

## THE DYNAMICS OF FISH TRADE IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF DORON BAGA

*Yakubu Mukhtar and Waziri A. Gazali*

### Introduction

The origin of the fish trade from the waters of Lake Chad is a long standing one. However, while local trade in the commodity has a very long history, the long distance segment appears to have been a relatively recent phenomenon. This has to do with various factors that limited the expansion of exchange and markets in the pre-colonial period. For instance, the availability of local supplies, the problem of transportation (besides the high cost involved, the transportation of fish over long distances carries many risks because it could easily deteriorate) and relative insecurity for long distance traders, all limited the expansion of trade in dried and smoked fish during the pre-colonial period.<sup>1</sup>

The coming of modern transport system, the rise in population (especially in the urban centres) and the increase in earnings (mainly as a result of the expansion of the overseas export sector of the Nigerian economy) have greatly contributed to the expansion of the trade in fish. In other words, the fish trade developed with the coming of colonialism largely because of the expansion of the market, greater freedom of movement and increased cash needs.<sup>2</sup> The coming of motor transport in the 1920s,<sup>3</sup> and especially the completion of the Maiduguri-Kano and Maiduguri-Jos highways in 1947, and the extension of the Nigerian railway to Maiduguri in 1964 significantly boosted the fish trade from Lake Chad.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the expansion of trade in general since the colonial period has equally created a well developed marketing system for processed fish (smoked and dried) in the North-east region of Nigeria, with Doron Baga as the most important market.

This paper, which is based on field research in Doron Baga and Maiduguri, attempts to describe and analyse the main determinants of the fish trade in North-east Nigeria with Doron Baga as the main focus. Fish is a significant

---

<sup>1</sup> REDMOND (1976: 10-11); MUKHTAR (1992).

<sup>2</sup> REDMOND 1976: 2.

<sup>3</sup> Nigerian National Archives, Kaduna (henceforth NNAK), SNP 17, Acc. No. K.102, vol. 3.

<sup>4</sup> For additional information on the development of modern transport in Borno and Northern Nigeria in general, see WALKER (1959: 92-3) and DUNBAR (1970: 108).

source of income and a principal trade commodity, bringing together the remote fishing community of North-east Nigeria with the major urban centres of the Southern part of the country. In order to get an insight into the workings of the fish trade, in-depth interviews were conducted with *fatoma* (or dealers), traders and transporters in Doron Baga and Maiduguri. In addition, the authors utilised documentary sources to supplement the data collected from the field. For instance, a number of postgraduate dissertations, archival accounts as well as journal articles and books were consulted. After giving a brief introduction of the development of the long distance trade in fish, the paper discusses the role of the *fatoma*, means of transportation, value and volume of the trade. The study focuses on the period 1997-1999, during which substantial part of the data used were collected.

### The study area

The Doron Baga fish market is located about six kilometres from Baga town, which is about one hundred and ninety-six kilometres from Maiduguri, the Borno State capital. This landing site, on the shores of Lake Chad, is the biggest fish market in the whole of North-east of Nigeria. Originally a landing site for natron from the lake, Doron Baga's emergence and development are closely tied to the fishing industry and fish trading. The present fish market was established about nine years ago. There used to be a market in the settlement, which was seriously affected by a large increase in population as a result of which the traders decided to move to a new location.<sup>5</sup> Doron Baga is populated predominantly by the Hausa, most of whom hailed from North-western Nigeria (Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara States) and a few from Hadejia (Jigawa State). Besides the Hausa, there are Kanuri, Yedina (or the Buduma to the Kanuri), Kanembu, Igbo, Yoruba, Jukun, and Tchadian and Malian nationals

Among the migrant groups to Doron Baga, the Hausa appear to have started moving during the colonial period. However, the largest wave of Hausa migrants arrived in the post-colonial period. As pointed out above, most of them came from the North-western part of the country. In particular, the drought and famine that affected the Sahelian region of West Africa in the early 1970s led to the movement of a large number of Hausa migrants to the Lake Chad area.<sup>6</sup>

Southern Nigerians, specially the Igbo, started making their impact on the trade in dried fish from Lake Chad as early as the end of the Second World

---

<sup>5</sup> Interviews with Alhaji Muhammadu Bakabe in Doron Baga in August 1997 and December 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Alhaji Musa Ambursa in Doron Baga in December 1998; interview with Muhammadu Bakabe in August 1997.

