

MATAW FISHING IN BATANES

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Mataw, the traditional capture of seasonal dorado and flying fish by hook and line fishers in Batanes, and the traditional organization as cooperative groups making use of special accessways to the sea called *vanua*, are described. An important subsistence activity among communities on the eastern side of Batan Island, *mataw* fishing is framed by an indigenous world view and belief system. These organize the fishers to perform rituals of "cleaning" for the *vanua*, observe taboos, and enforce laws to control or regulate marine resource use and access. How *mataw* fishers may confront the challenges of the changing present is also briefly illustrated with the case of a multi-gear fishery in one *vanua*.

The 10 small islands of Batanes where some 15,026 Ivatan or natives of Batanes live (NSO, 1990), are found at the northernmost tip of the Philippines, between Luzon and Taiwan. Only three of them — Itbayat, Batan, and Sabtang — are inhabited. The other islands are Yami, North, Mavudis, Siayan, Ivuhos — where some Sabtang residents pasture goats and cattle — Dequey and Balintang Island.

To the West of the Batanes province is the South China Sea and to the East, the Philippine Sea and the Pacific Ocean. These seas merge in the very deep and treacherous Balintang Channel to the South. Beyond this are the Babuyan islands that form part of Cagayan province. To the North, the Bashi Channel separates the northernmost islands from small islets within the territory of Taiwan. (The Batanes islands are actually closer to Taiwan than to Luzon. Basco is 280 kilometers north of Aparri on the tip of Luzon, and only 180 kilometers south of Taipei.) Batanes is the country's smallest province, with a total land area of only 230 square kilometers. Its territorial waters, however, encompass 4,500 square kilometers.

Batanes is better known for being the group of small islands frequently battered by typhoons. In fact, not only the winds, but also the strong sea currents contribute to Batanes' periodic isolation. Given these environmental conditions, self-reliance, cooperative work, and reciprocity have for generations ensured livelihood and survival for Batanes folk.

It has been noted that there is a high linguistic elaboration of terms for cooperative work (Hornedo, 1989; Yamada, 1989:446-451) ranging from small to large groups, and for endeavors such as planting fields to constructing houses and public works.

One such cooperative consists of associations formed to manage common areas. More and more studies show that common properties among indigenous communities are often managed by corporate groups.¹ Framed within local culture and world view, these traditional associations, however, are usually not recognized within the national government structure and legal system. In Batanes for example, access to the *payaman* or communal pasturelands for cattle-grazing is gained by becoming a member of the group, paying dues, and performing work requirements. This paper describes traditional fishing organizations among hook and line fishermen called *mataws* that control or regulate marine resource use and access.

Mataw Fishing

Mataw fishing is a seasonal activity, held during the three summer months of March to May. The Batanes climate has two main seasons, *amian* or "winter" that spans the months of October to February and *rayon* or "summer" that lasts from March to May. During these months, migratory dorado and flying fish pass through Batanes waters. They are known as *amung nu rayon*, the "fish of summer." Winter is characterized by cold and rainy weather and strong winds from the north. Fishing spans the summer months from March to May and tapers off in September when the weather becomes too cold. From June to August, the weather is often rainy. Typhoons blowing into the Philippines between June until October usually pass by the Batanes islands. An average of seven typhoons is experienced by the islands every year. Between September

¹ Two examples are the irrigation cooperatives or *zanjeras* in Ilocos (Lewis, 1991) and the small-scale miners' groups in Benguet Province (Caballero, 1993).

to October, for a short two weeks, there is a period of warm sunny weather called the “little summer” (*dekey a rayon*). This short season is associated with the migration of small brown hawks called *kuryah* into the islands.

The main source of livelihood in Batanes is agriculture. Fishing is seriously engaged in full-time by about 30 percent of households during the fishing season. Different kinds of hooks and lines are used. One method is *mayavavang*, fishing for medium-sized to large fish with a free moving hook and line. To locate underwater rocks or corals where groups of fish stay (*nahu*), fishers triangulate distinct landmarks. Fishermen must in general have a sound knowledge of the sea conditions and currents since these are changeable and powerful. At night, *sumuhu* fishermen in three-man-crew boats use a bright light to attract and blind flying fish and other nocturnal fish. *Manawoy* fishermen observe the roll of the waves, the phases of the moon to know the tides. Moreover, they climb the hills to observe the location of the fish. They can catch small or big fish depending on mesh size using a “flying net” supported on long bamboo poles that are cast in the shallow reefs as the tide becomes low or high. Another popular method is speargun fishing for fish and lobsters. A recent technological innovation is the use of the compressor that pumps air through a tube down to the diver, allowing him to stay underwater at greater depths for up to an hour. Drift nets set against the current to catch flying fish are fast gaining in popularity.

