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Networks of capital: Reframing knowledge in the Namibian hake fishery

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the failures of the quota allocation system in the hake fishery in Walvis Bay, Namibia through an examination of the complex processes that link commodities, labour, production, markets, and knowledge in the industrial setting. The relationships between state regulations and public nature point to a specific engagement in which nature is divided, distributed, and owned, namely through the market driven prospects of transferable quotas. This article examines fishing quota as a set of relations that links the transformation of fish from biological organism to global product and thus weaves science, the state, markets, and social relationships into an entanglement of different forms of capital. In this context, the tension between the quota holder, the value of that quota, and their participation in the industry reflects a complex network of capital mediated through various strategies. Based on ethnographic research in the Namibian trawl sector, this article surfaces these modes of capital in the dynamics of the fishing operations. As such, the fishing industry, the company that holds the fishing rights, the government's role in quota allocations, the vessels, gear, and technologies, and the relationships and roles of the crewmembers and skippers' knowledge all contribute to a particular formulation of fishing practices. Fisher's knowledge in industrial fishing practices becomes a site in which to explore the consequences of ITQs that may also begin to destabilise the neoliberal business model for fisheries in times of crisis.

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1. Introduction

Some people are very greedy; they just want money without making sure they create jobs. Those individuals need to be brought to book [1].

The tragedy of the commons narrative [2,3] has become so pervasive in fisheries literature that it borders on dogma. This fatalistic story depicts the self-interested and profit driven individuals as they race their fellow fishermen in a competition of speed and exploitation ending in dramatic ruin for both fish and fishermen [4]. Fisheries worldwide face uncertainties that stem from ecological change, governance and management regime shifts, as well as fluctuating and unpredictable markets in the current global economic situation. In the comment above Namibia's Minister of Fisheries recognises such claims of profit-driven individuals, but in this context, it is quota holders rather than fishermen that exemplify the self-interested. In Namibia the contrasts between those who are participating as fishers, crew and factory workers and the people whose quota they catch are stark. The quota holder

is able to 'lease' out his quota to the companies who need the quota in order to remain actively fishing. Therefore, it seems that the quota holder's participation only goes as far as finding an appropriate 'lessee,' to ensure their quota brings the highest returns. Whom, then, this system benefits should be quite clear. Quota is big capital. Even the Minister of Fisheries warns against those who seek only that capital. The current state of affairs in the Namibian hake fishery is complex. The capital-intensive industry and industrial production have been met with challenges in policy implementation regarding rights and quota allocations, conflicts in privatisation, uncertain global economies, and in addressing issues of poverty and inequality [5,6].

Using Law's claim that actor network theory is not a theory so much as it is a toolkit for unearthing stories about particular sets of relations [7], I will in this article trace the various relations that emerge in both relational and material forms in the Namibian hake fishery. In doing so I piece together a different narrative, one that puts *networks* of capital at the foreground of the fishery's political and economics malaise. This paper is informed by previous and current ethnographic research in Namibia's industrial hake fishery and brings qualitative analysis to bear on environmental issues. It engages with fundamental questions of meaning, value, and responsibility in a time of rapid and escalating

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environmental, social, and economic change. Additionally, it offers a particular methodology that contributes to the body of work on fisheries research in southern Africa. As such, I offer three interventions that challenge the economic orthodoxy of technological advancement and global markets in the form of the individual quota catch share system. These interventions are as follows: first, an examination of the sets of relations around knowledge required to negotiate the messiness of a highly privatised and exclusive industry; second, recognition of fisher's knowledge within the industrial fishing setting; and third, a critique and discussion on why the individual quota catch share system is failing in Namibia precisely because of its elitist manufacturing of wealth into the hands of a select few. Central to the paper is to show how networks of capital in the hake fishery play a crucial role in the processes of harvesting, commoditising, and marketing of hake, amidst the transferable quota system that subverts such networks into a highly exclusive corporate machine. I argue that individual quota catch share systems are very far from where they began in terms of their original design, and in the case of Namibia, they offer an unviable option for future generations of fish harvesters and industry. In the material that follows, I draw on observations from time spent at sea with one hake trawl vessel coupled with in-depth interviews and conversations with fishers, scientists, and industry personnel.

