

***The Stories People Tell: Gendered Stories of Social Class in the Bigouden Region, France.***

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the social dissonance between the stories told by women from fishing families and those told about them in the Bigouden region of Brittany, France. In this paper I draw upon stories told by and about women collected in the course of ethnographic research in the fishing communities of this region since 1992. Women from local fishing households tell stories that emphasize the importance of women in the local economy and that highlight their strength of character and abilities. These stories document the daily activities of women in the maintenance of family fishing enterprises and in the running of their households. However, these stories are not the only tales told about Bigouden women from fishing households. A counterpoising thread of stories are also told by non-fishing folk. Whereas the stories told by fisherfolk are complementary, those told by non-fisherfolk are not. Ultimately the argument is advanced that the stories told by non-fisherfolk are part of an attempt to maintain local class distinctions between the fisherfolk and the local professional and propertied classes.

**Acknowledgements**

This paper arises from the goodwill and friendship extended by fishers, their families, and others to my family and myself during our time in the Bigouden region of France. My ability to see beyond boats and fish to other aspects of the social world owes much to the new friends we made in France and to the inspiring teachers and colleagues that I have met along the way. My thanks to all of you. The research that this paper draws from was made possible in part from research grants from the Wenner Gren Foundation of Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the University of British Columbia research program.

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This paper explores the social distance between the stories told by women from fishing families and those told about them in the Bigouden region of Brittany, France. In this paper I draw upon stories told by and about women collected in the course of ethnographic research in the fishing communities of this region since 1972. Women from local fishing households tell stories that emphasize the importance of women in the local economy and that highlight their strength of character and abilities. These stories document the daily activities of women in the maintenance of family fishing enterprises and in the running of their households. However, these stories are not the only ones told about women from fishing households. A contrasting trend of stories are also told by non-fishing folk. Women from non-fishing households are also told by non-fishing folk. Women from non-fishing households are also told by non-fishing folk. Women from non-fishing households are also told by non-fishing folk. Women from non-fishing households are also told by non-fishing folk.

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Bigouden women from fishing families play a crucial role in the economic, social, and cultural survival of their families and households. These women are very well aware of the importance of their work. In conversations around their kitchen tables, in their homes, or in the social spaces through which they pass everyday they talk about their work: what has been done, what has yet to be done, or any of the myriad details that make up the social life of their families. These daily conversations are buttressed in local lore by stories in which Bigouden women's strength of character and ability are legendary. But, there is also another thread of stories that one can hear in this region. These are stories told by non-fishing folk about the fishermen's wives. Whereas the stories told by fisherfolk are complementary, those told by non-fisherfolk are not. In explaining the dissonance between the stories told by fisherfolk and non-fisherfolk I pay particular attention to who is telling the story, to whom they are telling the story, and consider why they are telling the story. Ultimately I suggest that the stories told by non-fisherfolk are part of an attempt to maintain local class distinctions between the fisherfolk and the local educated and propertied classes.

The Bigouden region of coastal Brittany is the leading artisanal fishing port in France. The region is noted for its strong local culture and its history of political struggle (Segalen 1991; Helias 1978). The fishery is the motor of the local economy. During the 1980s the fishery experienced a massive boom that pumped new wealth into the hands of fisherfolk. However, the boom was short lived. By early 1992 the combination of liberalized European Union trade regulations, European currency fluctuations, and declining fish stocks resulted in a massive crisis in the fishing industry (Menzies 1997, 2000). Between 1992 and 1994 fish prices plummeted by more than 30%. Many fishing

families found themselves close to losing their homes and their fishing boats. Twenty-five percent of the local fleet of 450 fishing boats were in financial arrears by the mid 1990s. In the ensuing protest movement women played key leadership roles in the demonstrations and organized support work. The stories that are recounted below were collected during the height of the fisherfolk protest movement between 1994 and 1996.

