'We're Still at Sea': Migrant Fishers and International Encounters on a Maritime Border Zone

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This paper draws on social science theories about the state and governance, geonarrative approaches, political economy of fishing, and the emerging field of Palawan studies to detail experiences of intra-provincial migrant fishers of the Philippines. It is informed by mixed-method approaches like semi-structured interviews, place-based observation, and discourse analysis. The fieldwork occurred in Manila and Palawan, 2018-2019. These methods produced three inter-related findings developed in the following text. First, fishers provide unparalleled understandings of place in remote, peripheral marine-spaces. Second, Palaweño fishers' geonarratives map translucent borders within ethnic, class, and gender landscapes of Palawan and neighboring provinces in the broader Philippine archipelago. Third, ad hoc engagement with fishers from other countries is emergent diplomacy on the open sea. Their encounters underpin the everyday geopolitics of maritime border areas and destabilizes state-centric imaginings of an ordered, homogenous territorial ocean-space.

Keywords: *Political ecology of fishing, migration, geonarrative, Palawan, Spratly Islands*

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My ancestors and relatives were fishers before.
That was the only way to survive, fishing
-A Cuyonon man living in Puerto Princesa City, 2018.

I struggled to keep balance in my *tsinelas* along a maze of muddy embankments as I followed a research informant through multiple rice-paddies. In that moment, I recalled that Palawan is one of the few places in the archipelago where equatorial spitting cobras live, oftentimes in settings like the one we were traversing. After navigating several paddies, we waited under the rickety roof of a *bahay kubo* as men holding sharpened *garab* finished their task. Weary from harvesting *palay*, they escaped the brutal sun, sharing stories about their experiences fishing in coastal Palawan and the maritime border zone further west.

This article traces the stories of inter-provincial migrant fishers, push/pull factors prompting their relocation, dreams of prosperity, and continued struggles as small-scale fishers in their new home, Palawan, Philippines. It draws on a range of literature on geonarratives, political economy of fishing, and Palawan studies. The following discussion develops three overarching ideas. First, Palaweño fishers are central for providing site-rooted understandings of place in remote, peripheral marine-spaces. Second, their geonarratives signpost translucent borders within ethnic, class, and gender landscapes of Palawan and neighboring provinces. Third, ad hoc engagement with fishers from other countries is emergent diplomacy on the open sea. Their encounters underpin the everyday geopolitics of maritime border areas and destabilizes state-centric imaginings of an ordered, homogenous territorial ocean-space.

This article is informed by fieldwork in Manila and Palawan, 2018-2019. Most of my time was spent in various municipalities of Palawan, including Puerto

Princesa City and the Municipality of Quezon (Figures 1 and 2). It is one component of a broader dissertation that details relatively sensitive political topics involving the Spratly Island dispute. Consequently, I omit personal names or use pseudonyms to protect informants from repercussions to their livelihoods or careers. I interviewed a broad array of stakeholders including fishers and their spouses, government employees, elected officials, and NGO workers. All the interviews with fishers and some government employees were conducted in Tagalog (with a mix of Cuyonon and Visayan) and later translated.

FIG 1. *Fieldwork sites were primarily Puerto Princesa City and the Municipality of Quezon in the Province of Palawan. Some archival research and a few interviews were conducted in Metro Manila.*

