

A village's link to the world market economy

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In a fishing village 15 km north of the city proper of Puerto Princesa, the porch or veranda functions as the market, a place where buyer and sellers of fishery products meet. Buyer here is in the singular, because there is only one reigning in that porch, the one fishers and their wives call their *amo*. This buyer is known in the literature as a middleman, or as I prefer to call them, a middleperson, because many are women. Armed with a calculator, sheets of lined paper, and cash, she sits on her desk and takes notes as each fisher or family member weighs their day's catch of octopus, cuttlefish, stonefish, abalone, or fish. This scene is repeated daily in Aplaya, a fishing village along the coast of Honda Bay in Palawan. The middleperson links the village with seafood exporters in the city and Manila, who in turn are connected with the markets in Hong Kong, Singapore, the United States, and other parts of the world.

A place called Aplaya

In the beginning there was no place called Aplaya. What existed was an *aplaya*, that is, a beach or seashore. In Tagalog, the word is a generic term and in every coastal municipality one is likely to find a place referred to as *aplaya*. It connotes both location

and direction. In local government records, Aplaya does not officially exist because it is known as Purok Silangan, one of the seven districts comprising Barangay Tagburos. The people in the barangay as well as the villagers refer to the place as Aplaya.

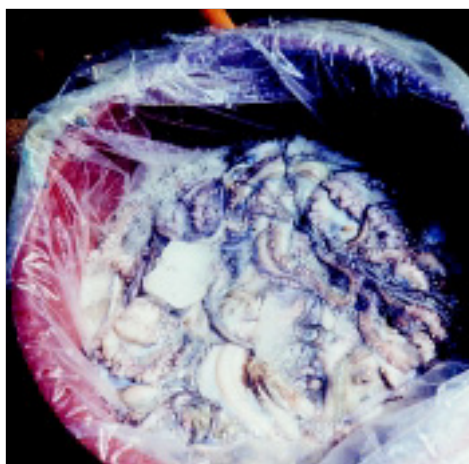
The creation of Aplaya is not a singular phenomenon. Many places in Palawan province have been made as a result of the movement and migration of people from within the province as well as from the outside. First came the boatload of workers from Mindanao who visited regularly to gather mangrove bark. Then came fishing families from Bohol who were looking for richer fishing grounds. They were then followed by groups of workers who were hired to gather mangrove wood for fuel. Finally, a group of workers was hired to convert the mangroves into fishponds. The origins of the present-day Aplaya may be traced to these last three waves of migration.

Market and social relations

Many of the fishery resources gathered by the men, women, and children of Aplaya are destined for the export market. These include sea cucumber, abalone, octopus, cuttlefish, pufferfish, lobster, stonefish, and in the 1980s, live fish such as grouper and humphead wrasse. Some of these fishery resources do not have a history of use value in Aplaya such as sea cucumber, pufferfish, stonefish, and abalone. The villagers came to know about the exchange value of these resources through information provided by the middlepersons, who are involved in



Sea cucumber. In Palawan, sea cucumbers are one of the oldest fishery export commodities, together with pearls, mother-of-pearls, shells, turtle shells, and shark fins and tails. Women and children gather sea cucumber in the intertidal zone during low tide. Sea cucumbers undergo a process of gutting, boiling (as shown in the photo), and smoke-drying, tasks which are usually done by women



Octopus. Octopus emerged as an export commodity in Aplaya in the mid-1980s, at about the same time that the gathering and shipment of live fish was banned in Palawan. The villagers in Aplaya would rather sell an octopus than eat it, not because they do not like the taste, but because it is too expensive for them to eat



Stonefish. The stonefish is a very poisonous fish. It is caught and sold live to village buyers and seafood exporters. Women and children gathering shells and sea cucumbers are careful not to step on stonefish, but as one woman remarked, "People used to be afraid of the stonefish, now the stonefish are afraid of people."

almost all commercial transactions.

The relationship between the fishers or gatherers and the middleperson is practiced like a contractual agreement whereby the fisher or gatherer is obliged to sell his or her catch only to one middleperson with whom he or she has established a long-term relationship. Trust and reciprocity characterize this relationship. If the fisher or gatherer is expected to sell his or her catch to only one middleperson, the latter is obliged to provide cash advances and loans to the former, particularly during times of emergency. In Aplaya, one of the personifications of the middleperson is the *amo*.

The *amo-tauhan* relationship

In Tagalog, *amo* literally means master, and *tauhan*, a person or persons under the service of another. In Aplaya, *amo* refers to a buyer of fishery products who finances the acquisition of boats and engines and to whom the fisherman and his family go to in times of need and emergency. Most of the *amo* in Aplaya are women who are themselves connected to seafood exporters based in Puerto Princesa City and Manila. These seafood exporters partly or fully finance the operation of the *amo* such as the acquisition of boats and engines for her *tauhan*. If the *amo* expects her *tauhan* to sell their catch to her, the seafood exporter also expects the same of the *amo*.

