

The Reluctant Competitors

Fisherman's Luck in Two Swedish Maritime Settings

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ABSTRACT The phenomenon called fisherman's luck has over the years been analyzed with the help of a number of theoretical perspectives, from early evolutionism to semiotics. This paper uses folklore material from the beginning of the 20th century to look at magic and social conflicts in two Swedish coastal regions. The analysis is focused on the production and reproduction of these ideas in fishing and community life, their integration within a larger cosmological system and the ways in which they are used as weapons of cultural warfare or means of conflict resolution. Finally, a comparative perspective is used to underline the ways in which this kind of magic operates in different ways under changing cultural and socio-economic conditions.

The Superstitious Fishermen

The Swedish author August Strindberg spent many summers towards the end of the nineteenth century among the fishermen of the vast Stockholm archipelago and was fascinated by their maritime culture. In his writings he tried to characterize the world view of the fisherfolk, stating that he had found "many simple customs and jural norms from a primitive society" surviving in the coastal communities. "The fisherman," he continues, "is superstitious and paganism is so deeply rooted in him that the Christian symbols are still on a footing with incantations, spells and sorcery..." (Strindberg 1957 [1886]:158).

Strindberg's observation is echoed in many other descriptions of maritime life, but the interpretations of why magic and fishing go together tend to vary. This paper starts by looking at some earlier approaches in the field and then goes on to discuss the use of magic as a cultural strategy among Swedish fishermen at the beginning of this century. The focus is on the role of magic in social relations between 'reluctant competitors'.

For Strindberg and other summer visitors the confrontation with life in isolated fishing communities at the turn of the century was something of a cultural shock. It was like suddenly discovering a new, exotic tribe in Swedish society. This interest in the more primitive and 'genuine' life which could be found out along the coasts was also shared by a number of ethnologists and folklore collectors during the decades around 1900.

Sune Ambrosiani has described an ethnographic expedition along the coast of Uppland just before the outbreak of the First World War. For him these Swedish fishing villages represented a world where time stood still. In the inland farming villages "everything was new and dull," but out along the coast one could

find ethnographical gold mines, crammed with survivals and traces of primitive culture. He speaks ironically about a colleague who had just returned from research among tribesmen in the Pacific and who frankly stated that he had never encountered a people so obsessed with religious matters as these. Ambrosiani points out that he might just as well have travelled a few hours north from Stockholm to the coast of Uppland in order to find the same strong cultural focus on religion:

In the same way as no boat currently goes out fishing on Saturday or Sunday evenings because of the Free Church's view of the sacredness of the Sabbath, no matter how good the weather may be on these two nights following a stormy week, there still exists a great number of beliefs from earlier times, which are held in great respect. We still meet many traits from religions which preceded Christianity by thousands of years in this country, traits which we in these presumptuous and self-centred times classify as superstitions (Ambrosiani 1916:304).

Ambrosiani was not the only ethnologist to develop an interest in the belief systems of the fishermen. The dominating evolutionary framework made fishing communities attractive research objects. The fishermen, like other types of hunters and trappers, were held to represent the step below the agrarian peasants on the evolutionary ladder of culture. For those folklorists and ethnologists who were interested in reconstructing earlier stages of cultural development, the traditions along the isolated coasts seemed especially interesting.

For men like Strindberg and Ambrosiani the superstitiousness of the fishermen could to a great extent be explained as a survival from earlier, more 'primitive' stages of cultural evolution. This view was carried further among later folklore collectors, who recorded with great enthusiasm materials on rituals, magic beliefs, incantations, charms, taboos and omens without paying any great attention to the social context of the beliefs. For many folklorists *form* was more important than context, as the interest was focused on tracing the history and diffusion of single 'folklore items' or cultural traits.¹

It was only with the functionalist breakthrough in anthropology that an alternative perspective on these fishermen's beliefs was put forward. When Bronislaw Malinowski developed his functional analysis of ritual and magic he illustrated his argument with examples from the maritime activities of the Trobriand Islanders. In what is now a classic statement he declared that the rituals which surrounded the fishing and sailing had the primary function of relieving anxiety and uncertainty (Malinowski 1954::30-31).

Although discussions of cause and effect were carried on in the functionalist camp (cf. Homans 1941), the 'Malinowskian formula' came to dominate anthropological research on ritual for a long time. This is evident in studies of ritual in maritime settings. The persistence of a considerable amount of magic and ritual activities, even in technologically very sophisticated fisheries, has been related to the fact that fishing remains an economic activity with a great element of risk and uncertainty. 'The Malinowskian formula' continued to be applied in studies of fishing communities in the 1960s and 1970s, with a heavy emphasis on the anxiety-relieving functions of ritual and a far too simplistic interpretation

of the complex relations between ritual and society.²

Such classic functionalist explanations link a vague ecological factor (the dependence on a capricious and uncertain resource like the sea) to an individual psychological factor (the need for security in an insecure undertaking). We get no satisfactory explanation of why the fishermen's system of beliefs is as it is, and what consequences these beliefs have for themselves and the world around them (cf. the critique in Van Ginkel 1987).

There is undeniably a connection between the need for ritual as support when undertaking dangerous acts, but the functionalist model is one-dimensional. I argue the need for a broader analysis, where ritual and magic are not viewed as isolated institutions with definite psychological functions, but as elements in a system of ideas, a cosmology, shaped by the social and economic reality in which the fisherman lives. It is within this framework that rituals are created and put into action, with constant repercussions on the social and material circumstances. It is this interplay between culture and praxis that I aim to exemplify.

The Settings

I will apply this analytical perspective to two pre-industrial maritime settings in Sweden, using the rich material on nineteenth-century peasant beliefs collected by ethnologists and folklorists mainly during the period of 1900-1940. During this period Scandinavian ethnology was focused on salvaging the remains of a rapidly disintegrating peasant culture. The result of these years of collecting is now deposited in the ethnological archives and presents something of a challenge to contemporary researchers. Much of the data is lacking in contextual information and coloured by biased collectors but handled with care it presents us with unique opportunities for reconstructing nineteenth-century peasant culture and society.

There are of course obvious drawbacks in this type of historical reconstruction. The picture one is able to give may be incomplete in many respects. In order to evade the criticism of lack of context which I made earlier, I have chosen two maritime settings where rich material on magic and ritual is matched by ample information on the marine ecology and technology as well as on the social and economic structure of the fishing communities.³

These two districts are the Scanian coast in southernmost Sweden and the southern part of the Norrland coast along the Gulf of Bothnia (see map). The period studied stretches roughly from the end of the nineteenth century up to the First World War. The rapid technological and economic transformation of Swedish fisheries during the period 1910-1920 gives a natural terminal point (cf. Löfgren 1979).

