

## SMALL FISH, BIG MONEY: CONFLICTS EVOLVING AROUND NEW FISHING TECHNIQUES AND OLD FISHING RIGHTS AT THE SHORES OF LAKE CHAD, NIGERIA

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### Prologue

In 1998 Alhaji Buba, who has been my neighbour for several months in a village at the Nigerian margins of Lake Chad, had many expenses: he rebuilt his wood and straw compound with mud bricks and zinc roofing, married his fourth wife, took care of his nephew's marriage, travelled together with his first wife to Mecca by air, made sacrifices of rams every fortnight, distributed gifts and alms to rich and poor, commoners and government officials alike, financed political campaigns and many things more. The money necessary to meet all these expenses came right from the waters of Lake Chad. As an organiser of a *dumba*-fish fence Alhaji Buba belongs to a number of immigrant Hausa fishermen who are engaged in a new and highly effective fishing technique. According to a popular saying "being the organiser of a *dumba*-fish fence is more profitable than being the owner of a factory". And as we will see, where plenty of money can be made, plenty of conflicts are likely to arise.<sup>1</sup>

In brief my argument goes as follows: *dumba*-fishing was invented at Lake Chad about 10 years ago by immigrant fishermen from Mali and Nigerian Hausaland. The new technique brought about a new era of Lake Chad fishery, characterised by social and institutional changes. Titled Kanuri fishery headmen (*Kacalla njibe*)<sup>2</sup> who traditionally controlled the access to the lake's water were unable to cope with the massive influx of immigrant fishermen. The lack of an institution for effective control lead to serious conflicts between local and immigrant fishermen. With the *Fishermen Association Marte Local Government* a new institution was invented, in which local and immigrant fishermen, regardless of their ethnicity, should control access to the fishing grounds together. The *Fishermen Association* was modelled after "modern" urban institutions and thus mirrors the transformation of the lake shores from rural

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is based on eight months of research in the Nigerian Lake Chad area. I wish to express my gratitude to the people of Marte Local Government Area who supported my research in many ways. I also wish to thank Marie-Thérèse Sarch for commenting on my paper.

<sup>2</sup> Except for this title which is Kanuri all other African terms are Hausa.

backwaters, with local customs and culture to an economic centre, characterised by in-migration, cultural diversity and several other 'urban' traits.<sup>3</sup>

### A technique called *dumba*

In its widespread use at the lake shores the term *dumba* can be translated best as "fish fence".<sup>4</sup> The fences are constructed in shallow water and consist of fish traps (*gura*) which are placed next to one another in a long row. Big fences reach over 1000 traps and cover a distance of more than one kilometre. The fences are either constructed with the rise of the water before the peak of the annual tide in December or with the falling water-level after the peak. Since the *dumba*-fences cut across natural water-courses through which the lake floods and retreats, migratory fish are trapped. Traps remain inside the water for several months. During this period they are emptied every second or third day. Most of the catch is sold on the spot to fish traders, the remainder is dried and later on sold by the fishermen themselves.<sup>5</sup>

### The social organisation of a *dumba*-fish fence

*Dumba*-fishing usually requires a group of fishermen working together at one *dumba*-site. The organiser of the *dumba*, who pays fees, deals with authorities (see below) and coordinates the work is called *uban dumba*, "Father of the *dumba*". The money that the *uban dumba* spends on acquiring the seasonal fishing rights is still surpassed by the money which he has to spend on nylon nets. The nets are usually fixed behind the traps in order to prevent fish from slipping through the gaps between the traps. The capital needed to cover these expenses may well exceed 100.000 Naira (2.000 DM).<sup>6</sup> Usually the *uban dumba* is the one who places the largest number of traps within the fish fence. Fishermen who join the fence with their own traps have to pay the *uban dumba* in cash or kind. To compensate the *uban dumba* different systems are

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<sup>3</sup> For more details on the social and cultural diversity of the region under study see the contributions of KIRSCHT/WERTHMANN and PLATTE in this volume, as well as KRINGS 1998 and PLATTE forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Though Kanuri fishermen are reluctant to take part in this type of fishing, *dumba* or rather *d↔mba* is a term of Kanuri origin. In its Kanuri meaning *d↔mba* describes an artificial earthen dam. In the Lake Chad area such small dams are used in years of an exceptionally high tide to prevent the lake water from entering into the villages. I guess that the widespread use of the term *dumba* meaning "fish fence" is rooted in the similarity of the two actions: in the first case the free flow of water is prevented in the second that of fish.

