

THE LOCALS AND THEIR USE OF ORAL HISTORY IN TOURISM: THE CASE OF THE CANDLE VENDORS OF TAAL, BATANGAS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the role of the local tour guide volunteers in sustaining tourism in Taal, Batangas, a municipality found in Luzon in the northern part of Philippines. Taal was founded in the 15th century by the Augustinian priests and hence, the Spanish influence is evident in the churches and ancestral houses scattered throughout the town. Presently, the Philippine government has designated its poblacion (central business district) as a National Historical Landmark. Located here is the Taal Basilica, canonically known as the Minor Basilica of Saint Martin of Tours, touted to be the largest Catholic Church in the Philippines and in Asia. With deep pride in their rich heritage, more than 30 townfolks, with age ranging from 7 to 60 offer free guided walking tour around the town upon purchase of a Php20/\$.50 candle. An analysis of the oral history imparted by the guides reveals that historical events are accentuated with personal opinions, popular beliefs and myths, creating a colourful account of Taal's past. Tourists express appreciation and delight in the guided tour due largely to two factors: first, how well oral history has preserved the stories of individuals who helped create the fabric of the town's history and whose lives, in turn, were shaped by the people, places and events of their day and second, the palpable pride of the townfolks as they took it upon themselves to preserve their culture through the free guided tour they offer. The study recommends that the local government formally recognize the tour guide volunteers and provide them with training to enhance their skills in delivering oral history.

Keywords: oral history; tour guide; sustainability; Batangas; Philippines

1.0 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A quick visit to the government-proclaimed heritage town of Taal, Batangas would show how deep-seated the Spanish influence is in their architecture. Street after street, houses in bahay na bato style (a house made of adobe on the ground floor and hardwood on the second floor) proliferate, and seem to have been mostly converted to cafés, restaurants and museums. Adding to the prominence of the Spanish influence in this town are the churches. Local churchgoers and tourists flock to the Minor Basilica of Saint Martin of Tours, touted to be the biggest Catholic Church in Asia, and to its nearby Church of Our Lady of Caysasay, which residents declare as miraculous.

Tourists who visit these churches are met by locals selling candles, who call themselves "volunteer guides" as they offer an informal walking tour replete with the history of the churches, miraculous events and anecdotes of prayers and wishes granted. Questions posed by the tourists are enthusiastically answered by the guides. When asked why they don't ask for fees, they replied in Tagalog (the vernacular in Taal) "we are just really proud

of our town, especially our churches, and we want visitors to appreciate our town. They can just buy candles from us to light before entering the church, and that's enough for us. We tell them to come back when their prayers are granted, and most do."

Apart from the churches, the volunteers suggested a visit to the public market as "any Taaleño (a resident of Taal) should promote locally produced or made products." True enough, the Taal public market is bustling with economic activities in both the dry and wet sections. Two businesses stood out conspicuously due to the number of stalls devoted to them: first are those selling the gown and embroidered Barong Tagalog (lightweight, embroidered shirt for men, worn untucked, and mostly used for formal events) and second, those selling native delicacies and meat products, specifically tapa (dried or cured beef).

From the above, it would appear that by capitalizing on its history and economic enterprises, Taal's potential for tourism is immense. What magnifies this potential is the active participation of the locals, which tourism experts consider vital in attaining sustainable tourism (Choi and Sikaraya, 2013). Sustainable tourism as an emerging paradigm enhances the existing conceptual frameworks on tourism planning and development by making the locals its focal point. Both direct and indirect support of community residents' participation is considered as the foundation of the sustainability paradigm (Butcher, 1997; Jamieson and Jamal, 1997; Hunter, 1997).

Indeed, the participation of the locals in tourism has long been recognized as crucial as evidenced by its inclusion as the 8th provision in the Berlin Declaration on Biological Diversity and Sustainable Tourism:

"8. Tourism should be developed in a way so that it benefits the local communities, strengthens the local economy, employs local workforce and wherever ecologically sustainable, uses local materials, local agricultural products and traditional skills. Mechanisms, including policies and legislation should be introduced to ensure the flow of benefits to local communities."

