TITLE - 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.

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., 2013), 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 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 state 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 non-governmental organisation (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 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 (Bebbington, 2001); 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 racialized 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, 2013; Lutz et al., 2011; Nash, 2008), intersectionality must continually negotiate and reconcile different theoretical and methodological challenges. For instance, disciplines use intersectionality differently guided by diverse theories of how identities are formed (Mayo, 2015), and there is no single methodological approach (McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008; Davis 2008). Yet, it is precisely the multi-faceted, open-ended nature of intersectionality underpinning these challenges that actually provides the basis of mutually beneficial collaboration across disciplines (Davis, 2008). The concept’s very ambiguity is therefore part of its strength (Davis, 2008; Lutz et al., 2011).

Work on intersectionality and the environment has been strongest in feminist political ecology, where research has shown how natural resource use intersects with different axes of power such as race (Sundberg, 2004; Faria and Mollet, 2014), sexuality (Elmhirst, 2011) and livelihoods (Carr and Thompson, 2014). Feminist political ecologists have applied intersectionality across a range of contexts, most recently to climate change (Lykke, 2009; Carr and Thompson, 2014; Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014). Our study adds to this small but growing work that combines theories of nature and the environment with intersectionality (Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014).

2.2 From identity to subjectivity

While intersectionality has long recognised that identity categories are dynamic, changeable and interlinked (Lykke, 2010), it has struggled to reconcile this realisation with analysis beyond naming and analyzing each category as fixed (Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014). Research has tended to assume that people's identity remains fixed when they move from place to place and across time, which misses the increasingly crucial role that mobility plays in people's lived experiences (Calás et al. 2013). There are also several semantic and analytical issues that need to be addressed, specifically relating to differences between identity and subjectivity. On the one hand, identity and subjectivity are often used interchangeably in the literature. For example, Rose (1995: 88) defines identity as 'how we make sense of ourselves… It refers to lived experiences and all the subjective feelings associated with everyday consciousness'. However, some authors define identity and subjectivity against each other so that identity is taken to mean the external social categories that individuals subscribe to, while subjectivity refers to the way individuals take these social categories and turn them into lived choices (Probyn, 2003; Wetherell, 2008). In this view, which we adopt in this paper, identities are taken as more or less stable, fixed and permanent, while subjectivity 'sums up the actual complex person and lived life' (Wetherell, 2008: 77). According to Morales and Harris (2014: 706) subjectivity 'refers to how one understands oneself within a social context – one's sense of what it means and feels like to exist within a specific place, time, or set of relationships'.

The important point is that while subjectivities may reference a particular sense of identity (or identities) - for example gender, class and ethnicity - they will inevitably be shaped by context and thus shift in relation to changing circumstances (Morales and Harris, 2014). Thus, in the context of natural resource use, subjectivities emerge and are shaped / re-shaped by everyday resource practices and governance (Nightingale, 2011). Space, place, time and material practices are therefore central to the way subjectivities are formed and experienced.

There is also an important distinction to be made between individual and group subjectivities. Group or collective subjectivity refers to the lived experience of ‘togetherness’ or how individuals are ‘subjected’ within specific configurations of power (Nightingale, 2011; 2013; Morales and Harris, 2014). For example, Nightingale (2011; 2013) highlights key differences in the way that fishers in Scotland are subjected in different power contexts. On the ocean, fisher subjectivities are an accumulation of embodied experiences of wet, harsh conditions and knowledge and physicality of their boat and gear on the sea. These experiences contribute to a sense of ability, pride and self-worth. However, when in formal boardroom meetings with policy-makers and scientists, the experience of being a fisherman changes dramatically. Fishermen become repositioned as irresponsible exploiters of the ocean, and therefore experience a powerless and defensive position against scientific and political authority (Nightingale 2011; 2013). This example emphasizes how individual fishermen share a sense of group subjectivity through the way they are subjected in different realms of power relations. As individuals move through different contexts, they are subjected, often collectively, by the multiple power relations that are simultaneously real, imagined and symbolic (Longhurst; 2003). In natural resource use, these group subjectivities have social and ecological implications because ‘resource management forms a space where domination and control of resources is contested and reinforced’ (Cote and Nightingale, 2012: 483).

2.3 Situating subjectivities - the contact zones of oyster harvesting

Subjectivities are performed through practices in specific spaces and places. They are thus composed of environmental spaces and practices to the point that 'subjectivity cannot be plucked from the spatial relations that constitute it' (Longhurst, 2003: 284). Nightingale (2011:153), working on the production of gender, caste, class and environment in rural Nepal, argues that 'the symbolic meanings of particular spaces, practices and bodies that are (re)produced through everyday activities including forest harvesting, agricultural work, food preparation and consumption, all of which have consequences for both ecological processes and social difference'.

In our research we focus on the everyday practices of oyster harvesters, which comprise both existing oyster harvesting and processing sites, but also newly created spaces and institutions. These everyday practices and spaces can be both uniting and divisive. On the one hand, the TRY Oyster Women's Association has created demarcated *bolongs* (mangrove tributaries) where groups of women are given exclusive harvesting rights (thus reinforcing divisions between groups). On the other hand, a new community space and TRY group meetings have brought together women from different villages who did not previously interact. As we will show, the latter have been particularly important in building broader ethnic identities.

