by the

community. The study will involve interviews with local fishermen, community leaders, and other stakeholders to gather qualitative and quantitative data.

Methodology

The research will utilize a mixed-methods approach, focusing on primary and secondary sources. Primary data will be collected through oral interviews with fishermen and indigenous community members of Ayetoro, allowing for a deeper understanding of their fishing practices, income levels, and the challenges they face. Secondary sources will include relevant literature on the topic, encompassing books, academic journals, and online resources, to provide a comprehensive context for the study.

Literature Review

Ilaje: The Yoruba Fishing People of the Niger Delta" by 'Gbade Ikuejube offers a comprehensive exploration of the Ilaje community, an ethnic group within the Yoruba nation located in Ondo State, Nigeria¹. The book delves into their rich cultural identity, emphasizing the significance of fishing as both an economic activity and a cultural cornerstone that shapes their social interactions and community bonds.

Ikuejube provides an deep look at the fishing techniques employed by the Ilaje people, detailing the tools and methods they use. Fishing is portrayed not just as a means of sustenance but as a vital part of their social fabric, where families and neighbors often collaborate, reinforcing their communal ties. The author also

addresses the environmental challenges that threaten the Ilaje way of life, such as coastal erosion, pollution, and climate change, highlighting the vulnerability of a community that relies heavily on the sea for its livelihood. The book examines the social structure of the Ilaje people, including their governance systems and the roles of traditional leaders. Ikuejube discusses how these traditional structures coexist with modern political frameworks, emphasizing the importance of elders in decision-making processes, particularly regarding resource management and conflict resolution.

Cultural heritage is another focal point of the book, as Ikuejube underscores the need to preserve the Ilaje traditions in the face of modernization and globalization. He explores various cultural practices, including music, dance, and storytelling, which are integral to the Ilaje identity. The author advocates for the documentation and promotion of these traditions to ensure that future generations remain connected to their roots. Through detailed descriptions and personal anecdotes, Ikuejube invites readers to appreciate the resilience and vibrancy of the Ilaje culture while raising awareness about the challenges they face in a changing world. This book serves as a valuable resource for anyone interested in understanding the complexities of coastal communities, their cultural practices, and the environmental issues that threaten their existence. It is a heartfelt tribute to a people whose way of life is intricately tied to the sea, reminding us of the importance of cultural diversity and the need to protect the livelihoods of vulnerable populations.

The work by O.M. Ehinmore and S.A. Ogunode delves into the historical context of fish as a vital component in the indigenous healing practices of the Ilaje people. The authors emphasize that fish is not merely a dietary staple but also holds significant medicinal value within the community. They explore various species of fish used in traditional remedies, detailing how these fish are believed to possess healing properties that address a range of ailments. Ehinmore and Ogunode give a thorough examination of the cultural beliefs surrounding fish in the Ilaje community. They discuss how fish is often associated with spiritual healing and is used in rituals and ceremonies aimed at invoking health and well-being². The authors highlight the intricate relationship between the Ilaje people's fishing practices and their understanding of health, illustrating how the sea and its resources are intertwined with their cultural identity. The study also addresses the historical evolution of these healing practices, tracing their roots and how they have been influenced by external factors such as colonialism and modernization. The authors argue that despite these influences, the Ilaje people have maintained a strong connection to their traditional healing methods, adapting them to contemporary contexts while preserving their cultural significance.

The study by T. Kehinde Adekunle and Olubusola Tunde Shemudara examines the ongoing struggle for fishing rights among the Ilaje/Apoi and Ijaw communities along the southwest coastline of Ondo State, Nigeria. The authors delve

into the historical and socio-political dynamics that have shaped the relationships between these two groups, highlighting the complexities of resource management and access to fishing grounds³. Adekunle and Shemudara provide a detailed analysis of the traditional fishing practices of both the Ilaje/Apoi and Ijaw peoples, emphasizing how fishing is not only a means of livelihood but also a crucial aspect of their cultural identity. The authors explore the significance of fishing rights in the context of community cohesion and the economic well-being of these groups, illustrating how disputes over access to fishing areas can lead to tensions and conflicts.

The study pinpoints the impact of external factors, such as government policies, industrial activities, and environmental changes, on the fishing rights of these communities. The authors argue that these external pressures often exacerbate existing conflicts, as both groups vie for limited resources in a rapidly changing environment. They emphasize the need for equitable resource management practices that consider the rights and needs of local communities. Adekunle and Shemudara also discuss the role of traditional leadership and community governance in addressing fishing rights disputes. They highlight the importance of dialogue and negotiation between the Ilaje/Apoi and Ijaw peoples, advocating for collaborative approaches to resource management that can foster peace and mutual understanding.

The study conducted by Mabel Omowumi Ipinmoroti, Adams Ovie Iyiola, and Babajide Idowu provides a thorough *economic analysis of artisanal fisheries in*

*selected fishing communities within the Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria*⁴. This research is significant as it sheds light on the economic viability, profitability, and sustainability of artisanal fishing practices, which are crucial for the livelihoods of local fishers and the overall well-being of the community. The authors employ a variety of methodologies, including surveys and interviews with local fishers, to gather data on the economic aspects of artisanal fisheries. Their analysis reveals important insights into the profitability of fishing activities, as they assess the income generated from these practices in relation to operational costs. This evaluation highlights the financial realities faced by artisanal fishers, illustrating how fishing serves not only as a source of income but also as a vital component of the local economy.

In addition to profitability, the study delves into the sustainability of artisanal fishing practices. The authors consider the environmental impacts of fishing activities and the long-term viability of fish stocks in the region. This aspect of the research is particularly important, as it underscores the need for sustainable practices that can ensure the continued availability of fish resources for future generations. The authors emphasize that the health of the marine ecosystem is intrinsically linked to the economic stability of the fishing communities. The socio-economic impact of artisanal fisheries is another critical focus of the study. Ipinmoroti, Iyiola, and Idowu highlight how fishing contributes to food security and provides employment

opportunities for many individuals within the community. The authors illustrate that artisanal fisheries play a significant role in supporting the livelihoods of local families, thereby reinforcing the importance of these practices in the broader socio-economic landscape.

However, the study does not shy away from addressing the challenges faced by artisanal fishers. The authors identify issues such as overfishing, competition from industrial fishing operations, and environmental degradation as significant threats to the livelihoods of local communities. These challenges not only jeopardize the economic stability of fishers but also raise concerns about the sustainability of fishing practices in the region.

In the Youtube video "*The Tribe That Only Survives Around The Ocean | ILAJE*," viewers are taken on a captivating journey into the heart of the Ilaje settlement, located in the Ebuno Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom. The video effectively captures the essence of the Ilaje people's rich cultural heritage⁵, emphasizing their unique relationship with the ocean, which is central to their identity and way of life. One of the standout features of the video is its exploration of the diverse fish species that the Ilaje people rely on for sustenance. The community's fishing practices are depicted as both traditional and sustainable, showcasing methods that have been passed down through generations. The video highlights the importance of fishing not only as a means of livelihood but also as a cultural cornerstone that

shapes the community's social fabric. Viewers gain insight into the various fishing techniques employed by the Ilaje, as well as the significance of specific fish species in their culinary traditions.

The culinary segment of the video is particularly engaging, as it showcases traditional Ilaje dishes that are rich in flavor and deeply rooted in the community's heritage. The preparation of these dishes, often centered around fresh seafood, reflects the Ilaje people's resourcefulness and connection to their coastal environment. The video emphasizes how food serves as a medium for cultural expression, bringing families and communities together during communal meals and celebrations. Additionally, the video delves into the historical relationship between the Ilaje people and Ile Ife, a significant cultural and historical center in Nigeria. This connection is portrayed as a vital aspect of the Ilaje identity, highlighting the shared history and cultural exchanges that have shaped their traditions over time. The narrative underscores the importance of understanding these historical ties, as they contribute to the richness of the Ilaje culture and its resilience in the face of modern challenges.

Throughout the video, the cinematography captures the stunning coastal landscape of the Ilaje settlement, providing a visual feast that complements the storytelling. The vibrant colors of the ocean, the bustling fishing activities, and the lively community interactions create an immersive experience for viewers, allowing them to appreciate the beauty and complexity of Ilaje culture.

