

THE DYNAMICS OF THE FISH TRADE IN CEBU CITY

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This paper examines the dynamics of the fish trade in Suba-Pasil in Cebu City, an area that has been the central trading point of fresh seafood coming from neighboring islands of Cebu since pre-colonial times. Barangays Pasil and Suba are currently two of the most congested barangays along the coasts of Cebu City. With the increasing population and pollution in the area fishing is no longer deemed viable for the local residents. Although fishing is no longer a primary livelihood in these communities, the fish trade continues to provide sources of income as well as a sense of community and cultural identity. According to fish traders interviewed, the supply from the Visayan Sea is already insufficient for the growing needs of the population in Cebu. This is why the sources of fish in the Suba-Pasil fish market now mostly come from Zamboanga and other parts of Mindanao and the Visayas, brought in via cargo trucks from major ports in the province. As a result, economic transactions, government regulations, as well as perceptions of fish and use of fish names have also changed over time. These dynamics were documented through in-depth interviews and field observations.

Keywords: *Cebu City, fish trade, fish traders, market dynamics, local fish terms, Pasil Market*

Introduction

This paper aims to shed light on the social and cultural dynamics of the fish trade within a major city in the Philippine urban landscape. My research describes the fish trade in the Pasil-Suba fish market in terms of fish supply sources and transactions and how these have changed over time as result of transformations in the urban context. To understand the dynamics of the fish trade in the Pasil-Suba Fish Market, this study describes the value chain and the system of trade: the sources of fish supply, fish port actors and transactions, and the changes in the fish trade industry, local terms, government regulations and perceptions of fish among locals.

The research site. During the 1990s, Cebu enjoyed an economic miracle, dubbed "Ceboom", due to its furniture industry, tourism, and commercial success despite the scar left by the devastating typhoon Ruping (*The Economist* 1996). Cebu is now the second largest metropolitan area in the Philippines behind Metro Manila and continues to enjoy a high average annual growth rate of 8.1%, which is faster than the national average and stronger than that of the national capital region (OECD 2016).

Two of the coastal barangays of Cebu City, Pasil and Suba, are located along the Guadalupe river. Pasil and Suba have similar coastal landscapes and both are identified as "urban poor" areas. The two independent barangays are densely settled— according to the 2015 census, Pasil is inhabited by 8,593 people and Suba has 11,026 people (PSA 2016) while each has an approximate area of 9 hectares. The population density for both barangays is more than a thousand people per hectare. To the North, Pasil shares boundaries with Pahina San Nicolas, to the West is Brgy. Suba. The Guadalupe River divides Pasil from Brgy. Ermita to the East, while to the South, Pasil faces the Mactan Channel with a clear view of Shell Island right across. Suba is bounded by Sawang Calero on the West. These neighboring barangays also have high population densities.

Suba was in the past part of Pasil, but it became a separate barangay in the early 1960s. This is why Pasil often serves as a blanket term to refer to both barangays. The terms "Suba-Pasil" or "Pasil-Suba" are also used. Thus the Fish Market, Fish Port, Missionaries of Charity, and the Sto. Niño Parish are located in Suba, but may be referred to as located in "Pasil". The officials of Suba actually do not like this misconception, going as far as claiming that the Pasil Fish Market should be renamed as "Suba Fish Market". Despite these 'territorial disputes', neither Pasil nor Suba LGUs benefit directly from the fish port and fish market because both facilities are managed by the Cebu City government. In fact, it has recently been renamed as the Cebu City Fish Market. However, for this paper, I am using "Pasil fish market", the term more commonly utilized by the various economic actors here.

There are few open spaces in Pasil and Suba. Streets have many functions such as becoming an improvised basketball court or playground. Street vending is also common. Most houses share the same walls with neighbors and their toilets often do not have septic tanks. The narrow passageways and pavements are actually above sewage canals and culverts. The solid and liquid wastes are usually disposed off in the Guadalupe river. The smell of the underground canals is what I associate

most with the place. Yet, lingering for a time makes the odor tolerable. Due to close proximity of houses to each other, the neighborhood is also very prone to fire.

The Pasil Fish Port fronts the coast where a number of fishing boats from different islets between Cebu and Bohol as well as from other municipalities of Cebu would dock to deliver fresh marine products to the Pasil Fish Market a few meters away. Traditionally, these fish traders were the main suppliers of fish in Pasil, aside from the fish caught by local fishers in the coastal barangays of Cebu City. With limited stocks, the market expanded to accommodate bigger fish traders from Mindanao and other parts of the Visayas who brought in tons of fish and other marine products via cargo trucks, despite the narrowness of the streets leading there from the national road. Since this is the central hub for fish trading in Cebu, many local traders from various municipal markets procure fish and other marine products in bulk in this market.

Fieldwork. I have been around the field site since June 2014 for coursework in Anthropology. When my key informants are not busy, I arrange semi-structured interviews with them in the comfort of their homes. Over the duration of the research, I have made friends in the field. They have referred me to different individuals. Most of my informants have been working in the fish port for 30 to 40 years already. They became traders of fish when their parents and grandparents passed the responsibilities to them. Sometimes I went around the fish port and market, observed activities that occurred, and joined in some conversations to supplement my study data. Barangay officials of Pasil and Suba helped me to reach out to leaders of various institutions of traders in the fish port and market and supported me by providing a companion *barangay tanod* for security. The market operations division of the Cebu City government provided data about the supply of fish going to Pasil as well as the regulations and plans that facilitate the fish trade operations.

Brief history of the Pasil-Suba fish trade

The fish trade in Pasil dates back to before the written history of Cebu. As part of the old colonial town of San Nicolas, Pasil was known as the port of *Cebu El Viejo* ('The old Cebu') (Urgello-Miller 2010). Locals also claim the place is the where Magellan first landed.

Before 1957, Pasil and Suba were one barangay. The sea was clean, without garbage, the waters green and full of sealife. The water that

flowed from the uptown district was clear and people could see the Guadalupe River bed. But by 1960, Pasil served as a dumpsite for the garbage of Cebu City. Cases of cholera, diarrhea, typhoid fever, and other bacteria-related diseases plagued the area. In the same decade, Mayor Sergio Osmeña Jr. decided to develop the southern part of Cebu City. He ordered the reclamation of Pasil. The vast land was intended to be a business area. Then Pasil was officially declared by the late President Diosdado Macapagal as a reserved lot for tenement housing in 1965 (Proclamation No. 356).