The fishing communities we will meet in the following discussion are, then, to a great extent embedded in a peasant economy and social milieu. The inhabitants of the coastal communities can be characterized as peasant fishermen with a technology based on sailing boats and small crews using nets, seines, long-lines and fish traps. The surplus catch is exchanged for cash or food with fish mer-

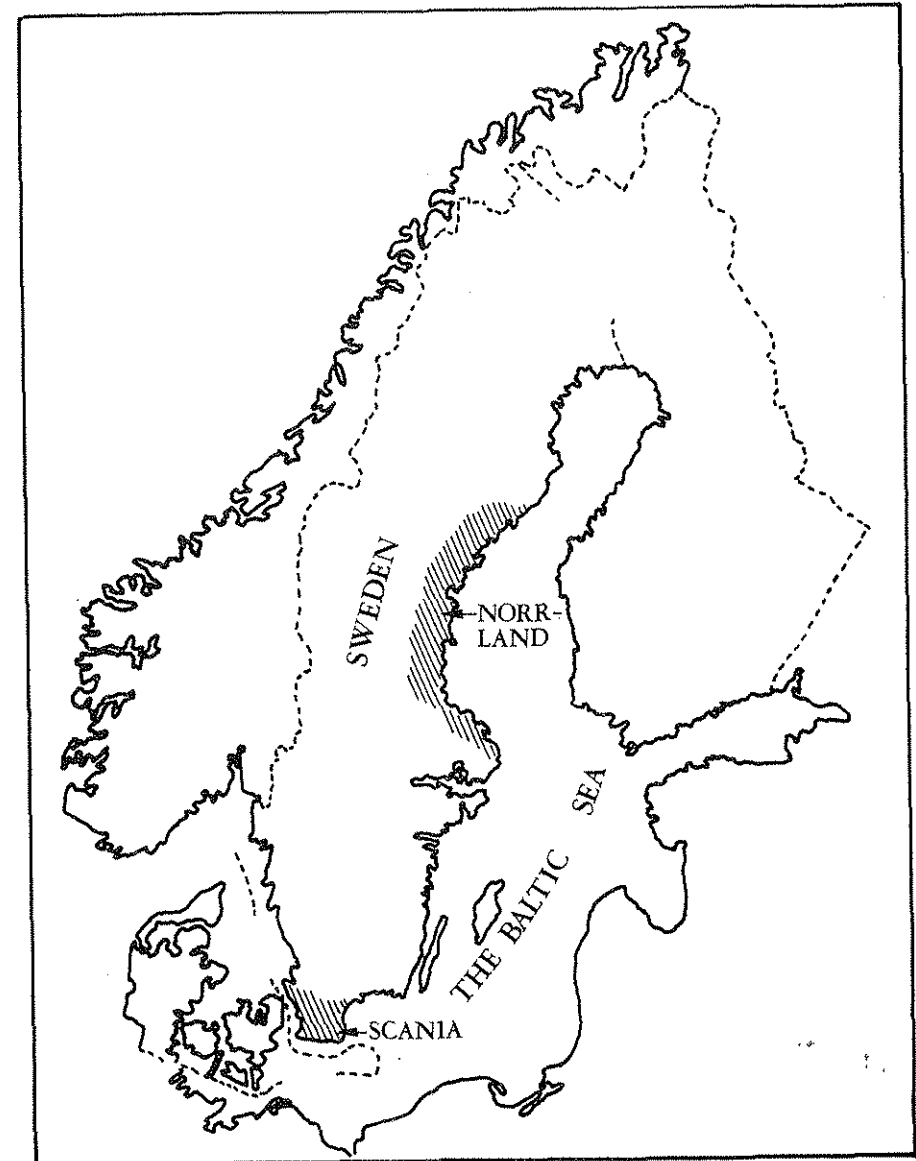


Figure 1. Location of Norrland and Scania

chants or local farmers. Fishing is supplemented by other types of subsistence activities like small-scale farming or gardening and some livestock raising.

Many folklore collectors in the past viewed these coastal settlements as 'traditional' and static societies. As I have shown in other contexts, this is not the case. Neither in social nor in economic terms do they represent a 'pre-industrial socie-

ty'. Many of these fishing communities emerged in the hiatus between the breakup of the old agrarian society and the rise of the new system of production represented by industrial capitalism (see the discussion in Löfgren 1977:167 ff. and 1980:189). Their apparent isolation was illusory; in reality these maritime communities were integrated into much larger economic and cultural systems than the inland peasant villages.

There was considerable variation in the pattern of production in the two coastal regions under study here. Scanian fishermen mainly operated in the intermediate ecological zone where the brackish water of the Baltic flows through Öresund to meet the North Sea. The waters remain open most winters and make fishing possible the whole year round. During the period of study herring, codfish and flat-fish were caught in nets or by long-line fishing. Fish traps were mainly used for eel but also for other species.

Along the Norrland coast the marine ecology was more dominated by species like herring, salmon and whitefish. The long hard winters with ice up to seven months of the year made intensive fishing a summer and autumn activity only and consequently the need for supplementary economic activities was greater in Norrland than among the Scanian fishermen.

Typical of both regions was the close integration between agrarian and maritime adaptations. Most Scanian fishing communities were settlements on the marginal land of farming villages and the fishermen were mainly recruited from



The harbour scene in many traditional Swedish fishing communities was a dense cluster of huts and jetties with little room for privacy. (Photo from Gullholmen on the Swedish West Coast early 20th century, the Nordic museum.)

the growing landless strata of the local peasantry. Along the Norrland coast many fishing communities were inhabited seasonally by peasants who combined farming with summer migration to fishing camps out in the archipelagos.

In the following I will focus on the most important economic activity in both districts: the hunt for pelagic stocks of herring which appeared in local waters during parts of the year.

Herring and Ritual

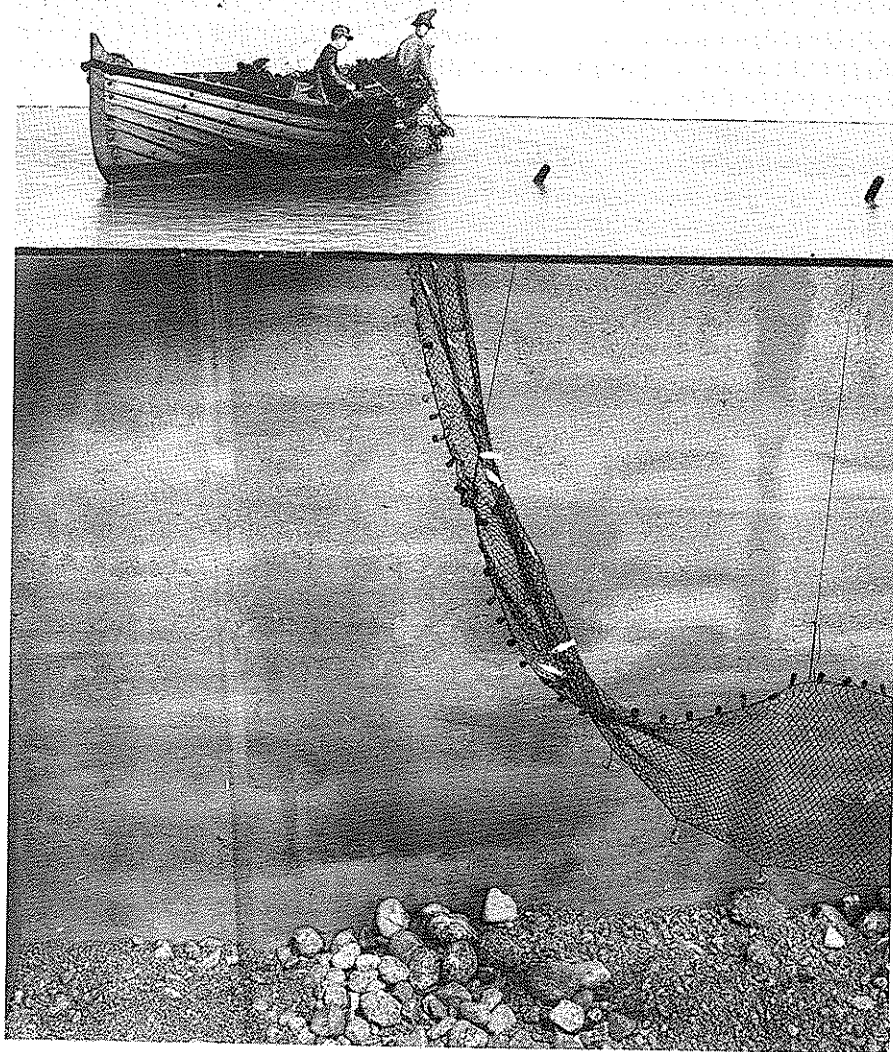
Along the Scanian coast the herring fisheries started in the early summer out at sea, while the autumn fishing was carried on close to the shore, as the shoals moved into shallower waters to spawn. Fishing was done with drift nets and crews of 4-7 men out at sea, while gill nets were used close to the shore.

