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Whispered Bidding Practice (*Bulungan*) in the Mercedes Fish Port: Cultural Communication and Informal Economy in Philippine Fisheries

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated a whispered bidding practice, termed as *bulungan*, at the Mercedes Fish Port in Camarines Norte, Philippines, as both a cultural communication system and an informal economic mechanism. The fisheries sector is vital to the Philippine economy, yet many trade practices operate outside formal structures. *Bulungan*, a form of whispered bidding, is one such practice commonly observed among fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers. The study used a qualitative case study design in which data were collected through focus group discussions, observations, and audio-visual documentation of the process. Thematic analysis was guided by communication models, including Shannon and Weaver's linear model and Barnlund's transactional model, as well as theories of cultural communication and the informal economy. Findings showed that this whispered form of bidding (*bulungan*) works as a structured communication cycle where participants shift roles as senders, receivers, and feedback providers. It conveys cultural meanings such as fairness, discretion, and trust, and it performs communicative functions like regulating prices, avoiding conflict, and keeping order in a noisy marketplace. Economically, it provides a grassroots system of trade that supports livelihoods when formal regulations are limited. Also, this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) faces challenges such as oversupply, price

disputes, and cheating (*dayaan*), which create noise in the communication process. However, it adapts through trust-based relationships and alternative methods. The study concludes that this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) is a cultural heritage and a livelihood system, and recognizing this as part of local governance and integrating it into co-management frameworks to create more inclusive and culturally grounded policies is recommended.

Keywords: *whispered bidding, seafood trading, communication practice, cultural system, community-based economy*

Introduction

The fisheries sector is an integral part of the global economy, particularly in developing countries, where the fish trade has experienced rapid growth in value over the past decade. The growing global demand has positioned fisheries as an engine of economic growth. However, the sector faces persistent challenges, including sustainability issues, inadequate infrastructure, regulatory weaknesses, and pressures on marine biodiversity (Elahi et al., 2024). At the same time, the global fisheries industry faces gaps in data and monitoring systems. Take, as an example, the case of wild-caught fish from coral reefs, one of the planet's most threatened ecosystems, which continue to supply the marine ornamental trade. The European Union imported 24 million euros' worth of fish from coral reefs between 2014 and 2021. Despite electronic monitoring, species-level data are missing. This gap highlights the risks associated with limited information and underscores the urgent need for greater transparency in the global fish trade (Biondo et al., 2024).

In the Philippines, fisheries play a crucial role in supporting food security, providing jobs, and helping to reduce poverty for millions. It supports 2.29 million workers across, according to BFAR (2024) and PSA (2024), as cited by the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (2025), who capture, process, and transport fish, and form part of a sector that contributed 8.6% of Gross Domestic Product in 2023. However, governance gaps, weak policy enforcement, and poor data systems remain (Durano et al., 2025). These issues create conflicts between policy frameworks and the realities of fishing communities. Environmental stress and socioeconomic pressures exacerbate the challenge.

Research in Ajuy, Iloilo Province, Philippines, reveals that even with interventions such as artificial reefs and alternative livelihood programs following Typhoon Yolanda, most fishing households remain dependent on fishing and resist relocation. This underscores the necessity for collaborative efforts among governments, NGOs, and communities. Balancing immediate livelihood needs with long-term sustainability is critical (Andriesse, 2018).

Local studies also reveal the importance of community-based trade. In Tawi-Tawi, the Ramadan Market Trend connects seafood trading with religious practices and cultural exchanges, such as *magsaliyu* or barter trade. These informal systems demonstrate how fisheries serve as cultural, social, and economic institutions (Sarri, 2025).

In the province of Camarines Norte, a whispered form of bidding (*bulungan*) has become the practice for seafood trading in the Pandawan Mercedes Fish Port. It is a practice of secret bidding through whispering during the fish and seafood trade within and outside the province, done for decades. It functions as both an economic activity and a communication tradition. This pattern mirrors findings from agricultural research in Region 02, Philippines, which found that farmers rely on direct talk and print materials because these fit the farmers' daily work and access limits (Jimenez et al, 2025). The same rule, in this case, is reflected on how this form of whispered bidding (*bulungan*) is practiced, such that traders choose face-to-face exchange because it suits the market conditions. Communication, in essence, works best when it matches the local routines and needs.

