

Traditional practices and cultural identity of small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes, Camarines Norte

Loida R. Navarro * and Delia V. Mendoza

Graduate School, University of Saint Anthony, Iriga City, Camarines Sur, Philippines.

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Abstract

This study documented the traditional practices, cultural identity, and community realities of small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes, Camarines Norte. Using a qualitative ethnographic research design with a Design and Development Research Type 1 component, the study gathered data from thirteen selected key informants from five barangays in Mercedes. Data were collected through a self-constructed interview guide, personal interviews, observation, and supporting library and online research. The responses were analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings showed that the identity of small-scale fisherfolk was anchored in fishing livelihood and marine abundance, distinct traditional fishing tools and methods regarded as Tatak Mercedes, and cultural products, rituals, and sea-linked practices such as bagoong production, dried fish, boat blessing, suob, karakol, and the Kadagatan Festival. The fisherfolk also encountered environmental risks, seasonal catch instability, structural pressures from overfishing and illegal or large-scale fishing practices, and limited coping resources. Despite these difficulties, they continued to adapt through shifting fishing areas, waiting for safer weather, adjusting fishing methods by season, seeking shelter, and repairing damaged gear. The study concludes that small-scale fisherfolk identity in Mercedes is not merely occupational but cultural, ecological, and communal. Based on the findings, a documentary magazine titled Tatak Mercedes: Stories, Traditions, and Resilience of Small-Scale Fisherfolk was produced as an information, education, and cultural advocacy material.

Keywords: Cultural identity; Mercedes; Small-scale fisherfolk; Tatak Mercedes; Traditional practices

1. Introduction

The sea has long served as a source of livelihood, culture, and identity for many coastal communities in the Philippines. In Mercedes, Camarines Norte, fishing remains a defining feature of everyday life, particularly among small-scale fisherfolk whose knowledge, tools, rituals, and community practices are closely tied to the sea. Their practices include traditional fishing gears, nearshore fishing methods, sea-related beliefs, boat rituals, processed fishery products, and community celebrations that express local identity.

The documentation of small-scale fisherfolk culture is supported by national policy and heritage concerns. Republic Act No. 8550, or the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998, recognizes the role of fisherfolk in the utilization, management, and conservation of fishery and aquatic resources [1]. Republic Act No. 10066, or the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009, also supports the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, including traditional knowledge, rituals, and community practices [2]. These legal bases affirm the value of documenting the cultural expressions of fisherfolk communities, particularly those connected to coastal livelihood and local identity.

Small-scale fishing is not only an economic activity. It is also a way of life shaped by intergenerational knowledge, ecological observation, material culture, faith practices, kinship, and community belongingness [5-8]. In Mercedes, these practices are locally understood as part of Tatak Mercedes, or the distinct cultural mark associated with the town's

* Corresponding author: Loida R. Navarro

fisherfolk. However, environmental changes, unstable catch, unsafe conditions at sea, overfishing, illegal fishing practices, and limited resources continue to affect the continuity of these traditions.

This study aimed to determine the traditional practices and cultural identity of small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes, Camarines Norte. Specifically, it examined the traditional and cultural practices that define small-scale fisherfolk, identified the challenges they encounter, and produced an output based on the findings of the study.

2. Materials and Methods

The study employed a qualitative ethnographic research design with a Design and Development Research Type 1 component. The ethnographic design was appropriate because the study described and interpreted the shared practices, beliefs, and experiences of a culture-sharing group [3]. The Design and Development Research component was used because the study produced a specific output, the documentary magazine Tatak Mercedes, based on the findings [4].

The key informants were thirteen selected small-scale fisherfolk from five barangays in Mercedes, Camarines Norte. They were chosen based on residency, engagement in fishing or fishing-related livelihood activities, age and experience, and knowledge of local fishing traditions, sea-related beliefs, rituals, festivals, and community practices.

