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UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN BICOL MUSEUMS

Master's Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Discourse on the inclusion and participation of "communities" and "community engagement" in museums has signalled a growing shift toward community-oriented museum practice. This study seeks to understand how four museums in the Bicol Region of the Philippines understand and practice community engagement. It also explores how local residents perceive the role of museums. It draws on interviews with museum professionals and focus groups with local residents.

Findings show that the museums frame community engagement as a form of outreach, through a variety of top-down practices ranging from educational programmes to identity building. More participatory approaches, such as collaboration, consultation, and co-creation, are not yet widely adopted in this region. From the locals' perspective, museums are valued for education and heritage preservation, but there is a desire for them to take stronger stances against issues such as historical revisionism.

The study provides insights into the challenges faced by museums in the region and highlights the need for a clearer understanding of "community", stronger institutional support, and more participatory engagement models in the Philippine museum sector that actively involve and attract both existing and potential visitors.

Keywords: museums, heritage, community, museum education, community engagement

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Museums are often viewed as spaces to represent, interpret, and learn about a community's cultural heritage and history. Traditionally seen as authoritative institutions that collect, conserve, and display objects, museums are now evolving into dynamic institutions wherein these tasks are performed in the service of society (International Council of Museums, 2022). This shift from object-centred to a people-centred approach reflects a rethinking of the museum's social responsibility.

This dissertation seeks to understand how local museums in the Bicol Region of the Philippines engage with local people. It asks how these museums define "community", what engagement practices they implement, how their idea of community influences these practices, and what their role is in their surrounding area. The term "community" in quotation marks is used here in the general sense in which it appears in museum discourse, not pertaining to any specific group of people, while recognising that it is a complex and context-dependent concept. Part of this study's objective is to explore how the museums themselves construct and interpret the idea of "community" in practice. The term "community engagement" is likewise used here in a broader sense. It does not refer to engagement with a specific community; rather, it describes how museums interact with people, build relationships with them, and actively involve them to participate in museum activities. While community engagement is now a prominent theme in international museum discourse, it remains relatively underexplored in the context of Philippine museums. By focusing on museums in Bicol, this study aims to contribute to the wider literature on participatory museology by providing insight into local museum practice in an underresearched area.

The shift toward more inclusive and participatory museums is often associated with the New Museology movement of the 1970s, which critically reexamined the museum's traditionalist origins and called for a democratic and collaborative approach (Vergo, 1989). This movement led to the emergence of new museum models, such as the ecomuseum and the community museum, which position the "community" as active participants and co-creators. The growing emphasis on such participation is reflected in practices including co-curated exhibitions, collaborative research projects, community consultation, and partnerships with underrepresented communities.

In the Philippines, museums and other cultural organisations are largely concentrated in the capital region of Metro Manila. Community engagement in museums in the Philippines remains an emerging topic, as evidenced by the limited literature. The research suggests that many museums, especially in provincial areas, prioritise tourism over local participation due to its profitability (De La Paz, 2011; Labrador, 2010; Ma-alat, 2022). Existing research on Philippine museological community engagement is situated in the context of public archaeology or built heritage conservation projects rather than in museums (see Kintanar & Barretto-Tesoro, 2020; Dulnuan & Ledesdma, 2020; del Mundo-Angeles et al., 2024). This points to a gap in understanding the practices of Philippine museums regarding community involvement that this dissertation seeks to fill.

My interest in this topic emerged from both academic and personal experiences. I grew up in Bicol and was familiar with a handful of local museums, but I had not thought deeply about their purpose or potential until I began my master's degree in Education in Museums and Heritage. During my studies, I was introduced to the topic of community engagement in museums through our coursework and visits to various museums throughout Europe. I encountered museums that co-created exhibitions with local residents or with members of marginalised groups, such as the LGBTQIA+ community, and offered participatory educational programmes. Through these initiatives, they created spaces for voices and perspectives that had not previously been welcomed. These experiences shifted my perspective on what museums could be. I began to reflect on whether similar practices existed in Philippine museums.

Choosing Bicol as the focus of this research felt both natural and necessary. My knowledge of the area provided a good starting point, and I was pleasantly surprised to learn that there are actually 36 museums in the region and that the Bicol Association of Museums was reestablished in the past year. These show a significant openness toward museums. Thus, I wanted to understand how Bicol museums were engaging with local people and how their work was understood by the people. This dissertation is guided by the following main questions:

1. How do local museums in the Bicol Region engage with those they define as communities?
2. How do people in the Bicol Region understand and relate to museums?

Alongside these primary research questions, this dissertation also examines how these museums define “community” and how such definitions guide their engagement practices. It explores which community engagement practices are commonly shared among museums, the perceived role and relevance of museums within their areas, the ways in which these museums contribute to shaping or reinforcing cultural identity, and the role of museum education in these processes.

These questions will be answered through qualitative research methods through in-depth interviews with museum professionals from four Bicol museums: the University of Nueva Caceres Museum, Museo de Casa San Rafael, Museo Bulawan, and Museo Sorsogon. To complement this institutional perspective, focus group discussions were conducted with nine young professionals living in Bicol to gather local views on museums and their relevance.

The significance of this dissertation lies in its contributions to Philippine museum studies and to the wider literature on community engagement in museums. By focusing on a region outside of Metro Manila, this study offers much-needed insight into practices and perspectives that are often underrepresented in national-level discussions. It foregrounds the lived experiences of museum workers, shedding light on the challenges they navigate in the course of their work, and presents feedback and experiences of Bicol Region residents who have visited several of the region’s museums. The findings may offer useful insights for museum practitioners, educators, and policymakers who are interested in developing community-centred approaches and in overall museum improvement.

This dissertation is organised into five main chapters. This first chapter provides an overview of the research topic, outlining its background and significance. It introduces the research questions and objectives that will be answered and serves as a guide to developing the research methodology.

The second chapter reviews the literature relevant to community engagement in museums, covering both theoretical and practical concepts to provide a comprehensive look at the foundational and current literature on the topic. It also examines the concept of “community”, which is crucial for understanding the dynamics of community engagement. This chapter also explores the history of museums in the Philippines and the current issues that they face.

The third chapter provides information on the Bicol Region and its museum landscape. It details the research methodology, including the sample of museums and community members, the qualitative data collection methods, data analysis process, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

The fourth chapter presents the findings from the data collected, presented through seven key themes. Lastly, the fifth chapter summarises the key findings and their implications for Philippine museum practice, suggests opportunities to improve community engagement and participation, and provides recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review critically examines how “community” is conceptualised in museum studies, the various theories and models of community engagement in museums, and how these ideas have been taken up (if at all) within the context of Philippine museums. The first section explores theoretical and conceptual frameworks for understanding “community”, highlighting its multiple definitions and dynamic and socially constructed nature. The second section reviews literature on community engagement in museums, focusing on models of engagement, participatory practices, and the outcomes of engagement. The final section turns to the Philippine museum landscape, where limited but growing scholarship and practice reveal the unique challenges and opportunities of community engagement. Altogether, this literature review provides the foundation for my research, which aims to understand the complexities of defining and engaging communities in and through museums, particularly in the Philippine context.

3.1. “Community”

In this dissertation, I maintain my explanation of the usage of the term "community," which I discussed in the Introduction. The term is presented in quotation marks to signify its general use as a concept, rather than being linked to a specific group of people. This approach acknowledges the complexity inherent in the notion of “community”, as evidenced by the discussion below.

The concept of “community” has been extensively discussed, with scholars proposing various definitions. A central theme across these definitions is the notion of sharing something in common. Ferdinand Tönnies’ (1887/2002) concept of *Gemeinschaft* reflects this concept, which describes “community” as a group of people bound by shared commonalities and close social ties. These commonalities can range from geographical location to shared experiences, histories, cultures, and interests, which can oftentimes overlap (Amit, 2002; Smith, 2013).

Building on this idea, other authors place greater emphasis on the connections that bind people together, defining “community” as a web of relationships and the social networks to which individuals belong (Lee & Newby, 1983). In this view, it is in interactions within

these networks that build "community", a process Beem (1999, cited in Smith, 2013) describes as "knitting the social fabric". Thus, interactions build relationships, which, in turn, form communities.

Benedict Anderson's (1991) concept of "imagined communities" highlights that communities can also exist without face-to-face interactions. For example, individuals belonging to the same nation may never meet but share a collective identity, often based on shared symbolic constructs such as culture or language. This aligns with what Anthony Cohen (1985, p. 9) describes in his work on "communities of meaning," where he argues that people symbolically construct "community" through "a system of values, norms, and moral codes which provides a sense of identity within a bounded whole to its members". He further argues that "community" is also "symbolically bounded" as community members recognise what unites them and distinguishes them from other groups (Cohen, 1985).

The emotional dimension of "community" is likewise significant. Amit (2002, p. 16) describes "community" as "visceral" in nature, involving "embodied, sensual, and emotionally charged affiliations". This makes sense when considering how it can shape one's sense of self while nurturing a sense of belonging through the relationships it fosters (Watson, 2007; Crooke, 2010). These qualities build on the typically positive connotations of "community". However, as Howarth (2001) argues, this is not always the case, especially when predetermined ideas of "community" are imposed onto people and these conflict with individuals' self-identities. Similarly, Crooke (2010) highlights how "community" can also be used as a label borne out of "expediency and purpose".

In the Philippines, Fernando Zialcita (1996) explored the "empirical content" of the concept by examining four aspects of the social system—the economy and ecosystem, kinship system, polity, and religion—across three different regional groups. He found that the concept of "community" varies across these groups:

> A culture where only one type of group is meaningful will presumably have only one concept of community, while one with several types of groups fosters several concepts of community. (Zialcita, 1996, p. 21)

Zialcita (1996) also frames "community" as an emotive concept, defined through common activities, mutual feelings, and positive interactions, mirroring what has been

discussed by other scholars above. However, he points out that this understanding of "community" can raise problems as it requires methods to assess the intensity of emotional bonds and the quality of interactions, and it complicates the task of defining clear boundaries, since individuals often belong to multiple communities whose significance may shift depending on the context.

In the realm of museums and heritage, the concept of "community" has become a key focus in recent decades. This first took root with the emergence of the New Museology concept in the 1970s, which challenged exclusionary and static museum practices in favour of "socially engaged museums" that prioritised active community participation and representation (Bennett, 1995; Vergo, 1989). One effect of this ideological shift was the rise of eco-museums and community museums, which were created with the specific purpose of involving locals in preserving local heritage and environment. Maria de Lourdes Horta (cited in Weil, 2007) describes this transformation in small community-led history museums in Brazil:

> For this moment, in my country, [museums] are being used in a new way, as tools for self-expression, self-recognition and representation, as spaces of power negotiation among social forces, as strategies for empowering people so [that] they are more capable to decide their own destiny. (p. 44)

Perhaps the clearest example of the centrality of the "community" concept in contemporary museology is found in the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) most recent "museum" definition, which states that museums should carry out their core functions of collecting, conserving, researching, interpreting, and exhibiting "in the service of society and with the participation of communities" (ICOM, 2022).

While museums frequently refer to "communities" in their work, they are often challenged when clearly defining whom they mean. Sheila Watson (2007) observes that museums typically interpret "community" as those living in their surrounding geographical area, while Nina Simon (2010) argues that it is either the general public or "everyone who does not currently visit here". Alternatively, Moore (2015) proposes that it may refer to a specific group that has historically been excluded, which a museum programme or exhibition seeks to cater to as a demonstration of inclusion. However, framing "community" in this way can come with some problems. Waterton and Smith (2010) caution against a "rhetoric of

community", wherein "communities" are disingenuously used by museums, heritage professionals, or policymakers to "feel good" about the work that they do.

It could be that the difficulty lies in the inherent ambiguity of the term "community", as evidenced by the various conceptualisations across the literature. This ambiguity may also reflect museums' lack of critical reflection about whom they serve. Moore (2015) argues that the problem is compounded by a tendency to view a social entity as one "monolith" labelled as "community", rather than recognising its internal diversity. In contrast, Schorch (2017, p. 41) conceptualises "communities" as "dynamic networks that become interpretively assembled, disassembled, and reassembled through the relations between individual actors, objects and curatorial practices", highlighting their fluid and relational nature.

In discussing the relationship between museums and what they define as "communities", it is important to remember that the power dynamics between the two are usually imbalanced, with museums holding more authority (Watson, 2007). Acknowledging this power imbalance is central to James Clifford's (1997, p. 192) concept of museums as "contact zones", wherein the museum becomes a dialogical space between itself and "the community", establishing an ongoing "historical, political, moral relationship". It is within this relationship that community engagement ideally arises, because genuine engagement requires dialogue and reciprocity rather than one-sided authority. When museums and communities interact within a collaborative framework, engagement can move beyond tokenism. Community engagement will be further discussed in the next section.

How different is a museum's "community" from "the public" or a target audience? According to Watson (2007), the term "the public" is too broad to describe a museum's "community" and it fails to account for the diversity of communities. In contrast, a target audience differs from a "community" because it refers to people who engage with the museum's content in a more transactional dynamic, often defined by demographics, and is used for marketing purposes (Watson, 2007). An example of this distinction can be found in Miles'(1986) categorisation of museum audiences. This framework includes three types: "actual audiences"—those who actually visit the museum; "potential audiences"—those the museum envisions reaching, often reflected in mission and vision statements; and "target audiences"—more narrowly defined groups identified for strategic purposes, such as marketing or programming. A target audience might be entirely hypothetical or based on

empirical insights from actual or potential visitors. This approach is beneficial for planning museum programmes and considering audience engagement strategies. However, a target audience can be a museum's "community" if the museum develops an ongoing reciprocal relationship with them and the engagement moves beyond mere consumption and into dialogue or collaboration.

One approach for museums to define what they see as their communities is to approach them as "interpretive communities". According to Hooper-Greenhill (1999, 2000), visitors co-construct their museum experience by drawing from their own contexts. Different interpretations can emerge depending on the individual; thus, the museum becomes a site for making meanings and negotiating them. These communities, characterised by shared interpretive strategies, actively make meaning from their museum experiences through these strategies, drawing on common references and ways of understanding (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, 2000). This has significant implications for museum practices, particularly in exhibition development and communication.

Mason (2005) builds on Hooper-Greenhill's work by offering a more nuanced framework for understanding how museums conceptualise "their communities". She proposes seven types of "museum communities": those defined by shared historical or cultural experiences; by specialist knowledge, such as enthusiasts or scholars of a particular subject; by demographic or socio-economic factors, including age or income level; by identities, such as gender or ethnicity; by visiting practices; by their exclusion from other communities; and by geographical location. This typology encourages museums to critically reflect on their assumptions about "community" and consider how different forms of "community" can influence interpretation, programming, and representation.

Onciul (2015) argues that while the discussion on "community" in museums is currently "in vogue", it should not be dismissed as a mere fad. Instead, she urges scholars and practitioners to take this as an opportunity to advocate for more meaningful community engagement and to develop more robust conceptualisations and deeper understandings within museological practice. However, if museums have not clearly defined who their "community" is, then who, exactly, are they engaging? Without such clarity, engagement risks becoming tokenistic or limited to groups already visible to the institution.

The literature suggests that attempting to pin down a singular definition of "community" is complicated and shows it to be multifaceted and context-dependent. Still, some common themes emerge, such as commonalities, social ties, emotional bonds, and symbolic boundaries. "Community" can be lived and imagined, tangible and symbolic, formed through interactions and constructed through shared values, meanings, and identities. This complexity is carried over into museological practice, where "community" is not a fixed entity but a shifting construct. It can be rooted in museums' relationships with their audiences, the geographical area in which they are located, or in the types of people who visit the museum, but it can also serve as a framework for the museums' initiatives, sometimes without clearly identifying which "community" they are actually referring to. The way museums understand, define, and interact with "communities" is a critical area of inquiry in this dissertation, as it underpins meaningful engagement with the local population, which the next section will explore in more depth.

3.2. Community Engagement in Museums

As I stated in the Introduction, my usage of "community engagement" does not necessarily refer to engagement with a specific community; rather, it refers to the wide range of processes through which museums build relationships with individuals and groups beyond their institutional walls, with the aim of fostering mutual benefit. It is often discussed alongside or used interchangeably with "participation"; I have adopted this usage in my discussion.

