

Dearest Readers.

The following is an attempt to weave together several core arguments of my dissertation in a fresh way, and with new a protagonist/guide. I would like this to serve as a stand-alone piece, so I will not say much more, except that it is an honor and a pleasure to share my work with you.

I look forward to our time together and to your comments,  
Jennifer

“AT LEAST IN SAUCE WE DO NOT SUFFER”: GENDERED HISTORIES AND  
THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICS OF FISHWORK IN UGANDA

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Somewhere on the shores of a large island in southern Uganda there lives a woman who is not exactly alive and not exactly dead. Her name is Sirya Buluma [pronounced: See-ree-ya Boo-loo-ma], a name my friends and colleagues there tell me means, “I do not eat food [Sirya] without sauce [Buluma].” Indeed some of Sirya Buluma’s familiars say that if she does eat food without sauce, the pain and the gnawing sensation of hunger that would accompany each dry bite would most certainly kill her. Others, myself included, observe that the only reason it is possible she exists at all – especially given her precarious ontological status – is because people who also do not eat their food without sauce continue to have occasion to speak her name.

Those who know of Sirya Buluma locate her home within a flat-topped section of blackish-red rock that separates the alternatively placid and violent sea from the shrubs, trees, and grasses the skirt this island's southern shore. Open pillars in the stone itself joining the dry world of humans with the wet world of fish below reveal the combined historical effects of constantly variable wave action and frequent drops of rain that still continue to work from beside, below, and above Sirya Buluma’s home. Multiple bowl-like indentations on the visible surface of her home suggest that residents, now long gone, once ground millet and dried bananas into meal there, and that young children were positioned in those same hollowed

places to be washed and refreshed in the clear tepid waters that enclose this island's highly crenelated littoral.

Storms are frequent and fierce along these shores that face the open sea. Some days, in the darkest hours before dawn, the air and water around Sirya Buluma's place suddenly seem to spring to life. Winds begin howling somewhere between a sweet song and a scream, bending back trees that were perfectly straight in the light of day, left temporarily prostrating towards the land. Strong waves crash into her solid home, spouting and spraying water meters into the air. Flashes of fuchsia, yellow, white, and brown light up the liquid horizon. Piercing, blending together into a spectrum of shades difficult to find anywhere else. Mesmerizing, until a sudden crack of thunder vibrates through everything, and hearts forget to beat.

A fifteen-minute paddle in a canoe from Sirya Buluma's place dwells another similar figure associated with a grassy plateau high atop a rocky peninsula known colloquially as Bega Point, still remembered as site of strategic, indeed sacred historical importance.<sup>1</sup> In the lightly forested land northeast of Bega Point one who is looking for them may find remnants of two subtle trenches, dug into the earth and braced with stones. Those familiar with Bega Point say that a former King ordered the people of this island to dig and fortify these trenches to protect themselves from intrusions of the Bazungu (Europeans) sometime back in the late 1800s. The published historical literature familiar to scholars of this region makes no mention of this island or battles worthy of military defense there, however, there is otherwise no reason to believe that these threats, or these battles did not exist. Possibilities for competing narratives were written out of history because they were not written into it.<sup>2</sup>

Many words for people and things in the largely Bantu-based languages spoken along these shores are derived from other people, things, and actions with which they are associated. Fishworkers, those who make their living fishing, processing, and trading fish in and around

places where Sirya Buluma dwells, for example, call themselves *abavubi*, derived from the ancient verb stem *\*-vuba*. Historical linguist Rhiannon Stevens recently reconstructed this proto-Bantu verb, dating its use from at least the ninth to twelfth centuries to describe a general form of fishing. For Stevens, and presumably for historical residents there, this *\*-vuba* form was dominated by women who fished with basket traps from inshore beaches and nearby swamps as part of regular household provisioning activities (“digging,” cooking, trapping small animals, pottery and basket making, child care, and so on) (Stevens 2013, 127:72–73). Although fisheries managers and fishworkers alike now agree that women never fished, or worked much with fish in the past, the comparative historical linguistic and ethnographic records do not bear this out.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the forms of fishing that women once dominated were rendered illegal through the combined processes of containing and then developing Lake Victoria (Johnson 2012).

In contemporary usage, *okuvuba* references the process of “getting anything from the sea. Fish, stones, something that fell in the water, or something that is already there naturally” (Zzibukulimbwa 2011, 6). Although women almost never fish today, both men who fish and women who dry and sell fish all consider themselves to be *abavubi* (*murubi* sing.), people in the process of getting things from the sea.<sup>4</sup> *Abavubi* who are fluent in both English and vernacular languages in use at the littoral prefer to be called fishworkers in English, rather than “fishers” or “fisherfolk,” as they are often called in policy circles and literatures, because the term *work* in fishwork, reflects the practices implied in their own renderings of who they are and what they do.

Following the logic that places and people were often named for what they do, and the stories I had been told about people in need travelling to Bega Point for its healing powers, I initially intuited that Bega's name came from the term beggar or the act of begging. It was only

after my fifth stay on this particular island that an elder woman who spends her days sharing the guidance of her ancestors, collecting and distributing herbal medicines, and working as a midwife when difficult children are trying to be born corrected my misinterpretation. "Bega," she said, "he is the one who served the visitors when they came." He was given his name, so long ago that no one remembers when, from the verb *okubega*, to cut and serve food.<sup>5</sup> Bega, the giver of food and not the one begging for it, still reminds me of the importance of trying not to overburden the worlding once and still ongoing at the littoral with my own semiotic baggage.

Just behind Bega Point rests a well-protected island bay a short distance from the wind and waves that meet Sirya Buluma and Bega's shores. Directly adjacent to these calm waters are gardens cultivated by women that most policy professionals consider "landless," who nevertheless superintend the growing of food that would make the most polycultured organic farmer tingle — sweet potatoes, beans, cassava, maize, sugar cane, spinach, hot peppers, onions, tomatoes, and savory and sweet bananas, all interspersed with mango, citrus, avocado, and *mutungulu*, a small deliciously acidic fruit tree found only in wetlands.<sup>6</sup>

There women who want to dig can request a plot from a man that the owner of the land has authorized to grant access to land for gardening, as the man who holds the legal title lives in another fishing site near Uganda's capital city of Kampala. Women only have to pay for a plot if they intend to sell their crops with a one-time payment of about twenty U.S. Dollars. If women plan to simply grow food for her family's consumption (or mostly for their own consumption, it is rare that women return from their gardens without something to give or exchange with a friend or neighbor) there is no cash payment required. In both cases, women are free to keep digging and keep harvesting as long as they would like. Most middle-aged women who have lived on this island for a few years have their own plots, younger women who may not plan to stay long, or who do not otherwise consider obtaining their own plot, may help

a friend in her garden, rely on her friends, family, or lovers for food, or if she has money, purchase her own.

Near Sirya Buluma's place and in many fishing camps like it along Uganda's southern shores, men and women from all over Uganda, as well as the neighboring nations of Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, and the so-called Democratic Republic of the Congo live and make a good living through the work of catching, processing, eating, and selling fish. Admittedly, Sirya Buluma's island home is located in a particularly "out of the way" place (Tsing 1993), indeed it appears only on the most specialized of maps. Still, fishworkers there live and make their living with each other and with species of fish both ancient and introduced. There, wild fish are caught. Depending on the type of fish available within a given season or a given moment, fish are sold whole and fresh, dried in the sun, salted and dried in the sun, or hot smoked in kilns (or in the littoral's vernacular "covers") and sold to traders who transport and sell these fish within local, regional, and global fisheries markets. There is little purely indigenous or local about fishworkers and the knowledge they forge with each other and with fish there.

Most women on this island and on others like it armed with a small amount of cash and a solid relationship with a brother, son, husband, friend, or customer who catches fish can easily earn enough money there to meet her everyday needs for cash.<sup>7</sup> Women who do fishwork particularly well manage to save enough of their earnings to eventually purchase land, livestock, and durable materials for building their retirement homes, and most manage to send their children to more and better schools than they themselves were able to attend.

In recent years, from about March to May several hundred women and men have begun converging in a fishing camp immediately visible from the place where Sirya Buluma still exists. In those three months, residents – whether temporary or permanent – together make

hundreds of millions of Ugandan shillings catching, processing, and selling an ancient, but contemporarily lucrative type of fish. Although women and men who live and work in this camp can and do speak many languages – Luganda, Lunyoro, Langi, Acholi, Rukiga, Ruyankole, Lingala, Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili, English, and others– when on this island, all refer to this seasonally abundant fish as *nkolongo* [pronounced: n-ko-long-go].

