



21st Century Challenges in the Preservation of Luna's Traditional Pottery

Padiwan, Ernest D.¹, Benemerito, Julie Ann L.², Nelmda, Blossom Ghae N.³, Morla, Teresita M.⁴, Garnace, Glaiza T.⁵, Protacio, Jessie M.⁶, Lucero, Kyle Anne L.⁷

¹Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College, Tagudin, Ilocos Sur, 2714 Philippines, padiwan.ernestdiasen@gmail.com

²Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College, Tagudin, Ilocos Sur, 2714 Philippines, ja.benemerito@gmail.com

³Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College, Tagudin, Ilocos Sur, 2714 Philippines, sakuranelmda5@gmail.com

⁴Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College, Tagudin, Ilocos Sur, 2714 Philippines, terryvaldez70@gmail.com

⁵Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College, Tagudin, Ilocos Sur, 2714 Philippines, Glaizagarnace27@gmail.com

⁶Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College, Tagudin, Ilocos Sur, 2714 Philippines, jessieprotacio76@gmail.com

⁷Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College, Tagudin, Ilocos Sur, 2714 Philippines, lucero.kyleanne@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The study navigates the multifaceted 21st century challenges confronting the preservation of pottery traditions in Luna, La Union, Philippines through phenomenological approach of qualitative research. Participants were selected through purposive sampling comprised of three local potters and one barangay official who are directly involved of pottery industry. These individuals were identified as key informants due to their firsthand experience, cultural involvement, and exceptional knowledge essential to the study. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews guided by semi-structured questions, allowing for both consistency and flexibility in eliciting detailed narratives. Bracketing was employed to minimize researcher bias and maintain focus on the participants' authentic perspectives. The data were analyzed using a thematic approach, which facilitated the identification of recurring patterns and central themes that encapsulate the participants' experiences and perceptions.

Several core challenges emerged, including diminishing interest among younger generations, limited access to raw materials, lack of institutional support, commercialization pressures, and the erosion of cultural identity tied to pottery-making. Furthermore, socio-economic changes and climate-related disruptions have significantly influenced traditional practices, posing threats to their preservation. Despite these challenges, there exists a profound sense of cultural pride and identity tied to the craft, as well as a strong desire within the community to preserve the tradition. The phenomenological approach reveals deep cultural and economic connections between the potters and their craft, underscoring the importance of pottery as both a form of artistic expression and a vital source of livelihood. The study highlights the need for a holistic approach to preservation through integrated, community-based, and policy-driven interventions.

Keywords: Challenges, preservation, pottery traditions

I Introduction

Pottery, one of the oldest human crafts, holds significant cultural and historical value worldwide. Across different regions, distinctive pottery traditions have evolved as living links to the past, showcasing unique craftsmanship and reflecting local identity. These traditional forms of artistic expression not only represent historical continuity but also contribute to community identity, economic livelihood, and cultural pride (David, 2022).

However, in today's rapidly globalizing world, traditional pottery faces growing challenges. Technological advancements, industrialization, and shifting consumer preferences have significantly altered production methods and market dynamics. Mass-produced ceramics and plastic alternatives, which are cheaper, more uniform, and widely available, have largely overshadowed handcrafted pottery. Consequently, traditional practices are being pushed to the margins and risk disappearing without deliberate preservation efforts. According to Shrestha (2018), potters also face shortages of raw materials and labor, and lack sufficient infrastructure, such as drying, firing, and storage facilities, which further threatening the sustainability of the craft.

In the Philippines, these global issues are reflected in the decline of local pottery communities. As the country continues to modernize and urbanize, traditional industries that once flourished in rural areas are struggling to survive. Handcrafted pottery has suffered a significant drop in demand due to competition from inexpensive imports and shifting consumer lifestyles. Furthermore, the younger generation often opts for more financially stable careers, resulting in a widening generational gap in the transmission of traditional skills.