According to Onciul (2015), museums create "engagement zones" when working with "communities". When both the "community" and the museum participate in this zone, various outcomes can be achieved, for example, changes to museum policies and practices, the development of new exhibitions or programmes, and opportunities for "community" members to volunteer at the museum (Onciul, 2015). For Crooke (2015), "community involvement" in museums introduces diversity into museums by encouraging staff to look beyond the museum walls, collaborating with people to uncover new stories that reflect a broader range of experiences.

In understanding community engagement in museums, it is essential to revisit the discussion on power relations between museums and communities, as community

engagement seeks to shift these dynamics, challenging traditional roles that position the museum as the expert and the "community" as a passive subject or consumer (Watson, 2007; Lynch, 2011; Boehm, 2015). Participatory practices allow people to have a more active, collaborative role in the museum. This is reflected in the various engagement models adopted in practice. Some models are discussed below.

Sherry Arnstein's *Ladder of Citizen Participation* (1969) is a foundational framework for assessing engagement practices across many fields, including museum work. The framework illustrates the levels of citizen involvement in planning or decision-making processes, through eight rungs that are grouped into three broad levels: non-participation (manipulation, therapy), tokenism (informing, consultation, placation), and citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). The model demonstrates how engagement fully happens when citizens are allocated power and agency.

Nina Simon's (2010) *The Participatory Museum* argues for transforming museums into audience-oriented institutions where "visitors can create, share, and connect with each other" through the museum's content. According to Simon (2010), this can be achieved through four participation strategies: contribution and collaboration, where audiences are invited to participate in institutionally controlled processes, and co-creation and hosting, in which audiences are given more control.

In the realm of participatory arts practice, the Audience Involvement Spectrum developed by Alan S. Brown and Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard (2011, p. 5) classifies "spectating" (the act of receiving a finished artistic product) and "enhanced engagement" (educational programmes that may stimulate creativity, but largely excludes audience members from creative expression) as forms of passive or "receptive" involvement, whereas "crowd sourcing", "co-creation", and "audience-as-artist" are considered as active or "participatory" modes of engagement. This model does not focus so much on who holds power, but rather the extent to which participants are engaged.

Lastly, Schreiber et al. (2024) propose that community engagement can be viewed through a spectrum of "passive" and "active" forms based on how much power is shared between the museum and "the community" and how much social change is realised. They demonstrate this through three levels. In the first level, the institution maintains control and

lacks transformation, as seen in initiatives such as free admission, travelling exhibitions, or simply inviting the public into the museum. The second level still holds power within the institution but allows for temporary change to some extent; Simon's (2010) strategies of contribution and collaboration belong on this level. However, the institution still decides which feedback to implement. The third level entails a deliberate sharing of power between the museum and "the community" with a commitment to transform museum practice. At this level, co-creation led by "community members" is the "gold standard", with their expertise driving innovation that would not have been realised without their leadership (Schreiber et al., 2024). Building on this point, it is important to unpack the concept of co-creation, which has been frequently cited as a key form of community engagement.

Co-creation or co-production is defined by Ruiz and Hendon (2022, p. 5) as "a process of collaborative engagement between audiences, museum staff, and the museum's collections," with the goal of developing "new interpretations" through "object-centred pedagogic practice". This definition notably considers the museum's resources as participants in the process, suggesting that engagement not only happens between the institution and the people but also with the museum's resources. Usually, museums initiate co-creation by inviting participation, but the outcome depends on collaborative decisions regarding how to mobilise the museum's resources. Allison (2019) notes that having a "shared vision" results in designing a relevant course of action. In practice, co-creation can take many forms, including co-curated exhibitions, collaboratively developed programmes, community-led object interpretations, participatory artworks, and co-designed events. Whatever form co-creation may result in, what is important is that it provides opportunities for people to experience learning and positive emotions (Allison, 2019).

Community engagement, however, is not just about allocating more authority to "communities", nor does it only concern its tangible outcomes—such as visitor-generated content or interactive exhibits—it is also about the learning process that unfolds within it. Scholars such as Black (2018), Coghlan (2017), and Knudsen (2016) emphasise the importance of valuing how people learn during the process of engagement and not only its outcomes. Black (2018), stressing the agency of museumgoers in creating their own experiences, argues that museums should embrace their function as a learning space through social interaction and leisure-based activity, as this is what mainly motivates people to visit

the museum. This does not equate to oversimplifying content; instead, it points to the value of integrating enjoyment and learning as complementary aspects of a rich museum experience.

Another outcome of community engagement is the fostering of deeper forms of connection among the museum network and shared responsibility. Jagodzinska (2023) argues that participatory projects help build social capital by motivating people to participate in co-decision making and co-creation. This approach positions individuals as active agents who can shape the museum experience and contribute to its relevance in broader social contexts. Coghlan (2017) offers a compelling example through her case study on exhibition design that invites visitors to respond (or not respond) to prompts. Here, the refusal to participate is framed not as disengagement, but as a valid form of participation. This perspective broadens our understanding of participation, recognising that it may also occur through internal reflection, imagined conversations, or subtle forms of meaning-making beyond direct interaction with displays.

Ultimately, participation in the museum becomes a way to democratise the museum experience. As an outcome of participation, museum visitors can make personal connections with participatory content, which, in turn, can provoke conversations that form connections with the "real and imagined communities" inside the museum's walls and beyond it (Coghlan, 2017).

Crucial to the success of community engagement efforts is the relationship that is built. Museums are often regarded as trusted authorities and custodians of heritage. For example, in the case of local museums, when locals do not see their histories, identities, or sense of belonging reflected within these institutions, they may perceive them as irrelevant (Watson, 2007). As Helen Graham (cited in Onciul, 2015, p. 4) argues, museums must cultivate "real reciprocal relationship networks that involve one another in each other's lived world experiences". This relationship must be built on the foundation of trust, and, on the part of the museum, this can be achieved in several ways: by being self-critical and aware of their positionality (Lynch, 2011; Cawley et al., 2023), by immersing themselves in the "community" (Lynch, 2011), or by listening to "the community's needs" (Thelen, 2005; Allison, 2019). Nonetheless, Boersma (2023) stresses that there is no set formula or checklist for achieving this relationship. Museums must continually strive to cultivate a meaningful

rapport with the people they aim to represent at every stage—from initial outreach and collaboration to project implementation and sustained engagement afterwards.

3.3. "Community Engagement" in Philippine Museums

Before examining community engagement practices in Philippine museums, it is essential first to understand the history of museums in the country, as it sheds light on their current state and future trajectories.

Written accounts of Philippine museum origins have only been found in two works so far. The most comprehensive work to date is *Enigmatic Objects: Notes Towards a History of the Museum in the Philippines* by National Artist for Literature Resil Mojares (2023), the first full-length book on the subject. Mojares' (2023) text focuses on museum history during the Spanish colonial period (1565-1898), whereas an earlier, undated study by Dr. Eric Zerrudo, published on the National Commission for Culture and the Arts website, traces the development of Philippine museums after that period, from 1901 to 1998.

Museums in the Philippines date back to the Spanish colonial period, beginning with university museums. The University of Santo Tomas Museum of Arts and Sciences, established in 1869 as part of the Faculty of Medicine, is considered the country's oldest museum. Its collections started from a "cabinet of curiosity" comprised of medical specimens used in teaching students, following Western tradition. Other universities followed suit due to a Spanish colonial decree requiring secondary colleges to have natural history museums to qualify as first-class institutions (Mojares, 2023).

The National Museum of the Philippines was established during the American colonial period (1898-1946). Its forerunner was the Insular Museum of Ethnology, Natural History, and Commerce, founded in 1901. The museum's colonial mission was evident, as it was led by American anthropologists who documented and collected materials from indigenous groups, many of which were later displayed at the 1904 World's Fair (Labrador, 2000). This institution evolved into the National Museum of the Philippine Islands in 1928, operating alongside the National Library in preserving the country's historical records.

The Second World War resulted in significant losses in Philippine museums. The National Museum was abolished before the war, its divisions distributed among various government agencies, and much of the collection was destroyed during the Battle of Manila in 1945 (Zerrudo, n.d.). The rebuilding of the National Museum was put on hold until the tail end of the 20th century. It was only in 1998 that its formalised system was established, now consisting of the National Museum of Fine Arts, the National Museum of Anthropology, the National Museum of Natural History, and regional branches. Between the war's aftermath and the reestablishment of the National Museum, other museums—such as university, privately run, local government, and special interest museums—emerged throughout the country.

Zerrudo (n.d.) estimates the country has 161 museums, with the National Capital Region housing the largest share. Unfortunately, an official list of museums remains unavailable. However, according to OpenStreetMap data, the actual number may now be 307 museums, including those managed by the National Museum, local government units, and private institutions (Pasion, 2024). The unavailability of a detailed list hints at the current unorganised state of the museum network in the Philippines. Efforts to establish a museum network have only recently emerged, with the establishment of a local ICOM chapter in 2011 and regional museum associations under the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA).

The period between 1986 and 1998 was described as a turning point for Philippine museums, characterised by greater inclusivity and accessibility—a shift toward “museums for all” (Zerrudo, n.d.). Interactive museums and ecomuseums emerged in the country during this time, reflecting a more community-oriented and participatory approach to museum practice. This contemporary museum movement, at the time, was supposedly marked by a consideration of the “Philippine milieu” in the design of museum services that would “maximise the impact” on people (Zerrudo, n.d.). What Zerrudo (n.d.) vaguely referred to as the “Philippine milieu” possibly aligns with what Cecilia De La Paz (2004) identified as the local realities, including political and economic marginalisation, and the impact of globalisation that was occurring in the country. These factors led to a “Filipino approach to museology” or re-evaluation of local museum practice (Zerrudo, n.d).

Naturally, the concept of community engagement is central to a particular type of museum: the “community museum”, named as such by the museum theoreticians and

practitioners in the Philippines. Perhaps the earliest call for establishing these museums in the Philippines came from Wilfredo P. Ronquillo (1992), Chief of the National Museum's Archaeology Division. He defined community museums as small, locally established museums tasked with collecting, preserving, and exhibiting objects that reflect a locality's natural and cultural heritage, serving both educational and cultural purposes. Ronquillo (1992) highlights key considerations in developing these museums, including the need for local participation in museum projects, the role of volunteerism and school partnerships in ensuring sustainability, the function of temporary exhibits in engaging the public's interest, and the risk of redundancy when many similar institutions exist within a locality. His emphasis on involvement from those outside the museum aligns with Labrador's (2010) assertion that local people should serve as the museum's "primary experts and supporters," reflecting the principles of community engagement, which advocate for shared authority between museums and their audiences. However, Ronquillo (1992) appears to assume that a museum's relevance is inherent simply because it showcases a locality's history and cultural heritage. While this is true, it overlooks the necessity of addressing the specific circumstances and priorities of the people a museum seeks to engage. This perspective is what Peralta (2008) underscores, arguing that a museum's character must be shaped by these locally articulated needs.

The following year, the NCCA held its Third Annual Museums Congress with the theme "Museums and their Communities", demonstrating the important role attributed to this concept. The event gathered 50 museums from all over the country to discuss "the contemporary role of museums in their geographical, cultural, and sectoral communities" (NCCA, 1994). An interesting topic explored in one of the panels was the differences between museums in urban and rural areas. David Baradas of the Malacañang Heritage Foundation presented the case of a T'boli museum he helped establish for the indigenous group. The museum served as a venue for local artisans to study traditional models of craftworks, enabling them to produce authentic reproductions and revitalise their livelihoods. Baradas argued that small, rural museums often directly impact people's lives, unlike urban area-based museums, which operate within more complex social environments (NCCA, 1994). Representing the urban perspective, Sonia Ner of the Ayala Museum in Makati's central business district discussed the challenges of serving residents of urban localities, particularly the difficulty of addressing the vast socioeconomic disparities among the city's populations (NCCA, 1994).

While I have no literature to support this, based on my knowledge, the "community museum" concept is still not very prevalent throughout the country. There are only a handful of community museums in the country. Unfortunately, some have closed. Labrador's (2010) ethnography of "community museum" development featured three museums, of which two have shuttered for various reasons, ranging from staff shortages to lack of support from the local government. Most of the museums in towns are local history museums, tending to focus on narrating the historical facts of the locality while disregarding local stories and involvement. The establishment of these museums is often driven by the "political symbolism" attached to having a museum in the town, as local museums are often treated as pet projects of politicians (De La Paz, 2004). Furthermore, these kinds of museums are more tourist-oriented because local governments (that are usually in charge of these museums) believe that framing history and heritage for the benefit of tourists is more profitable (Ma-alat, 2022). For De La Paz (2011), community museums cannot survive with this mindset, as it exoticises the "community". Furthermore, people's voices are crucial to the authenticity of community museums.

Some case studies of successful and still existing community museums are the Morong Community Museum (Sto. Domingo, 2015), Balay ni Tan Juan Historical House and Community Museum (De La Paz, 2011), and the Ifugao Community Heritage Galleries (Acabado & Martin, 2020). The first and third emerged from local people's initiatives, while the second began as a historic house bequeathed to the local government, which later designated it as a community museum. Perhaps the most unique among the three is the Ifugao Community Heritage Galleries, as it was established from an active collaboration between archaeologists and the Ifugao people, without any professional assistance from trained museologists. Project leads Stephen Acabado and Marlon Martin (2020, p. 175) described their approach as a way to "strengthen local voices in the stories and exhibits". Similarly, co-curation was cited in the case of the Balay ni Tan Juan, where community members participated in workshops to conceptualise and mount a "community" exhibit (De La Paz, 2011). Meanwhile, the Morong Community Museum was the product of a grassroots movement led by a local heritage organisation. All three case studies showed that the community museums were born out of the locals' desire to explore their history and heritage in their own terms to reclaim their identities.

Community engagement is, of course, not limited to community museums. Ethnographic museum Museo ng Nayong Pilipino co-curated one of their travelling exhibits with leaders of the indigenous cultural group Aeta Abellen. This was an important project for the museum, as it marked a shift from its previous tokenistic displays to more culturally sensitive and relevant content. Victor Estrella (2023), the exhibit curator, stated that this emerged from the museum's reflection on its practices. This highlights Zerrudo's (n.d.) claim that the modern Philippine museum movement must start with introspection and reflection. In these examples, the Ifugao Community Heritage Galleries and the Museo ng Nayong Pilipino practice community engagement by amplifying indigenous peoples' voices.

Aside from these studies, there are other case studies on Philippine heritage and community engagement. However, these initiatives happen outside the museum, particularly in the areas of public archaeology or built heritage conservation projects (see Kintanar & Barretto-Tesoro, 2020; Dulnuan & Ledesdma, 2020; del Mundo-Angeles et al., 2024). Nevertheless, a museum can be an outcome of such initiatives, as demonstrated by the Ifugao Archaeological Project (Acabado & Martin, 2020).

In surveying the challenges faced by Philippine museums affecting their capacity to engage "communities", three main issues emerge: the insufficient support for museums, the overall low levels of heritage consciousness, and the lack of a clearly defined "community".

The first issue relates to what Labrador (2014, p. 260) calls a "festival framework", where "excitement for opening a museum is much greater than sustaining it". Like festivals, museum projects in the Philippines are often met with great enthusiasm before they open, but quickly lose momentum afterwards, impacting their sustainability. This is usually the case in smaller towns that rely on local politicians' support. If cultural development is not a political priority, museums suffer. Labrador (2014) cites two cases: in Tayabas, a two-year museum project ended abruptly when a new mayor took office, while the Tagudin Living Community Museum, once celebrated as the country's first of its kind, was exploited for publicity but given little financial support and eventually shut down. Other studies highlight the need for training opportunities for museum professionals along with greater government support (Labrador & Paz-Tauro, 2019; del Mundo-Angeles et al., 2024). However, working with the government can be challenging, as seen in the Morong Community Museum's initial struggles with government officials who broke their agreements (Sto. Domingo, 2015).

