

# **“BARTER”: THE PERSISTENCE OF AN ILLICIT TRADE IN COMMERCIAL FISHING INDUSTRY**

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The practice of illicit trade in commercial fishing industry is a maritime reality in Mindanao. This paper unravels “barter”, as the locals call it, – illicit exchanges of part of the fish catch, and of other valuable commodities, between personnel of commercial fishing vessels (e.g. from General Santos City) and small traders in coastal communities. The site of the research in Governor Generoso, Davao Oriental is strategically situated between Davao Gulf and the Pacific Ocean. Kept hidden from the owners of these commercial fishing vessels, the barter transaction includes not only fish catch but also commodities such as livestock and gasoline. Barter thrives despite environmental, personal, and legal risks and threats. This paper discusses three possible reasons: 1) as a form of resistance against the venture capitalists or owners of the fishing enterprise; 2) as a livelihood strategy; and 3) as an activity that creates harmony in the community. The paper uncovers how barter is protected by powerful social actors through bribery and its persistence informs worsening conditions of fishers. Semi-structured interviews with key informants, and audiovisual materials, comprised the data for this study.

***Keywords:** Illicit trade, resistance, livelihood, commercial fishing industry*

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I document an illicit activity in the commercial fishing industry. The study unveiled deeper socio-economic and political factors that have been driving the fishers to engage in a flourishing illicit trade in the porous coastal communities of southern Mindanao.

Data gathered from the field reveals that trading portions of their fish catch and other goods such as gasoline from their fishing vessels without the knowledge of their employer (the commercial fishing vessel owner) is widely practiced in General Santos City. Those ‘stolen goods’ are sold to

the small traders in nearby coastal communities, particularly in Governor Generoso Davao Oriental where this research was conducted. This phenomenon that clandestinely happens in the middle of the sea, is mostly hidden but widely recognized and socially accepted as “*barter*” in the fishing communities.

*Barter*<sup>1</sup> in this study is a local term that is currently used to refer to trading of goods between personnel of commercial fishing vessel and small-time traders from coastal communities of southern Mindanao. This exchange is also deemed illicit because the commercial fishers’ items of trade may be considered ‘stolen goods’. The bartered fish are delivered to the local wet markets where they are said to sell at a lower price alongside ‘legally’ delivered fish. The goods and commodities that are usually *bartered* are not only limited to fish catch but also include fishing vessel supplies such as gasoline, ropes, and steel.

For a framework to explain the findings about the *barter* economy, I adopted what Janet MacGaffey (1991) described as the “second economy”. In her study on smuggling and unofficial trade conducted in Zaire, Africa, she suggests that these unmeasured and unregulated economic activities are carried out quite openly and intersect with official and recorded economic transactions. Her study revealed how “economic factors like availability of local natural resources, geographical location, scarcity of goods and services, political and economic conditions in neighbouring countries, and transportation conditions had driven these second economies to expand beyond official economic figures,” and gave emphasis on the “role of colonial powers and state controls in reviving ancient trade routes for smuggling, thereby resulting to strong personal ties among actors upon which second economies largely depend” (cited in Villanueva 2013:200).

The central question addressed in this study is how *barter* operates and why, despite environmental, personal, and legal risks and threats, it still thrives in the research area. The study proposes several possible reasons: (1) on the part of the personnel of commercial fishing vessels, *barter* is a form of resistance against oppressive employers (fishing vessel owners) and against an exploitative system; on the part of the local participants, (2) *barter* is considered as an important livelihood strategy; (3) given declining local catches, *barter* meets local market demand for fish; it continues to flourish because local enforcement and local

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike the standard definition of barter— ‘the direct exchange of goods without the medium of money’ (Headey 2005).

government agents appreciate its positive impact on local economy; and (4) *barter* enjoys protection from the powerful social actors through bribery. Varied social actors benefit from this trade.

I also looked at the past *barter* system among commercial fishers and *barter* traders around Davao Gulf in order to identify previous connections that resulted to strong ties among fishers from different regions (General Santos and Davao Oriental). I found out that there was in fact a booming *barter* trade in the waters of Davao Gulf, usually participated in by women but which was a wholly different economic activity from the current *barter* trade presented in the study. Women's participation in the present *barter* trade is discouraged by the presence of environmental danger, external threats and possible human trafficking conditions.

My informants confirm that *barter* has long been thriving in many maritime ports such as in Mati, Surigao, Davao, Malita, Balut Islands, Maasim, and General Santos City. Yet, *barter* as well as any smuggling activity is rarely mentioned in journalistic reports, newspapers, or maritime research. Despite their economic and political relevance, the phenomenon of smuggling or illicit trade in the Philippines is not widely researched owing perhaps to its political sensitivity and statistical elusiveness. According to Alano (1984), a few studies on illegal trade were limited to the establishment or description of the activity because any attempt to pursue these transactions is both difficult and dangerous.

The challenge now to commercial fishing industries is to take a closer look at the conditions of their workers in order to design good policy that could improve their condition. This study demonstrates how- through *barter* – fishers were active agents in the exploitation and struggles that they face in everyday work. And it hopes to fill the gap in the maritime literature where there is a considerable lack of inquiry on the human dimension in the commercial fishing sector.

### **Studying the barter economy**

The fundamental challenge in pursuing the topic was how to describe and analyze “*barter*” in all its complexity. Commercial fishing vessel owners and state agents from General Santos City (where bartered fish usually comes from) regard *barter* as illegal due to the ‘stealing’ of the fish catch and other commodities in the fishing vessel which the employer owns. However, the fishers (who are engaged in *barter*) regard the trade as a strategic source of the much needed income and justifies their action by

saying that they are not ‘stealing’ but just getting what is ‘rightfully’ theirs.

The terms “illicit/licit”, “illegal/legal”, in relation to informal economy are not categorically equivalent. A wide array of bewildering literature on informal and illicit economies suggests that oftentimes these terms are treated separately, “with the former detailing the strategies of the urban poor, women, or household labor, while the latter pair is fused with literature on criminology, law, corruption and gangs” (Galemba 2008). Yet, as Toranzo (1997) and Hagedorn (2007a, 2007b) suggest, in everyday practice the informal and the illicit often intertwine (as cited in Galemba 2008).

In this study, I used the term “illicit trade” to refer to *barter* since “illegal” seemed inappropriate due to the fact that *barter* activity is not explicitly prohibited by law in the research site.<sup>2</sup> I pursued the investigation of the study with a more actor-centered approach, “one that sought to understand how everyday people shaped, and were shaped by, the neoliberal order beyond the studies that simplistically portray them as the unemployed, poor, smugglers or mafias” (Galemba 2008).

The article investigates the fishers involved in this trade, their wider motivations, and other factors that influence them to engage in this activity. One of the reasons why I wanted to pursue the study despite all the challenges is in order to give voice to those involved. I think that we should not immediately condemn them but understand the structures that facilitate their participation, and why and how they exist.