Data were gathered through a self-constructed interview guide, personal interviews, observation, and supporting library and online research. The interview guide contained open-ended questions aligned with the statement of the problem. The interviews allowed the informants to explain their experiences freely, while observation was used to support the information gathered from the interviews by documenting the community setting, fishing tools, boats, and visible cultural expressions.

The gathered data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher reviewed the responses, identified recurring ideas, grouped similar responses, and developed themes based on the study objectives. Ethical procedures were observed by securing permission from barangay officials, explaining the purpose of the study to the informants, obtaining voluntary participation, and using the gathered information only for academic purposes.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Traditional and cultural practices that define small-scale fisherfolk

The findings show that the identity of small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes is defined through three interconnected themes: identity anchored in fishing livelihood and marine abundance, distinct traditional fishing tools and methods as Tatak Mercedes, and cultural products, rituals, and sea-linked practices that reinforce identity.

Table 1 Themes on the traditional and cultural practices that define small-scale fisherfolk

Theme	Description	Codes	Supporting Statements
Identity Anchored in Fishing Livelihood and Marine Abundance	This theme shows that the identity of small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes is strongly connected to fishing as their primary livelihood and to the abundance of marine resources in the locality. Fishing is not only viewed as work but also as a defining characteristic of the community.	Fishing as livelihood; Mercedes as fishing community; marine abundance; seafood resources; fresh and dried fish production; community pride	KI 4: “Basta sinabing Mercedes, kilala ang mga tao dito na mangingisda at ito din ang pangunahing hanapbuhay sa lugar na ito. Kilala din ito na mayaman sa lamang dagat na nagtataglay ng iba’t ibang uri ng isda.” (“Whenever Mercedes is mentioned, the people here are known as fisherfolk, and fishing is also the main source of livelihood in this place. It is also known for its abundant marine resources with different kinds of fish.”) KI 5: “Kilala ang Mercedes sa iba’t ibang yamang dagat nito. Kilala din ito sa pagiging mayaman sa lamang dagat,

			kahit sa tabi ng dagat may shells at iba pa na pwedeng pakinabangan at pagkakitaan ng mga tao.” (“Mercedes is known for its different marine resources. It is also known as a place rich in seafood, even along the seashore where there are shells and other resources that people can use and earn from.”) KI 8: “Siguro masasabi ko na kilala ang Mercedes sa hanapbuhay na pangngisda, mapa-sariwa man o tuyo.” (“I can say that Mercedes is known for fishing as a livelihood, whether through fresh fish or dried fish.”)
Distinct Traditional Fishing Tools and Methods as “Tatak Mercedes”	This theme presents the traditional tools, gears, and methods that fisherfolk identify as distinct practices of Mercedes. These tools and techniques serve as visible markers of local identity because they are repeatedly named, practiced, and associated with the fishing life of the community.	traditional fishing gear; lambat; pangki; galadgad; pambalaw na lambat; banwit; kikitang; local fishing terms; inherited fishing methods; Tatak Mercedes	KI 4: “Iba’t ibang uri ng lambat ang ginagamit sa pangngisda tulad ng lambat, pangki, at galadgad. Ito ay isang uri ng kagamitan sa pangngisda na maipagmamalaki ko na tatak Mercedes.” (“Different kinds of nets are used in fishing, such as lambat, pangki, and galadgad. These are types of fishing tools that I can proudly say are part of the identity of Mercedes.”) KI 6: “Kilala ang Mercedes sa pambalaw na lambat na medyo malapit lang kung maghagis nito sa dagat.” (“Mercedes is known for the pambalaw net, which is usually cast only at a relatively short distance into the sea.”) KI 7: “Tatak ng Mercedes ang pag-banwit at pag-kikitang na gawi sa pangngisda.” English Translation: “Banwit and kikitang are fishing practices that are identified as part of the identity of Mercedes.”
Cultural Products, Rituals, and Sea-Linked Practices that Reinforce Identity	This theme shows that fisherfolk identity is reinforced not only through fishing itself but also through processed fishery products, boat-related rituals, beliefs about luck and protection, and participation in coastal celebrations. These practices connect livelihood with faith, tradition, and community belonging.	bagoong production; dried fish; processed seafood; boat blessing; suob ritual; belief in malas; ritual materials; karakol; Kadagatan Festival; boat procession; faith and fishing	KI 6: “Kilala din ang Mercedes sa bagoong. Minsan pag tag-balawan, isa iyon sa ginagawang bagoong na balaw o alamang at ibinebenta ito sa iba’t ibang parte ng Pilipinas na gawa sa Mercedes. Minsan naman tinutuyo din namin ang huling isda tulad ng tamban.” English Translation: “Mercedes is also known for bagoong. Sometimes, during the balawan season, balaw or alamang is made into bagoong and sold in different parts of the Philippines as a product of Mercedes. Sometimes, we also dry the fish we catch, such as tamban.”

