

# **“AMOY ISDA”: THE ‘MIDDLE-CLASS’ LIFE OF MARKET FISHMONGERS**

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Fishing communities, especially in developing economies, are, most often than not, economically, socially, and spatially positioned in the fringes of society. People whose lives revolve around fishing and its ancillaries are looked down upon because they are perceived as dirty, uncouth, and unlettered and the very opposite of ‘being modern’. This is so in the case of a fishing community to be discussed here, though there is a group of people in the fishing community who in some interesting ways resist this broad denigrating socio-cultural description. They do not see themselves as part of the socio-spatial ‘other’. Some market fishmongers, by virtue of their good income in relation to the rest of the community, live, in their own reckoning, a modern life: they have relatively big concrete houses with modern amenities and do as most middle-class living in the town center would also do. But their ‘modern life,’ as it were, is fraught with contradictions and tensions. Firstly, they maintain residence in the fishing community, and secondly, to sustain their middle-class lifestyle, market fishmongers make a living through fish trading that traps them in a life of perceived servitude or ‘backwardness’. Their enjoyment then of modernity is achieved at the cost of embedding themselves further in an economic activity and in a place perceived by many to be the very opposite of what modern life stands for.

**Keywords:** *Fish auction, fishing community, fishmonger, middle class, modernity, Philippines, place*

## **Introduction**

I started doing fieldwork in fish trading houses, locally known as “*kumisyunan*” (‘place for making a commission’), a month after arriving in the fishing community. When I introduced myself to the owner and informed her of my research plan, she was sore and apologetic. “You missed the busy days here by three months!” she told me, throwing her hands up in the air in exaggerated exasperation. The morning I arrived,

there were a few fishmongers hanging around, chatting with each other while waiting for boats to arrive. There, indeed, was very little life stirring in the fish trading house. “But,” she added as if to rescue me from the disastrous and unredeemable state in which I found myself, “business will pick up a month from now and you will be able to get the information that you need.”

I carried out fieldwork in fish trading houses in 2008-2009. Apparently, when I arrived in the place in mid-August of 2008, I had missed a very important trading season for fishmongers. In May until July, the fish trading houses (there were four in the community), were extremely busy. It was the time when they were flooded with *galunggong* (mackerel). In this period, I was told, I would have witnessed the dynamics and intricacies of fish trading and how market fishmongers showcase their skills in winning fish auctions. Quite fortunately, in September until mid-October, I witnessed what the owner of the fish trading house spoke about so enthusiastically. The fish trading houses were inundated with *lumahan* (a variety of mackerel). For the next month or so, there was an electrifying atmosphere in the fish trading houses as the fishmongers laid their hands on the fish – inspecting the freshness of their gills and the color of their eyes, and smelling and feeling the firmness of the flesh, as they outbid each other in their quest for profit.

What stood out in those frenzied moments of competition, which is the basis of this article, were the market fishmongers themselves, who, in my mind, in the context of what I knew and heard about them prior to my visit, provided “the most telling contrast to the uncertainties and fears of modern life” (Qayum & Ray 2003:521). In one fascinating instance, clutching an imitation Damier Azur LV handbag, after winning a fish auction (a box of *lumahan* for ₱6,500), a market fishmonger took out from her bag a lipstick and a makeup kit. “*Kikay kit ko ‘to*” (‘this is my vanity kit’), she told no one in particular. She then borrowed a mirror from someone and started to fix herself. While preening, she was on the phone talking to her husband and instructing him on what to do with the fish. I was looking at her intently. I knew that she was an officer in a local organization that looks after the cultural and historical monuments in town. She might have noticed me because she pirouetted on her feet and faced me. Playing both coquettish and haughty, she told me:

*“Papunta akong meeting at dapat maganda, may ibubuga!  
 Alam mo na, baka sabihin ng mga ka-meeting ko na parang  
 nasa palengke pa rin ako! Pwes, exit na muna ang  
 magrigrigaton. Totohanan na ito. Modernong-moderno!”*

[‘I am going to a meeting, and I should look beautiful, to create the bearing, I got something special to show in my attitude. I don’t want my colleagues to say that I still look like someone from the wet market, you know. Time now for the fishmonger, to exit. This is for real. Indeed, this is very modern!’]

And she took out from her bag a small bottle of perfume, sprayed it into the air, walked into it, and bid good bye, leaving behind a trail of musky scent, heady and overpowering, that mingled with the penetrating odor of fish long soaked in ice and sea water.

In this paper, I look into how some market fishmongers, those who were earning well and living a relatively comfortable life in the community, represent the inherent contradictions and accompanying tensions of living a ‘modern life’ in a place deemed to be the very antithesis of such. To enjoy the relative comfort of a middle-class life and yet live in an impoverished fishing community, in effect, to live this ‘modern life amidst deprivation and poverty, is to live a life of constant negotiation, re-articulation, and reiteration of one’s social difference and positionality. In some way, there is the assertion and articulation of simultaneous inclusion and marginality “partly encoded in local hierarchies of space and status” (Mills 2005:386); because “the desire to be modern engages symbolic and material sources of value closely associated with desired standards of ‘being up-to-date’; (and) yet these claims were rarely achieved in more than partial and limited ways” (Mills 2005:392). Some of the market fishmongers were in a pursuit of, in their marginalized and constrained space, “dialectical Modern cultural ideals of authenticity and progress vis-à-vis the appropriation of valued experiences (and the construction of the narratives that describe them)” (Hines 2010:288). However, as shown by these market fishmongers, our embeddedness in a geographical location and enrolment in a particular work have an impact on our assumed and perceived class position and reception of people around us; though “theories of globalization have effected a significant discursive erasure of place” (Dirlik 2000, in Escobar 2001:140), the importance of place in shaping and constraining the very identities and social positioning that we construct on our everyday life is incalculable.

Place continues to be important in the lives of many people, perhaps most, if we understand by place the experience of a particular location with some measure of groundedness (however, unstable), sense of boundaries (however,

permeable), and connection to everyday life, even if its identity is constructed, traversed by power, and never fixed (Escobar 2001:140).

