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WOMEN AND FISHING IN TRADITIONAL PACIFIC ISLAND CULTURES

by

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Women are involved in many types of fishing in the traditional cultures of the Pacific islands. The extent to which women fish varies greatly from island to island. Most women, however tend to fish in shallow waters close to shore, without the use of canoes and implements other than baskets and sticks.

An examination of the role of women in the Pacific islands is complicated by several factors: (1) fishing studies tend to focus on the often highly ritualized, dangerous pursuits of ocean-living fish which are primarily male-dominated activities; (2) studies have often overlooked gender roles in fish collection by the use of general terms such as "fishermen" and the emphasis placed on documenting techniques and implements; (3) early researchers were often men and thus had access to male knowledge; (4) men in the Pacific islands often minimize the importance of women's contribution to fish collection; and (5) women occasionally fish even though it is called men's work.

From the data that has been collected, the tremendous variety of women's roles in fishing throughout the Pacific is immediately apparent. Generalization is not possible even within the confines of a particular cultural group, i.e., Melanesia, Micronesia, or Polynesia since each individual island has developed its own unique set of confines due to a great extent on its geography. However, some generalizations can be made if traditional Pacific island cultures are viewed as a whole. Exceptions, of course, exist and tend to be better documented than the general, mundane fishing activities of women. This paper will explore some of the variety of women's roles in Pacific islands fishing, briefly discuss possible reasons that this role is often restricted to shallow water fishing practices and comment on the importance of this often overlooked aspect of fish collection.

The ocean is an important resource for cultures with limited land areas and resources. Marine resources apparently have been exploited "quite extensively" by most coastal islanders in the Pacific (Oliver, 1989:250-251). The extent of this use varies from island to island due in great part to the geography of the shoreline environments and the accessibility of the sea. Cultures inhabiting islands with steep shorelines, little reef or beach areas and deep, turbulent waters developed open-sea fishing strategies utilizing canoes. Deep-sea fishing activities are generally dangerous, periodic and surrounded by ritual and magic. Both men and women are involved in such fish collection strategies when those are the only options available to the islanders. On the other hand, peoples inhabiting coral atolls that have shallow lagoons and inland reefs in addition to the deeper waters further offshore were able to exploit more types of marine environments and gender roles became more stratified as more people in different environments could be involved in seafood collection (Oliver, 1989:251).

Women's Role in Fishing

The dangerous, exciting pursuit of deep-sea, pelagic fish such as shark, tuna and bonito tends to be a male occupation throughout the islands that have shallow reefs. Women (and often children) are usually found collecting fish, shellfish and other organisms from the shallower waters closer to the land. Deep-sea fishing is generally restricted to men since it requires considerable strength and the acceptability of being exposed to great personal risk (Oliver, 1989:251). The ability to fish is often synonymous with manhood in these societies. Men who do not fish are sometimes ridiculed. For instance, in Pukapuka in the Cook Islands, a man who does not fish outside of the reef is called a "female god" which implies that he is only concerned with the feminine pursuits that would interest a female god who is not interested in masculine pursuits such as fishing (Beaglehole, 1938).

However, the generalization that men fish from canoes in the deep waters while women stay close to shore in the shallower waters is misleading. In a few Pacific societies, women are involved in all forms of fishing. In New Ireland on the island of Tanga "every man and woman, boy and girl, is a potential if not an actual fisherman" (Bell, 1947). In the Marianas both women and men are excellent swimmers, divers, sailors and both sexes participate in catching fish from offshore boats (Thompson, 1945). Women from Fiji also catch fish in deep waters (Hocart, 1929; Thompson, 1949). In addition, although offshore fishing may technically be men's work, in reality women may also participate. Penelope Schoeffel described an experience she had while studying fishing in the Solomon Islands. She had observed two canoes carrying groups of women when she first approached one of the islands. Once onshore she asked several old women about fishing practices on the island. They told her about "men's fishing" techniques: those utilizing lines, nets, hooks and canoes. When she asked where the women she had seen earlier in the canoes had gone, the old women replied that they had gone fishing and that they would be using those very same "men's fishing" implements – nets, lines and hooks. Apparently, the men own these objects but the women can use them as well (Schoeffel, 1985).

