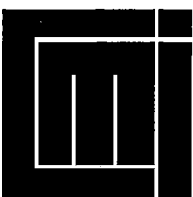


Migrant Fishermen in Congo: Tradition and Modernity

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¹ Other papers and articles are Jul-Larsen 1993 and forthcoming. A prior version of this publication is distributed as IDAF Working Paper no. 56, Cotonon 1994 under the title: *Migrant fishermen in Pointe Noire (Congo): Continuity and continuous change.*

1. Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to present a systematic analysis of the background, the establishment and the development of the so-called Popo fisheries around the town of Pointe-Noire in Congo. The "Popo" in Pointe-Noire constitutes an easily identifiable group of fishermen originally from Benin who live and work in two village clusters on the beach only some kilometres from the town centre. Both in relation to Popo fishery in Benin as well to local canoe fishery in Congo, their production is characterised by a high level of specialisation and market-oriented production based on capital-intensive technology. In this respect they are a typical example of what is now generally known as the West African migrant canoe fisheries, which dominate much of the coastal fisheries from Mauritania to Congo.¹

Although a relatively large amount of literature deals explicitly with the West African fishermen in Congo, mainly due to the existence of a long-term ORSTOM fisheries research programme in Pointe-Noire, few works have systematically dealt with its historical development.² Most of them describe and analyse production (and to a minor extent the community) for a specific time-period. Such studies may provide interesting knowledge, but in order to grasp the more fundamental factors behind the dynamic aspects of the fishery, a more process-oriented approach of the fishing community is required.

The literature has also tended to concentrate on physical and quantitative aspects of Popo fishery rather than on qualitative relational aspects. On basis of the existing literature it is fairly simple to get a satisfactory picture of the demographic development in the community or the development in means of production, like eg. number of canoes, nets and outboard engines. Much more difficult, however, is to get a picture of, for instance, how wealth and power have been distributed or what types of institutions exist to solve various types of problems and how they function.

¹ For a general description and analysis of the migrant canoe fisheries in West Africa, see e.g. Chaboud and Charles Dominique 1991 and Chauveau 1991.

² Nguingiri 1991b is one of the few exceptions where the internal development is explicitly being described and discussed. However, due to lack of data, there are several inaccuracies in his presentation, particularly related to the past 10 years.

Furthermore, the available literature reflects what may be termed a certain production- and male-centrism. Means and organisation of production is focused and since it is the men who go to sea and who operate the canoes, scant attention has been paid to the role of women, even in cases focusing on distribution and trade. In view of the relatively large literature emphasising the economic role and influence of women in West African fisheries, this is somewhat surprising. The scope of this paper is broader in the sense that it includes all aspects of social life seen as important for a proper understanding of Popo fishery.

The major problem caused by the above-noted weaknesses has been the creation of certain myths concerning the character of Popo production. Simple observations related to growth in catches and means of production (particularly in the 1970s) have led authors to conclude that Popo fishery is highly dynamic. However, since no investigations exist as to the character of this dynamism, the overall interpretation has been to link it to the high degree of market orientation and capital intensity and thereby refer to the West African fisheries as a kind of pseudo-capitalistic venture. Formulations like "increased accumulation of capital", "high level of re-investment" and "intensification of production" are often used to characterise the Popo and distinguish the migrants from the local Vili fishermen. However, the documentation given, if any, is problematic and it is my aim to challenge such representations, which seem increasingly widespread particularly among agents involved in development aid and technical assistance.³

This is by no means to deny the well-documented fact that Popo fishing units have at their disposal far more means of production than do the Vili, or that their direct level of reinvestment in means of production is much higher in financial terms.⁴ Nor is there any reason to doubt that increased market integration has affected their production. However, the formulations referred to above, particularly when used in combination with other formulations like "very dynamic production systems", easily and almost unavoidably lead to an interpretation of steady growth, more and more accumulation, more and more means of production and steady increase in fishing effort in line with traditional Western concepts of growth. As will

³ J-C. Nguingiri has in various works (eg. 1990 and 1991a) pointed out how consultants (and to some extent also researchers) misunderstand the Vili fishery in attempting to distinguish the migrant Popo from the local Vili fishermen according to such categories (Popo-dynamism versus Vili-stagnation). As will be demonstrated here, they have also misunderstood that of the Popo.

