

ANG MGA KABABAYEN-AN SA KABAYBAYON (WOMEN OF THE COAST): LIFE HISTORIES OF DEEP-SEA WOMEN FISHERS IN GOVERNOR GENEROSO, DAVAO ORIENTAL

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Using the life history approach, this paper presents three stories from three different barangays in Governor Generoso, Davao Oriental. *Nanay* Soping (age 62), *Ate* Nene (49), and *Auntie* Alet (55), are deep-sea women fishers who employ different fishing methods (*pamasol* and *pangundak* or hook-and-line), and who engage in “barter” (exchange of fish for other commodities between small traders and commercial fishers), as well as *panapyaw* (using fish nets called *sapyaw* and *sibot* to catch fish over the bigger gill-nets of commercial fishing vessels). I draw on these three life histories to examine larger socio-cultural practices and processes that inform the lives of women of the coast. Instead of stressing on women’s disempowerment in the fisheries sector, I lay more emphasis on their individual capabilities as deep-sea fishers and highlight their abilities as equally functioning agents. This paper also examines the existence, or lack thereof, of women fishers’ groups and organizations. Pink’s (2009) ‘sensory ethnography,’ audio and visual documentations, and participant observation are the methods of this study.

Keywords: *Women, life history, deep-sea fishing, agency, economic activity*

Introduction

*Sa dagat, naay kwarta;
sa dagat, mapakaon nako akong pamilya;
sa dagat, malipay ko.*

In the sea [in fishing], there is money;
in the sea [in fishing], I can feed my family;
in the sea [in fishing], I am happy.

- Ate Nene, 49

This paper documents and analyzes the status and plight of deep-sea women fishers using life histories.¹ Fishing is commonly perceived as a male-dominated field because it is believed that men's strength and stamina enable them to survive in the open sea. However, there are also deep-sea women fishers who fish for a living. I aim to reflect upon these life histories into larger socio-cultural and economic processes.

Women's involvement in the fisheries sector is often underestimated. They are seen as supporters of men rather than equally functioning agents (Siason et al 2002). This is because most of their contributions are not 'quantified.' Sobritchea (citing Firth 1984) claimed that in all rural regions, women perform roles of great economic significance which often fail to be appreciated and do not find their way into the standard calculations of gross national product and allied quantities (Sobritchea 1987). A sense of disempowerment is imposed on women given that their efforts are undervalued. Siason et al. (2002) further assert that "[t]he degree of participation of women in the fisheries sector is an overall reflection of the cultures, the laws of the country and the priority given by the state to ensure gender equity." These women deserve more appreciation and attention, and their needs deserve to be heard and addressed. One of the most important yet unappreciated roles of women in the fisheries sector is their contribution in the pre- and post-fishing practices. In some contexts, the more physical aspects of fishing and aquaculture may not be suitable for women, but they may contribute in other ways, such as providing ideas and thoughts on fisheries issues (Siason et al. 2002). On the national level, the wives of small-scale fishermen are significant in terms of what they do before and after fishing (Siason et al. 2002). Chapman (1987) asserts that women's fishing is much more restricted spatially, being mainly confined to the reef flats and lagoon and rarely occurring in the deep-water zone beyond the reef.

Methodological notes. I set the following criteria in the search for three deep-sea women fishers. First, they must be women (females), who are married, and who fish in the deep-sea (defined to be 100 fathoms deep) alone, with their spouse, or as a group. Second, they must be active in deep-sea fishing or have been active within the last year or two. Third, they must

¹ Life history is defined as an account of a life based on interviews and conversation. It is based on the collection of a written or transcribed oral account. It is subsequently edited, interpreted, and presented in one of a number of ways, often in conjunction with other sources. It may be topical, focusing on only one segmented portion of a life, or complete, attempting to tell the full details of a life as it is recollected (Ojermark 2007).

be recognized as women fishers by the people of the barangay in which they live. *Nanay* Soping (age 62), *Ate* Nene (49), and *Auntie* Alet (55) are three deep-sea women fishers who employ different fishing methods.² Their life histories illuminate their status and plight as women fishers and those who are like them whose life histories are yet to be unravelled. I do not avow to present three complete life histories, but rather to present what I have gathered during the limited time of one month of field work. In this paper, I use *Nanay*, *Ate*, and *Auntie* as terms of reference for them respectively, and I will use *Tatay* as the term of reference to their spouses, too, respectively. Deep-sea fishing is one of their many economic activities, and it is treated as their 'main' economic activity. The shifts and turns of their lives made them the women that they are today. Additionally, this paper discusses the key factors that affect the decision-making process in their becoming women fishers. Thus, agency (Giddens 1984) and gender roles in the fisheries sector (Siason et al. 2002) are central concepts in this research.

I begin by averring that 'women in fishing communities' is different from 'women *in* fishing.' By 'women,' I refer to married females from the age of 18 years old and over. Living in a coastal area does not equate with working in the fisheries sector nor does it mean that they are automatically wives of fishermen. So, I ask this question: What do women in coastal communities do? I pertain to their actual activities based on what I have observed and learned through conversing with and observing them. Most of them are housewives. They are married to commercial and local fishers, farmers, *sari-sari* (convenience) store owners, *pukot* (fish net) weavers. Some are involved in the informal economy (e.g. gambling), some are employed as overseas Filipino workers, and some are engaged in the fisheries sector as shell gatherers, gill-net fishers. A very few are deep-sea fishers. In the socio-political aspect, there are incumbent women councilors (at least in Barangay Montserrat), and women assume positions in the barangay; many are active in church activities; and all the members of 4Ps are obligated to become volunteers in the KALAHY-CIDSS: KKB³ project of the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

² *Nanay* (mother), *Ate* (elder sister), and *Auntie* (aunt) are all terms of respect to refer to kin or nonkin members.

³ KALAHY-CIDSS: KKB or Kapit Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan-Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services: Kapangyarihan at Kaunlaran sa Barangay is a barangay-based project under the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) that aims to reduce poverty by providing jobs and opportunities that can help the people at the local level. In Barangay Montserrat, a project of the KALAHY-CIDSS: KKB is the construction of a seawall, which is essential with plans of

A lot of the data are from a fishing community where I devoted my time and resources on documenting women's activities from 25 June to 26 July 2016. As much as I would want to get an accurate percentage of the women's economic activities from the municipal level, there were no data available. This is not to impose a negative impression on the whole municipality, but rather to emphasize that there are some things that cannot be achieved in the field.

Women in fishing

Generally, women in Asia, especially those from depressed fisheries households, participate actively in fisheries activities, including aquaculture. However, the lower status accorded to women in many Asian societies means that their contribution to fisheries is undervalued and unrecognized (Siason et al. 2002). The Philippines and countries like Cambodia, Laos, and India are experiencing the same dilemma. In Governor Generoso in Davao Oriental, women are active in the fisheries sector; the numbers only vary largely due to their topography. Participation in the fisheries sector includes *panginhas* (shell gathering), *pamukot* (gill-net fishing), and *pamasol* and *panunton* (hook-and-line fishing), which I elaborate on in the following sections.

Barangay Montserrat's topography is cove-shaped with vast seas and verdant mountains. The main economic activities of the residents are fishing and farming. During low tide, the *hunsa* (low tide area) is huge, making it easy to gather shells. In Montserrat, almost all the women who live in the *baybay* (shorelines) participate in shell gathering. They do this with their children during low tide (Fig. 1). There are more *manginhasay* (shell gatherers) in Montserrat and in Surop than there are in Nangan because of the difference in the width and length of the *hunasan*. However, I have seen more *mamukotay* (gill-net fishers) in Nangan than in Montserrat and Surop. I have encountered women from Montserrat who would want to do *pamukot* but were unable to, because of the lack of capital to buy *pukot* and other materials, and also because of the lack of fishing vessels. "*Kung naa lang, nagnong dili gud mamukot na dali ra man na.*" (If we had the resources, why wouldn't we do it? It is not a very difficult thing to do.)

I consider *panginhas* and *pamukot* as the most basic activities of women in fishing. 'Basic,' however, is not equivalent to 'easy.' Shell gathering is

putting up a fishing port in the barangay. Those who are members of the 4Ps are automatically members of KALAHI-CIDSS: KKB, thus, they are the ones who help construct the said seawall. 4Ps is DSWD's Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (Bridging Program for the Filipino Family).

time- and effort-consuming. A *manginhasay* (shell gatherer) has to walk in the *hunasan* usually under the scorching heat of the sun until she finds an area in which to settle, and where she can start searching for shells. She uses a *bolo* (knife) in shell gathering. It takes an hour or over an hour to gather shells. Every *manginhasay* would aim to get the most shells they could get because, aside from consumption purposes, one could sell shells as a way of generating income.