Government support is only one part of the equation; support from local stakeholders is equally important but also difficult to gain. De La Paz (2004) observes that Filipinos are not regular museumgoers, likely due to the limited number of museums throughout the country, most of which are located in the capital region (Ma-alat, 2022; Morley, 1972). While online technologies have expanded heritage accessibility globally, this is not the case in the Philippines. A study by Perez et al. (2022) revealed that Philippine museums have limited physical, online, and data accessibility because of outdated cataloguing practices, financial constraints, and concerns over Open Heritage Data. This demonstrates the serious accessibility issues museums (and museumgoers) face in the country.

The second issue is the limited appreciation of heritage in the Philippines. The heritage movement is relatively young, and awareness is often shallow due to the inconsistent implementation of cultural policies at both national and local levels (Canuday et al., 2017; De La Paz, 2004). Although the Philippines ratified its first omnibus cultural heritage law, the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009 (Republic Act No. 10066), significant gaps exist in implementation, leading to "unintended dissonant consequences" (Viray, 2025) such as the continuous neglect of heritage sites (Iglesias, 2023). An example of this is the persistent loss of Manila's heritage structures in favour of commercial development (see San Jose, 2019). This situation is primarily attributed to some government officials' lack of cultural heritage literacy, often prioritising short-term political gains or commercial interests (Bulan, 2018). Although laws exist to protect these sites, they are still neglected or destroyed.

Furthermore, heritage policy in the Philippines has also been criticised for its lack of local representation, a problem further exacerbated by tourism-driven policies (Ma-alat, 2022; De La Paz, 2011). This disconnect has historically marginalised indigenous and local voices, reducing intangible cultural heritage (ICH) to tokenistic inclusions. However, the 2023 Cultural Mapping Act marks a potential turning point by amending the 2009 National Cultural Heritage Act to explicitly recognise ICH and creative expressions and requiring localities to lead in cultural mapping of their towns' heritage assets (Viray, 2025). Whether this new development will address the lack of local representation is yet to be determined, but it is a significant step in the right direction.

Finally, the third issue relates to museums' challenges in clearly defining the "communities" they serve. Many museums—particularly those established through top-down

initiatives—often lack a clear understanding of whom they are meant to serve. “Community” is frequently treated as a generic or catch-all term, without adequately identifying the specific groups that make up a museum's stakeholders. This vagueness can lead to programming and exhibitions that are disconnected from local realities or fail to resonate with audiences.

The issues I have identified are deeply interconnected: the lack of support for museums aggravates low heritage consciousness. In contrast, low heritage consciousness makes it more challenging to acquire the support needed for museums in the Philippines to thrive. Compounding these challenges is the lack of a clearly defined “community”. When museums are uncertain of whom they are meant to engage with, or when “community” is treated as a catch-all category, developing relevant programming or building connections with these groups becomes more difficult. My study will examine this issue, as it forms a foundation for understanding community engagement practices.

The examples show that Filipinos are willing to participate in museums; the problem is that there are not enough opportunities to do so in ways that reflect their identities, interests, or needs. The examples explored here are collaborative or co-creative, but it is important to note that these do not fully represent the entire landscape of community engagement in Philippine museums. More community engagement practices on the ground likely remain undocumented, and this research aims to address that gap.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to identify the community engagement practices of local museums in the Bicol Region of the Philippines. To achieve this, the study is guided by two main research questions:

1. How do local museums in the Bicol Region engage with those they define as communities?

2. How do people in the Bicol Region understand and relate to museums?

Both questions aim to contribute to a better understanding of the relationships between museums and communities in the Philippines, an area that remains largely unexplored.

Given that the concept of "community" is central to the study, it is essential to establish how each museum defines the communities it seeks to engage with. Understanding these definitions will allow for a more cohesive analysis of their engagement strategies. Therefore, alongside the main research questions, the study will also address the following sub-questions:

A. How do local museums in the Bicol Region define "community", and how does that definition guide their practices?

B. Which community engagement practices are shared among museums?

C. What are the local people's perceptions of the role and relevance of these museums?

D. How do the museum representatives understand the role of the museums in shaping local identity?

E. What is the role of museum education in community engagement practices?

This chapter outlines the methodology used to address the research questions and is divided into two main sections. The first section offers context for the study, focusing on the Bicol Region and providing an overview of its museum landscape. The second section details the research design, including data collection tools, the research sample, ethical considerations, the data analysis process, and the study's limitations.

3.1. Research Background

3.1.1. Area of Study

To understand the area of study, it is essential to recognise the geographical context of the Philippines first. The Philippines is an archipelago in Southeast Asia with three main island groups: Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, with Luzon being the largest. The Philippines is further divided into 17 administrative regions, each consisting of multiple provinces, and each province is composed of cities and municipalities.

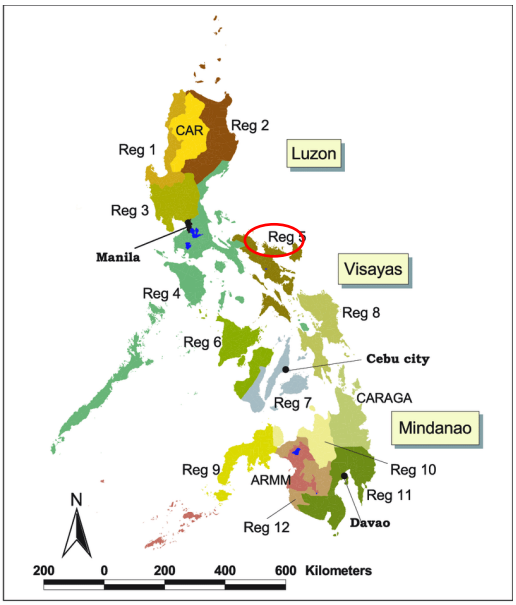

Figure 1. Administrative regions of the Philippines. The Bicol Region (Region 5) is encircled.

On the southeastern portion of Luzon is the Bicol Region, comprising six provinces—Albay, Camarines Norte, Camarines Sur, and Sorsogon are the provinces located on the mainland, while Catanduanes and Masbate are the two island provinces (Figure 1). The 2020 Census by the Philippine Statistics Authority recorded a population of 6,082,165 inhabitants across the region. It is the sixth most populated region of the country's 18 regions. The region is accessible via land, air, and sea routes, although inter-island travel remains more difficult in some areas, particularly for Catanduanes and Masbate. This posed a limitation during fieldwork, as I could not travel to these islands for in-person data collection. As a result, the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of museum workers from the mainland provinces, potentially overlooking the unique experiences and contexts of those based on the islands. It is also possible that museum practices and challenges vary depending on geographical location. Nonetheless, studying the museums located on the mainland of Bicol remains

valuable, as they are often more accessible and better resourced, frequently serving as models for other museums in the region.

Each of the six provinces in the Bicol Region has its own distinct geographic, cultural, and historical characteristics. Albay, home to the Mayon Volcano, is also the location of the regional centre, Legazpi City, which serves as a hub for governance, commerce, and education. Camarines Sur is the most populous province and hosts Naga City, a major religious and cultural centre known for the Peñafrancia Festival and its strong Catholic traditions. Camarines Norte has historical significance due to its connection to the Philippine revolution and is known for its mining heritage. Sorsogon, located at the southern tip of the Bicol Peninsula, is rich in biodiversity and known for its whale shark tourism in the town of Donsol. The island provinces of Catanduanes and Masbate are more geographically isolated, with Catanduanes frequently affected by typhoons, and Masbate is known for its cattle industry and annual rodeo festival.

Figure 2. Map of the Bicol Region and its provinces (Source: Cooperative Development Authority, n.d.)

The region's distinct geography is central to shaping Bikolano history and character (Mallari, 1988; Owen, 1999). Facing the Pacific Ocean on its eastern side, the Bicol Region was historically significant as a shipbuilding and repair hub for the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade from 1610 until 1814 during the Spanish colonial period, owing to its abundant hardwood forests and strategic coastal access (Banzuela, 2014). Today, the ocean serves as an abundant fishing ground; however, it also puts the region at risk from destructive typhoons, described by Mallari (1988) as the region's "life-time tormentor." Tropical storms and typhoons from September to November regularly strike the region. In 2024 alone, the Bicol

Region was affected by six consecutive tropical cyclones, three of which were classified as super typhoons (WFP Philippines, 2024). As these natural calamities have become a regular part of Bikolanos' lives, the Bikolanos have been lauded for their resiliency—but at the cost of significant impacts to their financial and material resources and their mental health (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2024). As Norman Owen (1999, p. 3) humorously describes it: "The land is so good, the people so kind, the Almighty had to invent the typhoon to even things up."

Alongside these frequent typhoons, the Bicol Region is also home to some of the most active volcanoes in the Philippines: Mount Isarog and Mount Iriga in Camarines Sur, Mount Bulusan in Sorsogon, and Mount Mayon in Albay, which is famous for being the most active volcano in the Philippines and for its near-perfect cone shape. These have frequently put Bikolanos' lives and properties at risk, yet the volcanic deposits from past eruptions contribute to the soil's fertility, making it well-suited for agriculture (National Museum Bicol, 2023). These fertile lands have allowed Bikolanos to cultivate their top agricultural products of rice, coconuts, and abaca (popularly known as Manila hemp). Historically, the Bicol Region has been producing and exporting abaca since the 16th century, since the days of the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade but reached its peak during the early 20th century and subsequently declined in the latter half, although it is still the top abaca producer in the country to this day (Owen, 1999; PSA, 2019).

Perhaps because of these constant threats posed by natural calamities, religiosity—particularly of the Catholic faith—has been deeply ingrained in Bikolano culture. The Bicol Region holds the highest proportion of Roman Catholics in the Philippines (PSA, 2020). Catholicism was introduced to the Philippines during the Spanish colonial period. Before this period, early Bikolanos worshipped ancestral spirits called *anito*, which they believed inhabited the natural landscape (Mintz, 2005). As a result, they did not construct religious temples because they viewed nature as sacred (Yakal, 2023). They were also deeply superstitious and often relied on protective talismans called *anting-anting* (Gerona, 2001).

Over time, Catholic beliefs merged with precolonial animistic traditions, giving rise to Filipino folk Catholicism. The most prominent Bikolano expression of faith is the deep devotion to Nuestra Señora de Peñafrancia (Our Lady of Peñafrancia), declared as the Patroness of the Bicol Region and is endearingly referred to by the people as "Ina" (mother) (Realubit et al., 2018). Folk elements are still evident in the festival as devotees often carry

handkerchiefs, which they use to touch the image of the Virgin, believing it transfers the Virgin's miraculous power.

The region is linguistically diverse. Bikol has been classified as a macrolanguage, as it encompasses several distinct languages, of which there is no definite number (Cordial, 2025). To give an example of how diverse the linguistic landscape is, Legazpi City and the municipality of Daraga are both located in Albay province and are only three kilometres away from each other, yet they each have their versions of the Bikol language, referred to as Bikol-Legazpi and Bikol-Daraga, respectively. These variations reflect the region's complex cultural landscape, shaped by local histories, colonial influences, and geographic separation. Such diversity is also mirrored in the kinds of heritage each province values.

3.1.2 Overview of Museums in the Bicol Region

Based on the latest data from a 2025 museum mapping project conducted by the Bicol Association of Museums, there are currently 36 museums in the Bicol Region. Table 1 provides a breakdown of these museums by province, classified by type and ownership.

Name	Type of Museum	Ownership
ALBAY (3)		
Museo de Guinobatan	Municipal museum	Local government
Museo de Legazpi	City museum	Local government
National Museum of the Philippines - Bicol	Natural history museum	National government
CAMARINES NORTE (7)		
Casa Barbin y Guinto	Historic house museum	Privately owned
Daet Heritage & Surf Museum	Special interest museum	Privately owned
Museo Bulawan	Community museum	Provincial government
Museo de Labo	Municipal museum	Local government
Paracale Gold Mini Museum	Special interest/local history museum	Local government
Vinzons Heritage Education Museum	Heritage museum	Local government
Wenceslao Q. Vinzons National Historical Landmark	Biographical museum	Local government
CAMARINES SUR (16)		
Bicol Guerilla Museum	War museum	Privately owned
Bicol Science and Technology Centrum	Science museum	Local government
Calabanga Museum	Municipal museum	Local government
CBSUA Ladawan Center and Museum	Indigenous peoples museum	Central Bicol State University of Agriculture
Museo de Fabella	Biographical museum	Privately owned
Museo de Hayskulano	School history museum	Camarines Sur National High School
Museo de Isarog	University-based heritage museum	Partido State University

Museo de Kawayan	Municipal museum	Local government
Museo Historico de Universidad de Sta. Isabel	University museum	Universidad de Sta. Isabel
Museo del Seminario Conciliar de Nueva Caceres	Ecclesiastical museum	Archdiocese of Caceres
NHCP Museo ni Jesse Robredo	Biographical museum	National government
Our Lady of Peñafrancia Museum	Ecclesiastical museum	Archdiocese of Caceres
Porta Mariae Museum	Ecclesiastical museum	Archdiocese of Caceres
St. Raphael the Archangel Parish Museum	Ecclesiastical museum	St. Raphael the Archangel Parish
University of Nueva Caceres Museum	University museum	University of Nueva Caceres
V Gallery x Museum	Art gallery	Naga College Foundation
CATANDUANES (2)		
Museo de Catanduanes	Provincial museum	Provincial government
Museo de San Andres	Municipal museum	Local government
MASBATE (2)		
Museo de Casa San Rafael	Historic house museum	Privately owned
Museo de Ticao	Community museum	Privately owned
SORSOGON (6)		
Bulan Heritage Museum	Heritage museum	Local government
Gubat Heritage Center	Heritage museum	Local government
Magallanes Heritage Center	Heritage museum	Local government
Museo de San Antonio	Ecclesiastical museum	San Antonio de Padua Parish
Museo Sorsogon	Provincial museum	Local government
Museo ng Gerilya sa Sorsogon	War museum	National government

Table 1. List of museums in the Bicol Region by province.

Among the six provinces, Camarines Sur has the highest number of museums, totalling 16, while the island provinces of Catanduanes and Masbate have two museums each. Most of the museums in the region are run by local government units and are typically classified as municipal, city, provincial, or heritage museums. Other common museum types throughout the region include ecclesiastical museums, special interest museums, and university museums.

3.2. Methodology

3.2.1. Qualitative Research Design

This study is framed within a constructivist research paradigm. Constructivism emphasises that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is created through interactions and the meanings people assign to their experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Omodan, 2024). This perspective is especially appropriate for a study which aims to examine museums' desire to build relations with what they consider "their community". Such relations

are not static but rather co-constructed, context-dependent, and continually negotiated through dialogue, interaction, and decision-making processes (Cawley et al., 2023; Schorch, 2017; Watson, 2007).

Moreover, it aligns with insights from community studies, where "community" is understood not only as a demographic or geographic category but also as a symbolic construction (Cohen, 1985). An interpretivist lens enables this study to explore how museum professionals and local residents of Bicol make sense of their relationships, define "community", and how engagement practices reflect or contest these understandings.

Another core principle of interpretivism is the recognition of multiple subjective realities (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This study seeks to highlight the diverse meanings that museums and local residents of Bicol assign to concepts such as "community", "engagement", "heritage", and "identity". By working within this paradigm, I aim to emphasise the varied understandings of these concepts, as experienced and expressed by both museum professionals and local people.

Investigating these meanings requires qualitative methods to capture the nuanced understandings from the participants' perspective. Qualitative research is primarily used when studying thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values (Marshall et al., 2021). It is best suited for answering questions about the role of museums in society and their relationships with various individuals (Tucker, 2020).

A case study approach was chosen to achieve an in-depth, contextual examination of museums' relationships with people because of its flexibility to integrate various perspectives, data gathering tools, and interpretive strategies (Marshall et al., 2021). A "case" is understood as any person, event, organisation, etc. that is a spatially and temporally bounded example of a larger phenomenon (Gerring, 2017; Marshall et al., 2021). In this study, a museum is defined as a case. Since several museums were examined, a comparative case study approach was used to explore and analyse the differences in how the concepts of community and community engagement practices vary among the museums.

