

# The Green March brings forth the desert treasures

Japan-Morocco economic and technical cooperation in the fishing sector has inadvertently resulted in Moroccan domestic politics integrating Western Sahara into the national territory. Japanese cooperation does not officially extend to Western Sahara due to the region's disputed political status, yet it was nevertheless effectively used by the Moroccan government to develop the fishing industry in the region. This was motivated by the rich fishing grounds off the south-Atlantic coastline, from Tarfaya to the Mauritanian border, which are good for more than 60 percent of the Moroccan national fishery production in quantity and value. Furthermore, after thirty years of Japanese cooperation, the Moroccan fishing industry in Laâyoune and Dakhla (Western Sahara) now plays a leading role in the south-south cooperation between Morocco and sub-Saharan countries, by initiating workshops and educational programmes designed for the transferral of technical knowledge.

Mayuka Tanabe



FISH MAKES UP HALF of all animal protein consumption in Japan, the highest rate in the world; the fishing industry has long been a vital part of economic and social life of the nation. Since the 1960s, however, Japan has had to start importing fisheries products (seafood) as a way to counter-balance the loss of domestic and distant-water production.<sup>1</sup> As reliance upon imported fisheries products intensified in the mid 1980s, cooperation with African and Oceanic countries was a necessary measure for the Japanese government in securing fisheries import while maintaining relationships through technical and economic cooperation.

The start of the Japanese-Moroccan cooperation was the fisheries agreement signed between the two countries in 1985, in which the Moroccan government allowed thirty Japanese high-sea vessels to fish tuna and bonito in their 200 miles offshores. Since then Morocco has also supported Japan's position at ICCAT Madrid (concerning tuna fishing), with regards to the Washington Treaty (International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling 1956), and the IWC (International Whaling Commission). In short, Japanese fisheries diplomacy in Morocco has had three main objectives: 1) securing food import for the Japanese nation; 2) acquiring rights for their vessels to fish off the Moroccan Atlantic shores; 3) acquiring political allies to defend their position on whaling and tuna fishing in the global context. So far the two countries have built a mutually beneficial relation, in terms of strengthening their political and economic influences in the African continent and beyond.

## Western Sahara: the core of the Moroccan fishing industry

In November 1975 hundreds of thousands of Moroccans crossed their southern border into Spanish Sahara in the strategic mass demonstration known as 'the Green March'. Accompanied by 20,000 troops, the event forced Spain to relinquish its power over the disputed territory. Although Morocco at first received very little resistance, it eventually became embroiled in a sixteen-year war with the Saharawi Polisario Front, representing some of the indigenous population, until a 1991 UN ceasefire. Morocco has secured *de facto* control of much of the region (including the coast) since then. The development of the fishing industry in this region was one of the important Moroccan policies to create income opportunities for both Moroccan immigrants

coming from the north of Tarfaya and also for the local Saharawi groups, in view of total annexation of Western Sahara to Morocco by means of economic integration.

In light of this political context, Japan's financial and technical support has played an indirect but significant role. 2015 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the start of the cooperation between Japan and Morocco, which began with a bilateral agreement on marine fishing in 1985. Japan-Morocco relations are characterised by the two countries' heavy economic reliance on import and export of fishery products. Morocco is the top exporter of fishery products in Africa. As a leading foreign exchange earner, accounting for 56 percent of agricultural and 16 percent of total exports, the fishing industry is an important economic sector of Morocco with an inextricable connection to Asia, Africa and the European Union.<sup>2</sup> Due to the growing demand for fisheries products, not only from Spain, Portugal and Japan, but also from Russia and China, the marine species off the Mediterranean and Atlantic shores of Morocco proper have become endangered. Therefore, south-Atlantic fishing off the shores of Western Sahara (Laâyoune, Boujdour and Dakhla) is of utmost importance to the Moroccan fishing industry; the Western Saharan coastal area accounts for approximately 50 percent (in quantity) of Morocco's annual production of more than 1,000,000 ton. Furthermore, the types of fish caught in this region mainly consist of cephalopods (such as octopus and squids) and other deep-sea fish, which sell at a three or four times higher price than the sardines and small pelagic fish caught in Morocco proper. In 2013, the fish captured along the Western Saharan coast accounted for 64 percent of the Moroccan national production in value.<sup>3</sup>

Although the JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) is not directly active in the development of Western Sahara, its models have nevertheless been locally adopted and implemented, exemplified by the highly computerised fish market, 'the Hall of Fish' (*la halle au poisson*) in the port of Laâyoune. Currently the ports of Laâyoune and Dakhla boast the most advanced levels of hygiene, traceability, inspection, and price control in the entire African continent, and strictly comply with the European Union's import standards.