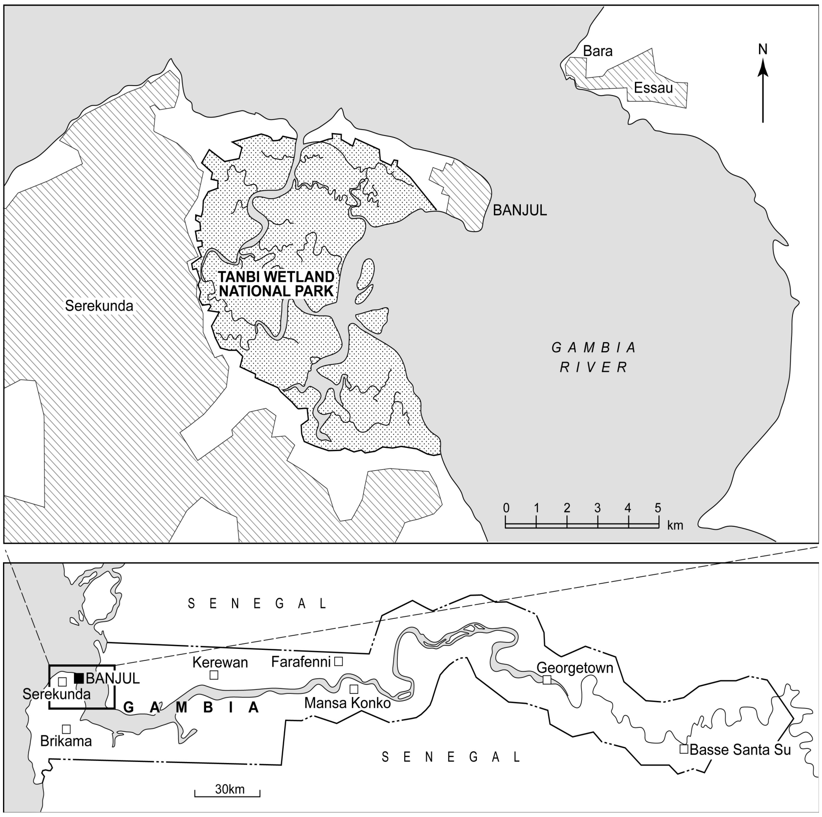
Nightingale (2011) argues that neutral 'interstitial spaces', such as the oyster harvesters' community centre in our case study, allow individuals to renegotiate their identities to a degree. We extend Nightingale's notion of the 'interstitial space', by drawing on work on contact zones to more explicitly examine how and where group subjectivities form in natural resource governance. The idea of a contact zone builds on a long line of work in psychology beginning with Allport's (1954) contact theory. The premise of contact theory is that tensions between conflicting social groups can be improved through more regular contact, but that this contact requires specific prerequisite conditions, such as equal status among groups and common goals (Dovidio et al., 2003). This work is most commonly applied to understanding inter-racial and inter-cultural conflicts and has been adopted in anthropology and geography.

Drawing on contact theory, Pratt (1992) has developed the notion of contact zones to describe the spaces where disparate social groups meet and interact. More recently, urban geographers have explored the potential of deploying contact zones as part of participatory action research to better understand what constitutes transformative urban spaces (Askins and Pain, 2011). Contact zones can be thought of as spaces of *intra*-action (Barad, 2003). In contrast to *inter*action, where bounded entities clash against each other without mutually changing, *intra*-action refers to interplay between non-bounded phenomena, which interpenetrate and mutually transform each other while interplaying (Barad, 2007). Contact zones provide specific spaces and practices where individual and group subjectivities can *intra*-act and change. As our case study illustrates, boundaries between groups are often blurred and re-produced within the contact zone through an emphasis on certain collective aspects of identity. Therefore, studying these ‘messy’ shifts, or spaces of *intra*-action (Lykke, 2010; Barad, 2007) can provide insight into how and where points of contact between different groups might change group boundaries.

3. Mangroves and oysters in the Tanbi Wetlands of The Gambia

The Gambia covers approximately 11,300km2 and has a population of about 1.85 million people. The Tanbi Wetland National Park of The Gambia (Figure 1) lies adjacent to the capital of Banjul. The Tanbi covers the mangrove and oyster commons that are important for people's livelihoods. Mangroves and oysters provide people with a safety net in a country where poverty is widespread (UNDP, 2014). In 2014 the Gambia ranked 172 out of 187 in the Human Development Index with around 60 per cent of its 1.85 million population living in multidimensional poverty.

Figure 1. The Tanbi Wetlands National Park, The Gambia


Bara
Essau
N
BANJUL
TANBI WETLAND NATIONAL PARK
Serekunda
GAMBIA RIVER
0 1 2 3 4 5 km
SENEGAL
Kerewan
Farafenni
BANJUL
Serekunda
GAMBIA
Mansa Konko
Georgetown
Brikama
SENEGAL
Basse Santa Su
30km

In this context, the Tanbi's 6300 ha of mangroves provide Banjul's large peri-urban population with fuelwood and construction materials, and support the artisanal fishery industry (Satyanarayana et al., 2012). The latter is particularly important because, alongside agriculture and tourism, artisanal fisheries are a key part of the Gambia's economy (UNDP, 2012). In addition, the wild oysters (*Crassostrea gasar)* that grow on the propagule roots of the mangroves provide food and income for women from nearby communities. Oyster harvesting is one of the main income earning activities in the Tanbi, especially for women. Indeed in The Gambia more broadly, poverty has a strong gender component. A high proportion of women are in the poorest cohorts and a growing percentage of women are household heads and breadwinners (Jones and Chant, 2009).

