

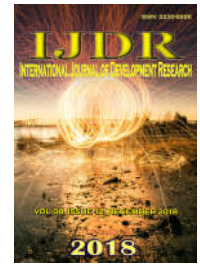


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SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF FISHING BY RESIDENTS OF AHÉMÉLAKE IN REPUBLIC OF BENIN

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ABSTRACT

This research shows the social representations of fishing within the populations of "AhéméLake". A total of 176 people aged 29.37 ± 4.54 years and from 7 socio-professional categories (fishermen, fishmongers, elected representatives, members of NGOs, members of development associations, representative of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fishery and Traditional chief) was taken into account for a semi-directive interview. It appears from the processing of the collected data that the social representation of the fishermen "*put gears and catch many fish*" and that of other subjects, "*sustainable protection of the lake and its species*" are convergent, because to take fish sustainably, one has to protect the lake. Moreover, it emerges from this work that residents who live directly from the exploitation of the lake are those who by their behaviour contribute more to its degradation. They have themselves acknowledged their responsibility for the problems in their environment and have asked other people involved in the management of the site to use their expertise to help them give back to the lake, its former functions. Nostalgic of the past, the traditional chiefs meanwhile, have said that beyond all, the restoration of the deities that once protected the lake is necessary for its rehabilitation. In this perspective, all populations must embark on a new foundation.

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INTRODUCTION

A fluvio-lacustrine complex, the "Lake Ahémé" extends from "Tokpa-Domè" in the north, to "Guézin" in the south, over a distance of 24 km and covers an area of 78 km² when the watercourse is at the lowest level. It serves several villages bordering the municipalities of "Bopa", "Comè" and "Kpomassè". With its channels, it also helps to access some villages in the municipalities of "Grand Popo" and "Ouidah". In sum, it passes through 5 municipalities whose area is estimated at 1532 km² for a population of about 463 019 residents. A large part of these residents live mainly from fishing (PIRA 2012, RGPH 2013, Edoh, Messan and Dossou-Sognon, 2014). Once flourishing, fishing is the main activity of the said local populations whose work allowed them to daily supply local markets such as those of "Tokpa-Domè",

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"Sègbohohouè", "Maga", "Gogotinkpon" (Agbanto), "Mayi – Mava" (Guézin), "Comè", "Akodéha", etc. Apart from the aforementioned markets, products of this lake are also available in the regional markets which were held every 4 or 5 days and which welcomed merchants from both inside and outside the country. In the past, the crabs and shrimps of this lake were sought-after in the big market of Lomé (Togo) where they were preferentially exported. Well known restaurants in Cotonou used to only serve its products for their palatability. In the past, the management of Ahémé Lake was less problematic. Indeed, regulation was under the traditional chiefdom where the chiefs "Zounon of Guézin" and the "Tohonon of Bopa", both religious and administrative authorities, ruled over the populations and ensured compliance with the regulations governing fishing activities. Still in reasonable numbers, these populations could live their activities without resorting to the techniques now denounced. Except for the periodic rites "*Ahuilé*"¹ (purification rituals for

¹Purification rituals for residents of Ahémé Lake

residents of Ahémé Lake) necessitated by worrying social contexts and generally leading to deprivations and restrictions of professional activities, including the prohibition of fishing for few days (Edoh, 1998), there is no fishing limitation or formal prohibition period. However, it must be notified, the existence of other endogenous cultural rites were leaders and disciples of the "VodunAvlekété²", together with their allies of other "vodouns" (deities, gods, spirits, ...), proceeded to the implantation of "Avlékétéins³". Apart from few administrative acts (the orders) that complement the aforementioned regulatory measures, everything was allowed. Apart from these obligations, there were no other prohibitions. "Avlékétéins" were types of protected areas or piscicultural park. Of variable size, they were traditionally located at strategic points of the lake and its channels to impose to fishermen the conservation of the resources of the lake and also the reproduction of some fish species for a sustainable fruitful fishing. Fishing indoors and too close to these installations was prohibited.

