Conservation of Cultural and Historical Heritage in the Province Of Laguna: Lenses and Experiences of Museum Curators

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Abstract. *Cultural and historical conservation is a dynamic and an engaging activity that requires external and internal stakeholders to put forward physical, financial, mental, and human resources to develop a synergic vision and mission for the future of the local communities. From macro perspectives, museum curators serve as active agents in informing the public about the relevance of conservation initiatives for the culture-led development in the Province of Laguna, Philippines; therefore, the experiences of the museum curators really play significant roles towards the fullest realizations of the conservation vision. This study aimed at describing the lived experiences of the museum in the Province of Laguna on the conservation of cultural and historical heritage using the transcendental phenomenology. Results revealed that various factors positively contributed to making cultural and heritage conservation possible and successful according to the experiences of ten (10) museum curators: personal factors (passion, goal orientation, and self-efficacy); social factors (collaborative efforts, stakeholders' participation, community's trust and initiative) and institutional factors (financial allocation, trainings, resources, and research). Also, museum curators addressed the challenges and problems through establishing partnerships with other organizations and engaging in training, workshop, seminars, and research. Moreover, museum curators were also confronted with the technological advancement which changes the demographics and preferences of the general public in getting information. In these regard, museum curators utilized social media to foster awareness among people regarding cultural and heritage conservation. They were also planning to incorporate digitalization in such endeavor to cater wider audience and to network possible advocates.*

Keywords: Conservation, Cultural Heritage, Museum Curators, Phenomenology, Laguna.

I.   Introduction

Cultural heritage is very essential to people's lives as it validates human existence. The cultural and historical heritage entail triumphs, history, life struggles, intelligence, and challenges of human ancestors that play significant roles in the future of mankind. In this regard, the importance of culture and historical heritage has become one of the major ventures in the policy-making process both in the national and international organizations. Essentially, the protection and preservation of such could bring out sustainable development not only in tourism but also in other related disciplines. This idea is supported by Petty et al. (2020) in which they mentioned that cultural heritage is a social and cultural process that has much to add to the concept and practice of sustainable development. Sustainable development is defined as meeting present-day needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Altan, 2018). While the nations strive for continuous improvement, the unique cultures and rich history would not be negotiated at the expense of development.

In the Philippines, many heritage sites and ancestral houses were demolished, were bought by private investors for business purposes, adapted as local warehouses or converted to high-rise condominiums in the sake of modernization and development, or just being left out to deteriorate (Cruz, 2017). Responding to these issues, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and other cultural agencies made collective efforts to push through the Republic Act No. 10066 otherwise known as the "National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009" that lays down the parameters for cultural heritage based on the instruments provided by the UNESCO. The legislation considers cultural heritage referring to the totality of cultural property preserved and developed through time and passed on to posterity (Art. II, Section 3).

According to San Miguel (2019), "cultural heritage preservation is an important means to understand the historic wealth where the culture comes from, signifying the essential of culture in both country and its people. Cultural heritage preservation caters the balance of the atmosphere of the historic past experience that

will harmonize the modern society today. Hence, culture is one of the inspirations to steward the present and the future." The conservation efforts are contributors to strengthen the integrity and dignity of the Filipino people. The historical treasures and cultural traditions manifest the real richness of the Philippine society.

Museum curators, on the other hand, serve as art specialists responsible for a museum's collection and exhibitions (Adamopoulou & Solomon, 2017). The role of the museum curators during the last decades has been gaining more importance and a far more complex phenomenon. In fact, the responsibilities of museum curators have transformed and become not only limited to the local museums or galleries. Their responsibilities have expanded through time from just mere collectors and presenters of artworks up to administrator, amateur, author of introductions, librarian, manager and accountant, animator, conservator, financier, and diplomat (Vitkauskaitė, 2016). Deuchar (2017) also mentioned that, in the 21st century, the roles of museum curators have been expanded from keepers of objects with specialist knowledge towards a broader hybrid to educator, storyteller, entrepreneur, fundraiser, and facilitator of learning. Museum curators also provide platforms where artists' ideas and interests would become responsive to the situations in which it occurs, and it should address timely artistic, social, cultural or political issues creatively (Vitkauskaitė, 2016; Fowle, 2017). Indeed, the role of the museum curators during the last decades has been gaining more importance and a far more complex phenomenon.

