

CRAFTING CULTURE: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL ARTS AND CRAFTS IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

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Abstract

This study explored the role of traditional arts and crafts in Baliwag's tourism, focusing on their cultural significance, production techniques, and preservation practices. Through interviews with local artisans and municipal officials, the research investigated iconic crafts such as buntal hat weaving, bone-inlay or imbute furniture making, karo-making, and pottery. The findings revealed that these traditional crafts not only served as vital expressions of cultural identity but also functioned as key drivers of community-based tourism. Their continued practice contributed to heritage preservation by sustaining indigenous skills and enabling intergenerational knowledge transfer, while simultaneously enhancing Baliwag's appeal as a cultural tourism destination. The study highlighted the need for strategic initiatives to preserve and promote traditional arts and crafts, as these practices increase tourist engagement and satisfaction, which in turn support the growth of Baliwag City's tourism industry.

Keywords: artisans, artistic techniques, culture preservation, cultural significance, tourist engagement, traditional arts and crafts

Traditional arts and crafts play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage, showcasing the creativity and craftsmanship of artisans, and sustaining community livelihoods. According to UNESCO (2025), traditional craftsmanship constitutes an essential component of intangible cultural heritage, as it strengthens community identity and empowers individuals to value their cultural roots. Globally, handicraft tourism has gained recognition for supporting cultural traditions, as seen in countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Vietnam (Ngomane, 2023). In the Philippines, national initiatives led by the Department of Tourism (DOT) and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) promote indigenous craftsmanship through trade fairs, cultural exhibitions, and digital marketing strategies (PRNewswire, 2021), emphasizing the cultural and economic value of local crafts.

Within this national context, Baliwag, Bulacan stands out for its traditional crafts—including buntal hat weaving, bone-inlay (imbute) furniture making, karo-making, and pottery—which serve as cultural symbols and potential tourism assets. Despite their significance, limited scholarly attention has been given to how these crafts contribute to Baliwag's tourism development, how artisans balance authenticity

with commercialization, and how these practices influence cultural preservation. Addressing this gap is critical for situating Baliwag's crafts within broader discussions on cultural sustainability and tourism.

These art forms not only embody the creative expressions of a community but also serve as living connections to its historical experiences. The promotion of traditional crafts further enhances tourist engagement and fosters cultural pride. Festivals and exhibitions, such as Baliwag's Buntal Festival, provide visitors with immersive experiences that deepen their understanding of local traditions (Kapampangan Traveller, 2018).

In Baliwag, traditional craftsmanship remains a cornerstone of local identity. The town is renowned for its intricate bone and wood inlay techniques used to produce finely crafted furniture pieces, such as *aparadors* and *comodas*, made from premium hardwoods like kamagong and narra. These highly detailed works, passed down through generations, exemplify the artisans' meticulous skill and form a defining feature of the town's cultural legacy (Salcedo Auctions, 2022). Baliwag is also home to one of the country's oldest religious traditions: the 290-year-old Holy Week Procession, featuring life-sized religious images on elaborately decorated *carozas*. Families who maintain these sacred artifacts—known as *camareros*—play a vital role in safeguarding both tangible and spiritual heritage for future generations (Cruz, 2023; Tulad, 2024).

Equally notable is the town's buntal hat-making industry, which dates back to the Spanish colonial era. Balibuntal hats, woven from coconut husk fibers, reached peak popularity in the early 20th century and continue to thrive today (Guevarra, 2015). The annual Buntal Festival celebrates these hats alongside other traditional crafts, such as imbute furniture, attracting tourists and showcasing the community's artistic traditions (Central Luzon Balita, 2022; Museong Baliwag, 2022; Turismo ng Baliwag, 2022). Pottery, another enduring craft, reflects the Philippines' deep historical roots, with techniques tracing back to the Neolithic period. In Baliwag, pottery-making remains a family-based tradition that balances artistic expression with functional design, demonstrating how cultural heritage can adapt to contemporary demands while retaining authenticity (Artchive, 2024; Reyes, 2021).

