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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

used the anxiety explanation to account for the ritual taboos of fishermen, and other mariners, in modern societies (Poggie and Gersuny 1972; Gersuny and Poggie 1972; Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny 1976; Acheson 1981; Orbach 1977; Sherar 1973; Mullen 1969, 1978; Clark 1982; Lummis 1983, 1985; Poggie and Pollnac 1988; van Ginkel 1987; but see Tunstall 1962). Since modern commercial fishing takes place in various conditions ranging from large ships far from shore for extended periods to lone fishermen in 20-foot boats who return home each night and never venture more than a few miles from shore (Acheson 1975; Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny 1976; Mullen 1969, 1978), several authors have predicted patterns in the use of ritual-taboos paralleling those of the Trobriand fishermen. These studies will now be reviewed.

Previous Studies

While there is little agreement over the causes and functions of specific taboos (see van Ginkel 1987), previous studies have generally supported the anxiety-ritual theory. A correlation between economic risk and amount of ritual behavior has been stressed by Mullen (1969, 1978), Lummis (1983, 1985), and Clark (1982). The relationship between personal risk and ritual behavior has been stressed by Poggie and Gersuny (1972), Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny (1976), and Poggie and Pollnac (1988).

A paper by Poggie and Gersuny (1972) is especially important in evaluating previous studies. These authors attempted to test for a correlation between personal risk and ritual in New England where some fishermen trap lobsters close to shore and others fish for extended periods on off-shore draggers. They predicted greater taboos among the off-shore draggers because of the greater danger assumed to be inherent in being far from shore for extended periods. However, their interviews with the two types of fishermen revealed that "each of the groups has about the same proportion of ritual beliefs" (Poggie and Gersuny 1972:72).

The inability of this study to find their predicted correlation between the amount of ritual taboos and the two types of fishing is probably a result of the small sample size used in the study (see Acheson 1981). What is more important is the fact that the authors suggested that the equal amount of ritual taboos in the two fisheries might be the result of a lack of variation in danger between the two fisheries. They suggest that the more congested waters and absence of certain safety equipment on lobster boats means that "... the risk factors involved in each of those types of fishing have been equalized more or less" (Poggie and Gersuny 1972:72).

Poggie and Gersuny's uncertainty over the relative degree of danger involved in lobstering and off-shore dragging in their 1972 paper is crucial to evaluating other studies that have found a greater amount of ritual behavior in types of fishing that involve extended offshore trips (Mullen 1969, 1978; Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny 1976; Poggie and Pollnac 1988; Lummis 1983, 1985). This is because any doubt about the relative dangers involved in day-trip lobstering and

off-shore dragging disappeared from these later analyses:

The strongest positive relationship was between number of taboos and day versus trip fishing. ... A "day fisherman" who goes out for only one day at a time would be more "secure" than a "tripper" who spends anywhere from two to eleven days at sea. The latter is more exposed to storms, illness, injury, and disaster because of the nature of the ecological niche exploited and because of his removal from shoreside aid. In some cases these "trippers" are more than fifteen hours' steaming time from land. The positive relationship between number of taboos and day versus trip fishing thus suggests that the greater amount of risk associated with trip fishing results in anxiety which is lessened by more extensive ritual behavior (Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny 1976:261; see also Poggie and Pollnac 1988:71; Lummis 1983; van Ginkel 1987).

The apparent correlation between amount of ritual behavior and extended trip fishing is consistent with my own questionnaire survey of lobstermen in a port in southern Maine which I will refer to as "Southern Harbor". Southern Harbor has existed as a small fishing village since the 1870s. While it has been influenced by the recent economic development and tourism of southern Maine, many of the 18 full-time and 14 part-time lobstermen have extensive kinship and social ties within the community. While in-shore lobsters are the dominant prey species in the area, many of the full-time lobstermen seasonally use their lobster boats to fish for shrimp, scallops, and surf-clams. Some of the lobstermen have also worked on larger off-shore fishing boats in the past. Questionnaires concerning 'superstitions' and other aspects of fishing were completed and returned by 19 of the 32 lobstermen (see Table 1). The correlation between ritual behavior and extended trip fishing is supported by the fact that nine of the eleven lobstermen who had also fished for extended trips on off-shore fishing boats reported that superstitions were "taken more seriously" on the off-shore boats.

In conclusion, while the modern societal data on the correlation of rituals and off-shore fishing is consistent with Malinowski's Trobriand example, these data also suggests the need for skepticism of the cause of this pattern. This is because the relative danger involved in day-trip fishing and off-shore fishing is not clear. The fact that even Poggie and Gersuny (1972) were uncertain about the relative dangers of the two types of fishing leaves the possibility of another variable being responsible for the apparent differences in ritual taboos.