3.2.2. Data Collection Methods

Two main data collection methods were used:

A. In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were held with the curators, directors or staff members of the museums included in the study. Because the museums included in this study are small museums which would not have typically published policy documents or comprehensive websites where one can learn about their content and operations—an observation reflected in Perez et al.'s (2022) study revealing the limited digital accessibility of Philippine museums—in-depth interviews were chosen as the main way to gather information. I assumed that community engagement is highly dependent on the decisions of the people working in the museum, so it was necessary to explore their thoughts on the topic through interviews.

The interviews were semi-structured, following a guide of questions and topics; however, the sequence and exact wording of questions were decided on during the interview, depending on the flow of the conversation. One advantage of this type of interview is its fluid and conversational nature, which helps participants feel more comfortable expressing themselves (Patton, 2014). It also allows them to introduce new topics that the interviewer can explore if relevant, making it well-suited for uncovering nuanced, subjective realities (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). At the same time, the interview is still structured enough to allow for a systematic collection of data (Patton, 2014).

To begin the interview, I started with background or demographic questions, a type of "warm-up" question from Patton's (2014) interview question categories, to help ease the interviewee into answering the main questions. In crafting the main questions, I referred to Brinkmann and Kvale's (2018) typology, mainly using introductory questions to elicit "spontaneous, rich descriptions", allowing participants to explain what they perceived as key aspects of the phenomenon being investigated. I also anticipated spontaneously using probing, specifying, structuring, and interpreting questions during the interview.

The topics to be covered include the museum's concept of community and the basis for this definition, the challenges it faces as an institution, its community engagement practices, its perspective on the role of the museum in the community, and the importance of museum education in these initiatives. These were translated into questions found in Table A1 of Appendix A. The selection of museums is discussed in Section 3.5 below.

B. Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were held with local residents to understand how they perceive the role and relevance of museums within their localities. While the participants cannot be taken to represent any specific communities, their perspectives provide valuable insight into how individuals within localities experience and interpret the museums' presence, content, and programmes. These views, considered alongside the insights of museum representatives, contribute to a broader understanding of the museums' practices.

Similar to the semi-structured interviews, the focus group discussions were intended to be conversational. Owing to the multilingualism of the participants, the participants (including myself) would often code-switch, speaking in Bikol, English, and Filipino (Tagalog). I also utilised a guide to help structure the discussion. The topics covered during the focus group discussions were the participants' awareness of museums in the Bicol Region, their experience in visiting museums, participation in museum activities and their motivation to participate, their ideas regarding cultural heritage, and the role of museums in shaping a sense of "community". These were translated into a discussion guide that can be found in Table A2 of Appendix A.

3.2.3. Research Sample

A. Interview Participants

Given the timeframe for completing this dissertation, I aimed to include at least three museums as case studies. I initially utilised purposive sampling, with my selection criteria focused on smaller, locally-oriented or heritage-centred museums, assuming that these institutions are often more deeply embedded in local contexts and provide rich opportunities for examining "museum-community relationships" (Jagodzinska, 2023). I also ensured that I would have a way to contact these museums, either through their email addresses or their Facebook pages.

Based on preliminary desk research, I identified four museums that appeared to meet these criteria: the Vinzons Heritage Education Museum in Camarines Norte; the Museo de Ticao in Masbate, a community museum; and the Museo de Isarog, a university-based heritage museum and the Museo del Seminario Conciliar de Nueva Caceres, an ecclesiastical museum, both in Camarines Sur. I considered the inclusion of the church museum particularly relevant, given the strong influence of Catholicism in Filipino culture and identity.

However, none of these museums responded to my interview requests. I later learned that the Museo del Seminario Conciliar de Nueva Caceres had temporarily closed due to severe damage from Typhoon Kristine in December 2024. In light of these challenges, I decided to focus my efforts on contacting museums with an active social media presence, which I took as a potential indicator that this might increase the likelihood of receiving a response.

This strategy led me to first message the University of Nueva Caceres (UNC) Museum's Facebook page to ask if they were open on the day I intended to visit, which they confirmed. On the day of my visit, I met Interviewee A. Following a tour of the museum, I introduced my research topic and invited them to participate in an interview. They agreed, and the interview was conducted a week later at the museum.

This initial connection proved instrumental as the UNC Museum Curator was also an officer of the recently reestablished Bicol Association of Museums (BAM), and they generously shared their network with me. My strategy shifted into opportunity sampling, with the UNC Museum Curator as a gatekeeper. I was able to arrange interviews with two individuals: Interviewee B of the historic house museum Museo de Casa San Rafael in Masbate, and Interviewee C, an officer from the provincial government-run community museum Museo Bulawan in Camarines Norte, who also serves on the board of officers of BAM. Both interviews were conducted online via Zoom.

By this stage, I had met my initial goal of interviewing three museums, with representation from three provinces: Camarines Sur, Camarines Norte, and Masbate. An opportunity to expand the study's geographic scope emerged when I was invited to attend the first Regional Summit of the Bicol Association of Museums, held on May 29-30, 2025, in Vinzons, Camarines Norte. The summit was a two-day event that featured presentations on museum management, conservation principles, exhibition development, and museum tourism, among other topics. While not all provinces were represented—particularly Catanduanes and Masbate, likely due to the logistical difficulty of travelling to the mainland—the summit provided valuable opportunities to connect with museum practitioners across the region.

I met Interviewee D of Museo Sorsogon at the summit, whom I later interviewed online. I also attempted to contact museums in the remaining provinces of Albay and

Catanduanes, but unfortunately, I did not receive any responses. In the end, the study included four museums, representing four out of the six provinces in the Bicol Region. Table 2 presents an overview of the four museums included in the study, detailing their respective types, locations, and the assigned codenames of the representatives interviewed from each museum. A brief background on each of the museums can also be read below.

Representative (Assigned Codename)	Museum	Museum Type	Location (Town, Province)
Interviewee A	University of Nueva Caceres Museum	University-based history museum	Naga City, Camarines Sur
Interviewee B	Museo de Casa San Rafael	Historic house museum	Aroroy, Masbate
Interviewee C	Museo Bulawan	Provincial community museum	Daet, Camarines Norte
Interviewee D	Museo Sorsogon	Provincial museum	Sorsogon City, Sorsogon

Table 2. Museums that participated in the study and the assigned codenames of the interviewed museum representatives.

University of Nueva Caceres Museum, Naga City, Camarines Sur

The University of Nueva Caceres Museum is the Bicol Region's first museum and the second-oldest university-based museum in the country. The museum opened in 1952 as a pet project of the university's founder, Dr. Jaime Hernandez. Its collections comprise various historical and ethnographical objects amassed by the Hernandez family. The museum's content is divided into three chronological galleries: Pre-colonial, Spanish Period, and American-Japanese Period. The museum is a founding member of the Naga City Museums Association, a museum network aimed at promoting tourism in Naga City through collaborative efforts.

Figure 3. *Pre-colonial gallery of the University of Nueva Caceres Museum.*

Museo de Casa San Rafael, Aroroy, Masbate

Museo de Casa San Rafael is a historic house museum containing a diverse collection of antique objects, archaeological artefacts, historic photographs, artworks, and family heirlooms. Originally the residence of the Alonzo family, the house was converted into a museum in 2024 by one of the family members who now serves as its curator. The Alonzo family is a direct descendant of Gregorio Cordero, the founder of the town of Aroroy, referred to as the "Golden Town" of Masbate. The museum is named after the family's patron saint, Saint Raphael the Archangel, whose religious image the family has long served as caretaker of. The museum's mission is to protect, preserve, and promote the cultural heritage of Aroroy for the benefit of the local community.

Figure 4. *One of the rooms in Museo de Casa San Rafael (Source: Museo de Casa San Rafael, 2025)*

Museo Bulawan, Daet, Camarines Norte

Museo Bulawan, which means “golden museum”, serves as the provincial community museum of Camarines Norte. Established in 1995 by the provincial government, the museum also functions as the province’s Cultural Office. It aims to serve as a centre for education about the province's cultural and natural heritage and history. This is primarily achieved through its *Centre for Creative Culture* programme, through which the museum hosts a range of activities such as art workshops, trainings and seminars, and commemorative programmes. In addition to its educational and outreach functions, the museum is also responsible for conducting historical research, managing and preserving the local inventory of cultural properties, and supporting local artists and cultural practitioners.

Figure 5. *A student at one of the galleries of Museo Bulawan (Source: Museo Bulawan, 2025)*

Museo Sorsogon, Sorsogon City, Sorsogon

Museo Sorsogon is the provincial museum of Sorsogon and is housed in the repurposed 1916 Provincial Jail and Courthouse. Inaugurated in 2021, the museum offers a comprehensive exploration of the province's history, culture, and biodiversity through ten galleries, covering topics ranging from its early origins to revolutionary movements to festivals. The collection features artefacts loaned by locals and the National Museum of the Philippines. Aside from its exhibitions, the museum also regularly hosts events and performances in its open-air amphitheatre and supports local enterprises through a souvenir shop that sells locally made products.

***Figure 6**. A gallery in Museo Sorsogon featuring the province's main industries (Source: Rivera, 2022)*

B. Focus Group Participants

I initially planned to recruit community member participants with the help of the museum professionals I interviewed. However, I decided to forgo this method to reduce the risk of selection bias, as museum staff might have directed me toward individuals with favourable views of the museum. It was also more logistically feasible to organise the discussions in my home province of Albay, as recruiting participants from other provinces in the Bicol Region would have required them to travel significant distances.

Instead, I employed two types of sampling. I used convenience sampling for the first focus group by inviting peers from my network. This group was initially intended as a pilot to help test my questions and practice facilitating the discussion. However, the insights that emerged from this group were so valuable that I decided to include them in the main study.

I used voluntary response sampling for the second group by posting a call for participants on the Bicol sub-Reddit, a popular online forum. The Bicol sub-Reddit is a public online forum on the social media platform Reddit, where users (often Bicolanos or those interested in the Bicol Region) share news, ask questions, and engage in discussions about regional issues, culture, and everyday life. I invited interested members of this online group to join the focus group by providing their contact details via a Google Form. In the recruitment post, I emphasised that this would be an opportunity to freely share their thoughts on museums—an experience that, for many, would be their first in-depth conversation on the topic. A limitation of this is that those who signed up via the Reddit post showed an interest in museums. It would be beneficial for future studies to include individuals who are not necessarily interested in museums.

Within a few hours, I had reached my target of six sign-ups. In total, there were two focus groups and nine participants: five male and three female participants, and one participant who chose not to disclose their gender. Table 3 presents each participant's assigned codename, occupation, gender, and age. The first group consisted of six participants, while the second group initially had five participants but was reduced to three on the day of the discussion, as one dropped out due to difficulties with travel, and the other did not appear. This number was intentional to maintain a manageable group dynamic and ensure that each participant had ample time to speak within the 1.5- to 2-hour sessions.

Participant Code Name	Occupation	Age	Gender
Alex	Lawyer	28	Prefer not to say
Annie	Nurse	25	F
Ezra	Business Owner	28	M
Franz	Architect	26	F
Pedro	Civil Engineer	25	M
Roger	Physician	26	M
Ryan	Software Developer	25	M
Samuel	Junior Architect & Business Owner	26	M
Sandra	Project Assistant	25	F

Table 3. Overview of focus group participants. The names listed are pseudonyms.

Participants across both groups were between 25 and 30 years old, and all were young professionals from diverse fields, including healthcare, architecture and engineering, education, software development, and business. This age range was unintentional, particularly in the second group, where I was unaware of the participants' identities as they responded voluntarily to a recruitment post online. The predominance of younger participants may reflect the platform's user demographics. The implications of this on the study include a need to consider how generational experiences may shape understandings of museums and community engagement.

3.2.4. Ethical Considerations

This study sought and received formal ethical approval from the University of Malta's Faculty Research Ethics Committee, which included a self-assessment form and a review of the research proposal, information letters, consent forms, and data collection tools. I specified that this study would not include vulnerable populations or anyone under 18. No potential risks of harm to participants were identified.

The study's purpose and the data handling were explained to all participants through an information letter. Consent forms were also provided. Participants were informed that the interview or focus group discussion would be recorded as audio, or as video if conducted online. Recordings were securely stored in a password-protected folder on my university OneDrive account, accessible only to me. These recordings will not be published or shared.

I assured participants that their identities would remain confidential and that any extracts used from interviews or focus group discussions would be attributed using codenames. Museum professionals were given the option to be quoted by name, but they had to explicitly give their consent for this on the consent form. All the museum professionals I interviewed agreed to be quoted by name. However, based on my dissertation supervisors' advice, I assigned them codenames instead.

Finally, participants were informed that they were free to withdraw their consent at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty and that they could contact me or my lead supervisor for any questions they may have about the study.

3.2.5. Data Analysis

The data gathered from interviews and focus group discussions were analysed using thematic analysis. The process began with transcribing all recorded interviews and focus group discussions. I thoroughly reviewed each transcript multiple times to familiarise myself with the content and to start identifying initial patterns, similarities, and differences.

During this phase, I used analytic memoing to record my immediate thoughts, reactions, and questions that arose while reading the transcripts. These memos included initial interpretations, links to relevant concepts or theories from the literature, and any notable observations regarding the emotion or context of participants' responses (Bingham, 2023; Miles et al., 2019). This recording and initial synthesising process helped me in the later stages of writing the analysis.

I then proceeded to first cycle coding (Miles et al., 2019), assigning initial codes to parts of the data that addressed the research questions and objectives. Coding was conducted using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, which enabled a systematic organisation and retrieval of codes. While most codes were directly related to the research questions, I also included codes for recurring data points that emerged across different transcripts, even if they were not directly related to or prompted by the interview or focus group questions, as these patterns could offer valuable insights across the case studies.

These initial codes were compiled into a codebook, which functioned as my coding framework. I then carried out second-cycle coding (Miles et al., 2019), wherein the first-level codes were reviewed, refined, and grouped into broader categories and themes based on

emerging patterns. In line with Marshall et al. (2021), I drew from both a priori themes, informed by my theoretical framework and literature, and in vivo themes, which emerged inductively from the data. This combination allowed me to remain grounded in participants' lived experiences while critically engaging with relevant theoretical constructs.

To construct the analysis, the final set of themes was interpreted and discussed in relation to the literature, along with quotes from participants used to ground the narrative. This helped ensure that the voices of museum professionals and focus group participants were emphasised throughout the study. Finally, a comparative analysis was conducted to compare the case studies' similarities and differences and illustrate museum practices across the region.

3.2.6. Limitations of the Research

While this study aimed to provide a comprehensive illustration of community engagement practices of museums across the Bicol Region, only 4 out of the 36 museums in the region were included due to time constraints. Given the use of opportunity and purposive sampling, it may be argued that the sample size does not fully represent the region's museum population (Brady, 2006). A similar limitation applies to the focus group participants. They do not represent the exact communities described by the museums. Instead, they are individuals from the Bicol Region with varying levels of familiarity with local museums.

In this study, "community" refers to the groups each museum identifies as people they currently or intend to engage. These communities may not always be consciously aware of being considered part of a museum's community, which raises questions about whether a "community" can exist as such without self-recognition. Despite not aligning perfectly with the museums' definitions, the focus group participants' perspectives remain valuable because they are residents of the Bicol Region, the broader area where these museums are situated. Their insights can reveal how museums are experienced (or not experienced) by local residents.

As this study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises meaning-making and the importance of context over generalizability, the sample remains valid and appropriate for exploring the nuanced experiences and perspectives of the selected museums and local people. As this study represents a landmark exploration of museums in the region, it

is hoped that future researchers will build upon it by using alternative sampling strategies or data collection methods to include a broader range of museums and defined communities.

Another crucial limitation of the research was the logistical challenges encountered during the fieldwork, particularly the difficulties in travelling across the region. Due to this, I could not personally visit three of the four museums included in this study; thus, three of the interviews with museum professionals were conducted online. An in-person observation of the museums' public programmes would have enriched the study by providing opportunities to speak with visitors and get their feedback.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The findings in this chapter are presented through seven key themes: Defining "Community", Community Engagement, Education in the Museum, Identity Building, Barriers to Community Engagement, Festivals, and Museums as Sites of Memory and Truth-Telling. The first theme, Defining "Community", explores the thoughts of museum professionals on what "community" means and how they identify the communities they serve. The second theme focuses on their perceptions and practices related to community engagement within their museums. The third and fourth themes, Education in the Museum and Barriers to Community Engagement, share insights from both museum professionals and focus group participants. Identity Building is another theme that highlights the role of museums in shaping community identity from the perspective of museum professionals. Lastly, the themes of Festivals and Museums as Sites of Memory and Truth-Telling emerged solely from the focus groups. While not directly related to museums, the former was brought up in relation to discussions on the authenticity of cultural expressions in the region. The latter theme was understood as a responsibility that museums must uphold.

