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Alicia Musika Kawayan: Unveiling Its Historical and Cultural Tapestry

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ABSTRACT

Despite existing research on bamboo music in the Philippines, studies focusing on Bohol's bamboo music culture remain limited. This narrative inquiry design explored the historical and cultural significance of Alicia Musika Kawayan through interviews with 16 key informants, including the founder, former members, and local stakeholders. Thematic analysis revealed that the ensemble, founded by Brad Ado, evolved from a school initiative into a prominent cultural group, overcoming challenges such as financial struggles and Typhoon Odette. Performing with bamboo musical instruments such as the *marimba kawayan*, *sugong*, *kuratong*, *tambol kawayan*, *bagater*, *palakpak*, bamboo flute, and ukulele, the ensemble blends traditional folk and contemporary music with dynamic performances. Further, it contributed to preserving local culture, fostering pride, promoting tourism, and mentoring younger generations. However, its decline underscored the need for sustained support and strategic planning to preserve such cultural initiatives, emphasizing music's role in uniting communities and safeguarding heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Music is a universal language that expresses emotions, connects diverse cultures, and shapes society's history and traditions. It also serves as a vital tool for preserving cultural identity, transmitting values, and unifying communities. The role of music in cultural preservation is particularly evident in the use of bamboo instruments worldwide. In the Philippines, indigenous tribes have long relied on bamboo instruments for ceremonial and festive purposes, evolving these traditions over time while maintaining their cultural significance despite colonial influences.

The province of Bohol, known for its rich cultural heritage, is home to Alicia Musika Kawayan, a school-based bamboo musical ensemble that once showcased traditional instruments and practices. However, despite its historical and cultural importance, the ensemble has ceased performing, and its contributions remain underexplored. Recent studies on bamboo music in the Philippines, such as Tradition and Innovation's (2022) comprehensive overview, have overlooked the bamboo music traditions specific to Bohol, particularly Alicia Musika Kawayan. This gap underscores the need to document and analyze the ensemble's historical and cultural aspects. This study will particularly investigate the ensemble's origin and development, its bamboo musical instruments, musical pieces, and performance practices, as well as its role in transmission and preservation of local culture.

Globally and locally, bamboo music reflects the interplay of tradition and innovation. Studies on bamboo music in Indonesia and the Solomon Islands highlight its evolution and commodification in response to cultural

and economic changes (Komarudin *et al.*, 2022; Mulya *et al.*, 2023; Samoto, 2021). In the Philippines, bamboo music continues to embody regional identities, as seen in the iconic Bamboo Organ of Las Piñas and the traditions of Panay Bukidnon (Dioquino, 2009; Muyco, 2008). Repertoire selection and ensemble practices, such as those of Alicia Musika Kawayan, further demonstrate how traditional and contemporary influences shape musical identity (Forbes, 2001; Hayward & Kartawi, 2023). Also, music is the best when integrated in the teaching of language and literature which is part of the transfer of culture (Pascua, 2025).

By addressing the lack of literature on this ensemble, the research aims to document its historical and cultural significance and support its recognition as a valuable cultural asset. This will also contribute to ongoing efforts to safeguard traditional music. This research ensures the appreciation and transmission of Alicia Musika Kawayan's cultural legacy to future generations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed a narrative inquiry design to explore the historical and cultural dimensions of Alicia Musika Kawayan. The study focused on Alicia, Bohol, Philippines, where the ensemble originated. Using purposive sampling, sixteen (16) key informants were selected based on their direct involvement with the ensemble and knowledge of its history and cultural significance. These included the founder, five former members, five teacher-coordinators, four parents, and a representative from the local government's Municipal Tourism Office. Inclusion criteria required informants to have significant roles with the ensemble, be aged 18–75, and provide informed

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consent. Exclusion criteria ruled out individuals without direct involvement, those outside the age range, and those with conflicts of interest or health conditions hindering participation.

