

Church Stewards: Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Parishioners in the Conservation of Spanish-era Churches

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Abstract

This phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of parishioners in conserving Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas, Region 8, Philippines. Through semi-structured interviews with participants chosen through purposive sampling, the study explored their perceptions, motivations, and challenges in preserving these historical landmarks. The theoretical framework integrated Cultural Heritage Theory, Collective Action Theory, and Social Constructivism to analyse the connection between faith, community engagement, and heritage conservation. The findings indicate that parishioners view their roles as spiritual and cultural responsibilities, though they face significant challenges including financial constraints, environmental threats, and declining youth participation. This study contributes to understanding the crucial role of community-driven conservation efforts in preserving religious heritage sites and offers recommendations for sustainable preservation strategies that balance historical authenticity with modern needs.

Keywords: Spanish-era Churches; Church Conservation; Faith-based Stewardship, Eastern Visayas

1. Introduction

This study investigates the pivotal role of church stewards in conserving Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas, Region 8, Philippines. These churches stand as enduring symbols of the region's colonial past, cultural identity, and spiritual heritage. As architectural masterpieces, they not only serve as places of worship but also embody the historical and cultural narratives of the communities they have served for centuries.

Despite their significance, these structures face numerous threats, including natural disasters, urban development, and the challenges of modernizing religious practices. Through a phenomenological lens, this research explores how parishioners, particularly church stewards, contribute to the conservation and preservation of these historical landmarks. By employing Cultural Heritage Theory, Collective Action Theory, and Social Constructivism, the study seeks to shed light on the motivations, practices, and challenges faced by stewards in their efforts to safeguard these treasured symbols of faith and history.

1.1. Background of the Study

Historical structures, especially churches, are integral to a community's cultural and spiritual life, reflecting the values, traditions, and historical events that have shaped its identity. In the Philippines, Spanish-era churches are not merely religious edifices but also living testimonies of the country's colonial history and cultural resilience. These churches have witnessed pivotal historical events and served as centers for spiritual and social gatherings, making them central to the collective memory of their communities.

Globally, the preservation of historical sites has been recognized as a critical endeavor, balancing the need to honor cultural heritage while addressing the pressures of modernization and urbanization. According to Dastgerdi and De Luca (2018), the value attributed to historical sites evolves over time, influenced by societal changes and shifting priorities. This shows the importance of fostering a collective commitment to conservation, ensuring that these landmarks continue to inspire and educate future generations.

In the Philippine context, the preservation of historical sites is particularly significant due to the country's rich and diverse colonial history. Spanish-era churches, in particular, exemplify the fusion of European architectural styles with local artistry, creating structures that are both culturally unique and historically meaningful. Despite the enactment of Republic Act No. 10066, known as the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009, which mandates the protection and conservation of cultural heritage, many historical churches remain vulnerable to neglect, natural disasters, and unauthorized modifications.

In Eastern Visayas, the challenges of preserving Spanish-era churches are compounded by the region's susceptibility to typhoons and earthquakes. These natural calamities, coupled with limited financial and technical resources, pose significant obstacles to conservation efforts. However, amid these challenges, local communities, particularly church stewards, play a critical role in the preservation process. These stewards, often volunteers, serve as custodians of the churches, ensuring their upkeep, organizing restoration activities, and advocating for their historical and spiritual value.

The study focuses on understanding the lived experiences of church stewards in Eastern Visayas, exploring their motivations, challenges, and strategies in preserving Spanish-era churches. By doing so, it aims to provide a nuanced perspective on the interplay between cultural heritage preservation and community engagement. Furthermore, the research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable heritage management, emphasizing the importance of grassroots participation in the conservation of historical landmarks.

Through this exploration, the study highlights the invaluable contributions of parishioners in safeguarding the cultural and historical legacy of Spanish-era churches, ensuring their continued relevance in a rapidly changing world.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The preservation of Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas is deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual identity of the community. Church stewards, as active parishioners, play a vital role in balancing their spiritual significance with heritage conservation. This study examines their perspectives, motivations, and strategies, highlighting the broader impact of community-driven efforts in safeguarding these historical landmarks.

