

Conceptualizing Indigenous Identity: Negotiation of Internal and External Factors for Indigenization



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ABSTRACT: This paper discussed the concept of the Indigenous Peoples based on the cultural concept of ethnolinguistics group in the Philippines that are in the level of endangerment. The objectives of this study are the following: to identify who are the indigenous of the Philippines by highlighting distinct cultures and practices of indigenous peoples such as hunting, family, rituals, and other cultural aspects; to enumerate the specific terms used by indigenous peoples related to their indigenous ways and practices; to analyze how their indigenous system and practices significant to their assertion as indigenous peoples; and to explore the issues and challenges faced by indigenous peoples in the country. The development of the identity and concept of indigenous peoples is anchored on the internal and external experiences of the community. External factors refer to social norms, standards, and policies that affect the assertion of the indigenous peoples in the country, while internal factors refer to the lens or perspective of indigenous peoples based on their organic culture and indigenous narratives. External factors include the Republic Act No. 8371 also known as Indigenous Peoples Right Act of 1997 (IPRA 1997) and other government policies, while community assertions and indigenous cultures are used as an internal basis for understanding the concept of "indigenous." The negotiation of two factors is essential to understand the concept of Indigenous Peoples. In relation community assertion and indigenous cultures, this study presented some terminologies of the unique cultures and indigenous knowledge of the Dumagat-Bulos from Sierra Mountain range of Doña Remedios Trinidad, Bulacan, Philippines.

KEYWORDS: Endangered Languages, Indigenous Peoples, IPRA, Indigenous Identity.

INTRODUCTION

The topic on indigenous peoples (Ips) or Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs) is vast and diverse, it includes language, kinship, political systems, livelihood, health, religion or beliefs, practices and identity. The issue of identity is a complex one, it encompasses political and cultural perspectives that both separate and connect individuals and communities. Identity reflects one's sense of belonging to a place, community, culture, and self. In the concept of indigenous peoples, the unique culture and practices of a serve as a concrete basis for their distinct identity. A holistic view of culture is essential since it covers various dimensions such as language, products, practices, perspectives, people, and community (Moran, 2001). In the Philippines, some indigenous people groups have similar practices and beliefs even though they have different names or assertion. For example, the Dumagat group in Central Luzon, the word Dumagat is collective term for indigenous people with dark skin and curly hair residing in the Sierra Madre Mountain range in Central Luzon region, Philippines. Dumagat people normally have black skin, kinky hair, and small physique. Even they are known by the lowlanders as one tribe because of their physical appearance, Dumagats in Central Luzon were consist various groups such as Alta, Alta Kabulowa, Bulos, Umiray, and Remontando. Despite of their different ethnolinguistic affiliations—they share the same belief in the great creator, whom they call *Makedepat*. Having a common belief in supreme being is not surprising, since Philippine languages are related and have their roots in the Austronesian language (Scheerer, 1918 cited in Reid, 2017).

The rich culture of indigenous peoples in the country shapes their identity, serving as the internal basis of their indigenous concept. In addition, this study will feature data on the concept of Indigenous People, drawing from existing policies, laws, and societal norms, which form the external basis. Therefore, the identification of indigenous identity in the Philippines is not solely based on the individual (internal), but also on the societal context (external) (Burke, 2004). By comparing these two bases, we can demonstrate how the concept of being indigenous in the Philippines is formed.

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The meaning and concept of the term "indigenous People" according to the Indigenous Peoples Right Act of 1997 is the connection and agreement with the unique and organic culture of indigenous peoples as proof of the convergence of the internal and external aspects of the term. The agreement or disagreement of policies and laws on indigenous practices, perspectives, and traditions has significant implications on maintaining the identity of indigenous peoples in the country. The negative implications of changes in the culture of indigenous peoples may result in the endangerment of their language. The endangered languages status of a language (ethnolinguistic group) that is on the verge of extinction is a widespread term used to describe it in the linguistics field (Drude, 2013).