Moreover, Philipsen's Speech Codes Theory states that each culture has a distinct way of speaking shaped by codes that define meaning, rules, and conduct. Philipsen (1992) sets two principles for cultural communication: (1) every communal exchange reflects distinct cultural meanings and practices. In this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), whispering represents shared values and norms in the fishing community, and (2) communication operates as a tool for individuals and groups to perform cultural roles. This whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) illustrates this by allowing traders to fulfill economic needs while expressing their cultural identity. Through this lens, it is more than bidding. It is a system of communication that preserves cultural continuity while serving practical purposes in trade. In this sense, communication serves a twofold purpose: it is a means of learning how to participate in communal life and a way of enacting roles, relationships, and collective identities.

Furthermore, Burke's (1941) metaphor of the "parlor conversation" further enlightens this framework as it positions communication as an ongoing, historically situated dialogue—one that individuals enter, contribute to, and eventually leave, but which continues beyond any single participant. Communication, therefore, is dynamic – it precedes individuals, transcends their immediate interactions, and sustains the communal norms that guide future exchanges.

Applied to the case of this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), these principles emphasize that whispered negotiations are not merely practical strategies for trading fish but also symbolic acts that enact cultural meanings, sustain community ties, and regulate participation in an informal economy. As a communal conversation, it reflects the distinctive communicative codes of fish traders in Mercedes. At the same time, as a cultural function, it embodies how some symbolic acts are performed and reproduced in everyday economic interactions. The framework of cultural communication directs the study to interpret this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) as more than a trading method. It shows how whisper bidding functions as a communicative practice that reflects and sustains community life.

The study also locates this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) within the informal economy. The informal economy encompasses activities that operate outside formal regulation but are essential to survival (Chen, 2012; Hart, 1973). In these spaces, traders build their own systems of exchange, pricing, and trust. This whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) thrives under such conditions. It demonstrates how communities adapt when formal markets are weak or inaccessible. This practice ensures livelihoods while preserving cultural traditions of communication and trade.

Within this broader context, this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) at the Mercedes Fish Port in Camarines Norte emerges as a compelling case. Characterized by whispered negotiations and discreet bidding, this practice is more than a mechanism of

trade—it is a cultural communication that has endured across generations. However, despite its persistence and cultural value, little is known about how this actually works, what meanings it holds for the participants, and how it functions within the informal fish trading economy. This gap leads to the central research question of the present study: How does this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) function as a cultural communication practice within the informal economy of the Mercedes Fish Port?

From this inquiry, more specific questions guided the investigation: (1) What are the processes, patterns, and types of participants involved in bulungan as a whispered bidding practice? (2) What communicative functions and cultural meanings are embedded in the practice among fish traders and stakeholders? (3) How can this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) be situated within broader discussions of cultural communication and the dynamics of the informal economy?

By embedding the analysis of this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) in global fisheries trends, national challenges, and local community practices, the research underscores its relevance to broader discourses on communication, culture, and economic survival. Ultimately, the study contributes to understanding how grassroots trading systems interact with national and global forces that shape the fisheries sector, while preserving the cultural distinctiveness of local practices.

Methods

Research Design

The qualitative approach to research is employed in this study, specifically utilizing the case study as the research design to explore bulungan as a cultural communication practice embedded in the informal economy of the Mercedes Fish Port in Camarines Norte. The case study approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth investigation of social practices within a real-life community context.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at the Mercedes Fish Port in Camarines Norte, locally known as Pandawan. The port is a vital hub for seafood trading, serving fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers from within and outside the province. This site was selected because this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) remains an enduring tradition that reflects both cultural meanings and informal economic dynamics in fisheries trade.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were purposively selected to ensure only those with direct and consistent involvement took part, and fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers engaged in this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) were included. The fisherfolk provided firsthand insights on their roles as producers and initial senders in the communication process. The brokers acted as intermediaries, estimating prices, and facilitating bidding. The buyers (buy-and-sell traders) offered perspectives as active participants in whisper-based bidding. The sample size consisted of 15 participants distributed equally across the three groups. All participants had at least 10 years of experience in the fish port trade. The paper about sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research by Hennink & Kaiser (2022) reported that researchers often reach saturation with small to moderate samples, once interviews or group discussions no longer produce new themes. With this number of participants, enough diversity of views, while controlling group flow and data quality was maintained.