In the Norrland waters the first herring was caught during the late spring, but the most important fishery was the *båtströmmingsrodd* (the herring row) in late summer, when the 'herring mountains' spawned on the banks out at sea. In the herring row from the harbour out to the grounds the crews consisted of two men or a man and a woman.

The fact that the herring fishery formed the cornerstone of the local economy in both regions gave the start of each new fishing season a certain aura. While the fishermen prepared boats and gear waiting for the approaching herring, there was much speculation about the outcome of the fishing. Would catches be better or worse than during previous seasons? Would there be enough earnings to prolong the yearly credit at the local store, or perhaps even enough to invest in a better boat or at least some new equipment?

The element of uncertainty was strengthened by the ecology of the herring fishing. More than other fisheries this was a chance hunting activity. The shoals of herring did not constitute a resource to be 'harvested' each year, but a prey that had to be located, stalked and caught. The mobile herring was the most elusive of all the marine resources exploited by the fishermen. The smallest changes in weather, water temperature of currents influenced the movements of the shoals, and the variations could be considerable from day to day and from season to season. Consequently the fishermen had little control over his most important source of income and his knowledge of the prey was fragmentary. Years of experience had taught the fishermen that the herring appeared at certain times, but if it was late or if the number of shoals was smaller than usual there was not always a ready explanation.

Thus we find a period of eager waiting for the herring at the start of the fishing season in both Scanian and Norrland villages. The journalist and author Ludvig (Lubbe) Nordström has described this very special atmosphere of waiting. He worked as a fisherman's apprentice in a Norrland fishing community around 1910 and shared the long days out at sea, scouting for the first signs of the approaching herring. When the first shoals revealed themselves by thousands of small bubbles out on the netting grounds, suspense was transformed into intensive activity in the harbour:



Norrland herring fishing was carried out from small, open boats like these. Success depended on the nets being placed at the right depth, as the herring moved with changing water temperatures. (Model in the Nordic Museum, Stockholm.)

The herring was on the banks. The herring had to be on the banks, for in the twilight over the fishing huts the noise was tremendous, the net sinkers streamed down from the quay into the boats, and young and old were running about with stacks of nets in their arms ... shouts were heard, boys in blue sweaters darted by each other, goats bleated from the folds, cows mooed loudly ...

The boats moved out. The herring row had started. The boat-rows out to the Great Bank to get the best fishing location.

It is against this background of waiting, suspense and speculation that the many ritual activities before the start of the herring season must be understood. Prophylactic ceremonies, the use of incantations and magical aids formed an integral part of the careful preparations of boats and equipment. The forms of these rituals varied greatly between the two regions. Scanian fishermen could make their nets fish better by smoking them or shooting with guns over them, while Norrland fishermen could add various magical ingredients to the dye-bath. Many of these rituals follow the cultural language of Swedish peasant ideas of magical manipulation, where fire, silver and steel were common magical elements.

The period of waiting before the arrival of the herring was also magically loaded in the sense that even trivial details were interpreted as omens and premonitions of coming success or failure in the fishing.

Another category of ritual activities was directed towards the supernatural rulers of the marine resources. These supernatural powers took various forms: mermaids, 'the old man of the sea', 'the sea mistress', etc. The rituals usually had the form of direct transactions with these powers, who ruled over both the herring and the weather. Small offerings of silver coins or half a bottle of schnapps before the start of the season were common tributes in both districts.

The ritual framework around the actual fishing operations was even more elaborate. There existed a great many beliefs centred around the proper way of starting out a fishing trip, how to behave on board and what types of sanction could strike a fisherman who did not follow the ritual rules.

This abundance of ritual and magic elaborations is not surprising considering the situation in which the herring fishing was carried out. I have stressed the element of suspense and speculation that came from the ecological and economic conditions of the herring fishery. To this can be added that the actual fishing operation, especially in the case of drift netting, was a very strenuous job with many nights of hard work and little sleep. Drifting with the long chains of net was also a dangerous activity: a sudden change of weather, an approaching storm meant that the nets had to be pulled quickly, or else the fishermen could be forced to cut away the nets to keep the boat from being dragged down.

Conversely, it is not surprising that a description of ritual activities in the small Scanian fishing village of Kullen concludes that the winter cod fishery with hand-lines, which was a steady and not very strenuous form of fishing, an in-shore activity that gave a stable but relatively unimportant economic yield, was carried out 'without any ceremonies'. Summer herring fishing here, on the other hand, involved many magical operations.

The dominant role of the herring fisheries is evident not only in the supernatural ideas but also in other domains of the cognitive system. It emerges in the very complex terminology of the actual object itself. Among Norrland fishermen we find 25 different terms for herring, classified according to its condition,

its use and the way it was caught (Hedblom 1913:23). We find similar patterns of differentiation along the Scanian coast.

Another important part of the cognitive map in the herring fisheries was all the labouriously and gradually accumulated knowledge of the maritime landscape and the locations of herring banks, the ways in which locations were found and fixed with the aid of coastal landmarks, the ways of interpreting and predicting the movement of the herring during weather changes, or the reading of signs of an approaching storm which could threaten the nets.

It is evident that the herring fisheries are very much in the focus of the two local maritime cultures. This is not very surprising given the important role of the herring in the lives of fishermen. The analysis could end here, but as I argued earlier, the analytical perspective needs to be broadened considerably. The rituals have to be viewed as parts of more complex cognitive systems. In this way the collections of 'maritime folklore' may give us insights into the fisherman's perception, not only of the resources he exploits, but also of the social and economic system he is part of.

