

Patron-Client Relationship (PCR) in Fresh Fish Trade (FFT) at Lake Chad, Cameroon

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Abstract

Lake Chad is an important fish supply centre in the semi-arid zone of West Africa. Processed Fish Trade (PFT) has catered neighbouring countries for a long time. However, Fresh Fish Trade (FFT) boomed due to severe droughts between 1970 and 1994, by which the PFT main fish species were replaced by species suited to FFT, and to the introduction of modern technology. As migrant fishermen increased, FFT also raised. In PFT the relationship between fishermen and middlemen is usually explained as Patron-Client Relationship (PCR), characterized by reciprocal agreement and exclusivity. The objective of this study was to describe FFT at Lake Chad, which has hardly been surveyed yet, and to compare the PCR in FFT and PFT. Field survey was conducted at Commune of Darak in Cameroon on March 2011. In the case of FFT, most of middlemen dealt with fishermen who got their fishing gears by themselves and quoted market price of major species was stable, but there were some cases in which fishermen paying back the gears borrowed from middlemen resulted in a deviation from the market price. Since trade was mostly occasional, interaction between middlemen and fishermen was mostly temporary, not long-term relations based on trust, so that middlemen had to keep the quoted market price in order not to lose their client. Therefore, fishermen are less constricted by and more equal to middlemen than in regular PFT. Because of this kind of PRC, FFT does not fit the 'economy of affection' model, but rather resembles 'market economy'.

INTRODUCTION: FISHERIES AND TRADE AT LAKE CHAD

Fishing in Africa has, in my view, two main characteristics. The first one is that the fishing actors are mainly small-scale fishermen, as is evident when taking into account that 90% (540,000 ton) of the total catchment in African inland water (600,000 ton) [1] is carried out by small-scale fishermen. The second characteristic is that the main commodity is processed fish. We can see various processing techniques like drying, smoking, salting and fermenting. These processes allow keeping the fish edible for longer, so that it can be stocked for longer periods of time and transported to cities at longer distances.

Lake Chad is the fourth largest lake in Africa, but it is very shallow, its deepest part being 10 meters deep. Precipitation is not stable in the area, and consequently it also shows seasonal and annual size fluctuations. In addition, this area has suffered several droughts between 1970 and 1994. Despite the climatic instability, this lake has played an important role as fish supply centre for the neighbouring cities [2]. According to recent reports, the fish production at Lake Chad was 60-90,000 tons per year for the past 40 years [3, 4]. Processed fish such as dried and smoked fish has been an important commodity for long time [5, 6]. However, in the 1980s, trade practices changed dramatically. The increase of fish demand fostered competition among middlemen. As a result, the patron-client relationship (PCR) between middlemen and fishermen changed into an exclusive one. Recently, Fresh Fish Trade (FFT) has become more active, because middlemen exploit

the new market at the capital city of N’ djamena, and because of the introduction of fresh fish as a new consumption commodity.

The PCR is a relationship of reciprocity between socio-economically higher and lower status partners (Fig.1). Patrons provide protection and profits from their influence and resources. On the other hand, clients pay back through endorsement such as the exclusive service to a particular Patron.

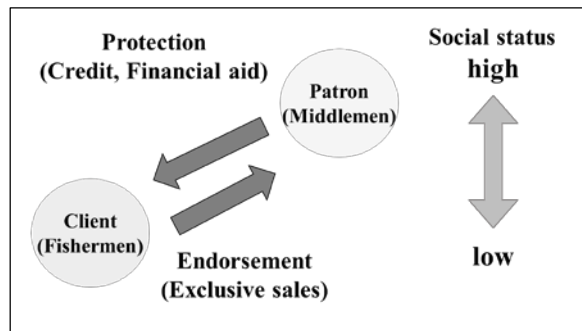


Fig. 1 Patron-Client Relationship (PCR) model

In 2009 I checked and verified the existence of this kind of relationship in Lake Chad basin’s PFT and noticed two characteristics [7]. First, PCR is a socially based tie within the local Musgun community. Second, middlemen lent fishing gear to the migrant fishermen and supported them economically, and in exchange fishermen sold their catch exclusively to the middlemen contracting them. At that time, this kind of PCR was not observed in FFT, but the situation had changed by 2011, when I carried out the field survey presented in this report.