M.L. Adeleke's study on the *Socio-economic characteristics of artisanal fisher-folks in the coastal region of Ondo State, Nigeria*, offers a compelling look into the lives of these communities⁶. The research paints a vivid picture of the challenges and triumphs faced by the fisher-folks, who rely heavily on traditional fishing methods while also adapting to modern practices. The study shows that the majority of the fisher-folks are in their prime working years, typically between 30 and 50 years old. This demographic insight highlights a community that is not only active but also deeply rooted in family values, as many of these individuals are married and support their families through fishing. However, the educational background of the fisher-folks often reflects limited access to formal education, which can impact their ability to access new information and resources that could enhance their livelihoods.

Fishing serves as the lifeblood of these communities, providing not just sustenance but also a primary source of income. The study emphasizes the variety of fish species caught, which are essential for both local consumption and market sales. Yet, the fisher-folks face significant economic challenges, including limited access to credit and financial resources. This lack of support can hinder their ability to invest in better equipment or practices that could improve their catch and, ultimately, their quality of life. Socially, the fisher-folks operate within a close-knit community where relationships and networks are vital. Traditional knowledge and practices are passed down through generations, ensuring that cultural identity remains strong. Community

gatherings and festivals centered around fishing not only celebrate their way of life but also strengthen social bonds among the members.

Adeleke and Fagbenro in their joint journal also highlight the importance of community and collaboration among the fisher-folks. Many of them work together, sharing knowledge and resources, which strengthens their ability to cope with challenges. This sense of community is crucial, as it allows them to learn from one another and improve their fishing techniques⁷. Also, their research points out that the fisher-folks face various challenges, such as limited access to modern fishing equipment, environmental changes, and competition from larger fishing operations. These factors can make it difficult for them to maintain their livelihoods. The authors suggest that providing training and resources could help these communities adopt better practices and improve their overall economic situation. The study also emphasizes the need for policies that support sustainable fishing practices. By promoting responsible fishing and protecting marine resources, the government and other organizations can help ensure that the fisher-folks can continue their way of life for generations to come.

Folasade Aderonke Olorunlana's in her work on *Sea level rise and its impact on the Ayetoro community in Ondo State, Nigeria*, provides a critical examination of the challenges faced by this coastal community⁸. Established in 1947, Ayetoro, often referred to as "Happy City," has historically been known for its thriving fish trade and

strong social ties. However, the community is now grappling with severe threats posed by climate change and the activities of oil companies, which have led to significant environmental degradation. The research highlights the alarming reality that Ayetoro has lost over 10 kilometers of land to rising sea levels and ocean surges in the past two decades. A particularly devastating surge on April 16, 2023, resulted in the destruction of between 500 to 700 buildings, displacing many residents and causing substantial property loss. The traditional ruler of Ayetoro, Oba Micah Olaseni Ajijo, attributes these surges to both climate change and the detrimental activities of oil companies, which have exacerbated the effects of rising temperatures and sea levels.

In response to the crisis, the Ondo State government has acknowledged the situation and formed a committee to address the coastal erosion challenges. However, many residents feel abandoned and frustrated by the slow bureaucratic processes and the lack of effective action from both state and federal authorities. A shoreline protection project awarded to Atlantic Dredgers Limited in 2006 remains incomplete, further heightening the community's vulnerability to environmental threats. The sentiment among the residents is one of despair and neglect. They express concerns about the future of their community, fearing that without urgent intervention, Ayetoro may face extinction. The calls for action from government agencies and international organizations emphasize the need for a dedicated response to the ecological disaster

that is unfolding. The future of Ayetoro hinges on effective measures to combat the ongoing environmental challenges and restore the livelihoods of its residents.

CHAPTERIZATION

Chapter One: Background to The Study

By giving a clear overview of the Ilaje fishing industry and the importance of it, this chapter establishes the foundation for the search. It outlines the purpose and particular goals of the study, highlighting its emphasis on the social and economic aspects of fishing in the Ayetoro community. The study's importance is emphasized, showing how it helps us understand local economies. While the methodology describes the study approach, including data collecting and analytic techniques, the scope establishes the geographical and thematic boundaries. In order to place the research within the larger academic discourse, a literature review summarizes previous investigations.

Chapter Two: History of the Ilaje People

The historical foundations, customs, and sociocultural development of the Ilaje people are explored in this chapter. It offers an in-depth study of the Ayetoro community's ethnic heritage and cultural legacy, highlighting its distinct identity within the Ilaje region. It also provides a thorough historical account of fishing in Ayetoro, examining the ways in which fishing methods have changed over time and their significance to the local way of life.

Chapter Three: Fishing Activities of the Ilaje People

This chapter provides a detailed examination of the fishing practices that underpin the economy of Ayetoro, a coastal community in the Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. It explores the artisanal fishing methods, tools, and socio-economic roles within the community, emphasizing fishing's role as the primary livelihood of households. The chapter covers traditional and modern techniques, the division of labor among men, women, and youths, and the economic contributions through the value chain of capture, processing, and marketing, while noting challenges like declining catches due to overfishing and environmental pressures.

Chapter Four: Economic Impacts Of Fishing On the Ilaje People

This chapter gives an overview of the fishing economy and its function as a pillar of the local economy. It also examines the economic significance of fishing in Ayetoro. It looks at the jobs that fishing creates and describes how it helps people and families make a living. Along with examining how the fishing industry affects regional markets and trade networks and how it promotes economic interdependence, the chapter also looks at income production and its role in maintaining economic stability.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the study's primary results, offering a brief summary of the historical, economic, and problematic aspects of Ayetoro's fishing Industry. It provides findings based on the research, providing facts about the industry's relevance and the necessity for sustainable practices to ensure its long-term existence, as well as considering the wider impact for the Ilaje community.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY OF THE ILAJE PEOPLE

The Ilaje, a unique branch of the Yoruba family, have a fascinating history that stretches back to the 10th century in Ile-Ife, the heart of Yoruba culture and spirituality. According to stories passed down through generations, the Ilaje were among the early settlers of Ile-Ife, guided by leaders like the revered Olugbo. But around the 9th or 10th century, the rise of Oduduwa, a powerful Yoruba figure who unified much of Ile-Ife, stirred tensions that pushed many groups, including the Ilaje, to seek new homes¹. Led by their chiefs, they trekked southward, settling along the rivers and coastlines of what's now Ondo State, Nigeria, in places like Igbokoda, Ugbonla, Mahin, Ayetoro, and Obe. This journey shaped them into a people of the water, perfectly at home in their aquatic world.

The Ilaje's identity comes from a blend of four ancient kingdoms Mahin, Ugbo, Aheri, and Etikan. The Ugbo trace their roots to Obamakin Osogaga, who came from Ile-Ife, while the Mahin migrated from Benin, and others arrived from upland Yoruba areas like Ijebu. Over time, these groups wove together into one people, united by a shared Ilaje dialect—a flavor of Yoruba spiced with words tied to their watery surroundings². Intermarriages and a common language cemented their bond.

Living along the Atlantic coast, with rivers and lagoons crisscrossing their land, the Ilaje became masters of fishing, canoe-building, and trading across the seas. By the 11th century, they were navigating far beyond their borders, striking trade deals in fish, salt, and other sea treasures with neighbors like Itsekiri, Ijaw, and Edo, though not without some quarrels over coastal borders. Still, ties grew strong through marriages and shared traditions³. The Ilaje earned the nickname “water people⁴,” and their motto, “*Ayemafuge*” which means harmony or unity, captures their knack for sticking together in a tough environment.

The colonial era, from the 19th to mid-20th century, shook things up as the British pushed cash crops over traditional fishing economies. But the Ilaje rolled with it, supplying fish to growing cities. When oil was found in Ilajeland in the 1950s, it brought both wealth and trouble. Oil money boosted local economies at first, but spills and coastal erosion soon began to harm their fishing grounds. Recently, the 2025 demolition of the Ilaje-Otumara community in Lagos displaced thousands, hitting their fishing and trading hard. Yet, the Ilaje keep their spirit alive through stories; like their role in the Moremi legend, where their warriors fended off invaders and vibrant festivals. With over 500,000 people today, they remain a strong coastal community, deeply tied to their maritime roots⁵.