These, however, appear to be exceptions to the more general rule that women stay closer to shore and fish without boats, canoes and the implements and ritual that accompany deep-sea fishing expeditions. Often, restrictions are placed on women, their ability to fish and their access to fishing gear. Not only are island women banned from houses where boats are being built, but they often may not even enter the water when their men are fishing (Hanson, 1982). Throughout the Pacific restrictions limit women's access to deep-sea fishing: a woman in a canoe could bring bad luck in Niue; fishing could be destroyed if the canoe or gear was touched by a woman in Samoa; in the Marquesas women could not have sex, light fires or leave their houses while their husbands fished; in the Society Islands women "would have neutralized the tapu of the craft, gear and fishermen" if they went out in a fishing canoe (Hanson, 1982). These traditions are strong and many hold forth today. In 1988, Marie-Claire Bataille-Benguigui, an anthropologist, recounts her difficulties in attempting a study of beliefs associated with Tongan fishing: "I was never openly forbidden to go on a fishing trip, but unforeseen, inexplicable circumstances usually prevented it!" She was forced to gather information from elderly and resting fishermen on shore (Bataille-Benguigui, 1988).

As one result of these restrictions women are much more involved in fishing activities in shallow nearshore waters such as reef gleaning, fish poisoning, patch reef construction and collective net fishing. Reef gleaning is the practice of collecting octopus, shellfish, sea urchins, crabs and other invertebrates from along the reefs (Chapman, 1987). Women (and in some instances, children) use sticks to probe animals from their coral shelters. They collect small fish, shellfish and crustaceans in baskets. These practices have been documented throughout the Pacific: Tabiteuea in the Gilberts (Luomala, 1980), Pukapuka in the Cooks (Beaglehole, 1938) and in many other areas (Chapman, 1987).

Fish poisoning is another fishing technique that women use in shallow reef areas. In Niuaotupapu, Tonga women place pulverized stems of the 'aukava plant in a sack and shake it under coral heads and overhanging rocks in the reef. Fish are stunned and float to the surface where they are speared, knifed or picked up by hand (Dye, 1983). In Futuna, Horn Archipelago women use a toxic substance from the seed of the Barringtonia fruit to poison small fish. This form of fishing, however, can be very devastating to a reef community since juveniles from as many as forty species of fish are affected (Galzin and Mauge, 1981). Construction of small patch reefs to attract juvenile fish is yet another way the women of Futuna catch fish (Galzin and Mauge, 1981).

Assisting with communal harvests of fish with nets is common in many areas in the Pacific (Beaglehole, 1938; Luomala, 1980). For instance, in Tabiteuea as many as one hundred men, women and children participate in an organized deep-water fishing harvest. The "participants swim in a great semicircle carrying a coconut leaf sweep [braided by the women] to drive fish towards a large purseless seine held by other swimmers." Traditionally married women were not allowed to participate in this event because their husbands would be jealous if their sexual parts were exposed if their kilts were lifted by the water. All women could participate once the British introduced cloth trousers in the late 1800s (Luomala, 1980).

Thus women are involved in a wide range of fishing activities from deep-sea fishing alongside men in boats to reef gleaning and communal fishing activities in shallow lagoon waters. These fishing activities tend to be secular rather than spiritual whereas men's fishing activities, even if they take place in the calm, shallow reef areas are usually surrounded by magic and ritual. Women do not generally utilize magic (Fiji, which appears to be the unique documented exception to this, will be discussed in more detail shortly). This is partly due to the fact that women collect fish and other marine resources on a daily basis for food. Men, on the other hand, embark on the occasional usually dangerous journeys into deeper waters that are often part of ritual feasts (Chapman, 1987).