The importance of preserving the nation's cultural heritage, including crafts like pottery, is underscored in the 1987 Philippine Constitution, Article XIV, Section 14. De Leon and De Leon (2018) emphasized the need to actively promote and preserve cultural heritage at the community level, highlighting the roles of education, local participation, and cultural awareness in sustaining traditional arts amid modernization. These national concerns are particularly visible in the local context of Luna, La Union, a town historically known for its vibrant pottery tradition. Renowned for its distinctive forms and glazing techniques, Luna has long been a cultural hub for traditional ceramics in Northern Luzon. However, in the 21st century, its pottery industry faces severe challenges that threaten its continuity.

One key issue is the youth's decreasing engagement with the craft. Thebe (2016) observes that young potters are increasingly abandoning traditional practices due to religious and economic pressures. This results in a lack of knowledge transmission and poses a risk to the long-term survival of the tradition. Additionally, potters face economic constraints such as the rising cost of raw materials, limited access to capital, and unstable demand, which make it difficult to sustain their craft. Environmental factors further aggravate the situation. Access to high-quality clay—a fundamental material for pottery—has become increasingly limited due to land conversion and urban development. Climate change and unpredictable weather patterns have disrupted traditional production methods, especially open-kiln firing, which relies on stable, dry weather conditions. Given these multifaceted challenges, there is an urgent need to implement strategic measures to revitalize and preserve Luna's pottery heritage.

II. Methodology

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to capture the lived experiences and perspectives of those directly engaged in pottery preservation. The study involved purposively 4 selected participants who are knowledgeable about pottery in the place. Data were gathered through key informant interview (KII) and participant observation and same data were analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover patterns and insights.

Ethical protocols were strictly observed throughout the research process, including securing a formal request letter to the barangay, obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality of shared information, and maintaining cultural sensitivity at all stages of the study. The study is limited only to Barangay Barrientos, Luna, La Union, the only barangay having pottery industry.

III. Results and Discussion

Challenges Faced in Preserving Traditional Pottery

Difficulty in accessing raw materials and tools. The primary challenge gauged was the difficulty in accessing raw materials and tools needed in the industry. Potters in Luna face increasing challenges in acquiring essential raw materials such as clay and sandy soil.

When asked, Local Potter 1 (LP1) remarked, "There are specific areas here in Luna that are designated for collecting sandy and clay soil. You can't just take sandy or clay soil from anywhere because some areas here in Luna have pure clay soil. Sandy soil is more available, and if it's not, people can get it from their neighborhood or their own land. But for clay, there is a specific location where it can be sourced. It's difficult to get because before, you had to buy it if you didn't know the person who owns the land. That's why, if you see the clay soil stored there, they start saving it during the dry season. When the rainy season comes, they can't get any because it's too wet. That's why it should be stored in advance. If you only start getting clay right before the rainy season, you might not get any because others have already taken it, and this is ongoing. Procurement of materials is another issue because you don't only need clay and sandy soil. There's also the firing process. What's needed for that? Bamboo or any type of wood, and then rice hay. They can also use 'sabat'—that's the husk removed from coconuts. In the absence of wood or during the dry season, they use animal manure."

LP2 explained that clay and sandy soil are found only in specific locations within Luna, and are often difficult to access, especially during the rainy season. The scarcity of pure clay soil and the need to purchase from known suppliers further complicate the process. In addition to raw materials, the tools for firing pottery—such as bamboo, wood, rice hay, and even coconut husks or animal manure—are also becoming scarce. This issue is compounded by the need to stockpile materials during the dry season in preparation for weather disruptions. If these material shortages continue, they may hinder regular production, reduce income opportunities, and discourage younger generations from taking up the craft. Over time, this could lead to the decline or even disappearance of Luna's traditional pottery-making, which would be a loss both culturally and economically.

