

# **Knowledge Sits in Places: The Vernacularity and Emplacement of Fish Markets in Southern Philippines**

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**Nelson N. Turgo**  
Cardiff University  
Wales, United Kingdom  
turgon@cardiff.ac.uk

## **abstract**

Markets sit in places and knowledge produced in these places also constitute the very foundation of markets' viability and market actors' performative competitive edge. However, not all markets are created equal primarily in the context of their importance in the global economy. Thus conceived, we imagine a world economy or markets populated by people in front of wide computer screens making sense of financial algorithms and derivatives. In a way, here, we see a market that is run by codified knowledge, or scientific knowledge that transcends boundaries. But what about a conception of market that recognizes the production of knowledge in the periphery, and this instance, fish markets, where place-based knowledge marks the contours of engagement of fishmongers to their wider world and yet, concomitantly, also underscores their attachment to place? In this article, in an ethnographic study of four fish markets in a small coastal town in southern Philippine, fishmongers engage with market processes via their production and deployment of vernacular knowledge which is performed in the form of public specialized knowledge, tacit knowledge and network knowledge. In these forms of vernacular knowledge, we become cognizant of the complexities of market processes even in places that are relegated to the margins, where knowledge plays a crucial role in sensing the world and making it lived and real.

## **keywords:**

Auction, Fish Market, Fishing Community, Modernity, Philippines, Vernacular Knowledge



## Introduction

Nowadays, there are very few markets, regardless of their size and location, the kinds and volume of product they trade, which are not impacted by events and processes that take place beyond the confines of their geographical situatedness. On the other hand, markets are also rooted in places, embedded in local networks of relations and knowledge pools, imbibing local jibes and vibes and operating within circumstances that also speak about their spatio-cultural belongingness.<sup>1</sup> Fish markets in many parts of the world in so many different ways are both; they are global and local at the same time. In this article, however, I am interested in the local materiality of markets as experienced in the ways in which vernacular knowledge (place-based) is produced and consumed by fishmongers in four fish markets in a coastal town in southern Philippines.

In recent years much has been written about fish markets and their embeddedness in places where they operate. For instance, regardless of measures to extract fish auctions, from the pull of local contexts (like the flow of privileged information between fishmongers to influence the price of fish, for example), undeniably, fish markets do not operate in a cocoon of purely economic relations and contexts, where decisions are based solely on rational and scientific grounds. Peterson, in describing the Honolulu fish auction, has shown that “non-economic factors such as the social relationships among bidders, different cultural cycles of holidays, and ethnic group species preferences affect bidding behavior and price”.<sup>2</sup> It also along this line that while most fish market regulations are structured to provide tools of the trade to all market participants to create an even playing field, ‘market imperfections’ like “market power of a group of buyers, the fishermen’s lack of information on the market, and the buyer’s lack of information on quality of the landed fish”<sup>3</sup> continue to persist affecting and shaping market dynamics in many places.

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<sup>1</sup>Stig-Erik Jakobsen, “Development of Local Capitalism in Norwegian Fish Farming,” *Marine Policy* 23, no. 2 (1999): 117-130.

<sup>2</sup>Susan B. Peterson, “Decisions in a Market: A Study of the Honolulu Fish Auction” (PhD Dissertation, University of Hawai’i, 1973), 241.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

To highlight the emplacement of fish markets, Fluvia et al.<sup>4</sup> have observed that in most cases social relationships and their attendant social dynamics have an impact on the outcomes of fish trading, like the ones in Palamos and Ancona fish markets in Spain.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, many studies also show markets for perishable products, including fish markets, contrary to what is expected, are characterized by patterns of behavior that may suggest imperfect competition and a segmented market.<sup>6</sup> These behaviors are borne out of market players' engagement with and in places where they conduct their business. And rather than market processes becoming homogenous as world goes turbo-charged towards globalisation, in fish markets all over the world, there are still different selling and buying practices which influence outcomes desired by fish traders.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, fish markets have undergone dramatic changes and this involves the digitization and use of technology in trading processes.<sup>8</sup> As new technologies are introduced, this also has an effect on the quantity and quality of information available in the market. Electronic auction systems, for example, have been introduced as a solution to the power imbalance between buyers (primary processors) and sellers (fishermen) in favour of the latter. However, as Guillotreau observed, "the diversity of trading and bidding systems in use, sometimes within a single country or region, demonstrates that the selection of market technology is not entirely motivated by economic efficiency, but reveals the negotiation of the

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<sup>4</sup>Modest Fluvia, Anna Garriga, Ricard Rigall-I-Torrent, Ernesto Rodríguez-Carámbula and Albert Saló, "Buyer and Seller Behavior in Fish Markets Organized as Dutch Auctions: Evidence from a Wholesale Fish Market in Southern Europe," *Fisheries Research*, no. 127-128 (2012): 18-25.

