



**FOSTERING COMMUNITY WELLBEING THROUGH FOREST-
BASED "BAHAY-BAHAYAN" IMMERSIVE THEATER:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF
"PAG-AKYAT SA BUNDOK MAKILING"**

Ana Katrina P. de Jesus*

University of the Philippines Los Baños, College, Los Baños, Laguna

*Corresponding author: apdejesus2@up.edu.ph

ABSTRACT – The weakening connection between human communities and forest ecosystems has become a critical issue of our time, simultaneously causing environmental harm and diminished community wellbeing. This research investigates a community-based approach that integrates immersive theater, multi-sensory forest experiences, and wellbeing practices to address these interconnected problems. It explores how participation in the immersive *Bahay-bahayan* play "*Pag-akyat sa Bundok Makiling*" fosters community wellbeing and environmental connection by analyzing participant experiences across simulated and authentic forest environments, examining how different settings shape these experiences, and identifying community response patterns to forest-based immersive theater interventions. A mixed-methods ethnographic investigation was conducted at three community venues in Laguna Province: Santa Cruz, Biñan, and Los Baños. Approximately 120 participants from various age groups participated in immersive sessions lasting 3 to 5 hours. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured group interviews with select participants, audio-visual recording, and reflective writing exercises. Key themes were identified through thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) analytical approach. Four major interrelated themes emerged: (1) transformative participatory engagement through multi-sensory forest experiences, (2) intergenerational knowledge sharing, (3) holistic integration of self-nature-society connections, and (4) openness to emotional healing and forgiveness. All three settings proved beneficial for fostering wellbeing, with authentic forest immersion eliciting elevated emotional experiences through tree interaction, stronger ecological learning motivation, and value system shifts. Immersive *Bahay-bahayan* theater set in forest environments shows strong potential as an intervention that builds environmental connections, while fostering wellbeing. The immersive simulation offers practical options for urban settings lacking access to forest ecosystems. Integrating healing practices with immersive theater creates a culturally relevant, adaptable framework for community wellness programs.

Keywords: environmental connection, forest therapy, immersive theater, Mount Makiling, wellbeing



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