Over the last two decades, human pressure on The Gambia's oyster and mangrove commons has increased (Satyanarayana et al., 2012). In The Gambia, mangrove forests cover approximately 581km2, or roughly 2.1% of total mangrove forest-cover in all of Africa (Spalding et al., 2010). Across the Senegambia region mangrove cover has declined by 35% since 1986 (Carney et al., 2014). In contrast, the area of mangrove forest cover in the TWNP has been relatively stable since 1980, decreasing by less than 1% (ibid). However, although oyster harvesting has a long history in the region, dating as far back as the 19th century and probably much further, recent changes in oyster harvesting practices have begun to negatively affect the Tanbi's mangroves (Crow and Carney, 2013). In the 1990s, economically vulnerable women from Guinea-Bissau and the Casamance region of Senegal began to migrate to the Tanbi area (Crow and Carney, 2013; Juffermans and McGlynn, 2009). This migration, coupled with a growing population in Banjul and an increased consumer demand for oysters, increased the pressure on both mangroves and oysters. By the end of the 1990s the mangroves near Banjul were starting to be degraded and the harvesting of immature oysters had undermined the ability of wild oyster populations to restock (Carney et al., 2014; Njie and Drammeh, 2011). As a result, oyster harvesters ventured deeper into the Tanbi wetlands and, to save time, began to use machetes to cut off oyster-bearing roots, which damaged the mangroves.

In response to growing threats, the Gambian government and several organisations have been working to stop the degradation of the Tanbi's mangroves and oysters.

In 2007, the Tanbi was identified as a Ramsar wetland of international importance and the following year became the Tanbi Wetland National Park (TWNP). The TWNP allows customary fishing and oyster collecting rather than forbidding resource use (Republic of Gambia, 2012). In 2009 the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Coastal Resource Centre at the University of Rhode Island launched the Gambia-Senegal Sustainable Fisheries Program, also known as *Ba Nafaa*. *Ba Nafaa* aimed to promote environmental stewardship through the co-management of artisanal near-shore fisheries (Crow and Carney, 2013). They specifically targeted the Tanbi oyster fishery to prevent harmful oyster harvesting practices, and because the oyster commons were at risk of becoming open access.

Alongside these programs, oyster harvesters themselves became concerned about the sustainability of their fishery. In 2006, oyster harvesters in the community of Karmalloh started the TRY[1] Oyster Women's Association (hereafter TRY) with the help of a local businesswoman. From this community, the association grew to oversee the entire network of around 500 oyster harvesters in 15 communities around the TWNP. TRY was eventually registered as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) aiming to tackle the 'connected challenges of unemployment and coastal degradation' (UNDP, 2013:4). In 2009, it became linked to the *Ba Nafaa* project and in 2012, gained sole rights to the entire oyster fishery and partial responsibility for its conservation through a co-management plan between the Gambian Department of Fisheries, the Department of Parks and Wildlife, the Department of Forestry and the National Environment Agency. The emergence of TRY provides a key insight into how group subjectivities form around natural resource management.

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[1] TRY is not an acronym but originated from the women's desire to try and improve their lives.

4. Methods

The research presented in this paper is based on data collected during two periods of fieldwork, the first in 2012 (May-June) and the second in 2014 (March-April) in seven communities next to the TWNP, in the community of Kartong and at the TRY Oyster Women's Association central office. The methods included participant and direct observation of oyster harvesting and oyster shucking in communities and in the mangroves; workshops and focus group discussions held at the central office with women from different communities; and in-depth semi-structured interviews with oyster harvesters. To follow up from themes raised during the initial focus groups and those that arose during participant observation, the interviews were focused around three main themes: i) knowledge and description of oysters and mangroves; ii) daily lives and alternative livelihoods during the closed season; and iii) perceptions of the TRY Oyster Women's Association and how it has influenced oyster harvesting. Interviews also touched on questions of ethnicity, gender and status and how they relate to oyster harvesting. In addition, we reviewed literature including TRY Oyster Women's Association project reports, participatory rural appraisal reports and the Tanbi co-management plan.

5. Intersections and individual subjectivities: class, gender and self-worth

Most accounts of oyster harvesting in The Gambia emphasise the socio-economic factors that influence resource use. Oyster harvesting is seen as 'an arduous and low status occupation' (New Agriculturist, 2013), 'dominated by the poorest members of the most economically marginalised communities' (UNDP, 2013:4).

While it is clear that oyster harvesting plays a key role in the livelihoods of low income households (Njie and Drammeh, 2011), the dominant narrative misses two key factors: i) the intersection of gender and class in shaping identities and resource use; and ii) the fact that oyster harvesting provides women with a strong sense of identity and self-worth. Oyster harvesting is not simply a last resort livelihood choice made by poor and marginalized women. Instead, oyster harvester subjectivities, or lived experiences, change across the spaces of the fishery. This section explores these subjectivities by examining the materiality of oyster harvesting and how oyster harvesters articulate intersections of class, gender, status and self worth.

Oyster harvester subjectivities are produced in large part by the performance of physical hard work in the mangroves of the TWNP and at landing sites. Oyster harvesting is laborious, physically demanding and often dangerous. Harvesters row out to the mangroves in small wooden boats and chip oysters off the mangrove roots with a small axe or knife. They then pile these oysters into baskets or the hull of their boats. Oyster harvester's hands and feet often bear signs of hard physical work; cuts, abrasions and bruises are common. Less frequently, harvesters are struck by toxic parasites living on the oysters. When exposed to air these parasites shoot a toxin that causes painful, swollen skin inflammation. Each season at least three or four oyster harvesters are hit in the face and are unable to work for several days. In addition, there is the ever-present risk of the harvesters' small boats capsizing, especially concerning given that many women cannot swim.

