



Sacred Ties to Ancestral Land: Reclaiming Indigenous Practices in Environmental Stewardship in the Cordillera

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the importance of Indigenous beliefs and practices in the Cordillera, Philippines, highlighting the necessity of maintaining cultural and spiritual ties to the land for environmental stewardship and sustainability. The research underscores the deep connection that Cordilleran communities have with their ancestral lands, regarded as sacred and vital for cultural identity and environmental management. For instance, the *myong* forest management system and water resource management rituals directly demonstrate this connection. These practices provide specific environmental benefits, including biodiversity conservation, soil fertility, and water regulation. However, these practices are increasingly threatened by modernization, industrial activities, and the decline of traditional values. The study also investigates syncretism, where Indigenous beliefs merge with Christianity, resulting in unique perspectives on environmental ethics. The methodology involves critically reviewing available written traditions, including ethnographic studies, government reports, and Indigenous oral histories from the internet and libraries around Baguio City. The data were analyzed through thematic content analysis to identify patterns and insights. Results indicate that syncretism offers a valuable framework for combining traditional and modern conservation approaches. This framework highlights integrating Indigenous spiritual practices with contemporary ecological strategies, fostering a holistic approach to conservation. The study concludes with recommendations for specific actions and strategies for collaboration among Indigenous communities, policymakers, and scholars to protect land rights and create inclusive conservation strategies.

ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengeksplorasi makna kepercayaan dan praktik masyarakat adat di Cordillera, Filipina, dengan menyoroti perlunya menjaga ikatan budaya dan spiritual dengan tanah demi pengelolaan dan keberlanjutan lingkungan. Penelitian ini menggarisbawahi hubungan mendalam yang dimiliki masyarakat Cordillera dengan tanah leluhur mereka, yang dianggap sakral dan penting bagi identitas budaya dan pengelolaan lingkungan. Misalnya, sistem pengelolaan hutan *myong* dan ritual

pengelolaan sumber daya air secara langsung menunjukkan hubungan ini. Praktik-praktik ini memberikan manfaat tertentu bagi lingkungan, termasuk konservasi keanekaragaman hayati, kesuburan tanah, dan pengaturan air. Namun, praktik-praktik ini semakin terancam oleh modernisasi, kegiatan industri, dan penurunan nilai-nilai tradisional. Studi ini juga menyelidiki sinkretisme, di mana kepercayaan masyarakat adat menyatu dengan agama Kristen, yang menghasilkan perspektif unik tentang etika lingkungan. Metodologi ini mencakup tinjauan kritis terhadap tradisi tertulis yang tersedia, termasuk studi etnografi, laporan pemerintah, dan sejarah lisan masyarakat adat dari internet dan perpustakaan di sekitar Kota Baguio. Data dianalisis melalui analisis konten tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola dan wawasan. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa sinkretisme menawarkan kerangka kerja yang berharga untuk menggabungkan pendekatan konservasi tradisional dan modern. Kerangka kerja ini menyoroti pengintegrasian praktik spiritual pribumi dengan strategi ekologi kontemporer, yang mendorong pendekatan holistik terhadap konservasi. Studi ini diakhiri dengan rekomendasi untuk tindakan dan strategi khusus untuk kolaborasi antara masyarakat Pribumi, pembuat kebijakan, dan akademisi untuk melindungi hak atas tanah dan menciptakan strategi konservasi yang inklusif.

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INTRODUCTION

The annihilation of the Cordillera’s ancestral lands is not just environmental destruction—it is an existential assault on Indigenous identity, sovereignty, and spiritual survival. For centuries, Indigenous communities have lived in sacred reciprocity with the land, recognizing nature not as a commodity but as kin, a living entity demanding respect and reverence. Yet, this lifeworld is now under siege by capitalist plunder, state-sanctioned land grabs, and the insidious creep of cultural erasure disguised as “development.” The *myong* system, sacred water rituals, and Indigenous cosmologies that once protected the forests, rivers, and mountains are being crushed under the weight of extractive industries and religious imperialism that desacralize the land and sever the people’s ties to their ancestral domains. This is not merely environmental degradation—it is an act of violence against people whose very existence is entwined with the land. To reclaim these sacred ties is not just a matter of cultural preservation—it is an act of radical resistance against the death-dealing forces of modernity, a defiant assertion that Indigenous knowledge is not archaic but essential for the planet’s survival.

The decline of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and practices among Indigenous communities in the Cordillera, Philippines, poses a significant challenge to environmental stewardship and sustainability.¹ This study was conducted to address the critical need to reclaim these Indigenous beliefs and practices, which are deeply connected to the land and play a vital role in cultural identity and environmental management. Existing literature has highlighted the sacredness of ancestral lands and traditional practices like the *myong* forest² management system, which intertwines spirituality with sustainable environmental practices. However, these practices are increasingly threatened by modernization, industrial activities (e.g., mining and logging), and the erosion of traditional values³.