<sup>5</sup> For more visual images of *dumba* fishing see ANDERHUB and KRINGS 1999.

<sup>6</sup> The monthly income of a secondary school teacher was at that time about 1.200 Naira (24 DM).

in use, all of which are closely connected to the way in which fish fences are constructed.

*Dumba*-fences are divided into a middle part (*tsakiya*) and two parts on each side of the middle part which are called *gefe* (side). The middle part covers the deepest part of the water and is that part of the *dumba* which is operated longest. Here nylon nets are fixed behind the traps. On the “sides”, where the water is shallow, no nets are fixed and the traps placed here will fall dry first during the cause of the receding water. The middle part is divided into units called “doors”.<sup>7</sup> Depending on the size of the traps each “door” (*bofa*) consists of seven or eight traps. Fishermen who want to place their traps in the middle part of the *dumba* are allocated “doors” by the *uban dumba*. The systems to compensate the *uban dumba* which are in use at present can be summarised as follows:

- a) The *uban dumba* takes cash from the fishermen who place their traps in the middle part of the fence. (In 1998 2.500 Naira had to be paid for each “door”.) Fishermen who place their traps at the “sides” do not have to pay in cash but pay in kind: here the *uban dumba* has the right to claim the catch of all traps on one particular day (upon the exact date of which he decides) his own. This institution is effective only once in a season and is called *ganin uban dumba* (*uban dumba's* catch removal).
- b) No fisherman has to pay in cash, instead the *uban dumba* is compensated in kind. This system is based on a shared right to remove the catch between *uban dumba* and all the other fishermen. In some cases the right to the catch changes weekly: during the first week everybody removes the catch of his own traps. In the second week the *uban dumba* calls the catch of all traps his own. Even during those weeks when their catch is taken by the *uban dumba* fishermen have to be present at the site in order to help emptying their traps, to repair and replace them. For the *uban dumba* this system is by far more profitable than the one described above.
- c) Sometimes the cost of fixing a *dumba* is shared equally between the fishermen taking part in it. This system can be observed only with smaller fish fences where less fishermen are involved.

### The *dumba*-revolution: Social and institutional transformations of Lake Chad fishery

At the open water Lake Chad fishery had always been an open access system. Only at the lake margins access to the water had been controlled by traditional

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<sup>7</sup> The unit “door” is fixed by using the traditional measurement *gaba*: the distance from finger tip to finger tip of a man spreading his arms apart. Three *gaba* (approximately six metres) make up one “door”. Big *dumba*-fences consist of 100 “doors” and more in the middle part of the fence.

Kanuri fishery headmen, the *Kacalla njibe*.<sup>8</sup> The power and authority of a *Kacalla* was strongest at the immediate off-shore region that belonged to his village area and diminished rapidly towards the open water. As titled office holder a *Kacalla* was and still is part of the traditional administrative system of Borno. Historically one of his functions was to supply on demand the higher levels of the administrative hierarchy with fish. Annually after the peak of the tide the *Kacalla* and his followers constructed artificial ponds from which they gradually drained the water to catch the fish inside. Historically this type of seasonal fishery was a communal affair and beneficial to all members of the local communities. Fishing activities were for subsistence rather than market-oriented.

Prior to the invention of *dumba*-fences traditional Kanuri fishermen engaged in artificial pond fishing had no competitors with static fishing gear. Hausa fishermen who had been around for more than two decades either used hooklines or different types of nets, frequently changing their position. The first *dumba* fish-fences, which in Marte Local Government were erected only about 6 years ago, suddenly changed the situation. Now Hausa fishermen and fishermen from Mali threatened the traditional monopoly of the Kanuri fishery headmen, who soon discovered a drastic drop in catches. The basic problem was one of coordination in space and time of the two fishing techniques. Because the new *dumba*-technique was suitable for deeper water than the artificial-pond-technique, the *dumba*-fences of the immigrants were often built in front of the dam constructions of the Kanuri. While *dumba* fences were erected during the rise of the water level, as early as November, the artificial ponds could be built only after the peak of the annual tide around January. The combination of these two factors caused a decline of catch for the Kanuri.

