

The role of migrating fishermen in West Africa : what we know and what we still need to learn

JAN M. HAAKONSEN

LE RÔLE DES MIGRATIONS DE PÊCHEURS EN AFRIQUE DE L'OUEST : ACQUIS ET QUESTIONS

RÉSUMÉ

Les pêches maritimes en Afrique de l'Ouest sont caractérisées d'une manière significative par les mouvements migratoires des pêcheurs, soit à l'intérieur des pays, soit à travers les frontières nationales. Un nombre limité d'ethnies, originaires de trois pays en particulier, jouent un rôle prédominant dans la pêche et dans la plus grande partie de la région, souvent en manifestant des spécialisations ethniques distinctes. Cette situation demande aux scientifiques d'acquérir une perspective régionale et ethnique en recherchant une meilleure compréhension des mouvements des pêcheurs d'Afrique Occidentale.

At the time the first Portuguese ships started to explore the West African coast-line, lagoon and estuary fishing was well-developed in many places, though ocean fishing was conducted on a more moderate scale through the use of very basic methods. Some of today's principal fishing groups such as the Wolof, Temne and Fante, had yet to establish their dominance on the coastal areas they now inhabit. In fact, it was not until the 19th century that indigenous marine fisheries underwent a significant development through a series of dramatic changes which also initiated certain specialization patterns that still continue at present. (see e.g. CHAUVEAU, 1986 ; JORION, 1988).

Today, of course, West African marine fisheries (which in some countries are considered to encompass lagoon and estuary fisheries as well) supply the region with a large share of the animal protein available for consumption. Seventy per cent, or about 700 000 tonnes of the total landed catch in the region are provided by artisanal fishermen who total about 425 000 operating from some 90 000 canoes, according to the latest available estimates (for details on the distribution of catches, fishermen and canoes per country, see table below).

In : La Recherche Face à la Pêche Artisanale, Symp. Int. ORSTOM-IFREMER, Montpellier France, 3-7 juillet 1989, J.-R. Durand, J. Lemoalle et J. Weber (eds.). Paris, ORSTOM, 1991, t. II : 709-715.

Table 1 - Estimated marine catches, canoes and canoe fishermen in West Africa

Country	Total catch*	Artisanal catch (t)*	Canoes**	Fishermen**
Mauritania	44 000	15 000	740	3 700
Senegal	199 323	131 878	8 300	40 000
The Gambia	18 131	7 312	870	2 300
Cap Verde	9 021	7 500	1 170	3 300
Guinea Bissau	2 696	2 000	600	2 500
Guinea	35 000	30 000	1 950	5 600
Sierra Leone	36 000	30 000	7 000	18 000
Liberia	10 650	9 000	900	4 000
Côte d'Ivoire	80 000	40 900	800	5 500
Ghana	269 154	190 196	8 214	104 000
Togo	10 227	10 055	256	2 400
Bénin	27 852	27 000	563	4 500
Nigeria	150 933	127 466	50 000	200 000
Cameroon	32 458	30 000	6 000	18 600
Equatorial Guinea	1 354	1 254	1 130	2 600
Gabon	24 200	15 000	1 800	5 000
Sao Tome & Principe	4 289	3 500	1 500	1 500
Congo	19 260	8 086	410	1 800
Zaire	1 000	1 000	316	500
Totals	985 548	687 147	92 519	425 800

Sources: * EVERETT, 1988:5; ** HAAKONSEN, 1988a:40.

The productivity of these fishermen, however, vary considerably. Of the 70 or so ethnic groups engaged in marine or brackish water fisheries in the 17 countries between Cap Blanc and the Zaïre river mouth, less than 10 account for some three quarters of the total catch, and they come from basically three countries: Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria. Fishermen from the two former in particular are almost as active in waters abroad as at home, and are in fact responsible for the bulk of artisanal catches in at least 10 of the 17 countries situated on the West African coastline. Nigerian fishermen take the lion's share in three of the remaining countries.

