1973

Fishing in Calliaqua

Michael A. Krasnow

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro_res_rpt12
Part of the Anthropology Commons

7.
Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro_res_rpt12/7
FISHING IN CALLIAQUA

Michael A. Krasnow

Calliaqua is a coastal community, not far from Kingstown, with a population of about 1,200 people. Most of the land in Calliaqua and its environs is broken up into small holdings, which have traditionally been farmed. Today, however, the majority of residents are wage workers, and much of the agricultural land is not worked. It was my impression that only a small percentage of the employed residents have secure full-time jobs. Rather, many of the people find day wage work on road gangs or engage in part-time labor.

Calliaqua, in terms of an island-wide system of stratification, can be considered to represent the middle and lower of the island's four classes. The middle class in Calliaqua (probably not more than 10% of the population) consists of shop-keepers and people with civil service appointments in Kingstown. Class lines are not rigidly drawn nor are they barriers to social interaction. However, this middle class group can be distinguished by their possession of cars, membership in the Anglican Church, sending their children to secondary school, or living in large cinder-block homes.

The lower class is represented largely by day laborers and the unemployed, but also includes shop assistants, fishermen, truck drivers, domestics, and those who find employment in the hotels. Incomes in this class seldom reach over $600 (E.C.C.). Many of these persons have multiple occupations (cf. Comitas 1964); almost all operate on credit at the local shops. It is difficult to characterize this group. All are poor, but some rent and some own homes, most are unmarried, and most have membership in one of the three local churches, although church attendance is rare.

The multiplicity of occupations, the variety of social alignments, and the varied life experience are expressive of the heterogeneous nature of the community. Calliaqua partakes of both the rural and urban aspects of the island.

Within this milieu, subsistence and commercial fishing are important activities. This paper is principally concerned with fishing as a cash-oriented full-time occupation involving seine nets and deep water hand lines. Subsistence fishing will be only briefly discussed. Subsistence fishing is important, however, both in terms of the number of males engaged in the activity and in terms of protein contribution to the diet which consists largely of starchy rhizomes, plaintains, and rice.

Subsistence Fishing

Subsistence fishing is a casual activity, characterized by the lack of necessity for coordination of a work group, small investment,
and low productivity. Individuals engaged in this activity are chiefly concerned with contributing food to a particular household; rarely do they sell their catch. Subsistence fishing is generally restricted to the inshore area. The basic techniques utilized are: 1) line and pole, 2) spear gun, 3) sprat net, and 4) fish traps.

Of all the techniques, the line and pole is most common. This method requires the least skill and eliminates most of the risks associated with the sea. Generally the catches are not large. Most line and pole fishing is done at night off the rocky areas of the coast by groups of boys or older men. Primarily, only the very poor engage in night fishing as the individual is often exposed to uncomfortable, damp, night air and rain.

Spear-gun fishing, a technique introduced in the early 1950's, is popular among the youth. Skilled spear-gun fishermen often use a small boat to facilitate access to the reef areas. At least two of these youthful fishermen regularly sell some sea gar and grouper at the market. But most of the youthful spear fishermen are not so successful. Usually they cannot afford the $20 (E.C.C.) investment for a face mask, flippers, and gun. Rather, they buy only the mask and build a gun out of wood and old rubber tires.

Fish traps are infrequently employed in Calliaqua, although they are widely used in other areas of the Caribbean in cash-oriented fishing. In Calliaqua only one individual owns traps. The small fish and crabs caught in the traps are never sold. The traps are baited with coconut and fruit, set in the bay, and tended about twice a week. Fishermen explain the limited use of the wire mesh traps on the basis that they are easily stolen or lost due to heavy seas.

Use of the sprat net is restricted to two old fishermen. Both nets are owned by one of these individuals and he loans to the other. A sprat net sells for about $20-30 (E.C.C.). Due to their price and the skill required to throw them, very few nets are used in the area, although historically they were apparently quite common. A variety of small fish are procured through this method, which involves stalking small schools of fish from the shore, generally early in the morning. The two old fishermen would typically catch 4-5 pounds of fish. When in need of money, they would sell two or three of the larger fish for $.60 to .80 (E.C.C.). The remainder would be brought home, although commonly one or two fish would be given away.

