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Social Relations and Commodity Chains – The Live Reef Fish for Food Trade

Abstract

This paper considers the relationship between anthropology and the inter-disciplinary field of commodity studies through an examination of an important commodity chain in the Asia-Pacific, the live reef fish for food trade. Using an ethnographic perspective, I focus on how particular social relationships within this commodity chain have significant implications for two key concerns of commodity studies – the distribution of benefits through commodity chains, and how commodity chains are regulated. The social relationships between fishers and traders provide a powerful avenue for relative economic prosperity for fishers, yet the forms of social relationships that operate between fishers, traders and regulators mean that regulation of the trade cannot be implemented. This analysis provides an example of how an ethnographic lens can provide a useful perspective that can contribute to an inter-disciplinary dialogue on commodity chains.

Keywords: Anthropology; Commodity chain; Live reef fish trade; Philippines; Malaysia.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an explosion of studies across a range of social science disciplines of what are termed in their most general form as 'commodity studies' (Bernstein and Campling 2006a, 240). Different strands of this inter-disciplinary research field have a range of emphases and are variously termed as value-chain analysis, commodity-chain analysis and *filière* studies, but what they typically have in common is that they take as their object of analysis a particular commodity, and track the movement of such commodities from production through exchange networks to the point of consumption. Correspondingly, over the last several decades in anthropology, a common trend has been to shift focus away from the traditional pre-occupation with single-sited fieldsites, and to grapple with questions of how the production, exchange and consumption of commodities in a globalised world is a fundamentally important trend that shapes modern social life (Appadurai 1986; Marcus 1995; Miller 1995). Increasingly, more and more anthropologists are directly engaging with the commodity studies literature (Ziegler 2007; Tsing 2009; Faier 2011; West 2012).

The range of approaches, emphases and concerns that have pre-occupied writers in the field of commodity studies are too numerous to cover here (see Bair 2005, 2009; Bernstein and Campling 2006a, 2006b for various reviews). Helpful is Bair's division of the literature into three 'chain frameworks': commodity chains, founded on world-systems theory; global commodity chains, incorporating influences from organisational sociology; and global value chains, which are oriented more towards the business literature (2005). Of possible greater interest to anthropologists working in commodity studies is the question of how to usefully incorporate details of various aspects of social context at each link in the commodity chain. In the jargon of commodity studies, such themes are sometimes referred to as 'horizontal' elements – themes such as class, power, impacts on the environment, and local social relations – in contrast to the 'vertical', economic elements that the commodity chain is actually made up of. As the field of commodity studies increasingly moves in this direction, there appears to be increasing scope for anthropology to engage in inter-disciplinary dialogue on commodity studies.

This paper uses these two related sets of academic standpoints on commodities as a point of departure to analyse the implications of the particular forms of social relationships that operate at different points across one commodity chain, the live reef fish for food trade (LRFFT). Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted on this fishery since 2005, the paper examines two sets of social relationships that hold particular significance for understanding the nature of the commodity chain – the relationships between the primary fishery actors of fishers and traders, and the relationships between both of these fishery actors and regulators (a range of government and non-government actors). The goal of the paper is to show how such social relationships are not simply interesting 'epiphenomena' that can be grafted on to the 'real' economic links in the commodity chain, but representative of important social processes that need to be understood in their own terms. I argue that the social relationships between the three sets of actors analysed in this paper define the nature of the LRFFT as a commodity chain that has generated high levels of both wealth and environmental degradation for fishing communities. I focus in particular on how the social relationships I focus on have implications for two key themes of concern to commodity studies: the distribution of benefits along the chain (especially, the position of producers [in this case fishers]), and the implications for regulation. My aim is to demonstrate how an ethnographic perspective on the social relationships that frame economic exchanges within a

commodity chain can provide greater insight into how such social relationships affect these two primary themes of commodity studies.

Anthropology and Commodity Studies

While exchange has been a major focus of anthropologists since the very foundation of the discipline (Malinowski 1922), since the 1980s there has been a growing focus in anthropology on global flows of commodities. Ethnographies informed by political economy and world-systems theory have examined historical patterns of commodity trade and influences on local patterns of social life (Wolf 1982; Mintz 1985); theorists informed by a more postmodern sensibility have promoted the view of 'commodity pathways' to understand the ways in which commodities are ascribed different values across time and space (Appadurai 1986); and writers focusing on consumption have explored the ways in which the consumption of commodities increasingly defines modern social life, such as through the production of identities (Friedman 1994; Miller 1995). Much of this work is reflective of broader shifts in anthropology from the traditional emphasis on single-sited fieldwork in the rural periphery to multi-sited fieldwork that focuses on the interaction of local and global processes (Marcus 1995).

In recent years, more anthropologists have explicitly engaged the commodity studies literature, focusing on commodities such as flowers (Ziegler 2007), mushrooms (Tsing 2009; Faier 2011), and coffee (West 2012). In a similar vein, cultural geographers such as Leslie and Reimer (2005) have highlighted the importance of retaining a focus on the horizontal aspects of commodity chains, such as gender and space. Such culturally-focused work engages a diverse set of ideas, but common themes include how ideas, cultural perceptions and values feed into the commodity chains, and an appreciation of how difference, context and ethnographic nuance highlights the broader social dynamics that occur at different points across the commodity chain.