Several studies have been conducted on labor and employment in the fishery sector. For example, Sharma (2011) provided a background on how fishers often face conditions of work that are different from those experienced by workers in other sectors. Fishers often work long strenuous hours, day and night. Fishing is a perilous and risky occupation wherein fishers are constantly challenged by the uncertainty of the marine

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<sup>2</sup> There are theoretical debates about how to define informality/formality or Illicit/licit. In fact, I almost fell into the trap of state-centered discourse, in which the designations of formal/informal and illicit/licit are political and seen through the eyes of governments and policy makers without examining the lives, thoughts and actions of the people engaged in it. Most scholars of informal economy take on Portes (1989) and Portes’ et al. (1994) definition of the informal economy as economic activities that avoid state regulation. Following this definition, in principle, the state dictates the boundaries of informal economic activity and has the sole control to criminalize whatever they deemed as informal, illegal or illicit.

environment. This dangerous occupation has a higher rate of injury and fatality rate compared to other types of work.

Another study conducted by Peji (2013) on the work of tuna hand line fishers in General Santos City shows that the fishers only have a medium level of decent work, 8 out of 19 indicators used scored below the acceptable level. The study followed the International Labor Organization's concept of decent work as the "promotion of opportunities for all men and women to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity" the work environment, work structure, and the traditional practices were considered in the implementation of reforms and development interventions to ensure fisher's protection. Yet, the study concludes that "the fishers have remained unable to enjoy the supposed benefits of these interventions; remained one of the marginalized groups who have a limited ability to change their working conditions and have been left with no other option but to 'accept things as they are' (Peji 2013). While the presence of human dimension in the fishery sector is now recognized, fishers in these studies are often portrayed as merely passive receivers of the oppressive structure of the industry with limited ability to alter their present situation.

In this paper, I intend to document an illicit activity in the commercial fishing industry. The study unveiled deeper socio-economic and political factors that have been driving the fishers to engage in the flourishing illicit trade that happens in the porous coastal communities of southern Mindanao.

## **Methodology**

This study is a product of a month long field school<sup>3</sup> in one of the coastal barangays in the Municipality of Governor Generoso, Davao Oriental. We stayed in the community and lived among the locals to observe the lives and works of the people in the community, the environment in which they lived, and to participate in their day-to-day activities.

I was able to gather barter traders' personal accounts and life stories during one on one interviews. Interviews were also conducted with Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) personnel, a local government official, commercial fishing vessels' personnel and laborers, *barter* financiers, and wet market vendors. I also have informants who were former and current commercial fishers who work at General Santos.

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<sup>3</sup> [Part of the BA Anthropology program at the the University of the Philippines – Mindanao. It was taught by Prof. Jessie Varquez, Jr.]

Their stories and sentiments about their lives as crewmembers supplement the reality of the reviewed literature. I compared the case studies of my key informants coming from different barangay in order to validate the *barter* process in general.

When I asked Jimmy if I could join in one of their *barter* trips, he laughed a little and said “*basig ikaw ang ma barter*” (‘you might be the one *barter-ed* !’). Although the thought of me joining *barter* trips is hindered because of my being a woman, I observed some advantages brought by my gender in this study. Most of my informants are men, but some of them seemed to show enthusiasm talking to me and the way they talk about their participation in the dangerous and risky illicit trade, sometimes sounded like they were showing off to elevate their masculinity. If this is the case, my gender somehow encourages the informants to take part in my study. Feelings of intimidation were only felt in the beginning; later on, I think we got used to each other.

*Barter* is a sensitive topic in the area. I did not realize this difficult situation until I was, several times, in my search for key informants, accused of being a special agent from the National Bureau of Investigation or from the Bureau of Customs or perhaps sent by the fishing vessel owners to investigate. Later in the field, when people got used to our presence, I was able to freely ask around for help about my topic. I observed that *barter* is widely recognized and accepted in the community but is hidden from outsiders. Just days before our arrival in the research site, I found out from my informants that a captain of a fishing vessel was caught in the act of trading *barter* goods and was imprisoned. This news made the people in the community more aloof toward inquiry about the topic.

I started out with one informant. I met him serendipitously. It was our second day of fieldwork, I was ready to drop *barter* as my topic of interest because when I had asked our field guide about *barter* he replied that I could not find any informant in the area where we are staying because *barter* traders live in a different and distant barangay. But then I met Jimmy in his small nipa hut, and when I was about to leave him after our conversation about his life and work as a “honey maker”, I looked at the sea and I asked him “do you happen to know about *barter*?” To which he positively responded, “Yes! I used to handle a huge *barter* trade in this area”. I spent another hour conversing with the old man.

Jimmy provided me a list of other possible key informants and thoroughly, with enthusiasm even, opened my eyes to the complex process of the *barter* economy. Later in my Applied Anthropology class, I

learned that ‘serendipity’ is indeed a method that can be used in the field (Zilberg 2016). Yes, I could have just given up immediately due to several considerations. Such as the danger and sensitivity of the topic; the lack of informants in the barangay where we are staying; or their unwillingness to participate; the need to travel and stay for days in a distant barangay; and getting lost in bewildering literature on which the hazy concept of *barter* falls into. But one serendipitous moment happened – meeting jimmy – so I held on to the topic.

My strategy in gathering data from interviews followed the “conversations” method in studies of informal economies as a product of multi-sited ethnography and life history method (cf Quitoriano, 2013). Conversations were conducted with six (6) *barter* traders who are commercial fishers and laborers combined; a former captain of the fishing vessel involved in *barter*; a woman who worked as a *basketer* in the past; three (3) *barter* financiers; a number of barangay officials during the courtesy calls we made in two barangays; and an official from the BFAR. All names are pseudonyms to protect the informants.

### ***Barter in Governor Generoso: past and present***

The municipality of Governor Generoso is an approximately 6-hour bus ride from Davao City. This coastal municipality is located at the southeastern most tip of Mindanao. With a total area of 365.75 km<sup>2</sup>, the municipality is divided into 20 barangay, 14 of which are coastal and six are land-locked (Municipal Development Plan 2014). It has a total population of approximately 50, 350 marked by considerable ethnic and linguistic variation. Consequently, majority of the population rely their livelihood on the opportunity that the environment provides. Farmers, fishers, commercial traders, labor workers, private business owners are some common livelihood in the municipality.

Governor Generoso is one of the “gulf towns” of Davao Oriental whose shoreline stretches along Davao Gulf (see Figure 1, next page). Davao Gulf serves as their major fishing ground, distributing fish catch to cities such as Mati, Tagum, and Davao City. According to informants, Davao Gulf also served as a significant maritime route for barter trade. Narratives recount that barter exchanges in Governor Generoso already existed in the 1990’s. Commercial fishers, mostly from Toril and Talomo in Davao Gulf, would barter fish in exchange for other goods and commodities.

