

Lake Victoria Export Fishermen

Global Capitalist Precariat or Emancipated African Adulthood?

JOOST BEUVING

1. Introduction: Lake Victoria Export Fisheries

This chapter briefly discusses questions of adulthood in the context of the global economic frontier of fresh fish exports from Lake Victoria, Uganda. With my discussion I hope to unveil an aspect of the lived reality of local fishermen usually receiving little scholarly attention: that many consider Lake Victoria a space for personal autonomy, bringing the promise of accelerated upward mobility. This optimistic estimation is difficult to realise in practice due to the precariousness of export fishing, yet it presents an important reason for large groups of East African men, especially the young, to venture into export fishing. Some observers argue that the optimistic image is the construct of a global capitalist precariat's false consciousness that reproduces poverty at the tail end of a global commodity chain (Pearson 2013), evocatively peddled in the popular documentary film *Darwin's Nightmare*. Grounded in a survey exploring the social lives of fishermen, I subscribe to a rival interpretation that points towards emancipatory forces, those pertaining to adulthood especially, which occur in a part of the world that is exposed to global forces compounding rapid social change wherein what it means to be young is no longer self-evident (Van Meijl 2013).

First, a short introduction into the world of export fishing from Lake Victoria. Lake Victoria has a long history of fishing for regional consumption and trade, yet this changed during the 1990s when in a large-scale export fishery emerged rapidly, connecting the lake to overseas consumer markets (Pringle 2005). Unlike export fisheries reported elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, a small-scale commercial fishery was at the heart of this export boom, whereby African fishermen catch

two dominant fish species, Nile perch (*Lates niloticus*) and tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*), with outboard engine-and paddle powered, wooden canoes using a combination of artisanal and modern fishing techniques, gill-netting and long-lining in particular. In the booming frontier economy that surrounds the lake, hundreds of thousands of mainly young Africans make a living from catching, processing, and trading export fish. This economic activity is organized through fishing networks, connecting local fishermen, boat owners, and those working in the service industry (fish processing, mending nets, building canoes), clustered around landing sites with well-developed connections to road infrastructure, needed to transport the perishable fish to the national airports (processed fish is airlifted).

We now turn to a closer examination of one such fishing network: Lambu-Kalangala in central Uganda. This particular network was selected because it sheds light on an important riddle which suggested itself during research: how does social order emerge in a dynamic global frontier that appears to be in constant flux? Then follows a short presentation of the results of a social survey, designed to capture fishermen's spatial mobility, which appears to be an important proxy to understand fishermen's social practices. Construing fishermen's lifestyles as spatially mobile initially made sense, as movement appears ingrained in the floating lifestyles of the Lake Victoria frontier, a view that resonates in the African studies literature (Roitman 2005). The survey findings yielded a surprise finding, however: constant movement does not explain the social world of Lake Victoria fishermen. My subsequent ethnographic work focused on explaining this paradox, showing that multi-ethnic, non-kin friendship networks are important for the fishermen in a social world wherein kinship ties normally prevail. This led me to a new interpretation of the survey material: engaging with export fishing revolves around ideals of self-actualisation in a world wherein being young usually works against this, which I briefly discuss towards the end of the chapter.

2. Social Life in the Lambu-Kalangala Export Fishing Network

Seven fishing landing sites constitute the backbone of the Lambu-Kalangala fishing network: Nile perch and tilapia are landed here in large numbers, processed into exportable fish fillets in factories, and then transported to the Entebbe International Airport (Figure 1). Landing sites are mostly new settlements that emerged

alongside the expanding fish export market, and they brought new types of social organisation. In summarised form:

(a) Linkages between landings are shaped by flows of people and things (canoes, fishing equipment and fish), including the various arrangements tying them together. These flows are highly patterned: it is for instance common to encounter the same crewmen or boat owners (together: fishermen) in different landings within a short time period. Particular business arrangements in part explain the pattern. For instance, a boat owner based at Kyagalangi landing recruits his crew from another landing, Kanaanas, and sells the fish to a trader located on a third landing, Lambu. The trader, in turn, purchases the fish from several boat owners, resulting in a concentration in the trade network. Such arrangements hence tie together, often geographically separated, locations along and in Lake Victoria.