According to the Commission on Filipino Language (2016), an estimated 36 languages in the Philippines are at risk of disappearing due to the decreasing number of speakers. The primary reason for this is changes in their culture brought about by intermarriage and the adoption of the language, perspectives, and traditions of other ethnolinguistic groups. Moreover, government policies in areas such as education, religion, and language regulations within communities under their jurisdiction also contribute to the cultural shifts impacting indigenous groups.

In terms of the number of indigenous groups in the country, it cannot be said with certainty how many indigenous people there are in the Philippines. Many scholars and linguists have attempted to determine the number of groups, but the results vary according to the anthropological and linguistic methods used for validation. The primary basis for identifying indigenous groups in the country is their native language. Culture is reflected in language as it serves as a repository of the representation and meaning of their identity. The material and non-material culture of an ethnolinguistic group can be observed in their existing language or dialect. The differences between the languages of each group in the country show its separation from other groups. Based on studies, there are at least one hundred indigenous groups in the Philippines. McFarland (1984) found more than 110 languages/indigenous groups in the Philippines, while Lawrence Reid (2000) found more than 150 languages/indigenous groups. Jesus Peralta (2000) identified 78 indigenous groups in the Philippines, while Thomas Headland (2003) estimated 100-150 languages/indigenous groups in the country. According to NCIP (2009), there are 109 indigenous groups in the Philippines. According to the data of the Commission on the Filipino Language (2015), there are 130 indigenous languages/groups in the Philippines, and according to the data of the Summer Institute of Linguistics Ethnologue (SIL, 2020), there are 186 indigenous languages/groups in the Philippines. Although the results differ, it is clear from the data from various studies that there are many indigenous groups in the country. According to NCIP (2009) data, the number of indigenous groups in the Philippines, including subgroups, is estimated to be between 70-140. Indigenous peoples comprise about 12-15 million or 15% of the country's total population. More than 33% of the total number reside in Luzon, 6% in the Visayas, and 66% in Mindanao. Indigenous communities are found in 65 out of 81 provinces in the country, scattered throughout the entire archipelago - mainland Luzon, Palawan, Mindoro, Visayas, and Mindanao. Indigenous communities are typically located in forests, mountains, and coastal areas, while some live in urban areas. Examples include the Igorot in the Cordillera region; Agta in Northern Luzon and the Bicol Region; Dumagat and Ayta in Central Luzon; indigenous groups in Palawan on the island of Palawan; Mangyan in Mindoro; Ati and Tumandok in the Visayas; and Manobo and Non-Christian IP in Mindanao.

The different cultures, politics, population, locations, languages, and people of the indigenous groups in the Philippines demonstrate how diverse the country is when it comes to studying identity. It is clear from the aforementioned studies and literature that the issue of identity regarding the concept of indigenous people is complex. From this, the researcher was challenged on how the concepts of "indigenous communities" or being indigenous should be formed from their internal and external experiences and perspectives.

Objectives of the Study:

In general, the purpose of this paper is to identify the so-called indigenous groups in the Philippines by featuring some of the cultures of specific indigenous groups in the Philippines. Specifically, the following are aimed:

1. to identify the various terms used for the indigenous Dumagat group;
2. to learn about their assertion in considering themselves as indigenous; and
3. to analyze the issues/challenges faced by the Dumagat indigenous group which may also be experienced by other indigenous groups in the country.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on Indigenous Research design or Indigenous Research Methodology (IRM). Indigenous Research Methodology is divided into four (4) aspects (Wilson, 2001): Ontology - the study and understanding of the nature of reality or realities; Epistemology - the study of the nature of knowledge, how reality is perceived; Methodology - how the methods of looking at reality (epistemology) are used to gather additional knowledge about the said reality; Axiology - a set of ethics or

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moral standards in conducting research. Indigenous Research Methodology is a belief that is suitable for indigenous research work. It aims to consider cultural standards, values, and ways of thinking as an important part of conducting research. The showcasing of their indigenous knowledge and terminology is given meaning and concept based on their indigenous perspective. This method can be considered as Indigenist Research Methodology, which not only highlights but also gives a voice to the indigenous peoples as partners in research allows the lens of the indigenous peoples to be emphasized, giving them a voice as a marginalized sector.

