3. Economic, Class and Status Relations in Esperanza

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, it will provide a detailed background to the sorts of social and economic relations that residents of Esperanza are frequently involved in, focusing in particular on relations in the fishing sector. Secondly, it will show how these relations can be characterised with reference to the idea of poorer people entering into reciprocal relationships with, and making claims on, those with more resources. Asking other residents to help pay for school fees or medicine; gaining access to a financier to fund equipment and individual fishing trips; moving to an alternative fishery; getting a position as a crew member on a boat; all these practices tend to require reciprocal relationships between people of unequal status. While there is great diversity in the nature and consequences of these relationships, this chapter will describe how these sorts of relationships play out in Esperanza, aiming to give a sense of the everyday economics and politics of life in the sitio. I focus in particular on such relationships within the context of fishing.

In order to situate my discussion, this chapter begins with a review of some of the voluminous literature that deals with social and economic relations in the Philippines. After a brief discussion of the ways in which I have categorised different class and status groups in Esperanza, I examine firstly class and social relationships within various everyday contexts. Drawing on these themes, I then consider how personalised economic relationships play out in the four primary fisheries of Esperanza. The bulk of the chapter examines in detail the economics underlying the four primary fisheries of Esperanza in order to understand broader class and status relations: how people finance their fishing trips, how much money is involved in fishing trips, how profits are shared, and how and where the fish are sold. I do not intend to make a neat argument about how the social and economic relations of the fisheries clearly mirror those in broader everyday life. Each of the fisheries I describe holds a range of different relationships. Instead, this section will show how such economic patterns are broadly characterised by personalised reciprocal relationships, both among different classes within Esperanza, and between different classes in Esperanza, Coron, Manila and elsewhere.
Approaches to Economic, Class and Status Relations in the Philippines

There is a vast literature that deals with social and economic relations in the Philippines. Here I have broadly characterised three distinct, yet related approaches—one focusing explicitly on patron-client relationships and class relations, a second focusing on some of the cultural concepts in the Philippines associated with such relationships, and a third focusing on patterns of economic personalisation. Each approach has its own set of debates, but it is not my intention to engage with the particularities of such debates here. Instead, my purpose in analysing this literature is simply to contextualise my analysis. I merely aim to give a flavour of how people of unequal status initiate and maintain reciprocal personalised relationships in the context of a coastal village such as Esperanza.

Class Relations and the Patron-Client Relationship

Research on class relations in the rural Philippines has been dominated by studies of patron-client relationships between landlords and tenants (Scott and Kerkvliet 1977; Fegan 1982; Wolters 1983). As Scott and Kerkvliet (1977: 440) define it:

[a] patron-client link is an exchange relationship or instrumental friendship between two individuals of different status in which the patron uses his own influence and resources to provide for the protection and material welfare of his lower status client and his family who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.

Frequently, a theme of this literature is to argue that the exchange relationships between patrons and clients have been historically transformed because of various factors, leading to a worse position for the ‘landless labourers’ (Fegan 1982) and other ‘clients’. Scott and Kerkvliet argue with reference to Southeast Asia generally, for example, that ‘[r]ural class relations that had once rested, in part, on consent became, under the forces of commercialization and colonial government, increasingly characterized by coercion and exploitation’ (Scott and Kerkvliet 1977: 455).

Other writers have sought to use the patron-client concept to explain political life in the Philippines. Hollnsteiner (1963) and Landé (1965) showed how political patrons would offer goods and services to particular regions in exchange for voter support, and this model has subsequently remained a popular one among observers of Philippine politics (Kerkvliet 1995: 401; Kasuya and Quimpo 2010).
In this model, various ‘factions’ form a pyramid, with the highest political patron at the apex, and their supporters massed below. Thus political and class relations become characterised as ‘symbiosis’ (Agpalo 1972, cited in Kerkvliet 1990: 243), and the links between poor people and rich people are emphasised and characterised as ‘mutual aid’ (Landé 1965, cited in Kerkvliet 1990: 243).

Various writers critical in particular of what they saw as an overly harmonious view of Philippine class relations, and as ignoring the potential for conflict and tension between different classes (Ileto 1979; Rafael 1988; Kerkvliet 1990; Cannell 1999; Roces 2001) subsequently critiqued analyses focusing on patron-client linkages. Kerkvliet (1990) for example, focuses on the resistance of poor peasants to richer landowners in his study of ‘everyday politics’ in San Ricardo, Central Luzon. He argues cogently that while patron-client ties are undoubtedly still important, this does not mean that conflict does not exist. Instead, he argues more generally that ‘[a] central dynamic of everyday politics in San Ricardo society is people trying to make claims on each other and on a range of resources according to their relationships to those superordinate or subordinate to themselves and in terms of their interests and values’ (ibid.: 14). With regard to the patron-client, factional model of political life, Kerkvliet has also argued that it ‘leaves little or no room for other values and ideas, other bases for cleavage and struggle, other grounds for organizing and cooperating’ (Kerkvliet 1995: 404).

I intend to argue that the forms of patron-client linkages that exist in Esperanza are somewhat different to the classic landowner-tenant relationships described in Luzon. Instead, like Kerkvliet (1990: 14), I aim to take a broader view, and simply suggest that poorer people make a variety of claims on richer people that are expressed in a range of ways. A key aspect of everyday life in Esperanza that I want to emphasise is how poorer fishers appeal to and make claims on other more well-off fishers, households and financiers. These appeals and claims are frequently expressed through particular cultural idioms of the Philippines.

Debt and Shame

The second, related approach to exchange that I introduce here is therefore one that has focused on some of the cultural ideas underlying exchange and reciprocity (Kaut 1961; Bulatao 1964; Hollnsteiner 1970; Lynch and De Guzman II 1970). In an influential article, Hollnsteiner (1970) distinguished between three types of reciprocity in the lowland Philippines: contractual, quasi-contractual and ‘debt of the inside/heart’ (utang na loob) reciprocity. Contractual reciprocity, according to Hollnsteiner, is where the reciprocal acts are ‘equivalent’: the amount and form of repayment is clearly established, and there is little, if any, emotional aspects to the exchange. In quasi-contractual reciprocity, by
contrast, the terms of exchange are implicit and generally culturally defined. Hollnsteiner gives the example of a cooperative workday (bayanihan), where a man would ask all his friends and neighbours to help build a new fishing raft. In any future cooperative workday of those friends and neighbours, the man would then be expected to help them in return. The key feature of quasi-contractual reciprocity, according to Hollnsteiner, is where ‘no clear statement of obligation has been made by either party, yet the necessity to repay in kind when the opportunity to do so arises is mandatory’ (ibid.: 69).

The third type of reciprocity distinguished by Hollnsteiner (1970), utang na loob refers to an enduring, personal debt that cannot be quantified, and is often associated between people of unequal status. Some versions of this type of reciprocity can never be fully repaid; a typical example in the Philippines is the debt a child owes to his/her parents. Other examples cited by Hollnsteiner that create utang na loob include sending a friend or relative’s child through school, facilitating entry into a hospital for someone who is sick, or getting a job for someone. Closely related to utang na loob is the idea of hiya—usually translated as shame, shyness or embarrassment. As Bulatao defined it in the early 1960s, hiya is ‘a painful emotion arising from a relationship with an authority figure or with society, inhibiting self-assertion in a situation perceived as dangerous to one’s ego’ (Bulatao 1964: 428). Hollnsteiner (1970: 71) similarly translates it as ‘a sense of social propriety’; if utang na loob cannot be repaid, for example, it is considered a great shame and the individual will feel hiya. Indeed, merely asking for any sort of debt will normally generate hiya and must be managed diplomatically. As Hollnsteiner puts it, ‘hiya is not necessarily accompanied by utang na loob, but utang na loob is always reinforced by hiya’ (ibid.: 82).

While Hollnsteiner and other members of the ‘Ateneo School’ (Lynch and De Guzman II 1970) have been criticised for their tendency towards structural functionalism (Cannell 1999: 8–9), and for their inadequate treatment of how these concepts are tied up in class relations (Pinches 1991), I would argue that their work remains useful as a general introduction to how these sorts of principles can operate in the Philippines. In Esperanza, the cultural norms and values surrounding reciprocal exchange are present to a strong degree.

As I shall further show in Chapter 4, these sorts of reciprocal relationships between people of unequal power in the Philippines are often enacted through the idiom of pity and a ‘basic rights discourse’ (Kerkvliet 1990; Cannell 1999).