Stories told in the passage of everyday life have a social life that can tell us much about underlying social formations and processes. The stories that I am interested in here are performed in everyday settings such as an evening dinner party, a chance meeting at the market, or over a cup of coffee in a kitchen or living room. These are not profound stories in and of themselves. However the embedded social commentaries speak to profound social antagonisms within the local community. In what follows I present two types of stories. One is told by a fisherman's daughter, ostensibly concerned with the inherent weakness of the local men, while highlighting the strength and importance of Bigouden women in the fishing household. The other type of story is told by members of the local educated and propertied classes as social stories whose subject matter is the naive and incompetent fisherman's wife. My argument is that these stories, most particularly those told by non-fisherfolk, are about the maintenance and defence of social boundaries by an urban professional and propertied class.

In describing their own work women from fishing families present detailed accounts of their daily activities which range from preparing food for family members, paying boat bills, and their own paid employment<sup>1</sup>. There is a seriousness to these stories of work that underscores their importance to the household budgets of fishing families. These stories reflect the way women from fishing families talk about

their work and their role in the community. But they also fit within a wider set of narratives about fishermen's wives and Bigouden women told about fisherfolk by their neighbours. These stories are complementary in that they are reflections on a common social reality. In terms of their messages, however, they differ widely. Stories told by fisherfolk instruct the audience on the importance and valuable role played by fishermen's wives. However, the stories told by outsiders are not complementary. They tend to either exoticize the 'Bigouden women' or to denigrate them. In what follows I focus on two specific narrative themes: (1) "the strong women," as told by fisherfolk, and; (2) "the naive spendthrift," as told by "outsiders".

### The Strong Woman, or how men go from mothers to wives

On my regular walk through Pont L'Abbé<sup>2</sup> for shopping I would occasionally stop by a small take-out crêperie to pick up crêpes and cider for lunch. The proprietor, Annette Le Coz<sup>3</sup>, had grown up in a fishing family and, when she learned that I was doing a study on the fishing crisis, she would greet me each time I came into her shop with another story about the local fishery. Her stories ranged from the characteristics of local fishermen to the work that women do in their households.

The store was a smallish room with a wide glass window store-front. Inside was a long high counter running along one side of the store. On one side Annette had installed three electric crêpe pans. On the public side she had placed a couple of tall stools for her clients to sit on while they waited for their crêpes to take home. All through the busy work day Annette combined cooking with conversation and storytelling.

One of her favorite themes concerned the immaturity of the local fishermen: "They don't even know how to write a check," she would often say. Given my own

difficulties figuring out how to write French bank checks I didn't feel particularly qualified to comment on this revelation.

"Oh," I said. "Why?"

"Because, they never have to do anything on their own when they are on land. We Bigouden women are strong, we have to be. The men, they are always out on the boat. They are never on land, not very long." Working continuously as she spoke she continued:

"My father, for instance: He lived in his mother's home until he was 27 –that's when he married my mother and then moved into her home<sup>4</sup>. He first went fishing when he was 14 years old. When the skipper gave him his share, he took it home and gave it to my grandmother. This she told me."

"He had to pay for his room and board?"

"No," she said. "He didn't know what to do with it. So my grandmother put it away, gave him a little bit at a time. It's that way with all the Bigouden fishermen. They need a little money to spend at the bistro when they're on land. But a woman who gives her man too much, loses everything."

An elderly woman had come into the store while she was talking. "Isn't that right Madame?"

"Absolutely," was the reply.

"Women are the heart and soul of the family," Annette said. "We are the true boss on shore. The fisherman is like a little boy. He doesn't know what to do, he doesn't understand the banks or finance. He works hard on the boat, our men are good

fishermen: the best. But a man who moves from his mother's home to his wife's will never be able to look after himself."

Annette's story about strong Bigouden women is part of a larger genre of stories that are told in the Bigouden region that emphasize the importance of women in fishing families. These stories are clearly based in a material reality in that women are at the centre of the fishing household. Without women's labour in the home and in support of the family enterprises it is unlikely that a Bigouden artisanal fishery could survive. Given this fact the stories told by non-fisherfolk are particularly revealing –not in terms of what they tell us about the world of fisherfolk, but rather what they reveal about the fears and anxieties of the local educated and propertied classes as they struggle to maintain the social distance between themselves and the local fisherfolk.