<sup>5</sup> Mauro Gallegati, Gianfranco Giulioni, Alan Kirman and Antonio Palestrini, "What's that Got to do with the Price of Fish? Buyers Behavior on the Ancona Fish Market," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, no. 80 (2011): 20.

<sup>6</sup> Gianfranco Giulioni and Edgardo Bucciarelli, "Agents' Ability to Manage Information in Centralized Markets: Comparing Two Wholesale Fish Markets," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, no. 80, (2011): 34.

<sup>7</sup> Ilene M. Kaplan, "Seafood Auctions, Market Equity and the Buying and Selling of Fish: Lessons on Co-management from New England and the Spanish Mediterranean," *Marine Policy*, no. 24, (2000): 165-177.

<sup>8</sup> Pedro S. Rodriguez-Hernandez, Francisco J. Gonzalez-Castaño, Jose M. Pousada-Carballo, Manuel J. Fernandez-Iglesias and Jaime Garcia-Reinoso, "Cellular Network for Real-Time Mobile Auction." *Wireless Personal Communications*, no. 22, (2002): 23-40.

social structure in the market”<sup>9</sup>. In affect, what this says is in the midst of purported modernization and technologisation of fish markets, fish markets, unavoidable, sit in places.

In all these talks about fish markets being located in places and the flow of information that circulate amongst market players being a product of their own social and spatial situatedness, however, quite interestingly, one very important issue that is left unproblematized and underexplored and yet underpins the operations and viability of fish markets is the production and consumption of knowledge in these places of commerce. As fishermen and their knowledge of fishing and fish trading have been amply covered in literature,<sup>10</sup> the other market player in the equation, fishmongers, their activities and their knowledge of the trade, have elicited limited attention in mainstream research. This article contributes towards filling in that lacuna.

In general, this study will make a modest contribution to our sustained engagement with peripheral markets like the fish markets cited in this article and how, regardless of the perceived homogenization of markets across the globe as a result of globalization, markets are still spatially situated in specific places and concomitantly, markets are also very much an effect of how knowledge is used in these places. This article adds further ethnographic nuance to what we already know about fish markets in the context of their social embeddedness and the processes that attend fish trading. Fish markets considered in this article are four small fish markets and are very much in the margins, in so many ways, as they are located in a small coastal town and with a very limited exposure to external forces and with few market players compared to similar markets in other places. In a way, this is a study of markets in the margins and as such a contribution to understanding the processual dynamics of commerce in markets such as this. This is also about vernacular knowledge and the role it plays in markets. Specifically, this article examines the forms of vernacular knowledge

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<sup>9</sup> Patrice Guillotreau and Ramon Jimenez Toribio, “The Price Effect of Expanding Fish Auction markets,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, no. 79, (2011): 224.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Jennifer F. Brewer, “Harvesting a Knowledge Commons: Collective Action, Transparency, and Innovation at the Portland Fish Exchange,” *International Journal of the Commons* 8, no. 1, (2014): 155-178.

at play in fish markets in a fishing community in the Philippines as they are produced and consumed by fishmongers.

Following this introduction, the methods employed in the study are explained together with the description of the place where the study was conducted. Immediately after, a brief history and descriptive accounts of fish markets, and auctions in fish markets are presented together with a look at vernacular knowledge and its relation to place. The discussion part provides the ethnographic account of the forms of vernacular knowledge deployed by fishmongers in their daily transaction in fish markets. The conclusion provides a summation of the arguments presented earlier with regard to fish markets and the use of vernacular knowledge and how they show us the continued emplacement of markets in many different interesting ways.

## Methods

This article is part of a bigger study that looked into the everyday life of a fishing community in the Philippines. The fieldwork from which the large bulk of the data used in this article took place in 2008-2009, July-January. Successive visits of the author to the community thereafter until 2015 allowed the author to add further empirical muscle to the article.

There were four fish markets in the community and while some fishermen from the community would sell their daily landings direct to fishmongers, most of the fish trading took place in fish markets. They were all on the town's promenade and close to the port although they were set apart from each other. Two of the fish markets had their own fleet of boats while the rest of the two relied mainly on the landings of local fishermen. On top of local fishermen living in the community, fishermen from neighboring communities as well as those from other towns sold their catch to these fish markets. In total, there were 35 fishmongers who did business in fish markets although not all of them would transact business in all of them. Some would do the rounds while others would concentrate on one or two fish markets only. Their reasons varied but most of the time their preference to transact business with any specific fish markets would boil down to their relationship with fish market owners and the volume of landing that fish markets would usually have. One fish markets, for instance, would only open their premises in the months of March to October and would close in the typhoon

season (November – February) as it was heavily reliant on local fishermen compared to other fish markets which were open the whole year-round as their suppliers were also fishermen from other towns as well. Some of these fish markets would also source their fish from the city port in times when no fish landings were expected.