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1 Hollnsteiner makes the point that these forms of reciprocity can be seen in the personalisation of public institutions: ‘The concept of impersonal service is not deeply ingrained in the bureaucracy or the general public; gift giving and receiving for service rendered is common…. How can the fulfilment of one’s social obligations, brought about through utang na loob, be anything but good, reasons the average Filipino’ (Hollnsteiner 1970: 76). Mulder (1997: 132–3) and Pertierra (2002: 88–90) both make similar points, and as I will show in Chapter 7, this has significant implications for how rural people in the Calamianes perceive the role of government.
Poorer people, according to Cannell (1999), ‘ask for pity’—not necessarily by presenting themselves in a pathetic way, as the English term may suggest, but by appealing to a ‘right to survive’ (Blanc-Szanton 1972), and to an ethic of fairness for the poor. I want to show how in Esperanza, many of the sorts of reciprocal relationships involved in fishing and in everyday life are mediated through the sorts of concepts I have introduced in this discussion.

### Personalised Economic Relationships

The third approach to economic and social relationships that needs to be explored is one that has focused on patterns of economic personalisation. Economic anthropologists have long documented the existence of markets where traders habitually sell to a regular partner. Forms of these personalised economic relationships were documented originally in Haiti by Mintz (1961) as *pratik*, and in the Philippines by Davis (1973) as *suki*. As Davis describes, the term *suki* refers to both the customer and the seller, and ‘nearly every seller has “supplier *suki*” from whom he buys and “customer *suki*” to whom he sells. The usage of the term is reciprocal, each partner referring to the other as “my *suki*”’ (ibid.: 217). The extent of the relationship may vary in intensity. Sometimes, *suki* may simply refer to a favoured or regular customer; in other instances, favoured prices and business and personal credit may form an integral part of the relationship. Davis argues that there are significant advantages for both buyers and sellers in this relationship. Primarily this is the security of ensured outlets for sellers, and the presence of continuous supply for buyers (ibid.: 226–7).

Similarly, Dannhaeuser (1983: 52) argues that *suki* relations increase security:

> in an insecure economic environment. Buyers seek reliable suppliers who give credit, preferred selection of new or scarce goods, and reasonable prices without the need to haggle incessantly. Suppliers search for regular outlets who won’t constantly drive a hard bargain and who can be trusted in matters of credit. *Suki*, in short, is an informal way to stabilize commercial relations.

Essentially, the idea is that producers and buyers forego the opportunity of potentially high short-term benefits for the stability of a regular exchange relationship based on a level of trust.

Firth (1966: 126–84) and Szanton (1971: 53–4) both describe a particular form of personalised exchange among fishing communities of Southeast Asia, whereby capital is essentially traded for labour. In Szanton’s ethnography based in Panay in the Philippines, fish buyers would extend credit to fishers in the form of money or equipment. The fishers would then catch the fish and sell them to the buyer at a price slightly lower than market value. Szanton shows that such
relationships favoured the dealer who was able to secure a very high return on the invested capital, when compared to the fisher’s return on his labour (ibid.: 54–6). Despite this, he argues that ‘[t]he dealer’s ready supply of cash and credit for fishing operations and consumption items makes the relationship advantageous for the fisherman as well’ (ibid.: 57).

Other writers have since critiqued this positive perspective of personalised relationships. Russell (1987: 139) argues that such models ignore power relations inherent in personalised exchange: ‘[t]hey give little attention to the wider institutional constraints that limit the choice of contractual arrangements nor to the potential power of personal relations to enhance trading imperfections’. Russell demonstrates that in the Philippine highlands, vegetable farmers were effectively forced to participate in personalised exchange relationships simply if they were to enter the market at all; ‘the great degree to which farmers are indebted to a middleman prior to the sale of the harvest gives middlemen substantial power’ (ibid.: 150). Subsequently, many farmers had no choice but to accept exploitative trading conditions such as poor prices. Thus, Russell argues that the basis of the entire personalised exchange is the initial inequalities between the trading partners. As Alexander and Alexander put it, citing Russell’s analysis of the vegetable market in the Philippines, and Acheson’s (1985) description of the relations between fishermen and dealers in the USA, ‘in both cases producers can choose their partners; but in neither case can they refuse to dance’ (Alexander and Alexander 1991: 502).

Based on fieldwork in Panay, Rutten argues that certain questions firstly need to be answered before it can be concluded that credit is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. The level of demand for products, the degree of choice in accepting credit, whether or not it is also possible to sell in an open market and the level of competition among buyers are all factors that need to be taken into account in the analysis of credit relations (Rutten 1991: 116). Bearing in mind the accounts of Russell (1987) and the Alexanders (1991) that demonstrate how producers in many cases cannot afford not to enter into personalised relationships, I have included Rutten’s argument at the end because I suggest that the relationships I describe in this chapter are highly variable in terms of their economic effects. Here I do not intend to engage in a detailed discussion of whether such relationships are

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2 Plattner argues that both of these sorts of personalised economic relationships (suki and extending credit) are ‘equilibrating’. This means they are ‘generalized, reciprocal, open-ended, and long-run’ relationships where each partner has trust that ‘an imbalance in an exchange will be made up in future exchanges’ (Plattner 1983: 849). Plattner stresses the economic rationality inherent in such relationships, arguing that they are a rational economic response to the weaknesses inherent in rural agrarian markets: ‘[v]ariable-quality goods, cheap labour and scarce capital, and insufficient transportation and communication systems mean that traders need to rely on equilibrating relationships to stabilize their businesses’ (ibid.: 851).

3 Similarly, analysing the central vegetable market in Cebu City in the Philippines, Hendriks argues that ‘[u]nequal bargaining positions exist where farmers and small traders depend on credit contracts’ (Hendriks 1994: 6).
exploitative or beneficial to all parties; instead, I want to merely introduce some of these themes of personalisation, and show how they figure in the everyday lives of coastal residents in Esperanza.

**Everyday Social and Economic Relations in Esperanza**

**Categorisation of Classes in the Philippines and Esperanza**

Firstly, a quick discussion about categorisation is necessary. Eder (1999) makes the important point that much of the literature on class and social relations in the Philippines has been dominated by studies on the rice-growing region of Central Luzon (for example Hollnsteiner 1963; Fegan 1982; Kerkvliet 1990). As he points out, provinces in this region, such as Bulacan and Nueva Ecija, have been ‘long characterized by monocrop agriculture and highly asymmetrical patterns of land ownership’ (Eder 1999: 73). As I outlined in Chapter 2 however, my research is concerned with predominantly fishing households where agricultural, landlord-tenant relationships are not present. How class relations play out in such coastal contexts is something that has received less attention in the academic literature (but see Russell 1997; Eder 2008). Indeed, generally throughout Palawan, including in the agricultural sector, such calcified, seemingly eternal class distinctions are not as present, where smallholder operations are more the norm (Eder 2008: 48).

Classifying the households of Esperanza into differential classes, therefore, is not as clear-cut as the classic Marxist division between wage labourers and capitalists, or landlords and tenants. Other writers have also struggled with such distinctions, even in the more strongly differentiated rice-growing regions of Central Luzon. Kerkvliet, for example, found that household class differences were often crosscut by differences related to status, and that households frequently contained individuals belonging to different classes (Kerkvliet 1990: 77). Notwithstanding these complications, he ended up dividing the community he studied into four classes: workers, peasants, small business owners and capitalists. Within these classes involved further subdivisions of workers into three categories, and peasants into five subdivisions. In his extensive study of economic change in mainland Palawan however, Eder (1999) found that it would be too problematic to use the term ‘class’ to represent different groups within the community he studied. He stated that:
[t]he multiplicity of on- and off-farm economic activities in the community is such that many residents enter into a variety of different economic relationships at the same time, making impossible the demarcation and juxtaposition of clear-cut collectivities of households standing in some type of stable relationship with one another, or with the means of production, over time (ibid.: 6–7).

Although class distinctions in Palawan are frequently not as clear-cut as in other regions of the Philippines, as I pointed out in Chapter 2, however, because of the lack of land tenure and agricultural opportunities, Esperanza maintains a greater marine orientation than many other coastal areas of Palawan and the Philippines. This means that a greater proportion of households are concerned primarily with fishing, and so it is possible to identify different fishing groups or classes within the community. While class distinctions are by no means rigid or clear-cut, I argue it is possible to roughly differentiate three broad groups of fishers: crew members; small pump boat owners; and commercial boat owners. The flexibility of fishing activities described in Chapter 2 makes it difficult to be any more specific about class, and makes the distinctions I have made only approximate ones. Bong, for example, was an engine-operator (mekanista) on a fusilier-fishing boat during habagat, and captained his own net fishing boat for the rest of the year. I have simplified the situation therefore by including fishers like him, who belonged to several different groups, in the ‘highest’ rank that they had. The typical features of these groups are summarised in Table 3-1.