			KI 4: "Hinahampas namin ng tanglad ang bangka o kaya ay dahon ng tuba. Pinabiblessing muna namin sa simbahan. Sinusuob din namin ito pang-taboy ng malas." ("We strike the boat with lemongrass or tuba leaves. We also have it blessed first in the church. We also fumigate it to drive away bad luck.") KI 6: "Mga kagamitan sa pag-suob ng aking bangka ay insenso, tawas, at kamangyan. Malas din kapag nasakyan ng babae na may buwanang dalaw." ("The materials used for fumigating my boat are incense, alum, and benzoin resin. It is also considered bad luck if a woman who has her monthly period rides the boat.") KI 7: "Naniniwala pa din ako sa mga nakaugalian na isinasagawa pa din sa ngayong panahon. Isa ako sa nakikisama sa Karakol, ginagamit ang baruto ko sa prusisyon kapag Kadagatan Festival sa Mercedes."("I still believe in the customary practices that are still observed today. I am one of those who participate in the Karakol, using my boat in the procession during the Kadagatan Festival in Mercedes.")
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The findings show that the traditional and cultural practices of small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes are deeply connected to their fishing livelihood, the abundance of marine resources, the continued use of traditional fishing tools and methods, and the observance of sea-linked cultural practices. The responses indicate that fishing is not merely an economic activity but a defining feature of community identity. For instance, KI 4 stated,

"Basta sinabing Mercedes, kilala ang mga tao dito na mangingisda at ito din ang pangunahing hanapbuhay sa lugar na ito. Kilala din ito na mayaman sa lamang dagat na nagtataglay ng iba't ibang uri ng isda" ("Whenever Mercedes is mentioned, the people here are known as fisherfolk, and fishing is also the main source of livelihood in this place. It is also known for its abundant marine resources with different kinds of fish.").

This was supported by KI 5, who shared,

"Kilala ang Mercedes sa iba't ibang yamang dagat nito. Kilala din ito sa pagiging mayaman sa lamang dagat, kahit sa tabi ng dagat may shells at iba pa na pwedeng pakinabangan at pagkakitaan ng mga tao" ("Mercedes is known for its different marine resources. It is also known as a place rich in seafood, even along the seashore where there are shells and other resources that people can use and earn from.").

These responses show that the identity of the community is strongly anchored in its relationship with the sea, where fishing serves both as a source of income and as a symbol of local pride.

The findings further reveal that specific tools and fishing methods function as visible markers of "Tatak Mercedes." The repeated mention of lambat, pangki, galadgad, pambalaw na lambat, banwit, and kikitang suggests that these are not merely fishing implements but also inherited practices that reflect local knowledge and community tradition. KI 4 emphasized,

"Iba't ibang uri ng lambat ang ginagamit sa pangingisda tulad ng lambat, pangki, at galadgad. Ito ay isang uri ng kagamitan sa pangingisda na maipagmamalaki ko na tatak Mercedes" ("Different kinds of nets are used in fishing, such as lambat, pangki, and galadgad. These are types of fishing tools that I can proudly say are part of the identity of Mercedes.").