The Cooperating Competitors

This cognitive and social dimension of magic is perhaps most clearly seen in the supernatural explanations of success and failure in fishing. These beliefs must be seen in connection with some characteristic traits of the social organization in the villages under study. Here we find a social dilemma that seems typical of many pre-industrial Swedish fishing communities: the tensions between inter-group solidarity and the individual strategies of resource exploitation. There exists a conflict of interests here, which is to a great extent a product of the precarious ecological and economic adaptation of maritime settings, where the fishermen exploit a common property resource individually. In discussions of pre-industrial Swedish fishing communities great stress is often put on the egalitarian and cooperative character of the social relations among the fishermen. We have plenty of evidence of how social and economic life was patterned by institutions of solidarity and mutual aid. Fishermen who lost their equipment would be helped by others. Widows and old fishermen who could not fish themselves were granted part of the catches, and so on (cf. Löfgren 1977).

Such social institutions of mutual assistance are also found in the two regions studied. In most Scanian and Norrland fishing villages the *hamnlag* (the harbour team) was a central institution embracing all the fishermen in the community. This corporation was concerned with regulating the fisheries as well as the management of communal investments like the harbour works or the wooden chapel buildings that were used for both religious and secular meetings in the Norrland villages.

The activities of this *hamnlag* could help to curb conflicts and competition among the fishermen. This was made very clear to Lubbe Nordström by a Norrland fisherman. They were discussing the element of competition in the local fisheries when the fisherman exclaimed:

And listen to this, Lubbe Nordström! One thing in this connection. They talk about the envy of fishermen. Listen now, Lubbe Nordström! Think of a labour union, construction workers, for example. Well! Yes! Saturday arrives. And it's time for pay. One gets 100 crowns. The other gets nothing, although he has worked just as hard. How do you think *that* would look, Lubbe Nordström? Wouldn't that create envy? Oh, oh, oh! Talk about envy among fishermen. No, no, no! That is nothing but talk! Talk, talk, talk! – He points: "Look! Up there! What is that up there! The chapel. I will tell you something about the chapels of the fishing communities, Lubbe Nordström. They have been very important. Guess for what? For unity. Where there is no chapel unity has always been less. Lubbe Nordström, think of Höllik. You will never find any unity there. Never! And is there a chapel there? No! And what kind of people do you get then?"

There is no doubt that the collective investments, from the chapels in Norrland to the harbour works in Scanian villages, helped to strengthen solidarity among the fishermen.

Even more important in this respect was perhaps the attempt to regulate competition out at sea. In many Norrland communities the fishing waters were divided according to a system called *dygning*. This meant that the fishing crews switched fishing locations every night after rules laid down in order to secure maximum fairness. There are parallels to this system in some Scanian communities. In Kivik and Baskemölla, for example, the harbour team met during Lent and drew lots for the fishing locations which were to be used during the approaching herring season. Furthermore we find the teams of both regions regulating the time fishermen could spend out on the fishing grounds. A fixed time for departure from the harbour could be set each day, or Sunday fishing could be prohibited. It is important to remember that these attempts at resource regulation were not the result of government interference. The rules had grown spontaneously out of the activities of local harbour teams.

In communities where no attempts were made to regulate fishing activities, fishermen could sometimes make individual claims to certain locations. Even more common was the view of the waters close to the community as a 'home territory' to which fishermen from other communities should not have access. In some instances we have evidence of recourse to physical violence in order to defend such individual or local rights in the resource.

The situation of competition in the herring fisheries was rather special. It was the knowledge of *where* to find the herring, not the herring in itself which constituted the scarce resource. Much-sought-after information like this could be manipulated strategically or preserved as a secret. We find the same pattern in most mobile fisheries and it is very evident in contemporary herring fishing as well. In the endless discussions of catches, fishermen try to secure as much information about the movements of the herring without being too forthcoming with their own knowledge.

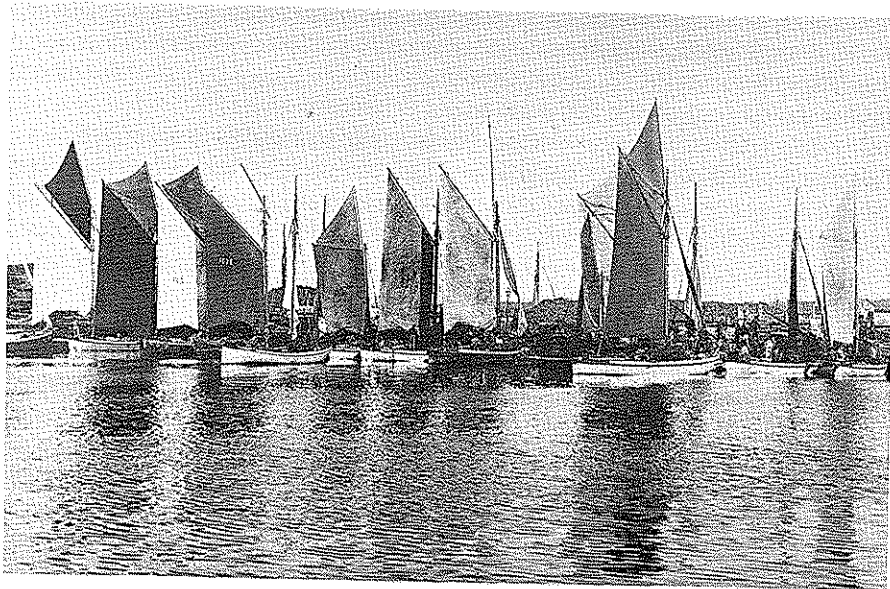
I would argue that the situation in the herring fisheries created particular tensions between cooperation and competition, solidarity and conflict. In the Norrland herring row no fisherman could leave the harbour before the master of the harbour team had struck the bell in the chapel, but after the signal we sometimes

find fishermen racing out to the banks in order to secure the best fishing locations for themselves. The regulating activities of the harbour team could diminish the sources of conflict but hardly eliminate them.

The most important source of conflict that remained to be dealt with was the uneven and often seemingly inexplicable distribution of success in the herring fisheries. It is important to remember here that success and failure were major concepts in the world view of the peasant fishermen. Students of maritime communities the world over have been struck by the intensive way in which fishing results are measured, judged and compared after each fishing trip. This critical evaluation is not necessarily linked to the participating fishermen themselves but often engages all the members of the fishing community: women, children and old people.

We find the same focus of interest in Scanian and Norrland villages. The highly varying individual results were judged after each day of herring fishing, and it is important to remember that the results were not measured absolutely but *relatively*.

"I got nothing and thank God, the neighbours did not get any more either", was a local saying in some Norrland communities. Success and failure were evaluated within the local community or within the group of fishermen exploiting the same waters. This is a pattern we find in many contemporary fisheries as well and it is of key importance to the understanding of individual strategies and patterns of cooperation among fishermen.



A fleet of herring boats in the harbour of Varberg on the Swedish West Coast. Before the emergence of marketing cooperatives fishermen could race each other in order to get in early and secure a good price. (Early 20th century photo.)

Luck - Its Loss, Destruction and Theft

The focus on success and failure in fishing and the great variations in the actual yields must have constituted a constant source of tension and conflict even in communities permeated by egalitarian and cooperative values.

After each fishing trip there is the need to explain differences in the individual catches and the need becomes greatest when the nets give only a poor catch. One can vent one's irritation against the pitiful herring that dangle in the nets. These were times when the herring were given bad names like 'lousy dogs' or 'suicides'. One can start to scrutinize the fishing trip: had the nets been set carelessly, sunk too deep in the water or had the currents entangled the chain of nets? If one was not prepared to find a cause for failure in personal carelessness or incompetence, there were, however, alternative explanations of a supernatural character. Had someone in the boat broken a taboo by whistling out at sea or by stepping over the nets down at the quay? Had there been an 'unlucky meeting' on the way down to the harbour? Perhaps more care should have been taken in shooting over the nets at the start of the season, and so on.

