

Pigs, Priests and other Puzzles

Fishermen's Taboos in Anthropological Perspective

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Anthropologists and folklorists have described and, albeit to a lesser extent, analysed the occurrence of taboos in maritime communities. Following Malinowski's anxiety-ritual proposition, the former stress personal risks and/or economic uncertainties involved in fishing as the cause of the observance of prohibitions. The author notices the omnipresence of distinct taboos in the fishing-villages of the North Atlantic fringe. Some of these are dealt with in detail. It is argued that these prohibitions are part and parcel of rites of territorial passage. The reason why particular creatures, objects, acts etcetera, should be avoided is hardly ever scrutinized. Nevertheless, this is one of the more challenging problems on the subject of fishermen's taboos. In this paper, some tentative explanations concerning this phenomenon are offered. Lastly, some attention is paid to the question of why taboos change or disappear over a span of time.

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I

In an oft-quoted passage the renowned anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski pointed out that

"[w]hile 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" (1955: 30–31).

This brilliant insight – a derivative of the anxiety-ritual 'theory'¹ – has been used by a number of authors² to explain the existence or absence of taboos in the fishing communities they

have studied. Anthropological and folkloristic literature concerning this subject abound with examples of these prohibitions, although in the latter the phenomenon is merely described and not explained. Anthropologists – following Malinowski – have stressed the dual cause of the performance of magical ritual and the observance of taboos: on the one hand there is the *personal risk* for the fisherman, on the other hand there is the *economic uncertainty* of the catch.

In this paper I will not recapitulate all taboos that can be found in the North Atlantic fishing-villages referred to. This would only lead to an endless enumeration similar to those prevalent in the folkloristic literature.³ Rather, I will concentrate on some prohibitions that are particularly widespread. By doing so, I will be able to illustrate my arguments clearly and make a number of cross-cultural comparisons. It should be noted, however, that taboos must be considered in their local contexts, taking into consideration folk taxonomies and beliefs prevalent in a community.

The purpose of this essay is threefold.

Firstly, to review the literature on the subject. Secondly, to evaluate the merits and defects of the arguments given. Lastly, to elaborate further on the explanations and formulate some new hypotheses.

The questions underlying my analysis are: 1) What is the rationale behind the use of taboos among fishermen? 2) What can be said about the meaning of words, about the human and animal categories which should be avoided? Most authors take the objects, acts, creatures and words to which the taboos refer for granted. They do not state explicitly that the issue is insignificant; they simply ignore it altogether. In my opinion, the question of 'why these categories?' is one of the more interesting and challenging problems on the subject of fishermen's prohibitions. 3) Why are some of these taboos so widespread? The last two questions in particular have been neglected by authors writing on taboos in maritime communities. 4) A last query pertains to Malinowski's proposition. If personal and economic risks are lessened, this should affect prohibitions. Does this in fact occur, or do taboos persist even when technological change and increased knowledge of the marine eco-system make life at sea safer and a successful catch more probable?

II

Ritual, conceived as a stylized, repetitive pattern of human behaviour (cf. Keesing 1981: 517), and taboo can serve, among many other things, to cope with anxiety. By adhering to prohibitions, fishermen try to reduce the risks they run when they find themselves in a perilous and unreliable environment. Man, as a terrestrial species, does not only have to adapt to maritime surroundings technologically, but psychologically as well. Psychological explanations, however, offer a limited perspective in dealing with this phenomenon. Taboos are always embedded in a socio-cultural context. This context must, therefore, be included in an analysis of fishermen's prohibitions.

As mentioned above, it was Malinowski who pointed out the dual risks involved in deep-sea fishing which led the Trobrianders to perform

magical rituals. Some authors have tried to refine Malinowski's original proposition. Mullen (1969) emphasizes the economic uncertainty of Texan fishermen as the main cause of their observance of taboos. Lummis, writing about East Anglia fishermen, agrees with Mullen's point of view. In providing data on mortal accidents among fishermen, Lummis stresses that trawlermen, whose death rates are highest compared to those of driftermen and inshore fishermen, do not observe as many taboos as the latter two categories do. His explanation is that

"[t]he technological revolution and capital intensification in drifting had at the same time reduced personal danger, and intensified the risks in economic outcome. It was the screwing up of the pitch of collective anxiety which provided such fertile ground for superstition which, although general among fishermen, were most widely practised here" (1983: 199).⁴

Other authors regard the personal dangers involved in fishing as the most important origin of taboo and ritual. Poggie and Gersuny (1972) and Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny (1976) write that in the New England maritime community of 'Shoreville' taboos are due to personal risks. They conclude that this is because local fishermen have the most modern equipment at their disposal – thereby reducing the uncertainty factor of the catch. The personal danger is still considerable, however: "there is great risk involved in a man's going out onto the water to catch fish – more risk to his personal self than to his economic self" (Poggie and Gersuny 1972: 71).