Thus, it would seem that what appeals tourists to visit and return to Taal are the Catholic churches, the streets dotted with houses that evoke memories of Spanish colonial time, and the home grown industries of gown-making, embroidery and tapa. What makes the visits even more remarkable is the generosity of the Taaleños who offer free walking tours.

2.0 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries and is a major source of income for many countries. The World Tourism Council (2017) reports that top 5 most visited countries in 2015 were as follows: first, France (84.5 million visitors), second, USA (77.5 million visitors), third, Spain (68.2 million visitors), fourth China (56.9 million visitors), and fifth is Italy (50.7 million visitors). In the Asian region, China tops the list with 56.9 million visitors, followed by Thailand (29.9 million visitors), Hong Kong (26.9 million visitors), Malaysia (25.7 million visitors), Japan (19.7 million visitors), and Macau (14.3 million visitors). Given these figures, the World Travel and Tourism Council pegged the contribution of tourism to the gross domestic product of any country at 9.8% in 2016.

In the Philippines, the Department of Tourism (DOT) indicated that international tourist arrivals in 2015 was 479,149 and increased to 542, 258 in 2016. The biggest number of tourists came from Korea, followed by the USA, then China, next is Japan and then

Australia. Income-wise, the Department of Tourism estimates that activities related to tourism in the country earned Php 21,681.23 million in 2016, slightly lower than 2015's earnings of Php 23 471.35. DOT assessed the share of tourism to the economy at 8.2 % in 2015.

Against the backdrop of huge tourist arrivals in various countries, it is clear that tourism benefits the economy because as a people-oriented enterprise, it creates and provides numerous jobs. Tourism also generates additional earnings from tourism-related activities and industries, revitalising not just the national but also local economies. However, like other forms of development, tourism can also create a host of problems, such as displacement of people (Barnett, 2008; Herrera, L. M. G., Smith, N., & Vera, M. Á. M., 2007; Wang, Y., & Wall, G. 2005), loss of cultural heritage (Timothy, D. J., & Nyaupane, G. P. (Eds.). 2009; Nasser, N. 2003; Du Cros, H. 2001), economic dependence (Kim, H. J., & Chen, M. H. 2006; Caneday, L., & Zeiger, J. 1991; Pizam, A.1978) and ecological degradation (Richards and Hall 2000). Acknowledging the impacts of tourism has led many governments to craft mitigating measures and common policies the tourism industry must observe. One such concerted effort is the Berlin Declaration on Biological Diversity and Sustainable Tourism of 1997, a treatise signed by environment ministers and senior officials from 18 countries in Europe, Africa, North and South America, Asia and Oceania. The declaration strongly advocated that tourism development consider the local communities by employing local workforce, and utilize indigenous materials. It also pushed for the crafting of policies and legislation that ensure the flow of benefits to local communities.

It is in this context that this study is proposed. As a tourist destination, how does Taal's history help draw tourists? What do the Taaleños consider as their contribution to the tourism of their town? How do the informal walking tours offered by the candle vendors help boost Taal's appeal? These are some of the questions the study will tackle.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study utilized qualitative research, specifically ethnography, oral history, and key informant interviews to gather rich descriptive data of the town of Taal, and its history, culture, and people to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the locals, particularly the candle vendors who offer free walking tours.

In this study, oral history is used as one of the data gathering methods, banking on the notion proposed by the Centre for Urban History of the University of Leicester (1995) that oral history includes the "interpretation of historical information, based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker" and "may take the form of eye-witness evidence about the past, but can include folklore, myths, songs and stories passed down over the years by word of mouth." The use of oral history is geared towards understanding how the people of Taal make sense of their culture to gain an understanding about their role in sustaining tourism in their town. In this study, a total of 30 candle vendors-cum-volunteer guides, one elderly local resident, one church official, one professional tour guide and one embroidery shop owner provided data for the study. The stories they narrated form the bases of the historical discussion included in this study.