Correspondingly, analysts in the commodity studies literature have become more interested in how such broader contextual issues affect the ways in which commodity chains are linked. Bair, for example, in an influential review of commodity studies literature published in 2005, argues for greater attention to 'studying how chains are articulated within and through the larger social, cultural and political-economic environments in which they operate' (2005, 168). She cites with approval studies such as those of Phyne and Mansilla (2003), who show how the organization of work in salmon farms of Chile can be understood with reference to

the historical patterns of social relations in rural Chile. Bair also emphasises the need to situate commodity studies within the broader context and structure of capitalism and the world-system; frameworks that were the original inspiration for one neo-Marxist, critical stream of commodity studies (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1977; 1986). From a more policy-oriented perspective, Bolwig et al. (2010) and Riisgaard et al. (2010) outline a way in which value-chain analysis can more meaningfully incorporate horizontal elements in order to improve regulation: poverty and the terms of participation in the value-chain, gender and labour, and the environment. Other authors, drawing on an economic sociology perspective, have highlighted the importance of the concept of 'social embeddedness' for understanding the ways in which commodity chains operate (Rammohan and Sundaresan 2003; Bowen 2011). In studying all of these horizontal and contextual elements, two primary concerns of commodity chain analysts have been to understand how such factors might contribute to 1), the position of marginalised stakeholders, or to the distribution of benefits, in any particular commodity chain (see for example Ribot 1998), and to 2), the possibilities for improving regulation of the chain.

Clearly, though, different analytical emphases remain. Anthropologists and similarly-inclined geographers are typically reluctant to sacrifice ethnographic depth and complexity for the sorts of models that typically accompany many commodity studies, always wary of 'reductionism' (Leslie and Reimer 1999, 404) or, even worse, 'economism' (Nevins and Peluso 2008, 228). Even the concept of 'social embeddedness', which originally derived from the work of Polanyi (1944) and Granovetter (1985), has come under critique for a lack of attention to culture and power (Bowen 2011, 326). Or, as Maurer asserts, '[d]iscovering that markets are not so individualistic and competitive as they have been made out to be in neoclassical economic theory, or that they rely on quasi-clientage relationships, is old news to anthropology' (2008, 185). From the commodity studies camp, writers like Bernstein and Campling deplore the emphasis of what they term the 'culturalist contribution to commodity studies' on complexity and symbolism, arguing that such a focus 'adds little value' and asking '[h]ow might we start to unravel and order those relations so as investigate and explain them, rather than simply relish listing them?' (2006b, 435).

Directed at such a fundamental disciplinary level, such assertions about analytical orientation appear to be more reflective of old debates in the social sciences and are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. Within anthropology itself, versions of such debates have been played out over many decades, such as the formalist-substantivist debate of economic anthropology.

As Carrier details (2009, 19), this debate was related to broader questions about the value of universalism vs particularistic context, individuals vs the social relations in which they exist, and neutral rationality vs contextual social value (see also Applbaum 2005; Gudeman 2009). To these binaries might be added another long-running dichotomous debate that seems to be a perennial bugbear for the discipline – that of applied versus academic anthropology (Sillitoe 2007; Trigger 2011).

Clearly, both the economic links of commodity chains and the social complexities that occur at each point of the chain are important, and a large part of the *raison d'etre* of economic anthropology has been about documenting and analysing the particular forms of *social relationships* involved in and surrounding economic exchange. While acknowledging that there frequently remain quite different epistemological and disciplinary orientations to these issues, I argue that with its characteristic focus on the details and contexts of social relationships, anthropology can move beyond the minutiae of academic debate and productively engage with the recent inter-disciplinary emphasis on context and 'horizontal' elements in commodity studies. The social relationships that frame economic exchange are part of the 'broader political-economic environment' (Bair 2005, 154) that commodity studies analysts have identified as important to the nature of and outcomes associated with particular commodity chains. My essential argument here is that an ethnographic perspective on the social relationships involved in economic exchange could play a useful role in deepening these understandings.[i] In the case of live reef fish, I show how the various sets of social relationships surrounding the LRFFT are responsible both for providing significant levels of financial benefits to fishers, and for impeding the sorts of regulation that is likely needed if the fishery is to be sustained.

The Live Reef Fish for Food Trade in the Asia-Pacific

The LRFFT is an exceptionally significant fishery for many communities in the Asia-Pacific. While the amount in terms of volume is not nearly as large as many other fisheries, in terms of value it is very important. There are considerable data gaps, but estimates are of a global fishery of around 30,000 tonnes per year worth US$1-2 billion (California Environmental Associates 2011). The trade is a commodity chain where Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia are likely the three largest suppliers of fish to the primary markets of Hong Kong and mainland China (California Environmental Associates 2011). Fish catch is concentrated on large, tropical reef fish: high-value species (costing well upwards of US$100 per kg at

Chinese restaurants) include leopard coral grouper (*Plectropomus leopardus*), Napoleon wrasse (*Cheilinus undulatus*) and the humpback grouper (*Cromileptes altiveles*); lower-valued species include a range of species from the *Epinephelus* genus. The high level of demand for these fish in Hong Kong and mainland China has translated into high prices for fishermen in coastal communities across Southeast Asia, and the LRFFT has rapidly become one of the most important coastal livelihoods in the region (Padilla et al. 2003; Fougerès 2005).

