OUR CONTINUING FRONTIER

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The Fisherman and His Wife

There is a certain universal quality in the problems faced by the wives of seafarers that transcends national boundaries and cultures. All must learn to live for long periods of time without their men and must, therefore, achieve a certain measure of independence, coping alone with minor annoyances and major problems. Yet in some traditional cultures, these problems are greatly increased by societal sanctions against independence for women. The resulting conflicts and the carefully circumscribed role of women in one such society, that of the sponge fishers of Kalymnos, Greece, are the subject of the following selection by H. Russell Bernard, an anthropologist at West Virginia University. This article was originally presented at the Third Mediterranean Social Anthropological Conference in Athens in 1966.

This paper discusses some aspects of male-female relationships on the island of Kalymnos in Greece. Kalymnos is a rather barren-looking rock in the Dodecanese chain. It is only 49 square miles, of which about 82% is nonarable. The economic prosperity of Kalymnos is directly linked to its native sponge-fishing industry. The sponge fleet of approximately 30 vessels leaves Kalymnos around Easter. It spreads out through the Aegean and, until recently, many boats travelled all the way to the North African coast. The boats remain at sea for about half the year, until the weather and cold water drives them home in early November. During the winter months the divers, crew members, and captains remain on the island. They work on repairing the boats and preparing for the next expedition. There is much to do. The captains negotiate loans from banks and from the buyers to underwrite the extremely high costs of an expedition—about $35,000, on the average, per captain. (Each captain runs two or three small boats and a single mother ship to carry supplies.) The divers and crew negotiate with the various captains to obtain the best platika, or advance payment on their earnings. Most of these complex negotiations take place in the coffee houses around Kalymnos, especially in the port city of Pothea where over 70% of the island’s population resides.

Just before Easter, the island honors its folk-heroes, the divers, with a formal banquet; the streets are lined with bunting and signs wishing the men safe return; there are visits from mainland politicos and displays of boats in the harbor; and then they are gone, leaving their families for six months.

Sponge fishermen are variously held in high esteem and disdain by the majority of the island’s population. They constitute a scant 10% of the labor force, yet they account for more than 40% of the goods and services of Kalymnos. . . . They risk their lives (indeed, there are men killed and crippled nearly every year from diving accidents) to make this significant contribution to the Kalymnian economy. Their efforts yield a total of more than a million dollars per annum in foreign currency flow to Greece, and their internal spending supports dozens of shops and hundreds of families beyond their own.

Divers earn two and a half times in six months what a similarly educated laborer earns in a year. Their high earnings and death-defying job behavior account for their folk-hero status among lower class Kalymnians. Their economic importance accounts for the banquet held in their honor by middle- and upper-class Kalymnians. The banquet, however, belies a harsher reality. The merchants and landed classes of the island despise the fisherman for the latter’s antisocial
behavior. Indeed, the raucous antics of young sponge divers are famous throughout Greece. Not knowing if they will return from a trip, they demand and get their high wages in advance. Many of the younger divers spend their money freely, often leaving Kalymnos penniless or in debt to the captain against bonuses for large catches.

When the divers return in the winter, they borrow money from the captains against the next year's wages, and so on. A diver may borrow from several captains, promising each that he will ship out at the proper time. The captain, who eventually signs a man, must pay off his fellow captains if they are holding notes against the diver.

The exploits of the younger divers and their seemingly reckless fiscal philosophy are tolerated by the outraged gentry. The divers have a kind of license for antisocial behavior. This antisocial behavior is largely directed against women. It is the young wives who suffer when their husbands openly throw money away in the taverns; and it is the young wives who suffer through the summer when their husbands leave them without funds and force them into debt to local merchants. When the men return from the sea they must borrow from the captains to pay off their wives' debts. The older, more stable divers are conscientious family men; and not all the young divers are irresponsible. But the exploits of a few are enough to reinforce the image of divers held by the gentry: "They are a cancer of this island."

