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Call for Papers

Fishing Communities and Livelihoods in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia:

Bridging Historical and Anthropological Perspectives

Workshop

at
Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin
10-11 March 2027

Organised by
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ZMO LEIBNIZ ZENTRUM MODERNER ORIENT

Leibniz Association

The fisheries of the Aral Sea are infamous for their collapse after the desiccation of the body of water on which they depended. The rusting seine boats amid sand dunes are a tangible expression of the asymmetrical relationships between the Central Asian Soviet Republics and Moscow, which prioritised cotton cultivation over fishing when it authorised to withdraw ever-growing volumes of water from rivers for irrigation of the arid lands. The very emergence of the Aral fisheries, however, was a product of a Moscow-driven project to develop industrial fisheries in the early 1930s. Facing the water retreat from ports and the collapse of fish populations in the Aral Sea in the 1970s, the fishing communities adapted their fishing practices without abandoning them. The fishing crews were redeployed to other waterbodies, while the fish-processing plants transformed fish caught at the open seas (Wheeler, 2021). While the Aral Sea catastrophe has become a cautionary tale of state-led water diversion and Soviet environmental mismanagement, the history of its fishing communities remains only partially understood. Other fisheries in the drylands of Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia have received even less scholarly attention.

This workshop aims to understand how different regimes of domination reshaped fisheries in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia and to explore how intensified extraction of fish impacted both fishing communities and aquatic environments. It addresses the entanglement between societies, the fragility of aquatic and dryland environments and relations of domination under imperial rule, in (post-)colonial contexts, under state socialism or in the internal peripheries of independent states. It seeks to understand how communities that depended on aquatic life adapted to changing conditions, both on land and in water.

The history and modalities of human relationships with aquatic life are only beginning to be written and understood. Since the motorisation of fishing vessels, the development of railways and refrigeration from the end of the 19th, fishers have gone ever further from the shore to satisfy the growing consumer demand for protein (Bricas et al., 2026). The industrialisation of fisheries has enabled intensified extractive pressure on populations of cod, salmon, anchovy, whales and seals. Governments, scientists and industrialists have transformed these living creatures into a resource to be studied, exploited and conserved, in a word – governed. Deconstructing the “terrestrial bias” (Rozwadowski, 2013) that represented oceans as “things crossed for transit or warfare” (Demuth, 2024), environmental historians now consider seas in all their depth, as a “last frontier” (Grancher and Rivoal, 2025) of extractivist expansion, yet already anthropised and degraded. Governmental decisions to support industrial fisheries resulted in the depletion of the living beneath the waves, while scientific assessments and models of fish populations served as tools to sustain and extract. However, the history of fisheries has been written largely from the perspective of the northern oceans, particularly the North Atlantic and the North Pacific, leaving the fisheries of the Global South at the margins of the historiography (Bolster, 2012; Finley, 2017, 2011; Holm, 2012; Locher, 2026; McKenzie, 2010).

This workshop proposes thus a double shift. The first is spatial: it calls to decentre fisheries history from the northern oceans and to redirect attention to fisheries in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. The second shift is methodological: rather than approaching fisheries primarily through the history of state regulation, expert knowledge and technologies, the workshop adopts a bottom-up perspective centred on fishing communities.

Anthropologists and historians studying fishing communities in the North Atlantic have demonstrated how the emergence of larger and mechanised vessels, state support for industrial fishing and the integration of fishing into international markets reconfigured local solidarities. It also marginalised small-boat and subsistence fishing, redefined gendered divisions of labour and space and encouraged the recruitment of crews from outside the community or led to the loss of local jobs. The goal of this workshop is to investigate whether

similar patterns have emerged in the fisheries of Africa's arid regions, the Middle East, and Central Asia. If so, it aims to determine its chronologies and mechanisms. If not, did fisheries in these regions follow distinct trajectories?

Although fisheries are commonly divided into small-scale (also called "small-boat" or "artisanal") and large-scale (industrial) sectors, the distinction remains fluid. Industrial fisheries rely on capital-intensive technologies (such as trawlers or purse seiners), wage labour, and corporate forms of organisation. On the contrary, artisanal fisheries are labour-intensive, rely on manual force and less mechanised gear, while fish processing depends on drying and salting rather than refrigeration. They are organised at the level of households or local communities and operate in coastal or inland nearshore waters. Small-scale fishers not only supply local and regional markets, but can also be integrated into export-oriented value chains. Despite the worldwide industrialisation of fisheries, small-boat fisheries are still estimated to sustain the livelihoods of more than 90 per cent of the world's fisherfolk, including those engaged in fish processing and trade (Fabinyi and Barclay, 2022).