While this fishery has proven to be a valuable source of income for many impoverished coastal communities across Southeast Asia since its expansion from the 1970s and 80s, analysts have also noted many negative features of the trade. These include the common use of sodium cyanide (which kills corals) to catch the fish, and the general tendency towards a 'boom and bust' type operation as overfishing occurs in specific locations (Sadovy et al. 2003). The relationships between fishers and traders, highlighted as responsible for fostering high levels of indebtedness and dependency among fishers (Padilla et al 2003; Pomeroy et al. 2005), have also come under criticism. It is thus a controversial trade which has long been the target of environmentalists for reform or even banning (Sadovy et al. 2003; Hughes et al. 2006). As the title of a (1995) paper by one of the early researchers on the trade, Robert Johannes, stated baldly: 'Fishery for live reef food fish is spreading human death and environmental degradation'. This environmental perspective on the trade concurs with aspects of neo-Marxist analysis that highlight the relationship between environmental degradation, poverty and capitalism (e.g. Hornborg 1998). As a multi-national commodity chain where concerns are widely expressed about both the distribution of benefits and how to improve regulation, the LRFFT offers a useful vantage point from which to analyse from an ethnographic standpoint these issues that are of primary concern to commodity studies analysts.

The data for this paper draws on ongoing, long-term ethnographic fieldwork on the LRFFT in source countries across the Asia-Pacific since 2005. Research has been conducted with fishing communities, traders and regulators in: a range of towns and fishing communities across Palawan province in the Philippines (the largest supplier of live fish in the country), and in Manila (from 2005-2011); Kudat, in the State of Sabah in Malaysia (2011) [see Map 1]; and at technical workshops on the trade in Hong Kong in 2009 and Bali in 2011. The relationships between traders such as ethnic Chinese exporters based in Southeast Asia, and Hong Kong and mainland Chinese based importers is another important element of the

commodity chain that is not considered here. Research on the consumption end in mainland China, though not considered here, is ongoing. The material relating to Indonesia draws on the ethnographic literature relating to the trade, mostly from Sulawesi (Adhuri 1999; Thorburn 2001; Fougerès 2005; Lowe 2006). Because of the variety of social relationships that exist in the trade in different locations, it is impossible to adequately cover them in any great detail – instead I draw on examples based on ethnographic fieldwork that illustrate my primary themes of how social relationships affect both the lives of fishers in the commodity chain and possibilities for regulation. With regard to relationships between fishers and traders, the data from the Philippines draws from locations across a province (Palawan), and highlights the relationships between traders and small-scale fishers, whereas the data from Malaysia is from one town only (Kudat), and emphasises the ethnic dynamics that play out in the relationships between ethnic Chinese traders and migrant Filipino crewmembers on larger commercial vessels. With regard to the relationships between fishers and traders and regulators, I draw on a range of data from different localities.

[Map 1: Palawan province and Sulu Archipelago, Philippines; and state of Sabah, Malaysia].

Distribution of Benefits and the Position of Fishers: Relationships Between Fishers and Traders

Economic Personalisation

An aspect of the LRFFT that has been heavily criticised by some observers is the associations with forms of dyadic, credit-based relationships between trader/financiers and fishermen (Conservation International 2003, 9; Padilla et al. 2003, 92; Pomeroy et al. 2005, 23). For many observers of the LRFFT, such relationships have been depicted as exploitative, underlying the creation of a ‘vicious cycle of dependency’ (Padilla et al. 2003, 92) that further impoverishes fishers while benefiting the traders. From this perspective, the trade is depicted as an industry that not only has contributed to the degradation of the marine environment through the use of destructive fishing activities and overfishing, but has enriched a small number of traders at the expense of exploiting and reproducing the poverty of fishers.

In the anthropological and agrarian studies literature, different forms of such relationships between traders and fishers or farmers have been widely studied through the lenses of

economic personalisation (Firth 1966; Szanton 1971) and the related field of patron-client relationships (Scott and Kerkvliet 1977). On the one hand have been authors who have stressed the risk-sharing nature of the relationship and that they are an economically rational relationship that is beneficial to both parties (Plattner 1983; Merlijn 1989; Ruddle 2011). Other authors have stressed the power dynamics in the relationship and the potential for exploitation (Russell 1987; Alexander and Alexander 1991).

Clearly, these relationships are highly variable in different geographical and social contexts, and the level of benefits, exploitation and power dynamics will differ depending on the specific circumstances (Rutten 1991; see also McCarthy 2010). In the LRFFT, as the following section will demonstrate, this is also the case. The experiences of fishers with the LRFFT highlight how access to this commodity chain provides employment and income in contexts where there are few other sources of employment, but that the conditions of this income and employment are sometimes constraining. In this way we can sidestep the debate on whether such economically personalised relationships are exploitative or beneficial, and look at the relationships between fishers and traders more broadly: they are a microcosm of how capitalism expands in many regions, and are typically simultaneously exploitative and provide important opportunities. This is one of the key tensions that I argue is key to understanding the nature of this commodity chain.