This handful of facts indicates two very fundamental aspects of West African fisheries:

- 1) the dominance of a few ethnic groups and;
- 2) the importance of long-distance migration of artisanal fishermen.

Both points imply that it often is more useful to look at the fishermen's activities from an ethnic point of view rather than by nationality, something which becomes particularly relevant since the ethnic groups most actively engaged in fishing tend to concentrate their activities around the use of one or two fishing techniques. Among Ghanaian fishermen, for instance, beach-seining is invariably conducted by the *Ewe (Keta)*, purse-seining mostly by *Fanti* while deep sea hand-lining is the domain of the *Ga* and to a lesser degree the closely related *Adangme* (DE SURGY, 1969; HAAKONSEN, 1988b). Similar specializations can be found among the principal Senegalese groups as illustrated in several works (e.g. CHABOUD *et al.*, 1987; DIAW, 1986). Even among «minor» fishing groups along the West African

coast these ethnic specializations are evident, from the fairly common one-hook line-fishing from small canoes (e.g. *Sherbro, Kru, Vili*) to the more particular techniques such as diving for ocean oysters armed with hammer and chisel, as the *Grebo* do, or the unique yellow mullet fishery with «filets d'épaule» and the aid of dolphins among the *Imraguen*.

Migration patterns are similarly linked to the various ethnic fishing specializations which again are related to the internal organization of each particular fisheries. Often the socio-cultural traditions relating to crew organization provide both the necessary prerequisite for long-distance migration and the possibility to pursue more complicated but also more rewarding fishing techniques such as the encircling gill-net or the purse-seine. For instance, without the well-developed and strictly adhered to «company» system of the *Fanti* it is doubtful that the same crew could stay together abroad for contract periods of between two and seven years while landing dozens of times as much fish as local fishermen such as the *Kru* of Liberia, despite the latter's outstanding seamanship and the fact that they tend to live wall-to-wall and intermarry with the *Fanti* immigrants. The individualism of the *Kru* seems to prevent them from evolving beyond the one-to-three men canoe which allows only for the simplest hand-lining and cast-netting techniques.

These are but a few of the questions relating to fishermen's migrations that the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) has been studying through the Programme for Integrated Development of Artisanal Fisheries in West Africa (IDAF, or DIPA in French). The principal objective of the programme is to promote the integrated approach to fisheries development, but also to achieve a fundamental understanding of the artisanal fisheries of this continental subregion. This includes the migratory movements of fishermen which, as LAWSON (1980) DIAW (1983) and HAAKONSEN (1987) have already pointed out, need to be studied from a regional rather than a national perspective.

Following is a necessarily sketchy and summarized overview of the artisanal fisheries situation regarding the ethnic participation and migratory movements in the sector from a regional point of view. The information is based on data collected from a large body of published and unpublished sources, including IDAF's own series of Working Papers which at present number 27, IDAF's Newsletter and the more than 120 internal travel reports written by IDAF staff members. The overview includes all countries covered by IDAF except Angola which only joined the programme this year and Cape Verde and Sao Tomé and Príncipe where ethnicity of the type found on the mainland is not prevalent and where international migration of artisanal fishermen is relatively insignificant. Fresh water fisheries are not included.

Mauritania's artisanal fishermen are mostly *Wolof* from the Grande Côte, some operating seasonally, others on a more permanent basis. Other Senegalese groups include the *Lébou* and *Halpoular (Toucouleur)*, while the country's own fishermen are limited to a few hundred *Imraguen* as well as some local *Halpoular* and *Wolof*. With the diplomatic crisis between Mauritania and Senegal, persisting since May 1989, most Senegalese fishermen have left, at least temporarily.

Some of West Africa's most skilled fishermen are found in **Sénégal**. The *Wolof* and the *Lébou* are among the most active and are found at least seasonally all along the coast while originating from the Grande Côte and the Cap Vert area, respectively. Other major groups include the *Séer* (from Petite Côte), *Nyominka* (Sine-Saloum) and *Toucouleur* whose origins are inland along the Senegal river. A number of part-time brackish water fishermen are also found, especially in Sine-Saloum and Casamance. They include the *Diola (Joola)*, *Sosé*, *Balant* and *Mandingo*, among others.