The fish trade in Pasil was not hampered even with the ongoing sea wall and reclamation projects of the City government. The small fisherfolk households fished in the nearby tidal flats between Cebu and Mactan island. The fish they caught were mostly for home consumption and the surplus would be sold directly to vendors in the Pasil fish market. The conversion of the reclaimed area for residential purposes and the fishing profile of the community attracted other fishers from nearby islands for trading purposes. The Pasil fish port and fish market then became a center for fish trade in Central Visayas.

In the 70s, fisherfolk coming from Bantayan Island, Bohol, and other islets in the Mactan Channel and the Cebu-Bohol Strait began to settle in Pasil. Land at the time was valued at ₱36-45 per square meter. Those who could not afford to buy land lived as informal settlers. There were several programs like Imelda Marcos' Slum Improvement and Resettlement Program (SIR) and advocacies of DWUP (Division for the Welfare of Urban Poor) but these did not anticipate the rapid increase in population in the 1990s. All through this time Pasil remained as the center of fish trade in Central Visayas; fish traders from various towns and provinces would procure fish from Pasil to sell in their respective markets.

With the increasing number of traders utilizing the fish port and market facility in Pasil, government built a second market facility in 1990 with financial aid from Belgium. The new market was located nearer to the port for better accessibility. At first, it mainly catered to traders coming from nearby islands and docking at the port. However over time, fish traders from more distant fish producing areas such as Zamboanga, Iloilo and Palawan, started supplying fish to Cebu by cargo truck. On October 15, 2013, the old Pasil fish market was destroyed by the 7.2 magnitude Cebu-Bohol earthquake. The lot is currently used as a playground for children living in the San Nicolas district of Cebu but the back portion is still utilized for selling some fish coming from nearby

islets. Thus the second facility is the one currently utilized for fish trading in the area.

The growing population in the highly urbanized cities of Cebu, Lapu-Lapu, and Mandaue, is a major reason why fish traders head to the Pasil Fish Market (now “Cebu City Fish Market”) to sell their products. Cebu province ranks fifth in population¹ in the Philippines (behind Cavite, Bulacan, Laguna, and Pangasinan) and it is the most populated province in the Visayas (as well as Mindanao). The population and growth rate of the highly urbanized cities in Cebu is high². This growing population has likewise contributed to land and water pollution in the area. The remaining few fisherfolk³ observe that they can no longer fish in the seawaters fronting Pasil and Suba because of too much garbage. They have to cross the Mactan Channel to the waters of Cordova, an island municipality adjacent to Mactan Island, in order to have a fair catch.

The Pasil fish trade system: two supply sources

Traditionally, the seafood traded in the Pasil Fish Market was brought in by small fishing vessels from the towns of Cebu, and the nearby provinces of Negros Oriental and Bohol. As the demand for fish in Cebu increased dramatically, these sources from the Visayas no longer sufficiently supply the market. That gave opportunity for large scale fishing operations from as far as Palawan and Zamboanga to enter the fish trade in Pasil, bringing tons of fish in cargo trucks via RoRo from other major ports of the province. According to carriers of fish from these areas, the fish trade in Cebu offers much more cash than their local fish ports and markets.

These distinct fish supply sources led to a division of the fish trade in Pasil between two facilities. The first facility or Phase 1 located near the old building destroyed by the earthquake, and the second or Phase 2 the new fish market as an area where wholesalers and other agents of the fish

¹ Excluding the cities of Cebu, Lapu-Lapu and Mandaue, Cebu province has a population of 2,938,982 (PSA 2015).

² The population and growth rate of the highly urbanized cities in Cebu as of 20 is as follows: Cebu City – 922,611 (1.21%), Lapu-Lapu – 408,112 (2.94%), and Mandaue – 362,654 (1.73%). The combined average of Metro Cebu is 1.96% which is higher than the national average of 1.72%.

³ The few remaining fisherfolk in Pasil consist of only 12 families. A few fishers in the coastal barangay in Suba, Sawang Calero, Duljo, and Mambaling remain, fishing in the Mactan channel where they congregate at Shell Island as a common spot.

trade meet. To refer to this dichotomy, I classify the fish supply into 'fresh' and 'stock'.

The 'fresh' fish supply (or what locals refer to as "*lab-as*") reaches the market in a matter of days. Most of it comes from traditional sources in the Visayan Seas— the ports of Bohol, Bogo City, Hagnaya (San Remigio), Bantayan, and Danao City. These goods originate from other major fishing ports in Cebu and are transported by multicabs or vans. Fishes from Bohol, especially from Bukabog and Jao islands, are delivered directly by boat to the Pasil fish port. These 'guaranteed fresh fish' are diverse and colorful— including species such as *mamsa* (*Carangoides fulvoguttatus*/yellow spotted trevally), *nukos nga dako* ('big squid')⁴, *katambak* (*Lethrinus*/emperor fish), *molmol* (*Scaridae*⁵/parrotfish), *tangigi* (*Scomberomorus commerson*/ Spanish mackerel), and *karaho*⁶ (*Saurida argentea*/shortfin saury or lizardfish). Aside from fish, other marine organisms such as crabs, lobsters, shrimps, mollusks, and other invertebrate are sold in Phase I market. According to my respondents, before bigger fishing operations from other provinces started supplying fish to the Pasil Fish Market, small fisherfolk from other towns of Cebu, Argao, Carcar, Alcoy, Aloguinsan used to enter the market system in Pasil, but eventually they were not able to compete.

The 'stock' fish supply arrives at the Pasil fish market via cargo trucks and container vans from three weeks to two months after having been caught. These were caught by large-scale fishing operations based in other provinces outside Cebu like Zamboanga, Leyte, Samar, Masbate, Iloilo, Negros Occidental and Palawan. However, if we say "fish supply from Zamboanga", it does not necessarily mean that the fishing was done in the waters of Zamboanga. Zamboanga only refers to the port. Respondents even claim that the *lansa* or *lantsa* (trawling ships) reach the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Some even say the fish "were caught by Taiwanese", a matter to verify.