#### Bourgeois Folklore and the Fisherman's Wife

Counterpoised to the image of women as the centre of the household are the stories told by outsiders, most notably by the local urban bourgeoisie<sup>5</sup>. These stories reflect a class-based antagonism in which urban professionals tell stories about incompetent fishermen's wives. In these stories the fisherman's wife is represented as a naive and/or inappropriate consumer; that is, someone who consumes beyond her means and station in life. Stories such as these were most often encountered at dinner parties I attended in the homes of local merchants and professionals and were told as amusing, but 'true' events. However, given the frequency with which I encountered variations of the same set of stories it is more accurate to understand these stories as forming part of a local mythology of fisherfolk propagated by the local bourgeoisie.

The stories were often embedded in conversations about the fishing protests. As other guests learned of my interest in the fishery they wasted little time in explaining the situation to me. I found myself regaled by stories of profligate waste on the part of local fishermen and their families. As if to emphasize this, one medical professional told me that the first order issued by the head of the fisherman's strike committee had been to tell the strikers to leave their Mercedes and gold jewelry at home. "We don't want to give the wrong message," the fisherman was reputed to have said.

Fishing incomes during the 1980s boom were much higher than previous generations of fishers ever had experienced. For deckhands their crew shares were rough equivalent to unionized manufacturing workers and near the level of skilled trades workers. Boat owner's net incomes were roughly equivalent to small to medium scale business in the region. These were not, however, extravagant incomes when compared to national French averages (local fishing incomes sat modestly higher than the national averages).

The impact of the early 1990s crisis was devastating for local fisherfolk (Menzies 2000). One measure of the severity of the crisis was an increase of the number of families using the local food banks (one food bank reported an weekly increase from about 20 people to nearly 100 during the height of the crisis). It was in the midst of the economic crisis affecting the fishing community that the following stories were told.

(1) **"Twice the length."** *A young fisherman's wife was ordering new cabinets and shelves for her home.*

*"How many cabinets and shelves do you need?" the carpenter asked.*



"How long was the cabinet Marie-Claire ordered?" the fishermen's wife asks.

"Ten feet."

"Then I'll have twice that length," she says.

(2) "**The silver sugar tongs.**" The other day a young fisherman's wife from Penmarc'h went to Quimper to shop. She walked into Henri's Silverware, it's near the old part of town. She saw a neighbor leaving the store and asked her what she had bought: "a silver coffee tong for when I have guests," said the neighbor.

The young fisherman's wife went up to the clerk. "I'll have one dozen silver coffee tongs," she said. "One for each of my guests."

(3) "**The piano á deux queue.**" A young fishermen's wife was overheard in a music store in Qumiper.

"I'd like to buy a piano."

"What type of Piano would you like?" said the clerk.

"Well, my neighbor just bought a piano á queue. I would like a piano á deux queue."<sup>6</sup>

In each of these stories the fisherman's wife commits a social *faux pas*, more apparent in the latter example, perhaps, than in the first two stories. The stories document a concern, on the part of the story-teller, with the transgression of social class barriers represented paradigmatically as a fisherman's wife. She is presented as almost desperate in her attempt to buy a new social image and keep up with her neighbors, yet she constantly trips over the hidden boundaries and codes of class which are the subtle markers identity designed to exclude (see Le Wita 1994:62-97).

Revealed in these stories (and others like them) is a hidden topography of class. Being told in the context of the fishery crisis, they also contain a barely restrained glee at the comeuppance of the 'uppity lower classes' who had forgotten their proper place in the social order but are now being returned to it. The stories are a discursive attempt to maintain social distance even while the very prosperity of the accusing class of town dwellers and merchants is itself tied to the economic health of the fishing community.

### **Conclusion**

The juxtaposition of stories told by the townsfolk against the fisherfolks' own descriptions of their daily life is stark. On the one hand we are presented with a bevy of irresponsible, consumer-crazed even grasping, women who don't know that a grand piano has only one 'tail.' On the other, we have the detailed explanations and descriptions of daily life and the work associated with running a household and a business, including the work of managing the consumption of every member of the family.