Figure 1. Women and children while doing *panginhas* (shell gathering) on the *hunasan*.⁴

Stay-at-home wives of small-scale fishermen in Montserrat, Nangan, and Surop prepare the essentials for the before-and-after of the fishing trip. In Montserrat, *pangnokus* and *pamasol* take one or two days, and for *pamarilis* (fishing for tuna), three days or more. The wife prepares the clothes, potable water, ice box, and *starting* (for fishermen who use pump boats and/or boats with engines who, guided by boat lights, spend nights in the sea). The wife also helps in preparing and cleaning the fishing gear, such as hook and bait.

⁴ All photos are by the author.

When the husband arrives from a fishing trip, the wife helps in cleaning the boat and sometimes the fishing gear, and collects the catch and prepares to sell them.



Figure 2. A closer view of shell gatherers of Barangay Montserrat.

When it comes to women who employ *pamasol*, *panunton*, and *pangundak* in the deep sea, I found out that there are more in Surop than there are in Nangan and Montserrat. One of the main reasons for this is the significant difference in the topography of the fishing communities. *Lawod* (deep sea) is defined as 100 fathoms under the sea and deeper, which is usually referred to as the “*payao*”.⁵ I have identified three deep-sea women fishers in Montserrat, four in Nangan, and seven in Surop. Most of the deep-sea women fishers in Surop employ *panabas*, a hook-and-line fishing method that is exclusively for catching *tabas* (Lampridae), using a small-scale fishing vessel called *pakura*. Most of the women fish alone, although there are some who fish with their spouses. Another fishing method employed is called *pangnukos*, in which a fishing gear, called the “flasher”, is used to lure *nokus* (squid).

One of the many fisherwives whom I had encountered was Ate Jane from Barangay Montserrat. I vividly remember the day I met her. It was a

⁵*Payao* refers to a fish-aggregating device which is shared by small-scale fishers and commercial fishers. It is commonly found in the open (deep) sea.

Tuesday, she was walking towards the sea, carrying her youngest child in her right arm, while the other arm was carrying a pail, all set to meet her husband who was returning from an overnight fishing trip (Fig. 4). Ate Jane was 25 years old at the time, a mother of four and a stay-at-home fisherman's wife. Her husband fishes approximately four times a week (depending on the weather), and does *pangundak* (a hook-and-line fishing method that uses "crystallite" as lure). He leaves at around 10 in the morning then spends a night or two in the sea. Before her husband goes to fish, Ate Jane buys the *starting* in the neighboring barangay, and she is tasked to help in preparing the food, water, and ice that must suffice for the entire fishing trip. While Ate Jane's husband is away, she takes care of the home, does the laundry, feeds their children, and if there are fish left from the previous catch, she and her oldest daughter sell them in the neighboring houses and *purok* (hamlet). When her husband returns home from the sea, he neither does any household chores nor takes care of the children. His stay in the house is intended for resting and for preparing the gear needed for the next journey to the sea, depending upon the need of the family and the weather condition.



Figure 3. Fisher couple from Montserrat doing *pag-kay* or the arranging of the *pukot* (fish nets) after *pamukot* (gill-net fishing).

Ate Jane was cooking the fish catch brought home by her husband, while her husband was resting in the room, which was visible from my vantage point, when I approached her. Having to cook while admonishing her children to stay put, Ate Jane looked exhausted. I asked her what her husband

does when he is at home, and she replied: “*Wala. Ginapapahulay lang nako na siya.*” (None; I just let him rest.) Astounded, I asked her, “why?” With a hint of exhaustion, she answered:



Figure 4. Ate Jane meeting her husband who was returning home from an overnight fishing trip in the open sea.

Kay kapoy na mana siya sa pag panagat. Dili pud lalim ang ka hago sa panagat unya wala pa na siyay tarong na tulog. Maong gina-pa-pahulay lang nako na siya kay kailangan niya ug kusog kay managat napud na unya. Maayo ra man ko diri makaya man nako. Naa man sad akong anak na mag tabang.

Because he is already tired from the fishing trip. Fishing is not an easy, breezy work. And he doesn't have the luxury of sleep. He needs all the energy he can get for his next trip which will be in a couple of hours. I can manage. I also have a daughter who helps me.

Almost the same goes for the wives of commercial fishers where the husband is away for a longer period of time. The amount of work exerted by the fisherwives are undoubtingly underrated albeit how significant in the fishing production.



Figure 5. Ate Jane carrying her youngest child in one arm while carrying a pail full of diwit (*Trichiurus lepturus*) on the other.

Life histories of deep-sea women fishers: prelude

I remember, days before field school⁶ I asked my great grandmother (who was born and raised in Bohol and who said she is familiar with fishing) if she knew any woman who fishes in the *lawod* back in Bohol. Appalled, she answered me: “*Ha?! Dili manna pwede. Malas mana managat ang babae, maskin muuban sa bana. Silang duha ang malason!*”(What?! That is forbidden. It is said to cause bad luck for women to fish, even if she is with her husband. Both of them would suffer great misfortune!) Puzzled, I asked her why. “*Mao mana’y sulti sa mga katiguwangan*”(That is what old people say), she replied. I had no reason to doubt what she said, because for one, I am not familiar with the lives of the people in coastal communities at that time, and two, I believed her for the simple reason that she is my *abuela*

⁶ Three days before going to the field, I informed my 92 year-old grandmother that I would be gone for one month due to our field school, from June 25 to July 26, 2015. My grandmother, or *Lola* as I call her, is a Boholanon woman who was born and raised in a coastal community. She stayed in Bohol until she was 30 years old and only moved to Davao City when her mother died. Even though she is very old, her memory is still very sharp. She enjoys sharing her younger days – what was it like during the Japanese-American war, what was our home forty years ago, among many other things.

(grandmother). However, I thought, what does ‘being a woman’ have to do with bad luck? Why is there such a belief? As Acheson (1981:297-299) suggests, “fishing requires stamina and strength, and women presumably do not have these qualities.”

A certain constraint of women has been presented, and yet, it does not link with the idea of bad luck. In the three barangays too, this concept is new for the young ones, but is not news to the elders. They would corroborate that this belief is present in their communities. It is because they claim that women are physically weak, most are sea-sick, and they cannot survive the strong waves and the heat of the sun. A lot of fisherwives who went fishing have experienced vomiting in the sea or even fainting while at sea. As a result, those ‘failed’ trips were adjourned and they were forced to get home as soon as possible. “*Bokol na pud ang isda*” (no fish catch, again), as a fisherman would recall their experience as a couple, shrugging, no catch means zero income. In most cases, women in fishing communities do not go on fishing expeditions because of the need for them to remain near the premises of the household where their primary responsibilities have been socially assigned (Lachapelle 1997; Villacorta 1998). I believe that is one cause of their being a source of ‘misfortune’ in the sea – the unfamiliarity of being in the sea, in the middle of nothingness but water; not a weakness, but rather a result of binding social and cultural beliefs and practices. They are used and sometimes forced to be surrounded by the corners of their home, and the sea is not their domain.

In the course of a month of field work, I came across three deep-sea women fishers whose stories I present in the subsequent sections. These are stories narrated to me by these women themselves—three dauntless and determined women from three fishing communities of Governor Generoso.

Nanay Soping of Montserrat

I got in touch with Nanay Soping (Fig. 6) through the recommendations of the people of Montserrat when I asked them if they knew any deep-sea women fishers. She is now in her early 60s and was an active deep-sea woman fisher until very recently. Almost all her (physical) qualities – her voice, the way she speaks, and her physique – are somewhat opposite of what one would stereotypically assume to encounter when you say ‘woman fisher’ or ‘fisherwoman.’

Of farming and childhood. Born and raised in the landlocked barangay of Tandang Sora in Governor Generoso, Nanay Soping grew up as a farmer. Her mother (of Manobo descent) and her father (of Mandaya descent) raised

her and her other siblings in an agricultural environment. She fondly recalled her younger days in the farm where she used to help her parents plant and till the land. In Governor Generoso, of 20 barangays, six are landlocked, while the rest are coastal communities. The ethnolinguistic group Manobo are generally known to be upland settlers, living in the hinterlands of Mindanao. The Mandaya-speaking people are also known for their farming, and other sub-groups, like the Kalagan and the Samaleño, are known as fishers and farmers (Nabayra n.d.)

