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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the cultural identity and heritage of the Iraya Mangyan people through the lived experiences and recollections of community elders aged 50 and above. Using Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) as the primary method, the research documents and analyzes the cultural expressions that shape Iraya Mangyan identity, particularly in the domains of festivals, performing arts (music and drama), visual arts, gastronomy, and traditional games. Elders shared vivid memories of communal festivals grounded in spirituality and seasonal cycles, performing arts that conveyed moral teachings and collective memory, and visual arts such as weaving and wood carving that served as both functional and symbolic cultural artifacts. Traditional food practices, including forest-foraged ingredients and shared preparation methods, reveal a deep ecological knowledge and cultural cohesion. Indigenous games were remembered not only for leisure but for their roles in social bonding, skill-building, and cultural instruction. Through these discussions, the study highlights the role of elders as vital custodians of cultural memory and underscores the urgency of documenting and revitalizing endangered traditions. The findings offer valuable insights for cultural preservation efforts, education, and policymaking aimed at supporting Indigenous identity and resilience in the face of cultural erosion and modernization.

Introduction

The Philippines is home to a rich tapestry of Indigenous cultures, each embodying distinct traditions, worldviews, and ways of life that have been shaped by centuries of interaction with nature, community, and spirituality. Among these Indigenous groups are the Iraya Mangyan of Northern Mindoro, one of the eight Mangyan tribes, whose cultural practices reflect deep ancestral wisdom and harmonious coexistence with their environment. Yet, in the face of modernization, migration, climate change, and socio-political marginalization, many of these traditions are at risk of being forgotten or diluted.

The urgency to document and revitalize Indigenous knowledge systems becomes more critical as elder members of the community—often the last living bearers of oral traditions and cultural memory—grow older. For the Iraya Mangyan, culture is not merely a static inheritance, but a living identity expressed through festivals rooted in spirituality, performing arts that transmit moral lessons, visual arts that carry both symbolic and practical functions, food practices grounded in ecological intimacy, and games that build social cohesion and values.

This study seeks to explore the cultural expressions and identities of the Iraya Mangyan people as remembered by elders aged 50 and above. Through focused group discussions, the research aims to capture the vibrancy, meanings, and transformations of these cultural elements over time. By centering the voices of the older generation, the study not only honor their role as cultural custodians but also offers insights into the challenges of cultural transmission in a rapidly changing world.

In doing so, this research contributes to broader efforts in Indigenous cultural preservation, education, and policy development, while advocating for the recognition and resilience of the Iraya Mangyan identity in contemporary society.

Significance of the Study

This study holds importance at multiple levels—cultural, academic, educational, and policymaking. First and foremost, it provides a vital platform for Iraya Mangyan elders to share their lived experiences, wisdom, and cultural memories, recognizing them as custodians of Indigenous heritage. By documenting their recollections of festivals, performing arts, visual arts, gastronomy, and traditional games, the research contributes to the preservation of cultural practices that are at risk of being forgotten.

Academically, the study enriches the body of Indigenous knowledge research by offering a qualitative and emic (insider) perspective on cultural change, identity, and intergenerational transmission. It highlights the nuances of cultural continuity and erosion within the context of globalization, development, and modernization. For researchers and educators, the findings provide culturally grounded material that can inform inclusive curricula and culturally responsive pedagogy.

On a practical level, the insights drawn from this study can serve as a foundation for initiatives aimed at cultural revitalization. Policymakers, NGOs, and cultural workers may use this research to support heritage conservation programs, promote community-based education, and design culturally sensitive development plans that empower rather than displace Indigenous communities.

Ultimately, this study serves as a call to action to recognize, respect, and support the Iraya Mangyan people's cultural rights, knowledge systems, and identity—before more is lost to time and neglect.

Main Problem:

How have the cultural expressions and identities of the Iraya Mangyan, as remembered by the elder generation, changed over time, and what factors have influenced their preservation or decline?

Sub-Problems:

1. How do Iraya Mangyan elders describe their cultural identity and its significance in their daily lives and community practices?
2. What cultural expressions—such as festivals, performing arts, visual arts, gastronomy, and traditional games—were practiced during their youth, and what meanings did this hold?
3. How have these cultural expressions changed over time, according to the elders' recollections?
4. What challenges have the elders encountered in transmitting their cultural knowledge and practices to the younger generation?
5. What do the elders believe can be done to preserve and revitalize Iraya Mangyan culture today?