Fisheries scientists recognize these fish as one of several species of *Synodontis*, an ancient type of “squeaker catfish” named for the sound they make when removed from the water. The geographical range of *Synodontis* was once and to a lesser extent still is “pan-African” (Stewart 2001) and likely pre-dated the establishment of the many of the Great African Lakes themselves (Koblmuller et al. 2006). During *nkolongo* season, there is sometimes far too much fish for sauce at Sirya Buluma’s place. A great deal of *nkolongo* are eaten freshly boiled or smoked close to where they are landed. Most are sold to traders on the mainland shore who transport and sell these fish throughout Uganda and as far north as South Sudan and as far west as Congo, where they too are eaten as sauce. Although *nkolongo* have long been fished and eaten throughout Africa as sauce (by humans, but also other fish, reptiles, and birds), and of recent have found willing producers and consumers within a growing regional fisheries economy in eastern-central Africa, since at least 1975 those who make their living managing the fisheries of Lake Victoria have considered these fish and their fisheries to be “commercially extinct,” or at best only “locally important.”<sup>8</sup>

Admittedly, not all fishworkers are as enamored with *nkolongo* as I am (for example, some find the oily flesh of this fish unpleasant, especially when boiled, but otherwise enjoy it when smoked), and not all as apt to entertain the idea that Sirya Buluma exists. Still, these figures combine to amplify a consistent, indeed insistent, refrain that graces the pages of my ethnographic fieldnotes, audio recordings of formal interviews, and remembered moments and

phrases that still echo in my ears from time to time, even when I do not invite them to.<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not women who work with fish there find smoking, frying, drying, and selling fish to be difficult or easy – those I work with almost all insist, at least in sauce we do not suffer.

This saucy refrain that fishworkers recount is the opposite of what is written about them in scholarly and popular crisis-based literatures on Lake Victoria's fisheries, which highlight paradoxically low levels of fish consumption in fishing communities despite their proximity to Africa's largest body of freshwater, and the world's largest freshwater fishery. This piece is inspired, or perhaps more accurately haunted, by Sirya Buluma, and her abilities to boast about how well she always eats, particularly in a place where most researchers and policy professionals fail to entertain the possibility that anyone actually can. It is an experiment in "staying with the trouble" that Sirya Buluma presents as a woman who always eats her food with sauce, has a home and can travel, but is neither alive nor dead.<sup>10</sup>

In what follows I examine contemporary conflicts between people who live for a time on this island and make their living there working with fish that are considered by fisheries managers to be "commercially extinct" and people who make their living managing "commercially important" fisheries for Lake Victoria as a whole. Sirya Buluma's message, *I do not eat food without sauce*, carries us through. Although violence both stark and slow sometimes erupts and is often simmering around the kinds of conflicts I describe, accounts of violence here evidence the ethical stakes involved in this analysis, rather than comprise the content of it. These conflicts, I suggest, are ontological in nature. That is, they are not about a clashing of different worldviews, but rather surprisingly sporadic encounters between different worlds.

For empirical philosopher and ethnographer of the body Annemarie Mol, "ontological politics...has to do with the way in which problems are framed, bodies are shaped, and lives are pushed and pulled into one shape or another"(2002, viii). The ontological politics unfolding

along the shores of Sirya Buluma's place reflect the increasing visibility of the crisis of the hegemonic project of modernity ongoing elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> As Webb Keane suggests "ontologies, as something people might be able to talk about, are a response to the ethical demands of social life (which may include relations with animals and other entities)." (2013, 188) It is, he argues, "within the world" and not some "set of beliefs about the world" that ethical positions are formed (2013, 190). It is within the world where Sirya Buluma and *nkolongo* continue to exist, seemingly against all odds, where the possibility of moving beyond critique and composing new histories and new sustainable futures resides.

## LAKE EFFECTS: NIGHTMARES AND OTHER POSSIBILITIES

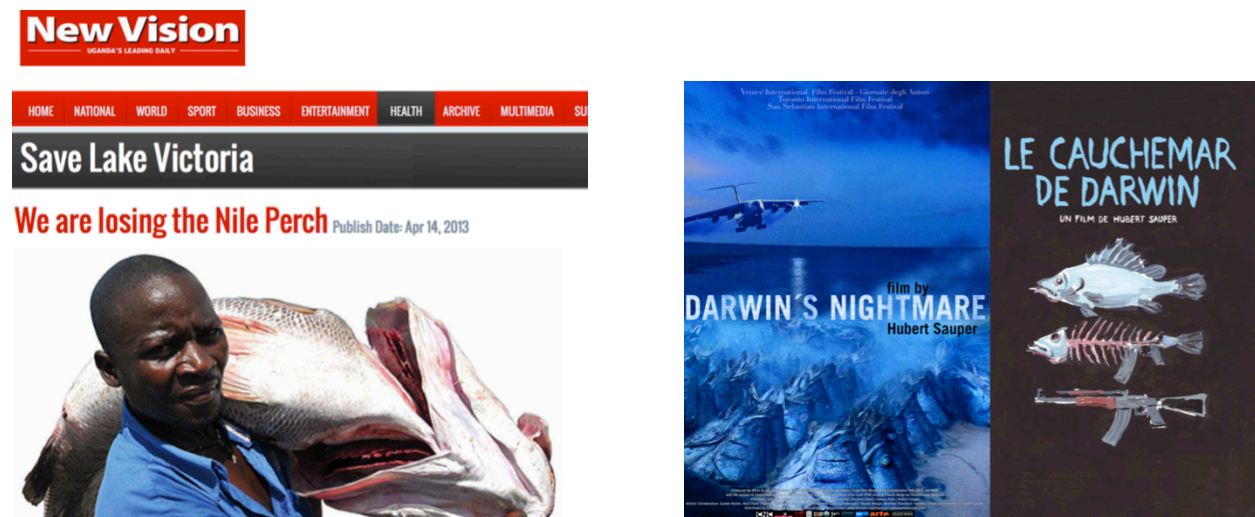
Approximately one hundred and twenty islands skirt Uganda's highly crenelated southern coastline. These islands vary in size and character from large and densely settled landmasses with fertile soils, rolling hills, and hardwood forests, to uninhabited clusters of rocky outcroppings appearing to offer little more than a resting place for weary birds in flight. The physical territory of these islands, and the cultural histories and contemporary concerns of their residents, however, remain literally off the map of Lake Victoria.

Almost 20% of all geographical territory now known as Uganda is composed of open water or permanent wetlands, increasing to 40% during the rainy seasons. General geographical accounts describe the country as having no actual coastline because, without a coast that borders an ocean, Uganda is considered completely landlocked. More than simply an artifact of sloppy geographical classification, Uganda's contemporary landlocked status highlights an uneasy correspondence between the practices and perspectives of Euro-American-inspired techno-science and those of residents who live and work at the littoral, places where there is open water further than our eyes can see. There, between a living sea and an island, figures like Sirya Buluma offer contemporary and past littoral residents opportunities to



negotiate ethical life on their own terms.

Lake Victoria is one of the most frequently studied lakes in the world and it is almost always studied as a system in constant crisis.<sup>12</sup> The magnitude of available research findings and resulting developmental interventions, however, have thus far failed to “save” Lake Victoria from its predicted future of death and collapse.<sup>13</sup> Solutions posed in these literatures, if posed at all, suggest that more and better fisheries management, and especially more and better research is needed to empower (or sometimes “sensitize” or “build the capacity of”) fishing communities to know what their needs are and how best they should be met.



Most of what the latest generation of euro-Americans scholars working on Lake Victoria's fisheries know about the lake, myself included, begins with the compelling 2003 documentary film *Darwin's Nightmare*. Artfully curated by Belgian filmmaker Hubert Sauper and nominated for an Academy award in 2004 for best documentary film, the *New York Times* called *Darwin's Nightmare* “harrowing, indispensable” for its betrayal of a “scene of misery and devastation...presented as the agonized face of globalization” (Scott 2005).

*Darwin's Nightmare* chronicles the story of the introduction of Nile perch into Lake Victoria and its subsequent export to Europe. It offers a compelling account of the social

complexity of Lake Victoria's fishery situation where fishermen, pilots, prostitutes, scientists, bureaucrats, owners of industrial fish processing plants, street children, artists, night watchmen, and invisible arms dealers converge around Lake Victoria's Nile perch export industry. It offers a classic, indeed horrifying tale of the exploitation of African resources and African labor. Sympathetic viewers of this film, and it is almost impossible to view it without being sympathetic, if not outraged, are left with the impression that all Africans around Lake Victoria have no choice but to live hungry and die of AIDS (Wenzel 2011).