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews using a self-made interview guide validated by experts. Interviews were conducted in Cebuano, recorded with participant consent, and lasted 30–60 minutes. Permission was obtained from university and local officials before data collection, and ethical approval was granted by the University of San Carlos Research Ethics Committee.

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework, was used to analyze the data. This included familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. To ensure credibility, initial findings were shared with informants for verification (member checking).

Participants were fully informed of the study’s purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Separate consent was obtained for participation and recording. Anonymity was maintained by assigning codes to participants (e.g., Informant 1). Digital files were encrypted, and physical copies were securely stored. Data will be permanently deleted two years after the study concludes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Anchored on the research objectives, the results of the thematic analysis revealed thirteen themes. Six themes are categorized within the origin and development of Alicia Musika Kawayan (Figure 1). Three themes are also classified within the bamboo musical instruments, musical pieces, and performance practices of Alicia Musika Kawayan (Figure 2). Furthermore, four themes are grouped within how Alicia Musika Kawayan helps transmit and preserve local culture (Figure 3).

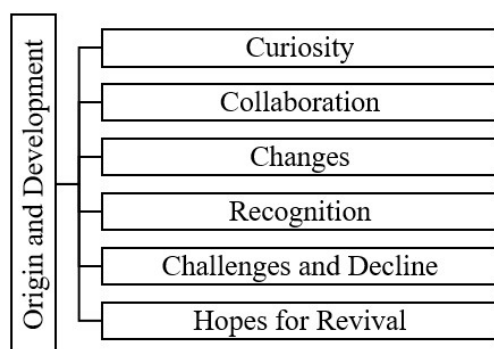


Figure 1: Schematic Diagram on how Alicia Musika Kawayan originated and developed

Curiosity

The origins of Alicia Musika Kawayan can be traced back to Catalino Salarda, commonly known as Brad Ado, a catechist at Katipunan Elementary School.

Brad Ado’s journey towards inventing bamboo musical instruments began with his background as a coconut wine gatherer. An informant stated, “It happened that Brad

Ado was a coconut wine gatherer or *manangiti*. When he knocked the bamboo poles that were used to gather coconut wine, it made a melody” (Informant 8, Teacher-Coordinator). The initial exposure to bamboo’s unique acoustics was a pivotal moment in Ado’s development of the first bamboo musical instruments. When bamboo poles were knocked together during his work in 1994, he observed that melody was produced.

This discovery of bamboo’s melodic potential formed the foundation of Ado’s musical exploration. From this discovery, Ado began to experiment and refine his creations, first developing the *kulintang* and later the *sugong*. Brad Ado’s discovery and use of bamboo as a musical resource illustrate the stages of Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 2014). His accidental discovery of the potential of bamboo to the systematic creation of instruments highlights how hands-on experiences, reflection, and experimentation can lead to significant innovation.

Collaboration

One of the most significant factors in the formation of Alicia Musika Kawayan was the growing interest among the children of Katipunan Elementary School. The founder of the ensemble started by allowing the students to try playing the bamboo instruments during school hours, which fueled their curiosity and engagement.

The formation of Alicia Musika Kawayan was not a solitary endeavor but a collective effort supported by various stakeholders, particularly the school, parents, and the broader community. The school principal and teachers played significant roles in facilitating the group’s activities, with informants acknowledging the support from teachers who became coordinators of the ensemble and encouraging others to assist in the training process. Further support came from the local community, including the parents who offered moral backing.

The involvement of the local government further illustrates the wider community support that was instrumental in the group’s development. Several informants highlighted the financial and logistical assistance provided by the Local Government Unit (LGU), particularly when the group faced budget constraints. An informant mentioned, “They tap into stakeholders like the LGU if there is a budget shortage” (Informant 7, Parent).

In addition to community and local government support, Alicia Musika Kawayan also received institutional backing from the Department of Education (DepEd) Bohol. With the stewardship of Dr. Cerina C. Bolos, Schools Division Superintendent, Brad Ado has been appointed a regular employee of the Division of Bohol since September 2003 as a Utility Worker in recognition of his ingenuity and contribution to culture and arts.