These accounts imply that the identity of small-scale fisherfolk is expressed through the tools they use, the local terms they preserve, and the methods they continue to practice across generations. Thus, traditional fishing practices serve as tangible expressions of cultural identity and livelihood continuity.

The responses also show that fisherfolk identity extends beyond fishing activity itself. It includes cultural products, rituals, beliefs, and community celebrations that connect livelihood with faith and tradition. KI 6 shared,

"Kilala din ang Mercedes sa bagoong. Minsan pag tag-balawan, isa iyon sa ginagawang bagoong na balaw o alamang at ibinebenta ito sa iba't ibang parte ng Pilipinas na gawa sa Mercedes. Minsan naman tinutuyo din namin ang huling isda tulad ng tamban" ("Mercedes is also known for bagoong. Sometimes, during the balawan season, balaw or alamang is made into bagoong and sold in different parts of the Philippines as a product of Mercedes. Sometimes, we also dry the fish we catch, such as tamban.").

In terms of rituals, KI 4 described,

"Hinahampas namin ng tanglad ang bangka o kaya ay dahon ng tuba. Pinabiblessing namin sa simbahan. Sinusuob din namin ito pang-taboy ng malas" ("We strike the boat with lemongrass or tuba leaves. We also have it blessed first in the church. We also fumigate it to drive away bad luck.").

Meanwhile, KI 7 shared,

"Naniniwala pa din ako sa mga nakaugalian na isinasagawa pa din sa ngayong panahon. Isa ako sa nakikisama sa Karakol, ginagamit ang baruto ko sa prusisyon kapag Kadagatan Festival sa Mercedes" ("I still believe in the customary practices that are still observed today. I am one of those who participate in the Karakol, using my boat in the procession during the Kadagatan Festival in Mercedes.").

These practices show that the fisherfolk's way of life is shaped not only by labor at sea but also by beliefs, rituals, food products, and communal celebrations. Overall, the findings indicate that the traditional and cultural practices of small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes are multidimensional, combining livelihood, inherited knowledge, material culture, faith, and community belongingness as important expressions of local identity.

3.2. Challenges encountered by small-scale fisherfolk

The findings reveal that small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes encounter challenges that affect livelihood stability, safety, and the continuity of traditional practices. These challenges are organized into three themes: environmental risk and seasonality, structural pressures from overfishing and illegal practices, and limited coping strategies amid uncertain fishing conditions.

Table 2 Themes on the challenges encountered by small-scale fisherfolk

Theme	Description	Codes	Supporting Statements
Environmental Risk and Seasonality Create Unstable Catch and Income	This theme shows that small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes experienced challenges caused by rough seas, storms, unpredictable weather, seasonal catch, and unstable income. These conditions affected both their safety and livelihood security.	storm exposure; rough seas; unsafe fishing conditions; seasonal catch; no catch; income instability; livelihood uncertainty	KI 6: "Naranasan kong abutin ng bagyo sa gitna ng dagat. Halos mabitawan na namin ang aming pamalakaya sa sobrang lakas ng bagyo, halos wala ka nang makitang liwanag, puro kadiliman na lang ang nakikita ko at ang tanging nagsisilbing liwanag ay ang patak ng ulan at hampas ng alon sa aming bangka." ("I experienced being caught by a storm in the middle of the sea. We almost had to let go of our fishing gear because of the