Mataw fishing is one of the most traditional fishing methods in Batanes. Lone *mataw* fishers specialize in catching dorado (*Coryphaena hippurus*) with a hook-and-line using live flying fish (*Exocoetidae*) as bait. To catch flying fish, *mataws* make use of crustacean bait like shrimps, crabs, and coconut crabs which are regularly provided the *mataw* by a supplier (*mamedberen*). The minced crustacean bait is placed on a special hook called the *yuyus* that is attached to a float. The *yuyus* allows the fish to be caught alive. The flying fish is in turn attached to a larger hook and released to serve as live bait for dorado.

These large fish are filleted, dried, and accumulated until the end of the season that begins in March and ends in May. The total catch is shared between the fisherman and his “partners” — persons who contracted with the *mataw* to invest in the fisherman’s needs for this fishing operation in exchange for a share of the catch. There are usually eight to nine such sharing partners for the necessary inputs to the enterprise which traditionally include: the boat, the labor of constructing the boat, the fishing gear,

the crustacean bait for catching flying fish, the labor of assisting the fisherman, the salt for drying the fish, capital, and any other need of the fishermen such as land for farming, firewood, and others.

Mataw fishing is integrated with farming as a subsistence activity since all fishermen are also farmers. The primary exports of Batanes are garlic and cows. The planting of different kinds of rootcrops for home consumption is also an important activity. Although rice imported from the mainland is the staple, rootcrops are still a mainstay in the diet.

Dried fillets of dorado are a very traditional food item in Ivatan life. They are usually kept hanging or stacked in the storage area over the hearth. Preserved by the smoke, they comprise a reserve food supply especially for the cold "winter" months from November to February and during typhoons. Dried dorado has high economic value — it can be exchanged for many valuable items. It can be used as payment for field hands and also exchanged for the use of land to farm. *Mataws* are favored by landowners in Mahatao and, compared to ordinary farmers, they can easily find land to borrow. It is said that only *mataws* can borrow pasturelands. Although reciprocal exchange is the traditional means of distribution in Batanes, in cash value, the *mataw's* catch is also worth a considerable amount. A *masagal mataw* or lucky fisherman is able to catch as many as 100 to 300 fish in one season.

Mataw fishing goes on in Valugan or the eastern side of Batan Island in the municipalities of Basco and Mahatao, and in the sitios of Itbud and Imnajbu in the municipality of Uyugan. In Basco and Mahatao there are some 85 *mataws* belonging to four groups making use of particular landing sites known as *vanuas* — natural formations that allow fishermen access to land and sea. The inhospitable shoreline of Batanes is often fronted by shallow submerged reefs or active beaches of boulders. The place where a passageway for a boat exists is called a *vanua*. These unique geologic features of the coastline are few and far between. The value of this place is underscored in special ritual during the fishing season where a *mataw vanua* becomes a sacred place that must be kept "clean" in order for fishing to be successful. Fishermen's groups using the *vanua* symbolically and temporarily "make whole" this passageway through ritual for the protection of the group every fishing season. Groups of *mataw* fishermen are defined according to their membership in a particular association of users of a particular *vanua*. Three of the *vanuas* (Diora and Maratay in Mahatao and Manichit in Basco) examined were exclusively *mataw vanuas*. One of them, Chanpan, is used by many other gear users.

To understand these traditional cooperative fishermen's associations, it is necessary to appreciate the indigenous world view and belief system which frame them. This worldview underlies the goals of the association, fishermen's relationships with one another, and in fact the whole process of *mataw* fishing. The *vanua* fishermen's association is framed by a view of the sea and the supernatural in which fish are sensitive to human action and invisible beings — *anitu* — have the power and capricious nature to inflict misfortune on people. The *anitu* or spirits watch over people's actions, sometimes revealing themselves to view. If one behaves well toward them, they may reward people with special favors. Hook and line fishermen fishing at night sing to elicit their help in catching fish. At the same time, they are believed to cause misfortune and illness if treated rudely. Man's relationship with the *anitus* is ideally a form of give-and-take, a reciprocal exchange of well-meant favors.

The migratory "fish of summer" or *amung nu rayon* are also believed to have supernatural abilities. They are perceived to be extremely sensitive and liable to be "hurt" or "offended" if people do not handle the catch properly. Correspondingly, they will not allow themselves to be caught. For this reason, fishermen observe taboos and rituals to "clean" the *vanua* or their gear.

