



*ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES*  
THE MARITIME COMMUNITY OF  
GABI IN GIGANTE ISLAND

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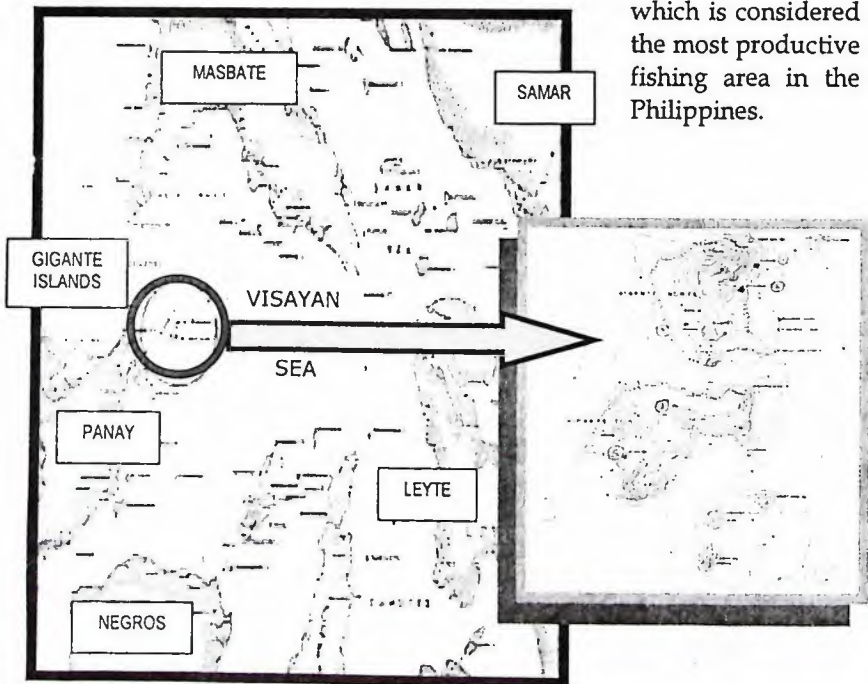
This paper is part of my report entitled "Child Labor in Fishing Communities - Child Labor in Gabi". I prepared the report in connection with an interdisciplinary research project entitled "An Ethnography of the Gigante Islands: Human activity systems and the ecological cell, a multidisciplinary approach" (headed by Dr. Cynthia Neri Zayas), for the Institute of Fisheries Policy and Development Studies (IFPDS), College of Fisheries, University of the Philippines in the Visayas, with Toyota Foundation funding.

The research revolved around the following concerns: (i) the lack of baseline material of ethnographic nature especially in the island communities in the Visayas where the richest fishing grounds in the Philippines are found; (ii) the need for qualitative field research to aid the formulation of sound aquatic resources policies in the context of the newly approved Local Government Code; (iii) the need for original and in-depth documentation of the problems of environmental degradation which the Philippines has been experiencing (e.g. the Ormoc tragedy, red tide, etc.); (iv) the need to focus on the Visayan sea as an important research area; (v) to

contribute to the advancement of maritime anthropology in archipelagic Philippines; (vi) to provide new insights into the nature of Philippine society and culture, and (vii) to serve as a direct source of academic program enrichment.

As objectives, the study set out 1) to identify the types of social organizations based on the major fishing activity each community was engaged in; 2) to determine the role and importance of children in production in the community; 3) to see how the community rationalizes and conceptualizes environmental spaces and how it allocates these; and 4) to demonstrate how the components of the ecological cell (or the basic productive elements of nature) — the coastal zone, the mangrove area, the river system, and the watershed interact to create water energy needed for people to survive.

The following are my ethnographic notes and first impressions of the maritime community of Gigante Island, Iloilo and of Gabi, one of its barangays. Gigante is located in the Visayan Sea, which is considered the most productive fishing area in the Philippines.