Prior to the introduction of Nile perch, this majority of fish in Lake Victoria were small, diverse, and brightly colored, in the decades that followed the Nile perch introductions, an estimated 200-300 of these species disappeared (F. Witte et al. 1991; Goudswaard, Witte, and Katunzi 2006). Although my larger project demonstrates the vital importance of these fish as a source of food, trade, and cosmopolitan cultural identity, fisheries development experts have always posited that these fish "have never constituted a significant fishery" (Kirema-Mukasa and Reynolds 1993, 141).

Bruce Kinloch, Chief Game Warden from 1950-1960 of the Uganda Game and Fisheries Department, claims to have clandestinely initiated the Nile perch introduction in 1954. Despite a prohibition on the introduction of invasive species in the lake, and ongoing scientific debate about its introduction, Kinloch believed that there was "overwhelming evidence" that Nile perch was valuable "not only as a sporting and tourist amenity, but as an important factor in maintaining the productivity of rich tropical fisheries" (Kinloch 1988, 316). The Nile perch is a large carnivorous fish species, capable of growing up to 70 kilograms, endemic to the Nile River and most major West African river systems.

By 1962, the same year that Uganda officially gained independence from British colonial rule, the Uganda Fisheries Department transformed this colonial-era violation of authority into

official post-independence policy and began introducing Nile perch into Lake Victoria from the Entebbe Pier in the northern portion of the lake. By the late 1980s, when Uganda's current President came to power, the Nile perch began dominating fish catches. In the words of Kinloch, "the Nile perch now comprise more than 56% of the overall catch – a case of turning what the Americans call "trash fish" (the smaller and less palatable fish which form the bulk of the Nile perch's food) into a ready catchable and marketable product (Kinloch 1988, 316).

In the peak of the Nile perch boom, around 600,000 tons of Nile perch were exported outside of the continent – an estimated two-thirds of all fish caught in the lake each year. This brought an annual average of 250 million USD in foreign exchange into the three countries that share the lake. Industrially processed fish fillets soon became Uganda's second most lucrative export commodity after coffee. By 2012, however, due to the combined effects of declining Nile perch stocks, increased local and regional demand for fish, and a global financial crisis, Uganda's Nile perch exports to Europe had fallen to just under 12,000 tons.<sup>14</sup> To attempt to sustain high levels of Nile perch, in the early 2000s eastern African managers acting under the guidance of Euro-American technical advisors and donors began enforcing prohibitions on forms of fishing (specifically the use gill nets with less than 5-inch stretched mesh size) and forms of processing, trade, and consumption (specifically Nile perch under 20 inches), rendering most fish available on local and regional markets illegal.

*Darwin's Nightmare* and the infrastructures it describes have framed subsequent attention to Lake Victoria's fisheries in a particular way. For most scientists and policy professionals the ecological extinction of hundreds of indigenous fish species is now a foregone conclusion.<sup>15</sup> The Nile perch, an introduced predator, has become naturalized in Lake Victoria fisheries, just as the Nile perch export industry has become naturalized in Lake Victoria's fisheries economy. Indeed, the Nile perch now features in Ugandan Government publications

and the monographs of otherwise careful historians as if it has always existed there.<sup>16</sup> This singular focus on the Nile perch as a subject of scientific study and as a managerial object is a result of what John Balirwa, the long-standing Director of Uganda's National Fisheries Resources Research Institute has called a case of "special interest management" (2007). It is the predicted extinction of the Nile perch that now frames Lake Victoria's fisheries crisis.

The presumed socio-economic impacts of Lake Victoria's predicted commercial fisheries demise do appear incredibly high. Experts argue that when Nile perch populations collapse, tens of millions of eastern Africans will be "without livelihoods," and that many more will be without Nile perch to eat. Industrial fish processing plants will close and the three governments that share the lake will be without an important, and an importantly shared, source of "much needed" foreign exchange.<sup>17</sup> From this vantage point, armed with these numbers, sustaining stocks of Nile perch may appear a worthy, if difficult, goal. Indeed at a high-level fisheries meeting sponsored by the Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization that I attended in June 2014, participants seriously considered declaring "the whole thing a disaster."

It is now conventional wisdom amongst scholars and policy professionals concerned with Lake Victoria's fisheries that the millions of residents of fishing communities around Lake Victoria appear to eat very few fish (Fiorella et al. 2014; K. Geheb et al. 2008). This is particularly the case, scholars have argued, for women, who because of assumed long-standing taboos against women fishing and their ostensibly obviously lower social status, have less access to regular sources of fish and are more vulnerable to a suite of illnesses and afflictions, not least of which is HIV/AIDS (Kwena et al. 2013; Dworkin et al. 2012; Medard 2012; Kwena et al. 2010; Seeley, Tumwekwase, and Grosskurth 2009; Bene and Merten 2008). I too am guilty of receiving this wisdom, taking it with me to "the field," and writing it up in my publications that followed whether or not I had any hard evidence from my own data (see for

example policy-oriented papers from my summer fieldwork in 2007 and 2008 in: Johnson 2009; Johnson 2010).

There seems to be little scholarly or popular need to critique this wisdom because it is already in line with what most Euro-Americans and University-educated Africans already know about African women. To crudely paraphrase the logic of these “moderns” (see: Latour 2010): women everywhere always get the short end of the stick (or rather, are beaten by the long end), and since African women draw their straws in AFRICA of all places, an entire continent that comprises what David Laitin has just called “the last frontier of development” in a series of lectures here at Yale, the situation for them must at least be doubly bad.<sup>18</sup> Of course women who live in African fishing communities lack access to fish in their own back yard – *why wouldn't they?*

As Joost Beuving, an anthropologist who has studied Nile perch fishermen “in a very small area in the Ugandan part of the lake” for the last decade has recently argued, leading social scientists working on Lake Victoria's fisheries have focused almost exclusively on the lake as a whole (to this I would add focused almost exclusively on Nile perch) (Beuving 2015). This has resulted in a generic model of Lake Victoria's fisheries based on a rational actor interpretation of human action. Beuving details this model and finds that it fits fairly well at the national level. At the local level, importantly, “the fit becomes loose, or even incoherent”(2). The choices a Nile perch fisherman makes about where and how to fish seem guided as much by the social connections he has with other fishermen and how he is able to mobilize them, as it does the amount of capital available to him or the abundance or dearth of fish (Beuving 2010).

How then might we compose better accounts of the work fishworkers do that are neither overdetermined by assumed universal theories of economic action, nor the particular species and actors preferred by the proponents of these universal models? Could seemingly

local renderings be scaled up to the body of water as a whole? As we have already seen, fishworkers are not only fishermen, but women and also men who process, sell, and eat and work with diverse species, including but not limited to the Nile perch. Indeed, this is vital to fishworkers' own understandings of the work they do and with whom and for they do it. The next move is to acknowledge the conceptual containment of this inland sea as Lake Victoria and the Nile perch as the body of water and the bodies of fish in question, something we might think of as "lake effects." This opens possibilities for other, simultaneously existing bodies of water and fish and the practices of fishworkers that sustain them, seemingly against all odds.

#### LITTORAL BODIES OF WATER

Residents of the three countries that share these cosmopolitan shores – Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania – speak many different languages; some residents there are from Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC. Most, however, use a similarly distinct term when referring to their inland sea. They call it Nyanja or Nyanza.<sup>19</sup> Nyanja, I argue, is not Lake Victoria.

Nyanja isn't even a lake.

Nyanja is a term that references the uncontainable material and metaphoric qualities of certain bodies of water. A particular Nyanja could be a wide and vigorously flowing river, like the Mayanja or Namayanja, twin streams that spring forth from the top of a hill in south-central Uganda and combine to flow as a river into one in a northwestern direction for almost one hundred miles. Or, it could be a body of water that is completely encircled by land, but is so large that it is dangerous, maybe even impossible, to navigate a straight course directly from one end to another.

Nyanja references more than simply the physical attributes of these exceptional and exceptionally moving bodies of water. For some residents who proclaim themselves to be proficient in the traditions of their ancestors, Nyanja represents the life-giving possibilities that

women possess as lovers, mothers, grandparents, and stewards of land, but also the proficiencies of men as lovers, fathers, grandparents and catchers of fish in distant waters. The Nya- and Na- prefixes on terms and titles of historical authorities there indicate their associations with femininity, though most remembered titles of political authority are now almost always remembered as belonging to men. As one littoral cultural expert told me, "In ancient culture women were not so much considered, not until the whites came." This is reflective of what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) have described as the invention of tradition, traditions without women.