This article endeavors to contribute to our continued engagement with issues that concern the problematization of place as a social analytic and the challenges and constraints to experiencing modernity and performing social class in the margins. Specifically, the article adds empirical muscle to the observation by Rodman that “places are not inert containers. They are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions” (1992:641). Therefore, this article elucidates how the experiencing of modernity and the performance of social class are constrained and impacted by the politics of place and of living in a place confined always to “supplying or consuming [global flows and local processes] from an unbridgeable distance” (Blank 2004:354). Through the lives of some market fishmongers, we bear witness to their struggle “to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it” (Berman 1982:5). Capturing the many conflicts arising from experiencing modernity in a marginal ‘nonmodern’ place like the fishing community “requires close attention to lived experiences of ‘marginalization’ and the localized forms of contest and struggle” (Mills 2005:387) of market fishmongers.

This article is also about what we think of and mean by, in the context of globalization and its attendant heterogeneous impact on localities, experiencing class and modernity. Following Marx’s classic conception, the character of class is marked “by fundamental antagonism between its two paradigmatic social ‘classes’: people with access to the means of production (the privileged/capitalist class) and those without such means (the laboring class)” (Hines 2010:291). Understanding class, however, needs to consider the concomitant social concepts that come with it: class position and social status. As explained by Hines, drawing from Weber’s explanation, “although the two are often intimately bound to one another they are also discernibly distinct” (Hines 2010:291). With this consideration we must pay close attention to the tension between the two, which is most manifest in how the middle class act out their lives in the struggle between the owners of the means of production and those that sell their labor to the market place, to explore how being in the middle class, between the two great class divides, has “afforded their practitioners a degree of remove from material production (hard physical labor) and greater income,” as Hines (2010:291) has pointed out. The middle class’

...elevated position did not translate into control of the means of production, however, and thus while the middle class remained aligned in Marx's schema of the laboring class, these members of capitalist society did possess (by Weber's time) greater access to increasingly mass-produced commodities (Hines 2010:291).

What makes the middle class distinct is their ability to accumulate, and the power to festoon themselves with the symbolic power of their class – the modernities of life in the form of commodities. However, their consumption of goods does not easily translate to the other sphere of life that is usually perceived to accrue with the power of money – the cultural capital, in all their manifestations, that people of their class (and money) are expected to have. Though some market fishmongers enjoy the accoutrements of modern life and the comforts that middle-class life offers, they are still very much defined by the place where they live and by their livelihood, which restrain them from claiming fully the identity of being 'middle class', or in more concrete terms, of the respect and gravitas that this social class affords. There are cultural and symbolic givens that they must act out in their everyday life, which are imbued with their place of origin and work attachment. Here lies the difficulty. What this article hopes to contribute is a deeper understanding of how experiencing social class and modern life in the margins is replete with contradictions and contestations, of resistance and negotiation.

The article is divided into several parts. In the next section, I describe the fishing community and its people to highlight the people's everyday life and their local economy, as well as the popular perception of the community and fishing by those who are also from the town, mainly those in the town center. The community is never divorced, therefore, from the town itself. After this, I explain the methodology used in the study. The succeeding parts explain the notion of place and the conception of being middle class. This is followed by the empirical data gathered from the field, which highlight the social practices and the accompanying struggle of some market fishmongers as they try to graft themselves onto the culture of 'modernity' that, for them, the middle class represents. The summary points toward a nuanced understanding of how modernity is lived, its associated values fought in places, its constitution as a product of geographic contingencies, and the people's attempt to go beyond the constraints of their own 'time-space envelope' (Hudson 2001).

### The fishing community

The fishing community is around six hours away by bus from Manila. It is a *sitio* (district) in one of the 40 barangays (villages) of Banaag (not the real name of the town), a bustling coastal town in the province of Quezon. The fishing community is the largest fishing community in the town and is popularly known as “*Gilid*” (‘edge’ or ‘margins’) quite a symbolic name for a place that had always been marginalized in so many aspects. Most of the people who lived there were poor, who I would categorize as “people who experience relative and absolute material deprivation” (Ballard 2012:564). The fishing community here is one of those places that through the years has suffered from “structural economic marginality” (Qian et al 2012). In recent years, life had been made even more difficult by the fisheries crisis which greatly reduced the volume of fish caught by local fishers.

In popular local discourse, *Gilid* has been variously identified as a colony of lowly ‘fishers and fishmongers’ (“*mga mangingisda at magririgaton*”), described as “*mababaho*” (‘foul-smelling people’), and as a ‘place of the untutored’ or ‘uneducated’ (“*lugar ng mga walang inaral*”). In this context, to be poor and discriminated against is, as shown by Young in a different context, to be “distinguished by their lack of economic, cultural, and social capital”, and “linked (physically or symbolically) to geographical undesirable space” (Young 2012:1155). This was impressed upon me by a number of people in the community who thought that their lives were a miserable lot.

*„Mahirap ang buhay dito. Isang kahig, isang tuka. Hindi kagaya sa ibang lugar, sa Gitna o kaya sa Maynila. Dito, kapag matagbik, walang makain. Kapag hindi naman matagbik, wala din namang mahuling isda sa dagat. Wala ding makain. Kaya tingnan mo ang mga tao dito, kalumata na sa kakaisip sa pera!*

[Life here is difficult. We live a hand-to-mouth existence. Unlike those in other places, like those in the town center or in Manila. Here, there is no fish for food when waves are rough. Even in good weather, fish catch is poor. No wonder people here are hollow-eyed, weighed down with cares, with thinking about money!]

The fishing community was often contrasted with “*Gitna*”, the town center, the commercial district, and where most of the more affluent and

educated people in the town lived. Mapping the social and class spatiality of the town, if Gitna, ‘the center’, was all about progress and modernity, Gilid, or ‘the margins’, was its opposite. In so many ways then, the fishing community occupies a space that is outside key arenas of a dignified and desirable local life (see also Mills 2005). While such a denigrating description of Gilid could at times be overly exaggerated, my fieldwork revealed a number of things about the fishing community: sanitation was dismal if not appalling; there was a high degree of unemployment; street affrays were a fixture of everyday life; small-scale drug trafficking and illicit drug use were common; educational attainment was very low, perhaps one of the lowest in town. Thus, by all measures, and borrowing Mill’s argument concerning the relation of a Thai rural community to cosmopolitan Bangkok, to be identified as coming from Gilid, “engages powerful cultural oppositions and symbolic hierarchies that define [people...] in terms of (their) distance from standards of modernity, progress, and development both within the town itself and on the national and global scale” (Mills 2005:386).