Nanay Soping's parents were both raised as farmers by her farmer grandparents. According to her, her parents met in their late 20s, and decided to start a family by the decision of her late grandparents. When Nanay Soping was 14 years old, she used to bring her younger sister, who was a still a baby then, to school with her. That was because her parents were busy in farming. Smiling, she said to me, "*Wala namay lain magbantay, mao to ako na lang.*" (There was nobody willing to look after her, so I did it.) Nanay Soping said she never thought she would become a fisher, nor did it cross her mind that she would go through what she has experienced in the next chapters of her life.



Figure 6. Nanay Soping showing her freshly caught *lagao* (Nemipteridae; bream fish) during our fishing trip off Barangay Montserrat.

Of barter and 'pugos na pakigminyo' (forced marriage). Back in the 1970s, barter was one of the most common forms of exchange, especially

between the uplanders (farmers) and lowlanders (fishers). The barter system is a *suki*-based exchange where one farmer exchanges her or his harvest (usually sweet potato [*camote*] and maize) with a fisher from the coast, without the medium of money. They agree on the exchange value of what they are going to barter with each other. The existence of barter during that time was crucial in the life of Nanay Soping because that was how she met her would be-husband, Tatay Guillermo, a Bisaya from Cebu, who was raised in a fishing environ by his father who was also a fisherman in Mactan. The father grew up in a coastal community and has lived as a fisherman for his entire life.

According to Nanay Soping, she met Tatay Gui (nickname of Guillermo) in Tandang Sora. “*Mao mana siya ang ka-barter saakong ginikanan tung una pa tung naa pa mi sa Tandang Sora.*” (He used to barter with my parents way back when we were still in Tandang Sora.) She said they used to exchange their crops for a kilo or two of *matambaka* (mackerel scad). One day when she was on her way to school, which was a 30-minute walking distance away from their house, she wondered why Tatay Gui (who was ten years older than her) was following her. When she asked him, he said he was just going to play basketball in her school’s basketball court. The same thing happened the next day, and the days after that. She took the hint when one day, Tatay Gui volunteered to look after Azon while Nanay was attending to her classes. She refused, but because of his persistence, eventually, she gave in. Tatay Gui would often offer her his company on her way home, and would volunteer carrying her things for her. Those gestures would have implied romance, but because Nanay was firm in her desire to finish school, she dismissed her thoughts.

Months later, her world would have a 360-degree-turn when she was told by her parents that she and Tatay would soon get married. She said her parents believed that Tatay Gui was best fit to be her husband because, for one, Nanay’s parents already knew him because of barter; two, he fished for a living, making him eligible to provide for her and their future family; and three, because they believed that his maturity would eventually benefit Nanay Soping in the long run. With a hint of indifference, Nanay Soping melancholically recalled the day of their marriage: “*Kinse anyos pa ko ato, siya bayntsengko na. Dili gyud unta ko musugot ato kay gusto pa ko mueskwela. Pero gigusto man sa akong ginikanan. Wala koy mabuhat.*” (I was 15, and he was 25. I would have not agreed with it because I really wanted to go to school. But my parents wanted it; they approved it. I had no choice.) Her wedding day was not a happy occasion for Nanay. It was, she said, a despondent event of death – the death of her dreams. A Jesuit missionary priest joined the two in marriage in Tandang Sora. She said it was

allowed before, to get married under the age of 18. It is only now that the law prohibits marrying underaged.

No permanent address. For a time, Nanay Soping and Tatay Gui stayed in Tandang Sora as they continued their economic activities before they were married – she as a farmer and her husband as a fisher. On the onset of their marriage, Nanay Soping noticed that Tatay Gui had some kind of a wanderlust. He had this attitude of not being content with where he is – he always moved from one place to another; today in the neighboring municipality, the next week in another coast. There were times when he would return home after a month or so, and Nanay would be left alone in their house.

Nanay had a series of miscarriages from the third year of their marriage. She lost their first three children. It was believed then that they both had *buwayahan* palms. According to the belief of the elders, people with *buwayahan* palms tend to lose their children because inside of them resides an entity with the qualities of a *buwaya* (crocodile) that was ‘consuming’ their unborn child. Unless they cut the curse by *pagpakudlit* (a cutting in the palms), the curse of the *buwaya* palms would continue. Out of the 14 that Nanay conceived, only six survived and are still alive. This happened over the course of almost three decades of changing homes – from Tandang Sora in Governor Generoso, to Kambalion in San Isidro in Davao Oriental, to Buda in Marilog District in Davao City, back to Tandang Sora, then finally to Montserrat – all because of the caprice of Tatay Gui to change locations whenever he felt so.

Nanay laments his *pangit na batasan* (ugly demeanor) of always being away from his family for long periods of time, and, in one snap of a finger, he would force them to go with without any second thought. “*Nagdako akong mga anak na murag walay papa. Kay kana siya, mura na siya’g ulitawo kaniadto. Muuli ra kung gustuhon niya unya guyudon pa gyud mi maskin asa siya gusto napud mupuyo.*” (My children grew up without a father, or so it seemed. He acted like he was still a bachelor back then even when we already had children. He would go home whenever he wanted to, and then he would drag us to wherever he would want to go to.) That was the main reason why their children had no formal and proper education. They settled in different places, ergo, their children did not have the opportunity to finish or to even continue schooling. Their daughters believe they would have had a better life if not for their father’s misparenting.

While narrating the story of her loss, Nanay could barely remember the names of her dead children. She sometimes paused for a few moments, stared

blankly in space, and with grief and anger written all over her face, she continued telling her story. I can only imagine the trauma she had been through. Having a delinquent husband made her the provider of the family, plus the loss of eight of her children. Nanay Soping is a tough soul.

Migration story: settlement in Montserrat. In 1998, their family first went to Montserrat because Tatay Gui was asked by his brother to look after his property, which was a *kalubinhana* (coconut farm). To Nanay Soping's delight, she was relieved that they would be living in a farm – a familiar environ for her. But unfortunately, Tatay Gui still kept on switching locations. “*Sayang gani, imbes okay na kaayo didto kay libre na.*” (It was such a waste of opportunity. Everything was okay back there, everything was given, and everything was free.) One fateful day in 2000, she and her youngest daughter decided to go back to Buda and decided to stay there agreeing that while her daughter went to school, Nanay would farm. Sometime in their stay in Buda, Nanay had to go to Davao City to look for a job because the harvest could not suffice for their everyday needs. She worked in Davao City as a house helper during weekdays and would return to Buda on weekends. When Tatay Gui learned that they went to Buda, he went there to tell Nanay to go back to Montserrat, with which Nanay strongly disagreed. Tatay Gui promised he would change for the better. It took years of persuasion and an early marriage for their daughter to convince them to go back to Montserrat – now to be settled in the *baybay* (coast). At the age of 14 in 2009, her daughter had married her husband whom she met while they were in Buda, a farmer ten years older.

Fishing practices in Montserrat: an overview. Unlike other coastal barangays in Governor Generoso, Barangay Montserrat's biggest source of income comes from the anchoring, dry docking, and repairing of small-scale and large-scale fishing vessels. The topography is a cove protected by mountains, which makes it a very strategic place to anchor boats during rainy and windy seasons in the months of June to September. There are a lot of small-scale fishers in Montserrat. Some are active in pamukot, and there are many, majority of whom are men, who employ pamasol, pangundak, and *pamarilis* [fishing for tuna]. A very few are identified as deep-sea women fishers. In early 2000, another fishing method was introduced in the barangay: compressor fishing. According to some of my informants, compressor fishing was brought to them by the migrants from Zambales City who married daughters of fishermen who are residents of Montserrat. Four to five members comprise the crew for compressor fishing. In a typical fishing trip, one or two dive into the open sea at depths reaching 200-plus fathoms,

wearing the compressor gear: a hosepipe attached to an air pump in the boat on the surface to keep them breathing underwater. The the other two, who hold the compressor and maneuver the boat, serve as lookout for any *bantay dagat* (coast guards). Today, compressor fishing is considered illegal in the Philippines because it is considered unsafe for fishers (Castillo 2009).

There have been reports of deaths of compressor fishers, as supported by the narratives of my informants. Three years ago, a *busero* (diver) was declared dead because he was unable to survive the pressure under the sea; they narrated that his veins exploded, causing his death. A wife of a compressor fisher said that beyond it being illegal, she is more concerned with the effect of compressor fishing on her husband's health. She wishes that instead of disallowing compressor fishing, the government should rather provide help and aid to those who choose compressor fishing as their main economic activity. After all, compressor fishing is just their way of providing for the family. "*Panginabuhian man gihapon na. Naa ra na sa diskarte sa tao.*" (It is still a form of work. It just boils down to the ability of a person to get through life everyday.) Today, there are only three to five fishers in Barangay Montserrat who are active in compressor fishing.