Ethnic background and cultural heritage of Ayetoro community.

The Ayetoro community, located in the Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State, Southwest Nigeria, is a vibrant coastal settlement renowned for its rich ethnic background and cultural heritage. As a subset of the Ilaje people, Ayetoro's history and traditions are deeply rooted in Yoruba culture, shaped by its unique aquatic environment along the Atlantic coastline. Surrounded entirely by water, Ayetoro's houses, transportation systems, and infrastructure are built on stilts, earning it the nickname "Venice of Africa."

Ayetoro shares the Ilaje's origins in Ile-Ife, with their migration to the coast around the 10th century, a movement often linked to resistance against Oduduwa's attempt at centralized rule and the search for fertile fishing and trading grounds. The Ilaje identity remains distinctly Yoruba, yet their centuries-long proximity to neighboring groups such as the Ijaw and the Itsekiri has fostered extensive cultural exchanges manifested in shared vocabulary, dress patterns, culinary styles, and intermarriage⁶. These interactions have also influenced their economic practices, particularly fishing and maritime trade, which remain central to their livelihoods.

The Ilaje dialect, while mutually clear with standard Yoruba, demonstrates unique linguistic features that reflect their coastal environment. Many idioms and expressions are directly tied to water, tides, and marine life, underscoring their adaptation to an aquatic setting. This maritime orientation is not only economic but also deeply spiritual. In Ilaje cosmology, their beliefs remain aligned with broader

Yoruba traditions, with reverence given to deities such as Olokun, the goddess of the sea, who symbolizes wealth, fertility, and protection⁷. However, the introduction of Christianity through missionary activity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought profound religious transformation, leading to the widespread adoption of Christian practices, while traditional spiritual observances persist in diverse forms.

Ayetero's cultural heritage blends Yoruba traditions with adaptations to its coastal environment. Fishing is not only the economic backbone but also a cultural cornerstone, with men and women skilled in navigating waterways using canoes. The community practices a form of communalism, with profits from fishing pooled into a "single purse" to finance education, infrastructure, and communal projects, reflecting their commitment to collective welfare. Other economic activities include canoe-making, net-weaving, and trading in fish and petroleum products, as Ayetero's land is rich in crude oil, historically making it one of West Africa's wealthiest communities⁸.

Religion is central to Ayetero's collective identity, functioning not only as a spiritual guide but also as a cultural support. While the traditional Yoruba worship of deities such as Olokun, the goddess of the sea associated with wealth, fertility, and protection is preserved in symbolic and ritual practices, Christianity dominates daily life in the community. The Cherubim and Seraphim Church of Zion, first established in nearby Ugbo Na in the mid-20th century, has become the most influential Christian denomination among the Ilaje, shaping moral codes, communal authority, and social

order⁹. Its renowned “Zion” music, which fuses Yoruba drumming, call-and-response singing, and indigenous rhythms with biblical themes, represents a uniquely Ilaje adaptation of Christianity and is central to Ayetoro’s spiritual life.

Religious festivals form another arena where Ayetoro’s cultural blend becomes visible. Annual celebrations dedicated to Olokun feature elaborate rituals, masquerades, and water-based offerings, while Christian observances such as Christmas and Easter are marked with musical performances, dances, and communal feasting. These festivals not only affirm faith but also reinforce kinship bonds, collective memory, and intergenerational solidarity.

Food in Ayetoro also reveal the interplay between environment, culture, and social life. Their cuisine highlights both maritime resources and indigenous agricultural produce. Staples like pupuru (a fermented cassava meal) are typically paired with obe marugbo (a medicinally valued vegetable soup) or igbanyege (a coastal dish of boiled corn, fish, and palm oil), reflecting their dependence on fishing and farming. Complementing these meals is ogogoro, a locally distilled gin from palm wine, which serves dual roles as a ritual libation in traditional worship and as a valued commodity in inter-community trade networks¹⁰.

Traditional attire mirrors that of neighboring Ijaw and Itsekiri, with men wearing hats, long-sleeved shirts, and wrappers, and women donning blouses with double wrappers, headscarves, and beads for ceremonies. Music and dance, featuring

instruments like the agogo (metal gong) and drums, mimic the sea's rhythms and are central to festivals and communal events. Ayetoro's social structure, led by the Olu of Ayetoro and influenced by the Olugbo of Ugbbo, blends Yoruba monarchical systems with communal decision-making, emphasizing respect for elders and collective labor.

Despite historical prosperity from petroleum wealth, Ayetoro faces challenges from oil-related environmental degradation and government neglect¹¹. Recent infrastructure improvements by the Ondo State government, including roads and amenities, recognize Ayetoro's economic and tourism potential, driven by its floating markets and unique stilt architecture. Ayetoro remains a symbol of Ilaje resilience, preserving its cultural heritage while adapting to modern realities.

Historical Overview of Fishing in Ayetoro Community

Fishing is the economic and cultural cornerstone of Ayetoro. Strategically located along the Atlantic coast and surrounded by lagoons and rivers, Ayetoro's aquatic environment has made it a hub for fishing and maritime trade. Unlike other Ilaje communities reliant on traditional methods, Ayetoro pioneered industrial fishing, employing trawlers for deep-sea fishing, a practice enhanced by sending community members abroad to study advanced fishing techniques. This innovation, coupled with their use of sophisticated equipment, distinguished Ayetoro as a leader in the Ilaje fishing industry¹².

In its early years, Ayetoro's fishers used traditional canoes crafted from mahogany and handwoven gill nets, traps, and hooks to harvest species like croaker, tilapia, bonga, shrimp, and crabs. Their sophisticated ecological knowledge, based on tidal patterns, lunar cycles, and seasonal migrations (e.g., targeting croaker from March to June), optimized catches. Fish were supplied to local markets in Igbokoda and Lagos and traded regionally with Cameroon, Gabon, Benin, and Equatorial Guinea¹³. By the 1950s, Ayetoro's fishing industry, bolstered by early oil discoveries, earned it the title "Happy City," with one of Africa's highest per capita incomes. The community's cooperative system ensured equitable resource distribution, with fishing profits financing education, housing, infrastructure, and communal projects like schools and health centers.

The fishing industry, passed down through apprenticeships, remains a generational tradition, with young fishers learning from elders. Ayetoro's economic advantages include job creation and the establishment of fish markets that supply neighboring communities, boosting regional trade. However, the discovery of petroleum in the 1950s introduced challenges. Oil exploration by companies like Chevron caused environmental degradation, with a 2019 study estimating a 30% decline in fish yields due to oil spills and coastal erosion, which altered spawning grounds¹⁴. By 2020, shrimp catches, a key resource, dropped by 40%. Competition

from industrial trawlers further depleted offshore stocks, straining local fishers reliant on traditional canoes.

Despite these challenges, Ayetoro's fishers have shown resilience. In the 2000s, some adopted aquaculture, farming tilapia and catfish in controlled ponds to supplement wild catches. Conservation efforts, informed by local knowledge, include mangrove restoration to support fish breeding grounds and sea turtle protection, with 80% of fishers avoiding nesting sites and releasing accidentally caught turtles. However, limited access to modern equipment, such as motorized boats, and ongoing government neglect hinder progress. Ayetoro's fishing industry remains a blend of tradition and adaptation, sustaining livelihoods while preserving its cultural significance amidst environmental and economic pressures.

The Ilaje people, originating from Ile-Ife in the 10th century, migrated to Ondo State's coast, forming a unified identity through the amalgamation of the Mahin, Ugbo, Aheri, and Etikan kingdoms. Their expertise as fishers and traders, rooted in their aquatic environment, has defined their cultural and economic heritage. Ayetoro, founded in 1947, exemplifies this legacy, blending Yoruba traditions with innovations like industrial fishing and communal resource-sharing. Despite challenges, including colonial disruptions, oil-related environmental degradation, and modern evictions like the 2025 Ilaje-Otumara case, the Ilaje and Ayetoro communities demonstrate

resilience. Through aquaculture, conservation, and cultural preservation via festivals like Umale and unique burial practices, they maintain their identity as a maritime people, contributing significantly to Nigeria's cultural and economic diversity.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER THREE

FISHING ACTIVITIES OF THE ILAJE PEOPLE

From previous chapters, it has been established that Fishing is the primary economic and cultural activity for the Ilaje people, particularly in coastal communities like Ayetoro within the Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. As a Yoruba subgroup with seafaring roots since the 15th century, the Ilaje have depended on the Atlantic Ocean and lagoons for sustenance and identity¹. Ayetoro has centered fishing as its core livelihood, supporting 80% of households. This chapter examines the fishing activities of the Ilaje, focusing on methods and techniques, economic importance, and cultural significance.