It was thus possible for each fisherman to make use of the technique of his choice and to exploit those which seemed to him the most appropriate and of the attitudes which he considers useful for an optimal catch. For the local resident, fishing, "was: putting gear; take the maximum of fish and other fish products; ... "But, did the fisherman always care about the way he was fishing, the direct and collateral damage that his activity could cause on the environment and consequently the conservation of the different species of fish in the long term? Since each fisherman was satisfied with his catches, no local resident was overly concerned with the way he behaved himself or the way his peers did. The important thing was to reach his goals. We were not too concerned about the possible destruction that we were guilty of by destroying hundreds of fingerling for a few numbers of tilapias for example. Even today, does the fisherman who brings his canoe back to the shore always pay attention to the dozens of fingerling he throws and crushes on the bank or tramples out of his canoe?

At the time when the traditional authorities still held a moral power which implicitly gave them the right to intervene in the management of the lake, they would have had to decree the destruction of the fingerling or the mangrove as a sacrilege against the divinity "avlekété⁴" and the other protective deities of the lake for it to be so and that would be a beginning of a solution to this situation, but alas. With the respective socialist and Marxist-Leninist revolutions of November 1972 and 1974, and more recently the decentralization that took place in the 2000s in Benin, traditional chiefs lost almost definitively the administrative power they exercised tacitly over the lake and the riparian inhabitants. The management of this territory is now in the hands of the local and communal elected representatives of the 5 administrative districts, the development associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the fisheries ministry who are fighting for it paternity (Edoh *et al*, 2014). This ambivalent management situation will lead to the aggravation of the problems related to the alarming decline of halieutic products in the lake. With the increasing demographic pressure (more than 302 inhabitants / km² PIRA, 2012; RGPH 2013), the lake will lose its influence

in the area. As a nourishing source, this river that directly and indirectly used to sustain its residents and other populations, will henceforth find it difficult to achieve that goal. Impoverished, it will see his sons (inhabitants) go to other horizons for adventures with all the consequences that follow (Tossou, 2017). Some of these emigrants, back on the shores of this lake that saw them born, will introduce poorly adapted (new) techniques, while the others, by introducing inappropriate fishing gear, will gradually contribute to the deterioration of the site. To the natural factors that threaten this complex by its geographical position, are dangerously grafted anthropic problems. Regarding this double spectrum, how could the populations of Lake Ahémé now foresee fishing if they still want to believe in the sustainability of their maintenance on the territory?

The Lake "Ahémé": a fluvio-lacustrine complex under threat

The Lake Ahémé and its channels are exposed to two major problems that threaten their survivability in the future. These are natural and anthropic problems.

Natural problems: In an ecosystem located in a wet tropical zone (two dry seasons and two rainy seasons), the Lake Ahémé and its channels have the shape of a ditch submeridally oriented (PIRA, 2012). It communicates with the Couffo River upstream and downstream with the Atlantic Ocean and the Mono River by the coastal lagoon and the "Ahô" Channel.

The surrounding soils are sandy-clay and offer little resistance to the erosion process. We also observe the presence of tropical ferrallitic soils less permeable than the bar soil. The vegetation consists of palm trees, degraded forests and grasslands located on the floodplains. Other species such as ferns and mangroves supplement the vegetation found on its banks (Salami and Tchawlassou 1992; Edoh *et al*, 2014). Because of its position, the lake Ahémé and its channels receive during the rainy seasons, the runoff waters with all sorts of waste that it carry without counting a part of the soils which, not only do not manage to retain the waters, but get literally carried away into the pond, naturally contributing to the filling of the lake.

