



BUHAY SEMENTERYO: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SETTLERS IN LAOANG PUBLIC CEMETERY

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand the lived experiences and daily challenges of settlers residing in the Laoang Public and Private Cemeteries in Barangay Guilaoangi, Laoang, Northern Samar, and to propose appropriate government interventions to improve their living conditions and well-being. The research was completed in June 2026 during School Year 2025–2026. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to explore the participants' lived experiences. Twenty-three (23) cemetery settlers were purposively selected, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations. Colaizzi's phenomenological method was used to analyze the data and identify emerging themes. The findings revealed that most participants were young adults, predominantly female and single, with low educational attainment and monthly family incomes ranging from ₱5,000 to ₱15,000. Many had lived in the cemetery for several years, reflecting prolonged settlement in a marginalized environment. Ten major themes emerged: survival under structural deprivation, environmental vulnerability, social construction of home, resilience and adaptation, family support, stigma, constrained mobility, health insecurity, gendered vulnerabilities, and temporal adaptation. The findings indicated that cemetery settlers experienced multidimensional poverty, limited access to basic services, environmental hazards, and social exclusion despite demonstrating resilience and strong family support systems. The study concluded that sustained and inclusive government interventions in housing, livelihood, healthcare, education, infrastructure, and social protection were essential to improve their quality of life, promote dignity, foster social inclusion, and support sustainable community development.

Keywords: *cemetery settlers, lived experiences, phenomenology, social exclusion, resilience, government intervention*

INTRODUCTION

Shelter is recognized as one of the most fundamental human needs and a basic human right, providing individuals with security, privacy, protection from environmental hazards, and a sense of belonging. However, poverty, housing insecurity, and the rising cost of living have forced many marginalized families to seek alternative places of residence, including informal settlements beneath bridges, along riverbanks, and even within cemeteries. For economically disadvantaged households, the cemetery becomes a refuge where they can construct temporary shelters despite the absence of essential services and the social stigma associated with living among the dead.

Cemetery settlements have become a visible manifestation of urban and rural poverty in several developing countries. According to Lapatha (2019), as poverty continues to prevail in the country, it is no surprise that nowadays, cemeteries, most especially the public ones, have served as homes not just to the dead but to the living as well. Likewise, Descalsota (2023) notes that many cemetery settlers choose to reside in cemeteries because they cannot afford rental housing or acquire land of their own. Also, Billing (2018) described how families build makeshift shelters on graves or occupy mausoleums where they live without adequate sanitation, electricity, potable water, and secure housing. These conditions expose settlers to health risks, environmental hazards, and social exclusion while reflecting the broader issue of housing inequality.

The phenomenon is not unique to the Philippines. Logan (2017) documented the City of the Dead in Cairo, Egypt, where thousands of impoverished families have transformed cemetery spaces into residential communities due to persistent economic hardship and rural-to-urban migration. Such settlements illustrate how cemeteries have evolved beyond their traditional function as burial grounds and have become spaces of survival for marginalized populations. Similar cases have been reported in other developing countries, demonstrating that cemetery settlements are closely associated with poverty, limited employment opportunities, and inadequate access to affordable housing.

In the Philippines, cemetery settlements likewise reflect longstanding socioeconomic inequalities. Murcia (2018) observed that residents of the Manila North Cemetery have developed adaptive strategies that allow them to earn a living within the cemetery, making it both a place of residence and a source of livelihood. Over time, cemetery settlers have established social networks and community structures despite living under precarious conditions characterized by inadequate infrastructure, poor sanitation, and limited access to government services. These realities demonstrate the resilience of cemetery settlers while underscoring the need for responsive social welfare and housing interventions.

The existence of cemetery settlers also raises legal and policy concerns. Under Act No. 1458, Section 3, cemeteries are generally required to maintain a distance of at least twenty-five meters from dwelling houses, except for structures intended for cemetery employees, caretakers, or administrative purposes. Furthermore, the principles embodied in Presidential Decree No. 603 emphasize the protection of human welfare and the promotion of conditions conducive to healthy living. Although these legal provisions seek to regulate cemetery spaces and safeguard public welfare, they also highlight the tension between housing realities and existing policies, particularly for marginalized families who have no viable housing alternatives.

Locally, the Municipality of Laoang in Northern Samar presents a similar situation. Barangay Guilaoangi houses two public cemeteries and one private cemetery where several families have established makeshift homes due to financial constraints. These settlers experience persistent challenges, including limited access to potable water, inadequate sanitation facilities, overcrowded living conditions, environmental hazards, and social stigma. Despite these difficulties, many families have remained in the cemetery for years, demonstrating their capacity to adapt and survive under adverse circumstances. Their experiences reveal the complex interplay of poverty, resilience, and social marginalization in a rural Philippine context.