The bourgeois stories told in the Bigouden region share a commonality with what Hugh Brody, in a different ethnographic context, calls colonial folklore (2000, 1991). Brody recounts the stories and received wisdom of white colonists in the Canadian Arctic that purport to describe the 'natural' inclinations and explain the behaviour of Inuit people. Like the white professionals in the Canadian Arctic that Brody describes, the local bourgeois story tellers in the Bigouden region are also members of a privileged class influential in shaping the social and political world within which the fishfolk must exist. Brody also identifies a clear disjuncture between the content of the stories told and the material reality of the subordinate groups' everyday experiences. Though separated

by geographic and cultural differences, the colonial folklore of the white colonists in the Canadian Arctic and the bourgeois story-telling in the Bigouden region share a similar basis in class power. In both cases the stories are discursive interventions oriented at maintaining and reproducing class distinctions between the powerful and their subordinates.

As with other 'colonial' myth-tellers, the bourgeois story-tellers pick up on a partial truth, in this case the central role of women in the fishing households. However, the stories turn this image of strength and importance into one of ridicule and disdain. Instead of self-reliant women responsible for the economic well being of their households, the bourgeois stories focus on a gendered image of incompetence and naivety. In the bourgeoisie's stories the fisherman's wife naively confuses their ability to purchase the accoutrements of the bourgeois lifestyle with it's attainment.

The ridicule and disdain expressed in the stories of the local Bigouden bourgeoisie is ironic and not a little bit perplexing given that their own economic security as shopkeepers and professionals is, to a significant extent, tied to the economic health of the local fishery. Especially during the last two decades of the twentieth century the growing economic power of fishing families propelled an economic boom in professional and service sector business. The collapse of fishing incomes in the mid 1990s had a direct spill over effect in all sectors of the Bigouden economy.

Over the course of the past two decades the economic ability of the local Bigouden bourgeoisie to maintain social distinctions has been seriously undermined. The new found wealth of the fishing boom provided fisherfolk with the economic means to purchase the signs and symbols of a cultivated French bourgeois lifestyle. The effect of

the fishing crisis of the mid 1990s undermined the entire region's economy (including the personal economic well being of the local propertied and educated classes). The combined effects of boom and crash left the local bourgeoisie with limited economic control over enforcing class distinctions and thus in part explains their employment of discursive interventions in the local arena of class maintenance and formation.

The truth value of the bourgeois myths, at least in terms of what they have to say about women from fishing families, is ultimately irrelevant. Yes, the myths are wrong. From my research of fisherfolk households it can unambiguously be stated that women have, for over a century, been a critical factor in the economic and social survival of the local artisanal fishery. Without the labour of women the local fishery would not be as it is. It is, however, what these stories have to say about bourgeois culture that is important. The 'truth' of these stories is the revelation of hidden codes of behaviour that are the cultural property of the elite classes.

In telling their tales, bourgeois story tellers are attempting a decisive intervention in the local level processes of class formation. The stories themselves are told in the semi-private safety of bourgeois dinner parties. They offer counsel –perhaps warnings(?)– to their listeners on the importance of maintaining social boundaries. Dinner guests share in the laughter, the sociability of the moment knowing that by their presence they are not the object of the story. Sharing food and stories around a common table reassures the members of this class and reinforces their confidence that their membership in the fraternity of privilege can continue in spite of the incursions of the lower classes. Having lost their supremacy within the local economy the bourgeoisie find solace in their misguided stories of naive and ignorant fishermen's wives.