Therefore, this study sought to address the following key questions:

1. What are the perceived challenges parishioners face in preserving Spanish-era churches?
2. What socio-cultural and spiritual factors inspire their dedication to these preservation efforts?
3. How do they handle both the practical needs of the church and the need to conserve its heritage?

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is grounded in three key theories: Cultural Heritage Theory, Collective Action Theory, and Social Constructivism. Primarily, this study is anchored on the theory of Alois Riegl, a foundational figure in cultural heritage theory, who introduced influential concepts about the values of monuments and their preservation in his 1903 work, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin". His ideas, when applied to the preservation of church buildings, offer nuanced perspectives that balance historical, artistic, and social considerations.

According to Ahmer (2020), Alois Riegl's perspective on cultural heritage, particularly as it relates to church preservation, emphasizes balancing historical, artistic, and age values with contemporary use and societal significance. He categorized heritage values into historical which refers to the connection to the past, artistic or the aesthetic and architectural merit, and age which refers to visible signs of time, while also recognizing the importance of functional use. Riegl argued that preservation should respect the evolving values attached to monuments, maintaining authenticity while adapting to modern contexts. In church preservation, this means carefully conserving their physical and spiritual significance, ensuring they remain both historical artifacts and active community spaces. His approach highlights the dynamic interplay between conserving original materials, restoring for continued use, and valuing the cultural and spiritual identity churches embody. This theory suggests that heritage value is shaped by evolving societal perspectives and includes historical, artistic, age, and functional aspects. Preservation should balance authenticity with modern relevance, respecting both the cultural significance and continued use of the church.

Further, this study is also anchored to the Collective Action Theory by Mancur Olson in 1965; he explains how individuals in a group work together to achieve shared goals, particularly when the outcome benefits everyone, regardless of their contribution. This explains how individuals work together to achieve shared goals, particularly when the outcome benefits everyone. In the context of parishioners' church preservation, the theory highlights the challenges of mobilizing resources and participation for a communal good like preserving a Spanish-era church. Parishioners overcome these challenges through strong social networks, shared values, and mechanisms such as fundraising events, volunteer efforts, and spiritual motivation. These collective actions ensure the preservation of the church, as it serves not just as a place of worship but also as a symbol of cultural and community identity. By exploring parishioners' roles phenomenologically, the study can reveal how their sense of stewardship, communal identity, and spiritual connection drive their collective efforts. Olson's theory thus helps frame the mechanisms and motivations behind parishioners' actions in sustaining these heritage sites.

The preservation and valuation of Spanish-era churches by parishioners are deeply rooted in the community's collective consciousness, manifesting only when such stewardship is strongly embedded within their community. The theory of Social Constructivism by Lev Vygotsky provides a critical framework for understanding this phenomenon, emphasizing the role of collaborative efforts and shared cultural and religious practices in fostering stewardship. Through communal activities such as repairs, cleaning, and

decorating, parishioners collectively developed a sense of responsibility, while intergenerational transmission of knowledge regarding construction techniques, rituals, and preservation reinforced this shared commitment. This collective engagement, underpinned by intrinsic motivation, cultivates individual and communal initiatives toward preservation. The theory is instrumental in elucidating how parishioners contribute to the enduring significance of these churches as both spiritual and cultural landmarks within their communities.

1.4. Scope and Delimitation

This study focused on the parishioners' roles in the conservation efforts to the churches in Eastern Visayas that were established during the Spanish colonial occupation. These churches serve as spiritual landmarks and represent as part of the legacy of Spanish occupation.

Geographically, this study is limited to the churches that were built during the Spanish colonial regime within selected municipalities and cities within Eastern Visayas. This delimitation is intended to provide a focused analysis to the preservation efforts of the parishioners of the Spanish-era churches which have played an important role in the spiritual, historical, and cultural identity of the region. While there are many other Spanish-era churches that were established across the Philippines, this study focused on those Spanish-era churches within the region.

This study limits its analysis to the conservation efforts made within the context of the region, acknowledging that while national or local may influence parishioners' action, the research primarily focused on parishioners' initiatives and perceptions regarding these Spanish-era churches.

