

THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF COMMUNITY AMONG SMALL-SCALE FISHERS IN MERCEDES, CAMARINES NORTE*

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Community-based action research and other intervention programs have gained currency in such fields as forestry and natural resources. Many of these programs rely on old conceptualizations of community focusing on such features as territorial boundaries, common goals and even affective aspects. The paper offers an ethnomethodological understanding of community as an accomplishment; it proposes that the properties of social life which seem objective, factual and trans-situational, are actually managed accomplishments or achievements of local processes. The aim of the ethnomethodological inquiry is to analyze the situated conduct of fishers in order to see how "objective" properties of community are accomplished.

Narratives of small scale fishers in Mercedes, Camarines Norte are analyzed to illustrate how fishers are "doing community." Because fishing involves access to resources in the sea and competition among several fishers, the fishers have over time evolved a set of norms governing conduct that is centered on sharing. The paper discusses different categories of sharing – from negotiating access to marine resources to sharing of catch with fishing companions and village people. Sharing also includes treating friends and kin to drinks and food after a successful fishing event. Thus, sharing behavior is something that is accomplished through interaction with others, and community is an accomplishment involving the local management of fishers' conduct in relation to normative conceptions of appropriate attitudes and activities for particular fishing-related situations. It also cites implications of the use of the ethnomethodological perspective on community for intervention programs specifically in forestry and fisheries.

INTRODUCTION

Community is a complex concept whose utility has waxed and waned over the years. It has regained currency in recent years due in part to the recognition of the importance of local initiatives and participatory approaches to development. For example, in forestry and natural resources, many action research and other intervention programs often invoke community-based approaches. How community is conceptualized is essential

to understanding why the approach seems appropriate for some programs but not necessarily so for others. The paper offers a not very popular conceptualization of community. It proposes community not as a static feature of collectivities but as an accomplishment or achievement of members through interaction processes in local situations.

The data for this paper are drawn from a bigger qualitative study that focused on intergenerational gender relations in fishing families (Lamug 2003). The study was conducted in two coastal barangays of the town of Mercedes in Camarines Norte, and examined fishing behavior in specific situations. The analysis of fishers' narratives shows patterns which are reflective of norms governing fishing in the barangays and illustrates the processes by which the fishers accomplish community in their fishing and related activities as they share the resources of the sea with other fishers, with kin and with other residents of the barangay. In the course of engaging in fishing for their livelihood, their interactions invoke rules as these apply to the everyday situations encountered in productive activities. In different situational events, the local management of the behavior of fishers results in the strengthening of social bonds and networks.

The paper is organized into four parts. The first presents different conceptualizations of community focusing on the ethnomethodological perspective. The second describes a study of fishers whose narratives were analyzed in this paper. The third part is on sharing and the thematically organized fishing-related practices representing the accomplishment of community. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of the ethnomethodological perspective on community for forestry and natural resources programs.

AN ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNITY

Community is a concept that has taken different meanings in different

contexts. The usage of the term is not entirely consistent even among sociologists. This situation is even compounded by the blurred traditional distinctions between rural and urban communities and the fast changes not only in the communities themselves but more so in the larger geopolitical contexts in which these are embedded.

Community, like any sociological concept, displays many different facets. It has been given different definitions most of which were for purposes of delineating manageable areas of research. Among the earliest definitions was the one given by Maclver (1917:107) where a community is "a social unity whose members recognize as common a sufficiency of interests to allow the interactivities of common life." Over the years the concept has undergone some subtle changes with emphasis on such aspects as co-occupancy of a given territory (Park 1929), sharing "a common culture, ... arranged in a social structure, and exhibit an awareness of their uniqueness and separate entity as a group" (Mercer 1956:27), effects of urbanization, industrialization, and bureaucratization leading to the "eclipse of community" (Stein 1960:107), non-utility of an areally bounded social entity in favor of a new form of "community without propinquity" (Webber 1963:23), interdependence of generalized activities in and through a set of institutions for its continuity as a social and economic unity (Schnore 1973; Castells 1996), social relations characterized by personal intimacy, emotional depth, social coherence, and continuity in time (Baltzell 1968; Nisbet 1969; Crow and Allan 1994; Etzioni 1997), a means of intervention and a process of participation in society (Steuart

1985; Wenger 1995) and community attachment as the social infrastructure to deal with such issues as out-migration and mobilization of residents for community action (Flora and Flora 1990; Allen and Dillman 1994; Lamug 2002).