Information was gathered through participant observation and unstructured interview. In total, I did fieldwork in fish markets for a month. The first fifteen days were used for observation. I would come to fish markets at around 8:00 in the morning and leave at 5:00 pm. As fish markets operated in different hours, I saw to it that I would have the time to visit the four fish markets everyday. In addition, as some fish markets were far busier than others, I would at times spend more time in one or two than others. In case (though very rare) all fish markets would hold auctions simultaneously (I would know this from the fishmongers themselves who would be informed via sms by fish dealers), I would choose the one which I did not have much information on. In my daily round of fish markets, I would keep myself in a corner, trying not to call attention to myself, while busy jotting down notes. My first days in the fish markets made me a curious object of attention and I had to explain myself to the fishmongers. At times, fish dealers (whom I talked to first to gain permission) were at hand to explain my presence. As time passed by, I became just one of them, blending in with the crowd, or like a piece of furniture, very much present and yet not heard especially during fish auctions. However, before and after fish auctions, I would join the banter and ask some questions with things and procedures that were not clear with me or needed further clarification. I started my formal interviews on my next 15 days and all interviews were done in the houses of fishmongers, fish auctioneers and fish dealers. The fish markets were not conducive for formal interviews and deeper probing of issues as they were always very busy and noisy and some questions could only be answered in the privacy of someone's house. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to two hours. Out of the 35 fishmongers, four refused to be interviewed. All the fish dealers and fish auctioneers agreed to be interviewed and two of the fish dealers opened their accounts for the author to have a look at although they refused their annual financial statements to be photocopied.

All interviews were audio-recorded while at the same time when necessary, the author also jotted down notes in the course of the interview to signpost interesting ideas that came into mind or as a way to identify follow up questions. The language used in the

interview was Filipino, the Philippine national language and the language used by people in the community.

## **Fish Markets, Auction and Vernacular Knowledge**

Fish markets now litter most fishing communities although in some other places, mostly remote and with no facilities and infrastructural support from the national and local agencies, or no private investment is available, fishermen directly sell their landings to fishmongers who are also, most of the time, tend to be family members and close associates. In fish markets, auctions are the usual method of setting the price of fish brought in by fishermen. While fish markets and auction could have a much later introduction in the Philippines as the first and the biggest fish port and fish market in the country was not constructed in Manila until 1973, they have a much earlier genesis in other parts of the world. For instance, in France, their introduction in big harbours such as Boulogne sur Mer or Concarneau dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In some parts of the US, the establishment of fish markets and use of auction took place much later. As recounted by Brewer, for example:

Until the 1980s, most New England boats unloaded and sold groundfish through long-term relationships between fishing boat owners and small, private fish buyers....These deeply local relationships were especially prevalent in more remote harbours.<sup>11</sup>

The first fish market in the town where this study took place was opened in 1985 although in a neighboring town which was known for its more developed fish port, the first fish market opened in the 1970s. In many parts of the world therefore, fish markets and auction only gained credence much later. Before then, fishermen would sell their landings directly to sellers and buyers.

Fish markets vary in size and concomitantly the volume of landings that is sold through auction. For example, the four fish markets where I did my fieldwork were a relatively modest affair. Each of them was housed in a small if not dilapidated building which could occupy not more than 10 people and 10 boxes of fish at a time. Although I was not given by owners any figure of their combined fish landings and earnings (they were wary that the information they

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 160.

would supply me might land in the revenue district officer's desk), I estimated that each of them would have a gross sale of not more than P 2 million annually. Compared these fish markets to Tsukiji, the world's largest market for fresh and frozen seafood. This is a marketplace where 60,000 traders come each day to buy and sell seafood for Tokyo's 22 million mouths, where every day over 2.4 million kilograms of seafood changes hands.<sup>12</sup>

We can attribute the establishment of fish markets where fishermen and fishmongers could come together and maximize the economic rent of fish to the increase in demands for fish as source of protein and also an effect of cities and towns being host to a bigger number of workers as the push for industrialization and modernization of economies gathered pace in many places. Along the same line, it also paved the way for an increased exposure of fishing communities to the market economy. Markets such as this are seen to provide the necessary space and opportunity for competitive markets to flourish. The most powerful argument in favor of perfectly competitive markets is that in the long run they supply the quantity and quality of products which consumers demand at a price equal to minimum average cost of production.<sup>13</sup>

Concomitant with the formalization of fish markets as a necessary fixture to any fishing community aiming to maximize the value of fish as commodity, auctions became the preferred way to settle the price of fish in the market between the seller and the buyer. Auctions would likely generate mechanism for solving the information problem, such as prior inspection of the product or trust.