Clark (1978, 1982) – though stressing the fact that fishing was and still is a dangerous and accident-prone profession – endorses Malinowski's original proposition.

It becomes clear, then, that there is no consensus concerning the primary reason why fishermen perform rituals and observe taboos. Apart from the explanation postulated by Malinowski, authors stress either economic uncertainties or personal danger as the origin of fishermen's taboos.

Is it often reported that fishermen are em-

barrassed when asked about taboos. As David Clark writes: "I could ... find no-one who would freely admit to having been influenced personally by these beliefs or to have made a point of observing the taboos" (1982: 153). Usually fishermen point to others or neutralize the subject by saying 'they' or 'fishermen' believe ...⁵ Some will even go as far as to demonstrate their defiance of taboos by taking a minister out fishing, for example, whereas, according to the taboo, clergymen should be avoided (Thompson, Wailey and Lummis 1983: 260).

Nevertheless, most fishermen do observe taboos, even when they maintain that they do not. The rationale behind the observance of prohibitions is twofold. In the first place it is a matter of *precaution*. When fishermen do admit to observing taboos, they rationalize this by saying that they do not want to abandon this custom because 'this is the way it is done'. In addition to this there exists a belief in the efficacy of rites and taboos: one sticks to them '*just in case*'. This leads to the second part of the explanation. When an accident has happened, fishermen try to find reasons for this. Often they will point to some broken taboo as the cause of the misfortune. This kind of *post hoc rationalization* may reproduce the belief in supernatural causes of unfortunate events. Two examples will illustrate the case in point. The first one pertains to a Staithes fisherman who twisted his ankle after people had mentioned the word 'pigs' (a verbal taboo) to him. Clark paraphrases his informant:

"It's funny, some of the blokes at work had been asking me about pigs – I'd say, 'don't mention those bloody things' – and since then they've been on about it all the time. Then just yesterday a bloke came up and said, 'hey, I've got a book about superstitions and it mentions pigs'. And then today this goes and happens" (1982: 156).

The second example relates to a Cat Harbour fisherman who worked on Old Christmas Day, a day on which it is prohibited to work according to the local belief. Faris writes:

"Stan Orange ..., in defiance of this taboo, went

into the woods on Old Christmas Day. He struck his foot with an axe, splitting it. Stan claimed that this was purely coincidental, and the next year went into the woods again on the same day, whereupon he struck his other foot, splitting it. Cat Harbour people found this especially significant: "Then he had two cloven feet, just like the Devil sure!" (1973: 140).

Often nothing happens, of course, when taboos are broken. But what is significant is that fishermen have seen bad luck 'as a result' of not observing these prohibitions every now and then. In addition, Mullen points to the fact that fishermen have internalized these taboos from an early age onward. Taboos have become so much a part of their personality structure, that they feel insecure and uneasy when these are broken (1969: 220).

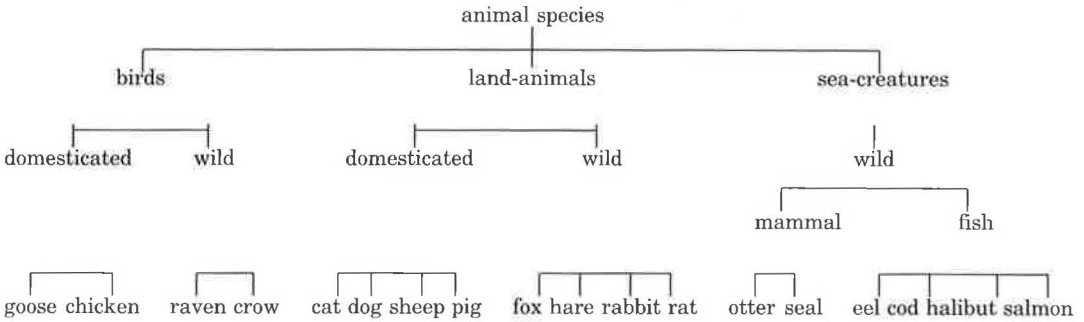
Apart from more general taboos prevailing in maritime communities, some fishermen have their own private ones. Apparently, symbols of good or bad luck can be a matter of personal taste. Lummis mentions that for some skippers a deck of cards aboard meant luck, while others would not even allow them aboard (1983: 190). According to Mullen "[t]here is no uniformity of belief; each man accepts or rejects a particular belief to a differing degree" (1969: 221).

