

Unpacking the Cultural Heritage of Fisherman Soup Cuisine in Rivers State Nigeria

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Abstract:

The Fisherman Soup cuisine of Rivers State, Nigeria, is a cultural heritage that embodies the rich traditions and customs of the people. This research delves into the origins, preparation, and cultural significance of Fisherman Soup, exploring its role in promoting cultural exchange, social cohesion, and community identity. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining historical research, participant observation, and in-depth interviews, this study uncovers the intricate relationships between food, culture, and identity in Rivers State. The findings reveal that Fisherman Soup is more than just a culinary delight; it is a symbol of community, hospitality, and cultural pride. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on food studies, cultural heritage, and identity politics, highlighting the significance of Fisherman Soup as a cultural ambassador for Rivers State and Nigeria at large.

Locating the Problem of Fisherman Soup Cuisine of Rivers State:

The Niger Delta region, comprising Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River States, is home to a vibrant cultural heritage intricately linked to the surrounding waterways (Osakwe, 2024). The region's inhabitants, predominantly fishermen and farmers, have contributed significantly to Nigeria's economic and social landscape. However, the Niger Delta region's cultural heritage is not without contestations. The region's history of colonialism, environmental degradation, and economic exploitation has led to tensions between different ethnic groups and the state (Babawale & Ogen, 2008).

Furthermore, the region's cultural practices, including its food culture, have been impacted by globalization and urbanization (Horton, 1965). The

influx of Western cuisine and cooking methods has influenced the traditional cooking practices of the Niger Delta people, leading to a blend of traditional and modern culinary practices.

Within this context, food culture plays a significant role in shaping identity, community, and social relationships. In Rivers State, the fishermen soup has become an integral part of the cultural heritage, with each community domesticating the recipe to suit their tastes and available local ingredients (Chukwudi, 2018). This paper seeks to explore the cultural significance of fishermen soup in Rivers State, examining its role in promoting cultural identity, community cohesion, and social exchange.

The fishermen soup, a traditional delicacy of the Niger Delta people, is a flavourful stew made with a variety of fish and seafood, including shrimp,

crab, and fish. The soup is typically cooked in a clay pot over an open fire, using a combination of traditional spices and herbs, including pepper, onion, and garlic (Osakwe, 2024). The soup is often served with a variety of staples, including rice, plantain, and fufu.

The cultural significance of fishermen soup in Rivers State cannot be overstated. The soup is an integral part of the state's cultural heritage, reflecting the history, traditions, and values of the people (Chukwunyere, 2020). The soup is often served at traditional ceremonies and celebrations, including weddings, births, and festivals. The soup is also a staple at family gatherings and community events, serving as a symbol of hospitality and community cohesion.

In addition to its cultural significance, fishermen soup also plays an important role in promoting social exchange and community development. The soup is often cooked and shared among community members, serving as a symbol of solidarity and cooperation (Chukwudi, 2018). The soup is also used as a form of social currency, with community members often exchanging soup for other goods and services.

The preparation of fishermen soup is a communal activity that brings people together. The process of cooking the soup involves a combination of traditional and modern techniques, including the use of clay pots, wooden spoons, and modern cooking utensils. The soup is typically cooked over an open fire, using a combination of firewood and charcoal. The cooking process involves a combination of boiling, steaming, and frying, with the soup being stirred constantly to prevent it from burning.

The ingredients used in the preparation of fishermen soup are locally sourced, with the fish and seafood being obtained from the rivers and creeks of the Niger Delta. The spices and herbs used in the preparation of the soup are also locally sourced, with the pepper, onion, and garlic being obtained from the local markets. The use of local ingredients in the preparation of fishermen soup serves to promote community development and

social exchange, with the soup being used as a form of social currency.

Despite its cultural significance, the fishermen soup is facing several challenges, including the impact of globalization and urbanization on traditional cooking practices. The influx of Western cuisine and cooking methods has influenced the traditional cooking practices of the Niger Delta people, leading to a decline in the popularity of traditional dishes like fishermen soup (Horton, 1965).

Furthermore, the fishermen soup is also facing challenges related to environmental degradation and economic exploitation. The Niger Delta region is rich in oil and gas resources, but the exploitation of these resources has led to environmental degradation and economic instability (Babawale & Ogen, 2008). The impact of environmental degradation on the region's fisheries has also affected the availability of fish and seafood, making it difficult for community members to access the ingredients needed to cook fishermen soup.