## IN THE VISAYAN SEA

We (myself, Dr. Chim Zayas, Lilian, her research assistant, and Leo, my research assistant) were ready to take our boat ride to Gigante Island from Carles on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February 1993. Carles is the municipality to which Gigante Island (its poorest and most neglected area) belongs.

It was 6:00 a.m. and there was an inviting soft morning breeze that greeted us on the shore. Some fishermen were just docking with their catch of fish, eels and squid, filling up about a third of a basket called *canastro*. We were told that this was the harvest of eight hours of fishing. Women (apparently their wives) were waiting for them by the edge of the water, having left their small children to one side inland. They helped the men to haul the catch to shore, then scrutinized it. Leo was asked to choose something for our brunch from the basket and he picked an eel.

We waited for another half hour before boarding our pump boat owned by Leo's uncle called "Iris Pher" (from Iris and Christopher). Our pilot was a speeder. We dashed against the big waves, which generously splashed cold salty water over us making us shiver in the early morning. Several fishing boats passed us by as we came near the island of Balbagon, which had been sold and was soon to be developed as a beach resort. All its inhabitants (except for one household) had been obliged to resettle elsewhere. There were 60 households in all.



FISHERFOLK from Carles, Leo and myself.

Our first stop on Gigante Island was at Langub, Granada. This was where Gigante Island's cemetery was located. It sat on a promontory overlooking the expanse of the Visayan sea. Due to the recent death of Patron, a prominent *amo*\* from Antonia (a sitio of Gigante), all the cement tombs had been newly whitewashed. White, yellow and red wild flowers grew in between the white structures and several open graves, from which spilt out crumbling bones. Several of the tombs had a small opening covered with glass in their front, through which one could glimpse the coffin within. We mused that this was probably to allow a continuing communication between the living and the dead, as well as to provide the dead a view of the sea they had left behind.

Against the cloudless blue sky and big expanse of darker blue sea in the background, I felt a deep sense of connectedness, peace and well being that bright morning. We also paid the teachers of the Granada Elementary School a visit. They informed us that they hardly had any books and would welcome any,





especially those on history and the social sciences.

Soon someone fetched us to have one of the best brunches ever of *inihaw na daing* and another large fish, *pangat na eel*, fresh tomatoes and steaming rice. We rested in hammocks after lunch and exchanged stories again for a while, before we boarded Iris Pher once more.

It was 1 o'clock in the afternoon, the sun was extremely hot, but the wonderful sea breeze made the heat bearable, and lulled us into a pleasant stupor. Leisurely cruising along the coast, we passed by impressive limestone boulders with caves, sparsely overgrown with yucca-looking trees and other green shrubs. This brought Philippine animist folklore to my

stream of consciousness. In effect, these caves were believed to be inhabited by *encantos* who interacted with the living and the dead in both positive and negative ways, depending on the earthlings' behavior. Many of these caves "are burial spots as well as annual sites for contemporary

Pilgrims looking for "power" during the Christian Holy Week" (Zayas, C. Proposal 1991: 5)

We docked for a while at Antonia, home of Patron, the late *amo* mentioned above. His village (where Cebuano was mainly spoken) looked neglected and inert, as mourning was still in the air. The children, on the other hand, struck me as very busy. One little girl, who was thin, seemingly malnourished, and looking prematurely older than her age, was washing clothes while cooking, supervising her younger siblings, and assisting her mother with her day-old sister, very much the "little mother" of the house. A boy, who looked 8, was attentively hooking up fish bait. Many children were tending to laundry. A 2-year old girl was taking care of herself by the water. My informant, who had spent time in Antonia, pointed out the small boat he was made to paddle from one shore to the other as initiation into the male fishing life of Gigante.

Once again on board Iris Pher, surrounded by such inviting water, we so longed for a dip. We were warned however that the hour was no longer appropriate. It was 2:30 in the afternoon, nearing the time *encantos*\* come out to roam the world, and something untoward might befall us. We did not insist.

