



Identity, subjectivity and natural resource use: How ethnicity, gender and class intersect to influence mangrove oyster harvesting in The Gambia



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ABSTRACT

Environmental policies have paid increasing attention to the socio-cultural dimensions of human–environment interactions, in an effort to address the failures of previous ‘top-down’ practices which imposed external rules and regulations and ignored local beliefs and customs. As a result, the relationship between identity and resource use is an area of growing interest in both policy and academic circles. However, most research has treated forms of social difference such as gender, ethnicity and class as separate dimensions that produce distinct types of inequalities and patterns of resource use. In doing so, research fails to embrace key insights from theories of intersectionality and misses the key role of space and place in shaping individual and group subjectivities. In this paper we investigate how multiple types of identity influence resource use and practice among a group of women oyster harvesters in The Gambia. We find that oyster harvesting is shaped by the confluence of an aversion to stigmatised waged labour; gendered expectations of providing for one's family; and an historically informed and spatially bounded sense of ethnicity. Drawing on the concept of contact zones, we show how new interactions and *intra*-actions between previously isolated groups of oyster harvesters have broadened conceptions of ethnicity. However, we find that new subjectivities overlay rather than replace old clan alliances, leading to tensions. We argue that new contact zones and emerging subjectivities can thus be at once uniting and divisive, with important implications for natural resource management.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between culture, identity and natural resource use has become the subject of growing interest in both policy and academic circles. On the policy side, governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have made efforts to address the failures of previous ‘top-down’ practices which imposed external rules and regulations and ignored local beliefs and customs (Hulme and Murphree, 2001; Dressler et al., 2010). This is particularly the case in the Global South, where policymakers have sought to address the impacts of exclusionary policies on low-income rural households that depend directly on natural resources for their livelihoods. There have been concerted efforts to build on local institutions (Agrawal, 2001; Dressler et al., 2010), indigenous

knowledge (Sutherland et al., 2014), as well as cultural norms and even taboos (Colding and Folke, 2001; Jones et al., 2008), informed by a more critical appreciation of local cultural context (Coombes et al., 2012; Dressler et al., 2010).

While environmental policies have paid increasing attention to the socio-cultural dimensions of human–environment interactions, research has shown how projects that have attempted to include resource users in decision-making have a tendency to treat communities as homogenous and assume a set of shared interests (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999, 2001; Hulme and Murphree, 2001; Dressler et al., 2010). Policymakers also have a propensity to treat identity (especially ethnicity) as concrete and unchanging and to make assumptions about the way it influences resource use, most notably in discussions of indigeneity and ‘traditional’ environmental knowledge (Brosius, 1997; Brockington, 2006; Scales, 2012).

The field of political ecology is particularly noteworthy for its contributions to debates over the role of culture in shaping human–environment interactions. Whereas early political ecology focused predominantly on how socio-economic class shaped natural resource use, researchers have become increasingly engaged

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with the ways that nature is perceived, understood and presented by different social groups (Paulson et al., 2003; Goldman and Turner, 2011). Research has highlighted the role played by gender (e.g. Schroeder, 1997; Nightingale, 2006; Rocheleau, 2008; Bezner-Kerr, 2014), ethnicity (e.g. Brockington, 2002; Scales, 2012) and race (e.g. Heynen et al., 2006; Peluso, 2009; Mollet and Faria, 2013) in struggles over access to and control of natural resources. In particular, this work has revealed how social difference is linked to livelihood activities and how individuals and groups can deploy specific identities to bolster claims to natural resources.

Although political ecology has deepened and broadened understandings of the socio-cultural dimensions of resource use, research within the field has often emphasised single aspects of social difference. Most work continues to treat gender, ethnicity and class as separate dimensions that produce distinct types of social inequalities and patterns of resource use (Valentine, 2007; Nightingale, 2011). Feminist theorists have highlighted how these approaches overlook intersectionality i.e. the way ethnicity, gender, class and other forms of social difference interact simultaneously to shape and constrain identity and social roles (Butler, 1990; hooks, 1984; Valentine, 2007; Nightingale, 2011). Recent research has shown how intersectionality can deepen understandings of environmental change and struggles over resource use by revealing how different forms of social difference interact in messy ways to destabilise categories that might otherwise be treated as concrete (e.g. Mollet and Faria, 2013; Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014). This research has also emphasised that identities, rather than existing as pre-formed and fixed entities, emerge (and are thus constantly shaped and re-shaped) through everyday practices (Banks, 1996; Nightingale, 2011; Sultana, 2011) and regulatory regimes (Peluso, 2011). As a result, space, place and power play a key role in shaping identities by creating particular arenas for material practices and the (re)production and contestation of social exclusion based on gender, class, ethnic and other socio-cultural differences (Peluso, 2009; Nightingale, 2011). Despite these contributions to understanding identity and practice, work on intersectionality remains limited in political ecology and geography more broadly (Valentine, 2007; Nightingale, 2011).

