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Research Article

Weaving Movements, Preserving Heritage: Raffia Dance Festival in Inabanga, Bohol

Cristelle Mira G. Hipe, Rafunzel Yap Bulilawa*

Holy Name University, Philippines

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**Corresponding author:*
E-mail:
rbulilawa@hnu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

In Inabanga, Bohol, raffia weaving provides the movement vocabulary and material foundation of the Raffia Dance Festival. This study documents the festival's origins, choreographic structure, symbolic gestures, music, costumes, and props, examining how weaving practices are represented in public performance. A qualitative descriptive design combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews, archival research, and audiovisual documentation over three months. Eight purposively selected informants participated: four local weavers, the choreographer who created the original dance, and three festival dancers. Thematic analysis examined recurring patterns across accounts, observation notes, and performance documentation, with triangulation across sources supporting the interpretations. The findings characterize the Raffia Dance as a contemporary occupational festival dance organized around harvesting, processing and drying fibers, weaving, tying, and marketing finished products. Gestures depicting these activities connect choreography to local work practices, while raffia costumes, weaving implements, and rhythmic accompaniment give the performance its material and expressive character. Participants described promoting the weaving industry and encouraging cultural pride among younger generations as aims underlying the festival's development. The study shows how festival choreography brings women's weaving labor and a local cottage industry into public cultural expression. The documentation provides a reference for heritage education and performance, emphasizing the importance of sustaining the weaving practice and community knowledge represented in the dance.

Keywords: *Cultural heritage, Ethnochoreology, Occupational dance, Raffia dance festival, Symbolic Movement*

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Background

Philippine folk dances should be regarded as more than mere artistic expressions, but rather as dance traditions that embody the memory, culture, and lifestyle of a community as an integral part of Philippine heritage. Many traditional dances in the Philippines tell stories about courtship, spiritual experiences, rituals, and festive occasions, reflecting their significance in community life (De la Peña, 2005; Reyes, 2011). While well-known dances such as tinikling and singkil have been studied in relation to these traditions, the Raffia Dance Festival of Inabanga, Bohol, directs attention to choreography rooted in local weaving work.

Occupational movements are found to develop into embodied cultural traditions across different societies. Such is the case for Sayaw Pangangaho, which refers to a traditional dance of the Ayta Ambala that ritualizes their labor activities while maintaining their indigenous identity (Sinag, 2006). Likewise, other researches on the weaving tradition of the T'boli people emphasize the ritual aspect of their labor activities (De Las Peñas & Santos, 2010). Nevertheless, these traditions tend to be understood in terms of spirituality or ritual, rather than the labor processes themselves.

Philippine folk dance studies have traditionally prioritized dances associated with mythology, religion, and courtship (De la Peña, 2005; Tiongson, 1994). Consequently, dances explicitly derived from occupational activities, particularly craft-based livelihoods such as weaving remain underrepresented in academic literature. Guado's (2024) ethnographic characterization of the Pinilisa Dance in Isabela illustrates how livelihood-based dance can be documented through its movements, music, costumes, props, and staging. The study examined the dance's political, social, economic, physical, and religious dimensions and provided a basis for developing instructional materials. Its attention to livelihood, cultural expression, and teaching provides a useful point of comparison for documenting the Raffia Dance Festival.

Although raffia weaving is recognized for its economic and cultural importance, how its work processes are translated into choreography deserves closer examination. Ethnochoreology provides a lens for examining this relationship between livelihood and performance. Hanna (1987) understood dance as nonverbal communication through which bodily movement conveys social and cultural meanings. Kaeppler (2000) approached dance as culturally patterned movement through which knowledge and values are expressed. Kealiinohomoku (1970) situated all dance forms within the cultural traditions in which they develop. Kurath (1960) extended this contextual approach by emphasizing the study of movement alongside its social setting and associated material culture, including costumes, tools, and props.