Artisanal fishing, small-scale operations using canoes, nets, and hooks, accounts for over 82% of Nigeria's domestic fish supply, and Ilaje is a major contributor². Targeted species include croakers, bonga shad, catfish, and shrimp, with the value chain—from capture to processing, transportation, and marketing—driving economic activity. A 2020 analysis reported average annual revenues of ₦1,356,852 per fisherman, with net profits of ₦663,076 after costs like fuel and net maintenance. However, a 20-30% catch decline due to environmental factors underscores sustainability needs³.

Fishing Methods and Techniques

The fishing methods and techniques of the Ilaje people in Ayetoro portray a harmonious combination of ancestral wisdom and contemporary adaptations, tailored to the region's water bodies. Traditional methods, practiced over centuries, form the foundation of these practices, emphasizing sustainability and efficiency in resource-scarce environments. Gill nets, for instance, are among the most prevalent tools, consisting of long panels of netting stretched across water channels to entangle fish by their gills. Constructed from natural fibers like palm threads in earlier times and now often nylon for durability, these nets measure 50-100 meters in length with mesh sizes of 2-4 cm, specifically designed to target mid-sized species such as croakers without capturing excessive juveniles⁴. A single set can yield 20-40 kg during peak seasons, particularly when deployed at dusk when fish schools migrate toward shorelines. This technique requires precise timing, often guided by tidal observations, and has been passed down orally, ensuring its persistence despite modernization.

Cast nets represent another cornerstone of traditional Ilaje fishing, involving a circular net weighted with lead or stones along the perimeter, thrown from a canoe to envelop surface-feeding fish. Typically 3-5 meters in diameter, these nets are ideal for shallow lagoons, capturing 10-25 kg per throw of species like bonga shad or small shrimp. The skill lies in the throw—a fluid, spinning motion that opens the net like a parachute before it sinks and closes. In an interview, Mr. Sunday Akintoye recounted, "My father taught me to cast at dawn when fish rise for plankton (Fish food); one

good throw can feed a family for days⁵." Hook-and-line fishing complements these methods, using baited hooks attached to lines dropped from canoes to target bottom-dwellers like catfish. Bait, such as earthworms or small fish, is threaded onto hooks of varying sizes, with catches ranging from 5-15 kg daily in deeper channels⁶. This method is labor-intensive but selective, allowing fishermen to avoid bycatch and focus on high-value species.

Traps, woven from local bamboo or palm fronds, are deployed in shallow, calm waters to passively capture shrimp and small fish, contributing to high yields. These traps are usually baited with crushed shellfish or vegetables, these structures are submerged overnight, checked at dawn. Their low-cost construction, which is often around ₱5,000 makes them accessible for novice fishermen, though maintenance against rot is essential. Indigenous knowledge elevates the effectiveness of these techniques'. Lunar phases also dictate timing: full moons enhance visibility for cast nets, while new moons favor gill nets for nocturnal species⁷. Tidal patterns, which are observed through water color and bird behavior, guide placement, boosting success rates by 20%. Seasonal variations further shape methods. The rainy season, usually around April-September, floods lagoons with nutrient-rich waters, ideal for gill nets and traps, yielding peak harvests as fish congregate for spawning. In contrast, the dry season, usually around October-March, demands offshore hook-and-line

fishing, where winds are calmer but visibility is lower⁸. These adaptations minimize risks, such as storms that can capsize canoes.

Modern techniques have gradually integrated with traditions, enhancing reach and efficiency. Motorized canoes, equipped with 15-40 horsepower outboard engines, have largely replaced paddled canoes since the 2000s, enabling trips 5-10 km offshore and increasing catches by 25-35%⁹. These fiberglass or wooden vessels, costing ₦200,000-₦500,000, allow access to deeper waters for larger croakers, but fuel expenses burden low-income fishermen. Synthetic nets, with finer mesh sizes, offer durability but raise sustainability concerns by capturing juveniles, contributing to stock depletion. The 2024 Ondo-Cares program distributed 1,500 engines and nets worth ₦26 million to Ilaje fishermen, improving productivity for 30% of recipients¹⁰.

Environmental pressures challenge these methods. Oil exploration, producing 60,000 barrels daily in Ilaje, introduces pollutants like heavy metals, reducing yields by 10-15% and altering fish behavior¹¹. Studies show elevated cadmium and lead levels in sediments affect enzyme activities in fish, leading to stunted growth¹². Climate change exacerbates this, with warmer waters, which has been (rising 1-2°C since 2000) driving species like bonga shad to cooler depths inaccessible to canoes, resulting in a 20-30% catch decline. Sea level rise has eroded 80% of Ayetoro's land, flooding traditional sites and forcing reliance on riskier offshore techniques¹³. To counter these, Ilaje fishermen incorporate adaptive strategies. Selective gear, like

larger mesh nets around 4-6 cm, allows juveniles to escape, as recommended in sustainability research. The Ilaje Youth Forum trains 150-200 youths annually in eco-friendly methods, including GPS for precise spot-fishing to avoid overexploited areas¹⁴. Community-led monitoring, where elders map polluted zones, helps reroute efforts. However, costs and enforcement gaps may hinder this adoption.

These methods not only sustain daily livelihoods but also embody Ilaje's resilience. From gill nets echoing ancestral designs to motorized canoes bridging old and new, fishing techniques in Ayetoro illustrate a dynamic response to environmental and economic pressures. Scholarly analyses emphasize that preserving this knowledge is crucial for biodiversity and community survival. As global warming intensifies, the Ilaje's adaptive ingenuity, blending tradition with innovation; offers lessons for coastal fisheries worldwide. Further research into hybrid techniques, such as solar-powered engines to cut fuel costs, could enhance sustainability. The evolution of these techniques reflects broader trends in Nigerian artisanal fishing, where 70% of practitioners still rely on traditional tools despite modernization pressures. In Ayetoro, where 67.5% of fisherfolk are literate, education facilitates adoption of improved methods, like ventilated smoking kilns to reduce smoke inhalation during processing¹⁵.

Economic Importance of Fishing

Fishing holds immense economic importance for the Ilaje people in Ayetoro, functioning as the principal engine of income generation, employment creation, and

trade facilitation in a coastal region where alternative livelihoods are limited by geography and even infrastructural challenges. As a sub-ethnic Yoruba group with a seafaring heritage dating back to the 15th century, the Ilaje have leveraged the Atlantic Ocean and its lagoons to build an economy centered on artisanal fishing, which not only sustains individual households but also contributes to broader regional development¹⁶.

The role of fishing in income generation and poverty alleviation is foundational to the Ilaje economy, providing a reliable revenue stream in a region plagued by high poverty rates and limited diversification. Artisanal fishing, characterized by small-scale operations, yields substantial earnings for fishermen, with average annual revenues reaching around ₦1,300,000 and net profits up to ₦600,000 after accounting for operational costs like fuel and nets¹⁷. During peak seasons from March to October, daily catches of 30-50 kg of species like croakers and bonga shad are sold at ₦400-₦800 per kg, translating to ₦12,000-₦40,000 per trip, enough to cover household essentials like food, school fees, and healthcare. This income is particularly vital in Ilaje, where poverty affects approximately 60% of the population, as fishing households experience 15-20% lower poverty rates compared to non-fishing ones due to the sector's consistent cash flow¹⁸. For many Ilaje families, fishing acts as a buffer against economic shocks, such as inflation or seasonal unemployment, allowing them to invest in assets like additional canoes or livestock.

