Perched on the brink of survival

Extracted from the author's doctoral thesis on Lake Victoria's Nile Perch fishery, this article reveals how women are adapting capitalist strategies to beat the stranglehold of export markets

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Lake Victoria is the largest freshwater lake in Africa and the second largest in the world, covering approximately 68,800 square kilometers. It is spread across three countries: Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. The lake contains many fish species and generates substantial income opportunities, food, employment and foreign exchange. Some four million of the 40 million people that live and work in the lake basin derive their livelihood directly from the lake.

Significantly, in the last three decades, the fishery sector has attracted many new entrants. An export oriented industrial processing and marketing infrastructure to industrially process fish for export has emerged along the major lakeshore towns of Kisumu in Kenya, Musoma and Mwanza in Tanzania, and Entebbe and Jinja in Uganda. By the mid-1990s, thousands of young men found employment as fishers, workers in the fish processing industry, and fish handlers. However, the main beneficiaries were the owners of the export processing factories. These owners are mostly of Asian origin.

Fishers have nicknamed the Nile perch '*mkombozi*' or 'the saviour'. The name highlights its regional economic significance, as the Nile Perch represents a significant portion of East Africa's export earnings, generating about $370 million per annum—68 per cent of the region's export earnings.

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A Bembe fisherman being helped by his son.
In Nile Perch fishing new organizational forms are continually emerging

The export industry is an aggressive market player, distributing the value added in highly unequal ways. The export factories control most of the Nile Perch catch through their control over the fishing investment, distribution and trading networks. More importantly, it controls credit arrangements in the form of cash and materials—given to fish collectors (middlemen) and fishing camp owners and operators. This tendency has resulted in high fishing intensity, notably for Nile Perch, which has triggered a range of controls by the export industry to streamline and improve production for export market and to safeguard food safety aspects.

The region is predominantly rural, although migration to towns is increasing. Along the lakeshore, 'boom towns' with new markets, transport facilities, bars, guest houses and recreational facilities have sprung up in response to the demand for fish and services to sustain the fishing industry both economically and materially. Not all services are up to standard, and most 'boom towns' resemble shanty towns. Fishing camp or boat owners, boat crew members, fish agents and handlers, fish traders and processors, cooks, net mounters and repairers, and bait fishers and suppliers make a living directly from the exploitation of the lake's fish resources. In contrast to the vibrant fishing economy, the traditional agrarian economy is suffering from a downturn in the production of its major cash crops: rice and cotton.

Despite the control exercised by export oriented operations, there is still competition and contestation in the Nile Perch markets and business. One of the most notable changes along the Lake is the emerging diversity of fishing relations and networks.

MlegwaMbuto, who is a boat crew member, remarked how women strive to control fish production and the lakeside fish markets in Ntama at Kome Island: 'These women are very clever—they control us, the fishing activity and the trade arrangements!'

There are many fishing relations in Nile Perch fishery that are dependent on social systems, market networks and governance processes. In Nile Perch fishing, capitalist

and commercial relations of production have become predominant, and new organizational forms are continually emerging in local, national and regional markets.

One example of transformation in Nile Perch fishing relations is the change from subsistence fishing to a 'capitalist deal' in the form of partnerships, as local markets attempt to escape the relationships of dependency and the subjective and exploitative conditions that characterise the export oriented markets. It is insightful to look into these dynamics at local levels in relation to global processes that have reorganized production and changed patterns of ownership and control.

To give an example, the Bembe and the Ha are fishers from Lake Tanganyika who migrated to Lake Victoria during 1992-1993. Although they say they belong to the Kigoma Region of Tanzania, local residents claim that they are not only from Tanzania, but from Zaire and Burundi as well. The Bembe and Ha fishers are experts in using single nets, locally known as *makila*. These three-ply nets that, on average, are of 3.5 and 4.5 inches mesh size, 90 metres length and 25 or 26 mesh nets width, are labelled 'illegal' by fisheries regulators. The fishers use canoes that have three or four *wajeshi* (crew members). A canoe that carries three crew members would be eight feet or 2.4 m long; one that carries four crew members would be 12 feet or 3.6 m long. Each *wajeshi* has a small wooden box into which he packs 10-15 single nets. Each boat, therefore, carries 30-60 nets, depending on the number of crew. They set their nets in the evening, and haul them in early the following morning. They do not stay with their nets or organize patrol boats, so the risk of net theft is high. Investment in this fishery is facilitated by mainly female shore-bound traders who will rent a boat jointly with crew, hire the crew and provide gear, while retaining full control over the catch. If the crew, for whatever reason, is unable to contribute towards rent for the boat, the women step in and pay for them. In the words of Mustafa Ali, a fisher: 'Each of us is given fishing nets, and because the catch varies from each one's nets, we face different situations. Nets are stolen or frequently drift, and we end up in continuous debt. Moreover, each of us is frequently loaned cash independently by the women, to feed our families. If I catch 60 fish, for every three fish, I get TSh 1,000 (USD 0.67) while the women will sell them for TSh 2,000 (USD 1.3). But we are not interested in paying off all our debts. Where would we go? The lake is everything for us. We are here with our elderly parents, wives and children. The real challenge lies in the frequent bribes to officials so that they don't confiscate the nets and fish because we fish small size Nile Perch. We don't own fishing licenses and we use unregistered boats. The women traders are behind us and they handle all sorts of hurdles.'