These perspectives guide the examination of the Raffia Dance Festival, where stages of raffia weaving are represented through movement. This includes activities such as harvesting, drying, weaving, tying, and selling. Here, gestures associated with economic production become a means of cultural preservation and remembering. As such, movement turns out to be an art form in itself. The literature discussed above does not provide a detailed account of how Inabanga's Raffia Dance Festival represents the weaving process, from cutting and drying raffia to weaving, tying, and selling finished mats. The local gap concerns how these production stages are organized into choreography and connected to the economic, material, and symbolic meanings of weaving. The question of continuity also connects with Waluyo and Wahyuni's (2023) study, which described youth empowerment and regular arts training as community efforts to preserve Kompangan arts and traditional dance. Their emphasis on youth participation and community-led training is relevant to considering how the Raffia Dance Festival may be sustained locally.

Documenting the Raffia Dance Festival can therefore clarify how raffia weaving, cultural meaning, and community heritage come together in one performance tradition. In this way, the festival is not merely a form of entertainment but also a living record of local livelihood, community identity, and cultural continuity. This study therefore aims to document the features of the Raffia Dance Festival, including its historical origins, cultural significance, choreographic structure, musical elements, use

of raffia-based costumes and props, and symbolic gestures mapped onto weaving practices. By doing so, the research contributes to Philippine folk dance scholarship, ethnochoreology, heritage preservation, and community-based cultural education while offering a framework for documenting livelihood-based dances in broader local and global contexts.

Methods

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, grounded in the Creation Framework proposed by Libby Smigel for dance documentation. The research emphasized gathering primary data directly from community members and aimed at documenting and interpreting the cultural components of the Raffia Dance Festival. Unlike studies restricted to observing the dance performance as a phenomenon, the present research aimed at comprehending both the cultural background and production process contributing to its choreography. The study was carried out in the Municipality of Inabanga, Bohol, located in the region of Central Visayas, famous for its flourishing industry of raffia weaving. Inabanga holds the Annual Raffia Festival that includes the performance of the mentioned dance in both cultural and economical aspects. The choice of location relied on its special combination of craft and performance together with the active participation of the population in both processes. Participants for the interview were selected using the purposive sampling method. The selection of key informants was based on their knowledge of raffia weaving or the Raffia Dance. Eight participants were interviewed during the study: four local weavers aged 16-55, the community choreographer who created the original performance of the Raffia Dance, and three dancers performing it in different festivals. All participants were lifelong residents of Inabanga and had direct experience translating the raffia-weaving process into embodied movement. Their diverse experiences enriched the data and enabled a multifaceted view of the dance's development and meaning.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, video documentation, and photography. Interviews with all eight participants explored the dance's origins, movements, symbolism, and relationship with raffia weaving. During participant observation, the researcher observed participants' performances and performed alongside them, engaging directly with the dance's rhythms, movements, and materials. She kept reflective notes during this process, documenting her field experiences as both observer and performer. The researcher also conducted validation of the dance steps. Video recordings documented dance performances and festival activities, while photographs recorded costumes and props.

Archival materials such as municipal records, cultural program brochures, and tourism documentation were also reviewed to provide historical and contextual background. All data were collected with the informed consent of participants and with respect for local customs and ethical research protocols. Thematic analysis involved coding interview transcripts, observation notes, video footage, and photographic documentation for recurring themes. These included symbolic gestures, production sequences, community values, and dance structure. The analysis examined how dance movements represented stages of raffia production, including stripping, drying, tying, and selling, and the cultural meanings associated with these movements. Triangulation across interviews, observations, archival materials, and audiovisual documentation supported the credibility and contextual depth of the findings.

Result

The findings of this study present a detailed ethnographic and cultural profile of the Raffia Dance Festival in Inabanga, Bohol. The data are organized around key thematic elements identified during the analysis, namely: (1) origin and purpose, (2) classification and choreographic form, (3) use of costume and props, (4) music and rhythm, (5) symbolic gestures tied to raffia weaving.

Origin and Purpose

Raffia loom weaving has been the most important cottage industry in Inabanga, Bohol since Hispanic times. Women traditionally led

the craft, producing mats, blankets, hats, bags, baskets, saguran, and nipa thatches for local sale and nearby islands like Cebu, while men focused on farming, fishing, and trading.

The emergence of the Raffia Dance Festival was part of a cultural movement that responded to the growing demand to feature their culture and livelihood through dance. As reported by the weavers and dancers themselves, the Raffia Dance Festival was planned by the local government together with the educators and artists. In 2017 and 2018, Inabanga held its first Raffia Festival Street dancing as part of town's fiesta.

