

# **Traditional Malgache Fishing at a Time of Internationalization**

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Praise the Lord for allowing us to come together here at this 21<sup>st</sup> World Congress of Apostolatus Maris! We praise Him because at this meeting we will be sharing our respective testimonies regarding our promotion of the human dignity of the People of the Sea for the Church's greater presence in the maritime world. Personally, I have been invited to share our experiences in accompanying the life of the traditional Malgache pirogue fishermen at a time of internationalization. Indeed, the real situations of these pirogue fishermen could never be lived on the margin of the current influence of internationalization. This is why we have accepted to offer this testimony while, at the same time, we discharge our duty to convey the amicable and fraternal greetings of all the traditional pirogue fishermen of Madagascar to you and their best wishes for the successful outcome of this 21<sup>st</sup> World Congress.

Based on the real life situations of these traditional fishermen, we will now describe the general context that prevails in this sector at a time of internationalization.

## **But first of all, what should we know about the country?**

Madagascar is separated from Africa by the Canal of Mozambique. It has an estimated population of 15 million inhabitants and incalculable natural resources; nonetheless, it is classified among the five poorest countries in the world. As in all the under-developed countries, in Madagascar the fishing sector, especially food fishing called "traditional fishing", represents an important activity both from the viewpoint of the economy and food security and employment. For the country's national economy, the fish products, *especially shrimp*, ensure the best returns in foreign currencies.

## **Now, why speak about "traditional fishing"?**

- The number of fishermen from the 1,250 villages that were officially counted in 1998 is estimated at approximately 100,000. These people never stop growing in number. Some socio-economic surveys carried out by an **NGO for Development** in the year 2000 indicate that "being a fisherman" is defined as "belonging to a natural identity", and to a trade or professional guild. This traditional identity of each ethnic group imbues the fishing practices of the coastal peoples as a whole, a traditional identity made up by very different, varied and often empirical practices and beliefs transmitted from father to son. It is in this way that from an early age every child is initiated into going out to sea in many coastal communities.

- In the southern and mid-western parts of the Island, agricultural is practically non-existent. The sun makes it arid and almost desert-like there. Fishing ensures the people's survival. The sea is the first resource for life or, we might even say for survival...

- *A hollow boat made out of light-weight, national wood propelled by oars and some rudimentary nets are all the working equipment a traditional fisherman has. To be sure, the physical strength of the person who is alone aboard his small boat conditions the distance of the fishing places and his endurance in the trade.* It should be noted that there are some fishermen

who have a 50 CV motorboat, but in this case, these fishermen practice what is called “artisanal” fishing.

- A point that should be stressed now is that according to official figures, the products caught in the coastal communities of traditional Malgache pirogue fishermen provide 70% of the nation’s annual consumption of fish, while the working equipment used in this sector, as we have just said, is ludicrous.

### **What is the place of this small-scale fishing in today’s world?**

In today’s world, fishing is one of the most internationalized economic sectors.

During the past years, we have noted the emergence of international frameworks on the governmental level for reflection on and the management of fishing. By way of example, we mention among others:

- The FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing
- The UN Agreement on overlapping stocks and the Law of the Sea
- The Cotonou Convention, etc.

As a result, regional fishing organizations have developed that are destined to be instruments for the regulation of fishing. However, the greatest challenge today is still the participation of the traditional and artisanal fishermen’s communities in these different discussions and decision-making centers.

Sophisticated and industrialized fishing systems reign all over the seas of the globe, but especially in the Exclusive Economic Zones (E.E.Z.) of the Third World countries. The common fishing policy enacted by Brussels through the European Union commits the A.C.P. countries (African, Caribbean and Pacific) to submit to certain conditions regarding the use of their fish and submarine resources. At present, 15 African countries, including Madagascar, have a fishing agreement with the European Union. Moreover, for Madagascar more specifically, work contracts with third-party countries, such as France and Japan, favor the expansion of industrial fishing, whether it be shrimp, tuna or deep-sea fishing. In the end, such phenomena could harm the country’s resources which, as they well know, are not estimated at their proper value because the country does not have the means to do so. Moreover, all this is being done to the detriment of small-scale fishing both in terms of resources and occupation of the fishing zones.

### **Faced with these challenges, what is the Church’s commitment through the Apostleship of the Sea?**

In Madagascar, small-scale fishing supplies almost the entire national consumption of fish. However, it is still classified as an informal sector in which fishermen get no recognition for their trade or professional status. A traditional fishermen is classified as a person with no profession. His trade has no official status with the administration: there is no census, subsidies, public infrastructures related to the work, etc. ... and wherever human dignity is not recognized in labor, the Church should feel challenged. The Apostleship of the Sea, as the Church’s presence in the maritime world, has to listen carefully to these real situations crying out for social justice.