Since the 1980s, the Moroccan fishing sector has been profoundly transformed by Japanese cooperation. The development of infrastructure, fishing techniques and human resources has made Morocco less dependent on Europe and

Above:  
Disembarkation  
of sardines at the  
port of Laâyoune  
(photo by author).

has increased its negotiating power with regard to fisheries agreements. Furthermore, the development of the artisanal fishing sector has contributed to a new pattern of internal migration of fishermen (see below), and has also helped them acquire new techniques and hygiene standards, making their products competitive in the international market.

However, Japanese cooperation has also had a profound effect on the integration process of Western Sahara into Moroccan territory. It started with the building of the port in Agadir in the mid-1980s, which initially served as a supply base for the Moroccan tanks rolling into Western Sahara for the war against the Polisario. Eventually the Moroccan government utilised the Japanese ODA (Official Development Assistance) to build a dock for high-sea vessels, which became a national disembarkation point for the ships fishing off the shores of Laâyoune and Dakhla. The Japanese cooperation served as the foundation for the Moroccan government's construction of the most advanced ports and fishery facilities in Western Sahara, which has become the undeniable centre of Morocco's fishing industry.

## The Moroccanisation of the fishing sector

The cooperation between Japan and Morocco officially started in 1985, at the request of the Moroccan government for help to 'Moroccanise' the professional workforce in the fishing sector, which had long been dominated by foreigners. Prior to this time, the Moroccan domestic fishing sector had no training institutions or fishing ports with docks; it lacked the necessary infrastructure for disembarkation and had no freezing facilities. Morocco was merely making its fishing grounds available to the European Union and was missing out on a significant amount of foreign currency.

In order to Moroccanise its high-sea captains and trawlers, and to provide practical education for its mariners, the first EPM (*École des Pêches Maritimes*) was established in Agadir with JICA's non-refundable financial and technical support. The EPM's educational programme was supported by the UN's FAO, and the curriculum was based on the French system. JICA sent several experts to teach navigational techniques. By 2000, thanks to these educational efforts, all the high-sea and inshore captains and mariners were Moroccan nationals. The EPM Agadir was upgraded to ISPM (*Institut Supérieur des Pêches Maritimes*) in 2006. Currently there are five ITPM (*Institut de la Technologie des Pêches*

# Japanese cooperation and Morocco's south-Atlantic fishing

Maritimes), eight CQPMs (*Centre de la Qualification des Pêches Maritimes*), and one ISPM in the coastal cities of Morocco.

The second initiative by the Japanese-Moroccan cooperation, was to build the INRH (*Institut de la Recherche Halieutique*) headquarters in Casablanca, a fisheries research centre that promotes diversification of production and aquaculture, which controls the number of vessels in port and their fishing allowances. For example, every year (since 1989) they set a 'biological rest' period for octopus fishing, so as to protect the animals during their breeding season.

The third important pillar of the cooperation, also vital to Moroccan politics with regard to Western Sahara, was to provide infrastructure for artisanal fishermen and their small-scale fishing activities. Historically, Moroccan artisanal fishermen sold their catch to intermediaries (*mareyeurs*), who bought at very low prices and who in return delivered the necessary provisions such as gasoline or ice, since the fishermen mostly had quite solitary working and living conditions. This project aimed to break this system of isolation. It set about building a fishing industry in Agadir, with docks and other substantial infrastructure. In order to sedentarise the artisanal fishermen, the first fishing village (*village de pêcheurs*, VDP) was built in Imessouane in 1996, on the Atlantic coast 99km north of Agadir, with the Japanese aid of 63 million Moroccan dirhams. The project was designed to improve the living and working conditions of 200 artisanal fishermen on the site; to advance the safety of accessing and navigating the sea for 60 small scale boats; and to enhance the conservation and marketing of fish. The community based approach included the creation of a cooperative, which manages fishing activities and the general needs of everyday life, such as the distribution of gasoline, the mosque and meeting rooms for education. Freezing facilities, and the knowledge of how to fabricate ice, are crucial elements in raising the quality and value of merchandise. Following suit, three more VDPs were created on the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts: Cala Iris (1996), Souiria Q'dima (1998-1999) and Sidi Hsaine (2002-2003). Later, a number of unloading points, PDA (*Point de Débarquement Aménagé*), similar to VDPs but without ports, were created. The Moroccan government built a total of 30 PDAs up and down the coast, mostly in the Western Sahara.

The 'sedentarisation' of villagers in Imessouane was partially successful; their revenue went up significantly and many benefited from insurance (CNSS, *Casse Nationale de la Sécurité Sociale*). The fishermen come to the VDP as early as 4am in the morning to prepare their materials, and return to their home villages after work. Their wives engage in other economic activities, such as collecting mussels, herding and cultivating Argan trees. They also participate in literacy programmes at the mosque. Some of the fishermen have indicated some technical problems at the port, preventing them from fishing during the winter months. The port of Imessouane is indeed only usable for five to six months, during the summer and autumn.

