



Narratives and cultural dances: Keys to the preservation of Higaunon culture

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Abstract

This study examines the role of narratives embedded in traditional Higaunon dances as instruments for preserving cultural identity. Grounded in recognizing indigenous peoples' rights as mandated by the Philippine Constitution and relevant cultural policies, the research aims to identify, analyze, and interpret the authenticity of selected Higaunon dances and their accompanying narratives. Using a qualitative research design with a cultural anthropological approach, the study employed field observations, interviews, and indigenous methods to gather data. The analysis focused on how specific dance movements—*indak* (sway), *padyak* (stomp), and *kumpas* (gesture)—function as nonverbal communication that embodies the tribe's values, beliefs, and historical memory. Findings reveal that these movements are not mere aesthetic expressions but symbolic actions grounded in the Higaunon's lived experiences and cosmology. The swaying of the hips often reflects joy, stomping produces percussive sounds that contribute to the rhythm of the ritual, and hand gestures convey complex emotions such as resistance or reverence. Each movement corresponds to a narrative thread, affirming a shared cultural identity transmitted across generations. The research concludes that Higaunon dances, accompanied by oral and written narratives, serve as a dynamic repository of indigenous knowledge. They are a creative medium through which the community safeguards its cultural heritage, asserts its identity, and sustains its traditional worldview in the face of modern influences.

Keywords

Higaunon culture, indigenous dance, cultural preservation

Introduction

Throughout history, humans have found creative ways to express their lived experiences. Long before written language was developed, communities used oral traditions, performance, and bodily movements to share knowledge and emotions. Among indigenous groups such as the Higaunon of Bukidnon in Mindanao, traditional dance emerged as a celebration or ritual vessel for preserving culture, beliefs, and communal memory. The gestures, rhythms, and body movements in these dances are deeply intertwined with the tribe's worldview, serving as a form of nonverbal storytelling that embodies their cosmology, moral codes, and social relationships.

Numerous scholars have examined the intricate relationship between dance, cultural identity, and heritage preservation across various indigenous contexts. Their findings affirm that traditional dances are not merely performative acts but function as embodied texts of collective memory, resistance, and spiritual practice (NCAA, 2029; Salazar, 2018; Tiatco & Bonifacio-Ramolete, 2008; Sone, 2020). These studies highlight various indigenous groups across Southeast Asia and the Philippines who maintain cultural continuity through movement, storytelling, and ritual. Despite this breadth, few works have explicitly focused on the Higaunon people or have mapped how specific gestures, such as the sway, stomp, and hand gestures, reflect codified cultural narratives. This study seeks to fill this empirical and theoretical gap.

What remains underexplored is how movement—precise gestures such as the *indak* (sway), *padyak* (stomp), and *kumpas* (gesture) interact with oral narratives among the Higaunon. Most scholarship lacks a granular look at dance as a narrative form, especially one that embodies tribal law (*balaod*), cosmological beliefs, and intergenerational pedagogy. There is limited empirical research on how specific dances map onto cultural memory and indigenous epistemologies in the Higaunon context.

This study addresses that gap by investigating how selected Higaunon dances function as embodied narratives and tools for cultural preservation. The central research question is: How do traditional Higaunon dances reflect and sustain cultural identity through movement and narrative? The objective is to analyze selected dances using qualitative ethnographic methods and cultural anthropological frameworks, documenting their symbolic elements and meanings as encoded in movement. This study offers a novel approach by positioning dance as a cultural performance and a dynamic text of indigenous knowledge, with direct implications for cultural sustainability, education, and policy.

Method

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic design, most appropriate for exploring indigenous cultural practices rooted in community experience and tradition (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research focused on understanding the meanings embedded in the traditional dances of the Higaunon tribe through their narratives, bodily expressions, and ritualized performances because the study sought to investigate the cultural and

symbolic significance of dance movements, a cultural anthropological lens guided the inquiry, aligning with methods often used in ethnographic and sociocultural studies of performance (Fetterman, 2010).

The sample population consisted of key informants from the Higaunon community in Impasug-ong, Bukidnon. The researchers employed snowball sampling to identify participants with deep knowledge of the dances, their choreography, symbolic meanings, and associated oral traditions. Initial contacts were made with local cultural leaders and dance practitioners, who referred additional knowledgeable participants. This approach ensured access to cultural bearers and tradition keepers, which is essential in indigenous knowledge systems studies (Bernard, 2017).

