

Nazare fishery

‘Who’s not rowing, has rowed already’

Despite changes wrought by modernization, the fishing community of Nazare would like to cling on to its roots

Nazare is located 135 km north of Lisbon, on the Atlantic coast. Until 1985, it functioned as a natural port. The boats used to be beached on the seaside and all the activities related to fishing-sorting, processing and sale of fish-would take place in the vicinity of the shore.

At the start of the 1980s, Portugal expressed its desire to enter the European Economic Community (EEC). Portugal became a member of the EEC in 1986. This event marked a turning point in the organization of the country’s fishing industry, which then became the focus of a revival that promised real progress for the national economy.

A special plan to modernize the national ports was begun. Investments in harbour installations were five times more than for the rest of the fishery sector. Priority targets were the modernization of infrastructure and the mechanization of auctions, which lightened the labour of the men.

In 1983, a harbour complex was begun in Nazare. It was inaugurated in 1985. In the meantime, the location of this harbour-in the suburbs and no longer in the centre of town-implied that the people of Nazare would soon be faced with domestic changes.

Their economic and social life underwent a great transformation, particularly with the inauguration of computerized auctions. This also forced the fishermen to re-define their organizations.

“The fishermen’s community soon found itself involved in far-reaching political and economic developments. What influences would national and international policies have on the

resources and lives of the fishermen and their families, and on the identity of the Nazare community? This was the question that seemed to trouble most people in the community.

Nationally, the building of harbour complexes in Portugal coincided with a plan to restructure the country’s fishing fleet by trimming its size by over 40 per cent in three years. The first to be affected by this decree were the traditional Nazare boats, which had no decks and were propelled by small outboard engines. In size, 85 per cent of them would be under two CRT.

Historically, in the 18th century, the native population of Poderneira was colonized by fishermen who came from the north of Portugal. The fusion of these two maritime communities-one fishing with lines and the other with nets-was possible since these two techniques did not conflict in the fishing ground.

The migrant fishermen, that is, the latecomers, showed a remarkable sense of adaptation to the environment, adapting their fishing and sailing gear to local geographic and ecological parameters. This is evident in the last of the ‘Candil’ purse-seiners, used for small-scale fishing. Their style is a throwback to the boatbuilding history of the community.

Further, these fishermen have been able to adapt themselves to the new situation by borrowing methods from other ports of Europe.

Large purse-seiners

Examples are the arrival of the large ‘Galea’ purse-seiners (over 15 m in length and propelled by six pairs of oars) at the start of the 20th century, and of the first steamboats in the 1920s, which grew

greatly in numbers just a year after their introduction.

These migrant fishermen could also raise production by diversifying the use of territories. The existence of a common interest between the two groups of fishermen fuelled a fast osmosis. This has created a group united by the sea, and whose fishing techniques are still technically and economically distinctive.

Immersed in an environment and a lifestyle noticeably different from those of land-based people, the identity of the fishermen of Nazare bears the unmistakable mark of the sea.

Equally at home with both lines and nets, the Nazareans exploit very different fishing areas, each having its own specificities in terms of the means of production, gear or the hierarchical organization of crews.

Among the crew, the boatowner or the 'patron' plays an essential role. The introduction of navigation instruments on the inboard powered boats has changed the very basis of the owner's know-how, shifting it from the empirical to the technical.

But the former skills have remained intact among the boatowners who still fish according to the techniques of their ancestors.

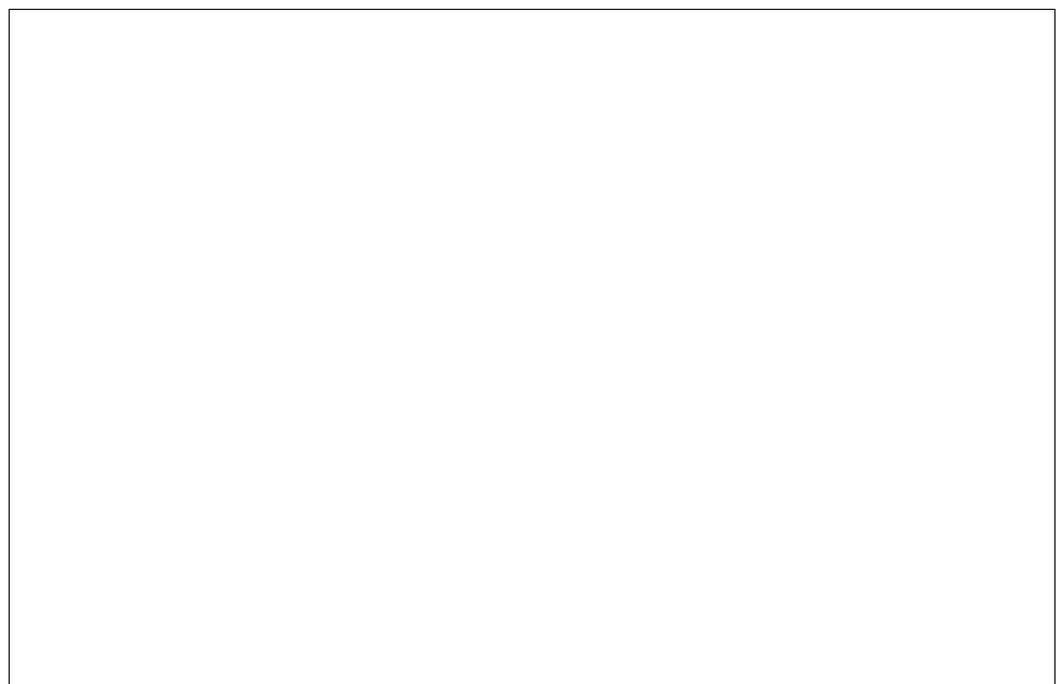
The crews comprise specialists as well as ordinary operators. This differentiation is less pronounced aboard the smaller units, where the multifaceted skills of the men elicit co-operation among the crew members.

