

■ LOCAL REGIONAL STUDIES NETWORK

Issues and Concerns

Crafting the Weaves of Northwestern Panay



Frances Anthea R. Redison

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Crafting the Weaves of Northwestern Panay



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"Weavers, LGU, and NGO representatives from Pandan and Libertad (Antique) and Nabas and Ibajay (Aklan) joined the Stakeholders' Workshop of "Pagrara: Exploring Northwestern Panay Weaving Heritage" held in September 2024 at the UPV Extension Campus in Nauring, Pandan, Antique led by the UP Visayas Center for West Visayan Studies."

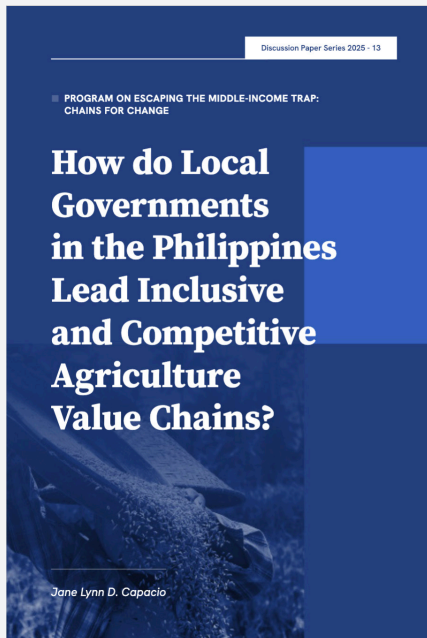
University of the Philippines Visayas Extension Campus, Nauring, Pandan, Antique
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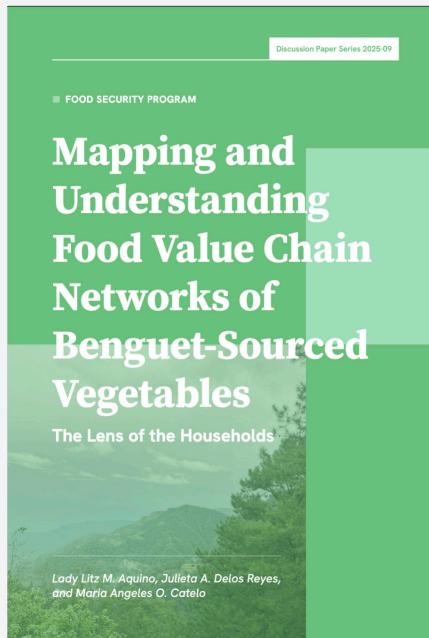
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ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Crafting the Weaves of
Northwestern Panay

Frances Anthea R. Redison

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

The UP CIDS Program on Northwestern Panay Weaving Heritage is spearheaded by the UPV Center for West Visayan Studies (CWVS). The program focus is anchored on the local term *hinun-anon*, which refers to exchanging views on a subject, speaking about it, talking over it, thinking upon it, dwelling upon it, or pondering on it; and *pagrara*, which is a local term for weaving.

The primary objective of the project is the assessment of the perceived capacity enhancement needs of the weaving communities in Northwestern Panay. Our partner Local Government Units (LGUs) include Ibajay and Nabas in the Province of Aklan, as well as Pandan and Libertad in the Province of Antique. The engagement with the communities will assist the project in identifying the specific issues and problems related to the cultural and economic viability of handicraft weaving in the region. Using a multistakeholder approach, the project aims to document narratives from local weavers and LGU representatives who are engaged in the promotion of the said crafts to identified markets. Furthermore, this project hopes to support the University of the Philippines Visayas' goal as well as UP Visayas' aim to increase its engagement with communities in the area through its Antique Extension Campus in Pandan.

The project methodology incorporates key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The team documented conversations with communities where weaving traditions are practiced and provide a source of livelihood. Activities included inception meetings with local chief executives and capacity-building activities with identified partners and stakeholders. Using the frame, the project envisions creating avenues of conversations for the partners and stakeholders to discuss matters related to the weaving heritage of communities in Northwest Panay, such as sustainability and heritage promotion, as well as exploring pathways towards cultural tourism. Another activity conducted is the capacity needs assessment to evaluate the perceived capacity enhancement needs of weaving communities. It will also help the program in assessing what kind of capacity-building activities can be conducted in relation to future UP Visayas project activities and community interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Pagrara is the local term for weaving. Weaving has long been part of the Filipinos' history and tradition even before the islands were colonized. Incorporated and intertwined with the culture of Western Visayas, different communities use various materials and methods in their respective weaving techniques. Weaving has become a source of livelihood for some communities. As modernization continues to pose threats to the weaving tradition in the area, weaving should be sustained in such ways that knowledge and skills are documented and passed on.

One initiative that would contribute to addressing the situation is the development of educational modules. These modules, focused on the creation of various woven products, could be integrated into school curriculums to teach students the basics of weaving. This effort aims to raise awareness and foster advocacy for supporting artisanal products in Northwestern Panay. The initiative would require the involvement of weavers and other culture bearers as they possess the knowledge and skills about their craft.

Another proposed initiative is the establishment of field schools, where learners can gain hands-on experience in the actual process of weaving. This initiative requires active collaboration with the community, particularly artisans and culture bearers, together with the local government units (LGUs) and other government agencies. The two initiatives weave solutions that contribute to addressing the needs of communities as they navigate the challenges of sustaining their weaving traditions.

During the implementation, the project was able to conduct a total of thirty (30) Key Informant Interviews (KII) from the four partner communities composed of weavers and implementers from the LGUs. Of the thirty (30), seventeen (17) are LGU representatives. They are the mayors, tourism officers, Sangguniang Bayan (SB) members, municipal agriculturists, and Negosyo Center personnel. All the mayors were interviewed except for the mayor of Libertad. Thirteen weavers participated in the interviews. Some of whom were members or officers of their respective local weaving cooperatives.