Although previous studies have documented cemetery settlements in urban areas such as the Manila North Cemetery and the City of the Dead in Cairo, limited scholarly attention has been given to cemetery communities in rural municipalities, particularly in Northern Samar. Existing literature has primarily focused on economic survival and housing conditions, leaving the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and everyday realities of rural cemetery settlers largely unexplored. This lack of localized qualitative evidence represents a significant research gap that limits the development of context-specific interventions and policies.

Given the continuing challenges of poverty, housing insecurity, and social exclusion, examining the lived experiences of cemetery settlers remained timely and relevant. Understanding how these families navigated daily life, coped with adversity, and perceived their living conditions provided data for local government units, social welfare agencies, non-government organizations, and policymakers. Thus, this study sought to explore the lived experiences of cemetery settlers in the Laoang Public and Private Cemeteries, Barangay Guilaoangi, Laoang, Northern Samar. The findings contributed to the growing body of literature on marginalized communities and provided an empirical basis for developing inclusive programs and policies that promoted housing security, social protection, and improved quality of life for cemetery settlers.

Research Questions

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of settlers residing in the Laoang Public and Private Cemeteries in Barangay Guilaoangi, Laoang, Northern Samar. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the socio-demographic profile of the cemetery settlers in terms of:
 - a. age;
 - b. gender;
 - c. civil status;
 - d. number of years living in the cemetery;
 - e. educational attainment;
 - f. monthly family income; and
 - g. number of family members?
2. What are the lived experiences of individuals and families residing in the Laoang Public and Private Cemeteries?
3. What challenges do cemetery settlers encounter in their daily lives?
4. Based on the findings of the study, what government interventions may be proposed to improve the living conditions and well-being of cemetery settlers?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of settlers residing in the Laoang Public and Private Cemeteries in Barangay Guilaoangi, Laoang, Northern Samar, Philippines. The phenomenological approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of how cemetery settlers perceive, interpret, and make sense of their everyday experiences. Specifically, Colaizzi's phenomenological method was used to analyze the data by identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and describing the essence of participants' lived experiences.

The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information about the phenomenon under investigation. The participants consisted of five (5) mothers representing five (5) households residing within the cemetery. They were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) they had resided in the cemetery for a considerable period; (2) they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study; and (3) they were able to articulate their experiences, daily challenges, and living conditions. The participants represented varying ages, educational attainment, civil status, family size, and monthly household income.

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using a researcher-modified interview guide adapted from Rosales (2016), *Buhay Sementeryo: Assessment and Comparison of the Living Conditions of Informal Settlers*. The instrument consisted of three parts: (1) respondents' socio-demographic profile; (2) questions exploring their lived experiences; and (3) questions examining the challenges they encountered while residing in the cemetery. The interview guide was reviewed by research and language experts to establish content validity and ensure the clarity and appropriateness of the translated questions. All interviews were conducted in Ninorte Samarnon to encourage open and authentic responses.

Before data collection, permission was obtained from the concerned local authorities, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

The study focused exclusively on the lived experiences of cemetery settlers residing in the Laoang Public and Private Cemeteries. Consequently, the findings are limited to the experiences of the selected participants and are not intended for statistical generalization. Instead, the study provides an in-depth understanding of the realities, challenges, and coping experiences of cemetery settlers within the context of the study locale.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the 23 cemetery settlers residing in the Laoang Public and Private Cemeteries. The respondents were predominantly young adults aged 21–30 years (30.45%), female (60.87%), and single (78.26%). More than half (52.17%) had lived in the cemetery for over twenty years, indicating long-term settlement. Most had reached only the high school level (34.78%), while monthly household income ranged from ₱5,000 to ₱15,000, reflecting persistent economic hardship.

1.1. Lived Experiences of Cemetery Settlers

Theme	Description
Survival under Structural Deprivation	Financial hardship and limited services
Spatial Exclusion and Environmental Vulnerability	Unsafe surroundings and poor infrastructure
Social Construction of Home	Acceptance of the cemetery as home
Resilience, Agency, and Adaptation	Resourcefulness and coping
Family as the Core Unit of Survival	Family support
Stigma and Identity Negotiation	Discrimination and self-worth
Aspirations and Constrained Mobility	Desire to relocate but limited resources
Health Insecurity and Informal Care	Limited healthcare access
Gendered Vulnerabilities	Harassment and unequal burdens
Temporal Adaptation	Gradual adjustment to cemetery life

The findings revealed multidimensional poverty, inadequate access to basic services, environmental hazards, and social exclusion. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience, strong family support, and gradual adaptation.