That women are not usually part of fishing rituals may be a reflection of the traditional beliefs of their relation to the gods and things spiritual in many societies. As noted earlier, Polynesian women are often restricted from such practices as canoe building and deep-sea fishing due to strict taboos on their participation. Menstruating and pregnant women are especially restricted from these activities – to the extent that they are not allowed out of their houses or into the water when their husbands are out at sea. Canoe building and fishing are highly sacred acts in many Pacific cultures; the men involved are in contact with the gods and spirits at these times and are "tapu" (in a sacred state). Women can somehow disrupt this spiritual state and cause the gods and spirits to leave the canoes, the men or the fishing grounds. Women are especially capable of this "secularizing" ability when they are menstruating or pregnant. This has generally been interpreted as being a result of the polluting effects of women and their contaminating bodily fluids which cause the spirits and gods to flee. An alternate view of this ability has recently been expounded by F. Allan Hanson. Hanson claims that women are conduits between the secular and the spiritual world: it is through women that ancestral spirits are born into the secular world in the form of newborn babies. Not only are spirits born into the secular world through women, but through them they can also return to the spiritual world. A woman in the Marquesas could draw the evil spirits out of her husband and other male relatives if she sat naked on the afflicted part or if she jumped over him (Hanson, 1982). Rather than repelling the spirits from the objects they inhabit because of their inherent baseness and uncleanness, Hanson claims women attract spirits because of their connection to the spiritual world. Women are particularly attractive to spirits when they are menstruating or pregnant (Hanson, 1982).

This view can explain many previously confusing beliefs in Polynesia quite satisfactorily as Hanson demonstrates in his study. However, there are still those societies that do not restrict women from fishing all areas of the sea. Perhaps women fishermen in those societies do face taboos and are not allowed to fish when they are menstruating or pregnant. In the Lau Islands in Fiji, where women fish at least as often as men, the mere glance of a pregnant or menstruating woman can destroy turtle nets. Also "during the first 100 days of pregnancy a woman may not bathe in the sea [or] participate in fishing" (Hanson, 1982). Systematic, detailed studies have not been undertaken to further substantiate the relationship between women's fishing taboos and their degree of fishing participation.

Importance of Women's Fishing

Women's contribution of fish and other shellfish to the diets of traditional Pacific island cultures has often been underestimated. Women fish everyday while men fish less often but with great fanfare and ritual secrecy. In addition, Pacific island men occasionally belittle women's fishing efforts and the fish that they catch as not being worth a man's attention (Dye, 1983). Although it may not be a highly esteemed occupation, in some instances women's fish collection may actually contribute more substantially to Pacific islanders diets than men. The women, at least, take it very seriously; shellfish, small crustacea, squid and octopus collecting are considered part of a woman's daily work in Tanga, New Ireland whereas the women see men's fishing as a pastime (Bell, 1947).

Because women fish on a daily basis they supply a great deal of the protein obtained in many subsistence diets (Bell, 1947; Chapman, 1987; Luomala, 1980). The importance of women's fishing contribution to the diets of several island societies is illustrated by the following examples: (1) 32% of the total fishing yield in American Samoa is supplied by the women even though they make up only 17% of those engaged in fishing; (2) in Western Samoa 17% of the daily seafood consumption is made up of invertebrates which are collected by women; (3) in Kiribati 84% of the seafood is collected by both men and women and the remaining 16% is caught solely by reef gleaning by women and children; (4) 11% of the households in Kiribati rely completely on shellfish collected by women and children for protein; and (5) in one village in Papua New Guinea 25-50% of the seafood is supplied by women (Chapman, 1987). Unfortunately, quantitative data such as this is rare. There is, however, some evidence that women's fishing may provide the necessary protein for a village when fish are scarce. For instance, the Tanga rely on meals of lobster, crab, prawns and cuttlefish when bigger, deep-sea fish are in short supply (Bell, 1947). It is reasonable to assume that many other island cultures in the Pacific depend on women's fishing to a greater extent than the men give them credit for.