⁴ See e.g. Niel 1973, Chaboud 1982, Gobert 1985b.

be shown, the main factors affecting the dynamism in Popo fishery are often others than the laws of the market. From a somewhat different perspective I have earlier (Jul-Larsen 1992) argued along the same lines at a more general level. However, only an in-depth empirical analysis can provide the data required to understand the specific logic of Popo fishermen's exploitation of resources.

A historical analysis of the Popo Pointe-Noire community also provides the opportunity to relate our findings to recent discussions concerning the underlying factors behind the migration and specialisation processes in West African canoe fisheries as such. Understandably enough literature dealing with the Popo focuses mainly on their situation in Benin. Little has been done to analyse the situation at home in light of what happens abroad,⁵ or vice-versa. P.J.M. Jorion (1985b and 1988) is among the few who has explicitly linked what happens abroad to the situation in Benin, arguing that migration and specialisation processes can be understood only in light of marginalisation of people in their original home areas. In a reply to Jorion, G.K. Nukunya (1989) argues with reference to another group of fishermen, the Anlo Ewe, that although marginalisation may have played a role, it is mainly pull factors like increased availability of fish, market outlets etc., combined with entrepreneurial qualities among the fishermen which have led to the new migration and specialisation patterns. The empirical evidence presented, however, is often unsatisfactory for drawing the type of conclusions both of them do. The following case study may in this way contribute to a better understanding of this important question.

Although the existing literature seems to demonstrate certain weaknesses, it must immediately be added that this study could not have been produced without heavily relying upon data from the same literature.

⁵ Beside Pointe-Noire, there are important settlements of Popo fishermen in Libreville, Port-Gentil, two towns near Douala and near Abidjan.

2. The Popo community of today

The community as such counts a little less than 500 fishermen and almost as many adult women. Together with some of their children they live in two villages on the northern beach of Pointe-Noire. With some very few exceptions, all the men are full-time fishermen in that they either own and/or work in a particular type of canoe fishery connected to their name. The great majority of the women smoke fish and sell it either as wholesalers or as retailers on the various markets in Pointe-Noire. The ethnonym 'Popo' makes reference to the European name of the village Grand Popo in the Lower Mono region in South West Benin. In fact, not all the Popo come from Grand Popo, as the community includes people from several groups. The great majority are either Xwla who originally come from different villages along the coastline between the Togolese border and Djegbadji near the town of Ouidah; or Xweda from Ouidah town or villages around or close to Lac Ahémé. Two Mina households of Togolese (Anecho) origin are also part of the community as well as one Anlo Ewe household and a small number of young Anlo Ewe workers. The latter group who originally come from the Anlo peninsula in Eastern Ghana, have all lived and worked in Benin before they migrated to Congo.¹ Almost all community members are directly or indirectly related to each other through links of kinship and/or marriage. This, however, does not necessarily mean that kinship is considered of great relevance in all types of internal relations.

The Popo have specialised in fishing for pelagic sardinella and ethmalosis species, using driftnets from the big motorised Ghanaian type of canoes. They occasionally fish for demersal species with lines or bottom gill nets. However, the latter fishery is mainly connected with the local Vili fishermen, who are scattered all along the 170km Congolese coastline. In Pointe-Noire the local fishermen are in the minority compared to the Popo and are less easily identified, since many live in the town suburbs and not

¹ The general literature on West African migrant fisheries has tended to reiterate an old truth: that the Popo in Pointe-Noire are a mixture of people of Ghanaian Ewe, Togolese Mina and Béninois Xwla and Xweda origin. Although this once was the case, the community must now be considered as composed almost exclusively of Xwla and Xweda people.

on the beach and most of them are part-time fishermen. In addition 200-300 young Vili² work with the Popo, often on a more or less occasional basis.

The best-known institution among the Popo is the male production unit, commonly referred to as the "company".³ At present there are 107 units, owing around 120 big canoes in addition to some smaller local dug-outs. The units are owned either individually or collectively by Popo fishermen. About half are individually owned.⁴ In collectively owned units the number of owners varies from 2 to 8, where one always is referred to as its leader or chief. About 40 per cent of the Popo fishermen in Pointe-Noire have status as owners. Depending on the number of owners who actually go fishing, units may need additional labour. The vast majority of companies therefore employ a certain number of Popo workers who stay in different types of client relationships, most often to the chief of company. The workers represent the remaining 60 per cent of the adult male population. Commonly the units also need additional non-Popo labour and this is supplied by the young Vili. The latter are not clients in the same way as the Popo workers, and they have much higher mobility in terms of switching between different companies than in the former group. Hence, the socio-economic composition of the companies varies considerably. At one extreme there may be a unit where all members are Popo and owners; another extreme would be where one Popo owner works exclusively with Vili labour. Both cases may be observed, but the great majority of units have one or more Popo owners in addition to both Popo and Vili workers.