Debt, Credit and Financial Opportunity in Palawan, Philippines

As fish stocks declined around Hong Kong, the Philippines was one of the first countries for expansion of the trade in live reef fish through the 1970s and 1980s (Sadovy et al. 2003). Hong-Kong based importer-investors typically established links with local fish traders throughout the country, financing the development of buying stations and credit advances in exchange for live fish. While live fish is exported from different locations throughout the country, for many years now the province of Palawan has supplied the majority of live fish that is exported from the Philippines, and the trade is a hugely important livelihood for coastal communities in this province. The fishers involved in the trade are usually relatively poorer fishers who live in remote areas, and the traders, based in various towns around Palawan, are frequently wealthy elites. While there are no significant ethnic differences between traders and fishers, the class distinctions between them are thus very strong.

During the 1990s and early 2000s as the trade expanded in Palawan, local fish traders usually financed the entry of fishers into the trade. A pumpboat with an engine would cost around

US$1000, and would be the primary initial expense for fishers – many of whom originally possessed little or no capital. Expenses for fishing trips, which often lasted for up to two weeks at a time, would also be financed. In many cases, local traders would finance personal expenses for fishers, assisting with things such as daily expenses for food, especially during periods of poor weather when fishers would be unable to go fishing. Usually these expenses would be distributed by roving middlemen who would travel throughout rural areas, as agents of the traders. In return, the fisher was expected to provide the trader with all of the fish that they caught. The original debt for equipment was paid off in instalments, flexibly, and without interest. Although there was no interest on these payments, the requirement that the fisher bring all their fish to one trader meant that the trader was able to offer a lower price, secure in the knowledge that the fisher was obliged to bring their fish to him anyway. (This was often due to the fact that the traders themselves had debts to Hong-Kong based importers or Manila-based exporters, and were thus set a price by them).

When discussing these relationships with fishers, most will readily acknowledge both the advantages and disadvantages (Author 2012, pp 81-88). One live reef fisher, for example, shrugged when asked about the lack of flexibility in financial arrangements, and simply gestured towards his TV and stereo, describing how he would not be able to make such purchases without the financial support of his *amo* (boss). Others would stress how their *amo* was 'kind', and would not press them for repayments on the capital if they were struggling. Other fishers were less happy about the constraints under such arrangements, and were keen to pay off their debt straight away and then establish themselves as independent, citing the flexibility and higher prices as advantages. However, highlighting again the variability in such economically personalised relationships, the forms of these relationships that manifested in the LRFFT in Palawan were clearly very different to some of the more onerous debt-bondage regimes that have operated in the Philippines, such as that of the notorious *muro-ami* fishery (Olofson and Tiukinhoy 1993). For most fishers, their engagement with the LRFFT was understood and described less in the context of exploitative social relationships with traders, and more in their broader livelihood context. Many parts of Palawan fall significantly below the national average in terms of human development indicators, and for many coastal communities, significant income-earning opportunities are rare. A single, 'good-sized' (0.5-1kg) live leopard coral grouper can bring a fishermen a payment of more than $50, a large sum of money where the average monthly income for fishers is frequently below this (Author 2012, 60-61). As one fisher explained when describing the significance of changes in his

fishing livelihood, ‘before, I used to just fish on a canoe and we lived in a simple bush house. Since I switched to live fish, I’ve now been able to pay off my debts for the boat and with the money I’ve saved, I’ve sent every single one of my ten children through school’.

More recently in Palawan, a smaller proportion of fishers have been involved in credit-based relationships with traders, or at least in less intense versions of the relationships. As the trade has penetrated across most parts of the province, many fishers have now obtained the boats and engines that are required to enter into the trade, so there has been less of a need for traders to invest in the basic equipment. Additionally, as one trader ruefully described, often when a fisherman had debt, there was no pressure to pay off the original equipment debt ‘because even after two to three years of debt they are still bringing their fish to you’. Eventually, he said, they would just ‘forget’ the debt because of the length of time lapsed—the practice of constantly bringing the fish to one buyer built a personal relationship to the extent that fishers felt they could get away with defaulting on the equipment loan (Author 2012, 85). Because of these factors, many fishers now operate either independently, or only have their fishing trips financed by traders – in this second case fishers are still obliged to bring all their fish to one trader, but do not have the added pressure of equipment debt deductions.

These changes and experiences highlight that for many fishers in Palawan, more important than the specific form of financial relationship between fishers and traders that is so frequently negatively highlighted by external observers of the trade, is the ways in which the trade has provided many fishers with a source of financial wealth in areas where such opportunities are exceptionally difficult to come by. Social costs do clearly exist as well, such as competition over fishing grounds, and the use of destructive fishing methods that results in resentment by other fishers and sometimes injuries. However, frequently described as a ‘big help’ to the people of Palawan by fishers and traders alike, the importance of the LRFFT to many communities means that in the social realm, the LRFFT cannot be dismissed merely as a purely exploitative industry.