Most of stock source fishes are pelagics that were caught in large numbers, such as the following: *bariles* (*Thunnus albacares*/ yellow fin tuna), *bodboron* (*Decapterus macarellus*/ mackerel scad), *tamarong*

⁴ Fish traders in Pasil usually classify squids through sizes unless there is a definite feature that determines a particular species.

⁵ Scaridae is scientific name of the family of Parrotfish composed of more than 95 species (Westnea & Alfaro, 2005).

⁶ A type of fish usually converted into fish balls because of its bony structure which makes it difficult to be eaten. "Karaho" is also a vulgar term in Cebuano for a clumsy person or an awkward stupid person.

(*Selar crumenophthalmus*/ big eye scad), *anduhaw* (*Rastrelliger faughn*/ island mackerel), *lumayagan* (*Sthenoteuthis oualaniensis*/purple squid), *tulingan* (*Auxis rochei*/bullet tuna), *bolinaw* (*Encrasicholina devisi*/anchovies), and *potpot* (*Secutor insidiator*/ponyfish). They are stocked in cold storage for several weeks until the container vans will be full. Each container van holds approximately 200 *bañera* (fish basins) weighing about 30 kilograms each. Fishing companies make sure that the vans are full to maximize the cost of travel.



Figure 1. Fish in *bañeras* at the Pasil Fish Port (Phase 2).



Figure 2. Cargo trucks from Zamboanga, Iloilo, Palawan, and other provinces bring seafood to the Pasil Fish Market through the ports of Hagnaya from the north, Toledo City from the west, Santander from the south, and the port of Cebu City.

The relatively recent sourcing of fish from farther away seems to solve the problems of scarcity of fish in Cebu during bad weather or full moon. Although natural factors may affect the fresh supply in the Phase 1 market, stock supply remains in abundance in Phase 2. However, during typhoons and full moon, the price of stock fish goes up, even with enormous supply in cold storage and even if they were in stock for a number of weeks already. The common assumption that seafood prices normally increase during weather and lunar events is taken as an economic opportunity for traders. When asked why they do that, they simply explained “*In-ana man gyud. Pag sa una pa na*” [It has always been like that, even before’].

Fish port actors and transactions

Prices in the Pasil fish market are determined by different agents of trade. I have listed nine types of actors who have significant functions in the fish trade: 1) *tag-iya sa panagatan* (the fishing operators/owners), 2) *tarima* (wholesalers or brokers), 3) “*toppers*” (middlemen), 4) vendors or *labasera* (retailers), 5) *listador* (‘listers’), 6) dispatchers, 7) *kargadors* (‘carriers’), 8) truck drivers, 9) *mamuwaray* (dried fish vendors), and 10) Sanitation Officers.

Tag-iya sa panagatan or fishing operators are not actually visible in the fish market. However, their presence is felt as they provide supplies of stock fish. They own the *lansa* and cargo trucks coming from the provinces. They are employers of *kargadors* and truck drivers. In the economic pyramid, they are on the top.

Directly under the *tag-iya sa panagatan* on the market chain are the ‘*tarima* owners’ (*tag-iya og tarima*), those who buy wholesale. The term “*tarima*” actually refers to the small offices within the fish port. In accordance to the law, a *tarima* owner should be a resident in Cebu City. Like the *tag-iya sa panagatan*, some of them are not visible in the fish port, although most of them are there especially during busy hours at dawn. They show up wearing an outfit that blends with other agents in the fish port. They are the only people who have direct contact with the *tag-iya sa panagatan*. They manage three to five container vans a day each of which contains about 200 *bañera*. A *bañera* is typically priced at ₱3,000-3,500. The *tarima* owner gets 10% of the total sales of fish and the rest goes to the *tag-iya sa panagatan* or fishing operation owners. They can gain additional profits by pricing a *bañera* higher. Based on the figures, each *tarima* owner has a gross income of ₱200,000-300,000 a day. They

also earn additional income by charging “parking fees” to container vans, of ₱20 per *bañera*. Since each container van has an average of 200 *bañeras*, a *tarima* owner may get ₱4,000 from parking fees alone for each trip. The expenses of the *tarima* owner include the wages of *kargadors*, *listadors*, and *dispatchers*. *Tarima* owners also have to pay ₱7,000 monthly for space rental in the fish market and ₱30,000 annually as taxes to the city government.



Figure 3. “Toppers” and other economic actors gather at the Pasil Fish Port (Phase 2) to get their share of fish from the wholesalers.

“Toppers” are middlemen who buy fish wholesale from the *tarima* owners, e.g. 10 *bañera*. He/she sells the *bañeras* to vendors and *labaseras* adding ₱200 per *bañera* [‘on top’ of the original price]. A topper can earn about ₱1,000-4,000 in a day. The toppers are not tied to a particular *tarima* owner (unlike the relationship between the *tarima* owners and the *tag-iya sa panagatan*). Since *tarimas* have a definite bond to fishing line owners, toppers are well aware what kind of species of fish are sold by each wholesaler. Usually, they wait for each container van to be unloaded. They have to deal with the *tarima* owners as soon as possible before other toppers can take over their chances of buying fish. There is no reservation allowed. That is why a topper should always be alert to when a *tarima* owner is displaying their fish. They have to be listed by the *listador* or *tarima* owners themselves prior to the actual distribution of fish.

Most of the toppers are women and they are registered with the Pasil Toppers Association. This organization has 60 official members who are mostly residents of Pasil and Suba. There are also toppers from Lapu-

Lapu, Mandaue, Talisay, and other towns of Metro Cebu who take part, distributing fish to their respective local public markets. While economic status of the toppers varies, the toppers' association also celebrates events like Christmas parties at sophisticated hotels in Cebu like Waterfront or Marco Polo.

The vendors and *labaseras* who buy fish from toppers are engaged in the fish trade 'on a smaller scale' or "*de menudo*". "*Labasera*" comes from the Cebuano word "*lab-as*" meaning, 'fresh'. It is easier to spot a *labasera* in the Phase 1 market since the fish there come from fresh sources. Ordinary vendors are those selling the fish from the Phase 2 fish port. The vendors have loyal clients and regular *suki* toppers who will supply them with fish. If sometimes a vendor cannot afford to buy a whole *bañera*, two to three vendors may team up to divide the cost. The fish vendors in Pasil are registered under the Pasil-Suba Sawang-Calero Vendors Association (PASACAVA) as mandated by the city government. After buying a *bañera* from a topper, a vendor sells the fish by kilogram. Price varies according to the species of fish. But vendors make sure that they could make a profit from selling fish on a retail basis. They also compare prices with competitors by 'whispering', to come up with "agreements" among themselves. Many of the vendors' customers are not end consumers but also smaller middlemen who will then retail the fish in other smaller satellite markets around Cebu City. The barangays Pasil and Suba have no direct earnings from the operations of the fish market. This also explains why, compared to other markets in Cebu, the vendors in the Pasil fish market sell fish at a lower price.