This study, therefore, examines how traditional arts and crafts in Baliwag contribute to tourism development, heritage preservation, and community engagement. It explores the cultural significance, production techniques, and preservation practices of these crafts, as well as their impact on artisans and tourist experiences. By doing so, it seeks to generate insights that support sustainable cultural tourism and strengthen Baliwag's cultural identity within a rapidly evolving tourism landscape.

Research Questions

1. How are the traditional arts and crafts that are unique to Baliwag contribute to the town's cultural legacy in terms of:
 - 1.1. cultural significance;
 - 1.2. artistic techniques and craftsmanship; and
 - 1.3. preservation and continuity?

2. What is the role of traditional arts and crafts in enhancing tourist engagement and satisfaction in Baliwag?

Conceptual Framework



Figure 1. Conceptual Diagram

The conceptual framework highlights that traditional arts and crafts play a critical role in enhancing tourist engagement and satisfaction, which subsequently drives the growth of Baliwag City's tourism industry. By preserving and promoting heritage practices such as buntal hat weaving, bone-inlay or imbute furniture making, karo-carving and pottery, the city provides authentic cultural experiences that foster emotional attachment, satisfaction, and repeat visitation. This sequential relationship—Traditional Arts and Crafts → Tourist Engagement and Satisfaction → Baliwag City Tourism Industry Growth—demonstrates that heritage-based tourism not only safeguards cultural identity but also strengthens the city's economic and competitive positioning, emphasizing its significance as a sustainable strategy for tourism development.

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the cultural heritage of Baliwag's traditional arts and crafts and their role in the local tourism industry. Qualitative research was deemed appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of artisans' experiences, cultural significance, and practices that may not be captured through quantitative measures.

The research was conducted in Baliwag City, Bulacan, focusing on four (4) artisans who specialize in traditional crafts: buntal hat weaving, pottery, karo making, and bone-inlay furniture. Selection criteria for artisans included a minimum of five years of experience in their craft, recognition within the local community for their skill, and active contribution to preserving cultural heritage. In addition to the artisans, two local government officials—the head of the Department of Tourism (DoT)

Baliwag and an employee from the Archives and Records Office—were included to provide institutional perspectives on tourism promotion and heritage preservation.

The number of participants was determined based on qualitative research principles, prioritizing depth of understanding over breadth. Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, and triangulation of data sources, including interviews with both artisans and government officials.

Data Collection

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants who possess specialized knowledge of Baliwag's traditional arts and crafts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by a self-constructed questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' experiences, techniques, cultural significance of their crafts, and perceptions of the tourism impact. The questionnaire was reviewed by experts in cultural studies and piloted with one non-participating artisan to ensure clarity, relevance, and validity.

Interviews were conducted in person at locations convenient to the participants, such as their workshops or offices, and were conducted in Filipino and English, depending on participant preference. Each interview lasted between 20 and 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent before being transcribed verbatim. Ethical considerations were strictly observed; all participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data. The process involved multiple readings of the transcripts, open coding to identify meaningful units, categorization into sub-themes, and abstraction into overarching themes that addressed the research objectives. Coding and theme identification were independently reviewed by two researchers to enhance reliability and ensure methodological rigor.

Results and Discussion

The study included four (4) local artisans, each specializing in buntal hat weaving, pottery, karo making, or bone-inlay furniture, along with one (1) official from the Municipal Department of Tourism (DoT) office, one (1) official from the Archives and Records of Baliwag. The artisans varied in age and experience, with the pottery artisan practicing the craft for decades, the karo-making artisan preserving a tradition begun in the late 1970s, the buntal hat weaving artisan engaged in the craft since childhood, and the bone-inlay furniture artisan recognized for more than sixty years of expertise.