Data collection was carried out through a combination of methods: (1) immersion and participant-observation, (2) key informant interviews, and (3) environmental and artifact documentation. The participant-observer approach allowed researchers to engage directly with dance practices, rituals, and musical accompaniments, fostering an insider's understanding of their significance (Spradley, 1980). Interviews were semi-structured and guided by questions related to the meanings behind specific dance movements, costume symbolism, music, and the historical origins of each performance. The team also documented musical instruments (e.g., *bulala*, *tambul*, *dayuday*), costumes, and ritual paraphernalia used in dance ceremonies.

To ensure cultural appropriateness and deepen interpretative insight, the research employed an indigenous research framework, which recognizes and respects local communities' knowledge systems and epistemologies (Smith, 2012). In collaboration with the Municipality of Impasug-ong's Public Information Office, historical and sociological data were triangulated with oral histories and ritual observations to validate accounts and contextualize the dances within their broader cultural milieu.

The data analysis followed a descriptive-evaluative strategy, which involved transcribing interviews, coding emergent themes, and interpreting the significance of bodily gestures in cultural narratives. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns in movement (e.g., *indak*, *padyak*, *kumpas*) and their meanings across various dances such as *Binanog*, *Agawan*, *Pamumulakaw*, and *Dugsu*. These findings were interpreted as artistic expressions and communicative acts conveying identity, memory, and collective values. The combination of narrative interpretation and cultural analysis allowed a holistic understanding of Higaunon dance as a performative text and cultural archive (Taylor, 2003).

All fieldwork was conducted with ethical consideration, including informed consent, community approval, and cultural sensitivity. The research was designed to honor indigenous autonomy while amplifying the tribe's voice and contribution to cultural preservation through dance.

Results

Indigenous Dance in Physical Education

The Higaunon community sustains a rich tradition of indigenous dances, including *Agawan/Pig-Agawan*, *Binakbak*, *Binanog*, *Binaylan*, *Dugsu*, *Inamu*, *Pamumulakaw*, and *Saet* (Saut). These dances are frequently showcased during community events such as the Kaamulan Festival, local fiestas, and school cultural programs. Field observations revealed that these dances are actively taught in both elementary and high schools within tribal communities, underscoring their educational and cultural value.

Each indigenous dance possesses a distinctive choreography composed of meaningful bodily movements such as *indak* (sway), *padyak* (stomp), *kumpas* (gesture), and expressive eye movement. These gestures are not merely aesthetic but are symbolic of deeper cultural values. The dances incorporate traditional implements, including *uway* baskets, medicinal plants, and ritual tools such as *bangkasu*, *bangkaw*, *kalasag*, *tugsuk*, gong, and *agong*. These items are handled carefully, preserved in proper storage, and respectfully used in ritual and public performances. In some instances, materials like wood or even plastic are adapted as props to ensure the continuity of cultural meaning during presentations.

Table 1. Higaunon Cultural Dance Practices and Their Cultural Significance

Theme	Findings	Cultural Significance
Traditional Dances	<i>Agawan/Pig-Agawan</i> , <i>Binakbak</i> , <i>Binanog</i> , <i>Binaylan</i> , <i>Dugsu</i> , <i>Inamu</i> , <i>Pamumulakaw</i> , <i>Saet</i> (Saut)	Represent ancestral stories, livelihood, nature, and spiritual practices.
Performance Settings	Kaamulan Festival, local fiestas, birthdays, school programs	Serve as avenues for community celebration, ritual expression, and youth education.
Key Movements	<i>Indak</i> (sway), <i>Padyak</i> (stomp), <i>Kumpas</i> (gesture), eye movements	Convey emotions, identity, historical memory, and cosmological views.
Choreography	Unique to each dance, shaped by cultural experiences, historical events, and geographic location	Preserves historical and spatial consciousness of the Higaunon.
Dance Implements	Baskets (<i>uway</i> , <i>nigu</i>), medicinal plants, <i>bangkasu</i> , <i>bangkaw</i> , <i>kalasag</i> , <i>tugsuk</i> , <i>agong</i> , etc.	Function as ritual tools and symbolic representations of indigenous knowledge and livelihood.
Material Preservation	Implements are correctly stored and adapted respectfully (e.g., from wood or plastic)	Emphasizes sustainable use, ancestral reverence, and authenticity.
Dance Laws (<i>Balaod</i>)	Only the knowledgeable and confident may dance; improper participation (<i>mahabayan</i>) is prohibited.	Ensures the sacredness of dance and regulates cultural performance.
Costume Symbolism	White (purity), Black (spiritual protection), Red (bravery), Yellow (sunlight and joy)	Reflects the Higaunon worldview, values, and cosmology.