**Barter in the past: Nelfa as a woman *basketer***

It was from Nelfa that I first learned about the nature of barter transaction in the past. I met her in barangay Nangan, the second largest barangay in the municipality in terms of household population. Nangan is one of the coastal barangay where most people rely on the sea for their source of income. In one of its purok which is known for making boats, I met Nelfa.

‘Can you still remember your experiences from barter trade?’ I asked her, after I learned that she used to trade goods back in 1980’s. (“*Maalala pa nimo tung kaagi nimo sauna te, katongga-barter pa ka?*”) ‘Yes’, she replied, “*Oo, mao nay gibuhi nako sa akong pamilya kani-ado*” [Barter was how I fed my family in the past], with a smile, a hint of a good memory perhaps came to her mind.

We sat under a huge tree, on a bench made of discarded pieces of wood, while Nelfa talked about her life in the past three and a half decades ago. “*Bibo kayo tung barter diri sauna. Mao gud tuy panginabuhian sa mga tao diri*”. [‘Barter was a flourishing business back then. It used to be an important livelihood for the people in our community’.]

From the 1980’s to 2005, over more than two decades, ‘barter trade’ was booming. Almost everyone in the community was involved in barter. At dawn, a number of “*basketer*” would gather along the shore waiting for their boats to set out on a barter trip. Nelfa further explained the process:

*Mga alas dos sa kadlawon, mularga name ana padulong sa payao. Mga pulo ka tao mi ana magsakay sa bangka, kasagaran unom ang babae unya upat ang lalaki. Bitbit na namo na among mga basket, nay uban puno klase-klase ang sulod depende ra pud sa budget. Kabalo man mi nahidlaw nang mga naa sa lantsa ug pagkaon gikan diri, mao dal-an namo silag mga klase-klaseng pagkaon. Pagabot sa payao, ang mga babae ray musaka dadto sa lantsa. Ang mga lalaki magpabilin kay manapyaw man nasila. Sa sulod sa lantsa, ah lingaw pud kayo na kay makauli man pud mig daghang isda.*





[At dawn, around 2 am, we would set out for the *payao*<sup>4</sup>. There would be about 10 of us in the boat, usually six women and four men. We'd be carrying with us our baskets, full of different things, depending also on our budget (capital). We knew that fishers crave food from here, so we would bring them different kinds of food. Arriving at the *payao* (floating structures anchored to the sea, where *lantsa* are fishing), only the women would go aboard the *lantsa* (to engage in barter). The men would remain at the boat so they could do some fishing. In the *lantsa*, fishers would then start choosing what goods they want and we would just wait. After going out of the *lantsa*, ah we would be so happy to be going home with a lot of fish.]

This barter transaction can be simply rendered as an equation: a basket of goods in exchange for a basket full of fish. Humprey and Hugh-Jones (1992) provide an explanation on features that are associated with barter as a specific mode of exchange. The focus is on demand for particular things which are different in kind, or, it may be for services exchanged for goods or other services. In this case, the *lantsa* fishers wanted food from land that the basketers could provide. This is evident in the term *hidlaw* (the emotion of 'longing' or 'yearning'): commercial fishers were said to crave 'land food' since they stay out at sea for a long period. The *basketers* for their part were interested in fish to exchange for money at the market or also for their own consumption (*panud-an*).

I consulted with Jimmy on some new information I gathered from our short fieldwork in Nangan. Surprisingly he said that he also used to work on a Toril commercial fishing vessel back in 1995, which he had never mentioned in our previous conversations. I took the opportunity to confirm the details Nelfa gave me by asking him about his own experiences. How was it back then? Can you still remember those times? [*"Kamusta man to sauna ya? Maalala pa nimo?"*], I asked after he confirmed he also used to trade fish to *basketers*. [*"Ah lingaw kaayo to saunang panahona"*] [Oh it was a joyful time back then], he said. He laughed, [*"ah kinsay di malipay na imong isda bayluhan ug dako kaayong bingka! Syempre malipay jud ka kay imong isa ra ka isda bayluhan ug dako na bingka!"*] [Who wouldn't get excited and happy because your fish

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<sup>4</sup> *Payao*, fish aggregating devices from where commercial fishers can catch fish, are scattered around Davao Gulf. In the 90's these *payaos* were mostly owned by *lantsa* owners in Davao City, specifically in Toril and Talomo.

would turn into a big *bingka*<sup>5</sup>]. He explained that the *lantsa* fishers, who are mostly male, were also happy to interact with the women aboard the *lantsa*.

Parties involved in barter may see the same transaction from different perspectives (Humphrey & Hugh-Jones (1992)— one party may perceive the exchange as 'barter' while the other as a disguised or surrogate form of monetary exchange. This is true for this case: the commercial fishers treat the basket of goods as pure barter while the *basketer* could perceive the fish as money because she can sell it afterwards.

In order to gain a better understanding of the barter trip, I traced the economic chain (see Figure 2, next page).

Most of the *basketers* during this time were women. In preparation for barter, a *basketer* would buy goods from the market. These purchases are placed in a circular rattan basket that can accommodate 15-20 kilos of goods. Usually, according to our informant, she would place a total of ₱100 worth of goods on her basket. A live chicken is placed in a separate basket because it has a different value.

In those days, each passenger would pay ₱10 to cover the diesel expenses (considered already a huge amount for fare) for the barter trip. When they reach the *payao* there may also be other boats carrying *basketer* passengers. The one that arrives at the *payao* first is assured to receive fish. According to Nelfa, one was lucky to be the first one to arrive because it meant that their basket(s) would be filled to the brim with fish. The bartered fish catch was then sold to compradors or small households in the community.

Just like fishing, barter involves risks and dangers. When I asked Nelfa about her 'most unforgettable moment' while bartering, she narrated:

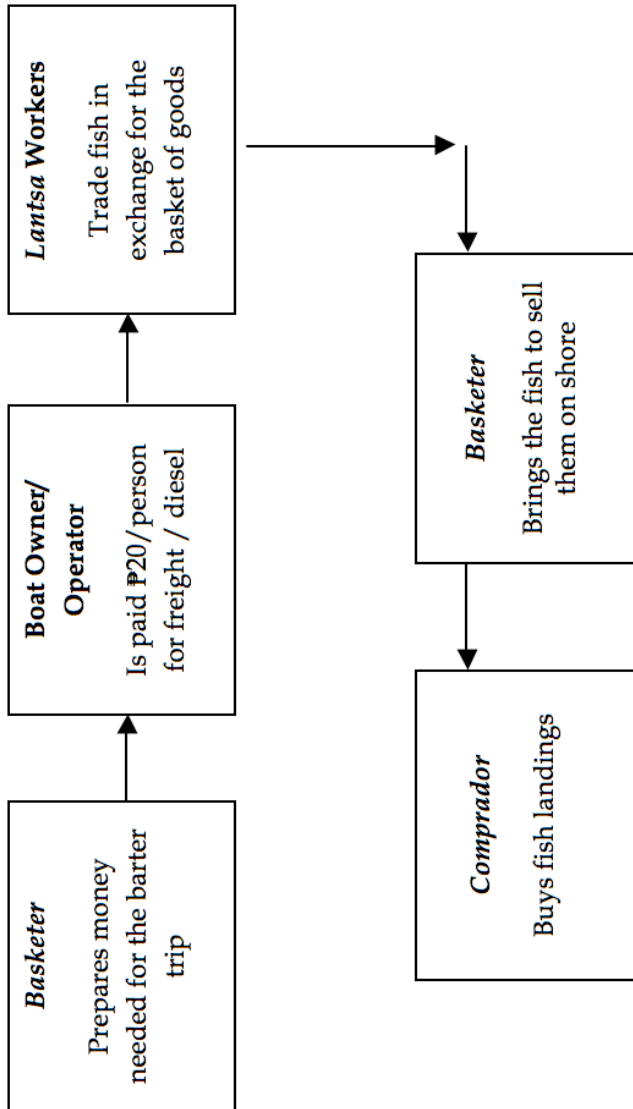
*“Pauli name ato gikan sa payao. Mga pulo mi ka tao, lima mi babae. Natagak mi sa Bangka tungod sa kadako sa balod. Unya ako ra man diay ang babae na kabalo mulangoy sa amoa, gitabangan nako akong mga kauban na babae. Dili pud nako to makalimtan, pero wala man gihapon ko nihunonug barter tungod ato.”*

[‘We were on our way home from a barter trip. We were about ten, 5 of us women. A huge wave threw us out of the

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<sup>5</sup> A rice cake, usually eaten as a snack.

boat! I think I was the only woman who knew how to swim at that moment so I helped the other women. It was a horrible experience, but it did not stop me from joining barter trips.’]



**Figure 2.** Economic chain of *barter* in the 1990s to early 2000s

Why would women engage in this kind of activity far out at sea when some of them do not even know how to swim? Table 1 illustrates the computation of cost and profit in a barter transaction based on Nelfa's account, and explains how the women would stand to gain. As shown in the computation of income, income from 'bartering' was very good compared to expenses. One woman in the community even finished her college degree by working hard and joining barter trips at dawn before attending school.

The barter transactions lasted until 2005, the year when a commercial fishing owner from Governor Generoso was able to stop other commercial fishers from catching fish in this area of Davao Gulf<sup>6</sup>. The *payao* belonging to the *lantsa* from Davao were destroyed. The *lantsa* coming from Davao City in Governor Generoso disappeared and this put an end to the local communities' barter activities.

**Table 1.** Computation of cost and profit in barter according to Nelfa (1990s-early 2000s)

<b>A. Contents of Basket</b>	Cost
Bread	₱ 10
Cigarette	₱ 20
<i>Suman</i> (rice cake)	₱ 30
<i>Saging</i> (banana)	₱ 25
Softdrinks	₱ 15
<b>Subtotal</b>	₱ 100
<b>B. Computation of Income of one <i>basketer</i></b>	
Contents of basket (purchased local goods)	₱100
Fare	₱20
Market Sale of barter goods e.g. fish 15 kilos x retail price ₱35/kilo	₱525
<b>Income</b>	<b>₱405</b>

Nelfa's experiences as a woman *basketer* illustrates how the practice called *barter* in the past clearly differs with the present day '*barter*'. Her story is of the time when barter was considered an acceptable activity. At

<sup>6</sup> [Perhaps by local government ordinance.]

present, *barter* is still the term used by the locals, but *barter* now involves huge sums of money and thousands of kilos of fish. When locals are asked why they still call it *barter*, they would say because it is the term they are used to (*naandan*). They would also refer to the transaction as “*comprada*” or ‘bulk buying’. However *barter* is more often how the locals today refer to their activity. They still bring the same goods like live animals, canned goods, and beverages, because these are requested by the fishers. The commercial fishing vessel owners and the government authorities from General Santos City however, regard *barter* as “illegal”.

### **The commercial fishing industry**

From as early as 1970, General Santos City has been tagged as the “Tuna Capital” of the Philippines (Gensan Annual Economic Profile 2014). General Santos City is the largest producer of sashimi-grade tuna<sup>7</sup> in the Philippines. The city also accounts for the second largest daily total fish catch landed next to Navotas City (GAEP 2014). The geographic location of the city gives proximity to tuna-rich fishing grounds including the Moro Gulf, Sulu Sea, Mindanao Sea and adjacent Celebes Sea, which are known centers of tuna abundance. It is also a zone that is not normally visited by devastating typhoons or seasonal adverse weather pattern.

Today General Santos City has assigned a total land area of 32 hectares for its General Santos Fish Port Complex, used for unloading and marketing of marine products for both local and foreign markets, for harbor operations, and for processing and refrigeration activities. This port complex emerged as the region’s principal trading port catering to the SOCSKSARGEN (South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani and General Santos City) economic growth area.

According to the figures released by the Philippine Fisheries Development Authority, the total fish volume landed at the General Santos Fish Port Complex in the year 2014 amounts to 193,868 metric tons. This figure of fish catch excludes the fish pilferage taking place in different coastal communities. According to my research, from two thousand up to ten thousand kilos of fish are being sold by the fishing crew to persons from the nearby communities without the knowledge of the commercial fishing owners. Informants from General Santos would say that “*pabukal*” (‘sale’) is indeed an extensive practice. *Pabukal* is the

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<sup>7</sup> Sashimi grade tuna is a ‘Class A’ freshly thawed tuna, mostly produced by General Santos for export.

term they used to refer to anomalous activities of selling fish catch on board fishing vessels. Such trading also includes selling of other goods that are essentially stolen from the fishing operation, such as ropes, gasoline, and steel.

The commercial fishing vessels from General Santos are called *lantsa*<sup>8</sup>. There are several kinds of *lantsa*: the “mother boat”, “service boat”, “skiff boat”, and a “light boat”. A motorized skiff boat is used to pull the *payao* (or fish aggregating device) from the periphery of the net. The ‘light boat’, which is a carrier of an incandescent lamp powered by a mounted generator, attracts the school of fish so they can be caught by the net.

Only two kinds of *lantsa* are found to be involved in *barter*: the *Unay* or *Mother boat* and *Serbis* or the *Service Boat*. *Unay* are less often trading partners in barter because they sail too far from the communities. When one is assigned to work in an *unay*, according to my informants ‘you cannot see land anymore’; that is how far the *unay* would sail. The *serbis* boats on the other hand pass by San Agustin Point and also carry more fish than the other boats. Hence, *serbis* boats are often the *barter* partners of the locals of Governor Generoso.