The *amo-tauhan* relationship carries with it certain obligations and responsibilities. During the lean fishing season of the northeast monsoon, the *tauhan's* wife goes to the *amo* to borrow money, asks her to buy certain things for the fisher's family, or requests her to pay the installment for a home appliance. The amount borrowed will be listed as a debt which will be paid in small installments and may take a long time to be fully paid. When



Pufferfish. Like stonefish, pufferfish are also poisonous and do not have a history of use value in Aplaya. Unlike the other export commodities, the demand for pufferfish is intermittent, so when the buyer says that she would temporarily stop buying pufferfish, the fishers also stop fishing for them



Abalone. Abalone are caught by women and children when they gather sea cucumbers at night. One middleperson in Aplaya finances the diving of abalone in Balabac and Mangsee in southern Palawan. Above photo shows shells of shucked abalone

the fisher gets a good catch and sells it to the *amo*, the amount of the debt is not deducted from the sale as long as the *tauhan* continues to sell his catch to her. The *amo* does this so that the *tauhan* will be tied to her indefinitely and continue to sell his catch to her. However, the *tauhan* who is indebted to the *amo* gets a slightly lower price for his catch than others who do not owe a debt. The *amo*, knowing the economic circumstances of her *tauhan*, accepts the little installments that are being given to her in payment for the debt as long as she knows that the fisher or his family is not selling his catch to other buyers in the village. Not all fishers in the village are tied to an *amo*, however. Those who have their own boats generally sell their catch to whoever pays the higher price. However, if they are indebted to an *amo*, they are expected to sell their catch to this *amo*. For the *amo* to stay in business, her *tauhan* must be loyal to her.

The *amo-tauhan* relationship appears to be a symbiotic relationship as practiced in Aplaya. The village is near enough to the town center for villagers to have ready access to information on prices of fishery products in the marketplace. Many women are fish vendors who have permanent stalls in the marketplace and news about the decline or increase in fish prices travels fast. In the case of export commodities such as octopus, cuttlefish, stonefish, lobster, abalone, or sea cucumber, the prices that seafood exporters pay are well-known. One *amo* even posts the prices that the seafood exporter pays and the prices that she offers her *tauhan* and other fishers in the village.

The middleperson-seafood exporter relationship

Export commodities such as octopus and cuttlefish end up with the seafood exporter based in Puerto Princesa City or Manila. Puerto Princesa City is a seafood exporter's paradise and the trade is dominated by the Chinese. As one travels along the national road going to the north of Palawan, the big signs saying that this or that establishment is buying seafood products such as lobster, octopus, cuttlefish, and sea cucumber are very noticeable. Many seafood exporters have their own facilities such as cold storage, packaging materials, holding tanks, and aerators to hold live fish, lobster and aquarium fish.

Seafood exporters specializing in octopus and cuttlefish have their own buyers in the fishing villages and fishers can only sell to these village buyers. In the case of live fish, lobster, and aquarium fish, the fishers or their wives can sell directly to the seafood exporter, unless there is a village buyer who has

online (but of course!); and if you wish to be updated about new specials, you can be notified by email. Links include nautical gift shops (wish to buy a mini-light house?), wines, and caviar.

The site also includes a fun page on jokes. A sampling:

- *Where do fish wash?* In the river basin.
- *Which fish can perform operations?* A sturgeon.
- *Where do shellfish go to borrow money?* To the prawn broker.
- *If fish live on land, which country would they live in?* Finland.
- *What sits at the bottom of the sea and shivers?* A nervous wreck.
- *What did the boy octopus say to the girl octopus?* I want to hold your hand hand hand hand hand hand hand hand
- *Why are fish smarter than mice?* Because they live in schools.
- *Where do fish keep their money?* In the river bank.
- *What is the best way to communicate with a fish?* Drop it a line!
- *What did the fish say when he hit the wall?* Dam!

BIG MOTHERSHIPS

www.sea-world.com

www.aquaculture.com

If you truly want to view all the players in the world's fish market, including auxillary industries, these two big websites are the



Just your ordinary fish market!

places to search. The creators said they aim to develop one place where all "necessary information related to the fishing and aquaculture industries could be found" and where information and services are given free of charge to every user.

The seaworld dotcom has a staggering 1,642 companies recorded under the category seafood. There are 340 government bodies, authorities and organizations. However, only 11 specific fish market sites are linked, and these are found in Australia, Denmark and Japan. The linked sites load quite slowly; the one dubbed the biggest fish market in Tokyo -- Tsukiji

Uogashi (www.tsukiji.or.jp) -- is in Japanese and, unfortunately, lacks an English language option.

The aquaculture dotcom, on the other hand, is yet to be officially launched (February 1, 2001 is the target) but has 46 companies and 24 organizations listed already. It offers several news/features and discussion forums. There are 15 of the latter, including one on marketing. This forum has the heading "Internet will revolutionize aquaculture marketing." There is also a book center where the current bestseller is *Freshwater Aquaculture* by William McLarney. An aquaculture poll is placed on the right side, with the question "Do you think high tariffs in the US for products such as Chinese crawfish are appropriate?" Vote as you believe.

TWO MORE WEBSITES ON  PAGE 12

A VILLAGE'S ... PAGE 15

an aerator to keep fish alive for a certain period. For abalone, the village buyer in Aplaya is connected with a seafood exporter based in Manila who has two male workers in his employ in charge of shucking abalone and packing them for transport to Manila through air cargo.

As in the relationship between the fisherman and the *amo*, the middleperson is also expected to sell her products only to the seafood exporter with whom she is connected. As in the *amo-tauhan* relationship, the middleperson-seafood exporter relationship is meant to be beneficial to both parties.

Middlepersons and Aplaya's incorporation into the world market economy

The men and women of Aplaya are active participants in the world market economy. This participation has brought in cash income

for the fishing households but ironically has not led to a better life for them. The crucial thing about this incorporation, however, is the way production is organized at the village level and the social relationships arising from it. The relationships through the middlepersons facilitate the orderly and efficient extraction of resources, oftentimes to the point of depletion. Interestingly, women are usually the conduits between the fishers and gatherers and seafood exporters. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the incorporation of Aplaya into the world market economy would not have happened without the intercession of the middlepersons. Small-scale fishing in Aplaya is being driven by the debt-relationship between middlepersons and fishers/gatherers.

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