Sometimes my hands don't work

An account of the life of John, which captures the hardships of black artisanal fishers of South Africa

Artisanal fishing has a distinctive history in South Africa, shaped by the way in which race and class have woven an intricate net of social relations along the shores of the country. There are records of subsistence harvesting of marine resources by indigenous coastal inhabitants for many centuries, but it was in the 18th century that marine capture fisheries really began along the southern African coast. From the onset, the emerging industry was dominated by white merchant capital, which used a range of strategies to consolidate its control over the labour and production processes. The country quite quickly developed a relatively highly industrialized and capitalized fishing industry with a sophisticated management system that eclipsed the subsistence fishing activities of coastal dwellers.

In addition to the subsistence fishers living along the coast, a small-scale and artisanal fishing sector developed in the limited space around the competitive edge of the growing deep-sea sector and the inshore trawling sector in the Western and part of the Eastern Cape. This sector, comprising predominantly coloured fishers, was completely marginalized in the apartheid years following the Second World War, when the State and industry institutionalized a system of racial discrimination, differentiating between 'white', 'coloured' and 'African' fishers. Most of the labour in the white-owned industry was provided by coloured and African fishers. The Western Cape province was declared a 'coloured labour preference zone' and it was extremely difficult for African citizens to live and work in this province. The artisanal fisheries, therefore, comprised mainly coloured fishers who lived in the fishing villages along the Western Cape coast and who supplied the local markets. A few of them owned their own wooden rowing boats, but many worked as crew on white-owned boats on a share basis. The fishing management system that was introduced by the apartheid State ignored the existence of these subsistence and artisanal fishers and focused on regulating the growing commercial sector and, to a limited extent, the recreational sector. These small-scale fishers were considered illegal and were not accommodated by any legislative provisions.

Notwithstanding the strict, racially based influx control laws, poverty in the rural areas of the country forced African rural dwellers to seek work in the growing fishing industry of the Western Cape. Fish merchants and factory owners also actively recruited migrant workers from the impoverished African homelands, regarding these workers as a 'cheap' form of labour.

These workers were usually African males who came to the Cape without their families, and hence their employers did not have to pay them a family wage or provide family accommodation. They could also employ them just for the fishing season. Labour recruiters would travel to the rural areas, promising a better life in Cape Town and the prospect of cash earnings. Some of these fishworkers found their way into the artisanal fishing sector, particularly in the fishing villages close to the urban areas.

Fishers' rights

The election of the first democratic government in South Africa in 1994 and the introduction of a new fishing management policy in the country held promise for subsistence, small-scale and artisanal fishers who hoped that, for the

first time, their rights would be recognized. This hope has not been realized.

The new regime has consolidated the property regime first introduced with the quota system in the 1970s, and the individual quota system now determines access to nearly all marine resources. While limited measures have been adopted for a narrow category of 'subsistence' fishers, to date, the new dispensation has failed to accommodate artisanal fishers in any way, and this category of fishers is not recognized. These fishers now move in a very constrained space, rarely qualifying for the very competitive commercial rights, and remaining dependent on working on other right holders' boats where they can, or by catching fish illegally; they have failed to gain access to marine resources in their own right.

These travails are reflected in the story of John, an artisanal fisher, whose life captures the hardship that black artisanal fishers in South Africa have faced, and continue to face. John is a 49-year old Xhosa-speaking male. The Xhosa culture is one of the dominant African cultures in South Africa. John was born in 1954 but does not remember exactly when, in a small rural village in the Transkei. The Transkei was a rural homeland, designated a 'black area' by the apartheid planners who intended that 13 per cent of the country would be set aside for the black population, despite the fact that black citizens comprised 87 per cent of the population. As a result of the poverty and systematic underdevelopment of this area, life in the Transkei became unsustainable for many who were forced to seek work as migrant workers in the gold mines or other growing industries elsewhere, thereby becoming a cheap labour source for white capital interests.

