WEATHERING THE COMMONS:
RESILIENCE AND HETEROGENEITY IN AN INLAND FISHERY,
MWERU-LUAPULA, ZAMBIA

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the multiethnic, highly mobile Mweru-Luapula population of fishers, traders, and farmers of Zambia and Democratic Republic of Congo, and the fishery it relies upon. I argue that community resilience in response to a highly variable freshwater fishery has not been an application of a homogeneous group indigenous knowledge system, but instead, extends from the heterogeneous nature of its ecological and human populations. The resilience of this fishery economy over time can be attributed to fluid social, ecological, and political relations among constituent groups. They have developed the ability to react to an environment that floods seasonally and changes its constitution annually. I examine how people living on this fishery maintain its sustainability as a shared resource; how laws, governance, and historical circumstances affect constituent behaviors and choices; and how this ecologically dynamic fishery constrains some groups, but endows others. Although many scientists
and policymakers believe it to be collapsing, evidence from my fieldwork suggests otherwise.

This study is based on methods that include 23 months of participant observation, from December 2003 to November 2005, and seventy semi-structured and formal interviews with fishers, traders, government officials, and customary rulers, among others. I conducted a 12-month quantitative and qualitative survey of three fish markets on the southeastern bank of Lake Mweru from September 2004 through August 2005, collecting fish species distribution and numbers, fish length, and comments from traders and fishers. Further methods include: spatial, demographic, and social organization of two villages, transcription and translation of oral histories, and archival research in the National Archives of Zambia.

This dissertation provides an example of a common-pool resource system that counters the static/equilibrium view of human ecology and a dissenting case study to predictive models that argue the singular viability of close-knit homogeneous commons communities. Mweru-Luapula is ecologically diverse and dynamic with a population constituted by individuals who share occupational, but not necessarily kinship ties, and who have constructed behavioral institutions over time that maintain this region’s economic and ecological viability. This dissertation contributes to common-pool resource theory, anthropological methodology, and social science research in south-central Africa.