1.2. Daily Challenges of Cemetery Settlers

Theme	Description
Multidimensional Poverty	Low and unstable income
Educational Barriers	Limited resources and bullying
Health Insecurity	Reliance on herbal medicine
Environmental Hardship	Flooding, snakes, muddy paths
Resilience	Adaptive coping
Spatial Isolation	Poor accessibility
Family Burden	Parental responsibilities
Psychosocial Strain	Stress and anxiety

These findings indicate that settlers face economic insecurity, poor housing conditions, health risks, environmental hazards, and emotional stress while relying on resilience and family support.

1.3. Proposed Government Intervention

Based on the findings, the researchers proposed the Movement Advocating Cemetery Area Inclusive Advancement (MACAIA) Program, focusing on community needs assessment, safer housing, livelihood, education, health and sanitation, social protection, community engagement, and sustainability.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that cemetery settlers in the Laoang Public and Private Cemeteries experience prolonged socioeconomic disadvantage characterized by low educational attainment, unstable income, and long-term residence within the cemetery. The demographic profile suggests that cemetery settlement has evolved beyond temporary shelter into an established community where families have lived across generations. This finding supports the observation of Descalsota (2023), who argued that cemetery settlements emerge because economically disadvantaged families are unable to secure affordable housing. Also, Billing (2018) described cemetery residents as living without adequate access to basic services such as sanitation, electricity, and potable water. The persistence of long-term residence among the respondents indicates that housing insecurity remains a continuing social issue rather than a temporary circumstance.

The lived experiences of the participants reveal that life within the cemetery is shaped by structural deprivation, environmental vulnerability, and social exclusion. Despite these adversities, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience by adapting to their environment, developing coping mechanisms, and relying on strong family support systems. Over time, many settlers reconstructed the meaning of "home," gradually

transforming the cemetery from a place associated with death into a familiar and emotionally significant living space. This finding is consistent with Logan's (2017) study on the City of the Dead in Cairo, where marginalized families similarly transformed cemetery spaces into functioning communities because of economic necessity. Likewise, Macaraig (2023) found that women and families were accepting side jobs in the cemetery. Also, Barimbad (2026), residents in the cemetery, used practical resources, "*diskarte*," to make a living inside the cemetery. Similarly, Murcia (2018) reported that settlers in the Manila North Cemetery developed adaptive strategies that enabled them to sustain their livelihoods while residing within the cemetery.

The daily challenges experienced by the participants further illustrate the multidimensional nature of poverty. Limited financial resources, inadequate access to education and healthcare, environmental hazards, unsafe infrastructure, and psychosocial stress collectively reduce the settlers' quality of life. These conditions demonstrate that poverty extends beyond income deprivation and encompasses restricted access to opportunities, essential services, and social protection. Nevertheless, the participants consistently exhibited resilience by utilizing available resources, sharing family responsibilities, and maintaining hope despite prolonged hardship. These findings reinforce previous studies emphasizing that marginalized communities often rely on adaptive strategies and social support to cope with structural inequalities.

The findings further highlight the urgent need for integrated and sustainable government interventions. The proposed Movement Advocating Cemetery Area Inclusive Advancement (MACAIA) Program directly addresses the major issues identified in the study, including housing insecurity, livelihood instability, inadequate healthcare, educational barriers, and social exclusion. The proposed intervention is consistent with existing policy directions that emphasize inclusive community development, social protection, and improved access to basic services for vulnerable populations. By combining housing assistance, livelihood opportunities, educational support, healthcare services, and community participation, the program provides a comprehensive framework for improving the well-being and quality of life of cemetery settlers. Ultimately, the findings underscore that addressing the needs of cemetery settlers requires coordinated efforts among local government units, social welfare agencies, and community stakeholders to achieve sustainable and inclusive development.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The cemetery settlers in the Laoang Public and Private Cemeteries are predominantly young adults, mostly female and single, with low educational attainment and low monthly household income. Many have resided in the cemetery for more than two decades, indicating that cemetery settlement has become a long-term and, in some cases, intergenerational living arrangement driven primarily by socioeconomic hardship.