Table 3-1: Socio-economic features of fisher groups in Esperanza.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group of fisher</th>
<th>Monthly income (₱)</th>
<th>Primary economic activity</th>
<th>Household circumstances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crew member</td>
<td>500–5000</td>
<td>Has to continually secure a place as a crew member, often in various net and commercial fisheries. Sometimes owns small canoe for simple hook-and-line fishing.</td>
<td>No electricity; no gas for cooking; no appliances; bush material houses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pump boat owner</td>
<td>3–10 000</td>
<td>Owns small pump boat for net fishing or live grouper fishing; usually captain of boat but will sometimes hire boat out.</td>
<td>Often electricity and gas; some limited appliances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial boat owner</td>
<td>Above 10 000</td>
<td>Owns commercial fusilier or fresh grouper boat; often captain of the boat as well but will sometimes hire boat out.</td>
<td>Electricity; multiple appliances; concrete houses.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s calculations, based on census data, household survey and interviews, 2006.

Generally, membership of these three different groups in Esperanza correlates with the level of wealth. Crew members are the poorest fishers, and as one of them told me, they ‘have to fish for every single centavo [cent]’ they earned.
These fishers often have a particularly high level of flexibility in the fisheries they practice, moving between net fishing, fusilier fishing, grouper fishing, and supplementary fishing activities (for example, gleaning or shrimp fishing), depending on seasonal and personal circumstances. I have also included in this category fishers who are not necessarily always crew members on net fishing or commercial boats, but who usually paddle a canoe out to the reef or sea beyond and fish with hook-and-line. Monthly incomes for these fishers range significantly depending on the season, the particular fishery they are involved in and variability in fish catch (which is dependent on a whole range of other factors as well), but generally these fishers earn well below ₱5000 and sometimes, such as during amihan, they will earn little or nothing at all. Some of these fishers will often struggle to make ends meet on a daily basis, especially if they have a family to support. Don, a fisher who usually practiced net fishing but sometimes joined on some fusilier-fishing trips during habagat, was typical of this category of fishers. Houses of fishers like Don are often primarily made of bush materials, they frequently have no access to electricity, and the main dish accompanying rice (ulam) will usually be based around fish and vegetables (as opposed to meat such as chicken or pork).

The mid-level economic category is characterised by fishers who operate a small pump boat collecting fish for the live fish trade and net fishing. As with the crew members, incomes are highly variable among this group, ranging from around ₱3000 (during amihan) to ₱10 000 (during habagat). Households of these middle-income fishers can afford electricity and some simple appliances like a stereo and gas stove for cooking. In Esperanza, the most economically successful fishers in terms of wealth and levels of capital invested in the fishing fleet are the owners of the commercial fishing boats—the fusilier and fresh grouper fisheries. These households have concrete houses, sometimes toilets with septic tanks, and appliances such as stereos and televisions. While those in the fusilier fishery were struggling financially at the time of fieldwork and often moved from debt-to-debt, by virtue of owning a large, commercial boat, I have classified them as belonging to a higher economic status.

Also relevant for the purposes of this chapter are the traders, financiers and other elites who live outside of Esperanza. This ‘category’ is considerably more mixed than the categories I have defined within Esperanza. For instance, the traders who buy rabbitfish from the net fishers in Esperanza and sell it at the Coron town market are very different to the live fish traders, many of whom held significant political influence at the time of my fieldwork research. So instead of summarising their typical features I will elaborate on the circumstances of these particular actors with reference to the fishery with which they are involved; discussions of which follow.
Following Kerkvliet (1990: 61), I found social status in Esperanza to relate primarily to wealth, or simply the standard of living within a household. Although the level of ‘respect’ individual households have varies according to their behaviour such as whether they treat poorer people well (see Kerkvliet 1990: 61–2 for a similar understanding), status here is understood in the narrow sense of wealth. While social hierarchies between these different groups in Esperanza are not as stark or pronounced as those documented by Kerkvliet (1990) and other writers in Central Luzon, similar general patterns of reciprocity exist.

**Class and Social Relations in Esperanza**

The Marquez family was regarded by the sitio community as one of the most high status families in Esperanza, and was demonstrably one of the richest. They were typical of a higher status family in that they owned a commercial boat(s), and their material standard of living was very high when compared to other families in Esperanza. They owned a television and a DVD player; they ate meat with many of their meals; their house was made of concrete and they had a toilet with a septic tank; and they could afford to send their children to private schools in Coron town. Manny and Grace arrived in 1968 from northern Samar with their daughter Anna. As such, they were one of the first families to settle in Esperanza. While Manny and Grace subsequently moved along the coast to a neighbouring sitio, Anna married Carlos Marquez, who had migrated from Romblon in the early-1970s. Carlos began working on basnig boats in Coron Bay during the 1970s, and by 1981, the family was relatively successful and owned their own basnig boat. Their fishing business continued to expand with largo fishing during the 1980s, fusilier fishing in the 1990s, and by 2006, the family had the biggest fishing business in Esperanza. Carlos Marquez based himself in Puerto Princesa with his fresh grouper boat, his son-in-law managed a large fish cage of several hundred leopard coral grouper in Esperanza, his brother-in-law captained a fusilier boat out of Esperanza, and his wife and daughter managed the finances (see Figure 3-1).

**Figure 3-1: The Marquez family and their business relationships.**
I describe later how their strong financial position led to their financing the fishing trips of other members of the community on occasion, but first I want to focus on some of the ways in which their relations with other community members functioned in other contexts. Frequently, during the dry, difficult season of amihan, children from poorer households in Esperanza would regularly come knocking at the door of the Marquez family house. Rice was a common request, as was money for school fees. Being able to afford to send all the children in a family to school is often a challenge for parents in Esperanza. This is especially so if such a family engages in what is locally known as ‘family planting’, an ironic pun on ‘family planning’ and a practice that produces numerous children. One morning for example, a child from a poorer family came to the window of Anna’s house while I was having coffee with her. Although she was already eleven-years old, she was still hopeful to begin elementary school, something that had been postponed because her family had not been able to afford her school fees previously. The child explained her family situation, which relied mostly on the income earned by her father, a poorer fisher who used hook-and-line on a paddle-powered canoe. She made a great deal of the fact that her family would not be able to send her to school without the generous help of a benevolent woman such as Anna.

Key here are concepts that I introduced in the earlier discussion of exchange and reciprocity. Using a child as a ‘go-between’ reduced the level of shame (hiya) and awkwardness by those who needed the assistance. Through the child, the parents were trying to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the Marquez family, presenting themselves as ‘pitiful’ (Cannell 1999) in order to obtain assistance that would be repaid in some manner in the future. By helping a poor family with such an important thing as sending a child through school, the Marquez family was probably accruing a form of utang na loob, and as such, the form and quantity of the repayment was uncertain. And, while the way in which Hollnsteiner strictly demarcates various forms of reciprocity into various categories inevitably simplifies the situation somewhat, this sort of debt between the child and Anna was clearly not ‘contractual’. When I asked Anna Marquez about her expectations for repayment, she told me that while it would be nice if the family of the child repaid the school fees in full, in reality she expected that this would be difficult to achieve. She said that the family would probably contribute in other ways, such as bringing around dishes or fish that they caught. As a foreign resident, I also found myself the subject of numerous requests for help to do with medical costs, rent and food in Coron town and Esperanza. Frequently, residents asked me to ‘share [my] blessings’; appealing to a sense that those in a more well-off position should help those less fortunate. For the Marquez family, fulfilling requests such as these was usually obliged. For them, it was important to maintain ‘an ability to get along with people’

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4 As Hollnsteiner describes it, ‘the social system requires that those who have more should share their bounty with those who have less’ (Hollnsteiner 1970: 67).
(pakikisama); literally meaning ‘togetherness’ with the rest of the community. They were conscious of the fact that they were well off compared to others in Esperanza, and to them it was very important that they be seen as good-hearted and generous. Practically, too, they said that it was important to have ‘happy workers’. As they employed many members of the community on their commercial boats as crew, it was important to them that the workers were satisfied. During the process of unpacking the commercial fusilier and fresh grouper boats, for example, many people would come along to assist. These would often be people with no formal connection to the crew or the family, yet they would put in great effort unloading the boxes of fish or repacking the fish in ice. For such work, Anna would then be obliged to pay them something (usually something simple such as snacks) for their contribution.