Employment opportunities created by fishing form another pillar of its economic importance, encompassing direct, indirect, and ancillary roles that support thousands in Ilaje. Direct employment involves capture fishing, where men operate canoes and nets, employing 80% of households as primary workers. According to Mr. Sunday, a typical crew of 3-5 men earns ~~₦3,000-₦6,000~~ per trip, with youths serving as apprentices to gain skills. He leads a crew that catches 30-50 kg daily, including two of his sons who help him on the boat. Post-harvest processing, mostly dominated by women, involves smoking or drying fish, with groups of 15-25 members handling 200-300 kg weekly and earning around ~~₦15,000-₦30,000~~ monthly per participant¹⁹.

Contributions to local and regional trade networks highlight fishing's economic multiplier effect, integrating Ilaje into broader markets. Ayetoro's catches supply bigger fish markets like Igbokoda, generating billions in annual trade value, with each kilogram sold creating income in downstream activity for vendors, transporters, and retailers. Smoked fish exports to Lagos and Benin Republic sustain historical routes from the 19th century, when Ilaje canoes traded with inland Yoruba groups²⁰. Fish, providing 40% of Nigeria's animal protein, ensures food security and stabilizes prices, preventing shortages that could inflate costs by 20-30%.

Food security and nutritional economics further amplify fishing's benefits, as it supplies affordable protein in a nutrient-deficient region. Ilaje diets rely on fish for essential omega-3s, reducing malnutrition rates compared to inland areas.

Economically, this lowers healthcare costs, with families spending less on supplements. Studies from Zambia have shown that fishing households have better nutritional outcomes, with children exhibiting higher growth metrics²¹. Government interventions, particularly through oil royalties from Ilaje's daily production, contribute significantly to local development. These revenues are often directed toward infrastructure such as landing sites, which in turn enhance accessibility and support the fishing economy

Cultural Importance of Fishing

Fishing holds profound cultural importance for the Ilaje people, serving as a foundational element of their identity, social structure, spiritual beliefs, and daily life in communities like Ayetoro. As a sub-ethnic group of the Yoruba, the Ilaje have developed a unique cultural framework centered around the sea and its resources, where fishing is not merely an economic pursuit but a symbol of resilience, community cohesion, and harmony with nature.

The spiritual and religious significance of fishing is central to Ilaje culture, where the sea is viewed as a divine entity embodying both benevolence and power. The Ilaje worship Olokun, the Yoruba deity of the sea and wealth, who is believed to control marine resources and protect fishermen. Rituals to appease Olokun are integral to fishing activities, often involving offerings of kola nuts, palm wine, and smoked fish at waterside shrines before setting out to sea²². These practices are not

superstitious relics but active cultural mechanisms that foster a sense of reverence and responsibility toward the environment. For instance, before a fishing trip, fishermen might perform a libation ceremony, pouring palm wine into the water while invoking Olokun for bountiful catches and safe returns. This spiritual connection extends to healing practices, where fish are used in indigenous medicine; for example, certain fish species are believed to have therapeutic properties for ailments like infertility or skin diseases²³. Such beliefs reinforce the cultural perception of fishing as a sacred duty, linking the physical act of fishing to metaphysical well-being and community prosperity.

Festivals and celebrations further underscore fishing's cultural value, serving as communal events that reinforce social bonds and preserve traditions. The Malokun Festival, held annually in Ilaje communities like Mahin; also near Ayetoro, is a prime example, combining religious rites, music, dance, and fishing demonstrations to honor Olokun²⁴. During the festival, participants engage in boat races, symbolic of the Ilaje's navigational prowess, and offer freshly caught fish at altars, symbolizing gratitude for the sea's bounty. These events attract community members and visitors, promoting cultural exchange and tourism, which indirectly supports the local economy. The festival also includes storytelling sessions where elders recount myths of Ilaje ancestors who mastered the seas, instilling pride in younger generations.

Other celebrations, such as harvest rites after peak fishing seasons, involve communal feasts of smoked bonga shad, reinforcing solidarity and sharing resources among families. These festivals are not isolated events but integral to the cultural calendar, helping to maintain Ilaje traditions in the face of modernization and urbanization.

Social roles and gender differences in fishing activities are deeply rooted in Ilaje culture, promoting a balanced division of labor that strengthens family and community structures. Men are traditionally seen as the primary providers, venturing into the waters to capture fish, a role that cultivates values of bravery, endurance, and responsibility²⁵. This is evident in the cultural narratives where fishermen are portrayed as heroes battling the sea's unpredictability. Women, on the other hand, are the preservers and distributors, handling post-harvest processing like smoking and drying, which not only adds economic value but also symbolizes nurturing and continuity²⁶. This role empowers women, granting them economic independence and a voice in household decisions, as seen in cooperatives where they share profits and knowledge.

Youths, through apprenticeships, learn these roles, with boys accompanying fathers on boats and girls assisting mothers in processing, ensuring intergenerational transfer of skills and cultural values; as many Ilaje fishermen claim to have learnt the trade from their fathers. Such dynamics foster social cohesion, with fishing serving as a

communal activity that binds families and neighbors, reducing conflicts through shared labor and resources.

The transmission of knowledge through apprenticeships and oral traditions is a cornerstone of Ilaje fishing culture, ensuring the survival of practices and values across generations²⁷. Apprenticeships begin early, with youths joining elders on boats to learn navigation, net mending, and species identification. This hands-on education instills discipline, environmental awareness, and cultural lore, such as myths of Olokun rewarding respectful fishermen. Oral traditions complement this, with stories, songs, and proverbs recounting ancestral exploits. For example, the proverb "The net that catches today feeds tomorrow" teaches sustainability and foresight²⁸.

Language plays a pivotal role in Ilaje fishing culture, with the Ilaje dialect rich in specialized terms that reflect the community's intimate relationship with the sea. Words for different nets: for instance,, "aja" for gill nets; tides "oke" for high tide, and fish behaviors (e.g., "sisa" for schooling) are embedded in daily conversation, preserving linguistic heritage. Proverbs like "The patient fisherman catches the big fish" promote virtues of perseverance, while songs sung during boat trips invoke Olokun's protection, blending art and ritual. This linguistic richness extends to cuisine, where terms for smoked fish ("eja osun") highlight preparation methods passed down maternally.

Fishing's integration into food and life rites makes it a comprehensive cultural symbol. Smoked fish is a staple in Ilaje meals, used in soups like "efo riro" or "gbegiri," and features in rites of passage. At weddings, smoked croakers symbolize abundance, shared among guests to bless the union. Funerals may include sea offerings for the deceased's journey, linking fishing to the life cycle³⁰.

The fishing activities of the Ilaje people in Ayetoro encapsulate a resilient fusion of adaptive techniques, economic sustenance, and cultural heritage, supporting the community's identity to its coastal roots. Traditional methods like gill nets and lunar-guided casts, augmented by modern motorized canoes, enable efficient harvesting of species such as croakers and bonga shad, balancing tradition with innovation amid mounting environmental strains. Economically, fishing fuels livelihoods through substantial revenues, diverse employment in processing cooperatives and ancillary trades, and robust contributions to regional markets and food security in a poverty-challenged landscape. Culturally, it weaves spiritual reverence for Olokun, vibrant festivals like Malokun, and intergenerational knowledge via apprenticeships and proverbs, fostering social cohesion and a profound sense of place.

Yet, threats from overfishing, imperiling diverse species, and climate erosion demand vigilant care. There is a need to enforce sustainable practices, subsidize community cooperatives, and document oral traditions as through this; the Ilaje can

safeguard fishing's enduring legacy, ensuring it remains a pillar of prosperity and pride for future generations.

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CHAPTER FOUR

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF FISHING ON THE ILAJE PEOPLE

Aiyetoro is a coastal community in Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. The community is widely known as a fishing settlement, and the people's way of life has been built around the sea for many decades. The location of Aiyetoro gives the people direct access to the Atlantic Ocean and the surrounding creeks and lagoons, making fishing, the most important occupation for both men and women. For the Ilaje people of Aiyetoro, fishing is not just an economic activity but also a cultural identity, as most households depend on it either directly or indirectly.

The fishing economy in Aiyetoro is dominated by artisanal fishing. Studies confirm that these artisanal operations are still economically viable, with average net profits for fishermen in Ilaje, estimated at about ₦703,683 annually¹.

The fishermen make use of small wooden canoes and motorized boats powered with outboard engines. Common gears include gillnets, longlines, basket traps, and hooks. The fishermen target a variety of species such as croaker, catfish, sole fish, shrimps, and bonga. Fishing trips are usually short, often lasting a few hours to one day, depending on the target species. This type of fishing requires skill, experience, and knowledge of the water environment, which is usually passed down from one generation to another².