There is also a more fundamental problem in evaluating the support the modern societal data gives to the anxiety-reduction explanation. This is the problem of establishing that fishermen actually believe in the efficacy of their taboos. Mullen (1969) criticises studies that have only recorded the taboos listed by informants. This is because: "Usually there is no indication whether the person who reported the item believes or practices it. This information is necessary for any analysis of superstitious behavior" (Mullen 199:214). Indeed, identifying the belief of subjects is necessary to testing the anxiety explanation because it is the belief in the efficacy of the taboo that allegedly relieves the anxiety. However, the problem of identifying beliefs is more troublesome than has been realized.

Previous studies have tended to focus on the discrepancy between the mere

knowledge and the actual observance of ritual taboos. They assume that the actual observance of a taboo can be taken as an indication of belief in it. In fact, the observance of a taboo has been assumed to indicate belief in it even when the fishermen claimed they did not believe the taboo had any efficacy (see Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny 1976:123; Mullen 1969; Tunstall 1962; Poggie and Pollnac 1988; van Ginkel 1987; Orbach 1977; Zulaika 1981). However, my data from Southern Harbor illustrates the necessity of questioning the assumption that observance implies belief in the efficacy of a taboo or ritual.

Table 1. lists the ritual-taboos, or 'superstitions', known by the lobstermen. Table 2. lists the positive responses of the various lobstermen to the questions of whether they "knew of", "observed", and "believed in" each of the taboos. The previous studies would have concluded that the observed taboos are believed in regardless of whether or not the lobstermen reported believing in them. For example, they would conclude that lobsterman 14 believed that turning a hatch-cover upside down brought bad luck even though he denied having this belief. However, it is just as possible that this lobsterman observed this taboo without believing that it works. More importantly, is there any way to falsify either one of these claims about the fisherman's beliefs? Neither the assumption of belief or disbelief appears to be sufficiently testable for use in a scientific study. This fact is particularly clear in the case of lobsterman 4 who reported believing that saying the word "pig" on a boat causes bad luck but did not report observing the taboo on this word while on his boat. These examples illustrate the simple fact that beliefs are neither talk nor behavior, they are internal states that cannot be identified by our senses (see Steadman 1985).

The above discussion means there is probably evidence of greater ritual be-

Table 1. *The Number of Lobstermen Listing Each Ritual-Taboo*

Ritual-Taboo	Number of Lobstermen Listing Taboo
a) Bad luck to paint boat blue	12
b) Bad luck to launch on Friday	6
c) Bad luck to turn hatch-cover upside down	6
d) Bad luck to say the word pig	4
e) Bad luck to whistle (causes wind)	3
f) Bad luck to kill a seagull	2
g) Bad luck to talk about good fishing	1
h) Bad luck to fish with a "Jonah"	1
i) Bad luck to launch a boat bow first	1
j) Bad luck to take a minister on boat	1
k) Bad luck to throw away bottle from launching	1
l) Bad luck to carry a black bag	1
m) Bad luck to bring a woman on board	1
n) Bad luck to change name of boat	1

Table 2. *Taboos "Known", "Observed", and "Believed in" by Each Lobsterman*

Lobsterman	Taboos "Known"	Taboos "Observed"	Taboos "Believed in"
1	a b g	_____	_____
2	_____	_____	_____
3	a	_____	_____
4	a b c d e	a b c e	a b c d e
5	_____	_____	_____
6	a b c	a b c	_____
7	_____	_____	_____
8	a b c d e f h i	a b c d e f h i	a b c d e f h i
9	_____	_____	_____
10	_____	_____	_____
11	_____	_____	_____
12	a d l	_____	_____
13	a b k	a b	b
14	a c	a c	_____
15	a j	_____	_____
16	a b c m	_____	_____
17	a f n	a f n	a f
18	_____	_____	_____
19	a c d e	a c d e	a c d e

havior and talk of taboos among off-shore trip fishermen than there is among in-shore fishermen, but we are unable to test whether there is greater belief in taboos among off-shore trip fishermen. Fortunately, there is an explanation of taboos that generates testable predictions about variations in ritual behavior in different types of fishing without the necessity of identifying beliefs.