Auction is the marketised embodiment of rationalized pricing as it tried to do away with the influence of extra-market forces to determine the price of commodity. In a way, by putting fish on auction, the logic of the market prevails. As a modernist way to do market, auctions are conceived as a manifestation of objectivist knowledge materialized as it "eliminate(s) all social influences over knowledge creation and in so doing determine the 'true' nature of the

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<sup>12</sup> Theodore C. Bestor, "Supply-Side Sushi: Commodity, Market, and the Global City," *American Anthropologist* 103, no. 1, (2001): 84.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Peterson and Samuel Georgianna, "New Bedford's Fish Auction: A Study in Auction Method and Market Power," *Human Organization* 47, no. 3 (1988): 235.

world outside of the individual mind”.<sup>14</sup> Through auction, people would use their reason and the information that they have to compete for goods. Everything would be transparent, rationalised and numericalised.

However, auctions are not just about the recalibration of market processes since coupled with these transformations are changes in people’s behavior, habits and attitude towards information gathering, and the ways people valorize certain methods of doing things over others, the very exercise of knowledge production and consumption. In a way, no matter which label one prefers, the production, acquisition, absorption, reproduction, and dissemination of knowledge is seen by many as the fundamental characteristics of contemporary competitive dynamics.<sup>15</sup> As Brewer explained:

When a centralized, regional auction co-organised by fishers and civic interests replaced local ex-vessel fish buyers, it precipitated subsequent changes along the market chain from harvest to consumption, and raised the economic value of industry knowledge. By extricating initial product sales from dense and multivalent social relations long entrained by undifferentiated commodity markets and localist dependencies, it provided a newly transparent and information-rich arena in which a wider range of differentiated product standards could arise and compete.<sup>16</sup>

However, though auctions are supposed to level the playing field, with all possible information ready for consumption and evaluation by market players, there are other things that get in the way for perfect competition to take place. Buyers or sellers may be restricted from entering auction, and trading may take place outside the auction. Within the auction, sellers and buyers can form coalition to rig bid prices. Central meeting places and the appearance of fairness can be useful settings for opportunistic behavior. The rules

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<sup>14</sup> Nigel Curry and James Kirwan, “The Role of Tacit Knowledge in Developing Networks for Sustainable Agriculture,” *Sociologia Ruralis* 54, no. 3 (2014): 345.

<sup>15</sup> Meric S. Gertler, “Tacit Knowledge and the Economic Geography of Context, or the Undefinable Tacitness of Being (there),” *Journal of Economic Geography* 3, (2003): 76.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer F. Brewer, “Harvesting a Knowledge Commons,” 158.

of the auction can cause problems even when bidding is competitive.<sup>17</sup>

This tells us how the rationalities of market are also about the people's own negotiation of what appeals to them and what engages them, in a way, what brings them better return regardless of the method or the ethos that attends them. The knowledge that they use in achieving these ends is therefore generated and deployed in a given time-space envelope. Indeed, all knowledge is both performative and representational. It is historical, contingent and is coproduced with society.<sup>18</sup> It is along this line that fish markets are a good place to explore the different ways in which vernacular knowledge is articulated in pursuit of market ends.

Vernacular knowledge, as deployed in this article, refers to place-based knowledge. I am cognizant of other possible variants to the concept, local and indigenous knowledge being the most popular and discussed in literature. However, as Bartel notes, the use of vernacular knowledge is most appropriate when there is a need to underscore the role that place plays in the production of knowledge:

Vernacular knowledge includes both biophysical and social and cultural phenomena. It derives from places, and produces places. Vernacular knowledge is knowledge gained not via theory and not just through practice, but practice-in-place.<sup>19</sup>

In a way, this also brings into the equation the role and importance of place in understanding knowledge productions in marginal places and as such places where a vernacular expression of market logic is most apparent. Vernacular knowledge then is a concept that recognizes that setting is not inert and that place is active and has agency.<sup>20</sup>

In placing vernacular knowledge at the centre of market processes in the fish markets under consideration, the article also recognizes the active role that fishmongers perform in making sense of their relations to the people around them, the public events and occasions that punctuate the tenor of their working lives and the flow

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<sup>17</sup> Peterson and Georgianna, "New Bedford's Fish Auction: A Study in Auction Method and Market Power," 236.

<sup>18</sup> David Turnbull, "Reframing Science and Other Local Knowledge Traditions," *Futures* 29, no. 6, (1997): 553.

<sup>19</sup> Robyn Bartel, "Vernacular Knowledge and Environmental Law: Cause and Cure for Regulatory Failure," *Local Environment* 19, no. 8 (2014): 893.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

of information relevant to their trade. Places beget knowledge and knowledge vernacularise places in return.

The performativity of vernacular knowledge in fish markets takes three forms: public specialized; tacit and network knowledge. As will be shown in this article, there are different facets to vernacular knowledge and by looking at them, we will be able to present vernacular knowledge as a contingent combination of information, skills and capacities, constituted within and responsive to the specificities of the place.<sup>21</sup> This helps in rendering more nuanced and ethnographically clear the epistemological richness of markets in the context of how knowledge is produced and consumed in places.