Senegalese fishermen are responsible for the bulk of catches in neighbouring countries and engage in both seasonal and longer term migration to Mauritania, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinée and even Côte d'Ivoire where there is a small *Lébou* line-fishing community.

In the **Gambia**, most native professional fishermen consist of «Gambianized» *Séer*, but also other groups of Senegalese origin. A few local *Mandingo* now also appear to be entering the sector, but mostly part-time as the

case is with some local *Diola*. Most artisanal catches are made by Senegalese fishermen commonly referred to as «Wolof» locally because they can all speak the language. In fact, they include both *Lébou* and *Séer* in addition to the «true» *Wolof*. The *Toucouleur* come for the shrimp season, and a community of Ghanaian *Fanti* fishermen is present in Brufut.

In Guinea Bissau and Guinée (Conakry) there are relatively few local full-time fishermen, most being *Sousou*. Part-time fishermen include the *Bijagos*, the *Pepel* and *BaynuK* in Guinea Bissau where the bulk of catches is made by *Nyiominka* fishermen coming seasonally from Senegal. In Guinée, foreign fishermen include Senegalese, Ghanaians and a few *Temne* from Sierra Leone. Local *Nabu* and *Baga* are engaged in some part-time brackish water fishery.

Besides the very small-scale *Sherbro*, Sierra Leone's professional fishermen consist of the highly skilled *Temne*. They originally learnt their trade from Ghanaian *Fanti* who have been drifting back after their expulsion in the 1960's. A small community of *Ewe* beach-seiners are also present as are some hand-lining *Kru* fishermen from Liberia. Part-time fishermen include local *Bullom*, *Mende* and probably a few *Sousou*.

The *Kru* of Liberia have long been known for their seamanship, but as fishermen operating individually or at most in pairs from tiny dug-outs their contribution to the country's fish production is marginal. The same is the case for more part-time fishermen such as the *Bassa*, or the oyster collecting and dynamite using *Grebo*. Most artisanal fish production comes from the efforts of Ghanaian fishermen, largely *Fanti* and to a lesser extent *Ewe* referred to as «Popoh» locally, as in Sierra Leone.

Côte-d'Ivoire's maritime fishermen are limited essentially to very few remaining *Alladian* shark fishermen. Several lagoon groups are active, among which the *Nzima* (Apollo) and some *Eotile*, *Ebrié* and *Ajukru* may be considered «professional», though many are engaged in other activities as well, as the case is with groups like the *Abe*, *Abure*, *Aizi*, *Anyi*, *Avikam*, *Dida* and *Gadye*.

At sea, Ghanaian fishermen dominate : *Fanti* are responsible for the largest share of artisanal production, *Ga'* fishermen specialize in intensive line-fishing from Abidjan in particular, and the *Ewe* («Awran») operate beach-seines. It is also worth recalling the *Lébou* community in San Pedro. Ghanaian *Nzima* are very active in lagoons, where one finds also a few Malian *Bozo* longliners and Nigerian *Hausa* trap fishermen.

Like Senegal, Ghana is the home of some of the most highly skilled fishermen in West Africa. They include first and foremost the *Fanti* of the Central Region, *Ga'* and *Adangme* of Greater Accra Region, *Ewe* of the Anlo peninsula and *Nzima* of the Western region in addition to minor groups, such as the *Ahante*.

Ghanaian fishermen continue to migrate to most countries of coastal West Africa *Fanti* and *Ewe* fishermen are found in every country from Sierra Leone to Nigeria and possibly Cameroon and Congo as well, the *Fanti* being present in Gabon, in the Gambia and Guinée as well. *Ga'*/*Adangme* fishermen are active in Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Benin and Nigeria (Lagos), mostly seasonally.

The *Ewe* are the dominant ethnic group of coastal Togo, though most fishermen appear to be «Anlo»*Ewe* originally from Ghana. Maritime fishing is also pursued by the *Mina*, while lagoon fishing is done mostly part-time by the *Wachü* and *Guin*. Besides the Ghanaians, also a few Beninese *Plah/Pedah* have settled on the Togolese coast.