How does the ethnomethodological perspective differ from all these? The best clue is provided by the word itself – *ology*, “study of”; *method*, “the methods [used by]”; and *ethno*, “folk or people.” It is thus, concerned with the common methods people employ to create a sense of order about the situations in which they interact (Watson and Goulet 1998). The aim of ethnomethodology is the analysis of the situated actions of members of a society in order to see how the supposedly stable patterns of social life are achieved.

The popular sociological explanation for stable patterns of social behavior invokes the institutionalized systems of norms and values which are internalized by the members of society. Parsons (1937) in his theory of action maintains that members of a society are socialized to respond to external social forces and are consequently motivated by inner moral directives. These normative conceptions of our culture specifying the appropriate attitudes and activities for particular situations influence the local management of conduct in such situations (Coulon 1995). Heritage (1984) discusses accountability as the possibility of describing actions and circumstances in serious and consequential fashion. Societal members routinely describe activities in ways that take notice of those activities and placing them in a social framework. These activities are designed with an eye as to how they might be evaluated.

The ethnomethodological perspective’s notion of accountability pertains to both the activities that conform to prevailing normative conceptions and those that deviate. Rather than focusing on conformity or deviance, the issue is the possible assessment of action on the basis of normative conceptions. In other words, the process of rendering something accountable is an interactional accomplishment. Accountability allows persons to conduct their activities in relation to their circumstances (Heritage 1984).

The alternative conceptualization provided by ethnomethodology is that the members of society “do social order” which is the consequence of the “particular, contingent accomplishments of the production and recognition work” conducted by participants (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970:94). Thus, the “objective” and “factual” properties of social life acquire their status as such through the situated conduct of societal members. In other words, the seemingly “objective” properties are produced by people through their language and interaction in specific situations (Gubrium and Holstein 2000).

The meaning of community, therefore, is dependent on the context in which it is invoked. Ethnomethodology addresses the question, how is community made visible through members’ descriptions and accounts (Patton 2002)? It focuses on how members, by invoking rules and elaborating on their application to specific cases, describe and constitute their activities as rational, coherent, and orderly (Zimmerman 1970; Wieder 1998). In fishing barangays, for example,

the descriptions and stories of fishers of their interactions with one another in specific situations are taken to constitute "doing community." These interactions allow others to systematically take the circumstances of the fishers into account and recognize the activities for what they are. Their intelligibility therefore rests on a symmetry between the production of interactions on the one hand and their recognition of the influence of normative conceptions on the other (Heritage 1984; Schegloff 1992).

THE FISHERS OF MERCEDES

The coastal town of Mercedes is Bicol's largest fishing ground and the nation's third largest (Lorejo 2002). Its rich marine resources make the production and processing of fish the major source of livelihood for the people of Mercedes. This fourth-class municipality produces at least 1,000 tons of fish daily. Fishing thus accounts for 56 percent of the town's total revenues. As an established port of trading vessels, numerous fishing vessels of different tonnages and capacities drop anchor on the port during the fishing season.

A total of 26 barangays comprise the town of Mercedes. Of these, two coastal barangays served as the study sites. These are Mambungalon and Pambuan where a large percentage of the households cite small-scale capture fishery as their major source of livelihood similar to most coastal barangays in other parts of the country. For fishers in Mambungalon and Pambuan, San Miguel Bay is their fishing area although when the sea is calm, many go to fish in areas farther than San Miguel Bay. Many households own motorized boats and various kinds of nets and other

gears. They catch a wide variety of fishes and crabs depending on the season. The fishers are all aware of the periodicity and differential availability of marine species. Some species caught have high value in the market while low value ones are consumed by the household. The unpredictable climate and frequency of typhoons are often mentioned as causes of variability in fish catch. Additional sources of variation are mobility of fish and competition with non-local fishers who operate with big boats and mechanized gears. Fishers consider their occupation as very risky. Many accidents and thefts happen at sea putting the lives and boats of the fishers at risk.