Listadors list the names of toppers and the amount of fish in each transaction between toppers and *tarima* owners. Dispatchers gather toppers and arrange those transactions. Their job is to keep track of the records. *Listadors* and dispatchers are two vital functions in the fish port but the role of a dispatcher and *listador* can be done by the *tarima* owners themselves. Some of the *tarima* owners hire dispatchers who are also *listadors* at the same time. Some mobilize their relatives, children, or wives/husbands to do the job without pay. In cases where dispatchers and *listadors* are hired, the *tarima* owner is usually not really present in the fish port. They take charge in their behalf.

Kargadors are men who carry fish at the fish port or fish market. They have no uniforms, in fact they are usually topless while doing their jobs. They currently earn ₱20 per *bañera*. They can be hired by the *tag-iya sa panagatan*, *tag-iya sa tarima*, and toppers. If a *kargador* works for the *tag-iya sa panagatan*, he also helps in hauling the fish from the ship

back in their province of origin to the cargo trucks. Usually, there is only one *kargador* per cargo truck; his main function in the Pasil fish market is to assist the truck drivers in the distribution of fish. The *tarima* owners or toppers for their part hire *kargadors* who are residents of Pasil, Suba, Sawang Calero or somewhere nearby. Their job is to carry loads of *bañera* from the container vans to the space allocated in the market for each *tarima* to display the fish for the toppers. There are also some freelance *kargadors* who only show up for part time work at the fish market especially if in times of great need. Aside from the money they get for carrying fish, they may also receive a kilo or a piece of fish as an additional incentive for their service. Transporting fish is done by placing the *bañera* on the head (with a styrofoam cushion).

Truck drivers are hired by the fishing operation owners (or *tag-iya sa panagatan*). Their task is to deliver fish from the ports of origin to the Pasil fish market. When they arrive, they wait for the *tarima* owners or the person in-charge (dispatchers or *listadors*) to check the number of *bañeras* in the truck. A driver from Hagnaya, San Remegio Port would receive ₱7,000 monthly wage plus ₱400 allowance per trip. A single trip means going to the Pasil fish market and back to the Hagnaya port—about 6 hours travel time or 90 kilometers. On a busy day, my informant said that he can do two trips within 24 hours. When not driving, he sleeps on the driver's seat of the cargo truck with his assistant *kargador* on the other seat.

Mamuwaray are those who buy fish from the *tarima* owners or toppers for the sole purpose of drying them (under the sun). The term *mamuwaray* is derived from "*buwad*" which in Cebuano means 'dried fish' or 'exposed to dry under the sun'. Sometimes, fish from far places are in stock for such a long time they are no longer appealing to buyers. When some fish shows signs of being "*dubok*" (no longer fresh but not yet rotten), the toppers who do not like the quality of fish of the wholesalers often leave the *bañera* with the *tarima* owners. That is the time when the *mamuwaray* buys *dubok* fish at a cheaper price, usually a markdown of ₱2,000 per *bañera* (from its original ₱3,000 price). The *mamuwarays* prefer smaller fishes which are better for drying e.g. *tabagak* (*Chirocentrus dorab*/ dorab wolf herring), *sapsap* (*Photopectoralis bindus*/ slipmouth fish), *potpot* (*Secutor insidiator*/ponyfish), *bolinaw* (*Engrasicholina devisi*/anchovy), *danggit* (*Siganus spinus*/ rabbit fish). They dry the fish in facilities in Pasil or in Talisay City. Afterwards, they

sell their dried fish at the Taboan Market located in Brgy. San Nicolas, north of Pasil⁷.

The sanitation managers are hired by the city government to oversee the operations in Pasil Fish Market. They are in charge of safety and health concerns. They watch out for spillage of fish by clumsy *kargadors*. They clean the vicinity from time to time since the fish market floor is full of silt and mud coming from water in the *bañera* and soil from the footwear of people visiting the market. The floor is very slippery too, most of the dispatchers and toppers wear boots. Sometimes, fights between toppers and dispatchers happen. In these cases, the sanitation managers act as sergeants-at-arms or peacekeepers.

It is also important to note that except for the fishing operation owners and sanitation managers, the other agents in the fish market have potentially overlapping roles. As I mentioned earlier, a *tarima* owner can be his/her own *listador* or dispatcher. A topper can be a fish vendor. If a topper cannot buy from a wholesaler, he/she can also buy fish from another topper. Moreover, for whatever role is performed at the fish port and market, aside from cash income, each of them also get a share of fish for home consumption as part of the value chain of the fish trade (usually consisting of the small fish⁸).

Aside from the agents involved in the fish trade mentioned above, there are other characters who play roles that have impacts on the operations in the Pasil Fish Market. There are informal retailers roaming around the market selling coffee and local 'rice snacks' (i.e. *puto*, *bibingka*, and *bodbod*). They keep the people in the fish port awake and 'not hungry' or *busog*. Other agents who may significantly affect the fish trade are thieves. They sneak in bringing some pails and collect fish from one *tarima* to another. It is hard to identify thieves because they strike whenever people are busy. They also blend in the crowd since they look like toppers or an ordinary *kargador*. The fact that *bañeras* are not weighed strictly also facilitates theft. Some toppers have mastered

⁷ The Cebuano word "*tabo*" means 'congregate' and refers to traders from relatively far areas congregating to sell goods on different market days hosted by barangays. The practice is still observed in the rural areas of Cebu, however in the city the Taboan is a permanent hub for traders of dry goods. Taboan is one of the three biggest markets in Cebu City; the other two are Carbon for fresh meat and vegetables and Pasil for seafood.

⁸ Big species like tuna usually end up being sold in entirety because slicing fish in the Phase 2 market is not available, plus, tuna are a bit pricey compared to smaller species.

intuitive scaling and are able to determine that a *bañera* weighs less than 30 kilograms. That could be one reason why some *bañeras* are not sold and end up left to be taken by the *mamuwarays*.