METHODS

In gathering specific data related to the concept of Indigenous People such as hunting, family, and other related cultures of indigenous groups in the Philippines, the researcher used an ethnographic approach in this research to immerse themselves in the community where the fieldwork was conducted. Ethnographic approach or ethnography is the study of relationships and social interactions, and the culture of a group - these groups can refer to the larger society, community, organization, or group (Reeves, S., et al., 2013). The central concept of ethnography is to develop a rich, holistic view of people's perspectives and behaviors, as well as the nature of their lives (Hughes 1992). The primary methods used in this approach are interviews, participant observation, guided discussions, and documents. After gathering the indigenous terms, they were analyzed based on the meaning given by the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 (RA 8371) to align with the internal experiences of indigenous peoples in the country and to develop a concrete discussion on the concept of "indigenous" in the Philippines.

LIMITATIONS

The primary focus of this research is the indigenous knowledge and culture of the Dumagat particular the tribe of Dumagat-Bulos that residing in the Sierra Madre mountains of Central Luzon region. It highlights the various terms used by the Dumagat to refer to themselves as indigenous; related indigenous knowledge about hunting, religion, and family; as well as the challenges faced by the Dumagat that may affect their culture and perspective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Ascription based on Internal and external labeling.

According to existing laws, an individual or group may be considered indigenous if they qualify or meet the definition and standards set by the Republic Act No. 8371 also known as Indigenous Peoples Right Act of 1997 (IPRA 1997). According to Sec 3h of RA 8371, the term "katutubo" (indigenous peoples) or "katutubong pamayanan" (indigenous cultural communities) refer to a group of people or homogenous societies identified by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as organized community on communally bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed and utilized such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have, through resistance to political, social and cultural inroads of colonization, non-indigenous religions and cultures, became historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos. ICCs/IPs shall likewise include peoples who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, at the time of conquest or colonization, or at the time of inroads of non-indigenous religions and cultures, or the establishment of present state boundaries, who retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions, but who may have been displaced from their traditional domains or who may have resettled outside their ancestral domains. The definition of indigenous people is very holistic. It encompasses all domains of the Indigenous Cultural Community concept. As per stated, some of the description considered for being indigenous in the country include having a name or terminology(ies) based on the community's internal language (endonym) or terminology(ies) from outside the community (exonym), as well as a broad concept of culture from ancient times (pre-colonialism), colonization period, and up to the present.

As stated by the law, Indigenous Peoples are better known as such, often also referred to as Indigenous Cultural Communities due to their collective view of their identity and culture. In some studies, they are also called tribes (Wolf, 1982); minorities (Eder and McKenna, 2008); marginalized sector; and ethnic group. These terms were coined by different scholars and law-makers. These are different from terms coined by non-indigenous people, and internal or self-ascriptions of indigenous people. For example, the Dumagat Indigenous people in Bulacan call themselves "Bulos," which means "river flow." This ascription clearly reflects their way of life and culture since the time of their ancestors who lived along the river. The Dumagat often build their homes by the river and obtain their food from it. Thus, the word "bulos" which means "river flow" is significant for the Dumagat as it is intertwined with their story as indigenous people in Bulacan province. On the other hand, the term

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"Dumagat" is considered by the Dumagat people as a term coined by the "abyang"¹ (non-indigenous people) to refer to their group. In a sense, "bulos" is the term used internally for themselves, while "Dumagat" is the term used by non-indigenous people. In addition to their personal term, the Dumagat also use the word "bulos" as a term in their indigenous language. Although "Dumagat" is the collective name of most of the indigenous people who reside in the Sierra Madre mountains in the Central Luzon region of the Philippines, each Dumagat still assert that they are different to other Dumagat because of having different languages. This can be seen in the simple illustration below.