In this paper we examine the relationship between identity and natural resource use in a group of women oyster harvesters in The Gambia. Before focusing on our case study, we provide an overview of work on the political ecology of identity and set out our analytical framework. Our approach is intersectional in that we focus on how multiple aspects of identity (in this case gender, class and ethnicity) shape resource use at the same time. It also pays particular attention to fluid *subjectivities* (rather than concrete identities). We focus on how individuals and groups take external social categories (such as ethnicity) and turn them into lived choices (Wetherell, 2008). Finally, our approach draws on contact theory (Allport, 1954; Dovidio et al., 2003) to focus on the role of new contact zones (Pratt, 1992) in shaping individual and group subjectivities. These contact zones are spaces where disparate social groups meet, interact and also *intra*-act to interpenetrate and mutually transform each other while interplaying (Barad, 2007).

After setting out our analytical framework, we explore how intersectionality, subjectivities and contact zones shape oyster harvesting in the Tanbi wetlands of The Gambia. Oyster harvesters consist mostly of marginalised women of the Jola ethnic group. Most accounts of oyster harvesting in The Gambia, in both policy and academic literatures, tend to focus on socio-economic class (specifically poverty) as the primary driver of resource use. However, rather than assuming that oyster harvesting is a practice driven simply by poverty, we show how the identities and practices of oyster harvesters are products of the intersection between ethnicity, class and gender. In the Tanbi wetlands, oyster harvesting practices are shaped by the confluence of an aversion to stigmatised

waged labour; gendered expectations of providing for one's family; and an historically informed and spatially bounded sense of ethnicity. So although oyster harvesting is an arduous and precarious activity, it is also a source of identity, pride and self-worth.

Finally, we explore how new institutions and spaces of *intra*-action shape identities, revealing their fluidity. We focus in particular on the role of the TRY Oyster Women's Association, a recently established NGO which was created to reduce pressure on mangroves by encouraging cooperation between groups of oyster harvesters. The association has established new contact zones for the women oyster harvesters, in the form of a community centre and an oyster festival. We show how *intra*-actions between previously isolated groups of oyster harvesters in these new contact zones have broadened conceptions of Jola ethnicity and oyster harvester identity. This new sense of collective identity has helped to reduce tensions between groups and has also helped the integration of newly arrived migrants. Through regular contact and a set of common practices, women gain the sense of shared experience that underpins group subjectivity. However, we find that the new identities born of these contact zones overlay and do not necessarily replace old clan alliances, leading to tensions between groups. The contact zones and emerging identities can thus be at once uniting and divisive, with important implications for natural resource management.

2. The political ecology of identity

2.1. Identity and intersectionality in political ecology

Identity can be broadly defined as the process by which individuals and groups express a sense of self. It is commonly expressed through categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality. Research in political ecology has paid increasing attention to the role identity plays in shaping access to and control over natural resources. This vein of work has revealed how individuals and groups strategically deploy and articulate particular identities as key mediators in claims to resource rights (Brockington, 2002; Upton, 2014). Groups have mobilised ethnic and indigenous identities to claim access to resources as rightful 'caretakers' (Perreault, 2001; Brockington, 2002); as the basis of environmental social movements (Upton, 2014); or to connect local interests to global indigenous movements (Igoe, 2006). However, there has been less empirical work detailing how *multiple* aspects of identity shape resource use at the same time.

To analyse interactions between different aspects of social difference, a small but growing number of political ecologists have drawn on the concept of intersectionality, which analyses the origin of multiple sources of oppression (Bastia, 2014). The theory sprung from critiques of the homogenous subjects represented by the feminist movement (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983; Mohanty, 1988; Mohanty et al., 1991; Lykke, 2010). Critics argued that women's political interests differed according to geopolitical positionings, class structures, ethnicities and racialised mechanisms of exclusion and oppression (hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 1988; Mohanty et al., 1991; Lykke, 2010; Valentine, 2007). In turn, these 'intersections' replaced gender as the object of focus in gender studies. Intersectionality thus stresses how ethnicity, gender, class and other social differences interact simultaneously to shape and constrain identity and social roles (Butler, 1990; hooks, 1984; Valentine, 2007; Nightingale, 2011).

By articulating these intersections and broadening the object of study, intersectionality has drawn together many strands of feminist theory around a shared frame. As a 'nodal point' (Lykke, 2010) in feminist theory and the social sciences (Calás et al., 2013; Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014; Lutz et al., 2011; Nash, 2008), intersectionality

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