

Fluid subsistences: towards a better understanding of northern livelihoods

Marianne Elisabeth Lien

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, Moltke Moes vei 31, Postboks 1091 Blindern, 0851 Oslo, Norway. (m.e.lien@sai.uio.no)

In this collection we learn about varied livelihoods that are roughly grouped as northern small-scale fisheries. Two messages are particularly salient, and hence they connect nearly all the papers:

First, that small-scale fishing is paramount for social and cultural livelihoods, and an indispensable resource for reproduction of coastal communities. And second, that certain fish related practices are changing, or currently under threat, and thus threatening the core subsistence of coastal communities.

Taken together, these statements convey a somewhat dystopian scenario for northern fisheries. Coastal communities are fragile, partly because they rely on fluctuations and decisions that are unpredictable and beyond their control. Whether the changes are ecological (fish are no longer where they used to be), economic (shifting global prices) or political (regulatory changes, of quotas for example), the people who make their living from small-scale fisheries generally find themselves at the receiving end of whatever it is that causes these shifts, and are forced to work around them as best they can.

This is an important message, reflecting the concerns of both scholars and local people, and occasionally of policy makers too. A nuanced understanding of the complexities involved is valuable in its own right, and this collection is a significant contribution to that aim. But let us approach this problem from a different angle asking: what is the ontological premise, or the theoretical assumption, that makes changes appear as a threat? And why does it seem important to point out that fish is a key resource for northern livelihoods? My concern here is not the salience of the difficulties described, but rather the assumptions that frame the political and discursive context in which such challenges are articulated. Perhaps a different framing might open for imagining alternative scenarios, and perhaps even less dystopian ones?

Let me begin with the role of fish in northern livelihoods. Nearly all the articles make an effort to highlight and substantiate, how fish is a key (re-)source of local integration, enacting community through networks of exchange, and ‘food for bodies’ as well as food for identity, friendship, kinship and belonging. For those of us who have worked in northern regions, this hardly comes as a surprise (see Lien 2012). But I cannot help thinking that for scholars working in agricultural villages, it would hardly be necessary to point out that the annual harvest, or slaughter, is an occasion of cultural and social significance, and that farmers depend on farmed products for their livelihoods. Isn't it a paradox then, that the

social and cultural significance of fish in the north needs such repeated emphasis? How could one ever imagine it otherwise?

I wonder if part of the reason why the significance of small-scale fisheries for northern livelihoods needs such emphasis, has to do with the centrality of what we might call the agricultural nexus in the narrative of domestication. Domestication is often told as a significant historical moment when humans began to grow plants and control animals for food. The neolithic revolution in the Middle East marks the beginning of this journey that allegedly paved the way for human population growth, division of labour, the notion of private property, hereditary ownership, social stratification, resource accumulation and state formation. As a story of human progress, this narrative reproduces and maintains fundamental dualisms between the ‘civilised and the savage’, the ‘farmed and the wild’, ‘nature and culture’, as well as humans and non-humans. The model of domestication as a quest for ever-increased human control over nature serves as a master script for popular narratives of the origin of modern civilisation. But what about the people who ‘followed the ice’ and carved out livelihoods in those northern regions where summers were too short for crops to ripen? How do we begin to understand settlements where ownership of land is peripheral to subsistence, simply because it is too cold for most common domesticated plants to grow?

The editors note that in spite of a growing interest in the Arctic as a region, ‘what exactly makes the Arctic a unique place is still poorly understood’. I think their observation is important, and that a better understanding of northern livelihoods requires that we begin to decentre this ‘agri-centric’ view of domestication as being rooted (!) in tilling the soil and reconsider what domestication might be if viewed from the north.