War.<sup>7</sup> For instance, a certain E.N. Dike was among the early Igbo traders in fish from Lake Chad during the mid-1940s. Another Igbo, Emmanuel Uche, was also famous in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> The Nigerian civil crisis of 1967-70 seriously affected the position of the Igbo in this and other sectors of the Nigerian economy. However, ten years after the civil war, the Igbo were able to re-emerge and were second in importance, being superseded only by the Hausa.

To illustrate the prosperity of Doron Baga, it is perhaps important to cite an incident that happened towards the end of 1998. As a result of high water level of Lake Chad, some settlements along its shores were nearly overrun by flooding. This severe ecological disaster almost destroyed the Doron Baga settlement. In containing the calamity, some traders of the settlement contributed as much as fifty thousand Naira for buying materials for sand bags, which were used in erecting huge ridges to control the flood.

### The role of the *fatoma*

The *fatoma* is a key factor in the fish trade. Without his blessing or consent, most transactions are usually considered inconclusive by the parties involved. *Fatoma* is a Kanuri word, meaning the owner or possessor of the house (in that *fato* means house, and the suffix *-ma*, commonly found in Kanuri, refers to owner or possessor of something). In other words, the term means a landlord, or one who accommodates, looks after or takes care of a visiting, non-resident long distance trader. Considered in this commercial context, the *fatoma* is a commission agent or broker who buys and sells fish (as well as other items) on behalf of his client. The word corresponds to the Hausa *mai gida*.<sup>9</sup> Besides being professional intermediaries, most fish *fatoma* of Doron Baga, and virtually the whole of the Nigerian Lake Chad area, are fish dealers in their own right. Many *fatoma* initially started their career as fishermen. After consolidating their position in the fishing industry, and having accumulated some working capital (which does not have to be great), they start trading.<sup>10</sup>

The *fatoma* institution is an integral part of the operations and development of long distance trade in Borno and neighbouring areas, especially Hausaland. The *fatoma*, besides accommodating or housing his clients, usually performs the following functions:

---

<sup>7</sup> NNAK, Acc. No. 40235.

<sup>8</sup> M. Sani Imam 1994: 67-8.

<sup>9</sup> For additional information on the institution of landlord in West African trading systems, see COHEN (1965); COHEN (1966), HILL (1966), HILL (1963: 445-453) and HILL (1972: 246).

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Alhaji Ibrahim Gwanki in Doron Baga in January 1999; interview with Musa Ambursa in December 1997; interview with Muhammadu Bakabe in August 1997.

- \* He is willing to take risks on behalf of his clients;
- \* He introduces fishermen and fish sellers (at times by way of enticement) to the market;
- \* He is entrusted with the safe-keeping of his clients' capital and goods;
- \* He provides financial assistance to his clients whenever they are in need; \* He initiates the transportation of his clients' goods to the big urban centres of the country;
- \* And being the main channel of communication or interaction between fish dealers or traders and sellers, he usually safeguards the interests of his clients to the very best of his ability and skill.

Thus, a successful *fatoma* is a relatively well off person. Apart from the money he realises from his transactions, through buying and selling in his own right, he usually has a fixed amount from every transaction he initiates. For instance, he gets one hundred Naira on every carton or sack of fish.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the big *fatoma*-cum-dealers, such as Alhaji Musa Ambursa, have permanent or semi-permanent agents in Lagos and Onitsha, specifically to look after their business interests. Whenever such big dealers buy fish in Doron Baga, they assign it to one of the traders transporting his own consignment to the Southern markets.<sup>12</sup> This is just one area indicating the degree of co-operation existing among the fish *fatoma* and traders, notwithstanding the elements of competition as well. It is perhaps noteworthy to mention here that both the fish dealers (or *fatoma*) and traders in Doron Baga have strong unions representing their interests.