On the other hand, it is also believed that people have the power to affect each other's luck through deliberately sending jinxes. This is another reason why cooperation among the members of the group is emphasized as extremely important by *mataws*.

Taboos And Ritual

Individual fishermen are traditionally concerned over the placing of "dirt" — polluting objects — on fishing gear and boat and even on the hands and body of the fishermen that render him unable to catch fish. Beliefs or taboos called *dagen* prescribe etiquette and protocol in fishing — the style or way to *mataw* fish — and reveal an ethic of respect toward one's catch.

For example, in catching dorado, one's attitude must be coaxing and not arrogant. One asks the fish to take pity on the poor fisherman riding his old puny flimsy rickety boat, striving hard to feed his family. Gloating over the fact that one has hooked a fish, it is believed, could result in the fish becoming obstinate, difficult to pull into the boat. It might even

overturn the fisherman's boat or give the *mataw* such a difficult time he is compelled to let go of his catch. Big fish like blue marlin and dorado have been known to be strong enough to do this.

Some of the *dagen* or taboos regarding how the catch must be handled are as follows:

- the fisherman must remove the hook from the dorado's mouth while at sea, not at the *vanua* or on land;
- an internal organ of the dorado called *riyal* should be removed at the shoreline and not brought home;
- the dorado should be faced toward land and their tail toward sea when laying them on the shore;
- the fishes should be faced away from each other when arranged on the *pingga*;
- fresh dorado should not be loaded on vehicles (bicycle, motorcycle, jeep, airplane) until the season is over; the catch should not be dragged on the ground;
- while eating *lataven* (*kinilaw*), one must not spit out the bones but take them carefully from one's mouth;
- raw dorado may not be eaten out at sea;
- dorado should not be eaten at the *vanua*;
- dorado may not be placed inside a bottle; and
- fresh or dried dorado may not be sold until the season is over.

The main objective of the *vanua* association is to care for the well-being or "health" of the *vanua* that the "fish of summer" (dorado and flying fish) are sensitive to. The *vanua* must be kept "clean" through ritual to ensure successful and safe fishing. In Ivatan cosmology, *anitus* or powerful unseen spirits are often deemed ultimately responsible for good luck and bad luck or misfortune. To be able to use the *vanua* during the summer, fishermen must negotiate with these invisible beings through ritual, making a sacrificial offering and symbolic "payment" in exchange for safe passage and for fish.

Important rituals that must be performed to ensure the success of the fishing season include the *mayvanuvanua* or ritual for the *vanua* at the start of the fishing season. This is a ritual sacrifice performed to ask for the favor of the supernatural beings of the sea for the safety of fishermen using the *vanua*. The ritual officiant, usually the oldest *mataw* during *mayvanuvanua*, "redirects" misfortune to the animal, "pays" with a symbolic coin and a prehistoric bead for the use of the *vanua*, intones a

“call” to the fish to come to the *vanua*, and examines the portents of the season in the sacrificial animal’s liver and gall bladder. Participation in this communal ritual by every fisherman using the *vanua* indicates his membership and commitment to the group thus the ritual activity serves a binding function, among other things. Part of the ritual may include the invocation of a curse: that misfortune befalls whoever behaves in an “uncooperative” manner toward fellow fishermen.

Cooperation is highly valued in the traditional association. In the *vanua*, members are obliged to render mutual help to one another in case of capsizing; they must assist other *mataws* coming ashore and return gear found lost at sea. In effect, they must behave decently toward one another, that is, not send bad luck to one another. Envy is the reverse of the cooperative spirit. Jinxes are often traced to envious fellow fishermen.

The fish are “called” to come to the *vanua* by the ritual officiant, and the possible fortunes of the fishing season are discerned by reading the signs on the liver and lungs of the sacrificed animal. As the ritual sacrifice is performed on the shore of the *vanua*, the ritual officiant’s words explain the purpose of the ritual, emphasizing the cooperative spirit of the fishermen’s group:

Manma kadiman su vinay aya aysayang su vanua ya, am an sino u may suerte su marahet diaten na ma’sa a mapias cooperasyon nu u dia na am nu vinay aya a tayto namen aya dimahen. Nu mapia ya yuhawan am isadiw namen su vanua’ da yanu apuapu namen di Dita’tan. As nu marem aya am akman chi siya u karuariem da waryen kada kasi isavasavat namen a makaraya du vanua aya Dita’tan. As akma kamu anchi nirakayan vunus du yuhwan namen aya.