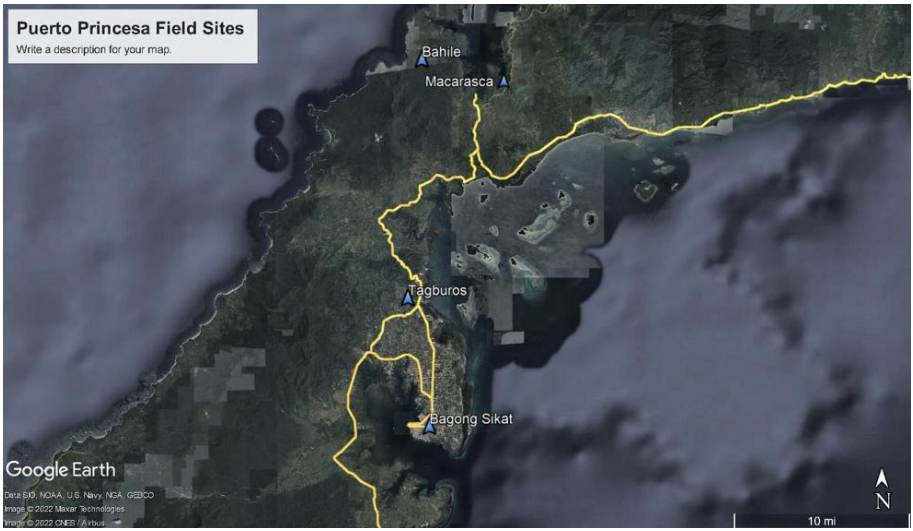

FIG. 2. *Field sites within Puerto Princesa City.*

The fieldwork involved approximately forty-five formal, semi-structured interviews and many other more informal conversations during my fieldwork. Tagalog is not my first language, but I studied it at my home university and other institutions. Furthermore, I hired an interpreter who was crucial during the earliest stages of data collection. However, logistical challenges caused me to also conduct interviews on my own at times. My primary target group was Palaweño fishers and, in particular, a group of fifty-four that the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) "deployed" to Thitu Island in late-2017. BFAR provided a list of names and barangays of the fishers deployed. My data collection approach was to first scout the interviewees alone, riding my motorbike to visit the barangay captain, ask permission to interview the fishers there, and schedule a time so the interpreter could be present. However, many times the barangay captain simply stated that interviews could occur immediately. Some of these locations were relatively far from Puerto Princesa City and I decided to conduct interviews

personally rather than wait for a later date and risk losing the opportunity. All interviews were audio recorded and the hired interpreter proved invaluable for translation during the transcription process. Inter-provincial migrants were not a target group for this project; the target group was largely the group deployed to Thitu Island. However, most fishers happened to be migrants, a reflection of the general cultural landscape of a borderland province.

Geonarratives and Practiced Materiality of Maritime Places

Overlap exists between geonarratives and the emergent materiality of place. Palis (2022) traces the utility of geonarratives as a method to visually detail place-based narratives. In subaltern settings, participant-produced maps can be "used as visual basis and prompt to discuss, tell and perform" individuals' stories (2022, p. 700). Such narratives often inherently differ from elite or state descriptions of those places. While the workshops described by Palis largely relied on countermapping to express "place-writing" (p. 700), the fishers involved with this current study expressed their understanding of place verbally. Additionally, I contend the very materiality of those places emerged through bodily practices and situated contexts of engaging fishers from other countries on the open sea.

This article focuses on the Palaweño fishers that physically traverse the disputed Spratly Island region, an area known as the Kalayaan Island Group in the Philippines. It draws on Dittmer's work on assemblage theory as well as Steinberg and Peters' "wet ontology" and later "more than wet ontology" (Dittmer, 2014; Steinberg and Peters, 2015; Peters and Steinberg, 2019). While the inability of state agencies to make peripheral marine-scapes legible results in varied understandings of Kalayaan space, the materiality of Kalayaan emerges through the experiences and everyday geopolitics of the folks that actually go there.

FIG. 3. *Fish port in the Municipality of Quezon, Palawan. The waters of Palawan and the nearby Spratly Islands are rich in marine resources.*

It is useful to assess two ideas from Dittmer's "assemblage and complexity" approach here. First, Dittmer argues that "assemblage embeds a relational ontology that dissolves the macro/micro scalar tensions at the heart of geopolitics" (2014, p. 386). Kalayaan space is imagined and maintained by countless stakeholders, government agencies, and military branches on local, provincial, and national levels. Dittmer further contends his approach "connects with arguments for geopolitics as everyday practice and as a local, bottom-up set of processes that

need to be studied as such – via disaggregation and attention to both specific sites and events" (Dittmer, 2014, p. 386). National-level Philippine government agencies actively construct narratives that a Kalayaan space integral to the state's territory indeed exists. However, the *materiality* of Kalayaan emerges through bottom-up, everyday practices, shared experiences, and site-specific events.