			storm's great force. There was almost no light to see, only darkness all around, and the only things that seemed to give light were the raindrops and the waves crashing against our boat.") KI 5: "Pag malakas ang tubig o dagat, ito ay nagsisilbing hamon. Malalaking alon sa dagat. Pag kalmada naman ang panahon, wala man lang hanapin sa laot." ("When the sea or water is rough, it becomes a challenge because of the huge waves. However, when the weather is calm, there is also nothing much to find offshore.") KI 4: "Nahihirapan din dahil sa minsan walang huli at walang mapagkakakitaan. Minsan din ay seasonal ang huli ng isda." ("It is also difficult because sometimes there is no catch and no income to earn. There are also times when fish catch is seasonal.")
Structural Pressures from Overfishing and Illegal Practices Limit Small-Scale Fishing Sustainability	This theme presents the challenges caused by large-scale fishing operations, illegal fishing practices, excessive catching, and unequal access to marine resources. These pressures reduced fish availability and threatened the sustainability of small-scale fishing.	large-scale fishing pressure; fish depletion; catching small fish; advanced fishing gear; unequal competition; illegal fishing; weak enforcement; resource abuse	KI 6: "Isa pang hamon ay ang mga malalaking pamalakaya o large-scale fishermen. Nauubos nila ang mga isda sa dagat dahil sa mga gamit nilang lambat na nakakahuli ng maliit na isda." ("Another challenge is the presence of large-scale fishermen. They deplete the fish in the sea because the nets they use also catch small fish.") KI 7: "Iba ta pa ang mga katarakulang baruto na may mga gamit na masangat sa kasaraditan. Gulpi sindang dakop na sira. Asahan mong ubos pati saradit na sira." ("Another challenge is the presence of large boats with equipment that is more advanced than those of small fishers. They catch fish in large amounts. You can expect that even the small fish are also depleted.") KI 4: "Sa lugar ng Mercedes, talamak na din ang masamang gawi na iyan ng ibang mangingisda." ("In Mercedes, that harmful practice has

			also become widespread among some fishermen.”)
Limited Coping Strategies Amid Uncertain Fishing Conditions	This theme shows that fisherfolk used practical coping strategies to continue fishing despite risks and instability. These included looking for other fishing areas, adjusting fishing methods by season, waiting for safer weather, seeking shelter at sea, and repairing damaged gear. However, these strategies were limited by lack of equipment, financial constraints, and uncertain catch outcomes.	relocating fishing grounds; seeking safe shelter; seasonal adjustment; changing fishing methods; waiting for better weather; gear repair; lack of money for new nets; uncertain catch; limited resources	KI 4: “Naghahanap ng ibang lugar sa dagat ng mapaghahanapan ng isda. Minsan naghahanap ng lugar na ligtas kahit malakas ang panahon upang kumubli para mangisda.” English Translation: “We look for other places at sea where fish can be found. Sometimes, we also search for a safe area where we can take shelter and continue fishing even when the weather is rough.” KI 4: “Seasonal na paghuli ng isda. Minsan nagpapangki. May at June, naghihipon. September at December. Minsan naggagaladgad din. Minsan ayos ang huli at minsan din ay walang-wala.” (“Fish catch is seasonal. Sometimes we do pangki. In May and June, we catch shrimp. In September and December, there are also particular catches. At times, we also do galadgad. Sometimes the catch is good, and sometimes there is none at all.”) KI 5: “Hinihintay na lang na tumigil ang masamang panahon, upang mangisda ulit sa dagat, at maghanap ng lugar sa dagat na mapapangisdaan.” English Translation: “We just wait for the bad weather to stop so we can fish in the sea again and look for a place where we can catch fish.” KI 6: “Walang kakayahan makabili ng bagong lambat kaya tinatahi na lang namin ang mga nasirang lambat na pwede pang gamitin.” (“We do not have the means to buy new nets, so we just sew the damaged ones that can still be used.”)