Indigenous Cultural Communities	Language	Endonym	Exonym ²	Location
Dumagat Bulos	Bulos	Dumagat, Tagibulos, Bulos	dumagat, baluga, itim,	Bulacan
Dumagat Remontado	Hatangkaye	Dumagat Remontado	negrito, ayta, baluga,	Rizal
Dumagat Umiray	Dumagat Umiray	Dumagat Umiray	kabalat, agta, katutubo,	Rizal and Bulacan,
Alta Kabulawan	Kabulowan	Dumagat, Alta Kabulowan, Kabulowan/Kabulowen	Pugot	Aurora and Bulacan
Alta	Alta	Dumagat, Alta, Edimala		Aurora

The presence of numerous indigenous terms in the Central Luzon region is a rich reflection of their history, dating back to the time when they lived solely among themselves until they had interactions with outsiders or non-indigenous communities. These terms exemplify the dynamic nature of their way of life. The existence of diverse terms among the Dumagat themselves also signifies clear distinctions, particularly in terms of language and culture. Despite variations in transcription and nomenclature, it cannot be denied that they are derived from the same language family - the Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, and Greater Central Philippine languages (Eberhard et al., 2022) - as evident in their spoken language, which shares similar forms and concepts.

Indigenous Terminologies on their Indigenous Concept.

This part refers to their internal bases. In addition to naming or labeling the Dumagat of Bulacan, here are some concepts of their indigenous identity that respond to RA 8371 (Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act) regarding their Ancestral Domain or territory, Political Structure, Indigenous Knowledge System and Practices (IKSP), Indigenous Language, Customs and Traditions, and other related concepts. The Dumagat-Bulos indigenous people live in the mountainous region of the Sierra Madre in the Central Luzon region, particularly in the provinces of Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, and some parts of Rizal in CALABARZON Region. Initially, they call themselves as Bulos which means "river flow" while non-indigenous people refer to them as Baluga, and Kabalat, sometimes they refer as Ayta, Agta, Ita, Negro or Negrito. The Dumagat people are not far different from other group of Negrito such as Agta and Ayta when it comes to physical appearance. They have dark skin, curly hair, and typically stand at 4-5 feet tall (pure Dumagat). Their native language is also called Bulos, which is the same as the name of their group. The political structure of the Dumagat is only divided into two—the tribal chieftain and the tribal elders. They call their tribal chieftain "gangot", who is characterized as brave and well-respected member of the community that capable of facing other people, especially non-indigenous people. The term tribal chieftain is a term that originated from NCIP. The main function of gangot is to serve as representative of the community in any external events and matters such as meeting with the NCIP, barangay, and to other non-government agencies. Tribal elder are called "lupon." They were normally grandparents or oldest family members. Lupon can also address as "gupad" which describe elderly women and "laki" for elderly men. The lupon is responsible for making decisions and settling disputes within the community. The lupon has the power to recommend who among the community members

¹ The indigenous Dumagat-Bulos people use the term "abyang" to refer to Tagalogs or those who are not part of their group

² The words "baluga," "Ita," "Ayta," "kabalat," and "katutubo" are derogatory or insulting terms for the Dumagat-Bulos because they have negative connotations that are not appropriate for their group. Like "Ayta" or "Ita," they do not accept these terms as labels for themselves because they do not live in Pampanga. The term "kabalat" is a derogatory term for them because it is used by Tagalog speakers with a mocking tone. The word "baluga" is also an insult to them because it is not registered in their language. Meanwhile, for the Dumagat-Bulos, the term "katutubo" is only appropriate for indigenous people in Pampanga and Zambales because for them, the term "katutubo" refers to people who live near Pinatubo.

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could be the next tribal chieftain. In the culture of the Dumagat, the elders are the ones who have more say in the decision-making process for the community than the chieftain. Their experience and age within the community are considered as the main basis for cultural adherence.