Cultural Expressions as Vessels of Identity

Knowledge formation, wisdom systems, beliefs and tradition, and normative practices are among the factors that constitute both the aesthetics and the complexities of human life. Our history is one that is characterized by these components—components of that which we call culture. They shape human values, norms, socio-economic structures, and relationships through which society is understood. But these factors that frame our understanding of human behavior are unpredictable and are sometimes ludicrous drivers of change. As various practices are handed down to generations after another, the threads of its continuity are weaved in the fabric of change. These changes operate in different angles (Torres, 2015, p. vii). As will be discussed, this is true in the case of the indigenous knowledge, practices, and tradition of the Iraya Mangyan.

One of the widely acknowledged assumptions on culture, one that comes from the discipline of the social sciences, is that it is a way of life molded by the people gathered in a community. In the behavioral sciences, culture is presumed to be something “we abstract from behavioral phenomena” (Sapir, 1994, p. 64). And the tribe of the Iraya Mangyan is one that is recognized as wealthy both materially and culturally (Natividad, 2024, p. 3).

Iraya Tribe is by far one of the richest cultural tribes among the Mangyans. For centuries, they have their own unique food preparation methods, health practices, and ways of doing their livelihood such as tilling the soil by ‘kaingin’ method (slash and burn agriculture), fishing in the river, and hunting wild animals in the forest (Cadiz, Rosales, Evangelista, & Maligaya, 2019, p. 16).

The richness of the Iraya Mangyan’s culture is not limited to those practices. Their knowledge of the world that surrounds them is shaped by their ethnoastronomical beliefs that played a vital role in the development of their civilization and (pseudo) scientific beliefs (Cadiz, Rosales, Evangelista, & Maligaya, 2019). These beliefs are crucial to their everyday lives and way of living. Their observance of the positions and movements of heavenly bodies fabricated an indigenous knowledge that has been translated to cultural practices. For example, in a study conducted by Cadiz, Rosales, Evangelista, & Maligaya (2019), a participant emphasized thus:

“Hindi pwede magkaingin kapag bilog ang buwan, kailangan bilog ang buwan para nalang mga hayop at maganda ang sibol ng palay” (“It is inadvisable to do ‘kaingin’ without moonlight. A full moon ensures that there are no animals and that the rice seedlings will germinate well.”).

Similarly, in Rosales’ (2020a, p. 76) probe of the Iraya’s justice system, ‘tigi’, the elders who act like “shamans” who are believed to be equipped with wisdom and magic skills play a crucial role in upholding justice by elevating the case to the spiritual realm if necessary (see also Bawagan 2009; Rosales, 2020b). And it is in the same vein that their climate knowledge is also modeled. According to Caparoso, Evangelista, & Quinones (2018, p. 130), the Iraya tribe “gather information on weather and climate from both animate and inanimate objects around them. Trees, animals, rock formations, rainbow and rituals are the primary sources.” With this indigenous knowledge, their wisdom system is dispensed with its legitimacy and is a part of the communal life and worldview of the Iraya Mangyan—the community live by these beliefs and practices.

Going back to the contention regarding cultural changes, while the indigenous knowledge systems, practices and traditions are particularly unique to the Iraya tribe, they are already, unfortunately, fading away. It was the task of the tribe elders to teach the younger people their practices and traditions. But one of the driving forces that halts their cultural preservation is the illiteracy of the elders which entailed their powerlessness and marginalization. As Caparoso, Evangelista, & Quinones (2018, p. 132) write, “the ability to pass on their cherished beliefs diminishes” (see also Danganan 2017). This is no different from the results drawn from the focused group discussions and interviews conducted in this research with the Iraya tribe of Paluan, Mindoro. It may be conclusive to say that the condition of their indigenous knowledge, practices, and tradition is already at the margins of precarity.

Cultural Heritage Preservation and Transmission

Our country's Indigenous Peoples (IPs) are a valuable sector to our ecological preservation, social justice (and inclusivity), and identity as a nation. In her article about the Mangyans of Mindoro Island, Candelario-Aplaon (2025) argued that despite their significant contribution to the country's heritage and ecological balance, these communities often face marginalization and discrimination. They are among the poorest sectors of the population, illiterate, most vulnerable to extreme weather, and have limited access to basic services.