Once collected, the oysters are transported back to land. Women row the oysters back to their community's landing site and carry the baskets of oysters to a communal area. Several harvesting sites lack infrastructure to store oyster baskets or boats and so some women must carry their heavy baskets for the 30 minutes to an hour it takes to walk back to their homes. Oysters are shucked (the meat removed with a knife) with the help of other oyster harvesters, family and children. The meat is then roasted, smoked or sun-dried and sold at market or roadside stalls for about 25 dalasi[2] per small can. A 2010 study estimated that oyster harvesting for that year provided women with an average income of about 12,369 dalasi (approximately US$ 280) for the season (Njie and Drammeh, 2011).

Coupled with the arduous physical experience of oyster harvesting, oyster harvester livelihoods are insecure. Oyster harvesting is often an unpredictable source of income. Indeed, although women in all communities select harvest sites in their *bolongs* on a rotating basis, there is no system in place to ensure the location has not already been harvested. Thus, even though oysters are sedentary, women sometimes struggle to find abundant sites:

> If we go [to a site] and find that there are no oysters, then we go to another place. So it is luck. It's like fishing, you throw your net and you haul, you cannot look inside your net. You throw, and then you bring it in and you may get fish or you may not get fish.
>
> — Oyster harvester from Old Jeshwang

Women cannot plan how far they may need to row in a day, nor predict how many oysters they will bring back.

This sense of uncertainty is a key part of oyster harvester subjectivity, and means that money made from oyster harvesting is insecure. As with an inability to predict where unharvested sites will be, oyster harvesters express their financial insecurity as an unavoidable outcome of working at sea. Several women explained their livelihood vulnerability through sea metaphors. For instance, one woman introduced a Jola idiom that ‘money from the sea is like water’. She explained that, like water, the money from oyster harvesting does not stay in hand. Just as the ocean has high and low tides, money also ebbs and flows. She also elaborated that:

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[2] At the time of research the exchange rate was approximately 40 dalasi to US$1

> The fisherman will get 1500 [dalasi] today, tomorrow he goes back to sea and he doesn’t have a good catch, and the 1500 [dalasi] he had yesterday is all gone. Money from the sea cannot be managed properly.
>
> — Oyster harvester from Faji Kunda

Thus, to be an oyster harvester is to be uniquely tied to the fluctuations of the sea. We explore the link between Jola ethnic identity and oyster harvester’s spatial connections to the sea further in Section 5.

While oyster harvesting is both arduous and precarious, oyster harvesters embrace and favour this uncertainty over the power struggles embedded in the uncertainty of more formal waged-worked, which places women at the mercy of the ups and downs of the Gambian economy and the whims of potential employers.[3] For example, a migrant oyster harvester from Guinea Bissau who had worked in the laundry service for 18 years lost her job when the business suddenly relocated. Indeed, many women previously employed in the maid industry have moved into oyster harvesting:

> Those [new arrivals] have not been harvesting oysters because they were housemaids, but now the housemaid industry is declining because they don’t have good pay there and sometimes they are not even paid. So those people have decided to stop and they have joined the oyster harvesting now.

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[3] Focus groups revealed that most women’s husbands held temporary jobs as night watchmen or bricklayers (field notes 22.03.14)

— Oyster harvester from Old Jeshwang

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Several others working in the laundry service industry in the closed season return to oyster harvesting each year because it is more lucrative.[4] In the communities we studied all women abandon other livelihood activities (except for gathering firewood) during the oyster open season.

A key part of oyster harvester subjectivity is the view that oyster harvesting is higher status than waged work. Indeed, in several interviews women expressed a palpable aversion to maid work. They directly contrasted the sense of self-worth and independence in oyster harvesting with the shame of being at someone else's behest. For example, one woman explained that:

> If you are working for people it is not a high job. It's dehumanizing and some form of slavery…. sometimes you work for people and they don't pay you. That's not fair. When someone does laundry service for you, you have to pay them… They sometimes accuse us of stealing; all those things are there. You should not work as slaves for other people. Working for other people is too hard.
>
> — Oyster harvester from Karmalloh

Oyster harvesters connect oyster harvesting to a strong sense of individual self-worth by emphasizing the shamefulness of employment as a domestic servant and contrasting it with the importance of freedom and independence:

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[4] Focus group 22.03.14

> You know service is of low class... Before you go and work for other people, it is better to work for yourself. They are not better than you. Some people have that belief. There are even places that mock [Jola maids].
>
> — Oyster harvester from Karmalloh

Thus, even though the incomes from waged-work and oyster harvesting are both precarious, having control over of one's own work is important to oyster harvesters. Indeed, even the physical hard work is linked to this sense of self-worth. Interviewees emphasized the benefits of the physicality of oyster harvesting. As one woman from Lamin noted, 'it's good to work and sweat, it's good to exercise [for your own livelihood].'