An Alternative Explanation

If one accepts the positivist notion that "it is of the essence of a scientific proposition that it be capable of being tested by observation" (Copi 1978:465; see also Popper 1959; Harris 1979), then a scientific explanation of rituals and taboos must be restricted to observable phenomena. Steadman (1985 n.d.) has proposed that what is observable about religion, and hence subject to falsification and scientific study, is not belief but behavior. He further suggests that all religious behavior is distinguished by "the communicated acceptance of another's 'supernatural' claim, a claim whose accuracy cannot be verified by the senses". (Steadman n.d.:2). Such behavior is likely to have an identifiable positive influence on the cooperation between co-acceptors. This is because the acceptance of a supernatural claim cannot, by definition, depend on the objective truth of the claim. Hence, by communicating acceptance of a supernatural claim one is

communicating a willingness to accept the speaker's influence unskeptically. Since a cooperative social relationship requires the acceptance of influence between individuals, such communication is likely to foster cooperative social relationships.

Ritual taboos involve the claim that certain actions have certain effects despite the fact that these effects are not observable. Communicating acceptance of such claims, either by following the taboo or by agreeing that the action has the unidentifiable effect, communicates a willingness to accept the influence of the other people following the taboo.

If this hypothesis is correct, ritual taboos should be found in situations requiring extensive cooperation between individuals – particularly situations where the lack of cooperation would produce costly consequences. Hence, a certain amount of some type of “danger” might be necessary to produce taboos, but the taboos should not occur unless some type of cooperation was also involved in the situation. Hence, rituals and taboos should be most common when a lapse in intense cooperation would be likely to have dire consequences. This hypothesis can be tested against the same variations in types of fishing previously discussed. The acceptance of ritual taboos should be regularly communicated during fishing that requires the intensive cooperation of a number of crew members, but nearly absent in solitary fishing.

Malinowski (1922) describes three kinds of Trobriand canoes. The smallest canoes are used in the lagoon and consist of only

a simple dug-out log, connected with a float. It never has any built-up planking, and no carved boards, nor as a rule any platform. In its economic aspect, it is always owned by one individual, and serves his personal needs. No mythology or magic is attached to it (Malinowski 1922:106).

The next larger type, which is used for fishing outside of the Lagoon, is manned by

fishing detachments each with a headman. He is the owner of the canoe, he performs the fish magic, . . . There is a good deal of fishing magic, taboos and customs connected with the construction of these canoes, and also with their use, and they form the subject of a number of minor myths (Malinowski 1922:10).

The third type of canoe is the largest and most seaworthy. It has a carrying-capacity of eighteen men (see Plate xxiii) and “its construction is permeated with tribal customs, ceremonial and magic” (Malinowski 1922:113). Firth similarly reports that ritual occurs with fishing in Malay “especially with the Lift-nets” (1966:122). This is a type of fishing which is presumably dangerous because it is done far from shore. However, it also requires the intricate cooperation of five boats and crews of over twenty-five men.

This same pattern is found in at least some modern fishing societies. While the superstition laden deep-sea fishing off the Texas gulf coast takes place on

boats with sizeable crews, the relatively taboo free bay fishing is performed by a fisherman who “goes out by himself or with one other person, perhaps a son, on his own small boat” (Mullen 1978:xxv). Lummis (1983 and 1985) also finds the largest amount of superstitions among “driftermen” who typically fish in crews of nine or more, an intermediate amount on trawlers with about six-man crews, and the fewest amount among in-shore fishermen who typically fish in two to three man crews.

In all of these cases there is a clear correlation between the degree of taboo and magic associated with each type of fishing and the number of men who must cooperate.

It is also interesting to note that another of Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny's (1976) predictions generated from the anxiety hypothesis was not met. They predicted there would be fewer taboos on larger vessels because “larger craft provide more security in rough waters, a large crew size resulting in greater safety of numbers, more onboard safety equipment, etc.” (Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny 1976:259). However, “the relationship between vessel size and number of taboos was not in the expected direction” (ibid.:260). Fishermen on large vessels with many crew members were found to have significantly more taboos than those on smaller vessels ($p < .01$) (ibid.:261).

The authors explain this unexpected correlation by stating that “it is important to note, however, that there was a strong positive relationship between vessel size and day versus trip fishing. When type of fishing [day vs. trip] was controlled for, the partial correlation between vessel size and number of taboos was reduced to .08 [from .32] ($p > .05$)” (ibid.:261; see also Poggie and Pollnac 1988). However, since the relative dangers inherent in “trip” versus “day” fishing appear open to debate, it is at least possible that a difference in danger is not the cause of the greater number of taboos among trip fishermen on large boats. I suggest that the greater taboos on the larger boats used in “trip” fishing may be the need for extensive cooperation among the many crew members on such vessels. Tunstall points out that “a deckhand at sea works, eats, is in conflict with, and places his life in the hands of a small group of other deckhands” (1962:12). This is in stark contrast to lobster fishing where the use of a single helper is a recent innovation and traditionally “virtually all of the full-time fishermen fish alone” (Wilson and Acheson 1980:213).