The Nyanja within which Sirya Buluma dwells, like many regional rivers, are still considered by some littoral residents to have actually sprung forth from the waters that break inside the bodies of women just before the labor of childbirth begins. That is, Nyanja emerges through what Hugh Raffles (2002; 2007) might call one of many "aquatic or "fluvial intimacies" between women and men (including researchers). However, the actual material stuff of life that makes Nyanja possible, "delicious, quenching, and healing water," emerges specifically from the body of a woman.<sup>20</sup> The waters that nourish the Nyanja once splashed the earth, alerting a long-pregnant woman, and those around her that their new baby is on its way. Women who formed these Nyanja long ago, however, did not deliver normally. Maybe most were expecting to bear children when their waters burst, but instead of children some say they produced only water.

Lots and lots of water.



Another Nyanja: "Sezibwa Waterfall, Kyagwe, Uganda." Roscoe (1911, Frontispiece)



"The Goddess Mukasa and Her Court" From Cunningham 1905, p 7

There is good reason to believe that the waters through which Nyanja once came into existence are not comprised of fluids from a single eruption of an amniotic sac, but rather are the kinds of waters that spring forth over time as uncontainable evidence for women's, and presumably men's, mutual pleasure, affection, and interdependence.<sup>21</sup> They not only link fluids to the interconnections between royalty and commoners – they link bodies of water to the life-giving abilities of women's bodies as mothers. As Rhiannon Stephens has demonstrated, the powers of once a royal woman like Namayanja, who features in the canoe song included below (Johnston 1902, 699), are "derived from her maternity and activated by her widowhood" (Stephens 2013, 127:106).

Namayanja: kubakungoma erawe  
Namayanja: abazalakabaka bazala  
Namayanja: kubakungoma erawe  
Namayanja: azala Kabaka  
alilusaka  
Namayanja!

Namayanja: beat the drum, let it speak out  
Namayanja: those who bare [sic] the king bare  
[sic] well  
Namayanja: Beat the drum, let it speak out  
Namayanja: she who bore the king is at Lusaka  
Namayanja!



One account of the origins of Nyanja stressed that a child was indeed eventually born from these waters that brought the Nyanja into existence, but not until the child's parents produced lots and lots of water. This child was named Mukasa, and became famous around Nyanja and beyond as the guardian of the multiple objects and phenomena that presented themselves within and around the Nyanja itself. Mukasa offered timely and practical advice on how to best bear children, behave, and engage (or not) with outsiders. After Mukasa's death, Mukasa was made known through winds, rain, and gifts of twins – a male-female pair being the most treasured form. Safety on the lake and perennially productive banana gardens were also expressions of the duality of Mukasa's domain. Mukasa's abilities to overcome immense heat, for example, extinguishing a spreading house-fire through a just-in-time downpour, associated Mukasa with the production of iron for hooks to catch fish, hoes to farm the land, and weapons to protect littoral residents' abilities to pursue both activities. Both the canoe paddle and hammerstone were once widely known material symbols of Mukasa, referencing the interconnections between water, land, and the littoral, and between liquid, metal and stone (Roscoe 1911, 290).

Mukasa's multiple natures, however, make it analytically irresponsible to refer to him as a singular entity as I just did. To call Mukasa a man is to ignore that when the earliest European explorers, missionaries, and traders encountered Mukasa; they encountered the still-strong physical body of a postmenopausal woman. In the words of James Cunningham, an early colonial administrator and lay ethnographer:

Mukasa...was the great, great goddess, and there is not the least doubt that her priests exercised extraordinary power. Tradition is voluminous in regard to Mukasa. It is said that she did the impossible – had only one husband – and had miraculous powers. She could bind the raging lake. She could kill or cure kings. She could make rain, or draw a tooth. Nothing was too big or too little for her. Mockers there were, but she taught them at the dearest of all schools – experience (Cunningham 1905, 79).

Mukasa simultaneously offered protection from and justification for the largely unpredictable harms that were possible at the littoral – including waterspouts, lightning, dangerous childbirth, infertility, and prolonged drought. Through sophisticated techniques of communication, transportation, artisanal production, trade, and food provisioning, Kabaka Mukasa and their subjects worked to create the everyday conditions of well being and eventful moments of abundance that made the shoreline such an attractive place to live and such an important place to defend. According to Cunningham:

Even the sneering Arab who attempted to cross the lake with a cargo of ivory from Mutesa's court without consulting Mukasa would be soon made to repent his rashness: Mukasa's priests had numerous fanatics in her service, and they would sweep the lake in small rafts and canoes, with lighted brands and hideous howling, and the sailors in the service of the mocker were soon put to flight. (Cunningham 1905, 80)

The problems associated with interpreting Mukasa within Euro-American frameworks are worthy of a study of their own. It is important to note now, however, that when contemporary scholars and littoral residents refer to Mukasa, they refer to a man. How did this happen? When Protestant missionary Alexander MacKay first wrote home in 1880 about “the Lubare...Mokassa,” he to referred the goddess of the Nyanja as a an old woman:

For several months I have found the word Lubare more or less in every one's mouth. Many spoke of the name with awe, while others refused to say anything good or bad of such a being. At last I learned that the lubare was really a spirit, but was personified in an individual – an old woman – who lives on the lake (CMS 1880, 419).

By the time MacKay's letters and journals were edited by his sister and published in 1893, the being MacKay originally described as “the lake goddess Mokassa,” had become one of several “men [who] were great liars, and Mukasa as the head of the *lubare*.” Harrison quotes MacKay as stating the Mukasa “was the greatest liar, and the greatest rebel of all” (Harrison 1893, 151). Almost twenty years later, Martin Hall, a Protestant missionary assigned to the Ssesse Islands and Mukasa's watery domain recounted:

There was also a class of persons, chiefly old women, called *Nakangu*, who were said to be inspired by the gods, and were consulted on almost all knotty points. There still lives one of these women on the island of Bukasa. She was a specially celebrated soothsayer in the old days. She was the one who went up to Mengo in Mackay's time to try to cure Mtesa's illness, and who succeeded in reviving the old heathen customs of worship in the king's enclosure. Heathenism is almost dead on Bukasa now, thank god! And is "sick unto death" throughout Buganda (Hall 1898, 97).

This transformation in Mukasa's gender, from a goddess to a god has gone unquestioned by anthropologists concerned with Lake Victoria's pre-colonial and contemporary cultural life (Kenny 1977; Pratt 1996a; Pratt 1996b). This inattentive historical research has further submerged women's historical and already existing forms of authority and agency. If it again becomes possible that a woman was once the "great, great, great goddess" of the Nyanja, other possible futures may too make themselves visible.

Whether or not Nyanja's contemporary residents believe that various Nyanja's were created through childbirth, or believe that Mukasa was a man – and many do – they may, from time to time, refer to this body of water as Lake Victoria. This is not a slip of the tongue, but rather marks the intentional use of, in their words, an "exotic phrase" when the more commonly used term there, Nyanja, does not satisfyingly capture the entity or phenomena being discussed in the same way that "Lake Victoria" does. That is, fishworkers recognize that the body of water in which they work is ontologically multiple. Others concerned with the sustainability of Lake Victoria's fisheries would do well to follow their lead.

Nationally and globally-circulating ideas about Lake Victoria's fisheries crisis and subsequently assumed "sustainability crisis" occlude histories and contemporary realities of already existing forms of fish production, consumption, and trade that actually sustain fishing communities in Uganda. There, Nyanja's local and regional fisheries economy grew alongside Lake Victoria's the export economy. If Lake Victoria does indeed die, Nyanja will almost certainly live on.

Sustainability is a compelling concept and an empirical reality that comes into being through the work of a shifting assemblage of littoral actors that include transnational and multidisciplinary managerial professionals, investors, concerned consumers of Lake Victoria's Nile perch, as well as fishworkers. However, based on my work with fish and fishworkers there, I do not interpret formally illegal fishwork as incommensurable with sustainability concepts, but rather recognize the artful practice required to both enact sustainability as reality and avoid being governed by its various enactments. That is, there are multiple versions of sustainabilities here, but not all of them are worthy of being sustained.