While some studies have explored the concept of syncretism—where Indigenous beliefs merge with Christianity—there remains a gap in understanding how these hybrid perspectives can

¹ Leni D. Camacho, Marilyn S. Combalicer, Youn Yeo-Chang, E. A. Combalicer, A. P. Carandang, S. C. Camacho, et al. "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge/technologies in the Cordillera, Northern Philippines." *Forest Policy and Economics* 22 (2012), 3-8.

² Camacho et al., "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge," 3–8; Stephen Acabado, "The Archaeology of Pericolonialism: Responses of the 'Unconquered' to Spanish Conquest and Colonialism in Ifugao, Philippines," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 21, no. 1 (2017), 1–26.

³ World Bank, *Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021), accessed December 15, 2024, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/baa43ce91ec55266a538e9023c528bd7-0070062024/original/No-Data-No-Story-Indigenous-Peoples-in-the-Philippines.pdf>; Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, *Country Technical Notes on Indigenous Peoples' Issues: Philippines* (Rome: International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2015).

inform modern conservation efforts⁴. Additionally, inconsistencies in applying and recognizing Indigenous knowledge in environmental policies, such as the Philippines' *Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA)* of 1997, further complicate effective stewardship⁵.

This research addresses these gaps by critically analyzing the intersection of TEK and modern conservation methods. By focusing on the Cordillera region, this study emphasizes the importance of collaboration among Indigenous communities, policymakers, and scholars to protect land rights and develop inclusive conservation strategies.⁶ Ultimately, the objective is to provide a framework that integrates traditional practices with contemporary approaches, fostering sustainable development while honoring and preserving cultural heritage.

METHODE

This study employs a critical literature review methodology to analyze traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and conservation practices in the Cordillera region, Philippines, synthesizing peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and gray literature (e.g., NGO reports ancestral domain records). It employed systematic searches across academic databases using specific keywords and applied critical discourse analysis and thematic coding to uncover patterns and power dynamics in how Indigenous knowledge is represented in conservation literature. Ethical considerations focused on decolonizing methodologies and addressing conflicting narratives, particularly between state-led conservation efforts and Indigenous stewardship, through a political ecology lens.

DISCUSSION

Overview of the Cordillera Region

The Cordillera Region, located in Northern Luzon, Philippines, spans approximately 1.75 million hectares and includes the provinces of Abra, Mountain Province, Kalinga, Apayao, Ifugao, Benguet, and the city of Baguio, with a population of

⁴ William Henry Scott, *A Sagada Reader* (New Day Publishers, 1988), 10; Acabado, "The Archaeology of Pericolonialism," 1–26.

⁵ Oliver J. Lynch, "Indigenous Peoples' Land Rights in the Philippines," *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine* 35, no. 4 (2011), accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/ancestral-land-and-cultural-survival>.

⁶ Martijn Petra, *Communal Land Management in the Cordillera Region of the Philippines* (New York: XYZ Press, 2018); Paul Holsinger and Maria Reyes, "Policy Innovations and Effective Local Management of Forests in the Philippine Cordillera Region," *Journal of Sustainable Forestry* 25, no. 3 (2016), 287–304; Cordillera Peoples Alliance, "Protecting Land and Territorial Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Cordillera Region," Cordillera Peoples Alliance, 2022, accessed February 15, 2025, <https://www.cordillera.org/>.

about 1.3 million.⁷ This region, renowned for its rich mineral deposits like gold and copper, is also a crucial source of several major rivers such as the Chico, Agno, and Abra. Historically covered by dense forests, which have since diminished, the Cordillera's rugged terrain limits extensive agricultural use. The region is the ancestral land of the indigenous peoples collectively known as the Igorots, encompassing seven major ethnolinguistic groups, including the Kankanaeys, Bontocs, Kalingas, Ifugaos, Tingguians, Apayao (Isneg), and Ibaloy, each with distinct socio-cultural systems and territories.⁸

The Igorots of the Cordillera are Indigenous People with a unique culture passed down through generations.⁹ During a discussion at the University of the Philippines in Baguio, a woman challenged the speaker's use of the term 'Cordillera,' expressing a preference for 'Igorot' instead.¹⁰ This incident highlighted a misunderstanding about 'Igorot,' sometimes linked to stereotypes and ethnocentrism. Additionally, Scott¹¹ noted that for some, 'Igorot' can carry a derogatory implication of being pagan and uncivilized¹² However, this does not accurately reflect their identity.¹³ Del Castillo et al.¹⁴ noted that the Igorot people possess a rich cultural heritage that reflects their unique traditions, values, and practices. Their complex social structure demonstrates a well-organized community with intricate relationships and roles maintained over generations. Additionally, the deep connection to their land is central to their identity, encompassing their history, spirituality, and way of life. Recognizing and respecting these aspects are crucial in fostering a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the Igorot people and their significant contributions to society.