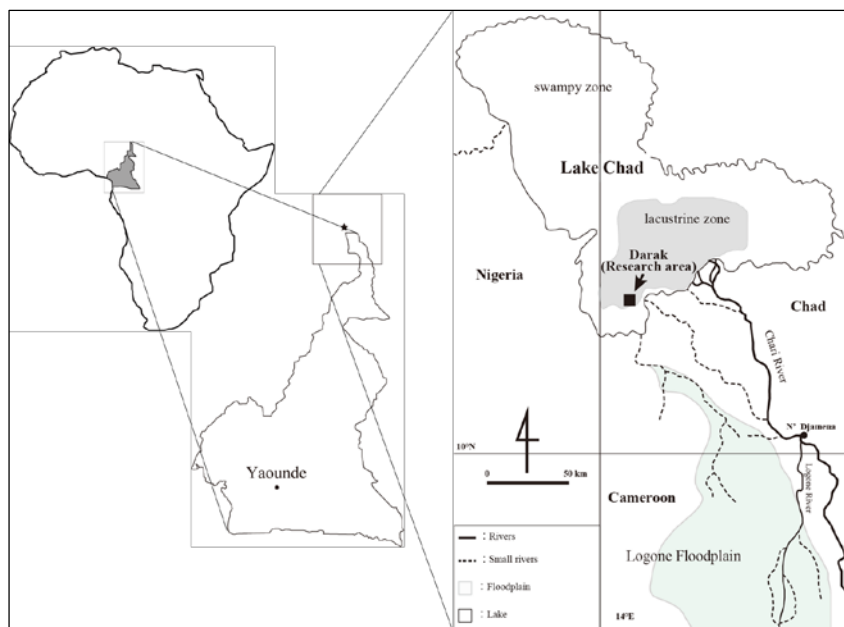


Fig. 2 Map of the research area

The purpose of this study is to describe how recently FFT became active at Lake Chad, and consequently specific PCR developed between fresh fish fishermen and middlemen,

different from the above-mentioned PCR in PFT. Research methods used in the survey included observation and interviews, as well as quantitative analysis. The research period was 20 days from 10 to 30 March 2011 and the researched area was Darak (Fig.2), an island in the south-eastern part of Lake Chad, situated in the department of Logone and Chari in the Extreme-north Province of Cameroon. The annual precipitation in the area is 400-450mm. In 2004 it was annexed to Cameroonian territory through conflicts and bilateral talks between Cameroon and Nigeria. Nowadays, not only Cameroonian but also Nigerian ethnic groups live together in the island. The Currency used is normally Cameroonian (CFA franc), but since it belongs to the Nigerian economic bloc, the Nigerian currency (Naira) is also used to buy and sell on a daily basis.

The Fish fauna of Lake Chad includes 22 families, 51 genera and 88 species, and Family of tilapia, catfish and Nile perch were caught and trafficked. Catchment fluctuated following water level of the Lake Chad according to habitat and spawning sites of fish. 15,000 migrant fishermen came to Lake Chad seasonally. Many of them stayed there from 3 to 5 months in the slack season on the farm and paired to engage with these gears and pirogues without outboard motor. Four fishing methods were observed. Each fishing method corresponds to certain target species. For example, trawling fishing allows catching large size species like Nile perch. But the gear is very expensive, around three million CFA. Normally middlemen own this fishing gear and fishermen who engage with them borrow the gear from their patron to employ this method. On the other hand, fishing baskets and casting nets are used to catch much of the Tilapia family fish. Its cost is very cheap, but the value of this kind of fish is low. So, in sum, the more expensive fishing gear is, the higher is the value of the target species and the target fish size is proportional to the amount of fishing gear. In general, fishermen prepare fishing gears by themselves. Some fishermen buy them by credit from middlemen, and once fishermen contract PCR with middlemen, they have the obligation to sell their catchment exclusively to their patron middlemen. I have studied migrant fishing of the Musgun community since 2006 [8]. The Musgun live in Logone floodplain. They earn their life through fisheries and Sorghum cultivation. Once, they were big herders, but they lost a large number of cattle because of the droughts from the 1970s to the 1990s. Accordingly, also the bride wealth system changed. While the parents used to assume the cost of the bride wealth, usually paid in the form of cows, now the groom himself must pay the bride wealth by cash. Many young men chose migrant fishing because it allows them to acquire cash at the lowest cost.

