



PHENOMENOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO THE ROLES AND PROMISING PRACTICES OF BIGA WOMEN IN SUSTAINING TRADITION AND ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Women have long been recognized as central to the survival and progress of societies, yet their contributions in indigenous contexts remain under-documented. This study explores the roles and promising practices of Biga women in Kalinga, Philippines, focusing on how they sustain cultural traditions while addressing contemporary challenges. Guided by a phenomenological qualitative design, the research engaged ten women—including elders, mothers, professionals, and youth—through interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Findings reveal that Biga women embody confidence and resilience in mediating peace within tribal conflicts, often serving as trusted negotiators who transmit information and facilitate reconciliation. Beyond conflict resolution, they safeguard cultural heritage by prioritizing children’s health, education, and spiritual development, ensuring continuity of indigenous values across generations. Their leadership extends to community governance, where they discipline wrongdoings, advocate for women’s rights, and integrate cultural principles such as *paniyaw*, *ngilin*, and *bain* into everyday life. Moreover, Biga women act as knowledge keepers of traditional ecological and medicinal practices, employing herbal remedies, midwifery, and ritual healing to address health concerns while reinforcing cultural resilience. These findings underscore the multifaceted agency of indigenous women as mediators, leaders, and healers, highlighting their indispensable role in sustaining tradition and innovating responses to modern challenges. The study contributes to ethnographic literature by documenting culturally grounded practices that inform gender-sensitive peacebuilding, education, and community health. It further emphasizes the need for policy frameworks that recognize and integrate indigenous women’s knowledge into broader development and sustainability agendas.

Keywords: *Indigenous women, Biga community, Peace mediation, Traditional ecological knowledge, Cultural preservation*

INTRODUCTION

Across societies, women have historically carried multiple responsibilities as caregivers, educators, and community organizers. Yet, in many indigenous contexts, their contributions remain under-recognized in academic discourse (Bayeh, 2016). In the Philippines, particularly in Kalinga, women have long been regarded as custodians of peace and cultural continuity. Their roles extend beyond domestic life into conflict mediation, ecological stewardship, and the preservation of spiritual traditions (Sibug-Las, 2024). Despite this, scholarly attention has often focused on men's leadership in tribal governance, leaving women's agency under-documented.

Global frameworks emphasize the transformative potential of women's empowerment. As Michelle Bachelet of UN Women asserts, "*When women are empowered and can assert their rights and choices, economies thrive, food security is better, and prospects for current and future generations are improved*" (UN Women, 2019). This resonates with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's Capability Approach, which highlights the importance of enabling women to exercise agency in education, health, and decision-making (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993). Similarly, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory underscores how cultural transmission—often facilitated by mothers and elders—shapes cognition and identity (Vygotsky, 1978). These perspectives affirm that women's roles are not peripheral but foundational to social development.

Furthermore, indigenous women play a critical role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, including oral traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, customary practices, and community values. According to UNESCO (2021), indigenous women serve as key transmitters of cultural knowledge across generations, ensuring the continuity of traditional practices while adapting them to changing social and environmental conditions. Their active participation in cultural preservation contributes not only to community identity and resilience but also to sustainable development efforts. This highlights the importance of documenting the experiences and contributions of indigenous women whose knowledge and practices remain insufficiently represented in scholarly literature.

Within Kalinga society, women are revered as peacekeepers and life-bearers, protected by cultural norms that forbid violence against them. The *pagta* (peace pact) recognizes their authority in mediating disputes and safeguarding community harmony (Paing, J.N. et al, 2025). Yet, little research has systematically documented how Biga women sustain traditions while innovating responses to contemporary challenges such as education, health, and conflict resolution (Maliao & Tóthmérész, 2025).

This study addressed that gap by analyzing the lived experiences of Biga women as mediators, leaders, and knowledge keepers. It sought to identify promising practices

that integrated traditional scientific knowledge with modern needs, thereby contributing to ethnographic literature on indigenous women's agency and informing culturally responsive development policies.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the significant role of Biga women in preserving and sustaining indigenous cultural heritage and knowledge systems. It sought to examine how Biga women contributed to the intergenerational transmission of cultural values, traditions, and practices, as well as how traditional knowledge was applied in addressing contemporary societal and global challenges. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Biga women play a significant role in ensuring that cultural knowledge, values, and traditions are transmitted and preserved across generations?
2. What promising practices led by indigenous women demonstrate the application of traditional scientific knowledge in addressing present-day global concerns?