4.1. Defining "Community"

One of the questions I sought to answer in this research is how museums define their "communities". As discussed in the literature review, the concept of "community" can be highly complex as it can be symbolically constructed or a shifting, bounded entity, depending on the context (Cohen, 1985; Amit, 2002; Smith, 2013). To help make sense of how museums might articulate or understand the communities they serve, I drew on Mason's (2005) and Miles' (1986) frameworks. Mason's (2005) typology of "museum communities" and Miles' (1986) distinctions between actual museum visitors, those audiences that the museum intends to reach, and narrowly defined "target audiences" for programming or marketing purposes provide useful lenses for analysing how the interviewees described their institutions' communities. These frameworks are useful in understanding whether museums view "community" as the people who currently visit and participate, as a group they believe they represent, or as a group they aspire to engage. In the interviews, these definitions were often fluid, as "community", "audience", and "public" were often used interchangeably by the interviewees, and "community" was also referred to as both those currently engaged by the museums and those yet to be reached.

To initiate this discussion, I asked each museum representative about the visitors who regularly visit their museum. My aim was not to define "community" for them, but to prompt reflections on groups that the museums already engage with. Regular visitors can, in some interpretations, be considered as a form of "community" because they have already built a connection with the museum through its content, physical access, or perceived relevance.

The responses from the four interviewed museum representatives varied, reflecting different institutional contexts. Interviewees C and D, both of whom work at museums operated by provincial governments (Camarines Norte and Sorsogon, respectively) framed their answers in relation to their museums' official mandates, which they described in similar terms: as "the primary repository and interpreter of the cultural, historical, and artistic heritage of the province" and as "the cultural manager or developer of the province". From these statements, their primary audience can be understood as the local population—the residents of the province. In this sense, the "community" they serve may be interpreted as both geographically and culturally defined.

This was further confirmed in how they described their visitors. Interviewee C referred to them as "the locals here", while Interviewee D described them as "…members of the community from all walks of life". This aligns with what Mason's (2005) framework categorises as "communities defined by identities"; in this case, it could be understood as the shared identity of being from Camarines Norte or Sorsogon. An interesting overlap emerges when viewed through the lens of Miles' (1986) audience types. The "community" outlined in the museums' mandates, which is their potential audience, also appears to be their actual audience and, by extension, their target audience. This alignment suggests a relatively coherent sense of purpose: the museums are, at least in principle, engaging the "communities" they intend to serve.

Meanwhile, Interviewees A and B offered more varied answers. Interviewee B established Museo de Casa San Rafael to present their town's history. They described their audience primarily by background or occupation: many were government employees, while others were specialist audiences such as university professors and students. Locals and tourists occasionally visited, though Interviewee B noted frankly, "There is no interest in local history here." Despite this perceived disinterest, they see the museum as a legacy for their town, aimed at fostering greater appreciation of history and heritage, and hope that future generations will keep it alive. This suggests an understanding of "community" defined

less by current visitors and more by those they hope will value the museum in the future. However, because this is a "community" envisioned by the museum rather than one that already self-identifies as such, it remains difficult for the museum to engage meaningfully with them due to limited resources and staff.

The UNC Museum was described as attracting visitors with "passion and curiosity", particularly those who discovered the museum on social media and decided to visit. According to Interviewee A, these visitors were "identifiable" because of their active engagement with the museum: they ask questions, spend time with the displays, and often have specific research interests. Interviewee A noted that many of them are scholars or students from other institutions who come to study the collections, which is consistent with how university museum audiences are often characterised in literature (e.g., Plaza, 2022). In this case, the visitors align with Mason's (2005) categorisation of communities defined by their visiting practices, or those with specialist knowledge.

What stood out, however, was the absence of the University's students in describing the museum's actual audience. One might assume that, as a university museum, it would naturally have a built-in student "community". However, they were not mentioned as regular visitors. Instead, university students were identified as the museum's target audience, particularly for its programmes, as Interviewee A can easily coordinate with instructors to have classes attend. As a result, students—not the museum's regular visitors—typically attend these programmes, given how they are promoted within the university. This gap between target and actual audiences may be unsurprising, as those expected to engage do not always do so in practice. It may also indicate that the museum struggles to engage the larger student "community". This raises questions about the museum's visibility and relevance within its University.

In the case of Interviewee A, there also appears to be a degree of uncertainty not just about who the museum's "community" is, but more importantly, how to engage them meaningfully. They explained:

> "You don't really know who your specific client is, but you have a big community. The problem is, how do you get that community?" (Interviewee A)

Notably, Interviewee A referred to the community as a "client", a term that appears to commercialise the relationship. This choice of language may reflect their professional

background in marketing and suggests that a transactional or strategic mindset also shapes their approach to community engagement.

Across the four museums, "community" emerged as a multi-layered and sometimes ambiguous concept. The clearest and most consistent definitions were found in the provincial museums (Museo Sorsogon and Museo Bulawan), where geography and institutional mandates to represent the province's history and heritage aligned, at least implicitly, with a "community" of provincial residents. In contrast, the UNC Museum and Museo de Casa San Rafael reflected more fluid understandings of community. But among all four museums, the concept of community appears to be understood in two ways: first, as a group of people that the museum already engages with, including both visitors and participants in programmes; and second, as a group that the museum aspires to reach, which includes individuals who have not yet visited. In these cases, "community" functions as a label for people who are, or could become, part of the museum's audience. This has important implications for how community engagement is understood in practice, as it largely refers to engaging with actual or potential audiences rather than with a distinct community.

4.2. Community Engagement

Having explored how the museums define their communities, I now turn to how they engage with them in practice. Interviewees A, C, and D reflected deeply on what community engagement means in the context of their work. Interviewee B did not provide much information on the topic, as they admitted they lack the resources to implement engagement programmes and are currently prioritising sustaining museum operations.

For these museum professionals, engagement was understood as a sense of obligation to reach out, especially to those unlikely to visit the museum on their own. This belief was echoed in some museums, particularly Museo Bulawan and Museo Sorsogon. As Interviewee C put it:

> "We really need to reach out. It's not supposed to be the museum just waiting for someone to visit. The museum needs to go out…with projects and activities. It can't just be complacent…the cultural work should really catch up." (Interviewee C)

Museum staff identified a range of activities that they considered forms of engagement. Education featured prominently in their responses, with common strategies including guided tours, school partnerships, internships, and workshops. These programmes

were often tailored to the museum's thematic focus and the perceived needs of students, who are often the target participants. Some activities also introduced young people to cultural work. While education is explored in more depth later, it is worth noting here that it forms a foundational pillar of how these institutions conceptualise engagement.

Another shared approach involved support for local artists. Museo Bulawan and Museo Sorsogon regularly host exhibitions of local artists, and the former has gone further by developing a website that catalogues artists and enables them to sell their work. Interviewee C described these artists as "ambassadors" of local culture who can foster pride and recognition for the province both locally and beyond.

Some of the museums also extended their efforts beyond their walls. Mobile exhibitions and off-site events were seen as ways to reach people in remote or underserved areas. Interviewee D, for instance, spoke of their plans to create a "Mobile Museum Box" with content featuring the history and heritage of each municipality it travels to. This initiative addresses the reality that not all locals can easily visit the main museum, so this is a way of bringing it to them. In the meantime, temporary exhibits have been hosted in more high-traffic venues, such as shopping malls.

Participation in local festivals, public commemorations, and large-scale cultural initiatives further illustrates the museums' role as cultural organisers. Events range from inclusive celebrations of national holidays to Museo Sorsogon's attempts at Guinness World Records tied to local heritage, such as the mass folk dance performance of *Pantomina sa Tinampo* or the creation of the world's largest *pili conserva*, a local delicacy. These events were framed as opportunities to celebrate shared cultural heritage and increase the museum's visibility in everyday public life.

Reflecting on these case studies, it became clear that while the museums' efforts are community-oriented, they often fall short of the participatory ideals described in the literature. Typical community engagement practices in museums, such as co-creation and consultation, have not yet been widely adopted in these institutions. Engagement still appears largely top-down. The museum initiates, plans, and implements, while the "community" — understood here as the audiences they currently reach and the potential audiences they imagine—is more of a recipient than a partner or owner. Nonetheless, the practices described

reflect an evolving awareness among museum professionals that meaningful engagement involves stepping outside traditional roles to meet people where they are.

4.3. Education in the Museum

Education emerged as a central theme across all interviews and focus groups. Museum professionals consistently described education not as a supplementary role, but as the foundation of their work. This reflects the long-held belief that museums serve as informal learning environments that enhance formal education (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007).

For Interviewee A, the museum is a "tangible extension of learning". In contrast to classroom teaching, pedagogy in the museum involves engaging learners through physical, experiential encounters with objects. Interviewee A provided an instance when students learning about national hero Jose Rizal's novels visited their museum and were thrilled to see a facsimile of Rizal's manuscripts. Interviewee D similarly emphasised the educational mission of their museum, which aims to make Sorsogon's "rich past and vibrant present" accessible to the public. For them, museum professionals are educators, even outside the classroom.

A core audience for this educational work is, unsurprisingly, students. Students emerged as a key group to engage in three of the four museums studied. Interviewees C and D described active partnerships with the Department of Education and regular outreach to schools through guided tours and educational visits. Interviewee A also targets students within their university through collaborations with academic departments. Students often become the museum's de facto community—not necessarily due to shared identity or location, but because they are the most accessible group. They are viewed as an audience to be educated about history and heritage, with the hope that they will carry this knowledge into the future.

Beyond reinforcing school curricula, museums also address local gaps in education. Interviewee C shared how their museum introduces visitors to overlooked aspects of local history, such as underappreciated historical landmarks or National Artists from the region. A frequent reaction from locals who visit is, "I didn't know we had this," which Interviewee C interprets as a sign of community pride.

The focus group participants echoed these sentiments. They described museums as spaces “to learn about the past” and “to understand one’s roots”. Sandra, in particular, agreed that museums can come in to fill the gaps in the education system, especially in terms of local history. Alex described the experience of visiting a museum as fundamentally different from reading about history in books: “It's one thing when you read it in a book. It's another thing when you get to see it and you get to walk through all of it.” Franz emphasised that this visual, experiential quality turns museums into living records of communities and their evolving identities.

Aside from telling stories from the past, Ezra added that good museums should be able to relate these stories to the present:

> “Any museum worth paying the entrance fee for will give you [a sense of what people] in the past endured, what they celebrated. And going up to the present day, what the current people of that place are going through, what they represent. To me, museums do help showcase those kinds of stories.” (Ezra)

For the museums in this study, educational programmes take various forms depending on the museum’s focus and the perceived needs of their communities. These include guided tours, thematic workshops, and internship opportunities. Internship positions are particularly valuable in understaffed museums, such as the UNC Museum, Museo Bulawan, and Museo Sorsogon. They support daily operations while introducing young individuals to cultural work. Interviewees A, C, and D noted that these roles can help the youth understand and appreciate the value of history and heritage.

Interviewee C’s museum stands out for formalising its educational initiatives through the establishment of the Centre for Creative Culture, a branded programme designed to make the museum a hub for workshops and trainings in their province. One of its flagship programmes is a summer art workshop for children, which provides activities during school breaks and contributes to “long-term cultural development”. Interviewee C believes these workshops cultivate values like discipline and excellence while fostering creative expression.

However, aside from attending guided museum tours as part of school field trips, none of the focus group participants had joined other educational activities in Bicol museums. Most were unaware of whether such programmes existed. While Sandra and Alex mentioned that the National Museum in Daraga hosts monthly public programmes, they had

never taken part. When asked why, it came down to two reasons: either they were busy or uninterested in the activity.

This gap between museums' educational function and the participation of the actual or potential audiences in these activities underscores the challenges of visibility and relevance. While museums clearly aspire to serve as educational institutions, these efforts do not always reach or resonate with actual or potential audiences. Building awareness and relevance is thus essential for museums to achieve their educational role.

4.4. Identity Building

Museums were framed not only as sites of learning and heritage preservation, but also as active agents in building and reflecting community identity. Several interviewees expressed a desire to deepen their institutions' work by moving beyond traditional programming and reflecting more critically on the museum's purpose, particularly in relation to identity. As Interviewee C reflected:

> "Before, it used to be educational tours only, but what if we make it deeper? Why are we doing these things? I proposed that maybe we can anchor it in one direction, like identity-building." (Interviewee C)

Museums, historically, have played a central role in defining and constructing identities, particularly national and collective ones (Davis, 2007; Labrador, 1996; McLean, 2008; Trofanenko, 2006). They do this through the curation of objects and the narratives they present. While this function is often discussed in national terms, local museums also play a role in shaping local identities. For example, Interviewee D conducted a province-wide cultural mapping project before Museo Sorsogon opened to create a comprehensive inventory of cultural resources that shaped the museum's content. This process involved fieldwork and personal conversations with local residents in the province. Interviewee D described this approach as a way to uncover "more interesting parts of the culture that you don't read about", highlighting that this knowledge could only be gained through direct interactions with the locals.

The museum also runs a programme that allows people to loan or donate objects. Before an object is accepted, the museum gathers the personal story of its owner, integrating it into the object's narrative. According to Interviewee D, these narratives imbue objects with

a unique, personal quality. These efforts contribute to Museo Sorsogon's goal "to educate and to promote Sorsogon identity".

As for Interviewee C, identity building means shaping "a sense of shared belonging" among local residents. Museo Bulawan is developing *Isang Cam Norteño, Isang Kwento*, a book that aims to be a singular source on Camarines Norte's culture and history. The project arose after learning that local social studies teachers often had to do their own research to teach about local history. By supporting local educators, the project reinforces community identity through education. This book project, along with other programmes, is viewed by Interviewee C as part of this broader mission of identity building. In this sense, the museum's role extends beyond serving an existing community to actively creating one. They explained that the ultimate goal is for the people of the province to "know who they are", feel confident, and take pride in their heritage. In this sense, the museum's role extends beyond serving an existing community to actively creating one, as it draws attention to people's shared heritage. As with any such process, however, the question remains as to who is included and excluded in this constructed "community". They explained that the ultimate goal is for the people of the province to "know who they are", feel confident, and take pride in their heritage.

While this can be understood as an internal outcome, it also affects how the local people are presented outside of the province, as a group with a shared identity. In the Philippines, museums are increasingly framed as assets within local tourism strategies, with their value often tied to their ability to attract visitors and stimulate the local economy (Ser, 2020). Although Museo Bulawan is part of the provincial government's Cultural Office (a separate division from the Tourism Office), they acknowledge that the two offices often collaborate. As they explained:

> "The difference [between] the Cultural Office and the Tourism Office…in Tourism their job is to really sell the place to invite tourists to spend their money here, so it's economic. Here [in the Cultural Office], it's more on building the people to receive those tourists." (Interviewee C)

In this perspective, culture is the foundation of tourism. The logic is that what tourism is "selling" is the area's culture; thus, the local people must first understand and value their shared features to build an identity on this before it can be shared with others. However, this interpretation also raises questions about the commodification of culture. On the side of the focus group participants, Alex, who works for their family's travel agency and is frequently

invited to the province of Albay's tourism stakeholder meetings, critiqued this commodification, arguing: "We harp on the fact that we can profit off our culture, rather than preserving culture first and then profit later."

While Interviewee C expressed a desire to "separate the tourism side from the cultural side", they also recognised that an overlap is often inevitable. This alignment may be strategic: for museums run by local governments, connecting to economic goals like tourism could be a way to remain relevant or justify continued support.

These examples show that museums do not merely represent identity but they also help produce it. Bennett (1998, cited in Witcomb, 2007) argues that "museums need to be understood not as institutions which represent communities and cultures—which create a 'place for all of us'—but as institutions which actually produce the very notion of community and culture." This is reflected in how museums choose which stories to tell and which objects to display, effectively shaping how local people might see themselves, including how they see themselves as forming a "community".