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered primarily through focus group discussions (FGDs), complemented by field observations at the fish port. FGDs provided collective insights on the processes, patterns, cultural meanings, and challenges of bulungan. Discussions were audio-recorded with consent. Then, observations allowed the researchers to capture non-verbal cues, environmental conditions, and actual trading dynamics. Finally, audio-visual documentation (video and photos) supplemented the data and aided in reconstructing the flow of bulungan for analysis.

All FGDs were transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and cross-checked with field notes to ensure accuracy. Before conducting the actual FGD, a pilot test was conducted in another nearby barangay with fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers. This helped identify gray areas that could arise during the discussion and guided the refinement of the discussion questions. FGD was used as a data gathering tool because it serves the needs of social science research (Salkind, 2017, as cited in Salmons, 2023).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and insights. The process involved four steps: (1) familiarization where the researchers read and re-read the transcripts to fully immerse themselves in the data; (2) coding where segments of text were coded based on the processes, patterns, and participants in this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), its cultural meanings and communicative functions, and its role in the informal economy; (3) theme development where codes were organized into categories that highlighted emerging themes, and were validated against field notes and participant quotations for accuracy; and (4) interpretation where the themes were examined through cultural communication frameworks (Philipsen, 1992; Burke, 1941) and informal economy discourses (Hart, 1973; Chen, 2012) to position this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) within broader theoretical contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Research in institutional and community settings requires formal authorization. The researchers obtained approval from the Port Administrator of the Mercedes Fish Port before data collection. This step ensured compliance with local policies and gained trust from stakeholders since this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) involves multiple actors.

The study prioritized participants' rights and autonomy. These participants were fully informed of the research objectives, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Participation was voluntary, and they signed a consent form before the FGD. This process protected ethical standards and promoted transparency.

During the FGD, researchers emphasized their comfort and understanding. They restated the objectives, explained the procedures, and encouraged open discussion. The sessions were conducted in the local dialect so they could express themselves clearly. A respectful setting allowed them to share experiences freely, which improved the quality of the data gathered. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned in transcripts, analyses, and reports. Any personal information that could reveal their identity was excluded. This measure preserved the privacy of fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers while ensuring that their contributions could still be represented accurately in the findings.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion are organized into three major sections consistent with the research objectives: (1) exploring the processes, patterns, and participants who are involved in whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*); (2) analyzing the communicative functions and cultural meanings embedded in whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), and (3) situating this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) within the cultural communication and informal economy discourses.

Processes, Patterns, and Participants Involved in Bulungan

Bulungan at the Mercedes Fist Port is initiated by the fisherfolk, who act as senders, and the message they convey is their catch. After the fisherfolk convey the message about their catch to the broker, who acts as an intermediary in estimating prices, the broker deciphers the message and provides an estimate of the fish's price. During the bidding process, the broker shifts its role to that of a sender, while the buyers at the Mercedes Fish Port assume the roles of receivers and senders. During the whispered negotiation process, buyers communicate their desired price, acting as senders, while brokers serve as receivers. Upon receiving the message from the buyers, the brokers then decode it to see whether the desired price aligns with their estimated price. This process continues as long as the buyer has not yet bid a higher price than the broker's estimated price. However, if the buyer's offer is higher than the broker's estimate, the buyer with the highest bid will be declared the winner and secure the desired catch.

Figure 1. *Focus Group Discussion with Brokers at the Mercedes Fish Port, Camarines Norte, on Whispered Bidding Practice* (*Bulungan*)*, Pricing Practices, and Daily Trade Decisions*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the restrictions forced brokers and buyers to find alternative ways to communicate. The situation led them to resort to using calculators, cellular phones, and writing on paper or on their palms to transmit messages instead of relaying them through whispers.

If there is an oversupply, the communication process continues in a particular manner. The broker acts as the sender of the price offered by the buyer and transmits it to the fisherfolk. The fisherfolk then decode the message to assess whether the price offered by the bidder or buyer is negotiable. If the proposed price is favorable for the fisherfolk, the broker will consequently declare the winner publicly.