METHODOLOGY

Locale of the Study

The research was conducted in Tabuk City, Kalinga, specifically in the communities of Amlao, Suyang, and Balawag, where a significant number of Ibiga people reside. These sites provided rich cultural contexts for exploring the roles and practices of Ibiga women.

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative approach, combining interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and ethnography. The phenomenological method was employed to describe, understand, and interpret the lived experiences of Ibiga women. The ethnographic approach examined the Ibiga people within their cultural setting, producing a narrative account of their practices against a theoretical backdrop. Data collection was iterative and reflexive, involving cycles of observation, reflection, theory-building, and field validation. This dual design allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both individual experiences and collective cultural practices.

Sampling and Respondents

A snowball sampling technique was applied to identify participants. The study engaged two mothers, two professional women, two women tribal leaders, two women in middle adulthood, and two youth (female), ensuring generational and social diversity among respondents.

Research Instrument

Data were collected through Informal interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), which provided nuanced insights into participants' perspectives. Participant observation, which captured cultural practices in natural settings. Open-ended interviews followed Patton's (1990) principle, cited in Best and Kahn (2006), emphasizing access to participants' perspectives rather than imposing external frameworks.

Data Gathering Procedures

Prior informed consent was obtained from key informants, including tribal elders, youth representatives, professionals, and mothers. Participants were encouraged to narrate detailed accounts of their experiences, ensuring authenticity and depth of data.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, supplemented by audio recordings, videos, photographs, and related literature. Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), enabling the identification of themes related to cultural preservation, peace mediation, health, education, and spiritual development. Triangulation of interviews, FGDs, and observations enhanced the credibility and validity of findings.

Scope and Delimitation

The study aimed to determine and analyze the practices headed by IBIGA women and their special role in ensuring their cultures. It also sought to develop a means of disseminating knowledge concerning the historical and present-day achievements of IBIGA women for educational purposes. Further, it was limited to the IBIGA women of Kalinga only.

The researchers conducted an informal interview with the IBIGA women of Kalinga Province. They chose the indigenous elderly women to find out their special roles then and now as promoters of peace in the community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the data collected, the special roles of Ibiga Women are bounded with three themes,

Biga Women as Mediator

Women have unique participation during conflicts of which they received information from women of the other tribe. When they meet in the Alang "rice granary" which located in the farm. During tribal conflicts women can go out to the rice fields for

their food supply, there in the *Allang* they can receive relayed news of their tribal conflict situation). The *Allang* is an anchor because it is source of information so that settlement of conflicts be resolved in such time in order not to prolong the agony of the tribesmen when their *Bodong* is severed. The news was relayed by the ladies to the pangats, or tribal elders, who then began peace talks with the other tribe. The Ibiga women work to ensure the peace and well-being of both tribes by assisting in the resolution of any issues that threaten their members.

Additionally, Ibiga women act as a source of relief by caring for the family's basic needs when conflict arises. Vegetables, fruits, and other food plants are collected to meet the fundamental needs of the family, as stated by the respondents. Since the quantity of forest goods acquired is greater than the family's need, they will need to sell some of it to convert it into cash; yet, they are unaware of how to market their items to improve their economic situation.

More so, it's important to note the unique contributions made by the Ibiga women to their society. Having acted as a mediator, their opinions have been heard. At night, they'll meet to negotiate with the feuding families. When that's done, the women will visit the home of the offended party to try and make amends and start settlement talks. In order to avoid interference from third parties, mediation is typically conducted after dark. According to Carolyn Dulmigas "*ada labi e inkani makitungtong tapno naid makisawsaw e udom untago, kama si osan problema si nanbootan da duwa e pamilya un awad problema da si boundary di luta da, inkani katungtong dida tapno an innayos si anbaruwan da*" (We usually set conversation at night time to avoid other people, like the boundary problem between the two families to fix their problem for the betterment).

As a result of instilling the *paniyaw*, *ngilin*, and *bain* into the minds of the Ibigas, women have become increasingly active in peace negotiations. Because women are valued and protected, harming or killing them is considered unacceptable behavior. Also a "*Bain*," because a man's violence against a woman symbolizes his own feebleness and cowardice.