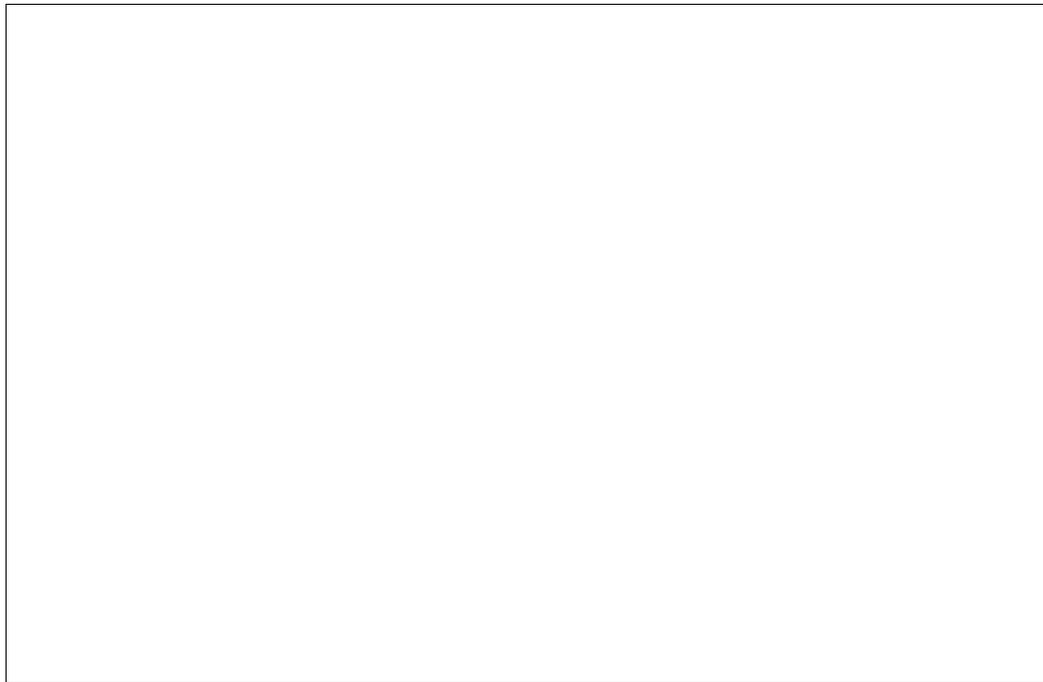
In Nazare, it is difficult to distinguish a worker from his partner or associate, particularly when the owner is also part of the crew and employs a few members of his own family.

These binding family relations and the predominance of independent work in this sector explain the diverse ways in which capital and labour combine in the exploitation of the fishery.

Even if, traditionally, the composition of crews was based on family ties, some economic and social circumstances—notably, the lack of work and, lately, the refusal of sons to follow in the footsteps of their fathers—have modified these arrangements. Commonly, the employer and owner of the fishing boat will transfer ownership to his own son, whom he usually employs on board.

Also, over the years, numerous wrecks have prompted the fathers to be more prudent. They now choose to keep their sons away from the boats so as to prevent the risk of a multiple bereavement which could destroy an entire family and reduce it to misery.





At present, apart from some attempts by family associations -which often cease abruptly due to generations-old confrontations-the percentage of family members working in the same crew is almost nil. This is now a characteristic feature of the organization of Nazare crews.

Today, in most cases, the crews comprise locals who are not related to the boatowner, but who are usually linked by strong bonds of comradeship. They are all bound by the events which occur to the crew, and it is on this unity that the fishermen base their strength.

The practice of fishing is constant all year round. The boatowner redistributes the catch among all those who have taken part in the fishing activities, both at sea and ashore.

However, bad weather and difficulty of access to fishing grounds, especially for the small boats which work near the shore, are handicaps which the presence of a port has not been able to overcome.

The experience and know-how of the fishermen of Nazare are acknowledged by shipowners and fishing societies from other ports of Portugal. The community has built a reputation for its work and its courage. This is their only reward, not a tangible rise in the incomes of fishing families.

Traditionally, the town is also a source for the supply of labour. The Nazareans are especially numerous in the crews of cod-fishing boats. They are known to be excellent technicians, specialists in line fishing, while those who practise purse-seining are much sought after for the exceptional quality of the fish they catch.