Swerte nga palad: "Sa dagat naay kwarta" (Luck: 'There is money in the sea'). In Nanay Soping and her family's return to Montserrat in 2009, they decided to settle in the coastal part of the barangay. At that time, all her children were already married, and four of them were living in their compound, while the other two were in Panabo, Davao del Norte and Talisay, Governor Generoso, respectively. Her eldest son is a small-scale fisher, and all her three sons-in-law are also small-time fishers in Montserrat.

One fateful day in September 2009, as Nanay Soping recollected, she was invited by Tatay Gui to go with him in his fishing trip since she has nothing to do at home. She agreed to go with him. She said she wanted to try it. After all, she had nothing to do at home, and she had nothing to lose. She described her first experience in the *lawod* (deep sea) as 'ordinary.' She said the wind was blowing on her face, the heat of the sun caressing her already sun-kissed skin, waves crawling into their boat, but she felt no fear; she was neither nervous nor terrified. At the age of 56, it was her first time to fish in the sea. "*Normal lang man*" (it was normal), she said. Surprised, I asked her: "*Ngano man, Nay?*" (Why so, Nanay?) She replied: "*Sa kadaghan sa akong naagian sa una, wala ra man to. Mahadlok lang ko inig naay dakong balod ug kusog ang hangin kay dili ko ka-bugsay. Mag lisod ko'g awil kay sakit akong abaga ug dughan.*" (It was nothing compared to what I experienced before. The only thing that frightened me was the threat brought about by the

big waves and the monsoon, apparently because I couldn't paddle the boat. I had a hard time maneuvering the boat because of my shoulders, my chest ached.)

That trip was followed by one, and then another, until she got used to it. She and Tatay Gui would fish if the weather was fine and if they had enough bait. Her daughters would cautiously tell her: "*Ma, ayaw na lang ug uban kay papa kay basin ihulog ka niya sa bangka. Walay makatabang sa imo.*" (Mother, don't go with father anymore. What if he pushes you off the boat? No one would be there to save you.) She smirking: "*Sige lang mag-unhanay lang gud mi ug tulak. Dili man pud ko magpalupig sa iyaha. Ug makahibalo ra man mo kung mahitabo na kay wala na ko pagbalik niya. Maayo man ug walay paryente mangita sa ako.*" (It's fine. Then, it becomes a contest of who-pushes-who-first. I will not let him outrun me. And you will know for sure if anything like that ever happens because I will not be with him when he gets back. And I have relatives who will come and look for me.)

Nanay enjoys fishing because it aids her needs and the needs of her family. It is not just an activity to kill time, but it serves as her main source of income. She says she is happy when she fishes, especially if she has a bountiful catch – because more catch means more money. Nanay does not want to be a burden to her children who are also having a hard time economically. She wants to be independent and capable of providing for her own. "*Malipay gani ko kung makahatag ko sa akong mga anak maskin minyo na sila.*" (It makes me glad to be able to lend money to my children, even if they now have families of their own.) Nanay is said to have 'palms of luck' or *swerte nga palad* when it comes to fishing. As her son-in-law would testify, he says they have plenty of fish catch whenever they fish together. Nanay gets small but a lot of fish, while he gets a little of those bigger fish. Her son-in-law considers the two of them as a tandem in the sea, and Nanay has never been a liability. He is personally astonished with Nanay Soping's strength and her grit in fishing.

Of independence and separations. After decades of being married to each other, Nanay Soping and Tatay Gui decided to call things even and finally separate. Many raised eyebrows, saying that "*kung kanus-a natiguwang, didto pa nagbuwag?*" (Why break up when they are already old?) Nanay just shrugged, revealing that she initiated the split because she had had enough of his faults and transgressions. For her, their separation was her ultimate gift to herself – the freedom from the shackles of their bitter past. Tatay Gui agreed, saving some pride for himself. Here is one thing, however, that I find interesting, which I keep on pondering: even when they are 'separated,' they

still live in the same compound; they see each other everyday, and they talk with each other on a regular basis. I believe that maturity and civility come with age. After all, they have nothing much to lose.

Nanay admitted that sometimes, when she sees him riding his bike, smoking his *trisbe*,⁷ she cannot help but feel angry and at the same time sad for how things turned out for him. Now, *Nanay* no longer fishes with Tatay. Instead, she tags along with her sons and sons-in-law whenever she can.



Figure 7. Nanay Soping with her grandchildren, daughter, son-in-law, and Tatay Gui.

“Dagat sa buntag, uma sa hapon” (*‘Fish in the morning, farm in the afternoon’*). Although Nanay’s main source of income comes from fishing with her sons and sons-in law, the ‘farmer’ inside her is still there. She was able to negotiate with a land owner who owns land near her house. They agreed that the owner will let Nanay plant whatever she wishes to, as long as she keeps the space clean and well-maintained. Her ‘mini farm’ (Fig. 8) has been there since early this year and she considers it as her special place. Her

⁷*Trisbee* is a rolled tobacco that Nanay Soping and Tatay Gui have been smoking everyday since they were in their 20s. For Nanay, trisbee served as her partner in everything she does. She smokes when she is sad, when she is happy, when she is bored, and even when she is sick. I have seen her huff and puff more than five rolls of trisbee in the course of our meetings. She said she would not survive a day without smoking it. The same goes for Tatay Gui, who, when I asked if he ever plans on quitting smoking trisbee, retorted, *“Mamatay na lang siguro ko, akong trisbee ra akong kauban hangtod sa hangtod.”* (Perhaps even when I die, my trisbee will always be with me forever.)

only crop is maize, but she plans to add more in the months and, hopefully, years to come. An ideal day for Nanay includes fishing in the morning, then farming in the afternoon. During our stay in Montserrat, she was not able to fish regularly because of the unstable weather condition brought by the rains and winds of the southwest monsoon.

At present, Nanay treats farming as more of a hobby, and not mainly as a source of income. It is also her one way of being physically active. She says she needs to keep herself busy with other things not just to kill time, but also to keep her mind away from problems and headaches. Fishing and farming are both therapeutic activities for Nanay.



Figure 8. Nanay Soping with her granddaughter, Jana, in her mini farm, a 10-minute walking distance from her house.

Fishing with Nanay Soping. It was a drizzly Tuesday, and we were set for a trip to the sea. It was seven in the morning when Nanay went to our headquarters to fetch us for the scheduled fishing trip. There were four of us - the operator of the boat who was Nanay Soping's son-in-law, Nanay Soping herself, I, and my field school adviser. A few minutes later, we headed to their compound to get the *pasol* and all the other paraphernalia and materials, including the diesel and the ice box. She said we would not go that far because the water current was strong, and evidently it was almost raining. She just wanted me to be able to experience how it was to fish. With three hooks and a lot of *uwang* (small shrimps that are found in the rivers) as bait, we went off. I observed her while we were on our way to the sea. She sat on the edge of the boat, looking towards the vastness of the water, as if she was

alone in her own world. I would ask her every now and then if she felt okay. She would smile and say, *Okay lang man ko! Ikaw, okay lang ka?* (I'm fine! How about you? Are you okay?) True enough, we did not go that far. We were still at Montserrat, and the houses and the mountains were still visible. Nanay's description was that in the lawod you would see nothing but water; no land, no trees – nothing but the vastness of the ocean. I had created a visual scenario in my mind immediately – in the middle of the sea, no technology, no access to everything that enables me to function normally on my regular day, and far from the comforts of the four corners of my room. I flinched at the thought.

A few minutes later we settled in a spot. Nanay prepared the gear, all set to launch into the water. She swiftly released the hook-and-line to the sea, and so we waited for a few minutes. But there was nothing. She would feel it if the fish fell into the trap, she explained. We waited for a few minutes more when, finally, she signalled to the boat operator that she felt something. When she pulled the line, there were two little *lagao* (Nemipteridae; bream fish) hooked onto the gear. I asked her if I could try it myself, and she willingly gave me the pasol. I concentrated all my energy to heighten my sensibilities to be able to figure out whether I caught something underneath. Honestly, even in retrospect, I could not distinguish the difference between whether the hook caught something, or if it was just the water current below, toying with the line. I felt that nothing changed for almost three minutes that I got a hold of that pasol. Or perhaps, I did not really catch anything at all! A while later, Nanay took the pasol and said she must feel it for herself. After several minutes of testing the waters while talking with me and my field school adviser, she said she felt something. And yes, there appeared our third and last catch for the day; last because at the peak of our excitement – the wind blowing our hair, water dancing us to the rhythm of the waves, came an anticipation-filled moment when Nanay announced she might just have caught a big one.