2. Review of Related Literature

Religious heritage buildings, particularly Spanish-era churches, represent more than mere architectural structures; they embody centuries of community life and spiritual significance. These edifices have maintained their central role in communities for hundreds of years, serving as crucial elements for their communities' future survival. The importance of religious heritage has been widely recognized for both cultural preservation and the sustainability of community life. However, modern challenges, including increasing secularization, have led to many religious heritage buildings becoming vulnerable to various threats and, in some cases, being repurposed for non-religious activities (Oluwafemi, 2015).

The value of historic church buildings extends beyond their objective elements such as building materials and design. Mark (2005) emphasizes the significant sentimental value these structures hold for those intimately connected to them. Through case studies, his research demonstrates the enduring strength of this subjective value within spiritual communities rooted in historic church structures. The strong affinity between church congregations and their buildings is evident in numerous emotive responses concerning various aspects of church institutions and architecture. Most respondents expressed deep admiration and respect for their historic church structures' architectural value, which they felt strengthened their personal connection to the church. This suggests that objective architectural elements have the capacity to influence and direct subjective responses, which is crucial to the symbolic importance of any church building in its function as a host for religious worship.

In the Philippine context, particularly in Eastern Visayas, the conservation of Spanish-era churches has been significantly influenced by parishioners' active involvement. A notable example is the restoration of the Immaculate Conception Parish Church in Guiuan, Eastern Samar, following its destruction by Super Typhoon Yolanda in 2013. This project demonstrated the effectiveness of collaborative efforts among the National Museum of the Philippines, heritage professionals, architects, anthropologists, and local parishioners. The community's participation proved crucial in rebuilding the church, highlighting the importance of local engagement in heritage conservation (Livingstone & Morrison, 2020).

The development of Conservation Management Plans (CMP), such as the one for St. Augustine of Hippo Parish Church in Bacong, Negros Oriental, further underscores the essential role of parishioners in preserving historical structures. Experts emphasize that successful implementation of such plans requires collaboration among the community, church authorities, and local government units. Training workshops are recommended to equip parishioners with necessary conservation skills, ensuring the sustainability of these initiatives (Partlow, 2019).

The preservation of Spanish-era churches in the Philippines requires a delicate balance between cultural heritage conservation and active community participation. These churches serve as both places of worship and valuable reminders of the region's colonial history and architectural heritage. The Baroque Churches of the Philippines, recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, exemplify the unique blend of European architecture and local craftsmanship that characterizes these structures (UNESCO, 1993). Their preservation is essential not only for their architectural beauty but also for their role in maintaining communities' cultural and spiritual identity.

Research indicates that grassroots participation yields more sustainable conservation outcomes. Examples such as the community-led heritage conservation in Ifugao demonstrate the effectiveness of engaging local populations in preservation efforts. These projects not only protect physical structures but also facilitate the transmission of cultural values and practices associated with these sites (Acabado & Martin, 2020).

Church stewards, typically composed of committed parishioners, play a vital role in maintaining and preserving Spanish-era churches. Their responsibilities encompass organizing restoration initiatives and advocating for the historical and spiritual significance of these structures. Their unique position, bridging both church and local community interests, enables them to reconcile practical congregation needs with heritage conservation requirements. This stewardship is crucial in ensuring these churches remain vibrant centers of worship while safeguarding their historical integrity (Otto, 2019).

The literature consistently emphasizes that preservation efforts are effectively embedded within these communities, supporting their walls of faith in both physical and spiritual terms. The emotional relationship between congregations and their historic church buildings serves as a foundation for sustained conservation efforts, ensuring these cultural landmarks endure for future generations.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design, sampling methods, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques that were used in the study. It details the phenomenological approach adopted to understand participants' lived experiences with the Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas, focusing on their

conservation efforts in preserving religious heritage sites. This chapter also explains the rationale behind selecting specific participants, the tools for gathering data, and the steps to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

3.1. Research Design

This study utilized a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of parishioners in Eastern Visayas concerning their roles in the conservation of Spanish-era churches. Phenomenology, as described by Creswell (2013), aims to understand individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to a particular phenomenon. Through this approach, the study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of how parishioners perceive their responsibilities in preserving these historical and spiritual landmarks.