Five families, two in Mambungalon and three in Pambuan were the cases for the study. For this paper, the narratives on fishing were used to illustrate how the fishers accomplish community in different situations.

SHARING AND THEMES ON ACCOMPLISHING COMMUNITY

The conceptualization of sharing has taken different forms where each emphasizes a particular facet of sharing. This section presents a brief overview of a selection of these conceptualizations in order to relate these to community. One form characterizes sharing as a distinct mode of transaction (Woodburn 1998; Gell 1992; Gibson 1986). Examples were drawn from hunting and gathering societies where large game is shared following a set of sharing rules. This ethos of sharing is distinguished from, for example, exchange or reciprocity which implies indebtedness and expectation of return.

Sharing often evokes both the spirit of spontaneous generosity and the fair apportionment of what is shared. As a form of economic behavior it implies the logic of divestment as opposed to accumulation. People give without expectation of return. Because some people are in a better position to share than others, sharing brings prestige and social value to the individual sharer and serves to reaffirm his/her status in the group. Moreover, sharing reflects the general expectation in social relations among immediate kinship and neighbors of the obligation of those who have to those who have not. It is an expression of "correct sentiments" in the relationship (Gluckman 1965:45). While sharing may have the consequence of maintaining social hierarchy, on the one hand, it could on the other hand serve as a "leveling mechanism" towards forging egalitarian social relations (Woodburn 1998).

Sharing is concerned "symbolically with 'total inclusion', it is constitutive of social totality, in a most immediate and spontaneous sense" (Mangahas 2000:13). Unlike reciprocity which constitutes persons and dyadic relationships, sharing constitutes specific social wholes. According to Price (1975), reciprocity as involving "sides" is different from sharing which is a "within" relationship. An ethos of sharing is seen to assert a cultural principle of interdependence. It is essential for survival in places that uphold the subsistence ethic. As a survival strategy, it is represented as a way of coping with risk or as a form of insurance so as to be able to depend on others in future time of need (Scott 1976).

Complementary to the act of sharing is the act of taking or partaking. Thus, such

questions as the following are raised 'What is to be shared?', 'To whom should it be shared?', 'Does sharing depend on need, demand or other factors?'

Having described some selected facets of sharing, the next section discusses specific themes in the lives of fishers that draw from the perspective of sharing to illustrate the particular ways by which their everyday interactions represent the accomplishment of community. These themes are sharing the resources of the sea, sharing with fishing companions, sharing the catch with people on the shore after a fishing trip, and commensality after a successful fishing event.

Sharing the resources of the sea

People who make a living from the sea often describe it, on the one hand, as unpredictable, changing with weather and seasonal conditions, treacherous, and generous, soothing and calm, vast and powerful, on the other. These seeming contradictions and tensions reflect the wide diversity by which people view the sea. One common viewpoint is that the sea is much like any common property resource. In this view, there is open access to the resource that may engender the "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin 1968). With unregulated use of the resource, the individual gains from the commons often outweigh the costs which are shared by all. Eventually the depletion of the resource necessitates a course of action to ensure subsistence especially in poverty stricken areas.

The view of the sea as a commons has been criticized as a short temporal perspective. Brox (1990) maintains that

this “initial” phase of open access is generally followed by a “closing” phase where the commons becomes a “desert.” He proposed that the open access phase be described as a “frontier” providing opportunities for delineating identities and communities.

The sea as a resource from which fishers make a living is thus an important space for social interaction. Because there are no individual territorial boundaries, one would expect intense competition among the fishers. Such a scenario would indeed lead to uncontrolled resource exploitation and eventually the tragedy of the commons. But there is ample historical evidence showing that fishers in many different places have over time evolved institutions for control over the resources to avert the tragedy.