Language is a cultural tool that continues indigenous culture and its value systems. In line with this, Balansag, Chan, & Maligaya (2020) observe that the present members of the Iraya tribe are either monolingual or bilingual. Younger members acquire their native language from the elder members of the tribe. To communicate with outsiders and other tribes, they use Tagalog as an alternative medium of communication. Unlike other Mangyan tribes like the Hanunuo, Iraya Mangyan does not have scripts; the only ethnolinguistic practice is through speaking (Balansag, Chan, & Maligaya, 2020). Language, an important facet of their cultural heritage, is threatened by their acculturation to Tagalog lowlanders (Balansag, Chan, & Maligaya, 2020).

The Iraya Mangyan, one of the eight Mangyan subgroups, is persuasive in their tribal rich discipline-based culture and industrious work ethic (Balansag, Chan, & Maligaya, 2020). Such adaptability is a testament to their resilience to the demands of the changes in their economic, cultural, and socio-political environment impacted by outside interference. Tagalog is a convenient language for intercultural exchanges and economic transactions. However, this phenomenon could also be interpreted as symptomatic of the gradual and widening generational gap between the elderly and youth that immensely affects the purity of their tribal heritage.

Aside from the native language, the Iraya boasts an ethnoastronomical worldview that links distant and observable heavenly bodies to their mystical spirituality. This is usefully embedded in their tangible traditions of planting, courtship and marriage, pregnancy and giving of birth, and spirits and sickness. It was also found out that only elders are the ones practicing these beliefs while the children and teenagers are not aware of such (Cadiz, Rosales, Evangelista, & Maligaya, 2019). In his article, Logdat (2023) describes the religious philosophy of the Iraya Mangyan:

"The Mangyans believe in the existence of one Supreme Being, "Ambunam," who created them and the world and who is continually sustaining their existence. The presence of the divine is experienced in terms of his omnipotence, pervading their everyday life, and manifesting himself in physically observable phenomena such as deliverance from calamities or sicknesses,

blessing of the harvest, and other forms. They believe that there are bad spirits roaming the land called “Bukaw” in the spirit-world.”

Unfortunately, Iraya Mangyan youth are disconnected from the meaning of the metaphysical assumptions and moral significance of their ethnoastronomy. Internal issues, such as the gradual diminishing number of practitioners of healing and spiritual intermediaries, are in steady decline. Moreover, Iraya Mangyan and other tribes like the Tau-Buhid Mangyans were converted by Protestant missionaries, which made them embrace a totally different religious orientation (Valera, 2015, p. 33). Education also acts as a catalyst in the erosion of this locally rooted cultural memory. Modern western pedagogy emphasizes positivism, professionalization, and gearing towards financial stability, which is incompatible with the cosmological, socially cohesive, and folkloric knowledge of the Iraya elders, thus alienating the youth from their native beliefs and practices.

The decline of the indigenous heritage, as mentioned in the areas of language and worldviews, implies an external shift that withstands the internal cultural shifts happening within the Mangyan communities. It is an issue of survival rather than voluntary reform. Economic survival is the paramount concern that ultimately alters the traditional livelihood of the Iraya Mangyan. Their harmonious environmental stewardship is characterized as sustainable and immediate; they only produce and consume what is necessary. This attitude is polemical to the modern consumerist notion of value, where things are determined by their profitability. With this pressure, some adaptation strategies became maladapted since they resorted to logging, charcoal making, and use of insecticides in their farms (Valera & Visco, 2015, p. 27).

Scholars assert that the destruction of the natural environment is related to the decline of indigenous culture. To remedy this, one of the first things that needs to be taken, as stated by Caoli and Tenorio (2023), is:

“Sustaining interventions to learning which include access to mainstream language, elder pedagogy, creation of a safe space, and inward gaze through balancing academic, linguistic, and cultural interests challenged by the fast-changing national curriculum, disconnection with elementary education providers, lack of culturally relevant instructional materials, and disinterest of Mangyan youth to sustain their own culture.”

Second, cultural revitalization must be properly executed. This involves continuous and meticulous documentation of community-based cultural maps, which will create a repository of linguistic expressions, oral histories, myths, culinary traditions, festivals, games, etc. The dual effort of the national and local environment must be complemented by the academic institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to increase the awareness

of the majority population regarding the intrinsic role of the native population as stewards of nature, cultural diversity, and pre-colonial history.