True enough, unlike before, museum curators are more deeply engaged with their audiences than ever, and more open to sharing and interpreting their collections beyond the individual institutions that own them. Although there have been significant shifts in the environment for curatorship in recent years, many local museums have seen dramatic cuts and job losses, and there are few curators whose lives have not changed in some way as a result (Deuchar, 2017). In effect, there was a major decline in the number of curatorial and subject-specialist roles in museums over the past decade, alongside a strong perception that vital skills and subject knowledge were being lost. While much was written about how foreign countries implemented the conservation of cultural and historical heritage, this research problem is still less investigated in the Philippine context. Also, the museum curators' lived experiences in the local museums are still understudied. Therefore, with these considerations, the researcher desired to venture into this study of explicating museum curators' lived experiences and determining up to what extent they have been engaged in the actualization of conservation efforts for communicating the relevance of cultural and historical heritage conservation in the Province of Laguna, Philippines.

II.   Methods

To closely analyze the experiences of the museum curators, the researcher utilized the transcendental phenomenology as a guide. This type of phenomenological method requires the researcher to access the participants' experience of the phenomenon pre-reflectively - that is without resorting to categorization on conceptualization, and quite often includes what is taken for granted or those things that are common sense (Tuffour, 2017). The researcher utilized key-informant interviews as the main tool to document the first-hand experiences of the (ten) 10 museum curators in the Province of Laguna. The researcher-constructed questionnaire consisting of twenty (20) open-ended questions: 10 questions answer the "what" of the study pertaining to the lived experiences of museum curators and another 10 questions respond to the "how" part that explains the ways on how they respond to the challenges and demands of cultural and historical conservation. The participants were identified using purposive criterion sampling technique. During the conduct of the study, the researcher adhered to all health protocols mandated by the IATF and LGU to ensure the safety of the participants. The researcher also followed the ethical considerations detailed by Creswell (2017), as cited in Capal (2020).

III.   Results And Discussions

1.   As to the lived experience of museum curators in the Province of Laguna.

Theme 1: Collaboration is a Real Driver. This theme represents the shared vision and collaborative efforts of various agencies in the conservation of cultural and historical heritage. Museum curators revealed that different institutions namely government, non-government, and private organizations worked hand in hand to pursue the main objectives of the conservation plan. They also underscored that there were organizations that put forward some initiatives concerning the conservation endeavor such as conducting several workshops and training that are deemed relevant to the overall attainment of the conservation plan. The results were consistent with the statement of Moreno-Mendoza et al. (2019), in which she stated that the stakeholder networks, as a competitive

advantage in cultural institutions, play an important role in creating or improving cultural heritage products, as well as helping to develop responsible tourism. Wang et al. (2019) mentioned that sustainable development for heritage tourism is people-oriented which puts premium on the efficient participation of the public and stakeholders.

Theme 2: Keep Open, Be Secured. This theme represents the learning experiences acquired by the museum curators upon assuming the position in cultural office. Museum curators consistently involved themselves in conducting research on historical accounts, doing local cultural inventory, checking of collections and facilitating of museum guests, spearheading collaborative activities with prospective stakeholders, increasing the number of conservation advocates, coordinating with educational institutions, and understanding the local history and culture. In connection, Zerrudo (2019) pointed out that conservation professionals can initiate heritage appreciation by assuming various roles such as an educational role to in providing information; a bureaucratic role in providing consultation; a supporting role in encouraging participation; and a facilitating role in ensuring involvement. Additionally, Deuchar (2017) argued that the roles of curators have been expanded from traditional collectors of tangible objects worth to be displayed in the museums, organizers of art exhibits, keepers of objects with specialist knowledge towards a broader hybrid to educator, storyteller, entrepreneur, fundraiser, and facilitator of learning. The dramatic shift of their tasks responded to the needs of the conservation process in the cultural and historical heritage in the 21st century demands.