I was thrilled thinking what a big one would actually look like. How much would it weigh? How would it feel to carry it? What kind of fish is it? In what dish would it be best cooked once we bring it to the shore? Anticipation rushed through me and, then, voila! No fish, only the nylon without the hook and the bait! I suppressed my disappointment with a laugh. What a more dramatic way to end our fishing trip than a much unexpected turn of events? I can still remember the look on Nanay's face when she found out she did not have any extra hooks left. We were forced to go back to the shore and make the most out of our fish catch. Her frustration stemmed not just for the fact that we had little catch, but also from pride – that as a woman

fisher, she was expected to be skilled in fishing, and thus, she is expected to do better than a catch of three little fish.

On pagkalimot ('forgetting'), paghinumdum ('remembering'), and paglaum ('hoping'). Before Nanay became a fisher, she was first a wife of a fisherman. I believe that her facility in deep-sea fishing is rooted greatly from her experiences as a fisher's spouse. Now, she is in the twilight of her years, and she admitted to me that there are a lot of things that she has forgotten from her younger days. She confessed, too, how she wished she would have forgotten every pain that she has been through. "*Kung pwede lang kalimtan ang mga kapait kaniadto, ako nang gihimo. Pero unsaon ta man, ing-ana man gyud ang kinabuhi sa tao.*" ('If I could, I would have forgotten all the bitterness from my past. But what can I do? That's life.')



Figure 9. Nanay Soping's future home which is still under construction.

When I asked Nanay where she sees herself in the next five years, she eagerly led me to her mini farm and showed me a bamboo-structured unfinished mini-house. "*Diri ko mupuyo aron duol lang sa akong mga tanom. Makapanagat man gihapon ko sa buntag kung hapsay ang tanan.*" (This is where I am going to live so that I can watch over my crops. I can still fish in the morning if everything goes well.) I asked her if she worries about her safety, looking and imagining what her future 'home' would look like. "*Wala man. Nagsalig lang ko sa Ginoo na dili ko Niya pabaya. Tiguwang naman sad ko.*" (None, really. I just trust in the Lord, that He will not let me be harmed. Besides, I'm already old.)

Ate Nene of Nangan

Barangay Nangan is also a coastal community, and one of the largest barangays in Governor Generoso. It was where I have gotten to know Ate Nene, a deep-sea woman fisher who had firsthand experience in barter in the open sea, and in *panapyaw* (a type of small-scale seine fishing). I met her through the personal recommendation of a barangay official in Nangan. She tells a story of how important a fishing vessel can be in a fisher's life and how existing cultural and social beliefs have hindered her from what she does best – fishing. Unfortunately, my encounters with Ate Nene were short because of time constraints.

Among the three life histories of this paper, Ate Nene seems to me to be the most reserved. She was neither rude nor indifferent. To me, she seems to just have these ‘protective’ layers of energy around her. I would someday find out why.



Figure 10. Ate Nene in her main house in Jamboree.

Bata'ng Ilongga ('Ilongga Kid'). Ate Nene was born in a barangay near General Santos City in Mindanao. Both her parents are Ilonggo. As a child, she was not exposed to a lot of work because they were well-provided for. Her father had parcels of land, while her mother remained a housewife. At the age of nine, and on the verge of her parents' split, Ate Nene went with her older sister to Leyte and stayed in their aunt's house for a couple of years. "*Dili namo gusto madamay kay samok kaayo.*" (We didn't want to get caught between the fight of our parents. It was such a drag.) Chuckling, she remarked that even when she was a little girl, she could not hide the rebel in

her. In Leyte, they were taught to live independently, and not to rely on their parents' support nor anyone's support. "*Didto na jud ko nagkabuot. Dili pwede mag ya-ya kay wala mi ginikanan didto. Kami-kami ra gyud.*" (That was where I understood things. We could not afford to be a liability because we did not have our parents with us. We were literally on our own.) She juggled attending school and selling delicacies in the neighborhood at the same time. At a young age, Ate Nene was exposed to a different life and a different environment. That was also when and where she figured that life was not a piece of cake.

Three years later, they returned to Mindanao after the death of her aunt. She said she and her sister did not get along well with her aunt's husband, so they decided to leave. She continued high school until she reached college in General Santos City. She and her sister stayed in the house of another relative who helped them through their studies. However, she was not able to graduate from college because she met her first husband, and they decided to elope. Unlike Nanay Soping and Auntie Alet, who both have a background in farming as a main economic activity, Ate Nene does not have any, although she recalled that when they were in Leyte, she knew a lot of people from different coastal communities whose livelihood include both farming and fishing.

Marriage and migration: of barter and being a woman fisher. When Ate Nene was 20 years old, she met her first husband who was born and raised in Barangay Nangan. They met in General Santos City. He was employed in commercial fishing when they met. When they got married, they decided to move to Nangan for good. In Barangay Nangan, her husband switched to small-scale fishing, specifically "barter" in the open sea. In 1985, she experienced her first time in the deep sea during a barter trip. It was three years after they got married, and in her recall, it was just an ordinary day. She was convinced by her husband to go with him, since she has nothing else to do at home. Surprisingly, this was quite similar with what happened with Nanay Soping. They were both fisherwives before they became fishers themselves. One of the main reasons why I had so much interest with her life history is because of her background in barter and panapyaw/sapyaw. I have heard of barter before, but I have never heard of a woman involved in a barter transaction, and who was willing to spill the beans and share her experiences to me firsthand.

Barter in the open sea refers to the exchange of goods or commodities (e.g., bread, cigarette, liquor, etc.) between a *basketera/basketero* (small traders; with the image of someone who carries a basket for the fish catch)

and the captain of a commercial fishing vessel. This type of barter transaction was common before between coastal settlers and commercial fishermen because there were no laws to prohibit such an activity. Ate Nene recalled and narrated the process of barter. The barter transaction is composed of the following partakers. First are the small traders, who are at the other end of the operation; they prepare the commodities to be exchanged. Small traders are typically men, and can be composed of up to eight traders depending upon the size of the boat used. Another participant is the boat operator, who is, more often than not, the owner of the fishing vessel. The boat operator collects a transportation fee from small traders, and is a key player in the whole transaction because he or she is considered the 'leader' of the small traders, and is usually the one who negotiates with the captain (*arais*) of the commercial fishing vessels. After the exchange of fish-for-commodities is done, the small traders now sell their fish to the *komprador*, who buys the catch and re-sells them to wet market fish vendors. The komprador can also lend capital to the small traders. From the small traders to the operator, to the captain of the fishing vessel, up to the komprador, these partakers are commonly men. Barter is, thus, male-dominated.

Ate Nene worked as basketera during the barter era in the 1980s and on through the early 1990s. Her husband used to own a boat that they used in barter, which made their income twice or triple higher than other traders. She fondly recalled that they used to earn around ₱500 a day within just a couple of hours. "*Dali ra man kaayo maka-kwarta sa una labi na kay daghan pa ug isda.*" (It was easy to earn money before because fish used to be abundant then.) The fish-for-other-goods exchange is the kind of barter that they employed then. There was no money involved in this form of exchange. Usually her day would start at 2:00 a.m., when she, together with her co-basketeras and basketeros would flock outside their house to get ready for the fishing trip. They were four women involved in barter then, but only Ate Nene remained a basketera in Nangan. The small traders had to pay a transportation fee to the boat operator which ranged from ₱50 for the men and ₱30 for the women.

I asked her why the male traders had to pay more than the female traders. "*Mas mahal ang lalaki kay mas bug-at man.*" (The men pay more because they weigh heavier.) At around 3:00 a.m., they would have reached the *payao* where they would meet with the available commercial fishing vessel. However, she identified that they had a *suki*⁸ who were from Toril, Davao

⁸*Suki* refers to an individual or a group of individuals with whom a seller, in this case the small traders, have the most (number of) trading interactions. A person or a group

City. The boat owner (her husband) would negotiate with the captain of the commercial fishing vessel and when they both agreed to the terms, barter would ensue. Every *basketera/o* is given an equal opportunity to go to the commercial fishing boat and personally exchange fish for their commodities. These commodities included cigarettes, bread, match, etc. “*Malipay gyud ko sauna inig ako na ang tagaan sa kapitan kay usahay pakapinan mana niya. Muabot gud ug 50 kilos ang akong makuha sauna.*” (I would feel happy whenever it was my turn to get the exchange [fish] from the captain because sometimes he would give more than what was due. There were times when I would go home with 50 kilos worth of fish in my container.) After all the traders have finished, they would get ready to go back to the shore at around 11:00 a.m.