The authors also participated in a number of informal walking tours done by the candle vendors-cum-tour guides of various ages. Part of this article is based on transcriptions of their narratives recorded during these tours. The informal tours formed the arena where the interaction between local guides and tourists could be examined. The

the 1950's to the 1970's in this town and in other nearby provinces, generated thousands of bulk artifacts ranging from stoneware, pottery, tools and jewelry dating back to the paleolithic period and into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This implies human habitation in these parts for nearly 40,000 years prior to Spain's colonization, suggesting that Taal may be one of the original settlement in the Philippines. Orlina (1976) further proposed that the early Taaleños most likely engaged in farming in the areas around the Pansipit River as far back as the neolithic period.

As related by the respondents of this study, it was in 1572 that the town of Taal was founded by Augustinian friars. Fr. Agustin de Albuquerque, the first Augustinian priest that came, gathered the local people and brought them to Balangon, the site of the original town of Taal. In 1575, the Moro pirates destroyed Balangon and the town was transferred to Lumang Taal (Old Taal), the precariously-situated area adjacent to the Taal Lake (presently San Nicolas town). Thereafter, the town enjoyed affluence and became prominent. Due to success in commerce and trade, Taal became the capital of the province of Batangas. In 1749, Taal Volcano erupted, endangering the town of Taal. Threatened by the new hazard, the townspeople, together with the Augustinian priest Francisco Benchucillo, sought refuge in a nearby area, now called Caysasay. Eventually, due to fears of recurring natural calamities, the town of Taal moved to its current location atop a hill, where the St. Martin de Tours church now sits.

Most tourists coming to Taal visit The Basilica de San Martin de Tours first before going elsewhere. From the outside, the structure looks very imposing and massive. Townsfolk and officials proudly claim that it is not just the biggest church in the Philippines but in Asia as well given the following figures: length of 88.6 meter/292 ft and width of 48 meters/157 ft. This church is a minor Basilica under the Archdiocese of Lipa, Batangas. The original church was built in 1575 near the bank of Taal Lake and was then already dedicated to St. Martin de Tours. For about 200 years of its existence, church construction seemed unceasing as it is perpetually under renovation. In 1754, the town was devastated by a massive explosion of nearby Taal volcano, leaving the church in ruins. Almost a hundred years later, another tragedy struck. A strong earthquake hit the province and destroyed the church almost completely. Four years later, a new church with a novel architectural design was built at the same place in 1865. After a decade, the church was inaugurated although it was unfinished. It was in 1878 the construction finally completed.

The Basilica features are awe-inspiring. For one, it houses the country's largest bell (6 feet in diameter at the lip, 9 feet and 4 inches around the crown and 6 feet and 5 inches in height). Unfortunately it no longer rings as it fell during the 1942 earthquake and now in display in the patio of the church. Another beautiful feature is the façade that consists of 24 classical columns in pairs lined up 2 rows of 6 on top of the other, similar to the St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

The church was declared into basilica on December 8, 1954 and a national shrine on January 16, 1974 through presidential decree No. 375. As previously mentioned through time, natural calamities have ravaged the Basilica. The most recent happened on April 4, 2017. A 5.5 earthquake struck Tingloy, a nearby town in the same province of Batangas, but it damaged the front part of the Basilica. Four days later, the Basilica was significantly damaged again caused by twin earthquakes (magnitudes 5.6 and 6.0) that struck the neighboring towns of Mabini and Taysan, also of Batangas. The National Historical Commission of the Philippines is presently undertaking some precautionary measures in order to preserve the Basilica.

The candle vendors note that the other church, The Church of Our Lady of Caysasay did not show any sign of destruction. The candle vendors explain why: "of course Our Lady of Caysasay will protect Her home. We've had so many natural disasters, but this church has never been damaged. That's how protective She is of her home and the people." A look at the history of the church would shed light on why and how Taaleños demonstrate so much faith in the Our Lady of Caysasay.