The anthropic problems

The natural problems of the lake will be aggravated by human activities (mangroves and other plants that border the water will be cut for human needs) (Montcho and Ségbedji 1991, Salami and Tchawlassou 1992). Highly exposed, Lake Ahémé and its channels to become a kind of receptacle that in addition to other waste, directly host eroded sand. Besides the establishment of the "acadja⁵" since the 1970s and through which impressive quantities of branches have been poured into this ecosystem, worsening the natural problems of filling. Other factors including the disturbance of the waves of the sea, the other rivers and the lake Ahémé especially due to the construction of the "Nagbéto dam" in the course of the Mono River, the waters of the Lake Ahémé have lost of their salinity. At their maturity, the lake's products no longer reach the size and weight they once had. To all this, it is likely to point out the effects of some agricultural practices especially that of

² One of the deities who use to protect the Ahémélake

³ Types of protected areas or piscicultural park

⁴ One of the deities who use to protect the lake Ahémé

⁵ An "Acadja" or brushpark is a simple fish culture technique used in West African Watercourse that can be classified as enclosure culture (see Welcome, 1972)

cotton production which involve massive use of chemicals that are susceptible to end up in the waters of the Lake Ahémé and consequently in fish and crustacean products.

Approaches to social representations

Social representations have given rise to several works, both theoretically and methodologically. According to Doise (2005), the study of a social representation which constitutes a symbolic reality for individuals, include three phases.

A phase of analysis of the representational field and of common positioning

This is the phase of analysis of the field of shared knowledge to identify its key elements and their organization according to the social integration of individuals (Drozda-Senkowska, Dubois and Moularet, 2010). In this case, it is about what "fishing" means to the local resident of the Lake Ahémé. It is the essential of what he thinks while talking about this object. The evocation of this word is reminiscent of a fruitful sustainable fishery and all that goes in the same direction. This may be a stay in a riverside village near the fishing site at a given time or on the island of "Mitogbodji" for example (island located southwest of the lake, it was inhabited in the 19th century when residents were fleeing the expeditions of Abomey kingdom) to maximize catches by having more fishing time. It is the invariant about the object of representation, this is the shared knowledge in the "Xhela community" about fishing.

A phase of analysis of variations in the individual opinion

This phase is about the analysis of the principles that organize personal view to have an appraisal of the differences and / or variations that the representational field generates. Beyond the symbol, the differences could exist in the representation of fishing when passing from one individual to another or according to the circumstances or the status of the subject (an elected member, a member of NGO, etc.). For some, fishery (a successful sustainable fishery) may be synonym of the protection of the lake. What according to the circumstances or the individual may correspond to the:

- Planting or maintaining of mangroves, and other plant species that border the lake;
- Protection of fingerling and consequently against the use of nets with small mesh;
- Requirement of environmental impact studies during the establishment of industries upstream so that their waste is not a source of pollution of the lake;
- Dredging of the lake and the commitment of people in each of the sectors they have chosen in this context.

A phase of analysis of the "anchoring"

This phase is about giving to the representational field and the personal view, their meaning in relation to other meanings and other systems of symbolic relation. What is usually thought by each local resident or group of residents about fishing in this lake, as opposed to fishermen or residents of other rivers where fishing could exclusively have alimentary function (fishing products are prohibited for sale and are reserved for domestic consumption). Relatively to this, they are individually displayed without affecting the representational

field, the symbolism of this object in their community. For example, it may be the introduction of new fishing practices (introduction of fingerling into the lake, introduction of fish farming or aquaculture in the habits of local residents, etc.). It is also about introducing new behaviour patterns among fishermen. As indicated above, these three stages correspond, according to Doise (2001), to three approaches that we find in studies of social representations. But in most of these studies, one or other of these three phases is put forward. In the case of the representation of fishing on the Lake Ahémé, we can retain or privilege "sustainable fruitful fishing", an activity that allows the fisherman to meet *all* his needs and avoid adventures out of his territory. Thus, everyone commits himself to a sector so that fishing can continue in a sustainable way (see Doise and Papastamou cited by Drozda-Senkowska *et al*, 2010).