3.2. Research Locale

This study focused on selected Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas that hold historical, cultural, and spiritual significance. These churches serve as both religious centers and important cultural landmarks. These locations were chosen based on their historical relevance, preservation status, and the active involvement of parishioners in conservation efforts.

3.3. Research Respondents

The participants for this study were individuals with diverse yet interconnected perspectives on church conservation and preservation of Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas. This includes the parishioners of the selected Spanish-era churches, each offering unique perspectives into the research topic.

1. Parishioners in this study refer to active members of a local Catholic parish who participate in the conservation and preservation of Spanish-era churches. As stewards of these historical structures, they play a significant role in maintaining their cultural, religious, and architectural heritage. These respondents may include lay members, church volunteers, and regular attendees of religious services who contribute to restoration efforts, community awareness programs, or heritage advocacy. Their insights provide a deeper understanding of how parishioners engage in the conservation process and the challenges they face in safeguarding these historic churches for future generations.

3.4. Sampling Techniques/Method

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants who can provide rich, detailed information about their experiences in conserving Spanish-era churches. Purposive sampling is particularly suitable for phenomenological research as it allows researchers to identify and select participants who have direct experience with the phenomenon being studied (Taherdoost, 2016). The selection criteria focus on parishioners who are actively involved in church conservation efforts, ensuring that participants can contribute meaningful insights about their roles and experiences in preserving these historical structures.

The selection process considers several key factors: (1) regular participation in church activities, (2) involvement in conservation or preservation initiatives, and (3) length of association with the Spanish-era church community. This approach aligns with phenomenological research principles, which emphasize

gathering data from individuals who have firsthand experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

3.5. Research Instrument

The primary research instrument for this study is a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore participants' lived experiences in church conservation. The interview guide consists of open-ended questions that allow participants to share their perspectives, motivations, and challenges in preserving Spanish-era churches. This format provides flexibility while ensuring consistency across interviews, enabling the researcher to gather rich, detailed data about participants' experiences (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

The interview guide addresses three main areas aligned with the research questions: (1) perceived challenges in church preservation, (2) socio-cultural and spiritual factors influencing their dedication, and (3) strategies for balancing practical church needs with heritage conservation. The questions are designed to encourage detailed responses and allow for follow-up inquiries when necessary.

To ensure instrument validity, the interview guide underwent expert validation and pilot testing. This process helped refine the questions and ensure their effectiveness in gathering relevant data for the study's objectives (Kallio et al., 2016).

3.6. Data Gathering Procedure

In this study, data was collected using a qualitative method to explore the roles of the parishioners in the conservation of Spanish-era churches. The data gathering process began with the preparation phase, where the researcher identified churches that were established during the Spanish colonial regime in Eastern Visayas and obtained necessary permission from the selected local Catholic parishes by sending a formal communication letter. A validated semi-structured interview guide was developed to ensure the veracity of the data collected. The participants were identified through purposive sampling and contacted through the assistance of the local catholic parish. Once consent is obtained, face-to-face interview was conducted using the semi-structured guide, allowing participants to narrate their experiences, motivations and perspectives regarding church conservation efforts. The semi-structured guide allows for flexibility, enabling participants to express their views freely while ensuring that key topics are covered. Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent. Data collected through this method was transcribed verbatim and analysed to identify recurring themes and patterns, providing a comprehensive understanding of the parishioners' involvement in preserving Spanish-era churches.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study, followed by a discussion of their implications. The results are analysed in the light of the research objectives, providing insight to the lived experiences of the parishioners in conserving Spanish-era churches. The researchers used thematic analysis, as it is widely used method for qualitative data. This approach allowed the synthesis of participants' responses into key themes, followed by an in-depth discussion of the findings.