How do the fishers of Mercedes “share the sea” to avoid rabid competition and at the same time ensure the sustainability of their source of livelihood? How do the specific interactional processes of their sharing of the sea become accomplishments of community?

The small-scale fishers of Mercedes use small motorized boats and different kinds of nets and other fishing gears. Depending on the season, fishers usually go out to sea in late afternoon, leave their *pangke* (fishing net) in certain areas, and return to retrieve these in early morning. The *pangke* are supposed to have caught the fish to be harvested upon retrieval.

While such a fishing trip is an individual “project” by a fisher and his companion, each trip provides an opportunity for community making. The fishers in practice are governed by the principle of primacy (i.e., a fisher who

arrives in a particular area first, stakes a claim on the area). This stake is respected by fellow fishers who lay their own stakes some distance from the first one. At sea, where there are no territorial markers, how is this principle upheld? According to Romeo, “Alam namin kung kaninong pangke ang nakikita sa laut kasi may kanya-kanya kaming ganito (pointing to a floater).” (We know to whom the nets belong because of the distinctiveness of the floaters.) So as each fisher steers his boat, he watches out for markers like floaters of nets, little flags of other kinds of gears. “Sa dilim, malayo pa kita na yung ilaw ng naunang bangka, kaya iwas na sa lugar na yon ang dumadating,” (In the dark, we could see the light of the first boat, so the next boats keep their distance.) he adds. His son, Samuel explains that a low density of fish catching gears has to be maintained to avoid competition and to ensure that fishes are caught by only one set of gears and not by others. This principle of primacy is a common refrain of the different fishers in their narratives. No one, however, could tell how it evolved and when it started.

From an ethnomethodological perspective, observance of the principle of primacy in the everyday behavior of fishers at sea is a norm that averts competition among people who rely on a resource that is commonly shared. Such a rule reduces the likelihood of fellow fishers returning from sea with empty nets. It is a variant of the distributive rule where the benefits from a common resource are distributed among fishers. This form of sharing affirms a cultural principle of interdependence that is essential for the survival of fishers who uphold the subsistence ethic (Scott 1976).

Sharing of catch with fishing companion

"Mapanganib and pangingisda sa laut, kaya walang nagpapalaut na solo." (Sea fishing is dangerous that is why no fisher goes by himself.) This statement of Alvin embodies the risks faced by fishers. He adds, "Kung minsan, biglang lumalakas ang hangin at ulan. Nung isang taon ay nahold-up ang aking motor, palakaya, pati pang-ilaw ko sa laut. Mabuti na lang at hindi kami sinaktan." (There are times of sudden strong winds and rain. Last year, pirates took my boat motor, gears and light at sea. I am thankful they did not hurt us.)

It is thus the current practice to take a companion whenever a fisher goes out to sea. Because sea fishing is a male activity, the male fishers always take a male companion. In many cases the companion is an adult son. However, there are as many cases where non-family members serve as companion. Alvin's son Ferdinand often went to sea with his father, but there were times when Alvin took his godson with him on some occasions. Romeo maintains that when he was young, he was brave and went fishing by himself. He hastens to add that more recently no one does solo fishing anymore.

Sharing the catch for the day between the fishers is another theme that is illustrative of the accomplishment of community. For having helped in procuring the catch, the fishing companion is given a share of the catch. Expectedly, the boat owner who also owns the pangke and other gears takes the larger share of the catch relative to his companion. The quantity of the shares

allocated depends on the volume and type of catch.

Roberto and Eduardo are fishers but do not own boats. It seems that their share of catch by being a companion to boat owners is adequate to provide for most of their subsistence needs. It should, however, be noted that all the fishers in the study were also farmers. Alvin says that because fishing is seasonal, there are times of the year when most households work on their farms. Thus, fishing families are also farming families.

How are fishing companions selected? "Kahit na paiba-iba ang kasama sa laut, kailangan ang kasama mo ay kapalagayang loob mo. Karaniwan, anak na lalaki, kumpare, inaanak o kapitbahay." (Even if we go with different companions out to the sea, it is important that one is at ease with one's companion. Often it is the son, fictive kin, godson or neighbor.) This is the reply of Romeo. He adds, "Maraming oras din na kayo lang dalawa sa bangka, at saka kung may peligro dapat maaasahan ang iyong kasama." (We spend many hours together in the boat, and in case of danger one should be able to rely on one's companion.)