Mothers in the Biga culture are revered as the family's guiding light because of the crucial role they play in caring for their children and managing the household's finances. Mothers enforce rules so their kids develop into responsible adults. Hence, they are the first teachers in their children's lives, teaching them not just their native language but also the values and customs of their culture. As stated by Mrs. Siblawn "*ada ana kad e abeng ko a gingak e ibiga di ginga da te siya pasig ko usaron e guminga, pati ama da e lpangol a gingan da Ibiga di ginga na kad pati da ug-ugalin da Ibiga di tigammo da*" (My children adopted our language, culture and traditions despite that their father is from different place).

Mother also plays the role of peacemaker, ensuring that family members got along with one another. In the event of an argument between her kids, mom always takes the time to calm everyone down and hears them out. As a result, she enforces rules and stresses the importance of family. Children typically listen to their moms more than

anyone else, but some modern mothers are either young or too inexperienced to effectively instill moral values in their offspring.

In order to provide a good upbringing and the things their children desire, some women have to work full-time. Even when they have to be in the field working, she brings the kids. She'd stay up all night with a sick infant after a long day at the office, and she takes hours to meticulously organize age-appropriate activities for her kids, constantly putting their needs ahead of her own sacrificing her own mental, physical and emotional energy.

Mothers safeguards their family that they sacrifice to provide the needs of her family. As stressed by the respondents “e ipon da gandaton da ambalo e boloy kanda gangamit tapno lang awad itton da atta anak da e an-iswela” (*They don't aspire for materials things like having a big house and and other household material to be able to provide enough financial support for their children's education*).

In addition, once a daughter becomes pregnant without her parents' consent, the mother and a few of her chosen relatives will approach the man's family in an effort to resolve the matter. Since the father cannot bear to see his daughter pregnant at such a young age, he is highly susceptible to becoming upset and confrontational if he hears unsuitable statements coming from the man's side. Mrs. Cosidon claims that after learning that her niece is pregnant, she and her husband discussed the situation with the girl's parents. The girl's father, understandably upset, allegedly yelled, "Do not come to me if you will not marry my daughter," a statement that was too harsh to be swallowed. To prevent his father from doing anything that could cause trouble in the neighborhood, Mrs. Cosidon and some other women visited the man's family to discuss her niece's upcoming marriage.

Men and women alike look up to the Ibiga women as role models. Men are in charge of making ladek, and women are responsible for making diket. Women are always the ones to take the lead in preventing and resolving any potentially dangerous situations. The Ibiga women have an important role in society, as they are responsible for the organization and security of all communal gatherings. Also, Ibiga women provide alcohol/wine to their male counterparts to regulate or limit consumption and so reduce potential for conflict. Mrs. Dumaguing stated that “Nu dikani di anggimao atta nabaltek ket guminok da e an-gulo” (nu pasardengen mi isuda ket dumngeg da kanyami).

Biga Women as Leader

Leadership is also for women. They have firm decision in disciplining those who commits wrongdoings in the community. In their new role as the village's peace ambassador, they are devoting more of their time and energy to assisting others in finding solutions to their issues. Because of their tribe's support, being female was of no consequence. As expressed by Ms. Elena Baglinit, she is a morally upright leader who will always take the high road. She is able to put aside her prejudices and back those who

are on the moral high ground in any given situation, regardless of how wealthy or intelligent those individuals may be.

Most of the women today, they occupy reputable positions in the government service and non - government organizations. They injected the importance of values of Paniyaw, bain and Ngilin to youth and to their children to empower in asserting their rights as women.

And thus, even though they are strong, independent women, they continue to fulfill their unique duties in society.

Knowledge Keepers and Practitioners:

Women are often the primary repositories of traditional medical knowledge within their communities. They inherit and preserve traditional healing practices, including knowledge of herbal remedies, diagnostic techniques, and healing rituals.

Herbalists and Healers:

Women frequently serve as herbalists, utilizing their knowledge of plants and herbs for medicinal purposes. They prepare and administer herbal remedies to treat various ailments and health conditions.

Midwives and Birth Attendants:

Women in many traditional societies act as midwives and birth attendants, providing care and assistance during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum periods. They possess knowledge of traditional birthing practices and remedies to ensure safe deliveries.