The irresponsible image of divers is transferred to their wives. Everywhere on Kalymnos the divers' wives are described as "loose women, waiting for their husbands to leave so they can run around behind their backs." A very small number of cases of adultery serve to reinforce this prejudice. An abortionist told me that the peak time of year for these operations was soon after Easter. "The men like to leave their wives pregnant so they can be sure they will not make them cuckolds. These women will not make them cuckolds. After all, how would they get away with it on a small island? But neither do they want so many children. So they come to me for help."

The essential relationship of distrust between men and women in the Mediterranean culture is drawn in high relief in this example. On Kalymnos, because the men are gone for long each year, the picture is drawn more sharply than usual. The basic quality of the male/female relationship is one of battle—a game of resource manipulation whose prize is personal power over the opponent. There are certain crucial rules in this game: (1) the status of man is defined as superior to that of woman and everyone must acknowledge this, at least superficially, in order to be eligible to play the game; (2) final and formal authority for legitimate use of decision-making power within the family is vested in males; a corollary of this rule is that a man succeeds to this authority formally when he transfers his primary allegiance from a nuclear family of orientation to one of procreation; and (3) the resources for control of this authority and power within the conjugal domestic unit are not the same. Essentially a man controls decision-making by force of tradition. His resources for maintenance of that control are, among others: (1) the sanction of custom and tradition; (2) the threat or actual use of physical coercion; and (3) the control of finances as breadwinner. The resources of the wife are, among others: (1) the legitimate use of cajoling techniques; (2) argument; (3) the threat of infidelity; and (4) the withholding of sexual favors. The husband's objective is maintenance of control. For the wife, the goal is the usurpation of power (both physical and that of decision-making) from her husband in order to attain her own goals.

Men and women each have a private realm within which they may exercise considerable control. "The house is the woman's domain (so long as she runs it to suit her husband)" and "the outside world belongs to men" are two cultural clichés that sum up this polarity. At the same time, they demonstrate that, ideally, the man gives his wife power in the house at his tolerance.
A Kalymnian woman must understand that a man's *philotimo* (honor) is at stake every time he deals with women. The side of family life which faces on public display must demonstrate the husband's control of the situation. A woman's own *philotimo* depends to a large extent on her not doing anything to harm her husband's *philotimo*. Of primary importance is the notion that shame rather than honor is the independent variable in *philotimo*. A man's honor depends on the shame possessed by his wife, sisters, and mother. If a woman does not possess shame, she brings dishonor on her family, specifically on the men of the family. The dishonor throws open to public questioning the men's authority to control social, political, and economic life.

Given this, the wife of a Kalymnian sponge fisherman leads an extraordinary existence. She is not exempt from the primary rules outlined above, neither is she free to play her role in the orthodox manner prescribed by Kalymnian (and Greek) society. For the sake of her own *philotimo*, and that of her children and of her family, she must preserve her husband's by not appearing to usurp his authority during his absence. Yet, the simple facts of life dictate that she must act in his stead. For six months of every year she must ask herself if she is indeed free to act in her husband's name, or whether she should defer action until his return. Consider the use of financial credit. Ordinarily only men can incur debts with local merchants. On Kalymnos a woman whose husband is away at sea may buy what she requires for herself and her family on credit. These debts become debts of honor for her husband. To fulfill his honor, the sponge fisherman must go back into debt to a captain for cash against his next year's earnings. The use of this power cannot be taken for granted, however. In one case, a diver returned to find himself in debt to a beauty parlor. He refused to honor the debt and sued for divorce. Registering the children in school is considered to be a masculine activity. Since the sponge fishermen are still away during September, this task falls to their wives. One more example may suffice. Until recently, women did not shop at the central market place for fresh fish and meats. This was reserved for men. The wives of sponge fishermen, however, purchased these items between May and October while their husbands were working at sea. When the men returned, they took up the shopping duties.

Because the sponge fisherman's wife acts in traditional male roles for part of each year, she is the subject of gossip and suspicion by other Kalymnians. A sponge fisherman's wife must take every opportunity to protect her husband's *philotimo*.