Trust is very crucial in the relationship between the *fatoma* and his clients. The *fatoma* always tries to project transparency and honesty in his dealings with his clients. It is generally by so doing that he would continue to enjoy the confidence of their clients. For instance, sometimes fishermen from the lake send their catch for sale to their *fatoma* at Doron Baga. After selling the commodity, the *fatoma* would send a piece of note to the fish owners, indicating the amount realised from the sale for subsequent payment to the latter. Furthermore, the selection of a *fatoma* by fishermen and traders is largely not dictated by ethnic consideration. Although there are more Hausa *fatoma* than other groups in Doron Baga, perhaps because of the numerical strength and level of participation of this group in the fish trade, it is common to find Buduma fishermen having a Hausa *fatoma* and *vice-versa*.

---

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Muhammadu Bakabe in December 1998; interview with Ibrahim Gwanki in January, 1999; interview with Malam Mato Mai Kifi in Maiduguri in February, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Musa Ambursa in December 1998; Alhaji Musa Bauma in Doron Baga in August 1997.

## Transportation

Pick-up vans, motorcycles, wheel barrows and portage constitute the most important means of transporting processed and fresh fish from the shoreline to Doron Baga. Fish processing takes place both near the shoreline as well as in Doron Baga.

The transportation of fish from Doron-Baga to Maiduguri and to the rest of Nigeria is a profitable business. It is therefore not surprising that a number of very prosperous fish dealers and traders, so long as they can afford it, prefer to buy their vehicles for conveying the commodity from the Lake shores to Maiduguri and beyond. Those who could not afford to have their vehicles often resort to pooling their resources together to buy one for their convenience and profit. Through this strategy, and so long as their businesses prosper, they could one day ultimately own a vehicle each. Interestingly, the recent acute fuel crisis in Nigeria has influenced many well-to-do dealers living along the shores of the lake to buy their vehicles. Thus, while the fuel scarcity has been producing negative impact on the level of trade, the dealers along the shores of Lake Chad are learning to live with the problem, and somewhat to their advantage, by buying and owning their vehicles. According to one informant, five to six years ago, the local fish dealers in Doron Baga largely depended on vehicles coming to the Lake shores from Maiduguri. According to him, the situation has now changed, in that there are a number of Doron Baga residents with their vehicles for the transportation of fish to the big markets of Maiduguri and the southern part of Nigeria.<sup>13</sup>

The Igbo, Hausa and Kanuri people owned most of the vehicles that transport fish from Doron Baga to Maiduguri and elsewhere. This ownership of the principal means of transportation clearly reflects the level of participation of the three groups in the overall fish trade. Different brands of pick-ups (especially Toyota Land Cruiser, Dahaitso and Land Rover) are loaded with tens of cartons and sacks of fish from the Doron Baga market to Maiduguri. From Maiduguri to the rest of Nigeria, the Mercedes Benz 911 truck (with wooden body) is the commonest vehicle for conveying the commodity.

The volume of traffic from Doron Baga to Maiduguri and other parts of Nigeria is largely determined by the season of fishing as well as by the market days of settlements along the Nigerian shores of Lake Chad. For instance, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday are usually brisk days for Doron Baga. These days, being the market days for the settlement, witness the greatest business transactions during which hundreds of cartons and sacks, worth of millions of Naira, are loaded on to the waiting trucks for transportation to Maiduguri and from there to cities such as Lagos, Enugu, Ibadan, Onitsha and Ilorin.

---

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with Alhaji Musa Ambursa in Doron Baga in August 1997 and December 1998, interview with Malam Sanusi Doron Baga in Doron Baga in January 1999.