An understanding of oyster harvesting as a more lucrative, less stigmatised, less low-status livelihood than working as a maid or launderer unsettles assumptions about the marginality and 'low status' of oyster harvesters. While women are drawn to the fishery in part because of precarious wage labour and the possibility of higher earning, there are equally important elements of value, a strong sense of self-worth and reflection on stigma and wider class issues in Gambian society. Women navigate and challenge realms of class (i.e. how they are subjected by external actors) by proclaiming oyster harvesting of higher class than service work.[5]

Yet, class and status are only part of oyster harvester's subjectivity. As members of a household and family, oyster harvesters experience a gendered responsibility to provide for and support their children. Women are responsible, sometimes solely, for the needs and education of the children within their household. Many of the women interviewed said they needed to harvest oysters in order to pay for children’s school fees and food, sometimes because their husbands were absent or deceased. During focus groups many women stressed that, although the men pay for some things, it is the mothers - no matter what - who take care of the children’s health and education. Previous studies show that women mostly pursue oyster harvesting to generate income for school fees, house rent, medical bills and food (Drammeh, 2010a, b and c). In this setting, children, and their care, are very much considered to be a woman’s domain. Oyster harvesting is thereby entwined with gendered subjectivities of motherhood, carer and provider.

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[5] This perception may reflect wider, historical class and ethnic tensions whereby Jola women migrated to work as maids in urban households. In Senegal, Wolof women found domestic work demeaning (Linares 2003:121) and treated Jola maids accordingly.

In different settings these very subjectivities appear to conflict with different perceptions of the status of oyster harvesting. For example, while oyster harvesters understand their work as a means of supporting their children and thus a source of pride, they did not want their children to become harvesters themselves. All women interviewed held different aspirations for their children. Many women wanted their children to gain an education and do ‘office work’ in the city rather than gathering oysters. While most children and teenagers helped to prepare and sell oysters, women did not involve them in the actual oyster harvesting. So although oyster harvesters link their self-employment to a personal sense of self-worth, many oyster harvesters have higher regard for jobs in the city or in an office. Oyster harvester subjectivities thus emerge from a set of tensions about status and self-worth, where women see oyster harvesting as a source of pride but also the means towards a better future (and different occupation) for their children. This tension re-emphasizes the way that subjectivities shift across space (Nightingale, 2011). Oyster harvester subjectivities can concurrently enrol a sense of self-worth, and be viewed as a means to a different future.

5. Ethnicity and group subjectivities: The importance of being Jola

As well as gender and class, ethnicity plays a key role in shaping resource use in the Tanbi wetland. Jola ethnicity intersects with class and gender as a key element of oyster harvester subjectivity. The fluid nature of this ethnicity is key not only to how oyster harvesters narrate the 'naturalness' of their livelihood practice, but also to the development of a collective subjectivity across the many communities within the fishery. As we discuss later in the paper, the sub-divisions and spatial dimensions of Jola ethnicity *intra*-act in the new contact zones to produce new group subjectivities. To help situate these *intra*-actions, this section details the complex and fluid nature of Jola ethnicity in the oyster fishery.

Although small, The Gambia is culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse, with at least ten ethnic groups and languages, and many more dialects (Juffermans and McGlynn, 2009). Members of the Jola ethnic group form approximately 11% of The Gambia's population and also live in Guinea-Bissau and the Casamance region of southern Senegal (Juffermans and McGlynn, 2009; Sonko-Godwin, 1985).

Ethnicity and historical tradition play significant roles in shaping resource use in the TWNP. Oyster harvesters in the Tanbi wetlands are mainly from the Jola ethnic group.[6] Academic and policy accounts of oyster harvesting in The Gambia place a large emphasis on the role of ethnic identity and tradition in oyster harvesting livelihoods:

> 'In western Gambia the…women [who work as shellfish harvesters] are mostly of the Jola tribe, while many are migrants from Guinea-Bissau and the Casamance region of Senegal' (UNDP, 2013:4).

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[6] A study of 507 harvesters in the Tanbi wetlands by Njie and Drammeh (2011) found that over 80% of harvesters were Jola

Jola women are viewed as ‘traditional gatherers’ (Crow and Carney, 2013:12) and ‘the traditional users of mangroves in Senegambia’ (ibid:17). During interviews, oyster harvesters themselves frequently referred to Jola ethnicity and kinship as a major part of their identity and resource practices. In particular, many women emphasized that oyster harvesting is ‘in the blood’:

> It’s our trade… our forefathers, our parents have been doing this, so now it is in our blood. Even if we don’t teach [new harvesters], the first day when they go to sea, they know [oyster harvesting]. It’s a gift to them. They just know it, it is natural, it is instinct.
>
> — Oyster harvester from Ibo Town

Yet, our findings suggest that Jola ethnicity is in fact more nuanced and has important sub-divisions and spatial dimensions, which are at times a source of tension across communities. These elements are crucial to understanding how group subjectivities in the fishery both change and remain bounded.

As with class, gender intersects with a Jola sense of shared ancestry, knowledge and practice. Oyster harvesters perceive their livelihood as part of a continuing historical tradition based on narratives, stories and explanations of previous techniques passed through generations of female harvesters:

> Our foremothers also harvested oysters. When our grandmothers used to harvest oysters, there was a method where you use a stick. When you go to sea you put the stick [in the water] - the stick will be stuck in the mud - and you hold on to the stick and pick the oysters [up]. Those oysters stick… and you just pick them [up].
>
> — Oyster harvester from Lamin

Alongside this gendered sense of shared history, ethnic identity also has an important spatial dimension that encompasses both men and women. Interviews revealed that a sense of shared Jola identity and practice is tied specifically to coastal landscapes and includes not just female oyster harvesters but also male fishers:

> ‘Our livelihood is at sea – we always like to go out to the sea.’
>
> — Oyster harvester from Faji Kunda