Although this may be true to some extent, most taboos are 'learned, shared and transmitted'. In other words, prohibitions are an aspect of culture and socially reproduced. Children who grow up in a fishing-village learn and adopt these taboos.⁶ Besides this,

"folk religion derives considerable supportive benefit from the presence of certain structural conditions, such as closely-knit communal and kinship networks which facilitate and foster elements like superstition. Moreover the existence within the village of an occupational subculture ... forms the context within which beliefs and actions of this type find expression" (Clark 1978: 67).

So far, only a passing reference has been made to the contents of prohibitions. Three types of fishermen's taboos can be distinguished:

Figure 1. Some tabooed animals in North Atlantic fishing-villages.⁷



1) verbal taboos; 2) visual taboos and 3) action taboos.⁸ The central notion is that certain words, objects, acts and creatures should be avoided. It would not be useful to mention the variety of taboos or rules of avoidance people observe in the areas and communities dealt with in this paper. On first consideration there seems to be no regularity underlying the prohibitions in general. For instance, several animal species are tabooed, varying from a number of land-animals to some sea-creatures and birds. Figure 1 shows a rough and incomplete classification of animals which should be avoided by fishermen in one or more North Atlantic maritime communities. This taxonomy does not offer a clear insight into the problem of why mentioning or seeing these specific animals is considered to bring bad luck in several fishing-villages. Apparently, there are no fixed classes or categories of animals to which prohibitions relate. It is remarkable, however, that some of these taboos are particularly widespread. This can be seen from table 1, which gives their place of origin.

Some of the taboos will be treated in more detail in this essay. Before doing so, however, I shall present a critique of the lack of depth expressed in the positions held by some authors on the subject of fishermen's prohibitions.

III

Fenton (1968/69), Lockwood (1955), Martin (1981) and Van Beelen (1951) do not even attempt to explain the occurrence of fishermen's taboos. They suffice with mere description.

There are also more specific points of criticism to be made. In his essay on Texan fishermen, Mullen discusses the functions of taboos. Although his presentation is illuminating in some respects, it is also an example of psychological reductionism.⁹ Mullen's emphasis on the individual variety of taboos exposes his disregard for the socio-cultural aspects of rules of avoidance. He illustrates his ideas by referring to two fishermen, of comparable age and background, one of whom readily admits to observing taboos, while the other is extremely sceptical about this. Mullen thinks that "[t]he reasons are personal and psychological rather than cultural" (1969: 220). He casually mentions the fact that the former respondent is still a fisherman, while the latter is retired and runs the boats he owns from the land. Below I argue that taboos are part and parcel of rites of territorial passage. For the latter, whose activities are shore-based, these rites are not necessary, while for the former they are. Their different socio-economic positions might also, in part, explain their diverging attitudes. The fact that the observance of prohibitions varies within communities to some extent, is, in my opinion, no reason to adhere to an exclusively psychological explanation. It merely shows that an individual's cultural knowledge is fragmentary and incomplete, apart from the question as to whether he or she wants to live by these cultural 'rules' and to what extent.

Another critical remark relates to Poushinsky and Poushinsky's brief article (1973) on Nova Scotian lobster fishermen. In it, they express the opinion that by observing taboos cer-

Table 1. *Prevalent taboos in some North Atlantic areas*

Taboo	Area									
	Fleetwood	East Anglia	Staithes	Kintyre	Orkney	Shetland	Faroes	Katwijk	Cat Harbour	Shoreville
pigs		+	+	+	+	+		+		+
women		+	+	+		+			+	+
priests/ministers		+	+	+	+	+		+		
new activities on Fridays	+	+	+				+	+	+	+
whistling while embarking/ at sea	+	+	+	+				+	+	+

tain technologies are preserved over a span of time, while the introduction of new ones can be mitigated. The authors illustrate their hypotheses by referring to the fact that white woollen mittens are thought to bring luck. Nova Scotian lobstermen avoid using any other kind of mittens. Apart from the meagre circumstantial evidence, this argumentation leaves many taboos that cannot be reduced to technological reasons unexplained.

With the exception of Clark and Lummis, most authors have treated their subject as a unique phenomenon. Therefore, they have failed to note that quite a few similar taboos are in force in different North Atlantic areas. Can this similarity be attributed to culture contact? Although this might be so, I do not think this diffusionist explanation holds. Why would people adopt rules of avoidance which are not theirs? The reason might rather be that fishermen share a common cognitive orientation that is connected with the nature of their occupation. Before discussing this topic, I shall draw attention to one other major shortcoming in the literature concerning fishermen's prohibitions.