Their reputation for generosity to poorer members of the community was strong. Bong, for example, was a fisher who worked as an engineer on one of the Marquez family commercial fusilier boats. He stated that he would regularly go to them during amihan, rather than other more well-off families, because of their kindness. A short anecdote illustrates the strength of the positive perceptions of the Marquezes. Maricel, a poorer woman from the community, had recently finished her contract job as a domestic helper in Coron town. Her husband, Don, was a net fisher who was often unable to make enough money to support their family, which included eight children. Carlos and Anna decided to employ Maricel as a domestic helper in their household in order to help her. As Anna put it, ‘I don’t need a domestic helper here. I can look after my own place. We decided to employ Maricel because of makatao (humanity)’. Here, again, Maricel was deserving of pity (Cannell 1999). Several months into this relationship however, a misunderstanding over payment led Maricel to cease working for Anna and accusing the Marquezes of underpayment. All corners of the community were awash with gossip over the next few days; however, the consensus among other households was that Maricel must have misunderstood the payment method and that the Marquezes should not be to blame for the angry fallout.

For the poorer people in Esperanza, assistance from well-off families like the Marquezes was gratefully received. Recipients of such largesse would repay favours in different ways. Fine specimens of freshly caught fish would be given to the Marquez family or sold to them for a cheaper price. Members of poorer households who were in debt would provide labour around the house such as laundry work, or do extra work on the boats. Frequently, such relationships between wealthier and poorer households are forged through connections of kin or work. Raul, for example, was an elderly man who eventually found fishing on the Marquez commercial boats too difficult because of his age. His children had moved away and were no longer in contact and with his frailty; his circumstances rendered him with few livelihood options. The Marquezes gave him work to guard their fish pen during the night. Again, this was seen
as a non-contractual debt: giving work to somebody who had few or no means of attaining it otherwise was not able to be repaid in a simple or contractual way. For Raul, ‘I have *utang* [debt] towards them because they helped me when I really needed some work. I try to pay them back by doing a good job, making sure nobody takes any fish from their pen. Sometimes I go fishing near the fish pen and give them my catch in the morning’.

Similar relationships exist between households in Esperanza, and other households in Coron town. The Marquez family, for instance, maintained links with the Alejo family in town. The Alejo family had been one of the large basnig boat operators during the 1970s, and Carlos Marquez had originally started fishing in Coron for Mr Alejo Snr. Since this time however, the Alejo family have moved away from fishing and have achieved relative success in politics with Mr Alejo Jr acting as member of the municipal council during the 1990s. The Marquez family had not had a formal business or fishing relationship with the Alejos since the 1980s; instead, they maintained an informal friendship and contact. When they required a loan for capital or other expenses, they would sometimes call on the Alejos for financial support. In return, the Marquez family ensured the Alejos received political support in Esperanza. When the mother of Mr Alejo Jr died in 2006, the Marquez family offered various assistance during the mourning period, such as contributing gifts and helping to organise mourning activities.

None of this is to say that all relations between poorer and richer households in Esperanza are necessarily harmonious and free of conflict. Some richer families were cast as stingy, and there was certainly evidence of some of the tensions that Kerkvliet (1990) focused on in his analysis of ‘everyday politics’. The point I am making, however, is that personalised modes of reciprocity form the basis of much of the social relations between households of different status in Esperanza, and that such reciprocal relationships are often marked by certain cultural idioms.

**The Social and Economic Relations of Fishing in Esperanza**

Personalised economic relations exist in multiple arenas within the fisheries of Esperanza. Pumpboat and commercial boat owners and their respective crews, buyers and sellers of fish, financiers and owners of boats all practice variations of personalised economic relationships. My approach here is not to describe them in great depth, although some of the typical features are summarised in Table 3-2 and Map 3-1. Instead, I aim to outline the basic economic patterns of the fisheries in Esperanza and how they are intertwined with the themes that I have introduced in this chapter so far: poorer people making claims on those
with more resources through particular cultural idioms, and the formation of economically personalised relationships. In each fishery, I will demonstrate how the class relations that I have introduced in this chapter are expressed in various relationships related to fishing. It should be emphasised though that I do not intend to imply any sort of neat argument or equivalence between all of these relationships—class and status relations are similar to, but do not necessarily replicate, the other forms of relations I have already described. At the risk of thematic overlap, I have organised discussion around the four primary fisheries: net fishing; fusilier fishing; the fresh grouper fishery; and the live grouper fishery.

Map 3-1: Map indicating fish export destinations.

Source: Cartography ANU.
Table 3-2: Economic characteristics of primary fisheries in Esperanza.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fishery</th>
<th>Crew (number)</th>
<th>Trip Expenses (₱)</th>
<th>Length of trip (days)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Net fishing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>800–1200</td>
<td>1–4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live grouper</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5–6000</td>
<td>4–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusiliers</td>
<td>20–30</td>
<td>70–80 000</td>
<td>10–14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh grouper</td>
<td>25–30</td>
<td>200 000</td>
<td>10–14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s calculations, 2006 data.

Net Fishing

While there are many variations in specific gear and technique, the type of net-fishing mostly practiced in Esperanza involves the use of a plunger and gillnet (Plates 3-1, 3-2). It is conducted from a double-outrigger pump boat, around five metres long, powered by outboard motors ranging from 6–16 hp. There are normally two crew members on the boat. During a fishing expedition, one fisher will pilot the boat while the other sets down the gillnet along the seagrass bed. With the net in place, the fishers thrust a long wooden pole plunger into the water from the boat while it traverses the length of the net, driving the fish into the net. Target species include various types of rabbitfish (Family Siganidae). Fishers in this area adopted this particular form of gillnetting in 1989, when a local fisher returned from several years fishing in nearby Batangas Province. Trips can range in length from just a couple of hours fishing along the village shoreline to three or four days. During longer trips, fishing is usually conducted at more remote locations that have more fish. There is no strict season for net fishing; however from June to February there are plenty of fish to be caught but the price is lower (₱25–40 per kg). From March to May the market price increases (₱50 per kg) due to smaller catch sizes. The fish are usually sold at the local market of Coron, and are sometimes dried (see Plate 3-3) and later bought by roving dealers or middlemen based in nearby provinces such as Occidental Mindoro.
Plate 3-1: A fisher using the plunger to drive the fish into the gillnet.
Plate 3-2: Gillnet with the trip’s catch.

Plate 3-3: Preparing net-caught fish to be dried.
Fishing for Fairness

Frequently, the owner of the boat is also the captain, but this is not always the case. Capital required for net fishing includes a boat, an engine and a net. In 2006–07 these costs would amount to between ₱40,000–50,000, depending mostly on the power of the engine and whether it was new or second-hand. Given the average monthly earnings for many net fishers is under ₱10,000, obtaining the money for this equipment is a significant task. As with other fishers who seek to buy a boat, most simply borrow money to do this either from wealthier kin and other personal connections, or through the Landbank in Coron town. These sorts of loans are usually contractually based (Hollnsteiner 1970), and depending on the source of the loan, they are slowly paid back over time. Ed, for example, originally borrowed money from a variety of sources to pay for his net fishing boat when he first came from Bohol to live in Esperanza in 1989. Some money came from his brother Gary, who had already established himself in Esperanza several years earlier. Gary introduced two other creditors in Coron town to him; these creditors had originally helped Gary with his own net fishing boat. Ed paid monthly installments on the loan for several years until it was completely repaid.

A minority of fishers avoid such relationships in order to obtain capital. Vicente, for example, slowly saved up for his pump boat over a period of several years:

I was extremely thrifty for a long time to get my boat. Sometimes, I didn’t have any ulam with my dinner; I just left it for my family to have. I saved up little by little, and first I got the boat made, then I bought the engine and eventually I got the net. You see, I really didn’t want to go into debt. I don’t care if I don’t end up like them [points to the house of his successful neighbours, the Marquez family], I just want to keep my family secure and do it all by myself.

An average net fishing trip of three to four days costs between ₱800–1200, depending mostly on the fishing location. Expenses include boat fuel, ice for fish storage and rice, coffee and cigarettes for the crew. The owner finances this trip, whether he is on the boat or not. The relatively low expenses mean that the owner is usually able to do this trip without needing to go into debt.