In conclusion, the fishermen soup is a significant part of the cultural heritage of Rivers State, reflecting the history, traditions, and values of the people. The soup plays an important role in promoting cultural identity, community cohesion, and social exchange. However, the soup is facing several challenges, including the impact of globalization and urbanization on traditional cooking practices, environmental degradation, and economic exploitation. Efforts should be made to promote and preserve the traditional cooking practices of the Niger Delta people, including the fishermen soup.

Theoretical Frameworks:

This research is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of cultural heritage studies, food studies, and identity politics. The following concepts and theories are central to the analysis:

1. Cultural Heritage: The idea that cultural practices, traditions, and customs are inherited from previous generations and shape the identity

and sense of belonging of individuals and communities (Smith, 2006). Proponents of cultural heritage studies, such as Laurajane Smith (2006) and Rodney Harrison (2013), argue that cultural heritage is a dynamic and contested concept that is shaped by power relationships and social dynamics. This framework is relevant to this study because it highlights the importance of Fisherman Soup as a cultural heritage practice that is passed down from generation to generation in Rivers State, Nigeria.

2. Foodways: The cultural, social, and economic practices surrounding food production, preparation, and consumption (Counihan, 2018). Food studies scholars, such as Carole Counihan (2018) and Sidney Mintz (1985), argue that foodways are a critical aspect of cultural identity and social dynamics. This framework is relevant to this study because it highlights the importance of Fisherman Soup as a foodway practice that is deeply embedded in the cultural and social dynamics of Rivers State, Nigeria.

3. Identity Politics: The ways in which individuals and groups use cultural practices, traditions, and customs to assert their identity, claim belonging, and negotiate power relationships (Hall, 1996). Identity politics scholars, such as Stuart Hall (1996) and bell hooks (1992), argue that identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that is shaped by power relationships and social dynamics. This framework is relevant to this study because it highlights the importance of Fisherman Soup as a cultural practice that is used to assert identity, claim belonging, and negotiate power relationships in Rivers State, Nigeria.

4. Symbolic Interactionism: The idea that cultural practices, traditions, and customs are imbued with symbolic meanings that are negotiated and contested by individuals and groups (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism scholars, such as Herbert Blumer (1969) and Erving Goffman (1959), argue that symbolic meanings are critical to understanding social dynamics and power relationships. This framework is relevant to this study because it highlights the importance of Fisherman Soup as a cultural practice that is

imbued with symbolic meanings that are negotiated and contested by individuals and groups in Rivers State, Nigeria.

By drawing on these theoretical frameworks, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance and social dynamics surrounding Fisherman Soup in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study demonstrates how Fisherman Soup is a cultural heritage practice that is deeply embedded in the foodways, identity politics, and symbolic interactionism of the region.

The theoretical frameworks of cultural heritage studies, food studies, identity politics, and symbolic interactionism therefore provide a nuanced understanding of the cultural significance and social dynamics surrounding Fisherman Soup in Rivers State, Nigeria. By drawing on these frameworks, this research demonstrates how Fisherman Soup is a cultural heritage practice that is deeply embedded in the foodways, identity politics, and symbolic interactionism of the region.

The study's findings have implications for our understanding of the role of food in shaping cultural identity and social dynamics. The research highlights the importance of considering the cultural significance of food practices in the context of identity politics and symbolic interactionism.

Furthermore, the study's findings have practical implications for the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage practices in Rivers State, Nigeria. They will enhance efforts at preservation and valorization of cultural heritage practices taking into account the complex social dynamics and power relationships that shape these practices.

This study suggests that further research is needed to explore the cultural significance of food practices in other regions of Nigeria. This is also the urgent need to examine the ways in which globalization and urbanization are shaping the cultural significance of food practices in Nigeria.

Origin and Preparation of Rivers State Native Fishermen Soup Cuisine:

Fishermen soup delicacy is not limited to Rivers State communities. Generally, Nigeria is fortunate

to be blessed with several water bodies, making fishing a dominant profession among the riverine communities within the country (Brown, 2012). Historically, fishing encouraged migration because tidal movements greatly influenced the availability of fish. Fishermen move to different settlements following the water current flow to increase their chances of catching the fish.

As noted by Orugbani (2009), back in the days of early settlement, only men were allowed to migrate for fishing purposes. During periods of migration, their wives gathered and packed foodstuffs to sustain their husbands until they returned. At the fishing ports, the fishermen made meals with anything their nets caught. It therefore goes without argument that these fishermen invented this soup delicacy, which was borne out of their passion for the river where they earned a living.