One or two failed fishing trips may be easy to explain, but the situation gets worse for the fisherman or the crew that are continually struck by bad luck. Why do we fail when the boat next to us hauls in nets loaded with herring?

In such situations one may resort to a special type of supernatural explanation:

When the fishermen continually shift locations day after day, and when everybody fishes at the same time, one would believe that the catch would be the same for everybody. This is not the case. Good and bad luck are concepts that are perpetually in the minds of fishermen. Some will get almost wealthy by good catches. Others only get poorer by their damned bad luck. In the past, more than now, they tried to explain this by referring to the infringement of supernatural powers. It was believed that spiteful competitors could "destroy" (*förgöra*) or put a spell on the nets, so that the herring avoided them. Even today there are one or two persons who have the power to do more than others. And still today one can hear about persons who have seen the ruler of the sea or a mermaid, or have received strange premonitions and much more (Viksten 1936:327).

This observation from a Norrland fishing village in the 1930s has many parallels in the folklore collections. We find a whole complex of beliefs centred around the magic manipulation of fishing luck of *förgörande* both in Scania and Norrland. In the many recorded cases where such a manipulation is believed to have occurred we can find certain patterns.

It is, for example, possible to analyse the material in terms of the type of social relations that are involved: who has destroyed my luck and why? Another answer is that I have to take the blame myself. I have in some way broken a taboo or a norm, and my bad luck can be explained as a punishment from the supernatural rulers of the sea.

As I have mentioned earlier, these 'rulers of the sea' were a firm reality in the beliefs of both Scanian and Norrland fishermen. Their forms and names

varied regionally, but like most supernatural beings in Swedish peasant tradition they were neither good nor bad. You had to be careful in your dealings with them. Successful fishermen were sometimes said to have good relations with a mermaid or a 'man of the sea', and there are numerous examples of fishermen being warned by supernatural beings of an approaching storm. But in the same way as the supernatural powers could help you they could also constitute a menace and a threat. They would punish a fisherman who had broken one of the norms of the sea or neglected a taboo. A story from the Scanian fishing village of Lomma illustrates a common pattern in these beliefs, where a breach of taboo is followed by supernatural retribution and then by the repentance of the culprit:

There is a fisherman in Lomma who is called Nilsson. Well, it is about forty years since this occurred. He was very good at swearing, and he still swears, by the way, and he has never been afraid of anything. But now I will tell you how it happened that he lost all his fishing gear. He was out fishing with a friend off Malmö. They were running before the wind and there was not much of it. Then they saw a couple of arms stretching out of the water towards the starboard rail and the whole boat was weighed down and started to take in water. Nilsson, who was a brave fellow, took the tiller and was going to strike out, but his companion said that this was something supernatural and that he should stay away, probably it was the ruler of the sea. But Nilsson did not care about what he said and struck the hands, which then let go of the boat. During this night there was only a small breeze, but Nilsson lost all his nets and gear. And after that night he turned into a Free Churcher and refrained from swearing for a long time, but now he has new nets and swears as well as he used to. I think he is 84 years old.

Against those situations where supernatural beings manipulate the luck of a fisherman there are the instances where suspicions are directed towards other members of the fishing community, against neighbours and colleagues. In both regions we find the belief that there exist certain evil-minded persons who may perform sorcery. Thus we often find that the accusations of magic manipulation are directed towards individuals with a marginal position in the social structure. They were the persons who could create 'an evil meeting'. If you met one of them on your way down to the harbour your fishing trip was already 'destroyed' and you might as well turn back home again. The notion of especially old women causing bad luck if you meet them on your way to work is common to many hunting cultures. In the Swedish material, however, we often find that these notions are focused upon certain individuals, men and women. An incident from another Scanian fishing village may illustrate this pattern:

Here there lives an old woman whom you should not meet on your way to fishing. If you meet her you get bad luck, the old ones say. A couple of years ago there was a fisherman here who was going fishing. He walked down towards the pier. There he met the old hag and he returned straight home and did not sail out to sea. The old ones said that if he had gone out fishing he would not have caught a single fish.

Once I, who am telling this, was going fishing. I was sitting on the quay attaching sinkers to the nets. Then the old hag appeared and touched the sticks on which I carry my nets with

her hand. After that she went away without uttering a word. "Now you won't have any luck in fishing", her two brothers told me, they were also going fishing. I did not care and set my nets in between theirs . . . But as I was going to take them up the following night, my net was torn to pieces and had very little fish in it, but in the nets that were next to me there was not a single hole and plenty of fish. So meeting that woman sure brings bad luck.

The fact that suspicions were directed towards some individuals had mainly to do with their reputation for magic power. Their acts were seen to be caused by sheer spitefulness or as sanctions for earlier instances of misbehaviour towards them. During his fieldwork up the Norrland coast Sune Ambrosiani was given many examples of this:

In order to damage the fishing of another fisherman they could make a cross of two twigs close to his boat. The informant's father often saw this, but he did not take notice. When the nets were hung to dry, they stole three net sinkers from the nets of fishermen with good luck. With the same intention to cause trouble they would kill a louse on the first float of the net, where the owner had inscribed his name. They could tie together a couple of meshes in the net with hair from a woman, they could let snakes into the nets, but the worst thing that could happen was to find frogs in the nets. Then they absolutely refused to go to sea. Then of course there were spells to be shouted to a fisherman on his way out of the harbour in order to destroy his luck in fishing (Ambrosiani 1916:307).

When the suspicions as in the example above are directed towards other fishermen it is not a case of malicious destruction of luck, but usually of *stealing* luck.

When old women in the Scanian village of Arild were observed sneaking around the nets and moving the net sinkers, this was not interpreted as malicious destruction. These old women had their own nets brought along by the fishing crews on a half-share basis, as a customary form of widow's pension, and they were anxious to move the fishing luck from successful nets over to their own. The theft of net sinkers or floaters was generally the most common way to manipulate luck in both Scanian and Norrland communities. One could also transfer fishing luck by cutting out a piece of the net and attaching it to one's own. A third technique is described by an old Scanian fisherman:

When a malicious person stole something from your boat and put it in his own, he also took the luck from the boat. One night many years ago I was asleep in the fore-cabin. Then there was someone walking on the deck. I woke up and climbed on deck and there was a man ready to jump ashore. His one hand was on the stay and in his other he had two herrings which he had taken from me.

Incidents like this could lead fisherman to take counter measures. If they suspected that their equipment had been tampered with and their luck manipulated, they could visit a local wise-man or a witch doctor. A crew from the Scanian village of Baskemölla had a long spell of bad luck in the herring fisheries and



Norrland fishermen preparing their herring nets before taking out. The man in the middle is attaching one of the sinkers, which could be stolen in order to gain some luck from a successful competitor. (Early 20th century photo, Museum of Maritime History, Stockholm.)

went away to consult 'Flanken', a woman with renowned supernatural powers. From her they received a mixture to smoke their nets with:

The fisherman thought it slightly embarrassing to smoke the nets in public down at the harbour, and therefore they carried all the eighty nets up to the doorway of a house. There the smoking procedure took place. At the end of the summer 'Flanken' was loudly praised and with good reason. The fishing had been uncommonly good with full boatloads almost every day.