When the time came for marketing, every single net fisher I interviewed in Esperanza had only one buyer to whom they sold their total catch. For example, Ramon, a net fisher in Esperanza, had an agreement with Mily, a buyer based in Coron town. During the dry season of amihan, when the fish catch was very low and the demand was higher (forcing prices up), he brought the fish to Mily who gave him a good price. During habagat, however, the market was glutted with all sorts of fish and consequently the demand was very low. During this

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5 Landbank was the only bank in Coron town during 2006-07. It is a government bank that has a priority in rural development and credit extension to the fishery and farming sectors.
period, Mily would only take the fish she could manage to sell; only then would Ramon go to other buyers to sell his fish. Thus, Mily had a regular supply of fish during lean times, and Ramon was guaranteed a steady price and a buyer of fish during periods of over supply. The problem, however, during habagat when there was little demand, was that Ramon had to wait until all of his fish were sold before he was paid. This had led him to become frustrated with net fishing during habagat, and he eventually turned to fusilier fishing during this time of year instead. So the economically personalised relationship between Ramon and Mily didn’t necessarily always overcome all of the economic and environmental constraints.

The relationship between net fishers and buyers in Coron is marked by respect. Despite the fact that Ramon was several years older than Mily, he called her ‘Ate Mily’ (older sister Mily), a term of respect. At the same time however, their relationship was not characterised by the same degree of distinction that characterises those between fishers and buyers in both the fresh and the live grouper fisheries. Mily and other buyers based in Coron town would often come down to the beach in Esperanza as the net fishers arrived with their catch in the mornings, laughing and joking with the fishers as they unpacked the fish from the nets. The sums of money exchanged are not as great as in other fisheries, and the subsequent class distinctions are not as strong.

The way in which profits are shared is quite simple, and is reminiscent of other accounts of share systems in Southeast Asia (Firth 1966; Stacey 2007)—one third goes to each of the two crew members, and one third goes to ‘the boat’. Eder (2008: 70–1) reported that in San Vicente, if the owner of the net is not the owner of the boat, the net owner will also get a share of the profits. He points out that ‘the principle used in determining compensation is that capital comes before labour. In the Philippines, capital commands a considerable share of the total revenue’ (ibid.: 71). When I lived in Esperanza, there were no such ownership arrangements where the net owner was different to the boat owner. However, even when the boat and net owner are the same, as in Esperanza, the share system gives rise to a practice whereby the owner of a boat will often stay on shore, picking up a third of the profits while he hires his boat out to others to do the actual fishing for him. It is widely perceived that owning a boat, even one of the small pump boats used in net fishing, is a means to a reasonably steady income. Hence, being a boat owner entails relative social status and economic security.

For others, however, being forced to ‘just join as a crew member’ (magsama lang) has little security. As net fisher Don put it: ‘Being a boat owner would be much better; that is my goal one day. Then I could relax at home sometimes

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6 The use of fictive kinship is common in the Philippines; I expand on this theme in Chapter Seven.
while others went out and did the fishing for me! But now I have to fish for every single centavo I earn’. These fishers often move between different net fishing boats in the village, dependent on the schedules and requirements of the owners. Usually however, the fishers who do not own boats establish working relationships with two or three boat owners who are kinsmen, friends or neighbours. In this situation, fishers who don’t own a boat become personally ‘indebted’ to the boat owners. They will attempt to repay this indebtedness by working hard and reliably on the fishing boat, and attending to any other tasks the boat owner may require. Don, for example, had a working relationship with two pump boat owners for whom he fished. He had to constantly ask these two boat owners what their schedules were and what days he would be able to work. Because he had been given regular work by these two owners, he said that he had an obligation to fish well for them, and ensure that they got a good return on their investment in him.

Sometimes younger fishers who are not yet established, or older, poorer fishers who are not as proficient as others struggle to get a place as a crew member on any of the fisheries. Nick, for example, had worked on several fusilier boats (during habagat) and net fishing boats (during amihan) for many years. Unmarried, he was not regarded as a particularly able fisher. Yet he was still able to find regular work on these boats, as there is an unstated form of obligation among boat owners to give work to those who need it and ask for it. This is not always easily given, of course, and this obligation to give work away is always in tension with the business and practical necessities of fishing. Ricardo, for example, normally worked as a crew on his father’s net fishing boat. He asked Carlos Marquez one afternoon if it would be possible to crew on his next fresh grouper fishing trip in Tawi-Tawi; adding he wanted the chance to prove his skills with the method used in fresh grouper fishing (cascasan). Carlos brusquely responded that the crew had already been decided and that it was too late to change anything. The examples of these crew members negotiating with different boat owners is simply used to demonstrate the different ways in which relations between crew, captains and owners play out.

Net fishing is a relatively low risk, low return fishery; the start-up costs and ongoing expenses associated with fishing trips are not as high compared to other fisheries. While personalised relationships between buyers and sellers are always present in Esperanza, it is frequently but not always necessary to go into debt to start fishing in this fishery. While practiced by some residents all year round, net fishing is most common during amihan; the off-season for fusilier fishing.
Fusilier Fishing

The primary fishing season for fusiliers begins in late-April, when the captains and boat crews will work together preparing the boats for the upcoming trips. Some boats need significant repairs or the replacement of old outriggers; others merely need a fresh coat of paint or a basic clean. There were five active commercial fusilier boats in the 2006 season in Esperanza; two boats had recently moved to the fresh grouper fishery, two had gone into cargo shipping and two were grounded because of a lack of funds. Repairs and preparations were done over a month period, timed for the boat to be ready for its first trip when the wet season rains begin.

Before departure, the crew gathers at the home of the boat in Esperanza. Twenty to thirty crew members sleep on the boat during the trips and fish the outer reefs of the Calamianes and the northern mainland. Four of the five fusilier boats fished the reefs of Dibangan during 2006, while one smaller boat fished closer to Coron. *Caesio cuning* (red-bellied or yellowtail fusilier) is the primary target species (Plate 2-7), but a variety of other fusiliers from the Family Caesionidae are also caught. They are caught in schools using hook-and-line baited with shrimp; although a variety of tactics are used by successful captains to obtain a good catch. This technique was adopted in a neighbouring barangay and became widely used in Esperanza from the late-1980s onwards. The fish are stored in a hold below the deck packed with ice and by preserving the fish already caught the fishers are able to fish for more than a week at a time.

The typical boat crew for fusilier fishing comprises of a captain and crew. Specialised roles exist within the crew such as the engine-operator, the ice-hold packer and cook (*kusinero*), but the majority of the crew are simply fishers. Trips usually last a minimum of ten days, and can extend for up to fourteen days if sufficient catch has not been obtained. Wives and children remain at home during this period, involved in household work and watching for signs of rough weather.

There is a great energy among the community on arrival of any of the commercial fusilier boats. People congregate in and around the boat, joking and laughing as the fish are taken from the ice-hold on the boat, weighed and repacked into freshly iced boxes on the shore (Plate 3-4). A tricycle driver, or sometimes a truck, is hired to take the boxes of fish to the port terminal in town. There, they are weighed and processed by Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) staff, before being transferred to any one of the cargo or passenger vessels that ply the waters between Coron and Manila. Upon arrival in Manila, they are unloaded by a paid caretaker, who then arranges for the fish to be sold at the wholesale fish market in Manila. From there, the fish are finally transported to the individual markets from where they are bought by consumers. Meanwhile, at
some point after the unpacking process has been completed back in Esperanza, drinks are bought (usually by the family of the captain or boat owner), and the crew sit around, luxuriating in their return home and telling stories of their trip. This process repeats itself numerous times, with boats averaging between seven to a maximum of ten trips per year; with the overall aim of two trips per month between May and September. The number of trips for each boat depends on variable factors such as the weather, the availability of ice and the finances of individual boat owners.

Plate 3-4: Packing the fusiliers in boxes with ice.

The equipment required for commercial fusilier fishing is more expensive than for net fishing, mostly because the boats are simply much bigger (Plate 3-5). The first fusilier boats in Esperanza were adapted for use from boats originally built to use for the basnig fishery using bag or lift-nets. While they range in size and power, all the vessels are larger and have a far more powerful engine than the net fishing boats. Start-up costs for the boat and engine depend considerably on the exact size of the boat, when it was built and the strength and age of the engine, but costs normally are in the hundreds of thousands of pesos, as opposed to tens of thousands of pesos for net fishing or ordinary pump boats. Arrangements for the financing of this capital equipment vary. Carlos Marquez built his boat in 1980–81 for the purposes of basnig fishing, and this was done with the financial assistance of a wealthy businessman in town who owned many basnig boats.
Another owner, Geronimo, obtained a large loan from the local bank, Landbank. Most others combine savings with credit or loans obtained from various sources such as Landbank, kin, and patrons in town.

Plate 3-5: Fusilier fishing boat.