External organizations, particularly those dedicated to cultural preservation and development, also played a key role in promoting Alicia Musika Kawayan. LAWIG Bohol and the Center for Culture and Arts Development-Bohol were instrumental in connecting the group with

opportunities for performance and exposure. An informant expressed, “They were discovered by LAWIG Bohol and the Center for Culture and Arts Development-Bohol” (Informant 11, Teacher-Coordinator).

Additionally, these organizations were pivotal in creating a network of cultural groups where Alicia Musika Kawayan was one of several groups supported by cultural organizations alongside other notable ensembles like the Dimiao Children’s Rondalla and the Loboc Children’s Choir.

Changes

A consistent shift in the group’s name across different periods is a noteworthy aspect of its development. Initially, the group was known as the Katipunan Elementary School Bamboo Ensemble, but it underwent a name change to Alicia Musika Kawayan. However, when the group performed in Los Angeles, California, they were referred to as the Bohol Children’s Bamboo Ensemble, due to the need for a name that would resonate more with international audiences and reflect the province. Eventually, the group returned to the name Alicia Musika Kawayan, which has become its official and enduring name. An informant shared, “The name changed from Katipunan Musika Kawayan to Alicia Musika Kawayan. But when they went to Los Angeles, they brought the name, Bohol Children’s Bamboo Ensemble. And now, it is officially Alicia Musika Kawayan” (Informant 10, Teacher-Coordinator). The evolution of the bamboo musical instruments is another critical aspect that reflects the group’s development. There has been a significant increase in the number and diversity of instruments, particularly noting the improvements in the *kulintang*, which now features carved designs and varnish. The inclusion of more instruments represents an expansion of the ensemble’s capabilities, allowing them to produce a richer, more complex sound. “Eventually, the group returned to the name Alicia Musika Kawayan, which has become its official and enduring title.” Increased exposure and invitations are direct consequences of the group’s rising reputation.

Recognition

The Alicia Musika Kawayan initially gained local recognition, performing at various events within the province of Bohol. The first appearance of the ensemble was in 1996 when Katipunan Elementary School was awarded the Regional Winner in the Revitalized Tree Planting and Greening Program (RTGP). During that time, the Schools Division Superintendent of DepEd Bohol, Dr. Cerina C. Bolos, conducted the meeting of school administrators of Bohol in the said school to showcase the RTGP project and the bamboo ensemble. The next public appearance of the ensemble was during the cultural night of the Central Visayas Regional Athletic Association Competition held in Bohol in February 1997. These local performances, often accompanied by other prominent local groups such as the Loboc Children’s

Choir and Dimiao Children’s Rondalla, provided Alicia Musika Kawayan with a platform to showcase their unique bamboo music and performances. An informant said, “First, they were invited to perform in the CVIRAA during the Cultural Night, along with Loboc Children’s Choir and Dimiao Children’s Rondalla” (Informant 9, Teacher-Coordinator)”

As the group’s local popularity grew, their performances began to attract a dedicated following, with audiences eager to witness the distinct musicality of the ensemble. The ability to perform regularly at well-known locations such as Eskaya Beach Resort and during events like the Sandugo Festival further cemented their local status.

The group’s recognition did not remain confined to Bohol. National opportunities soon emerged, particularly through initiatives by the Department of Tourism. Alicia Musika Kawayan performed in prominent venues outside their province, such as in Intramuros, Manila, as part of the WOW Philippines campaign. They were also invited to perform in other major cities, including Cebu, Davao, and Tagum, and received notable attention through appearances on national television programs like *Pilipinas Got Talent* in 2016 and *Little Big Shots* in 2018.

In addition to showcasing their musical talent, these performances allowed Alicia Musika Kawayan to engage with diverse audiences across the Philippines, from urban centers to more remote areas.