Fishing communities comprise all those whose livelihoods depend, directly or indirectly, on fisheries. Beyond people who capture fish, they include those involved in boatbuilding, net making, gear maintenance, fish processing, transport, trade, and marketing. The fishing communities under study are either geographical (inhabitants of the same village or neighbourhood) or occupational ones (members of the crew on the same ship). The workshop aims to explore their social organisation, as well as their interactions with other actors: traders, industrialists or the authorities, in order to understand how fishing communities responded and adapted to the social, political and environmental transformations caused by the effort to intensify fisheries or to maintain them in the face of fish stock depletion.

The workshop aims to bring together historians and anthropologists working on fisheries and fishing communities in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia since the 19th century with two goals. First, to contribute to the decentring of fisheries scholarship by bringing into focus inland and coastal fisheries of these regions and to shift the focus from the northern oceans. Second, to build a network of scholars working on fishing communities in (post)colonial, socialist and peripheral contexts, contributing to the growing body of scholarship on these regions (Camelin, 2006; Dahou, 2018; Knudsen, 2004; Malm and Esmailian, 2012; Ross, 2024; Vermeren, 2023; Wilson, 2021).

The workshop warmly invites contributions from historians and anthropologists addressing one or more of the following, non-exhaustive lines of inquiry:

Aquatic livelihoods in the drylands: emergence and decline of fishing communities

While some fishing communities, such as those of the Nile Delta in Egypt, have centuries-long histories, cases from Lake Turkana in Kenya and the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan suggest that fishing could become a seasonal or long-term livelihood for pastoralists after the loss of their livestock, lasting from a single drought to several generations. In the late nineteenth century, Samburu pastoralists near the Lake Turkana learned to fish from the Elmolo fishing community and did so until they could recover their herds, incorporating fishing in their subsistence strategies (Sobania, 1988). This theme raises several questions. Under what circumstances did populations turn to fishing in the context of water scarcity? How were fishing activities articulated with other occupations within pluriactive rural economies? How did droughts, cattle loss, irrigation projects, and fluctuations in water availability reshape fishing livelihoods? How did fishing communities respond to catastrophes, socio-political upheavals, and armed conflicts?

Negotiating use rights to water and fishing grounds

In response to declining fish stocks since the 1960s, the Mafia Island Marine Park, established in Tanzania in 1995, imposed a conservation enclosure that dispossessed local fishing communities of their customary rights to fishing grounds. Yet local fishers participated in the negotiations, hoping the park would protect their waters from outside fishers who practised dynamite fishing (Walley, 2004). This line of inquiry examines how rights to water and fishing grounds were defined, negotiated, and contested both inside of the fishing communities among its members and in their interactions with external actors, would that be other fishers, state authorities or non-governmental actors. How did transformist, conservationist or developmentalist projects driven by state authorities transform the environment and reshape access to fishing grounds? Did the scarcity of water make conflicts over access to fisheries in situations of domination fundamentally different from those observed at the northern fisheries?

Moral economies of fishing communities: kinship and non-commercial exchanges

Contributions are invited to examine the meanings and practices of non-commercial fish exchange in order to understand the moral economy of the fishing communities, its role in maintaining social relationships and their eventual environmental impact (Ben-Yehoyada, 2017; Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971). How did the non-commercial exchange of fish shape relations between fisherfolk and other social groups, traders or authorities in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia where societies were shaped by kinship ties, tribal affiliations, and historically situated forms of solidarity and authority? What symbolic meanings were attached to particular fish and aquatic species, and on what occasions were they mobilised or expressed?

Knowledge from below: fishing techniques and responses to resource depletion

On the British Gold Coast, new herring drift (*ali*) and beach seine (*yevudor*) nets were introduced by African fishing entrepreneurs in the late nineteenth century and very soon, their greater catching capacity generated conflicts among fishing communities, which mobilised customary institutions and colonial authorities to arbitrate disputes over the legitimacy and environmental consequences of these new fishing techniques (Wilson, 2026). This theme invites contributions that address the fishing communities not only as repositories of vernacular knowledge but also as sites of technical experimentation, environmental reflexivity and local regulation. To what extent did artisanal fishers themselves contribute to resource depletion? How was their knowledge used by experts, colonial authorities, and state regulators?

Submission Guidelines

Please send an abstract of 300–500 words, together with a short biographical note (100-150 words), to anna.safronova@zmo.de by **1st of August.**

Financial support for travel and accommodation is currently subject to funding applications. The level of reimbursement will depend on the outcome of these applications. When submitting your application, we kindly ask you to indicate whether you would require financial support to attend the workshop.

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