Surprisingly enough, none of the authors explicitly refers to Van Gennep's classical essay on rites of passage. According to him "the acts of embarking and disembarking ... are often accompanied by rites of separation at the time of departure and by rites of incorporation upon return" (1960: 23). Among these rituals Van Gennep includes taboos, or in his own terminology 'negative rites'. These taboos and rites

serve, among other things, to cope with dangerous transitions from one physical and cognitive domain to another: "the transition from one state to another is a serious step which could not be accomplished without special precautions" (ibid.: 184).

Although there is a host of taboos which have to be observed by fishermen while they are at sea, it is my hypothesis – keeping Van Gennep's interpretation in mind – that prohibitions while preparing to sail are especially widespread and strictly observed. Many fishermen, for example, would not put to sea after having met a woman, minister or priest on their way to the boat.¹⁰ Another situation which should be avoided is the bringing aboard of a black bag or suitcase.¹¹ Several authors mention that fishermen never leave for a trip or start new activities on Fridays.¹² Thompson, Wailey and Lummis refer to a refusal to sail when a crewman made his way to the ship while whistling (1983: 105). Although there is little empirical data concerning the moments at which taboos apply, I think they are best regarded as part and parcel of rites of territorial passage. These can be considered as rites of separation. Illustrative of rites of incorporation are the meals – *caldeirada* – Portuguese fishermen share upon a safe return to their homeport (Johnson 1979: 249–51).¹³ Additional research is necessary, of course, to test this hypothesis.

Nevertheless, I agree with the Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren that "[i]n the cultural management of space boundaries are import-

ant" (1981: 31). Crossing a border is marked by the performance of rituals and the observance of prohibitions. Examining these can give us "important insights into both the attitudes towards nature and territories as well as images of society" (ibid.). Taboos, then, must not be regarded as remnants of more traditional world-views, but as ways of coping with transitions from one physical and cognitive domain to another. Fishermen have to cross the land-sea boundary time and again. From the time of their departure until the moment of their return they are liminal *personae* who must observe many prohibitions.

This observation does not explain, however, why certain words, acts, creatures etcetera, and not others should be avoided. Many authors have altogether ignored the topic of the meaning of tabooed categories. Only Clark (1978, 1982) refers to the fact that, in the Yorkshire village of Staithes at least, the tabooed animals (pigs and foxes) are landcreatures. He concludes: "The crucial symbolism therefore seems to point to the opposition between land and sea" (1982: 160). This is relevant because Staithes fishermen share an aversion towards rural life. I think this argument – though it seems sound on first consideration – is lacking in depth. This will be explained in the next section.

IV

In a well-known article, the anthropologist Edmund Leach (1964) offers an explanation for the occurrence of verbal taboos on certain animal categories in England. David Clark (1982) mentions this essay, but he does not find it useful in accounting for Staithes fishermen's prohibitions on mentioning pigs and foxes. Although Clark's elaboration is, in my opinion, too shallow, his attempt to explain why particular animals are tabooed should be appreciated.

Let me state briefly, then, the purport of Leach's essay. His central idea – following Lévi-Strauss – is that people make binary distinctions and mediate these by creating ambiguous, taboo-loaded intermediary categories (1964: 45). In his own words:

"... it is the ambiguous categories that attract the maximum interest and the most intense feelings of taboo. The general theory is that taboo applies to categories which are anomalous with respect to clear-cut category oppositions" (ibid.: 39).

Another protagonist of symbolic anthropology, Mary Douglas, treats the subject in a similar manner: "Cultural intolerance of ambiguity is expressed by avoidance, by discrimination, and by pressure to conform" (1975: 53).

Returning to the verbal taboos on pigs and foxes mentioned by Clark, the question arises as to whether these animal categories can be considered to be ambiguous. According to Leach they can. He hints at the fact that foxes occupy – at least in the English situation – the borderline between edible and inedible animals (1964: 52). Besides this, foxes are sometimes considered as wild, and sometimes as game (ibid.: 46).

Neither are pigs a clear-cut category. The sole purpose of breeding these animals is to eventually slaughter and eat them. Like dogs, they are fed on the left-overs of human food. Unlike dogs, however, they are not considered as pets. Contrary to other farm-animals, pigs are but useful as suppliers of skin and pork (ibid.: 46, 51).