[Before I kill this animal that will *sayang* or remove present potentials for misfortune in this particular place, if there are any among us in our *vanua* with good cooperation who is destined to have bad luck or misfortune, let it go to this animal we are about to kill. This precious gold is in payment for the *vanua* of our ancestors at Dita’tan, and also this *marem* or green thing like the color of the sea with many *waryen* or flying fish and *kasi* or dorado, which we fishermen who come ashore here at the *vanua* of Dita’tan bring home. And you (fish) will be hung on the *rakayan* in reward for our cooperative labor here.]

With the ritual *mayvanuwanua*, the *vanua* area is made taboo, that is, off-limits for all fishing except for *mataw* fishing of surface-swimming flying fish, and *sumuhu* or the catching of flying fish with dip nets and light by night. Until the ban is lifted at the end of the fishing season by the ritual *maychava nu vanua* (literally, the "dismantling" of the *vanua*) no one may even swim in the *vanua* or gather shellfish along the shore. In effect, the *vanua* becomes a tiny marine sanctuary for the duration of the fishing season from March to May because when the season is over, large octopus and lobsters may be caught there.

Umdinarw nu vanua is the first fishing trip made by the one chosen to be the first fisherman, called *mandinarw nu vanua*. The *vanua* is again "paid" for, and the fish are enticed to come to the *vanua*. All the actions and whatever he may "say" are believed to affect the season's fishing, not just his own but also that of all the fishermen who will pass through the *vanua* after him. Since he is said to have the power to cause misfortune to befall others who follow after, the one chosen to be first should be trustworthy, unselfish, a person of good will, known to be a good fisherman; an ideal person, one who can put the welfare of the group above his own interests. The first fisherman is ideally like a father to the rest of the group. The welfare of the *vanua* is his responsibility, and performing rituals to "clean" (*maynamunamu*) it to attract the fish back when the catch is low during the season is one of his important roles. He must also be *machanitu* or can communicate and deal with the *anitus* on behalf of other people. This requires integrity, fearlessness, and the necessary knowledge or *kasulivan*.

Maynamunamu or "cleaning" to remove pollution of the *vanua* is a ritual performed when fishermen are unable to make good catches because taboos have been broken. In this ritual, a chicken is sacrificed by the first fisherman at the shore to rid the fish of their "hurt feelings" and convince them to come back.

Maychava' nu vanua or the ritual "dismantling" the *vanua* at the end of the fishing season marks the end of the season and takes away the taboos imposed on usage of the area at the start of the season through the initial ritual *mayvanuwanua*.

Mataw Organization and Leadership

As an association of users of a *vanua*, *mataw* groups are egalitarian in nature with leaders who are elected. The first person to fish (called the *mandinaw nu vanua*) traditionally also serves as the leader and is called "President." Besides the President, there are two other important officers elected from among the group: the Secretary-Treasurer who keeps records of membership and finances, as well as new rulings or policies, and who collects the contributions for the group's expenses; and the Sergeant at Arms or "runner"/"information officer"/"promoter" whose task is to keep all the members informed of the developments. The elder ritual officiant acts as an adviser to the President. The latter instructs the other fishermen when fishing may begin after his first fishing trip, and when the sharing of the catch can begin at the end of the season. He resolves fishing disputes. His relationship with the other members of the group is seen as paternal; as a father to his children.

In some cases, the association can provide other benefits to members after the fishing season is over. The remainder of the contributions after expenses for ritual have been settled can become a fund to be used for other purposes. An example is off-season loans to members that must be repaid with interest thus increasing the revolving fund. In the case of one *vanua* (Manichit), the revolving fund became large enough to forego collections before the season begins. Instead contributions are collected at the end of June. The Manichit association moreover has a socialized system wherein contributions are based on the size of the catch each fisherman was able to make during the season.

Laws: *Abtas Ng Mataw*

To enforce the taboos, rules or customary laws known as *abtas* are traditionally imposed by the *mataw* fishing group. These rules are made to apply even to other fishing methods. For example, fishing using nets is customarily prohibited by *mataw* laws over a much wider area than the *vanua*, usually a large part of the bay, as demarcated by rocky promontories on either end of the bay. These laws apply for the duration of the fishing season only.

Following the ritual of the *vanua* (*mayvanuvanua*), *mataws* traditionally hold a meeting to discuss or revise policies and regulations

regarding fishing for the season. These formal fishing laws known as *abtas* reiterate the expected behavior of *mataws* and prescribe punishments or fines for violations.

