

The loss of inheritance

Rapid commercialization of the local fisheries in Tanzania's Lake Victoria region is leading to the disappearance of gifted customs and traditions

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Lake Victoria supports Africa's largest inland fishery. In the 1950s, a new fish species, the Nile perch (*Lates niloticus*), was introduced in Lake Victoria. Whether that was a right decision has been a subject of intense debate as catastrophic results have been reported in the last two decades, with about 300 fish species all but wiped out as a result of the newcomer's predations. Today, only three fish species dominate the fishery: the Nile perch, the *dagaa* (*Rastrineobola argentea*) and tilapia.

The Nile perch is a white meaty fish, grown for export to the EU, the US, Australia and the Middle East. The *dagaa* is used more widely for human consumption and animal feeds. By 1994, the export of perch from Tanzania had reached 53,000 tonnes, a fivefold increase over average perch exports from Kenya and Uganda in the 1980s. Tanzania now has the highest export figures, closely followed by Uganda.

There are many concerns about the impact of the globalization and commodification of the Nile perch fisheries as a result of the export-led development of the sector: food

and job insecurity, spread of HIV/AIDS and loss of morals in fishing communities, exploitation and unequal share of benefits, continued fishing illegalities, over investment and spread of theft and piracy. Moreover, a direct relationship between the commodification of Lake Victoria fisheries and the disappearance of traditional norms and values in fishing communities, particularly traditions and rituals in boat construction and launching, is evident.

Historically, ritual is regarded as part of traditional knowledge, signalling an inner life of the community. This knowledge is restricted; it is meant not for all but only the 'gifted'. Apart from traditional medicine, it entails sorcery and witchcraft—the power to work up harm against an enemy. Such knowledge, beliefs and norms shape the social and economic systems of traditional fishing societies and also determine property usage—the control of a fishing boat, for instance—by families, clans and societies.

The traditional ethnic fishing groups in the Tanzanian side of Lake Victoria include the Jitas, Kerewes, the Haya, the Luo and the Zinza. Another group, the Sukumas, who were originally riverine fishers, have become major investors in the Nile perch fishery, own more boats and camps, and represent a higher proportion of crew labourers than the other groups. Among the traditional fishing groups, the Kerewes were the first to make paddle boats but, over time, the other groups have learned this craft too. With rising demand, the cost of paddle boats has steadily increased from TShs3-5 (US\$0.002-0.003) in the 1940s and 1950s to TShs12-30 (US\$0.01-0.02) in the 1960s and to TShs2,000-6,000 (US\$1.3-4) in the 1980s, the period when the Nile perch fishery was introduced. Today, a *mninga* (hard-wood engine boat) costs about TShs3 mn (US\$2,000) and a paddle boat, depending on size and type of wood, between TShs400,000 to TSh1 mn (US\$267-667).

In the early days, the activity of boatbuilding was honoured by special ceremonies and rituals. The novice learnt his craft from working with an expert builder for many years, and the end of the apprenticeship was marked by an elaborate ritual that involved *kuchanja chale* or making incisions to the body, and smearing the body with medicinal

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Clan eder, Magesa Lubumbika from Lugata village (Kome Island) performing fishing rituals in honour of his grandson

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plants and black ashes. Commonly, the craft of boatbuilding was passed on from father to son or uncle to nephew but sometimes a person outside a boatbuilder’s family could also be chosen for the job.

There were certain characteristics demanded of a *fundi* or good boatbuilder: good conduct with people; trust; the ability to keep secrets; tolerance; wisdom; and a readiness to help others and share wealth and talent. Of particular value was the ability to make a boat that was stable and not likely to capsize, that would yield good fish catches, and that would avoid collisions with hippos. In the words of 51-year old Everist Mazoyo, a boatbuilder from Zinza:

“In the old days, not any person could be a boatbuilder. We were trained in many things: how to make a boat and how to avoid misfortunes, especially low fish catches, accidents, bad winds, storms and rituals against enemies. When we inherited this occupation, we were given *mikoba* (a bag with powered tools). It was not just about teaching how to make boats and how to use the plane, saw and sword. We were traditionally honoured with rituals and traditions by clan elders. We were given some herbs to rub on the boat and some for burning; we were taught *zindikoo*—how to make the boat invulnerable against enemies and bad spirits, bad winds and storms—before we became true boatbuilders”.

Throughout his life, the boatbuilder obeyed and carried out the bidding of his elders and clan spirits. From them he learnt the intricacies of tradition and ritual, including the use of medicinal plants, marinated ashes, old jewellery and charms (*hirizi*) in boat construction and launching. Making a new boat was like “preparing for a daughter’s wedding”. Elaborate ceremonies were held to which village elders, men, women, friends, neighbours and relatives came. A male goat was slaughtered and food and local brew made plentifully available. Offerings of food and fishing accessories were made to the boat owner. After the celebrations, the boat was launched but only if the boatbuilder permitted it. The launch was accompanied by a spiritual ‘immunization’ of the boat to make it safe for the boat owner, passengers and crew. Should the boat owner ignore this ritual and an accident befall his boat, the entire clan and family faced disgrace. Elders, however, did not allow such negligence, and minor ceremonies were arranged from time to time to avoid risks.

Different fishing communities in the Lake Victoria region have different sets of beliefs.