According to Bortolotto and Skounti (2024) in their study on heritage practices and sustainability, resource scarcity and environmental changes directly affect the continuity of traditional practices, especially those dependent on specific natural materials. When raw materials become difficult to obtain, practitioners face reduced productivity and may abandon their crafts altogether. This confirms that the problem of sourcing clay, sand, and firing materials such as bamboo or rice husks in Luna mirrors broader threats to traditional craftsmanship caused by ecological, economic, and access-related challenges.

Sales Difficulty and Economic Instability: One of the significant challenges faced by traditional potters in Luna is the difficulty of selling their products consistently causing unstable income. LP1 related, "It's also hard to sell, there are days with no sales, just like today. I sell on credit sometimes just to have sales". LP4 agreed that making pottery is difficult especially when it comes to selling the products. These answers indicate that income from pottery is highly unpredictable and insufficient to ensure financial security. Such instability not only affects the potters' daily lives but also threatens the sustainability of the craft, as younger generations may be discouraged from continuing a livelihood that cannot guarantee steady earnings. The implications

of this are significant: the traditional pottery industry in Luna may decline further unless interventions are made to improve market access and income stability.

Alcántara and Trinidad (2020) highlighted that many rural craftsmen in the Philippines struggle with low and unstable incomes because their products are not well-integrated into wider commercial or tourism networks. Pore (2025) also emphasized that poor marketing strategies and low demand contribute significantly to the economic vulnerability of traditional artisans. These studies support the notion that the experiences of Luna's potters are part of a larger structural issue that requires targeted support and intervention to ensure the preservation and viability of traditional pottery-making.

Climate-related Disruptions. Local Potter 3 (LP3) supported by the other potters admitted that weather condition significantly affects the production and sale of traditional pottery in Luna. "During rainy season, we cannot make the pots and we have no income. During dry season, we got good sales and income. We take advantage of the dry season to make pots as many as we can so that we have something to sell during rainy season. We have no production and meager delivery when rainy season comes."

These responses indicate that weather and climate significantly affect the pottery production and sales. They experience better sales during the dry season, while heavy rains disrupt both the making and delivery of their products. Since pottery often requires sun-drying and relies on favorable transport conditions, adverse weather causes delays and income instability. Despite these challenges, potters try to maintain continuous production during off-peak seasons to build stock for busier periods, showing resilience amid seasonal vulnerabilities. This dependency on weather highlights the need for climate-resilient solutions such as covered drying areas or improved logistics to reduce disruptions. Without such support, the craft remains at risk of economic instability and may discourage new generations from continuing the tradition. These findings align with broader research showing that rural artisans are vulnerable to climate variability, which directly impacts their productivity and livelihoods (Campos, 2025). This stresses the importance of integrating modern tools and infrastructure to help traditional crafts adapt to changing environmental conditions.

In the Philippine context, the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (2023) also points out that informal sectors like traditional potters face income shocks due to weather-related disruptions, underscoring the need for innovative and policy-driven climate adaptation measures to sustain these cultural industries.

Changing Market Dynamics: The increased availability of modern cooking alternatives and shifts in consumer behavior reduced the popularity and profitability of traditional pottery products. The local potters expressed their concerns about this. LP2 remarked, "But before, this really was the ahhh... back when there was no LPG yet... it used to sell well. It's like a rivalry between pottery and, ahhh, LPG." This indicates that traditional pottery products have faced declining popularity and profitability due to changing market dynamics, particularly the introduction of modern cooking alternatives like LPG (liquefied petroleum gas). Before the widespread availability of LPG, pottery items such as clay stoves were commonly used and sold well. However, as consumer preferences shifted toward more convenient and modern cooking technologies, demand for traditional pottery diminished. This trend reflects a broader challenge where traditional crafts struggle to compete with modern products that offer greater convenience. The implication is that without innovation or diversification, traditional pottery-making may continue to decline, threatening the preservation of cultural heritage and the livelihoods of potters.

This finding aligns with studies such as by the International Trade Centre (ITC, 2018), which highlights how modernization and changing consumer behavior reduce demand for traditional crafts, urging artisans to adapt through innovation and marketing strategies to sustain their trades.