4.1. Theme 1: Faith and Identity: Catalysts for Conservation

The findings of the study reveal that faith and identity play a significant role in the willingness of parishioners to contribute to the conservation of Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas. Participants expressed that their motivation to preserve these historic religious structures is deeply rooted in their faith and personal experiences, viewing these churches as integral to their spiritual journey and communal identity. Their commitment aligns with the principles of Mancur Olson's (1965) Collective Action Theory, which suggests that individuals participate in group efforts when they perceive a shared benefit, and Lev Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, which emphasizes that knowledge and cultural values are transmitted through social interactions.

Many participants articulated that their involvement in preservation efforts is not just merely an act of volunteerism but also a profound expression of gratitude and devotion.

P1: Para ha akon, ini nga simbahan nganhi ha Palo usa nga simbolo han aton pagtuo ngan pagkaurosa... buot ko ini buligan kun ano man it panginahanglanon sugad hit pag-ayad. Ako, maaram man ako mag panday, asya aadi ak yana ngan dre ak nag aaro hin bisan anon nga kabalyo.

(For me, this church here in Palo is a symbol of our faith and unity... I want to help in whatever way is needed, such as in repairs. I know how to do carpentry, so I am here now, and I am not asking for anything in return.)

P3: Aw kay, dadako gud an akon pagpasalamat hini nga simbahan kay didi ako ginbunyagan ngan didi nagsingba an akon pamilya tikang pa han una. Para ha akon, diri la ini usa nga daan nga simbahan didi ha amon kundi usa nga buhi nga testigo han akon pagtuo ngan pagkatawo. Karuyag ko ini mapreserbar kay ini an nagpapahinumdom ha akon kon hain ako tikang.

(Oh, I am truly grateful for this church because I was baptized here, and my family has been attending mass here since the beginning. For me, this is not just an old church in our town, but a living witness to my faith and identity. I want to preserve it because it reminds me of where I come from.)

This response illustrates Olson's (1965) notion that individuals engage in collective action when they recognize its value beyond personal gain. Here, faith serves as an intrinsic motivator, compelling individuals to take part in conservation efforts without expecting material compensation. Instead, their reward is the continued existence of a sacred space that reinforces their shared beliefs and community cohesion.

Moreover, the participants' narratives indicate that their faith-driven participation in conservation is influenced by social interactions and historical narratives, aligning with Vygotsky's Social Constructivism. Many participants conveyed that their deep connection to the church stems from family traditions and community rituals that have been passed down through generations.

P2: Kay ngadi ako gin bunyagan, nganhi gihap ako igin kasal han akon asawa. Hirani gud kaduro ha akon kasing-kasing inin nga simbahan kay saksi inin akon pagdako komo usa nga Kristiyano.

(I was baptized here, and I was also married here with my wife. This church is very close to my heart because it has witnessed my growth as a Christian.)

This statement underscores how religious heritage is not only a matter of personal devotion but also a socially constructed reality. Through collective memories and communal practices, parishioners develop an

intrinsic responsibility to maintain their church as both a spiritual and historical landmark. The church, in this context, functions as a living repository of shared faith and cultural identity, reinforcing Vygotsky's (1978) argument that human development is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts.

Additionally, faith was often cited as the primary driver for parishioners to engage in conservation work.

P1: Para ha akon ano, akon gud karuyag nga bumulig ha simbahan kay akon gud ini panata kan Senyor Santo Niño, tungod han Iya mga binaton nga akon durudilain nga mga panginyupo. Amo gud inin akon gn dak-an nga simbahan, ngan mahitungod hiton an akon an akon pinaagi nga makapasalamat ha Iya kay inin pagbulig namanla ha paglimpyo ha simbahan.

(For me, I really want to help the church because this is my devotion to Señor Santo Niño, in gratitude for all the prayers He has answered. This is my church, and through this, I can express my gratitude by helping in simple ways, such as cleaning the church.)

P3: An Palo Cathedral gud an akon gn dadaupan hit akon bis anon ga pangamuyo nga gin aaro. Damo na nga beses nga dinhi ako nagpaupay han akon kasakit ngan naghangyo hin bulig nga. Para ha akon, diri la ini usa nga lugar kundi usa nga buhi nga ebidensya han gahum han pagtuo.