Spiritual and Ritual Practitioners:

Women often hold significant roles in spiritual and ritual healing practices. They conduct ceremonies, rituals, and spiritual healing sessions, addressing not only physical ailments but also emotional and spiritual well-being.

Bone Setters and Massage Therapists:

Women may have expertise in bone setting and massage therapy, employing various techniques to treat injuries, muscle aches, and joint problems. Their skills are essential for the community's musculoskeletal health.

Caretakers and Community Health Advisors:

Women act as caretakers within their communities, offering advice on health and wellness. They educate community members about preventive measures, hygiene, nutrition, and family health.

Mental Health Practitioners:

Women often play roles in addressing mental health issues within their communities. They may provide counseling, support, and traditional remedies to individuals experiencing emotional or psychological distress.

Doulas and End-of-Life Caregivers:

Women may also act as doulas, providing emotional and physical support during the end of life. They help in ensuring a peaceful transition and comfort for individuals nearing the end of their lives.

Knowledge Sharers and Educators:

Women are responsible for passing on traditional healing knowledge to the younger generation. They educate apprentices or family members, ensuring the preservation and continuation of traditional healing practices.

Community Organizers and Advocates:

Women may take on roles as community organizers, advocating for the recognition and integration of traditional medicine into modern healthcare systems. They work to preserve their cultural healing practices and ensure their accessibility to the community.

The role of women in traditional medicinal practices reflects their deep-rooted connection with community health and well-being. Their expertise, knowledge, and care have been essential for generations, contributing to the overall health and resilience of their communities.

The Ibiga women turn to traditional remedies made from local plants as a means of alleviating the pain and illness they endure on a regular basis. Most respondents said that Dangla, oregano, gayubano, suha and Guava leaves helped reduce their children's fever, cough, and flu symptoms. One mother explained *that (ada bulbulong kama atta dangla, oregano, bajabat, lubban kan gayubano kad pati da an-alsom e bulong da iluto ni ta ipa-inom ni atta awad bukos na weno ipasu-ob ni atta awad pudot kanda sigab di long-ag tapno makaan. Ada sana kad kinningwan da dadakkol ni kandikani si idi.) she used a decoction of guava and dangla leaves to treat her children's fevers and coughs because her own mother did the same for her.* Because of the extensive travel time required to reach a hospital, they also shared that there are numerous tried-and-true traditional remedies of treating common ailments that have been used for generations.

In addition, the community's mysterious ailment is believed to have been caused by unseen elements, which are driven away by the ceremony performed by a dignified and faithful elderly woman. They have such faith that the ceremony will heal the kid that they are performing it. Mrs. Flory Bakidan narrated her experience to her child *“pasig ansakit di abeng ko, inkani pon ipacheck up si health center naid pun maodasan da e sakit na siya e inbaon dikani si ospital. Inpaala ni losan e laboratory nap on naid latta naotap. Siya e nan-imus kani atta bakbakot e nalaing atda ugali ok imbaga na e kailangan un madawak te adda ipon naila nangwa si sakit na. Kinningwa nipon di dawak, nakaan di sakit na”* (Mrs. Flory Bakidan went to the health center for checkup of her daughter,

however they were referred to the nearest hospital for further assessment. The medical examination found no evidence of severe impairment; yet, they made no progress while under confinement. The mother ultimately made the decision to consult with a group of old women in order to get an expert opinion on her daughters' condition and to carry out any necessary rites. The elderly women carried out the rite, and the patient's sickness was miraculously cured).

The health protocols established by the Department of Health were adhered to without deviation during the pandemic. More so, when a member of the household experiences a sore throat or a persistent cough, the mother will conduct a su-ob as a preventive measure. They drink some ginger tea and warm water with a pinch of salt. The bettle leaf (lawod) was grilled and then slathered with coconut oil and applied to the sick person's back. The sick individual would rest on a bed of banana leaves to reduce his fever, which was another treatment employed in the past.

Moreover, when kids are taught in modules, they have such feeble coping mechanisms that they need constant coaching from their teachers just to get through the modules and the rest of the schoolwork. Despite having less education themselves, some mothers consistently provide for their families and push their children forward in their modular education.