In Pandan, seven (7) individuals participated, including four (4) from the LGU/NGA (national government agency) and three (3) weavers. Among the seven

(7), two (2) are males, and five (5) are females. In Libertad, six (6) respondents accepted the invitation, with three (3) weavers and three (3) LGU/NGA representatives. In Ibajay, Aklan, nine (9) interviews were conducted, with six (6) respondents from the LGU/NGA and barangays, and three (3) weavers: six (6) males and three (3) females. In Nabas, there were eight (8) key informants. These included four (4) representatives from the LGU/NGA and barangays and four (4) individuals from the weaving community. Among them, were three (3) males, and five females.

Although other parts of Northwestern Panay have a handicraft weaving industry, this research only focused on the four (4) partner LGUs. All are coastal municipalities. The paper categorized the analysis of the gathered data into four aspects: (1) self-assessment of the weaving industry; (2) identified interventions from the government; (3) challenges and concerns experienced by the weavers; and (4) possible initiatives.

Pandan is a coastal municipality in the province of Antique with thirty-four (34) barangays, fifteen (15) of which are situated along the coast, twelve (12) inland, and seven (7) upland. Pandan is known in the whole province for its ecological tourism sites like the Malumpati Cold Spring, the Tingib-Duyong Golden Beach, and Mt. Mab-o, among others. Aside from these destinations, Pandan has rich culinary traditions with delicacies such as *binabak* and *molido*. It is known for handicraft weaving using abaca, *bariw*, pandan, and other natural fibers. Adjacent to Pandan is the town of Libertad, which is the northernmost part of the province of Antique. Libertad is popular for its *banig*, or woven mat products. The yearly celebration of the Banigan Festival highlights the importance of *banig*-weaving as the main source of livelihood and communal pride of Libertad. With a land area of 96.82 square kilometers or 37.38 square miles, Nabas constitutes 5.50 percent of the province of Aklan's total land area. The municipality is home to ecological tourism sites such as the cold springs of Basang and Hurom-Hurom in Barangay Laserna. The municipality also known for woven products made of the *bariw* plant. Weavers make and display purses, bags, mats, and hats during the *Bariw* Festival. Bordering Nabas is the municipality of Ibajay. Of its thirty-five (35) barangays, three (3) have active weaving communities—Monlaque, Aparicio, and Mabusao. These barangays produce *nito*, abaca, and coconut-based products that are marketed locally and outside Aklan.

FABRICS AND FIBERS: THE WEAVING TRADITION

Weaving has long been part of the Filipinos' history and tradition. It was an integral part of women's household work, and by the time of Spanish colonization in the 1560s, the people of Panay Island were already skilled weavers. Iloilo, the capital of Panay Island, was known as the "textile center" of the country producing textile products like *sinamay*, and cotton silk fabrics (McCoy 1982; Funtecha 1981, 301; Madrid 2023, 23). According to Alfred McCoy (1978), the large-scale commercial weaving in the eighteenth century paved the way for Iloilo's modern economic transformation so that by the nineteenth century, textile production reached a remarkable degree of development. However, the industry collapsed after British firms imported cheap cotton, and the female labor force was greatly displaced and found themselves jobless and less productive in their communities (Abinales and Amoroso 2005, 83; Torio 1990, 51).

Apart from weaving threads, Filipinos also use raw materials such as in handicraft works. Many of these products are for practical use like mats, baskets, and hats. Basket-weaving, like the weaving of mats, is considered a form of textile art that has existed since prehistoric times. Highly skilled mat weavers use multiple methods of weaving, which may involve more than one technique of interlacing. This results into mats that are both plaited and woven. (Araneta 2013, 88-89). *Rara* is a process of creative and artistic manipulation of mat weaving using long strips of various fibers that incorporate weaving techniques (Nochesada 2016). Many of these weaves are usually found in forested areas or sourced in mountainous parts of the islands. One of the most utilized materials is *buri*, which is the largest palm species in the Philippines. Because *buri* is easier to flatten into sheets, some weavers prefer using it in their crafts. Weavers also use more durable fibers like the *nito* and rattan, a semi-woody climbing palm with thorny stem (Pazon and del Rio 2018, 112). Other natural fibers used are abaca, *bariw*, and pandan. In the Visayas region, a 2016 report identified the thriving local handicraft weaving communities are also located at Nabas, Aklan and Pandan and Libertad in Antique.

Most of the studies on handicraft weaving usually focus on ethnographic data collection and value-chain analysis. An undergraduate research on the value chain analysis of *bariw* in Libertad and Pandan, Antique, identified the issues of low pricing, climate change, and lack of policies to support the

industry (Lota and Paraiso 2019). These observations, including the lack of multistakeholder initiatives, are also recognized by the LSRN-Iloilo project. A recent study by the British Council in the Philippines (2020) on handloom weaving communities shows that there is a need for capacity-building efforts. Further, the study suggests the empowerment of weavers, artisans, and cultural masters, and the importance of fostering collaborations and networks. Although the report did not cover handicraft weaving, the issues and concerns of handloom weavers are relatively shared among *rara* weavers in Panay.

Philippine laws like Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (Republic Act [RA] No. 8371), the Intellectual Property Code of the Philippines (RA No. 8293), and the Cultural Mapping Law (RA No. 11961) are among institutionalized policies that aim to protect indigenous weaving. This project acknowledges that the handicraft weaving industry is a shared heritage in Panay and a source of the community's pride and identity. Crafting policies suited for the community needs are seen as an important intervention to support the promotion and preservation of Northwestern Panay's local heritage and culture.

FORGING PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE COMMUNITY

The project team headed to Aklan and Antique for the courtesy call and inception meetings with partner LGUs in May 2024. Director Frances Anthea R. Redison, together with University Research Associate Sashah Dioso, Ms. Ericka Paula Galvan, and Attorney Jojo Varon represented the UP Visayas CWVS Team in Aklan. To foster collaboration and synergy for the UP CIDS–CWVS project, the team discussed with the local government units (LGUs) how the endeavor will explore and document the weaving heritage of Northwestern Panay.