Clark rejects Leach's notion that the edibility of animals might be important in assessing why they are tabooed: "The animals' significance in the present context does not appear to lie in this direction so much as in a common factor which they all share as *land* creatures" (Clark 1982: 160). But the key notion in Leach's explanation of prohibitions pertaining to certain categories of animals is not so much their *edibility* as their *ambiguity*. And his argument seems plausible in the present context. The more so as Clark notices that Staithes miners, like the local fishermen, avoid seeing and saying pigs (ibid.: 152). Consequently, it is not exclusively a fishermen's taboo. Therefore, Clark's allusion to the rivalry between fishing and agricultural villages and his concomitant observation that "[p]igs and foxes are somehow central elements of a rural life which is abhorrent to the fisherfolk" (ibid.: 160) seems inadequate.¹⁴

Admittedly, Leach's reasoning is, in certain respects, laborious and far-fetched.¹⁵ Nevertheless, he must be credited with having established the possibility that ambiguous categories are the object of prohibitions. Taboos that can be interpreted in this fashion are the ones pertaining to rats, otters, seals, eels and alligators.¹⁶ These animals belong to an intermediary category in the land/sea dichotomy. They are, like fishermen (although only by means of a vessel), able to survive in both ecological domains for longer or shorter periods of time. It is this ambiguity that might explain why fishermen in some areas of the world avoid these animals.

There is, however, another case where a similar kind of analysis is appropriate. I am referring here to taboos on certain human categories. Why is it that women and ministers or priests are so often tabooed in maritime communities? Are they ambiguous and ambivalent from a fishermen's point of view and if so, is this the reason why they should be avoided?

Women are seldom found aboard fishing-vessels. Nevertheless, they occupy a very important position in fishing communities, in economic, social and other respects.¹⁷ In spite of the fact that women perform crucial tasks in the local fishing economy, in several villages fishermen try to avoid meeting them when they are preparing to sail. For instance, in Cat Harbour "women are regarded as pollutants 'on the water,' and the more traditional men would not consider going out if a woman had set foot in the boat that day" (Faris 1973: 73). Martin provides an example of a Dalintober fisherman who was on the way to his boat. He met an old woman who inquired if he was going to fish. His answer was: "A was, but seein' A've met you, A can go away back hame" (1981: 48).

Why do fishermen, in their field of activities, consider some women polluting? Mary Douglas writes "dirt [is] matter out of place" (1975: 50). When reduced to its bare essence, this axiom boils down to the notion that people regard certain objects as pollutants in certain contexts. It must be made perfectly clear that the objects are not intrinsically 'dirty'. People merely perceive 'matter' and 'place' as incompatible,

hence matter out of place is tabooed. Can this insight – substituting 'female persons' for 'matter' – shed light on the question why women are often avoided by fishermen who are preparing to sail? Consider Clark's observation:

"Men setting off to their work, to a hazardous and dangerous world in which women had no place, feared the contagion which might result from meeting a member of the opposite sex. Women did vital work in the community, but this was essentially based on the home, which men left behind each day; consequently to meet a woman *en route* to the ... boat represented an intrusion whereby the separateness of the two worlds was violated" (1982: 159).

Upon leaving home fishermen enter a liminal period which lasts until their return from the marine environment, but which is especially dangerous, in a supernatural sense, until the moment of embarkation. Women should be avoided because during this transitional stage fishermen, if they are to survive economically, cannot associate with them. They are on their way from their wives to another 'wife', their boat. Let me elaborate on this.

The image of a ship as a fictive woman is very widespread among seafarers and has been noted by many authors.¹⁸ Lummis quotes one of his informants, a Norfolk drifterman. Some of the latter's remarks may throw light on the case in point: "we went to sea that night, we filled her [the boat] full of herring, we came in and landed, we went out again, we filled her full of herring again" (1983: 191). This same man mentions "the ship's husband" (*ibid.*: 190). Although this is a common expression for the boatowner's bookkeeper, it is none the less significant; he provides her with the necessary supplies. By doing so, the boat is capable of reproducing her labour.¹⁹ But how do fishermen perceive their vessels? Rodgers postulates that among sailors "[t]wo images predominate: the all-powerful mother who nurtures and offers womb-like protection; and the enchantress of whom a man can never be certain" (1984: 2). Perhaps a fisherman also experiences his boat as a protecting mother. Yet I think that the image is more that of a wife. Through their work,

fishermen 'impregnate' their boat with fish, which she keeps in the 'belly' for some time, until the catch is landed ('born'). If this reasoning is correct, fishermen are bigamous in a certain sense; they have both a natural and a symbolic wife, both of whom fulfil positive functions for them; the former in social reproduction, the latter in economic reproduction. Any other member of the opposite sex poses a threat to fishermen passing from the one feminine realm to the other. Unlike wife and boat, these women cannot contribute anything positive to a fisherman's economic pursuit. He perceives them as incompatible with his venture, because they might reveal themselves as enchantresses, who could negatively influence his success. These female persons are ambiguous because they are 'out of context' during the *limen* of fishermen, hence they should be avoided.