Kinship relations between Popo members in a company can always be traced, although there is no specific kinship principle for recruitment of members. Relations (among owners as well as between owners and workers) seem to be fairly random and include agnatic, matrilineal as well as in-law relations (often several at the same time). Or a father may work

² Many of the young Vili are migrants like the Popo, coming from nearby Cabinda. The group also includes people with Zaïrian nationality and Congolese of other ethnic origins. They should in general not be considered as a uniform group. More or less detailed descriptions of the Vili and their fisheries are found in the same literature as that dealing with the Popo in Pointe-Noire.

³ The use of the term "company" varies considerably in the literature on West African canoe fisheries. Some authors use it for analytical purposes, giving it well defined characteristics (see eg. Jorion 1988 and Atti Mama 1991). Gobert (e.g. 1985a) uses it to distinguish collectively owned units from those owned individually. Both definitions are problematic. Here the term will simply be used to describe any Popo fishing unit. This is also the way it is used by the Popo themselves.

⁴ One unit is owned by a Popo woman.

together with friends and cousins, while his sons or brothers work in other companies.

The companies sell their catch immediately after it has been landed on the beach. By far the greatest part is sold to Popo women, according to certain principles of division. The sale is considered the concern of all crew members, and the internal share system is formally based on a 50-50 share between means of production and labour. The owners take their part in the labour share provided they participate in production. Accounts between owners and workers are settled once a week, and no difference is made among workers except for minor bonuses to the captain and the mechanic. In cases of co-ownership the share of means of production is kept aside and the co-owners occasionally meet (perhaps once a year) to decide how the money should be used. Groups of owners often have their own treasurer(s) and accountants, or the money is kept with the leader. The principles behind owners' internal rights are not easy to describe as they always will tend to be defined contextually, although they can at times remind of the formal principles in a modern shareholding enterprise (rights and interests according to level of investments, etc).

Assets in the companies vary considerably, although we estimate that FCFA 4 million⁵ is the minimum required to establish a viable unit. The wealthiest companies may possess values in production equipment near FCFA 20 million (new price), but the average is far less, probably somewhere between 6 and 8 million.⁶ Canoes are always bought in Ghana and transported to Pointe-Noire on liners, often after they have been navigated to Benin. Nets and engines are sometimes bought in Congo, but they may come from all over West Africa. No fisherman or group of fishermen wishing to establish a new unit will normally be able to provide the necessary financial means by themselves. They always rely on support in terms of some kind of credits.

Units are continuously being dissolved and recreated with new ownership relations. One of the reasons is obviously that the management principles give ample room for manipulation and conflicts, particularly since formal accountancy knowledge is very limited among owners as well as among workers. Furthermore, co-owners steadily seek to achieve higher social (and economic) prestige through establishing themselves as chief of company.

⁵ At the time of study the fixed exchange rate was 50 FCFA= 1 FRF.

⁶ The figures are based on "official" prices and should be handled with great caution. In real life people often find much cheaper ways of providing means of production. However, in relative terms they give an approximate picture of the variations encountered.

With demersal gill net or line fishery, the social relations are different, in that many workers themselves own nets or lines privately. Since not all owners allow or are interested in this type of fishing and many workers do not own their own gear, the formation of the crews changes completely. We will not describe the share system for this fishery here,⁷ but only indicate that demersal fisheries are relatively less interesting from the viewpoint of the owners, compared to pelagic fisheries.

When the fish is sold on the beach the price is normally set by Congolese traders early in the morning. However the majority of the catch is sold to the wives of the crew members at a somewhat lower price (FCFA 500/20 kg) than what the market is willing to pay. In principle every woman married to a crew member has the right to the same amount of fish from the canoe of her husband, but it is well known that it is an advantage to be the wife of a company leader or at least of one of the owners. Although many other factors influence marriage structures, this dilemma is clearly reflected by the fact that 70 per cent of the Popo women are married to owners and that 60 per cent of the Popo workers remain without a Popo wife in Pointe-Noire.