(The Palo Cathedral is where I go whenever I have something to pray for. There have been many times when I sought solace here for my pains and asked for guidance. For me, this is not just a place, but a living testament to the power of faith.)

This response reflects how faith creates a strong personal and collective attachment to religious structures, thereby motivating individuals to take action for their preservation. From the perspective of Collective Action Theory, this demonstrates how personal faith converges with collective interests, leading to sustained communal efforts.

The testimonies of parishioners underscore how faith influences their commitment to preserving their church. This aligns with findings from Denning's study in 2021, "Religious faith, effort and enthusiasm: motivations to volunteer in response to holiday hunger," which explores how religious faith serves as a primary motivator for individuals engaging in volunteer work. Denning emphasizes that volunteers often intertwine faith-based and secular motivations, viewing their efforts as expressions of their religious devotion. This perspective resonates with the parishioners' experiences, where personal faith converges with collective interests, leading to sustained communal efforts in church conservation.

The findings suggest that the preservation of Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas is deeply intertwined with the faith and social identity of parishioners. The application of Olson's (1965) theory highlights the role of shared benefits and collective responsibility in motivating individuals to contribute to preservation initiatives. Simultaneously, Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism explains how cultural and religious values are transmitted through social interactions, reinforcing the necessity of conserving these historical structures for future generations. The convergence of these theoretical perspectives underscores the significance of communal faith in driving heritage conservation efforts, making these churches not just places of worship, but enduring symbols of collective memory and identity.

4.2. Theme 2: Guardians of Faith: The Struggles of Church Stewards

This theme captures the heartfelt responses of parishioners as they share the challenges they face in preserving Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas. These churches, standing tall for centuries, are more than just places of worship; they are symbols of faith, history, and community identity. Yet, the responsibility of conserving them is not without its burdens. Participants expressed concerns about financial limitations, environmental factors, and the gradual loss of interest among the younger generation.

P1: Dako gud an amon problema pagdating ha pondo. Kon may naguguba, kinahanglan dayon ayadon, pero waray kami sadang nga kwarta para ma-repair dayon it mga kailangan aydon.. Masakit la isipon kay ini nga simbahan, parte ini hit amon kinabuhi, pero kulang gud an suporta nga amon nakukuha.

(Our biggest problem is funding. When something breaks, it needs immediate repair, but we don't have enough money. It's painful to think about because this church is part of our lives, yet support is lacking.)

P2: An pagbag-o han panahon, dako an epekto ha aton mga simbahan. It linog, it uuran, nag-aagi nga mga bagyo—nagkakaguguba an atop pati an bungbong. Bisan gusto namon protektahan, diri namon kaya kon kami la.

(The weather has a big impact on our churches. The earthquake, the rain, the typhoons—roofs collapse, walls deteriorate. Even if we want to protect them, we can't do it alone.)

P3: An hadto, an kabataan, aktibo adto ha simbahan. Yana, mas interesado na hira ha mga bag-o nga teknolohiya, ha sosyal media. Kulang na an interesado ha mga buhat han mga aktibidad para simbahan.

(Before, the youth truly believed in the significance of the church. Now, more are interested in technology, in social media. Fewer people are actively participating in church activities.)

Despite these struggles, participants remain hopeful. They believe that with strong faith and collective effort, these churches will continue to stand for future generations. Their testimonies reflect the deep emotional and spiritual connection they have with these historical structures—reminding us that heritage conservation is not just about preserving buildings, but about keeping faith and identity alive.

These responses align with the theory of Cultural Heritage, which suggests that people interact with historical sites in different ways, shaping their understanding and appreciation of them (Liu, 2022). The participants' experiences show that conservation is not only about physical upkeep but also about fostering a sense of responsibility among the community. As they continue their mission, they serve as living proof that faith, resilience, and a shared commitment can keep the past alive in the present.

The challenges described by the parishioners also resonate with the findings of Lamarca (2017), who examined the heritage management of two Baroque churches in the Ilocos Region. His study highlights financial constraints, inadequate enforcement of protective laws, and the crucial role of local leaders, including parish priests, in conservation efforts. Similar to the churches in Eastern Visayas, these historical structures face threats from environmental factors and dwindling community involvement. This further emphasizes the need for sustainable conservation strategies that balance cultural heritage preservation with modern societal changes.