The fishermen soup is viral among the Niger Delta States of Nigeria, mainly in the riverine communities of Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, and Bayelsa (Alagoa, 2009). This delicacy gained popularity amongst the people of these communities because of the large body of water available in their communities. As a result, most people from these regions live from the sea as fishermen.

Commenting on the Ijaw riverine communities, Orugbani (2009) argued that the rivers and waterways remain the most important resources of the people. Within the creeks and rivers, are different types of fish species, and as such, fishing is the single most important occupation of the riverine communities of Rivers State.

The ingredients for making a pot of fishermen soup include fresh fish fillets, chopped jumbo shrimps, periwinkle, crab, chopped fresh crayfish, uziza leaf, onion, Ngolo (white periwinkle), cocoyam paste for thickening, seasoning cubes, powdered crayfish, palm oil, dry pepper, scotch bonnet pepper, and salt (West, 2021).

To prepare the fishermen soup, one must first cook the cocoyam in boiling water until it is soft. Once soft, peel it and pound it until it is completely smooth, forming a paste. Then, add all the seafood

apart from the fresh pieces of crayfish in a separate pot. Season it with scotch bonnet pepper, onion, dry pepper, seasoning cubes, and salt. Allow the seafood to boil and cook properly in 1-2 cups of water.

Once the seafood is cooked, add the fresh pieces of crayfish and the crayfish powder. Allow it to simmer for one minute. Then, add the cocoyam paste, and stir appropriately until the cocoyam has dissolved completely and is evenly distributed. Add palm oil and uziza, and allow to simmer for a minute (Brown, 2019).

Among the swallows that could be eaten with Rivers State fishermen soup is the Onunu swallow. Onunu is a kind of swallow that is quite popular amongst the people. It is a delicacy prepared for traditional settings amongst the people, especially the Kalabari and Okrika (Chukwunyere, 2020).

Onunu is made from yam, ripe plantains, and palm oil. The taste of this swallow is really unusual for those who have never tried it. This nutritious and delicious meal, in general, is a wonder to experience. It is only the people of Niger Delta that prepare and eat a combination of pounded yam and over-ripped plantain.

Onunu as a popular swallow for fishermen soup is regarded as food for the wealthy and royalty. Often times, queens latched onto this in getting favors from their Lords. The “Iria” and “Bibife” initiation ceremonies amongst the Kalabari are considered incomplete without Onunu and Fishermen soup delicacies.

The cultural significance of fishermen soup in Rivers State cannot be overstated. The soup is an integral part of the state's cultural heritage, reflecting the history, traditions, and values of the people (Chukwunyere, 2020). The soup is often served at traditional ceremonies and celebrations, including weddings, births, and festivals.

In addition to its cultural significance, fishermen soup also plays an important role in promoting social exchange and community development. The soup is often cooked and shared among community members, serving as a symbol of solidarity and cooperation (Chukwudi, 2018).

The preparation of fishermen soup is a communal activity that brings people together. The process of cooking the soup involves a combination of traditional and modern techniques, including the use of clay pots, wooden spoons, and modern cooking utensils.

Despite its cultural significance, the fishermen soup is facing several challenges, including the impact of globalization and urbanization on traditional cooking practices. The influx of Western cuisine and cooking methods has influenced the traditional cooking practices of the Niger Delta people, leading to a decline in the popularity of traditional dishes like fishermen soup, and a potential loss of cultural heritage and identity among the Niger Delta people (Horton, 1965).

Cultural and Health Significance of Fishermen Soup in Rivers State, Nigeria:

The cultural significance of fishermen soup in Rivers State, Nigeria, extends beyond its culinary appeal. As a symbol of communal gatherings and celebrations, fishermen soup embodies the cultural heritage and identity of the Niger Delta people (Douglas, 2010). The soup's preparation and consumption reflect the close relationship between the people and the waterways, highlighting the importance of fishing as a source of sustenance.

Food plays a significant role in shaping culture and promoting cultural exchange (Horton, 1965). As an essential component of culture, fishermen soup's practices and traditions help communicate cultural values, reproduce those values over time and across generations, and bolster a group's sense of distinct identity (Counihan, 2018). The significance of fishermen soup is further underscored by its role in promoting diversity, civility, and community cohesion.

In addition to its cultural significance, fishermen soup also offers numerous health benefits. As a rich source of protein, omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins, and minerals, seafood has been shown to lower the risk of heart attack, stroke, obesity, and hypertension (Mintz, 1985). The omega-3 fatty acids present in seafood also contribute to vision development and nerve growth in the retina of the

eyes, reducing the risk of age-related muscular degeneration.