The Social and Cultural Organization of Knowledge

It is evident that the ideas and practices I have described represented a considerable amount of knowledge. I have been able to give only a few examples of a rich stock of taboos and omens, magical prescriptions and ritual techniques. During fishing even the most trivial details could be given a ritual significance. Everyday occurrences and objects could be classified as positive, neutral and negative forces: pancakes in the food container brought along for the fishing meant bad luck, just as a silver coin under the mast ensured success. Smoke from burning pine wood created luck, while a birch broom on board was a negative influence.

When it comes to judging the actual distribution of magic beliefs in the community we face a special problem. The material that I have used for my analysis has mostly been collected in a period of disintegration and rapid cultural change. For many centuries the two ideological systems of the state church and the local peasant world view had existed side by side. Vehement attacks on 'folk beliefs' from priests and other representatives of the elite culture had but marginal effects on this coexistence.

During the nineteenth century we find a gradual disintegration of supernatural ideas in the process of modernization. The impact of change varied highly between different regions and different groups of local peasants. We can talk here of a gradual restructuring of traditional world views, as new 'rational' scientific explanations took the place of 'traditional', supernatural ones.

In the two coastal regions under consideration here, this change seems to have accelerated towards the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth. Thus we find fishermen who still have a firm belief in supernatural powers, while others have a more wavering or downright sceptical attitude towards the old traditions.

On the other hand it is not a simple question of a gradual decay of traditional beliefs. It is hardly possible to construct a continuum ranging from firm believers to non-believers. The belief systems discussed often constituted *latent* knowledge, which was activated or brought out into the open only in situations of crisis.

As long as the herring fishing goes well and as long as one is not hit by misfortunes, one can distance oneself from the supernatural beliefs or even joke about the superstitiousness of the old people. When one is suddenly struck by bad luck these beliefs and rituals may well be actualized again (cf. Firth 1966:123).

It is evident that most of the informants grew up in a setting where the belief in supernatural powers in fishing was firmly established and where the learning of ritual techniques and magic prescriptions constituted a natural part of socialization into the occupational role of fisherman. However, the situation at the time of interviewing is often a different one. Some admit that they still turn their knowledge into ritual action, others are in two minds about many of the 'old traditions', while others give the impression that they are totally distanced from 'all that superstition'. This process of disintegration is also evident in the fact that some fishermen prefer to perform the rituals in secrecy in order not to risk the ridicule of others. The distancing can even be more marked and provocative, as in the following example of a very conscious break of taboo by a young Scanian:

As the old ones put out the nets in earlier times they said: "Now we start in the name of Jesus." But the younger fishermen were not interested in this and once there was a blasphemer who said: "None of that Jesus stuff here, but for hell's sake get the damned nets into the water."

A folklore collector who worked in a Norrland community in 1924 met a

75-year-old fisherman who gave a parallel picture of the conflicts between generations that developed as the young fishermen started to distance themselves from the supernatural explanations:

You should have been here 30-40 years back, when old man Lindelöv was alive... That was a fellow who dealt with sorcery and strange things, and he taught others quite a lot as well. They say he was born with a caul and there is something peculiar about things like that.

I remember one time – it was during the summer of '89, I think – one morning when we were working with nets, then suddenly before I knew anything he (Lindelöv) threw himself to the ground and kicked with his legs as much as he could and blew with his lips. I thought the devil had come over the fellow, so I said to him: "What is wrong with you, Lindelöv?" Then he shouted to me; "Get down on the ground and do like me, you idiot!" – Well, I threw myself to the ground, but I was so full of laughter that I could neither kick nor blow.

Yes, old Lindelöv believed that as soon as you saw the first swallow of the summer you should get down on the ground and blow after her and kick as he did, and then the herring nets would never get entangled during the coming fishing season.

I guess there were many who believed in that and I am dead sure there were others besides Lindelöv who used to do that here, although more in secret.

The same fisherman told the collector that out on one of the herring banks "they used to throw a silver coin for luck in fishing from the stern over the box to the *sjörå* (the female ruler of the sea). – I know my grandfather wanted me to do that, when I started going out to sea, but that had no effect in either direction for my own part, although I have to admit that I agreed to do it."

The same folklore collector was also told that 'the old ones' used to slip a silver coin between the meshes, when binding nets, in order to make them more 'fishable'. As he was visiting the house of his old informant he saw that the 25-year-old maid of the house, who was binding a new herring net, had a silver coin in her lap and that she was trying to conceal it "not without a markedly embarrassed blush."

Such direct observations are rare in the folklore collections. Most situations or evidence are hearsay. The delicate nature of the topic also makes one wonder how much the informants chose to hide. When Sune Ambrosiani had once finished an interview with some fishermen on the topic of magic, he asked: "Well, now of course you haven't told me everything you know about these types of customs and traditions?" He was given the frank answer: "No, indeed! You should understand that there are many things which are not told to outsiders" (Ambrosiani 1916:308).

In spite of these shortcomings the collected material mirrors a vital tradition, but it is a tradition that need never have been evenly distributed among *all* the fishermen. What earlier generations of folklorists and ethnologists often called 'collective tradition' has turned out to be a rather more specialized and differentiated knowledge, as later studies of the social organization of tradition have pointed out. The material from the two regions underlines this. Some fishermen know more than others. The magical techniques are not mastered by all, and there are ritual experts and wise men who are alone in their knowledge of how

to use magic in a constructive or destructive way.

It is also evident that some parts of the belief systems were more readily abandoned in exchange for other types of explanation. Accusations of witchcraft and beliefs in sorcery died out more quickly than the more passive type of beliefs reflected in the many prescriptions of taboo (cf. the discussion in Mullen 1978:62 ff.).

The way this fisherman's lore was integrated into wider cognitive systems and cosmologies emphasizes the need to look at this knowledge not as a neat and orderly cultural system, shared by all in the community, but as a repertoire which may function in direct contradiction to other ideas, or coexist through a system of cultural compartmentalization and situational selection.

Thus the ideas about supernatural manipulation in fishing constitute a field which, for example, is very clearly delineated from the body of Christian religious beliefs which formed another part of the fisherman's cognitive framework. The two systems are relatively autonomous and to some extent contradictory, but as they were used in quite different domains of life they could continue to exist side by side. The powers of God were rarely invoked in the domain of fishing. The presence of a priest out at sea or down by the shore was viewed as a destructive force, an unlucky omen. God's might and the ritual expertise of the local priest were used in other domains of domestic life.

Luck as Limited Good

Another aspect of the cultural organization of these traditions concerns their relations to basic notions in the local culture. It is evident that the supernatural explanations of success and failure in fishing are related to the widespread idea of *luck as an individual resource which can be manipulated by others*. Furthermore, this notion of manipulative luck has a strong element of a zero-sum-game: my success means failure for someone else and vice versa.