Migrating For a Better Livelihood in Kudat, Sabah

The live reef fish for food trade in Kudat developed in the 1980s and boomed through the 1990s. While there have been strong indications of declining fish stocks for some time and that the ‘boom’ may be well over (Daw et al. 2002), there remain eight traders (*towkays*),

who together still supply a significant amount of live fish to Hong Kong. Seven of the eight live fish traders operating in Kudat are of ethnic Chinese heritage; one is Malay.

The majority of the live fish in Kudat actually comes from the southern Philippines – the relations between traders and these Philippine-based fishers are not discussed here. Of the fishers based in Kudat who sell fish to the *towkays*, there are two general types. There are some fishers who fish locally, using small pumpboats to catch live fish, and these are sold to middlemen employed by the Chinese traders (Daw et al. 2002). Far more live fish, however, are brought in by large, commercial vessels with crews of around 20 fishers who fish for up to two weeks at a time. Crewmembers on these vessels are composed almost entirely of Filipino migrants. As crewmembers will explain, this is likely due to the expertise of Filipino fishers in the highly specialised and often dangerous fishing techniques required to catch live fish – using an air hose attached to a compressor on the vessel, fishers will dive down often up to a depth of 40m to catch the live fish and other marine products. While many Malays are involved in the fishing industry as middlemen, engineers and petty traders, very few work on the commercial boats as crew. This is likely due to the low status of fishing as an occupation; or as one Filipino crewmember put it less diplomatically, 'they are lazy'. The relationships between fishers and *towkays* in Malaysia are tightly bound up with the broader political economy of ethnic relations in the region, and the radically different economic and political backgrounds and histories of Filipino migrants and ethnic Chinese determine the character of the LRFFT in this part of the world.

Chinese settlement of Kudat began under the aegis of the British North Borneo Company in the late 19th century. Primarily from Christian, Hakka-speaking parts of southern China, the early arrivals were given plots of land and engaged to work as farmers. Initially working mostly on small coconut plantations, many shifted to the township and developed small businesses. Over the following decades, migrants from other parts of China followed, firstly from Hokkien speakers from southern Fujian province and then during the 1920s and 1930s from Hainan Island. As Chinese migrants prospered, Kudat soon appeared as a familiar version of other parts of Sabah and Malaysia where ethnic Chinese have dominated the economic landscape (Gomez 1999). They have long been the dominant ethnic group in the fishing industry in Kudat. A fall in the price of copra during the 1970s stimulated the development of the commercial fishing industry as many ethnic Chinese landowners shifted economic livelihood. Other than the LRFFT, the fishing industry also includes large numbers of trawlers and purse seining vessels. Three factories in Kudat process frozen fish, prawns

and other seafood for export to a range of national and international markets. The vast majority of all commercial vessels and factories are owned by ethnic Chinese.

The fate of migrants from the Philippines to Sabah has typically been less prosperous. Movement across this part of the Philippine-Malaysia border has always been very fluid, and much of the area was originally part of the Sulu sultanate (Warren 1981). In more recent times, out-migration to Sabah was spurred on by the declaration of Martial Law in the Philippines in 1972. As conflict spread throughout large parts of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago, much of the region descended into lawlessness, poverty and hardship. Many of the residents who migrated to Sabah during the 1970s and earlier – predominantly Sinama-speaking groups from Tawi-Tawi – live in squatter settlements in and around Kudat town.

While open conflict ended across most of the Sulu archipelago many years ago, much of this part of the Philippines remains mired in poverty and low-level banditry and violence. Indeed, across the country as a whole, in comparison with many of its neighbours the Philippines has declined in terms of relative living standards, and many Filipinos have looked elsewhere for economic opportunities (Balisacan and Hill 2003). Sabah's popularity as a migrant destination has thus continued, and the modern population of migrant Filipinos in Sabah today includes a diverse array of ethnic groups who have migrated at different times for different reasons. What many of them have in common, however, is that they are relatively economically marginalised within Sabah society (Kassim 2009).

The social relationships between the Filipino fishermen and the ethnic Chinese traders are marked by significant power dynamics, and the primary theme is of the insecurity of the Filipino crewmembers and their dependence on their ethnic Chinese *towkays*[ii]. Many of the fishers first entered Sabah illegally through what is referred to as the 'backdoor' – that is, through the remote and porous maritime borders between southern Palawan, south-western Mindanao and Sabah. Upon arrival in Sabah, they will then find a *towkay* to try and obtain employment. Once employment has been confirmed, the *towkay* then arranges for the necessary paperwork to be completed and documentation for the fisher to be produced. There are also many fishers who originally obtained employment entirely legally – in these instances, a captain or agent already based in Sabah will work out an agreement with a *towkay*, and then the captain will organise for the crew to come over from the Philippines. The problem with this, however, is the high costs, delays and obstacles involved. Most people in the rural Philippines do not have a passport, and so this is the first step towards obtaining a

legal work permit. A *barangay* (village/community) clearance is required, then a municipal clearance, and then an application to the passport office itself. After the passport has been obtained, a letter of employment from the *towkay* in Sabah is necessary, and without friends or kin already based in Sabah in an existing relationship with the *towkay*, this is difficult if not impossible to obtain. At each point in this process, of course, significant financial and time costs are incurred.