The findings reveal that small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes encounter challenges that affect their livelihood stability, safety, and continuity of traditional fishing practices. One major concern is the risk brought by rough seas, storms, unpredictable weather, and seasonal catch. These conditions directly affect both the physical safety of fisherfolk and their ability to earn a stable income. KI 6 shared,

“Naranasan kong abutin ng bagyo sa gitna ng dagat. Halos mabitawan na namin ang aming pamalakaya sa sobrang lakas ng bagyo, halos wala ka nang makitang liwanag, puro kadiliman na lang ang nakikita ko at ang tanging nagsisilbing liwanag ay ang patak ng ulan at hampas ng alon sa aming bangka” (“I experienced being caught by a storm in the middle

of the sea. We almost had to let go of our fishing gear because of the storm's great force. There was almost no light to see, only darkness all around, and the only things that seemed to give light were the raindrops and the waves crashing against our boat.”).

This response shows that weather-related risks expose fisherfolk to danger and uncertainty while performing their livelihood.

The findings also show that small-scale fisherfolk are affected by structural pressures caused by large-scale fishing, illegal practices, and unequal access to marine resources. These concerns reduce fish availability and create an uneven fishing environment for small-scale fisherfolk who depend on limited tools and nearshore fishing areas. KI 6 stated,

“Isa pang hamon ay ang mga malalaking pamalakaya o large-scale fishermen. Nauubos nila ang mga isda sa dagat dahil sa mga gamit nilang lambat na nakakahuli ng maliit na isda” (“Another challenge is the presence of large-scale fishermen. They deplete the fish in the sea because the nets they use also catch small fish.”).

This suggests that the sustainability of small-scale fishing is threatened not only by natural conditions but also by human activities that contribute to fish depletion and unfair competition.

Despite these challenges, the fisherfolk continue to practice coping strategies in order to sustain their livelihood. These include looking for other fishing areas, waiting for safer weather, adjusting fishing methods according to season, seeking shelter at sea, and repairing damaged fishing gear. KI 4 explained,

“Naghahanap ng ibang lugar sa dagat ng mapaghahanapan ng isda. Minsan naghahanap ng lugar na ligtas kahit malakas ang panahon upang kumubli para mangisda” (“We look for other places at sea where fish can be found. Sometimes, we also search for a safe area where we can take shelter and continue fishing even when the weather is rough.”).

This response shows that fisherfolk demonstrate resilience and practical adaptation; however, their coping strategies remain limited by financial constraints, lack of equipment, unsafe conditions, and uncertain catch outcomes. Overall, the findings indicate that the challenges encountered by small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes are interconnected, involving environmental risks, economic instability, resource depletion, and limited capacity to respond to changing fishing conditions.

3.3. Output produced based on the findings

Based on the findings, the study produced *Tatak Mercedes: Stories, Traditions, and Resilience of Small-Scale Fisherfolk*. The output transforms the major findings into a documentary magazine that presents the cultural identity, traditional practices, challenges, and resilience of small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes, Camarines Norte.

The documentary magazine serves three major functions. First, it documents local fishing practices, cultural products, sea-linked rituals, and community narratives. Second, it may be used as an information and educational material for schools and local stakeholders. Third, it supports cultural preservation by presenting fisherfolk life as part of the identity and heritage of Mercedes.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that the identity of small-scale fisherfolk in Mercedes, Camarines Norte is strongly shaped by fishing livelihood, marine abundance, traditional tools and methods, and sea-linked cultural practices. Fishing is therefore not merely a source of income but a cultural marker of community identity, pride, and belongingness.

The small-scale fisherfolk encounter challenges that affect both livelihood and the continuity of traditional practices. These include hazardous weather conditions, seasonal and unstable catch, overfishing, illegal and large-scale fishing pressures, and limited resources. Although fisherfolk practice coping strategies, these remain constrained by financial difficulty, unsafe conditions, and uncertain catch outcomes.

The documentary magazine *Tatak Mercedes: Stories, Traditions, and Resilience of Small-Scale Fisherfolk* is an appropriate output because it presents the traditional practices, cultural identity, challenges, and resilience of small-scale fisherfolk in a localized and accessible format. It may support cultural preservation, classroom use, community awareness, and advocacy for responsible coastal livelihood support.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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