Each woman, whether she is the only wife or a co-wife, constitutes her own economic unit. She has her own ovens for smoking the fish she buys and her own staff of young Congolese helpers.⁸ She then either sells the fish herself in the town markets or sends the smoked fish by rail to Congolese clients for sale in all the major population centres from Pointe-Noire to Brazzaville. For every processor, access to pelagic fish is of major concern.⁹ In order to increase her supplies she can buy pelagic fish from a small industrial fleet or get access to fish in other canoes than that of her husband by providing financial support through credits. Simple observations on the beach of which women who receives fish in which companies, demonstrate that many women operate as creditors in other units than that of the husband. Information on the credit situation in a certain number of fishing units indicates that Popo women in Pointe-Noire provide at least half of all credits to the companies. Other creditors are often old well-established owners and Congolese businessmen or civil servants with whom some of the fishermen have special friendship relations. Fig.1 gives an idea

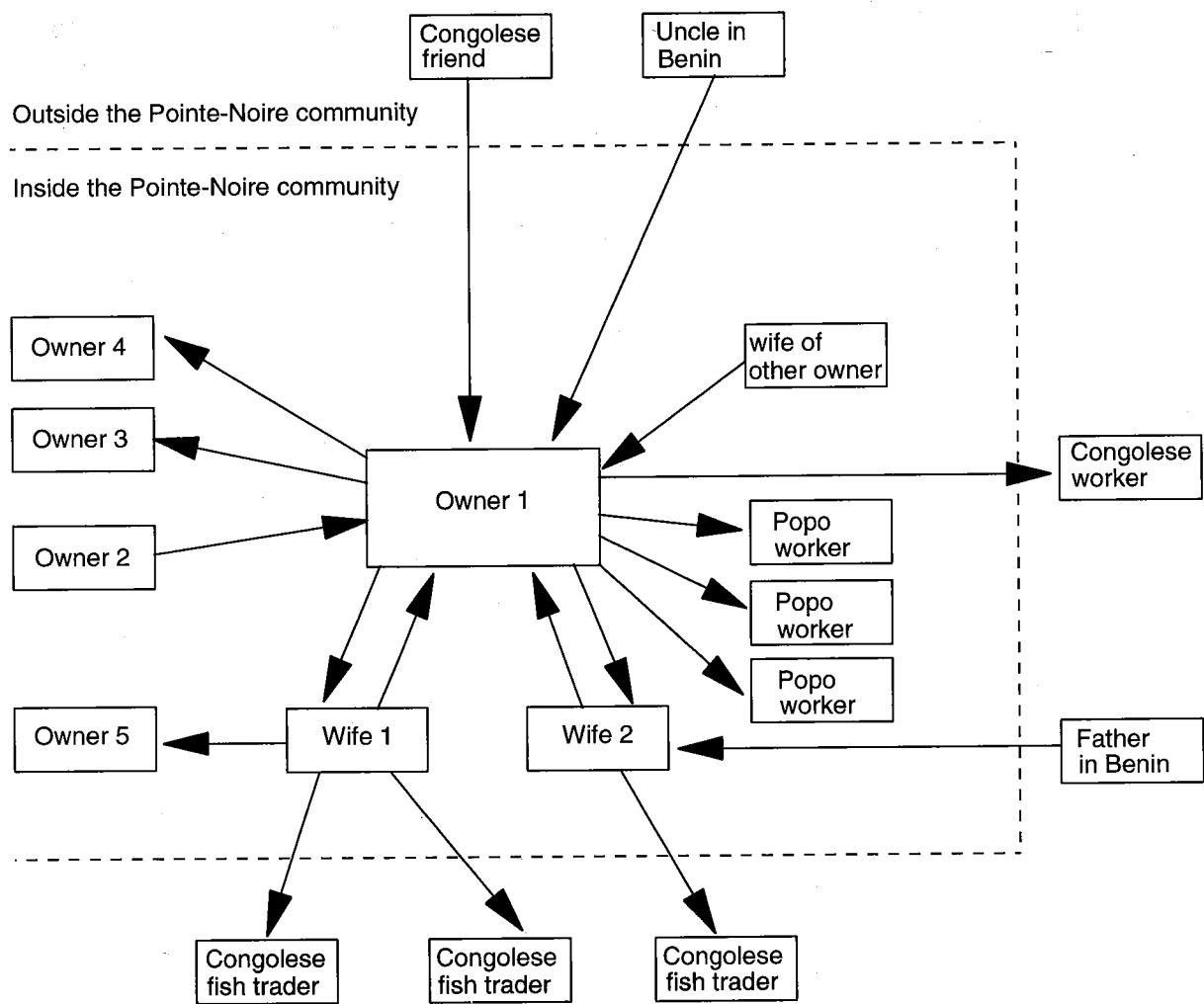
⁷ The system is described eg by Chaboud 1982 p. 25, Gobert 1985b p. 255 and Makaya 1983. Minor changes in the system have occurred since then.