Finally, we reached Gabi, but our journey was not over yet, for the center of Gabi was on the other side of the island. My friend, who was familiar with the place, suggested we first drink some of the excellent native coffee brewed by a villager. While sipping the aromatic, tasty strong brew and eating bitso-bitso bought from an ambulant female vendor (who had so much longing for some life outside Gabi), the topic of *encantos* cropped up once more. My informant's uncle narrated that a young boy had once disappeared. The *babaylans*\*\* said he had been taken by *encantos* to their world, as propitiation for the unwanted San Juanico bridge built by Mrs. Marcos in Leyte. The child, they said was well taken care of, although he would never be returned (in fact, he was never seen again).

\* enchanted spirit beings

\*\* local healers/spiritual advisers

It was 5 in the afternoon, and we still had a long way to walk to the center of Gabi. While on our way up hill and down, a drizzle began. By the time we got to our destination, our bags and clothes in them had gotten all wet.

## GABI FISHERFOLK

Every fishing season, fisherfolk from Bantayan, Cebu come to Gabi, often together with their families, to settle for several months. During these times, the population of Gabi doubles, and the otherwise sleepy barangay is transformed into a bustling community of old timers (*tumandok*) and migrants (*pangayaw*). In 1993, at this period, Gabi had a population of 223 households, mostly settled along the coast. Hiligaynon, Cebuano and Masbateno were the common languages often heard.

Gabi fisherfolk engage in small to large-scale fishing. Small-scale fishing involves the use of long line, bottom gill net, gill net, hook and line, jiggers for squid, diving with the aid of an air compressor, and dynamite fishing (see also Zayas 1992). Large-scale fishing includes at least a 5-tonner capacity fishing outfit called *hulbot* (a modified Danish seine and purse seine fishing method), otherwise called trawl. The Gabi population also engages in other livelihood activities like milkfish (*bangus*) fry breeding on a commercial scale, and the cultivation of rice, corn, cassava, and coconut for personal consumption.

The relationships of people in Gabi are generally organized according to a hierarchical obligational system termed *amo-sakop* or "lord-lorded-over". The *amo* (who can be a man or a woman, but is more often a man) is one with means enough to extend credit and assistance to *sakops* (those indebted). In exchange, the *sakop* and his/her family must sell to the *amo* their fish catch and render service. As part of the *amo-sakop* relationship, children of *sakops* (especially girls) are often required to provide a variety of free labor to the *amo*, like mending nets, cleaning the storehouse (*kamalig*), baby sitting, fetching water, doing repairs of all sorts and so on. Even among brothers, there

can exist an *amo-sakop* relationship. For example, if a brother buys a boat from his more enterprising brother on credit, he becomes his *sakop*. The indebted brother is now obligated to sell his catch to his *amo*-brother, until his debt is paid in full.



*Amos* are the richer merchants engaged in large-scale trawl (*hulbot*) fishing. They are often the owners of fishing and passenger boats. They are storeowners and middle buyers of fish catch (*datahan*). The *datahan* are also ice dealers (*ilador*) and dried fish merchants. They extend credit to more modest fisher folk and finance fishing operations. They incur risks but in return, exact heavily for their risks. They are themselves beholden to their richer financiers called *propitaryo* (land owners).

Most of the worker-fisherfolk are *sakop*. They comprise the crew of large-, medium- and small-scale fishing boats, and are alert to a variety of livelihood opportunities





offered by kinship, political and other relationships, by favorable weather, new market opportunities, and personal talents. Nevertheless, while this relationship is common, a *sakop* may end his indebted status by full repayment or by breaking off, as was done by a disgruntled *sakop* and his family. They moved to another place and formed another sitio in rebellion against their *amo* Patron from Antonia.