The communication process encounters external noise, such as oversupply of fish and seashells, price conflicts, and deception or "*dayaan*," which affect the whispered bidding's communication procedure. The oversupply is an uncontrollable natural phenomenon, as it is influenced by the climate season. Consequently, fisherfolk have no option but to endure this external influence, which has a direct impact on their income. Conflict in price is another external noise that is linked to feelings of spitefulness. This somehow affects not only the process but also the partnership among the fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers. If conflict arises, no whispered bidding (*bulungan*) will happen. Cheating, on the other hand, poses a challenge to participants in the process. When asked about cheating, Buyer 1 narrated: "*Cheating cannot always be avoided, as whisper negotiations often occur in proximity*."

As an external noise, it affects trust and relationships, particularly among buyers, which can have serious repercussions for the communication process in general. Clearly, this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) is a communication cycle that involves shifting roles: the fisherfolk as the initial sender of the message, which is about their catch, the brokers as both decoders and secondary senders of price information, and the buyers as receivers and counter-senders when they whisper their bids. The process continues until the highest acceptable price is reached. As Fisherfolk 1 asserted: "*The catch cannot be sold if it does not go through a whispered bidding* (*bulungan*)."

The practice creates a structured bidding environment where fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers each perform distinct but interdependent roles. As a process, it is not immune to "noise" such as oversupply, price conflicts, and perceived cheating, which disrupts the communication flow and affects the relationship among the participants.

Explaining this further, the communication processes, patterns, and participants that occur in bulungan can be viewed more thoroughly through established communication models. Practically, fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers alternately serve as sources/senders and receivers/decoders based on the communication flow that parallels the Shannon-Weaver model. The details of the fish catch and whispered price bids constitute the message conveyed through whispered speech, serving as the medium. The respective counter-bids, as well as the acceptance or rejection of offers, are forms of feedback; meanwhile, the presence of oversupply, price conflicts, and cheating surfaces as noise.

Moreover, El-Zaghal (2022) also employed the Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication in a study analyzing language and communication changes in social contexts, with a focus on the elements of communication. It illustrated that, despite efforts, messages can become distorted due to misinterpretations resulting from external disruptions, such as the pandemic, restrictions, and social isolation. In this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), the identified issues include oversupply, price conflicts, and cheating, which distort the bidding process. El-Zaghal (2022) provided the theoretical backing, arguing that noise is not incidental; rather, it is central to understanding a communication phenomenon.

Additionally, during the whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), negotiation takes place in which trust and relationships enable the co-creation of meanings. This suggests that, although it is cyclical, the process is dynamic and relational, which parallels Barlund's transactional communication model. Similar to the study by Veazey et al. (2025), which employed Barnlund's Transactional Model, the clinical settings served as the communication environments in which medical students and clinical trainers collaboratively constructed meanings. This underscores how the ongoing and dynamic

process of communication works under pressure and with "noise" such as patient misunderstanding and environmental distractions, which is comparable to the noise experienced in bulungan.

In a paper revisiting Barnlund's Transactional Model of Communication, Sisodia and Mitra (2024) emphasized that communication practices adapt in ways such as adjusting encoding and using different feedback amidst the emergence of digital constraints. In whispered negotiation, when noise persists, the actors adapt. Such that they whisper more quietly, or choose certain brokers, or delay announcement. Clearly, these are adaptations that can be framed as dynamic adjustments predicted by the transactional model as updated by Sisodia and Mitra (2024). Whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), in this case, may already have built-in modifications, such as during COVID, when they resorted to using calculators, cell phones, writing on paper, or their palms to convey information, which makes it and the community truly resilient.

Interestingly, it can be noted that a pattern is observed here, such that traders rely on direct exchange to settle prices and close deals. During the COVID-19 period, traders shifted to mediated communication but returned to in-person once access returned. This confirms a point that communication gains effect when people meet, speak, and respond in person. In a study by Gumiran (2024) about a community extension project in Cabagan, Isabela, Philippines, on participation in a medicinal and food plants program, it was revealed that the shift to mediated communication is a main cause of weak engagement. In Cabangan, surveys, interviews, and group talks built shared control. In Mercedes, whispering built shared control. Direct communication through bulungan, thus, shows how participation shapes outcomes.