#### WHAT KIND OF BEING IS SIRYA BULUMA?

Technically, Sirya Buluma is a being known to those who know her as a *musambwa* [pronounced: moo-sahm-bwa], a being unique to, but almost ubiquitous around the Nyanja, just as the goddess Mukasa once was. Admittedly, it is difficult to render the *musambwa* concept intelligible in English, in large part because the types of beings recognized as *musambwa* [pl. *misambwa*, pronounced: me-sahm-bwa] do not exist in the realities of most English-speakers. When beings like *misambwa* are recognized in English scholarly and popular accounts – secular or otherwise – they are usually associated with arcane notions of ancestor or devil worship, more succinctly with witchcraft, or more generously as an aspect of traditional religion. Indeed, the conceptual durability of Sirya Buluma is striking, particularly amongst a century of shifting epistemological and material terrain that accompanied the establishment of conventional historical narratives about this region that in large part relied on the emancipatory possibilities of Christianity to justify the establishment of and success of the colonial project there. At the littoral, *misambwa* continue to dwell as a form of practical reason.

In one sense Sirya Buluma is one of an innumerable pantheon of what David Gordon (2012) has recently described as invisible agents, spirit beings who intervene in mundane and

spectacular ways in the day to day lives and large-scale political projects of those who believe in them. And yet to conceive of *misambwa* as only existing in a mental, spiritual realm excises beings like Sirya Buluma from the very situated people, places, and their materially-linked practices that continue to bring them into being.<sup>22</sup> If Sirya Buluma is simply a spirit, it is too easy to overlook the corporeal nature of the message she relays – *I do not eat food without sauce*.

Historians of the Great Lakes Region of Africa, and the northwestern shores of the sea where Sirya Buluma dwells in particular, have described *misambwa* as territorial spirits and the “guardians of abundance in their territory” (Schoenbrun 1998, 199). *Misambwa* like Sirya Buluma are indeed rooted in particular places and the spectacular material formations found in these places (including springs and waterfalls, large anomalous rocks or tree trunks, and potentially dangerous animals like pythons, hippopotami, and crocodiles), but also in more understated ones, for example, a group of smooth rocks between two villages where it makes sense for people to sit and rest a while while travelling between the two, or under a tree that offers the last bit of shade before a stretch of open grassland.

Individual *musambwa* and the *misambwa* concept itself are ancient, however, both were and still are continually changing alongside changing weather, settlement, and food procurement practices (amongst much else) through the desires, words, and, actions of those who claim to speak for them and those who believe they do (Schoenbrun 1998). Indeed it is this simultaneous attachment to place and the circulation of ideas about the power of specific places expressed in the *misambwa* concept that historians argue this regions’ historical intellectuals worked with to “steer the content of a community’s moral economy” towards the constitution of the complex and consolidated political communities that have fascinated visitors to and scholars of this place for so long (Kodesh 2010, 173). Sirya Buluma and those who speak for her do the difficult work of judging and rendering justice in the cosmopolitan communities that

have long kept coming into existence with fish along her shores (Schoenbrun 1997, 152).

Indeed historians of the region have demonstrated the importance of spirit mediumship as a shifting set of practices through which discontent with the workings of the region's more commonly analyzed figures of political power – African Chiefs, Kings, and European traders, missionaries, and administrators – was voiced and resistance to them mobilized towards healing (Feierman 1995; Berger 1981). Women tended to be the most numerous and active mediums, who worked with the *misambwa* concept and practical repertoire to “articulate and monitor the moral character of all residents behavior” towards the benefit of the broader community (Schoenbrun 1998, 199). As of 2012, Sirya Buluma was still actively passing her judgments on the practices of littoral women who live and work near her home. For example, the women who speak for Sirya Buluma work to enforce prohibitions on women bathing in prominent and public places near her shores. Newcomers not familiar with the rules at Sirya Buluma's place learn them quickly, as eating and living well there, depends on them.

Sirya Buluma initially appears to be a very local being. The proto-Bantu roots of –lya (eat) and –luma (bite, or pain), however, are evidenced throughout most historical and contemporary African Great Lakes Bantu-speaking communities as well as throughout much of Bantu-speaking Africa itself.<sup>23</sup> To break this down: her first name *Sirya* reflects the common negation, [si-, meaning I do not], of the verb [-rya], meaning eat. *Sirya*: I do not eat. *Buluma* is a bit more difficult. *Bu-* in the Bantu languages in use there generally indicates a state of abstract existence or a specific geographical territory.<sup>24</sup> *Buluma* then, reflects a sense of existential strife linked to the physical sensation of pain induced by eating food without sauce, the implication being that the lack of sauce is more than an isolated phenomena.<sup>25</sup> The persistence of *Sirya Buluma*, one who refuses to entertain the possibility of that pain for herself and for her community is striking.

## EATING AND REFUSING TO EAT

“Eating” and “refusing to eat” are actions that inspire metaphors for the transfer, consolidation, and differentiation of political power across multiple temporal and geographical scales as well as abuse of the same. Indeed the verb *-lya* (as found in Sirya, I do not eat) means both to “eat” and “to become the owner or lord of” (Pilkington 1892, 65). The region’s Kings were considered to “eat the kingdom” upon ascending their thrones. Things that were not eaten, say particular animals, fish, or small beans, served as living, material symbols for consolidating notions and practices of clanship around what scholars still call a “totemic avoidance” that marked both social cohesion and difference along the northern shores of Nyanja and the diverse therapeutic and agro-pastoral economies that developed alongside each other there (Kodesh 2008; Schoenbrun 1993). Sirya Buluma’s refusal to eat food without sauce is more than simply a dietary preference; it is a practical, political act.

The language of eating continues to lend a visceral quality to popular explanations of the failures of contemporary developmental projects in the region, including those for Lake Victoria’s fisheries. Rather than the bureaucratic language of transparency or the accusatory language of corruption used to explain the failures of state, corporate, or non-profit developmental efforts, in the littoral vernacular (as in many others), projects are said to fail – often with a shrug of the shoulders – because one or more individuals involved “ate the money.” Of course one cannot eat money directly, and the insinuation is that whomever “ate the money” distributed at least a portion of their possibly misappropriated largess amongst friends, relatives, lovers, and other influential constituents. Indeed, as Parker Shipton has shown for Luo communities alongside the western portion of Lake Victoria, those most able to access the forms of financial and material capital that developmental projects distribute are those who, because of their comparatively high social status, are least expected to pay it back (Shipton 2010). Still, a particularly corpulent body draws attention to the differential distribution of

consumptive agency within the body politic, initiating conversations about whether or not individuals and groups are “misusing food” or “misusing funds.” Of recent, the region’s most savvy contemporary leaders have recognized the political importance of appearing lean, but not too hungry. Nyanja’s fishworking entrepreneurs, like many other eaters of things, recognize the feeling of pleasure of that follows a satisfying meal.



## THERE IS NO FOOD WITHOUT SAUCE, WITHOUT SAUCE THERE IS PAIN

At the littoral, a complete meal is referred to as *ekijjulo*, the thing that makes one full, derived from the verb *-jjula*, to be or become full, to be filled up (Murphy 1972, 2:122). The meal pictured above (left) was one I shared with my research assistant Akello in 2012 inside the home of a woman I’ll call Mama Tabby who was born on a large island, though has lived and worked on a distant fishing island for almost two decades. Mama Tabby is pictured in the background of the photo above (right), in the foreground is her best friend, who lives and runs a small shop next to Mama Tabby’s home adjacent to where her boats and her fish are landed. I am pictured on the right. Although Mama Tabby is clearly a woman, the fishermen who work her call her Ssebo, or Sir.

On this island, Mama Tabby makes her living managing four large fishing boats equipped with powerful engines that target Nile perch for the export trade. When I first met Mama Tabby and her Husband Tata Tabby (who also owns four fishing boats) in 2008, their



daughter Tabby was still in primary school. Soon, with the proceeds from her mother and father's fishwork, Tabby will join her other sisters and brothers at Makerere University in Kampala – an iconic east African intellectual institution, once widely recognized as the Harvard of Africa. Tabby told me in 2008 and told me again in 2014 that will study to be a lawyer.

They have taught me that the only portion of this meal that is considered *emere* or food is the bowl containing sweet potatoes and two kinds of cooked bananas. The other two bowls, featuring the head and body of a fish, respectively, are considered *enva* or sauce. Sirya Buluma reminds us that in the absence of sauce food as *emere* does not exist. Rather, without sauce, would-be food is instead called *muluma*, *amaluma*, or *buluma*, reflective of “biting, gnawing, hunger or pain.”

*Emere* (or food proper) is derived from the verb *-mera* (to grow). Nouns here whose roots end in “e” express a passive state, suggesting that *emere* is “that which is grown” (Crabtree 1923, 171). On the mainland beans, groundnuts, or greens make fine sauces. On the islands where I work, however, the only sauces strictly considered *enva* are those made with fish. Fish served in warm, wet sauce are the mediatory substances, which transform cultivated crops such as *matooke* (peeled, steamed and mashed savory green bananas), sweet potatoes, cassava, millet, Irish potatoes (or simply “Irish”), or rice into edible foods.