Because the trips are of longer duration than those of the net fishers, there are a far greater number of crew and the expenses for trips are correspondingly higher. A typical trip in 2006–07, lasting between ten and fourteen days (depending on the catch and the weather), required ₱70–80 000. In recent years, the prices of fuel and ice (the two most significant expenses) have been steadily increasing, while the price of the fusiliers has stayed around the same (₱40–70 per kg when sold in Manila at the wholesale fish market). Maintenance costs are also high. Combined with a decreasing catch in the primary fishing grounds, this meant that many boat owners struggled to fund their fishing trips in 2006. Two of the eleven boats that had been used for fusilier fishing in the past remained grounded throughout the 2006 season, unable to fish because of a lack of funds; a further two had their boats contracted out for cargo transport instead. Other owners who could not meet the funds required for fishing trips on their own had access to creditors (usually close kin or wealthier patrons based in Coron town) who could provide funds. Geronimo, for example, had five different
creditors for each trip he made. Each creditor contributed ₱10–20,000, and if he had a successful trip he was able to pay all of them back immediately. On other occasions, the Marquez family would finance them.

Many fusilier boat owners spoke with distress about their current situation. During the late-1980s and for most of the 1990s, the fusilier fishery was essentially booming: trips were shorter than they were in 2006, fewer crew were required and more generally the prices for all expenses were down. Of the fusilier boats that were still operational in 2006, most of the owners either held narrow profit margins or were continually mired in debt. Most owners expressed a desire to transfer to either one of the export fisheries that their neighbours were clearly having so much success in managing. Geronimo, for example, said that:

Fishing for fusiliers is not really good anymore. Back when I started in the 1980s, it was great, nobody had any debts and we only fished for short periods. But live reef fishing and fresh grouper fishing, they are the two methods that I want to get into now. I am organising this year to start live reef fishing because I know a trader, but for cascasan I need the personal connections. I need to get to know a financier who will pay for it.

Geronimo’s experience illustrates the importance of personal knowledge of a financier in order to make these sorts of moves. Financing someone like Geronimo for either a fusilier-fishing trip or a switch to a new fishery is seen as a ‘big help’ (malaking tulong). Fishers like Geronimo thus often capitalise on the notion that richer people are expected to redistribute their wealth in ways that benefit other members of the community. Since his fusilier fishing had become less profitable in the last few years and he was unable to fund his own fishing operations, he asked the Marquez family help him to do so. Even though this was not the most profitable operation, according to both him and the Marquez family they continued to do so in part because of a sense of obligation (which Geronimo actively pressed) to help their struggling neighbour and the crew he employed.

In the five operational fusilier fisheries enterprises in Esperanza in the 2006 season, the captain of the boat was either the owner or a close kin of the owner. Crew was usually selected from within Esperanza and the neighbouring barangays or sitios. Many fishers use the kinship metaphor when describing relations at sea; the captain is the ‘father’ and the crew are all ‘siblings’. It does not take long to make close friends in such circumstances, and the bonds formed by the often intense experiences at sea among the commercial fishers are particularly tight. What I observed in Esperanza is similar to what Russell (1997: 85–6) notes with regard to the Batangas fishing community she studied, where the shared experience of working at sea tends to form strong
relationships of trust between captains and crew. Captains and boat owners (especially of the larger commercial vessels) of Esperanza typically belong to households of higher status and are generally better off, but still maintain common interests with their crews. The captains of the five operational fusilier boats were highly regarded within Esperanza.

The patterns of sharing profits in the fusilier fishery are slightly more complicated than how profit is divided among the net fishers. The captain automatically receives ₱4 for every kilogram of fish caught by the boat each trip. Other crews with specialised roles such as the engine-operator and ice-hold packers receive ₱2 for every kilogram of fish caught by the boat while the cook takes ₱1 per kilogram caught. In addition, they also receive payments for any fish they catch themselves. Each of the fisher crew receive ₱16 for every kilogram of fusiliers they catch, or ₱40 for any ‘first class’ fish they catch. This is a steady rate; independent of market fluctuations and the owner of the boat takes all the risks if there is a poor price for fusiliers in Manila. For example, if a boat catches 2000 kg of fusiliers, the captain of the boat will earn ₱8000, the engine-operator ₱4000, and each crew member ₱16 for every kilogram of fish he has individually caught (which, given a crew of 20, would equate to approximately 100 kg for each fisher and thus a payment of ₱1600). One person has the role of recording and weighing every fish caught by each fisher, so that the amount to be paid to each fisher is easily tallied at the end of the trip. Fishers also receive an advance payment (bale) of ₱500–700 before each trip; often used to buy things like cigarettes, clothes and other personal supplies for the trip.

The fusilier fishery was a fishery in decline by 2006; economic and environmental conditions no longer favoured it as well as they had in the 1990s. No longer able to fish outside of the wet seaon, many captains had turned (or expressed the desire to turn) to other gears and fisheries. All of the captains had gone into debt to establish their fishing operations, and many now needed to go into debt to fund each trip. Despite this, the fusilier fishery was still a prominent commercial fishery that provided employment for many people in the sitio.

**Fresh Grouper Fishery**

Unlike the seasonal fusilier fishery, the fresh grouper fishery operates all year round. The primary species targeted in this fishery is *Plectropomus leopardus*, which is exported to Taiwan, but there are a range of lower-value groupers and other reef fish that are caught as well. In 2006–07 some of these grouper boats operated in the far south waters of the Sulu Archipelago in Mindanao, near the Tawi-Tawi Islands. The crew was based at the provincial capital Puerto Princesa in between fishing trips. Three or four trips were conducted before the crew returned home to Mindoro and the Calamianes for a break. The technique of
fishing for grouper using hook-and-line technology using a lure as opposed to bait (cascasan), was adopted in Esperanza by a captain who learned it from his relatives in Occidental Mindoro. With this technique, fishermen leave the mother boat on small one-person outriggers and fish by themselves in the open sea. They return to the boat at intervals to weigh and record their catch and then have it packed in the ice-hold. All of the fish are processed in the provincial capital Puerto Princesa before being transported to Manila, where a caretaker again processes them. The export value groupers are sold directly to an exporter based in Manila who subsequently sells the fish to an importer in Taiwan; the lower-value catch is sold at the wholesale fish market at Manila.

This fishery has only been in use in Esperanza since 2004, but the success of those who have adopted it has made many of those in the fusilier fishery eager to take it up. This success has been mostly due to the rising price of *P. leopardus*, fuelled by a strong demand in China. While this species is especially prized among Chinese consumers when freshly killed, it is always considered a delicacy even if it is killed at sea. In 2006–07 the price of fresh export-quality grouper was ₱500–600 per kg when sold in Manila. In all cases in Esperanza the captain was the owner, but the large capital necessary to run a fishing trip required the support of a financier.

There were two large boats involved in the fresh grouper fishery in Esperanza in 2006, and a fusilier boat was adapted for this fishery later in 2007. One boat belonged to the Calvino family and the Marquez family had the other boat as well as adapting a second boat for their grouper fishery business during 2007. While two of the boats were originally fusilier-fishing boats that had been adapted for use in the fresh grouper fishery, the first in the Marquez family fleet was purpose built for this fishery in 2004. It was considerably larger than the rest of the fusilier boats with two 90 hp engines accommodating up to 25 one-person outriggers (Plate 3-6). The Marquez family established contact with a Taiwanese fish export company (Sun Corporation) through their in Manila office, introduced by relatives based in Mindoro Occidental already involved in this fishery. Sun Corporation financed the P1 million required to build the boat, and some of the Marquez family’s relatives from Mindoro joined as crew. The Marquez family was able to pay off this debt within two years. Carlos Marquez introduced the Calvino family to the manager of Sun Corporation (Ma’am Ping) during this period, and she subsequently financed the building of their boat as well.
The cost of each grouper-fishing trip is much greater than in the fusilier fishery for several reasons. Because of the local prestige associated with this fishery and the higher number of fishers, the total advance payments to the fishers are higher. In addition, because of the massive distance to be covered before the fishing grounds are reached, considerably more fuel is needed. Finally, the larger boat size has correspondingly higher maintenance costs. Around ₱200 000 was required to complete each trip, and this was financed by Sun Corporation for all three boats operating in 2007. The credit was subsequently paid off after each trip. Ma’am Ping was clearly regarded with a great deal of respect; an indication of this is the way Carlos, the head of the Marquez family dealt with her. One of the most respected and successful captains in Esperanza, Carlos was used to being the focus of respect from others. One of the few times I ever heard him use the Tagalog grammatical particle used when addressing someone with respect (po) was in conversation with her. Ma’am Ping did not visit the Calamianes, but stayed in Manila and all communication was conducted over the phone. Bill, the son of Carlos and Anna Marquez who stayed in Manila, would arrange transport of the fish from the Manila port to the Sun Corporation aquariums when shipments would arrive from Palawan.