In one case, for example, a woman was approached by a distant relative and was asked to sell off a piece of property so that the relative might put together a decent *prika* (dowry) for his daughter. The price was fair, the property was legally hers (she brought it with her to the marriage in her own dowry), and there was some urgency in the sale. The prospective groom, it seemed, was demanding to know exactly what land would be included in the dowry lest he break the engagement. Still, the woman did not sell but told her relative that he would have to wait until her husband could decide. A letter was dispatched to North Africa where her husband was fishing at the time. A month later during a shore leave, the letter caught up with him. The letter contained a full exposition by the wife of why she thought the offer a good bargain; but her husband was left to make the final decision. The groom was told what the problem was and agreed to wait. Two months after she had first been approached, the woman sold the land with her husband's consent. Her public display of obedience to her husband's authority in this matter went a long way toward maintaining her own reputation as a "good woman" and the reputation of her husband as a male who had his family firmly in control.

The role of the Kalymnian "business widow" is ambivalent, difficult and precarious. She is held in contempt, in admiration, in distrust,
and in envy by other Kalymnians, male and female. We may briefly examine each of these characteristics.

The morals of a sponge fisherman’s wife are universally suspect by non-sponge fisherman males. During the months prior to the departure of the sponge fleet, gossip becomes rife on the island concerning the impending orgiastic behavior of the women after their husbands leave. During investigation of various problems dealing with infidelity, I was told many times: “Wait until the men leave; then you’ll really see something.” Another favorite explanation was that the young men of Kalymnos had to seek sexual exploits somewhere and, given the lack of prostitution, the sponge fishermen’s wives were the most likely prospects. “What do you think? They all just put themselves in deep freeze?” was another favorite saying among some males.

At sea, anxiety runs high concerning infidelity. For one thing, being a cuckold is a very unenviable status in Greek society. For another, a sponge fisherman rarely finds out directly about his wife’s indiscretions. Comfreres find out first in letters from the island, and they, in turn, tell him. On a boat 33 x 11 feet where fifteen men live out half a year the thought of being known as a cuckold is almost intolerable to many individuals.

During the several days each season when the sponge boats find port shelter for one reason or another, many men go to prostitutes. One informant summed up the double sexual standard as follows: “When I went to a prostitute last time, I didn’t even ask her name. And other times, if I knew it at the moment we were in bed, I forgot it the next morning when I left. For a man it is a purely superficial act, one which one does with sexual organs, not with his heart and soul. But for a woman—a woman must love a man to go to bed; she will remember him and compare him to you the next time you go to her.”

Mediterranean men are culturally conditioned to be jealous of female sexuality capacity. They seek to restrict female sexuality because they
view it as threatening to their self concepts. Most men will not discuss these anxieties; but at sea, in an isolated male society, the topic of female sexuality and its threat to male honor is quite common. The problem, it seems to me, is that men define their honor in terms of control over something they believe is essentially uncontrollable. The result is that shame rather than honor becomes the observable quality. The men believe that women have the power of shame (sexual receptivity and high orgastic capacity) and thus men's honor depends upon women not using that power.

On Kalymnos, as elsewhere in Greece and the Mediterranean, men are entitled to extramarital sexual liaisons so long as they are not a threat to their wife's philotimo. "So long as you do not make a fool of your wife in her own house," one informant told me, "you do not have to worry that she will make a fool of you." While the sponge fishermen are at home on Kalymnos during the winter, they indulge themselves in food and drink and gambling to a large degree. Considering the general license of the sponge fisherman for antisocial behavior, an absence of adulterous unions (or perhaps great discretion in the conduct of such unions) indicates the sponge fisherman's fear of retaliation by their wives.

In fact, very little evidence was uncovered to support the claims made by the non-sponge fishermen Kalymnian males beyond their own accounts of their own sexual exploits with sponge fishermen's wives. Undoubtedly, these accounts were exaggerated although they were not without a grain of truth. Perhaps as many as six or more women were known to be habitual adulteresses, according to some informants. But in any case the number and percentage was very small.

