

Europe/ France

A piano with two tails...

The bourgeoisie of Bigoudennie, France joke about women of fishing families in an attempt to maintain control over the privileges of the elite.

by Charles R. Menzies, University of British Columbia. Menzies is an anthropologist who spent a year in the Bigoudennie with his family in the mid 1990s. He has returned several times since. His doctoral dissertation, *Red Flags and Lace Coiffees* describes and analyses the politics of survival amongst family-based fishing enterprises in the Bigoudennie.

Women from fishing families in France's leading artisanal fishing region, the Bigoudennie, are critical to their families' well-being. Their importance is reflected in local lore by stories in which Bigouden women's strength of character and ability are legendary. However, there is a second thread of stories, told by the local bourgeoisie, that denigrate the role of women in the fishing family. The contradiction between these two threads of stories is part of the everyday experience of many fisherfolk as they struggle for dignity, respect, and the well-being of their families.

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. There is a seriousness to these stories that underscores their importance to the household budgets of fishing families. There is, however, another set of stories about fishermen's wives and Bigouden women that are told by the local bourgeoisie. These stories are similar in that they are reflections on a common social reality—the importance of women in fishing households. They differ, however, in terms of their messages about women.

Stories told by fisherfolk instruct the audience on the importance and valuable role played by fishermen's wives. The stories told by the local bourgeoisie denigrate the importance of fisherfolk women by exoticizing them or ridiculing them through reference to cultural *faux pas* told in the form of a 'joke.' The following is a typical 'joke' told about fishermen's wives by the local bourgeoisie.

A young fisherman'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 neighbour just bought a piano á queue. I would like a piano á deux queue."

Piano á queue is a grand piano. The literal translation is a piano with a tail. The 'joke' 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 fisherman's wife, that it is possible, however, to purchase such a piano reveals—according to the storyteller at any rate—the social ignorance of the young woman and her cultural backwardness and, by extension, the backwardness of fisherfolk in general.

Here is another story:

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.

The ridicule and disdain expressed in the stories of the local Bigouden bourgeoisie is ironic and not a little bit perplexing given that their economic security is largely tied to the economic health of the local fishery. During the last two decades of the twentieth century the growth in the fishery propelled an economic boom in the professional and service sectors. The collapse of fishing incomes in the mid-1990s had a direct spill over effect in all sectors of the Bigouden economy.

Over this same period the local Bigouden bourgeoisie's ability to maintain social distinctions economically was seriously undermined. The new-found wealth of the fishing boom gave fisherfolk the means to purchase the symbols of a cultivated French bourgeois lifestyle. The combined effects of boom and crash left the local bourgeoisie with limited economic ability to enforce class distinctions and, in part, explains their use of storytelling and myth-making in the local arena of class politics.

Ultimately the truth-value of the bourgeois myths is irrelevant. Yes, the myths are wrong. From my research

of fisherfolk households during the 1990s it can unambiguously be stated that women have, for over a century, been a critical if not central factor in the economic and social survival of the local artisanal fishery. What is more important here is what these stories have to say about bourgeois culture. 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 storytellers are attempting to maintain control over the privileges of the elite. Their stories, told in the semi-private safety of bourgeois dinner parties, offer counsel 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 objects 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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