4.3. Theme 3: Faith as a Guiding Force in Heritage Conservation

Faith serves as both a spiritual and practical foundation in the conservation of Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas. The responses of the participants highlight how their religious devotion influences their roles and responsibilities in maintaining the church's structural integrity while preserving its historical significance. The theme encapsulates the balance between faith-driven stewardship and the pragmatic demands of church upkeep.

Participants expressed that their commitment to caring for the church is deeply rooted in their faith, which they view as a moral duty rather than mere responsibility. Daily tasks such as cleaning, repairing minor damages, and organizing community efforts are carried out as acts of devotion rather than obligations. The responses illustrate a profound sense of ownership and pride in preserving the sacred space, reinforcing the church as a living testament to their religious heritage.

P1: Para ha akon, sugad nga usa nga parokyano, parte na han amon pagtuo an pag-atiman han simbahan. Diri la ini basta bilding kundi santuaryo han amon pagtuo. An tagsa nga akon ginbubuhat ha pagpapanlimpyo o pagmentenar, sugad nala hin paghalad ha Ginoo.

(For me, as a parishioner, taking care of the church is part of our faith. This is not just a building but a sanctuary of our belief. Everything I do—cleaning or maintaining it—I see as an offering to God.)

The daily needs of the church are met through a combination of volunteer work, donations, and organized community activities. Many participants mentioned that while the local clergy oversees major restorations, the parishioners handle smaller tasks such as sweeping the floors, maintaining the pews, and ensuring that religious artifacts remain intact. They emphasized that their efforts, though seemingly mundane, contribute significantly to the church's long-term preservation.

However, participants also shared the challenges they face in balancing practical needs with heritage conservation. One recurring issue is the difficulty of maintaining the church using traditional materials and methods. Some parts of the structure, particularly wooden elements and old stonework, require specialized care that is often costly and beyond the expertise of local caretakers.

P2: Ginkikinahanglan an mga karaan nga pamaagi ha pagpreserba han simbahan, pero kinahanglan gihapon naton mag-adjust ha kabag-ohan. Diri mahimo nga lahos la pagbag-o kay matatanggal an espiritu han kasaysayan.

(Traditional methods are needed to preserve the church, but we also have to adjust to modern times. We cannot just make drastic changes because it would erase the spirit of history.)

Another challenge is the weathering of the church due to natural calamities, a common occurrence in Eastern Visayas. Typhoons and earthquakes threaten the integrity of these heritage structures, making restoration a continuous and demanding task. Despite these obstacles, participants stressed that their faith gives them the perseverance to find solutions, often through fundraising initiatives, government partnerships, and diocesan support.

When asked about their specific roles in church conservation, participants consistently framed their responsibilities within a religious perspective. Some viewed themselves as “stewards” entrusted with safeguarding a sacred legacy, while others saw their involvement as an extension of their devotion.

P3: Para ha akon, an simbahan usa nga kabahin han akon kinabuhi. Diri la ako parokyano, kundi usa nga tinag-iyahan nga may baratunon ha pagmentenar han amon panulondon.

(For me, the church is part of my life. I am not just a parishioner but also a custodian who has a responsibility to maintain our heritage.)

These reflections align with the concept of faith-based conservation, wherein religious beliefs serve as a motivating factor for heritage preservation. Scholars like Smith (2020) argue that churches, as living heritage sites, are maintained not only for their historical value but also for their continued religious function. This perspective is evident in the responses, where participants expressed that their efforts in maintaining the church are acts of faith, ensuring that future generations can continue to worship in the same sacred space.

Ultimately, faith serves as both the motivation and the method for church conservation in Eastern Visayas. The church remains more than a historical monument; it is a spiritual home where religious identity and community values converge. The participants' unwavering dedication demonstrates that heritage conservation is not merely about preserving structures but also about upholding traditions, memories, and a shared sense of purpose anchored in faith.