A second aspect of the underestimation of women's fishing is that their knowledge of marine resources is terribly overlooked. Much has been written about the ethnobiological knowledge of male fishermen and that knowledge has proved to be extensive for their local areas. Often this knowledge is greater than that of the researchers who come equipped with scientific books and university training (Johannes, 1981). Undoubtedly women have similar knowledge of the biology and ecology of the resources they collect or they would not be so adept at finding food on the reefs and in open waters.

For instance, in Fiji, an island society that values women's efforts in fish collection and has relatively few of the more restrictive taboos associated with fishing, women have considerable access to the power and knowledge of marine resources. Fijian culture is an exception to the general rule that women do not possess ritual knowledge or magic control of marine resources. A woman in Fiji can have great knowledge and power over some of the fish resources. One woman of a particular clan knows all about the habits of a special species of worm that swarms seasonally. The worms attract sharks that are in turn attracted to the woman and her powerful magic. She watches these worms until the time is right to call the rest of the islanders. The sharks collect at the base of the rock that the woman stands upon chanting and the villagers are able to collect the sharks as they sit passively at her feet. This woman can even cause the fish to get stranded (Hocart, 1929).

Myths from other areas in the Pacific also portray women possessing fishing knowledge. A myth from Tabiteuea describes how knowledge was passed from a woman spiritual ancestor to a fisherman. This knowledge consisted of techniques for catching a certain kind of fish as well as where to best catch them. Fishing methods have also been credited to ancestral women. In another story from Tabiteuea a woman "imitated the action of [a migratory wading bird's] beak" as it pokes in the mudflats for marine worms. With a pointed stick, the woman was the first to find how best to catch the edible marine worms. These worms are now caught everyday to be eaten raw, cooked or sun-dried (Luomala, 1980).

Whether it is probing for worms, catching crabs and shellfish as they hide in the shallow reef waters or venturing out in canoes to catch deep-sea fish, women contribute greatly to the fish collection in many of the Pacific islands. On some islands, women's access to the marine resources is limited to the shallow nearshore areas, while on others women fish alongside men in deep-sea fishing canoes. As traditional cultures change upon contact with outside (especially European) influences, the roles of the native peoples change and the management of their resources is affected. In many Pacific islands fisheries are expanding and are becoming more commercialized. Tuna is of both subsistence as well as commercial importance in Samoa, Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Solomon Islands and Fiji, among others (Schoeffel, 1985). However, inshore fisheries have largely been ignored as the development emphasis is placed on offshore resources. This is unfortunate, as the inshore areas have been successfully fished by women and their families for generations providing a substantial amount of protein to the islanders' diets.

It is equally unfortunate that more anthropologists have not studied the ethnobiological knowledge of women. Why a women anthropologist such as Bataille-Benguigui did not opt to study the women's knowledge of fish beliefs and resources in Tonga rather than being forced to sit on the beach while the male fishermen were out to sea is not clear. A woman anthropologist is in a good position to study that side of fishing knowledge that is passed from a woman to her daughters. While a woman's role in Pacific island fishing is not often as exciting and magic-filled as that of her ocean-going husband, it is very important in terms of its contribution to her society's protein input. Without further study of the importance of women's fishing and resource knowledge in the Pacific islands, a complete appreciation of Pacific island culture is impossible. Without this appreciation, commercial development in the islands will not reflect the reality of the traditional culture since it emphasizes and encourages the importance of male-dominated fish collection methods as it omits the role of one half of the population - women. Self-sufficiency and balanced development, however, depend on the contribution of both women and men to the collection of fish resources in the Pacific islands. Development projects should not ignore the importance of the resources that are under the domain of Pacific island women.

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