Women play a very important role in the Aiyetoro fishing economy. Although they rarely go to sea to fish, they are deeply involved in post-harvest activities. They smoke, dry, and package fish for sale in the local market and in other towns. They also act as retailers and wholesalers, making sure that fish caught in Aiyetoro reaches urban centers such as Igbokoda, Ore, Akure, Benin, and Lagos³. This gendered division of labour ensures that fishing benefits are shared across the community and that the economy works smoothly. However, fishing in Aiyetoro faces serious challenges. The most critical challenge is coastal erosion and sea incursion. In the last decade, Aiyetoro has lost large portions of its land to the sea. Homes, landing sites, and fish processing sheds have been washed away. Reports suggest that more than 400 buildings and even key community landmarks like schools and churches have been destroyed. This has caused displacement of families, loss of assets, and disruption of fishing activities⁴. The problem has been made worse by the abandonment of shoreline protection projects that were meant to defend the community against erosion.

As a result, fishing in Aiyetoro today is caught between resilience and vulnerability. On one hand, fishing still provides income and employment for the people, sustaining their livelihoods. On the other hand, environmental and infrastructural problems keep threatening the sustainability of the industry. The community continues to adapt to these challenges, but without government support,

credit facilities, and protection measures, the long-term survival of Aiyetoro's fishing economy is at risk.

Employment Opportunities Created by Fishing

Fishing is the single largest source of employment in Aiyetoro. Almost every household has at least one member engaged in the sector, whether directly at sea or indirectly through processing and trade. Employment opportunities are created along different stages of the fishing value chain. For men, the most common form of work in Aiyetoro is direct fishing. Fishing at sea has traditionally been regarded as a male occupation because it requires physical strength, long hours on water, and the ability to withstand unpredictable weather conditions. Most young men in Aiyetoro are introduced to fishing at an early age, usually as teenagers, through apprenticeship under experienced fishermen. Apprenticeship is a key part of the learning process, as it allows young men to gradually acquire practical skills and knowledge of the sea. During this stage, they are taught how to set and retrieve nets, how to operate outboard engines, how to mend damaged gear, and how to identify valuable species of fish. They also learn how to observe natural signs such as tides, winds, and fish movement, which are crucial for locating good fishing grounds⁵.

As the apprentices gain experience, they take on more responsibilities within the crew. A typical fishing trip in Aiyetoro requires coordination between the captain, who directs the boat and decides where to fish, and the crew members, who handle

nets, paddles, and storage of the catch. After several years of apprenticeship, many young men aspire to become independent fishermen by either buying their own boat or entering into a co-ownership arrangement with relatives or friends. Boat ownership is seen as an important milestone, as it not only increases income but also raises social status in the community⁶.

Those who cannot afford full ownership often join cooperative groups where several fishermen pool resources to acquire a boat and share profits. The structure of fishing crews in Aiyetoro varies depending on the type of gear and fishing method being used. For small canoe fishing with handlines or basket traps, the crew may be only two to three men. For gillnet fishing or larger canoe operations, crews usually range from three to six men, with clear role distribution: some operate the engine, others set and pull the nets, while others handle the catch on board. These crew arrangements create flexible employment opportunities, as boat owners often recruit crew members on a daily or seasonal basis depending on demand⁷. Fishing thus provides both daily and seasonal employment for men, particularly those in their active working years between the ages of 18 and 45. On a daily basis, men are engaged in short fishing trips close to shore, which bring in income that supports immediate household needs. Seasonally, larger fishing expeditions are carried out during peak periods when certain fish species are abundant, offering higher returns. The seasonal nature of fish availability means that fishermen can earn significantly

more in some months than others, but the year-round demand for fish ensures that there is always at least, some work to do. Beyond direct fishing, men also diversify their roles within the industry. Some work part-time as mechanics for outboard engines, while others build or repair canoes. These side activities are often pursued during lean fishing seasons or when weather conditions make fishing unsafe. Such flexibility ensures that men in Aiyetoro remain economically active throughout the year, even when fishing conditions are unfavorable⁸.

For many households, men's earnings from fishing form the financial backbone, while women complement this by processing and selling the fish. This gendered partnership has sustained Aiyetoro's economy for decades and continues to provide one of the most important sources of employment for men in the community.

For women, employment is concentrated in post-harvest activities. Women dominate the processing and marketing of fish. A study in Igbokoda, which is the main market hub for Ilaje, found that nearly 89 percent of fish marketers were women. These women earn income by smoking fish, drying fish, and selling in baskets to wholesalers and consumers. Their activities employ additional hands in firewood collection, sorting, packaging, and transport. In this way, the fishing industry indirectly creates casual jobs for youths and even children⁹.

Employment also comes from support services. Fishing boats need to be built and repaired, which provides work for local carpenters and craftsmen. Engines require

regular maintenance, creating jobs for mechanics. The constant demand for fuel provides a steady market for fuel sellers. Ice-making and storage services, though limited in Aiyetoro also offer opportunities for local businesses. Food vendors, shopkeepers, and transport operators all benefit from the daily activities of fishers and traders.

Fishing therefore supports not just those who fish but a wide circle of people whose livelihoods are tied to the sector. Even during low seasons, workers often shift to other tasks such as petty trading or farming but always return to fishing as their main source of livelihood. The industry's ability to absorb labour at low entry cost makes it an essential foundation for employment in Aiyetoro.

Income Generation and Economic Stability

Fishing is also the main source of income in Aiyetoro. It generates money for household consumption, school fees, health expenses, and community contributions. Studies show that despite increasing costs of inputs, fishing still offers higher income compared to most other rural occupations¹⁰. According to research in Ilaje communities, fishing yields net profits of around ₦700,000 per year per canoe, depending on catch size and market conditions. Post-harvest traders, especially women, earn average monthly incomes of about ₦60,000, which can rise during peak seasons. For many households, the combination of income from men fishing and women processing creates a relatively stable cash flow throughout the year. However,

income is also unstable because of several risks. The most serious risk is the destruction caused by sea incursions. Whenever the sea floods the community, homes, smokehouses, and processing sheds are damaged, and fishermen lose boats and nets. These events wipe out months of savings and income, leaving families in debt or forcing them to rely on relatives.

Another problem is rising input costs. Fuel is one of the biggest expenses for fishermen, and whenever petrol prices rise, profits are reduced. Firewood for smoking fish is also getting more expensive because of deforestation and distance from collection sites. These costs eat into traders' margins.

Post-harvest losses also reduce income. Without proper cold storage, fish must be sold quickly or risk spoiling. During periods of abundant catch, prices at landing sites can fall sharply because there is no storage facility to hold the fish until demand rises. Traders sometimes sell at very low prices to avoid losing everything.

To cope with these challenges, households use informal financial systems. Many belong to savings groups or rotating credit associations, where members contribute money and take turns receiving lump sums. Others borrow money from middlemen in exchange for promises to sell fish to them in the future. While these methods provide short-term relief, they often keep traders dependent on middlemen and limit their bargaining power.

Despite these difficulties, fishing has remained the most reliable way of generating income in Aiyetoro. The daily cash cycle, where fish caught in the morning can be sold for cash by evening, makes fishing especially important in meeting immediate needs. It gives households flexibility to respond to emergencies and sustain daily living, even if profits fluctuate.

Contribution to Local Markets and Trade

Fishing in Aiyetoro contributes not only to the community but also to the wider economy of Ilaje and Ondo State. The fish caught in Aiyetoro flows into regional markets through an organized trade network. The main hub for this network is Igbokoda, which is the largest fish market in Ilaje. From there, fish is transported to urban centers such as Ore, Akure, Benin, and Lagos. Fishing in Aiyetoro contributes not only to the immediate livelihood of the community but also to the wider economy of Ilaje Local Government Area and Ondo State as a whole. The fishing activities of the community form part of a larger network of regional and state-level trade that connects rural production zones with urban consumption centers. Because Aiyetoro is one of the most prominent fishing communities in Ilaje, the fish caught there plays an important role in ensuring food supply and generating revenue beyond the community itself.

