

AQUARIST IN GHANA

Never on a Wednesday

SOME days before dispatching the collected fishes as I described in my last article, I had gone to the Togoland Embassy in Accra to get visas for Togo and Dahomey. That afternoon, after dispatching the fish, I went to Lomé, the capital of Togoland, about 120 miles east of Accra-Tema. About 5 p.m. I arrived chez Paul Loiselle, an American Peace Corps volunteer, working on freshwater fish in Togo. Another visitor had arrived shortly before me—Paul Opel—son of the Peace Corps director in Accra, and also interested in fish.

We started off fishing the next day with a visit to a temporary pool north of Lomé, where we thought we might find the annual *Fundulosoma thierryi*—originally, but wrongly, called *Aphyosemion walkeri*. Anyway, the pool we started work in looked a reasonably likely habitat, except for one small defect—it contained no fish. There were thousands of huge tadpoles of *Xenopus*, the clawed toad, and some other tadpoles shaped a bit like angel fish. As well as these, 2 in. 'fairy shrimps' with red tails were abundant, and something in the water gave us some beautiful stings, which came up as red welts. We preserved a few of the invertebrates, then retired to Lomé to recover and feed.

Despite our lack of success on that trip, we caught huge numbers of *Fundulosoma* a day or two later. The localities in which we found these little toothcarps were all in the Transvolta basin, which drains into the systems of lagoons and channels towards the mouth of the Volta River. To reach these little streams we took the train from Lomé up the west side of Togoland towards Palimé, visiting towns with names that sound as if they belong in a fairy-tale—Noépé, Glekové, Aretonon.

By DAVID BLAIR

For those who have never experienced the Chemins de fer Togolaise, here is an introduction. Railway regulations insist that freight must not be put in the passenger carriages—or so said the guard, who rushed around the train until the piles of yams, plantains and firewood reached waist depth. Then he retired to a

corner and sulked amidst a collection of howling babies and tin boxes.

It was at Noépé that we had our first luck. Right on the Ghana/Togo border runs an intermittent stream, the sole source of water for the town. Recently a small dam was built on the stream ensuring a year-round pool of water, where previously the village women had had to walk 20 km. for water in the dry season. The little stream below the dam had been full for some weeks when we arrived (about half-way through the rains) and we found many *Fundulosoma*, often swimming close to the surface with their eye spots showing. The coloration of this strain was much less intense than in the brilliantly coloured individuals near Accra.

North of Noépé, towards Palimé, there are old forest fragments, patches of dense vegetation and tall trees, usually found overhanging streams. In these streams we found



Food is scattered in front of this mud effigy of a river god built on the river bank and respected by native fishermen

more *Fundulosoma*: obviously this is a species that is more catholic in its habitat requirements than the books would have us believe. This has always been thought of as a fish of the dry savannahs. The Ewè name for small cyprinodonts, especially *Fundulosoma*, can be translated as 'The first fish in the river'. Even the village children can recognise that these fish appear first in the newly filled streams at the start of the rains.

In these same streams were quite a collection of good-looking fishes. Grubbing along the bottom was a *Gnathonemus* species (a mormyrid). *Ctenopoma kingsleyae*—the young have a very attractive colour pattern—were abundant, as were various barbs, *Hemichromis bimaculatus* (jewel cichlid), *Neolebias unifasciatus*, *Petersius intermedius* (a small tetra), and we also caught an undescribed species of *Clarias* with a small, rounded tail. Paul Loiselle told me that some villagers catch young *Ctenopoma*, and keep them for a while, feeding them well. At the start of the rains the little fish is released into the river and told to pass on the message: 'Look how

Right: many fish were caught in roadside streams like this one (on the Palimé Road, W. Togoland). Paul Loiselle is seen examining a haul of *Fundulosoma* in his net



Below: the barrage of stakes and rods placed across the lower Mono River (near Anécho, S.E. Togoland) is used to trap fish in basket-work containers set in the spaces through which the fish swim



well fed I am. There is food for all the fish if they will visit the fisherman's net.'

Despite the forest cover there were no forest *Epiplatys*. However, to the north and east of the Transvolta basin, *E. sexfasciatus* is found with *E. chaperi* in Ghana to the west.

One afternoon we went to Anécho, near the Togo/Dahomey border. This is a straggling town winding among the palm groves along the estuary of the Mono River. A small fisheries station close to the river has set up a local fish-culture device as an experiment. This consists of placing a mass of sticks, twigs and

brushwood on the bottom of the shallow estuary. Fish then tend to accumulate in these and use them as hiding places. Any waste food thrown into the device (known as an acaja) then boosts the size of the fish. The fish in the acaja can be harvested at intervals (by staking out gill nets all round it, and removing the brushwood).

Both up- and down-stream of this particular acaja, large fish-trapping barrages had been set up by arranging lines of poles in a zig-zag manner across the river. At the apex of each 'zig' and 'zag' was the only space large enough to allow a fish through. Behind each of these spaces a trap was set to catch the fish as they moved up and down the estuary. The traps were beautiful basket-work constructions, about 4 feet long, and could hold large *Tilapia*, mullet etc., which are the main species caught.

On the bank, facing towards the barrage, was a mud statuette of, I suppose, a river god, food stuffing up its open mouth and littering the ground around. These fishermen will always deny knowing anything

about juju, and yet they adhere to old tribal taboos. Most coastal tribes in Ghana will never fish in the sea on Tuesdays or in fresh water on Wednesdays, but usually refuse to give reasons. The commonest story is that, long ago, a fisherman called Kofi (a name as frequent as John or

Jack) caught the sea-god in his net, one Tuesday. Since then, no fisherman will go to sea on that day for fear of the god's revenge.

One of the last places I visited during my stay in Togo was the Lagoon of Lomé, just outside the capital. We caught many *Epiplatys*

bifasciatus among the reeds and *Pistia* mats there. Close to the lagoon is Lomé's juju market, with the usual collection of dried monkey heads, bird claws and herbs. Large chameleons can be bought there alive—unusual souvenirs of an unusual place.