Among the fishing vessels, the *unay* or the mother boat is the biggest. Figure 3 shows an example of a mother boat docking on shore. This boat is equipped with big fishing nets and *payao*, a heavy object made of steel. An average *unay* can carry up to 30 tons of fish, more or less 40 *payaos* and about 30 workers.

As shown in Figure 5, the mother boat is manned by a captain (*arais*) who commands the fishing operation. The second captain (*segunda arais*) or second in command serves as the assistant of the captain and provides commands when the captain is not available. The *timonel* is in charge of the navigation. He controls the rudder (*timon*). The chief engineer manages the engines and is in charge of the engine maintenance, repairs, and problems. The assistant engineer and the oiler assist him in the engine room. The divers (*busero*) dive in the water to check the *payao* for fish. The *maestro busero* is the chief diver who signals when and where the net should be dropped. The rest of the crew (e.g. the *ultimos* ) take charge of the general labor including operating in the maintenance of the vessel, loading of ice, gasoline, food and water, and the loading and unloading of

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<sup>8</sup> Spanish *lancha*/a boat that carries a net and is powered by inboard engines (cf Campado 2007).

fish catch. Additionally, a cook prepares food for the entire crew on board the *lantsa*.



**Figure 3.** An example of an *unay* or mother boat



**Figure 4.** An example of a *serbis* or service boat



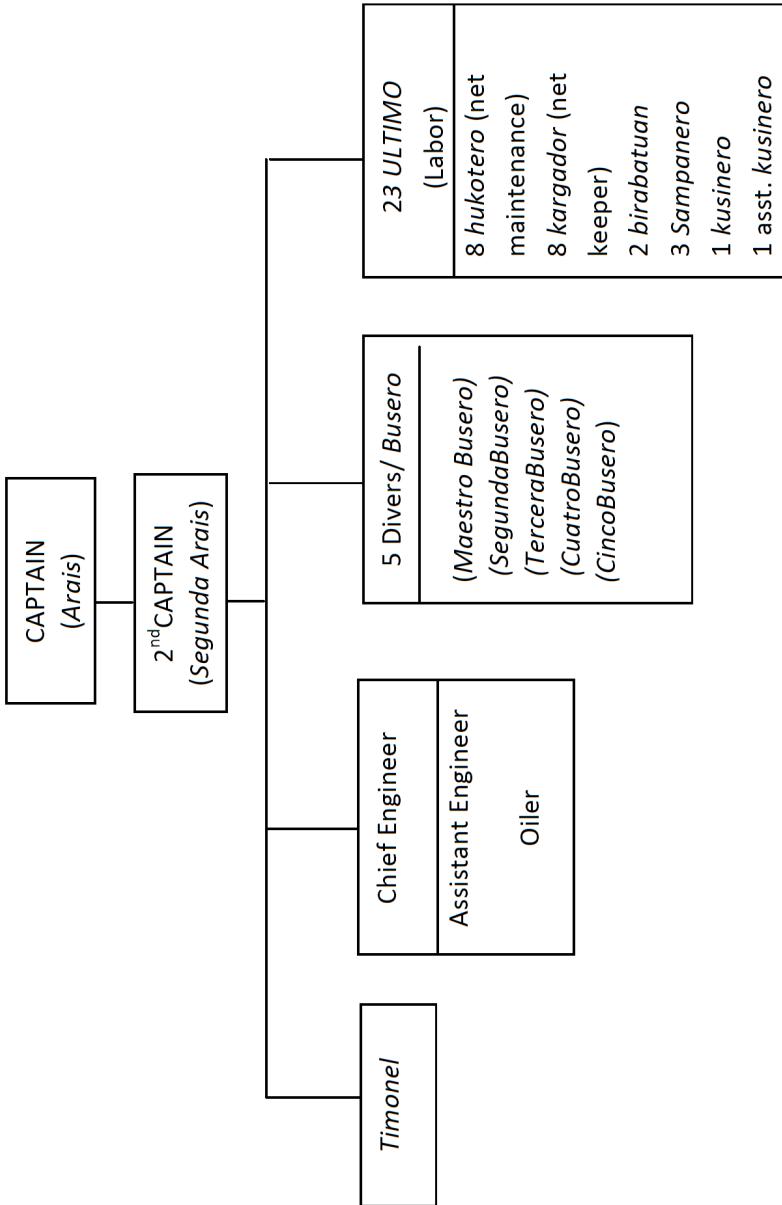
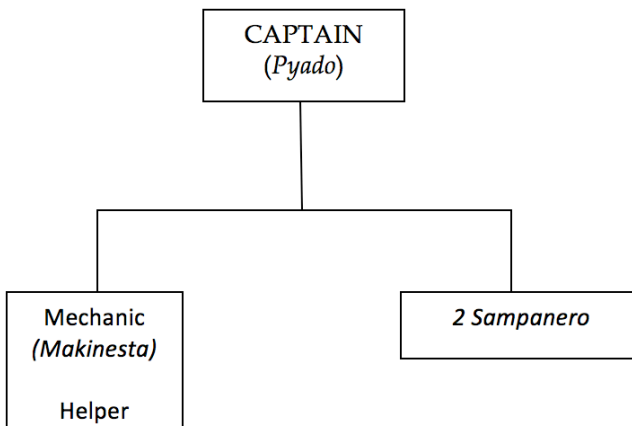


Figure 5. Mother Boat labor organization

A service boat is the fishing vessel that carries fish catch from the *payao* to the port. It has large Styrofoam ice boxes used to transport fish. It carries 10 to 15 workers and stays at sea for a shorter number of days than the *Unay*. A service boat can be a wooden one or it can also be a *lantangan* or a steel service boat.

There is a mechanic (*makinesta*) on board who takes charge of the boat's engine. The rest of the crew works as general labor including loading ice, gasoline, food and water, and general maintenance like cleaning the storage and equipment.

Concerning the fishers wages, there are two main types of payment in the fishing sector: the flat wage and the share system. In a flat wage, fishers have a fixed salary per pay period. In a sharing system, fishers' incomes depend on their fish catch. Under the sharing system, there is no fixed percentage of who gets how much since the contract depends on a pre-arranged agreement between the owner and the fishers. However, commonly, this is how they do it: the proceeds from the catch are used to cover the expenses for the operation of the vessel. The remaining net profit is shared among the vessel owner and the fishers based on the hierarchy in the labor organization. As will be discussed further below, there is an issue of exploitation in the implementation of the sharing system.