ANALYSIS OF FRESH FISH TRADE AT LAKE CHAD

Some tendencies can be seen in Fish Trade at Lake Chad: First, Consumption methods correspond to target species. Large sized and high valued species like Nile perch are smoked. Middle sized or middle valued species like catfish and family of characin are dried. And not small but low valued species like Tilapia is refrigerated to keep fresh. Second, purchase strategies of fishermen and middlemen are diverse according to consumption methods. Fresh fish fishermen move around the lake to catch fish. So, for middlemen, it is better to stay in the same place every day. Processed Fish fishermen stay in their fishing camps to process fish there. So middlemen have to move around the fishing camps of fishermen in order to purchase processed fish. So, we can say that the consumption methods of the fish products and circulation are clearly compartmentalized. Third, fishing methods correspond to target species, since target species also correspond to consumption methods like fresh, dried or smoked. Thus, the target fish size is

proportional to the amount and the price of the fishing gear. Fishermen employ different fishing gears according to their economic condition and their technical level and habit, etc. In addition, fishing methods for processed fish targeting large and high-value species need a large amount of operating expenses, and fishermen may have to depend on middlemen. But the ones targeting fresh fish do not require any investment and anyone can operate easily. Fresh fish is less competitive among other consumption methods and targets a niche both ecologically and economically. At Lake Chad, about 60 fresh fish middlemen engage in FFT, and 9 of them trade around Darak. Almost all of middlemen are Hausa, who is recognized as the trading ethnic group there. Fresh fish middlemen mainly deal with Tilapia family fish, the cheapest species, and they increase their value by keeping the fish fresh. Actually they can sell fresh Tilapia for twice the price they buy it. It seems a very easy lucrative method, but this kind of trade requires some patience. When fishermen catch the fish, they visit the nearest middlemen to sell their fish as soon as possible, so that it is better for middlemen to stay put at the same place every day waiting for the fishermen to come to them to sell their fish, than moving around to find the fishermen, as is the case in PFT.

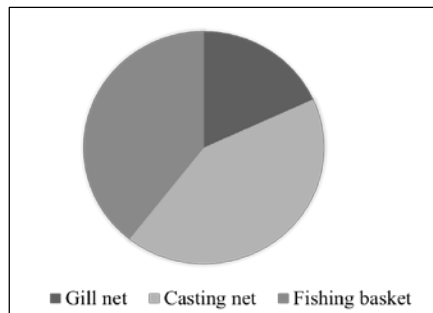


Fig. 3 Proportion of fishing methods employed by fresh fish fishermen (n=33)

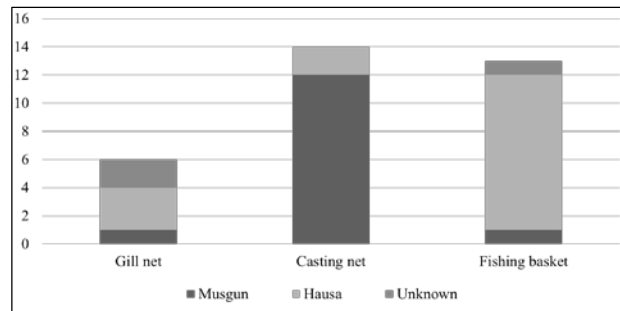


Fig. 4 Proportion of fishing methods employed in fresh fish trade by ethnic group

During the observation period 33 fishermen dealt with one single middleman. In total three kinds of fishing methods could be observed, but each fisherman employed just a single one for their fishing activity, rather than using simultaneously multiple fishing methods. The round graph (Fig.3) shows the proportion of the fishing methods employed by fresh fish fishermen. We can see that they employed mostly low cost methods like the casting net and fishing baskets.

In the bar chart (Fig.4) the ethnic composition of fishing units in every fishing method can be seen. Fishermen catching fresh fish belonged to two ethnic groups: Musgun and Hausa. Each ethnic group has its own favourite fishing methods, so that the Musgun mainly used casting nets while the Hausa preferred fishing baskets. All the observed fishermen except one made provision for the fishing gears by themselves, so we can say that employing low cost gears may be related to the high proportion of self-investment in Capitalization Ratio. A closer look at the case of Musgun fishermen should further illuminate the characteristics of FFT and clarify how it differs from PFT in Africa.