Lastly, the national and local governments must refrain from tokenism. Our indigenous communities need proactive, sustainable, and tangible solutions to the economic pressures that threaten their cultural integrity. Economic empowerment of this sector, following the provisions of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA), can include eco-tourism, organic farming, or handicraft production, livelihoods that avoid the deviation of the community from their indigenous customs.

Elders as Custodians of Cultural Memory

The preservation of Indigenous identity and cultural expressions is deeply tied to the oral traditions, lived experiences, and memory work of community elders. As this study focuses on the recollections of Iraya Mangyan elders, it aligns with a growing body of literature emphasizing the pivotal role of elders as stewards of cultural heritage.

Battiste (2002) underscores the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems in education, noting that elders carry unique epistemologies rooted in generations of lived experience. Their narratives are not merely historical recounts but are pedagogical tools that embed values, ecological insight, and social cohesion within oral storytelling. This aligns with Simpson's (2000) work on Anishinaabe knowledge, where elders transmit teachings through language, ceremony, and land-based practices—forms echoed in the Iraya Mangyan's expressions of identity through festivals, food, and games.

Cruikshank (1998) explores how Indigenous elders in the Yukon Territory use stories to contextualize landscape, social relations, and spirituality. These "social lives of stories" mirror the Iraya Mangyan elders' use of memory to reconstruct cultural identity amid shifting socio-economic realities. Assmann (2011) and Casey (2000) offer complementary theoretical insights, proposing that cultural memory is not static but actively shaped by recollection, forgetting, and intergenerational dialogue.

Locally, Postma (1991) provides foundational ethnographic documentation of Mangyan lifeways, including art, ritual, and spiritual cosmology, while Rodil (2004) highlights the structural marginalization of Mangyan and Palawan Indigenous groups—factors that have led to cultural discontinuities and the erosion of Indigenous self-determination. These are crucial in understanding how external pressures such as land dispossession and economic displacement affect elders' ability to pass on traditions.

The National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) has undertaken projects aimed at revitalizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) among the Mangyan, recognizing that knowledge holders—particularly elders—must be centered in preservation efforts. However, Smith (1999) and Kovach (2009) warn against extractive or colonial research practices that objectify Indigenous knowledge rather than empower its keepers. Decolonizing methodologies, they argue, must honor Indigenous relationality, respect oral traditions, and support self-determined cultural continuity.

Fanon's (1963) work, though focused on colonial trauma, remains relevant in illustrating how cultural identity is shaped in resistance to erasure. His insights help frame the Iraya Mangyan elders' narratives as acts of survival and cultural resistance, not just memory.

Grenier (1998) provides a practical framework for working with Indigenous knowledge, emphasizing participatory and respectful approaches. This is reflected in the study's use of Focused Group Discussions as a culturally sensitive method to elicit shared memories and communal reflections.

Taken together, these works affirm that elders are not passive bearers of a disappearing past but active agents in shaping collective identity. Their voices are crucial to any attempt at cultural preservation and renewal, particularly for Indigenous groups like the Iraya Mangyan facing the twin forces of modernization and marginalization.

Challenges of Cultural Continuity in the Face of Modernization

The continuity of Indigenous cultural identity amidst modernization has long been a subject of concern, particularly for communities such as the Iraya Mangyan. Cultural expressions—festivals, arts, foodways, and oral traditions—are not only symbolic but serve as living vessels of ancestral knowledge, spirituality, and social organization. However, these expressions face increasing threats from assimilation, globalization, displacement, and policy neglect.

At the international level, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) asserts the right of Indigenous peoples to maintain, protect, and develop their cultural heritage, knowledge systems, and expressions. Yet, as Sissons (2005) points out, the survival of these cultures in modern nation-states is continually challenged by structural marginalization, commodification, and epistemic erasure.

Specifically within the Philippine context, Postma (1991) provides an essential ethnographic survey of Mangyan life, underscoring the intricate relationship between culture, environment, and spirituality. Meanwhile, Rodil (2004) and Gaspar (2000) document the

historical processes of displacement and minoritization among Indigenous communities in Mindoro and Mindanao, respectively, tracing how political and economic pressures—often in the form of militarization or development aggression—disrupt cultural transmission.