The main goals of creating such a festival were to boost raffia production in Inabanga and instill cultural pride among younger members of society and publicly honors raffia workers and elevates weaving as a symbol of cultural dignity and collective identity. This choreographed presentation of daily weaving activities was seen not only as performance art but also as a form of cultural education and economic advocacy. The Raffia Dance Festival is a cultural response to modernization and serves as a "living archive" of Inabanga's raffia weaving heritage. The festival functions simultaneously as economic advocacy and cultural education. Overall, the Raffia Dance Festival functions as a living archive of raffia weaving culture, preserving labor, identity, and heritage through performance.

Classification and Choreographic Structure

Based on its movements, the Raffia Dance is considered an occupational folk dance, a subcategory of Philippine Folk Dances. This type of dance depicts the process and the means used in earning a living. The movement in this dance is characterized by a linear progression that represents the steps involved in the creation of the raffia product; these include removing and drying of the fibers, binding, weaving, and finally transporting of the products to the market. The dance serves as a mechanism for transferring traditional weaving knowledge and values to younger generations through embodied movement.

Costume and Props

The dance features a costume set made from authentic raffia fibers, including handwoven skirts, headdresses, and accessories. These costumes are dyed in earthy colors symbolizing natural materials and labor. Props such as bunot (coconut husks), dagit (raffia bundles), bilao (woven trays), and mats are not merely decorative but are functional tools within both the weaving process and the dance choreography. These materials situate the performance within its broader social and material environment, not merely as stage decoration. Their presence on stage creates a multisensory environment that bridges the audience's perception of craft and culture.

Musical Elements

The musical score used in the Raffia Dance is set in 2/4 time, which mirrors the repetitive rhythm of hand movements in weaving. The melody incorporates indigenous instruments such as the tongatong and kalutang, paired with percussive clapping and stomping to simulate the rhythmic cadence of labor. Dancers often synchronize footwork with these beats, enhancing the authenticity of the piece. Some musical passages are intentionally slower, providing moments of reflection and symbolic emphasis.

Symbolic Gestures and Livelihood Mapping

Possibly the most unique characteristic of the Raffia Dance is its symbolic gestural language, which maps the steps involved in the raffia production. First, performers use a gesture that symbolizes harvesting, repeatedly slicing downward as if chopping raffia leaves. They then mimic the actions of drying the leaves in the sun, hand-stripping, twisting, and rolling the fiber. A repetitive hand-weaving gesture performed in a diagonal space reveals the intricacy and patience needed for weaving mats. In the last part of the dance, the dancers portray economic activities through gestures of bartering or selling, usually by extending their hands as if presenting mats to the audience. These gestures transform the dance into a visual narrative of labor, tradition, and community livelihood. The movements reflect learned

bodily techniques from actual weaving practice, embedding occupational knowledge into physical performance.

Discussion

The Raffia Dance Festival of Inabanga represents far more than a staged cultural presentation; it functions as an embodied system of knowledge through which labor, identity, and heritage are collectively preserved. "Rooted in the municipality's historical dependence on raffia weaving as both livelihood and cultural marker, the festival can be understood as a strategic cultural response to the growing need to affirm local identity while adapting to changing social and economic contexts. Its creation through the collaborative efforts of the local government unit, educators, artists, and community practitioners reflects a deliberate institutional and communal initiative to transform traditional occupational practices into a visible and celebratory form of cultural expression.

In the case of an international study about "Esquela Tusuy Dance in Peru (Duche-Pérez & Mamani-Daza 2024), the choreography is directly derived from the lived experiences of llama herders, where movements imitate herding activities, travel, and ritual practices, thereby transforming everyday labor into a meaningful cultural performance. This finding affirms that dance can serve as a "living archive" of work-based knowledge, preserving not only technical skills but also the social and symbolic meanings attached to a community's occupation. Similar to the Esquela Tusuy dance, the Raffia Dance Festival goes beyond performance, reflecting the community's actual processes, values, and identity by translating weaving practices into choreographed movement, music, costume, and staging. Both studies highlight that when livelihood activities are transformed into dance, they become powerful mediums for cultural preservation, education, and community cohesion.