During the early encounters immigrant fishermen gradually were made to accept the older rights of the Kanuri fishery headmen who were backed by their village heads.<sup>9</sup> Through the fishery headmen village heads then started to collect seasonal fees from the immigrant *dumba*-fishermen. Thus the transformation of the water into a commodity took its roots and the hitherto unknown seasonal "selling" of fishing grounds began. Still, there was no effective control of access to the water. Not every *dumba*-organiser was willing to

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<sup>8</sup> Very little is known about historical fishery management at Lake Chad. Whether the institution of *Kacalla njibe* existed everywhere on the shores is not known. NEILAND (1997) who's project worked in the neighbouring Monguno and Kukawa L.G.As does not mention this institution. At least in recent times in Baga village area of Kukawa L.G.A. it is another traditional title holder, the *Kaigama*, who is controlling access to the water (SARCH 1995: 33).

<sup>9</sup> The fishery headmen symbolically expressed their rights to the *dumba*-sites by frequently appearing on the sites, demanding for compensatory 'gifts'. Rather than questioning the legitimacy of the fishery headmen Hausa fishermen accepted these demands by gifts of fish and small sums of money.

pay for the sake of peace and attempts of either group to destroy the gear of the other were made. However, the beginning transfer of fishing rights from indigenous people to immigrants paved the way to an alienation of the lake margins that should aggravate over the years. The discontent of the Kanuri fishermen grew again when modern authority in the form of local government revenue collectors, who welcomed *dumba* fences as source of revenue, appeared on the scene. The collection of fees was taken over by modern authority which compensated the traditional authorities – very much to the disappointment of the latter – only with a very limited share of the total.

The ban of *dumba*-fishing by the Federal Department of Fisheries in 1995 (MADAKAN 1997: 337) gave the whole situation an unexpected turn.<sup>10</sup> Coincidence or not, backed by the local government authorities and the divisional police force local Kanuri fishermen began with the destruction of *dumba*-fences. Thus the federal decision to discourage *dumba*-fishing was locally implemented. For the Kanuri fishery headmen and their people who had solved the conflicts with machetes and clubs competition for control over and access to fishing grounds seemed over and won. Far from being beaten the immigrant fishermen took their complaints to the local government headquarters of Marte with the intention to take the destroyers of their gear to court for the violation of their property. At that point, as oral history has it, the chairman of the local government intervened and proposed the foundation of an association in which the conflicting parties should exert control over the access to the water together.

### The Fishermen Association Marte Local Government

The Fishermen Association Marte Local Government has the structure of modern social and political institutions similar to that of political parties, unions, self-help groups or social clubs. This structure is characterised by a hierarchy of posts ranging from chairman, via secretary, auditor and others to ordinary membership. The Fishermen Association has a written constitution (which is difficult to come across), a neat printed letter heading which reads all members of the committee, it issues laminated membership cards, and it is formally recognised by the local government authorities. The posts of the committee were shared among the three major ethnic groups of the region: Kanuri, Shuwa-Arabs and Hausa – irrespective of the fact that Shuwa-Arabs usually do not engage in fishing. The honour of grand patronship was given to the chairman of the Local government. The post of chairman of the association was given to the one Kanuri fishery headmen who was most willing to collaborate with modern authorities and who at the same time was also pro-

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<sup>10</sup> *Dumba*-fishing was banned in theory since 1992 by the Inland Fisheries Decree. It was only in 1995 that the Federal Department of Fisheries enforced the ban. I have to thank M.-T. Sarch for pointing that out to me. See also MADAKAN (1997: 329ff).

moted to chief fishery headmen – an institution which formerly did not exist. As vice-chairman figures a Hausa fisherman who due to his charismatic personality had been prominent among the Hausa fishermen of the area since long. The post of secretary is held by a Shuwa-Arab who is able to read and write roman script and who is fluent in local Arabic, Kanuri and Hausa. The other committee members are either Kanuri fishery headmen or prominent Hausa fishermen.