⁸ A thorough description of the smoking processes has been presented by Adrien (1981).

⁹ It is mostly pelagic fish which is smoked. Simple estimates of the profitability of processing and trade of different species demonstrate that smoking of pelagic fish is by far the most profitable option for Popo women.

about the complexity of Popo credit relations. Credits often may go two ways between the same persons. Each type of credit (whether credit from processor to company owner, or from owner to workers/clients) has its own rules and logic and within each type, the context remains important, as very few credit relations are equal in terms of interests, repayment periods etc.

Figure 1
Credit chart oriented from viewpoint of one Popo owner
and his two wives*



* The chart takes a specific case as its starting point, but has been somewhat modified in order to demonstrate the variation in types of credits found.

The Popo households in Pointe-Noire mainly function as reproduction units. The overwhelming majority is based on marriages between Popo, although there is no prohibition against Popo marrying a Congolese. The marriage structure is polygynous and the maximum number of wives at the

beach is four. Many fishermen also have wives living in their home village and there is a certain mobility among the women between Congo and Benin. To some extent this mobility is connected with the fact that many couples choose to send their children to Benin for further schooling. The age structure in the community shows a very clear deficit of young people (particularly boys) between 15 and 25 years of age.

Husbands and wives work in different economic units, and they also keep separate accounts where each contributes to household expenses. There is great variation as to who contributes with what and how much. In such a situation one could expect households to be of minor economic importance. To some extent this is true, but spouses do exert important influence upon each other's economic activities. Investigations on credit demonstrate that a woman who provides credits to fishermen, will almost without exception, primarily provide loans to the company of her husband. Furthermore a wife can not decide on her economic dispositions completely independent of her husband — particularly in relation to in-community economic transactions. In some of the wealthiest households husband and wife operate *de facto* as a corporate economic unit.

Another important feature is the fact that 36 per cent of the men, despite of having reached normal marriage age, have not established their own units.¹⁰ They are all workers and live single or as members in the household of their patron.

For various purposes, the Popo in Pointe-Noire are organised according to a system combining agnatic descent and village/territory of origin. This we may term, simplifying matters somewhat, the extended family system.¹¹ The system is intimately connected to Popo religious ways of thought. Extended family identity is defined according to commonly agreed genealogies which trace descent six to eight generations back, and to myths which connect the lineage to certain mythical forefathers in the more general and extended pantheon of the voodooos. Lineage voodooos and other forefathers may intervene actively in everyday life to give protection and support against other voodooos or living persons who seek to attack another person or render life difficult. Protection is most efficiently sought from those with whom an individual is identified and with whom some people in the group have direct means of communication. Forefathers and voodooos

¹⁰ Many of them may have wives in Benin, but they are not in a position to bring them along.

¹¹ Although agnatic lineage dominates as the organising principle in Popo kinship organisation, there are so many modifications to this, that it would be misleading to use the term lineage to describe it, thus the looser term "extended family".

are intimately linked to territories, and in Benin the distribution of access to land and waters is closely related to lineage identity. However since people from different lineages often live in the same areas, collaboration between forefathers is important and besides, some voodoos are connected to a territory more than to lineages.

The extended families are not formal political fora with leaders who are elected and easily identifiable. The way they work is always contextually defined. It is the nature of the matter to be handled which defines who become involved in solving it. The broader and more serious a matter is, the higher is the level at which it is treated. If it concerns affairs between patrilineal cousins, only the immediate family will be involved, and if it is a minor affair between two persons of different lineages the problem may be solved without mobilising the whole extended family. Leadership is based on seniority and formal decisions are always taken by men.

Only the most important matters are taken to the top of the hierarchy which classifies the Popo community into three main segments, often referred to as "the three communities". One involves those who come from the village of Gbéfa (Agonékamé) and other neighbouring villages in Grand Popo; its members are almost exclusively Xwla. The second group includes people from nine villages located on the inner side of the lagoons stretching from Grand Popo towards the Ouidah lagoon. In this group people are claiming both Xwla and Xweda descent. The third and least segmented part is constituted exclusively by Xweda from Ouidah town or the villages in the southern end of Lac Ahémé.