Inter-provincial Migrants and Everyday Fishing in Palawan

Palawan became a prime destination for migrants in the latter-half of the twentieth century. Known as the "Last Frontier" in the Philippines, the rugged, undeveloped island was considered an opportunity to escape violence and poverty in Mindanao and elsewhere. Indigenous groups like the Batak, Palawan, and Tagbanwa engage in shifting cultivation in the island's uplands (Eder and Evangelista, 2014, p. 4). The Islamic Molbog in the south and the Hispanicized Agutaynen, Cagayanen, Calamiane and Cuyonon in the north have resided in Palawan for centuries. In addition, a broad array of migrants has lived in Palawan for generations. Palawan studies scholars Eder and Evangelista write:

> These migrants and migrant-origin peoples include Christians from Luzon and the Visayas, Muslims from Mindanao and Sulu, and other indigenous groups from different parts of the Philippines. All of these peoples have figured prominently in the story of Palawan past and present. (2014, p. 4)

While Tagalog and English are considered the official languages of the province, fieldwork experience for this project reveals widespread usage of Cebuano or other Visayan languages. This is unsurprising since Palawan has been a migrant destination for decades, including many people from the Visayas and Mindanao. Additionally, Malay can be heard in southern areas of the island

(Macdonald, 2014, pp. 69-70). Autochthonous and indigenous languages include Palawano, Tagbanwa, Batak, and Molbog. Cuyonon, closely related to languages in the Visayas, has become the main autochthonous language of Palawan (Macdonald, 2014, pp. 68-69). Intra-provincial migration is also transforming the fisher profile in Palawan as some members of indigenous upland communities move to lowland coastal areas in seek of greater opportunities as fishers (Dressler and Fabinyi, 2011, p. 538).

Most of the fishers interviewed for this project are originally from other locations in the Philippines and moved to Palawan for potential economic opportunities. Consequently, Palawan is characterized by immense linguistic diversity (Eder and Evangelista, 2014, pp. 3-4). One fisher originally from Masbate explained, "People told us it was a good place for a livelihood, not like there where we were poor, so my parents moved here to Palawan." Johndel, a Cuyonon man in his forties, stated, "My ancestors and relatives were fishers before. That was the only way to survive, fishing." Except for Johndel, every fisher interviewed for this study was from the Visayas. He was the first in his family to be born in Puerto Princesa City after his relatives moved from Cuyo Island. He explained, "Of course our life here is only fishing." Several other fishers were originally from Samar, one moving to Palawan twenty years ago. Another moved from Bohol thirty years ago and others were originally from Masbate. One explained his relatives were sent to Palawan during Marcos' martial law. A different fisher moved from Cebu in 2001 to find work.

Unsurprisingly, inter-provincial migrants like Visayans and intra-provincial migrants like the Tagbanwa typically face restricted access to marine resources in the province. Consequently, they often rely on motorless vessels or work as crew members of larger fishing operations, experiencing low investment returns and continued vulnerability (Fabinyi et al., 2018, p. 106). One fisher said, "[I have been

a fisher] since I lived here but we [relatives] really began fishing in Samar. We are still at sea." This latter fisher's statement is particularly poignant, accentuating the challenges migrant workers face globally, including fishers in Palawan. His family left their homeland for better opportunities but find themselves still adrift at sea culturally and socioeconomically.

The group interviewed for this project are lifetime fishers but sometimes work in construction crews or as farmhands. Some plan their fishing trips around tri-annual rice harvesting. Their primary livelihood is small-scale fishing in nearby areas like Honda Bay or Ulugan Bay. They catch a variety of species including threadfin (*bisugo*), emperor (*amadas*), Spanish mackerel (*tangigi*), and grouper (*suno or Lapu-Lapu*) for the market or personal consumption.

Sometimes their fishing trips last several days, something they call *mag-dayo.* An approximate translation is to "go out" or "venture out" from your own place. However, it seems to have a more specific meaning among the fishers interviewed. For them, *mag-dayo* involves going to another area for several days, sleeping on an island or their vessel. One frequent *mag-dayo* destination is near Dos Palmas Island at the mouth of Honda Bay. A further destination is Roxas in northern Palawan. One fisher explained that while on one of these longer trips, he practices net-fishing during the day and goes spearfishing at night, catching squid (*pusit*), crabs (*alimasag*), and various coral fish (*isdang bato*). The duration of the *mag-dayo* depends on food supplies they bring and can catch. One fisher seasonally joins a crew to catch tuna (*tambakol*) near Tubbataha Reef Marine Park in the Sulu Sea.

The province is immensely rich in marine resources. This includes the Kalayaan Island Group. One government employee claimed that "probably seventy or eighty percent of Philippines catch is from the West Philippine Sea." Filipino leaders consider these waters to be supremely important because more than

twenty-two percent of the per capita protein intake in the Philippines is fish (Baviera and Batongbacal, 2013, p. 13). Most Palaweño fishers lack the capital, large-vessels, or equipment to exploit the marine resources in the Spratly Island region. Small-scale fishers rarely voyage far from the Palawan mainland unless they are employees on larger fishing operations. They oftentimes fish for sustenance and whatever they can sell at local markets. According to others, lack of capital is not the only factor restricting access to those rich waters. Rather, fear of encountering Chinese Coast Guard or other Chinese vessels also keep some from venturing far from shore.