In terms of traditions and belief, even before Christianity was introduced to their group, the Dumagat already had their own belief in the great creator, which they call "Makidepat." They believe that Makidepat provides blessings and protection to their group. Apart from Makidepat, the Dumagat-Bulos also have belief to unseen forest elements which they refer to as "Agta de Bokod." Dumagat considered these elements as forest guardians. They believed that Agta de Bokod led the wild animals to their traps or snares, so that they can have food to eat. They also believed that their ancestors who have long passed on are also became guardians of nature.

In terms of cultural practices, the Dumagat do not embalm their deceased loved ones; they usually wrap them in a blanket or a santol leaf, and the lips are pinched together with bamboo. The funeral typically lasts up to three days, during which time the bereaved family members sleep next to the deceased as a final act of love. Afterward, the deceased are buried near the river where they often build their "tinupi"³ homes. Tinupi is a type of temporary shelter made of stacked leaves and wood, held together with rattan and *nitò*⁴. The Dumagat are not known for farming, and instead rely on hunting, fishing, and gathering rootcrops and fruits for their livelihood (Headland et al., 1989). Even though hunting and fishing are common among indigenous groups in the country, the methods and terminologies for catching vary. For example, "ge-ikag" refers to hunting in the Dumagat-Bulos, while "pangayam" is the term used by the Ata—other negrito group in Negros Occidental. Some groups use traps to catch animals, while others use dogs or hunting tools like improvised guns, bows, and spears. A significant part of culture of the Dumagat involves offering sacrifices as a way of thanking Makidepat and Agta de Bokod for providing food and keeping them safe. The culture of the Dumagat is truly rich and unique because it is grounded in their own way of life, meaning, and language.

Here are some other indigenous terms in various domains used by the Dumagat-Bulos people residing in DRT, Bulacan:

- **adéw** - refers to monkey (*Macaca philippinensis philippinensis*) is one of the animals commonly caught by the Dumagat when they go hunting.
- **aklóp** - refers to the roof/peak or the highest part of the house. The roof structure in Dumagat dwellings is typically made of layered branches and leaves.
- **alálang** - part of the body that refers to chest.
- **amâ** - father or paternal figure in the Dumagat family.
- **awóng** - refers to grandmother or grandfather.
- **gepánusû** - gathering of river snails (class Gastro-poda).
- **getanúm** - planting activity (any type of plants)
- **gesalád** - river spearfishing.
- **geduláng** - gold panning.
- **mettának** - refers to the family or unit commonly composed of parents and children.
- **biyakúd** - refers to the fence or barrier that surrounds a house. It can also refer to an enclosure for domestic animals.
- **biyalóy** - house structure where Dumagats dwell.
- **Guramót** - refers to fingers.
- **guróy** - waterfalls or Refers to water that flows from a higher point to a lower point
- **ibít** - lips or part of the face at the opening of the mouth, used for speaking, eating, and expressing emotions
- **inâ** - mother or maternal figure in the Dumagat family.
- **káksan** - bone or rigid organ that forms the skeleton of vertebrate animals, providing support and protection for the body and enabling movement.
- **katát ni kew** - bark of a tree
- **kumót** - part of the body that refers to hand.

³ "Tinupi" is similar to the form used by Ayta, Alta, and Agta tribes in Luzon where they usually lift and position the "atip" (a type of shelter) where it can receive sunlight and wind.

⁴ This refers to a type of vines (*Ligodium circinnatum*) that the Dumagat people use as a tie or cordage. It is also often used in making hats and other handmade products.

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- **lángges** - It refers to sand that normally found along riverbanks and is commonly used as the foundation for their traditional folded or native dwellings called "tinupi."
- **lubí** - The mature fruit of the coconut tree (*Cocos nucifera*).
- **mániwang** - slim or a person who has a thin and muscular physique

The enumerated Dumagat terms above are just a few of the rich indigenous words of the Dumagat-Bulos. Having own terminologies for various concepts related to family, region, nature, architecture, anatomy, and other disciplines clearly aligns with the provisions of RA 8371, which recognizes the Dumagats' distinct culture, traditions, and indigenous knowledge embedded in the Dumagat-Bulos language.