Theme 3: Community Empowerment is Relationship. This theme shows the mechanisms utilized by the museum curators to inculcate a sense of nationalism among community people of Biñan City. Museum curators revealed that they have built connection with different institutions and organizations with the aim of strengthening partnerships for shared resources towards the achievement of the desired conservation goals, leading to community empowerment. The results echo the statement of Terzic et al. (2018), in which they emphasized that local community have important roles in the development of sustainable cultural heritage conservation and tourism such as respecting local culture, conserving natural resources, and educating both tourists and local residents. Moreover, Chan (2016) highlighted the role of participatory process as a component of contemporary preservation practice in heritage management. He emphasized the caring relationship is needed when encouraging people to get involved in the heritage participatory program since public participation is critical to the ethical performance of cultural heritage management.

Theme 4: Local Museum mirrors One's Identity. This theme fuels the engine of the conservation process. The relevance of local museums must not only be appreciated for academic undertaking or for leisure activity, but also for representing history, challenges, and triumphs of the ancestors. Museum curators shared that academic communities must provide equal importance between highly academic learning areas. In addition, they also revealed that there are values, stories, and practices of the past that can be rekindled by these cultural and historical properties which are indeed relevant to the full appreciation and identity-formation of people's wellbeing. Similarly, Memisoglu & Kamci (2017) cited some benefits of museum to students: 1) helps understand the values of historical artifacts and cultural properties of the past protect the cultural heritage and internalize multiculturalism by tolerating different cultures; 2.) harness critical thinking abilities on the past and history discipline through helping them to see how past is evaluated; 3.) helps the protection of national identity, culture and memory and help them handing down the historical and cultural heritage to next generations; and help the formation and development of abilities like observation, using imagination and creativity, and emotions like aesthetics or like.

Theme 5: The Perks of Having a Supportive Local Government. This theme depicts the relevance of the unwavering supports of the local government towards the rationalization and realization of the conservation plan. Museum curators revealed that local government has been very supportive in the endeavors involving cultural and historical conservation. They mentioned that the local government has allocated budget to finance various activities initiated by the City Tourism Office which deliver positive impacts on the conservation undertaking. In addition, they also shared that local government units hired additional human resources who were assigned to execute tasks such as cultural mapping, assessing cultural impacts, documenting historical accounts, and linking the office to various organizations. In relation, Aydan et al. (2016) mentioned that local municipalities should lead the role in conservation of historical and cultural values, because these values must be evaluated by local dynamics. Also, Goral (2017) emphasized the role of local authorities in managing cultural heritage resources particularly in specifying and achieving cultural policy goals. She also argued local authorities' collaboration with stakeholders involved in guiding the development of culture in the community and their active participation in its implementation have proven that these resources are of great importance to the local community.

Theme 6: Love Knows No Boundaries. This theme discusses the internal motivations of the museum curators in pursuing the conservation process. These internal motivations have driven them to keep inspired and steadfast amidst the possibilities of failures and challenges. Museum curators jointly shared that the love for cultures, history, and the arts has become their strong foundation in this long-term engagement and lifetime commitment. Being devoted advocates even before assuming the position of museum curators, the participants mentioned that they are really passionate in promoting awareness to people about the significance of cultural conservation which are indeed beneficial to the socio-economic development.