Whatever the ways in which fishers got their start as a crewmember, the continued support of their *towkay* is vital to their livelihoods in Sabah once they are working. Again, this is because of the considerable uncertainty many Filipinos have in Sabah about their migrant status. Rules and legal arrangements for migrant Filipinos in Sabah are constantly changing, and the lives of many residents are marked by a profound insecurity. As one crewmember who had originally arrived without legal documentation described it: 'life was very difficult when I first arrived here; I couldn't go outside at all and I had to wait for a very long time while my papers were being prepared. But since I started working on this boat, I'm legal now'. For all of these sorts of migrants, the need to maintain a good relationship with a *towkay* or other sort of employer is vital to their security. As one fisher put it: 'as long as you have a *towkay*, you are ok. They know the right people and know how to make sure you will be looked after'. Fishers cited examples of the powers of *towkays* to help fishermen such as successfully intervening when fishermen had been apprehended out at sea for flouting fisheries laws, or when their crewmembers had been arrested for breaking immigration laws.

Many other Filipinos living in and around Kudat did not have legal status, and described episodes of fleeing during night-time police raids, hiding in secret compartments within houses, being deported out of the country back to the Philippines, and subsequently returning again. For others, they would obtain temporary visas and then be declared as illegal again. As one resident described: 'they gave me a 3 month temporary visa, and then I had to apply again for another, more long-term visa. But I've now found out that my boss isn't going to get me this visa. I thought my relationship with the boss was better than it turns out it is'. Many fishers throughout their time in Kudat operate to varying degrees in this state of insecurity and dependence.

Despite these hindrances, fishers would consistently emphasise the economic opportunities in Malaysia and expressed enthusiasm about their lives in Kudat. In my analysis of fishers' discussions of life in Malaysia compared to Philippines, two major themes stood out. Firstly,

the strength of the Malaysian ringgit compared to the Philippine peso (1 MYR = 14 PhP at the time of fieldwork) meant that fishers were earning far more than they would in a similar job back in the Philippines. Secondly, the poverty of livelihood options in their Philippine homes was frequently emphasised. This is frequently a theme in accounts of Filipino fishers migrating for better livelihood opportunities (Eder 2008; Seki 2000; Author 2012). Many of the fishers I spoke to in Kudat came originally from heavily populated, environmentally degraded parts of the country such as Cebu in the Visayas, or from poverty and violence-stricken provinces with few opportunities such as Sulu in Mindanao. For these fishers, the LRFFT and migration to Sabah had brought them relative prosperity.

Regulating the Trade: Relationships Between Traders, Fishers and Regulators

I argue in this next section that relationships between fishers and traders and the regulators of the trade are characterised by the marginalisation of fishers at the formal policy-making level, and complex webs of interdependence and obligation at the informal level of policy implementation. I look at formal policy-making through international workshops involving traders, and government and NGO regulators. Informal policy implementation includes relationships between traders, fishers, and national and local-level government regulators. The focus is on how these sets of social relationships affect the ability of regulators (both government and NGO actors) to regulate the commodity chain – a key concern of commodity chain studies.

Participation, Marginalisation and Legitimacy in Policy-making

At a formal level, one way in which social relationships between different stakeholders in the LRFFT has influenced the implementation of governance has been through the *lack* of effective social relationships between fishers and regulators. The lack of participation among fishers in regulation design and implementation has undermined their legitimacy and contributed to their failure to date.

Broad attempts at regulation at a regional scale have occurred in recent years as a part of the development of the Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI). The CTI is a multi-million dollar inter-governmental agreement designed to address coral reefs, fisheries and food security between the six member nations of the Coral Triangle: Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste. Since 2009 a series of ‘technical workshops’ on management of the LRFFT has occurred that have included representatives of

governments, major international environmental NGOs, and traders from across the region. Notably, in the two meetings I have attended, fishers themselves were absent. This had obvious implications for the sorts of topics that were discussed and the ways that possible solutions were framed in these meetings. For instance, at the end of one meeting, all 39 participants were asked to vote about what the priorities for management of the industry should be. Participants were given 12 priorities, and told they each had 12 votes which they could spread across the 12 priorities any way they saw fit. When the votes were totalled, the option of 'matching harvest to reproductive capacity' came out first with 72 votes, followed narrowly by the development of full-cycle mariculture (67 votes) and enforcement against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (52 votes). Last on the list, with a paltry 12 votes, was the one option that was offered which dealt primarily with the livelihoods of fishermen – 'mitigating the consequences of displacement'. 6 of these votes came from me, and the other 6 from an NGO representative whose project work focused on alternative livelihoods.