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**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> In her study of maritime households and the women at the centers of them, Sally Cole suggests using the term 'Women-centered' over such terms as matricentric or matrifocal -terms which "tend to emphasize the centrality of the mother in household relations, whereas, 'women-centered' acknowledges the centrality of women in general, regardless of kinship" (1991:62). Women-centered families are standard in many different fishing communities from around the world. See, for example: Fields 1997; Nadel-Klien and Davis 1988.
- <sup>2</sup> Pont L'Abbé is the commercial capital of the Bigouden region. During the fieldwork period that these stories were collected I lived in a small apartment in Pont L'Abbé with my partner and our two young children.
- <sup>3</sup> In keeping with standard anthropological practices I am not using Annette Le Coz's real name.
- <sup>4</sup> The notion that a home belongs to one's mother or wife is not a reference to legal ownership (typically homes are jointly held by husband and wife). What this means in daily practice is that the house is seen as the domain of women. Boats and related work spaces are understood as masculine space. The home, especially the home of a married couple, is unambiguously understood as a female space.
- <sup>5</sup> I am using the term bourgeois as it is used locally: that is, a member of the social and economic elite (see Le Wita 1994, for a discussion of the Parisian bourgeois culture).
- <sup>6</sup> *Piano á queue* is a grand piano. The literal translation is a piano with a tail. The 'story' doesn't really work in English. But, the absurdity that the story plays on is that of course no grand piano would have two 'tails.' To think, as does the young fishermen's wife,