In the case of the museums in this study, however, identity-building appears less about constructing a new identity and more about uncovering, reinforcing, and celebrating what is already present in the local history and heritage. As Bennett (1998) suggests, museums can inevitably shape the concept of a community's identity through what they choose (and do not choose) to present to the public. Moreover, because museums are often regarded as authoritative institutions, they significantly influence how people understand their collective identity.

This also raises important questions. If museums are meant to build or represent community identity, what role do the local people play in shaping that representation? Do they recognise themselves in the narratives on display? Some might argue that practices like cultural mapping are a form of community inclusion. Yet in the case of Museo Sorsogon, cultural mapping happens only at the beginning, during museum planning. It is unclear whether this kind of participatory engagement is sustained over time. This question may require more sustained locally embedded research in the future.

4.5. Barriers to Community Engagement

This section explores the challenges that hinder museums' efforts to engage local people. Many of these stem from the lived realities of museum workers themselves, who spoke candidly about institutional limitations, resource constraints, and personal challenges. While these reflections primarily highlight their working conditions, many of these same issues are intertwined with barriers to meaningful community engagement. In addition, I have included perspectives from the focus group discussions, which similarly recognise certain factors that can negatively impact people's experiences in museums.

a. Access and Visibility

A fundamental barrier to community engagement is physical, financial, and informational inaccessibility. Long travel times, inconvenient transport routes, and expensive fares often prevent people from visiting museums, even when there is interest. As Interviewee D shared, "Even if we invite them to visit the museum, they have no fare. Sometimes, they have no time." I experienced this myself during fieldwork, when I was only able to visit one of the four museums because of difficulties in travelling.

Financial accessibility is another concern. Entrance fees can discourage visitors, especially those from lower-income backgrounds. Some museums, like Museo Sorsogon, attempt to reduce these barriers by waiving entrance fees for public schools and occasionally providing transportation. UNC Museum and Museo de Casa San Rafael accept donations instead of setting entrance fees.

Beyond physical access, museums also struggle with visibility and public awareness. Interviewee A noted that many students are unaware that the museum exists due to poor signage. For external visitors, gaining access requires passing through campus security and surrendering an ID to gain entry. I found this process inconvenient myself, and Interviewee A acknowledged how it may deter visitors. They expressed a desire to create a dedicated public entrance, saying, "If you have an entrance for the public, they'll be more enticed. 'Hey, a museum!'"

In some cases, the barrier is more cultural than logistical. Interviewee A observed that even faculty members seldom encourage their students to visit their museum. This points to deeper issues of uncoordinated institutional support and, perhaps, low heritage consciousness and appreciation, which is further discussed below.

The two focus groups also agreed that there seems to be a general lack of awareness regarding museums in the Bicol Region, and they were surprised to learn of the total number. Participants mentioned that they were familiar with or had visited seven out of the thirty-six museums across the region, namely the Bicol Science and Technology Centrum, National Museum of the Philippines – Bicol, NHCP Museo ni Jesse Robredo, Museo de Legazpi, Museo del Seminario Conciliar de Nueva Caceres, Museo Sorsogon, and the UNC Museum. They traced this lack of awareness to poor visibility and minimal advertising. They said museums were "not advertised as much" compared to other establishments, making them easy to overlook.

b. Exhibition Layout

The layout and design of museum exhibitions can hinder audience engagement. Interviewee A recognised that a poor layout can deter visitors, noting how their museum's dim lighting made it feel like "a haunted house," discouraging children from attending.

When asked about their experiences in the few museums they had visited, focus group participants offered a range of feedback regarding some Bicol museums in terms of their exhibition layouts. Museo de Legazpi was frequently described as "not memorable". Franz, a participant who has lived in Legazpi City her entire life, only found out about the museum when she had a work meeting there. However, the museum left little impression on her. Sandra likewise expressed disappointment with the museum's displays:

> "There's a storyline, but…I felt like it was a brochure, like they just painted words on the walls. Very limited displays. I didn't see the effort to give something that you would take time to visit, because what was there, you could read in a book." (Sandra)

When I visited the Museo de Legazpi, I also noticed how there were very few objects on display. It was mostly dioramas accompanied by extensive walls of dense, academic text. A burial jar was tucked in one corner, a rare find in the region, but it barely had any contextual information.

Alex also commented on the museum's condition and apparent lack of development, observing that it was only "hyped" or given attention in its early stages. They felt the museum had since been neglected, with little change in the exhibits. This is an example of Labrador's (2014) "festival framework" concept relating to museums in the Philippines that

are initiated by LGUs, where attention is given to museums primarily at their launch, but they struggle to sustain that interest over time.

A standout museum for many was the Bicol Science and Technology Centrum, especially among those who had visited as students. Pedro, Franz, and Annie described it as "interactive" and a "core memory" from school field trips. They vividly recalled elements such as a room with an echoing effect and a show in the planetarium. Sandra remembered it as the only museum she enjoyed as a child because it allowed visitors to physically interact with exhibits, like holding an orb.

The focus group participants frequently highlighted interactive museum exhibitions as an enticing factor to visit the museum, and it was a common element when they shared positive experiences from museums they had visited. They described "immersive" museum exhibitions and activities that allowed them to contribute, such as adding their name to a display, having the opportunity to decorate a display with stickers, or simply being allowed to handle objects.

The focus group participants expressed similar interests regarding the topics they would like to see in Bicol museums. They suggested the creation of a museum dedicated to Bicolano cuisine, as well as exhibits on local products such as *abaca* and their production processes. Additionally, they expressed a desire for displays featuring regional myths and legends, the Bicol language, and a provincial museum that showcases the unique aspects of each town in the province, with a particular emphasis on promoting the smaller towns. These suggestions indicate that there is still much to explore in the region's museums.

c. Low Heritage Awareness

Across all interviews, museum workers observed a general lack of public concern or interest in cultural heritage, history, and cultural work. Interviewee D expressed frustration over how difficult it is to capture the attention of younger generations and how history is perceived as "boring" by them. Interviewee A also shared that "If they don't care about history, they don't visit." As a result, museum audiences tend to be limited to a small group of those already interested in the museum's topics.

This disconnection is especially striking because the heritage represented in these museums belongs to the local communities themselves. Yet according to the interviewees,

many locals appear disengaged or unaware of their own historical and cultural heritage. As Interviewee B, who founded their town's first museum and is a direct descendant of its founder, remarked: "My relatives don't know—how much more the ordinary people that don't really know history?". Interviewee A echoed this, adding that fewer students appear to pursue degrees in history, leading to a decline in the number of people entering heritage-related professions.

This limited awareness also extends to heritage sites, many of which have been neglected. Interviewee B pointed to a Spanish-era lighthouse in their locality that has significantly deteriorated due to a lack of interest from local authorities in preserving the structure. Interviewee C noted similar disregard for World War II monuments in their province: "Because for them, it's been there for a long time…sometimes they probably lose sight of it, why that monument is there." Interviewee A believed tangible heritage in their city is largely lost— "totally ruined"—while intangible practices are "not really practised."

At the same time, the museums themselves were not necessarily established in response to strong local demand or locally-led initiatives. Instead, they were often the result of personal advocacy or institutional goals. For example, the UNC Museum was founded by the University's founder, an avid collector of art and artefacts. Museo de Casa San Rafael was established by Interviewee B out of a personal desire to preserve local history and provide their town with its first museum. Meanwhile, Museo Bulawan and Museo Sorsogon were both created by provincial government units, likely as part of efforts to showcase local culture and history, possibly with tourism in mind.

These observations highlight a broader tension: while the groups or communities connected to this heritage exist in some form, they may not recognise themselves in how the museum presents this heritage. Without a strong sense of shared identity around these narratives, people may feel little personal connection to what is on display, resulting in limited participation and inconsistent interest. This also aligns with the broader problem of the lack of heritage appreciation or consciousness in the Philippines (Canuday et al., 2017; De La Paz, 2004; Viray, 2025)

For many museum workers, this suggests an urgent need to strengthen heritage education at the local level. Interviewee A reflected that past efforts may have focused more on external audiences: "Maybe we focused on tourists, outsiders, but our locals, we weren't able to

educate them properly." They stressed the importance of teaching people to "love local", not just for tourism, but as a foundation for deeper appreciation and understanding of local history and heritage.

d. Institutional, Budget, and Staffing Challenges

Interviewees C and D, who work for museums operated by local government units (LGUs), shared that their museums face instability with every election cycle. Funding is often unallocated when supportive leaders are replaced by officials who deprioritise cultural work. This reflects an earlier finding by Labrador (2014) regarding the sustainability of local museums in the Philippines, wherein the "fickle political climate" can affect museums, especially those that are government-run. Although Museo de Casa San Rafael is privately managed by Interviewee B, they shared that LGU support can still be a big help, especially in terms of promotion, although in their case, the previous mayor had little interest in heritage, forcing them to establish the museum independently.

This indifference is often tied to a perceived lack of return on investment. LGUs may claim they have "no budget" for culture, yet as Interviewee D pointed out, the Seal of Good Local Governance (a national incentive program) includes cultural preservation in its criteria, suggesting that there should be resources that can be utilised.

Without political will, museum workers are often left to sustain their work through their own resourcefulness and initiative. As Interviewee C remarked:

> "It's not possible that you just sit, wait. If the person in power doesn't like you, you won't do anything. That's not public service. We're not the only ones with a small fund. To be honest, there are many offices who have that reality. But you need to move. Have pity on the targets that you need to help." (Interviewee C)

Budget constraints remain one of the most pressing concerns across all institutions. Some museums, like Museo de Casa San Rafael, are self-funded. They rely on donations to sustain operations, sometimes amounting to just a few hundred pesos per month. Others, such as the UNC Museum, depend on external sponsors or occasional alumni donations to cover basic improvements. Government-supported museums also struggle, as Interviewee C observed that tourism offices often receive greater funding because they are perceived as "income-generating", while museums are not.

Staffing is a parallel concern. Many LGU-employed museum staff hold temporary contracts and can be reassigned at any time, depending on LGU priorities decided by those in power. Interviewee C shared that "manpower will be diverted to another office" if deemed more urgent by local officials. With no security of tenure and few legislative protections, museum teams are often understaffed and overworked.

UNC Museum and Museo de Casa San Rafael operate with only one or two personnel. Larger ones, such as Museo Sorsogon, run daily operations with just seven staff members, despite serving up to 200 visitors daily. According to Interviewee D, understaffing limits their ability to carry out outreach and engagement programs, which are often cancelled in favour of keeping doors open to get more income through entrance fees.

Museum staff also often take on multiple roles. Interviewee D described the museum curator role as "multi-faceted", while Interviewee A noted that many act as "teacher slash curator" or perform multiple responsibilities out of necessity.

e. Knowledge and Capacity

Many museum workers enter the field without formal training, often learning on the job. Interviewee A, with a background in economics, admitted they had limited knowledge of curatorial work before pursuing graduate studies in anthropology. Interviewee B, who works alone, has no formal background in museum work and relies on resource persons, such as antique collectors, for guidance. Interviewee D noted that most applicants lack research or public engagement skills, assuming museum work is mostly administrative.

This lack of knowledge and capacity amongst museum staff can negatively impact visitors' museum experience. Focus group participants Alex and Ezra emphasised the importance of having knowledgeable museum guides who can engage with visitors by addressing questions and knowing when to go off-script if necessary, rather than just reading captions aloud.

This gap in training also reflects a broader issue in the Philippine context. As Interviewee D observed, there are no formal undergraduate or graduate programmes in museum work, and even related fields like anthropology or history are limited. Without opportunities for formal training or upskilling, professionalising the sector and building long-term capacity remain significant challenges.

4.6. Festivals

An interesting topic that emerged during the second focus group discussion was the festivals celebrated in the Bicol Region, particularly in the province of Albay. This topic came up in response to my question about their experiences with museum activities or programmes, although the discussion eventually extended to a broader context beyond museums.

A key criticism was that some festivals have strayed from their original cultural purpose. Ezra observed that many have "lost their focus" over time, becoming disconnected from the stories and values they were meant to celebrate. The Magayon Festival, for example, began in 1995 and was originally inspired by the legend of Daragang Magayon, an origin story tied to the Mayon Volcano. Intended to highlight "the beauty, culture, and history of the province of Albay" ("Magayon Festival", n.d.), it has now become dominated by thematically unrelated yet crowd-drawing events such as a beauty pageant and a beer plaza. For Alex, the story behind the festival has been sidelined, making the celebration feel "shallow" and purposeless.

Participants also noted a proliferation of what they called "manufactured" festivals—those created by local governments primarily for tourism, rather than a celebration of a town's culture. Torres (2006) argues that traditions are lost in these "fake" festivals as they become highly commercialised activities. An example shared by the focus group participants was the Sunflower Festival in Ligao City, which began in 2014 to celebrate the blooming of sunflowers in the area, said to represent the city's resilience ("Sunflower Festival", n.d.). However, Alex shared that back in school, their teachers were asked to invent a legend about the sunflowers to justify the festival's cultural narrative. For Ezra, such manufactured festivals are hard to relate to: "It's difficult to get people realistically and passionately involved in these things because it's not really part of their identity."

Underlying these concerns was the sense that cultural activities are often politically driven. As Alex noted, "The energy of these festivals every year depends on who's sitting." Programs tend to concentrate around the festival period, with little sustained cultural activity throughout the rest of the year.

Nonetheless, participants pointed to examples of more grounded and meaningful festivals. The Peñafrancia Festival in Naga City was described as a strong expression of

regional faith and cultural identity, centred on a fluvial procession honouring Our Lady of Peñafrancia, the Patroness of the Bicol Region. Another example was the Paroy Festival in Libon, which celebrates the town's main livelihood of rice farming through activities involving local farmers. Alex appreciated how the festival connects directly to people's everyday lives: "It gives importance to the rice. There's a correlation with planting."

Participants suggested that instead of creating new festivals, local governments should strengthen what already exists and root activities in authentic cultural practices. As Sandra put it, "I hope that's what they make festivals or activities out of, because I feel like those younger generations... if there's an event that's interesting enough, I feel, they will also want to go back to reconnect with their roots".

4.7. The Role of Museums in Fighting Historical Revisionism

A significant insight that emerged from the focus group discussions, which was not present in the interviews with museum professionals, was the role of museums in resisting historical revisionism and revealing overlooked narratives. Several participants expressed dismay over the lack of a dedicated museum on Martial Law[1]. This concern is deeply tied to broader anxieties about the return of the Marcos family to political power and the growing normalisation of historical revisionism (Islam, 2022). Participants observed how the Martial Law era is either absent or only superficially covered in school curricula. This is worsened by widespread disinformation campaigns on social media that have emerged in recent years, portraying the era as a "golden age" in Philippine history (Juego, 2022). Pedro described this as a version of "filtered" history, while Roger remarked on its effects: "As a country, we are very divided…as to whose history is correct, whose history is not."

I informed them about existing institutions such as the *Bantayog ng mga Bayani* in Quezon City and the upcoming Freedom Memorial Museum, which has faced long delays in its establishment (Reyes & Subingsubing, 2024). They were surprised to know about these developments, yet they still reiterated that the lack of public awareness about these institutions, especially among students, remains a serious issue.

[1] Martial Law in the Philippines was declared by President Ferdinand Marcos in 1972 and lasted until 1981, although authoritarian rule continued until Marcos' ousting in 1986 following the People Power Revolution. This period was widely remembered for its human rights abuses, corruption, and censorship.

The focus group participants believe that museums could play a role in reminding the public about these overlooked histories. Annie, for instance, recalled a powerful experience as a student visiting a Martial Law exhibition in her university museum. At the end of the exhibit, audiences could speak with a survivor of human rights abuses during the Martial Law period. For Annie, this was a powerful, “awakening” experience that humanised a topic she had only encountered in history books.