However, there are large-scale commercial fishers from Palawan that can afford to operate in the Spratly Island region, despite potential danger. This second group of fishers are more involved with the global seafood market. One example is the live-reef fish (LRF) trade. In Palawan, this involves capturing species like leopard grouper alive to be shipped to luxury restaurants in China and elsewhere. As local communities in Palawan and beyond are increasingly integrated into the complex network of the global seafood market, fish become commoditized and the actual costs of fishery production is "masked" from consumers and others (Crona et al., 2015, pp. 1-8). Integration into global markets does provide opportunities for many local communities. Fabinyi et al. (2012, pp. 120-121) point out that commodity fisheries such as the LRF trade provide livelihood for many Palaweños. However, these benefits are varied; some large-scale fishers enjoy increased wealth while those they employ or other small-scale fishers sometimes experience greater poverty (Fabinyi et al., 2018, p. 94). Fabinyi et al. (2012, p. 129) write that the LRF trade is:

> arguably an example of how at a broad scale, the East Asian region is consuming or "appropriating" the marine resources of [Southeast Asia],

> yet the long-term environmental cost of this consumption is borne by [Southeast Asia]. (Fabinyi et al., 2012, p. 129)

They describe the regional LRF trade as an "ecologically unequal exchange" between Southeast Asia and China (Fabinyi et al., 2012, p. 129).

Tuna is perhaps even more important than leopard grouper and the LRF trade in Palawan. In 2007, the Kalayaan Island Group accounted for thirteen percent of the country's tuna production (Baviera and Batongbacal, 2013, p. 13). Furthermore, the potential annual yield of these waters is estimated at five million tons or around twenty percent of the country's annual fish-catch (Baviera and Batongbacal, 2013, p. 13). An officer of the Municipality of Quezon fish port explained plans to construct a large "international" fish port in southern Palawan, a development that could shift the Philippine tuna industry from Mindanao to Palawan. Such a plan could impact the fishing industry in the province immensely. The current tuna capital of the Philippines is General Santos City, Mindanao, although the officer claimed that most tuna caught in the archipelago is from the waters west of Palawan. A major fish port in Berong would foster cooperation between the municipalities of Kalayaan and Quezon to share generated income. A port in Quezon would shift the center of the tuna industry from Mindanao to southern Palawan, allowing direct exports to China, Malaysia, Vietnam, and beyond.

Fabinyi et al. (2018, p. 93) employ a "scaled political ecology approach to examine how access unfolds at the 'extractive ends' of seafood trade in the coastal frontiers of Palawan province." Palawan's unique geography provides opportunities to reconceptualize frontiers. It is useful to share a lengthy excerpt from Fabinyi et al. here to illustrate this. They write:

> In effect, frontiers are often portrayed as quintessential land-based territories...However, much less research emphasis has been placed on how politically, economically and ecologically connected coastal regions are also undergoing intense and rapid transformations. In many respects, marine enclosures, extractive zones and commodities production are part of frontier transitions as much as boom crops are in the interior. Yet compared to the agrarian smallholder cousin, the poor coastal fisher is the less visible 'surplus migrant' arguably left out of the popular frontier imaginary. (2018, p. 92)

The frontier of southern Palawan illustrates the limitations of state governance in the Philippines and the regionality of the economy. The friction of terrain (Scott, 1998, 2009) coupled with the inefficacy of borders to restrict mobility foster an environment of exchange and trade that transcends national borders.

FIG. 4. *Father and young son, small-scale fishers, returning to their barangay in Macarascas, Puerto Princesa, at dusk (left). Fishing village in Barangay Bahile, Puerto Princesa City (right).*

One migrant from the Visayas region described his situation as a fisher in Palawan. Originally from Masbate, he moved to the province in 1986 in hopes of greater income. He found little employment opportunities besides working as a crew member of larger fishing operations. He explained, "I have no way to work as a worker cause I'm older, my family will not allow me to be an employee [elsewhere], I'm older now." He quickly added, "of course, there is no other source of income" because he does not own a vessel. He and his friend sell their labor to large-scale fish owners. Despite their status as wage-earners, they are still not guaranteed a wage. He explained, "if we get the fish, [then we get] our income. No fish, no money." The vessels are crewed by fifteen to twenty men and have a capacity of approximately eight tons. They usually target a variety of species like scad, mackerel, and skipjack tuna.