Most of the economic transactions in the fish port are made through credit. The debt is recorded through the list made by the *listador*. A deal is made between a topper and a *tarima* owner with promises to pay the amount within three days. Each wholesaler has his/her own system for making deals with toppers. One may limit credit by counting the unpaid days. Another imposes a credit limit of ₱75,000. When a topper reaches his/her credit limit, a *tarima* owner stops him/her from getting more fish. Thus, when a broker says, "*Dili na gyud ka makaisda nako*" ('You can no longer get fish from me'), that would be the end of the contract. The contract can be renewed once the debt has been completely or a large chunk is partially paid. Each transaction is built on trust between *tarima* owners and toppers. Each wholesaler has a list of trusted toppers whom they usually give credit to. When trust is broken, it is hard for that topper to make another transaction with the same *tarima*.

Some toppers say that it is good to work in the Pasil fish market because they can earn money without having any capital ("*makasapi sila nga walay puhunan*"). However, it is also hard for toppers to collect cash from the fish vendors and *labaseras* to whom they also sell their fish through credit. For this reason, sometimes toppers do not return to pay the *tarima* from whom they bought fish, resulting to a deficit at the top of the value chain. According to *tarima* owners, a million pesos worth of credit is not even a fraction of their total loss every year. However, they admit that the profit gained annually covers losses from lousy deals.

Aside from regulating credit, *tarima* owners also have their own ethical principles on the manner of distributing fish. A famous broker called "Inday Evee" distributes her fish evenly among the toppers. She first lists the toppers who want to buy before the fish are displayed in the space allocated for them. She makes sure that the *bañeras* are spread out evenly to give equal chance to all toppers. She would not allow a topper to do a *pakyaw* (wholesale) deal since this will be unfair to others. As her standard, Inday Evee limits transactions to 10 *bañeras* per topper and follows the order of the list on a first come first served basis. Equal distribution of *bañeras* is also frequently practiced among other *tarima* owners. For "Chenie" on the other hand, distribution is done by piling the *bañeras* into rows of 10 arranged by the *kargadors* in a pyramid pattern. The topper who lines up before a row of *bañeras* first will receive all the fish in that row. There are some other *tarima* that impose an elitist

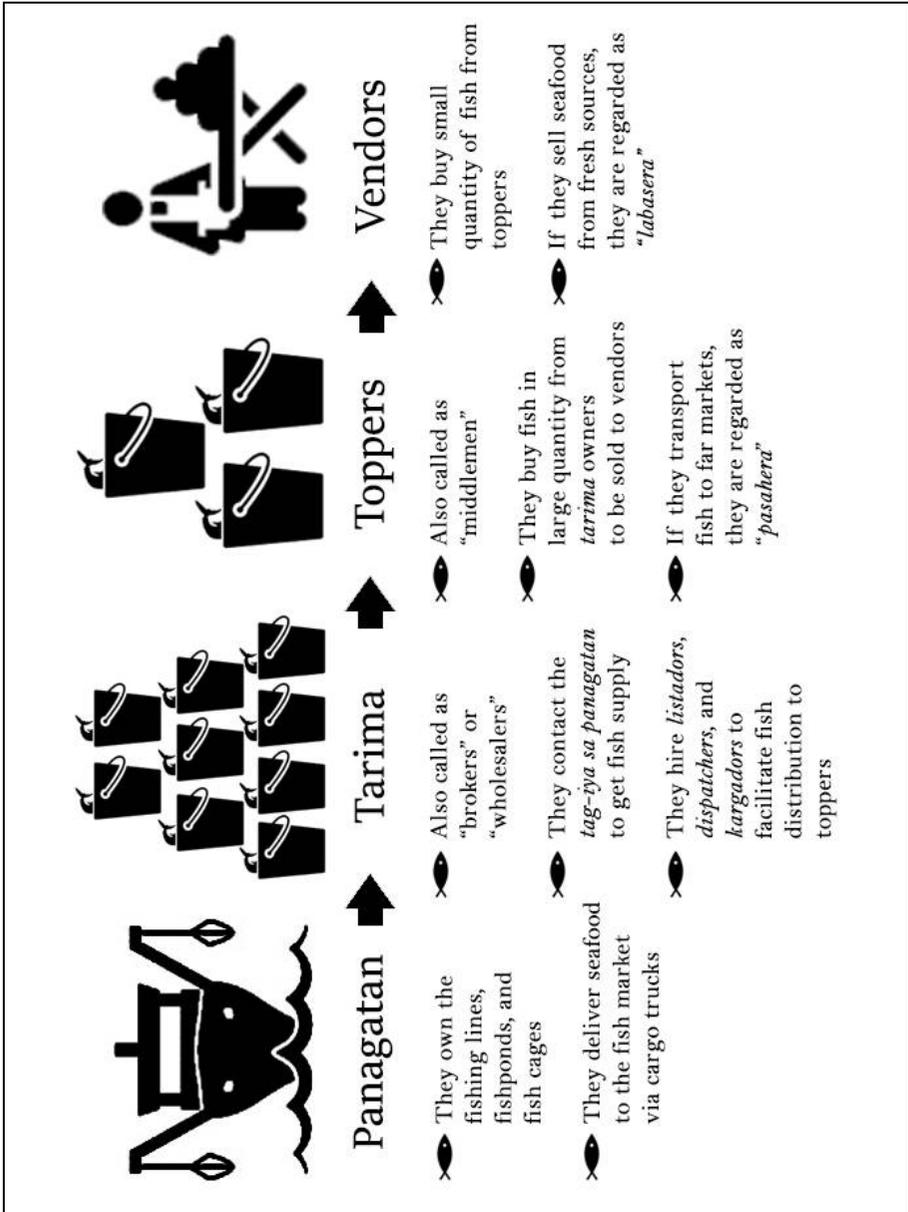


Figure 4. Diagram showing the value chain of the fish trade in the Pasil fish market.

structure. They appoint toppers to buy a particular species of fish—the *bañeras* are assigned to fixed individuals already.

The price of a *bañera* is determined by agreement between the fishing operators and the wholesalers. For now, the wholesale prices range from ₱3,000-3,500 per *bañera* for stock sources of any species. These are supplied by 20-30 container vans each containing about 180-200 *bañeras* of varied species.