Issues/challenges faced by the Dumagat indigenous people that may also be experienced by other indigenous groups in the country.

The presence of rich and large numbers of indigenous communities in the country also entails a great responsibility to maintain and support the culture and traditions of each ethno-linguistic group in the country, not just by the government but also by the community itself. It is a complex issue and concern, whether viewed from a cultural or socio-economic perspective. For example, it is difficult to access or travel to communities in remote areas; limited opportunities in education, health, and even employment. There is also a prevailing condescending attitude towards indigenous communities among many Filipinos, especially those belonging to dominant ethnolinguistic groups in the country. The evidence of this can be found in the discourse frequently heard by the researcher from acquaintances, students, and even individuals encountered during fieldwork, who do not belong to indigenous communities—such as indigenous peoples having crooked or flat noses; being poor because they live in the mountains or being rich because they have vast lands; all indigenous people wears loincloths or traditional clothing; they having unique physical features (especially if referring to indigenous peoples with dark skin and curly hair); and they have amusing language or dialects. The prevailing colonial and inferior view of indigenous peoples in the Philippines is noticeable due to their complex experiences and orientation to the hands of colonizers, capitalist-fascists, feudal lords, and foreigners who continue to encroach on their ancestral lands. In the dissertation of Prof. Mary Jane Rodriguez-Tatel (2021), she mentioned that the problems and challenges faced by indigenous groups are always related to land issues. Like the issue of ancestral lands and being employed as workers or laborers on their own lands.

CONCLUSION

Out of the many indigenous communities in the country, Dumagat-Bulos is one of the few ICCs that shows unique culture and customs. Like other indigenous groups in the country, the culture, history, and practices of the Dumagat reflect the overall concept of their identity and being as native settlers of the country. Culture is not just limited to the practices, products, language, and traditions of a person or group, it encompasses the entire concept of the individual and society that shapes their identity. While the Agta, Ayta, and Dumagat may share physical similarities, such as being often considered related due to their linguistic characteristics or similar appearances and clothing, it is difficult to make assumptions about their similarities due to differences in their language, practices, and beliefs. Just like what former Commissioner Dominador Gomez⁵ of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) mentioned, although the ethnolinguistic groups in the country are believed to be related due to the close characteristics of their languages or almost identical appearances and clothing, they still have unique characteristics, especially in terms of values, traditions, practices, and beliefs. The differences in the culture of the indigenous communities in the country set each indigenous group apart.

Various institutions, particularly those in the field of education, will play a significant role in increasing the awareness and sensitivity of every Filipino towards the situation and culture of indigenous peoples in the country. Responding to the issues faced by indigenous peoples and creating programs and projects will help to strengthen and improve the views on indigenous communities. Providing equal opportunities and privileges that come from outside (the state) will help the internal perspective of indigenous peoples' value and take pride in their own history, identity, and culture.

Recommendation

In relation to possible research studies, the researcher respectfully recommends the following:

1. The researcher suggests to focus on other aspects and domains of indigenous identity, such as the challenges and issues in their socio-economic condition, as this can contribute to a broader understanding of indigenous communities in the present context.

⁵ From my interview with Comrade Gomez of the NCIP regarding the validation of the Higaonon language in Impasug-ong, Bukidnon on November 24, 2018.

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2. For future researchers, conduct similar research but with a specific focus on different indigenous groups in the Philippines, particularly those residing in urban areas or in coastal regions.
3. The researcher recommends to undertake a comparative study between indigenous communities living in the mountains and those residing by the coast, with a specific focus on their indigenous traditions and knowledge, in order to further strengthen the concept of indigenous identity in accordance with Republic Act 8371.

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Personal Interview

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