On distant islands where Mama Tabby lives and works, food is more difficult to come by than sauce. Because her island home is small and rocky, there is no farming there like there is on Sirya Buluma's island, and food must be imported on fishing boats. When researchers visit islands like these, and ask whether residents have difficulties sourcing food, fishworkers honestly report that yes, food is a problem. Because most Euro-American and Euro-American-trained researchers do not recognize differences between food and sauce, sauce rarely, if ever, enters into the conversation. The result is that researchers too often leave fishing sites thinking

that everything that could be eaten is scarce there, particularly fish.



Fish are also particular beings at the littoral, and not everything that Euro-Americans generally consider to be fish. In fact, there is no vernacular word for fish as a category of things. Fishworkers simply call them *ekenyanja*, or things from the sea (Nyanja), which also include things people do not eat like bivalves and crabs. Like food, similar misunderstandings about what constitutes fish are in operation here. For littoral residents, and especially fishworkers, these small abundant almost minnow-like fish are not “fish” at all. They are *mukene*. When researchers ask fishworkers about their fish consumption, fishworkers sometimes report eating fish both they and researchers recognize as Nile perch or tilapia, and only rarely report eating mukene (even though they often do eat mukene), because for them, mukene might be a snack, but they are certainly not fish.

Warm, wet fish sauce allows those familiar with Lake Victoria to begin to better understand Nyanja. We now know that sauce transforms cultivated crops into food and food into complete meals. Sauce helps explain how some fish are not always fish. It also, in the words of one of my closest Ugandan collaborators Bakaaki Robert, is an “honorific term for a man to call a woman,” without *enva*, or sauce, “one’s reproductive life is completely incomplete.” For younger generation of adults there, however, *enva* is a popular gloss for women’s sexual fluids.

If one's sauce isn't warm, wet, and otherwise ready, would be lovers and eaters of sauce may go elsewhere, for a new "sidedish." Sauce speaks to the shared desires, if not needs, of littoral residents, and residents of the broader region for complete meals that satisfy both the body and the mind (recall the existential crisis implied in the term Buluma).

Ugandan fisheries managers who work most closely with Nyanja navigate treacherous ontological terrain. Between Lake Victoria and Nyanja frictions are generated as assumed universal truths about what exists, what should be sustained, and how what exists should be sustained meet the littoral politics of provisioning complete meals. Even the most highly educated managers know that they too need fish for sauce. In the *nkolongo* season, it's not hard to come by.

#### WHAT KIND OF BEING IS *NKOLONGO*?

*Nkolongo* are abundant in the deep waters off of the southern shores of Sirya Buluma's island from mid-March to mid-July, roughly corresponding to the long rainy seasons (from mid-January to mid-June), but are also common in many central and southern African rivers and lakes (Frans Witte and Goudswaard 1997; Day, Bills, and Friel 2009). Its three serrated bone-like appendages that stick out from its scale-less body just behind the top of its head and on both sides of its body (behind what scientist call its "humeral process") are capable of easily piercing through the flesh of careless humans and fish alike, signaling the evolutionary advantage of this fish's ancient body armor. *Nkolongo* are also one of the most delicious smoked fish I have ever tasted.

During the *nkolongo* season hundreds of fishworkers live for a time in rented rooms constructed with repurposed timber sourced from old fishing boats near Sirya Buluma's place. Most come to fish, smoke fish, or buy *nkolongo* for sale on the mainland, though others come to sell clothes or domestic goods, or work in newly opened restaurants and bars. Permanent and

seasonal residents alike appreciate the activity of the *nkolongo* season, not least because they may earn as much, if not more cash during the peak *nkolongo* season than they probably will throughout the rest of the year, whether they spend their time farming, trading, or working with other types of fish.

Most scientists believe that *Synodontis* spend most of their lives in open water, traveling only to rivers to spawn, or at least they did when they were abundant (J. S. Balirwa and Bugenyi 1980). Most fishermen know the opposite to be true, that *nkolongo* usually live in rivers like the Kagera and Katonga in the west and only come into the open waters between February and March, where they spawn, feed on nutrients and mollusks disturbed in the turbulent waters there, and wait for their young to become big enough to safely make the journey back to the rivers from which they came.<sup>26</sup> Most female *nkolongo* begin becoming gravid, that is ripe with eggs, in March, just as the season is beginning, and by May/June, the last months of the season, many more small *nkolongo* (about the size of one's hand) are caught.

Whatever their seasonal origins and aggregations, *nkolongo* is one of the only fisheries in the region actually increasing in size. Its significance however, is systematically -- though likely unintentionally -- obscured by methods used to assess fish abundance in the lake and the economic value of fish once they are captured. Both lake-wide net and market-based surveys have thus far been unable to capture basic information required for scientists and managers to estimate the ecological and economic value, or even extent of this niche fishery. Neither research methods are designed around the seasonal abundance or dearth of this species in mind, and only very few studies have been designed for Lake Victoria with this species of fish in mind at all.

The bulk of *nkolongo* are caught in areas between submerged rock outcroppings that are difficult for large research vessels and their large nets to pass. According to a particularly well-

connected informant who participated in a managerially-oriented catch-assessment research as part of his training decades ago, the European's directing these efforts simply him to throw these fish back into the water uncounted and unaccounted for. Because *nkolongo* are very difficult to remove from fishing nets, when they have been caught in research nets, the nets too may be discarded, even thrown into the body of water scientists bring into being as Lake Victoria.<sup>27</sup> Nets of all kinds are expensive, losing them is costly, least costly perhaps for well-funded development projects than for fishworkers.

This is not a new problem for fisheries researchers working on Lake Victoria. As early as 1961, E. L. Hamblyn, a scientist then briefly affiliated with the East African Freshwater Fishery Research Organization noted in the same organizations' Annual Report:

“It will be noticed that the gill net was not fished after the large haul of *Synodontis* caught in Fishing 2 [the second experimental treatment identified in his report]. These Machochid fish are dangerously armed with serrated pectoral spines, which may be locked at right angles' to the body. This behaviour, coupled with the strong dorsal spine, causes them to become almost inextricably entangled in a gill net which is ruined by a heavy catch.” (Hamblyn 1961, 47).

At least half of all *nkolongo* processed from fishing camps like those at Sirya Buluma's are transported directly from landing sites to traders taking fish for export to distant markets in Northern Uganda and eastern Congo, thereby bypassing most of the formal markets where fisheries statistics and formal taxes would be collected. Because *Synodontis* do not fit into managerial modes of assessment – they either exist too much in research nets or not at all, but only rarely feature in market surveys and tax revenues for large fishing sites, they have ceased to exist commercially in Lake Victoria at all.

The *nkolongo* fishery is the only one where I have seen women removing fish from nets,

indeed this is one of the most straightforward ways that women can easily be given, or earn fish for sauce. Even when women own the boats and nets that bring in Nile perch, tilapia, and mukene (the three most common commercial species of fish presently caught in the lake), they leave it to fishermen to remove fish from nets. This is largely due to the nature of fishing for *nkolongo* and the materiality of the *nkolongo* itself. *Nkolongo* fishing begins around ten or eleven at night, when fishermen leave the shore, traveling slowly to conserve fuel. Once in the productive fishing grounds of the lake's open waters, fishermen set their nets and wait. Because the best catches of *nkolongo* are hauled in on rainy and windy nights when *nkolongo* are forced up towards to surface of the sea from the deep waters where it prefers to dwell, fishermen are careful to wait until the sea has calmed down before they pull their nets and begin traveling back to shore. Even the most careful fishermen sometimes lose their lives.

Boats usually do not return until between mid-day and mid-afternoon. Because of the high oil content of the *nkolongo's* flesh, and its three serrated boney appendages that make it very difficult to remove these fish from nets, once boats land, it's 'all hands on deck' to remove them for smoking before they are spoiled by the afternoon sun. Indeed, women residents also pride themselves at working so hard during this season that they have no time for "backbiting" or "rumor-mongering." They are simply too busy, they tell me, making their own money, to worry about whether their husbands are spending time with women who come to fishing camps like these when catches are good to entertain men, and earn their money in a different way.