Theme	Findings	Cultural Significance
Music and Instruments	Traditional instruments include <i>agong</i> , <i>tambul</i> , gong, among others	Guides choreography and fosters spiritual and community connection.
Ritual Use of Dance	Integrated into rituals such as <i>Pangampo</i> , <i>Panagulilay</i> , <i>Samayaan</i> , <i>Pamuhat</i> , <i>Pamahandi</i>	Conveys gratitude, requests for protection, and spiritual devotion to <i>Magbabaya</i> and nature.
Educational Integration	Dances taught in tribal schools as part of Physical Education	Formalizes indigenous knowledge and strengthens cultural identity among youth.
Youth Participation	Youth are trained for performance during school and community events	Encourages cultural pride and counters cultural displacement caused by modern technology.
Storytelling and Narratives	Every dance has oral or written stories transmitted alongside movement	Facilitates heritage preservation and promotes intergenerational transmission of values and identity.

Teaching the Laws Governing Dance

Findings reveal that the performance of Higaunon dances is strictly governed by *balaod* (customary laws). These regulations outline who may participate in dances and under what conditions. Only competent, confident, and culturally informed are permitted to dance, while those who lack proficiency are excluded to avoid violating ritual harmony, a cultural safeguard referred to as *mahabayan*. This legal framework surrounding dance is a protective mechanism for the tribe's cultural integrity and plays a significant role in transmitting traditional knowledge and social values to younger generations.

The Authentic Mark of Higaunon Dance

Authenticity is maintained through the faithful preservation of original movements and rhythms. Elements such as *indak*, *padyak*, and *kumpas* remain unaltered, ensuring each dance retains its original spirit and cultural message. Higaunon dance attire is also protected by cultural prescriptions, with specific colors—white (purity), black (spiritual defense), red (valor), and yellow (joy and sunlight)—symbolizing distinct tribal values. Original musical instruments, choreography, and oral storytelling are passed down through generations, emphasizing fidelity to tradition and promoting cultural sustainability.

Ritual as an Expression of Faith

Dance is an essential medium for the Higaunon's spiritual life. Ritual performances—such as *Pangampo* (prayer), *Panagulilay* (meditation), *Pamuhat* (ritual offering), and *Pamahandi* (thanksgiving for abundance)—are conducted during significant events like the Kaamulan Festival. These rituals are performed to honor ancestral spirits, request blessings and protection, and offer gratitude to *Magbabaya*, their supreme deity. The dances are integrated with indigenous musical accompaniment and are believed to maintain harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that Higaunon dances are multifaceted cultural expressions embody identity, spirituality, pedagogy, and heritage preservation. As practiced today, these indigenous dances are not only forms of art but also function as living texts through which ancestral knowledge, belief systems, and social structures are continually communicated and preserved. Their integration into school curricula—particularly in Physical Education—illustrates a successful model of cultural transmission, aligning with frameworks on educational indigenization that aim to legitimize and preserve traditional knowledge systems within formal academic settings (Llanes, 2021; Jessy & Vijayanand, 2023; Dasilva et al., 2019).

Consistent with global research on indigenous performance traditions, the continued practice of Higaunon dances illustrates what Smith (1999) terms “decolonizing methodologies,” where indigenous peoples reclaim and transmit knowledge through culturally grounded forms. In contexts like those of the Māori in New Zealand (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2010), the Sámi in Northern Europe (Lehtola, 2015), and the Ainu of Japan (Nakamura, 2015), dance has been shown to act as both a spiritual medium and a mechanism for collective memory. Similarly, among the Higaunon, dance operates as an “embodied archive” (Taylor, 2003) where meanings are stored in bodily gestures—such as the *indak* (sway), *padyak* (stomp), and *kumpas* (gesture)—each representing aspects of community life, cosmology, and resistance.