The respondents narrate that on December 8, 1954, two hundred years after the great Taal eruption, the image of Our Lady of Caysasay was canonically crowned at the Basilica of San Martin de Tours by Spanish Cardinal Fernando Quiroga, representing Pope Pius XII. Yet again, almost 60 years later, a very important Vatican declaration came. On June 3, 2012, Lipa Archbishop Ramon C. Arguelles formally announced to the public the special privilege granted by the Vatican to The shrine of Our Lady of Caysasay. The shrine was given the perpetual plenary indulgence by the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (a Papal major basilica and the largest Catholic Marian church in Rome, Italy). For the Catholics, this means that devotees making a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Caysasay will now be able to receive the same plenary indulgence granted to pilgrims who visit the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. However, even without Vatican support, Mr. Pio Goco, Head of the Goco Ancestral Museum and one of the reputable tourist guides of Taal assert that, the Taaleños have always been steadfast in their faith. Robert Lota, 75, a native Taaleño and a candle vendor, concurs saying every Taaleño knows by heart the stories of miracles through the intercession of the Our Lady of Caysasay since the 16th century up to the present: " these are gifts and rewards from the Lord because we have strong devotion to His mother."

One story that has been passed on through oral history is the finding of the image of the Virgin Mother (now named Our Lady of Caysasay). Taal folks relate that in the 16th century, Juan Maningcad, a fisherman, who was also a devout Catholic was fishing in the Pansipit River when he "captured" in his net along with fishes a small image of the Virgin Mary. He brought it back and showed it to his neighbors, who proceeded to congregate, and recite novenas. The news reached the authorities, including the Vicar who represented the King of Spain. He ruled that the image be handed to Doña Maria, the widow of the town's judge for safekeeping, who placed it on a specially made urn. Something extraordinary took place: several times, the image would disappear in the evening, only to return the next morning. This prompted the priest to ask a few volunteers to mind the urn. Despite their close watch, the image would be gone, but would be there the following morning. At any rate, news of the frequent disappearance and return of the image resulted to multitudes of devotees regularly reciting prayers, and discussions on what message the Virgin Mother may want to convey through Her frequent disappearance.

For more than a decade, the image got lost for unexplainable reasons. It was in 1611 when the image was once again spotted by locals on the place where the image was originally found. They caught a glimpse of the image of the Lady reflecting on spring water. Lifting their heads up, they found the image of the Virgin Mother on top of a sampaga tree along with lighted candles guarded by a Kingfisher which is locally called Casaycasay. The respondents speculate that it was due to this that the image started to be named Our Lady of Casaycasay. However, because the Spaniards had a hard time pronouncing the bird's name and frequently ending up sounding like Caysasay, the image began to be called Our Lady of Caysasay. The apparition at the spring was reported to the priest and with the locals, they commonly interpreted this as a sign that Our Lady of Caysasay wanted to stay on this particular spot, prompting the people to build a shrine for Her in 1611. In the same year, Juana Tanguí, an almost-blind servant girl, as well as 30 other women saw other

apparitions of Our Lady of Caysasay in the same place. The almost-blind Juana’s vision was miraculously restored after the apparitions. It was in 1620 when a small chapel was made on the spot where the Lady of Caysasay appeared many times. Almost 20 years later, a new church made of corals was built to honor the Lady of Caysasay and to serve as a visita or a chapel of ease of the Basilica of St. Martin of Tours. The well and the stream waters near the spot was said to be miraculous and the townfolks now calls the place Banal na Pook, also commonly known as the Miraculous Wells of Sta. Lucia. The whole chapel is no longer there as it was destroyed by the Taal eruption in 1754. Only the arch with the bas relief of Our Lady of Caysasay remains to this day.