The group’s national success paved the way for an international performance in Los Angeles, California. This experience marked the peak of Alicia Musika Kawayan’s international visibility and offered them a global stage to showcase their music.

The performances of Alicia Musika Kawayan, both local and national, provided significant economic opportunities for the group and its members. Talent fees generated from their performances, though initially modest, became a crucial source of income for the group. These earnings were divided among the members, with portions allocated for maintenance, costumes, and other operational costs, as well as shares for the teachers who contributed to the group’s success.

Furthermore, the economic benefits extended to travel, as the group’s performances across Bohol, to other parts of the Philippines, and internationally allowed members to experience new places, which was often an exciting prospect for the youth involved.

Challenges and Decline

According to Cottrell (2017), musical ensembles face various challenges, including musical, social, logistical, and financial aspects. The financial struggles faced by Alicia Musika Kawayan are another critical issue. This highlights the persistent underfunding of the ensemble, which has forced members to seek external financial support from local government units (LGUs), private sector sponsors, and even borrowing. The financial constraints also extend to the purchase and maintenance of instruments, as well as covering the costs of traveling

to performances. Despite these challenges, the group has managed to raise funds through solicitations and sponsorships, though these are often not sufficient to cover all costs. An informant shared, “We are struggling with the travel expenses because we need money and the money, we will use for this is from our funds” (Informant 11, Teacher-Coordinator).

External factors such as the pandemic and Typhoon Odette also have had severe impacts on Alicia Musika Kawayan. The pandemic, with its associated lockdowns, halted the group’s performances, and even after restrictions eased, there was hesitation to perform, particularly due to concerns over health and safety.

In addition, typhoon Odette caused extensive damage to the ensemble’s musical instruments, further hindering its operations. Many instruments were either destroyed or rendered unusable due to the typhoon, which, combined with the loss of storage space, created a significant setback. Brad Ado’s retirement is another pivotal event that led to the decline of Alicia Musika Kawayan. As the principal trainer and creator of the bamboo musical instruments, his departure left a leadership vacuum that has not been filled. The lack of a successor with the necessary skills and commitment to continue the work of the group has led to its cessation.

Hopes for Revival

Despite the ensemble’s decline, there is a collective desire for its restoration with an emphasis on its cultural and educational importance. The loss of such prominent figures is seen as a setback, but the idea of finding successors and ensuring the continuation of the group is also central to the aspirations of the community members. Furthermore, there is a shared understanding that the revival of Alicia Musika Kawayan is not merely about the continuation of a musical group, but about preserving and passing on the cultural heritage tied to the bamboo instruments.

Other community members are also hopeful for its revival due to the involvement of key individuals, such as Teacher Jona, a pioneering member of the group, and a teacher at Katipunan Elementary School. According to Matlosa (2014), pioneering members can embody leadership qualities, inspiring others and foster a culture of creativity and resilience. An informant stated, “I hope Alicia Musika Kawayan returns. This is what the Local Government Unit of Alicia has planned to bring it back; it would be a waste to let it go” (Informant 7, Parent).

A need for an organized effort, including the involvement of coordinators and support from local government units (LGUs) is also integral. As supported by Proksch *et al.* (2022), the presence of a coordinator can shift the dynamics from coordinated interactions, as evidence by increased recurrence and stability in group performances. Ongoing efforts are also aimed at reviving Alicia Musika Kawayan, with multiple stakeholders actively contributing to the initiative. The Local Government Unit (LGU) is cited as a key player in these efforts.