In Ibaday, the team met with Mayor Jose Miguel Miraflores, Vice Mayor Julio Estoloso, Sangguniang Bayan Member Nestor Inocencio, and Municipal Tourism Officer Lyn Ilinon on 20 May 2024. It was a productive meeting where the two parties discussed ways to implement and strengthen shared endeavors. This was followed by a meeting with Nabas Mayor Maria Fe Taunan Lasaleta, Municipal Agriculture Technologist Mary Anne Janoya, Junior Business Counselor of the Negosyo Center John Donnel Tumbagahan, Municipal Tourism Officer Bryan Briones, and Municipal Budget Officer

Josephine Sabando. On the provincial level, the team was also given the opportunity to discuss the project with the representatives of the Provincial Government of Aklan, led by Provincial Administrator Attorney Selwyn Ibarreta and Provincial Tourism Officer Roselle Ruiz.

On 21 May 2024, the UPV team traveled to the Province of Antique, where Director Redison presented to the members of the Sangguniang Bayan of Pandan, presided over by Vice Mayor Jeremy Tan. It was an opportunity to answer the questions and queries of the LGU about the project. The next meeting would be with Mayor Tomas Estoperez Jr. of Pandan met with the team and initiated planning activities with identified partner communities. Mayor Esoperez asserted his commitment to support the project of UP for his constituents. From Pandan, the team headed to the LGU of Libertad where a similar meeting would be held to present the project to the Sangguniang Bayan of Libertad. The LGU representatives included Municipal Tourism Officer Galahad Garcia, SB Member Nobert Sualog, and SB Member Menard Tandug. It would also be worth noting that the Research Assistants are from the community, so rapport was established easily.

Following the initial meetings with the LGUs, the team drafted the memorandum of agreement (MOA) for each municipality. The process involved three months of constant exchanges involving revisions and editing between UP Visayas and the LGUs before the MOAs were finalized and signed. One challenge the team encountered was addressing specific conditions raised by some LGUs. For instance, one LGU initially expected financial aid from UP Visayas, which the team promptly clarified was not part of the arrangement. Additionally, since mayors are required to secure SB approval to enter into agreements, the approval process took time. The team also had to identify a legislative sponsor for the resolution required to approve the MOAs. Despite these challenges, the team successfully completed and formalized four MOAs with the concerned municipalities.

WEAVING THE STORIES OF NORTHWESTERN PANAY

This section will focus on the issues and concerns of the four weaving communities of Pandan, Libertad, Nabas, and Ibajay. Although the four towns

are politically divided, they share similarities in their narratives pertaining to their experiences and knowledge of weaving. The parallel responses of the respondents only show the opportunity for collaboration between these communities. Hence, the discussion paper will summarize the shared concerns and present significant differences in terms of the usage of raw materials, interventions, and attitudes toward knowledge transfer.

The traditional weaving industry in Ibaday revolves around abaca, *nito*, and *buli* (buri palm). The skill is handed down from generation to generation. Communities involved in weaving continue to produce products that are sold locally. Coco coir geonet weaving was recently introduced due to its commercial and export demands. Most of the participants cited that weaving is thriving and continues to be a source economic activity for the people of Barangay Mabuso, Barangay Aparicio, Barangay Monlake, and other upland barangays. Another reason why the abaca weaving industry continues to thrive is because Ibaday supplies abaca to its market outside Aklan. From the perspective of the LGU, the industry is stable and driven by strong market demand. The municipality consistently meets orders, producing a variety of products made from *nito* and abaca. While machines are utilized in abaca processing, *nito* products are crafted entirely by hand.

In Pandan, the association of weavers are well-organized because of the Santo Rosario Multi-purpose Cooperative. The cooperatives assist the weavers with their needs, especially in marketing the products to Boracay, Manila, and Cebu. The LGU identified Barangay Santo Rosario as one of the bigger producers of handicraft weaves. Other products come from the hinterland barangays, but they produce less in terms of volume output. Raw materials like *bariw* grow in the wild. Usually, weavers get it from the barangays of Santa Cruz, Mag-aba, Tingib, Candari, Santa Ana, San Joaquin, Perfecta and Badiangan. Weavers source the abaca from the hinterlands and buy the buri from the Barangay Aparicio, Ibaday, and the town of Tangalan.

Similarly, Nabas has been known for weaving *bariw* products such as *banig*, hats, bags, etc. However, many respondents noted that while the industry persists, there remains numerous areas of possible improvement. Identified weaving communities for *banig*-weaving are the communities and barangays of Pinatad, Solido, Buenavista, Poblacion, Alimbo Baybay, Buenasuerte, Nagustan, Toledo, Laserna, and Matabana. It has been noted that some of

the weavers are Indigenous people. Further, many weavers are now elderly, and only a few of the younger generations have expressed interest in learning the craft. According to two of the interviewed weavers, the weaving business has weakened over time. They previously delivered products to Boracay, but declining tourism has reduced demand. Additionally, orders from Manila have become irregular, and stable monthly orders are no longer common.

The town of Libertad prides itself on its *bariw* weaving that produces mats and bags. With its annual celebration of Banigan Festival, the LGU of Libertad hopes to raise awareness of the heritage-old craft. Like in Nabas, the majority of the informants shared that the mat weaving is not as lucrative as it once was. Primarily, they see insufficient resources or raw materials for weaving as the main reason. Despite this, weaving remains an alternative source of income, mainly during the *habagat* (southwest monsoon) season when fishing is not feasible due to heavy rains and typhoons.

FROM FARMING TO WEAVING: THE CHALLENGES WEAVERS FACE TO SAVE THE HERITAGE

Weaving is a separate process from sourcing raw materials. It can be particularly challenging for weavers who harvest their own materials from the mountains. For instance, the initial process of harvesting *bariw* involves removing the leaves from the tree. Next, they have to carefully cut and remove the thorns. The leaves are then sun-dried. After about a week, the leaves undergo *pagpapakpok*, or the process of gradual beating using a hard material. Many respondents shared that the process takes a toll on the whole body, especially on the chest and on the shoulders. If there are other ways to make the process less strenuous on the body, they would prefer so.