Breaking off means deprivation from a vital source of badly needed credit and survival during lean months. Therefore, only very few Gabi inhabitants are not hemmed in by this relationship, and are independent. People still remember a time when the inhabitants of one of the sitios of Gabi were able to survive and freely dispose of their abundant catch. But with a progressively leaner catch and more competition, independence is hard to come by. Perhaps because of such difficulties, independent fisher folk are reputed to engage in illegal dynamite fishing. They are derogatorily called *tirador* (shooter), and are constantly on the run from the Coast Guards.

## CHILDREN'S GENDERED PARTICIPATION



There are also bad times when fishing ebbs low, especially during strong winds called *halakay*. In these times, the families survive through a variety of other means, and children even between the ages of 4-7 years play a big role in gathering other sources of sea food. They go in groups with their pots, pans, and plastic containers, raking the wet ground, teasing each other, comparing each other's catch, scavenging for little creatures like *bangongon litob* (a kind of meaty clam), and other creatures found in the *hubasan* (tidal reef) during low tide, and in the ever receding mangrove.

As early as 4 years old to the age of 7, children get to be depended on for participation in work. Boys and girls are seen cleaning the house and fetching water from any of the few functioning wells in Gabi, or to paddle half a kilometer to fetch it from another place. Children are also made to gather wood for fuel, and worms for baiting. Girls in particular care for younger children. At the age of 5, boys and girls voluntarily go to their parents' *amo's kamalig* to offer their services in scaling fish that

will later be dried. A group of 4 children could easily finish off work on 30 kilos of fish in less than two hours, while listening to their favorite drama "Dorothy an pigadong sosyal" ("Dorothy the poor socialite") on the radio. In exchange for this work, they get 4 to 5 fish or a cash equivalent of P2 - P3. Children of this age are encouraged to earn cash so they could buy their candies or watch a VHS movie in the afternoon at the video house (*bitahan*). In between working, children play at fishing by using the hook and line (*panaplik*) to catch inedible globe fish.

While there are common activities which boys and girls perform, like putting bait on hooks for long line fishing (*kitang*), gender divergence in activities between boys and girls becomes more apparent after the age of 7 years (see TABLE). Girls are tasked to look for worms for bait (*panulati*) and to prepare the bait (*pamaon*). They have been observed to be able to put bait on about 6,000 hooks a day, for which they are only paid P 12.- P 15 for every spread of 3,000 hooks (*luwang*). Girls are also engaged in post catch activities like the scaling (*panghimbis*), splitting (*pamakas*), and drying (*pamulad*) of fish. Girls get involved in household activities, and child care and in non-play activities like vending banana cue, bread, fruits, iced buko, and iced scramble, for which they get only 30 percent of sales for their labor. More often than not, girls after puberty, become domestic servants (*ga pasweldo*) in and outside Gigante Island, and in places as far as Manila. They have less leisure time, but do not earn as much as boys their age. Even as domestic servants, girls earn only about P500 a month, while a boy catching squid can get as much as P800 to P 2,000 a month.



THE CHILDREN of  
Antonia. Gabi

At the age of 7, boys begin to be trained in actual fishing. By the age of 8 years, they join their fathers more and more in their fishing activities. If they are in school, they do so on week-ends, if they are out of school, they do so on a more regular and even daily basis. They mend nets (*puna*), make new nets (*sumag*) and join the fishing fleet in deep sea diving with compressor (*konpressor*), long line fishing (*kitang*), and hand line fishing (*pamasol*). Many an *amo* declares that boy divers are better than adult ones because they have better lungs and eyesight. By the age of 15, boys become experts at making nets and are able to finish three 100 arm-length nets (*paldos*) in a day. While it is prohibited by the Coast Guard to hire children below 19 in trawl fishing (*hulbot*), some younger than 19 year-old boys start working on the sly for the trawl fleet. They are hired as *ultimos* (the last ones), the lowest ranking crew member with the lowest pay. As *ultimos*, boys prepare the scareline (*tabog*), disengage fish from the gill net or hook, and fix the hooks in long line fishing called *pansinsay* (a most difficult task as care must be taken not to destroy the nylon net nor to entangle the lines). Boys can also be hired as fishermen (*pescador*). Ten year old boys and older also get involved in post catch activities like being part of a convoy (*komboy*) to bring fish to the famous fish market of Estancia in the Panay mainland. Thirteen and fourteen year old boys are also hired to clean headless giant squids before these are put in ice. Since boys are starting to earn money (during peak fishing season, they can earn as much as P 300 - P 400 a week), they get drawn into gambling (like *sakitsa* or *pusoy*), and pool, and can avail of more entertainment and vices than girls.