With the invention of the *Fishermen Association* the taxes or fees which have to be paid by the individual organisers of *dumba*-fences went up to 25.000 Naira (about 500,- DM). Compared to the income a *dumba* yields this amount is negligible for the organiser of the *dumba*. However, for those who receive these fees they constitute a fine extra-income. The sum of 25.000 Naira calculates as follows: 10.000 Naira are collected by the local government as revenue; 5.000 Naira are paid to the traditional Kanuri fishery headman in who's territory the *dumba* is fixed; 5.000 Naira go to the Fishermen Association and another 5.000 Naira are shared between the village head (*lawan*) and the ward head (*b↔lama*), in who's territory the fish fence is constructed. In the 1998/99 high-tide season 15 *dumba*-fences have been constructed in Marte L.G.A., and a much higher number of smaller fences – for which the fees are only half as high – are constructed every year around the low-tide season. Given these numbers it becomes obvious that *dumba*-fishing has developed into a valuable source of income for several interest-groups.

### Different interests, different opinions: Protagonists in a local drama

Different interest groups who are directly or indirectly involved into the work of the Fishermen Association have different opinions about the association's aims and achievements. For the local government officials as most powerful actors in this local drama the greatest achievement of the association is seen in the collection of revenue from individual *dumba*-organisers. At least the records of the responsible local government department read as such.<sup>11</sup> Whether the chairman of the local government who – according to the Fishermen Association – had proposed the foundation of the association was conscious about the contradiction of this action to federal law remains obscure. (*Dumba*-fences had been declared illegal and banned by the Inland Fisheries Decree since 1992. The ban was enforced by the Federal Department of Fisheries in 1995.) What ever the case may be, today, official revenue collectors of Marte Local Government openly approach *dumba*-organisers at the sites of their fish fences with the aid of the Fishermen Association. For the local government chairman the association also became an important medium to mobilise voters at the eve of the local government elections among the numerous Hausa immigrants of the lake margins. The leading Hausa

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<sup>11</sup> I have to thank my colleague Editha Platte for bringing this file to my attention.

committee members did their best to support the powerful patron of their association and won him many votes as well as financial support for his political campaigns.

For the Hausa committee members, who at present dominate the activities of the association, the Fishermen Association is a perfect tool to protect their own interests in certain *dumba*-sites and a powerful instrument to control access to the water. At the beginning of every season the committee “discusses” how the limited number of *dumba*-sites are distributed. Since the Hausa committee members act as gate-keepers they do not have to fear competitors to their fishing grounds. Due to their helping hand in revenue collection their activities are sanctioned by modern authorities. The vice-chairman of the association and his immediate followers do not only have their own unchallenged *dumba*-sites, but also have the undisputed privilege to place some of their fish traps in every other fish fence of the area. Consequently the Hausa members of the committee not only achieved power and authority but also gained a massive increase of financial resources.

Individual Hausa *dumba*-organisers, who are ordinary members of the association, sometimes regard the association as self-help group or union. The committee seems to purport the notion that the association may get financial aid from the government one day, with which new fishing gear for all shall be bought. The fees which have to be paid to the association are expected to be used as sort of “quick-aid-money” in cases where members are in desperate need of money or new fishing gear. However, when in early 1999 one of the committee members asked for the where-abouts of the *dumba*-fees he had to learn that other committee members had made use of the money to buy expensive nylon nets for their own personal use.

The traditional Kanuri fishery headmen experience a loss of their former power and authority and probably also a decrease of financial resources. Similar to ordinary *dumba*-organisers Kanuri fishery headmen who still engage in their traditional fishing technique now also have to pay revenue and a fee to the association for every artificial pond that they build.<sup>12</sup> Six out of the seven *Kacalla njibe* of the lake margins in Marte L.G.A. stated that they accept the association only for a lack of alternative. The association's protection by the local government authorities is felt as too powerful to act up against. The seventh *Kacalla* was reluctant to complain about the association, he, at least, was promoted to chief of all fishery headmen and chairman of the association, which formally looks like an increase of power. Today, every Kanuri fishery headman gets a fee (or compensation?) of 5.000 Naira for every fish fence that is fixed on his territory. This sum is not paid directly by the respective *dumba*-organiser to the *Kacalla* but transmitted by the Hausa vice-chair-

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<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the forced payment of revenue and association fees is used by Hausa committee members to demonstrate their power to the Kanuri fishery headmen: when in 1998 the *Kacalla* of one village area was unable to pay his fees cash down, the association confiscated his boat.

man. This transaction symbolically stresses the role of the association as controlling body and also limits the possibilities for the headmen to make some extra money by charging higher rates from the *dumba*-organisers.