Matters like birth, marriage and death are always a concern of the extended family. In Pointe-Noire it is the extended family which regulates relations between the fishermen and their kin in Benin. One easily observable example is the death of close kin living in Benin. In such cases, the leaders of the concerned segments will allow the dependents to organise a ceremony of money collection to help the family at home. All adult members of the segment are in principle obliged to contribute at least FCFA 1000.¹² People from the other segments may also contribute, but

¹² There are no direct sanctions against someone who does not participate. However, in cases of deaths in the family of someone who does not participate, the segment may refuse to organise a similar ceremony. One of the segments has even elaborated written regulations concerning which kin in Benin are "eligible" for ceremonies and who in Pointe-Noire should participate.

that is more voluntarily. Such collection ceremonies are frequently organised and may include as many as three or four in one week.¹³

In addition, the extended families organise a range of different religious ceremonies which are important parts of Popo life abroad. Community members outside the family in question participate in great numbers. Information on when to organise certain ceremonies comes from the family elders in Benin and then implemented by the elders in Pointe-Noire. The extended families are also involved in matters related to all types of internal conflicts in the Popo community. However, as will be demonstrated below, other institutions are far more influential in this respect.

In addition to the family system, but also largely as an integral part of it, political life in the Popo community is dominated by an institution generally referred to as 'l'Association des Ressortissants BENINOIS' (ARB). Formally ARB appears as a sort of voluntary association for all Béninois residents in Pointe-Noire. It has a general board of elected men with background in trade as well as fishing and it has close connections to the newly established Benin Consulate in the town. At the beach however, ARB is organised with its own locally elected boards in the two fishing villages and where only the fishing community is concerned. This separate branch of ARB (ARB-B) has its own regulations and rules,¹⁴ besides having functions far more comprehensive than what is found in the community of Béninois as such.¹⁵ ARB-B is the dominant institution at the beach in relation to the following tasks:

- a) All external relations concerning the general situation of the Popo fishermen in Congo. This mainly involves to contacts with representatives from local units in the administration, like immigration, customs, port authorities, police and others, but includes also the relations to the Vili fishermen and to representatives of the Congolese residents in the fishing villages. Maintaining good relations to the Congolese community also includes the organisation of internal

¹³ Estimates based on the public accounts of twenty of these ceremonies indicate that perhaps as much as FCFA 30 million or more is collected annually in the Popo community in Pointe-Noire for these purposes. However, probably not more than one fourth is actually sent to Benin. As a general rule the remaining three fourths seem to be spent on ceremony costs (about 50 per cent) and the remainder is more or less secretly kept by the immediate family in Pointe-Noire.

¹⁴ The well-known written regulations of 1967 have already been presented both by Makaya 1983 and Nguinguiri 1991.

¹⁵ The fishing population represents close to 2/3 of the total Béninois population in the town.

collections of money for Congolese charity purposes or purposes related to beach infrastructure. The different contacts are sometimes handled through ARB in town, but are more frequently established directly by the fishermen.

- b) ARB-B has both legislative, judicial and executive powers related to the internal social order of the community. Phenomena like public disturbance, theft, fighting, adultery and offenses related to various other aspects of community life are regulated subject to sanctions by the ARB-B leadership. In the most serious cases people are repatriated, sometimes at the expense of the community. Probably some 20 Popo men or more have been forced to leave the community over the past 10 years.

In cases where members offend or come into open conflict with people from the Congolese community or with Government authorities, ARB-B will normally have a role to play either as defender, or mediator, or simply by taking over the case and passing internal judgement.

- c) It is involved in all matters concerning the safety and social security of community members. This is illustrated through its role in coordinating rescue operations at sea when canoes are missing and in an internal system of money collection to repatriate members who fall seriously ill. Travel costs are in such instances covered by the community. If a person dies in Congo a similar system exists for covering funeral costs. All money collection organised by ARB-B is compulsory.
- d) ARB-B also plays a major role in regulating and judging in internal conflicts of a more economic nature. Generally these conflicts concern disputes between production units over the control of Popo labour, internal conflicts between owners and workers or pure economic conflicts between co-owners or in credit relations. In order to fulfil this judicial function a system often referred to as "the transparency" has been established. This implies that major economic transactions or agreements always take place with the presence of a person "accepted"¹⁶ as an ARB-B witness.

¹⁶ Acceptance is misleading in the meaning of formally appointed people. However, the community knows perfectly well which persons are acceptable or not.