Previous studies that situate knowledge within sets of relations begin to re-imagine the boundaries between humans, nature, technology, and environment [8–13] while utilising relational and materialist techniques in various conventions. In particular, Johnsen [9] employs a relational approach to his analysis in the Norwegian context to tease out why capture capacity has continued to expand despite efforts to reduce it. He argues that the bio-economic model substantialises the fisher and his fishing vessel thus the logical antidote is to reduce the number of participating vessels and fishers. But although the number of vessels and fishers is less, this plays out as an increase in fishing capacity and efficiency. Structuring an analysis around the networks of relations that determine the fishers' actions while recognising that fishing activities are not conducted by individuals independently, acknowledges that the fishing actors are the enterprises of different sizes, shapes, and characters with all their relations, persons, technologies, regulations, etc. [9]. In the Namibian context, the individual quota catch share system is driven by the advocacy of individual rights and quota that can be reduced into capital via the leasing of quotas. Therefore, the value attributed to the quota would be non-existent without the networks of relations and capital that comprise the fishing enterprise. Inclusive within and across the fishing industry we then see a variety of actors at work engaging various elements from the fishing itself to technological advancements, business practices such as marketing and promotion, and onshore processing of hake into fillets, and thus into profits.

2. Navigating the corporate sea: the rise of individual quota catch share systems

Individual transferable quotas (ITQs) in fisheries worldwide point to the complex mechanisms at work within fisheries structures to curb the tragedy of the commons narrative, namely the drive to privatise and limit access while maximising profits from the resource [14–16]. As a result, the logic structuring fisheries management is premised on a commitment to scientific and economic rationality, i.e. the bio-economic model, one that manifests in the merging of science and economics for the optimal allocation of natural resources. ITQs as a product of this logic have been, and continue to be, deeply polarising among fishermen,

scientists, managers, and interested citizens [4]. The underlying assumption is that concentration of resource access in fewer hands will conserve fish stocks. However, the effects on the actual fish stocks of dividing up a limited total allowable catch (TAC) into individual, tradable commodities, is less clear [4]. ITQs developed out of processes of privatisation, marketisation, and commoditisation linked to the use of bio-economic models emerging as a testament to the need for fisheries managers to decide the amount of fishing effort and subsequent total allowable catches to exert on fish stocks that would bring maximum economic rent [17]. ITQs contribute to the application of the bio-economic models' principles of reducing catch efforts and maximising returns. Through introducing a quota system whereby rights to fish and quota are allocated, a set of controls [in the best interests of fishers, citizens, and the country] will uphold a management structure that designates who is worthy enough to access, and benefit from, the resources. There are deeply rooted problems with these sets of controls, perpetuated by paternalistic neoliberal policies, particularly so in Namibia, where society is very much still in transition. The legacy of fisheries management is committed to the conservation of fish stocks for the future generations of fish harvesters and fishing communities. At the same time and starkly contrary to the conservation goal, fisheries management supports the endeavour for maximum profits through extraction, onshore processing, and exports. ITQs add an additional layer of privatisation that in Namibia further excludes the majority of the population, one which management seeks to include as one of the prominent political objectives emerging at the time of independence. Namibia's history of apartheid, and the privilege of the white elite, contributes to the ongoing struggle for restructuring that is built into policy today. Black Namibians have historically been excluded from the fishing industry and even today there are only a few black skippers in the hake sector. While policy has extended the role of government to ensure opportunities for the majority black population in their efforts of employment and opportunity, the trajectory has been and is presently the exploitation of cheap (black) labour and temporary and seasonal work (non contract). The Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR), as part of the social redistribution plan, have attempted to implement an empowerment policy. In 1994–1995 this policy saw 25% of the TAC allocated to newcomers; historically excluded business people, fishers, and Namibians in prominent positions. The main objective of this new policy was twofold: to provide the newcomers with enough quota to compete with the well-established companies and as these quotas were distributed on the condition that the fish would be processed on land, also to increase employment which was estimated at 63% for the hake sector of the overall fishing industry in 2010 [18]. However, an average wetfish vessel at the time cost roughly 7.7 million NAD (about 55 million today), and while cheaper than freezer vessels, which then cost about 26.5 million NAD (about 100 million today), it was still costly enough to make it difficult for newcomers to buy their own vessels [18]. While the business model for the industrial hake fishery in Namibia is designed to provide accessibility and benefits to Namibian citizens who were systematically excluded, the emergence of ITQs in practice points to the perpetuation of exclusivity in terms of benefits and opportunities and continued structural inequalities within fisheries management and policy.

As the Minister's quote implies, the ITQ system has turned the tragedy of the commons narrative into a self-fulfilling prophecy with the quota holders exemplifying the characteristics of resource users in the discussion. It must be stated that in Namibia, quotas are not transferable. However, the high cost of entry into the industry encouraged new rights holders to lease their quota to already established firms to build up capital for future investments. As such, this leasing agreement in practice appears to have

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