FIG. 5. *Members of a large-scale fishing crew just returned to Quezon, Palawan from a two-week trip in the Spratly Islands (left). Municipality of Quezon Market where female fish vendors oftentimes sell fish-catch of male relatives (right).*

Orlando has lived in Quezon, Palawan since the 1980s. His first experience in the fishing industry was as a crew member of a tuna fishing operation. He had hopes of personally owning vessels, explaining, "of course, I worked on other vessels and I saw that they could have a vessel, so I dreamt to have my own. If you come from a place where you have nothing, of course you seek to improve life." He currently owns two medium-size fishing vessels. They typically only travel fifteen to thirty nautical miles out to sea. Like many fishers in the province, they usually leave in the morning and return to shore by evening. Like Orlando, Jhun also has a relatively successful migration story. Originally from Cabadbaran City, Occidental Negros, his family was driven by poverty to seek livelihood in southern Palawan in the 1980s. In the early 2000s, he invested in a fishing business and now personally owns three vessels. Each vessel is crewed by six to seven men and they target big-eyed scad, tuna, and squid. He indicated that it can be difficult to find enough fishers because there are so many fishing vessels seeking crewmembers. They change location depending on the season but typically only travel sixty to seventy nautical miles from the Palawan mainland due to fear of encountering Chinese vessels.

Many fish vendors in markets throughout Palawan are female relatives of fishers. They play a crucial role in the finances or the success of family business ventures. Maria moved from Masbate to Palawan with her family in 1975. Considered a matriarch of the extended family, they own five vessels crewed by sons and nephews. She explains their trips usually only last one day, saying, "They use stones, then chicken feathers, that's what they attach to the hook. When they return, I will sell my own fish here." They are also involved in the LRF trade, targeting leopard grouper. She explained her vessels are equipped with holding tanks for the grouper. Vendors from Puerto Princesa purchase them on arrival in Quezon and prepare them alive for shipment to Manila and, presumably, East

Asia. She suggested her sons do not visit Kalayaan because of the danger of Muslim "pirates" near Balabac. This illustrates fluid understandings of Kalayaan's location as well as an undercurrent of Islamophobia in the province. A common mistrust of "pirate" Islamic communities in the southernmost portions of Palawan is ironic because the only significant case of kidnapping for ransom in the province occurred in Puerto Princesa, not Balabac (Ch, 2001; Mendez and Romero, 2001). Furthermore, the perpetrators were members of Abu Sayyaf from Sulu, not Muslims from southern Palawan.

While extremists or kidnappers are unlikely a danger to Palaweño fishers, storms are. Maria shared a tragic story about a vessel named *40 Watch*. According to her, the tuna vessel voyaged to a *payaw* (fish aggregator device) in the Spratly Island region approximately ten years ago. A typhoon swept the sea and the vessel disappeared with all aboard. I was unable to find reports of this occurring in news archives. This does not discredit the story; local news agencies oftentimes fail to properly archive articles that occurred months ago. It would be unsurprising for a record of an event occurring a decade ago to be missing. Furthermore, reports of missing Palaweño fishers during the stormy season are common (Aning, 2012; Philippine Coast Guard, 2016; Ballarta, 2020). Illegal fishing practices like using dynamite can also pose dangers, not only to fragile coral systems, but to the fishers themselves. A Balabac-based fisher died from this in April 2021 (Ballarta, 2021).

Marie Cris is thirty-five years old and a fish vendor at the Quezon market. She shared a harrowing personal story about the dangers and fear involved with the fishing life. Several years ago, her husband's vessel failed to return at the expected time during stormy weather. Panicked, she contacted the Philippine Coast Guard, Quezon branch. During an interview, she expressed bitterness towards the Coast Guard's response which, in her opinion, was indifferent to her husband's danger. Fortunately, the storm only delayed her husband and he later returned safely. She

also suggested local government agencies are discriminating in who receives aid in the form of fishing gear or other equipment, saying, "Only those who seem to be close to them [government employees] are the only ones they give [supplies to]. Everything should be fair." Her family is involved in the leopard grouper LRF trade. In addition, her husband catches other species that she sells in the market in Quezon.

