

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: Institutions for the Management of Common Pool Resources in African Floodplains: The AFWeP Research Project, by Tobias Haller

Traditional Power of the Master of the Water: Continuity and Change in the Fisheries in the Niger Inland Delta (Mali)

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In the Niger Inland Delta, an ambiguous system of rules concerning use and access to the natural resources favour a few powerful people. These people control the resources, were able to change local institutions in their favour and are profiting from them today. But unlike other case studies in this issue, profitable parts of the traditional system remain in place.

The Niger Inland Delta of Mali is a rich ecosystem, marked by a seasonal inundation of the plain. The inundation pattern deeply influences resource productivity – among the most important are fish, arable land and pastures – and resource management. For the inhabitants – whose main activity, such as fishery, agriculture or stockbreeding, is determined by their ethnic affiliation – the fluctuation of the resource availability is a factor of great uncertainty. This uncertainty causes certain strategies, like flexibility, mobility and reciprocal relations among local peoples, and a well adapted use of the resources in order to ensure the preservation of the ecosystem and hence the supply. The Niger Inland Delta is known for its resource management, which still today in certain aspects follows the Dina, a theocratic organization system created in the 19th century by the dominant ethnic group of the region, the Fulani. But they did not challenge the most ancient resource management system regarding the fishery, controlled by other ethnic groups such as the Bozo and the Somono, but integrated it into the new governance system. This system rests upon the primacy accorded to the founding lineages and their ties with the water spirits. The use of the natural resources is organised along the lines of ethno-professional specialisation. For example, the Bozo specialise in fishing shallow waters with traps, whereas the Somono specialise in fishing the main water courses of the river with big nets. The Masters of the Water play an outstanding role in this system, since they are controlling the most productive fishing grounds. People fishing these fishing grounds have to deliver the third part of the catches, called the *Manga dji*, to the Masters

During the past 60 years, considerable changes have taken place in the institutional setting of the fishing activities in the Niger Inland Delta of Mali. Political, economic, technological and climatic changes have affected the living conditions at the local level and consequently, the way fishing is carried out. The introduction of money and administrative taxes during the French colonisation, which forced the local peoples to dispose and get access to money, along with more efficient fishing equipment, better transport systems, fish storage techniques and new market possibilities facilitated the embedding of the fishery sector in the market economy. Fishing hence shifted from being an activity to meet domestic needs to being a means of satisfying cash needs, and fish became a very important export product. The productivity attracted new users, which by new state laws, were able to gain access to the fishing grounds simply through the purchase of a fishing permit, whereas before – according to the traditional management system – it hadn't been possible for them to access these resources. The aim of the new independent state (in the 1960s) to fight the traditional resource management ended in an ambiguous system of legal pluralism, in which levels of traditional and state rules are overlapping. In this

environment, some individuals profit by changing or interpreting the customary and state regulations in their favour and legitimise themselves through their positions, may these be traditional or administrative.

What developed therefore are not the most efficient institutions for sustainable use but institutions which favour the interest of the most powerful individuals. They are able to legitimise themselves by making reference to the traditional or the formal system. Among the actors who gained considerably in power are many traditional Masters of the Water, who gain a lot of money through raising taxes (instead of the third part of the fish catch, the users have to pay cash to gain access to those fishing grounds) although these taxes often are illegal. In the actual situation, in which rules are very ambiguous, a sustainable use of the resource is no longer guaranteed, resulting in declining fish stocks and heightened competition over resource access and conflicts between different users.

Additionally, climatic impacts on the delta – the period of droughts during the 1970s and 1980s – led to the disappearance of major parts of wetland zones, a reduction in the fishing sites and a decrease in the duration of the inundation. Without favourable conditions, the reproduction and renewal of fish stock is reduced, and the fishermen have to intensify their fishing techniques to maintain a certain level of income. These changes in behaviour patterns were analysed among two different ethnic groups, the Tié-Bozo and Somono fishermen, in two neighbouring fishing villages, Daga- Womina (Gomina; research site of Sabrina Beeler) and Wandiaaka (research site of Karin Frei), both situated along the river Niger close to the city of Mopti, an important market centre. The two villages are of particular interest: the first is highly dependent on the latter for access to water, as the latter – being inhabited by two Masters of the Water – retains a prerogative on the water, both legal and traditional.

Increasingly, strangers who can pay the Masters high sums to gain access to good fishing grounds enter the same waters which the Tié-Bozo of Gomina are fishing, sometimes pushing them out of their customary fishing grounds. This preference of rich individuals by the Masters often breaks out into conflicts, either between the rich strangers and the local fishermen, or between the Masters and the local fishermen, who – seeing others breaking the rules – often themselves do not consider the rules anymore.

These examples showed that the present institutional situation increases the bargaining power of rich individuals or of those who know how to profit from their traditional position. This results in increasing the gap between rich and poor users of the fisheries, with the latter pushed out further into marginal resource zones.

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