The struggle to retain cultural knowledge is often compounded by educational and institutional systems that promote assimilation. Smith (1999) critiques these systems and calls for decolonizing methodologies that center Indigenous worldviews and practices. Similarly, McCarty and Nicholas (2014) stress the responsibility of schools to support Indigenous language revitalization and cultural identity, warning against one-size-fits-all educational models that disregard local epistemologies.

Cultural erosion is further exacerbated by environmental degradation and climate change, which disproportionately impact Indigenous ways of life. Ford et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of including Indigenous knowledge in global climate discourse, highlighting how such knowledge is vital for resilience and adaptation. Berkes (2012) also advocates for the integration of sacred ecology into sustainability strategies, echoing IIED's framework on Indigenous Biocultural Heritage as a pathway toward inclusive development.

The role of elders as custodians of memory and resilience is a recurring theme across studies. Kirmayer et al. (2011) propose a culturally grounded concept of resilience rooted in Indigenous kinship, storytelling, and spiritual practices, which aligns with the Iraya Mangyan elders' recollections. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2020) and Cultural Survival (2021) further argue for global mechanisms that protect Indigenous cultural integrity in the face of modernization and extractive development.

Taken together, these literatures highlight that cultural continuity is not a passive process of preservation, but an active struggle for recognition, participation, and sovereignty. The Iraya Mangyan elders' lived experiences—as recorded in this study—resonate with these global and local narratives, revealing both the vulnerability and vitality of Indigenous cultures navigating change.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Indigenous research methodologies and narrative inquiry. It focuses on exploring the lived experiences, cultural memories, and recollections of Iraya Mangyan elders as they relate to cultural identity and expression. This design is appropriate for understanding how intangible cultural heritage is remembered, embodied, and transmitted through oral tradition and communal practice.



This study was conducted in Iraya Mangyan communities of Occidental Mindoro, particularly in areas where elders (aged 50 and above) are still actively participating in cultural life or communal gatherings.

Purposive sampling was used in selecting 10–20 Iraya Mangyan elders, aged 50 and above, who are recognized as knowledge-bearers in their communities.

Criteria include elders known for their cultural participation, storytelling, or leadership in rituals, arts, or games. Community leaders or local coordinators helped in identifying the participants.

The Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) was conducted with 10 participants each for the two groups. The discussion centers on themes such as festivals, rituals, songs, performances, games, food, and crafts, guided by open-ended prompts to allow organic storytelling and group memory work.

Transcripts from FGDs was coded to identify recurring themes under categories like: Cultural continuity; Loss and transformation; Generational transmission; and Revitalization strategies.

Results and Discussions

This section presents and interprets the key findings of the Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted with Iraya Mangyan elders. Guided by the main research question and sub-problems, the results are analyzed thematically and framed within the four key literature review clusters: Cultural Expressions as Vessels of Identity, Cultural Heritage Preservation and Transmission, Elders as Custodians of Cultural Memory, and Challenges of Cultural Continuity in the Face of Modernization.

The study draws from Indigenous research methodologies and narrative inquiry, foregrounding the voices of elders as knowledge-bearers and cultural anchors in their communities. Their recollections not only reveal the richness and diversity of Iraya Mangyan cultural expressions—ranging from festivals and rituals to foodways and traditional games—but also trace the contours of cultural transformation shaped by time, modernity, and external pressures.

By weaving together oral histories and community memory, the discussion highlights the dual realities faced by the Iraya Mangyan: the persistence of certain traditions despite adversity, and the gradual erosion or forgetting of others. Each thematic subsection responds to a specific sub-problem, offering a nuanced understanding of how cultural identity and expression have changed over time, what factors have influenced this change, and what can be done to ensure cultural continuity for future generations.

Cultural Identity in Everyday and Communal Life

(Sub-problem 1: How do Iraya Mangyan elders describe their cultural identity and its significance in their daily lives and community practices?)

Elders described cultural identity not as an abstract concept but as an embodied way of life expressed through daily subsistence activities, intergenerational roles, and communal rites. The terms used to address each other—*kina*, *kalo*, *soog*, *abyan*—reflect intricate kinship and social systems grounded in respect, reciprocity, and relational identity. These ritualistic greeting terms signify a rich social taxonomy that once structured interpersonal relationships. These linguistic markers reinforce community cohesion and serve as expressions of identity encoded in speech.

These naming conventions, now largely abandoned, reflect a worldview where identity was relational and collective rather than individualistic—a key distinction often eroded by modern schooling, economic mobility, and media exposure. In the elders’ narratives, culture is not merely a set of practices but a lived ontology—how one exists and belongs within a moral and ecological order.