Approaches of social representations according to Moscovici (1961)

The idea of an organization of social representation appears already in the theory of Moscovici (1961) who explained how during their constructions, the representations are elaborated around a simple and concrete figurative core which is marked by norms and values of a group. It is that core which gives the representation its stability and coherence. Beside, other elements relating to the object represented, are retained, classified and interpreted according to this object (the peripheral elements). Using the same ideas, Abric (1987) considers that once constituted, any representation is presented as a set of linked and hierarchised elements, some contributing more in the management, organization and stabilization of the representation than others. All the peripheral elements around the (central) core do not have the same importance. Some are more so than others; however there is always consistency among them. For this researcher, limit oneself only to the identification of the few elements that constitute the representation (the content of the representational field, the core), without seeking the relationship existing among them, that is to say their organisation (hierarchical structure), does not allow to discover all its meaning. For the local resident of the Lake Ahémé, fishing could be understood by "putting gear, catch as much as halieutic products possible" while for another actor, fishing could be described as "Protecting the lake and its species sustainably" (see Guimelli, 1998). To put gears and catch fish sustainably, the lake must be protected from natural and anthropic threats. It is therefore necessary to undertake to manage it differently to sustainably improve catches. These essential elements must be followed by concrete behaviours that reflect the existence of the peripheral elements of the social representation of fishing among local residents and other actors who are interested in the problems of this site. The table below shows the representations of fishing on the Lake Ahémé. Like the study of the approach of social representation, the peripheral system as described by Moscovici (1961) in his approach also provides three essential functions.

A function of concretization of the central system in terms of behaviour or individual opinion to make accessible or observable the object of the social representation (Drozda-Senkowska *et al*, 2010). By its function of concretization, the peripheral system makes it possible to give more visibility to the core (the object of the representation) which is only symbolic from the beginning.

Table 1. Summary of the social representations of fishing on the Lake Ahémé

Periphèralements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjust gear and fishing techniques for a better management of the lake Ahémé <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Encourage or introduce aquaculture and fish farming in the habit of local residents ✓ Prohibit the utilization of Small mesh nets. ✓ Protect and introduce fingerling in the lake ✓ Control the size of halieutic product sold on the market ✓ Protect and plant mangroves and other plant species on the shores of the lake ✓ Reintroducing "avlékététins" into the lake • Require environmental impact studies before the establishment of factories upstream the lake (Namgbéto for example) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Periodically initiate environmental control to check eventual presence of chemicals in the water and fish product in order to evaluate and palliate major risk on the environment and population ✓ Periodically control the evolution of the aquacol population in the lake.
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Table 2. Repartition of the sampled population by commune and socio-professional category

	Commune of Comé	Commune of Bopa	Commune of Kpomassè	Commune of Ouidah	Commune of Grand-Popo	Total
Fishermen	18	18	18	12	12	78
Fishmongers	10	10	10	06	06	42
Elected representatives	04	04	04	03	03	18
NGO members ¹			05			05
members of development associations	04	04	04	04	04	20
Traditional chief	02	02	02	02	02	10
MAEP*			03			03
Total	38	38	38	27	27	176

*Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fishery; ¹NGOs and MAEP representatives cover all the territory (5 communes).

A function of adaptation to changes: The object of the representation being now accessible, it becomes necessary to adapt it to the various changes that come up in order to better protect it (the central core) from the threats that come from the environment because in reality, it is the substance of all representation. Introducing fishermen to fish farming in order to reduce the pressure of the increasingly population of fishermen on the lake is for the peripheral system a way to protect the central core (a fruitful sustainable fishery) and to keep the local residents on their territory by helping them to exercise their activities in a different and sustainable way.

Finally, an individuation function: makes it possible to express the differences in people's positions with regard to the contents of the social representation, while preserving its consensual nature within the community. Otherwise, the differences in opinion among the members of the social representation group concern the peripheral elements and not the core. This latter, by gathering the consensus of the group, remains intact. For example, without touching the essential idea of the representation of fishing, some residents consider it as "a lucrative activity that must be preserved", or "an activity that preserves from the rural exodus". Others consider it as "an activity that favours meeting of various populations" or assimilate it to "the return of groups of fishermen to the animation of fish markets, etc." It enable contact among the concerned actors through the activities related to fishing (between merchants coming from far and fishmongers, between fishermen and fishmongers, between members of NGOs and fishermen etc.).