3.2 “Buy a Candle for a Free Guided Tour”

“Buy a candle from me and I will accompany you to the Sta. Lucia Well. It’s where Mama Mary appeared to the people. Pray there, ask Mama Mary to grant your wishes. Then, bathe in the miraculous water from the well, or drink the water because it has been known to cure ailments.”

Such persuasive speech is commonly heard as soon as tourists approach the Church of our Lady of Caysasay. For Php 20 (.40 USD) per candle, a detailed account of the important events and people, infused with anecdotes is narrated confidently by any candle vendor as he/she accompanies a tourist to the church and the nearby Sta. Lucia Well. In this study, 30 candle vendors were asked about the following: how they have obtained a mastery of the history of Taal, particularly in regard to the Church of our Lady of Caysasay, the Basilica of St. Martin De Tours, and the Sta. Lucia Well and the benefits they reap from sharing what they know to tourists and how tourists respond to their story-telling. Table 1 describes the candle vendors.

Table 1. Profile of the candle vendors

	Characteristics	F	%
Sex	Male	6	20
	Female	24	80
Age	20 and above	6	20
	16-19	3	10
	12- 15	16	53.33
	11 and below	5	16.67
	\bar{x}	16	
Educational attainment	presently studying	22	26.67
	High school graduate/ College level	2	6.67
	Elem. graduate/High school level	14	6.67
	Elementary level	6	6.67
	presently not studying	8	26.67
	College graduate	2	6.67
	High school graduate/ College level	2	6.67
	Elem. graduate/High school level	2	6.67
	Elementary level	2	6.67
	Marital status	Married/in a relationship	4
Single		26	86.67

The candle vendors who give free guided tour are mostly females, with age ranging from 9 to 49. Judie, 23, however said that there are candle vendors as young as six years old who can equally give a very good guided tour as their knowledge of the stories surrounding the churches of Taal and the miraculous well of Sta. Lucia is remarkable. In fact many respondents said that their young age is a big advantage. May, 16, says,

“as soon as they approach the visitors, they invite them to light a candle at the Caysasay church and the Sta. Lucia Well so their prayers will be granted. We frequently see visitors looking amused and then, they tell the small ones to accompany them. They feel even more delighted when they hear these young kids tell them there’s no need to pay for the tour but to just buy candles from them.”

Of the thirty respondents, 2 are college graduates, 22 are still studying, while the rest have stopped. The college graduates explain that they are married and have young babies, and they personally care for them, making it difficult to seek employment or livelihood elsewhere. The candle vendors estimate that weekly, they could earn about Php 900 (\$18-20) on the average. However, during holy week, when tourist come in buses, they could earn as much as Php 2000 a day (\$40-42). Their earnings from selling candles is supplemented by tips given by visitors after every guided tour, which could range from Php 50 to Php 1000 (\$1-20). There are visitors who do not give tips, but as Sam, 9, said, “that’s rare, and if they don’t give, it’s okay because we really offer it for free.” Table 2 gives a summary of their earnings.

Table 2. Estimated income per week

Income	F
From selling candles (weekly)	
Below 100	3
100 – 300	5
301- 500	8
501- 1000	2
Above 1000	8
Can’t estimate	4
\bar{x}	Php 890/\$18 (estimate)
Tips received per tour	
Below 100	6
100 – 300	7
301- 500	3
501- 1000	1
Given but varies greatly	10
None	3
Other sources of income	
Tutorial	1
none	29

Since most are still in school, many of them sell candles only during weekends, regular holidays and during the Holy Week. Table 3 shows the number of times the respondents sell candles.

Table 3. Frequency of selling candles per week

Frequency of Selling Candles/Week	F
1-2	15
3-4	5
5-7	4
Depends on number of visitors	6

4.0 WHY VOLUNTEER

The candle vendors relate that when they suggest a tour to guests approaching the church, it is mostly starting from the Church of our Lady of Caysasay to the Sta. Lucia Well, allowing a leisurely 10-minute walk, where they could give the history of these important sites. Jun, 8, explains,

“when guests come here, it is really to visit these 2 places. The Statue of Our Lady of Caysasay inside the church arrived here in 1600, so it’s very old. The Sta. Lucia Well is also very important because that’s where Mama Mary appeared.”