Obviously, the fishing companion gains economically from the transaction. Roberto and Eduardo, for example make a living through this means. But more than a contractual form of exchange, the pairing and sharing strengthen personal bonds based on mutual obligation to kin and social network (Gluckman 1965; Woodburn 1998). Even as the pair climbs off the boat on the shore after a fishing trip, they already are making plans for the next trip. As evident in the sizes of their

respective shares, a stratified relationship obtains between the boat owner and his companion. "Mahal din kasi ang bangka at motor kaya siyempre mas malaki ang bahagi sa huli ng may bangka," (The boat and motor are expensive, so expectedly the share in the fish catch of the boat owner is bigger.) Romeo argues.

The sharing may be in the form of fish or crabs, depending on the season, or in the form of cash. Romeo narrated that when he caught three big sting rays, he took the catch directly to the Mercedes fish port and sold these for P2,500.00. He gave some amount to his companion and part of the smaller fishes also caught. When fishers are late in returning to shore from sea fishing, they often had taken the day's catch to the buyers in the Mercedes fish port which means immediate cash for the family. "Pag maaga ang balik alam naming kaunti ang huli," (If they return early, we know the volume of catch is small.) says Monica, Romeo's wife.

Thus, the choice of companion for fishing trips and the sharing of catch are acts of accomplishing community. The multiple combinations of dyadic relationships on these fishing trips forge a network of social ties that in many cases extend beyond fishing related endeavors (Gluckman 1965; Woodburn 1998).

Sharing the catch with people on the shore after a fishing trip

Every morning during the fishing season is a social occasion in the study villages. This is commonly the time when the fishing boats return from the sea fishing trips. It is likewise an important interactional situation for sharing and community making.

The fishers return to shore with varying volume of catch. Somehow there is an equitable apportionment of the catch. Part of it is set aside for the boat owner fisher, part for the fishing companion, and another part for the people on the shore who "meet the boat." The allocation of part of the catch to the people on the shore represents a situation of sharing. It seems to be an extension of sharing the resources of the sea, this time in the form of entitlement to a part of the catch. This sharing activity is limited to the time the boat returns to shore and the people who are present at that particular time.

According to Kendrick (1993) this practice is related to "social equity" in access to resources; it is a way of enforcing a community's rights to resources they cannot otherwise access due to lack of technology or capital. Similarly, Mangahas (2000:20) maintains that "sharing is the characteristic expectation of what must be done with something you got by luck, just as gambling or games of chance; proper sharing legitimizes success, it is also intended to invite further good luck....It is the proper thing to do with things gotten by luck."

Who are the people who meet the boat on its return to shore? People who are present at the time or when the division of shares takes place get a share of the catch. Some refer to this share as the "fish giveaways." The relevant questions in this regard are who and what. Who are the people who meet the boat on the shore? Romeo's response is "Meron mga kamag-anak, kaibigan pati kapitbahay. Kung minsan may mga bata na sumasalubong para may ma pang-

ulam kasi maysakit ang tatay o nanay." (There are relatives, friends, including neighbors. Sometimes, there are children who meet the boat to have something to cook for a sick parent.) I saw a little girl standing alone on the shore some distance from the boat. One fisher looked at her, grabbed a handful of small fishes and said, "O iuwi mo itong pang-ulam sa nanay mo." (Take this to your mother for your food.) The fisher looked at me and said, "may sakit kasi ang nanay niya." (Her mother is sick.) The people seem to come forward to 'demand' their share. But even I who was observing the social event, was given a few pieces of fish as share. Alvin explains that strangers and visitors are included in the sharing as a gesture of hospitality and "maramdaman nila na sa amin hindi sila iba" (for them to feel that they are one of us).