**Figure 6.** Service boat labor organization

***Sugat sa lawod* ('to meet in the sea'): the *barter* process**

Considering that *barter* is regarded as 'illegal' it is also important to look at the legal geography of this activity. The notion of legal geography is that the illicitness of your act depends where you do the act. According to Banister et al.,

Inquiring into illicit economies... involves asking questions about the relationships between spatial practices of illegality and their relationship to the ways that government actors conceive of the territory of the state, and where and when they police its diverse boundaries (2015:365).

Governor Generoso is strategically located between the Pacific Ocean in the east and Celebes Sea in the south. The map (Figure 7) shows the proximity between the municipality of Governor Generoso and General Santos City. Governor Generoso is far from the commercial fishing vessel owners in General Santos City although they do have ways of surveiling and tracking their boats (to be discussed below). The route of the commercial fishing vessels always passes the waters of San Agustin on their way back to General Santos. According to the *barter* traders from Governor Generoso, they sail about 120 miles south to reach the *payao*, approximately 5-6 hours of sailing via motorized boat. Some would also sail 60 miles east in the waters of Mati to meet the *lantsa*, depending on the agreed meeting point by the two parties.

*Barter* in this case is not deemed 'illegal' in Governor Generoso. For those who were apprehended, informants would say that it came from the efforts of the *lantsa* owners because *barter* is not a problem in Governor Generoso.

This is exactly what an official of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) in Governor Generoso told me when I had a short conversation with him about *barter*. "*Nganong dakpon man namo na sila na gwapo man sad na ilang isda? Makahatag man pud nag trabaho sa mga tao*" ['Why should we apprehend them, when their fish is good? They also give jobs to the people']. This statement of a municipal BFAR official may not necessarily be representative of the state agents in Governor Generoso but it explains why the local government is lenient and accepting of *barter*.

The *lantsa* can come close to shore in areas that are somewhat isolated to avoid possible exposure. This makes them accessible to communities located close to a deep trench or "*kantilan*" feature of the shoreline. There are barangay where the presence of *barter* traders was



**Figure 7.** Map of Southeastern Mindanao  
*[Source: Google Maps. 9 December 2015]*

identified, but there are no barter boats coming to its shore. There are also barangay where the presence of barter was identified along with the presence of barter traders. The commonality among these locations is that these places have *kantilan*, and are quiet and relatively isolated or ‘far from the crowd’. Barter was identified to be present, or was thought to be ‘high’ in six locations (see Figure 8).

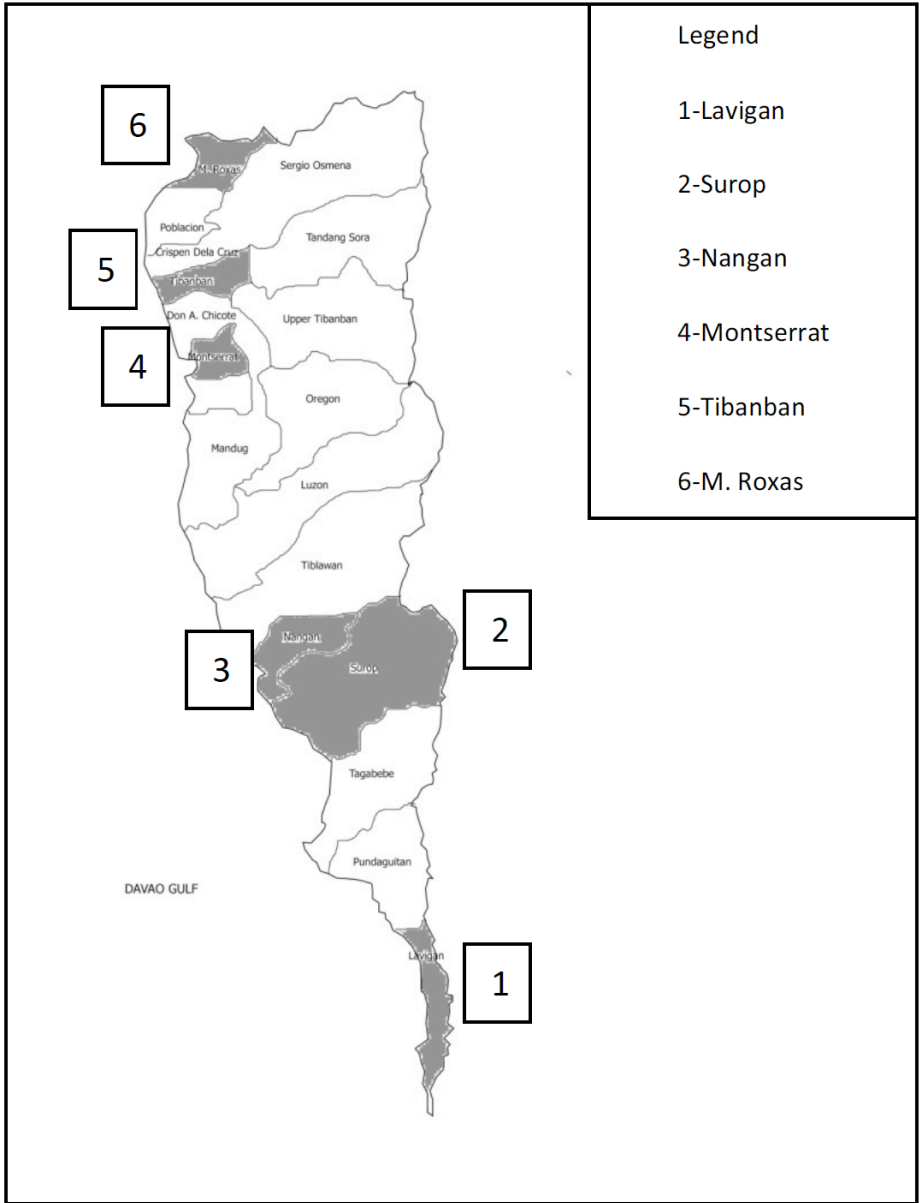
In Governor Generoso, fishers recount that there are lesser fish in the sea than before. Nevertheless, the demand of fish in the market is still high. *Barter* helps traders meet the market demand. That is why even financiers with big fishing business (*panagatan*) still buy fish from *barter* traders apart from their own fishers. Since fishing industries cannot meet the increasing local demand of fish, especially that there is an annual fishing ban for the nesting season of fish, financiers supplement their business with *barter*. *Barter*, thus is also locally appreciated as it sustains the local market demand.

A closer look at this trade system further reveals how varied social actors (barter traders, financiers, barangay officials, and the community) benefit from this trade. Figure 9 illustrates the flow of barter trade transactions and relationships among key actors in Governor Generoso.