A few cases of adultery are discovered each year. These are sufficient validation for the institutionalized rumoring and nervous joking that occurs as a result of a generalized male ambivalence towards women.

Some Kalymnian divers leave strict orders and rules for behavior during their absence. One diver left written instructions that his wife should not use cosmetics of any kind or sweet-smelling soaps or colognes during his absence. She should, he said, avoid making herself attractive to other men. She could not attend the cinema, even with other women. Beauty salons were off limits and she could not remain absent from the house after dark for any reason.

Residence patterns add to the difficulty of completing a secret tryst. While young couples usually establish their own homes, during the summer fishing season the sponger's wife goes to live with her own parents or her in-laws. Alternatively, her mother (or mother-in-law) may come to live with her if the latter is widowed. The high-density nature of residence and settlement patterns mitigates strongly against sexual indiscretions. Yet, the sponge fisherman's wife is always suspect, always liable to be maligned.

On the other hand, the sponge fisherman's wife is envied by many poor, lower-class women whose husbands are not absentees from the household. The reasons most commonly given for this are: (1) the sponge fisherman's wife is freed from the "burden" of catering to her husband's sexual demands; (2) she is freed from catering to her spouse's domestic needs for half the year; and (3) she is responsible to her husband only for the welfare of their children during his absence; she is not responsible to him for how she creates that welfare or how she raises the children.

In recent years much has happened to alter this situation. Many stresses have occurred within the system. The sponge industry has collapsed, and as a result the sponge fishermen have become a source of social discomfiture. Lacking capital for reinvestment, or education, and lacking skills to change jobs, sponge fishermen have become idle as the fleet has diminished. Lacking the mystique of their dangerous occupation, their "no-tomorrow" attitude and their antisocial behavior have become structural anachronisms.
As a result, women have taken the opportunity to capture a larger share of publicly recognized power. Several examples may illustrate. Each year during April, wandering musical bands, accompanied by female singers, used to arrive on Kalymnos to perform at the various taverns. The sponge fishermen collect large advance sums at this time against the impending trip. These sums are supposed to be used by the men's families until November. Several cases each year used to be recorded where a man would spend all his money at the taverns on music and drink. Sometimes the singers worked as prostitutes in their off-hours. Since 1960, as a result of a forceful lobby by Kalymnian women, captains are obliged to pay a man only one-half of his advance sum. The other half goes into the bank under the wife's name to insure her of at least minimal sustenance during her husband's absence. Men in the sponge industry, however, use subtle and technical countermaneuvers within the letter of the law to neutralize the gains of women.

In the early 1960s a sponge diver divorced his wife to marry an entertainer. In 1964 a group of women descended upon the mayor's office demanding that something be done to prevent such occurrences. In 1965 a law was passed forbidding female entertainment to accompany musicians on Kalymnos. Such displays of female power, it is supposed, would not have occurred in the days when sponge fishing was the mainstay of Kalymnian economy.

In the case of men leaving Kalymnos for foreign shores or the merchant marine in search of work, there has been much less social disorder. Traditional intra-familial roles have been more easily preserved. Men who leave the island in search of work are considered *timi i* (honorable). They are willing "to brave the trials of living in foreign environments" for long periods of time in order to support their families. Absent from Kalymnos, they present no threat to the plans of the economic aristocracy which is in the process of promoting tourism. Their very absence prevents the eruption of the battle between the sexes for power. The wives of these absent breadwinners are conspicuously careful to protect their husband's *philotimo*.

One of the prime motivations for Kalymnian men to opt for the merchant marine and for migration is the fact that they can thus maintain their traditional status most effectively. Women continue to occupy their position as "business widows" to be pitied and to be suspected. The burden thus continues to fall to them to preserve the masculine image of the father for the next generation of Kalymnian sons. The newly-won power of women, however, has placed part of the responsibility for the preservation of that image on the men themselves.