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Selling Songs of Leyte

An award-winning documentary tells the tales of the dried fish vendors in Leyte, Philippines, who sell their wares to the rhythm of the songs they sing

Tacloban City (15 October)—*Selling Songs of Leyte*, a 14-minute documentary on the dried fish vendors in Leyte who sell their wares to the rhythm of the songs they sing, won the Best Foreign Short Documentary in the recently held New York International Independent Film and Video Festival. The documentary was made by Eli Africa, 41, who lives in San Pablo, California and whose mother is from Alangalang, Leyte and whose father is from Nueva Ecija.

The festival, the largest of its kind in the world, is held several times a year in different cities of the United States, including New York, Miami and Los Angeles. It is covered by national and international media and popular among struggling but promising independent filmmakers.

Eli revealed that the idea for the video came by accident, when he heard about these vendors from Leyte who sold dried fish by singing to their customers. He was so intrigued that he asked his niece to investigate. With the information from his niece, he flew to Tacloban, visiting towns like Palo, Tanauan and Carigara during *tabo* or market day, filming and interviewing the singing vendors.

Eli said that he learned that the dried fish vendors of Leyte sang because it helped them keep track of how many fish they had sold. They also claimed their singing attracted customers.

Little is known about how and when the tradition started. Most of the townspeople in North Leyte are not even aware of the dried fish vendors who sing. Afrika believes it could be related to the rich musical heritage of the Leyte-Samar region.

With more vendors selling fish, and fewer of them singing, the dried fish vendors of Leyte who sang to sell their wares is a dying breed. Thanks to the love of country of a Filipino who was born and lives in

California, this dying tradition will now continue to live and be known by future generations.

Encouraged by the positive response to his *Selling Songs of Leyte*, even from non-Filipinos, Eli wants to make more films that capture the Filipino experience



and culture. Already, he is toying with the idea of making a documentary on the “Tree of Life”. What deters him from doing so is the lack of logistics support.

This piece is based on a Philippines Information Agency (PIA) press release.