

Fishlore in the Central Philippines and Its Role in Development



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Children of Visayan fishing families. Chances are that the boys will follow in the footsteps and traditions of their fathers.

The Visayan fisherman grows up believing that the seas are owned by the "enchanted", whose wishes are to be obeyed and whose rules are to be strictly followed. He accepts these rules and associated rituals because they were faithfully followed by his ancestors as their successful way of coping with the forces of the sea.

Rituals

Thus, a new boat is rubbed with pig blood so that just as the pig eats everything in its path, the boat will gather all kinds of fish. Offerings to the enchanted are then made but only on Tuesdays or Fridays. Wednesday or Saturday is the new boat's first day at sea and the first haul is thrown back as a sign of goodwill to the enchanted. Church-blessed amulets or those of hard-to-get objects like a tooth from a live dog, or the dried head of a snake which has devoured the head of a frog are taken on the boat.

* Adapted from "Fishlore of Western Visayas", 1980 (Mimeo). The study was conducted under the auspices of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of the University of the Philippines System.

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At sea there are dozens of reminders about the proximity of the enchanted and ways to deal with them, while every kind of fish has an associated morality legend - one fish is lazy, another a peeping tom, etc. -- and a particular use or danger for the young, old, sick or pregnant.

These traditional beliefs serve to inculcate customs, values and ethical standards held dear by the Visayans. Through the various rituals, the fisherman imbibes the values of respect for property and ownership, selflessness, generosity and discretion. This tradition-oriented nature of Visayan fishing communities well predates the arrival of the Spanish in the early sixteenth century.

Development

While fisheries resources abound in Western Visayas, it was only towards the latter part of the 1970s that concerted

efforts in their development by government and private agencies were visibly made. Fisheries programs in schools and universities were stepped up, fisheries research centers were established, fisheries cooperatives were formed and strengthened while bank lending schemes for fishermen were liberalized. All these indeed, reflect the aim of the Philippine government to improve the living conditions of the people through the development of the fishing industry.

Development always implies change, for both are inseparable. To a marked degree, change is a chain of interconnected conditions and events, one change bringing yet another. In any attempt to effect change, it is often important that change agents have an adequate knowledge and understanding of the locale where such change is to be initiated because culture can either facilitate or hinder change. Thus, environmental factors in general and cultural factors in particular are important to those who attempt to bring a major change in society. Such factors condition the outcome of any governmental program or other innovations.

Custom is slow to change when challenged by new ideas and practices

especially where sentiment pervades customs. Ideas, as well as emotions, may be powerful obstacles to innovations. Therefore, any attempts to introduce change which threatens to belittle customs, beliefs and traditions and their power to control forces unseen and unknown, are naturally met with skepticism and resistance.

Take, for example, the belief that some portions of available fishing grounds are not for fishermen to freely explore because these are enchanted according to tradition. This concept automatically shuts off other possible sources of fish to these fishermen. If by sheer change a fisherman trespasses into these areas, he suffers pangs of guilt and anxiety and will attribute any stroke of illness in the family, financial upset and the like to this breaking of the unwritten code. To prevent similar mishaps, he will therefore make ritualistic offerings of food, dance and song to appease the "owners" of that area and will take more and better precautions not to ever venture into that place again.

An Ounce of Prevention....

Big fishermen, owners of trawls and larger and more sophisticated fishing boats, likewise adhere to the old adage "an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure" and compromise by undertaking the prescribed rituals for all new boats. If they do not, they will find it difficult to give their crew the psychological sense of security they will need when they go out to fish. Sometimes, before their boats set off, these big fishermen have to declare to the four winds their assumption of responsibility for whatever mistakes their men or boats make in the course of fishing. This way, they proclaim themselves solely responsible for any change they may introduce, thereby relieving their men of tension and fear of the unseen and the unknown forces of the sea. If a rich harvest results from these ventures, the men may take this to mean that their employers are favored by the "owners of the sea" and will from then on feel freer to exploit these formerly forbidden areas.

In this particular case, the fishing boat owner acted as an agent of change and, because he was himself steeped in the culture of the area, he was able to act with thorough knowledge and understanding of the psychology of the people.

In using an item of folk belief related to the one his men held, the owner was able to introduce change in the men's perceptions of their own relation with the unseen spirits. This way, folklore was utilized to bring about economic development.

Folklore and Cooperation

There are other "harmless" items of Visayan fishlore which may be utilized in effecting change, for they give the fishermen a sense of security and provide them with positive outlook, two psychologically important components in fishing. Since from day to day the fisherman has to contend with the awesome vastness of the seas and the loneliness that such expanse evokes in him, he needs to provide himself and his boat with amulets to serve as his psychological anchor and source of security. If such other practices like rubbing blood on the boat before launching, offering the first harvest back to the sea, not allowing women aboard, etc. are not arguments against change, these practices may even be utilized by the change agent in paving the way for the introduction of scientific fishing techniques. By doing so, he communicates to the fishing community his desire to reinforce the cultural foundations which arise from his full understanding of their beliefs.

Because Visayan fishlore is communal and therefore shared folklore, it is the collective representation of a homogeneous social group. As such, it serves to generate an in-group feeling among its practitioners. This sense of belonging may well be explored as a basis for organizations working towards development, like cooperatives and credit unions, geared towards economic self-sufficiency. This shared folklore can bring about cooperation, coordination and "teamwork", which is a basic principle of community development. Thus, development can occur when people participate in effecting the desired development changes. It will not be difficult to imagine harnessing a people having shared traditions and common guidelines for behavior into undertaking activities for their common welfare.



The boats are new and modern but the ceremonies are old. Even today, commercial fishing boats still go through traditional rituals to "win the favor of the sea spirits". *Clockwise:* At a boat blessing, the owner (1) "offers" food to the sea before feeding the guests and (2) throws a generous shower of coins as giveaways. (3) A "Sto. Niño" (Infant Jesus) in fisherman's clothes holding a net full of money is carried aboard the boat for good luck and prosperity. Photos courtesy of RBL Fishing Corporation, Philippines.