



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Threads of Heritage: The Cultural and Socio-Symbolic Significance of Ifugao Traditional Regalia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Dec 26, 2024 Accepted: Jan 29, 2025	This study examines the cultural significance and socio-cultural dynamics of traditional bodily regalia within the Ifugao Indigenous Knowledge System. Grounded in the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA, 1997) and the global framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), the research aims to document and analyze the evolution, material composition, and cultural functions of these regalia, emphasizing their roles in social stratification, spiritual practices, and heritage preservation. Employing qualitative methodologies such as ethnographic interviews, focus group discussions, and visual anthropology, the research highlights the enduring importance of Ifugao regalia in community identity and rituals. Findings reveal that the regalia serve as markers of social hierarchy, spiritual belief, and communal identity, yet they face challenges from modernization, commercialization, and declining intergenerational transmission. The study underscores the need for policy development, educational integration, and legal protection to sustain the authenticity and cultural relevance of Ifugao traditional attire. These findings contribute to broader discussions on indigenous heritage conservation and cultural resilience.
Keywords Indigenous Knowledge System Ifugao bodily regalia Cultural preservation Indigenous heritage, Social stratification Intellectual Property Rights	
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INTRODUCTION

The preservation, conservation, and development of indigenous cultural heritage are integral to sustainable development and social equity (UNESCO, 2019). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) underscores that cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is fundamental to identity formation, social cohesion, and the sustainability of local communities. Likewise, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), advocate for the protection of indigenous cultural heritage and the integration of indigenous knowledge into formal education systems (United Nations, 2015). Additionally, the Gender and Development (GAD) Goals emphasize the role of cultural heritage in promoting inclusivity and gender equality by ensuring that indigenous women and marginalized groups actively participate in cultural preservation efforts (Philippine Commission on Women, 2017).

The Ifugao people, renowned for their intricate rice terraces—recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site—uphold a rich Indigenous Knowledge System deeply embedded in their daily lives and rituals (Acabado, 2017). Among the most vital expressions of their cultural identity is traditional bodily regalia, encompassing attire, adornments, and body modifications. These regalia serve as markers of social status, rites of passage, and spiritual beliefs, reflecting the intricate relationship between indigenous material culture and intangible heritage (Dulawan, 2006). The preservation of

such traditional attire is critical in maintaining cultural continuity, fostering community pride, and preventing the erosion of indigenous identity due to modernization and globalization (Eder, 2019).

At the national level, the 1987 Philippine Constitution (Article XIV, Section 17) mandates the recognition, respect, and protection of indigenous cultural communities and their heritage (Republic of the Philippines, 1987). This commitment is further reinforced by the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA, 1997), which affirms the right of indigenous peoples to cultural integrity and self-determined education. However, despite these legal frameworks, traditional knowledge and practices continue to face threats from globalization, commercialization, and socio-economic shifts (Tebtebba Foundation, 2016). The commodification of indigenous attire has also led to cultural misrepresentation, wherein traditional bodily regalia are often replicated and sold without regard for their original meanings and significance (Zimmerli & Albert, 2010). This calls for a more robust and community-led approach to safeguarding indigenous heritage, aligning with global frameworks that stress the importance of cultural sustainability (UNESCO, 2019).

This study aims to document, analyze, and interpret the traditional bodily regalia of the Ifugao people, investigating their symbolism, cultural significance, and contemporary relevance. By examining how these regalia function within social, spiritual, and historical contexts, this research underscores the urgency of preservation initiatives. Furthermore, it advocates for policy interventions, educational integration, and sustainable conservation strategies to ensure that Ifugao cultural heritage continues to thrive for future generations. Through qualitative research methods, this study contributes to the broader discourse on cultural heritage management and indigenous identity formation within the global landscape of sustainable development and gender inclusivity (Zimmerli & Albert, 2010; Philippine Commission on Women, 2017).

Hence, this study was undertaken to:

Document and analyze the symbolism and cultural meanings of Ifugao bodily regalia in terms of material composition and evolution, spiritual and ritualistic significance and social stratification and symbolism.

Identify challenges in preserving traditional bodily regalia.

Propose strategies for the sustainable preservation and promotion of Ifugao bodily regalia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing ethnographic methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural significance of Ifugao bodily regalia. A combination of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and visual anthropology was used to collect data from key informants. These informants include Indigenous Knowledge Holders, cultural practitioners, and community elders from two ethnolinguistic groups: the Tuwali and Ayangan.