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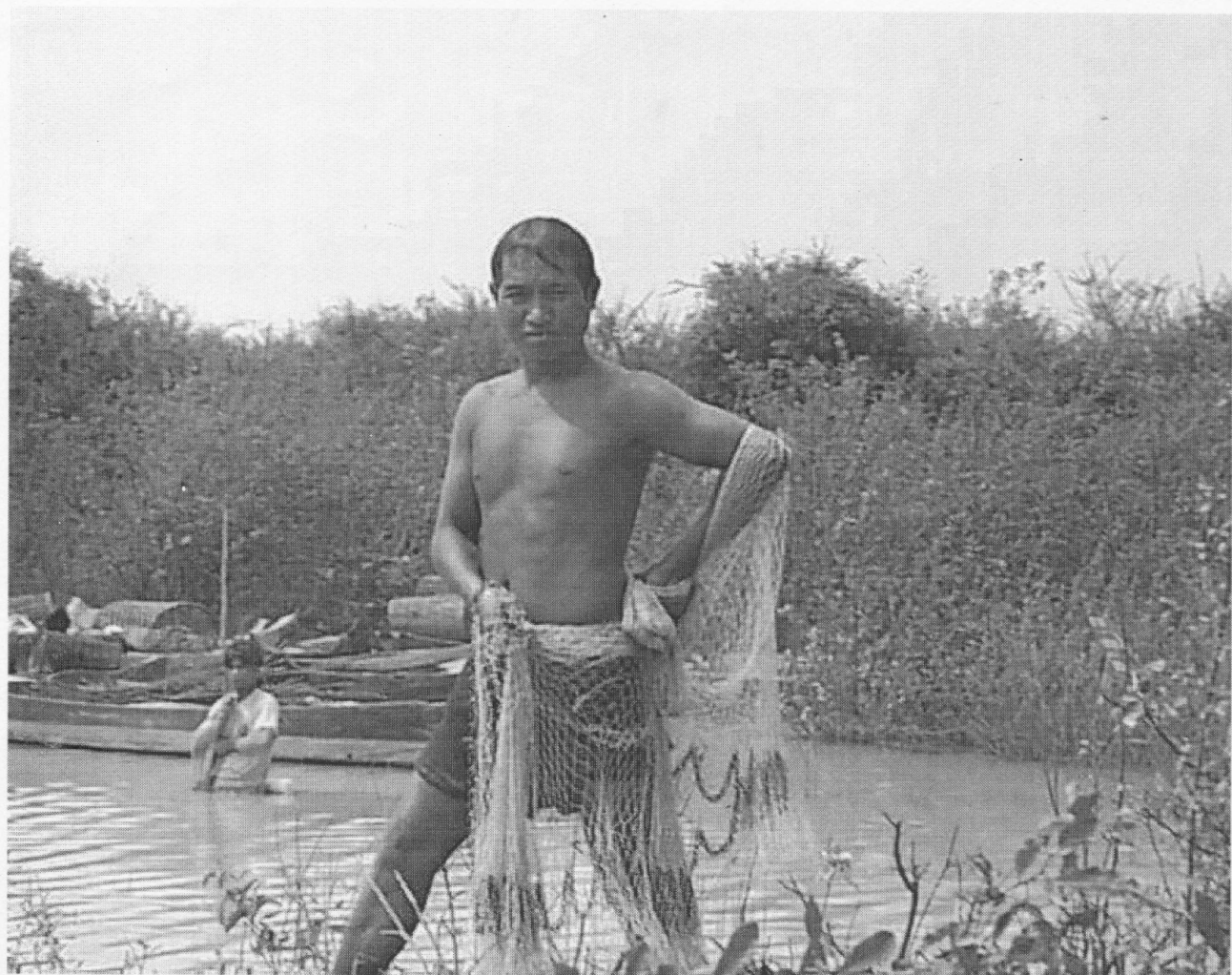
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