The festival's dual purpose to promote the local raffia weaving industry and to cultivate cultural pride among younger generations demonstrates how performance can operate simultaneously as economic advocacy and heritage education. By choreographing the daily processes of raffia production into performative sequences, the community elevates ordinary labor into symbolic cultural capital. This transformation brings work traditionally associated with women and a local cottage industry into a public setting where its skill and economic contribution can be recognized. Its economic significance is therefore understood here in terms of representation and advocacy, since changes in weavers' income or working conditions were not assessed. In this context, the Raffia Dance Festival serves as more than artistic spectacle; it is a form of cultural documentation, social cohesion, and economic representation. It embodies the community's effort to preserve its heritage while adapting to modern cultural and economic frameworks. Ultimately, the origin and purpose of the festival underscore its significance as a living archive of Inabanga's identity where movement becomes memory, performance becomes preservation, and tradition becomes an enduring source of communal pride.

The choreographic progression makes the order of raffia production visible, allowing audiences to follow gathering, drying, weaving, and trading as related stages of work. This connection between dance and cultural learning is consistent with Egorov et al. (2019), who discuss folk dance as a means of transmitting ethnocultural traditions. Serna et al. (2023) offer a closer occupational comparison through Gaynek Ta Cabiga-O, a dance developed from bamboo basket-making procedures. Both dances translate craft processes into movement, although the Raffia Dance places this translation within a municipal festival that also promotes a local industry. The educational value of this sequence lies in making work processes recognizable; acquiring the practical skill of weaving would still require engagement with the craft itself.

Mauss's (1979) concept of "techniques of the body" helps explain the connection between the dance's work gestures and learned occupational practices. The gestures associated with cutting, stripping, twisting, and weaving are not arbitrary theatrical choices; instead, they reflect deeply rooted occupational knowledge acquired through lived experience. In the Raffia Dance, these actions are selected and arranged for an audience, turning

movements used in production into representations of the craft. Tempo shifts and spatial transitions organize these gestures into a staged sequence, showing how the experience of labor is adapted to public performance.

The festival reinforces collective identity by publicly honoring the economic and cultural contributions of raffia workers. Participation in the dance reflects communal pride, shared history, and local resilience. Because women traditionally led the weaving craft, its inclusion in the festival brings their contribution to local livelihood and production into public view. The cultural significance lies in recognizing the people and skills behind raffia products alongside the products themselves. Maintaining this recognition calls for weavers' knowledge and participation to remain visible in how the dance is presented and explained. The symbolic movements that represent slicing raffia leaves, drying them, hand-weaving mats, and promoting them as a product contribute to creating a visual story around labor. The sequence connects the physical work of gathering and processing fibers with the exchange of finished products, placing livelihood at the center of the performance. The concluding bartering gesture and donation of crafted goods to the audience link the representation of production to the circulation of its products. This ending frames weaving as an activity through which skill and material resources contribute to community livelihood.

Material culture also plays a critical role in reinforcing authenticity. Raffia-based costumes, woven accessories, bilao trays, bunot, dagit bundles, and indigenous tools do more than enhance visual appeal; they serve as extensions of occupational identity. Their integration into performance supports Kurath's assertion that dance documentation must account for the broader material and social environment in which movement occurs. Through costume and props, the dance maintains a direct connection to the weaving traditions it seeks to preserve. The use of authentic raffia fibers, earthy-toned garments, and functional weaving implements symbolically reinforces the dancers' connection to natural resources, labor, and artisanal heritage. These elements create a multisensory environment where audiences experience raffia weaving not only through movement but also through the visual and tactile realities of traditional craftsmanship, bridging the boundaries between craft, culture, and performance.

The integration of local rhythmic traditions and community-based instrumentation enhances the performance's connection to its cultural origins. The musical score's 2/4 time signature mirrors the repetitive cadence of hand movements central to weaving labor, embedding occupational rhythms directly into the structure of the performance. Indigenous instruments such as tongatong and kalutang, paired with percussive clapping and stomping, sonically reproduce the physicality of labor while strengthening the authenticity of the dance. Dancers' synchronized footwork with these rhythms further reinforces the inseparable relationship between sound and movement. Meanwhile, slower musical passages provide reflective intervals that symbolically emphasize particular stages of production, transforming routine labor into moments of cultural contemplation. This synchronization between music and choreography creates a multisensory representation of labor, embedding occupational memory into both auditory and visual performance.