The nets in pictured above are are owned by Peace, the woman working on the right in that image and the boat is owned by her boyfriend seated to her left. Together her son and her boyfriend (who is not her son's father) fish for *nkolongo* at night, and her boyfriend works with Peace to take the fish out of her nets. Then, he sleeps, and Peace begins the work of smoking these fish. In the four months of the 2012 *nkolongo* season, Peace told me she made 5 million Ugandan shillings, or about \$2,500. This is no trivial sum. In 2012, GDP per capita in Uganda was estimated at just under \$560.<sup>28</sup> In four months, in a “commercially extinct” fishery, Peace made over four times more money than most Ugandans make in an entire year.

## WHEN FISHERIES MEET

Fisheries are simultaneously conceptual categories and material realities that come into being through the practices of working with fish and managing fisheries, as well as the practices of representing fishwork and management itself. Fisheries cross the artificial divide between nature and culture and blur distinctions between wild and domestic -- and in the case of those considered here -- existence and extinction, even life and death. To be clear, fisheries cannot exist without both fish and people. They require fish, people, and ideas about fish and people to keep coming into being, that is, to continue to exist. Formally trained fisheries

managers know this well, they know they primarily are managing people, because it is impossible for them to specifically manage fish.

Fishworkers, whether or not they are fluent in English, use the English word “Fisheries” in a very specific way. For them, Fisheries is a proper noun, and a pejorative one at that. When fishworkers use this term they are referencing an ensemble of people who seek to and sometimes do manage to manage their activities – from high-level government Ministers, the leadership and staff of the Department of Fisheries, to anyone assuming the authority (whether officially granted or not) to seize the tools they use to produce fish for profit and fish for sauce, including researchers. When “Fisheries come,” fishworkers tell me they run, disappear, or otherwise make themselves unavailable as subjects of the law or science, especially if they are busy working with fish. My long terms engagements with fishworkers and the work they do, whether it is considered legal or not, has helped me build relationships of mutual respect, trust, and reciprocal obligation. Fishworkers ask me to talk to “Fisheries” on their behalf, because they know I don’t work for “Fisheries.”

Since at least 1992, fisheries managers have operated under the assumption that fishing nets with a stretched mesh size of less than 5” which previously had “targeted smaller species like Schilbe, Labeo, and *Synodontis*, now exclusively crop immature Lates [Nile perch] and *O. Niloticus* [tilapia]” (Ssentongo and Orach-Meza 1992, 10). While Fisheries believe Nile perch have decimated *Synodontis* populations (like they have most other fish), fishworkers know that Nile perch have learned to avoid consuming or even coming into contact with *nkolongo* – because they will die if they eat one, or at best suffer if pierced by one of its appendages.

Unlike Nile perch, there are no size restrictions for *nkolongo*. All *nkolongo* fishing, however, is technically illegal because the nets used to fish them can theoretically be used to catch “undersized” Nile perch. But again, *nkolongo* fishermen know that Nile perch avoid places



where *nkolongo* congregate, because Nile perch know that swallowing a fish with sharp, bony protrusions means almost certain death. During the *nkolongo* season, boats land at Sirya Buluma's place literally filled with *nkolongo*, and only one or two Nile perch. At least for those few months, "illegal" fishnets, do not catch many illegal Nile perch.

Beginning in 2011, unmarked boats filled with armed men dressed in military fatigues have been sporadically deployed to fishing sites as part of a new multinational governmental and non-governmental collaboration known as SmartFish. Smartfish is financed by the European Union and implemented by the Indian Ocean Commission with the support of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, regional economic development funds, authorities, and organizations, as well as the national governments in the countries where SmartFish works.

SmartFish, in their words, "aims at contributing to an increased level of social, economic and environmental development and deeper regional integration...through improved capacities for the sustainable exploitation of fisheries resources." This explicitly includes increasing food security, a concept they note requires "access to adequate food at all times, with reduced risk of losing access to food due to sudden shocks."<sup>29</sup> Their goals sound innocuous enough. Indeed, they sound great, even or especially if we know that at the littoral without sauce there is no food, so for food security to increase, sauce must also increase!

In their words and practices, SmartFish is particularly dedicated to reducing "illegalities" in fisheries. This they claim will produce "secure fisheries and secure futures." Let's check in with Mama Ssalongo, a woman in her mid-50s who has lived near Sirya Buluma's place for at least half a decade to see what she has to say about this.

Mama Ssalongo (meaning she is a mother of a son who is the father of twins) began working with fish in the early 1980s under the tutelage of another woman who was then in her

50s. Together they would travel on foot to the shores of the Nyanja, buy several large bunches of fresh Nile perch [which they call *emputa*] tied together through their mouths with strong banana fibers. In those days fish were abundant and in high demand. Mama Ssalongo would sell each fish for around three times more what she paid for them, and even more if they were cut in pieces and fried before selling. Many of her early customers were soldiers fighting for the National Resistance Army under the leadership of Yoweri Museveni, who is still the President of Uganda, a position he has held since 1986. Indeed, Mama Ssalongo can still quite literally feel a twinge of pain around a small fragment of a bullet that grazed and then was lodged into her upper back sometime around 1985, just before the National Resistance Army took control of Kampala. It is not likely, but it is still possible that some of the same soldiers to whom she once sold fish for sauce are now supervising efforts to stop her from producing fish. In any case, her scar remains.

In Mama Ssalongo's words:

The first time when they came in 2011, for me I was buying fish to smoke that day. It was raining. Men came dressed like the Marines and stormed over to the cover where I was making fire. They asked what I was doing. I said, "I am making money for my children." I had 50 pieces of fish. I gave them to the man, and he said, "you can go." They took my fish.

All the ladies ran to the farms for a day because Fisheries were beating them and breaking their covers [fish smoking kilns]. Some who owned nets ran. Others stayed. Those who stayed were caned seriously. I knew they would beat me and take me to the police, so I offered my fish and ran. For me, I fear police.

For the fish, some of it they burned and some they took and sold. Fisheries just want money. The fish [they took] was too much...

In April 2012 it happened again, they wanted to take the nets of *nkolongo* this time. They said, "if you want us to allow you to fish *nkolongo*, each boat should give us 50,000, each net 50,000." They were thieves. Here you can take anything you want if you have a gun because fear runs things.

After they took our money and left the people here the police of our island. Our police said "No, those Fisheries are not real. They must be thieves." It was too late, they had already gone. We calculated that we paid them 2.5 million total [about USD \$1,000], not to break our boats.

According to SmartFish “the ultimate beneficiaries of the Programme will be the fishermen, coastal communities and wider populations...it is furthermore expected that diverse stakeholder groups will draw specific direct and indirect benefits from the SmartFish programme.”<sup>30</sup> I think it's fair to say, Mama Ssalongo would disagree.

#### “I'M FED UP WITH YOUR BRIEFCASES”

Women now serve in the highest levels of government science and management institutions in Uganda, including until only recently, the State Minister of Fisheries herself. This does not mean that all women's interests are being represented in every, or even any meeting where “all stakeholders” come together to talk about and design policy for Lake Victoria's “sustainable future.” It should not come as a surprise that women, and to a lesser degree men, who actually purchase, process, and trade fish for growing local and regional markets are noticeably absent.

As carefully expressed in the words of one woman fish who smokes and sells fish for a living whom I had the good fortune of meeting during a late 2011 meeting on small-scale fisheries guidelines sponsored by the FAO and the International Federation of Fish Workers:

You people [the conveners of the meeting] keep saying that you speak for us. Only once has any one of you come to see where I smoke my fish. One said he would come sometime back, but he has never shown his face again. I keep inviting you to come and see what we do and how we do it, and the problems we face.

Every time you complain it is too far, the journey is too difficult, or that the place smells of fish.

[She paused]

You know, I left my home two days ago to be sure I would arrive here on time.

I don't think I will waste my time here again. For what? I am fed up with your briefcases. If you want my opinion, you will have to come get it.

When she finished speaking, this woman – the only woman who earns her living processing and selling fish that I have ever observed in attendance at a national, let alone an international policy meeting like this one – then literally stepped away from her seat at the

table. She issued her statement in Lusoga, one of several vernacular languages in use at this particular meeting. Although most statements from participants were translated into Luganda and English for the other participants in attendance, hers was not. The word “briefcases” however, was intelligible to everyone present – a phrase used colloquially to refer to organizations that seem to have no physical home, but rather exist by shuffling papers from place to place and from one meeting to another.

Littoral anthropology is anchored in the assumption that people live their lives in ways that make sense for them. It recognizes that there are structural inequalities embedded within global economic and knowledge-based transactions – transactions often termed development, capacity building, or sensitization. But it does not assume that this lack of equivalencies precludes fishworkers or other actors in local, regional, and intercontinental resource-based economies from knowing what makes sense for them and exercising their own agencies and authorities to work in ways that continue to make more sense. Fishworkers extend this generosity of spirit to Fisheries whether or not they happen to be carrying ‘briefcases,’ (or clipboards, or guns), it is time this sentiment went both ways.

