

■ LOCAL REGIONAL STUDIES NETWORK

LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND THE *PAGRARA* HERITAGE OF NORTHWEST PANAY

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INTRODUCTION

According to Nochesada, *rara* is “the art and tradition of weaving mats that involves the process of creative and artistic manipulation that makes use of long strips of fiber, grass, leaf, petiole, reed, stem, twig, vine, and even branch and cane that are harvested, gathered, boiled, pounded, split, dried and dyed to make durable, easy to use, long-lasting supple mats.”² The practice of *rara* or *pagrara* in Northwest Panay has been a shared cultural heritage and a source of livelihood for weaving communities in the area. Aside from mats, bags, carpets, placemats, hats, and decors utilizing natural fibers such as *abaca* (*Musa textilis*), *bariw* (*Pandanus copelandii*), *nito* (*Lygodium circinnatum*), *buri* (*Corypha utan*), and others through *pagrara* are also produced.

Policies and programs at the national level are implemented to safeguard traditional weaving practices, enhance product quality, and provide economic opportunities for artisans. In the case of *pagrara* in Northwest Panay, however, challenges such as the low price of handicrafts, the lack of technological interventions to ease the weaving process, the

lack of interest among the younger generations to continue their weaving heritage, and the limited or repetitive design of woven products remain critical concerns that need further attention and support from various stakeholders.³ This paper looks into the current practice of *pagrara* and how far it is supported by select local government units (LGUs) in Northwest Panay, in terms of local policies and programs, and its prospects in light of relevant laws. Based on the findings of the study, this paper proposes key recommendations to further promote and support the traditional weaving industry and strengthen cultural preservation.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through key informant interviews (KIIs) from July to October 2024 conducted at the respective place of informants and a focus group discussion (FGD) that was conducted on 28 September 2024 at the University of the Philippines Visayas – Antique Extension Campus in Nauring, Pandan, Antique. The key informants and FGD participants were from the four local government units (LGUs) in Northwest Panay namely Libertad and

1 University Research Associate, Center for West Visayan Studies, University of the Philippines Visayas.

2 Elmer Nochesada, *Arts and Tradition of Mat Weaving in the Philippines* (HABI – The Philippine Textile Council, 2016).

3 Focus group discussion with representatives of local government units and other agencies, conducted by the author, 28 September 2024.

Pandan in the province of Antique, and Ibajay and Nabas in the province of Aklan. These LGUs were engaged by the project, “*Pagrara: Exploring Northwestern Panay Weaving Heritage*,” a component of the Panay Weaving and Culinary Heritage Program funded by the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS).

PAGRARA IN NORTHWEST PANAY: A SITUATIONER

The handicraft weaving heritage in the Northwest Panay area faces challenges that threaten the sustainability and viability of the industry. One of the main challenges that handicraft weaving faces is the inadequate supply of raw materials.⁴ In Pandan, the supply of *bariw* and *buri* is dwindling.⁵ The same is also happening with the supply of *nito* in Ibajay.⁶ Buri materials used by weavers in Pandan are even sourced from the neighboring municipality of Nabas.⁷ On the one hand, there were instances that *banig* weavers in Nabas would source *bariw* materials from Ibajay.⁸

Banig weavers in Candari, Pandan need support such as the development of value-added products.⁹ In Monlaque, Ibajay, the long distance in transporting materials and products to and from the weaving communities also poses a challenge.¹⁰ Also, sourcing raw materials

from distant areas, such as in the case of abaca, poses considerable difficulty. Meanwhile, the extraction of coconut coir materials is managed by private individuals who have inadequate facilities for efficient production.¹¹ Improvements in road networks had started hoping to contribute to lessening difficulties in transporting materials from the upland to the lowland and vice versa.¹²

Handicraft weavers in Northwest Panay are mostly organized through cooperatives. In Pandan, there is the Sto. Rosario Multi-Purpose Cooperative (STORMPC) for *bariw*-based handicraft, and the Sta. Ana – San Joaquin Agrarian Reform Cooperative (SASJ ARC) where some of its members are into *nito*-based handicrafts. Libertad has the Libertad Bariw Weavers Federation (LIBAWFED).¹³ In Ibajay, there is the Monlaque Cooperative assisting members who are into *nito*-based products.¹⁴ There are also *nito* weavers in Aparicio and Mabusao in the same municipality. In Nabas, the LGU and some private enterprises assist those who are into *bariw*-based handicrafts in their area.¹⁵ Non-government organizations (NGOs) also provided support to organizations such as training on product development. Notable of these NGOs is the Antique Development Foundation, which has been actively engaging with handicraft weavers in Pandan and Libertad for years through various projects.¹⁶

4 Floremae Olandres (Municipal Agriculture Officer of Pandan, Antique) interview by J. Varon, 19 September 2024; Norita Chavez, (Board of Directors, Vice Chair, Sto. Rosario Multi-Purpose Cooperative), interview by J. Varon, 11 September 2024; Josefina Delos Santos (General Manager, Sto. Rosario Multi-Purpose Cooperative), interview by J. Varon, 11 September 2024.