Conclusion

The cooperation explanation of fishermen taboos is at least as consistent with existing evidence as the explanation that taboos reduce anxiety over the possibility of economic or personal injury. It also has the distinct advantage of avoiding the problem of identifying the beliefs of another person. It even avoids the more general problem that has plagued nearly all attempts to explain religious behavior: “how does it come about that people capable of logical behavior so often act in a non-logical manner?” (Evans-Pritchard 1965:94). As Tunstall states, “to accuse somebody of being superstitious is to accuse him of being irrational”

(1962:12). Since the cooperation explanation does not require the assumption that people "believe" their statements about taboos, there is nothing necessarily irrational or non-logical about the fishermen's behavior. An increase in cooperation following ritual behavior and talk of taboos is as identifiable to the participants as it is to the social scientist. Orbach reports how an elaborate magical ritual took place after a period of bad fishing when "people were getting edgy and a little testy" (1977:212). If the ritual increases cooperation in such a situation, it is perfectly logical and rational to partake in the ritual.

Like a parent, or any person in a position of authority, the skipper of a boat plays a large part in maintaining the cooperation between those under his authority. Hence, the cooperation hypothesis is consistent with the fact that skippers are reported to be more interested in taboos and take them more seriously (see Lummis 1983; Knipe 1984). Crew members communicating acceptance of the taboos endorsed by the skipper communicate a willingness to accept the influence of both the skipper and other co-acceptors among the crew. This possible relation between taboos and the acceptance of a skipper's authority is suggested by Lummis who explains a particular crew's willingness to mock their skipper's rituals by the fact that "they were not getting much fish: which must have undermined the authority of their skipper" (1983:201).

The cooperation hypothesis generates several testable predictions. The simplest prediction is that taboos will be most frequent in fishing, and other activities such as warfare (Poggie and Pollnac 1988), in which cooperative relationships are crucial in avoiding some type of dire consequence. Another prediction is that fishermen should quit observing taboos after switching to a solitary style of fishing. Unfortunately, the small sample from Southern Harbor does not answer this question as 5 of the 11 lobstermen who had previously worked on larger boats still observed at least one taboo while 6 did not. Of course, the most basic prediction is that the communicated acceptance of a supernatural claim is indeed followed by increased cooperation. The different types of supernatural claims should also always be appropriate to the types of cooperative relationships important at the time. If the cooperation hypothesis is correct, the specific context in which this behavior takes place should be conducive to promoting important cooperative relationships.

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Sea Turtles and Resistance to TEDs Among Shrimp Fishermen of the U.S. Gulf Coast

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ABSTRACT The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has issued regulations requiring Southeast Atlantic and Gulf Coast shrimp fishermen to use Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) on their nets. Significant opposition has developed among Gulf Coast shrimpers. Ethnographic data, including observations of turtle capture and mortality, suggest reasons for resistance to the regulations.

Paul Durrenberger (1988) provides an excellent description of a complex legal situation which has led to pending regulatory requirements that U.S. shrimp fishermen install TEDs (Turtle Excluder Devices) on their trawl nets.¹ Durrenberger notes that Gulf Coast shrimpers believe they pose no critical threat to sea turtles and are intent on resisting use of TEDs. Here I offer ethnographic details on why shrimpers hold these attitudes. Key points are that shrimpers are not antagonistic toward turtles and are being neither duplicitous, nor irrational; their reactions are basically forthright and firmly based upon experience.

The Threat to Turtles

Shrimpers are closely attentive to the varied fauna brought in by their nets. Captains constantly evaluate the mix of species as one means of gauging whether their nets are properly "tuned" to work on the bottom without "plowing" (White 1977b:214). Thus Gulf shrimpers are well aware that they sometimes catch sea turtles. (It is in the rhetoric of confrontation that "we don't catch many turtles" becomes "we don't catch turtles.") Until recently, they did so with impunity; what to do with a turtle was strictly up to those on board the vessel.

Some shrimpers are recent recruits to the fishery, but many are from families with several generations of experience in Gulf coast fisheries. Along the eastern shore of Mobile Bay, Alabama, many people recall going down to "the front beach," on the Gulf of Mexico, to dig for turtle eggs in early summer.² Sometimes used for omelettes, the eggs were especially prized for use in cakes and puddings. Over the past three decades, though, increasingly rapid beachfront development (first cottages, then high-rise condos and hotels) has led coastal people to perceive lessened access to beaches, both for themselves and for turtles.

Alabama shrimpers interviewed in 1987-88 consistently held that (a) other causes are primarily to blame for turtle mortality (they cited beachfront development, intensive turtle eggging in Mexico and Central America, ingestion of plastic