In several North Atlantic villages there is another category of human beings who should be avoided by fishermen when they are preparing to sail, *viz.* priests or ministers. Usually, they know nothing of the hazardous life at sea through their own personal experience. Coming from outside the community, they are 'outsiders' in a literal sense. Clark notices that in Staithes "[m]inisters were, and are, frequently perceived as interfering 'foreigners', who, unacquainted with local conditions and attitudes, attempt to assert their will over that of the village populace" (1982: 79).²⁰ At the same time it is their task to take care of the spiritual well-being of their congregation. So, while on the one hand priests or ministers are outsiders, they are strongly attached to the community on the other. Furthermore, their position as spiritual leaders is often ambiguous. They are mediators between the sacred and the profane. As intermediaries they hold important positions in local religious life and they perform crucial tasks at the most significant rites of passage; birth, marriage and death. Sometimes, however, they cannot fulfil their tasks. Jorion (1982), for example, hints at the fact that priests on the Breton island of Houat frequently fail to perform the appropriate death rituals for drowned fishermen. Priests or ministers are often associated with death. There-

fore, fishermen, during their liminal stage, consider meeting them a bad omen.²¹ They do not fit in with the context of a fisherman's endeavour.

Of course, a great deal of my argumentation is conjectural. Yet we cannot dismiss the matter with a mere description of the rules of avoidance which are in force in a maritime community. In my opinion, the taboo-puzzle has to be probed into with more vigour. As anthropologists we cannot afford to be fortuitists.

Many prohibitions remain unexplained. In order to understand them correctly, the local taxonomies and beliefs must be scrutinized. Due to the scantiness of literature on the topic, a full analysis cannot be given here. My purpose was, however, to point out why certain categories of animals and human beings are tabooed in fishing-villages. It is my hypothesis – following Leach and Douglas to a certain extent – that fishermen avoid mentioning or seeing foxes, pigs, women and priests or ministers due to their ambiguity or incompatibility within certain contexts. This might, in part, explain why some of these taboos can be found in so many maritime communities of the North Atlantic fringe. In my opinion, the reasons for the omnipresence of particular taboos can only be understood by paying attention to the common experience and cognitive orientation of North Atlantic fishermen, which exist in spite of all regional differences.

There is one other important subject to be dealt with. I am referring to the question of why and how taboos change over a span of time.

V

Thus far, I have written on the topic in the ethnographic present. But in many villages the ideas about avoidance have changed or are changing rapidly. This process is often attributed to technological change. Clark, for instance, postulates that "where ... a relative mastery of the situation is possible, we find ... that magical strategies disappear" (1982: 146). This mastery is achieved by the introduction of modern equipment, which reduces economic and personal risks. Undoubtedly, the increased

knowledge of the marine eco-system contributes to the decreasing observance of taboos as well.

Alluding to the German sociologist Max Weber it might be said that when people, at least hypothetically, can master all things by calculation, the world becomes disenchanted. In other words, magical thought and practice are eliminated in the process of modernization (cf. Giddens 1971: 183–84). I find this statement too extreme. Even in highly technocratic societies people sometimes relapse into supernatural explanations of unfortunate events. For example, when a young child dies, they wonder why ‘fate’ has taken his life and not an older one. As Van Baal writes: “In our need for communication we are all bricoleurs, looking for signs which can ‘explain’ our universe” (1971: 278).

Are the introduction of sophisticated equipment and the increased knowledge of the marine biology the sole agents of the change or disappearance of taboos? One is inclined to answer in the affirmative or, at least, to attribute a major role to these factors in the declining observance of prohibitions. But consider Poggie and Gersuny’s observation:

“While it is true that man has continually increased his control over and predicability of the process of production, there has not been a comparable increase in technological control over the elements that endanger his life and limb. Man’s cognitive image of his capacity to preserve his mortal self through rational technology can never reach the degree of confidence that he has in his ability to control his environment” (1972: 67).

Lummis discovered that drifter skippers in East Anglia continue to observe taboos even after the introduction of modern technology. He attributes this to the responsibility borne by the skippers. They are the ones who run economic risks:

“Here was the secret of a paradox, of a world in which attitudes seemed to reflect economic structure in a reverse mirror, in which captains of a modern industry were driven back to

seek refuge in the images and delusions of ‘traditional’ superstition” (1983: 202).