Biga mothers also regularly urged their children to prioritize schoolwork over an intimate relationship. They also openly use their home life as an inspiration and point of self-reflection. Thus, moms make it a point to listen attentively, share their feelings, and demonstrate their trust in their children in variety tangible ways. However, one respondents shared that (*Idi natigammuan ni e mabugi abeng ni on high school paylang ket amod sigab nakom ko te nantiwala ak on adi pon makigayyom, amod di bagbaga ni e una-ona iswela na, ngem uray nu katdi sinuportaan ni tapno makagampot si iswela na te siya lang d maipamana ni candida e annak ni*) when we learned that our daughter got pregnant after all the advises and guidance, the mother continued to support, care and give her unconditional love to be able to let her daughter to move on and finish her studies beause that's the only thing that we can provide as inheritance.

Today, these are the promising roles of Biga women in development especially in maintaining peace, fostering strong character and the unshakable faith which are passed down to the younger generation.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Biga women are not only custodians of tradition but also active agents of peace, leadership, and cultural resilience. As mediators, they sustain harmony through negotiation and reconciliation, embodying values such as *paniyaw*, *ngilin*, and *bain* that reinforce community solidarity. As leaders, they discipline wrongdoing, advocate for women's rights, and integrate cultural principles into governance. As knowledge keepers, they preserve traditional ecological and medicinal practices, ensuring intergenerational continuity of indigenous wisdom.

By documenting these lived experiences, the research contributes to ethnographic literature on indigenous women's agency, highlighting how cultural practices intersect with contemporary challenges in education, health, and conflict resolution. The findings affirm theoretical perspectives such as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which underscores the role of elders in transmitting values, and Sen and Nussbaum's Capability Approach, which emphasizes enabling women's agency in decision-making.

Beyond academic contribution, the study carries practical implications. It calls for policy frameworks that recognize and integrate indigenous women's knowledge into peacebuilding, education, and sustainable development programs. For curriculum designers, the documentation of Biga women's practices offers culturally responsive materials that strengthen identity and heritage education. For government agencies and NGOs, the findings highlight the need to support indigenous women's leadership in community health, ecological stewardship, and conflict mediation.

Ultimately, the Biga women exemplify how tradition and innovation can coexist, offering lessons for cultural preservation and resilience in the modern era. Their practices remind us that empowering indigenous women is not only a matter of equity but also a pathway to sustainable and inclusive development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Curriculum Development. Educational institutions should integrate the lived experiences and practices of Biga women into culturally responsive curricula. Modules on indigenous peace mediation, ecological knowledge, and traditional healing can strengthen identity formation and promote heritage education among students.

Policy Integration. Government agencies such as the NCIP and local government units should formally recognize the roles of indigenous women in peacebuilding and community health. Policies must ensure that women's voices are represented in Bodong negotiations and development planning.

Community Empowerment. Programs should be designed to support Biga women's leadership in conflict resolution, ecological stewardship, and health practices. Training workshops and community dialogues can enhance their capacity to adapt traditional knowledge to modern challenges.

Documentation and Preservation. Continuous ethnographic documentation of Biga women's practices is essential. Universities and research centers should collaborate with communities to archive oral histories, rituals, and ecological knowledge for future generations.

Youth Engagement. Encourage intergenerational transmission of knowledge by involving youth in cultural activities, peace rituals, and ecological practices. Mentorship

programs led by elder women can ensure continuity of traditions while fostering innovation.

Gender and Development Programs. Strengthen GAD initiatives by incorporating indigenous women's perspectives, ensuring that empowerment strategies are culturally grounded and responsive to local realities.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This research was conducted in full compliance with ethical standards for qualitative and ethnographic studies involving indigenous communities. Prior informed consent was obtained from all participants, including tribal elders, mothers, professionals, and youth, with the purpose and voluntary nature of participation clearly explained. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, with identities withheld unless explicit permission was granted, and all data securely stored. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw or decline to answer sensitive questions at any time. Cultural sensitivity was observed throughout the study by respecting indigenous customs, rituals, and values, and by collaborating with community leaders to ensure appropriateness and reciprocity. The researcher minimized harm by approaching discussions with empathy, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as family conflict and the emotional challenges faced by OFW children, while also providing information on available support services. Importantly, the study was designed to benefit the community by documenting and sharing findings that can support cultural preservation, education, and local development initiatives. Finally, the research adhered to the ethical guidelines of Kalinga State University and followed international standards for research involving indigenous peoples, ensuring that the dignity, rights, and welfare of participants were safeguarded at all times.

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