Many of the weavers claim that they must rest their hands and refrain from washing them after weaving because they may get *pasma* (strain). The tedious pounding process is especially more challenging for the older weavers. Even the younger ones have trouble with the physical toll. Most of the men contribute by pounding the fiber. To soften the *bariw*, they must roll and reroll the leaves to make them elastic. Weavers unwind and straighten the leaves repeatedly to their desired sizes in preparation for the *pagrara* or the weaving

process. A study on an alternative method intended to soften the leaves was conducted, but it was not successful because it relies on the traditional *sampok* method. Therefore, there is a need for further research on appropriate facilities for processing and producing *bariw* more efficiently.

PRICING AND COSTS OF RAW MATERIALS AND FINISHED PRODUCTS

"Dahil kon owa ta it materyales don, paano bay kami?" (What will happen to us if we cannot source our raw materials?)

The shared issue of most weavers from the four communities was the pricing of their products. They claim that back then, "middlemen" or brokers set the prices, which puts the weavers at a disadvantage. Their effort and capital invested often result in minimal profit. The income is insufficient to meet the day's end. Thus, many weavers remain poor. The pandemic exacerbated these struggles. With restrictions in place, and loss of demand, many weavers lost buyers as woven products were no longer considered necessities. In Nabas, weavers who managed to produce *banig* during the pandemic lockdowns had to accept lowered prices dictated by buyers, which often failed to cover production costs. For instance, the weavers of *walis tambo* (brooms) face a similar predicament. Despite the labor-intensive process of gathering materials from the mountains like sun-drying and incorporating rattan wires and bamboo handles, the brooms were only sold for as low as eighty pesos (₱80.00), a price that barely compensates for the effort and resources invested.

Another challenge identified is the transportation of goods. Since some weaving communities source materials from mountainous areas, they are further challenged by having to transport the raw materials and products to-and-from their communities. Many weavers in Sitio Malindog, an Indigenous People's (IP) community in Nabas, Aklan, see the lack of roads as another challenge. In Pandan and Libertad, production delays are caused by the limited availability of raw materials. As a result, weavers are forced to prepare stocks whenever raw material deliveries are made. Sourcing materials, such as abaca, from long distances is a significant challenge. Furthermore, the weather can also be a hindrance. When disasters and calamities occur, the damaged areas are not immediately rehabilitated and could remain

impassable for extended periods of time. Safety is also a concern during said calamities, when the weavers cannot gather the leaves for production because the mountain slopes are slippery and dangerous.

THE LACK OF WEAVERS, THE DEMAND FOR NEW DESIGNS, AND THE NEED FOR INVESTMENT

Some weavers in Nabas buy their *buri* from Ibajay. They say that it is too brittle for use in weaving. Others share that they are skilled at *bariw* weaving but find it difficult to create designs that are more appealing to buyers and reach a broader market. Further, they pointed that there is a decline in quality of work. For weavers who are growing their plants and raw materials, their main problem is the lack of a suitable storage facility. *Buri* and other sources of fiber are prone to decay. Further, since they sell directly from their communities, there is the problem of transporting the goods to the buyers.

Another obstacle identified is the lack of manpower to meet high production demands. Though these weavers receive a lot of orders, they have lacked the workforce to produce the required orders. Further, in communities like Ibajay and Libertad, most weavers are also mothers with additional responsibilities at home. Weaving is often a part-time job for many, as a source of supplemental income, and the uncertainty in demand means that weavers cannot transition towards making it their main source of livelihood. Some needed other sources of income because relying solely on weaving is impractical. Many young people are not interested anymore because they prefer jobs that offer quicker cash. Weaving takes five to seven days to complete just one side of a *banig*, making it less appealing compared to other employment options.

In Libertad, some respondents shared that most of the designs are based on the personal choice of the weavers. They acknowledge that they need more training on producing other patterns and designs, and additional weaving techniques they can employ. For the *banig*, the needs are minimal in terms of costs as it only requires labor. However, it gets damaged when stored for a long period of time. Thus, it must be sold right away to avoid spoilage. Because everything is handmade, the production speed varies per weaver. They also mentioned receiving support from the Department of Science and

Technology (DOST) but the equipment was not effective since the machine could only process a few pieces at a time. Some weavers in Nabas are part of the Sustainable Livelihood Program (SLP) under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps). Capital is considered one of the major solutions.

MEANINGS BEYOND THE KNOT: KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

"Udya bay ako nakapaeskuwela kag nakapagtapos man it akon unga dahil lang sa idea itang weaving ngaran." (Because of weaving, I was able to finance the education of my children.)

The primary weavers are women who learned the craft from their mothers and grandmothers. One barangay councilor in Ibajay shared that her mother was a *nito* weaver. As a child, she became interested in learning how to weave. Furthermore, she reiterated that her children are interested to continue weaving because it generates income.

A 60-year-old weaver from Nabas shared that she started weaving at the age of seven. She learned to make *kalo* (hats) and later *banig* (mats) from her mother. She said that *banig* is synonymous with Nabas. Customers say that Nabas-made products are top-tier quality.

Weaving is also a source of pride and identity. One of the weavers interviewed from Nabas shares that she won in handicraft weaving competitions. Through her products and skills, she was able to represent the whole province of Aklan. She was also invited to give talks and workshops. Through the current cultural mapping efforts, more locals have come to understand the importance of preserving our culture and the significance of the weaving tradition in Nabas. The community recognizes that weaving played a significant role in the local economy because it supported the education of generations of children who are now professionals today.