The same notion of 'luck' is found in other sectors of Scandinavian peasant culture (cf. the discussion in Honko 1962:86 ff., Joensen 1981:121 ff.). Luck in cattle raising and in hunting, to name two examples, was an individual asset under constant threat from others in the community. Economic success on a neighbourhood farm could create suspicions of magic manipulation and even lead to accusations of sorcery. The fact that one farmer started to enjoy conspicuous prosperity had to mean that someone else was suffering bad luck. In the same way misfortune in hunting could mean that somebody else in the community was out to steal one's luck. Closely tied to this belief we find the notion of *envy* as a destructive force among Scandinavian peasants. A successful farmer or hunter knew that the envy of others constituted a threat to his own success. There are, of course, close parallels to these beliefs in George Foster's much debated notion of the limited good as a central value in peasant culture.⁴

Without an understanding of the concept of luck and its magical destruction it is hard to explain the witchcraft beliefs that are connected to it. A closer look at the form and structure of these beliefs also reveals that they had relatively

little in common with the great witchcraft epidemics which swept through Scandinavian society during the seventeenth century. While many scholars have been studying this historically conditioned witch-hunt and its many continental counterparts, the 'little tradition' of sorcery manifested in the manipulation of luck has received but scant attention.

This little tradition of witchcraft functioned as a stable and well-integrated part of peasant life up to the present century. Unlike the spectacular witch-hunts of previous centuries it did not inject terror into the peasant community, being rather viewed as an outlet for tensions and irritations.

The fishermen's witchcraft beliefs cannot only be analysed in functionalistic terms on an individual psychological level. A witchcraft accusation may well be an expression of an individual's anxiety over constant failure in the herring fisheries, but it can only be understood as an integrated part of a cognitive system with well-established cultural perception of the surrounding world to back it up (cf. Douglas 1970:xiii ff.). Furthermore it is channelled along certain social relations and very directly mirrors latent social and economic conflicts and tensions in the community. An example from a Norrland community may illustrate this:

They are superstitious, the fishermen around here. I remember, when we had hung up two nets down at the harbour a Saturday evening, once. On Sunday evening when we took them down again to go out fishing, there was a round hole – around 3 decimeters – cut in each of them. We suspected one of the neighbours of that. He was awfully jealous, and folk used to do these things to others who were lucky, and then attach the patches to their own nets. After that had happened it was dead impossible for us to get any fish. Finally Daddy took some schnapps with him and travelled to Själevad, to old man Nischin Fors, the local wise man, and he was going to put it right again. After that we had a bit of fishing, but not much. This incident created a hell of a lot of enmity.

Although it may be possible to argue along functionalist lines that the witchcraft accusations created a culturally accepted outlet for frustration and aggression, the very existence of these beliefs must also have acted as a disruptive force in the interpersonal relations of the fishermen.

Through the folklore material we get a backstage view of the social scene in the fishing communities, that may serve as a corrective to an over-idealized Redfieldian model of the harmonious little community. There has been a tendency to depict Swedish peasant fishing villages as both conflict-free and totally permeated by cooperative values of solidarity and mutual assistance, as I have stressed earlier. The material on witchcraft and magic manipulation gives us a chance to balance that picture. This is not to say that we find instead of the harmonious fishing village conflict-ridden communities, characterized by sorcery and black magic, strife and bitter conflict. It can still be argued that the element of cooperation and solidarity was strong in most Swedish pre-industrial fishing communities, but the folklore material may temper the too rosy picture sometimes presented in earlier studies.

Luck and the Production of Cultural Tensions

I have argued against a functionalist reduction of fishermen's magic to a kind of 'safety valve' in situations of anxiety. If we instead view magical ideas as a cultural resource and a model of interpretation used in certain social situations, we find that these ideas not only create security and harmony, but are also used as weapons in conflicts: they give cultural form to social tensions, and if we are to understand their function our analysis must include their relation to the social structure.⁵

Functionalist studies of fishing magic and the view of good and bad luck often combine ecological, technological and psychological factors to produce an explanation. The common denominator is the exploitation of a natural resource where there are considerable elements of risk and uncertainty, and where variations in the catch are difficult to explain. This ecological factor is often linked to individual psychology: the need for security in an insecure undertaking is invoked to explain the complex of beliefs about good luck and bad.

As a counter to this ecological focus we may look at the social dimension. Dependence on as peculiar a natural resource as the sea obviously affects fishermen's culture, but *how* this influence occurs and the effects it has is a result of the social and economic structure in which the fishing population acts. These material and social conditions determine the forms of competition, conflict and cooperation among fishermen. This can be exemplified in some illustrations.

In this study of Faeroese bank fishing around the turn of the century, Jóan Pauli Joensen has shown the extent to which the fishermen had supernatural explanations for the fluctuations in their catch: it was common to suspect fellow fishermen of magical manipulation (1981:114). Yet if we are to understand this mentality, which appears more pronounced than that found among Swedish fishermen at the same time, we must relate belief to the social situation. The pay system on board these company-owned fishing boats was based on a percentage of each fisherman's individual catch, not only a share system. The fishing itself was done with a cod jig, every man for himself. The economic structure in which the fisherman worked thus accentuated the luck of the individual. This created a seedbed for competition and suspicions of magical manipulation by others in the team. The degree of uncertainty was thus heightened by the economic circumstances.

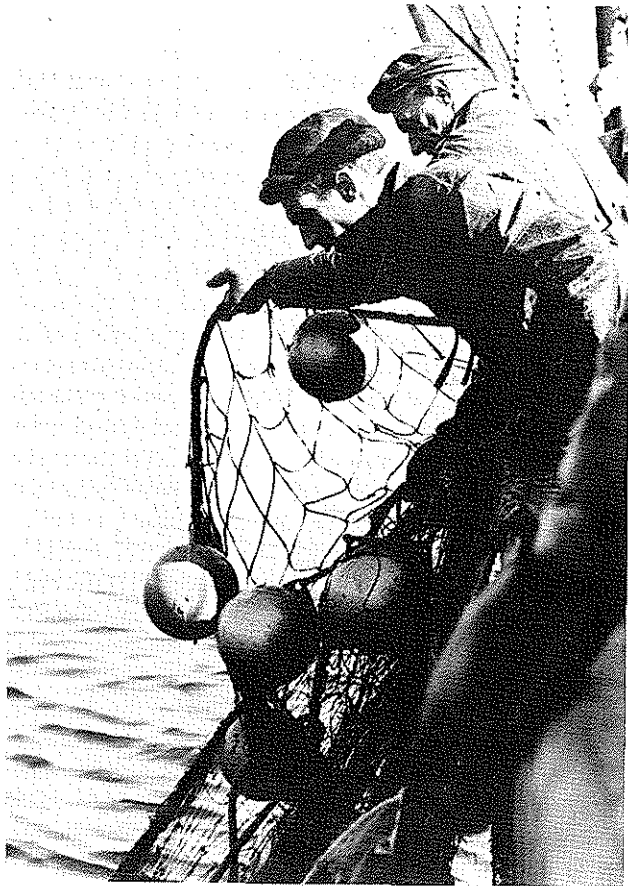
In the same way we can ask ourselves to what extent the 'competitive spirit' of Norrland fishermen was shaped exclusively by the unpredictable herring fishing. Apart from the boat race out to the herring grounds to secure good locations, fishermen could race each other on the journey back to coastal towns and the fish merchants, who usually paid much better prices for the first boatloads of herring that arrived in the harbour.