The study follows a purposive sampling technique to ensure that participants possess extensive knowledge and lived experiences relevant to Ifugao traditional attire. In-depth interviews were conducted to capture personal narratives, cultural interpretations, and the historical context of bodily regalia. Focus group discussions provided a broader perspective by facilitating dialogue among community members, enabling cross-verification of information and the identification of shared cultural themes. Participant observation allowed the researcher to witness firsthand the use of regalia in various cultural events, rituals, and daily life, thereby deepening the contextual understanding of their significance. Additionally, visual anthropology, including the documentation of regalia through photographs and video recordings, was utilized to preserve and analyze the aesthetic and functional aspects of the attire.

Data transcription and thematic analysis were employed to systematically categorize emerging patterns and themes related to the cultural meanings and social functions of Ifugao bodily regalia. Thematic coding was conducted to identify recurring motifs, including symbolism, ritualistic use, and markers of social identity. To ensure data validity, triangulation was applied by comparing

information from different data collection methods and sources. This methodological approach ensures that the study provides a holistic and nuanced portrayal of the role of Ifugao bodily regalia in cultural heritage preservation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes and subthemes were derived through meticulous data transcription and thematic analysis of the collected information, focusing on the symbolism and cultural meanings of Ifugao bodily regalia. These findings underscore the evolving nature of Ifugao garments, the social stratifications they represent, and the deep-rooted spiritual connections embedded in these traditional attires. The analysis also highlights the challenges faced in preserving these cultural artifacts, as well as strategies for safeguarding their authenticity for future generations.

Theme 1: Symbolism and Cultural Meanings of Ifugao Bodily Regalia

The Ifugao bodily regalia are far more than mere adornments; they are powerful symbols of cultural identity, social structure, and spiritual beliefs. These garments represent the deep-seated values and traditions of the Ifugao people, marking an individual's role within the community, as well as their adherence to cultural practices. Each element of the regalia, from the materials used to the design and color choices, carries profound meaning. These garments not only reflect the social stratification of Ifugao society but also embody the collective spirit of the community, their connection to the spiritual world, and their continuity of heritage.

Subtheme 1: *Material Composition and Evolution of Ifugao Bodily Regalia*

The materials used to create Ifugao bodily regalia are reflective of both their environmental surroundings and the traditional craftsmanship passed down through generations. Traditionally, garments were intricately woven from locally sourced natural fibers such as abaca (Manila hemp) and cotton, which were readily available in the region's tropical environment. These fibers were dyed using plant-based pigments derived from indigenous flora, which ensured that the colors held significance rooted in local ecological knowledge (Acabado, 2017). The incorporation of decorative elements, such as shells, beads, and brass accessories, enhanced the regalia's aesthetic value, while also symbolizing various cultural and spiritual beliefs. However, in recent decades, the traditional materials used in these garments have been increasingly replaced by synthetic fibers, a shift that alters the authenticity of the regalia. Synthetic fabrics are not only less environmentally sustainable, but they also lack the cultural resonance of the natural materials that were once integral to the regalia (Dulawan, 2006). This transformation highlights the growing tension between preserving traditional crafts and adapting to contemporary practices of material sourcing and environmental sustainability. As noted by UNESCO (2019), the need for conservation efforts is paramount to ensuring that traditional weaving techniques are maintained and adapted to modern standards without compromising their cultural integrity.



Subtheme 2: *Spiritual and Ritualistic Functions*

Beyond their social and cultural roles, Ifugao bodily regalia are deeply intertwined with the spiritual and ritualistic practices of the community. These garments are worn during significant cultural and religious events, marking the transition between the mundane and the sacred. The regalia serve as conduits for connecting the living with their ancestors and the spiritual realm. For example, during the Gotad Festival, a major cultural event celebrating Ifugao traditions, individuals wear elaborate

regalia to honor their ancestors and to invoke blessings for the community. The Uya-uy marriage rites and death rituals also involve the use of traditional attire, underscoring the regalia's role in facilitating spiritual communication and reinforcing communal ties (Philippine Commission on Women, 2017). The bahag (loincloth) and tapis (wraparound skirt), which are often worn during these rituals, are believed to have protective and sacred properties. These garments are seen as more than mere clothing—they are regarded as vessels of spiritual power, offering the wearer a sense of divine protection and favor (Zimmerli & Albert, 2010). The belief that clothing can carry such sacred qualities reflects a worldview where the physical and spiritual realms are interconnected. This spiritual significance is crucial in the ongoing preservation of Ifugao regalia, as it underscores the importance of maintaining their traditional forms to ensure that their cultural and religious integrity is upheld.