### **Public Specialised, Tacit and Network Knowledge: Markets Sit in Places**

An uninitiated in fish markets would have a casual description on how auctions are done and on my first day in one of the fish markets, this is what I wrote in my notebook:

Once the four boxes of fish are opened, the gathered fishmongers swarmed around them and for several minutes they went around them, like in a dance, eyeing the boxes, intently. One fishmonger dipped his hand into the open box and stayed there for a second, feeling the density of fish inside. Another fished out several pieces and examined them. When I asked about the weight of each of the boxes, I was told that no one knew. They had to guess. It's part of the auction process. Soon, the auctioneer asked the fishmongers to submit their bid. One by one, they went up to her and whispered into her ear their bid. When all was done, the auctioneer conferred with the fisherman who brought in the boxes of fish. I was told she was asking him if he would accept the amount of the winning bid. Apparently he did because in a matter of seconds, the winner was announced.

The auction looked so simple and easy. However, what was going on in the minds of the fishmongers as they were preparing their bid could be an entirely different matter. So many questions could be

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<sup>21</sup>Andrew Wilbur, "Cultivating Back-to-the-Landers: Networks of Knowledge in Rural Northern Italy," *Sociologia Ruralis* 54 no. 2 (2013): 170.

asked but the most important is: What could be the best price for the boxes of fish wherein a good return could be had?

While putting in a bid is no exact science, in my days in the fish markets, I was able to identify three types of vernacular knowledge at work in every auction that was taking place. The first one is all about the deployment of public specialised knowledge. This form of knowledge refers to all the publicly available and accessible information that fishmongers must know and have in their pursuit of a most appropriate bid, appropriate in the sense that the bid must be high enough to be competitive and yet not too high enough to incur a good return. This information is available to everyone though only those who are into fish trading would be most likely to be interested to acquire and meticulously keep track of this information. As such, they are public and yet specialised since while everyone is free to acquire them, their acquisition takes time and effort and only fishmongers would be willing to spend time and energy mastering them. In what follows below, I list down some of this information:

*Quality of fish:*

If the eyes of the fish is red, it is not fresh anymore

If the gills are red, the fish is in a good condition.

If the flesh is soft and not firm, then it will not last for more than a day

If the fish is properly packed in a box full of ice, and the eyes are not red and the flesh is firm, the fish will last for two-three days more

Buyer has to check the stomach if it is still intact or innards are starting to come out (fishmongers refer to this state of fish as 'nagtatae', or 'shitting'), if it's the latter then it is in a bad state

*Size of fish*

Small size means a lower price

Medium means a premium price

Big size means a lower price

*Availability of fish in the market*

If there is a big volume of the same species being sold in the market the price is greatly reduced

*Availability of different species in the market*

There is a hierarchy of fish species in the market in terms of people's preference. So if two species are landed and come in huge quantity, the most popular one becomes more expensive over the other.

*Supply of fish in the market*

If there is a low supply of fish in the market and what is available are mostly cultured varieties like milk fish and tilapia, the usual cheapest varieties of caught fish becomes 'gold' and thus, buyers must maximise this opportunity. If there is an abundant supply of different types of fish however, one has to know the most popular or preferred types by consumers as they are a bit more expensive than others. However, certain fish varieties, the premium ones, like snapper, hold their price regardless of the volume of supply of other varieties of fish in the market but command an even better price if their supply is low.

*Fish price biography*

Buyers should always keep abreast of the fish's price history at least for the preceeding week to have a handle of the fish' average and 'regular' price

*Town's calendar of events and other public occasions*

Public events affect the price of fish in the market as this also drives up consumption. Events like Easter break is usually known to drive the price of fish up as people tend to consume fish rather than meat and not many fishermen go out to fish. Buyers should also have an ear for big private events since this could also have an impact on the prices of premium varieties of fish.

*Other considerations*

If a particular fish which is unknown in town is landed, its price will depend on its closest fish type.

In so many ways, fishmongers should have a knowledge of all these information to be able to weigh properly the best tactic possible

to approach a particular type of fish up for auction. However, mere acquisition of these knowledge is not enough. How one makes sense of them all, trying to figure out what particular information is more salient than others matters. In addition, some information are still subject to the fishmonger's own personal interpretation. For example, when it comes to the constitution of the fish, whether it's soft or firm is still very much subjective. For an untrained eye, all fish's flesh could be soft but for those who had been in the business for many years, they could easily decide and make an outright clear-cut evaluation whether a particular fish is firm to the touch or soft which would have an impact on its longevity in the market and therefore its price. And there are different degrees to being soft, I soon found out. Some fish' flesh could be soft but could still be sold for a number of hours in the market before they get stale. In a way, there is a particular shelf life to this quality of fish and there is always a different way to feel it. One good example is when Lou won a box of fish. One of the fishmongers who lost to her told me:

May angur yang si Lou. Malambot na ang isda ang taas pa ang bulong. Bukas sira na yan, tatae na. Malulugi pa s'ya.