As mentioned earlier, there is a group of people in the community, however, who do not fit this description to a certain extent. Though they grew up in the fishing community, raised their family there, and continue to live in the area, they enjoyed a much more comfortable life, indeed a middle-class life. Their seeming out-of-place status was brought about by their ownership of fish stalls in the town market and their involvement in fish auction in fish trading houses which has provided them with a comparatively huge income compared to other people from the community. Practicing an economy of scale allowed them to own big houses in the community and enjoy the affordances of a modern life, which is only a dream for the rest of the people living in the fishing community. At the time of fieldwork, although the fishing community was in the throes of a fisheries crisis, some of these market fishmongers were least affected than the rest due to their ability to diversify economically (a number of them engaged in money lending). Since they could also source fish from the city fish port to be sold in their stalls in the town market, they were not affected by the reduced fish landings in the fish auction houses.

At the time of fieldwork there were about 708 people in the community, of which 12 were classified as market fishmongers. These fishmongers owned stalls in the town market and were ‘licensed’ to participate in fish auctions in fish auction houses in the community. In times when fish landings were lean, they, on their own, would buy fish from the city fish port, an hour from the town, and would sell them in

their stalls. Some of them could earn as much as ₱2,000 per day and could sell as much as 10 boxes of fish in one trading day. Not all market fishmongers were earning well, although, by virtue of their being able to participate in fish auctions and sell fish in the town market, they were much better off than the other fishmongers from the community. The latter type of fishmongers were the itinerant ones, who were not able to participate in fish auctions due to lack of capital and social connections (see, e.g. Turgo 2016) and who mostly relied on market fishmongers for a daily share of fish. The itinerant fishmongers would do the round of neighboring communities to sell fish and would make ₱200-300 a day at most.

The mode of fishing in the community was predominantly small-scale, which refers here to fishing using boats of less than three gross tons (Kurien 1998, 2003; Stobutzki et al 2006), which are “typically coastal and differ markedly in structure and function from large-scale, offshore fisheries (Vincent et al 2007:207). Boats were largely mechanized, but they could only accommodate at best two fishers for every foray to the sea. They also mostly fished in the designated municipal waters, within 15 kilometers from the shoreline, due to the limited capabilities of their boats. Other boats were non-motorized, locally known as “*sagwanan*” (‘paddled boats’), which could only be used to fish in areas not far from the shore. In the 1980s until the late 1990s, the community was the single biggest supplier of fish in town and the most populous among the many fishing communities dotting the long municipal coastline. But a crisis of the local fisheries took place in early 2000, negatively affecting the community (and other fishing communities of the town as well), compelling many fishing families to diversify economically. While a number of fishers continued fishing, others shifted to selling fish on the street (fish came from commercial fishing boats plying the high seas of the Pacific Ocean), while the rest explored other economic possibilities in nearby towns and cities. Those who opted to stay made ends meet by doing odd jobs. For men, they did carpentry in nearby communities, while women sold food on the street, washed clothes for other families in other communities, or worked as *kasambahay* (house help) in more affluent parts of the town and neighboring cities.

## Methodology

This article forms part of a bigger study that looked into the everyday life of the fishing community in the context of a localized fisheries crisis and the effects of extralocal forces, such as globalization. Fieldwork was



undertaken for a period of six months in 2008-2009. As someone who had a father who was a fisher and who grew up in a place close to the fishing community, I consider myself to be from the fishing community, although I have spent much of my adult life in Manila. In a number of ways, my research was an insider research (see Turgo 2012a, 2012b). Being from the community, I had a very easy time in the field reconnecting with people. Tagalog was the sole medium of communication (and I am fluent in the language). I participated in many community activities, observed the daily conduct of community life on the street, in *sari-sari* stores (convenience stores), in fish stalls, and on the shore while waiting for boats to arrive, and attended special occasions, like birthday parties. I interviewed fishers, fishmongers, housewives, and old and young people alike. Thus, like any ethnographic study, I spent an inordinate time immersing myself in the cultures of the people and the community.

My family had many relatives in the community, and my father had friends who were still into fishing. My mother, on the other hand, had friends who were into selling fish. This made my research far more convenient in terms of accessing research participants. There were a number of disadvantages of doing insider research, however, as conveyed by the literature on the topic, but these did not outweigh the evident advantages of being a ‘native’ of the community studied (see Turgo 2012b). It did not take long for me to establish rapport with the people of the community, and interviews with research participants went smoothly. I do not claim any epistemic privilege, and I am cognizant of the cultural blinders that a native researcher would have in the conduct of research in his own place and the constraints it posed on his analysis of the data.

### **Notion of place and being middle class**

Globalization and modernization have an undoubtedly profound effect on the constitution of our being, although their manifestation on the ground may be too abstract for many (Appadurai 1996, Giddens 2001). They shape the discursive space of local mobility (Mills 2005, see also Kennedy 2010), such as the global transit by people finding work (Fajardo 2013, Lee & Pratt 2013, Parrenas 2001, Sampson 2013) or forced by circumstances to seek places of refuge (Mountz 2013). As the effects of globalization are felt on the ground, and globalization’s associated values - modernity, for example - penetrate even the most marginal of places, compulsion to make the most of it and enjoy its supposed affordances have never been more cogent and enticing for many. Everyone wants to partake of the good life that globalization instantiates on its trail. Although

our experiencing of and engagement with globalization and its associated forces could at times be frustrating, we plod on. As explained by Mills:

...ideas of progress, development, and modernity represent deeply desired standards of well-being for many people in today’s world. Although the content of such ideals (as well as their diverse vocabularies) are always variously imagined and locally constructed, the desires they evoke can retain a powerful attraction for individuals and communities even when their achievement is continually frustrated or denied (Mills 2005:386).