Subtheme 3: *Social Stratification and Symbolism*

The bodily regalia worn by Ifugao people are deeply embedded with social meaning, serving as visible markers of an individual's social rank, achievements, and familial ties. Among the Tawali and Ayangan ethnic groups, there is a clear distinction in the regalia worn by different social classes, which reinforces the hierarchical structure of the community. The kadangyan, or the elite class, traditionally adorn themselves with elaborate garments featuring intricate embroidery, symbolizing their high social status, wealth, and accomplishments (Eder, 2019). These regalia are typically made with the finest materials and are often worn during important ceremonies and events, signaling the wearer's authority and prestige within the community. In contrast, members of the lower classes wear simpler designs, reflecting their more modest social standing. This distinction in dress is not merely aesthetic but serves as a tool for communicating one's position in society. Additionally, specific colors within the regalia hold profound cultural significance. Red, for instance, signifies bravery and is often associated with warriors and protectors of the community. Blue represents nobility, often worn by the higher social classes, while white symbolizes purity, frequently seen in ceremonial contexts or associated with spiritual practices (Tebtebba Foundation, 2016). These color choices are not arbitrary; they are carefully selected to align with the values of honor, courage, and spirituality that are central to Ifugao culture. Through these visual distinctions, Ifugao regalia perpetuate societal structures and emphasize the importance of cultural continuity across generations.

Theme 2: Challenges in Cultural Preservation

The preservation of Ifugao bodily regalia is threatened by several complex and multifaceted challenges. These challenges not only hinder the safeguarding of these cultural symbols but also jeopardize the transmission of indigenous knowledge and traditions to future generations. The following are key challenges identified in the study:

Subtheme 1: Commercialization and Misrepresentation

One of the most pressing threats to the preservation of Ifugao bodily regalia is the commodification of indigenous attire. As the global demand for "exotic" cultural artifacts grows, indigenous regalia are increasingly being produced and marketed as commodities for profit, often disconnected from their original cultural contexts. Zimmerli & Albert (2010) highlight the growing trend of indigenous cultural artifacts being used for commercial purposes, with little regard for the cultural significance they hold. In many instances, these regalia are sold in tourist markets or mass-produced without the involvement of the indigenous communities themselves, leading to a dilution of their cultural meanings. This commercialization not only strips the regalia of their spiritual and social significance but also diminishes their role as symbols of identity, honor, and cultural continuity. As traditional knowledge and craftsmanship are overshadowed by profit-driven motives, the authenticity of these garments is increasingly compromised.

Subtheme 2: Declining Intergenerational Transmission

The transmission of traditional attire and the accompanying cultural knowledge between generations is weakening, posing a significant threat to the preservation of Ifugao bodily regalia. As younger generations are exposed to urban migration, modernization, and Western education systems, their connection to traditional practices has become increasingly tenuous. Acabado (2017) found that the adoption of Western-style education, combined with the allure of urban living, has led to a decline in interest among the younger Ifugao population in learning and preserving their cultural heritage. As older generations, who are the primary bearers of traditional knowledge, age and pass on, there is a growing gap in the transfer of indigenous weaving techniques and the cultural values attached to these garments. This generational disconnect not only threatens the survival of traditional regalia but also risks the loss of valuable knowledge that has been passed down through centuries.

Subtheme 3: Lack of Documentation and Legal Protection

The absence of comprehensive documentation and legal safeguards for Ifugao bodily regalia exacerbates the challenges of cultural preservation. Despite their significance, these regalia remain insufficiently documented, with many traditional garments and their associated meanings being passed down through oral tradition rather than written records. As a result, there is a risk that critical cultural knowledge may be lost or misrepresented. Furthermore, existing policies do not provide adequate protection against cultural appropriation. The increasing global interest in indigenous cultures has led to the exploitation of traditional attire without the proper recognition or compensation for the communities that create them. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO, 2015) has emphasized that indigenous cultural expressions, including traditional attire, require stronger intellectual property rights to prevent unauthorized use and misrepresentation. Without legal protection, Ifugao bodily regalia are vulnerable to exploitation by external entities, leading to the erosion of their cultural value and significance.

Theme 3: Proposed Strategies for Cultural Preservation

In response to the challenges outlined above, a multifaceted approach to cultural preservation is necessary to safeguard the integrity of Ifugao bodily regalia. The following strategies can effectively address these concerns:

Subtheme 1: Policy Development

Local governments should take proactive measures by enacting policies that specifically protect Ifugao bodily regalia from unauthorized commercialization. Such policies should enforce regulations that ensure the production of these regalia adheres to traditional weaving techniques, preserving both their cultural and artistic authenticity. Collaboration with local artisans, cultural advocates, and indigenous communities is essential in creating these policies to ensure they are grounded in the needs and aspirations of the Ifugao people. By providing incentives for the preservation of traditional

methods, these policies can empower local communities to continue their artisanal practices while resisting external pressures to commercialize their cultural symbols (Tebtebba Foundation, 2016).