Lack of Effective Marketing Strategies. Traditional potters in Luna face significant challenges due to limited market reach and weak promotion of their products. The barangay official quipped "The problem sometimes is marketing. Pots easily break when transported. Breakages are quite high and it means great loss in our part. Sometimes, we are discouraged due to this". The statement highlights that poor marketing is a major factor contributing to the declining interest and sales in pottery. Without effective marketing strategies, their products struggle to gain visibility and attract customers, which affect their income and the sustainability of the craft. This situation implies the need for adopting modern marketing approaches, such as using digital platforms and leveraging tourism, to enhance product exposure and reach wider markets. Supporting local artisans through improved marketing could help revive traditional pottery-making and preserve this cultural heritage.

Similar findings are discussed by the International Trade Centre (2018), which emphasizes that many traditional crafts face challenges in market access due to weak marketing and recommends innovation in promotion and digital engagement to sustain artisan livelihoods.

Declining Interest Among the Youth. One of the 21st century major challenges identified by participants is the decreasing interest of the younger generation in learning traditional pottery-making. LP1 noted that today's youth are more focused on mobile phones and modern technology, making it harder to pass down the craft. LP3 observed that many young people pursue formal education and seek other career opportunities, often viewing pottery as outdated or less desirable and dirty. Similarly, LP4 shared the difficulty in encouraging youth participation, emphasizing that modern distractions like gadgets have taken precedence over cultural learning. These responses suggest a generational gap in interest and involvement, posing a serious threat to the continuity of Luna's pottery heritage.

LP1 commented, "Nowadays, children are different. Times have changed, so it's hard for them to learn, especially with cellphones being popular. If they graduate their degrees, they will not be engaging in pottery anymore since this considered as lowly job" said LP2. "It's hard to encourage the youth today because they prioritize gadgets over learning pottery-making." (LP4). The responses reveal that declining youth interest in traditional pottery-making is influenced by modern distractions such as gadgets and the perception of pottery as a less desirable occupation. As younger generations prioritize education and technology over this craft, fewer individuals continue the practice, threatening the tradition's survival. This trend implies a risk of cultural loss and challenges in sustaining the pottery industry economically.

Supporting this, Smith and Akagawa (2009) noted that younger generations often shift away from traditional crafts due to modernization and changing values, which can lead to the erosion of intangible cultural heritage if not actively addressed. Therefore, initiatives to engage youth and reframe traditional crafts as valuable cultural and economic pursuits are crucial for preservation.

Cultural and Economic Significance

Cultural Identity: Pottery-making is not only an economic activity in Luna but also a defining element of the town's cultural identity. As LP3 shared, this tradition is unique to Luna, making it a symbol of community pride and continuity. This suggests that preserving pottery is not only about economic survival but also about maintaining a cultural legacy passed down through generations. The implication is that efforts to support pottery-making should consider both its cultural and economic value. Cultural preservation programs, local education, and tourism initiatives could help sustain this heritage. This idea is supported by UNESCO (2003), which recognizes that intangible cultural heritage—like traditional craftsmanship—is vital for cultural diversity and should be protected and promoted through community involvement and national policy.

Economic Sustainability

Traditional pottery-making in Luna is deeply rooted as economic livelihood of its practitioners. LP1 admitted, “We will lose our jobs. Because this is the only livelihood we know, we could provide the needs of our children and support our families. We could sustain our survival, at least. We could buy our foods through this occupation. We could buy our children's clothes and school paraphernalia and send them to free public schools. But during poor sales, we have to spend a little and eat a little.” These remarks imply that pottery business could sustain them yet they have to play intelligent decisions when to spend the income wisely. It means that their occupation gives them opportunities to survive and educate their children.

Generational Continuity: The continuation of traditional pottery in Luna is deeply tied to the personal involvement of community members who have inherited and sustained the practice. LP2 said, “I learned to make pottery when I was still a child. I will still teach such to my interested children.” LP4 added, “When I got married here, I learned the pottery business and I have to teach it to my children, too.”