This was merely an exercise in trying to understand what workshop participants thought the priorities for action should be, and there have been other instances where NGOs have aimed at engaging fishery stakeholders through 'fisher forums' and similar workshops. Much NGO work has also aimed at engaging fishers through the development of live fish mariculture projects. Nevertheless, to date, the general thrust of proposals to regulate the industry has not focused primarily on how to develop and deal with alternative livelihoods for fishers and food security. At a provincial scale in the Philippines, direct engagement with the concerns of fishers has been minimal – in a survey I conducted of 115 live reef fishers in Palawan during 2009, for instance, only 6 individuals (5.2%) even knew of the existence of the quota system that had been legislated in late 2007 but not yet implemented. As Padilla et al. identified (2003, 87), '[c]ommunities are essentially marginalized from the decision-making process' of the LRFFT. These examples of an international workshop and the situation of fishers in Palawan illustrate how the interests of fishers are not effectively represented at a formal level.

Importantly, addressing the situation of fishers is not just an exercise in sympathy for the plight of communities living in poverty. It has real implications for the proposals of regulators who wish to see their proposals implemented. Experiences across the developing world among fishing communities have shown that in contexts where regulatory capacity is weak, regulations need to have some sort of legitimacy among local stakeholders if they are to succeed (Eder 2008; Coulthard et al. 2011). This has been the case for the LRFFT as well in Palawan. Here, the lack of legitimacy among fishermen concerning many of the

regulations has been a primary factor behind their lack of success (Author 2012, 171-189; Author 2011).

Corruption and Class Relations in Informal Policy Implementation

In this next section I highlight how local social relationships surrounding regulation limit their implementation. These include conflicts of interest and corruption involving traders and regulators, and patron-client relationships between fishers and regulators.

An important social aspect of the LRFFT frequently highlighted by observers and critics of the trade is its close association with forms of governmental corruption (Adhuri 1998; Thorburn 2001; Sadovy et al. 2003; Lowe 2006). In Palawan, blatant conflicts of interest are present – many of the traders are municipal councillors (or closely related to them), who are the government actors responsible for legislation in the decentralized Philippine governance system. Government corruption is perceived to be strongly present in fisheries governance in the Philippines (Author 2012); as the authors of a study on the LRFFT in 2003 put it, fishers suggested to them that 'the reason why illegal activities persist was the strong link between unscrupulous traders/operators and law enforcement agents' (Padilla et al. 2003, 87). In the LRFFT in Indonesia, observers from a variety of fieldsites have written of 'collusion with fishing companies' among government and regency leaders (Adhuri 1998, 15); 'a protected environment for business' (Lowe 2006, 149); and that the ease of obtaining permits among fishing companies that used cyanide suggests 'collusion extending through the bureaucracy' (Thorburn 2001, 163)[iii]. Similarly, in Kudat in Malaysia, popular discourse frequently levels accusations of corruption and collusion with illegal fishing activities at different levels of the government. The commonality with which fish traders are alleged to smuggle turtles and other banned marine products out of the country, sell dynamite and cyanide to local fishers, sell subsidised diesel for profits, and to produce documentation for illegal migrants is used as evidence of significant personal linkages between the fishing *towkays* and government officials – 'you help me, I help you' as one long-term resident described the system (see Gomez 1999: 191-197).

At the local or community scale, the relationships between fishers and regulators is embedded within broader patterns of class and state-society relations, in particular the notion of patron-client relationships. In the Philippines, fishers appeal strongly to notions of rights to their livelihood that are articulated through local cultural idioms of 'pity' (Cannell 1999), a 'right to survive' (Szanton-Blanc 1972) and a 'basic rights discourse' (Kerkvliet 1990, 242-273)

that emphasise fairness and justice for the poor. When regulations are proposed that may have a significant impact on the livelihoods of fishers, fishers appeal through these themes to members of government and to local patrons (such as trader/financiers). In its most blatant form, these appeals can be seen when a fisher, caught for violating fisheries laws, will bring his entire extended family into the local Mayor's office, asking how he will be able to care for these family members if he were to be fined or go to jail (Author 2011, 375). More often, appeals take the more subtle form of pressuring local leaders through various tactics of 'everyday politics' (Kerkvliet 1990) and 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985). In the social landscape of the rural Philippines, local elites, such as government officials, are pressured to take part in versions of patron-client relationships, where poorer fishers and farmers will exchange political support for support of their resource use practices (Russell 1997, 91; Author 2012). In this way, questions of environmental management become reframed as questions about particular forms of social relationships, and the obligations of the local elites to engage with the poor through forms of patron-client relationships (Author 2012).

In practice, in the Philippines, these social relationships have had the effect of blocking all attempts at effective regulation of the LRFFT (Author 2011; Author 2012). Since 2005, such attempts have included trying to institute a closed season, and to introduce a quota system for the amount of live fish to be exported from the province – to date neither reform has been implemented, and enforcement of the existing regulatory regime remains weak (Dalabajan 2009; Author 2011). In this way, effective governance of the trade can be seen to have been impeded by the social relationships operating between fishers, traders and regulators (Author 2012).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper I have focused on two sets of social relationships and their social and environmental implications for one particular commodity chain, the LRFFT. Through this focus on the social relationships operating at different points along a commodity chain, I have aimed to provide an example of how an ethnographic lens can provide a useful perspective that can contribute to an inter-disciplinary dialogue on commodity chains. Two key concerns of commodity studies have been to improve understandings of the distribution of benefits along the chain, in particular the terms of participation of resource producers; and what the possibilities are for regulation of the chain. I have argued that relationships between fishers and traders, and relationships between fishery actors (fishers and traders) and regulators, are

