

In the wake of the anthropology thread

(Based on a posting on the FISHFOLK discussion list)

Just a few comments to the anthropology debate.

I took a 3 years “course” in social anthropology during my first assignment in Africa. My teachers and examiners were the local people (fishermen, government. officers, merchants, fish processors, and others), and I had to pass many, almost daily exams. I went there as a fishing technologist and masterfisherman with terms of reference of introducing new technology, training fishery apprentices, skippering a government boat, etc. Before I left Israel, an experienced man told me: you’re going to Africa to catch fish, but don’t be surprised, if you find yourself hunting crocodiles.

Well, I never came near a crocodile, but I soon found myself negotiating local small-scale fishermen’s debts consolidation, and organizing with them and for them a credit scheme and mutual guaranty groups. Not because those were my professional duties, but because that was what was needed.

Some years later, while at the FAO, I read a report by a German anthropologist, who was sent to some archipelago to help to prepare an artisanal fishery development project. To the horror of the powers-in-charge, he wrote that what is needed is to drill for clean water and to build school classes. That’s not what you were sent for – they told him. But he insisted that this was what the fishing communities were asking for, and that they were right. “We can fish all the fish we need, thank you” – they said – “but the children are sick of the water they drink, and they take their classes under the palm trees”.

Long time ago, I read an excellent book written by Shepard-Forman, entitled “The Raft Fishermen - Tradition and Change in the Brazilian Peasant Economy”, (Indiana University Press, 1970). Forman spent something like a year among Northeast Brazilian janghada (sailing raft, something like the Indian kattumaram) fishermen, and made a PhD thesis of it. You can take a janghada out in the morning with the seaward breeze, and bring her back in the afternoon with the shoreward breeze. I’ve been there later myself – quite a view, as they are coming in, like a flock of giant butterflies, through the foaming surf. Forman found out why the janghada fishermen snubbed a well-paid job on board motorized boats, introduced by some development project, which could stay at sea for some days. They tried for a while, though, but soon returned to their raft sailing.

The entrepreneurs, the development and government’s agents, and everybody who was not fisherman, told Forman that fishermen are a lazy, conservative lot that wouldn’t pick up a progressive opportunity. However, after some time, Forman found out that the higher earnings on the motorized boats couldn’t compensate for the loss of other values dear to the fishermen: time to attend to their coconut trees, leisure time each evening, and nights with their ladies. They had their values those guys. Like in a plenty of cases, however, the project people never asked for anthropologist’s advice.

At the FAO fisheries department, I think I was the first one to employ anthropologists as a reconnaissance before introducing a project. They mostly did a good job at pointing out at futility of some, and expedience of other project ideas. Once, along with a young anthropologist, we found out in a South American country why fishermen shrugged off

convenient loans from a bank, provided by an external bi-lateral institution (the bank staff demand high bribes, which were too high to make the loans attractive to the fishermen).

Of all this, you'd understand that I believe that anthropology is also applied science. Notwithstanding, I read a lot of esoteric to me anthropologic stuff that was of little help to an activist, or, as some call, "agent-of-change".

Finally, I found that there're things that a sociologist can do and things that an anthropologist can. A sociologist would go to a community and produce a report on the number and character of the local households, how they make their living and who and how many work, how much do they make, etc. A good one would find and describe in socio-economic terms in-community stratification – the haves and the have-nots, and produce also plenty of useful statistical, averaging figures.

An anthropologist would go to a community and find out WHY things are as they are, describe the local social norms, and cultural characteristics that are important to know before you go there with any "human-engineering ideas", if you'll excuse me this expression. But, for example, fishery management is human engineering, for one cannot manage fish in the sea. All one can manage is people. And for references, just go and read J. Russ McGoodwin's classic book "Crisis in the World Fisheries". The title is a misnomer: should be "Crisis in the World Fisheries Management".

I apologize for taking up your time and disk space. Cheers, MB-Y

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