The fish harvested in Aiyetoro does not remain within the village. Instead, it flows into a structured trade system that has developed over decades. At the heart of

this system is Igbokoda, the headquarters of Ilaje Local Government, which functions as the primary commercial hub for fish trade in the region. Igbokoda has long been recognized as one of the largest artisanal fish markets in Southwest Nigeria, attracting buyers from nearby states. The market is strategically located along the waterways, making it accessible by canoe from fishing settlements like Aiyetoro, and also linked by road networks that connect to larger urban centers like Benin and Lagos.

The process typically begins at the Aiyetoro landing sites, where fishermen return with their catches. Women traders and processors buy fish directly from the boats, sometimes on credit arrangements, and then prepare them for sale. A portion of the fish is smoked or dried locally, which adds value and extends its shelf life. Smoked fish is particularly important because it is less perishable and can be transported over long distances without the risk of spoilage¹². From Aiyetoro, women traders transport the fish in canoes or boats to Igbokoda, where larger volumes are aggregated. Women who process fish in Aiyetoro sell to traders who then take it to Igbokoda. From there, wholesalers buy in bulk and supply retailers in cities. This system ensures that fish caught in Aiyetoro contributes to food supply and protein intake for people across the southwest of Nigeria.

The trade also supports other economic activities; especially the transportation system. The ability of Aiyetoro to contribute to these markets is closely linked to its transportation system. Being a coastal settlement surrounded by water, Aiyetoro relies

mainly on water transport¹³. Canoes and motorized boats are the major means by which fish is moved from the landing sites to Igbokoda. Traders, mostly women, use these boats daily to carry baskets of fresh and smoked fish. From Igbokoda, transportation shifts to road vehicles, which distribute the fish to nearby towns and large cities. However, this mixed transport system is not without its difficulties. Boat travel is often slowed down by bad weather, strong tides, or high fuel costs, while the poor state of rural roads makes the onward journey by vehicle expensive and time-consuming¹⁴.

Even with these challenges, the water-and-road transport link remains the backbone of Aiyetoro's fishing economy. Without it, fish from the community would not reach wider markets, and the contribution of Aiyetoro to the economy of Ondo State and beyond would be greatly reduced. This shows clearly that fishing and transportation are interdependent, and the growth of Aiyetoro's fishing economy depends as much on efficient transport as on the productivity of its fishermen. However, disruptions caused by sea erosion affect trade significantly. When landing sites and smokehouses are destroyed, the volume of fish entering the market drops. Traders sometimes have to source from farther communities, which increases transport costs and reduces profits. This weakens Aiyetoro's contribution to regional supply chains.

Despite these challenges, Aiyetoro remains an important player in Ondo State's fishing trade. Its smoked fish has a reputation for quality and continues to attract buyers. With better infrastructure, such as shoreline protection, cold storage facilities, and improved roads, Aiyetoro's role in regional trade could be even greater.

The economic impact of fishing on the Ilaje people of Aiyetoro is profound. Fishing is the foundation of employment, income, and trade in the community. It provides jobs for men at sea and for women in processing and trade, sustains household income, and supplies regional markets with affordable fish. Yet, the industry faces major threats from environmental change, rising costs, and inadequate infrastructure.

The decade from 2015 to 2025 shows both the resilience of Aiyetoro's fishing economy and its fragility. While the community has managed to survive repeated shocks, its future depends on stronger support systems. Government intervention in shoreline protection, credit facilities for women traders, improved smoking technology, and better storage and transport facilities would go a long way in stabilizing the economy. Without such measures, Aiyetoro's fishing economy, though vibrant, may continue to weaken under the combined weight of erosion, poverty, and neglect.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The fishing industry in Ayetoro, a coastal settlement in the Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria, represents far more than a source of food; it is the cultural and economic lifeline of the Ilaje people. Over the period 2015–2025, this study has shown that fishing remains central to sustaining livelihoods, generating income, and supporting trade networks across the region. Yet the industry is beset by mounting challenges—ranging from overfishing and climate change to regulatory weaknesses and socio-economic disruptions—that undermine its sustainability. This concluding chapter combines the study’s findings, highlights the economic importance of fishing to the Ilaje people, explores the threats to its viability, and outlines the coping strategies employed by the community. Finally, it draws overall conclusions and offers recommendations for strengthening the resilience of Ayetoro’s fishing economy.

Fishing emerged from the study as the single most important economic pillar of Ayetoro. With few alternative sources of formal employment in the coastal zone, artisanal fishing dominates household livelihoods. Characterized by small-scale operations involving dugout canoes, outboard engines, nets, and hooks, the practice contributes significantly to Ondo State’s fisheries output, itself forming a share of Nigeria’s national GDP¹.

The evidence highlights that Ayetoro's fishermen target species such as croakers, bonga shad, catfish, and shrimp. Average daily landings range between 30 and 50 kilograms, marketed at ~~₦400–₦800~~ per kilogram depending on the species and season. A 2020 economic assessment revealed that a typical fisherman in Ayetoro earned annual revenues of about ₦1.3 million, with net profits of approximately ₦660,000 after deducting operational costs such as fuel, net repairs, and crew wages². These figures underscore that fishing is not merely subsistence-based but a vibrant commercial activity that sustains hundreds of households.

Importantly, fishing in Ayetoro is not an isolated act but part of a value chain that extends into processing, storage, transportation, and retailing. Women dominate post-harvest processing, particularly fish smoking and drying, thereby adding value to raw catches and enabling storage for trade beyond local consumption. Transporters, canoe-builders, and market vendors form additional layers of economic participation, creating a complex web of interdependent livelihoods revolving around fish.

The fishing economy provides wide-ranging employment opportunities for men, women, and youths. Approximately 80% of households in Ayetoro depend primarily on fishing and related activities for survival³. Direct employment involves fishermen who operate canoes and nets, while women, representing nearly two-thirds of processors, engage in smoking, drying, and marketing fish. This division of labor is

not only economic but also cultural, reflecting long-standing Ilaje traditions of gendered roles within the fishing economy.

Beyond direct engagement, the industry sustains numerous ancillary occupations. Boat construction, which employs about 4–6 artisans per vessel, remains an important craft, while net mending offers smaller-scale income streams of ₦500–₦1,500 per job. Informal apprenticeships ensure knowledge transfer to younger generations, with youths aged 15–35 constituting about 40% of the workforce. This dynamic shows that fishing is a means of not only economic survival but also skill development and intergenerational continuity.

Government interventions have further expanded employment. For example, the Ondo-CARES Program (2024), which distributed subsidized nets, outboard engines, and training resources, reportedly increased employment opportunities by 15–20% within coastal communities⁴. Nevertheless, the sector faces the paradox of rising youth unemployment when fish stocks decline, often driving migration to urban centers like Akure and Lagos in search of alternative livelihoods.

The fishing industry has long served as a stabilizing force for household income in Ayetoro. In a community where poverty rates remain as high as 60%, access to regular cash income from fish sales reduces vulnerability and sustains household consumption. During peak fishing months (March to October), fishermen typically earn between ₦50,000 and ₦100,000 monthly. Women processors generate

about ₦10,000 weekly from smoked fish sales. Such incomes allow households to meet essential expenses including school fees, healthcare, and food purchases.

Moreover, households reliant on fishing reportedly experience poverty rates 15–20% lower than their non-fishing counterparts. Diversification further enhances resilience⁵. Some families, like the Adebayos, combine fishing with small-scale farming or trading, generating an extra ₦10,000 monthly during the off-season. Government subsidies and grants, when accessible, can further raise fishing household incomes by 15–25%. Despite all these, declining catches due to overfishing and environmental pressures have drastically reduced daily earnings for many fishermen, from averages of ₦25,000 down to as low as ₦2,000. This volatility creates income instability, with ripple effects on education, food security, and household welfare⁶.

Fishing in Ayetoro is not confined to subsistence; it sustains vibrant market networks across Ondo State and beyond. The community supplies an estimated 30–40% of the state’s seafood demand. Major markets, such as Igbokoda, process tons of fish weekly, generating billions of naira in annual trade. Each kilogram sold locally creates an additional ₦150–~~₦300~~ in downstream economic value through transportation, retailing, and food vending.