Among marine fishermen in Benin, the *Plah* (Xwla) and *Pedah* (Xweda) dominate, whereas many groups such as again the *Pedah* as well as the *Tofin*, *Nago*, *Aja* and others pursue age-old and highly skilled fisheries in the lagoons. The *Fon* are more part-time fishermen. Ghanaians are present both permanently (*Ewe*, *Fanti*) and seasonally (*Adangme*), as are a few Togolese *Ewe* and *Mina*. *Plah* and *Pedah* fishermen on the other hand have migrated in substantial numbers to Cameroon, Gabon and Congo.

In Nigeria much of the fishing takes place in lagoons and the brackish waters of the Niger delta. The dominant fishing groups include the *Kalabari*, *Ibibio*, *Ijaw*, *Itsekiri*, and the *Ilaje*-branch of the *Yoruba*. The latter two are also

quite engaged in maritime fisheries together with Ghanaian *Fanti*, *Ewe* and *Adangme*. Part-time fishermen occur in great numbers in the estuaries and include the *Brass*, *Efik*, *Igbo*, *Nimbe*, *Okrita*, *Oyoni* and *Yako*. Important *Ijaw* and *Yoruba* fishing communities are found in Gabon, and also in Cameroon where they take the bulk of the catches together with the *Kalabari*.

The main local ethnic group engaged in Cameroon is the *Dwala* which engages mainly in estuary fishing together with part-time fishermen like the *Batangas* and *Yakalak* operating from small one or two-man canoes. This is also the case with most fishermen in Equatorial Guinea where little socio-economic data on fisheries exist. The *Bujiba* and/or *Ndowe* are probably the main fishermen, and it is not clear whether immigrant fishermen do or are allowed to operate in the country's waters.

Gaboon and Congo depend almost entirely on foreigners for artisanal fishery surplus production which is provided mainly by the *Yoruba*, *Ijaw*, *Plah/Pedah* and *Fanti*. In recent years, a number of Sao Tomean fishermen have also been coming to Libreville. Of native groups, the *Vili* are known for their simple line-fishery from small canoes also pursued by some Gabonese *Benga*. Among the better known part-time fishermen we find the *Oroungou* and *Fang* (Gaboon) and *Loango* (Congo).

Along Zaire's extremely limited coast-line (40 km), some 300 canoes, largely unmotorized, are operating, but it is not clear by which group or groups, some Angolan fishermen of undetermined ethnicity are also said to make landings.

So far the overview which, if nothing else, shows that migration of artisanal fishermen plays a crucial role in West African fisheries, and that migration patterns are closely linked to the ethnicity of the fishermen. It also indicates that we have acquired at least a general idea as to who migrates and where (see also map).

On the other hand, the list implies that there are still considerable gaps in our knowledge. The scarcity of even the most fundamental data in certain countries has already been indicated, while the fact that no attempt has been made here to quantify the information presented is due simply to the almost total lack of such data.

When it comes to the causes of the wide-spread fisheries migrations, the overview similarly provides few clues, again largely due to a general lack of basic background information. The general factors contributing to migration are of course known, some being very basic, e.g. «skilled fishermen follow the fish» (a major reason for seasonal migrations), or they go where they obtain the highest prices for their products. Others are more complex. For instance, fishermen from «soft currency» countries often go to CFA countries to earn the readily convertible currency in order to buy equipment such as nets or outboard engines, or simply to make a profit on the black market back home. Or to take another example, not an insignificant portion of at least *Fanti* fishermen commit themselves to fish for years far away from home in order to be in a better position to save up capital by escaping the often very burdensome social and economic commitments towards their kinsmen.

These, too, are questions which cannot be readily quantified on basis of the scattered data available. More intensive, long-term research is needed, perhaps of the kind undertaken by ORSTOM and ISRA staff at CRODT in Casamance and which has resulted in very valuable information on fishermen's migrations, even if basically within one country (CORMIER, 1985 ; DIAW, 1986 ; CHABOUD *et al.*, 1987).