5 Josefina Delos Santos, interview.

6 Aser Batoy (weaver in Aparicio, Ibajay, Aklan) interview by E. Galvan, 30 July 2024; Junrey Italia, Punong Barangay of Monlaque, Ibajay, Aklan, interview by E. Galvan, 30 July 2024.

7 Olandres.

8 Mary Rose Rait (weaver from Nabas, Aklan), interview by E. Galvan, 17 September 2024.

9 Olandres.

10 Marilyn Pines (weaver in Aparicio, Ibajay, Aklan), interview by E. Galvan, 30 July 2024.

11 Lyn Ilinon (Municipal Tourism Designate of Ibajay, Aklan), interview by E. Galvan, 12 August 2024.

12 Hon. Joemilla Tugon (Sangguniang Bayan Member of Pandan, Antique) interview by J. Varon, 30 August 2024.

13 Eda Victoriano (weaver in Libertad, Antique), interview by J. Varon, 2 September 2024.

14 Italia.

15 Rait.

16 Jude Sanchez (Municipal Tourism Operations Officer of Pandan, Antique), focus group discussion, 28 September 2024.

THE ROLE OF LGUs AND NGAs IN PAGRARA

All four LGUs have been assisting their handicraft products to be showcased in trade fairs and exhibits. These LGUs also assisted in facilitating the implementation of programs and projects from National Government Agencies (NGAs) relevant to handicraft weaving in their respective areas.¹⁷

National government agencies such as the Department of Tourism (DOT), the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), and the Philippine Fiber Industry Development Authority (PhilFIDA), among others, through the coordination of the LGUs concerned, had conducted skills training and product development workshops in weaving communities in these municipalities.¹⁸ The role of LGUs is mostly relegated to coordinating with the national agencies for skills development, training on new designs, provision/request of equipment, and livelihood/financial assistance.

Initiatives of then Antique Representative, now Senator Loren Legarda, in coordination with PhilFIDA, had provided significant assistance to artisans in the province. These included the establishment of weaving centers in Antique, one of which is in Sto. Rosario, Pandan for handicrafts.¹⁹ Building, handlooms, raw materials, dyeing implements, furniture, high-speed sewing machines, and other supplies were provided

to assist weavers in increasing their production.²⁰ The Regional Satellite Weaving and Processing Center for Bariw and other fibers in Libertad, Antique, also an initiative of Legarda, in coordination with PhilFIDA, was formally turned over to LIBAWFED on July 2024.²¹

Some LGUs have festivals anchored on handicraft weaving like the annual Banigan Festival of Libertad and the Bariw Festival in Nabas.²² The Libertad LGU, on its part, has institutionalized its annual Banigan Festival and included it in its inventory of cultural property.²³ Except for Libertad, the other three LGUs have yet to pass ordinances or resolutions aimed at preserving and promoting the weaving heritage of their respective municipalities.

PROSPECTS FOR PAGRARA IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Despite the identified challenges, there appear to have positive prospects for handicraft weaving in local governance. With the passage of Republic Act No. 11961 or the Cultural Mapping Law, LGUs are expected to increase their existing efforts to conduct research and implement activities geared towards mapping their cultural properties as they are mandated to conduct a comprehensive cultural mapping of their areas of jurisdiction.²⁴ Senator Loren Legarda, the primary author of the law, said that institutionalizing cultural mapping empowers communities to define and value their heritage for inclusive local and national development.²⁵ This

17 Hon. Tomas Estoperez, Jr. (Municipal Mayor of Pandan, Antique), interview by J. Varon, 30 September 2024; Maria Hon. Fe Lasaleta (Municipal Mayor of Nabas, Aklan), interview by E. Galvan, 18 September 2024.

18 Joemilla Tugon, interview; Galahad Garcia (Municipal Tourism Operations Officer of Libertad) interview by J. Varon, 13 October 2024.