Subtheme 2: Educational Integration

Incorporating indigenous knowledge, especially traditional weaving techniques and the cultural significance of bodily regalia, into formal education curricula is crucial for fostering a deeper understanding of these traditions among younger generations. Educational programs should be developed at both the primary and secondary levels to expose students to the rich cultural heritage of the Ifugao people. Furthermore, universities and academic institutions can partner with indigenous elders to offer specialized workshops and courses on traditional regalia. This integration will not only help preserve these practices but also encourage the younger population to engage with and take pride in their cultural heritage, ensuring continuity and appreciation across generations (Philippine Commission on Women, 2017).

Subtheme 3: Community Engagement

Strengthening collaborations between indigenous elders, cultural institutions, local artisans, and academic organizations is vital for fostering an environment of knowledge-sharing and sustainable practice. These partnerships can facilitate the exchange of traditional weaving skills and the cultural context behind Ifugao regalia, enabling younger generations to learn directly from seasoned elders. Additionally, local and international cultural institutions can provide platforms for Ifugao regalia to be showcased in exhibitions, ensuring visibility and recognition. Training programs that focus on sustainable regalia production and the preservation of traditional materials will also help protect these garments from the adverse effects of commercialization, encouraging artisans to adopt eco-friendly practices without compromising the cultural integrity of their work (Dulawan, 2006).

Subtheme 4: Legal Protection

Advocating for stronger legal protections for indigenous cultural expressions is critical in preventing the exploitation and misrepresentation of Ifugao bodily regalia. This involves lobbying for the establishment of intellectual property rights tailored specifically to the protection of indigenous cultural products, including traditional attire. Legal frameworks should be designed to prevent unauthorized use and commodification by external entities, ensuring that the cultural and symbolic meanings of these regalia remain intact. Moreover, international organizations, such as the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), can play a pivotal role in offering support for policies that protect indigenous knowledge and practices on a global scale, preventing cultural appropriation and fostering respect for indigenous intellectual property (Zimmerli & Albert, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

The Ifugao bodily regalia are key cultural markers reflecting social status, spiritual beliefs, and community identity. The material composition, designs, and colors hold significant cultural meaning, reinforcing traditional hierarchies and values such as honor, bravery, and spiritual protection.

The preservation of Ifugao regalia faces several challenges, including commercialization and misrepresentation, which dilute its cultural meaning; declining intergenerational transmission, driven by modernization and urban migration; and the lack of adequate documentation and legal protection against cultural appropriation.

To address these challenges, the study proposes strategies such as: developing policies to protect traditional regalia from unauthorized commercialization, incorporating indigenous knowledge into formal education, fostering community engagement for knowledge sharing, and advocating for stronger legal protections to safeguard Ifugao cultural expressions.

Implications to Theory and Practice

This study enhances cultural preservation theory by highlighting the evolving nature of Ifugao bodily regalia as a dynamic cultural artifact. It challenges the view of cultural heritage as static, emphasizing

that cultural expressions are living identities. The findings reveal the connection between material culture, social hierarchy, and spirituality, showing how clothing carries cultural meanings and values. Additionally, the study contributes to discussions on cultural appropriation and the commodification of indigenous artifacts, advocating for stronger frameworks on intellectual property and cultural continuity. It also supports the idea that material culture reinforces societal structures and collective identity within indigenous communities.

This study offers practical insights for cultural practitioners, policymakers, and educators focused on preserving indigenous cultural expressions. It stresses the need for policies to protect cultural heritage from commercialization, recommending stronger local and national laws to prevent exploitation and ensure traditional practices are followed in regalia production. For educators, the study highlights the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge and weaving techniques into curricula, especially in communities near indigenous groups, to foster cultural pride and inspire preservation efforts among younger generations.

The study advocates for collaboration between indigenous elders, local governments, and academic institutions to create sustainable training programs that empower communities to maintain traditional regalia production. It also emphasizes the importance of securing intellectual property rights to protect Ifugao regalia from unauthorized use and misrepresentation.

Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible without the invaluable support of many individuals and institutions. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Ifugao State University for providing the necessary resources and platform for conducting this study. My sincere thanks go to the Ifugao Administration for the guidance and encouragement throughout the research process. I also appreciate the contributions of the cultural experts, community elders, and participants who shared their knowledge and insights, making this study meaningful and relevant. My profound gratitude also goes to Dr. Bonimar T. Afalla for refining and editing this research article.

Additionally, I acknowledge the assistance of ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com/>), QuillBot (<https://www.quillbot.com/>), Grammarly (<https://www.grammarly.com/>), and Turnitin (<https://www.turnitin.com/>) for their support in refining and enhancing the quality of our writing and ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the content. Finally, we extend our heartfelt thanks to our families and colleagues for their unwavering support and motivation.

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