There are various ways in which the longing for modern life, i.e., “to be engaged in activities that are predominantly urban and/or cosmopolitan in style and association” (Mills 2005:389), manifests in specific localities and temporalities. Such differentiated modernities are mediated by and processed through the discursive prism of global forces and local contingencies. In all this, what we do for a living and the place where we live bear heavily on the ways we construct and re-construct our membership in social groups for which we hanker and to which we hope to belong.

Globalization, localization, and all those forces that structure today’s world are experienced in places (Escobar 2008, Gupta & Ferguson 1997, Massey 2009, Rodman 1992). Regardless of one’s hypermobility, one has to rest, and, for a time, live in places and make oneself at home (Bochove 2012). While there are people who are constantly on the move (Andreotti et al 2013, Parrenas 2001, Sampson 2013), there are also those who are chained to places. For the latter, in a number of cases, the place where they live, to a certain extent, also becomes the predictor of their fate (see also Hutchinson 1996; Scheper-Hughes 1992). In recent years, there has been a resurgence in the study of places, and rightly so (Escobar 2001; Dirlík 1998, 1999, 2000; Rodman 1992). While placelessness has become the essential feature of the modern condition (Escobar 2001, see also Sheller & Urry 2006), immobility has also become the lot of innumerable people, primarily those who reside in the margins of the world, i.e., in economic, technological, and geographical terms, among others.

The return to place, as it were, marks a turning point in our understanding of how globalization makes many of us embark on sojourns of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of places. The experiencing of globalization does not just make us more attuned to a global sense of place (Massey 2009) but also renders us more aware of our place in the

world and emplacement in a particular geographical continuum – the way we own the place and how it owns us in return. Thus, in a sense, as globalization intensifies, so does the experiencing of specific places. As the power of mass media and other global forces keep on deterritorializing our experiencing of everyday life, as shown by Liechty in his study of the middle class in Kathmandu “this same cultural ‘deterritorialization’ has a very ‘territorializing’ effect on the minds of people” (2002:67). As we deploy our imagination to reach other places and as we become aware of what transpires in other places as well, it follows that, in some ways, the experiencing of our own place becomes even more arresting and salient. As our world seems to expand revealing endless possibilities, our entrapment in particular locales also becomes even more acute.

It is in this context that we should look at places as more than geographical locations as they are also determinants of identities. Places have a power over us. They make us into who we are. Massey (1991, 1994), for example, argues that place must be seen as the juxtaposition of a multiplicity of competing and contradicting identities. Places have an effect on us. Our being chained to places, either literally or symbolically, in more ways than one, regardless of our efforts to free ourselves from their shackles, shapes the very contours of social life that we enact for ourselves.

Personal and cultural identity is bound up with place; a topoanalysis is one exploring the creation of self-identity through place. Geographical experience begins in places, reaches out to others through spaces, and creates landscapes or regions for human existence (Tilley 1994, cited in Escobar 2001:143).

Social forces, therefore, are produced, articulated, and experienced in places. Places stamp on us their distinct characteristics as much as we ourselves intervene in the constitution of places. It is in this context that our understanding of what modern life means and brings is embroiled in the politics of place and place making. The experiencing of modern life, therefore, and the aspiration of being recognized as belonging to a particular social class is tied up with our making sense of places;

“politics is also located in place, not only in the supra-levels of capital and space. Place, one might add, is the location of a multiplicity of forms of cultural politics that is the cultural-becoming-political” (Escobar 2001:156).

Among people in the fishing community, some market fishmongers were the best provisioned to partake of and contest this politics of places, to revel in the good life that modernity predicates, and at the same time be endlessly disappointed and left feeling disjointed by gaps and fissures that their enactment of modernity instantiates. They were of their place, and they wanted to contest it. Thus, it is in their struggle to shake off the ‘curse of geography’ that the experiencing of modernity by some market fishmongers becomes fraught with tension and contestation; it is in their continued residency in the fishing community and working as fishmongers which “continually frustrate and deny” their claim to being middle class. Their place and trade-specific habitus – social and bodily disposition – in so many ways, has structured their “meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions” (Bourdieu 2007:170). Such persisting difference, regardless of their efforts at finding and executing similarities with the middle class in town, underlines how people from other places in town read the cultural and social significations of the fishing community and the people who live there, and the kind of work that they do. Thus, how other people make sense of the work that market fishmongers do and the place where they live contributes to their social and cultural marginalization regardless of their economic capital.

In this article, my definition of middle class admits to the accepted fact that “characterizing the middle class as a social and cultural entity has always presented a distinct challenge to class theorists” (Liechty 2002:10-11). As with other subjectivities, ‘the middle class’ is an unsatisfactory term for a wide range of people whose disparate relations to means of production give them little class coherence (Cohen 2004, cited in Ballard 2012). Regardless of the seeming elasticity and ambiguity of this social group, however, “it functions as a powerful idea of an open class of ordinary people who enjoy good incomes from their hard work, and to which everyone can aspire” (Ballard 2012:567).

There are various ways to arrive at a definition of middle class. A number of studies have shown a multiplicity of criteria (see, e.g. Bochove 2012, Boterman 2012a/2012b, Lemanski & Lama-Rewal 2012, Lu 2013). The most helpful, I think, is that offered by Lu (2013). In his study of Chinese middle class, he aggregated into two distinct strands numerous studies of Western societies using objective and subjective approaches. By using the objective approach, he argues that a sociopolitical class is mainly determined by such important objective socioeconomic indicators as income, education, and occupation (Lu 2013). On the other hand, the subjective approach signifies an adherence to a particular structure of feeling and expressed social practices that constitute the daily routine of

being middle class. It is identified according to an individual's belief or perception that he or she belongs to the middle stratum of a certain society. Thus, for example, being middle class could mean being good citizens, reasonable, rational, responsible, educated, and self-propulsive (Ong 2006, cited in Ballard 2012).

This schema is helpful, but solely basing the definition on objective approach might result to “measurement fetish” (Guram 1998, cited in Mazzarella 2013:3), while relying solely on the subjective side might result in classifying people who do not have the resources for middle-class affordances and yet classify themselves as one. Bearing that in mind, it is nonetheless important that in our understanding of middle class, we are also guided by the observation made by Hines.