Ezra emphasised the importance of learning from history, drawing comparisons to countries like Germany and the Netherlands. He believes these nations have taken a stronger stand against historical revisionism and acknowledge the importance of showing their World War II history through museums and memorials, such as the Holocaust Memorial and the Anne Frank Museum. He argues that because of the existence of these institutions, “People tend to have an appreciation of that history and they tend not to repeat the bad things that happened in the past.” He contrasted this to the Philippines, where he observes that people do not have access to these types of institutions, which present a part of the country’s “collective history”, and, as a result, this history is reduced to merely a story rather than a reality.

In this discussion, the participants perceived museums not only as places to showcase the past, but also as active agents in truth-telling and remembering histories that may be uncomfortable for some but are necessary to confront.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In recent years, the value of community engagement has gained significant attention in the museum field. This dissertation set out to investigate how museums in the Bicol Region of the Philippines understand and practice community engagement, addressing a research gap concerning how these institutions relate to the locals in their area as well as to their actual and potential audiences. Of the 36 museums currently established in the region, this study focused on four institutions—two run by local government units (LGU) and two privately managed—providing an initial but valuable insight into how museums in this area engage with the people around them.

Although a limited number of museums were included in the study due to time constraints, this research contributes to a growing interest in museology in the Philippines and offers a localised perspective. The conversations with museum professionals and people from the region reveal several areas for future research and confirm that the Bicol Region, with its rich cultural heritage and history, offers many opportunities for further study.

The four museums included in this study can be broadly grouped into local government-run museums and privately-run museums. These museums share similar challenges, such as limited resources and institutional capacity, but differences also emerged in their operations, outlooks, and approaches to engagement. The LGU-run museums seem more restricted in their capacities because they are under the local government, yet they appeared to be more active in engagement, as they had more public programmes and catered to larger audiences. In contrast, the privately-run museums in this study tended to serve more specific or niche interest groups, with fewer outreach activities overall.

The findings reveal that, in this study, community engagement is understood as the actions of museums in relation to the people they consider to be their "communities", a label that does not necessarily refer to any clearly identifiable group in the local area. In practice, engagement is primarily framed as outreach. It is often motivated by a sense of obligation to inform and connect with local people or specific interest groups they see as their potential or actual audiences. Common practices include guided tours, educational programmes (e.g. workshops), commemorative events, and support for local artists. These practices, however, largely reflect top-down approaches, with institutions defining and directing the terms of engagement. This is influenced by how museums understand what their "communities" are,

which the findings suggest is not always straightforward. Defining "community" is complex in both academic and everyday contexts, which also applies to the current study. Museums' idea of "community" partly overlaps with those who visit and participate, and those whom the museum wants to reach. While familiarity with their intended audiences might be expected to support more responsive programming, there appears to be an assumption of the "community's needs" rather than active collaboration or consultation.

Following Schreiber et al.'s (2024) levels of power sharing in the museums, most of these practices fall within either the first level, maintaining institutional power with little change, or the second level, changing public experiences temporarily while institutional control remains. In terms of practices corresponding to the third level, where power is deliberately shared between the museum and people outside the museum, these are not yet widely adopted. Practices such as co-creation, shared authority, consultation, and long-term partnerships—ideal community engagement approaches in museums according to the literature—remain limited in this context. Yet this should not be seen as a failure, but rather as an indication of where some Bicol museums currently stand in their engagement journey, which appears to be in the early stages. Museum professionals recognise the value of people's participation and express interest in creating more opportunities; however, they face institutional and external challenges and a lack of clarity about who exactly the "communities" are that they want to participate.

On the side of the local people, the participants of the focus group discussions show openness and willingness to engage, particularly when museums are accessible and responsive to their needs. I recommend that museums find ways to better understand the needs and preferences of their potential and actual audiences to move away from a top-down approach. In this way, community engagement may shift to positioning potential and actual museum audiences as partners or co-producers, rather than as passive recipients. To support this finding, further research can foreground the perspectives of representatives of different groups to better understand their expectations from museums.

As for the barriers to community engagement, this dissertation identified several interconnected factors: limited institutional resources, bureaucratic constraints (especially in LGU-run museums), low public awareness of museums, and broader issues of professionalisation in the heritage sector. The findings support two previous studies regarding issues in the cultural sector within the Philippine context. First, as several authors note,

heritage consciousness in the Philippines is still relatively young, shaped by the uneven implementation of cultural policies and limited, localised grassroots efforts (Canuday et al., 2017; De La Paz, 2004; Ma-alat, 2022; Viray, 2025). The lack of a strong museum-going culture observed in this study may be both a symptom and a contributing factor to this limited heritage consciousness, as some people are unaware of museums in the region, do not recognise the value of visiting them, or are not interested.

In particular, there appears to be a cyclical relationship between heritage awareness and institutional support. On one hand, low public awareness of cultural heritage can result in weak support for museums in terms of attendance and policy prioritisation. On the other hand, this limited support—as evidenced through tight budgets, staffing shortages, and lack of professionalisation or work opportunities—contributes to the low heritage consciousness. This issue is worsened by some government officials perceiving museums as "not income-generating", leading them to undervalue these institutions due to a lack of perceived return on investment.

This raises a "chicken and egg" dilemma: is heritage undervalued because museums lack support, or do museums lack support because heritage is undervalued? The findings suggest that both are mutually reinforcing and can hinder the emergence of a community that values heritage. Further research could investigate the causes of low heritage consciousness and multi-sectoral solutions to break this cycle. This dissertation also calls for efforts to professionalise the field, including developing academic programmes and legislative policies that promote heritage and museum work as viable career paths and provide them with the necessary support to carry out their work. Such programmes should also foster a more precise and critical understanding of what constitutes a "community" in the context of museum practice. It is important to highlight the pitfalls of using this concept without scientific rigour, as this can help museums better identify the "communities" they intend to engage. This understanding can prevent falling into tokenistic forms of community engagement (Waterton & Smith, 2010; Onciul, 2017).

The second study these findings support is Labrador's (2014) critique of the 'festival framework'. This critique argues that museums, particularly those in provincial areas run by local government units, initially receive much attention during their openings but quickly lose interest and momentum afterwards. The findings also highlight the Philippines' "fickle

political climate", as described by Labrador (2014), which complicates the sustainability of these museums, as seen in the lack of support discussed earlier.

An unexpected but significant insight was the role of festivals as sites of cultural expressions, raising questions about authenticity and representation. The findings from this study encourage local politicians and cultural workers to reflect on how festivals are conceptualised and implemented and to consider returning them to their cultural roots. These events can be used as opportunities to strengthen heritage awareness among local people.

This dissertation also revealed the perceived role of museums in the Bicol Region from the perspectives of museum workers and local people. Education remains a central pillar of museum work, yet the findings suggest a need for more interactive and participatory pedagogical methods, as the focus group participants identified these as what they are most receptive to. Museums have an opportunity to fill the gaps in the national school curriculum where local history and culture are often underrepresented. Strengthening heritage education through museums could play a transformative role in raising heritage consciousness, especially amongst the youth, and in cultivating future generations of museum supporters and workers.

The role of museums in identity building is not new, as museums have historically been associated with this role (see Anderson, 1991; McLean, 2008; Zhang et al., 2018). Identity building was particularly emphasised in LGU-run museums, where curatorial narratives often aim to construct and promote a collective local identity rooted in shared heritage. Such efforts reflect the civic mission of museums. Identity-building narratives also count as an example of authorised heritage discourse (Smith, 2006), as they become the prevalent narrative shaped by the museum, which is seen as an authoritative institution regarding history and heritage. This prompts reflection on how local people participate (or do not participate) in shaping those narratives. Further studies can also be done on these specific narratives presented by museums to discover how they are shaped and the people's responses to them.

A noteworthy role of museums that emerged from the focus group discussions was museums' involvement in addressing historical revisionism and tackling marginalised histories, especially in the context of the country's Martial Law era. Several studies have been conducted on this topic, but there is always room for more research (see: Claudio, 2010;

Buenrostro & Cabbab, 2018; Destrooper, 2023). As discussed in the focus groups, audiences increasingly see museums as educational institutions and institutions that are socially relevant and willing to take a stand. This opens up important conversations about how museums might engage with contested histories, promote critical thinking, and contribute to the public good.

In closing, this dissertation affirms the importance of museums, particularly those located in regions beyond the Philippines' National Capital Region. Museums in the Bicol Region and other similarly underrepresented areas play a vital role in preserving heritage and shaping a sense of collective identity. It is my hope that this research encourages local museums to remain committed to their missions and to actively address the needs of both their actual and potential audiences, acknowledging the significance of people's participation. At the same time, I hope it inspires greater public interest and support in museums, whether through visiting, participating in programmes, or even pursuing careers in the museum and heritage sector. Additionally, I hope this study encourages more support from local government officials. Strengthening local museums begins not only with institutional change but with a broader cultural investment and belief in their value and potential.

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APPENDIX A: Data Collection Tools

Table A1

Guiding Questions for Interviews with Museum Professionals

Warm-up Questions	1. What is your role in the museum that you work for? 2. What was the path that led you to that role? 3. What made you interested in working in a museum?
Main Questions	4. Can you please describe the role or function of your museum? 5. Who usually visits the museum? Is there a particular group of people that your museum tries to engage with? 6. Do you experience any challenges in engaging people to join or participate in these activities? 7. As a museum professional, do you think that it is necessary to engage the community?

Table A2

Focus Group Discussion Guide

1. Tell us a bit about yourself.
2. Do you have a favourite museum, and if so, which one is that?
3. Are you aware of any museums in the Bicol Region? Which ones have you visited?
4. What was your experience in visiting these museums?
5. Have you ever participated in any museum activities, such as workshops, exhibitions, or public programs? If so, what was your experience like?
6. If you haven't participated in museum activities or visited museums, what has prevented you from doing so?
7. What would make you more interested in visiting and participating in museum activities?
8. What comes to mind when you hear the words "cultural heritage"? How would you describe Bikolano cultural heritage?
9. Do you think museums help in preserving and sharing cultural heritage? In what ways?
10. How would you define community? What community do you think you are a part of?
11. Do you think having a sense of community is important? Why or why not?
12. Do you think local museums have a role in shaping or strengthening a sense of community? Why or why not?

APPENDIX B: Information Letters for Interviewees and Focus Group Participants (in English and Filipino)

L-Università ta' Malta

Information Letter ***(for Interviews)***

[Date]

Dear **XXX**

My name is Martina Roces and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for an International Master's in Education in Museums and Heritage. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled Understanding Community Engagement Practices in Bicol Museums. This is being supervised by Dr. Patricia Camilleri.

This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to examine how local museums in the Bicol Region engage with communities. Participation will involve a one-hour interview, which can be conducted in person or online at a time convenient for you. You will be asked to answer questions about your experiences and insights as someone working in or for a museum in the Bicol Region. This may include topics such as your role in the museum, the museum's exhibitions and programmes, your perspectives on community engagement, and sharing real-life experiences of how your museum engages with communities.

Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of how Bicol museums define and interact with their communities, as well as how they can become more inclusive and responsive to community needs. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study and will be treated confidentially through the provision of codenames. Your name (or any other identifying information) will not appear upon publication of the study, unless you prefer to be named and explicitly give your consent to do so.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, you may contact myself or my supervisor on the details provided below.

Yours Sincerely,

Martina Roces
martina.roces.23@um.edu.mt
+63 917 558 1615

Dr. Patricia Camilleri
patricia.camilleri@um.edu.mt

LIHAM UKOL SA PAGHINGI NG IMPORMASYON SA PAGLAHOK SA ISANG PANANALIKSIK

Dear XXX,

Ako si Martina Roces, isang mag-aaral ng International Master's in Education in Museums and Heritage sa Unibersidad ng Malta. Nagsasagawa ako ng pananaliksik para sa aking tesis na pinamagatang *Understanding Community Engagement Practices in Bicol Museums*. Ito ay pinangangasiwaan ni Dr. Patricia Camilleri.

Ang liham na ito ay isang paanyaya na lumahok sa pag-aaral na ito at naglalaman ng mga impormasyon tungkol sa pag-aaral at sa kung ano ang kaakibat ng iyong pakikilahok, kung magpasya kang sumali.

Ang layunin ng aking pag-aaral ay suriin kung paano nakikipag-ugnayan ang mga museo sa Bicol sa mga komunidad. Ang pakikilahok ay may kasamang isang oras na **panayam**, na maaaring isagawa nang *personal* o *online* sa isang oras na angkop para sa iyo. Hihilingin sa iyo na sagutin ang mga tanong tungkol sa iyong mga karanasan at pananaw bilang isang taong nagtatrabaho para sa isang museo sa Bicol. Maaaring kabilang dito ang mga paksa tulad ng iyong tungkulin sa museo, mga eksibisyon at programa ng museo, ang iyong mga pananaw sa pakikipag-ugnayan sa komunidad, at pagbabahagi ng mga karanasan sa totoong buhay kung paano nakikipag-ugnayan ang iyong museo sa mga komunidad.

Ang iyong pakikilahok sa pag-aaral na ito ay makakatulong sa isang mas mahusay na pag-unawa sa kung paano tinutukoy at nakikipag-ugnayan ang mga museo ng Bicol sa kanilang mga komunidad, gayundin kung paano sila magiging mas inklusibo at tumutugon sa mga pangangailangan ng komunidad. Ang anumang data na nakolekta mula sa pananaliksik na ito ay gagamitin lamang para sa mga layunin ng pag-aaral na ito, at ituturing na kumpidensyal sa pamamagitan ng pagbibigay ng mga *codename*. Ang iyong pangalan (o anumang impormasyon sa pagkakakilanlan) ay hindi lilitaw kapag iniulat ang mga resulta ng pag-aaral.

Maraming salamat sa iyong oras at konsiderasyon. Kung mayroon kang anumang mga katanungan o alalahanin, maaari kang makipag-ugnayan sa akin, o sa aking superbisor sa mga detalyeng ibinigay sa ibaba.

Lubos na gumagalang,

Martina Roces
martina.roces.23@um.edu.mt
+63 917 558 1615

Dr. Patricia Camilleri
patricia.camilleri@um.edu.mt

Information Letter ***(for Focus Group Discussions)***

[Date]

Dear **XXX**

My name is Martina Roces and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for an International Master's in Education in Museums and Heritage. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled Understanding Community Engagement Practices in Bicol Museums. This is being supervised by Dr. Patricia Camilleri.

This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aims of my study are to examine how local museums in the Bicol Region engage with communities, and to understand how communities view the relevance of museums. You will be asked to join a focus group discussion with two to four other individuals, where you will share your thoughts on and experiences with museums. This also an opportunity to share your insights, exchange ideas, and contribute to a better understanding of the role of museums in your community. The session will be conducted at a scheduled time and venue convenient to all participants.

Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of how Bicol museums can become more inclusive and responsive to community needs. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study and will be treated confidentially through the provision of codenames. Your name (or any other identifying information) will not appear upon publication of the study.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, you may contact myself or my supervisor on the details provided below.

Yours Sincerely,

Martina Roces
martina.roces.23@um.edu.mt
+63 917 558 1615

Dr. Patricia Camilleri
patricia.camilleri@um.edu.mt

LIHAM UKOL SA PAGHINGI NG IMPORMASYON SA PAGLAHOK SA ISANG PANANALIKSIK

Dear XXX,

Ako si Martina Roces, isang mag-aaral ng International Master's in Education in Museums and Heritage sa Unibersidad ng Malta. Nagsasagawa ako ng pananaliksik para sa aking tesis na pinamagatang *Understanding Community Engagement Practices in Bicol Museums*. Ito ay pinangangasiwaan ni Dr. Patricia Camilleri.

Ang liham na ito ay isang paanyaya na lumahok sa pag-aaral na ito at naglalaman ng mga impormasyon tungkol sa pag-aaral at sa kung ano ang kaakibat ng iyong pakikilahok, kung magpasya kang sumali.

Ang layunin ng aking pag-aaral ay suriin kung paano nakikipag-ugnayan ang mga museo sa Bicol sa mga komunidad, at maunawaan kung ano ang tingin ng mga komunidad sa mga museo. Hihilingin sa iyo na sumali sa isang ***focus group discussion*** kasama ang dalawa hanggang apat na iba pang indibidwal, kung saan ibabahagi mo ang iyong mga kaisipan at mga karanasan sa mga museo. Isa rin itong pagkakataon upang makipagpalitan ng mga ideya at mag-ambag sa isang mas mahusay na pag-unawa sa papel ng mga museo sa iyong komunidad. Ang talakayan ay isasagawa sa nakatakdang oras at lugar na maginhawa sa lahat ng kalahok.