The system of sharing returns of the fresh grouper fishery is essentially the same as for the fusilier fishery, except that the payments are much higher because
the fish are much more valuable. Each crew member receives ₱110 per kg of export-quality grouper caught individually, and a further ₱16 per kg for any by-catch caught individually. As with the fusilier fishery, the captain and men performing specialised roles receive higher payments based on the overall catch of the boat. On an average trip, only one third of the catch may comprise export-quality grouper, while about two-thirds is a mix of by-catch. The captain would aim for around 300 kg of export-quality grouper; any less than 200 kg and the trip would make a loss. The captains and fishers are regarded with particular respect because of the distance and extra challenge involved in this fishery.

The two families involved in the fresh grouper fishery both stated that it had been a real blessing to them. Melinda Calvino, the mother of the Calvino household, told me that during their time in the fusilier fisheries from the 1990s through to 2005, the family steadily accumulated more and more debts. In just one year since transferring to the fresh grouper fishery, they had been able to pay off all of their debts. The only debt they had in 2006–07 was to Sun Corporation when they financed their trips, but they were able to make regular repayments after each trip; as a result, it was not understood as ‘real’ debt. At the end of 2006 they were able to enrol one of their sons in a mechanical course at a good college in Manila and enrol their daughter at the local university in Coron town. Melinda said that ‘ever since we transferred to cascasan, we have been really blessed’. Similarly, the Marquez family told me how lucky they had been since transferring to the fresh grouper fishery from the fusilier fishery. Shortly after 2000, they were struggling financially, in debt and only able to run one of their two fusilier boats. Since transferring to the fresh grouper fishery, they had been able to pay off these debts and repair their other fusilier boat to work in the fresh grouper fishery as well. As the Marquezes described, there were simply many more fish in the Sulu Sea where they fished for fresh grouper, and the price for the groupers was much better than they were getting for fusiliers. These two factors made the fishery extremely rewarding financially. One particular fishing trip in the later part of 2006 had the whole of Esperanza gossiping furiously about the Marquez family hitting the ‘jackpot’. Three tons of fish were caught—one ton of grouper suitable for export and two tons of mixed by-catch—yielding a profit of around ₱300 000; a story repeated enviously by the rest of the community.

The transfer to the fresh grouper fishery had not been advantageous in every way however. In particular, it required the crew to be based in Puerto Princesa for most of the year. Carlos’ wife Anna often worried about his extended absences, and felt it was necessary to go there to visit sometimes. She felt that Carlos was getting old (he was over 50) and should have been thinking of an easier life
The fresh grouper fishery is characterised by personal relationships between financiers and fishers. As Melinda Calvino said, ‘everyone else would like to do cascasan as well but they need to be introduced to Sun as well. You need to have a financier to start doing cascasan because it is so expensive’. Again, then, the importance of being able to initiate a relationship with a financier is seen as vitally important to this fishery. Funding an operation like this is seen as helping a household, and households like the Marquezes and the Calvinos emphasised the importance of their personal relationship with Ma’am Ping in the success of their fishing. While other households had approached the Marquezes for an introduction to Sun, raising the value of obligation, by the beginning of 2007 the Calvinos remained the only family who had successfully done so. Not everyone could get an introduction of course, and the likelihood of economic success was of course a central factor in the Marquezes deciding which fishing families they would introduce to Sun and Ma’am Ping. Personal obligations were thus in tension with more practical factors.

### Live Reef Fishing

Fishing for live reef fish is conducted on a modified version of the net-fishing boats described earlier, with an aquarium built into the hull (Plate 3-7, see also Padilla et al. 2003: 56–63 for other images). Once the fish are transferred to aquariums owned by a buyer in Coron town, they are flown to Manila and then on to Hong Kong, from where many are re-exported on to mainland China (see Plate 3-8). Although live fishing has been prevalent in the Calamianes for well over a decade, it only really began to increase in Esperanza from the late-1990s. Because of the extremely high price of live groupers (frequently above ₱2000 per kg return for individual fishers), this fishery continues to attract many fishers. Fishing is conducted all year round, but reaches a peak during wet season when the weather is more conducive to fishing. Aquaculture is also practiced (Plate 2-3). This is not sustainable full-cycle aquaculture, however; instead, fish are caught as sub-adults and held in cages until they reach a marketable size (0.5-1.0 kg). The global live reef fish trade is a highly significant trade (Scales et al. 2006), and dominates livelihoods for many throughout coastal Palawan (Eder 2008; Dressler and Fabinyi 2011; Fabinyi and Dalabajan 2011).
Plate 3-7: Boat used to catch live grouper.
Plate 3-8: Final destination of live grouper caught in the Calamianes waters: a Beijing restaurant.
The costs for the capital equipment for the live grouper fishery are somewhat more than those in net fishing as the boat is more specialised, and requires a 16 hp engine at the very least. A typical live grouper business set-up cost would range from ₱80–120 000 in 2006–07. Trips usually last longer than net fishing trips, and range much further. Sometimes a trip can take around four days if the catch is found quickly; more often, the trips last around ten days. Due to a sharp decline in grouper stocks in Coron Bay, most fishing is now done in more remote areas of the Calamianes or near the Palawan mainland (Padilla et al. 2003: 4; Fabinyi 2010). Because of the higher fuel and supply costs compared to net fishing, ₱5000–6000 was required for a standard trip during the 2006–07 period. All of the live leopard coral grouper caught in Calamianes waters is exported to Hong Kong (via Manila). When I interviewed eight restaurateurs specialising in live fish in Cebu and Manila, not one of them sold live leopard coral grouper anymore (some had previously), and it was only possible to buy the lower-valued species.

The live grouper fishery appeals mostly to fishers that were previously small-scale, typically using a net or simple hook-and-line from a canoe. While it is not regarded as a ‘commercial’ fishery under the regulations of the Philippines because the boats are under three gross tons, more money is involved both in initial capitalisation and in fishing trip maintenance compared to net fishing and hence it is heavily associated with credit extension. All of the live reef fishers I interviewed got their start in the fishery with the help of a financier, who arranged for the purchase and construction of the engine and the boat. Usually, a meeting between the financier (one of the buyers based in Coron town) and the fisher is set up through a mutual acquaintance. Often, this is another fisher already working for that buyer or sometimes someone better connected, such as a barangay councillor. Enrique, for example, owned his own net fishing boat and sometimes worked as a crew member on a fusilier-fishing boat during the wet season until 2004. At this time he approached a friend who had worked for several years for one of the live fish traders, asking him to act as a ‘go-between’ and set up a meeting with the trader. Enrique asked his friend to recommend him as a hard-working and successful fisher. As with the fresh grouper fishery, these are therefore not simple relationships between traders and fishers, but personal relationships facilitated by mutual acquaintances.

Once the relationship has formed, fishers like Enrique enter into a similar sort of personalised exchange relationship as described earlier with regard to net fishers. The major difference between these two patterns of financing however is that the fisher is usually deeply in debt to the fish buyer: firstly, with regard to the purchase and construction of the equipment, and secondly, with regard to the trip expenses. In practice, fishers ask their traders for personal loans and try to defer payments on the original loans as well. Credit is therefore often
extended to a fisher and his family for his personal needs. In this way, the relationships resemble the ‘patron-client’ relationships more commonly seen in agricultural regions of the Philippines. The fisher is then required to sell all of his fish to his creditor until he has paid off his debt for the start-up costs. Once this has been achieved, the fisher is free to switch buyers or to enter into debt again with the first buyer for another boat. One of the traders described what he would do when fishers refused to play by these rules and sold to another trader; firstly, he would give a warning, and if it happened again then he would take the engine and boat back but he said in his experience this occurred infrequently.

Crew of these boats originated from more diverse locations than the net fishery, and included people from neighbouring barangays.

Interestingly however, the biggest trader in Coron town during 2006–07 was the only trader who did not practice the credit-based system of personalised exchange. He avoided this mode of buying for several reasons. Firstly, before 2001 only some of the fishers in the Calamianes had the equipment needed to catch live fish, so many new players required considerable start-up capital, and needed credit for the boats and engines. But by 2001 when he started doing business in Coron, many fishers already had access to these things, so credit for the equipment was not always necessary. He said that often when a fisherman had debt, there was no pressure to pay off the original equipment debt ‘because even after two to three years of debt they are still bringing their fish to you’. Eventually, he said, they would just ‘forget’ the debt because of the length of time elapsed—the practice of constantly bringing the fish to one buyer built a personal relationship to the extent that fishers felt they could get away with defaulting on the equipment loan. Even if the debt was paid off after a couple of years, he said that this meant that they were no longer bound to that particular buyer. The equipment debt in itself was not enough to bind a fisher to a buyer in the long term so after all the investment the buyer could still lose the fisher’s patronage. To avoid losing the relationship developed with the fishers and instead of maintaining personalised economic relationships, he offered a better price than the other traders to fishermen (he called this the ‘true price’). Additionally, he practiced *pakikisama* with the fishers by extending them small personal loans and allowing them to eat, sleep and drink at his aquarium on occasions.