In summary, subsistence fishing is generally an individual concern, not particularly productive, only part-time, and primarily focused on food procurement.
Cash-Oriented Fishing

During the summer months of 1970, between 20-25 men were employed as full-time fishermen. However, interviews indicated that there is variation in this number from year to year and there is also marked seasonal fluctuation. During the winter months, trolling for pelagic fish is popular, and informants estimate that the number of fishermen may double. Cash-oriented fishing also involves several other groups of persons: shipwrights, boat owners, and those involved in a small retail trade which sporadically supplies inland communities with fish. The residents of Calliaqua are the primary consumers.

The distinctive features of cash-oriented fishing and its declining importance in Calliaqua can be appraised from two points of view: the investor (boat-owner) and the fisherman. The investor is faced with relatively high costs (at least initially), uneven returns on his investment, and management problems. The fisherman is faced with problems of uncertain wages from fishing and of physical and social stress in the work.

The investor

Initial capital requirements effectively minimize the proportion of the community who can be boat-owners. The chart below represents the capital outlay (E.C.C.) for the three types of fishing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seine Fishing</th>
<th>Ballihou</th>
<th>Hand-line (deep water)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Net</td>
<td>$350</td>
<td>Boat $250-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boat</td>
<td>$350-500</td>
<td>Boats $300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$700-850</td>
<td>Motor $250-300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not surprising that in Calliaqua fishermen themselves own neither boats nor nets. In fact, only one fisherman of 17 interviewed had a bank account. Fishermen receive shares of the catch sold which amount to a little over subsistence wage (my rough estimate would be between $300 and $600 (E.C.C.) annually.) Further, opportunities for loans are not available due to scarcity of funds and the fact that fishermen are generally poor credit risks. In contrast, seven of the eight present boat-owners maintain bank accounts and are employed in another occupation. In fact, all present boat-owners, and two of the three past boat-owners who were interviewed, had never been fishermen.

In counterpoint, informants pointed out that traditionally fishermen had owned boats, a situation which presently obtains in Bequia, Greathead, Kingstown, and Barrouallie, major fishing centers in the state. This suggests that Calliaqua has been subject to different economic pressures than some other communities. The socio-economic statuses of boat-owners indicate that these individuals generally release capital
into fishing, as a means of collecting additional income, rather than using the returns on their investments as a primary means of support. The occupations of present boat-owners are: shopkeeper (2), druggist, government employee, hotel owner, cab driver, sea captain (2).

Judging from sales of fish brought in by hand-line crews it is doubtful whether boat-owners can realize a return of more than $600 (E.C.C.) a year, even if they could keep their boats in continual operation. Seine fishing returns, in particular, are unpredictable and uneven. Spectacular catches might yield as much as $500 (E.C.C.), but these are very rare. Informants noted that such a successful catch had not occurred within the last couple of years. Moreover, spectacular success is counter-balanced by equally spectacular catastrophe. One shopkeeper related that he had owned a seine which first had paid for itself in a single day of operation and then, shortly thereafter, had been totally ruined on the reef. This shopkeeper did not re-invest.

Another set of problems for the boat-owner relates to management of crew and equipment. Fishing equipment must be properly maintained. Seines, for example, must be constantly patched and replaced. In Calliaqua only part of this work was done by the captains of each boat. Nets are often made at an asylum near the town at piece-work rates. Boat repairs are completed by shipwrights, but boat-owners usually arrange for the repairs. Owners store boat motors at home; when in use, the motors are subject to constant breakdown which means that the crew relies on sails.

Boat-owners have problems maintaining good relations with their crews. Disputes between owners and crew lead individuals and entire crews to transfer from boat to boat. Two boats lay beached during the summer because the owners were unable to find crews, despite a surplus of fishermen. Owners find it difficult to check catches without seeming to call into question the honesty of the crew. Owners also find it difficult to inquire why a boat had a poor catch or did not fish on a particular day. Few owners, in fact, ever venture down to the beach when the crews return from a day's fishing. Consequently boat-owners maintain only peripheral control over their investment.