Weaving financially helped the people of Santo Rosario in Pandan. Many children in Santo Rosario know how to weave. School children help with the preparation of the materials to shorten the process. One weaver explained, *"Owa tana it problema ang pagpasa it mga abilidad sa mga kabataan"* (There is

no problem with knowledge transfer to younger generation.) For one weaver, she is grateful that the industry is doing well. A big part of this success is the role of their weaving cooperative. To another female weaver, teaching the craft is borne out of necessity. If it is the source of living of their parents, and, most likely, their children will also follow their footsteps and inherit the skill.

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY: WHO ARE STILL WEAVING?

All the weaving communities have noted the lack in interest among the youth when it comes to weaving. While there are exceptions such as in Pandan where young children are proactively taught, the situation is generally uniform with communities like Nabas, Ibajay, and Libertad where there is waning interest due to the prominence of technology. Others claim that many of those young ones in the upland area are already professionals working on other fields and enterprises. They took undergraduate degrees because their weaver parents preferred that their children pursue professional careers instead of weaving. Some of the weavers do not want their children to continue because it is a tedious process and not a practical source of livelihood. Many continue to weave for immediate extra income, to support educational needs, or as a pastime.

There have been efforts made to encourage children to be interested in weaving. For instance, in one of the weaving communities of lowland Nabas, there has been attempts to teach children about the culture and crafts. The attempts have not always been successful however, due to the presence of many distractions, such as mobile phones. Even when it comes to household chores, respondents claim that they do not show much interest. They say that training for children should also be offered. This is in contrast with the experience of the IP communities in upland areas of Nabas, where they have greater success in teaching how to weave *banig* because it is part of their daily lives. Early in the morning, the *banig* is laid out, for the children to be exposed to it. Even young children in the upland communities are curious to learn and they start to get an idea of how to weave, allowing for the successful sharing of knowledge to the next generation. One male weaver even mentioned that he learned the craft from his mother. As young as five years old, he was already taught how to weave. He said, "It is like a skill you carry with you."

Some women consider weaving as their hobby or pastime. After doing their chores, they create crafts for them to make use of their time. However, because there are other forms of entertainment, some women no longer weave for fun or practice it as a form of entertainment. Others choose to take opportunities outside the weaving industry. Yet according to an informant in Ibajay, if the LGU can provide funds and find sufficient resources, the weavers would be better motivated to use them to help the production and sustain their income. In some instances, the weaving skill is handed down from family to family because it is their livelihood. The handicraft weavers are from upland barangays, and most of them are middle-aged women.

To ensure the sustainability and growth of the *nito* craft in the community, it is essential to teach the younger generation the art and importance of weaving and the process of fabricating this weave. During the interviews, many weavers emphasized the importance of supporting local products. They believe that people should utilize and appreciate items made within the community. In some cases, parents who are weavers pass down their skills to their children, guiding them to become experts in the craft. A local weaver shared that Ibajay once had many older *banig* and *bariw* weavers, but over time, many of them have passed away. Weavers generally prefer working on their handicrafts at home, where they can balance their craft with their domestic responsibilities, as many of the weavers are women.

Despite the challenges, the LGU of Ibajay believes that the tradition of weaving will not perish because the government is proactively helping promote it through marketing and by encouraging community members to take up weaving. Implementers recognize the need to train the younger generation but face the hurdle of weavers not teaching their children to weave. However, if given the opportunity, they would like the local government and government agencies to intervene by teaching the youth, ensuring the sustainability of the craft. The weavers on the other hand see knowledge transfer as the responsibility of the government. One weaver even mentioned that government officials should be more hands-on in promoting abaca weaving, especially to the youth. Currently, production meets existing demand, but there is a need to increase demand and expand the market.

Even on weekends, weavers in Nabas continues their work to preserve their heritage. One of those weavers shared that some of her peers have already

stopped weaving, making it crucial to ensure that the next generation becomes engaged in this craft as well. Over time, many traditional weaving techniques and practices have been discontinued, including the making of sacks from native abaca fiber. According to the weavers, the tools and equipment once used for weaving are no longer available. The LGU of Ibajay recognizes the economic value of the industry, as it serves as one of the major sources of livelihood in the community. Therefore, the LGU aspires for the industry to become self-sustaining, meeting the daily needs of the community and helping preserve this traditional craft from becoming lost due to declining interest.

In Pandan, when the pandemic hit, the staff of the cooperatives went without pay for two years. Abaca weavers are struggling financially, with even one eighty-year-old farmer still working to provide for her grandchildren.

IN SEARCH OF NEW MARKETS: IS BORACAY STILL A VIABLE MARKET FOR HANDICRAFT WEAVING?

The closure of Boracay in 2016 significantly impacted the weaving industry, as demand dropped due to the decline in the number of tourists. Learning from this experience, weavers realized they could not solely depend on Boracay's tourism industry. Before the pandemic, weavers from Ibajay and Nabas personally delivered their *nito* products to Boracay. During the lockdowns, many sent their products through local couriers and retailers. They also noticed a decline in tourism activities, which affected the demand for their products.

Weavers from Nabas often lack direct buyers and usually rely on middlemen and retailers. They have also noted their difficulty in competing with other municipalities in terms of quality, linkages, and marketing. However, some established weavers have direct buyers from places like Iloilo, including Ayala Corporation, but still face challenges with financial capital. Despite these difficulties, Nabas continues to supply products like bags and souvenirs for tourists in Boracay. There are also other organizations and cooperatives involved in this enterprise. For example, events hosted in Aklan have used tokens or bags made of *banig*, helping to promote their products and highlighting its connection with the community.

In Pandan, weavers source materials from the mountains, just like *bariw* that grows in the wild. They bring their products to tourist spots like Malumpati Cold Spring, where there is enough demand for their products. Despite competition from private weaving businesses, the cooperative-run industry still manages to provide income for its weavers. However, when the pandemic hit, the staff of the cooperative in Pandan went without pay for two years. They acknowledge that their industry still has many improvements to make.