Comparative studies reinforce these findings. Guado's (2024) documentation of the Pinilisa Dance similarly demonstrated how occupational choreography can preserve agricultural identity while functioning as a pedagogical and heritage-based tool. Likewise, Waluyo and Wahyuni (2023) emphasized the importance of structured community engagement and youth participation in sustaining traditional arts. Together, these studies suggest that occupational dances are not isolated cultural artifacts but dynamic systems through which communities preserve identity, transmit knowledge, and negotiate continuity amid social change.

The Raffia Dance Festival brings rural craftsmanship into public cultural expression by presenting work processes, materials, and products as parts of a shared local identity. Its particular significance lies in making women's weaving labor visible within a celebration supported by community and institutional actors.

Kealiinohomoku's (1970) understanding of dance as culturally embedded helps situate this transformation within the community that gives the movements their meaning. The festival can therefore support recognition of raffia weaving, while continued cultural transmission depends on sustaining the craft and the participation of those who practice it.

Conclusion

The Raffia Dance Festival presents Inabanga's weaving heritage through the work involved in producing and exchanging raffia goods. The documented sequence of gestures, supported by music, costumes, and tools, links the staged performance to the skills and materials of local production. This relationship gives the dance its occupational character and makes weaving practices visible to audiences beyond the workplace. By placing a craft traditionally led by women at the center of a municipal celebration, the festival recognizes their contribution to local livelihood and cultural identity.

The festival's development also shows how local government, educators, artists, and community practitioners can draw on present-day livelihood to create a shared cultural expression. Its significance rests on the connection between the performance and the community knowledge that informs it. The resulting documentation provides a reference for heritage education and for studying other festival dances based on local crafts and industries. Sustaining this expression calls for continued attention to the weaving practice and the people whose knowledge gives the dance its meaning.

Recommendation

1. National and local cultural agencies should prioritize the ethnographic documentation of community-created dances derived from labor practices. These choreographies carry rich, underrecognized knowledge systems.
2. The Raffia Dance should be adapted into school curricula to foster regional cultural awareness and pride. Embedding such performances in educational settings promotes cultural sustainability and youth engagement.
3. Local artists, choreographers, and weavers should be given institutional support—through grants, training, and recognition—to encourage the continued development of traditional, craft-based performances.
4. The Raffia Dance should be considered for official designation as intangible cultural heritage at municipal, provincial, or national levels to ensure its preservation and visibility.
5. Scholars are encouraged to investigate other Philippine folk dances that draw from fishing, farming, pottery, or other forms of labor, to establish a broader framework for occupational dance as a distinct and significant cultural form.

Ethics Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the researcher's academic institution. Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

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Declaration of AI Use in Research Methodology and Manuscript Writing

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to support language refinement and improve the clarity and coherence of selected sections of the manuscript. Grammarly was also used for grammar

checking and language polishing. This assistance helped communicate the authors' concepts, research procedures, and interpretations. The empirical material reported in this study originated from interviews, participant observation, archival research, and audiovisual documentation.

The authors, Cristelle Mira Hipe and Rafunzel Bulilawa, retain full responsibility for the research methodology, interpretation of findings, and final manuscript, including the accuracy of AI-assisted text. The suggested revisions were reviewed and edited by the authors to maintain consistency with the study's actual procedures and evidence. AI assistance remained subject to the authors' judgment, with attention to appropriate attribution, confidentiality, and research integrity.

The main findings (novelty) and why they are important and useful:

This study documents the Raffia Dance Festival of Inabanga, Bohol, as a contemporary occupational festival dance grounded in local raffia weaving. Its novelty lies in tracing how the production sequence from harvesting and fiber processing to weaving, tying, and selling is represented through movement, music, costumes, and props. The findings show how festival performance gives visibility to women's weaving labor and presents the cottage industry as part of Inabanga's cultural identity.

The documentation provides educators, cultural workers, choreographers, and local government units with a reference for heritage education and performances based on local livelihood practices. It also informs the documentation of similar festival dances while emphasizing the need to sustain the craft and community knowledge that give the performance its meaning.

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