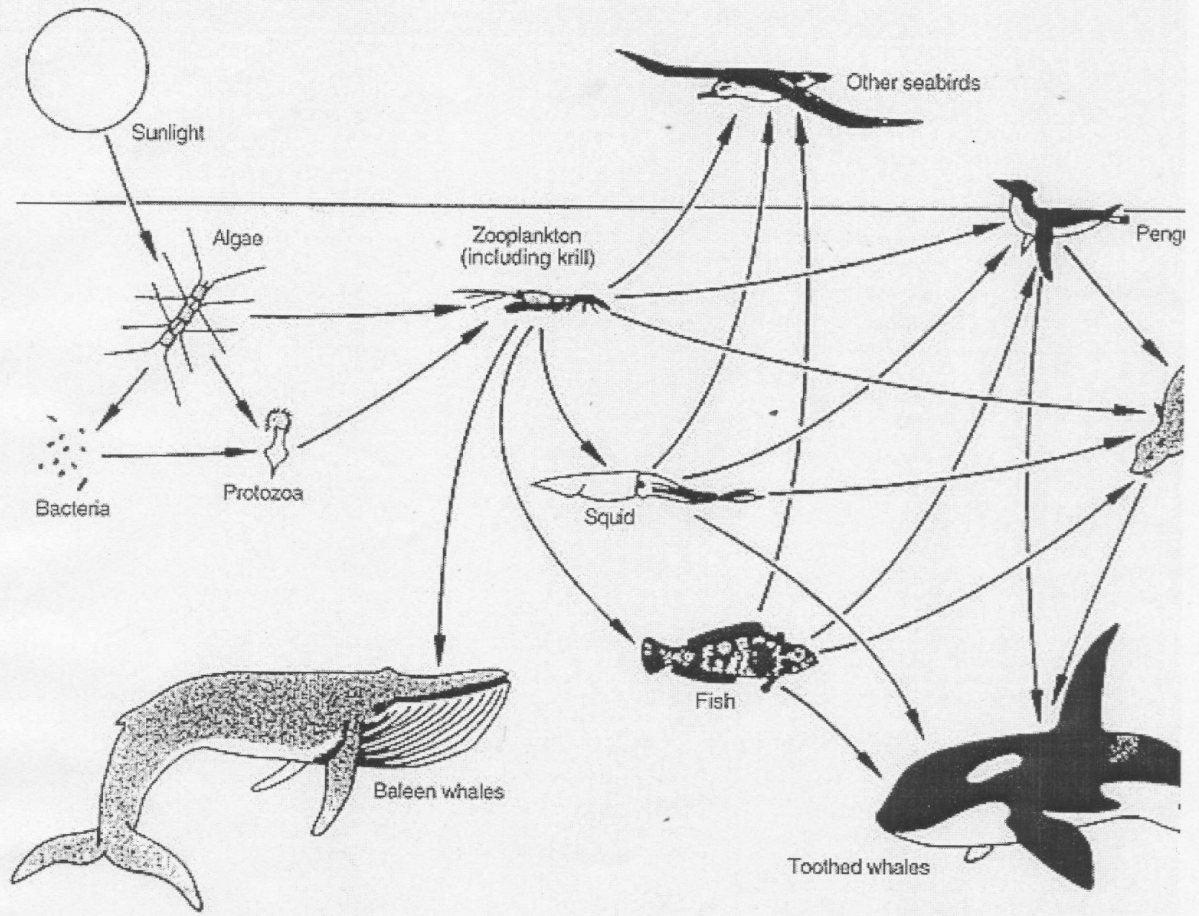
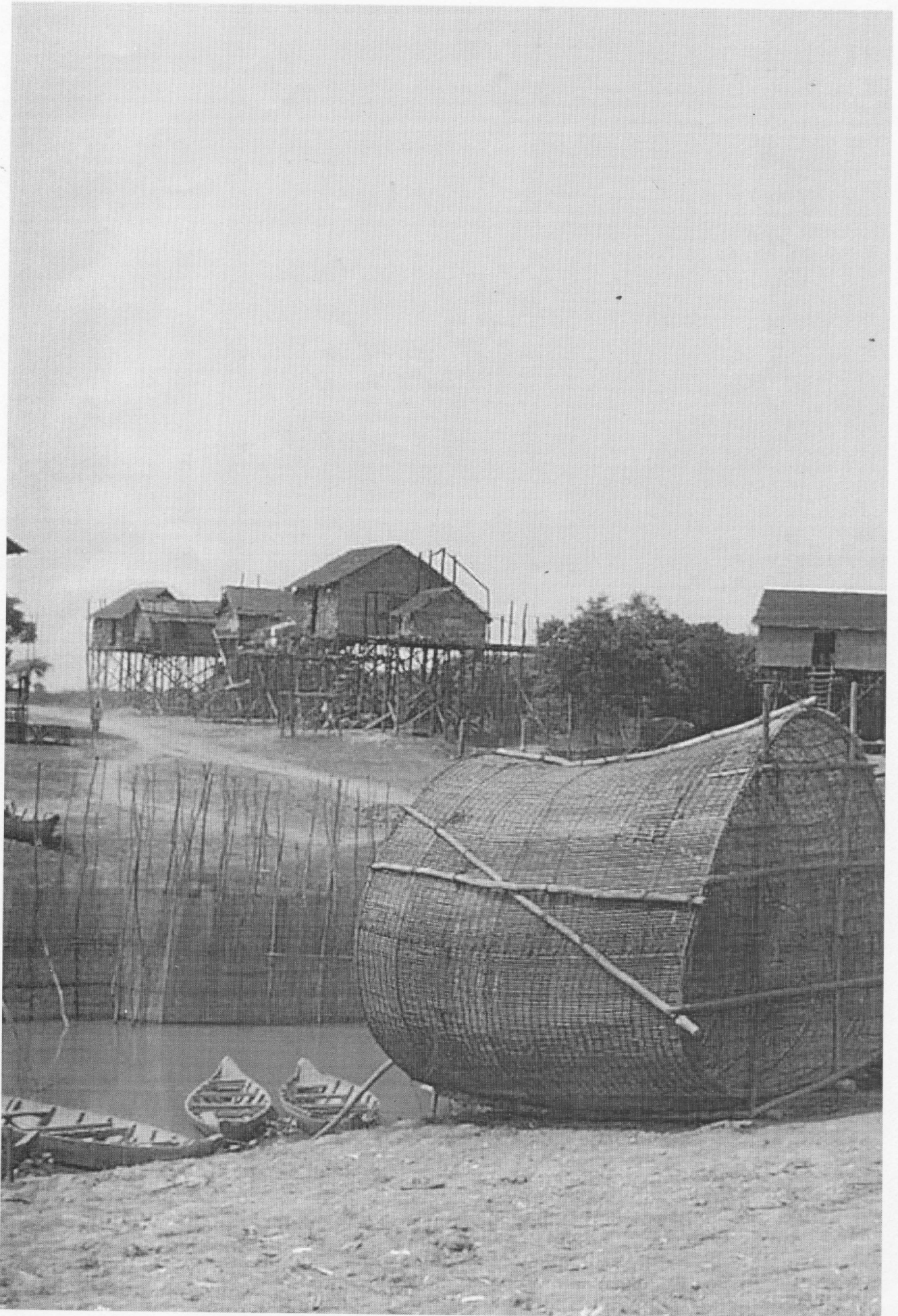
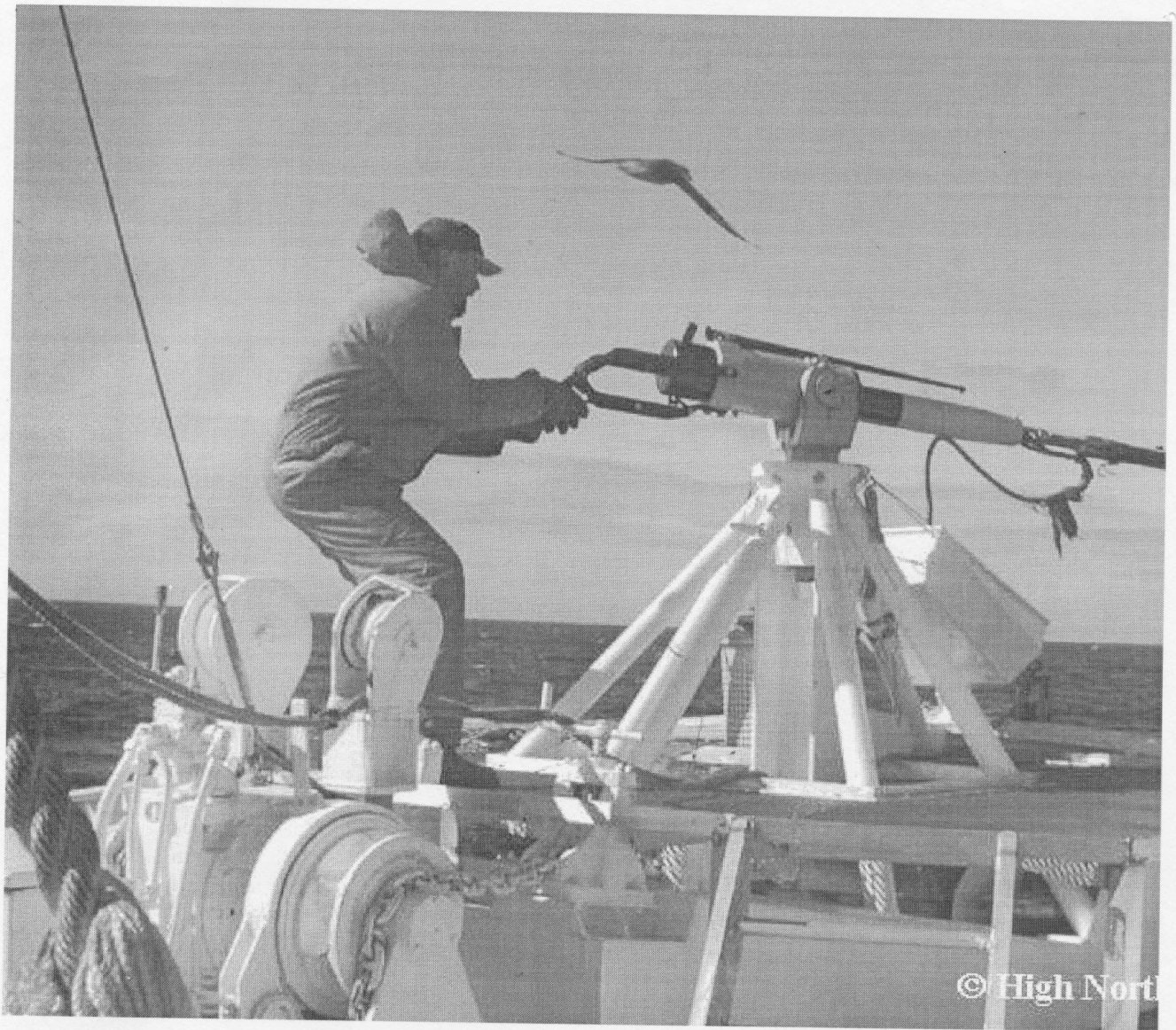


Figure 1: Simplified trophic relationships in the Southern Ocean.





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