Weavers and representatives from the LGU of Ibajay claim there is a need to improve skills in product design and development to enhance their craft and productivity. Various innovations and marketing strategies to expand their market. Furthermore, Libertad acknowledges the need for product diversification and marketing to mitigate the issues of declining demand. A great help would be for local officials to promote the products at gatherings or events. This small gesture could encourage, brand recall, partnerships and collaborations.

CURRENT INTERVENTIONS IN THE INDUSTRY: TRAINING, PROJECTS, AND PARTNERSHIPS

The four weaving communities received assistance from various government agencies, including the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Department of Agriculture (DA), the Philippine Fiber Industry Development Authority (PhilFIDA), and support from Senator Loren Legarda. These agencies are active and visible in helping the weavers.

Weavers from Santo Rosario, Pandan, mentioned that the DTI's training on native bags and placemats sparked interest in weaving among many women in the area. As a result, the weavers organized as a cooperative under the Cooperative Development Authority (CDA) back in 10 November 1998. Today, the Santo Rosario Multi-purpose Cooperative continues to assist members with marketing their products. PhilFIDA has provided laptops to weaving organizations in Pandan to assist in this objective. The community has also received food assistance through the LGU and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). In 2003, the LGU launched a community tourism program, offering a tour package that allows tourists to immerse themselves in the community's weaving areas. This initiative helps promote

the local weaving industry. PhilFIDA also attempted to plant abaca, but the undertaking failed due to the El Niño season. An organization planted some seedlings, and training for abaca planting was provided. Both PhilFIDA and DTI also donated sewing machines to the community, but due to a lack of financial aid, some of these projects have not been sustainable.

The *Parangabuhian* (Livelihood) Weaving Center in Libertad was established by the LGU to empower local weavers by centralizing the display of their products, making it easier for customers to access them. However, the LGU acknowledges the lack of financial support for mat weavers as a major challenge. The weavers do not plant *bariw*, so they buy raw materials and weave them instead. The Libertad *Bariw* Weavers Federation (LIBAWFED) plays a key role in organizing the weavers in the community. Although they have received donations of sewing machines, the budget for maintenance is not included, and the machines cannot be used due to the logistics and upkeep involved. If demand rises, the weavers need to be paid before completing the products, requiring the organization to have sufficient capital to handle bulk orders. If LIBAWFED had enough capital, they could cover the financial needs of the weavers until payment is received from customers. In terms of training support, members of LIBAWFED have been reported to attend trainings and trade fairs. While an informant claims that these trainings are sufficient, they believe government agencies can further improve packaging and help apply for patents to protect their products. The Local Council for Culture and Arts has lobbied for the inclusion of weaving in the curriculum, specifically in Araling Panlipunan and Music, Arts, Physical Education, and Health (MAPEH), as it represents the identity of Libertad. Weaving has also been included and approved by the Philippine Registry of Cultural Property (PRECUP).

In partnership with DTI, the LGU of Nabas regularly conducts training and innovates promotional products beyond the traditional *banig*. There are plans to adapt skills training for making *bariw* twine, based on the model from Antique. The LGU continues to explore innovations and organize training sessions to preserve the weaving industry, which is the primary source of livelihood in Nabas. The DA attempted to establish a *bariw* plantation, but it was unsuccessful as the *bariw* tree grows in the wild. The LGU plays a crucial role in sustaining the *banig*-weaving industry and recognizes that weavers are small-scale participants in the business due to the need for capital. They view cultural mapping as an essential activity to preserve the weaving heritage. The

town's Negosyo Center, under DTI, also supports these initiatives by inviting businesses and people's organizations to join trade fairs. The One Town, One Product (OTOP) program by the National Government focuses on product design development and offers consultations. Nabas also had the Bottom-Up Budgeting (BUB) initiative, which teaches weavers to manage their finances. In terms of interventions and assistance, weavers receive almost all the skills training provided by the municipality.

Ibajay participates annually in the Philippine Travel Mart in Metro Manila, where weaving communities can showcase their products to attract both local and global markets. The LGU also displays handicrafts at the DTI office, the Negosyo Center, and the municipal hall. Collectively, the LGU promotes the weaving heritage through various activities, such as weeklong exhibits at regional and national events. Additionally, the LGU organizes *Tinda Turismo* every Tourism Month, where weavers are provided stalls to sell their native products. However, Ibajay still lacks a permanent space to showcase its local products.

In Ibajay, the Monlaque Cooperative is the only private sector entity supporting the production of *nito*. They provide materials and support to the local community to produce these products. Weavers appreciate the help from the barangay council and the LGU. One weaver noted that the members work harmoniously and are satisfied with the project, especially because it provides a source of income for mothers in the community, and further training for those involved in the craft. Thanks to the training, Monlaque Agrarian Reform has become known for displaying *nito* products. Government agencies and tourism officers regularly visit their weaving sites, and the Department of Agrarian Reform conducts monthly inspections. Even weavers from Pandan visit the community. One of the weavers expressed the need to create a cooperative that can help manage financial funds and provide support for the group. She emphasized that expanding the industry and forming an organization would significantly help address the needs of the weavers.

THE FOUR WEAVING COMMUNITIES MET

A two-day Stakeholders' Meeting and Workshop was held at the UP Visayas Extension Campus in Pandan, Antique on 28-29 September 2024 as part of the "*Pagrara: Exploring Northwestern Panay Weaving Heritage*" initiative

funded by the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS). This event is part of the Panay Weaving and Culinary Heritage Program of the UP Visayas Center for West Visayan Studies (CWVS). The workshop was attended by weavers and officers of local weaving cooperatives, local tourism officers, and representatives from key local government units in Aklan and Antique, particularly from the municipalities of Ibajay, Nabas, Pandan, and Libertad—areas known for handicrafts made from *bariw*, *nito*, and abaca. Representatives from the Provincial Government of Aklan and the DTI also contributed valuable inputs during the workshop. With their focus on assessing the economic viability and sustainability of Northwestern Panay weaving, the participants explored the tradition's significance, discussed its status, and identified capacity-building needs within the communities. The discussions also opened opportunities for future collaborations among local governments, national agencies, and academic institutions, all aimed towards strengthening support for weaving heritage and industry.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Pagrara (weaving) is a shared cultural heritage of the four communities in Northwestern Panay. The age-old knowledge transcends political and geographical boundaries. It has been a source of livelihood for weavers who were able to support their family's needs for generations. The documentation of UP CIDS–CWVS of the narratives of stakeholders in the four LGUs allows the project to highlight five significant findings in the study.