For other fishers involved in the live reef fishery, relations of debt and credit have a large influence on their everyday lives. For some fishers, having debt to a financier is like carrying a huge burden. According to these fishers, having debt means that if your catch was small, you only have enough to meet your basic needs like food: ‘Any extra profit that you make has to go to your financier to pay off your debt’ said one live fish collector. Some are suspicious that buyers pay lower prices to fishers indebted to them because the fishers have no choice
to whom they sell: ‘If you cannot sell anywhere else, you have no choice. Then they give you the wrong price; there is nothing you can do’ another live fish collector alleged. For some men, being in debt is viewed as a significant blow to independence and self-confidence. It can present in some as psychologically damaging, threatening their idealised role of what it is to be masculine. Successful fishermen are seen as men who have no problems looking after the family. The accounts of fishers like these and traders such as the one mentioned in the previous paragraph are an indication that personalised relationships are not necessarily harmonious and free of tension.

An important point to note is that in 2006–07 many of the live fish traders held extremely high status in Coron municipality. Two of the ‘Big Three’ live fish traders were also municipal councillors, and all of the others were either closely related to other councillors or at the very least, had good political connections. The lifestyles and personal influence of these traders were thus extremely different to even those of the elite of Esperanza. The wide social gap between traders and fishers was often marked by considerable deference on the part of the fisher. The last trader I discussed was noteworthy for the unusually comradely relationships he held with the fishers. In this context of marked social difference, the credit-based economic relationship tends to reinforce such wide social gaps.7

Organisations and individuals involved in attempts to regulate the live fish trade in Palawan have commented on the crediting and financing systems of the fishery, arguing that they encourage dependence and favour the traders over the fishers. A report commissioned by WWF to investigate the sustainability of the live fish trade in Palawan emphasised the dependency and inequitable distribution of benefits in the financing arrangements: ‘[w]ith returns uncertain, costs [of fishers] are compounded and the debts increase. To ensure needed support, they offer loyalty to operators, and a vicious cycle of dependence is perpetuated. Thus, fisherfolk become increasingly disempowered and marginalized’ (Padilla et al. 2003: 92).

Another report on the live reef fish trade in the Calamianes by CI emphasised the problem of debt and its consequences. Referring to those fishermen working for financiers, it contended that:

dependency is reinforced as debts accumulates. The dependence ensures the supply of live fish to the dealer, but leaves fishers powerless to act contrary to the dealers (sic) wishes and sell to other traders who offer higher prices. Indebted fisher folk practicing illegal fishing methods associated with the LRFT (live reef fish trade) are unlikely to

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7 See Pinches 1991 for a discussion of how hiya is invoked in class relations.
be in a position to respect MPA establishment and supporting fisheries management rules if the dealers whom they owe money (sic) are not in favour of them (CI 2003: 9).

Finally, a policy brief by Pomeroy and colleagues acknowledged the profits from the live reef fish trade but stresses their short-term nature:

The LRFFT (live reef food fish trade) has provided some communities with the opportunity to earn—at least temporarily—additional income from their fish resources in the area where very few income-generating opportunities exist. For the most part, these benefits have been gained in the short run with considerable long-run costs, ecologically, economically and socially. While many fishers have gained an income in the short term, in many cases they end up indebted to brokers, or required to fish in a way that is incompatible with local practices and habits (Pomeroy et al. 2005: 23).

Based on economic data collected during 2003–04, this policy brief also argued that these trading arrangements result in a significantly inequitable distribution of benefits. Based on figures of 2100 live fish collectors and 15 traders in the Calamianes in 2004, it estimated that each individual collector received 0.03 per cent of the total gross revenue of ₱475 905 500 of the Calamianes (ibid.: 86). Individual traders however received 0.87 per cent of the total—almost 30 times as much.

Many of those involved in the live reef fishery do not seem to mind the process of getting into debt and acknowledge that it seems to be a necessary element of succeeding in this fishery for most poor fishers. The crediting arrangements vary widely; some fishers had paid off the debt on one boat and then gone into debt again for a second boat that they could then hire out to other fishers; others had paid their debt on the initial equipment expenses but still occasionally went to their buyer for trip expenses and personal credit. Importantly, despite the associations with heavy debt, many of the live reef fishers expressed great satisfaction at the results of their livelihood. The majority of these fishers I interviewed had been net fishers or simple hook-and-line fishers without a pump boat before they had started live reef fishing, and so the greater rewards of live reef fishing had made a massive difference in their lives. Marco for example, simply pointed to his TV and stereo as purchases he had made in the last five years since he had turned to live reef fishing; purchases that he would never have been able to make before this. All of them wished to continue with live reef fishing, viewing it as the most profitable fishery for fishers of their level of income.

8 Such a view recalls the observation by economist Joan Robinson that ‘the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all’ (Robinson 2006 [1962]: 45).
This optimism tempered during the latter part of 2006, however, when the issue of heavily regulating the live reef fish trade came to the fore (described and analysed in Chapter 7).

The views of the live fish traders based in Coron town invariably reflected such positive perceptions of the fishers mentioned above. All of them emphasised that the fishers’ debt did not have to be paid-off straight away; that it was usually only paid-off in installments when the fisher had a good catch. As one live fish trader once told me as he raised a glass of rum to toast his fisherman counterpart sitting next to him, with a broad grin on his face: ‘We are all winners in this fishery’. Indeed, the life histories of some of the live fish traders themselves reflects both the transformative power of this fishery in the Calamianes, and the potential for social mobility in the Philippines.

Joey was from a poor fishing family that had originally migrated from Bicol in the 1960s. Going to school in Coron in the 1970s, he had ‘only one pair of pants’ that he had to wear every day because all of his family’s spare money was spent on his school fees. Starting with a small-scale dried fish business, Joey was one of the very first fish traders to get involved with the live fish trade in the early-1990s. Again, he was able to do this because of his wife’s personal connections to an importer based in Hong Kong. Throughout the 1990s his business grew, so by 2006 he had around 500 boats fishing for him, based in the port area of Coron town. By 2006, he was one of the most influential politicians and successful traders in the municipality. Similarly, Bob was originally a fisherman himself from a rural part of Coron municipality who by 2006 had 300 boats fishing for him and had also made a successful second career in politics. Not surprisingly, he saw the live fish trade as ‘a big help’ to the people of the Calamianes.

**Conclusion**

I have aimed in this chapter to provide a window into how some of the relations between different groups in Esperanza function. As a simple description, my focus therefore has not been to provide a comprehensive discussion of the circulation of wealth, nor of all the strategies for economic and social security that households in Esperanza adopt. Instead, I have tried to show how relations between different groups in Esperanza tend to be mediated by patterns of economic personalisation. All these relations are bound up in an ongoing series of appeals, claims, and negotiations that form part of the ‘everyday politics’ (Kerkvliet 1990) that occurs in every barangay of the Philippines.

Poorer people in Esperanza relate to those better off or with more resources in a variety of ways. Frequently however, poor people try to set up personalised, reciprocal relationships, as I have shown particularly through the different
relationships and exchanges involved in fishing. All transactions tend to require personalised connections between people of unequal status. Such connections include: providing capital to finance individual fishing trips, selling fish at a consistent rate, working as a crew member on a boat, switching to a new fishery, or in other contexts such as asking for help with matters like education and medical costs. The importance of managing good personal relations with those of higher status is seen as a fundamentally important way of going about everyday life. Having ‘good’ personal relations with someone of higher status does not necessarily always mean ‘smooth interpersonal relations’ (Lynch 1970), of course; I have tried to show how such relationships can encompass a range of pressures and tensions (such as the pressure to redistribute wealth).

These patterns of socio-economic relations I have identified in the fisheries of Esperanza thus foreshadow several themes highlighted and developed in the later part of this book. While the diversity of these relationships makes it difficult to generalise, frequently they involve certain cultural idioms that emphasise a sense of fairness for poor people. The next four chapters shift focus to examine how versions of these relationships are enacted in the discourse of the poor moral fisher. Here, I show how fishers take the underlying ideas about fairness for the poor, and reproduce them in a particular form during debates about environmental regulation.