Theme 7: Culture is a Long-term Asset. This theme represents the gains that the local community could obtain from cultural conservation. Museum curators stated that culture, whether tangible or intangible, is a long-term asset that the local policy makers and community development planner must put premium on to pursue inclusive development in their respective local communities. Also, museum curators confirmed that they used cultural mapping as a community engagement tool to archive and locate the cultural assets of the communities including those tangibles, intangible, movable, and immovable components. In congruence, Chung & Lee (2019) discussed the significant role of the community as a carrier of cultural resources and heritage, assets which contribute to the creation of a community's identity. Through cultural mapping, the community is exclusively engaged in the endeavor of locating the cultural properties that have been neglected and undiscovered in the communities. Likewise, Assumma & Ventura (2017) considered cultural mapping as a functional instrument utilized in the local development processes to enhance territorial resources and to increase local growth in terms of environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Theme 8: Academic Community an as Enabling Institution. This theme discusses the relevance of participation of academic communities in the execution of the conservation plan. Education is seen as important contributor to strengthen the implementation of cultural and heritage conservation plan. Museum curators mentioned that they have coordinated with the educational institutions to push through program goals to the educational administrators, instructional designers, curriculum developers, teachers and students as the drivers of change in the context of conservation of cultural and historical heritage. Boxtel et al. (2017) stated that to instill the value of cultural conservation into students' minds, they must be required to visit memory institutions such as monuments, archeological sites, landscapes, historical places and discover past history. They might also be involved in illustrating historical events, illustrating artifacts, and raising historical queries which can be done in the classroom. Similarly, Srivastava (2015) pointed out that cultural heritage educational programs must also be conducted in schools to support the conversation plan. He mentioned that schools might utilize public conferences, audio, visual shows, street plays, exhibitions, heritage newspapers, annual celebrations, heritage festivals, heritage walks and publications to create awareness about cultural and heritage education.

Theme 9: Community-Based Activities Induce Active Participation. This theme presents the relevance of community-based activities in instigating peace and social harmony in the local communities. Museum curators stated that the local government has consistently allocated budget cut for the conduct of these community-based activities, because these celebrations are not conducted to conform to the annual traditions and cultural practices only, but these are effective ways to bring people together with joy and happiness while valuing the principles of solidarity and self-worth. In connection, Shimray (2019) noted that conducting cultural heritage festivals present the vibrant power of cultural improvement and establish social connection to people. These celebrations and festivals make general people educated about the significance of heritage conservation for development. Getz (2018) also affirmed that cultural and heritage festival contribute a lot to economic development as these provide employment, attract tourists, and promote the inherited identities for promotion and recognition.

Theme 10: Conservation as a Multifaceted Activity. This theme discusses the dynamic and multidimensional perspectives of the conservation process. Museum curators highlighted that conservation is a multifaceted undertaking that must not solely be done by the assigned agency or organization but also with the collaboration of various stakeholders. This undertaking is made possible by conducting activities that require people to collaborate and contribute to the attainment of the conservation goals. Museum curators also agreed that tourism office is not only the beneficiary of these goals but also other sectors that value socio-economic competitiveness and sustainable development of local communities. According to American Institute for Conservation (2021), "conservation encompasses all those actions taken toward the long-term preservation of cultural heritage. Activities include examination, documentation, treatment, and preventive care, supported by research and education."

2. As to how the participants coped with the demands and challenges of being a museum curator:

Theme 11: Partnership Lessens Shortage. This theme represents the concept of "responsibility sharing" in the conservation of cultural and historical heritage. Museum curators jointly noted that the time-honored relationship helped them foster positive attitudes towards the conservation process and build rapport to various stakeholders whose passions and motivations are parallel. They also explained that while the local government unit had allocated budget for the conduct of cultural initiatives and activities in their respective cities and municipalities, the financial allocation was still not enough to sustain and maintain the implemented conservation programs and projects. In connection, Spiridon & Sandu (2018) noted several ways in which community members can be encouraged to become active actors and collaborators in the preservation/restoration process of cultural heritage assets and promoters of tourism policies and processes and the cultural, ethnographic and religious values that such assets embody. Aas et al. (2017) accentuated that stakeholder collaboration is relevant to heritage management and tourism development. Stakeholder partnership is found to have helped in the generation of income through tourism activities and collaborative decision making for heritage conservation.