One of the few things fishers and state representatives interviewed for this project agree on is concern over ecosystem destruction from unsustainable fishing and China's island reclamation. A Municipality of Kalayaan administrator believes the damage caused by island reclamation will take many years to recover. Fishers reported extensive damage to the coral surrounding Thitu Island, suggesting dynamite fishing and the use of cyanide for catching live-reef fish like grouper are primary causes. Of course, they blamed Chinese, Malaysian, and Vietnamese fishers, although such methods are indeed practiced in the Philippines and throughout Southeast Asia. They reported only seeing larger species from deeper water like sharks, Spanish mackerel (*tangigi*) and barracuda (*rumpi*). Speaking about the reclamation of Subi Reef, some fishers emphasized that fish do not spawn in destroyed coral. They suggested the fact that they only observed larger species from deeper waters indicates other species are no longer spawning in the nearby coral-reefs. Furthermore, the only giant clams some of the fishers saw were already dead. In 2015, reports surfaced that Chinese giant clam harvesters were deliberately destroying reefs in the Spratly Islands (Wingfield-Hayes, 2015).

The former president of the Quezon Basnig Operator Association (BOA) reported at least five large vessels from the municipality currently fish for tuna in the Spratly Island region. This contradicts an officer of agriculture in Quezon. The Office of Agriculture is responsible for all fishers in the municipality. The officer's claim that no local fishers travel to the Spratly Island region reveals the

inability of local state agencies to make legible and keep track of Palaweño fishers. The Quezon BOA president is a migrant from Masbate who now owns two vessels. He was once interviewed by ABS-CBN, advocating that the government should provide job opportunities or aid for fishers during the stormy season, which typically occurs November to January. Each of the five vessels from Quezon that visit the Spratly Islands have a crew of seven or eight, are equipped for basnig fishing, and are accompanied by three smaller vessels. Basnig fishing is a method common in the Visayan region and usually employs nets. The large vessel is typically equipped with powerful lights to attract species at night while the smaller vessels set a net around the periphery.

Emergent Place in a Maritime Border Zone

One barangay captain in Puerto Princesa claimed that many fishers from Palawan visited the disputed waters in the 1990s, targeting yellow-tailed fusilier (*dalagang bukid*), surgeonfish (*labahita*), leopard grouper, mackerel (*tangigi*), skipjack tuna (*tulingan*), and yellowfin tuna. He lamented, "they don't go there now because they are afraid, the Chinese vessels have guns and can harass them." Consequently, according to him, many large-scale Palaweño fishers are forced to travel to the Malaysian national border near Balabac. Jhun, the migrant from Occidental Negro, expressed fear of fishing in the Spratly Island region, claiming he heard reports of the Chinese Coast Guard intercepting large-scale vessels from Puerto Princesa and confiscating their vessels or fish-catch in 2016.

Dionel and his crew are more mobile than many other fishers in Palawan and actually operate in two different seas. The crew lives in Puerto Princesa, which faces east toward the Sulu Sea. The business owner that employs them also owns a vessel on the west coast. If the winds are too strong on the east coast, they operate

in the west in the South China Sea. Oftentimes, Quezon and Balabac are some of the destinations during west coast trips. The length of these trips varies considerably, depending on fish-catch and weather. He explained, "when you leave here when it is calm, we return home after one week [of fishing]. But if it isn't calm or it is strong, you hide out on the islands; it will take you two or three weeks [to return home]." Other fishers also share stories of taking shelter from storms on deserted islands, even during three-day trips. Dionel explained their targeted species depends on the season; during the interview in June, they were catching large squid. Between October and February, they typically target tuna. Fishing in Balabac brings them close to the national border of Malaysia. Dionel uses GPS but reported that if they are careless, sometimes strong winds cause them to drift across the boundary. Chuckling, he explained when that occurs, the Malaysian Coast Guard is sure to chase them out of their national waters.

Many interviewees shared stories of encountering fishers from other countries in the Spratly Island region. One expressed indifference to these experiences, stating, "There are also fishermen from other countries, but I don't even ask where they come from." This apathetic response is an outlier among the interviews for this project. Most fishers reported either positive or negative descriptions of the fishers they encountered in the disputed waters. Dionel succinctly described Vietnamese fishers, saying, "there are good and there are others who are rude or stingy." The term "stingy" refers to a common practice of bartering or sharing goods with fishers from different countries. Another fisher had similarly negative opinions of other fishers, saying, "They are just there in the China Sea. They are greedy. Vietnamese, Taiwanese. They do sea turtle, do dynamite for *suno* [leopard grouper]."