*To bring a new idea into the age-old, empirical fishing practices with the aim of improving working conditions for greater human welfare:* these are the priorities of traditional fishing in Madagascar, a developing country like so many others in its present state. But these may not be the priorities of internationalization...For a poor country like Madagascar, internationalization in the fishing sector appears somewhat like tentacles of compulsory rules imposed on the sector that cannot be applied without considerable effort on the part of all concerned. It seems that this would require all the countries to be on an equal footing in terms of technical means and often the latest technological means as well.

Moreover, the practical know-how has to be adopted and there must be a response to international regulations for which the most important adaptation to be made is the psychological adaptation the citizens have to face. Such psychological adaptation is not just to understand, but also to be able to follow the major thrusts and challenges of internationalization. We are all called upon to help man stand on his own two feet and this is through recognition of what he is, his evolution and his trade. This recognition is based on the dignity and welfare of man as an image of God.

### **Traditional Fishing at a time of internationalization: What conclusion should be drawn?**

The questions raised by traditional and artisanal fishermen in terms of development and promotion of their trade have never had any repercussions on the activities, discussions and decisions made between the countries of the North and the South. At the international meetings of decision makers, no effective participation of real traditional fishermen has been achieved until now. In this situation, can we believe that fishermen will be able to make a contribution to building this world?

To put traditional fishing on the scale of internationalization is certainly an honorable and praiseworthy ambition, but this could raise another more delicate discussion in a more profound way: namely, the tradition, culture and identity of an entire People who are facing modernism, progress and the domination of nature following and according to the will of a technical development imagined and conceived by intellectual, so-called “civilized” man...

In any case, let us not get into the wrong discussion! This is first of all a question of our daily lives. The flagrant realities do not allow us to be indifferent to them because they affirm that in the small-scale fishing sector, like traditional Malgache fishing, some crucial problems exist and offend the dignity of man in the essence of his being. In the image of Madagascar, three major problems affect these fishermen to which we must pay serious attention:

**The problem of recognition:** Traditional fishing has all the necessary conditions for promoting lasting development: *the capacity to create jobs; potentially unexplored resources; food security and protein input; unification of the entire country into a common activity that can result in a professional vocation.* These few aspects confirm the crucial need for us to promote “Recognition of the Rights of the Fishermen’s Communities”. This recognition aims at granting them: **access to the resources of the coastal zone, access to the basic infrastructures, and access to financial resources.** It should be pointed out that since 1995, protection of the rights of traditional fishermen, particularly in terms of priority access to the resources and fishing zones, is recognized by the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing.

**The problem of resources:** In Madagascar, 30,000 tons of “by-catch” fish are thrown back into the sea every year by Industrial Shrimp Fishing. Moreover, it is officially stated that the greatest percentage of the shrimp catches are made in the 2-mile zone, at less than 4 kms from the coast. This allows us suppose that the 30,000 tons of fish thrown back were caught inside

this zone less than 4 kms from the coast which, in principle, ought to be reserved for small-scale fishing. Here it is important to point out that if the resources of the coastal zones were depleted, industrial fishing could always move to the areas rich in fish. In the same way, investors in this sector could also move their capital to other investment sectors. On the other hand, small-scale, fish-well fishing, called traditional or artisanal fishing, would not have these possibilities. If the resources are over-fished and depleted, it is condemned to disappear. Therefore, it is the very survival of the coastal families and communities that is threatened...

**The problem of the fishing zone:** It is not enough to vindicate their rights of access to the resources of the zone; it must also be ensured that the traditional fishermen's communities will be able to occupy this fishing zone and manage it as well as possible. Often the unorganized, pirogue fishermen are present individually in their fishing zone for a few hours during the day, but they occupy the same zone at different times. This gives the impression that they are always there whereas in terms of productivity there is a lack of earnings which must be made up. How will the traditional and artisanal fishermen be able one day to fully occupy this zone so as to benefit totally from its resources in view of the social promotion of the sector as a whole?

These are the major challenges for traditional Malgache fishing at a time of internationalization. Now it is our duty to face the challenge...

To conclude, please allow me to share one personal thought with you here: "Perhaps it is because of the deep spiritual quality of traditional fishermen that Christ built his Church by choosing his first Apostles from among the fishermen...". This is a thought that merits reflection. Thank you, brothers and sisters!