“Kami noon, kilala mo ang tao sa tawag pa lang. Ngayon, pareho na lang, wala nang kina o kalo.”
(FGD 1 participant 3)

The Iraya Mangyan elders describe their cultural identity as deeply interwoven with nature, communal life, and spiritual practice. Their recollections foreground a collective identity grounded in ancestral wisdom, ecological knowledge, and sacred lifeways.

The elders underscored that cultural practices like kaingin, forest foraging, and ritualized sowing (paghahasik) are not only agricultural strategies but also spiritual acts, evidencing the close link between land, livelihood, and cosmology. As affirmed by Keesing (1993) and Tengan (2005), Indigenous identity is often defined through intimate engagement with territory and ancestral knowledge systems.

Cultural Expressions and Their Embedded Meanings

(Sub-problem 2: What cultural expressions—such as festivals, performing arts, visual arts, gastronomy, and traditional games—were practiced during their youth, and what meanings did this hold?)

Communal festivals (pagdiriwang) were remembered as vibrant, multisensorial events often aligned with the agricultural calendar and spiritual cosmology. Ritual slaughter of cattle (nagpapatay ng baka), food-sharing (sumánan), and ritual chants (maráyaw) served both social and sacred functions. Ritualized healing through chanting, particularly for ailments undiagnosable in hospitals, remains one of the few surviving practices—underscoring Indigenous epistemologies of health. These practices served as social glue and reaffirmed communal values, echoing the function of ritual as both a religious and socio-political act (Durkheim, 1995).

Performing arts such as namumuyboy (evening story-dramas) and the use of bamboo instruments (plawta, subing) transmitted moral lessons, myths, and historical narratives. Participants recalled namumuyboy, or night-time dramatic storytelling, akin to didactic theater. These were often narratives of ancient beings, moral allegories, and genealogies. Accompanied by bamboo instruments (plawta, subing), these performances served as intergenerational transmission mechanisms of both history and ethics.

“Hindi lang ito kuwento; aral ito sa kabataan noon. Guni-guni, pero may katotohanan.” (FGD 2 Participant 5)

Visual arts like stone carving (pag-ukit ng bato) and functional crafts (e.g., traps such as balatik, balanan, atas) demonstrate how aesthetic practice intersects with survival, ecological knowledge, and cultural continuity. These artifacts serve as mnemonic devices for ecological literacy, consistent with the work of Ingold (2000) on the material culture of Indigenous communities.

The Iraya diet, based on nami (wild yam) and other foraged plants, reflects deep ecological knowledge. Preparation methods were precise, with some foods being potentially poisonous unless cooked correctly. The value of food was not measured by monetary cost but by its availability and relationship to the land.

“Noon, mayaman ka kapag may asin. Ngayon, pera ang tinitingnan.” (FGD 1 Participant 2; FGD 2 Participant 1, 2 & 3)

Games (suungan, talukunan, dawikan) held deeper pedagogical roles. Beyond entertainment, they trained youth in strength, resilience, cooperation, and respect for community norms—what Rogoff (2003) describes as “cultural apprenticeship.”

Cultural Change Across Generations

(Sub-problem 3: How have these cultural expressions changed over time, according to the elders’ recollections?)

Most elders acknowledged a significant decline in the practice and visibility of traditional cultural expressions. Activities such as storytelling, ritualized games, and traditional healing (marayaw) have diminished or are viewed as outdated. A few practices remain—such as the cooking of nami (wild yam) and kaingin—but often in modified forms.

This intergenerational discontinuity reflects the impact of modernization and external interventions. For instance, the banning of balatik traps due to safety and DENR regulations demonstrates how legal frameworks rooted in Western conservationism can marginalize Indigenous systems of ecological stewardship (Berkes, 2012).

The rise of formal education, economic incentives such as 4Ps, and increased use of mobile phones were identified as both facilitators of change and contributors to cultural loss. The educational system, while offering opportunities, often prioritizes assimilation into dominant Filipino norms, displacing Indigenous knowledge (Battiste, 2002).

Moreover, state conservation efforts, while environmentally beneficial, inadvertently curtailed access to forest resources—further displacing traditional practices such as wood carving and kaingin (swidden farming).