2. The lived experiences of cemetery settlers are characterized by structural deprivation, environmental vulnerability, social exclusion, and limited access to essential services. Despite these challenges, the settlers have demonstrated resilience by adapting to their living conditions, relying on strong family support systems, and gradually accepting the cemetery as their home. Their experiences reflect the complex interaction between poverty, survival, and human adaptability.
3. Cemetery settlers continue to face numerous daily challenges, including financial instability, inadequate healthcare, educational barriers, environmental hazards, poor infrastructure, and psychosocial stress. These challenges significantly affect their quality of life and limit their opportunities for social and economic mobility despite their continuous efforts to cope and survive.
4. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive and sustainable government interventions. The proposed Movement Advocating Cemetery Area Inclusive Advancement (MACAIA) Program provides a community-based framework that addresses the identified needs of cemetery settlers through integrated housing, livelihood, healthcare, education, social protection, and community development initiatives. The implementation of these interventions may contribute to improving the well-being, dignity, and social inclusion of cemetery settlers in Laoang.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers recommend the implementation of the Movement Advocating Cemetery Area Inclusive Advancement (MACAIA) Program as a comprehensive community-based intervention to improve the living conditions of cemetery settlers in the Laoang Public and Private Cemeteries. The program should be implemented through collaborative efforts among the Local Government Unit (LGU), barangay officials, national government agencies, non-government organizations, and other stakeholders. Its major components include community needs assessment, safer housing and infrastructure, livelihood development, educational assistance, healthcare and sanitation services, social protection, community engagement, and continuous monitoring to ensure sustainability.

The Local Government Unit is encouraged to prioritize inclusive housing programs, improve access to clean water, sanitation, electricity, and safe pathways, and strengthen livelihood opportunities that will enable cemetery settlers to achieve sustainable sources of income. Educational assistance, regular health services, psychosocial support, and community participation should likewise be integrated into existing social welfare programs to promote the overall well-being and social inclusion of marginalized families.

Future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies using larger participant groups or different qualitative and mixed-methods approaches to validate and expand the present findings. Comparative studies involving cemetery settlements in other municipalities or regions are also recommended to determine similarities and differences in the lived experiences of cemetery settlers. Further investigations on the long-term social, educational, psychological, and health outcomes of cemetery settlement may

provide additional evidence for developing more responsive public policies and sustainable community development programs.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors affirm that this study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards governing research involving human participants. Before data collection, permission was obtained from the appropriate local authorities, and informed consent was voluntarily secured from all participants after the objectives, procedures, benefits, and potential risks of the study were clearly explained. Participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or prejudice. To protect their privacy and confidentiality, no identifying personal information was disclosed, and pseudonyms or respondent codes were used throughout the study. All data collected were handled in accordance with the provisions of the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173) and were used solely for academic and research purposes. The researchers ensured that the dignity, safety, rights, and well-being of the participants were safeguarded throughout the conduct of the study, particularly considering their socioeconomic circumstances. The authors declare that no conflict of interest existed during the conduct of the research. Furthermore, plagiarism was strictly avoided through proper citation and acknowledgment of all sources, and the interpretation of the findings was based solely on the participants' narratives and the evidence gathered, without fabrication, falsification, or researcher bias. Artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools were utilized only to improve the clarity, grammar, organization, and academic presentation of the manuscript. All interpretations, analyses, conclusions, and final decisions remained the sole responsibility of the authors, who carefully reviewed and verified the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript before submission.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the Almighty God for His guidance, wisdom, strength, and countless blessings throughout the conduct of this study. They likewise extend their deepest appreciation to Prof. Benjielen C. De Guzman, Research Professor, for her invaluable knowledge, guidance, and constructive suggestions, and to the Institute. Allan J. Valila, Research Adviser, for his unwavering support, patience, encouragement, and expert guidance throughout the research process. The authors are also grateful to Dr. Caridad M. Delmonte, Chair of the Panel of Examiners, and Ms. Criselle B. Muncada and Prof. Ronaldo B. Tepace, members of the Panel of Examiners, for their comments, constructive recommendations, and valuable expertise that enhanced the quality of the study. Sincere appreciation is likewise extended to Dr. Jovan A. Giray for his assistance in validating the research instrument. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cemetery settlers of Barangay Guilaoangi, Laoang, Northern Samar, for their voluntary participation, trust, and willingness to share their lived experiences, which served as the foundation of this research. Finally, heartfelt gratitude is extended to the authors' families, friends, classmates, and everyone who, in one way or another, contributed to the successful completion of this study.

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APA Citation:

Dula, M. D., Ortea, A. B., Espiña, C. L., Valila, A. J. & De Guzman, B. C. (2026). BUHAY SEMENTERYO: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SETTLERS IN LAOANG PUBLIC CEMETERY. *Ignatian International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 4(7), 1254–1263. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21457475>

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