Versatility of Bamboo Instruments

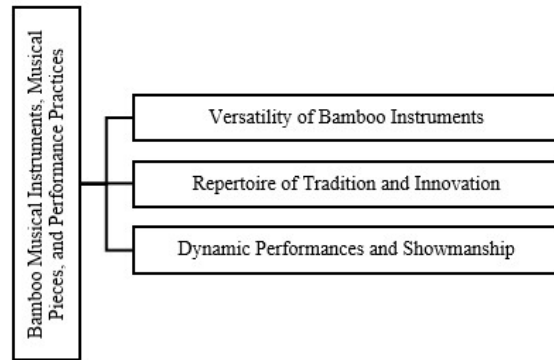


Figure 2: Schematic Diagram on the bamboo musical instruments, musical pieces, and performance practices evident in Alicia Musika Kawayan

Versatility of Bamboo Instruments

Alicia Musika Kawayan showcases a carefully curated set of bamboo musical instruments including the *marimba kawayan* (*kulintang* or bamboo xylophone), *sugong*, *kuratong*, *tambol kawayan* (snare drum), *bagater*, *palakpak*, bamboo flute, and ukulele. The *marimba kawayan* commonly called a *kulintang* is made of bamboo slats of different sizes that are arranged in order of pitch on a wooden stand. This is a bamboo counterpart of a xylophone and is considered the first invention of the founder.

It is also worth noting that the *marimba kawayan* provides a melody for the ensemble. The same musical discovery was also evident in the craftsmanship of another instrument during the founder’s pastime. Given his hobby of harvesting coconut wines, he managed to transform his tool into a medium for music. The *sugong* was originally used as a container for coconut wine but was refashioned into a musical instrument.

The *sugong* also served as the “*bajo de arco*” of the ensemble. These instruments are primarily handcrafted by Brad Ado which only demonstrates his ingenuity and skill in repurposing natural materials into means of artistic expression. Other instruments in the ensemble serve a distinct musical function. For example, the *kuratong* acts as a bass drum, producing deep, resonant sounds that anchor the rhythm, while the *tambol kawayan* provides percussive beats that signal the start of the music, enriching the rhythmic layer. The *bagater*, with its “*panisit*” sound, functions as a tweeter, adding higher-pitched tones to the ensemble. The *palakpak* also introduces playful percussive effects, enhancing the ensemble’s auditory texture. Subsequently, Dioquino (2009) provides a comprehensive listing of Philippine musical instruments, classifying bamboo instruments into idiophones, chordophones, aerophones, and membranophones.

Repertoire of Tradition and Innovation

Alicia Musika Kawayan presents a unique balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to contemporary musical trends, as seen in the ensemble’s diverse repertoire.

The ensemble places significant emphasis on traditional

and local music. This includes well-loved Filipino folk songs like *Kuradang*, *Timikling*, *Carinosa*, and *Dandansoy*, alongside Boholano songs such as *Bol-anon* and *Alimukoy*. According to Kuang and He (2022), folk songs, as an important part of cultural heritage, not only carry rich historical and cultural information but also symbolize national and regional cultural identity.

In addition to traditional music, the ensemble incorporates modern and contemporary songs. These include popular tracks like *Otso-Otso*, *Bulaklak*, and even English dance tunes such as Cha-cha and Boogie. Butete (2013) opines that the world is gradually becoming a global village because of the realities of the technological age and advancement, hence musical elements among other facets have also been influenced and thus assimilated into other cultural proponents.

Furthermore, the ensemble’s song choices often depend on the event and the preferences of the audience. Seasonal songs, such as Christmas carols, are performed during the holidays, while English songs are selected for international audiences. Additionally, audience interaction plays a role.

Dynamic Performances and Showmanship

A recurring highlight of the ensemble’s performances is the integration of stunts and exhibitions that amaze audiences. One striking feature is the blindfolded performances, where performers dance or play their instruments while blindfolded. The other thing is that they will play the ukulele behind their back in a certain part of the performance.

In addition, dance is a central feature of the ensemble’s performances, adding dynamism and rhythm to their musical repertoire. In particular, specific segments of the repertoire include choreographed dances that complement the music, enhancing the overall presentation.

Furthermore, the use of traditional costumes enhances the cultural authenticity of the performances. The performers wear Filipiniana outfits that reflect Filipino heritage and align with the traditional folk songs and dances they present.