(b) The network is informal and administratively invisible: few village landings are displayed on government maps, and the population census does not mention landings as a separate settlement category. Landing dwellers are mostly migrants who rarely possess land in the landings (administrative identity in Africa is usually fixed to land), and fish is taxed by the fishing authorities; registration is associated with tax collection and therefore evaded by landing dwellers. Further, specialised businessmen organise transport between major landings, yet there are usually no fixed sailing schedules; travelling between landings by canoe depends on asking around for trip information. And fishermen get jobs through these contacts, just as boat owners rely on contacts with traders to mobilise capital for fishing trips. In order to understand spatial movements of fishing crews and boat owners, one has to appreciate their network of social contacts, therefore.

(c) The network of landings shows different degrees of structural complexity. Smaller landings function as 'stubs': end nodes that have no linkages with other landings, often integrated into the export fish market through ambulant fish traders in spot-transactions. The integration of larger and well-established landings (e.g. Lambu) is shaped through multi-stranded (e.g. friendship ties form across locations), more intense (centrality promotes more frequent interaction), and diverse relations. To better appreciate the last type, I focus on the commercial fishing network that centres at Lambu, a prominent landing site that emerged in the wake of the Nile perch boom (the group of islands opposite Lambu is administratively known as Kalangala, hence the name of the network). Recognising its strategic place in regional trade networks, the British transformed Lambu into a small port (Beuving 2015); for a long time, it was an island, but with the lake's water table dropping in the 1990s, Lambu is nowadays part of the mainland, connecting to the national road grid.



Figure 1. Lambo-Kalangala Fishing Network, Uganda's Central Region.

Source: author.

3. The Social Survey

In 2010-1, with the help of research assistant Javira, we carried out a social survey among 534 fishing crews and the boat owners they work for in the network's seven village landings. The idea for a survey emerged during ethnographic fieldwork which I conducted during twelve months in the 2009–2012 period. The survey faced several challenges (e.g. several forms were filled out only partially, which explains the range of N-figures), which are further discussed in a forthcoming publication. The important outcome is that the survey results corroborates various observations I made during the fieldwork, chief of which is that around 80% (431 of 534) of the fishermen originate from places further afield; they are migrants. The material suggests a split roughly halfway; around 50% come from a village or town located in the coastal zone of Lake Victoria, whereas the other half originates from places at least a day's travel away from the lake. Several interesting differences lurk beneath this first, crude image, to which I will turn now by discussing five statistical tables summarising survey findings.

When considering age, we found that the fishermen are 31 years old on average, clustered in the 26–45 age bracket (65%), and that the men had stayed where

we surveyed them for six years on average ('current'), pointing at considerable stability of residence (Table 1). A further breakdown shows that many were in their mid-20s when they first came to the landing ('at arrival'). This is relevant because it suggests some professional trajectory preceding their arrival at the lake; few were born into fishing families.

Table 1. Migrant age distribution (N = 431)

age category (yr)	current (%)	at arrival (%)
<25	0.26	0.59
26–35	0.45	0.28
36–45	0.20	0.13
>46	0.09	0.01
average (yr)	31	24

Source: author's social survey.

A strong relation appears between their arrival at the landing ('residence') and the overall duration of their occupation as a fisherman ('occupation'), which is consistent across age categories (Table 2). This shows that the men arrived without prior experience in fishing, and that they stayed on once they had settled there, reinforcing an image of sedentarity. It is noteworthy that a further breakdown per village landing (not listed in the table) reveals little differentiation; the pattern replicates itself throughout the Lambu-Kalangala network.

Table 2. Occupation and residence of fishermen (N = 394)

age category (yr)	occupation (yr)	residence (yr)
<25	5.4	4.4
26–35	5.7	5.7
36–45	7.4	7.3
>46	8.2	7.7
average	6.1	5.7

Source: author's social survey.