The spatial dimension to Jola identity is particularly important, since it leads to divisions *within* the broader Jola category. Oyster harvesters identified themselves as 'sea-side' Jolas and distinguished themselves from 'forest' Jola. In interviews they reinforced that the Jola category is not monolithic:

> [Oyster harvesting] is only for the Jola people living near the coast. The ones not at the sea cannot [harvest]. Like, we originated from Casamance where there is sea and mangroves. So *where we originated from is where our parents harvest, so it is in our blood*. But the other Jolas who do not have access to sea cannot harvest.
>
> — Oyster harvester from Faji Kunda

In addition to the broad dichotomy between ‘sea-side’ and ‘forest’ Jola, we found that interviewees often identified further sub-groups based on clan relations and dialects. So, for example, women from Ibo Town generally identified themselves as ‘Yutu Jola’, while those in Lamin were mainly from the ‘Elia clan’. As we explore later in the paper, different harvesting practices between clans and sub-groups have been a source of tension in the fishery.

Our findings suggest that there is no single Jola identity, but rather that numerous different components that women draw on to express what it is to be a Jola oyster harvester. This fits with the broader literature, which argues that the Jola ethnic group consists of various segmented groups and lineages, with members speaking a variety of dialects (Thomson, 2011; Linares, 1992; Sonko-Godwin, 1985). As Thomson (2011:117) has remarked, in The Gambia it is 'not uncommon for one's ethnicity to be sufficiently ambiguous to defy easy categorisation'. This fluidity may in fact be a key aspect of building collective subjectivities across different groups of resource users. It means that oyster harvesters can perceive an overall shared Jola identity and ancestry, and also make distinctions between sea-side and forest Jola, and clan based differences. Thus, in the TWNP, a sense of place, history and practice come together to shape *specific* Jola ethnic identities. These specific identities are enrolled in the group subjectivities born of TRY.

6. The new contact zones of oyster harvesting

In this section we explore how the new contact zones created through the TRY Oyster Women's Association - namely the community centre, group meetings and the annual oyster festival - have helped to create a new collective oyster harvester subjectivity. However, we caution against romanticising the ecological and social outcomes of this new group subjectivity, as a new sense of togetherness cannot and does not entirely replace existing group subjectivities based on clan alliances. Instead, the subjectivities of TRY exist concurrently with other subjectivities expressed and acted on at different times and spaces throughout the fishery.

Interviews with oyster harvesters show that TRY has created a new sense of shared group identity across the oyster fishery. All the women interviewed expressed that being part of TRY had changed how they viewed and acted towards other oyster harvesters. One woman very clearly articulated this change:

> Great changes have occurred since TRY began. Back in those days [before TRY], we just passed each other without greeting, but since TRY we've become *like one big family*. Now *we realize that we are all Jola*. We did not know each other - you know the dialects are different - and *we were not organized*. Every community was harvesting on their own, like the boundaries, if you crossed the boundary of the other communities we always quarrelled, now *we are unified, we feel like one big family that originate from one big tribe*.
>
> — Oyster harvester from Ibo Town (our italics)

Many oyster harvesters highlighted how their recognition of a shared Jola ethnicity was important to this new group subjectivity, which they likened to being part of a big family. TRY has thus brought together harvesters across geographic and linguistic divides. These new links are translated back into the physical spaces of oyster harvesting. Women, who once silently passed each other in the mangroves, now recognise and greet each other on the water. Thus, TRY has enabled women to *intra*-act (Barad, 2003), changing their lived experiences of oyster harvesting and relationships to each other. Furthermore, these new links are not superficial:

> When I die now, even those communities that are far away, up to Kartong and Kubuneh, they will know that Mary*, Mary has passed away and everybody will come to the burial.
>
> — Oyster harvester from Faji Kunda, * name changed

How did this sense of a ‘big TRY family’ emerge? We posit that the spaces and practices of TRY have created contact zones where previously separated groups now come together, and their contact and *intra*-action has blurred the boundaries between oyster harvesting groups from different communities.