Rarely do tourists request a tour to the Basilica of St. Martin de Tours because most often, they have already visited it before proceeding to this church. The candle vendors however assure that their knowledge of the Basilica is adequate and they can give a guided tour of this church as well.

It is during the ten-minute walk from the Church of Our Lady of Caysasay to the Sta. Lucia Well, that they discuss the history of these 2 places, including anecdotes about wishes granted by the Virgin Mary. All the respondents believe that the stories they narrate “make lighting candle to the Sta. Lucia Well more meaningful.” Judie, 23, succinctly expressed the beliefs of the other candle vendors,

“ when they light a candle, after having heard of how Mama Mary has actually appeared here, it gives the visitors more hope, more faith, compared to just coming here and lighting a candle without knowing the background.”

The candle vendors also explain why there’s a pile of flowers placed in front of the Statue of the Virgin Mary. Rose, 14, explains why:

“See those fresh flowers, they were just brought here a while ago. The dried ones were placed yesterday, and those that are already brown, from previous days, maybe last week. That means, everyday, people visit to thank Her [referring to the Virgin Mary]. During the tour, we tell them to come back when their prayers are granted.”

The respondents profess that they are not just selling candles, but they are helping people in need to pray more fervently through the stories they narrate. The oldest of the candle vendors, Cristina, 49, say, "it's not just candles, it's not just selling, we help them have more faith, because we think our stories make them believe more in the power of prayer."

It would seem that the candle vendors are correct in their assumption that tourists who visit have fervent wishes. A quick inquiry with tourists reveal why they visit the Sta. Lucia Well: to pass the board exam, to pray for relatives who have serious diseases, to ask for help for a very difficult problem, etc.

The candle vendors admit that volunteering to be a guide and narrating the stories are part of their strategies to sell, but, it's not just about getting more people to buy candles from them. Ben, 17, explains,

"we can just give them a 1-minute background of the churches, and we can move to the next visitor, but we don't. We choose to accompany them to the Well, because we'd like to make their visit more memorable, so that when they pray, they pray harder. That's just what I think."

When asked if they are after the tip, Rudy, 20, explained the sentiment of the group: "Getting tips is really good, but we don't get much. We could move on to the next visitor, or we could lie and tell them to buy 3 candles for their prayers to work, so we'll earn more but we don't do that. What we narrate is something we learned from listening to the priest, church people, from the best tour guides here in Taal, and from old people here."

The church officials agree that what these candle vendors narrate is factual, and consistent with what the official account of the Church on what transpired in the past. Even those who offer paid tours agree that what the candle vendors recount is in harmony with the factual records of the town. Sir Ed, 51, a sought-after tour guide in Taal says,

"When I conduct a guided tour, I sometimes ask some of them to accompany me, and I let them do the talking. The tourists are happy, and surprised at how well-informed they are. Even when I guide foreign tourists, they can narrate the stories in English. They're that good."

When asked if they are knowledgeable enough to guide tourists in visiting all the historical places in Taal, five of them said yes, while the rest said they could, but with limitations.

4.1 Volunteer guides: underutilized resource

Tourism banking on cultural heritage "demands a specific body of knowledge and a high standard of tourist guiding because the guide is entrusted with the public relations missions to encapsulate the essence of a place and to be a window onto a site, region, or country" (Dahles, 2002, 783). It may seem presumptuous to delegate this sophisticated task to the candle vendors of Taal who offer a short and informal guided tour especially since they do not think of themselves as "real" guides, and second, without any formal training, it seems unthinkable that they are up to the job of synthesizing the essence of Taal's heritage. However, what they offer at present, i.e., their story telling is nothing short of remarkable when seen against the backdrop of Cohen's (1985) argument that guiding is not just geographical but spiritual. How is this so?