Furthermore, Barnlund's Transactional Model of Communication emphasizes that in communication, participants simultaneously act as senders and receivers, and they adjust at all times through feedback. Sisodia and Mitra's (2024) explanation illustrates that digital communication facilitates feedback in multimodal forms, which can be described as text that is either delayed or instantaneous. In whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), the fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers shift roles as sender and receiver in real time. The feedback, whether through whispering or in alternative channels if whispering is not possible, affects the flow and the possible outcome of the negotiation, particularly when the buyer whispers a bid, the broker decodes it, and the buyer adjusts.

The complementary perspectives of Shannon-Weaver and Barnlund's Transactional Models highlight the different aspects of communication, explaining that bulungan is not one-dimensional; rather, while it is a technical process, it is also an interactive process. The subsequent discussions will delve into the domains of culture, norms, and meaning-making to unravel whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) further.

Communicative Functions and Cultural Meanings Embedded in Whispered Bidding Practice (*Bulungan*)

Analyzing the system further reveals specific cultural meanings and communicative functions. Whispering bids basically control the flow of transactions and discreetly determine the winners. Whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) facilitates pricing and finalizes the transactions efficiently. Thus, communication functions by regulating trade in this practice.

The fish port, as a designated area where fishing boats or vessels dock to unload, trade, and distribute their catch, is usually bustling, noisy, and crowded. Broker 2 explained:

> *Whispered bidding practice (bulungan) is the way to buy fish. We have long been accustomed to this practice. Shouting and disorder are not allowed because they might be mistaken for a quarrel, and also to prevent competitors from knowing the bids.*

Kleine and Huntington's (2024) examination of how transparency rules among institutions, such as the Council of Ministers, leads governments to shift sensitive or contentious negotiations into more informal settings, and how confidentiality allows space for negotiation. The researchers argue that communicators utilize concealed spaces to control the outcomes of negotiations. Similar to whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), the regulation of the trading process is informal, yet it is effective. How they form, disseminate, and understand the rules about whispering, the prohibitions on open shouting, and how brokers control the procedures are all informal. Nevertheless, these practices enforce the "regulatory" norms in whispered bidding despite the absence of formal institutions.

Figure 2. *Exchange of Information Among Buyers at the Mercedes Fish Port, Camarines Norte, on Pricing, Negotiation, and Routine Market Concerns*

Whispering in the Mercedes Fish Port prevents the chaos of open shouting in a crowded fish port, which implies that maintaining order has become its communicative function. Whispering keeps bids secret, so it protects buyers from "spotting" or others overhearing and copying offers. It has evolved as a concealment strategy for the whisperers, another communicative function of whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*). As Buyer 3 said: *"Yes, it is done so competitors cannot overhear. For instance, if I add 50, and your bid falls short, you will be required to raise it further."*

In peer interactions, Li et al. (2025) explained that participants use various communication strategies, such as repetition and clarification requests, as well as nonverbal means, to address conflicts and ensure the continuous flow of interactions. The strategies facilitate the exchange of information and maintain order within the communicative process. Similarly, whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) functions purposefully to maintain order in itself. Mercedes Fish Port is an environment that is naturally chaotic and noisy, in which whispering serves as the primary means of communication to avoid disorder and ensure that the bidding process carries on as expected. Learners, based on the study by Li et al. (2025), employed different strategies

to maintain smooth conversations despite the gaps; brokers and buyers in whispered bidding, on the other hand, used whispers or gestures to manage the pacing of negotiations and reduce misunderstandings. These identified communication strategies promote trust, uphold norms, and secure the integrity of the bidding process, which practically shows that the very idea of maintaining order is not incidental, but, in fact, integral to the cultural dimension of whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*).

Figure 3. *Participants' Reflection on Shared Issues on Pricing, Trust, and Market Relations After FGD*

As mentioned earlier, oversupply occurs in the fish port. When this happens, brokers communicate with the fisherfolk to reach acceptable prices. As Broker 4 said, *"When prices drop, the broker consults the owner of the fish. Fisherfolk are consulted when prices risk causing losses. If the price is already favorable, consultation is not required."* Whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) carries substantial negotiating value. Nilou et al. (2024) stated that negotiation is central when communicators need to align perspectives, balance power, and reach agreement despite differences in knowledge or authority.