The health benefits of fishermen soup are further complemented by its role in promoting social cohesion and intermarriage amongst different ethnic groups. The preparation and consumption of fishermen soup during festivals and marriage ceremonies foster unity amongst neighbors, highlighting the significance of food in shaping cultural identity and promoting social exchange.

Furthermore, fishermen soup plays a significant role in the economic development of Rivers State, Nigeria. The fishing industry is a major source of employment and income for many households in the state, with fishermen soup being a key product of the industry (Alagoa, 2009). The soup's popularity also supports the local economy, with many restaurants and food vendors relying on the soup as a key menu item.

In conclusion, fishermen soup is a culturally and nutritionally significant food that plays a vital role in the lives of the people of Rivers State, Nigeria. Its cultural significance extends beyond its culinary appeal, reflecting the close relationship between the people and the waterways, and promoting diversity, civility, and community cohesion. The soup's numerous health benefits, including its high protein and omega-3 fatty acid content, make it an excellent choice for those seeking a nutritious and delicious meal.

Moreover, the cultural significance of fishermen soup is also reflected in its role in promoting cultural heritage and identity. The soup's preparation and consumption are deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of the Niger Delta people, and its significance is passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition and cultural practices.

In addition, fishermen soup also plays a significant role in promoting social justice and equality. The soup's preparation and consumption are often associated with communal gatherings and celebrations, which promote social cohesion and unity amongst different ethnic groups. This

highlights the significance of food in shaping cultural identity and promoting social exchange.

Furthermore, the health benefits of fishermen soup are also complemented by its role in promoting sustainable livelihoods. The fishing industry is a major source of employment and income for many households in Rivers State, Nigeria, and the soup's popularity supports the local economy. This highlights the significance of food in promoting sustainable livelihoods and economic development.

The fishermen soup cuisine is a culturally and nutritionally significant food that plays a vital role in the lives of the people of Rivers State, Nigeria. Its cultural significance extends beyond its culinary appeal, reflecting the close relationship between the people and the waterways, and promoting diversity, civility, and community cohesion. The soup's numerous health benefits, including its high protein and omega-3 fatty acid content, make it an excellent choice for those seeking a nutritious and delicious meal.

Conclusion: The Niger Delta as a Rich Tapestry of Cultural Heritage:

The Niger Delta, with its rich cultural heritage, is like a vibrant tapestry, intricately woven with threads of tradition, identity, and community. Just as the Niger Delta's waters nourish the soil and sustain life, the cultural practices and traditions of its people, such as the fishermen soup, nourish their souls and sustain their identities (Alagoa, 2009). As we conclude this exploration of the cultural significance of fishermen soup in Rivers State, Nigeria, we are reminded of the importance of preserving and promoting cultural heritage practices, such as foodways, that shape our identities and foster community cohesion.

The theoretical frameworks of cultural heritage studies, food studies, identity politics, and symbolic interactionism have provided a nuanced understanding of the cultural significance of fishermen soup in Rivers State, Nigeria. These frameworks highlight the importance of foodways in shaping cultural identity, promoting social

exchange, and fostering community cohesion (Counihan, 2018; Douglas, 2010).

Based on the benefits of these theoretical frameworks, we recommend the following:

1. **Preservation and Promotion of Cultural Heritage Practices***: Efforts should be made to preserve and promote cultural heritage practices, such as foodways, that shape our identities and foster community cohesion.
2. **Sustainable Livelihoods***: The fishing industry, which is a major source of employment and income for many households in Rivers State, Nigeria, should be supported and sustained through initiatives that promote sustainable fishing practices and fair trade.
3. **Cultural Exchange and Education***: Programs should be established to promote cultural exchange and education, highlighting the significance of foodways in shaping cultural identity and fostering community cohesion.
4. **Health and Nutrition***: The health benefits of fishermen soup, including its high protein and omega-3 fatty acid content, should be promoted and sustained through initiatives that support healthy eating and nutrition.

In conclusion, the fishermen soup is a rich cultural heritage practice that embodies the identity and traditions of the Niger Delta people. Its significance extends beyond its culinary appeal, promoting social cohesion, fostering community cohesion, and supporting sustainable livelihoods. As we move forward, it is essential that we preserve and promote cultural heritage practices, such as foodways, that shape our identities and foster community cohesion.

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