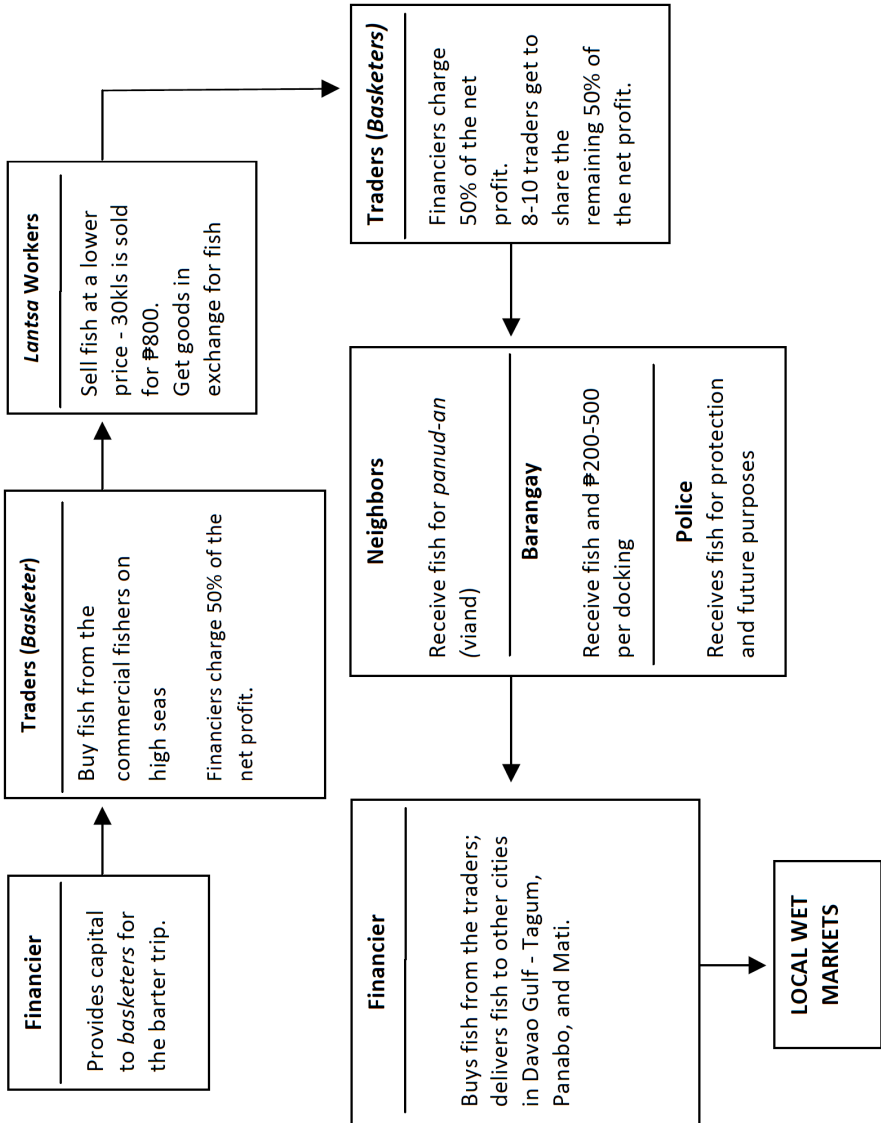
Contemporary *barter* starts with the financier who provides capital or the ‘*starting*’ of the barter trip. Most small traders/fishers do not have enough financial capabilities to fund a barter trip. Usually, financiers who support the purchase of fish also expect to buy the goods of their *barter* traders. Some financiers also act as barter traders themselves where they join the barter trip as broker or buyer.

The financier’s role in barter is no different from a financier in the tuna hand line fishery sector. The financier, who can either be an individual or a corporation, stands to profit from the fishing venture through (a) interest on the loaned amount, (b) commission from the gross sales of the catch, and (c) commission as trader if the financier also disposes the catch to the local markets (Peji 2013).

In Governor Generoso, a financier who owns a fishing unit may also hire laborers as *barter* traders. The financier then provides everything; from ice, gasoline, boat, food supplies, and cash to his workers. The barter traders will receive either a fixed amount or a share from the net profit depending on the prior arrangements with the financier. This arrangement can be further explained by the case of Nilo (30), former *barter* laborer for a year.



**Figure 8.** Map of Governor Generoso showing the six barangays of the study.



**Figure 9.** Flow chart of contemporary *barter* in Governor Generoso

I met Nilo in front of the gates of a former financier in Montserrat who I wanted to interview. However, the person was hard to catch for an interview even if we went to their house night and day, every day, for five days. Fortunately, the financier's gate gave me Nilo. He used to work for Rey [the financier] as a laborer for *barter* trip. "*ah, labor labor ra man ko ato maam*" he said when I asked about his experience from barter. He received a fixed rate of ₱800 per *barter* trip and some fish for viand (*panud-an*).

The *basketer*, however, exerts all the effort and hard work. With the dangers they face at sea and the unpredictable weather condition, sailing for a barter trip sounds much harder than fishing. When a *basketer* reaches the agreed meeting point, the commercial fishing vessel would not stop for the transaction because the company can track them down. Therefore, the smaller fishing vessel needs to attach to the bigger one through small planks of wood. The danger further exacerbates when this clandestine transaction is held at night. With just a little mistake, a trader could be pushed off the vessel and risk getting lost in the vast open sea.

The *lantsa* workers for their part are motivated by the insufficiency of their income. They treat this activity as a "*diskarte*" or strategy to live within a coping economy, which refers to "all economic activities undertaken by subsistence groups that use their dwindling asset-base to maintain below minimum living standards as a means to survive" (Villanueva 2013:199). Sentiments of *lantsa* workers show that they feel deprived of decent work and it puts their families on the line.<sup>9</sup>

Before the *basketer* reaches the financier when their boat lands on shore, they usually give away portions of their bartered goods to sustain smooth relations with their neighbors, law enforcers, and local government officials. Neighbors are given fish for "*panud-an*" or for viand which prevents personal conflicts with them. Police officers and local officials are given a share of the catch for security purposes, 'in order not to cause any trouble'.

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<sup>9</sup> [Editor's note: Russell (1994) has written on how there is rampant opportunism and cheating in a purse seine fishery in Batangas. Crew members steal fish because of disadvantaged implementation of the terms of the shares contract. Captains cannot fire crew, and pay wages according to the fish they estimate the crewman has stolen. According to Russell, cheating continues because of transaction costs: fair and properly enforced share contracts are more costly to negotiate than allowing cheating to continue.]



### Going against the current: *barter* as resistance

*“Kung nangawat mi, unsa na lang ang tag-iya sa lantsa? Maayo pa ang nangawat nag hago; ang tag-iya, ballpen ray gamit!”*

[‘If we are indeed stealing, what more of the owners of the fishing vessel? At least we worked hard while stealing; but the owners, they only use a ballpen to steal from us.’]

- a former *Lantsa Mechanic* for 10 years

*“Kay pirme man pud gud na sila gina-dapawan sa tag-iya sa lantsa mao maghuna-huna na sila’g laing pangita para sa ilang pamilya.”*

[‘Because the fishers are always being tricked and cheated by the vessel owners, so they need to think of ways to feed their family’.]