A study by Ibañez et al. (2024) examined the significant features of historical churches in Cagayan, Philippines, and provided policy recommendations for their conservation. The researchers conducted on-site visits, documentation, and interviews to gather data on 18th century-old churches in the region, identifying key architectural and engineering features essential for preservation efforts. Their findings underscore the importance of community involvement and faith-driven stewardship in maintaining these heritage sites. This aligns with the current study's observations in Eastern Visayas, where religious devotion plays a crucial role in the conservation of Spanish-era churches.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that parishioners perceive their roles in preserving Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas as both a spiritual duty and a cultural responsibility. Their deep connection to these historical landmarks is rooted in faith, personal experiences, and communal identity. P1 and P3 emphasized that their involvement in conservation efforts stems from gratitude and devotion, aligning with Olson's (1965) Collective Action Theory, which suggests that individuals engage in group efforts when they recognize shared benefits. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism supports this perspective by illustrating how social interactions and traditions shape cultural values, reinforcing the idea that church preservation is a communal endeavor passed down through generations.

Moreover, socio-cultural and spiritual factors significantly influence the dedication of parishioners to conservation efforts. As highlighted by P2, faith and family traditions play a crucial role in motivating individuals to maintain and protect these churches. These findings resonate with Denning's (2021) study on religious faith as a driver for volunteerism, which argues that individuals often intertwine faith-based motivations with communal interests. However, the study also uncovered significant challenges faced by parishioners, such as financial constraints (P1), environmental damage (P2), and declining youth involvement

(P3). These concerns align with Lamarca's (2017) research on heritage management, which emphasizes the necessity of sustainable conservation strategies that balance historical preservation with modern societal changes.

Ultimately, this study underscores that Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas serve as both places of worship and symbols of collective memory. The testimonies of the participants illustrate that faith remains a guiding force in heritage conservation, fostering resilience despite financial and structural challenges. The integration of Olson's and Vygotsky's theories provides a comprehensive understanding of the communal effort behind preservation, reinforcing that the survival of these churches depends not only on material resources but also on the unwavering commitment of the community. Thus, this research highlights the necessity for continued support, awareness, and collaborative initiatives to ensure that these historical structures endure for future generations.

5.2. Recommendation

Preserving Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas requires community involvement, institutional support, and innovative strategies. While faith and cultural identity motivate parishioners, challenges such as financial limitations, environmental threats, and declining youth participation hinder conservation efforts. The following recommendations address these concerns to ensure sustainable preservation.

1. First, **institutionalizing community-based conservation programs** is essential. Local government units (LGUs), in collaboration with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), should provide heritage conservation training and establish church heritage committees to oversee preservation efforts. Integrating these churches into cultural tourism programs with the Department of Tourism (DOT) can also generate economic support for their maintenance.
2. Second, **strengthening financial and institutional support** is necessary to sustain conservation efforts. Churches should leverage government grants under the NCCA and National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP) while also forming partnerships with private entities through initiatives like a church partnership program. Additionally, community fundraising programs, such as heritage fairs and donation drives, can provide continuous funding.
3. Third, **enhancing youth engagement through digital and educational initiatives** can address the declining involvement of younger generations. Integrating heritage education into school curricula, developing digital documentation projects, and launching volunteer and internship programs for students in history, architecture, and tourism can foster a long-term commitment to conservation.
4. Finally, **strengthening legal protection and policy implementation** is crucial. LGUs must enforce Republic Act No. 10066 (National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009) to prevent unauthorized modifications, while heritage conservation zones should be established to regulate urban development around these churches. Additionally, Spanish-era churches should be included in the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council's (NDRRMC) hazard mitigation plans to ensure their protection from natural disasters.

The preservation of Spanish-era churches in Eastern Visayas requires a collaborative and multi-faceted approach, as outlined in these recommendations. By equipping parishioners with education and training, securing institutional and financial support, and fostering youth engagement through digital initiatives, these historic structures can be effectively safeguarded for future generations. Integrating cultural, social, and

technological strategies will not only protect their structural integrity but also preserve their role as enduring symbols of faith, identity, and history.

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