Firstly, the supply of raw materials depends on whether the communities grow them or if they have direct access to the stock in the wild. Farming, harvesting, and preparation of natural fibers entail separate skills. The process of pre-weaving is often seen as the most labor-intensive and time-consuming. Many of the weavers depend on the supply of the materials that are grown in the wild and they often prefer natural fibers that are not cultivated because the quality is significantly superior to those that are farmed. This high reliance on the availability of plants also reveals that protecting the environment is vital in ensuring the sustenance of the supply chain. Climate conditions like El Niño (warmer temperature) and strong rains and typhoons also impact the quality and availability of the materials.

Secondly, most of the respondents acknowledged the significant role of the LGU in supporting the weaving industry in their various communities. Weavers expect the government to be at the forefront of providing them with the necessary training, assisting them in sourcing and planting raw materials, and coming up with opportunities for financial aid to their respective local cooperatives. Respondents also acknowledged that the academe can also help in the conduct of research to support capacity-building initiatives. Though efforts have been made by national agencies in farming raw materials, conducting regular training, and providing technology support and equipment, the LGU is still seen as a major player in ensuring that these projects will materialize and succeed in the long term. Travel exhibitions and trade markets provide favorable space for weavers to showcase their crafts. Most importantly, these events allow the LGU and weavers to market their products to their clients.

Thirdly, there is a need to address the different experiences of lowland and upland weavers. Most of the lowland weavers see the lack of raw materials, the unavailability of the workforce, and the difficulty in imparting the skill to the younger generation as three of the main challenges they face to sustain their weaving activities. On the other hand, some upland weavers who identify themselves as part of the Indigenous peoples (IPs) claim that knowledge transfer to their children is not a problem because they believe that since their children are exposed to weaving, the skill is already inherent. Upland weavers suggest that they be provided with more access to financial resources, improvement of their product design training, and digital marketing strategies. While many of these issues are present in all four communities, the more organized weavers are members of cooperatives which allow them to receive more training and direct connections with their buyers and markets.

Lastly, both the LGU and the weavers see the declining interest of the younger generation. Part of the reason for this disinterest is the presumption that if their children practice weaving, they will be poor. Therefore, instead of weaving, they encourage their children to pursue higher education to have better lives. They also acknowledge the influence of mobile phones and other forms of digital entertainment as a hindrance. Some of the stakeholders admit that if the conditions of weaving will not be improved, it will not be economically viable for the next generation to continue the craft. To address this issue, many of the respondents acknowledge that incorporating weaving

in the school curriculum can help ensure the persistence of the tradition in the communities.

DREAMS (OF AND) FOR THE WEAVERS: WAYS FORWARD

The local government, academic institutions, and other organizations must harmonize their efforts and coordinate their programs and activities to support the weaving communities. One possible approach is integrating weaving into the school curriculum. All the LGUs expressed the need for the weaving industry to be supported by all stakeholders for it to develop and remain sustainable. Provision of financial assistance, skills, and equipment development, as well as the marketing of products, must be prioritized to ensure sustainability and growth. While training, seminars, and programs are well-conducted for the weavers, schools can also consider incorporating weaving into their senior high school work immersion activities. This would help popularize the tradition and spark interest among younger students. The LGU could also explore experiential tourism activities for visitors who wish to engage with the weaving communities, developing activities to include in tourism packages. Tourism videos produced by the LGU could further promote weaving. Additionally, the LGU could collaborate with the community to craft agri-tourism destinations in upland areas as part of their tour offerings.

For some communities of Indigenous peoples (IP) with a weaving tradition, there is limited awareness of programs from the Local Government that could improve their trade and products. However, they are eager to receive support for their *banig* and broom-making practices. They recognize the importance of government dialogues with IP communities to ensure the survival of their traditions. Their primary concern is financial support from the local government, as the *banig*-weaving tradition is fading due to low product prices. If given adequate support to scale up production, they believe many weavers would continue the craft because of its economic viability.

One of the initiatives of the LGU of Ibaday was the replanting of raw materials to ensure sustainability. The LGU has also allocated a budget to build facilities, such as a multipurpose building at Barangay San Jose, to support the weaving communities. Although programs and initiatives aimed at supporting and promoting weaving heritage, such as those conducted by the Fiber Industry

Development Authority (FIDA), the Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA), and the DTI, have been implemented, they were short-lived due to a lack of resources and other challenges. Other innovations include making abaca textiles in addition to producing traditional abaca ropes. Numerous training programs on quality control and product costing have been conducted, but it is not feasible to use machines for the craft, as it is handmade. The LGU acknowledges the need to improve both local and global product promotion. The LGU aims to sustain the potential and interest of international buyers by focusing on continuous demand for abaca products. Furthermore, the LGU assures local weavers that they will continue to guide and support them, as the craft is essential to meeting their basic needs.

In Nabas, the LGU has introduced several initiatives to improve the weaving industry. They are encouraging weavers to create bags from *banig* to appeal to a larger market, and some weavers have started making boxes as an alternative to wrappers, as well as wine holders as gifts. The LGU has conducted various programs, such as *bariw* twine making, to highlight the importance of the weaving industry. The LGU is currently constructing a Tourism Visitor Center in Barangay Unidos with the help of Petro Wind, which will display products made from *bariw*. Academic institutions and other organizations also play a vital role in maintaining and sustaining the weaving heritage in the municipality, acting as key partners by providing resources, facilities, and networking opportunities. When these stakeholders collaborate, they can help meet the needs of the weaving industry.