Other questions that still need to be investigated are those related to the actual mechanisms of the migratory fishing fleets, such as how decisions to migrate are made, how needed credit is obtained, who provides such apparently risky capital to fishermen who «disappear» into foreign lands hundreds and even thousands of kilometers away, etc.

Finally, the perhaps most fundamental question of all needs to be addressed : why do only some ethnic groups evolve into skilled and efficient fishermen (who are also those most likely to migrate) while others, often closely associated to the former, continue to fish essentially on a subsistence level? And related to this, why have some local

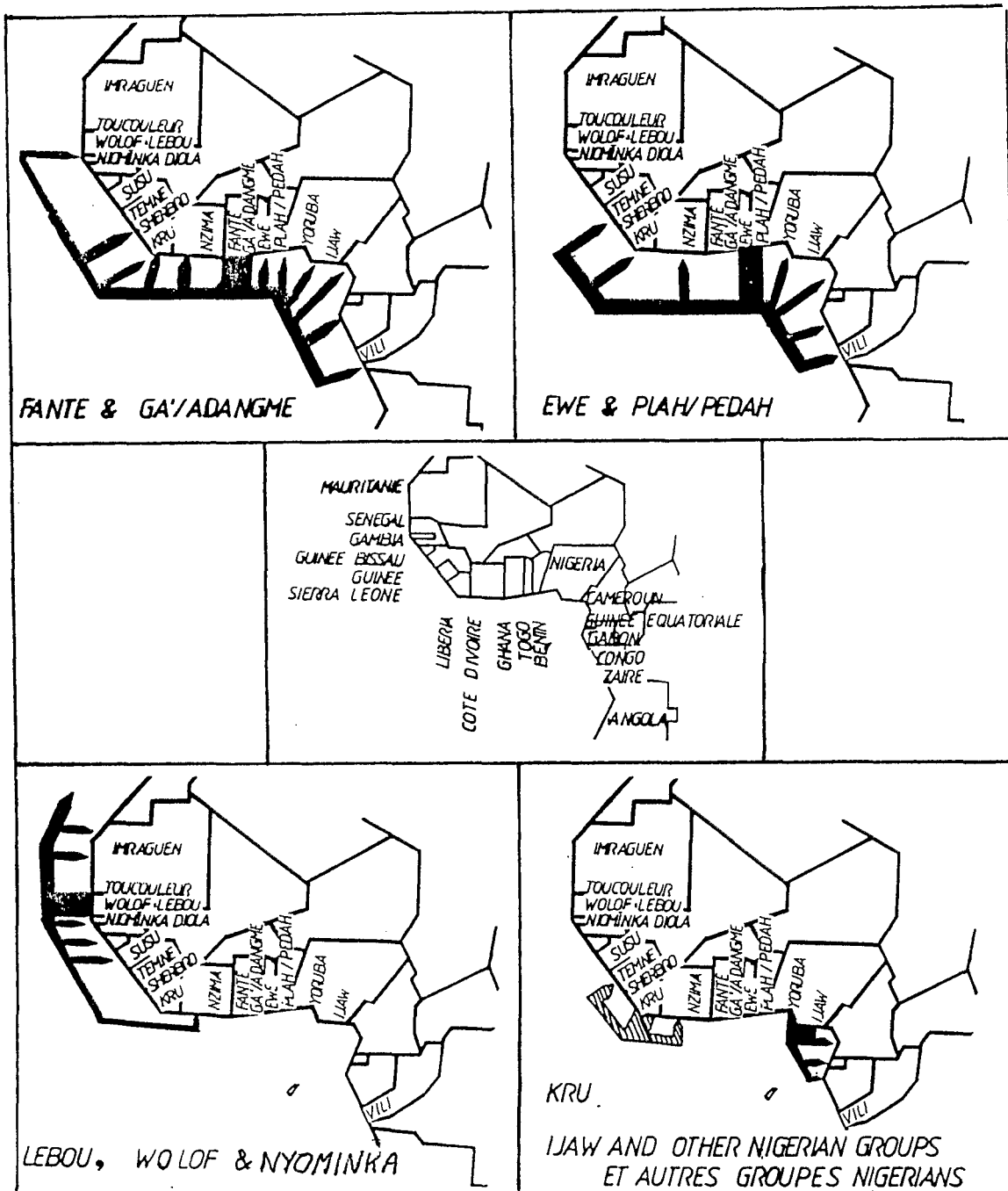
fishermen (e.g. the *Temne* of Sierra Leone or the *Plah/Pedah* of Benin) successfully taken up more advanced fishing techniques from years of contact with immigrant fishermen, while others with long seafaring traditions seem unable or unwilling to acquire even such basic skills as net-mending ?