If livelihoods depend on the seasonal shifts of sowing and harvesting and subsistence practices rely on ownership of land, then stable, sedentary communities emerge as the precondition of food security. But where such practices are untenable, people turn elsewhere to secure their food supply. Typically, as this collection shows, people then rely on subsistence practices that are not one, but many. Hence, they combine hunting, gathering and fishing in a creative and dynamic meshwork that is shifting and responding to the equally dynamic shifts of seasons and of animals’ and fish’s migratory routes. Communities then become shifting too, sometimes nomadic, or transient, reflecting changes in fish migration

or technology, markets or processing practices. Such transience does not necessarily imply a social and cultural discontinuity. As this collection indicates, exchange relations mediated through what the sea affords often transcend the boundaries of a village settlement, and are part and parcel of a wider web of food security. This is because fishing practices sustain not only the human bodies and households that are directly involved, but also relations to people elsewhere. As many studies from the Arctic show, when settlements disappear, they do so because of a lack of connections (for example Hastrup 2013). In Norway, for example, coastal communities have sold dried cod to distant buyers for at least a thousand years, and have relied on merchant infrastructures like the Hanseatic League and the Pomor trade for their local livelihoods. In other words: fish is a mobile resource, both before and after its moment of capture.

If we see fluidity and transience as adaptive modes of being for humans as well as non-humans, then, rather than lamenting the dismantling of a settled community or the disappearance of a valued prey, perhaps we should ask instead how flexibility and robustness is better secured in the long-term. More precisely, we need to ask what sort of policy measures support or facilitate livelihoods that rely on diversity and flexibility in order to survive? One point that this collection makes clear, is that common tools of governance often do not work. Firstly, governance measures that operate through sharp distinctions between subsistence and commercial fisheries, between 'work' and 'leisure', between hunting and fishing, or between indigenous and non-indigenous often undermine the fluidity of local lives, as they fail to embrace the messy diversity of people, non-human species and practices that constitute the core of livelihoods in the north. Similarly, a dualist image of nature as being situated outside, or in opposition to society, (or the Euro-American notion of 'wilderness') is particularly awkward in relation to livelihoods in which there is no sharp distinction between inside or outside, and where landscapes which appear 'barren' and 'pristine' can offer rich seasonal abundance, of berries, game or fish (Rybråten 2013).

Secondly, governance measures that presuppose a model of private property, exemplified through the allocation of individually transferrable quotas are often deeply problematic. The notion of private property has a long history in Europe, but it seems fair to say that it developed from domesticating practices related to the soil, rather than the sea. Hence, as many articles demonstrate, it is often not the best way to allocate individual user rights where people's relation to food is transient, unpredictable and relying on shifting and collaborative forms of organization.

Finally, as governance necessarily relies on measures of simplification, it is crucial to consider carefully how such simplifying moves are actually done. Statistical, numerical or descriptive tools can appear to be neutral, but as effective scaling devices they are never innocent. To understand how they work, and why they sometimes undermine the fragile existences that they were made to support, we need to extend our ethnographic gaze beyond the fishing grounds and their communities, and into the offices of regulators, corporate boardrooms, or even banks. It is along such networks, and in the translations through which particular fishery practices are made legible, that we can begin to understand how policies could be different, or better. Politics is not only about the right to fish, but also about *how to become visible*, to regulatory authorities, corporate decision makers, or NGOs which often govern by proxy. To make oneself visible in a way that resists the most common misrepresentations of what it is that makes northern livelihoods viable is therefore an important task in its own right, and another way to ensure supportive connections with the wider world.

This implies, for example, resisting the tendency in nearly all governance measures to govern, regulate or address *one thing at a time*: one type of fish; one community; one region; one set of environmental issues (for example climate change, marine resources); one model of exchange (the market); one type of livelihood (fisheries). While such divisions often make the world more manageable from a governance perspective, they are also bound to fail, because northern livelihoods subsist precisely in the margins, and in the gaps between entities that such simplifications try to make separate. In this way, they require other tools, or other forms of visibility. As long as the economy and the environment, or society and nature, are systematically perceived as separate, northern communities will struggle to make themselves visible. Hence, a fluid, flexible, and dynamic approach is called for, not only in relation to local politics, but for researchers as well.

References

- Hastrup, K. 2013. Scales of attention in fieldwork: global connections and local concerns in the Arctic. *Ethnography* 14 (2): 145–164.
- Lien, M.E. 2012. Conclusion: salmon trajectories along the North Pacific Rim. Diversity, exchange and human-animal relations. In: Colombi, B.J. and J.F. Brooks (editors). *Keystone nations*. Santa Fe: SAR Press: 237–255.
- Rybråten, S. 2013. *'This is not a wilderness. This is where we live'*. *Enacting nature in Unjárga-Nesseby, northern Norway*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Oslo: University of Oslo, Department of Social Anthropology.