### Transformation of conflicts

Whereas prior to the foundation of the Fishermen Association competition between immigrant and indigenous fishermen using different types of static gear was the main source of conflict, today competition for fishing grounds among *dumba*-organisers, irrespective of their ethnic origin, is a prominent source of conflicts and quarrels. (The profitability of fish fences and especially that of fences erected in specific areas is well known.) Where ethnicity can be used as an argument to kick out competitors it is used. Such is the case with *dumba* fishermen from Mali who as national strangers are regarded by many as second class citizens who consequently have to step aside if a Nigerian national declares interest in their *dumba*-sites. Competition among Hausa *dumba*-organisers also frequently occurs. With the approaching *dumba*-season every year there is sort of a race between *dumba* organisers competing for the same fishing grounds. With gifts and advance-payment of the fees competitors try to gain the favour of the vice-chairman of the Fishermen Association. Other *dumba* organisers try to circumvent the vice-chairman directly approaching instead the respective *Kacalla* and the village head of the territory where they intend to fix their fish fences. Since this procedure threatens the monopoly of the Hausa committee members by enhancing the status of the Kanuri fishery headmen it is highly disregarded by the former. However, every year rumours can be heard about exorbitant sums of money spent by *dumba*-organisers to secure their rights.<sup>13</sup>

### Summary and conclusion

To sum up and conclude let me stress three points:

- a) With the invention of *dumba*-fishing portions of water, or rather certain fishing grounds at the margins of the lake became commodities. At the same time a remarkable shift in fishing activities with static gear from indigenous to immigrant fishermen took place – a process which by Kanuri fishermen was experienced as alienation. Where once seasonal fishing was conducted as a communal affair by the indigenous inhabitants of the lake margins it is today undertaken as profit oriented fishing industry by immigrant fishermen.
- b) The Fishermen Association is one of the rare formal institutions within the area of our field studies with trans-ethnic character. It was founded with the

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<sup>13</sup> Whether true or not – these rumours serve to glorify the *dumba*-organisers which serve as role models for younger and poorer fishermen.



explicit aim to overcome ethnic conflicts. However, traditional Kanuri fishery headmen and Hausa *dumba*-organisers who are members of the committee, are far from acting in concert. Today its Hausa members dominate the activities of the association. Without the support of the local government authorities, who benefit from the association's help in revenue collection, the Hausa committee members would have less power. One can even speculate that the association would fall apart as soon as support from modern authorities would break away.

c) The question than that remains to be asked is: how effective is the Fishermen Association in preventing or solving conflicts about fishing rights? At first sight it seems as if the association has become a great success: open conflicts between Kanuri fishery headmen and immigrant *dumba*-fishermen no longer exist. However, I would argue that this is not an achievement of the association but that conflicts of this type are today rather suppressed than solved. They are suppressed by the power of the local government authorities who protect the association and Hausa-dominated *dumba*-fishing. The traditional Kanuri fishery headmen, who privately still oppose *dumba*-fishing, accept the association only because it is seen as inevitable since it is invented and protected by modern authority. What probably would happen if (local) governmental protection of *dumba*-fishing would break away can be seen even presently at the neighbouring Ngala Local Government area where modern authorities strongly oppose *dumba*-fishing. Here the balance of power is in favour of the Kanuri fishery headmen who have a strong lobby. Every season a mixed troop of Kanuri fishermen, police and mobile police sets out to destroy fish fences which have been erected illegally mostly by Hausa fishermen.

Whether the governmental support of the association persists does not only depend on the political development of the local government but also on the ability of the association to effectively control its members, which is a task that might become more difficult in the future. Given the fact that places where fish fences can be erected are limited in number it is likely that quarrels and conflicts among *dumba*-organisers will rise during the next years. And I doubt very much that at that point people like my neighbour Alhaji Buba and other *dumba*-organisers are willing to accept the unchallenged power of the Fishermen Association any longer.

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