...the primary distinction of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century middle class is ‘determined’ less directly by its relations to the means of production (selling labor or owning capital) than by its relations to the market, that is, by its ability to consume. This point leads us to the appreciation that although the middle-class position gets on a profound amount of economic privilege, its power is ‘always exercised and reproduced culturally’ (Hines 2010:291).

Taking this into consideration, we ask: Who are the middle class with whom some market fishmongers most earnestly identify? Earlier, I mentioned that these were the “*tagagitna*”— the people who live in the town center. Their identification in this article is arbitrary. These people from Gitna were some market fishmongers’ choice of people who for them represent the kind of life that they most desire – life that represents progress, modernity, and upward mobility.

“*Tagagitna*” encompasses more than a named and a demarcated geographic location, but rather a class of people who were deemed to signify and radiate the accoutrements of what it takes to lead and live a middle-class life in town. While the ‘gitna’ as a location in town points to the commercial district, to be *tagagitna* becomes more than a geographic situatedness, but a cultural and symbolic affiliation that one possesses by virtue of his or her social station in life. They were mostly the educated and office-going people in town, those who worked in the municipal government, banks, and schools. They were the town’s professionals; they were office clerks, teachers, accountants, lawyers, *balikbayan* (people who lived overseas for a long time and chose to spend their old age in town), overseas Filipino workers, etc. Their designation coincides with a

number of studies which classify the middle class in the Asia Pacific as “salaried professional, technical, administrative, managerial white-collar workers who have special skills and expertise, small proprietors and the self-employed, and salaried, non-manual routine clerical workers and personal service workers” (Lu 2013:130).

These professionals were looked up to as the embodiment of progress in town, of life’s ideals that for many are attainable and yet somewhat difficult to achieve. They are, in the eyes of the people in the fishing community, modern life personified. Thus, for example, some market fishmongers would look up to them when it comes to provisioning their houses with modern-day conveniences or their aspirations in life. It is along this line that they would tell me that in buying a new appliance, they would usually consult their friends working in the municipal government. They wanted their houses to be like theirs, they told me. “*Yung moderno, hindi kagaya ng mga bahay dito.*” (‘modern, unlike the houses here’). These people were also looked up to as confident individuals, people who could express themselves well.

In so many ways then, there was a clear dichotomy playing out in the minds of some market fishmongers. The people living in the town center were well connected to the outside world. They represented what was ‘modern’, good, and desirable. In contrast, the rest of the people in the fishing community, from which some of the market fishmongers tried to disassociate themselves, were the complete opposite. They were local, provincial, and backward – the center versus the periphery. Thus, in emulating the middle class as the people that they wanted to be, some market fishmongers were seeking to become modern social actors, people who could face up to the challenges and risks of everyday life with competence and sophistication (Hsu 2005).

Concomitant with this, belonging to the middle class is also about the performance of particular social practices, the experiencing of distinct everyday affordances, and the display of a set of skills. The cultural character of middle-class-ness necessitates an internal dynamic through which it is constantly constructed and reconstructed in ‘opposition to its class others, above and below; thus, it is “always a work in progress” (Hines 2010:292). In a sense, to belong to the middle class is to create a particular space – culturally, socially, and politically:

The middle class is a constantly renegotiated cultural space – a space of ideas, values, goods, practices and embodied behaviours – in which the terms of inclusion and exclusion

are endlessly tested, negotiated, and affirmed (Liechty 2002:15-16).

As a class, it is ever-evolving, and its constitution and configuration are always subjected to the workings of power. The most desirable and fitting to the values that constitute the middle class is never without contestation from within. There is an internal struggle as to what makes the middle class middle class. There is a need to negotiate one's inclusion, which also means that there are power relations at work in the shaping of one's belongingness or feeling of inclusion and exclusion. In a number of ways, to be middle class in town is akin to performing a set of everyday routines, a sort of prescribed habitus or bodily hexis (Bourdieu 1989, 2007), not unlike gender itself, as explained by Butler (2006).

### **Desiring modernity: keeping up with the *tagaitna***

In navigating the by-ways of fulfilling and coping with the demands and requisites of a middle-class life, there are various ways in which some market fishmongers acquire the necessary capital – cultural, social, and symbolic – to advance their lot. When I speak of capital, I refer to

...accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. It is a *vis insita*, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures, but it is also a *lex insita*, the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world. It is what makes the games of society – not least, the economic game – something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle (Bourdieu 1986:241).

Encouraged by their income, some market fishmongers would make manifest their claim to middle-class lifestyle through consumption. They do this within a specific context and geographical contingencies, “the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices” (Bourdieu 1986:241). Through this, they signified their being not part of the community but rather of the world outside, where abject poverty, backwardness, and the depravity that characterized the fishing community

was nowhere in sight. They consumed things and services that legitimized their claim to middle-class life.<sup>1</sup>

Through consumption, market fishmongers were accentuating their social and material distinction from others in the community and their affiliation with the middle class in town. As explained by Bourdieu (1998), “distinction is always relational, that social actors maintain or create identity through consumption practices only insofar as those practices are different from other people’s practices” (cited in Hsu 2005:547). It is this attempt at a marked delineation of difference between them and the rest of the community and their connection to the middle class in town that is best shown in their houses and for example their procurement of motorbikes for their daily transport needs.