- Johnny (34), Barangay Monserrat

*“Para sa amoa, dili man ni kawat. Gihaguan gud namo na.”*

[This (*barter*) is not stealing. We worked hard for this (catching the fish)].

-Lino, former *lantsa* captain in Governor Generoso

Some 300,000 Filipino fishery workers “toil like slaves” in aquaculture farms and on board commercial fishing vessels for pay below minimum wage (Cervantes 2012). Poverty incidence among fishers is 39.2 percent according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA 2014), consistently highest among the nine basic sectors in the Philippines. For a fisherman’s family, everyday survival depends on fish catch, as they say, “*kung di magpakuha ang isda, kulob angkaldero*” (if the fish do not allow to be caught, then there will be no food in the table). The plight of fishers is worsened by the kind of working environment they are working in. The sea is a dangerous and alien environment, and one in which man is poorly equipped to survive (Acheson 1981:276). With the constant threat of unpredictable weather, storm, typhoon and some wild marine animals, the fishers’ safety is endangered.

In addition, fishers are subjected to an oppressive structure in the industry. One of these is the long held traditional practice of shares system arrangement in the sector. The owners control the fish landings, market price and declaration of profit.

Along with the credit system, where a fisher can get an installment of their income, a common sentiment during our conversations with *lantsa* workers is that they think vessel owners often trick them. “*Dapaw*” (to cheat) is the term that always comes out in my conversation with Johnny while he was taking a rest from his work (fixing boats) under the shade of a tree. Another informant narrated that owners of fishing vessels trick their fishers in many ways. For example, instead of declaring their tuna catch as “class A”, an owner would have it declared as “B” or any class lower.

Commercial fishing vessel owners hire “classifiers” to trick the fishers,<sup>10</sup> who after a hard day’s work cannot attend to the post harvest activities such as classifying tuna. Secondly, when it comes to their share, the owner would add unnecessary expenses to their accounts so that when the payday comes, the fishers get almost nothing because the “*balance*” of outstanding debt is higher than his share. One of my informants elaborated on the *modus operandi*:

*“Kuntahay mularga ang lantsa sa kantidad na 1M, para sa tanan-tanan operation expenses. Kargo man na sa tanan ni sakay sa lantsa. Utang man na ninyo tanan, kay para pag-uli ibawas ra na sa inyon mahalín sa isda. Unya pag lakaw na mo’g isa o duha kabulan, alangan way kaonon among pamilya? Syempre mubalanse sa’ mi sa tag-iya. Unya mubalanse mi’g tag 1K. Pag-uli ngano man na mahimo namang 5K ang balance. Kay gibutang-butangan na nila ug sulat na wala nimo gikuha.*

[‘Take for example if the *lantsa*’s trip cost 1M. This will become a credit to all the *lantsa*’s riders—the debt of all—so when you return it is deducted from the sale of the catch. Meanwhile, when you go on a fishing trip for one or two months, what would your family eat? Of course you need to borrow money first from your boss. Then if we take 1K

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<sup>10</sup> I talked to my aunt who has years of work experience in General Santos’ fish port, about the said sector. I have learned that, indeed, trickery is rampant when it comes to tuna grading. “*Dato na unta na imong angkol kung nisugot pa nasya ma classifier. Unya di man daw niya kaya, kabalo gud na sya mutan-aw jud sa isda*” (‘Your uncle could have been rich today if he pursued to be a classifier of tuna. But he said he can’t do it’.), my aunt stated, saying there is a lot of money in classifying tuna in General Santos.

[₱1,000] why would it turn to 5K when we come home? It is because they are writing things that you did not take.']

With families to support and children to educate, fish workers argue that the owners are only getting what they deserve when they trade some of the fish catch for *barter* which to them is derived from their hard work and not the property of the fishing vessel owner. Further, they believe that fish pilferage will not make the owner poor: “*Ahh, dili man gihapon na sila mapobre. Dato man gihapon sila*” [‘They will not become poor, they will stay rich’]. Scott (1985) states that it is wrong to suppose that subordinate classes are dominated to such extent as to render autonomous and resistant subcultures impossible. This concept is not far from what the fishers are doing to their vessel owners or boss.

Many of my informants would confirm that almost all companies in General Santos have fishers engaged in *barter*. However, the informant I quoted earlier (former *lansta* mechanic) told me that he experienced working for a *lantsa* where they did not engage in barter:

“*Maayo to sya na kompanya sa una. Buutan kaayo ang tag-iya, tagaan gud niyag housing ang mga tabahante unya naa pa gyud pautang. Maayo gyud ang tag-iya kaso katong nagkuha syag manager, nalain na. Mura bag ang manager gusto mu sipsip sa tag-iya gipang-ipit niya ang mga trabahante.*”

[‘It was a good company at that time. The owner was so kind that he gave his workers housing and loan services. We were so happy with him. But when he hired a manager, things changed. Perhaps the manager wanted to impress the owner, he began to cut our resources and our shares.’]

He raged over *lantsa* owners who exploited and abused workers in commercial fishing vessels. He told me that there was one company in General Santos where all its workers quit their job. The company was that shut down and the fishing vessels were left to rot because no one wanted to work with them.

*Lantsa* owners and state officials in General Santos regard *barter* as an “illegal” activity because the workers are perceived to be stealing fish catch from the *lantsa* owner. Since the owner provided the capital, the boat, gasoline, he supposedly owns everything that his boat and his workers catch.

However, fishers (*barter* traders) see *barter* as their right to livelihood and sufficient income. These fishers feel that they are cheated, exploited, and marginalized. They justify *barter* using a language of “rights”.

Brown (2005) “argues that rights-based discourses may have emancipatory potential since they can empower individuals to challenge marginalization” (as cited in Galemba 2009:8). It seems to me that fishers would not “steal” in the first place if they have been treated well by their *lantsa* owners. Going back to the argument of resistance, *barter* is an oppositional act of the fishers against the unjust treatment of the *lantsa* owners.

### **Conclusion**

Illicit trade by workers in the commercial fishing industry in Governor Generoso evolved from a pure maritime *barter* system of exchange involving money, fish catch, and other commodities. The main drive of this trade leads back to the economic agenda of both trading partners involved. The economic agenda of these fishers fall into the notion of ‘coping economy’. *Barter* provides an opportunity for the much needed additional income for the family allowing fishers to find ways to provide for their family in order to survive. They are attracted to *barter* trade because it has linked to previous trade routes and networks with other fishers. Fishers engage in *barter* because of the prevailing exploitation in the commercial fishing industry. Hence, despite the risks and dangers involved, the actions of law enforcement officers, criminal cases charged by commercial fishing owners, *barter* as an illicit activity thrives in the research site.

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