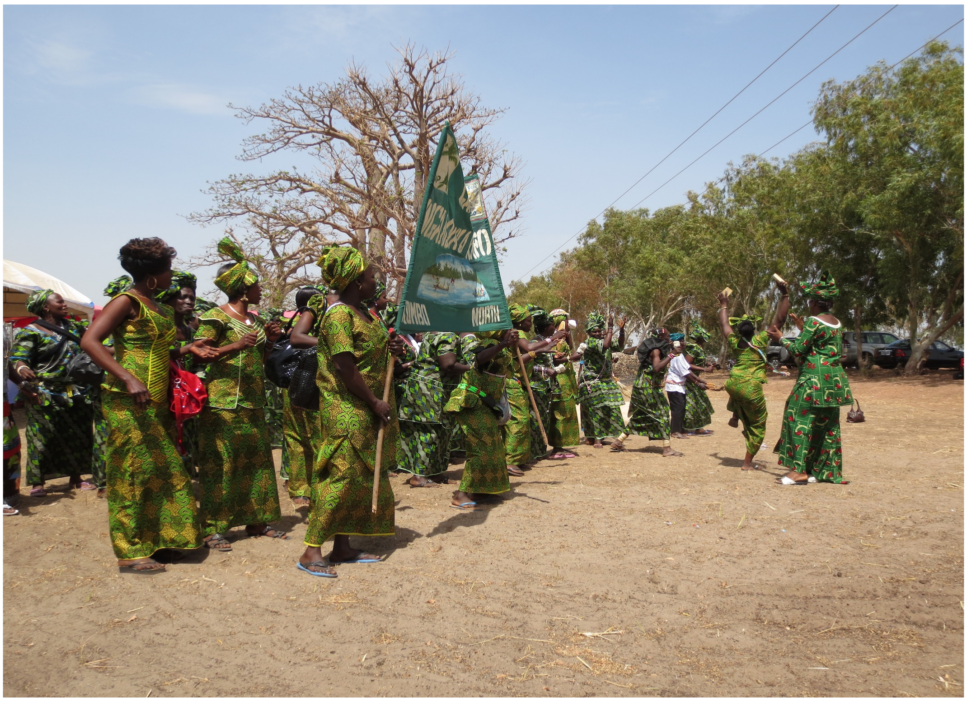
The TRY central office, located in Old Jeshwang is the main contact zone. The office serves as a communal centre, owned equally by all members of TRY. This provides a neutral space where women from diverse and dispersed communities gather. Women who attend meetings at the office are reimbursed for their travel costs, allowing women could not otherwise afford to travel to participate. Thus, women from as far away as Kubuneh, which lies outside the Tanbi wetland on the border of Cassamance, feel connected to the women who live around Banjul. When women attend workshops or meetings as part of TRY, they sit together, eat together, and share stories and experiences. Furthermore, there are routine administrative practices that happen at meetings such as taking the roster, voting on matters and representatives and sometimes receiving certificates as part of programs. In fact, all women at the meetings we observed had a genuine and common concern that all the administration, particularly noting down all attendees, be properly completed.

The TRY office forms the neutral platform required for different groups to negotiate rules for the management of the fishery. By providing this space for discussion (and indeed, encouraging and sometimes provoking heated debate), TRY has brought oyster harvesters together through the very process of creating new harvesting rules. Our interviews revealed that the interactions within this contact zone have helped to address some of the tensions between oyster harvesting groups.

These deliberations have attempted to address the problem of oyster over-harvesting by changing both the temporal and spatial practices of harvesting. The women voted to institute open and closed seasons, and agreed to reduce the open season from seven months (December to June) in 2011 to four months (March to June) in the following years. Each community retained an exclusive *bolong* to change the spatial dynamics of oyster harvesting, encourage harvesters to manage oyster populations, and preserve mangrove cover and structure. Thus, while many oyster areas remained open access, each community in effect gained sole rights to an equally sized area, usually near the community's landing sites. Beyond simply instituting new rules about spatial and temporal dynamics of oyster harvesting, however, the very process of changing formal access rules created a sense of unification. The communities within TRY have not only changed harvesting practices in the oyster fishery, but through collaborating have created a sense of togetherness.

There are also contact zones beyond the meetings at the TRY office. TRY runs a broad range of development projects such as skills training for the daughters of TRY members and a savings scheme to help women manage the income they earn from oyster harvesting. These activities expand the meaning of TRY in oyster harvester's everyday lives. Furthermore, TRY's activities in the Tanbi mangroves have also helped create a sense of collective purpose. TRY provided the materials and training to set up aquaculture racks to increase oyster yields. The organization then worked with communities to select locations, build and maintain their own aquaculture racks. In addition, TRY extends contact zones beyond the mangroves. At the end of the open season, TRY holds an oyster festival (Figure 2). The festival was first held in 2007 at the community of Karmalloh's oyster processing site along the Banjul-Serrekunda Highway. The festival was started to both raise awareness of TRY within The Gambia and to bring the various groups of oyster harvesters together in celebration through music and dancing. Throughout the day of the festival, oyster harvesters from all communities cook, eat and celebrate together. In addition, TRY has run several study tours to Senegal for oyster harvesters to learn about different methods of preserving and preparing oysters. These study tours included representatives from each oyster harvesting community. These activities, alongside the large group meetings, have played a role in cultivating the sense of shared subjectivity expressed in interviews as being part of a 'big family/tribe/group'.

Figure 2. The TRY Oyster Festival. Photo: Ivan Scales



While TRY has helped to create a sense of shared subjectivity, there is a danger in assuming that this subjectivity neatly and simply corresponds to changes in oyster harvesting practices and more sustainable mangrove use. In some cases, the opposite is in fact true. One interviewee highlighted how a sense of shared subjectivity meant that newcomers to the mangroves could not be turned away, leading to increased pressure on the mangroves:

> The most pressing challenge is the lack of alternative livelihoods, and also that the population of oyster harvesters is high. *But we are all relatives, so you cannot stop people harvesting*. So the number is high. But the oysters are not enough for all of us.
>
> — Oyster harvester from Karmalloh

The sense of shared ancestry and kinship and the way that oyster harvesting is perceived to be ‘in the blood’ of Jola women entitles them to access the fishery and receive assistance from their more established relatives or community members. In this case, a sense of shared rights to access based on ethnicity and kinship may be detrimental to the fishery’s overall sustainability as the boundaries of user-groups become more fluid and difficult to limit.