The detailed observation of the case of a specific middleman who dealt with Musgun fishermen provided data to analyse the fluctuation in market price and the frequency of trade with a particular middlemen in FFT. The graph (Fig.5) indicates the relationship between the weight of the catchment and the dealt price according to fishing methods. The 90% of the species caught belong to the Tilapia family. The average quoted market

price is 105 NGN/Kg (about 0.65 USD). While the market prices of fish caught by casting net and fishing basket are stable, the price of fish caught by fixed net, also called gillnet, shows fluctuation. Occasionally, prices below half of the average can be seen. This is because some fishermen bought their fishing gears by credit from their middleman and repaid part of their debt by selling part of their catchment at a very low price.

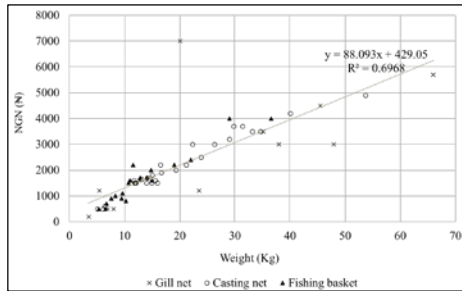


Fig. 5 Quoted market price of fresh fish middlemen in FFT

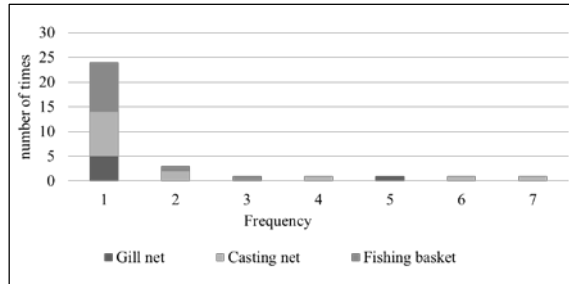


Fig. 6 Frequency of trade interaction between fishermen and middlemen in FFT

Let us now analyse the graph (Fig.6) indicating the distribution of the number of deals per fishing unit. It is striking that 73% of the deals are just a one-time deal. This is not because of lack of mutual confidence, but because of the characteristics of the fishing methods. The FFT middlemen's tendency to "passivity" is due to the unforeseeable mobility of the fishermen, who are forced to exploit vast fishing grounds due to the variation on fish availability and therefore sell their fish to the closest middlemen, prioritizing spatial proximity to social ties. This is why middlemen end up dealing with a large number of fishermen in a one-time basis, rather than keeping a small fixed number of recurrent clients, leading to high fluidity of trading partners. This analysis is based on the observation of the trading activity of one particular middleman during a very short period of 20 days, and it would be necessary to find out if fluidity decreases when a longer period is observed.

CONCLUSION: PCR IN FFT AT LAKE CHAD

To conclude I would like to emphasize the main characteristics of fresh fish fishing and trade at Lake Chad. Most importantly, fish products, its circulation, consumption centres, etc. are clearly compartmentalized according to its consumption method, i.e., fresh fish differs substantially from processed fish. The particularity of FFT is that does not require any extra investment from migrant fishermen and targets ecological and economical niches. Fishermen exploit vast fishing grounds, moving around the lake depending on fish availability. This makes it very difficult for the middlemen to maintain their clients, so that they deal with a large number of fishermen on a one-time basis. As a result, high fluidity can be seen in trading partners.

It is often assumed that the so-called "Economy of Affection" coined by Hyden defines all economic activities in rural Africa. Indeed, in the PCR in PFT, interaction that is not directly related to trade, such as financial support to fishermen, is very important, creating strong social bonds between trading partners. However, such kind of PCR is lacking in the case of FFT, since fishermen who do not depend on middlemen economically to buy fishing gear deal with various trading partners. As a result, middlemen cannot control the price of fresh fish, and its quoted market price is rather stable. Since conclude that the

lack of a strong patron-client relationship results into a stable quoted market price that is characteristic of the modern economy, we can therefore conclude that PCR in FFT at Lake Chad is based on market economy.

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