Mina was one of the pioneers in selling fish in the market and was one of the very first market fishmonger to join a fish auction in the first fish auction house in the community. She was 65 at the time of my fieldwork. She maintained two stalls in the town market, one occupied by her eldest daughter and the other still maintained by her. Mina’s house was the biggest in her neighborhood. It was a two-storey house, with a balcony which in the evening, during summer, to escape the stifling summer heat, the couple would use as their bedroom. Inside the house, the floor was made of tiles and the living room contained upholstered sofa made from *narra*, a pricey local wood. Against the wall, right by the door, occupying a prominent place, was a huge picture of “The Last Supper” framed in exquisitely curved mahogany wood. On the other side was a cabinet where Mina was keeping her china and some expensive utensils, which, I surmised, were hardly or never used at all. There was also a huge television set in one corner, ‘the biggest in the neighborhood’, Mina proudly told me. In the kitchen, there was a refrigerator and a cooking range fueled by liquefied petroleum gas. There was also running water in the sink, a luxury in the community. A small outback shack served as their toilet. Upstairs there were three rooms, the first one occupied by the

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<sup>1</sup> As observed by Liechty in his study of middle-class Nepali:

...middle-class people share a common orientation to capitalist productive processes as consumers of commodities, and to the extent that consumption (with all the social fashioning and practice that the term implies) becomes their primary mode of cultural production, middle class practice is inescapably consumer practice. Because of their ability to both include and exclude class others, and to both display and conceal class privilege, commodities (and their attendant practices) are the primary currency of middle-class life (Liechty 2002:31).



couple, the second by their youngest unmarried son, and the third serving as a storage room or sometimes a room for visiting friends and relatives. On the wall were framed cheap reproductions of landscape pictures of waterfalls, forests, and snowcapped mountains.

A visit to other houses owned by some market fishmongers would be a repeat of what I described above, although the others would have fewer appliances or feature less expensive furniture. But, as mentioned earlier, another mark of distinction in the community which some market fishmongers were quick to show off was the possession of motorbikes. This mode of private transport is very popular in the town, especially among the middle class who would do their daily routine, like bringing children to school or going to work, on their motorbikes. Motorbikes are, of course, also convenient in terms of taking up less space and maintenance and easier to acquire compared to cars which were very few in town (those who owned cars were usually the upper class, the landed class, or the *balikbayan*). Most of those who worked in the local government, for example, owned a motorbike. Thus, in many ways, the motorbike signifies another mark of distinction and signified both literally and metaphorically the mobility of some market fishmongers. While ordinary people either traveled on foot or used public transport like tricycles, the middle class in town used motorbikes and so did some market fishmongers.

The power to consume makes some market fishmongers different from others in the community and connects them to the middle class in town. Thus, as Bourdieu (2007) puts it, consumption practices define social position (cited in Hsu 2005). It is no wonder then that, as explained by Liechty, “middle class consciousness is inseparable from a kind of consumer consciousness. Commodities are fundamental components in the middle-class project of constructing itself as a social group” (Liechty 2002:87).

Much of the virtue associated with the non-poor is their ‘ability to produce value through their practices of consumption...’ For consumers themselves, consumption is the vehicle not only for meeting material needs but also for achieving modernity and emancipation (Ballard 2012:567).

Thus, as the Chinese studied by Hsu (2005) saw their consumption of Western food as a signification of modernity, some market fishmongers, on the other hand, thought that by fashioning their homes in the image of houses of the middle class in town and by having motorbikes, they too

would share in the ritual of everyday modern life and partake of its accorded prestige.

In addition, some market fishmongers were also signaling their difference from other people in the community and improving their middle-class credentials through their social activities, alliances, and friendships forged with people outside of the community. Here, Bourdieu’s notion of social capital is illustrative of the attempt of some market fishmongers to transcend their consumption-oriented qualification to middle-class life by joining organizations and forging alliances and friendships with the people who matter in town. By improving the profile of their social circle by including some known personalities in town, they also put on more social prestige, bestowing them “the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu 1986:243). By doing so, they saw themselves as participating in a world of ‘modernity’ – a world of globalized products, ‘scientific’ progress, and cosmopolitan glamour (Hsu 2005).

Regular trips to Manila and other places constitute some of the tactics in which some market fishmongers accumulate a considerable degree of cultural capital. For Bourdieu, capital could be in the form of embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state. Some market fishmongers tried to varnish their cultural capital by joining such activities as visiting museums, attending plays, and participating in seminars. Here, we see how they tried to embody all these states, from imbibing the sophisticated “dispositions of the mind and body” (Bourdieu 1986) of the middle class to feeding their minds various information about culture and politics. While they simply could not obtain the institutionalized capital provided by formal schooling, they tried to supplement this through other means. For example, Anita, through her membership in a socio-civic organization would see to it that she got to attend talks by visiting experts concerning the preservation of local culture. Her interest in the topic was a source of amusement even amongst her own family members. For her, however, attending seminars and conventions on culture made a big impact in her life.

*Malaki ang tulong sa akin. Parang lumalawak ang pang-unawa ko sa buhay. Marami akong natutunan at nakikilala. Masaya ang ganoon. Kung lagi lang ako sa palengke, anong malalaman ko?*

[‘It helps me a lot. It widens my understanding of life. I learn a lot, and get to know more people. I like it that way. If I limit myself to the market, how would I know things?]

Implicit in her explanation is the feeling of elation that in so many ways, like many professionals in town, she was also doing the things that were the usual preserve of those who went to the city to obtain a university education.

Some market fishmongers scaled up their lifestyle to approximate the modern conveniences and norms that they perceived to be the defining qualifications of middle-class life. They also made efforts to acquaint themselves with the cultural affordances of the town's middle class to equip them with the needed idioms beyond the patina of material largesse in their command. There is, therefore, a determined trajectory of life on the part of some market fishmongers to extricate themselves from the limited and limiting geographical logics of their existence. They want to transcend their place-based limitations and explore the myriad of possibilities made available to them by the expanding local economy. Their accumulation of capital to escape their perceived marginalized status in town would prove tricky, however. The modernity that they were aspiring for and judiciously enacting in their everyday life was both precarious and contentious. Their social distinction was founded on shaky grounds. All was not well.

### ***Balinguynguy* ('nosebleed'): modernity in question**

Life on the ground is constituted by an array of co-mingling presences of global, national, and local forces that in so many ways presents people with choices that are seemingly achievable and, at the same time, realistically beyond the reach of some segments of society. Global flows feed the frenzy of local imaginings pertaining to social mobility and capitalist consumption. It is in this context that, for example, workers in a rural community in Thailand "confront a continuing gap between constructed desires for Thai standards of 'modernity' and 'progress' and at best the partial achievement of such desires in everyday life" (Mills 2005:387).