In addition, although the TRY has increased collaboration and broadened notions of a big TRY community, the new institutions and practices have also led to tension and conflict between the community groups involved. For example, for the community of Karmalloh, being the first group of the TRY remains a source of pride: ‘Yes. We started TRY here, number one! We are the first group in TRY here.’ When TRY began expanding, some of the women from Karmalloh were initially resistant because they believed that oyster harvesters from their community were the only rightful members. In addition, harvesting groups from different communities put unequal pressure on the fishery. The increased contact through TRY has made these differences more obvious. One woman complained that a particular clan in TRY now harvests as a collective and thus gains unfair advantages (as well as potentially placing more pressure on resources). By dividing up the labour of harvesting, shucking and marketing, this clan creates economies of scale which enable them to extract more oysters; a sub-group of women can constantly harvest throughout the week while the rest of the group focuses on processing and selling the oysters. Thus, although it is tempting to view the establishment of new collectives as inherently good, they may create new tensions between groups by bringing different practices into view. Nonetheless, contact zones do at least provide a platform for groups to begin to navigate these tensions.

So while TRY has indeed generated a sense of collective subjectivity, women can feel at once unified as one big ‘TRY tribe', but also unhappy about clan-based differences in harvesting practices. This seeming contradiction can be explained by the way that oyster harvesters are subjected differently in various contexts. Individual TRY oyster harvesters do not always neatly fit with the TRY group subjectivity. Instead, individuals inhabit contradictory subjectivities, meaning that oyster harvester subjectivities vary over time and space, differing for instance between local communities, or when part of a larger workshop as a representative of TRY. In other words, oyster harvesters can concurrently experience a sense of being part of a unified group working towards the goal of sustainably managing their resource, *and* part of a smaller cooperative wishing to best profit from their own exclusive *bolong*.

7. Conclusion

Our work on mangrove oyster harvesting in The Gambia has revealed how ethnicity, gender and class intersect to shape individual and group subjectivities and practice. While most accounts of oyster harvesters focus on poverty as the main driver of resource use, we have encountered a much richer reality. Although there is no doubt that oyster harvesting is physically demanding and precarious, it is also linked to feelings of self-worth - especially when held in contrast to maid work, which is likened to servitude. Furthermore, oyster harvesting is driven by strong gendered responsibilities relating to the care and education of children. Oyster harvesting thus enrols gendered subjectivities of motherhood, carer and provider.

Ethnicity also plays a key role in shaping oyster harvester subjectivities. Oyster harvesting is tied to a spatially and historically bounded sense of Jola ethnicity and kinship. However, our findings suggest that there is no single Jola identity, but rather that there are numerous different components that women draw on to express what it means to be a Jola oyster harvester. The fluidity of ethnic identity, and the way it becomes internalised by individuals and groups, means that oyster harvesters can perceive an overall shared Jola identity and ancestry but at the same time make distinctions between sea-side and forest Jola, and between different clans.

Finally, our research has revealed the importance of space and place in the formation of individual and group subjectivities. The intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, class and status are enacted in the spaces and material practices of the oyster fishery - in the mangroves themselves; at the landing sites and processing sites; and in the new contact zones of the TRY Oyster Women's Association central office and the oyster festival. These contact zones are key to understanding how group subjectivities emerge in natural resource use and management. They have not only brought together women from different and previously distant communities to interact, they have also led to *intra*-action (Barad, 2003), so that previous boundaries that existed between oyster harvesting groups from different communities have become blurred and Jola ethnic identity has become broadened. This process has changed the way women understand and experience their sense of what it is to be an oyster harvester, and indeed, what it is to be Jola.

Although the TRY has increased collaboration and broadened notions of a ‘big TRY community’, the new institutions and practices have also led to tension and conflict between the different community groups involved. Oyster harvesters can concurrently experience a sense of being part of a unified group working towards the goal of sustainably managing their resource, *and* part of a smaller cooperative wishing to best profit from their own exclusive *bolong*. Oyster harvesting subjectivities are full of such tensions and contradictions. Oyster harvesting is *at the same time* an arduous practice relied on by poor marginalised women *and* a source of pride that is seen as preferable to maid work. Furthermore, while women take great pride in oyster harvesting and see in terms of a matrilineal heritage, they also wish for a different future for their children. Finally, the new institutions and contact zones created through the TRY Association are both a source of new relationships and shared identities *and* a source of conflict. The broadening of Jola identities through the TRY Oyster Women’s Association means that migrants are welcomed but also a source of concern. Some groups are criticised for the efficient division of labour and greater harvesting rates that the new group subjectivity has facilitated. Shared identity can thus be at once uniting and divisive. These tensions are never fully resolved and subjectivities are the product of a process of continual negotiation (Gibson, 2001).

Our findings have important implications not only for the way research on human-environment interactions deals with the role of identity in shaping resource use, but also for the way policy attempts to influence natural resource management. Literature on common pool resources suggests that the formation of group identity and norms plays a crucial role in developing strategies to stop over harvesting (Agrawal, 2001; Janssen, 2010; Ostrom, 1990; Beitl, 2011; Mosimane et al., 2012).

However, our research suggests that forming new group identities can lead to contradictory outcomes, especially as different forms of social difference intersect. For example, while the newly delineated *bolongs* have spatially organised oyster harvesting so that open access resources are now regulated, the broadened notion of Jola ethnic identity has helped the integration of newly arrived migrants. So although a sense of shared identity has the potential to increase cooperation and reduce pressure on mangroves, it also means that migrants are not turned away, potentially increasing pressure on mangroves. While mangrove tributaries can be firmly bounded and assigned to groups, the boundaries of the user-groups themselves are fluid and difficult to limit. Revealing the complex interplay of identities and natural resource use in the Tanbi wetlands underscores the need for continuing work on how to better integrate socio-cultural analysis with policies and projects in conservation and development (Poe et al., 2013; Batterbury and Beddington, 1999) and for research to incorporate fluid identities, intersectionality and subjectivity into analyses of natural resource use.

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