The social organization of the fishermen community was based on a division of labour by which men worked only at sea. This became more pronounced since the beginning of the 20th century, when one of their erstwhile tasks, the transporting of fish from the port to the market, was relegated to the women.

One production unit

The fisherman's family was a true production unit, where all aspects of fishing took place. Men were responsible for the fishing gear and navigation devices, and for the actual fishing, while the women remained ashore and participated in the transport, processing and sale of the fish. They also did some fishing near the shore, using shore-seines, or in the river's estuary. All this was, of course, in addition to the traditional domestic duties. Nonetheless, women continued to be influential members of the community.

However, as a consequence of the development of Nazare's fishery sector,

women have disappeared from the complementary activities connected with the fishery. There has been a redefinition of their roles and status within the community.

Until 1930, the auctions in Nazare used to take place close to the landing site. The fisherwomen would bring their baskets down to the auctions, which were conducted directly on the shore.

But, slowly, the auction sites moved farther and farther away from the landing area. Simultaneously, the task of transporting fish from the landing centre to the new auction centre and also to the processing plants fell on women, who came to be called *cabezeiras* in Portuguese (literally meaning headloaders). In other parts of Portugal, however, it was still the fishermen who transported fish to the auctions and processing plants.

Until the 1950s, the social organization of the fishermen's community remained unchanged, with long-standing traditions and heritage transmitted from one generation to the other. Still, there did occur a transformation of the fabric of Nazare society. While the fishermen's population dwindled into a minority, the numbers of land-based people increased. Alongside, some new economic activities appeared, while older ones were improved and developed.

In 1950, the distribution of the working population of Nazare was thus: 59 percent in the primary sector (mainly fishery), 15 per cent in the secondary sector and 26 per cent in the tertiary sector (the national average being, respectively, 43 per cent, 24 per cent and 27 per cent). In the secondary sector, the manpower was distributed mainly between the food industry (5 per cent), construction (6 per cent) and the textile industry (5 per cent). In the tertiary sector, trade (11 per cent) and services (3 per cent) dominated.

Fishery-related activities have evolved over the years. Today, there are two fish canning factories in Nazare, which together employ 104 female workers. Small firms exist alongside some large firms which distribute marine products beyond the areas already covered by the

tradeswomen of Nazare. The owners of these larger firms are not themselves fishermen. This marks a break-up in the traditional organization of the fish markets of Nazare and opens the way for 'non-native' fish dealers.

The women are gradually abandoning distribution activities. Walking, riding donkeys or using lightweight carts, they can not compete with professional firms equipped with modern distribution systems. Only those women who can invest in a driving licence and can afford a delivery van will remain in the market, increase their incomes and differentiate themselves from the other women of the fishing community through some external signs of wealth: the ownership of gold Jewellery or even lodgings to be let out to tourists.

The other women will have to limit their roles to a family economy, or become employees in the tertiary sector, where operations linked to tourism create mostly female employment. Hotels, restaurants, and food and souvenir stalls are the areas where the wives and daughters of the fishermen can be seen today.

It was from the period 1985-90 onwards that the women began to turn to activities from which they had so far been abstaining. They started attending courses for licences to fish or mend nets. Previously, mending nets was a typically male domain.

The women have slowly left all the sectors originally meant for them unloading, sorting and processing fish, and selling at auctions in the local or regional markets. This change has come about not only because these activities have been shifted from the village, as the harbour complex has taken over the activities of the fishing economy.

The change is also because fishing activities are now dominated by men. Fish processing is today totally in the hands of large firms, except for a few old women who still undertake traditional drying.

More male involvement

More and more men are engaged in different stages of fish processing and marketing. Dealing in fish has become a

male profession, after having remained essentially a female task. Today the only activity that the fishermen of Nazare continue on shore is the making and mending of nets.

Thanks to the reputation of the quality of the sardines and fish of Nazare, which have crossed local and regional borders, a market economy has developed.

Distribution networks, initially very localized, are operated by the Nazare women. They function at various levels: the street, the quarter and the town. The status and role of the women enable them to create networks of exchange of goods as well as information.

Compared to the feverish activity of the women, one could easily call the fishermen indolent, even lazy, when they are ashore such is their inactivity.

However, it should be remembered that their courage, energy and perseverance while at sea should be seen in the context of a social and economical organization where each individual has a clearly defined role. This way, the sexual division of labour is justified in terms of collaboration towards some goals of social and economic balance.

These changes have transformed the traditional lifestyle of the Nazare community. At present, the fishermen and their families are a minority among the other categories which make up the Nazare population, namely, officers, clerks, artisans, contractors, doctors, painters and writers.

But what still unites the fishing community is the old adage 'Who's not rowing, has rowed already.' All of them the 'naked feet' and the 'shod feet', as they are popularly known, that is, fishermen and non-fishermen stem from the same roots. All their ancestors have had in common the fact of being fishermen.

It must be remembered that the Nazareans are originally a population of fishermen. That is the essential identity they wish to preserve and the one they want others to accord them. ♣

This article, written by ethnologist Christine Escallier, has been translated from French by Roberta Valente