An account from a Norrland fishing community stresses that the competitive element among local fishermen decreased considerably as the fishermen decided to pool their resources and transport the catches cooperatively instead of individually (cf. Scotte 1979). The same tension between competition and coopera-

tion can be found in many contemporary fishing communities, despite the fact that fishing is nowadays carried on with sophisticated technology and in forms which have drastically reduced the amount of danger involved.

The cultural forms taken by this tension have changed, however. Rivalry and frustration at one's own lack of success rarely lead to accusations of *black magic*, but the concept of luck still exists as a part of the world view of many fishermen, although in new forms.

Swedish fishermen still use concepts like 'lucky' or 'clever' to explain why some skippers or teams are more successful than others. Notions like this still enable them to explain ostensibly inexplicable variations in luck. We encounter the same pattern in a number of contemporary settings.



The moment of suspense: getting the gear in and judging the catch on a small trawler. (Photo from the Swedish West Coast 1966 by the author.)

Michael Orbach, who has studied the Californian tuna fishing fleet – the world's most capital-intensive and high-technology fishery, found that the concept of luck and the opportunities for magical manipulation of success had an important place in the world view of many fishermen (1977:182 ff.) and there are more examples of this (cf. Brandt 1972:156 ff. and Poggie & Pollnac 1988).

Naturally, such notions have an important function as alternative explanatory models, but they are just as much a product of the economic structure that many of today's fishermen work within. The skippers of the large industrial trawler fleets are not only competing about catches, but also about the position of top skipper. The struggle to obtain command over the company's best boats and to attract good crews makes skippers in the same company into competitors at sea. Competition creates a seedbed for secretiveness and attempts to mislead rivals in the competition for the best results, yet the uncertainty may also lead to a focus on good luck and bad. The economic structure can thus reinforce individual insecurity and with this the supernatural notions (cf. Andersen 1972).

Added to this is the fact that the view of 'luckiness' can also have a conflict-avoiding function: in closely knit fishing communities there is no need to rank one's neighbours and colleagues according to their skill, since it is sufficient to refer to the more diffuse quality of 'luckiness'. This pattern was found by Barbara Yngvesson in her study of a fishing village in Bohuslän:

It seems plausible to me that the stress on luck was not unrelated to the reluctance evidenced among all fishermen to rank Stenö teams relative to each other. Direct evidence regarding relative ranking or skill generated statements to the effect that no team or person was "better" but that some boats had more luck (n.d.:104).

In her study *West Indian Sea Magic*, Jane Beck has drawn attention to the same social function:

Perhaps ... supernatural practices operate as a psychological crutch giving the fisherman greater confidence in his own skills but one thing is certain, the presence and the application of magic removes any onus of defeat from the individual failure and at the same time tempers the social view of success, thus minimizing the difference and therefore alleviating the tensions between the successful fishermen (1977:210).

Yngvesson and Beck underline the ideological function ideas about luck can have, as a way of legitimizing an existing social order (cf. the discussion in Byron 1988).

The phenomenon called 'fisherman's luck' has over the years travelled through a number of different theoretical paradigms and has been given various explanations. I have advocated an analysis of these supernatural ideas on several levels. They are used, instrumentally, as *cultural props and weapons* in social activities, but they also express ideas about how society works or social relations should function.

First of all we need to analyze how ideas about magic and ritual are related

to and integrated with the overall cosmology of fishermen. Secondly we need to look at the material conditions under which these ideas are formed and how they reflect social life. Finally, we need to analyze the social dynamics of magic – the situations in which these ideas are expressed and used. Such an approach combines an interest in the ways ideas about fisherman's luck are produced and reproduced in a given setting but also what these ideas do to social relations among reluctant competitors.

In this perspective the notion of fisherman's luck may turn out to be a cultural phenomenon which operates in widely different ways under different cultural and socio-economic conditions.

Notes

1. Typical of this classic research tradition is Christina Hole's inventory of maritime folklore (1967).

2. The early studies of Mullen (1969) and Poggie & Gersuny (1972) are examples of this functionalist tradition. In a later and more elaborated monograph on maritime folklore by Mullen (1978) the analysis is much more complex and rich, but still there is an emphasis on the "anxiety thesis" (see for example p. 7 ff.). A similar broadening of the analysis is found in Poggie & Pollnac (1988), but again the search for a Malinowskian (and rather one-dimensional) cause and effect relationship still colours their discussion.

3. For a discussion of the sources used, see Löfgren (1975 and 1981), where all references to the Swedish material also are found. They have been omitted in this English version.

4. See Foster (1965) and the overview in Gregory (1975) as well as the critique in Silverman (1974).

5. Cf. Mary Douglas' discussion in *Natural Symbols*, where she points out that "witchcraft beliefs are likely to flourish in small, enclosed groups, where movements in and out are restricted, when interaction is unavoidably close, and when roles are undefined or so defined that they are impossible to perform" (1973:108). An example of such a structural conflict is the tension between competition and cooperation in the fishing communities I have discussed.

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The Ritual Taboos of Fishermen

An Alternative Explanation

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ABSTRACT This paper applies a new explanation of magic and religion to ritual taboos among fishermen. Instead of seeing the taboos as a means of relieving anxiety, the paper proposes that taboos promote cooperation by communicating a willingness to accept traditional patterns of authority. This approach predicts that taboos will be more frequent in situations where intensive cooperation between individuals is crucial. This prediction is tested against data on fishing societies that have been used previously to demonstrate a correlation between danger and taboos. The cooperation hypothesis appears to be at least equal to the anxiety-reduction hypothesis in accounting for variations in taboo usage in different types of fishing. It also has the advantage of not requiring the problematical assumption that the fishermen believe that the taboos they observe actually work.

The "anxiety-ritual theory" states that magic, taboos, and religious behavior in general functions to relieve men of otherwise irreducible anxiety. While Evans-Pritchard (1965) points out that its fundamental premise is found in a number of different works (see Marrett 1914), this idea is usually attributed to Malinowski. Although certain aspects of the theory have been questioned (Kroeber 1948; Radcliffe-Brown 1965; Evans-Pritchard 1965), the general premise remains widely accepted (Homans 1941; Kluckhohn 1965; Firth 1955; Rosenthal and Siegel 1959; Wallace 1966; and Gmelch 1971).

Taboos Among Fishermen

The most famous example used to support the anxiety-reduction explanation is Malinowski's description of Trobriand fishing taboos. Malinowski reported striking differences in the behavior of Trobriand fishermen engaged in different types of fishing:

While in the villages on the inner lagoon fishing is done in an easy and absolutely reliable manner by the method of poisoning, yielding abundant results without danger and uncertainty, there are on the shores of the open sea dangerous modes of fishing and also certain types in which the yield greatly varies according to whether shoals of fish appear beforehand or not. It is most significant that in the lagoon fishing, where man can rely completely upon his knowledge and skill, magic does not exist, while in the open-sea fishing, full of danger and uncertainty, there is extensive magical ritual to secure safety and good results (Malinowski 1948:30-31).

Since this fishing example remains the cornerstone of the anxiety-reduction explanation of religious behavior, it is not surprising that numerous authors have