Among all the fish traded, *bangus* (*Chanos chanos*/ milkfish) is the least favored among toppers because of two main reasons: 1) *Bangus* costs more because they were raised in fish ponds and need much capital for feeds and maintenance, and 2) *bangus* are transported in styrofoam boxes which contain less compared to *bañeras*. Most of the time a topper earns less and even gets deficit from buying *bangus*. As much as possible, toppers go to stock sources because of the large supply and cheaper price. *Bangus* serves as a last resort whenever there is nothing else to buy.

Bangus is transported from Butuan, Davao, Cagayan de Oro, Bohol, Negros, and from other towns in Cebu like Consolacion, Badian, and Ronda. All the fish pond and fish cage owners are contacted by four *tarima* owners who specifically sell *bangus*, *tilapia*, and *pansat* (prawns). Milkfish also vary in terms of quality and quantity. Those raised in fresh or brackish water ponds are fed with seaweed and sometimes with chicken dung, resulting to smaller growth (a kilo of fishpond milkfish consists of 5-6 fishes). In addition, traders complain because this type of milkfish occasionally smells like mud especially during summer, which is also a time when fish kills may take place—a phenomenon locally called “*dunlok*” refers to fish that die afloat because of the heat. The milkfish coming from fish cages are raised in deeper waters where the tides cannot affect their development; this type of milkfish grows larger (a single fish can weigh from 1 kg to 1 ½ kg). Like the other stock fish sources, they are delivered to Pasil Fish Market via cargo trucks. However, instead of being distributed by toppers, the *pasahera* buys them. *Pasaheras* are those traders who buy in large quantity and sell the fish to big peripheral markets in Cebu as far as Bogu City, Naga City, Carcar City, and Toledo City. After getting the supply from the brokers, *pasaheras* have the freedom to increase the price to make profit.

Fish trading activities happen everyday at Pasil Fish Market except on days when the toppers and wholesalers may have to attend an important gathering (such as Christmas parties and government meetings). Sundays are peak trading days on account of more supply arriving at the fish market. The day starts at 12:00 midnight and ends at around 7:00 a.m.

Transactions between *tarima* owners and toppers occur between 12:00 m.n. to 4:00 a.m. By 5:00 a.m., wholesalers can no longer be seen at the fish market as all of them have already gone home. By 4:00 to 7:00 a.m. most of the deals made at the market are only between toppers and vendors. By 7:00 a.m. the fish market would seem like a ghost town. Activity at the Pasil fish market resumes at 11:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. when new fish stocks arrive. Most of the people I interviewed prefer working at dawn because they can do more with focus. In addition to this, their customers also prefer to buy fish at dawn since they have to travel to their respective municipal or other satellite markets to also sell the fish and other marine products there.

An important thing to note regarding the fish trade in Pasil is that everything is sold. Even if some fishes have some minor defects and are already in the *dubok* state, the *mamuwarays* still buy them for drying. All fish vendors at the Pasil Fish Market have also sold out their fishes before the end of the day because many customers still buy them to be distributed at a higher price in their respective markets in other places. This is also one reason these entrepreneurs give for why they would enter into trading at the Pasil fish market.

The economic structure in the Pasil fish port observes a trickle-down effect. Every agent earns a daily income from the fish trade at varying levels. However, vendors and toppers have not really become “rich” despite the daily income they earn from the fish trade. According to most toppers, the system only makes the *tag-iya sa panagatan* and *tag-iya sa tarima* wealthier. Toppers cannot stop working because they have few options. Most of them are elementary graduates and high school dropouts. Despite these circumstances, a good number of toppers and fish vendors have been able to provide education to their children even at the most prestigious universities of Cebu. They are also able to sustain their household needs. They say that their lives will improve when their children start working. But generally speaking, the wealth gap between toppers and *tarima* owners is very wide, connoting that the fish trade’s benefits are larger for those at the top (fishing operation owners and *tarima* owners or wholesalers). The local government, as represented by the employees of the Market Operations Division, is aware of such social inequalities at the Pasil fish market. Even marine biologists attest that middlemen are the most maligned players of the fish distribution channel (Surtida 2000).

Changes in the Pasil fish trade over time

There have been a number of observable changes at the Pasil Fish Market which may be a result of the entry of big fishing operation owners bringing stock sources from other provinces via cargo trucks, as well as the coastal and water pollution in the seawaters of Pasil and Suba. In this section, I will discuss 1) changes in local fish terms; 2) government regulations on the fish trade; and 3) changing perceptions of fish among local residents.

Changes in local fish terms. Local fish names used in Pasil are typically descriptive of appearance. For example, *bariles* (*Thunnus albacares*/ yellow fin tuna) supposedly got its name from "*badlis*", meaning 'lines' in Cebuano; the linear pattern on the body of such fish is the reason why some people call it "*badlisan*". Another example is *tulingan* (*Auxis rochei*/ bullet tuna) whose name is derived from "*lingin*" referring to the black "circle" marks near the fish' gut.

Locals in Pasil also have particular classifications for fish. For instance, *bodboron* (*Decapterus macarellus*/ mackerel scad) is categorized into three kinds: the ordinary "*bodboron*", "*bodboron pravil*", and "*bodboron iring-iring*". *Bodboron pravil* is deemed special because of its larger size compared to the ordinary *bodboron*. *Budburon iring-iring* got its name from "*iring*", which means "cat" in Cebuano, on account of its colorful red tail. *Nukos* (squid) are sorted into four kinds: 1) *nukos Bisaya* or *dalupapa* (*Architeuthis*/ giant squid); 2) *tarorot* (*Mastigoteuthis flammea*/ whip-lash squid) are small-sized squid with pointy heads and usually dried under the sun, 3) *lumayagan* (*Sthenoteuthis oualaniensis*/purple squid) are small red squid with a lighter ink color, and 4) *bokoboko*⁹ (*Sepiida*/ cuttlefish), the squid with a hard shell in its back.