By quoting these authors I merely want to suggest that it is insufficient to regard technological change and increased biological knowledge of the marine environment as the sole causes of declining magical ritual and taboos. Apparently, there is not a simple inverse relation between these processes, although the former will strongly influence the latter. This is no reason, however, to give up tracing other relevant variables. Certainly, additional research, especially of the kind concentrating on the processual characteristics of change in local collective representations, is of utmost relevance. Such studies are, however, still in their infancy.

VI

In conclusion, anthropologists have offered a number of explanations for the occurrence of taboos in fishing-villages. They either assign prohibitions to both the personal and economic risks fishermen run, or they emphasize one of these. In general, the former type of explanation seems to be the more adequate. Other people in perilous occupations, like miners, for example, are also known to observe many taboos. Lummis (1983), however, convincingly shows that fishermen – in this case drifter skippers – who carry a heavy economic responsibility are equally prone to observe taboos. Depending upon the specific case, either personal or economic risks may weigh more heavily.

Although there definitely is a strong psychological component in the use of prohibitions, we must not lose sight of the fact that they are ‘learned, shared and transmitted’, and socially sanctioned. Often fishermen deny their observance of taboos. Yet they persist in avoiding certain words, acts, creatures etcetera. They do this as a matter of precaution, ‘just in case’. Furthermore, when some misfortune befalls a fisherman, frequently some formerly broken taboo will be pointed out as the cause, in an attempt at *post hoc* rationalization.

It is my hypothesis that most of the taboos in maritime communities are part and parcel of

rites of territorial passage. During their transitional stage fishermen have to observe ritual avoidances. Prohibitions while preparing to sail are particularly widespread and strictly observed. Rites of separation, therefore, appear to be especially important.

A widely neglected subject in the literature on fishermen's taboos pertains to their meaning. Most authors apparently find this topic unproblematic and neglect, or do not elaborate on, the question of why *certain* categories are avoided. Yet I suspect that this is the crux of the matter. In my opinion, the answer to this lies in the ambiguous or incompatible character of that which is tabooed in certain contexts. In this paper I have tried to make clear that this is the case with foxes, pigs, women and priests or ministers. My explanation is, however, tentative. Only additional research can prove whether this hypothesis is, or is not, a fallacy.

It is equally necessary to study the processes by which rules of avoidance change and why they do so. Technological modernization and increasing knowledge of marine eco-systems appear to be important, but cannot simply be considered as the only causes of the gradual decline of taboos. Other variables might also be important in changing attitudes towards rules of avoidance. Research into the sociogenesis of local collective representations is urgently needed to establish the impetus behind such processes.

Notes

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1. 'Theory', as it has come to be called (cf. Clark 1978: 59; 1982: 145; Lummis 1983: 194; Mullen 1969: 216), is an incorrect term, of course. Malinowski merely states a proposition similar to 'where a, there b'. In this case: where there is anxiety, there is magical ritual.
2. Malinowski's anxiety-ritual proposition is referred to by Clark (1978, 1982), Mullen (1969), Poggie and Gersuny (1972) and by Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny (1976).
3. I do not disparage the work done by folklorists, on the contrary. It would be to the mutual advantage of anthropologists and folklorists to take note of each other's work. Mullen, for example, fruitfully combines "collecting procedures of folklorists with the analytic methods of anthropologists" (1969: 214).
4. Fishermen themselves usually use the term 'superstitions'. Although many authors have adopted this emic terminology, I will try to avoid it. I do so because it is my opinion that the distinction often made by social scientists between folk and institutional religion – whereby the above mentioned concept belongs to the former – is artificial. Both are part of a wider belief system. Therefore, I will use the more neutral words 'belief', 'prohibition', 'rules of avoidance' and 'taboo' throughout the rest of this paper, except when quoting other authors.
5. This embarrassment of fishermen when asked about taboos and their subsequent denial of observing them is also reported by Martin (1981: 48); Mullen (1969: 215); Poggie and Gersuny (1972: 72); Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny (1976: 260). Hence, talking about taboos is taboo.
6. Martin gives an example of the intergenerational transmission of taboos. A Campbeltown fisherman's son refused to mention the taboo word 'pig': "At school Willie was asked to repeat the lesson 'P-i-g ... pig', but he resolutely and persistently recited: 'P-i-g ... doorkie', until the teacher, exasperated, asked: 'Now what's the reason?' He replied, immediately and with relief: 'My daddy'll no' let me say that!'" (1981: 50).
7. The finding-places of these taboos are as follows: goose, chicken, raven and crow (Faroes); cat (Faroes, Katwijk, Shetland); sheep (Faroes, Shetland); fox (Staithes); hare (Katwijk); rabbit (East Anglia, Kintyre); rat (Faroes, Shetland, Kintyre); otter (Shetland); seal (Shetland, Orkney); eel, cod and halibut (Shetland); salmon (Scottish East Coast); pig (see table 1).
8. There are other prohibitions, of course, such as the ones pertaining to food, but these are not specific fishermen's taboos. The three types of taboos refer to the following rules of avoidance: avoid saying (...), avoid seeing (...), avoid doing (...).
9. Mullen also deals with the instrumental and sociological functions of taboos. The instrumental function relates to the behaviour of fishermen. The sociological function pertains to the support of social values of a society (1969: 216–17).
10. These taboos can be found in several maritime communities. Compare Van Beelen (1951), Clark (1978, 1982), Faris (1973), Lockwood (1955), Lummis (1983), Mullen (1969), Poggie and Gersuny (1972) and Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny (1976) on this topic.
11. This taboo is mentioned by Mullen (1969), Poggie and Gersuny (1972) and Poggie, Pollnac and Gersuny (1976). The association with a coffin is obvious.
12. For example Van Beelen (1951), Clark (1978,