Rather puzzled by his observation, I asked Lou about the fish quality and he told me that it was okay, the flesh was firm. I was left wondering about their divergent opinion. This however proves that regardless of the public nature of these information, there are some facts that depend much on the personal evaluation of fishmongers.

However, bids submitted should not be competitive only, they should also be calibrated properly to make profit. I had been told a number of stories where fishmongers got their number so wrong that they ended up incurring huge losses. A number of them had been hauled to the local court to force them to pay up while others were barred from fish markets until the time they were able to meet their commitments. One that I met had to stop from sending her only daughter to a private college in the city to be able to raise the required money to pay her debt. In the four fish markets, she could only transact business in one because of her unpaid debts in the remaining three fish markets.

One crucial task in coming up with a competitive and yet profitable bid is the ability to guess the approximate weight of the box of fish being auctioned and this is a difficult task. Years of participation in auction does not guarantee the ability to properly

assess the weight of a box of fish. A fishmonger with a knack for it would not err by more than five kilos more or less the actual weight of the box of fish. For example, if the total weight of a box of fish is 50 kilos, his ‘computation’ should not be less than 45 or more than 55. Guessing a figure which is less than five of the actual weight while promising a much better profit could lessen the competitive edge of the fishmonger as this dramatically reduces the amount of his bid. On the other hand, making a guess which is more than five kilos the actual weight could also prove disastrous as this could translate to lesser profit or worse, a big loss. Thus, the imperative here is to minimise the margin of error on both sides of the equation and doing so is not an easy task. On this ‘talent’, this knack for guessing the weight of a box of fish, some fishmongers seemed to be better than others.

This type of knowledge falls under tacit knowledge. As one of the great commentators of this type of knowledge explains, tacit knowledge is that which derives from experience and intuition and through shared experience. As such, it is often difficult to translate into rational language because it derives from a context, or a set of cultural rules. Furthermore, tacit knowledge cannot be overtly learned. It has to be experienced and assimilated rather than simply passed on.<sup>22</sup> Out of the 35 fishmongers that I met and interacted with in the field, only four were deemed to have the ‘talent’ to guess with a very small margin of error the actual weight of a box of fish. Two were in their 50s and had been selling fish for almost 30 years, the other one was in his 40s and was into fish trading for close to 10 years while the last one was in her 30s and selling fish for only three years. The ‘talent’ of the first two could be possibly attributed to long years of exposure to the trade. However, many fishmongers had more than 20 years of experience and yet could not do better than the people I cited.

Fishmongers who were good at it could not point a finger on how they could do this. A fishmonger who had a talent for this said:

Hirap ipaliwanag ay. Basta pag tiningnan ko tapos nacheck ko ang box kung anong hitsura at nacheck ko ang loob, matatantya ko na ang laman. Tapos medyo aangatin ko, yung bang bigat ay nakukuha ko dahil parang nararamdaman ko.

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<sup>22</sup> Nigel Curry and James Kirwan, “The Role of Tacit Knowledge in Developing Networks for Sustainable Agriculture,” 345.

Fishmongers who did not have this ‘talent’ could only say that these fishmongers are “magaling sa simbiran”, “simbiran” in the local language means guessing the weight of something. No one in the fish market could offer any rational explanation aside from saying that these fishmongers had the ‘talent’ to guess close to the real weight of the box.

Based on my field observation, these four fishmongers were almost always very close to guessing the weight of any box of fish although in some instances, they would also err. For example, most of time these four fishmongers would only have a margin of error of 2-4 kilos on average, compared to other fishmongers whose guess could go as far as 10 kilos more or less than the actual weight of the box of fish. However, having this special ability is not a guarantee that auctions could be won outright. It could provide an edge but did not guarantee success in any auction. Nonetheless, such ‘talent’ is very helpful in preventing fishmongers from incurring big losses as they would not submit inflated bid compared to others.

There is one form of vernacular knowledge, however, which is highly selective and secretive. I would call it network knowledge or the knowledge that comes from one’s social network. This knowledge comes in the form of one’s association with people. Further elaborations are needed here.

In relation to information, after all other considerations, one’s bid could also be influenced by extra information known only to the fishmonger via her close association with other people. For example, one could submit a relatively high bid for a kind of fish if the fishmonger is told that the fish could command a good price in other places or there is a particular demand for this kind of fish by someone who is willing to pay a good price for it. It could also be the case that a fishmonger had a customer who was willing to pay a good price for a kind of fish. Such information of course was not available to others and therefore they could be more timid and subdued in their bid.