For Libertad, there is a need for innovations, such as shifting to the production of *bariw* hats, which can be made in a shorter time. Longer production processes result in higher product costs. In terms of competition and support, Libertad is still lagging behind. Unless the LGU or organizations connect with international markets, this gap will likely remain unaddressed. Weavers should diversify by making bags or combining *bariw* with materials such as leather or cloth to cater today's dynamic market. They should also receive technical training in areas like digital marketing and proper product pricing to aid in marketing their products. Schools can be encouraged to use local products, and competitions, such as festival dance contests, can help promote the culture. There is also a call for elected officials to champion the weaving industry. The LGU can propose new programs to scale up the industry and

showcase the craftsmanship of the people of Libertad, one of which could involve the LGU utilizing and wearing locally crafted products.

The weaving industry in Pandan has significant potential due to the materials produced by the weavers. The community is known for *bariw*, though abaca production is not yet fully developed. Collaboration with UP could help improve the industry through interventions in production, marketing, and financial assistance. The LGU is working to improve facilities in barangays such as Aracay and Perfecta and recognizes the importance of linking the communities to national agencies like DTI, DA, and the Center for International Trade Expositions and Missions (CITEM) for support. In Pandan, weavers conduct training on governance fundamentals and how the board of directors can assist in improving product marketing, even internationally. They also want to continue participating in trade expos, joining festivals, and displaying their products in malls. The local government can continue to provide technical assistance, funds, and grants. The national government could offer training to improve raw material production for bags, and universities and academic institutions could integrate weaving into their curriculum or offer training to strengthen the skills of younger generations.

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APPENDIX

LGU LIBERTAD

Libertad Banig Products at the 2024 National Arts and Crafts Fair at SM Megamall. The exhibit runs at the Mega Trade Halls 1–3, 5th Level, Mega B, SM Megamall, Mandaluyong City, with its final day on 27 October 2024. The 2024 National Arts and Crafts Fair proudly features the intricately crafted *banig* and other *bariw* products from Libertad, Antique. This prestigious event is part of a program championed by Senator Inday Loren Legarda, showcasing the artistry and ingenuity of Filipino artisans. The exhibit booth is led by the Organisasyon kang mga Libertadnon para sa Pag-Ugwad (OLIPA) Lindero. The group has been a consistent participant in the fair, thanks to the unwavering support and initiatives of Senator Loren Legarda and the continued efforts of Congressman AA Legarda. Visitors to the fair have the opportunity to meet the dedicated OLIPA members and explore their handcrafted products, which highlight the rich cultural heritage and skill of Antiqueño artisans.



The Province of Antique joins the Philippine Travel Agencies Association (PTAA) Travel Tour Expo 2024! With support from the offices of Senator Loren Legarda and Representative AA Legarda, the Antique booth highlights their unique tourism destinations, and local food products and offers demonstrations from the weavers of Libertad *Bariw* Weavers Federation (LIBAWFED).



The *Banig* Products of Libertad are proudly showcased at the 2023 National Arts and Crafts Fair, held at Megatrade Halls 1–3, 5th Level, Mega B, SM Megamall, Mandaluyong City, from 4 to 8 October 2023. This remarkable display is brought to life by the Organisasyon kang mga Libertadnon para sa Pag-ugwad (OLIPA) - Lindero, a beneficiary association under the Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program (4Ps), with valuable support from the Department of Trade and Industry Philippines (DTI). OLIPA is committed to crafting and marketing high-quality *banig* and other woven products, which reflect the artistry and creativity of local artisans from Libertad. Special recognition is given to Congressman AA Legarda and Senate President Pro Tempore Inday Loren Legarda for their leadership in championing this initiative, aimed at promoting and uplifting the products of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Libertad and the entire Antique province.

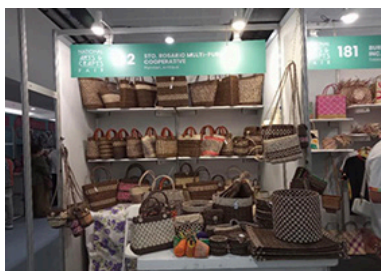


The Negosyo Center Northern Antique Cluster Bazaar showcased a variety of products crafted from banig (woven mats) including the weave products of the Municipality of Libertad last 16–25 February 2023 at Negosyo Center–Tibiao Antique. The display included *banigs* in different sizes, highlighting the versatility and quality of locally made goods. This event served as a platform to celebrate and promote Antiqueño products, encouraging community support for local artisans and entrepreneurs.



LGU PANDAN

The Santo Rosario Multipurpose Cooperative (STORMPC) from Pandan, Antique, proudly showcased its woven *bariw*-based products at the National Arts and Crafts Fair (NACF) 2024, held at Mega Trade Halls 1–3, 5th Level, Mega B, SM Megamall, from 23 to 27 October 2024. This prestigious event, championed by Antiqueña Senator Inday Loren Legarda, underscores her unwavering commitment to supporting Filipino artisans and preserving the nation's rich cultural heritage. With the strong backing of Senator Loren Legarda and Congressman AA Legarda, the cooperative joined other skilled Antique artisans in highlighting the province's exceptional craftsmanship on a national platform, inviting visitors to celebrate and support local artistry through the purchase of their beautifully handcrafted creations.



LGU IBAJAY



Ibajay displayed its *nito* and abaca products at the 35th Philippine Travel Mart last September 2024, the country's largest and longest-running travel exhibition. Led by Municipal Tourism Officer Ms. Lyn B. Ilinon, the municipality proudly showcased its local craftsmanship and shared its rich cultural heritage on the national stage.

LGU NABAS



The Municipality of Nabas participated in the 34th Philippine Travel Mart, the nation's longest-running and largest travel exhibition, in September 2023. With the full support of Municipal Mayor Hon. Maria Fe Lasaleta, Tourism Officer Mr. Bryan Briones spearheaded the showcase of Nabas' *bariw/banig* products to highlight, promote, and celebrate its *bariw* weaving tradition.

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