

To Work and to Weep: Women in Fishing Economies

Edited by Jane Nadel-Klein and Dona Lee Davis

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The cover illustration – an old etching showing Scottish women, their dresses tucked high about their waists, carrying their men ashore from a fishing boat – encodes this volume's themes: women as bridges to land-based community life, women as carriers of physical and emotional burdens, women in multiple and ambivalent relationships to men. The etching alone is a powerful symbolic challenge to several decades of anthropological research on fishermen and fishing communities, during which the topics of women's roles and gender relations received less than their full due. The essays collected in the book redress that neglect and add rich data and valuable perspectives to the ethnology of maritime and coastal communities. They are based on ethnographic and ethnohistorical work that ranges from subsistence and artisanal fisheries production systems to commercial and industrialized ones. They include research in communities of North America (Alaska, the Pacific Northwest, New England and Newfoundland), South America (Peru and Brazil), Europe (Portugal and Scotland), India, Africa and Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Indonesia).

The editors' introduction and chapter on the literature place the case studies in thematic and intellectual contexts while giving a nearly exhaustive review of prior work on women in fishing and coastal communities in relation to major questions in gender studies. The 11 ethnographic case studies cover a wide spectrum of approaches, ranging from holism and status/role analysis to currently more fashionable attempts to bring both history and ideology into analysis. In addition, the question of power is dealt with explicitly and throughout, capped by M. Estellie Smith' summary chapter.

The book includes some ethnographic gems that are often enhanced by a focus on particular situations and people, such as Robben's portrayal of the strained and often humiliating conjugal relationships of lower-class Brazilian fishermen. Others are Cole's report on a Portuguese community where women were active in fishing for over a century, Gulati's collection of transcribed biographies of Indian women affected by an Indo-Norwegian fishery development project, and Clark's study of two Sicilian-American women who lead a powerful fishermen's wives association in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

The editors did a fine job of bringing together these and other essays, including their own, in a book that will become a classic in maritime anthropology. The book also has the merit of being inexpensive and thus suitable for classroom use; happily, the editors of the Institute of Social and Economic Research not only designed the book well but also chose to issue it in paperback. In addition, the book is very important to anthropologists and others engaged in women's studies: the question of women's status, roles, and relationships with men in settings frequently characterized by the division of labour is not at all unique to fishing communities, although they provide excellent ways to study it.