However, network knowledge is not just about information derived from close associates or relations. Network knowledge could also be about obtaining favours from those who are involved in the auctions themselves. In a way, this kind of knowledge is all about who one knows and as such the kind of arrangement that could be had in such kind of social network. In this instance, having network knowledge could translate to the rigging of results in favour of a particular fishmonger.

Bidding though thought to be following certain rules and conducted in the presence of many people is open to manipulation. In a number of auction houses (not fish markets though) studied by Smith, he speaks of how bids are rigged by the participants themselves. One of them is called a pool bid. Professional buyers may enter into collusive practices of their own, known as “pools” and “rings”. In such cases, in order to buy a particular item at the lowest possible price, a group of professional buyers agree not to bid against each other. They rather select one of their members to bid against any nonpool- members and then hold their own private auction later. These private auctions are called knockout auctions.<sup>23</sup>

In the case of fish markets mentioned in this article, the rigging of bids was done differently. Fishmongers did not make a pool bid. They acted independently of one another. Furthermore, whereas in cases cited by Smith, the auctioneer was not involved in any form of chicanery, in the case of fish markets, the auctioneer plays a big part. Without her consent, no rigging would take place. As previously mentioned, however, relations between the auctioneer and the participating fishmonger should be intimate enough so as to secure unshakeable trust in one another. In a way, one’s network or who one knows makes it possible.<sup>24</sup>

Though I was told that the practice is not widespread, and in fact I was only able to confirm two fishmongers who were doing it (out of 35), the fact that it was being done points to the utilisation of a particular form of knowledge which is illicit in many respects. The way to do it is to make an arrangement with an auctioneer wherein at least an auction could be arranged to be won by a particular fishmonger. This could only be done if the fishmonger had a long standing close relationship with the auctioneer. The rigging goes like this.

Once all the bids had been communicated to the auctioneer, and after the winning bid was accepted by the fisherman (or owner of the boat that brought the fish), the fishmonger concerned who arranged the rigging would be proclaimed winner regardless whether he submitted the highest bid or not. What the auctioneer would do is to add an amount, usually between 100-200 PhP to the winning bid and proclaimed it to be the bid of this particular fishmonger. Thus, for example, if the actual winning bid was 3,000.00 PhP, it would

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<sup>23</sup> Charles W. Smith, *Auctions: The Social Construction of Value* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 70.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 70, 91-93, 98, 125.

become 3,200.00 PhP or less, as long as it was more than the winning bid. This kind of set-up would be arranged a day or early morning before the actual auction. The auctioneer would inform the fishmonger how many auctions were expected that day. In some instances when knowing the actual volume or species of fish would be impossible, on the actual auction itself, the fishmonger would send an SMS to the auctioneer detailing her preferred fish. Usually, not to attract suspicion from other fishmongers, there would only be one case of an arranged auction. If there would be six boxes of fish for auction, one box would already be marked for the fishmonger concerned. In all this, in return, the auctioneer would get 200-300.00 for every case of rigging (which would translate to once a day) from the fishmonger. In some cases, the auctioneer could ask for an advance, say, 2,000.00 PhP which would ensure the fishmonger a series of winning bids for several days.

In these two examples, the social network of the fishmongers allowed them to execute arrangements to their own advantage. Thus, one's membership in a social network has become a 'knowledge' on how to make money in fish trading. As mentioned earlier, not everyone would have the opportunity to be involved in such arrangements as they needed trust between people. Such trust could only be gained through years of social intimacies which a few could only afford to have and enjoy.

## Conclusion

Central to my discussion is the importance of fish markets as fulcrum of knowledge used in the daily affairs of fishmongers, fishermen and fish traders as they make sense of their place in the local economy. Assessment and assimilation of newly received information, the reframing and integration of observations into useful knowledge, were further enabled by the more public spaces in which burgeoning business activities transpired. Conversations that once took place only on small boats, and in private spaces of shore side fish houses, homes, and pickup trucks expanded into largely public locales, enabling a much freer exchange.<sup>25</sup> Like money, markets can convey noneconomic values rather than efface them. Spiritual practices and political relations mediate markets on the capitalist periphery. In short, capitalism's most fundamental forms

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<sup>25</sup> Brewer, "Harvesting a Knowledge Commons," 173.

are vulnerable to us. We can saturate them with our anxieties, fetishes, and fictions and structure them with our political practice.<sup>26</sup> As centre of knowledge production and consumption, the fish markets stand as the fishing community's emblem and connection to modernity. As knowledge knows no boundaries and as information travel, the fish markets serve as the people's expressed affinity to the wider world, to facts and figures that matter to their daily lives which are also very much a product of the outside world – of places, far and away. In their daily interaction, fishmongers have enacted ways to negotiate their precarious state in a place that is both peripheral and at the mercy of nature – fishing is very much dependent on weather condition. As everyone competes with everyone in staking their small portion in the available resources in the community, they have created a pool of knowledge that they get to deploy in their quest for a living. It is also in this sense that fishmongers have enacted their modern selves.