Preservation of Heritage through Music

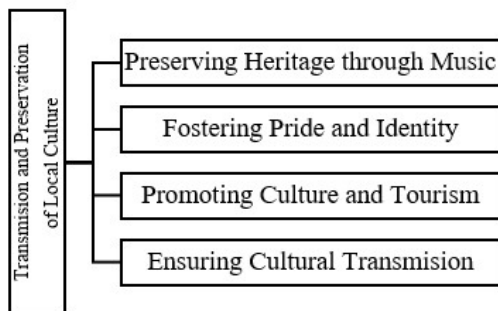


Figure 3: Schematic diagram on how Alicia Musika Kawayan helps transmit and preserve local culture

According to Ekpo and Loko (2022), music composition and performance serve as tools for safeguarding cultural

and natural heritage. The Alicia Musika Kawayan demonstrates a profound commitment to the preservation of musical heritage, particularly through its use of folk songs and bamboo instruments.

Public performances are integral to this preservation effort, as they ensure that the music remains accessible and visible. These performances draw large audiences, which amplifies their cultural impact. The repertoire of Visayan and folk songs performed by Alicia Musika Kawayan is particularly significant in fostering community pride and connection.

Fostering Pride and Identity

Alicia Musika Kawayan has had a transformative impact on the local identity and pride of the municipality of Alicia and the broader province of Bohol. The group’s prominence extends beyond the municipality, with its music gaining recognition across the province and even internationally. Such achievements enhance local pride, as the ensemble represents the cultural richness of its origin. Additionally, Alicia Musika Kawayan has been instrumental in making Alicia well-known. The ensemble’s participation in high-profile events and media coverage has further solidified its reputation.

Promoting Culture and Tourism

Alicia Musika Kawayan has become a pivotal cultural asset for tourism in Bohol. Its performances attract both local and international visitors. This mobility ensures a wider reach, extending the ensemble’s influence beyond its locality. The ensemble has also contributed to the broader tourism landscape of Bohol. Performances not only entertain but also provide a unique cultural experience for visitors. The ensemble’s ability to merge entertainment with cultural education enhances its value as a tourist attraction. According to the study by Tapson *et al.* (2018), by showcasing local talent and cultural heritage, ensembles can attract tourists who are interested in experiencing unique musical traditions.

Ensuring Cultural Transmission

Alicia Musika Kawayan has also played a significant role in cultural transmission by engaging younger generations in its activities. Seasoned members mentor recruits, ensuring the continuity of skills and traditions. This is supported by the study of Menkshi *et al.* (2021) which revealed that youth engagement in cultural heritage preservation and promotion enhances awareness and contributes to preservation and promotion.

Moreover, the ensemble fosters personal growth and skill development among its members. According to Burland (2021), ensemble participation fosters a sense of belonging, builds friendships, and helps overcome isolation. It also contributes to the development of musical skills and provides opportunities for learning and personal growth.

CONCLUSION

Alicia Musika Kawayan asserts the importance of cultural groups in preserving intangible heritage. Catalino “Brad Ado” Salarda’s ingenuity and community collaboration transformed the ensemble from a school-based ensemble into a recognized cultural entity. The ensemble’s repertoire of instruments, songs, and performances created a unique cultural identity that helped preserve traditions and promote Alicia and Bohol as cultural tourism destinations. The ensemble also mentored younger generations and fostered environmental awareness, making it a conduit for cultural transmission. However, its decline brought by financial constraints, lack of leadership succession, and external factors emphasizes the fragility of cultural initiatives and the need for sustained community support and strategic planning. Music, with its universal appeal, leaves a lasting impression on societies by transcending linguistic and cultural barriers. It serves as a powerful tool for emotional expression, cultural preservation, and community building. The significance of Alicia Musika Kawayan, even in its decline, underscores the enduring impact of music as a medium that bridges the past and the future, ensuring the resilience of intangible cultural heritage. While the study documents the ensemble’s historical and cultural tapestry, it does not fully explore the strategies needed to address leadership succession and financial sustainability, thus opening opportunities for future research.

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