On balance, when one considers the high risks of boat loss or net damage, the difficulties with crews, and the uneven return of fishing, it is apparent that fishing at this technological level has a limited ability to attract investment capital.

The fisherman

As an occupation, fishing has several distinctive features setting it apart from other types of work available on the island: 1) uncertain weekly income, 2) physical stress and even danger, 3) problems of mutual dependence of the crew and of group decision-making. These factors are interrelated; they combine to limit the attractiveness of the occupation.
Fishing and a variety of other occupations yield approximately equal wages. The average weekly household income on St. Vincent is $14.25 (E.C.C.) (Institute of Social and Economic Research 1961).

I estimated that hand-line fishermen in Calliaqua draw, on an average, $15,000 (E.C.C.) a week, while clerks have an income (E.C.C.) of $10.80/week, maids $8.50/week, road laborers $2.50/day, and agricultural laborers receive between $1.80 and $2.50/day. Thus, while typical average wages are similar for different occupations, the wages of fishermen accrue on a different basis than the others. Fishermen are paid on a share-of-the-catch basis. If no fish are caught, no wages are paid. This causes a great deal of fluctuation in weekly income. In addition, while other workers in Calliaqua sometimes might have variable incomes due to supply and demand of labor, fishermen always work on an unpredictable schedule for unpredictable wages.

Under even good conditions, the work of fishermen is strenuous. Rowing, to keep the boat on a particular bank, and weighing and hauling line can be made yet more difficult by rough seas. On certain days, the fishermen know that they risk getting chills from rain and spray, while on other days, they may be sunburned. Finally, there is always the danger for fishermen of drowning.

In contrast to road work, agricultural labor or even subsistence fishing, cash-oriented fishing demands complex cooperation and decision-making by the work group. In day wage work, for example, the individual works at an expected pace at a particular task which demands little cooperation from other workers. On plantations and work crews, foremen assign tasks, direct activity, and assume responsibility to higher authority. Absenteeism does not adversely affect the ability of a work group to perform its jobs, although it might affect the amount of work completed in a given day. The size of task groups can also be altered to meet current demands and workers in different groups are interchangeable. These factors do not hold for fishing.

In Calliaqua the minimum crew required for hand-line fishing is four. Although individual crewmen can be replaced from a small pool of fishermen not currently attached to a particular boat, it is usually the case that when two fishermen are absent, a boat will not leave the beach. When a captain is not able to fish, again a boat will not leave the beach, for the captain assumes responsibility for the boat.

Bait getting, in hand-line fishing, also requires dependence on crew members. Members rotate weekly or monthly the responsibility for obtaining bait in Kingstown. If the individual responsible on a particular day either fails to go to town or goes in too late and does not return with the bait the crew cannot fish.

Fishing demands that a crew arrive at a consensus as to whether or not to fish on a particular day and off which bank to fish. Crews could often be seen sitting on the beach for several hours watching the weather while other boats went to sea, because of differences of opinion. Similar problems occur off the banks; at times a crew unable to reach a consensus will return to the beach.
Scheduling difference between boats and differences of opinion within crews in deciding to fish can be at least partially explained by the subjective nature of the evaluation of fishing conditions. Hand-line fishermen weigh the following factors in their decision: phase of the moon, tide, wind and roughness of the sea, current, and cloud cover. Seine fishermen, in contrast, rely heavily on sighting schools of fish in the inshore area. Thus the decision to fish is based on the likelihood of a catch balanced against the expected work and risks: for example, heavy currents would involve greater work input while wind conditions might increase the physical danger.

In summary, the uncertainties involved in fishing for cash are significant in comparison with other lower class occupations. The fisherman not only accepts uncertain wages and attendant physical risks, but he relies heavily on a work group which must function collectively through consensual decision-making.

Conclusions

Cash-oriented fishing provides uncertain incomes for both boatowners and fishermen. Similarly, both the boat owner and fisherman, as individuals, have limited control over their respective investments in capital and work input. Both factors seem to offer barriers to the development of fishing at its present technological level. Furthermore, some contraction of fishing operations is likely as development of the island proceeds and alternative labor and capital investments become possible.