People of the Zinza community believe that they are protected by their spiritual clan being, *O-Mswambwa*, and surrounded by their *mizimu ya koo*, a totality of clan spirits, souls and ghosts. *O-Mswamba* is worshiped at a sacred site located within the clan land, usually near a big tree, forest and shrubs. Prayers to *O-Mswambwa* are made, among other things, for better job prospects and family fortune, for conflict resolution and a good crop yield, and are usually accompanied by a goat sacrifice. However, the protector of the lake is *Mgasha-Mungu wa majini* (the God of water) to whom prayers are offered for fishing, launching new boats and for cleansing rituals involving fishing boats and crew.

Fishers of the Luo community consider a boat to be not an object but a living being, to which blame and responsibility can be assigned. Boatbuilding is accompanied by many rituals. Describing these, Ochallo-Ayayo writes that the ceremony that takes place before the launching of a boat is like the final ceremony called *riso* in a Luo marriage. The launching of the boat is the occasion for a major ceremony called *nyasi-yie*, in which the boat that is ready to be launched, is regarded like a married daughter coming home. During the *riso* celebration the grandfather presents gifts such as beads, earrings, plumes, bangles and *dol* (necklaces), objects believed to act as protective talismans. In Luo society, the boat may be named after a grandmother, a grandfather or a married daughter, whose spirit is believed to enter the boat to look after it. Each boat is believed to have its own *nyamrerwa* or priest. If a death takes place as a result of an accident on the lake, it is regarded as a killing of retribution, the slaying of a kinsman by another.

Boats are thought to be accompanied by boat spirits that are easily offended by certain behaviours such as smoking marijuana, abusive language and whistling. A boat spirit would be offended by menstruating women or by a person who enters the boat with shoes on. Customary practices are in keeping with beliefs related to misfortunes, locally known as *janaba*. For instance, a fisher is required to bathe before fishing or after sleeping with a woman, even his own wife. Likewise, a woman is supposed to bathe before stepping on a boat or after sleeping with a man.

Today, however, with the commercialization of the fisheries, only lip service is paid to these beliefs, which have come to have the status of ‘fishing camp bye-laws’. As a result, community elders find themselves progressively marginalized from the fisheries, while non-fishers are able to gain easier entry.

In fact, some fishers object to traditional beliefs on the grounds that they are used merely to impose restrictions on individual behaviour. Indeed, traditions are fast disappearing.

Mzee Faida Ndayi, a Zinza, believes the problem to be the culture of modernity that is sweeping through his community:

“Our younger generation is spoiled by education, intermarriage and modernity, especially those who are married to educated wives from other tribes with different religious beliefs and traditions. In such homes, women have become the spokespersons of their families, and object to our cultural practices—something which is impossible for a village woman in our society. Now our sons have to negotiate with their wives to safeguard their marriages. But also, our sons are not able to follow tradition, and some of them don’t believe in tradition anymore. Whatever they do, they link it with science from European books and not to their natural environment, and, as such, our rituals and traditional values are becoming history. Actually, what I am telling you is history too—the younger generation is totally broken! Our *O-Msambwa* get so mad, they don’t answer our prayers any more. But when their families suffer as a result of losing a job or a demotion or the breakdown of marriage, sickness and political trouble, our sons come to us at once and say: “*Babu nisaidie nimekwama!*” (“Grandpa, I need your help; I am stuck!”) Then we know exactly what they need.”

The average age of the boatbuilder is declining and today’s builder has little sense of the history of the lake. New entrants in the field come in from the *ng’ambo* (hinterland) and have no traditional knowledge. Says Andrea Simba: “Fictitious rituals are many and conducted haphazardly. Some performers are Maasais from dry lands who know neither how to swim nor what types of fish are found in this lake. But they earn good money by cheating our fishermen.”

Clearly, customs and traditions are disappearing as commodification and credit markets give birth to new fishing relations.

Fleets of new boats and other capital assets are pledged to fishing camps by fish buyers and their agents. In turn, fishers are obliged to supply fish continually. There is stiff competition, intense fishing, the tendency on the part of financial guarantors and fish suppliers to externalize the costs of exploitation and distribution onto others, loss of cultural norms, and the marginalization of the elderly fishers who earlier mediated clan and kinship relations and fishing customs.

Boat construction has shifted from local grounds to commercial fishing camps and factory yards. The involvement of clan elders is dying, and with it, clan/kinship relations. Given the high investment costs of commercial fishing, it is the financiers and equipment suppliers who command respect today. Moreover, migration and the relocation of camps to distant islands in search of good catch means that the new ties between people are based more on business than social relations and involve strict control, supervision and division of labour, exploitation, the fading of traditional customs and the rise of migratory quack healers and ritual performers.

Piracy, cheating and the theft of boats and fishing equipment have dramatically increased with the disappearance of traditional customs. Performing a boat ritual is risky because there is no guarantee that the next day the boat will not be stolen or used for theft, actions guaranteed to anger *O-Msambwa*. This high-risk environment makes elders cautious and reluctant to undertake customary rituals. Tradition provides the moral, ethical, social, economic and political underpinnings of a way of life, a customary code of conduct, and a framework to regulate the behaviour of individuals within the community. With the erosion of traditional norms and beliefs, the future of Lake Victoria’s cultural norms and traditions is shaky, and more so, the organization of fishing. To what extent will these concerns be taken on board is anybody’s guess. As governments become busy with ‘modern’ management perspectives that further strengthen fish trade and commodification, history is all but forgotten. ❏

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