When he was 21, John came to live in the Western Cape. He says he was forced to come and seek work, as there was no way of sustaining life in the Transkei. He came to the Cape as his brothers worked as contract workers there and told him about the work opportunities available. "The only way you could get work in the Cape if you were black was if you came as a contract worker; otherwise, one would be intimidated and harassed by the police, if you could not show your permit," he recalls.

Contract worker

Initially, John got work through his brothers as a contract worker offloading boats in the Cape Town harbour. He worked there for one year and then, in 1976, went to Saldanha Bay, 120 km north of Cape Town, where he was employed by a fishing company as a contract worker on their stockfish trawlers. He worked for this company for 12 years. During this time, he lived in the company hostel

where a large number of male workers lived together under difficult conditions.

The crew went to sea for approximately 10 days at a time, returned for two, before setting out to sea again. John earned approximately 300 rands per 10-day trip. He only travelled home to see his family once a year. He felt that he was not earning enough money and hence, in 1988, he left this work and moved back to Cape Town and began working for a small fishing company based in a fishing village on the outskirts of Cape Town, pole-fishing for tuna. There they worked on a share basis, the owner getting slightly more than half the share.

During this period, he lived with friends in the informal settlement in the area, now known as Imizama Yethu. They lived in a corrugated iron shack, surviving by supporting one another with their meager earnings. About six years ago, John moved to another fishing village near Cape Town, Kalk Bay, as he felt that the linefish and snoek fishing was a better proposition. In Kalk Bay, he has no fixed place of abode but usually sleeps in one of the boats moored on the harbour. He goes out to sea on one of the boats at 4 a.m. in the morning and returns at 1 p.m. He has worked on the same boat for some time now, but works within the 'pan-a-pan' system, which is a casual system where he can work on any boat that is available. The boats work on a 50:50 share system, whereby the crew can sell half of their catch and the owner takes the other half. They are not provided with any clothing or gear, which they have to purchase themselves, as well as food. They catch snoek, cob, yellowtail and hottentot.

John and the other crew listen on the boat radios to learn where the fish are heading and then decide where to go. He will regularly go to Ysterfontein, a small seaside village approximately 60 km out on the west coast, when the snoek are running. In order to get there from Cape Town, he catches a late train from Kalk Bay to the city centre, then a taxi to a petrol station on the outskirts of the city. He sleeps outside the petrol station overnight and then hitches a ride with a boatowner the following morning. He says that the boatowners know him now and give him a lift. He will stay in Ysterfontein, catching snoek for between seven to 10 days. There are normally about 10 men who work on the snoek boats. In Kalk Bay, there are about 16 men who work on the boat with him. John says, "It's a terrible life, but I can't help it as I am poor. It is better in Kalk Bay, there are different fish there, it's better money... geelbeck and Cape Salmon ...so the money is better. I move around when the snoek runs....I go to Imizama Yethu in Hout Bay if it's good, then back to Kalk Bay."

John has a partner and two young sons, aged four and two years, who live in Langa, one of the oldest African 'townships' in Cape Town. ('Township' is the term used to describe a residential area that was designated a 'black residential area' under the 'group areas' legislation of the apartheid era.)

Due to the transient nature of his work, John is forced to move from one fishing village to another; however, he returns to Langa to spend time with his partner and sons when he has the opportunity to do so and considers this 'home'. Langa was an area designated African during the apartheid years of group areas, when legislative restrictions limited certain racial groups to specific residential areas.

Although these restrictions have long been repealed, the legacy of apartheid planning remains and Langa is a very poor area with few community resources, and the standard of housing is generally poor. John and his partner live in a renovated hostel flat. They have one room and they share communal washing and toilet facilities with at least 12 other families. They pay relatively little for this flat, however, and the greatest expenditure is on his travel to and from the harbours.