HYPOTHESIS

Referring to Guimelli (1998), we say that the local populations of the Lake Ahémé must change their approach of fishing. Hence it is required they work together with the other actor in charge of the management of the lake in the perspective of a better protection of the site.

OBJECTIVE

As the leaders of the ministry in charge of fishery, NGOs, elected representatives who work alongside the fishermen to improve their working conditions this study aims to enable the local populations of the Lake Ahémé to adjust their behaviour and fishing techniques in order to carry out their activity in a sustainable manner.

METHODS

This study conducted from 2017 to 2018 took into account 176 people of 29.37±4.54 years old. They were all subjected to a semi-directive interview and their repartition by commune and socio-professional category is indicated in the table 2. Out of the 7 categories of subjects interviewed, fishermen and fishmongers are those who live directly from the exploitation of the lake. The first bring out the halieutic products that the seconds are in charge of buying and transforming or not before selling them. The survival of the lake for a sustainable fishery depends on their daily behaviour in the sense that the exploitation techniques put in place by the fishermen and / or the means of smoking or of conservation of the products used by the fishmongers can ruin or contribute to rehabilitate the lake. The 5 other types of actors of the study population (elected representatives, development association leaders, NGOs, the representative of the Ministry in charge of fisheries and traditional chiefs) who do not derive their means of subsistence from the lake are however deeply concerned about its future. For this reason, they are all committed to protect it in a sustainable way. The menu (questions) of the interview was the same for all categories of subjects (single interview guide). This is essentially what each subject understands by, or knows about "fishing" on the Lake Ahémé and the behaviour that must be his and / or that of each actor so that this activity takes place in a sustainable way on this territory. The answers of the interviewees are therefore relative to their status and the way each of them perceive fishing.

RESULTS

The results are globally presented according to three trends:

- First fishermen and fishmongers believe that fishing (a successful and sustainable one) correspond to the continuation of their activities around the lake and exhort the other actors that they consider as their leaders (intellectuals, experts, elected representative, traditional chiefs etc.) to do their best to help them continue their activities on and around the lake. They have therefore proposed the dredging of the watercourse, the reintroduction of some old management techniques ("avlékététins" for example), as a solution for a sustainable fishing, guarantee of their maintenance on the territory.
- Second, elected representatives, development association officials, NGOs, the representative of the Ministry in charge of fisheries indicated that a sustainable successful fishery goes through a number of measures to protect the lake. For them, the lake must be protected from natural threats by protecting the mangroves and planting them where they were destroyed. Therefore, female fishmongers (who normally cut the mangrove to smoke or fry fish and crustaceans) need to understand the consequences of their actions on the survival of the aquatic population.

They also underlined the behaviour of fishermen who by their activities contribute to the destruction of the lake by making use of inappropriate techniques (very fine mesh nets, establishment of acadjas, etc.). To reverse the trend, they must change their working methods.

- Finally, the traditional chiefs as far as they are concerned, have remained nostalgic for the past. According to them, fishing must be able to feed all the local populations if they (traditional chiefs) are associated to its management. The rites dedicated to the protective deities of the site are no longer used; the spirits of the lake are neglected, hungry, and angry, they insisted.

They concluded that apart from the measures to be taken to revive the lake and allow for a sustainable fruitful fishery, it is essential to relocate the deities who once protected the watercourse.

DISCUSSION

The present results are similar to those of Guimelli (1998). First, we have the impression that the fishermen, the fishmongers and people who live around the lake (and whose income are directly related to the lake) have a representation different from that of the other actors whose daily work do not depend on the exploitation of this watercourse. But this is fortunately not the case. A successful sustainable fishery is intimately related to the continual protection of the lake and its resources through a change in the behaviour of all those involved in its management. It is therefore necessary to bring fishermen and other residents who live by fishing to understand that the sustainability of their work and therefore their maintenance around the lake depends on the quality of their interactions with the dear people who are working to help improve the lake conditions.