Particularly this last question is of crucial importance for a development organization like the FAO which is under increasing pressure from governments to help develop their national fishermen. Past experiences with the expulsion of Ghanaian fishermen from Sierra Leone and Nigeria or Beninese fishermen from Gaboon, shows that governments can be prepared to take drastic actions against immigrant fishermen. Even governments of countries like Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire and Gaboon which readily acknowledge the positive contribution of foreign fishermen to the local food supply, are increasingly calling for greater participation by their national fishermen.

On this background, it is obvious that development agencies engaged in artisanal fisheries in West Africa will need a better understanding of fishermen's migration, but they will need help from professional researchers for much of the base-line data collection and their interpretation. Unfortunately, there often appears to be a gap between the work pursued by development workers on the one hand and researchers on the other. It should not be so, and a regional programme like IDAF can hopefully contribute to bridge this gap.

REFERENCES

- CHABOUD C., CORMIER-SALEM M.C., DIAW M.C., KEBE M., 1987. Approche socio-économique de l'exploitation du milieu aquatique casamançais. *Rev. Hydrobiol. trop.* 20 (3-4) : 323-332.
- CHAUVEAU, J.P., 1986. Une histoire maritime africaine est elle possible ? *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 101-102, XXVI (1-2): 173-235.
- CORMIER M.C., 1985. Les pêcheurs: nomades de la mer ? L'exemple des déplacements en Casamance, *Anthrop. Mar.* CETMA-CNRS, cahier N°2 : 135-142.
- de SURGY A.N., 1969. La pêche maritime traditionnelle à l'ancienne Côte de Guinée. Kara : Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches de la Kara.
- DIAW M.C., 1983. Social and production relationships in the artisanal maritime fisheries of West Africa. Master of Arts thesis, Michigan State University.
- DIAW M.C., 1986. Sociologie contemporaine de la pêche et rapports pêche-agriculture en Casamance, in L'estuaire de la Casamance : environnement, pêche, socio-économie, LE RESTE I., FONTANA A., SAMBA A. (eds), ISRA/CRODT (Dakar) : 153-180.
- EVERETT G.V., 1988. West African Marine Artisanal Fisheries Cotonou : IDAF Working Paper 22.
- HAAKONSEN J.M., 1987. Getting to know West Africa's fishermen/ Connaître les pêcheurs d'Afrique de l'Ouest. IDAF Newsletter/La Lettre du DIPA N°6 : 32 - 42.
- HAAKONSEN J.M., 1988a. Estimating the number of canoes and canoe fishermen engaged in marine fisheries in West Africa. *In* Everett (op.cit).
- HAAKONSEN J.M., 1988b. Socio-economic aspects of Ghana's canoe Fisheries. *In* Recent Developments of the Artisanal Fisheries of Ghana. Cotonou, HAAKONSEN J.M. (ed.), IDAF Working Paper 21 : 42-57.
- JORION P., 1988. Going out or staying home. *MAST* 1(2): 129-155
- LAWSON R.M., 1980. Proposal to CECAF for enhancing the development of small-scale fisheries in the region, in Report on the ad hoc meeting on artisanal fisheries CECAF/TECH/80/88 : 10-24, FAO.



Répartition des principales ethnies de pêcheurs en Afrique de l'Ouest et les principales voies de migration