- 1982), Joensen (1975), Mullen (1969), Poggie and Gersuny (1972) and Thompson, Wailey and Lummis (1983).
13. Johnson himself does not refer to the *caldeirada* as a rite of incorporation. He merely deals with its function in conflict resolution.
 14. Nevertheless, it is an interesting observation, that bears a striking family resemblance to the phenomenon of totemism. Linguists have given another explanation. According to Havers, for example, one should avoid mentioning any animal not belonging to the domain of one's hunting or fishing activities, because the 'spiritual rulers' of these different realms may be on bad terms with each other. Hunters, for instance, never mention names of domesticated animals when they are hunting and fishermen never mention species of game when they are fishing (1946: 30–31). See also Nirvi who writes: "On the water one does not dare mentioning land-animals by their names, because it incenses the sea-deities and the fish will not swim in the net" (1947: 71, my translation, RvG).
 15. Furthermore, Leach's postulate concerning the binary character of human reasoning is highly dubious. Their classification principles might just as well be more complex. For this reason I prefer to consider the tabooed categories as ambiguous because they are incompatible with certain ventures or 'out of context'.
 16. Alligators are a tabooed animal category in Texas. The finding-places of the prohibitions pertaining to eels, rats, otters and seals are mentioned in note 8. Most of these prohibitions are word taboos. These present a special problem. The words which should be avoided do have synonyms which may be used. For example, cat, a taboo word on the Faroes (cf. Lockwood 1955) as well as in Katwijk (cf. Van Beelen 1951), is referred to in both cases by the *pars pro toto* 'long-tail'. It puzzles me why using this so-called noa-name, which designates the same animal, is permitted, while using the proper name should be avoided. Havers gives a rather doubtful explanation for this phenomenon:

"Only one or two generations ago, Shetland fishermen pointed out many creatures and objects which should not be mentioned by their proper names, by describing them, in order to avoid the wrath of the sea-demons, who, so to say, considered the fishermen intruders in their realm" (1946: 16–17, my translation, RvG).

According to Havers, people were convinced that animals were able to hear and understand them. Therefore, they avoided using their proper names, because they feared that the animals would escape or harm them (ibid.: 28).

 17. On the special position of women in fishing communities, consult Thompson (1985).
 18. Not only in relation to fishing-boats; other ves-

sels are also perceived as fictive women. On the femininity of Royal Navy ships confer Rodgers (1984). Verrips (1985) notes that river-vessels are perceived as symbolic women as well.

19. In a footnote to a fine article on the naming of river-vessels, the Dutch anthropologist Jorada Verrips points out that there is a similarity between a boat and a woman with respect to the reproduction of life: "To a bargeman a boat is a means of reproduction. Much like a woman reproduces labour or life by giving birth to children, the existence or life of a bargeman is reproduced by the loading and unloading of a boat" (1985: 493, my translation, RvG).
20. An interesting detail is that Staithes people assumed that the ethnographer David Clark was training for the ministry (cf. Clark 1982: 39). As an outsider, who studied the religious belief of the local fishermen, and by doing so involving himself in their life, he could be classified as a minister.
21. In Dutch villages it was, and is, a minister's task to officially inform relatives of the drowning of a fisherman. He truly is a 'messenger of death'.

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