That was true before the advent of money in the barter exchange, and when there were a lot of fish in the sea. In the past, money was never a problem for them as a family. She started engaging in barter only after she gave birth to their second child – missing nothing in parenting because they were only away for a couple of hours. That was until her husband had a heart failure that eventually caused his death in 1994. Filled with grief, Ate Nene had no choice but to work for her family. They were on their own, she was on her own. Her late husband had relatives and they helped Ate Nene and her children recover. She eventually got back to her feet. With three mouths to feed, she said that was the turning point of her life. “*Ang barter lang gyud ang nagbuhi sa ako ug sa akong pamilya.*” (My family is alive and complete because of barter.) When I asked her what she felt being the only woman who participated in barter, with brevity, she responded: “*Wala na koy pakialam. Kailangan man sa akong mga anak naay magtrabaho. Isa pa wala may manghilabot sa ako kay kaila naman tanan sa akua.*” (I didn’t care. My children needed someone who would provide for them. Besides, no one would dare take advantage of me because they all knew who I was.)

Second marriage: towards a nightmare. It took an hour of conversation, a luncheon meal, and my audacity to ask for old photographs until she confided to me about her second husband. I was scanning through her photo album, and there was this one photo where she was with a man, and that

of individuals become a *suki* when exchange relations benefit both the seller and buyer.

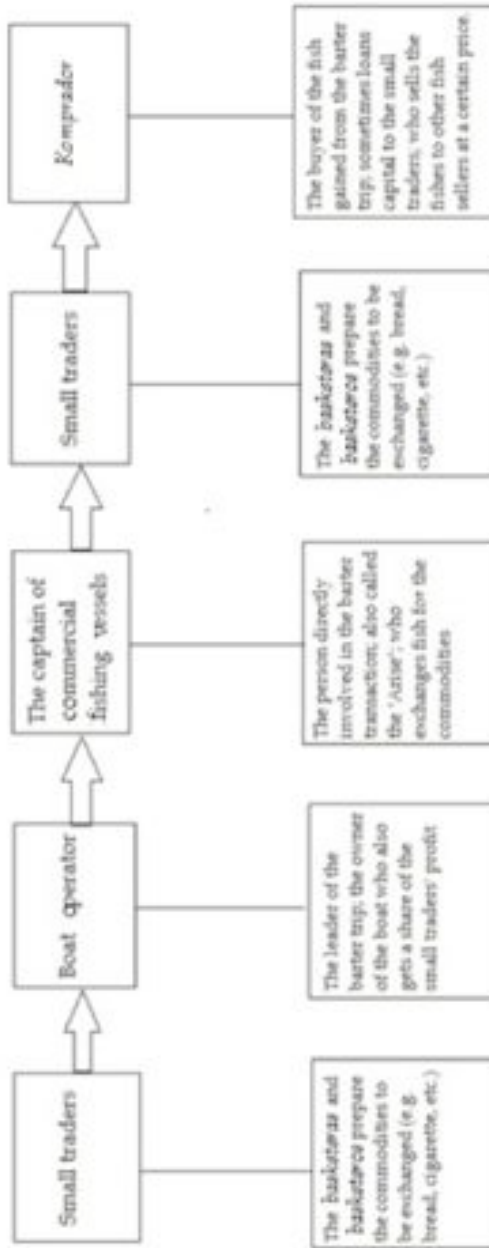


Figure 11. Barter system in the open sea in the 1980s to the late 1990s.

man's hands were around her. So I asked her: "*Ate, kinsa ni? Mao ni imong unang bana?*" (Ate, who is this? Is this your first husband?) Shaking her head, she replied: "*Dili. Mao na akong ikaduhang bana.*" (No. That is my second partner.) I was confused with the numbering because I was thinking all along that her current husband was the one with her in their house, although, technically, that man was really not her husband because they were not married. I felt suspicious as to why she omitted that information in the start of our conversation. Right then, I knew our next conversation would be a tough trip down her memory lane

The darkest days of her life occurred while she was with that man, as I would later find out. She found out that he was molesting her then 14-year-old daughter for almost two years already by the time that she found out. It was as if the universe had conspired to put her into that kind of misery. "*Hapit ko nabuang sa una pagkabalo nako.*" (I almost went crazy when I knew about it.) She felt disappointed with herself because, as a mother, how could she have not noticed that? They lived in the same house, they ate in the same table, and they slept in the same room. Yet she was oblivious of what was going on around her. The time when she found out about it was when her daughter had a pregnancy scare, and asked who the father could have been, if indeed she was pregnant. Ate Nene remembered that day: a cold Monday morning; they were having a serious talk when her daughter suddenly became hysterical after the fifth time she asked who the father was of the unborn child. Her daughter started sobbing, shaking, and then she eventually confessed to her that it was the same man she went to sleep with at night; her own husband.

She could vividly remember her own reaction when she heard about it: she was trembling while she was speaking – every word was a stab to her heart. She tried to be strong for her daughter. After all, they only got each other. Her daughter needed her more than ever. "*Abi nako ug sa salida lang na mahitabo.*" (I thought that that only happens in the movies.) She did everything she could to put him to jail and to never let him escape. But fate is not always a friend. He was imprisoned for a period of time, but was released after two years because of alleged personal connections from prison authorities. "*Sus, kalami patyon! Kung dili pa lang sala ang mupatay, dugay na nako na siya napatay.*" (How I wish I could have killed him! If it were not a sin to kill another human being, I would have done it a long time ago.)

Sapyaw as a coping mechanism. By the early 2000, barter was declared illegal due to the complaints of commercial fishing owners about the new barter system in the open sea, now with the medium of money. The owners'

sentiment was that their employees steal from them through engaging in barter. These employees would transact with big-time kompradors or fish buyers in exchange of fish for a certain amount of money. Since then, Ate Nene had to stop bartering commodities for fish, and so she and other small traders in Nangan (who were basketers like her) had to think of an alternative. They shifted to a new fishing method called *panapyaw/sapyaw* or seine fishing. According to her, *sapyaw* was their original idea; having names of the materials changed from time to time due to the modifications they made for it to exude creativity. However, it was not the first time that I heard about *sapyaw*. It was reported that in one village in Bantayan Island in Cebu women actively participate in an offshore fishing operation called *sapyaw* or haul seine (Sotto et al. 2001).

In *sapyaw*, small-scale fishers gather around the huge *pukot* (net) of commercial fishing vessels in the *payao* (fishing site). A *sapyaw* is a racket-shaped scoop used to catch fish over the huge *pukot* of the commercial fishers. Ate Nene said she enjoyed the *sapyaw* fishing method because it seemed like they were like kids playing with the fish. In practical terms, *panapyaw/sapyaw* is an easier method than the hook and line methods of *pamasol* or *pangundak*, because one would not exert so much effort in finding fish since in *sapyaw*, the fish are already caught in the bigger net. All they had to do was to be fast and quick in catching the fish (Fig. 13).

I asked her if there was any difference being a *basketera* and switching to *sapyaw*. She told me it was no different than when she was doing barter. Except that there was this one man who used to insult her by saying she just wanted to be with men that was why she did *panapyaw/sapyaw*, which is commonly, like other fishing practices, male dominated. Aghast, she told him to back off if he wanted to be able to return home. “*Nisukol ko. Porke’t babae ko mao na dayon ang isipon, na katol ko? Nanginabuhi kog tarong unya ing-atuon ko niya tungod kay babae ko?*” (I fought back. Just because I’m a woman did it mean that I have an itch waiting to be scratched? I am working hard and minding my own business, and then he would accuse me that, just because I am a woman?)

Ate Nene’s endeavour in *panapyaw/sapyaw* only stopped last year when her pumpboat could no longer be used. She did not want to rent her neighbor’s boat because she did not like other people to think something malicious is going on between her and the owner. She would rather stay at home than be the subject of other people’s gossip. “*Dili lang ko gusto na naay maingon ang lain tao. Nagsawa nako ana sa una pa.*” (I just didn’t want to be backstabbed by other people. I have had enough of that before.)