Taken together, these tables are suggestive of community; men in their mid-20s arriving at a particular landing site, staying together for several years in a more or

less integrated social network. The tables validates what can be observed; once I had developed a circle of trusted research participants, I was able to retrace them, which is important considering the several-month intervals between various fieldwork episodes, and considering that mobile phone coverage in the region is patchy and not available to all fishermen.

That fishermen tend to stay for several years in the same landing does not mean they do not travel. Two types of travel may be discerned: fishing trips that are central to their professional lives, and for which they are paid by the boat owners, and trips in connection with religious festivities and family functions which are celebrated in their place of origin, called ‘the village’. Table 3 breaks down trips to the village, suggesting that a minority of 25% rarely travel (last trip more than a year ago); whereas the remaining 75% does. This is surprising since, in order to travel, some money is needed; petrol prices in Uganda are high (they have increased since the fieldwork ended) and travel expenditure is, therefore, significant. Even more important is that almost none of the surveyed fishermen did not return after their travels; this pattern is consistent with findings collected during a round of open interviews with fifteen trusted crewmen and five boat owners that were conducted in the wake of the social survey, suggesting that the fishermen consider the landing sites their home.

Table 3. Interval in trips to the village (N = 515)

trip interval (months)	percentage
<3	0.55
4–11	0.30
>12	0.25
average (months):	7.2

Source: author’s social survey.

The image of fishermen with some money to spend on social travel is corroborated by their educational levels. Table 4 shows that most fishermen completed (state sponsored) primary education, but that 43% have had some form of secondary education (S4), for which money needs to be paid (it is not state-sponsored). This figure compares favourably to Uganda’s national statistic at the time of the survey; around 26% of the population enrolled in secondary education (World Bank 2022). This suggests that the fishermen’s parents must have succeeded in sending them to school for a good number of years, being able to pay for that; therefore they rank

from income brackets above the so-called ultra-poor. That said, tertiary education, which in Uganda presents a secure pathway into white-collar salaried positions, is reserved for only a very small minority.

Table 4. Educational attainment of fishermen (N = 534)

schooling (years)	percentage
<6	0.55
7–10	0.43
>11	0.02
average:	5.5

Source: author's social survey.

Family life presents a further indication of material attainment. Marriage in central Uganda comes with bride price payment obligations, and in order to nurture children, money must be spent on food, clothing and school fees. Table 5 shows that, with the exception of younger fishermen, the vast majority of the fishermen reported to be married with children. Wives and children were not necessarily present in the surveyed village landing, but the statistic suggests they were present as a financial commitment.

Table 5. Migrant family situation (N = 431)

age category (yr)	married (%)	children (%)
<25	0.48	0.48
26–35	0.72	0.79
36–45	0.86	0.94
>46	0.97	0.95
average	0.69	0.74

Source: author's social survey.

The relative material attainment of the fishermen further emerges from the observation that, in the occasion of a windfall profit or gain, few fishermen are seen to leave the village landing. Instead, a tendency could be observed to invest unexpected gains in status goods, such as mobile phones, and in status consumption,

such as eating meat and drinking international beer brands, both featuring in a local prestige economy (Beuving 2010).

4. Interpretation: Export Fishing as Social Aspiration

The survey material suggests an image of men in their mid-twenties with above-average educational qualifications who trek to the lake where they create a life for themselves in a new home. To further interpret this pattern, there are material realities to consider. Whereas export fishing comes with considerable risks (fish stocks are difficult to predict, rejection rates at the fish processing factory gates are high) which translates into erratic wages, and village landing life is expensive (fishermen depend on local shops for daily groceries; they do not farm themselves), many fishermen report decent incomes, and a considerable number are even able to (occasionally) send money to their villages of origin. Moreover, many report that incomes from fishing are higher (though also more erratic) than the incomes accrued by their rural peers; rural incomes in this part of Africa are under considerable pressure with the decline of agriculture, contributing to chronic poverty.