19 "More Weaving Centers in Antique," *Daily Guardian*, 11 September 2020, <https://dailyguardian.com.ph/more-weaving-centers-in-antique/#:~:text=Recognizing%20the%20significance%20of%20weaving,boost%20the%20local%20textile%20industry.>

20 "More Weaving Centers in Antique."

21 PhilFIDA RSO VI Turns Over Regional Weaving Center in Libertad, Antique," Philippine Fiber Industry Development Authority, 14 July 2024, <https://philfida.da.gov.ph/2024/07/14/philfida-rso-vi-turns-over-regional-weaving-center-in-libertad-antique/>.

22 Bryan Briones (Municipal Tourism Officer Designate of Nabas, Aklan) focus group discussion, September 28, 2024; Dangielyn Unilonggo (Municipal Tourism and Cultural Affairs Office of Libertad) focus group discussion, 28 September 2024.

23 Unilonggo.

24 An Act Strengthening the Conservation and Protection of Philippine Cultural Heritage Through Cultural Mapping and an Enhanced Cultural Heritage Education Program, Amending for the Purpose Republic Act No. 10066, Otherwise Known as the "National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009," RA No. 11961 (24 August 2023), https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/republic_acts/ra%2011961.pdf.

25 Loren Legarda, "Sponsorship Speech on An Act Strengthening the Conservation and Protection of Philippine Cultural Heritage Through Cultural Mapping, Amending for the Purpose Republic Act No. 10066, Otherwise Known as the 'National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009,'" 8 February 2023, <https://lorenlegarda.com.ph/sponsorship-speech-an-act-strengthening-the-conservation-and-protection-of-philippine-cultural-heritage-through-cultural-mapping-amending-for-the-purpose-republic-act-no-10066-otherwise-k/>.

could mean more LGU activities and projects relevant to cultural practices and traditions, the *pagrara* included.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Policy advocacy or engagement of the University of the Philippines Visayas – Antique Extension office / UP CIDS with the LGUs to pass ordinance on the preservation and promotion of weaving heritage.
2. A costing study on an LGU program on the preservation and promotion of weaving heritage may serve as basis to advocate and substantiate proposals on legislation, planning, financing, and budgeting of the said program.
3. To complement Seal of Good Local Governance (SGLG), localize the implementation or implement the LGU provisions of the Republic Act 11961 or the Cultural Mapping Law. At the executive-planning and budgeting and investment phases, this includes the preservation and promotion of weaving heritage in Executive-Legislative Agenda (ELA), Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP) and sectoral plans, with corresponding Local Development Investment Plan (LDIP), Annual Investment Programs (AIP) and annual appropriations/budget of the focus LGUs. This will entail creation of a focal point unit/office with staff and regular program on the preservation and promotion of weaving heritage under the Office of the local chief executive or Local Tourism office.
4. Aside from or more than being part of the Seal of Good Local Governance (SGLG), LGUs may explore engagement with DILG, the Leagues, key agencies like NCCA, DOST and DTI, and focus LGUs to develop a cultural governance audit and awards system for the preservation and promotion of weaving heritage akin to the Child-Friendly Local Governance Audit (CFLGA) with Seal of Child-Friendly Local Governance (SCFLG) and Presidential Award for the Child-Friendly Municipalities and Cities.
5. Include cultural mapping as a regular data gathering activity of the LPDO and formulate indicators to be integrated in the annual statistics and data management and information system like CBMS of the focus LGUs. The objective is to regularize indicators to measure for the monitoring and evaluation of implementation of the policies, plans, programs, and activities of the program on the preservation and promotion of weaving heritage.
6. Seek sponsorship of key national government agencies, the UP Visayas/UP System administration and legislators to push for programs, projects and activities for the preservation and promotion of weaving heritage to be funded in the national budget or the General Appropriations Act (GAA).
7. A collaborative and participative partnership among concerned NGOs, POs, and LGUs through the inter-municipality alliance, which participants during the FGD had suggested and were welcoming about it.²⁶ Such partnership will enable weaving communities under member LGUs to collectively address the challenges related to *pagrara*. Also, the alliance can provide a venue for member-partners to standardize policies and regulations regarding handicrafts, reducing inconsistencies, and promoting a unified approach to the cultural sustainability and economic viability of their shared heritage.

26 Sanchez; Mary Anne Janoya (Municipal Agriculture Technologist of Nabas, Aklan), focus group discussion, 28 September 2024.

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