fundamentally important to understanding these two key concerns of commodity chain analysis in relation to this trade. Fishers may be relatively marginalised in relationships with traders, but still obtain vital economic income and support through the fishery. I have argued here that an understanding of this relationship in an ethnographic sense and how it is expressed by local fishers themselves is vitally important. In most source countries of the LRFFT (such as Philippines and Malaysia), this relationship plays out in a context of relative poverty and strong aspirations for improved economic prosperity. This speaks to the concern of commodity studies with the distribution of benefits within commodity chains. Regulation of the trade currently is not implemented due to the complex webs of social relationships among fishers, traders and regulators at formal and informal levels, which work to maintain the status quo of weak regulation. This addresses the other key concern of commodity studies with the regulation of commodity chains.

From an inter-disciplinary commodity studies perspective, the implications of these social relationships are that they are an important element of a regionally important commodity chain with significant environmental and social consequences. As many reports and studies have documented, the environmental implications of the LRFFT are clear – the LRFFT in its current form is unsustainable, and is presently causing high levels of environmental degradation (Padilla et al. 2003; Sadovy et al. 2003; Scales et al. 2006; 2007). Fishers themselves in multiple locations across the Asia-Pacific are well aware of many of the environmental problems associated with the trade, highlighting how they now have to fish for longer periods of time and for longer distances, and that the ease of catching live fish has greatly diminished (Daw et al. 2002; Padilla et al. 2003; Author 2012). The trade continues to expand and shift to new locations both within countries and to new countries as fishers and traders continue to seek out new opportunities in further and more remote locations (Sadovy et al. 2003; Scales et al. 2006). It is clear that the long-term viability of the trade is under threat, and that the long-term environmental costs are likely to be significant. This is the situation that has spurred many environmental NGOs, regional governments and other stakeholders involved in the CTI to try to take action to improve regulation of the trade.

Viewed from this perspective, aspects of neo-Marxist analysis might appear to provide the most logical explanation for what is taking place. Various forms of neo-Marxist analyses have developed concepts such as political ecology (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Peet and Watts 1996), ecological unequal exchange (Hornborg 1998; Rice 2007), metabolic rift (Foster 1999), food regimes (McMichael 2009), and, within the commodity studies literature,

world-systems theory (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1977, 1986). While such work varies enormously in scope, a common theme is the (unhappy) relationship between capitalism and the environment. The LRFFT appears to be a classic case of how through expanded access to credit (Fougères 2005) and access to lucrative global markets (Nevins and Peluso 2008), forms of intensified capitalist activity are driving patterns of environmental degradation across the region. From a large-scale perspective, the LRFFT appears locked into a path of endless accumulation in the short-term with environmental costs over the long-term that will eventually have significant consequences for the fishers involved in the trade. As indicated in the background earlier section, much of this analysis has similarities with ecologically oriented perspectives (see Warren-Rhodes and Sadovy 2003; Hughes et al. 2006).

A key argument of this paper, however, has been to contend that for fishers, the LRFFT has provided a powerful opportunity to gain income in a context where such opportunities are few and far between, and where aspirations for improved economic wellbeing are strong. I have argued that, rather than describing the relationships between fishers and traders in terms of 'debt-bondage' or exploitation, this access to economic benefits in the context of poverty and aspirations for an improved quality of life is a more important feature of the LRFFT from the perspectives of fishers. The point here is that local people have actively sought out opportunities to participate in this trade, will continue to do so, and that these aspirations and practices cannot be ignored if we want to understand outcomes associated with this particular commodity chain. The tension between the short-term economic benefits of the LRFFT and the significant long-term environmental costs is inescapable, and the ways forward for those involved in this particular commodity chain will be filled with hard choices that will have to deal with this difficult reality (Coulthard et al. 2011; McShane et al. 2011).

In this way I have aimed to show how an ethnographic perspective on several key relationships in a commodity chain can highlight some of the complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes associated with two of the primary concerns of commodity studies: the distribution of benefits, and possibilities for improved regulation. Social relationships between fishers and traders provide a powerful avenue for relative economic prosperity for fishers, yet the forms of social relationships that operate between fishers, traders and regulators mean that regulation of the trade cannot be instituted in a form that will allow the fishery to be sustained. While this ethnographic perspective highlights the messy realities of social relationships and commodity chains, it is only one perspective. Despite its value in illuminating aspects of social life that are not necessarily obvious through the use of more

formal methods, it is not necessarily one that offers clear ways forward in terms of practical implementation of policy (Li 2007: 2, 30, 280). Understanding how to move the debate forward on this particular trade and other commodity chains will continue to require greater inter-disciplinary work and dialogue across commodity studies.

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Notes

[i] In this paper I do not intend to refer to anthropological debates about the nature of what a 'social relationship' is; I use the term in a deliberately, broad holistic sense.
[ii] See also Derks 2010 for a related case examining the position of Cambodian fishermen in Thailand.
[iii] See also McCarthy 2006 for a similar discussion of how informal patron-client relationships among various actors at the district level prevents effective policy change in the forestry sector in Aceh, Indonesia.