“Sugod sa uno” (‘Back to square one’). At present, married to her third partner, Ate Nene is a stay-at-home mother and a wife. She is now a mother of three. Her youngest child was with her second husband. She also works as the caretaker of the ‘big house’ of a mining company in Nangan, where her current husband used to work. She developed new hobbies because of the change in her lifestyle. Since early last year, she stopped fishing because her boat got wrecked. “*Lisod man gud kung wala kay sariling pamboat*” (It’s hard if you don’t have your own boat), she said. I asked her, “*Ngano diay, ‘Te? Kung mag-rent lang diay ka sa imong silingan, o maki-sakay lang ka?*” (Why is that so, Ate? Why don’t you just rent a boat from your neighbor, or why don’t you just tag along with them?) “*Lisod kaayo kung ing-ana, labi na kung sa lalaki na silingan. Daghan kaayo’g musaway. Labaw na nang uban na wala nay gihimo kundi bantayan ang lihok sa laing tao.*” (That’s too complicated, especially if with my male neighbors. There are a lot of people who will turn their backs and speculate things, especially those who have nothing but ill words to say about other people.)



Figure 12. Ate Nene explaining the parts of the materials used in panapyaw: *sapyaw* (on her right hand) and *sibot* (a type of net, on her left).

Now, she makes rugs and doormats on a regular basis, and then sells them to her neighbors and sometimes in other purok (section of the barangay). She is also busy fixing their house, planting crops, selling *tuba*

(coconut wine), and cooking for her family. I could feel her desire to buy a new boat. In fact, she was saving money to buy a new one. She recalled her most unforgettable experiences in the deep sea – encountering whales and dolphins and referring to them as *mga kabaw sa dagat* (sea monsters). She also experienced waves that were taller and bigger than houses. I asked her if she ever had plans of going back to fishing. Determined, she replied: “*Magka-pumpboat lang ko managat jud ko! Maskin karon, managat ko. Unsa man, uban ka?*” (If I just have a pumpboat, I would definitely go back to fishing. Even now, I would go! Do you want to come along?)

One of the most unforgettable things that Ate Nene has shared to me, which taught me a thing or two in life, is what she said during our last conversation:

Kabalo ka, hadlok sa dagat. Daghan ka ug makita di nimo damguhon makita, ug daghan ka ug ma-agi-an na kalisod. Pero kabalo ka, sa akong kinabuhi, nahibal-an nako na ang tinuod na dapat ka-hadlukan kay wala sa dagat. Naasa yuta; sa lugar na wala nimo gina-asahan. Usahay, sa sarili pa nimong panimalay.

You know what, the sea is a dangerous place. You will see a lot of things that you would never expect to see, and you would eventually encounter hardships along the way. But if there is one thing that I have learned in this lifetime, it is that the ones you should be afraid of are not in the sea. They are on the land, in a place where you least expect them to be. And sometimes, they can even be at your own home.

Auntie Alet of Surop

I first met Auntie Alet during a fisherfolk’s organizational management training on 28 June 2015 held at the Municipal Activity Hall. I had the chance to talk to her for almost 30 minutes. The way she spoke and carried herself in public showed confidence and easiness, which sent a message to me that she is used to public events and appearances. I immediately arranged a second meeting with her and she agreed by saying: “Sure, anytime.” That was my hint. The third life history will be hers.

Batang mang-uuma (on being a young farmer). Like Nanay Soping, Auntie Alet grew up as a farmer. She raised by a Kalagan⁹ mother and a Manobo father, who were both farmers. Her father also fished for a living after being a soldier in the war. She remembered when she was a little girl, her mother would ask her to look after their farm, and she was tasked to scare away the monkeys from pestering their crops. She said the monkeys were always two steps ahead of her, and she would end up exhausted from running after them. “*Brayt sad to na mga unggoy ba.*” (Those monkeys were pretty clever.) As a result, she would get caught up with other errands instead.



Figure 13. Auntie Alet’s second house where she and her family stay around during the dry and warm seasons.

She experienced fishing when she was in her teens because of the influence of her father. “*Ginauban man ko sa akong papa sa una. Ako ra pud iyahang ginauban sa amo tanan mag-igsuon. Ambot, siguro kay abtik ko ug lihok sauna.*” (My father used to bring me with him when he fished. I was the only one whom he would tag along among all of my siblings. Perhaps

⁹ The Kalagan used to control the Davao Gulf and Pacific Coast seanelanes, but now they live in coastal settlements in the Pacific coast and inside the Davao Gulf. Kalagan people starts from Tarragona, Jovellar, Kabagayan, Lucatan, and Tagabakid, Lawigan, Makambol, Lupon, Banaybanay in Davao Oriental; and in Pantukan, Mabini, and Maco in Compostela Valley Province. By the end of the 1800s, the Islamized Kalagan people used to live in coastal settlements engaged in purchasing captives from the Mandaya, Mansaka, and Tagakawlo slave raiders. They still call themselves Kalagan even if they no longer live in the Christian town of Caraga (Nabayra n.d.).

because I was full of enthusiasm back then). But she did not take it seriously because she was more interested in and more focused on farming at that time. At present, her home is in the middle of a piece of land awarded to them by the Department of Agrarian Reform in 2009, but is also near the coast. She said she liked the feeling of being surrounded by the sea and the farm.



Figure 14. Auntie Alet's main house, where they stay during the cooler months.

Women fishers in Surop. Barangay Surop is the next barangay after Nangan. The barangay has a topography similar with that of Nangan's and Montserrat's, with fishing and farming as the two main economic activities of the residents. Like other coastal communities, there are a lot of women shell gatherers, *mamukotay* (net fishers), basket and *pukot* (net) weavers in Barangay Surop. Many are wives of small-time fishers and commercial fishers. Interestingly, like Montserrat, there are a lot of women in Surop involved in farming that are also active in farmers' association and who are certified cacao growers. Surprisingly too, there are many deep-sea women fishers in Surop who employ pangundak, pamasol, and *panabas*, a fishing method done to specifically target *tabas* (Lampridae). Furthermore, these women fishers whom I identified were *single* women whose age range is at 30-68 years old. From a total of six women fishers in Surop, four of them employ panabas, and two employ pangundak. More than anything, these women independently fish because some of them were apparently left alone by their husbands, the others did not have a choice, and there are those who just enjoy the experience and the feeling of fishing in the open sea. All these women fishers treat fishing as their main source of income.

What does Islam say about being a woman fisher? Auntie Alet and her husband practice Islam. When I asked what her religion says about being a woman fisher, she said, “*Okay lang man. Wala may problema. Ug maskin pa ug musupak sila, dili man ko magpapugong.*” (There’s no problem with being a woman fisher. And even if they do have anything against my being a Kalagan fisherwoman, I will not let them stop me.) Her statement is both powerful and unnerving. Her willingness to defy restrictions, if it is what it takes for her to continue what she does, still astounds me.



Figure 15. An Arabic Scripture that is iconic and important in Islam, which represents great devotion to Allah, is displayed in Auntie Alet’s house.

Fishing together. Since her return to the country after being employed as an overseas Filipino worker, Auntie Alet met her would-be husband for the second time around. She remembered their first encounter – she was working in the hollow blocks shop in Surop when she saw Tatay Lito looking at her, while passing by, riding on his bike. She figured he was just some passerby or perhaps a farmer or a new settler in their barangay. She admitted she was attracted to him the first time she saw him. She jokingly remarked, “*Gwapo akong bana, ‘no?’*” (My husband is good looking, is he not?) The second time that they saw each other, Tatay Lito approached her and asked her if they could meet sometime. “*Lampas na ko traynta; magpakipot pa ba ‘ko?! Ingon ko sa akong sarili*” (I’m already in my thirties; did I even have the luxury to play hard-to-get?! I told myself.) A few months of seeing each other and after convincing Auntie to agree to his marriage proposal, they

decided to get married. Tatay Lito had to convert himself to Islam, for which he did have second thoughts. They had their first and only son three years after being married. “*Ako ang pinaka-luoy sa among mag igsuon, tiguwang na unya isa lang ang anak.*” (I was the last among us [she and her siblings]. I’m old and I only have one child).

Tatay Lito is originally a fisherman, being born and raised by a fisherman father. He is used to the life in a coastal area. He is the incumbent president of the fisherfolk’s organization in Surop. I found out that Auntie Alet was his proxy in the training where I met her. Being married to Auntie Alet allowed him to learn things about farming, and eventually, he became an active farmer himself. In return, he also influenced Auntie Alet in fishing. She was not ignorant when it comes to fishing, but he made her more interested in it.