These findings support the case of whispered bidding at the Mercedes Fish Port. The process unfolds in a setting where roles are unequal but interdependent: fisherfolk provide the catch and depend on brokers for pricing. Brokers act as intermediaries who estimate and interpret value based on market norms. Buyers place bids while adapting to the practice of secrecy and whispering. This context shows that negotiation is not only about economic outcomes. It also requires sustaining trust and cooperation among participants, despite the noise they face. In short, the insights argued by Nilou et al. (2025) supported the notion that whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) is not a mechanical bidding system, but a negotiated communicative practice in which the outcomes depend on managing relationships, resolving conflicts, and maintaining order. In other words, it emerged as a communication practice with practical purposes, including regulating trade, maintaining order, concealing information, and negotiating value.

Several insights, similarly, surfaced when it comes to whispered bidding practice's (*bulungan*) cultural meanings. Whispering that takes place between the fisherfolk and the broker, as well as between the broker and the buyer, reflects both the fisherfolk's and the buyer's confidence in the broker's fairness and integrity. When

asked if the buyers do not understand the broker because the surroundings are noisy or there are disturbances, Buyer 2 answered: *"That rarely happens, since almost everyone here has known each other for a long time because of our years in this livelihood."*

Trust, in other words, is loudly communicated as a symbolic value of a whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*). In a study on bonding, bridging, and linking through fish farmers' associations as a form of social capital among small-scale aquaculture producers by Manlosa et al. (2023), it was revealed that these helped them cope with various livelihood challenges by providing access to assistance and collective efforts for problem-solving. Simply put, cooperation and trust among fish farmers in Bulacan, Philippines, are strengthened through such social capital. Reflectively, it mirrors the fisherfolk-broker-buyer trust networks, in which the relationships and the reciprocity, which also surfaced as a symbolic value of a whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), serve to sustain market order.

Furthermore, fisheries governance in the Philippines is highly participatory, as it is shaped by co-management frameworks and institutional linkages among the state, the market, and civil society (Binobo et al., 2024). Even if these structures function to balance biodiversity conservation with socioeconomic goals, the lived realities of fishing communities expose specific gaps in fisheries governance. This whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) operates within the informal economy where fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers create their own rules and accountability systems.

Like co-management in formal governance, whispered bidding depends on participation and negotiated trust among stakeholders. The whisper-based bidding process reflects secrecy and reciprocity. These cultural meanings regulate trade, reduce conflict, and preserve social order. A whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) offers a structured approach to organizing and sustaining trading. It represents a localized form of participatory governance rooted in cultural tradition. This also shows the interdependence of formal and informal governance. Cultural communication practices such as whisepered negotiation reinforce the resilience of fisheries-based livelihoods by balancing economic needs with social trust and cooperation.

Because of the hidden nature of bids, all those who become part of the practice create a sense of belonging to an insider group. Beyond trust, bulungan symbolizes secrecy for the community. In its general sense, the system represents a mutual obligation, where fisherfolk provide the catch, brokers facilitate the process, and buyers respect the system. This reciprocity is culturally communicated in the community, enabling the sustained practices in the fish port. Broker 1 recalled:

> *If we will look back to the 1950s to 1960s, the payment system here was very different. However, this whispered bidding practice (bulungan) was already in practice then. There was no price per kilo, only bulk trading during that time.*

As they continue, whispered bidding serves to honor the heritage of local fish trading that reflects cultural continuity. Culturally, it signifies respect for tradition and the continuation of local identity.

A recent study on knowledge of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) by Pastera (2024) found that values, practices, and local traditions highlight its centrality to how communities sustain their cultural identity. The study revealed that through exposure to festivities and indigenous communities, ICH is experienced and thus safeguarded through continuous participation and intergenerational transmission. Contextually, whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) may be considered a form of ICH because it has not only facilitated trading but also reinforced trust, reciprocity, and respect for tradition

among fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers. Just as the students observe the cultural practices, the whispered bidding system serves its economic function and cultural meaning. Evidently, the local communities across generations safeguard their heritage by continuing to practice it and adapt it, despite the challenges of modernization. Thus far, bulungan, when discussed within the discourse of ICH, is more than a trading mechanism, but a living tradition reflective of community values, relationships, and cultural distinctiveness in the daily life of coastal communities.

Whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) has emerged as both a technique and a symbol. For fisherfolk, it is a way to boost their income by ensuring that it regulates the trading through pushing the price of fish upward. For buyers, it is an act of bargaining through a concealment strategy where the highest whisper secures the catch. For brokers, it enables negotiation and maintains order by preventing "spotting." Beyond it, the whispered bidding practice conveys the symbolic values of trust, secrecy, reciprocity, and respect for tradition.

Situating Bulungan within Cultural Communication and Informal Economy Discourses

Whispered bidding (*bulungan*) in the Mercedes Fish Port has been practiced in the province of Camarines Norte. Mercedes is a coastal municipality with abundant fishing grounds, and the sea serves as the main fishing ground for almost all barangays engaged in fishing. Most of the catch is sold within and outside the province.

For the fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers, whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) shows how informal mechanisms sustain local trade and livelihoods in the fisheries sector. Hart's (1973) work on the informal economy explains that unregulated practices often play a vital role in economic survival. Whispered negotiation fits this description, as it operates outside formal systems while ensuring the continuity of trade.

Before linking this whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) directly to the informal economy, it is important to establish its communicative value. A philosophical perspective on language emphasizes that it serves multiple functions. Whispered nehotiation demonstrates this through its dual role in trade and culture. As a practice, it demonstrates how communication conveys meaning beyond transactions and reflects the cultural traditions embedded in community life. Citing Michaelson's (2024) rejection of one "proper function" of language provides theoretical support for understanding whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) within its own cultural and economic context, rather than viewing it through reductionist models of communication. Similar to language that evolves along with the diverse social and material functions, it proves to demonstrate that the communication that takes place in the Mercedes Fish Port is not as simple as transmitting price information. Cultural meanings are embedded in this practice, as clearly detailed earlier; therefore, if it is analyzed as a channel for price negotiation only, it would miss its multi-layered cultural and economic functions. Therefore, situating it within the cultural communication and informal economy discourses affirms that language has been shaped to address the specific needs of the fisherfolk, the brokers, and the buyers who are all operating in a noisy, trust-dependent, and unregulated trade environment.

Now, moving on to the informal economy discourse, it is a concept that is recognized yet remains contested. Luque (2022) explained that, based on his analysis of the concept of informal economy with reference to 102 definitions, there is an overemphasis on legal and regulatory dimensions, but it overlooked the cultural ones. This is frustrating because culture, as generally acknowledged, is a foundational force

that shapes why and how informal practices exist. As a fish trading practice, it shows that informal economies are not regulatory gaps, but cultural systems rooted in trust, secrecy, reciprocity, and respect for tradition, as mentioned earlier. Whispering and hidden bids are not merely economic acts, but symbolic performances that regulate trading, serve as a concealment strategy, facilitate negotiation, and promote order, as discussed in the previous section.

Informality, as it emerges from the discussion, can be viewed as both an economic undertaking and a cultural phenomenon. The way it is embedded in culture ensures that fish trading remains viable despite oversupply, conflict, and some external disruptions, as discussed in the earlier part of this paper. In essence, the case of whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) in Mercedes Fish Port fills in the conceptual gap identified in the literature mentioned by Luque (2022), emphasizing that informal economies can be fully understood only if adequate attention is given to the communicative traditions that sustain them.

Using the Interactive Governance Approach in studying the case of small-scale fisheries in Zimbabwe by Jimu et al. (2025), they found that weakly regulated governance systems, while highly centralized, created implementation gaps. The situation highlighted the prevalence and visibility of informal fishing practices, which sustained local livelihoods despite limited policy support. Similarly, whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) prevails in Mercedes as an informal economic mechanism shaped by certain policy enforcement, albeit in the absence of direct state oversight in its daily transactions. Like the earlier cited community, whispered negotiation persists, but it does not, in any way, mean disorder or lawlessness; but a reflection of an organized, trust-based, and culturally grounded exchange system. The norms that the fisherfolks, brokers, and buyers have established themselves as they whisper negotiations, convey secrecy, and demonstrate reciprocity have regulated participation and warrant fairness amidst the challenges like oversupply, price disputes, or instances of cheating or "*dayaan"* in the process.