Interaction with fish dealers from far places has introduced some new fish terms however, as locals observe. *Tamarong* (*Selar crumenophthalmus*/ big eye scad), referring to a fish famously cooked as *inun-onan* (stewed fish), is now interchangeable with the new term "*matang*". Sometimes, in making deals in the market the Ilonggo word "*aloy*" replaces the term *tulingan* (*Auxis rochei*/ bullet tuna). The local term for prawns, "*pansat*" (*Dendrobranchiata*), is now interchanged with the term "*lukon*". The new term "*bulaw*" substitutes for *anduhaw* (*Rastrelliger faughn*/ island mackerel). The owners of the fishing boats are not

⁹ Technically, *Bokoboko* is not a squid but a cuttlefish. However, local seafood traders are very particular about classifying species – an example of how local knowledge contrasts to what marine biologists know.

Tagalog but operate in fish ports in Luzon, thus they have come to acquire Tagalog terms for certain fish. *Mat-ang*, *bulaw* and *lukon* are thought to be Tagalog by the locals. Some toppers say that they find *bulaw* more convenient to pronounce because it has only two syllables. English terms are also sometimes used interchangeably with their local counterparts. “Yellow fin tuna” (or “tuna” in general) is more understood than the local term “*panit*”. *Panit* means ‘skin’— tuna is generally called *panit* because it has no scales on a large portion of its body. *Panit* is also a blanket term encompassing *bariles*, *tulingan*, and other species of tuna. The most interesting discovery I made in this language game was finding out that “*lapu-lapu*”, the famous fish cooked in Cebu *SuTuKil* restaurants, is not a local term. The original local name of the fish grouper is “*pugapo*” (*Variola louti* or *Epinephelus*)¹⁰.

Despite enculturation and acculturation processes due to the entry of outside fish dealers, some terms remain in Cebuano/Visayan forms especially for fishes usually caught in the Visayan Sea. To name a few: *molmol* (*Scaridae*/parrotfish), *mamsa* (*Carangoides fulvoguttatus*/yellow spotted trevally), *tangigi* (*Scomberomorus commerson*/spanish mackerel), and *tuloy* (*Sardinella fimbriata*/ray-finned sardine). The fish *mamsa* has penetrated Cebuano pop culture in the expression, “*mura man ka’g nakapabingwit og mamsa!*” (‘it’s like you hooked a *mamsa*’), which is said when a man marries a very beautiful or rich woman; implying someone gained instant good fortune regardless if he/she deserves it. *Mamsa* is a big tasty demersal fish that sells in the market for a high price.

Government regulation of the fish trade. The question of politics is a sensitive topic in Pasil Fish Market. To enter the fish trade at the Pasil Fish Market (or the Cebu City Fish Market, which is now its official name) is not easy as there are necessary bureaucratic procedures. The Cebu City government controls the traffic of fish by licensing the fishing operation owners and wholesalers to do business at the fish market.

All economic actors in the Pasil Fish Market are subject to the 1993 Market Code of Cebu City (Ordinance No.1486). However, according to Cebu City’s Market Operations Division, the said law has not been strictly implemented. One important provision of the ordinance is that business permits for wholesalers and vendors would be issued through a bidding process. The highest bidder will have the right to occupy a market space. The provision was never realized after the market authorities concluded

¹⁰ Scientific names vary in the case of *Pugapo* since a different color means a different fish.

that the system will only benefit those who have more capital. Because most of the brokers, toppers, and vendors at the Pasil Fish Market were already established dealers there long before the ordinance was approved, they were no longer required to undergo the bidding process, and their rental fees were not affected by the ordinance (which meant they paid lower rates than those of the bidders). The person who won the bidding will thus need a higher capital which makes it difficult for him/her to compete with established dealers. For this reason, no new players have succeeded in establishing their business at the fish market. The few who were brave enough to take the risk in accordance with the new ordinance, would last for only a year or less. The bidding process was eventually stopped by the government. There are plans to revise the present market code.

The primary requirement to become a broker or wholesaler is to be a resident in Cebu City. Most of the *tarima* owners live in Pasil and Suba except for one, who lives near the downtown district of Cebu. Moreover, this person is also the least visible in the fish market among all the *tarima* owners. These wholesalers may spend most of their time in Pasil, but they have bigger houses in other municipalities of Cebu as well as in the uptown district of Cebu City. Most of them became wholesalers by inheriting their family's fish trading business that has been in operation for many years already. When I met one of the *tarima* owners, I did not have an impression that they are rich because the clothes they wear were very casual and just the same with the toppers. However, when a topper is asked how a wholesaler became a wholesaler, the usual response is "*kay sila man ang datu*" ('because they are rich').

Toppers must also go through registration with the city government. However, the regulations for toppers are more relaxed compared to wholesalers. Some toppers from outside Cebu City can get licensed through the arrangement of registering as voters of Cebu City. This rule was strictly observed during the administration of Mayor Tomas Osmeña in the mid-90s and the early 2000s. The same regulation is also observed among fish vendors and *labasera*, and only members of the PACASAVA or SPMRA (Suba-Pasil Market Retailers Association) are allowed to sell marine goods at the Pasil Fish Market. Actors are regulated this way because many will be interested to go into this business as cash is certain since every fish at the Pasil fish market will be sold out before the day ends.

Another concern addressed by government authorities is that of health and sanitation. Notably, there is a lack of comfort rooms and other

necessary hygienic protocols at the market. Sometimes, the ice is broken up by a *kargador* by smashing it with his muddy boots. Whenever a *kargador* accidentally spills fish on the ground, he picks the fishes and just places them back in the *bañera*. If the condition of the spilled fish is not in a serious state, simple rinsing can be done so that the fish can still be sold. If the fishes still look dirty that rinsing it with water cannot clean it, the *mamuwaray* will immediately buy the spilled fish at a much lower price. Cleaning of the fish will be done later on by the *mamuwaray* in their own facilities. (Every clumsy move of a *kargador* is a deduction to his pay, or worse he cannot receive his 20 pesos from the *bañera* he just carried.) The current fish market also lacks access to fresh water to ensure cleanliness of the place. In comparison, Talisay City and Danao City are said to have more sophisticated fish ports and market facilities with better access to the sea.