Akong bana ang nga ingon sa ako na managat mi, hangtod sa naganahan napud ko. Karon kami na duha ang managat; dili mi managat kung wala ang isa liban kung kailangann gyud. Mahinumduman pud nako akong Papa ug ang among mga ka-agi sauna tung nanagat mi. Nagpasalamat ko na gitudluan ko niya managat tung bata-bata pa ko.

My husband was the one who pushed me to go back to fishing, until I got at ease with it. Now, we fish together; we don’t fish without one another, except when it is really needed. I can also remember my father, and what we have been through before when he brought me with him to fish. I am grateful that he was able to teach me how to fish in my younger days.

The only dilemma that Auntie and her husband face now in fishing is that

[w]ala na may isda sa pagka-karon. Sa una katong gamay pa lang ang mga komersyal, dili na nimo kailangan mulayo para makakuha ug isda kay ang isda pa mismo ang muduol sa imo. Karon maabot na lang ka sa pinaka-lawod gyud, makakuha ra ka ug pila ka kilo.

There are no fish left today. Back in the day when there were only a few commercial fishing companies, we did not have to go that far because the fish were the ones that approached us near the shores. But today, even when you reach the farthest and deepest parts of the sea, you can only get a few kilos of fish.

Auntie Alet's words speak on the behalf of almost all small-time fishers in Barangay Surop. They share the same sentiments. They wish that there will be a more elaborate and stricter implementation of the limitations of commercial fishers when it comes to the area where they are allowed to fish.

Part fisher, part farmer. If she had to choose between farming and fishing, she said she would not choose one without the other. She believes that every individual must at least know the basics of fishing and farming. With the environmental condition of the world today, knowledge of the two (fishing and farming) is essential if you want to live longer.

Muabot ang panahon na di na gyud magsilbi na dili makabalo ang tao managat ug mag-uma. Labaw na karon na nisamot na ang problema sa kinaiyahan sa tawo. Unsaon na lang kung di na sila maka sustento sa kinabuhi sa siyudad? Mag-nganga sila?

There will come a time that ignorance in fishing and farming will no longer be acceptable for any human being, especially now that environmental degradation is getting worse. What if they can no longer keep up with the lifestyle in the city? They will starve to death?

If worse comes to worst, it is good and practical that one has a luxury of options and knowledge in both fishing and in farming. Auntie Alet is currently the president of the Farmers' Association in Surop and is an active member of the fishers' organization. She is also a member of a women farmer's association which was established through the initiative of a member of a nongovernment organization (NGO). She revealed that the lack of effort and initiative from the local government to form organizations that solely aim to aid women farmers and fishers like her is alarming. "*Mas daghan pa man ug nabuhat ang mga NGO diri sa amoa. Hilom ra man ang gobyerno.*" (NGOs have brought more programs here in our community. The local government is absent.)

She showed me her personally made farm illustration of what she planned to do with the land that was planned to be granted to her back then. She made these a few years after she was awarded the title for a 0.8 hectare of land. The illustrations show her skills and astuteness in farming. The crops included in her farm plan were cacao, coconut trees, mango trees, banana trees, among others, all of which she and her husband have planted on their own.

National and international opportunities. Auntie Alet has been featured in a number of journals and coffee-table books produced by foreign scholarship. In 2009, she was able to mentor and guide Kalagan elementary students in an event spearheaded by PARFUND (Philippine Agrarian Reform Foundation for National Development). They went to Manila for a week to perform a traditional Kalagan dance in front of many delegates from all over the Philippines. The said activity aimed to showcase the talent and skills of Kalagan children during the night of thanksgiving. Auntie Alet was also featured in a book by Dutch researchers about farmers in the Philippines. After her appearance in numerous national and international publications, she is now a well-known guest lecturer, especially in cacao production, and is also in various seminars locally and on the national level. I would say Auntie Alet's easiness dealing with a lot of people, specifically those who are not from the Philippines, was influenced by her experience working abroad. Her exposure to a lot of activities and programs from different institutions made her a credible source of knowledge and inspiration to other farmers and fishers who aspire to achieve what she has achieved.



Figure 16. Auntie Alet holding her farm plan which she made in 2006. Now, Auntie grows different crops (e.g., cacao, coconut, and banana) in her farm.



Figure 17. A photo album of Auntie Alet with pictures taken when she was featured in an activity organized by PARFUND.

Reflections and conclusions

In a faithful attempt to document and analyse the status and plight of deep-sea women fishers in Governor Generoso, this study first presented an overview of the situation of women in fishing communities and women in fishing. The distinction being made clear is that they vary in terms of their economic and socio-political activities. There are overlaps, however. On the one hand, a woman can be both a barangay councilor and a gill-net fisher, and, on the other hand, she can be a farmer and at the same time a deep-sea fisher.

Albeit it is uncommon to hear about ‘deep-sea women fishers,’ they exist. I cannot stress my point further, but just like the wives of fishermen who are key players in fishing production, these women whose lives I presented above, among many others, deserve recognition, attention, and their needs per se and predicament in general must be addressed.

It is central in this research to determine and analyse the factors that inform the decision-making process that women fishers go through in the course of choosing ‘fishing’ as their main economic activity. I have identified some of the major factors that women fishers consider. First, fishing in the deep sea generates more income than any other occupation that they can find in the shorelines (e.g., housekeeping in the neighborhood, fish net weaving, etc.). Second, if their body can handle the load of work, there is no reason for them not to go into deep-sea fishing, especially if it is beneficial to the

family. Third, they feel a certain degree of joy and satisfaction in fishing. As stated by Ate Nene, “*Sa dagat, pantay ra man gud mo. Dependeng lang sa diskarte sa tao.*” (You are all equal in the sea [in fishing]. It is just up to the person’s capabilities and strategies.) Other factors include the topography of the community in which they live, the experience that they acquired in connection to fishing, their age, and their ethnicity.

There is always a turning point, a defining moment, in their lives when they decide and commit to becoming a woman fisher. For Nanay Soping, it was a mixture of chance and the motivation to live independently. For Ate Nene, it was when she got married to her late first husband, who was a fisherman and migrated to a coastal community, and, upon the death of her first husband, when it became solely her responsibility to feed her family all by herself. For Auntie Alet, it was when she got married and had to go back to her roots, to the place where she was raised, which was also one way of honoring her father.

Fishing in the lawod (deep sea) is not an easy undertaking. Some might ask: Why fish? If it is so hard of a task to do, then why do they choose to do it? This is where the concept of agency plays a significant role. Agency, in simple terms, refers to the ability of an individual to decide for herself or himself. Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory suggests that one must move past the dichotomy of ‘structure’ and ‘agency,’ and on to the rather *duality of structure*, where social structure is both the medium and the outcome of social action, and that *agents* – those capable to act on the structures – and *structures* – those systems acted upon by agents – *are* ‘mutually’ constitutive entities of equal status. An agent’s common interaction with structure, as a system of norms, is called *structuration*. A fisherwife prepares for her husband’s trip to the open sea, that I consider structuration. Giddens’ *reflexivity*, moreover, refers to the ability of an agent to alter consciously her or his place in the social structure. A woman choosing to fish in the deep sea is a form of reflexivity. It is because of individual decisions and individual capabilities as equally functioning agents that they became women fishers – all in an attempt to adapt and survive within a coastal community life.

Agency, then, now refers to a continuous flow of actions. These actions are responses of the ‘social agents’ or ‘actors’ in the ongoing process of what is happening around them. Actions must be viewed through the different contexts in which they have been undertaken. These contexts include the actions or responses of other people, and the constraints imposed and opportunities offered by social structures. Another component of action involves the forms of knowledge that actors-agents have on the basis of how they connect their interventions.

A way of promoting women empowerment not just in the fisheries sector but in general is by recognizing that women who defy cultural and social standards exist. One would have to have the strength of character to survive the waves, the punishing heat of the sun, the wind, and the rain. Nevertheless, women are able to conquer these. There is no truth to the the discourse that “*malas managat ang babae*” (women are the bearers of bad luck in fishing). This belief exists as a form of constraint for women to put them in the ‘proper place,’ so to speak, which is often the abode. The notion that women are physically weak and are a liability stems from these socio-cultural prescriptions that limit them. Women do not cause bad luck in fishing; lying around and doing nothing offers no resistance to adversity. Social structures, some of which spring from cultural factors, limit the active participation of women in types of fishing that have normally been assigned to or done by men. This study has shown that women, in particular contexts, find critical and creative ways to respond to the household, economic, and cultural challenges that they face. I hope that by presenting in this research the three life histories of deep-sea women fishers, I was able to contribute to a larger discourse on the status of the women of the coast.

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