The desire for being perceived as middle class and accepted as such, on the one hand, and the playing out of local contingencies, on the other, are clearly defining the limits of market fishmongers' aspiration for modernity. While the accoutrements of modernity could really be at some market fishmongers' disposal, most importantly the ability to consume material things, other forces at are play on the ground. Modernity is not just about things; most importantly, its 'characteristics and badges' were also about values (Weber 1997). There are competing claims to social

values and privileges. There are unspoken criteria to be met and, thus, middle-class affordances do not come that easy. Contestations are inevitable. This results in the tenuous enrolment of some market fishmongers in the social universe of the middle class in town. To highlight this fact, how people in their own community and the middle class in town perceive market fishmongers is worth looking into.

The putative disenfranchisement of market fishmongers from claiming legitimacy as middle class comes from two fronts: from their own people in the community and from the people living in Gitna themselves. Thus, we see here a consistent and persistent disjuncture between what some market fishmongers felt and what others thought of them. In a rather scathing remark that sums up the sentiment of the people around them, a store owner in the fishing community told me: “*kahit pa magsabon sila ng mahal, amoy isda pa rin sila!*” (Even if they wash themselves with an expensive soap, they still smell like fish.) Quite interestingly, a similar remark was said to me by someone working in a local company in town. She told me, referring to some market fishmongers: “*Yung ibang kilala kong taga-Gilid, kung makayabang na. E kahit pa anong sabon ang gamitin nila, amoy isda pa rin sila!*” (“Some people I know from Gilid have the temerity to blow you off for their new-found dash of wealth. But even if they wash themselves with a premium soap, they will still smell of fish.) Their exclusion therefore from the middle class has been reduced metaphorically to their smell, that regardless of their efforts, they would always be mere fishmongers, living in the fishing community.

In the community, some market fishmongers were perceived as “*mayayabang*” (showing excessive pride). They were also seen as pretentious and overbearing. People would usually call them “*mga tagarito na nanggangali-ngali*” (from among us, but who is narcissistic). Stories about some market fishmongers playing down their connection to the community and boasting about their different class status circulate in the community and are the staple of conversations in sari-sari stores. One, for example, cited an experience she had with a market fishmonger who tried to downplay her connection to the community. On a bus going back to the town after a trip to the city, she had as her seatmate a market fishmonger. They had a good chat about the dwindling supply of fish in the community even in buffer months. Then someone from the back asked her neighbor where she was currently living, and without hesitation, the market fishmonger said Liwayway. Liwayway is the community next to Gilid. Wryly and with a dint of scorn, she asked me: “*Eh anong problema sa Gilid, e dito naman talaga siya nakatira? Dito siya nagkapera!*”

(‘What’s the problem being identified with Gilid, where she actually lives? This place brought her her wealth!’)

However, this feeling of disjuncture, of being unable to bridge the social gap, of an unsatisfied quest for respectability and acceptance, was, to my surprise, not unnoticed amongst market fishmongers themselves. They too felt that regardless of their considerable economic stride and their accumulation of capital, they simply found it hard to fit in. They could not produce “classifiable practices and works and ... differentiate and appreciate practices and products” (Bourdieu 2007:170) that constituted the space of the lifestyles of the middle class, or, maybe, they tried, and were found wanting. What they showcased, in a number of instances, were the habitus of their place of residence – the fishing community. Such desire to belong was always met with resistance. They suffered too much of symbolic violence thrust upon them in their quest for belongingness to the middle class.

For example, in a political meeting that I attended, the market fishmongers that I met there were visibly enjoying their time. While some of their compatriots from the community were in the kitchen helping with the cooking and serving of food, they were hobnobbing with the political leaders and the powers-that-be in town. But being invited did not automatically translate to either outright respect or acceptance. This reality was, of course, not lost on these market fishmongers. As I was doing the rounds, meeting people in the meeting, I had a short chat with one of the market fishmongers who was eating all by herself in one corner of the house. When I asked her why she was not joining the conversation, she said: “*Nakakapagod makipagkwentuhan. Wala akong masabi! May mga pa-Ingles-Ingles pa. Babalingyunguyin ako!*” (‘I’m weary of having conversations with them. I have nothing to say. They speak in English. I’m afraid I will have a nosebleed.’)

Her observation reveals the persistent precarious and insecure position that market fishmongers had in the power geometry of the town’s social class. The expression ‘*babalingyunguyin ako*’ signifies their clumsy or even poor grasp of the English language, the language of the educated and the privileged members of society. The market fishmonger exposes her predicament of retaining the patina of backwardness amidst the illusory modernity that she thought she had with her socializing with the middle class by her failure to speak and understand English. This exposes a lacuna that inflicts symbolic violence on their quest for inclusion in the middle-class circle in town: they never had any formal schooling. The market fishmongers’ lack of a college diploma or formal higher education

credentials, for that matter, has been a constant refrain amongst the middle class in town as to why market fishmongers acted the way they did. Seemingly, one’s lack of education is equated to a lack of decorum and social graces. Their habitus, therefore, could not measure up to the requirements of the middle class. Thus, in so many ways, formal education, which many, if not all, market fishmongers sorely lacked, serves as a marker of class status and as a means of upward social mobility (cf Walley 2002).

In all this, the attainment, curtailment, and endless postponement of a particular desired social status has become more a structural battle than a personal quest for the market fishmongers. They have had to contend with the specter of opposition coming from all sides. Such opposition, of course, reveals some very interesting issues about the maintenance, management, and constitution of middle-class life in town. It is not a status that is given free to anyone. There are considerations, like acceptance and acknowledgment, that need to be met, something that market fishmongers could not break through. All that they had was what Tolentino (2010) calls “*panggitnang uring fantasya*” (‘middle-class fantasy’). Their being from the fishing community and the kind of work that they do has entrapped them to a structured life from which they seemed not able to free themselves. In a number of ways, market fishmongers are positioned in a bifocal space of anxiety and excitement, of things near and far.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This article offered a look at the ways in which some market fishmongers in a small fishing community negotiate their conflicted and protracted membership to a social class that constantly and consistently complicates their experiencing of ‘modernity’. Through their accumulation of social and cultural capital, facilitated by their economic capital, they forged ways to symbolically erase their attachment to and emplacement in the fishing community. Such attempt at radical break from their moorings could be attributed to their exposure to accelerated processes of modernization which accentuates, for many, a life that is centered on social mobility and progress. But this pursuit of modernity – that is, a life that is aligned with the accoutrements of middle class affordances - is not without predicament. The lives of market fishmongers revolved around fish trading and they were very much a part of the everyday life in the fishing community, very much embedded in the economic and social fabric of the fishing community. And this posed a dilemma. Their well-entrenched association with the fishing community is a contrapuntal force