To save the lake, it is required to make an inventory of how it is exploited, to identify deviances in the behaviour of each type of actor and to get them to formally commit themselves to new bases. In this context, the involvement of traditional leaders will be particularly useful. Without having clearly indicated it, the local fishermen of the lake Ahémé have recognized their responsibility in the current situation of the lake. That why they have asked for the help of other actors who they rightly consider as experts, to help them rehabilitate this watercourse. In the past, halieutic products (fish and crustacean) were sold according to 3 categories depending on their size. The first category (consisting of products of gig size) at least 5 times more expensive than the second category (of medium size), which itself was sold at a higher price possible than the third category. Those whose size was below that of the third category were not requested on the market (not marketable). The consequence was that the fishermen preferred to catch the first-category products to others because it was the first choice of fishmongers. The mesh of the nets provided information on the size of the species that each fisherman wished to capture. Those who used small mesh net could be seen as bad or less ambitious fishermen. In successful fishing periods par excellence, fishmongers could give up the purchase of second and third category fish because they were less popular on regional markets. Small fish and crustacean were thus spared and released to the water when accidentally caught in the net.

As the lake is shrinking more and more in fish products under increasing demographic pressure, fishing techniques have been perfected to better adapt to the situation. In the absence of first-category products that have become very rare, the fisherman readily accepts all species without worrying about size. Even species that for cultural or convenience reasons were neither fished nor consumed have been rehabilitated and labeled. Size and Category no longer matter as before while coming to fishing and selling. The fishmongers have also taken the measures of adaptation to the new situation. The exchanges between the fishermen and the fishmongers are therefore made by units of measurement. These are standard containers of different capacities used to measure the fish or the crustaceans since their size (often) no longer allows counting as in the past. The price of the measure is however variable according to the seasons and the type of halieutic products (species of fish or crustaceans). Infact the riparian fisherman of the lake Ahémé finds himself, in an ambivalent posture. This watercourse by becoming depleted from year to year has forced fishermen to resort to fishing gear and techniques that do not spare any size of fish and crustacean species. Means of purchase or sale have also internalized new situations. Under these conditions, fish products no longer reach breeding size before being caught. The direct consequence is that by taking the fish before their maturity the fisherman prevents them from reproducing, leading the lake inexorably to a process of drastic impoverishment and ultimately towards the extinction of its function (fishing) if nothing is done. To return to its traditional role, all stakeholders must pool their efforts to redefine the notion of (sustainable) fisheries and to agree on the essential of what will be the responsibility of each one. With particular regard to the fisherman, for his activity to continue on the lake, he must protect the site by allowing different species to reach an optimum size before capture. As for the fishmongers, they must now save the trees that line the lake by using for smoking of fish, the techniques that the NGOs that assist them in their work put at their disposal. The "firewood " projects that exist

in many municipalities can be an asset to explore in this direction. The development associations, elected representatives, the representative of the ministry in charge of fisheries, NGOs and last but not the least the traditional chiefs will have to pool their expertise to save the Lake Ahémé and its residents.

CONCLUSION

Every object carries a symbol. To represent an object is to give beyond the symbol that it embodies, an accessible and consensual character on which a community will agree despite the individual differences that can always subsist. This research is a contribution to the effort of those involved in the management of the Lake Ahémé and its channels. This is another perspective whose objective is to reinvigorate fishing in this watercourse. To this end, it is suggested behaviours that must now prevail among the various actors so that the lake recovers its traditional and related activities. Indeed, a successful sustainable fishery is the basis for the promotion of all other sectors of activity in this area, including schooling. It is fishery that allows sellers of foodstuff other products to increase their turnover. When the fisherman earns a substantial sum of money after the sale of his fish, he spends most of that money to get supplies of necessities from the local merchant. Even the motorcycle taxi driver, as well as other craftsmen of the village, benefit because local and regional markets are becoming more lively and attractive, and their activities are draining more people than usual. These market use more local labour for routine tasks. The maintenance of local fishermen on the spot and the stability of this region which shelters a population of more than 463019 inhabitants, distributed in 5 of the 77 municipalities of the country, depend on the rehabilitation of this lake and consequently of its activities. This inexorably passes through a good collaboration of all concerned party in the management of the Lake Ahémé.

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