Unwritten laws governing resource use are known to have been operative in Batanes fishing communities. (O. Hontomin, personal communication.) For example, in Sumnanga and Chavayan, Sabtang, it is said that in the past during the fishing season, no one would be allowed to catch more than a specified number of crabs (*kayang*) for bait. In Sumnanga River, river shrimps were restricted for use by *mataws* as bait and were prohibited for consumption as food. Those who went against these rules were punished by community censure. There have been severe cases in which the offender's boat was burned.

This indicates that *mataw* fishermen do perceive that resources are finite and that a resource can be overexploited unless it is carefully managed.

The *mataw* customary laws are not static but constantly updated according to the needs of the group. This can be seen over time in the case of one of the *vanua* organizations where written documents of *mataw* laws have been preserved dating back to 1943 and 1960. The 1943 document enumerates penalties for not attending meetings, for leaving the meeting without the permission of the presiding officer, for not helping other member fishermen who need assistance because they are capsizing or have problems with the boat, for stealing bait, for not returning fishing equipment that one finds, for placing "dirt" on another fisherman's boat (this implies the placing of a jinx), and for not respecting the order of the President when the *vanua* shall be dismantled and the taboo season is over.

In 1960, the revised document included the following amendments: that the fishermen's helpers (or *manala*'s) are not permitted to seek shade beside the boats while waiting for the fishermen to come ashore to avoid "dirtying" the boats, that fishermen's helpers must aid other fishermen come ashore, and that the fisherman is responsible for the behavior of his *manala*' or helper.

A Case Of A Multi-Gear Fishery

The *vanua* Chanpan, being the closest to the capital Basco, is a distinct case where many different kinds of fishing gear are used. In the course of

the introduction of new technologies, conflicts with the traditional use rights of *mataw* fishermen are becoming more pronounced. One of the potential conflicts is between *mataw* fishermen and drift net fishermen over flying fish. By tradition, nets are banned from *vanua* and contiguous fishing grounds. Instead nets are restricted to the sea at the back of Mt. Iraya. Chanpan *mataws* recently asserted their claim to exclusive use of fishing grounds contiguous to the *vanua* based on these traditional laws through a sectoral organization, the Basco Fishermen-Farmers' Association. In the resolution dated March 12, 1989, the group resolved:

1. That no fisherman or group of fishermen is allowed to catch flying fish with nets in areas where other fishermen particularly the *mataw* are catching flying fish for dorado (*arayo*) bait within the areas between Rudaw and Achip.

2. That no fisherman or group of fishermen is allowed to fish with nets beyond the area designated by the group/association before May 15 of every year. Any person found violating this regulation shall be penalized with a fine of P100.00.

3. That all fishermen fishing in the areas shall follow all instructions, or directions given or made by the leading fisherman who was designated to make the first fishing trip (*mandinaw nu vanua*) pursuant to traditional fishing practices in the area.

4. That any person caught or found vandalizing any fishing banca, banca accessories and other fishing gear or equipments (sic) shall be penalized by a fine of one hundred (100.00) pesos or to change the damaged equipment or both fine or changing of the damaged equipment at the discretion of the BFFA officers.

In the rapidly changing fisheries situation at Chanpan, however, the resolution cannot be enforced because it is being undermined by some *mataws* joining or switching to drift nets once they are able to find the capital to do so. This includes the ritual officiant himself. Those using the new techniques find it convenient to argue that fishermen like *mataws* should not have greater privileges because they do not "own" the sea and Philippine laws do not recognize the *mataw* fishermen's claims to the right to restrict access.

Today, the continued relevance of ritual practices is a subject of active debate among fishermen. They are mainly concerned over whether there is still danger in disobeying the traditional norms on *mataw* fishing. Different individual *mataws* and groups of *mataws* have been dealing

with this in different ways. There are some who say that they participate in the rituals for the *vanua* mainly to show their solidarity with the group. But the belief in ritual, on the other hand, is reinforced from time to time by disastrous occurrences that are perceived to be correlated with the insufficient observance of rituals and taboos.

Meanwhile the increasing efficiency of exploitation and competition from the new technologies underscores the need for fisheries management to keep fishing sustainable.

As the Batanes fisheries today negotiate with the different pressures and influences, it is worthwhile to be more aware of the implications of change and of the ways fishermen have traditionally coped with the sea as members of cooperative groups, because these may still hold relevant options for the future.

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