Co-operative work

John explained that they work on the 'gazat' system whereby fishers from the township work co-operatively by jointly paying for a taxi to get from the township to the harbour in the hope of work. If they do not get work, then they cannot pay the taxi driver. When they finally get work, even if it's a few days later, they will have to pay the driver. The cost of transport is a huge problem for them.

There is no social security system for artisanal fishworkers in South Africa and because of their status as 'independent contractors', they are not protected by basic legal conditions of employment and other recently introduced labour legislation.

Years of fishing and working in very cold conditions have taken their toll on John's health. He says his body feels very tired and he has been experiencing problems with his fingers and hands as a result of working in wet conditions for so many years. He says, "In the morning, sometimes my hands don't work and my legs don't want to work as well." There are toilets at the harbour but there are no showers or other rest rooms for the fishers. There are no formal death benefits for fishers in Kalk Bay; however, John says that an informal system operates whereby the boatowners do have a policy of paying a death benefit of 3,000 rands in the event of the loss of a fisherman at sea. The fishing community will pass the hat around for all to contribute, if this happens. If, however, a fisher is injured or disabled, he has no disability cover.

John says that it is difficult to state what his income is per month or year as it varies from week to week, depending on the weather and season and fish catches. In the summer months, from October to February, the catch is good and they can earn up to 4,000 rands per month. During the offseason, however, they can earn as little as 30 rands per day and only be able to work eight days per month. On average, spread over a year, he estimates that he earns between 800 and 1,000 rands per month.

The new fishing rights allocation system introduced after the democratic elections aimed to redistribute rights within the industry by encouraging previously disadvantaged individuals and new black entrants to apply for quotas. In 2001, John and a group of nine other artisanal fishers were assisted by a boatowner to apply for a crayfish quota. In 2002, they were allocated a relatively small crayfish quota of 800 kg. In the first year, they were each paid out a portion of the quota, and John put aside some money towards a down payment on a boat, as it has been a long-cherished dream of his to have his own boat. The boatowner then brought five of his own friends and family members into the group and, in the second year, redistributed the gains amongst these individuals as well, even though they were not on the original application.

No money

When John complained, the boatowner refused to catch his full quota for him and, as a result only, 120 kg of the quota was caught, and John and his group have not received any money this year. John's experience in this regard is not unique. The new system has enabled those with

resources such as access to boats and ability to 'work the system' to use poor black fishers and apply for quotas in their names. A system of 'paper quotas' exists, with many of the bona fide fishers not receiving the benefits that they are entitled to.

John is very disillusioned about the current fishing rights allocation policy. He says that the fishing authority, Marine and Coastal Management (MCM), has not consulted the fishers and has ignored their demands. He was part of a protest to MCM several years ago and feels that this did not help. He says, "The new policy is terrible, it's worse than before, terrible for fishermen in the township, for the black fishermen."

He explained that a lot of the white and coloured boatowners have not received licences in the recent allocations and, as a result, there are many fishers out of work. (The fisheries authorities have recently introduced a licensing system in the snoek and handline sectors that has greatly restricted the number of small-boat owners able to put a crew out to sea. The rationale was the marine scientists claim that the resources are threatened. This has had a considerable impact on the livelihoods of artisanal fishers.)

John feels that the MCM is unfair to withhold licences from the small boatowners, while still allowing the large trawlers to operate big quotas, as they are the ones affecting the sustainability of the resource. One of the other problems, he says, is that "there is still a lot of racism amongst the fishers. The coloured boatowners often have meetings with the coloured fishers but do not invite the African fishers to these meetings."

John would very much like to buy his own boat and work with his own crew. He is trying to do a skippers course and a safety course. These courses are run in Cape Town over two weeks and cost approximately 1,000 rands. John has to pay for the course fees and also for transport to the course. He is concerned as he will not be able to work for this period and hence this makes the feasibility of doing a course limited. John recognizes, however, that, given the current policy that prioritizes commercial enterprises and those with existing resources, the only way he will ever succeed is if he tries to compete in this already highly competitive market.

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