Other Palaweño fishers shared more congenial experiences with other fishers. Jhun, the migrant from Occidental Negros, described bartering with Taiwanese

fishers. He indicated the Taiwanese enjoyed cigarettes from the Philippines. In return, the Taiwanese would share their own cigarettes, liquor, or noodles. Marie Cris described her husband's encounters with Chinese and Taiwanese fishers. According to her, Chinese were sometimes hostile while Taiwanese were usually friendly. The Taiwanese share food or noodles and fishing gear like hooks or lines. In return, the Taiwanese that her husband encounters are interested in Filipino *ulam* (partner of rice or entree).

As mentioned, Dionel and his crew travel more extensively and further from the coastline than many of the other fishers interviewed for this project. Unsurprisingly, he provided greater insight into encounters with fishers from other countries. He reported many Vietnamese fishers in large, more modern fishing vessels known locally in the Philippines as *lantsa.* Filipino fishers, even large-scale fishing operations, usually consist of smaller vessels than what the Vietnamese and others use. According to Dionel, the Vietnamese fishers in the *lantsa* catch tuna, sharks, and even sea turtles. Dionel and his crew give them Philippine cigarettes and some of their fish-catch. In return, they receive cigarettes from Vietnam and noodles. Typically, they rely on makeshift sign language to communicate. Sometimes the Vietnamese crew will have a Tagalog speaker on board, so they can communicate in greater depth. When this occurs, they discuss a variety of topics. Dionel stated:

> Depends, like we talk about our work, the mess [of a situation], of course our conversation focuses on, "why is it like this now?" The situation is so different right now. Until finally we talk about where they are from until we know each other.

Fishers from East Asia and Southeast Asia that frequent the disputed waters of the Spratly Island region are concerned with more than which marine species are in season. Their fish-catch and incomes are directly affected by the geopolitics of the South China Sea and increasing militarization of the Spratly Island maritime frontier.

While diplomats debate the dispute over the South China Sea during ASEAN and other forums, the fishers from various countries discuss the dispute among themselves during ad hoc encounters. Elected officials manufacture state-sponsored imaginaries of an uncluttered, ordered marine-space bounded by clearly demarcated territorial claims although most of them lack first-hand experience in the disputed waters. However, the very materiality and specificity of Kalayaan space emerges through the embodied experiences of Palaweño civilians, soldiers on lonely military outposts, and fishers chasing peripatetic marine life through an ever-moving, fluid Spratly Island region. Fishers perform nonstate diplomacy within site-specific contexts on the open sea, creating emergent yet temporary places that problematize the simplistic spatial imaginaries of state spokespeople. This exemplifies Dittmer's treatment of assemblage that emphasizes the dissolution of macro/micro scalar tensions at the heart of geopolitics. Fishers and other littoral communities embody the complex geopolitics of maritime Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

Fishers' international dialogue, bartering traditions, everyday experiences, and inherent mobility blur state-sponsored visions of the spatiality of the Spratly Island region. As government agencies publish declarations and maps averring a u-shaped line encompassing the South China Sea or tidy, clear exclusive economic zone

boundaries adjacent to national coastlines, the geopolitics of fishing produce alternative spatial realities in the Spratly Islands. The coordinates listed in Marcos' 1978 presidential decree (Presidential Decree No. 1596) declaring the existence of a Kalayaan Island Group have little to do with daily events on the water and marine spaces of the Spratly Islands.

Interactions between fishers and other civilians from different countries in the region produce emergent nonstate diplomacy, a site-specific alternative to state-sponsored imaginings of homogenized territorial claims to the Spratly Islands. Fisherfolk from maritime Southeast Asia inscribe place in Kalayaan with meaning and values largely divergent from state visions. The magnitude and weight of state discourse usually drowns out the stories of these marginalized communities. However, their voices, recollections, and geonarratives are the optimal sources for reflecting the actual spatiality of the disputed region.

While East Asian and Southeast Asian diplomats debate the dispute over the South China Sea during Association of Southeast Asian Nation meetings and other forums, the fishers from various countries discuss the dispute among themselves on the open sea, sometimes lamenting the current geopolitical situation. The materiality of Kalayaan emerges through the experiences and everyday diplomacy of the folks that are actually there.

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