According to Romeo, the sharing is not limited to those who did not go out to sea for fishing. "Karaniwan binibigyan din yung galing sa pangngisda na walang huli." (It is not uncommon to share the catch with fishers who had no catch.) "Walang nagugutom dito. Wala ka mang huli may lulutuin ka rin." Romeo adds. (No one goes hungry here. Even those without catch will have something to cook for food.) Sharing with fishers who have no catch is a practice that affirms interdependence among small-scale fishers considering the unpredictability and variability in fish catch (Mangahas 2000).

Roberto adds that not all villagers come to the shore to meet the boat. There are those who inhibit themselves out of a sense of shame or propriety. "Siyempre may mga mahihiya naman na makibahagi pa e hindi naman nila kailangan." (Of

course, there are those who are ashamed to share when they do not need this.) Thus, sharing seems to be more about who one is and less about who gets what.

The other question is what is given away? This is not an easy question to answer because the response is dependent on a number of factors. One factor is the volume of the catch. For a good catch, a significant proportion is sold for cash either in the Mercedes port or in the local market. But the part that is not sold is not insignificant. In many cases the part that is shared with those on the shore comprise the fishes which are either smaller in size or of low market value. Alvin claims that for fishers "alam naming kung gano ang patas at tamang dami nang binibigay sa mga sumasalubong." (We know what is a fair share to be given to those who meet the boat.) I interpret this to mean that their practices are governed by rules for determining the fair and proper apportionment (Woodburn 1998) of catch "from the shared resources of the sea."

COMMENSALITY AFTER A SUCCESSFUL FISHING EVENT

The sharing does not end with apportionment of the catch among fishers, the fishing companions and the people on the shore who meet the boat. A successful fishing trip is not complete without fishers eating and drinking with friends. Part of the catch is set aside to be cooked or prepared as *kinilaw* (a dish from raw fish). Carsten (1997) refers to the sharing of food or substance as a central symbol for "making kinship." This commensality is a standard practice among fishers after the boat's return from a successful fishing trip.

Romeo narrates that after he caught the three big sting rays and brought them to Mercedes, he treated his friends and kin, “maghapon at magdamag kaming nag-inuman na yung ding ibang isda na nahuli ang pinangpulutan namin.” (All day and all night, we drank and ate some fish.) The commensality represents an extension of sharing with people who “hindi na iba sa amin at nakabahagi sa grasya nang dagat (are part of us and share in the graces of the sea.)

While a fishing companion expectedly gets a proportional share of the fish catch on successful fishing event, it is the boat owner who hosts the social event of sharing the food and drink with significant others. The fishing companion may bring a bottle of gin to add to the drinks prepared by the boat owner. The event marks, not only a sharing with people of the ‘grace from the sea’ but the practice also has the latent function of forging or strengthening social bonds with villagers (Gluckman 1965). It is an occasion for telling and retelling of stories of fishing trips both the successful ones and the risky ones that are attended with loss and danger.

IMPLICATIONS OF ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNITY FOR INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

The conceptualization of community as an accomplishment, accountable to interaction, implies that its emergence is located in social situations rather than in social collectivities. The task of rendering actions accountable arises recurrently across different situations and different forms of conduct. Thus, intervention

programs, for example, in forestry and fisheries that invoke the community as vehicle for their implementation, may find it worth the try to shift the focus from a social structural framework to one that capitalizes on social situations that have through time been the site of practice for community making.

The ethnomethodological perspective implies that one cannot determine the relevance of community to social action apart from the context in which it is accomplished. The sharing that represents acts of accomplishing community differs significantly among fishing villagers, upland farmers or occupants of forest reserves. Their social situations, circumstances and normative structures vary widely so a blueprint approach to community-based interventions is often bound to fail.

Institutions as well as collectivities may be held accountable to normative conceptions of community. For example, the family or the people’s organizations of fishers or upland farmers are held accountable to normative conceptions of community. What may seem to be an individualistic conduct of accomplishing community in specific situations is actually cut from the larger social fabric of cohesiveness, concern and interdependence. Thus, situated social action is central to our understanding of how community contributes to the reproduction of social organization and social structure.

NOTE

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