For me and those work in in Nyanja – that liminal littoral world where it is possible for Sirya Buluma not only to exist but to continue bringing the life of others into existence – the obvious flourishing of types of fish considered by formally trained fisheries experts to be commercially extinct offers compelling material that calls into question the validity of other conventional wisdoms framing so much social scientific research and policy-driven interventions into the lives of fishworkers in Lake Victoria. By insisting that food does not exist without sauce, and that sauce cannot exist without fish, Sirya Buluma and those who keep enjoying their food with sauce sustain an ontological politics of eating that actively violates national fisheries laws, international fisheries management norms, and the advice of global food

security experts, but nevertheless continues to nourish the bodies and minds of Ugandan eaters of fish.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As of 2014 a particularly entrepreneurial Ugandan husband and wife team were well on their way to transforming Bega Point into a luxury eco-tourism resort.

<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this compose an entirely different article, and have much to do with the exceptional abilities of the British-led Uganda Protectorate government to conceal battles associated with colonial conquest, attempts to subdue rebellions, and the extermination of all island residents under the banner of sleeping sickness control efforts – a disease which also both existed and did not exist.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: (Johnston 1902, 787–789) (Roscoe 1909, 117) (MacQueen 1909, 285) (Graham 1929, 91) (Condon 1910, 954)

<sup>4</sup> While outsiders might have derogatory associations with the term *abavubi*, littoral residents specializing in fishing do not share these, "it's what we do, we work with the lake, it's no problem."

<sup>5</sup> Thank you to Eve Irene Kirabo for clarifying this connection through her careful work transcribing an audio recording of my interview with Nzera Nabosa, the healer referred to above. See also: (Snoxall 1967, 18)

<sup>6</sup> On "worlding" see (Tsing 2010)

<sup>7</sup> In the region's littoral vernacular the English term customer implies a business relationship, and applies both to those who buy things or services from someone and those from whom one purchases things or services.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Sutinen and Davies' review of USAID technical assistance to the East African Freshwater Fisheries Organization which declares the *Synodontis* fishery "commercially extinct" (1975, 3).

<sup>9</sup> These were collected as part of my extended dissertation research in fishing beaches, near fish-smoking kilns, in homes, markets, management meetings and ancestral shrines along the island and mainland shores of southern Uganda (most intensively from 2011–2012 and most recently in 2014).

<sup>10</sup> "Staying with the trouble" is a useful phrase Donna Haraway has coined and works with to work through "ontological, ethical, and ecological cats cradle knots of companion species" (Haraway 2010b) with the hope of finding ways to do so "without the mad solace of yet another exterminism, another fix" (Haraway 2010a).

<sup>11</sup> Blaser has recently offered this succinct summary of "the three key elements that shape the modern story: the internal great divide (nature/culture), the external great divide (modern/nonmodern), and linear progressive time" (Blaser 2013, 555)

<sup>12</sup> A Google Scholar search for "Lake Erie" returns approximately 143,000 results. "Lake Victoria" returns approximately 772,000. For bibliographies of now classic ecological and socio-economic literatures on Lake Victoria see: "Lake Victoria (Crul et al. 1995; Kim Geheb 1999)

<sup>13</sup> Also popularized in Uganda's national news media, and in international film and sportfishing adventure television alike see for example the yearly "Save Lake Victoria" series of articles featuring in Uganda's New Vision newspaper each May at ("Save Lake Victoria" 2014), Hubert

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Sauper's documentary film *Darwin's Nightmare* (Sauper 2004), and the National Geographic series *River Monsters* (Animal Planet 2010).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.globefish.org/nile-perch-august-2011.html>

<sup>15</sup> The initial extinction narrative, championed by fisheries ecologists like Franz Witte (1991; 1992) and Leslie Kaufman (1992; 1997), continues to motivate a niche contingent of evolutionary biologists and fisheries ecologists towards the underappreciated project of documenting and analyzing the persistence and resurgence of haplochromine populations. See for example the work of (Chapman et al. 2002; F. Witte et al. 2007; De Zeeuw et al. 2013; A. J. Reid et al. 2013).

<sup>16</sup> For example, a 2012 Government report on "Uganda's Agriculture Sector Performance" covered in the Ugandan national press noted that Uganda's Nile perch catches in 2011 were just over 69,000 tons. This, the authors of the report state, is "the lowest level ever recorded." This is a historic impossibility, especially since before the Nile perch boom of the late 1980s, few Nile perch were recorded at all. See also Richard Reid's otherwise careful political history of pre-colonial Buganda in which he noted, "widely eaten fish [in the pre-colonial period] included lungfish, barbels, catfish and the type known to Europeans as Nile perch." (2002, 65)

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of how these data are compiled, transformed, and indeed are rarely too poor to accurately access even the most basic characteristics of African economies see: (Jerven 2013)

<sup>18</sup> <http://isps.yale.edu/events/2015/03/epe-castle-lecture-series-david-laitin-africa-the-last-frontier-for-development-1#.VSWKp2OqDbx>

<sup>19</sup> Nyanja is the term used often by residents of Kenya and Tanzania who grew up speaking Kiswahili – whether as their first language, their "mother tongue," or as a language taught in school and/or learned while interacting with other Kiswahili speakers. Luo speakers may refer to this body of water as Nam, or Nam Lolwe. Nyanja is the term most often used by residents of northwestern Tanzania and most of Uganda, but also in Mozambique, Malawi, and Zambia. Because this study focuses on the history of the geographical territory now known as contemporary Buganda, which is centered between the Nile river in the east and Uganda's lake border with Tanzania in the south – I use the term Nyanja throughout this text.

<sup>20</sup> The quote in the main text above is from (Zzibukulimbwa 2011, 22) Christopher Wrigley reads Appolo Kaggwa to reach a different conclusion. He describes these rivers as forming because prior his ascension to the throne, King Kiggala "lay with his sister Nazibanja who gave birth to the twin Mayanja rivers." This myth, Wrigley argues, offers evidence for sacred Kingship – the "sacred one must prove his sacredness by an act that in profane life was most stringently forbidden." Kiggala, he argues, is "the father of the rivers," saying nothing more of the mother, or sister of these rivers. The contemporary littoral residents that inform my interpretation – interestingly, only men have told me stories about this – do not mention men or King Kiggala when they talk of the Mayanja rivers being born. That is, they attribute parentage of the Nyanja to women, not to men. (Wrigley 1996, 155–156)

<sup>21</sup> These liquids are similar to those Christopher Taylor has described for Rwanda as imaana – fluids through which Kingly authority, the health of land and of resident are mediated and circulate. Taylor, however, overlooks conceptually productive Rwandan sexual practices that produce waters like Nyanja. Imaana is as much about women's everyday sexual pleasure as it is about masculine royal authority. It is no coincidence that one word for vagina in use at the littoral is emaana. Although these are spelled differently, David Schoenbrun confirms that link between the two. (Schoenbrun 1997, 215–216) See also: (Kaspin 1996)

<sup>22</sup> This is not something that David Gordon himself does in his own scholarship. See for example his earlier and equally excellent book (D. Gordon 2006).

<sup>23</sup> See for example David Schoenbrun's Appendix of 100-Word Lists for Great Lakes Bantu Languages (Schoenbrun 1997, 266–313) and Alice Werner's (1919, 180) list of "Primitive Verbs."

<sup>24</sup> For example, Buganda is a geographical territory inhabited by people known as the Baganda who speak the Luganda language (though many people live in Buganda who do not usually self-identify as Baganda, but nevertheless speak Luganda).

<sup>25</sup> Illustrated in the proverb Sirikuleka wabi, akuleka ku mmere nnuma, literally I will not leave you in a bad situation, he leave you (eating) food without any sauce." (Murphy 1972, 2:437). For a definition of –luma see Snoxall (Snoxall 1967, 186)

<sup>26</sup> As Webb Keane suggests, "it is the problem of killing animals that induces questions about their nature, and not vice versa." (2013, 189)

<sup>27</sup> Interlocutors have suggested this for contemporary Lake Victoria. This tendency for *nkolongo*, known to scientists as

<sup>28</sup> See <https://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Uganda> for "the data," but also Morten Jerven's (2013) on why these and other development data are misleading.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.fao.org/fishery/smartfish/en>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.fao.org/fishery/smartfish/en>

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