Another weak point regarding government regulation is lack of proper documentation. Since *tarima* owners are the only people who have contacts with the fishing operation owners, the government has no way of telling where the fish came from. However, they have data on the amount of seafood transported by container vans/cargo trucks.¹¹ According to their latest appraisal report, the monthly average fish supply is 410,610 kilograms (410.61 metric tons).¹² Calculating that amount means the *tarima* owners have a collective gross income of more than 41 million a month, although as earlier noted there is a significant deficit in collecting their receivables from toppers. However, *tarima* owners complain whenever the government raises the rental fees. During public consultations, *tarima* owners claim that they might get much deficit if the government will ask more from them. The authorities face this struggle of controlling the businessmen at the Pasil Fish Market. My interviewee from the city government said that they are confused why the vendors at the Carcar City¹³ public market have no complaints regarding higher rental fees there when in fact the fishes sold there also came from the Pasil fish market. "*Hakog gyud sila.*" ('They are very greedy'), a government

¹¹The Market Operations Divisions provided data for November to December 2016, considered as the peak season for sales at the market since demand increases for the holiday celebrations. Holy Week when Catholics abstain from eating meat is another peak time.

¹² The figure shown is also alarming for the government agencies in Region 7 who find that the surge of seafood supplies at the Pasil fish market is a clear manifestation of overfishing (Green, et al. 2004).

¹³ A provincial city at the southern part of Cebu.

official said. The toppers and vendors share the same sentiments regarding the *tarima* owners.

It cannot be said that government workers have omitted performing their duty. It has been observed that in the highly populated district of Pasil-Suba, politics is a tough game (Abellanosa 2011). Having many people under them (toppers, vendors, *kargadors*, and other employees), each *tarima* owner can influence election outcomes. Needless to say, wholesalers have political power; one of them was a former city councilor. The Market Operations Division staff are not able to regulate entry of businesses efficiently unless they have strong support from elected officials. Nor can they meticulously record the flow of seafood into the market with lack of direct communication with the fishing operation owners. Changes in the status quo have been trivial because the government and wholesalers are fighting over dominion while the fate of those economic actors in the lower ranks is at the mercy of the *tarima* owner who holds economic power over them in particular and in the fish market in general. This is a clear example of how economic power of wholesale fish dealers holds sway over government regulations.

Changing perceptions of fish among locals. The residents of Pasil and Suba who were mostly fisherfolk in the past, have become disconnected from the marine and coastal environment since they are no longer involved in fishing but only in trading (buying and selling). Fish is generally regarded as cash opportunity rather than as food for direct household consumption. For a fact there are less than ten households in these barangays whose primary livelihood is still fishing. A manifestation of this disconnection from the environment is the pollution of the shores and coastal waters fronting both coastal barangays. The fish supply, as mentioned earlier, comes from other places. So, why should they take care of their own sea if there are people elsewhere who will bring in fish to the market?

Pollution in Pasil-Suba reached an extreme case since its establishment as a dumping site of Cebu City in the late 1950s. The Guadalupe River beside Pasil which flows into the open sea is already considered biologically dead since its waters are now full of solid and liquid wastes not only from Pasil and Suba but also from the upper districts of the city. The poor sewage system also contributed to this problem. During low tide, the river delta yields so much garbage that some scavengers would flock there to collect recyclable materials to be sold in junk shops. Since the fish port and a large part of these barangays are reclaimed areas, *hunas* (low tide) and *taub* (high tide) no longer play a

part of their lives. The waters at the port are now dark and murky with garbage, human feces, and other chemical wastes. Despite such a state, some children still dive and swim in these waters. But according to residents, it is no longer possible to fish near this area, and so the remaining fisherfolk need to go across to the waters of Cordova in order to have a fair catch. Some residents have shifted livelihood from fishing to scavenging in and under the waters fronting Pasil and Suba.



Figure 5. Pollution on the shores of Pasil.

This disconnection from the environment is also manifested in the mindset of the locals at the ideological level. Instead of seeing fish as food for direct household consumption, they see fish as money. What is important for them is to have money to spend for other expenses. Most of the time, *kargadors* just buy cooked food from *karenderias* (eateries) and “*pungko-pungko*” stalls around Pasil and Suba. Because most of their time is dedicated to earning cash, the knowledge of cooking more complicated fish dishes like the *larang* is left to the cooks managing *karenderias*. In this informal settlement, it is more convenient to buy ready-made street food than cook it at home.

The young formally educated segment of the population is not even interested in the fish trade. Most of the children of my informants took up courses which are not related to fish, aquaculture, or business. For them, fish trading is a difficult life. They would rather work somewhere else or go abroad to support their family. The current young generation of traders and *kargadors* in the fish port are mostly dropouts from schools. The lack

of education explains why a person is working at the fish port or wet market is commonly looked down upon in Cebu (without realizing that some of them actually earn more than most people working in a corporate setting). With the children of *tarima* owners, toppers, and vendors becoming professionals, the inherited practice of the work at the fish market seems set to be cut by modern occupational standards.

Conclusion

Without doubt, the Pasil-Suba fish trade is the biggest marine business operation in the Visayas and Mindanao. The steadily increasing population in Cebu especially in its highly urbanized cities, the growth of commercial, industrial and service facilities in many parts of these cities and the entire province, have fueled the expansion of the fish trade in this area. This has had a number of implications on the marine environment not only in Cebu but also in neighboring provinces as well brought about by overfishing in their surrounding waters.

The capitalistic system of the fish trade in Pasil has changed the way in which the locals perceive fish. They now view it as more of an economic asset rather than food for direct household consumption. In addition, the present coastal community of Pasil no longer cast their nets in the sea, thereby limiting their ecological knowledge and awareness of marine species to what is available in the market. Some studies show that the ecological knowledge and educational awareness have a direct relationship to the positive attitude of people towards conservation of the environment for the next generations (Fass 2007). There is a sense that foreign terms are slowly replacing the local terms in the identification and classification of fish and seafood.¹⁴

The current physical and social set-up of the Pasil-Suba fish market invokes urgency to improve monitoring systems, support facilities, and sanitation in the area. But despite such limitations, the fish trade in Pasil still remains the most vibrant in the entire province of Cebu and in the region since its roots of trade date back to pre-colonial times and have been maintained by the intricate web of economic networks and transactions proliferated by second and third generation *tarima* owners or wholesalers whose families have also been in the trade for a number of decades already. It is ironic, however, that while there is a growing fish trade in the area, poverty is still very much pervasive among informal settlers in Pasil and Suba. The business development in the fish trade

¹⁴ There is a tremendous need to document these observations.

seems to have only benefitted the big traders and not the small fisherfolks and slum dwellers. A more inclusive development framework needs to be put in place.

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