Theme 12: Training Empowers Learning. This theme depicts the innovative practices employed by the museum curators to sharpen their skills and update themselves in the new ideas relating to the job responsibilities in the conservation program. Museum curators revealed that they have attended several training workshops which are deemed relevant to their job as museum curators. Some of these workshops include the culture-sensitive governance, digitalization, cultural mapping, community museum, etc. Zaid & Abioye (2018) investigated the training needs of workers in heritage institution in Nigeria, the training program available, aspects of heritage preservation covered the facilities in place and the obstacles encountered. They pointed out that various organizations developed curriculum, created delivery framework and developed training model for staff members working in heritage institutions in Nigeria to increase local capacity through organizational and professional development. AIC (2021) argued that conservators need to embody a canon of knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience which can be acquired through training. They must also be aware of analytical techniques and treatments that may compromise future research on the cultural heritage through proper training.

Theme 13: Resistance to Change. This theme presents one of the challenges encountered in the conservation process. It was revealed that the assigned office for conservation program has no direct power to make the business owners' mindset change. Museum curators revealed that some business establishments refrained from changing their facades and interior design so as to fit in the structures and styles embedded in the conservation plan. Furthermore, they also shared that there were still obstructions that need to be removed to capture the authentic beauty of the historical and cultural properties. This is consistent with the results of Iliyasu (2017), which he found out that people rather partake in ruin and destroying them instead of participating in preserving those historic elements. Spiridon & Sandu (2018) mentioned that the active community members' engagement in the broader process of conservation of cultural heritage assets must involve looking into the incidence of conscious deterioration/degradation of the cultural heritage assets such causes of vandalism, ignorance, negligence, carelessness or inattention that have been reported in the current integrated platforms for cultural and environmental education and information.

Theme 14: Social Media as a Means to Increase Advocates. This theme depicts the innovative method utilized by the museum curators to inform people about the conduct of cultural activities, schedule of heritage tour, fun facts associated to the historical and cultural properties, and other important announcements. Museum curators shared that they used social media to encourage people to be engaged in the realization of conservation goals in the local community. They also disclosed that utilization of social media as a means to communicate the relevance of the conservation platforms of the office was certainly more convenient for them as this allowed them to get connected to a wider audience as compared to traditional method.

The technological advancement creates strong possibilities of informing wide audience across the world about the importance of cultural and heritage conservation in human development. Nowadays, the shifting of communication medium, from traditional face-to-face meeting to technology-assisted engagement, is exclusively seen to various organizations including those who advocate for cultural and heritage conservation. Vassiliadis & Belenioti (2019) stated that social media facilitates interpretation of cultural experiences to boost dialogue, real time communication and engagement with visitors; social media also enables participatory learning as it connects people together to share similar experiences in cultural conservation; and social expands museums' authenticity, and they diminish the boundaries and authority of conventional museums. Likewise,

Owiny et al. (2018) emphasized the social media is amenable to be utilized in the preservation of indigenous knowledge. Social media and mobile technologies can open opportunities to document, disseminate, and raise awareness about indigenous knowledge form local and international partnerships.

Theme 15: Globalization leads to Museum Digitalization. This theme discusses the innovation practices that the museum curators wish to do in the future as everything has become digitalized. Museum curators jointly agreed that museum digitalization would be an effective way to educate the public about the significance of treasuring and appreciating the cultural and historical properties that can be found in local community. Also, they emphasized that it would be a gateway for the educational planners, policy makers, curriculum developer to include curated learning and cultural appreciation as learning competencies that must be instilled among students not only on cultural-related subjects but also across all learning areas. Not & Petrelli (2019) proposed ways to support cultural heritage professionals (CHPs) in the process of creating and deploying a wide range of different personalized interactive experiences that combine the physical (objects, collection and spaces) and the digital (multimedia content). Aside from that personalization interface used by CHPs, another technologically driven method developed for the museum management was MusA which uses indoor positioning and navigation to enhance cultural experiences (Rubino et al., 2016; Poce et a., 2019).