This study revealed that Baliwag's traditional arts and crafts are vital to the town's cultural identity and economic vitality, as they not only preserve the skills, traditions, and values passed down through generations but also serve as key attractions for tourists. The research, which involved local artisans specializing in buntal hat weaving, pottery, karo-making, and bone-inlay furniture, shows that these

crafts stand out due to their specialized techniques—such as the customization seen in Baliwag pottery and the meticulous process of shaping carabao rib bones for imbute designs—setting them apart from mass-produced items in other regions. However, significant challenges, including the scarcity and rising cost of essential raw materials and the declining interest of younger generations amid modern distractions, threaten the continuity of these traditions. In response, local government initiatives, such as integrating traditional arts into the public-school curriculum through programs like "Tuklas Aral" and organizing heritage tours, have been implemented to foster cultural pride and ensure the sustainability of Baliwag's rich heritage.

Cultural Significance of Baliwag's Traditional Arts and Crafts

The responses highlighted that Baliwag's traditional arts and crafts are more than just creative expressions—they are living legacies that preserve cultural identity, historical continuity, and local pride. Craft making encouraged artisans to engage with local knowledge and contributed significantly to their commitment to sustaining local development and heritage (Kouhia et al., 2020). Each craft, from buntal hat weaving and imbute-making to pottery and karo construction, reflects the ingenuity, patience, and dedication of Baliwagenses, showcasing generations of skill passed down through time. These crafts serve as symbols of perseverance and craftsmanship, with buntal hats requiring weeks of meticulous work, imbute furniture being highly sought after by antique collectors, and processional floats playing a central role in the country's longest Holy Week procession. According to one respondent "*ang tradisyonal na sining at likha ay bahagi talaga ng kultura ng Baliwag, sumasalamin ito ng ating pagkakakilanlan,*" indicating that these crafts function as cultural links to the town's past. Beyond cultural preservation, they also provide artisans with a sustainable livelihood, allowing their work to reach different parts of the country. However, modernization and shifting interests pose challenges to their continuity, making it essential to pass these traditions on to younger generations. Traditional arts and crafts require continuous improvement and preservation by future generations to sustain their development (Zhu, 2023). Despite these obstacles, artisans take immense pride in their craft, emphasizing that once learned, these skills are never forgotten. Their work is not just about making products—it is about keeping Baliwag's heritage alive, ensuring that its unique traditions continue to shape the town's identity for generations to come.

Artistic Techniques and Craftsmanship

The findings suggest that Baliwag's artistic techniques and craftsmanship are defined by specialization, customization, and meticulous attention to detail. Pottery artisans, for instance, create unique, multi-functional pieces that stand apart from mass-produced designs, while imbute and karo makers employ labor-intensive processes—ranging from individually shaping bones into precise patterns to integrating intricate carvings and gold leaf detailing. As one artisan explained: "*mahaba ang proseso ng paggawa, simula pa lang sa buto, kailangan mong pispisin isa-isa, gagawa ka ng hugis. May pattern kami at ginagamit namin kapinso. Gumagamit din kaming makinarya, gumagamit kami ng drill. Hanggang ngayon, meron kaming mga pang panatak kong tawagin namin. Kapag naman expert ka na, mga dalawang oras kaya na, pagka yung mga ganyan bangkito lang, pagka yung mga sala set, pagka isang set, mga isang linggo, matagal din gawin.*" This firsthand account illustrated the laborious

and skill-intensive nature of Baliwag's craft-making process. The integration of traditional arts and crafts with modern cultural and creative design helps preserve cultural heritage while promoting innovation. This combination supports the development of cultural products and contributes to the sustainability of arts, crafts, and creative industries (Jin, 2022). Additionally, the generational transfer of these traditional methods ensures that the 29 cultural authenticity and innovative spirit of Baliwag's arts and crafts continue to thrive across time.

Preservation of Traditional Arts and Crafts

The findings suggest that Baliwag's traditional arts and crafts are at risk due to two main challenges. First, the scarcity of important raw materials, like carabao rib bones needed for imbute, makes it harder for artisans to produce these traditional items. The scarcity of materials makes it difficult for many artisans, especially those with limited capital, to produce crafts, which in turn affects their ability to share cultural stories through their work (Leynes, 2023). Second, younger generations are showing less interest in learning these skills, largely because modern gadgets have taken over their attention. In response, the local government has started initiatives to include traditional arts and crafts in the school curriculum—such as through the "Tuklas Aral" program—to help keep these skills alive. Handicrafts positively impact students by promoting cultural and economic development in art education. They also help develop creativity, practical skills, and hands-on learning opportunities (Mahgoub et al., 2015). These measures are seen as essential for passing down Baliwag's cultural heritage to future generations.