Guided by Hart's (1973) assertion on the nonformal economy, whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) resonates that informality results not on the margins, but at the center of community survival. Extending this idea, Chen (2023) argued that informal practices are not temporary; rather, they are embedded in livelihood systems, particularly in communities where state regulation is limited. The Zimbabwe case strengthens the analysis of whispered negotiation as an institutionalized practice of governance characterized as informal, flexible, locally accepted, yet capable of sustaining economic life.

Within this frame, whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) is not only an economic mechanism but also a cultural communication system. Philipsen's Speech Codes Theory explains that each community develops ways of speaking that reflect its values, rules, and social order. In this view, the whispered negotiations are symbolic acts of trust, reciprocity, and discretion that reinforce the cultural identity of the Mercedes fishing community.

Additionally, Burke's (1941) idea of "parlor conversation" also clarifies the practice. In whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*), fishers, brokers, and buyers share a communicative space where roles shift, voices compete, and meanings are negotiated. No single actor dominates, but each helps reproduce the rules and traditions that keep the practice alive. Through this lens, it shows how informal communication and trade practices function as systems of grassroots governance. They fill gaps left by formal institutions, preserve cultural meanings, and sustain local economies. Whispered

bidding practice (*bulungan*) highlights how fishing communities build order, trust, and continuity even without formal regulation. Communication serves as the link between culture and economy, ensuring that livelihoods endure at the community level.

Conclusion and Future Works

This study examined the whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) at the Mercedes Fish Port in the Philippines as a cultural communication practice rooted in the informal economy. It is affirmed in the study that communication is not just a tool, but structural in regulating informal markets. Moreover, the adaptive strategies of whispered negotiation show how communities innovate under stress. Globally, this proves that informal systems support resilience when formal systems fail. This lesson applies to crisis communication, disaster response, and food security.

Whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) conveys cultural meaning. Whispering conceals bids, enforces fairness, and symbolizes discretion. It prevents disorder, enforces informal rules, and promotes reciprocity. Trust emerges as a central value, reinforcing long-standing ties among fisherfolk, brokers, and buyers. The findings add comparative knowledge on how culturally embedded systems, that is, trust-based, sustain the livelihoods that operate within limited regulation. This supports global discourse on informal economies in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia.

Viewed through the informal economy, whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) sustains livelihoods where formal institutions are absent. Hart (1973) and Chen (2012) argued that informal economies are essential for survival. Whispered negotiation reflects this through norms of secrecy, trust, and reciprocity. It also aligns with Philipsen's Speech Codes Theory and Burke's idea of parlor conversation, both of which stress how communities develop distinct ways of speaking to regulate behavior and express values. Many developing countries rely heavily on fisheries but struggle with governance gaps. Lessons from whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) show how incorporating cultural practices into policy-making can make governance more inclusive and effective. This has implications for sustainable fisheries management, especially across the Asia-Pacific. The study affirms that documenting whispered negotiations adds to global scholarship in intercultural communication by revealing how communities embed values like fairness and trust in economic exchange. It also reminds the international academic community to recognize non-Western practices as valid knowledge systems.

The study recommends recognizing whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) as part of local governance and integrating it into co-management frameworks. Media, IEC materials, and participatory forums may be used to document and promote it as community heritage. The local government should also support livelihoods through programs that strengthen trust-based relationships. Infrastructure, training, and market linkages should be delivered with respect for cultural traditions. Future research may examine whispered bidding practice (*bulungan*) as intangible cultural heritage and compare it across fishing communities. At the global level, international agencies and cultural bodies should include practices like whispered negotiations in cross-country discussions on informal economies and cultural heritage. Recognizing and preserving these systems provides lessons for sustainable fisheries management, enriches intercultural communication studies, and strengthens the resilience of small-scale communities worldwide.

The study acknowledges limitations. Findings are based on a single case and may not be representative of all fish ports in the Philippines. Participants' perceptions or social desirability may also influence reliance on self-reports in FGDs. Despite these,

the study provides valuable insights into the intersection of cultural communication and informal economic practices.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Declaration Statement

ChatGPT and Grammarly were used to assist with language editing, sentence restructuring, and clarity improvement. No AI tool was used to generate data, conduct analysis, interpret results, or write any part of the findings or conclusions. The study design, data collection, coding, analysis, and interpretation came solely from the authors. The authors reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted content. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript. No AI tool influenced the research outcomes, decisions, or theoretical framing. This statement confirms ethical transparency in tool use.