Theme 16: Awareness at Its Best. This theme signifies the long-overdue challenge bestowed to the museum curators. Museum curators pointed out that creating awareness on cultural and heritage conservation to people is a demanding and tiring task. It needs a consistent follow-up programs or projects to deepen and strengthen the program goals in the mindset of the people. It also requires various resources, whether in the forms of financial, human, physical, intellectual, and even psychological, to ensure that the conservation program would be rightfully implemented in the local community. In relation, Perez & Templaza (2012) underscored that the conduct of seminars, conferences, lecture series and workshops about history, culture, heritage and local studies helps in the promoting and increasing in awareness and appreciation of history, culture, heritage and local studies, thus opening opportunities and interests for research on the said fields.

Theme 17: Research is the Bloodline of Conservation Endeavor. This theme depicts the importance of research undertaking in the realization of conservation objectives. Without intensive research, museum curators cannot successfully point out the cultural and historical properties that worthy to be saved and recovered from possible extinction and depreciation. Museum curators shared that there is a lot of cultural and historical properties, whether intangible and intangible, that are still undiscovered and unmapped out. The importance of research in conservation endeavor is further discussed by Katrakazis et al. (2018). They pointed out that there is an increasing need for heritage science and conservation institutions to engage in knowledge dissemination pathways that extend beyond traditional journal article publishing to new models of research sharing and knowledge exchange. Heritage science and conservation institutions, as key players within the heritage sector, need to negotiate affordable and sustainable open access options for publishing institutions and journals. Perez & Templaza (2018) also noted that availability of researches and studies on history, culture, heritage and local studies increase people's interest for research on the fields of history, culture, heritage and local studies, thus enriching and widening the views and understanding of the said fields.

IV. Conclusions

Various factors positively contributed to making cultural and heritage conservation possible and successful: museum curators' personal factors (passion, goal orientation, and self-efficacy); social factors (collaborative efforts, stakeholders' participation, community's trust and initiative) and institutional factors (financial allocation, trainings, resources, and research). The museum curators addressed the challenges and problems confronting them brought about by cultural and heritage conservation through establishing partnerships with external and internal organizations who have invested interests in the conservation plan to provide them with needed resources towards the realization of the program's vision and mission. They have also consistently engaged in training, workshop, seminars, and research to keep them updated with the current policies and contemporary methods that can make their works easier and more productive.

Moreover, museum curators were also confronted with the technological advancement which changes the demographics and preferences of the general public in getting information. In these regards, museum curators utilized social media to foster awareness among people regarding cultural and heritage conservation. They were also planning to incorporate digitalization in such endeavor to cater wider audience and to network possible advocates.

V. Recommendations

Examining museum curators' experiences provides a valuable information for the national government, local government, related offices and departments, private organization, non-government group, and general public on what ways they could extend assistance and resources to make the cultural and heritage conservation successful. In this study, the research recommends that the local government, together with the assistance of NCCA and other relevant agencies needs to develop a Local Museum Master Plan which sets out a road map for all future activities and projects towards the realization of cultural and heritage conservation framework. They must also create more employment items for museum curators and museum staff to increase human resources who would work on the conservation program in their respective localities. Moreover, the said additional manpower would also attract best service providers for museum curatorship, which in a way, affects the overall achievement of conservation plan.

To respond to the digitalization of museum experiences, museum curators, through tourism office, must be a website created specifically to cater digital visitors who would like to have a different mode of museum experiences. Aside from digital gallery, this website also consists of information about conservation, fun facts or historical trivia, schedule of cultural activities, and other relevant features that need to be cascaded down to the general public.

In relation to educational landscape, local museum curators need to intensify their engagement to educational institutions through asking teachers to localize some contents of the lesson with the aim of making students appreciate their own cultural and heritage. This is also done to strengthen the vision of the conservation initiatives in the local communities. Additionally, Commission on Higher Education (CHED) must look into possibility of offering Bachelor of Arts in Museum Studies and Curatorship for those individuals who have passion in conserving cultural and historical heritage in the country. The said specialized course would help solve the decreasing number of fully pledged museum curators in the country. Thus, such program would intensify the awareness of people on the significance of museum learning on individual's wellbeing.

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