Women play an important role in the Bembe and the Ha communities to gain access to the fishery operations. Decisions over net purchases, renting boats, buying fishing accessories and where to sell the catch, are all made by women. Women forge a relationship with one *mjeshi* (guarantor) who is not necessarily a boat captain but a trustworthy person, typically settled with his family along the shore, who is obliged to look for another two or three *wajeshi* for a complete fishing unit. Women use this strategy in order to allow freedom of choice in constituting *wajeshi*, who can work together with minimal conflict and risk. After landing the catch, the women organize the sale, keeping aside some fish for the *wajeshi's* food and for their own domestic needs.

The women in the fishery under study had a minimum of one and a maximum of three peddled fishing boats. It has been reported that before 2008, agents representing export processing factories would buy fish in the 0.5-1.5 kg range. But now they buy only fish of 1.5 kg and above, and only the remainder goes to female traders and processors, and bicycle traders.

The basic idea with this arrangement is that the women front the initial costs of startup, such as the nets and other fishing accessories, and also bear costs of replacement of worn-out or stolen nets. They identify a guarantor—who in effect guarantees the investment by agreeing to fish for the women—and the business can shift to a guarantor if he manages to pay the costs of the nets and other fishing accessories. The cost for renting a small boat, which is about TSh 35,000-40,000 (USD 23-27) per month, is shared by the crew but, often, women provide the crew with small credits if they have no cash. Eventually, the women control all fish sales, and the guarantor and his crew receive compensation by way of wages or fish. The guarantor also assumes the risk of his crew—if any of them were to make off with the nets, the guarantor is obliged to replace these. The same is true if the nets are lost on the lake, or stolen by someone else. He also reduces the women's administrative responsibilities by managing the crew, their complaints and their problems.

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The risks are many. On the lake, the fishers are wary of armed patrols from the big commercial fishing camps, which are liable to attack and chase them away from the fishing grounds. Their nets, too, are illegal and, if there is any trouble with the authorities, it is the crew—and not the women—who bear the responsibility of gear seizure, and the threat of court action.

According to MlegwaMbuto, 'If the woman doesn't like you personally or you are unlucky, she can hire someone else. There are those who have sexual relations with women just because they want to get power of ownership of the nets and the box for keeping the nets…We are the ones who go out fishing and are labelled as illegal fishers because the mesh nets are small in size. The truth is we are in a poverty cycle and lumbered with endless daily debts and an insecure life.'

The above example shows that apart from export markets, in local, national and regional markets too, capitalist arrangements characterized by employer-employee relationships are emerging. These markets are dynamic and provide substantial livelihood opportunities to local and regional communities. Much of the fish caught for these markets are labelled as 'illegal' because of their small size.

A range of Nile Perch fish sizes and other traditional fish species are caught as by-catch and also enter these markets. The competing markets do not just co-exist but also interact, so that the local, national, regional and export markets together impact the way fish resources are accessed and traded at the local level. They mutually transform each other and the socio-ecological spaces and networks that surround them. The continuous struggle by women and men in these markets is more than just about generating income. It is also about escaping dependency and unfair relationships in export oriented markets. Relationships of this nature have spread and shaped many relations in different fisheries, gear types and fishing camps.

It is evident that the strategies evolved in engaging in fish trade by these women, encompass the requirements to secure fish (capital) and power; they use individual influence and traits, social networks, local level alliances, sexual relations, and subordination of lower level actors—in this case, mainly crew members. The emerging relations of production and trade in the fishing sector in Lake Victoria are therefore a response to global and local forces, which have produced a very specific site of struggle, in the attempts to reap the benefits and escape the stranglehold of export markets.