Smoked fish, in particular, has emerged as a key commodity⁷. Processed in Ayetoro and surrounding communities, it is transported to Lagos, Ibadan, and even

exported informally across West African borders into Benin Republic. Historically rooted trade networks from the 19th century have thus evolved into contemporary supply chains that integrate Ayetoro into regional and international commerce. However, declining catches threaten these linkages. Supply shortfalls lead to higher prices, with the cost of fish rising from ₦500 per kilogram in 2015 to ₦1,200 by 2025. This inflation reduces affordability for consumers and depresses market activity, weakening the economic contribution of Ayetoro's fishing industry.

Although Ayetoro's fishing industry remains a pillar of economic life, it faces multi-dimensional threats that undermine its sustainability:

The most immediate problem is the depletion of fish stocks. The combination of population growth, rising demand for fish protein, and intensified artisanal effort has led to a significant reduction in available fish species⁸. Fishermen report travelling longer distances and spending more hours at sea only to return with smaller catches. Illegal foreign trawlers, often operating within Nigeria's restricted inshore waters, exacerbate this depletion. These industrial vessels not only harvest unsustainably but also destroy artisanal nets in the process, further impoverishing local fishers⁹. The result is a classic "tragedy of the commons": dwindling resources shared among too many users without effective regulation.

Climate change has reshaped the coastline of Aiyetoro in dramatic fashion. Rising sea levels and coastal erosion have swallowed large sections of the community,

displacing hundreds of families. Infrastructural assets critical to fishing—such as landing sites, processing sheds, and storage facilities—have been washed away. Warmer sea temperatures and erratic rainfall patterns also affect fish migratory cycles, leading to unpredictable catches¹⁰. Fishermen now struggle with unstable seasons, and processing activities are frequently interrupted by flooding or storms.

The existence of laws such as the Sea Fisheries Act and decrees restricting trawling within 5 nautical miles of the shore has done little to protect Aiyetoro's artisanal fishers. Enforcement remains weak due to chronic underfunding of monitoring agencies, corruption, and a lack of surveillance capacity. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing therefore thrives, costing Nigeria billions annually and leaving communities like Ayetoro unable to compete fairly¹¹. Weak governance also extends to resource allocation: subsidies and support programs often fail to reach the intended beneficiaries or are distributed along political lines.

Declining catches translate directly into reduced household income, unemployment, and deepening poverty. Families unable to sustain themselves experience food insecurity, with rising fish prices making this once-affordable protein inaccessible to many. The social consequences are visible: children dropping out of school due to lack of fees, youth migrating to cities in search of work, and increased domestic tensions as financial strain mounts. Cultural practices tied to fishing, such as festivals and rituals, are also in decline, weakening the social fabric of the community.

A further challenge comes from offshore oil exploration. Oil spills contaminate water bodies, kill fish stocks, and destroy mangroves essential for spawning¹². Artisanal fishermen in Aiyetoro often return with tainted or drastically reduced catches after such incidents, while compensation from oil companies is delayed or contested. This compounds existing vulnerabilities and adds an environmental justice dimension to the fishing crisis. Despite the daunting challenges, the resilience of the Ilaje people of Aiyetoro is evident in the coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies they employ

About 70–80% of local fishermen adapt to declining stocks by travelling farther into the sea or migrating seasonally to other coastal towns. This increases operational costs but ensures some level of continuity in income. While not sustainable in the long run, it demonstrates the determination of fishers to preserve their livelihoods. Aquaculture has emerged as a modest but growing adaptation strategy. Small-scale tilapia and catfish ponds are being developed, often with state support or through NGOs. Although capital-intensive and still relatively new to the community, aquaculture offers a stable alternative to wild capture fisheries and reduces dependence on unpredictable marine catches.

Fishing families diversify their income sources. Women in particular supplement household earnings through small-scale trading, vegetable gardening, and food vending. Some households also engage in cassava farming or transport services

(canoe ferrying), providing critical buffers against seasonal downturns in fishing. Traditional ecological knowledge remains a key coping tool. Many fishermen continue to rely on lunar calendars, tidal movements, and indigenous weather forecasting to plan fishing expeditions. This knowledge helps them optimize limited opportunities and reduce wasted effort.

Cooperatives play a crucial role in enabling fishers to pool resources to purchase outboard engines, repair nets, or access micro-credit. These groups also provide a platform for collective bargaining in markets and advocacy with government agencies. Cooperatives strengthen social cohesion and reduce the vulnerability of individual households. Community-based organizations, such as the Ilaje Youth Forum, have begun training young people in sustainable fishing techniques, modern aquaculture practices, and entrepreneurship. Each year, about 150–200 youths benefit from such programs, helping to build a new generation of fishers who may adopt more sustainable practices.

While these strategies reveal strong resilience, their effectiveness is limited by inadequate finance, poor infrastructure, and the scale of environmental threats. They are thus coping mechanisms rather than long-term solutions.

Recommendations

To ensure the sustainability of Ayetoro’s fishing industry, this study recommends a combination of policy changes, infrastructure investments, and community-driven strategies:

1. Strengthening Regulatory Enforcement

The government must invest in effective enforcement of fisheries laws. This includes providing patrol boats, modern surveillance technology (such as satellite monitoring), and empowering local communities to participate in co-management of marine resources. Transparent enforcement will reduce illegal trawling, restore fish stocks, and protect artisanal livelihoods.

2. Climate-Resilient Infrastructure Development

Given the scale of sea incursion in Ayetoro, urgent action is required to protect the shoreline. Constructing sea walls, rehabilitating mangroves, and implementing coastal zoning will reduce erosion and safeguard both residential and fishing infrastructure. Provision of modern landing sites, ice plants, and storage facilities is equally crucial to minimize post-harvest losses.

3. Promotion of Aquaculture and Diversification

State and federal governments should provide technical and financial support for aquaculture, including low-interest loans, training, and access to improved fingerlings. Promoting diversification into agriculture, processing, and trading will further stabilize household incomes and reduce dependency on declining wild stocks.

4. Women and Youth Empowerment

Targeted programs for women—who dominate fish processing—should include improved smoking kilns, credit schemes, and market access support. For youths, vocational training in aquaculture, net making, and fisheries technology will reduce unemployment and migration while modernizing the sector.

Strict monitoring of oil exploration activities and enforcement of environmental standards are essential. Oil companies must be held accountable for spills, with compensation schemes delivered promptly and transparently. Partnerships with NGOs and international environmental organizations can strengthen advocacy and rehabilitation efforts.

Local cooperatives should be strengthened as platforms for collective action. Community-led monitoring of fishing grounds, coupled with indigenous knowledge, can improve sustainability. Additionally, the branding of Ilaje fish through geographical indications or certification could raise market value and improve incomes.

Awareness campaigns on sustainable fishing practices, marine conservation, and the risks of overfishing should be carried out through schools, churches, and community associations. Education will help shift community practices toward long-term sustainability.

The decade from 2015 to 2025 has demonstrated the dual character of Ayetoro’s fishing industry: it is both a vital economic engine and a fragile system under threat. Fishing sustains livelihoods, reduces poverty, and supports markets that link Ayetoro to regional and international trade. It is deeply interwoven with the cultural heritage of the Ilaje people, offering not only income but also a way of life.

Yet, the same industry now faces unprecedented pressures. Overfishing, climate-induced sea incursions, weak regulatory frameworks, and the disruptive effects of oil exploration collectively threaten its survival. These challenges have eroded household incomes, driven youth outmigration, and heightened social vulnerability. Without deliberate intervention, the economic foundation of Ayetoro risks further destabilization.

Nevertheless, Ayetoro’s resilience offers hope. The community’s capacity for adaptation through aquaculture, cooperatives, diversification, and indigenous knowledge, demonstrates that solutions are possible. What is required is sustained investment, robust governance, and climate-resilient infrastructure.

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Benson Are	Businessman	69	Ilaje	10th June, 2025
Oba Ademola Akinbule	Orere Township Ruler	58	Orere	12th June, 2025
Sam Alabi	Engineer	50	Okomu	20th July, 2025
HRH Oba Oluwambe Ojagbohunmi	Traditional Ruler	73	Ayetoro	10th April, 2025
Henris O. Adaniken	Businessman	75	Benin city	23rd July, 2025
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