Transporters usually charge #50,000 per lorry as freight from Doron Baga to either Lagos or Onitsha whenever fuel could easily be bought at the filling stations.<sup>14</sup> However, in times of fuel scarcity, such as the recent one that lingered on for more than seven years, they charged as much as #60,000 or #70,000 per lorry. It is perhaps interesting that although the distance from Doron Baga to Lagos is relatively longer than that from the former to Onitsha, transporters still charge the same rate. This is mainly explained by the profitability of the Lagos route for transporters during the return journey, in that they hardly come back to the North with empty vehicles.<sup>15</sup>

The fish trade from Maiduguri to the southern parts of Nigeria is likely to be boosted by the recent resuscitation of the Nigerian railway system, which had been in poor condition for nearly two decades. However, this development would probably affect the transportation of the commodity by road.

### Value and volume of the trade

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to give the exact value and volume of the Doron Baga fish trade due to lack of accurate statistics. For one, in spite of the level of government involvement, by way of revenue generation, the fish trade along the Nigerian shores of Lake Chad almost falls within the informal sector of the country's economy.<sup>16</sup>

The prices of fish usually appreciate during the rising flood around February, and depreciate during the low water period around June. The highest peak of the fish trade at Doron Baga usually extends from January to April. During the rising flood or peak of the fish trade in Doron Baga between approximately 25 and 40 lorries leave the market weekly loaded with fish. For instance, on Tuesday it is not unusual to find as many as 10 and 15 trucks loaded with fish from the market. The same numbers of vehicles sometimes leave the market loaded with the commodity on Wednesday. And on Thursday, which is the last day of the market week, from 5 to 10 lorries convey fish to various destinations from Doron Baga.

From the above, the weekly value of the Doron Baga fish trade during the peak period ranges between #146,250,00 (at #4,500 per carton x 130 cartons x 25 lorries) and #288,000,00 (at #4,500 per carton x 160 cartons x 40 lorries) during the peak period. This would mean that the annual value of the Doron

---

<sup>14</sup> #50,000 (which is presently equivalent to 900DM) is almost equivalent to three months' earning of a University professor in Nigeria.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Gwanki in January 1999; interview with Mr Emmanuel Maduka in Maiduguri in December 1998; interview with Mr Gabriel Okpala in Doron Baga in August 1997; interview Mr Hycinth Chinedu in Doron Baga in December 1998; interview with Alhaji Hamidu Na Madugu in Maiduguri in August 1997.

<sup>16</sup> The Naira, Nigeria's currency, is the medium of exchange.

Baga is in excess of #248,625,000. As rightly indicated by the TMAF research, the annual value of the Baga fish sales, amounting to #478 million (or US \$7 million) for 1995-96, is the highest in the entire North-east region of Nigeria.<sup>17</sup>

Given the above rough value and volume of the Baga fish trade at a time when the Nigerian economy is a poor state, one can argue that there is an even brighter future for the trade in an improved economy.

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the insecurity associated with settlement along its shores, Lake Chad has for a considerable time acted as a magnet, attracting people towards its shores and islands. This trend is clearly visible in the case of Doron Baga. Many people came to Doron Baga in search of greener pasture provided by the lucrative fishing grounds on the Lake and the fish trade on the landing sites. There is thus relative security for survival in the Doron Baga area than in other comparative rural communities of Northern Nigeria. Just as the drought and famine condition of the 1970s encouraged the movement of various people to the shores of Lake Chad the recent downturn of the Nigerian economy has forced many individuals (fleeing from poverty) to find refuge in the abundant resources of the lake and its shores.

However, just as security encourages commercial activity along the shores of Lake Chad and elsewhere in the North-east region, insecurity could have the opposite effect. Recent cases of armed robbery as well as sporadic forays by armed bandits from Tchad Republic have produced serious negative impact on the level of fish marketing in the Baga area, though very difficult to quantify.

The emergence and development of Doron Baga as the main fish market along the Nigerian shore of Lake Chad has in turn created a vibrant multi-ethnic community. Although the Hausa are relatively dominant in the area, other groups, such as the Kanuri, the Buduma, the Jukun, the Igbo and Malian elements, are well represented.