As a result, about 30 percent of the young villagers in the Agadir region migrate south to Dakhla, Tan Tan, Boujdour and other areas during winter months (December to February), which is also the season of octopus fishing. Octopus is abundant in the Western Saharan waters, and fetch higher prices than other products. Migrants from Imessouane generally build temporary barracks near the disembarkation sites, and find work with local boat owners.

Before 2000, Laâyoune and Dakhla lay in an anarchical territory where Moroccans and foreigners would randomly catch octopus and other marine species and then disembark at the Spanish port of Las Palmas in the Canary Islands. After the building of the modern ports and PDAs, the central state encouraged the local Saharawi people to work in fishing. The project 'Sakia El Hamra' was implemented in 2011, which aimed to absorb the young indigenous population into the fishing sector, by giving them education and offering 250 boats (one for six persons) for free, equipped with fishing tools. However, the project to provide work for the

Below:  
Imessouane: the first fishing village (VDP) created by Japanese cooperation (photo by author).



indigenous population simply resulted in more work performed by migrants from Morocco proper, since many of the locals rented out or sold their boats and did not actually work themselves. Some of the migrants from the north of Tarfaya (Agadir, Essaouira, Safi, El Jadida, Marrakech, etc.) are now settled in the region, with sufficient income to buy a house and educate their children, whereas others leave their families in the home villages and engage in seasonal labour.

## South-south cooperation

The current advanced state of the Moroccan fishing industry is the most successful example of the Japanese fisheries policies in Africa. After 30 years of Japanese cooperation in the Moroccan fishing sector, involving the non-refundable annual aid of 500 million yen (4.42 million euros), Morocco has grown to possess a solid infrastructure and expertise in the fishing sector. What characterises the Japanese cooperation most is the 'win-win relation', guided by the principle to help build up the national economy of the African country, as opposed to mere exploitation of resources. As a result, Morocco now functions as mediator of technical knowledge transfer, from Japan to countries in sub-Saharan Africa, referred to as 'south-south cooperation'.

In March 2016, the 27th edition of the Crans Montana Forum took place in Dakhla, with the theme 'Africa and the South-South Cooperation - Toward a better Governance for a sustainable Economic & Social Development', reinforcing Dakhla's leading position not only in the national fishing industry, but also in the south-south cooperation. More than 1000 participants from 130 countries were present, including African and European entrepreneurs looking for business opportunities in Western Sahara. By choosing the city of Dakhla as a venue for the forum, the Moroccan government intended to showcase the advanced level of its fishing industry and economic activities, and the impact on the sub-Saharan African countries' development through regional cooperation.

The strong relationship between Morocco and Francophone Africa dates back to the time of late king Hassan II, who sent several political advisors and made significant investments in various sectors such as banking, telecommunication and insurance in Gabon, Guinea, Benin, Senegal, Comoro and Madagascar. The south-south cooperation in the fisheries sector is aimed at further solidifying Morocco's economic and political influence in West Africa.

## Conclusion

Japanese financial and technical support to Morocco's fishing industry has not only led to unbelievable development and growth—turning it from a lawless, artisanal and unproductive sector, into a high-tech and profitable industry—but the cooperation has also had an indirect effect on internal politics concerning the incorporation of Western Sahara. In a win-win situation, Japan benefits from Morocco's fisheries products: the octopus collected in Dakhla alone constitute 40-60 percent of the Japanese market demand.

On 6 November 2015, the Moroccan nation celebrated their 40th anniversary of the Green March; like a swarm of bees they eventually extracted treasures from the desolate desert landscape. With the abundance of fishing resources, Western Sahara has become an integral part of the Moroccan economy, attracting migrants and foreign investors who, in so doing, recognise the region as Moroccan territory. Evidently, for the Moroccan government and its people, the Green March has no end.

**Mayuka Tanabe, is a Fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden; and a Postdoctoral researcher (anthropologist) at the Institut des Mondes Africains/École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. Her research *The cultural impact of Japanese-Moroccan cooperation in the fishing industry* is funded by the Canon Foundation in Europe (mayuka\_tanabe@hotmail.com).**

## References

- 1 See, for example: Akaha, T. 1985. *Japan in Global Ocean Politics*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; Smith, R.D. 2015. *Japan's International Fisheries Policy: Law, Diplomacy and Politics Governing Resource Security*. London: Routledge.
- 2 See, for example: Galduf, J.M.J. 1997. 'Spanish-Moroccan Economic Relations', *Mediterranean Politics* 2(1):49-63; Damis, J. 1998. 'Morocco's 1998 Fisheries Agreement with the European Union: A Crisis Resolved', *Mediterranean Politics* 32: 61-73.
- 3 *La Mer en chiffres* 2013. Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Fishing, Rabat.