The enforcement of customary laws or *balaod* in determining who can participate in sacred dances reflects a cultural regulation system rooted in communal respect and authenticity. This aligns with findings by Salazar (2018) and Tiatco and Bonifacio-Ramolete (2008), who stress that indigenous performance traditions are not open-ended art forms but are governed by sacred protocols that protect their ritual integrity. Violating these protocols is seen not just as disrespect but as cultural desecration, which the Higaunon avoid through strict observance of ritual codes—a practice also documented among the Ifugao and Kalinga (Castro, 2011; Sannadan et al, 2024).

The authenticity of dance elements—from movements to costumes and musical instruments—is a conscious resistance to cultural homogenization brought by modernization and global media influences. Scholars such as Terada and Maceda (2000) and Manjula and Kumar (2024) observe that preserving such artistic details is vital to safeguarding indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. Among the Higaunon, the symbolic use of colors (white for purity, black for protection, red for valor, and yellow for joy) is not decorative but an affirmation of tribal narratives and values.

Moreover, the integration of ritual in dance is symbolic and theological. Rituals such as *Pamuhat* and *Pangampo* function as spiritual dialogues with *Magbabaya* (Supreme Being), and reflect what Sone (2020) terms “embodied cosmologies,” where faith, culture, and movement converge. Similar phenomena are observed among the Subanen (Jocano, 2000) and the Dayak of Borneo (King, 2001), where dance is both worship and political assertion.

The research also addresses a significant gap in Philippine ethnodance literature: while much has been written about the Cordillera and Tagalog cultural expressions (NCAA, 2020; Peterson, 2010), the Higaunon have remained underrepresented. This study contributes significantly by documenting and contextualizing specific choreographic codes within narrative traditions and communal laws.

In summary, Higaunon dances are not merely cultural performances but dynamic, embodied knowledge systems. They operate as spiritual rites, pedagogical tools, legal expressions, and identity markers. Their survival hinges on the synergy of education, cultural policy, community participation, and ritual continuity. In light of ongoing modernization, the Higaunon's commitment to preserving these traditions—primarily through festivals like Kaamulan—is a compelling model for cultural resilience and self-determination among Indigenous groups worldwide.

Conclusion

This study examined the traditional dances of the Higaunon people in Impasug-ong, Bukidnon, revealing how specific movements—such as the *indak* (sway), *padyak* (stomp), and *kumpas* (gesture)—encode and transmit cultural identity, values, and spiritual worldviews. These dances function as artistic expressions and integral cultural texts embodying the community's history, cosmology, and educational systems. Including these dances in Physical Education classes within tribal schools demonstrates their pedagogical relevance, serving as tools for intergenerational knowledge transfer and cultural continuity.

The findings also highlight the importance of *balaod* or customary laws, which regulate dance participation and maintain the authenticity of rituals. Such rules reflect a collective cultural consciousness that prioritizes respect for tradition and ensures the sacred nature of performance remains intact. Moreover, the deliberate use of traditional musical instruments, symbolic colors in costume, and original choreography underscores the Higaunon's commitment to preserving the integrity of their artistic heritage in the face of external cultural influences.

Despite these insights, the study is limited by its focus on a single indigenous group and its reliance on qualitative methodologies. Broader comparative studies and mixed-method approaches could further enrich the understanding of how traditional dances function across other indigenous communities. This research contributes to the growing discourse on indigenous knowledge systems by reinforcing the significance of dance as a holistic cultural form—an archive of memory, identity, and resistance.

Future work should explore how narrative-based modules and digital documentation can support the formal integration of indigenous dances in national educational frameworks. There is also a need to develop accessible visual records—such as ethnographic films—that preserve the nuanced artistry of Higaunon performance to benefit younger generations. These efforts will be instrumental in ensuring that the cultural knowledge embodied in dance remains vibrant, visible, and valued in the evolving narratives of Philippine indigenous heritage.

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