The prosperity of Doron Baga and other fishing communities along the Nigerian shores of Lake Chad has created an important market for a variety of goods and services needed by the communities. Most of the goods needed by the people come from, or through, Maiduguri. Apart from improving the economic, or commercial, position of a number of individuals, the emergence of Doron Baga has thus created employment opportunities for many people from both far and near.

Government can do a great deal to boost the Doron Baga fish trade. Besides the provision of greater security, along the Maiduguri-Baga road, as well as

---

<sup>17</sup> NEILAND 1997: 12.

along the shores of Lake Chad, the resurfacing of the same road would reduce the long time spent in transporting goods. The Doron Baga fish traders are also in dire need of warehouses, even if temporary ones, for keeping their wares. This would undoubtedly improve the security situation within the market. For instance, some traders complained of the cases of theft because of lack of fence in the market place.

## References

- ALEXANDER, Boyd (1908): "Lake Chad". In: *Journal of the African Society* 7: 225-238.
- COHEN, Abner (1965): "The Social Organization of Credit in a West African Cattle Market. In: *Africa* 35: 8-20.
- COHEN, Abner (1966): "Politics of the Kola Trade: Some Processes of Tribal Community Formation among Migrants in West African Towns". In: *Africa*, 36: 18-36.
- DUNBAR, Gary S. (1970): "African Ranches Ltd., 1914-1931: An ill-fated Stock-raising in Northern Nigeria", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 60,1: 108.
- HILL, Polly (1963): "Markets in Africa". In: *Journal of Modern African Studies* 1,4: 441-453
- HILL, Polly (1966): "Landlords and Brokers: A West African Trading System (With a Note on Kumasi Butchers)". In: *Cahiers D' Etudes Africaines* 6: 349-366.
- HILL, Polly (1972): *Rural Hausa: A Village and a Setting*. Cambridge.
- IMAM, Muhammad Sani (1994): "The Exploitation of Lake Chad: A Study of Development and Impact of the Fishing Industry, 1900-1964". Unpublished MA Dissertation, University of Maiduguri.
- JAMES, Ibrahim (1987): "Human Mobility in the Lake Chad Basin". In: *Annals of Borno* 4: 57-67.
- MIGEOD, F.W.H. (1924): *Through Nigeria to Lake Chad*. London.
- MUKHTAR, Yakubu (1992): "Trade, Merchants and the State in Borno, 1893-1939". Unpublished PhD. Thesis, SOAS, London.
- NEILAND, A.E., ed. (1997): "Traditional Management of Artisanal Fisheries in North East Nigeria: Final Report". Centre for the Economics and Management of Aquatic Resources, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth.
- NIGERIAN NATIONAL ARCHIVES KADUNA (NNAK), MaiProf. 117/1925: "Yerwa Town: Special Report on, Captain P.A. Tegetmeier, ADO, 1924".



- NNAK, SNP 17, Acc. No. K. 102, vol. 3: "Bornu Province, Annual Report for 1926".
- NNAK, MaiProf. 907/3181: "Fishing Industry (1921-51)".
- NNAK, Acc. 40235: "Bornu Province, Annual Report for 1945".
- REDMOND, Patrick M. (1976): "Notes on the Trade in Dried Fish in the Central Savanna, 1800-1930". Paper Presented at the Seminar on the Economic History of the Central Savanna of West Africa, Kano, 5-10 January.
- REED, William et al. (1967). Fish and Fisheries of Northern Nigeria. Zaria.
- SARCH, M.-T. and Madakan, S.P. (1995): "Community Management Systems at Lake Chad". In: *Appropriate Technology* 22,2, September: 32-33.
- SARCH, M.-T. (1996): "Fishing and Farming at Lake Chad: Overcapitalisation, Opportunities and Fisheries Management", In: *Journal of Environmental Management* 48: 305-320.
- SARCH, M.-T. (1997): "Fishing and Farming in Lake Chad: Implications for Fisheries Development". In: *Development Policy Review* 15,2, June: 141-157.
- WALKER, Gilbert (1959): Traffic and Transport in Nigeria: The Example of an Underdeveloped Tropical Territory, London.