Social realities are further important. Even a passing visit to larger village landings reveals that fishermen are often in the company of friends. It is common that multi-stranded and multi-ethnic ties develop between them, typically originating in occupational relations forged during shared fishing trips as crews, quickly spilling over into spending leisure time together. Larger landing sites are vibrant places with a night life that rivals regional towns and cities, contributing to a frontier culture. Interviews suggest this is the outcome of intent; kinship ties, though paramount in the rural localities where the fishermen hail from, are not taken for granted in the landing sites. Fishermen frequently allude to the authoritarian nature of the affinal and/or consanguinal rural relations they were born into, especially with members of their patrikin: older brothers, fathers and uncles in particular – a troubled side of African kinship (Platteau 2000).

Hence, the migration of young Africans to the lake is inspired by a negative sentiment associating social life in the village with impossibility. Dissociating themselves from the pull of their patrikin takes time, as the survey suggests: the normal pattern is one of men moving to the landing sites roughly a decade after they stopped attending school. Once they succeed in making it to the lake, and gain a foothold in the village landing economy, and once their migration solidifies into a more or less sedentary existence, this parallels changing perceptions of kinship. Kinship then recedes into the background and becomes part of a much

broader pallet of social experiences and practices that structure everyday life. In that pallet, ethnic ties come to acquire new social meanings too. Traditional African society projects an image of ethnic inclusion, expressed in ritual practices, group languages and affinal practices (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012). Social life at landing sites throws into question such special claims. Ethnic stereotypes may prevail in daily conversation (as they do elsewhere on the continent), yet everyday inter-ethnic mixing is considered largely unproblematic and is practiced as a matter of course.

The above interpretation suggests that the social aspiration young Africans look for in the Lake Victoria frontier finds an expression in dynamic networks of multi-ethnic relations and in the strategic manoeuvring of kinship ties. The fishermen I interviewed for this study usually emphasized how they see social aspiration in terms of becoming an adult, considered as the symbolically opposite of being young. 'Young' in this part of Africa has various meanings, though often revolving around liminality in the sense of remaining in the lower reaches of a social hierarchy that esteems seniority, with the village as the symbolic locus (Barratt et al. 2012). In central Ugandan villages one may encounter men in their forties still being called young, in the sense that they are unmarried, lacking a following and property in the form of land or real estate. Fishermen emphasise how remaining in the village therefore keeps them young. Making a living in export fishing, however difficult it may be in terms of achieving a secure economic livelihood, also brings new social experience, promoting a repositioning in an imaginary esteeming self-actualisation that is associated with adulthood.

5. Conclusion

Further research is needed to grasp how the ongoing interpenetration of a globalising capitalism in sub-Saharan Africa produces new understandings of the self. In the melting pot of the Lake Victoria global frontier, we may be witnessing the rise of a new African adulthood. This new African adulthood associates being young with greater personal autonomy combined with an aspiration for self-advancement. It denotes an emancipatory ideal, therefore, and this rubs against conventional social lifecycle markers in sub-Saharan Africa, those of ethnic affiliation and deference to seniority in particular. Clearly, the precise confines of this emancipatory ideal remains to be further identified and clarified. It remains to be seen, for instance, how new points of authority and prestige that emerge in Africa's global economic frontiers can bring the new adulthood ideals within the reach of

particular individuals and groups. In other words, whether frontier life privileges particular groups, possibly at the cost of others, is not a foregone discussion. This chapter suggests that the road ahead begins by foregoing entrenched understandings of global frontiers as sites of capitalist exploitations geared towards the reproduction of a global precariat. Certainly, the Lake Victoria case shows that making a material life in global frontiers comes with many real challenges that often compromise a positive outcome. At the same time, the presented material underscores the benefits of understanding how the global frontier features in the imaginaries of the young adults that are drawn into it, including the paradoxes and contradictions that go along with them.

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