Ang iyong pakikilahok sa pag-aaral na ito ay makatutulong para malaman kung paano magiging mas inklusibo at tumutugon sa mga pangangailangan ng komunidad ang mga museo sa Bicol. Ang anumang data na nakolekta mula sa pananaliksik na ito ay gagamitin lamang para sa mga layunin ng pag-aaral na ito, at itituring na kumpidensyal sa pamamagitan ng pagbibigay ng mga *codename*. Ang iyong pangalan (o anumang impormasyon sa pagkakakilanlan) ay hindi lilitaw kapag iniulat ang mga resulta ng pag-aaral.

Maraming salamat sa iyong oras at konsiderasyon. Kung mayroon kang anumang mga katanungan o alalahanin, maaari kang makipag-ugnayan sa akin, o sa aking superbisor sa mga detalyeng ibinigay sa ibaba.

Lubos na gumagalang,

Martina Roces
martina.roces.23@um.edu.mt
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Dr. Patricia Camilleri
patricia.camilleri@um.edu.mt

APPENDIX C: Reddit Recruitment Post

r/Bicol · 51d

LF: Participants for a FGD on museums in the Bicol Region (w/ incentives!)

Looking for/DMs

Hello! I'm a master's student from Legazpi City taking up a joint master's programme in Education in Museums and Heritage at the University of Glasgow and the University of Malta.

As part of my thesis, I'm looking for 4-5 Bicolanos to participate in a focus group discussion about your thoughts and experiences about museums and what they mean to you.

👥 Who can join?

- You're 18 years old and above
- You live in Legazpi or nearby areas
- You are open to sharing your honest opinions and experiences — whether or not you've visited a museum before

🗓️ When and where?

- The discussion will last around 1.5 to 2 hours
- Venue will be in Legazpi City (exact location to be confirmed)

If you're interested, please fill out this short form: https://forms.gle/jxgbnancBAgpTXkDA

For any questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to PM me. 😊

Dios mabalos! 🙏

15 | 0

APPENDIX D: Consent Forms for Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (in English and Filipino)

L-Università ta' Malta

Participant's Consent Form

Understanding Community Engagement Practices in Bicol Museums

I, _____ (full name), agree to participate in an **interview** for the research being conducted by Martina Roces as part of her master's thesis.

1. I confirm that the purpose of the interview has been explained to me by the researcher, and I have understood the information received.

2. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty.

3. I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded and, if interviews take place via a communication platform such as Zoom, video-recorded, and that the recording will not be published or shared beyond the researcher.

4. While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, I will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential, unless I give consent to be named or cited (see below). I give permission to the researcher to use extracts from the interview either in anonymous form or using a pseudonym (a made-up name or code, e.g., respondent A).

   Mark only if and as applicable:

   ☐ I **agree** to be quoted in this dissertation using my name.

5. I understand that I can contact either the researcher or the researcher's lead thesis supervisor with questions about this study via the contact details below.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

PAGBIBIGAY NG PAHINTULOT

"Understanding Community Engagement Practices in Bicol Museums"

Ako si _____ (buong pangalan) at sumasang-ayon akong lumahok sa isang **panayam** para sa pananaliksik na isinasagawa ni Martina Roces bilang bahagi ng kanyang master's thesis.

1. Kinukumpirma ko na ang layunin ng panayam ay ipinaliwanag sa akin ng mananaliksik, at naunawaan ko ang impormasyong natanggap.

2. Naiintindihan ko na ang aking pakikilahok sa pag-aaral na ito ay kusang-loob at maaari kong bawiin ang aking pakikilahok anumang oras nang walang anumang dahilan at walang anumang parusa.

3. Naiintindihan ko na irerekord ang *audio* ng panayam. Kung magaganap ito *online* sa pamamagitan ng Zoom o iba pang *communication platform*, naiintindihan ko na mairerekord din ang *video*. Hindi maipa-publish o ibabahagi sa ibang tao ang *audio* o *video* rekording.

4. Ang impormasyong nakuha sa pag-aaral na ito ay ilalathala batay sa ipinaliwanag na hindi ako makikilala, at ang indibidwal na impormasyon ay mananatiling kumpidensyal, maliban kung pumayag akong pangalanan o banggitin. Binibigyan ko ng pahintulot ang mananaliksik na gumamit ng mga sipi mula sa panayam sa alinman sa di-kilalang anyo o paggamit ng isang *codename* (isang ginawang pangalan o code, hal., *respondent A*).

Markahan lamang kung ikaw ay sumasangayon:

☐ Sumasang-ayon akong ma-*quote* sa disertasyong ito gamit ang aking pangalan.

5. Naiintindihan ko na maaari kong kontakin ang mananaliksik o ang nangungunang tesis supervisor ng mananaliksik para sa mga tanong tungkol sa pag-aaral na ito sa pamamagitan ng mga detalye sa ibaba.

Lagda ng Kalahok: _____

Petsa: _____

Participant's Consent Form

Understanding Community Engagement Practices in Bicol Museums

I, _____ (full name), agree to participate in a **focus group discussion** for the research being conducted by Martina Roces as part of her master's thesis.

1. I confirm that the purpose of the focus group discussion has been explained to me by the researcher, and I have understood the information received.

2. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty.

3. I understand that the focus group discussion will be audio and video recorded to help the researcher in the transcription and correct attribution of quotes, and that these recordings will not be published or shared beyond the researcher.

4. While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, I will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.

5. I give permission to the researcher to use extracts from the focus group discussion either in anonymous form or using a pseudonym (a made-up name or code, e.g., respondent A).

6. I understand that I can contact either the researcher or the researcher's lead thesis supervisor with questions about this study via the contact details below.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

PAGBIBIGAY NG PAHINTULOT

"Understanding Community Engagement Practices in Bicol Museums"

Ako si _____ (buong pangalan) at sumasang-ayon akong lumahok sa isang ***focus group discussion*** para sa pananaliksik na isinasagawa ni Martina Roces bilang bahagi ng kanyang master's thesis.

1. Kinukumpirma ko na ang layunin ng *focus group discussion* ay ipinaliwanag sa akin ng mananaliksik, at naunawaan ko ang impormasyong natanggap.

2. Naiintindihan ko na ang aking pakikilahok sa pag-aaral na ito ay kusang-loob at maaari kong bawiin ang aking pakikilahok anumang oras nang walang anumang dahilan at walang anumang parusa.

3. Naiintindihan ko na irerekord ang *audio* at *video* ng *focus group discussion* upang matulungan ang mananaliksik sa transkripsyon at tamang pagpapatungkol ng mga sinabi, at hindi maipa-publish o ibabahagi sa iba ang rekording.

4. Ang impormasyong nakuha sa pag-aaral na ito ay ilalathala batay sa ipinaliwanag na hindi ako makikilala, at ang indibidwal na impormasyon ay mananatiling kumpidensyal.

5. Binibigyan ko ng pahintulot ang mananaliksik na gumamit ng mga sipi mula sa panayam sa alinman sa di-kilalang anyo o paggamit ng isang *codename* (isang ginawang pangalan o code, hal., *respondent A*).

6. Naiintindihan ko na maaari kong kontakin ang mananaliksik o ang nangungunang tesis supervisor ng mananaliksik para sa mga tanong tungkol sa pag-aaral na ito sa pamamagitan ng mga detalye sa ibaba.

Lagda ng Kalahok: _____

Petsa: _____

APPENDIX E: Acknowledgement of Research Ethics Application from the University of Malta's Faculty Research Ethics Committee

The status of your REDP form (EDUC-2025-00422) has been updated to Acknowledged

F **form.urec@um.edu.mt <form.urec...** Friday, May 2, 2025 at 5:55 PM

To: martina.roces.23@um.edu.mt

ⓘ Completed on Saturday, August 9, 2025.

Dear Martina Isabela Roces,

Please note that the status of your REDP form (EDUC-2025-00422) has been set to *Acknowledged*.

This status change was accompanied by the following explanation/justification: *Dear Martina Isabela Roces, This is to acknowledge that FREC has received the online Research Ethics application EDUC-2025-00422 Martina Isabela Roces (for FREC records) together with your supervisor's endorsement. Your application will be filed for possible future audit purposes. This means that you can proceed with your research since you did not declare any potential issues in Part 2 of the online URECA Form. Kind regards. Natalie Formosa FREC Secretary f/Dr Joseph Gravina*

You can keep track of your applications by visiting: https://www.um.edu.mt/research/ethics/redp-form/frontEnd/.

This email has been automatically generated by URECA. Please do not reply. If you wish to communicate with your F/REC please use the respective email address.*

APPENDIX F: Maps

Figure F1

Map of the Philippines

Figure F2

Map of the Bicol Region and its provinces

Figure F3

Screenshot of museums in the Bicol Region mapped by the Bicol Association of Museums (link to map: http://bit.ly/3FLZaoy)

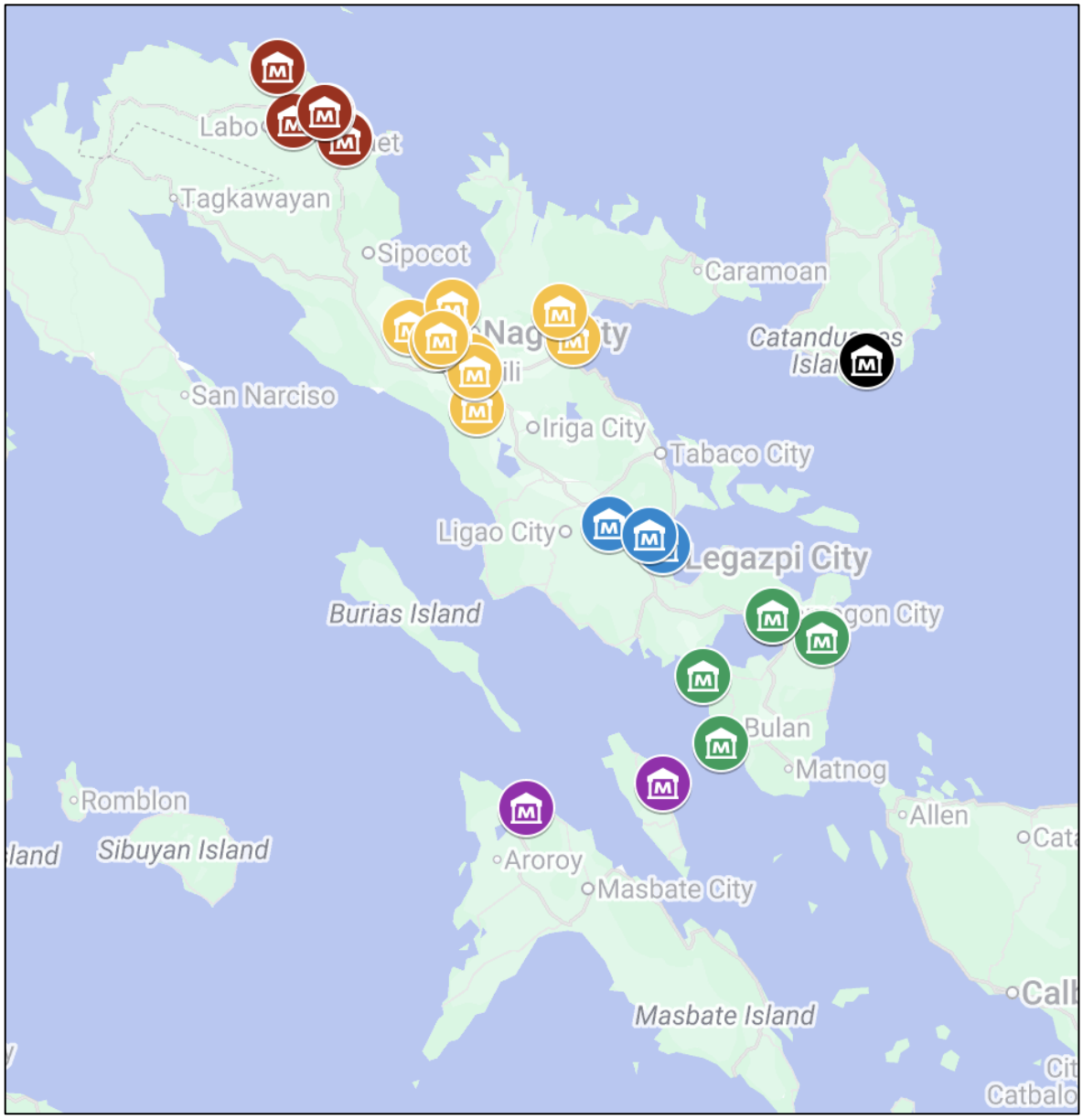
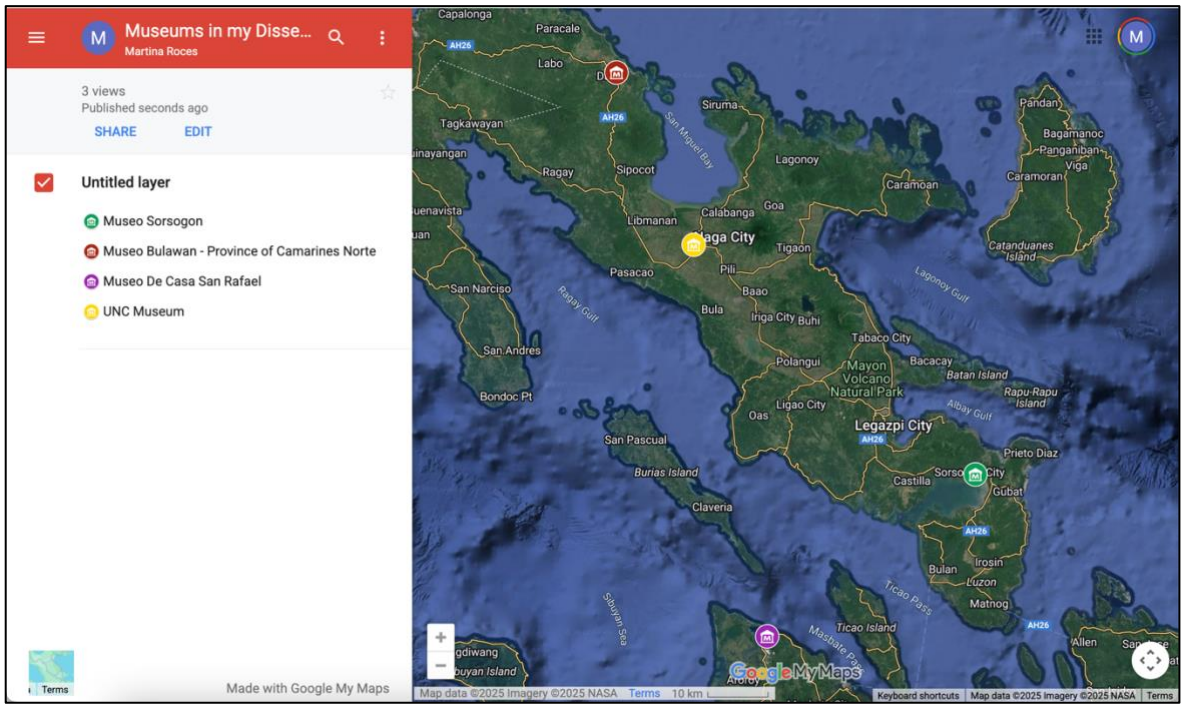


Figure F4

Map showing the locations of the four museums included in the study



APPENDIX G: Photos of the Festivals

Figure G1

Street dance presentation during the Magayon Festival 2024 (photo by Rey-an Llaguno)

Figure G2

Street dance presentation during the Sunflower Festival of Ligao City in 2019 (photo by Biernes Atrece)

Figure G3

Fluvial procession of the image of Our Lady of Peñafrancia during the Peñafrancia Festival in 2024 (photo by Axcel Cruz)

Figure G4

Farmers Parade during the Paroy Festival 2024 (photo from BM Das Maronilla)

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Martina Isabela R. Roces
19/08/2025