Cohen (1985, 5-9) argues that a tourist guide's role is two-fold. First, a guide is a pathfinder "who leads the way through an environment in which his followers lack orientation or through a socially defined territory to which they have no access." Without maps, guide-books, signposts, and other orientational devices, non-residents entering an unknown destination were, in the past, dependent upon guides to lead the way and gain access in face of an often suspicious or hostile local populace. Pathfinders were initially locals with a good native knowledge of their home environment, but have not undergone specialized training. The second role is that of a mentor, a personal tutor or spiritual advisor. During the tour, the guide tells tourists what to focus on, including where and when, and may single out objects of interest, and how to act in particular places. Their stories may be interspersed with historical facts, comments on architecture, or pieces of cultural information. Hence, information is considered to be a vital element in the mentor's task (Cohen, 1985; Dahles, 2002). For a guide to be considered a mentor, an extensive body of knowledge must be acquired.

Are the candle vendors mentors? Again, it would seem audacious to elevate them to such status, but given how knowledgeable they are with significant events especially those concerning the Catholic church, and how deep-seated their own beliefs regarding them, the potential for mentorship is vast.

It is worth noting that the candle vendors' narratives are approved by church officials in Taal because they are consistent with historical facts. The candle vendors contend that the apparitions of the Virgin Mary in their small town are enough to merit attention. Yet, it becomes even more interesting when they include how the Virgin Mother's statue had been lost and recovered several times. Here, their interpretation is very important because a guide who is not Catholic might simply say the statue is retrieved, but for them, their strong Catholic faith leads them to a different interpretation: that the Virgin Mother insists that her statue be found so that she could permanently be seen in their town, and hence, can look after Her people. As Gina, 15, said, "how else could we explain the strength of our church? It's more that 400 years old yet it's still standing, still strong, still beautiful." This resonates Urry's (1990) thesis that "guides are becoming interpreters; they are not "translators" of other cultures in the limited sense of the word, but are mediators who enable tourists to experience the other culture; they are guides who encourage tourists to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel the other culture. Hence, pivotal to the interpreter's approach is the art of storytelling (Urry, 1990; Cohen, 1995). This implies that they are cultural brokers whose pivotal role is "to influence the visitors' impressions and attitudes, as well as enhance their appreciation and understanding of their surroundings" (Ibid).

Against this backdrop, the paper argues that the candle vendors are on their way to mentorship and given the chance to hone their skills via consistent training and education, their potential could be maximized. This is crucial as Cohen argues that the role of the guide is evolving and shifting from the logistical aspect to the facilitation of the experience, from the pathfinder to the mentor role.

5.0 CONCLUSION

As a tourist destination, Taal benefit from its rich and deep seated religious history. In a country where more than the majority of the population is Catholic, its potential is enormous. All the more so, despite the lack of Vatican declaration, its popularity as the first recorded apparitions of Mary in the Philippines and in the whole continent of Asia is drawing multitudes of local tourists and is beginning to get the attention of even the foreign ones.

The candle vendors' enterprising mind-set has led them to offer free informal guided tour in exchange for candles bought. However, given the meager amount they earn from selling candles, it can be argued that their motivation is beyond earning. Many of them contend that they help people pray more fervently because they know that people who visit their place are in need of divine intervention. Perhaps, without meaning to, the candle vendors of Taal are contributing to the preservation of their history every time they narrate the important events and people, folk stories and anecdotes to all tourists who buy from them. Hence, their use of oral history is not only instrumental in spreading the religious history of Taal but also in preserving it.

However, they have not been recognized for their efforts as local government officials perceive them as simply vendors who are resourceful enough to utilize storytelling as a strategy to attract buyers.

The study recommends that the local government consider the candle vendors in their tourism program. With proper training, they could significantly contribute to the sustainability of tourism in Taal.

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