Nowadays it has become common place to refer to the global economy as predominantly knowledge economy and as such our vision of the world is inundated with workers solving and creating formulae that underpin the foundations of global wealth creation. We have this vision of people in smart suits in front of wide screens tinkering with numbers and concepts that deal with market derivatives and software programs, amongst many. However, knowledge economy should not be limited to such work regime and market actors, otherwise, such highly specialised and constraining conception of knowledge will result in the marginalisation and trivialisation of other types of knowledges and work places and their contribution to global economic developments. Corollary with this, and in recent years, the importance of other types of knowledge, most notably local knowledge, as they are incorporated and recognised in policy documents and academic studies has signalled the recuperation of the will of the people from the margins and their active engagement with the world. In a way, as much as knowledge economy is about people with universal and technical know-how of how market derivatives affect the ebb and flow of interest rates in various places, it is also about place-based knowledge, the more limited and constrained expression of people as a response to the

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<sup>26</sup> Aaron Ansell, "Auctioning Patronage in Northeast Brazil: The Political Value of Money in a Ritual Market," *American Anthropologist* 112 no. 2 (2010): 283.

demands of everyday life. The habituated practices of formal science tend toward universal or translocal explanations and applications, whereas local knowledge may apprehend such phenomena within a particular and contingent range of causative, practical and cosmological possibilities.<sup>27</sup>

As premium is put on knowledge economy, there should also be a continuous excavation in peripheral places of what and how knowledge makes these places work and thrive. As shown in this article, there is a need to re-evaluate our understanding of peripheral markets such as fish markets considered in this article as they signify the richness of place and how in so many ways knowledge sits in places and markets typify this given. As evinced by the people involved in the daily operations of fish markets, the vernacular knowledge that they have evolved and deputised is, as it were, a many splendored thing, as it involves an array of information for evaluation and execution.

In setting out a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of knowledge produced and at work in fish markets, we saw how fishmongers made use of publicly available knowledge on the social biography of fish, immersing themselves in facts and data that allow them to make judicious assessment in fish trading. Such hoard of data, complex in their own terms, alert us to the richness of vernacular knowledge in fish markets. On the other hand, with similarities to other work places, fishmongers were able to develop their own ways of appraising the weight of fish for auction. Tacit refers to embodied capabilities that defy formalization and explication.<sup>28</sup> This knowledge can't be transferred and is unique to individual fishmonger. Some of them were able to develop this eye for mathematical accuracy of assessing fish weight through years and years of participation in and exposure to fish trading. However, long years of being a fishmonger does not guarantee the acquisition of such tacit knowledge and also the way to winning auctions. Such accuracy in prediction helps in avoiding a bloated bid which could result in financial losses for the fishmonger concerned. The ability to

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<sup>27</sup> Wilbur, "Cultivating Back-to-the-Landers: Networks of Knowledge in Rural Northern Italy," 169.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

tap into the advantages and benefits of one's social network, on the other hand, enables some fishmongers to turn their social relationships into financial gain. In a way, as shown by this article, chicaneries could be performed for the purpose of monetary accumulation through the exploitation of social affinities. Not everyone had this opportunity as some could have chosen not to or others did not have the same network that would enable them to engage in such illicit activities.

This article therefore contributes to our understanding of local economies in developing countries. It is also an exercise in highlighting the territoriality of market forces and the adaptability of people who make use of them.<sup>29</sup> It is a contribution to the burgeoning literature on the geographical situatedness of knowledge like how knowledge is deployed and put into action in certain places and context and how such forces are received and fashioned in different ways in different locales at different depths and degrees of commitment and involvement by people on the ground. How knowledge plays a crucial role in facilitating the daily affairs of a peripheral market compels us to pay close attention to the robust domestic informal economy of the fishing community studied and contributes to its further articulation as a rich domain of knowledge production.

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<sup>29</sup> T. Roopnaraine, "Constrained Trade and Creative Exchange on the Barima River, Guyana," *Royal Anthropological Institute* 7, (2001): 51-66.

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## About the Author

**Nelson N. Turgo** was a SIRC-Nippon fellow that gave him a chance to study PhD in Social Sciences (Sociology-Global Political Economy) at Cardiff University, Wales, United Kingdom. He currently works at the Cardiff University's Seafarers International Research Centre. His thesis "Bugabug ang Dagat: The Local Life of a Fishing Community in the Philippines" was awarded a Category 1 Pass in Cardiff University. He also holds a postgraduate diploma in Social Science Research Methods (with distinction) from the same university. He is also an accomplished researcher having been published in a number of journals in the world. In June 2017, Turgo began working on an

ESRC-funded three-year project on port chaplaincy in the US and the UK. This multidisciplinary international case study aims to consider the religious/spiritual needs and expression of multinational workers employed in confined residential settings on board ships.