Impact on Tourist Interest and Engagement

The findings indicated that Baliwag's traditional crafts, including buntal hats, imbute furniture, processional floats, and pottery, serve as major attractions that enhance tourist interest and engagement. Handicrafts play a significant role by attracting visitors who purchase them as souvenirs, thereby helping tourists preserve memories of their visit (Mukhrjee et al., 2016; Nzei, 2024). Heritage tours that feature these crafts provide immersive cultural experiences, educating visitors about Baliwag's cultural legacy while generating positive word-of-mouth through social media and personal interactions.

The uniqueness and craftsmanship of Baliwag's arts also strongly impress tourists. Respondent 4 stated, "*kakaiba lahat ng puntahan ko, hinihimas ang gawa ko kase naa-amaze sila, basta nakita nila ang ganda ayan talagang kakaiba*" This statement highlighted that the specialized imbute craft not only stands out but also generates admiration wherever it is presented. Being the only artisan with this skill in the entire Cordillera underscores the uniqueness of Baliwag's heritage and its ability to captivate diverse audiences.

Similarly, Respondent 5 remarked, "*Syempre nagagalak sila pag nakikita nila na magaganda ang karo rito sa Baliwag,*" and Respondent 6 added, "*Wow! Ganon sila agad as in nakikita ko nakasaksi na kasi ako nyan dahil meron pag festival.*" These observations indicated that the beauty of Baliwag's processional floats consistently delights visitors, thereby reinforcing the town's reputation for exceptional craftsmanship and cultural vibrancy.

Overall, these findings demonstrated that heritage tours showcasing Baliwag's traditional crafts provided visitors with immersive cultural experiences while promoting tourist engagement and reinforcing the city's identity as a hub of unique artistic traditions.

Conclusions

Baliwag's traditional arts and crafts, including buntal hat weaving, imbute furniture, and pottery, play a vital role in cultural tourism and heritage preservation. Skilled artisans use intricate techniques, such as bone inlay and detailed woodwork, distinguishing Baliwag's craftsmanship. However, challenges like scarce raw materials and declining youth interest threaten these traditions. Modernization and digital distractions reduce young artisans' engagement, risking gradual decline. Ensuring sustainability through education and resource management is crucial to preserving these crafts and maintaining Baliwag's identity as a center of artistry and heritage. Baliwag's traditional crafts thrive through tourism, festivals, and digital promotion. Tourists value buntal hats, imbute furniture, pottery, and karo for their authenticity. Social media and influencers further boost visibility, increasing demand and economic opportunities while preserving the town's rich artistic heritage. Preserving Baliwag's crafts requires government support, including school programs like "Tuklas Aral" and financial grants. Modernizing designs and using sustainable materials attract younger consumers and expand markets, ensuring these traditions endure.

Recommendations

To strengthen the preservation and promotion of Baliwag's traditional arts and crafts, efforts should focus on transferring skills and knowledge to younger generations through workshops, apprenticeships, and cultural education initiatives. The use of sustainable, locally sourced materials should be encouraged, along with financial and marketing support for artisans. Integrating these crafts into tourism activities such as festivals, trade fairs, and cultural exhibits can enhance heritage preservation, promote local artistry, and increase cultural appeal to visitors. Modernizing traditional crafts through contemporary designs and applications can expand market opportunities without compromising authenticity.

Digital platforms and collaborations with influencers should be leveraged to increase visibility and market reach. Future research may examine the effects of modernization, consumer behavior, and government support, as well as the role of digital marketing or comparative studies with other regions. These initiatives collectively contribute to SDG 8 and SDG 11, fostering inclusive economic growth, promoting decent work for artisans, and supporting sustainable, culturally vibrant communities.

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