The responses show that pottery-making in Luna is a skill passed down through generations, often learned informally at a young age or through family involvement. Whether taught during childhood or acquired after marriage through observation, the craft is deeply rooted in family tradition and community practice. This indicates that traditional pottery-making is not just a livelihood but also a form of cultural inheritance that strengthens family bonds and community identity. The implication is that if this tradition is not preserved and passed on, both cultural knowledge and local livelihoods could be lost. According to UNESCO (2003), traditional craftsmanship is a vital part of intangible cultural heritage, and its transmission from generation to generation is essential for preserving cultural diversity and sustaining traditional communities.

Strategies to Preservation and Revive Pottery Industry

Stable Financial Assistance: Potters in Luna stressed the importance of stable financial assistance from the government. LP1 quipped when asked on assistance, “There is support, but there are times when they provided financial assistance through DSWD to those who are involved in pottery... But nothing is given on a permanent basis. If the government gives financial assistance, we will use it to sustain our pottery-making.”

The statements from potters in Luna highlight the need for consistent and stable financial assistance from the government to help sustain their pottery-making activities. While occasional aid has been provided—such as through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)—the lack of permanent or structured support makes it difficult for artisans to plan long-term and improve their craft. This implies that without regular financial backing, traditional potters remain vulnerable to economic uncertainty, putting both their livelihoods and cultural practices at risk.

According to the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS, 2021), informal sectors such as traditional crafts often lack access to steady support, and strengthening government financial programs can help improve productivity and preserve heritage industries.

Designated Workspaces and Public Exposure: Luna's local potters call for dedicated areas to craft and display their work, emphasizing that proper facilities can preserve heritage and promote local pride. LP 2 remarked, “There should also be a place provided for us who are making this, even at the market, because there is none. People come to see what we make. Then, they also showcase it to other neighboring towns or nations.”

The potters' statements reflect the need for proper physical space where they can create and display their products, such as designated areas in local markets. Having a visible and accessible space would not only support their production but also help promote their work to visitors and potential buyers. It also highlights the growing interest from outsiders and other communities, showing that pottery-making has potential beyond local consumption. The implication is that investing in proper facilities and showcasing venues can help boost the local pottery industry, attract tourism, and preserve cultural identity. This aligns with findings from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA, 2020), which emphasize that providing infrastructure and public spaces for traditional artisans helps promote cultural heritage and improves their income opportunities.

Effective Promotion: Luna potters want stronger and more effective promotion to increase the visibility and sales of their traditional pottery. LP2 replied when asked, “*Promotion of products.*”. LP2's simple response highlights the local potters' strong desire for improved marketing, which mirrors the common challenge artisans encounter in expanding their reach and competing against mass-produced products. Without effective promotion, these traditional crafts risk fading into obscurity, resulting in reduced income and the potential loss of valuable cultural heritage. This situation implies that adopting modern marketing strategies, including digital platforms and tourism partnerships, could help sustain and grow the local pottery industry. According to the International Trade Centre (2018), improved marketing and digital engagement are essential for traditional artisans to expand their market reach and preserve their livelihoods.

IV Conclusions

Based on the findings gathered from the interviews, it can be concluded that 1) Luna's traditional pottery-making faces several serious challenges that threaten its continuity in the 21st century. These include difficulty in accessing raw materials and tools, sales difficulty and economic instability, climate-related disruptions, changing market dynamics, lack of effective marketing, and declining interest among the youth. 2) The challenges faced by Luna's traditional pottery-makers are significant because they affect the core foundations of the craft's survival—cultural identity, economic sustainability, and generational continuity—all essential for its long-term sustainability. 3) To address the challenges and preserve Luna's pottery traditions, providing stable financial assistance, establishing designated workspaces with public exposure, and actively promoting their products can support pottery-makers and sustain the craft.

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