From responses of adults in Gabi, once girls reach puberty and have menstruation, they enter a stage when they are no longer considered children but "*dalagitas/solteritas*" who should be closely guarded against "rape, coitus, pregnancy". At this age, they stop being "little mothers" as they can become real mothers. They stop playing. Girls marry at a younger age than do boys. On the whole, they are marginalized in importance in the fishing life of Gabi, even as

TABLE: GABI CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES BY AGE AND GENDER

GENDER	BOYS & GIRLS	GIRLS	BOYS
AGE (Years)			
0-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play</li> </ul>		
4-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play</li> <li>• Worm-baiting</li> <li>• Scavenging for food</li> <li>• Scaling fish</li> <li>• Splitting fish</li> <li>• Studying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baby caring</li> <li>• Cleaning house</li> <li>• Looking for worm bait</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fetching water</li> <li>• Carrying load to boat</li> </ul>
8-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studying or dropping-out</li> <li>• Working in the amo's kamalig</li> <li>• Gathering wood fuel</li> <li>• Catching sea animals</li> <li>• Fixing fish hooks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baby caring</li> <li>• Cleaning house</li> <li>• Doing Laundry</li> <li>• Scaling/splitting fish</li> <li>• Vending</li> <li>• Doing free labor for the amo</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fetching water</li> <li>• Fishing</li> <li>• Mending nets</li> <li>• Diving</li> <li>• Delivering</li> <li>• Joining diving fleet</li> <li>• Playing basketball /gambling</li> <li>• Doing free labor for the amo</li> </ul>
13-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studying in high school/dropping out</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doing household work</li> <li>• Scaling/splitting/drying fish</li> <li>• Doing domestic service for wages</li> <li>• Getting married/having children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joining the trawl fleet</li> <li>• Fishing</li> <li>• Carpentry</li> <li>• Butchering</li> <li>• Animal raising</li> <li>• Cleaning boat</li> <li>• Drinking with friends</li> <li>• Getting married</li> </ul>

their labor is necessary in the pre- and post-catch stages. Girls stay close to home, and while they may leave home to be domestic servants, they merely transfer to another home. Boys get to move about, see new things, experience excitement and enjoy entertainment. A teacher in Gabi noticed that children in general were assigned so many household duties that they were often absent. One student

had been in Grade 1 for four years due to repeated absences as a result of household responsibilities, and this was not uncommon. Gabi has two elementary schools offering Grades 1-5. About 159 students enrolled in Grade 1 in 1993-94. However, by Grade 4, only 40 to 45 remained (with more boys than girls dropping out) and only 26 graduated from the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade (18 students, 69% of whom were girls). About ninety percent (23 students) of those who graduated entered high school, but only 50 percent (11 students) got their high school diploma. Of these, only about 25 percent (3 students) went to college, and most likely none would get a college degree. Boys at the age of 8-9 years (around the time they are in Grade 4) start joining their fathers in fishing, and start earning. On good days, they can get as much as P100-P1,000 a day from fishing, and P 50 - P 80 a day from catching squid. It is not surprising that boys, sooner than girls, lose interest in schooling, and drop out.

The shortcomings of the educational system, combined with the island's geography, the obligations of the *amo-sakop* relationship and the early entry of children in the world of work and wage, give children ample motivation to drop out of school.



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