that leaves a spate of cracks and fissures in the very concrete edifice of modernity that they were aspiring for. Quite imminently, their life of being market fishmongers and all the associated trade habitus that comes with it is seen by the people from Gitna as the very anti-thesis of being 'modern'. In so many ways then, market fishmongers serve as a "metonymic representation for the dislocations of modernity" (Qayum & Ray 2003:535). Market fishmongers had never been modern, after all.

The place where they lived and the work that they did were their route to economic and social freedom and paradoxically were also the chains that trapped them to a life of precarious modernity. To a large extent, place of residence (neighborhood or town) structures the social milieu in which children grow up. Together with the circuits of education, the social environment in which people are brought up constitutes the framework for the accumulation of social experiences (Boterman 2012a:2400). In making money from fish trading, market fishmongers became more identified with fish trading and the fishing community and in the process sunk deeper into the very essence of life that the community represented: a life of perceived backwardness. Being reduced to mere residents of the fishing community and in the process losing their own individuality and agency to effect change in their lives, the symbolic dominance of the middle class in town is articulated through the machination and mastery of space (which recalls Lefebvre's [1991] insistence that the command over space is a key source of social power in everyday life [Qayum & Ray 2003:530]).

Place then, as market fishmongers' lives would attest, has a structuring force on our lives. Their being in a particular place had entrapped them to particular values that in turn kept them at bay from claiming social belongingness in a desired class. Here, we are reminded that if a particular cultural imaginary is accepted by concrete subject positions as appropriate for constructing the identity of a particular place, it is likely that others will be excluded simultaneously (Qian et al 2012:1075). By constructing market fishmongers as their socio-cultural 'other' by virtue of their work and place of residence, the middle class in town had excluded them from the social space of the middle class. Market fishmongers were chained to their place.

Their failure to gain acceptance in the eyes of their own people in the fishing community and from the middle class in town exposes the power struggle that constitutes both the making of place politics and the maintenance of control over the cultural production of places and belongingness. Fish trading as work is very much attached to the fishing

community, and because of that, its deployment as a tool for social mobility is always attached to the demeaning values associated with the fishing community and fishing itself. Thus, to belong to the middle class is in essence to be able to be associated with Gitna and not with Gilid.<sup>2</sup>

Middle class social norms dictate sophistication and decorum of restraint about certain things that market fishmongers simply lack. There is an unspoken recognition amongst the people from Gitna that there were things that some market fishmongers simply could not crack right: to experience modernity and concomitantly be called middle class, is not just about consumption or the acquisition of capital, it is also about one’s habitus, the ways in which one’s self is rightly and appropriately deployed and exhibited in any given time and place. Consumer goods (and the economic privilege that they index) are necessary elements of claims to middle-classness, but their uses and meanings are always negotiated through the lens of “suitability.” In stories of everything from food to fashion, middle-class people discuss the promises and pitfalls of consumerism and the need for middle-class restraint (Liechty 2002:73).

The marginalization of some market fishmongers – at least those who consciously aspire to an image of being middle class – reveals a particular territorialization of privileges and distinction and as such, the social spatialisation of modernity in town. Membership in the middle class is regulated by a cache of rules that are determined by the people from Gitna. The othering of the market fishmongers is effected to fend off their relentless incursion into the domain of the ‘real’ middle class.

The middle class as a class position in society occupies a tenuous terrain. Rather than an ontological position, it is a process which is buffeted at all fronts by competing claims. In other words, the middle class is a kind of performative space characterized by constant alignment and realignment with class others, and where goods play active roles. Ultimately, middle-class membership is not about fixing rank but about claiming the values that exclude and restrain others from joining in (Liechty 2002:115). In all this, it could be said that both market fishmongers and the rest of the middle class in town are engaged in a tug of war, the former insisting on their membership in the middle class while the latter strengthening their hold on their notion of what middle class life

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<sup>2</sup> As Ballard explains in relation to the development of the middle class in South Africa:

The kinds of spaces associated with the non-poor are celebrated by authorities as ‘pacified, morally superior, and governable consumer paradises’ (Ballard 2012:568).



is, “engaging themselves in a complex choreography of expectations and disappointments” (Qayum & Ray 2003:547) as they negotiate the terrain of what takes it to be a part of the middle class in today’s world.

One’s locality seems to be, in a sense, also one’s destiny. The life of market fishmongers testifies to the verity that no one can escape from his geographical entanglement and all its attendant values and meanings. People view others from the spectrum of where they are from and what they do. In the case of market fishmongers, their attachment to the fishing community and the kind of work that they do render their membership in the town’s middle class contentious, fractious and precarious. Geographical situatedness in so many ways produces discursive marginality and otherness.

Modernity as it was experienced by some market fishmongers was centered on the assumption that it exemplified the kind of life that was respectable and privileged, quite different from the kind of life that the fishing community represented. Through their acquisition of ‘the good life’ as represented by their relative material wealth, they were enacting a belief, fed endlessly by orgies of material consumption, that they were indeed living a modern life. But the struggle to make a capitalist modernity comfortable for oneself, to find a sense of community in it, to be – as Berman puts it – ‘at home in modernity’, is an ongoing, ceaseless process for all (Chakrabarty 2001:123). Furthermore, the acquisition of modern life and membership to the middle class do not come friction-free. One’s desire to belong is also other’s right to exclude. Membership to the middle class also concerns the building of fences, the institutionalization and ‘exclusivization’ of social privileges and the enactment of exclusionary tactics. Calling out someone to be “*amoy isda*” seems to be one of them.

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