Challenges in Knowledge Transmission

(Sub-problem 4: What challenges have the elders encountered in transmitting their cultural knowledge and practices to the younger generation?)

Participants expressed concern over their inability to transmit practices to their grandchildren, citing lack of interest, technological distractions, and systemic dependencies. The youth's preoccupation with mobile phones and the internet—exacerbated by pandemic-era distance learning—diverts attention from traditional learning spaces like the forest, hearth, and community gatherings.

This aligns with McCarty and Lee's (2014) concept of "cultural interruption," wherein structural inequalities and epistemic displacements interrupt the natural flow of cultural transmission. Moreover, the elders noted that cultural teachings once embedded in everyday tasks are no longer sustained, as subsistence practices wane in favor of wage labor and cash economies.

Despite the elders' willingness to teach, there is often no institutional or community framework to facilitate intergenerational learning, demonstrating the gap between heritage knowledge and its sustainability in modern contexts.

Revitalization Strategies and Aspirations

(Sub-problem 5: What do the elders believe can be done to preserve and revitalize Iraya Mangyan culture today?)

The elders strongly advocated for the revitalization of their culture, emphasizing the importance of teaching traditions to the youth. They proposed integrating cultural education into schools and reviving rituals and crafts through community-led workshops and storytelling circles.

Elders also recommended recognizing Indigenous knowledge as equally valuable to formal education, echoing the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000) and Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) (Republic Act 8371, Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997). They saw the documentation of oral narratives and rituals as a pathway toward cultural resilience, suggesting that projects like ethnographic archives, cultural mapping, and community museums could be vital tools.

This underscores the role of elders as living archives, bearing both knowledge and authority, as noted by Cruikshank (1998) and Wilson (2008). Supporting their leadership in cultural preservation initiatives ensures that cultural revitalization is not merely symbolic but rooted in Indigenous agency.

Conclusion

This study underscores the profound role of cultural expressions in shaping and sustaining the Iraya Mangyan identity across generations. Through the recollections of community elders, it becomes clear that identity is not a fixed label but a lived practice—embedded in language, land-based rituals, social relations, and embodied forms such as performance, crafts, and games. These cultural expressions, once vibrant in daily life, have gradually faded under the pressure of modernization, state interventions, formal education systems, and economic programs that privilege external norms over Indigenous worldviews.

Despite these disruptions, the elders' narratives reveal not only loss, but also enduring threads of cultural resilience. Practices like marayaw healing, ritual sowing, and the cooking of forest-gathered foods remain symbolic of a cosmology that resists full assimilation. Yet the erosion of intergenerational transmission signals an urgent call to action. The youth, caught between technological seduction and structural dependency, are increasingly disconnected from these ancestral roots.

This disconnection, however, is not irreversible. The elders' collective vision for cultural revitalization—through education reforms, community workshops, and culturally rooted leadership—reflects a powerful assertion of Indigenous agency. Their call to recognize Indigenous knowledge systems as vital, rather than supplementary, affirms the relevance of traditional wisdom in addressing contemporary challenges of identity, sustainability, and community well-being.

Ultimately, this study affirms that preserving Iraya Mangyan culture is not merely about conserving the past; it is about sustaining a living heritage that continues to offer meaning, dignity, and direction in the face of change. Centering the voices of elders is not only a methodological choice but an ethical imperative—ensuring that cultural continuity is not scripted from the outside, but nurtured from within the community itself.

Recommendations

Future research can expand and deepen the understanding of Iraya Mangyan culture by exploring how younger generations (ages 15–30) perceive, receive, and reinterpret traditional

cultural knowledge. This is to understand the extent of youth knowledge and participation in traditional practices, identify barriers to cultural engagement from the perspective of youth, examine how modern tools (e.g., social media, mobile tech) can be harnessed for cultural revitalization.

Another study could be systematic documentation of specific elements of intangible heritage (e.g., dances, oral narratives, medicinal practices, tool-making) through cultural mapping. This will create a community-led cultural inventory, identify endangered practices in need of urgent documentation and safeguarding, build foundations for a community museum or digital heritage archive.

Lastly, policy analysis. Investigate the intersection of land rights, cultural practice, and state policy, especially the implementation of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (RA 8371). This will analyze how land tenure, ancestral domain claims, and resource access impact cultural preservation, document community experiences with NCIP and other policy actors and Identify gaps in governance structures that affect cultural autonomy.

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