

Culture



Ronnie VERNOOY, *Starting All Over Again: Making and Remaking a Living on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua*, Wageningen, Netherlands: Agricultural University of Wageningen, 1992, 299 pages (paper)

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Underlying van den Hoonaard's argument is the notion that shrimp fishers form a unified occupational culture defined 'internally' in terms of skills and fishing ability and 'externally' in opposition to other fishery-based occupational cultures (such as longliners or trawlers) and in opposition to the government bureaucrats who are charged with regulating the fishery. This approach incorporates an analytic weakness in that it reifies such factors as techniques of capture (for example, hook and line versus net) or size of vessel (for example, offshore/inshore, big/small) and thereby creates a false conception of separateness between fishers engaged in different spheres of the fishing industry. Van den Hoonaard's focus on gear types, as opposed to, say, the organization of labour within the process of production (i.e. divisions between crews and skippers, owners and non-owners, or shoreworkers and fishers) ignores what is more likely a fluid social situation; a situation in which men begin their fishing career in small dories, move on to the larger offshore boats and then, when advancing age begins to impair their ability to work on the physically taxing offshore fleet, 'retire' to the shrimp fishery (see, for example, pp.23, 48-49, 79).

In very few fisheries world-wide do divisions based explicitly on gear type or species of capture remain static for very long. More typical is a constant fluctuation between levels of capitalization, scales of production, and/or species targeted. The causes for these variations and changes are more likely to be found in changes in the market, costs of production, and resource depletion. Furthermore, fishers may move between different sub-sections of a fishery or even find employment in several different fisheries.

A more fruitful approach toward the social divisions of contradictions between fishers as a group and/or between fishers and non-fishers would begin by asking questions such as: how does the structure of ownership vary? Are boats owned by individual fishers and their family, groups of agnatic kin, or by large corporations? How extensively capitalized is the fishery? How are fishers articulated to the market (directly through fisher-owned co-operatives, through government controlled marketing boards, or through private brokers and/or fish processing firms)? By asking questions such as these, the researcher is forced to look beyond the artificial line drawn around a particular occupational sub-culture and is thus forced to confront the messiness of social interaction.

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This book, which is based on research carried out for the author's PhD thesis, analyzes interrelations between economic, political, gender, and cultural aspects of people's livelihoods in the Bluefields region of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua. It pays special attention to the ways in which coastal people in and around Bluefields react to events that cause major disruptions to their livelihoods: the Contra war, hurricane Joan, and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas by the UNO coalition. Such disruptions are treated by Vernoooy not as merely isolated or peculiar historical incidents, but as important constitutive parts of the historical makeup of the Bluefields region and of the life stories and experiences of its people. He finds that one of the basic features of life in the Atlantic coast is the inability and the need to cope with the many uncertainties that accompany the 'boom and bust' pattern of development in the region.

Tendencies toward disruption and instability are illustrated by case studies of farms in the Bluefields' hinterland, an analysis of trading relations within Bluefields itself, and the labour history of an elderly *costeño* involved in the forestry industry. Among the subjects of broader theoretical interest that the book covers are: different forms of market exchange and the continuing presence of non-commoditized relations in many enterprises; the complex and often unintended social consequences of policy making by the state; the importance of non-economic concerns based on gender, ethnic, and cultural values within economic decision making; and the need to address the realms of everyday life as well as the structures of *longue durée* within analyses of social change and continuity.

One of the principal goals of the book is to better understand the complex and often contradictory process of social change by examining how a diverse group of social actors react to a series of locally and regionally disruptive events. Regional transforma-

tions are interpreted not only in terms of external interventions and broad structural change, but also within the local context of the life-worlds of the coastal people themselves. The result is a detailed account of how coastal people make and remake their own histories within the overarching constraints presented by external forces and a violently disruptive environment.

Vernooy is interested in the social and cultural construction of meaning: how people attribute meanings to things and events and how these meanings relate to the broader material aspects of personal life and society. He is highly critical of "simplistic materialist and cultural explanations that tend to reduce social realities to the imperatives of one dimension or single driving force" (p.2). He contends, along with many recent feminist and postmodernist authors, that such explanations characteristically have neglected social heterogeneity and have dismissed from consideration the voices of social groups that do not occupy dominant positions of power.

A series of recent histories of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast have stressed foreign intervention and external factors of development, while largely neglecting how various groups of *costeños* have come to terms with these outside forces in order to shape their own lives and histories. Vernooy's project is to develop an alternative approach to the understanding of coastal history by applying an actor-oriented political economy perspective to regional issues. This perspective entails recognizing the 'multiple realities' and diverse social practices of various actors representing different social groups. It also requires an innovative methodology that can account for the different and often incompatible social worlds of the different actors. As such, it presents a considerable challenge to Vernooy for this study and, broadly, to ethnography in general.

I believe that Vernooy has made an important contribution to the development of an alternative history of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. His efforts should be particularly appreciated by anyone who has experienced the chaos of doing primary research in contemporary Nicaragua or who has seen the devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Joan. The book successfully portrays the diversity of life experiences among people in the Bluefields region; it especially gives the reader a good first-hand account of many of the persistent problems against which different groups of coastal people have historically struggled. These include: isolation and market inac-

cessibility due to an inadequate transportation network; domination by mestizos and other outsiders; discrimination and favouritism based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, or political affiliation; the failure of the state to understand and respond appropriately to coastal wishes and demands; and heightened exploitation of particularly disadvantaged groups (e.g. peasant women) due to the interplay of gender and other socio-cultural, political, and economic factors.

My main problem with the book concerns its organization; in many places it shifts subject areas rather abruptly, causing it to lose much of its flow and continuity. Many of the issues and subjects covered (e.g., non-commoditized relations, social influence of policy making, trade and the informal sector, agrarian reform) are of interest to the development literature, either within Nicaragua itself or at a more general level, but there are few connecting threads to give the reader a clear idea of why these topics rather than others were covered in the book. Moreover, much of the historical information on the Atlantic Coast is contained near the end of the book where it does least good for readers trying to establish a context within which to place the many phenomena and events described earlier. Nonetheless, there is much to recommend in this book, especially for those who have a particular interest in Nicaragua or who have a more general theoretical interest in developing alternative methodologies for ethnographic studies. Particularly for these readers, I recommend this book highly.

Jean-Paul DUMONT, *Visayan Vignettes: Ethnographic Traces of a Philippine Island*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 256 pages, \$16.25 (paper).

By Henry T. Lewis
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Dumont is an extremely skillful writer, clearly the best in the genre of new ethnography, and the *Vignettes* ("fragmented realities") from the Island of Siquijor are an especially good read. For this reviewer it evoked the humanistic aspects of field studies, experiences of having lived in Filipino (Ilocano) communities, and an increased nostalgia for time, place, and particular individuals.