⁷ Milagros A. Rimando, "Potentials and Challenges in the Cordillera Administrative Region" (paper presented at the Regional Conference on Industry Roadmaps and AEC Game Plan: Roadmap Localization for Competitiveness, Baguio Country Club, Baguio City, May 28, 2015), accessed January 15, 2025, https://mabikas-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CAR_Potentials_and_Challenges_Rimando.pdf.

⁸ Igorotage, "The Kankana-ey People of the Cordilleras," *Igorotage*, January 27, 2024, accessed Dec. 12, 2024, <https://www.igorotage.com/blog/kankana-ey-people>; PSA-CAR, *Land Ownership in the Cordillera Administrative Region (2020 Census of Population and Housing)*, Release No. SSR 2024-19, June 27, 2024, accessed January 15, 2025. <https://rssocar.psa.gov.ph/content/land-ownership-cordillera-administrative-region-2020-census-population-and-housing>.

⁹ Bene Molintas, *Inayan, a Cultural Indigeneity: Coping Strategies for Igorot Indigenous People and Ethics in Individualist Organizations* (La Jolla: Northcentral University, 2019).

¹⁰ Ricardo G. Abad, *The Asian Face of Globalisation: Reconstructing Identities, Institutions, and Resources: The Work of the 2001/2002 API Fellows* (Tokyo: Nippon Foundation, 2004).

¹¹ Scott, *A Sagada Reader*, 52.

¹² Scott, *A Sagada Reader*, 52.

¹³ F. Del Castillo, A., Edara, I. R., Ching, G. S., Molino, J., Jacoba, R., and C. D. B. Del Castillo.

"Religiosity among Indigenous Peoples: A Study of Cordilleran Youth in the Philippines." *Religions* 14, no. 6 (2023), 751. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060751>.

¹⁴ Del Castillo et al., "Religiosity among Indigenous Peoples," 751.

Their culture is marked by a deep connection to their land, characterized by communal land management, subsistence agriculture, and communal solid values. Traditional socio-political systems emphasize consensus and respect for elders, with rituals underscoring the sanctity of life and death.¹⁵ Despite the erosion of traditional systems due to external and internal pressures, the indigenous people's bond with their land remains robust. The Cordillera also hosts a notable non-indigenous population, mainly in Baguio and provincial town centers, alongside indigenous communities living near regional boundaries.¹⁶ The cultural significance of the Cordillera is equally profound. This region is home to various indigenous groups with distinct languages, traditions, and social structures. Among the prominent indigenous groups are the Ifugao, Kankanaey, and Ibaloi. These groups have developed a unique cultural identity closely tied to their environment, reflected in their traditional practices and belief systems.¹⁷

The Ifugao are perhaps best known for their elaborate rice terraces, which are considered engineering marvels and are recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The Ifugao rice terraces, built over 2,000 years ago, exemplify a sophisticated system of irrigation and terracing that demonstrates their deep understanding of sustainable agricultural practices and environmental stewardship.¹⁸ This ancient agricultural system is a testament to their engineering skills and reflects their spiritual connection to the land, where agriculture is interwoven with ritual and community life.¹⁹

The Kankanaey, residing primarily in the western part of the Cordillera, are known for their intricate weaving and vibrant cultural rituals. Their social organization is based on a communal system where kinship ties and ancestral traditions play a central role in maintaining harmony within their communities.²⁰ Kankanaey culture is marked by its rich oral traditions, ceremonial practices, and a deep reverence for ancestral spirits, which are integral to their worldview and daily life.²¹

The Ibaloi people, part of the Indigenous groups in the Cordillera, have distinct cultural practices, including unique clothing, rituals, and gold mining traditions, which reflect their environment and beliefs.²² Their social and religious practices are intertwined

¹⁵ Molinatas, *Inayan*, 15.

¹⁶ Del Castillo et al., "Religiosity among Indigenous Peoples," 751.

¹⁷ J. Carling, "The Cordillera Experience," *Asia Society*, October 2001.

<https://asiasociety.org/cordillera-experience>.

¹⁸ Scott, *A Sagada Reader*.

¹⁹ Camacho et al., "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge," 3–8.

²⁰ H. Sitabayasi, "Beliefs of Kankana-ey and a Contextualization of the Gospel," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 25, no. 2 (2022).

²¹ Sitabayasi, "Beliefs of Kankana-ey."

²² A. Sumeg-ang, "The Ibaloy," in *Ethnography of the Major Ethnolinguistic Groups in the Cordillera* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 2005), 28–51.

with their spiritual beliefs, especially in the context of feasts and ceremonies like the *cañao*, and their traditional music forms, such as the Jew's harp and nose flute, are considered sacred in these rituals. They are recognized for their elaborate burial practices and ceremonies that reflect their beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife.²³ The Ibaloi communities practice a form of animism where natural elements and ancestors are believed to have spiritual significance, guiding their agricultural and social activities.²⁴

The Cordillera's indigenous peoples have historically maintained their cultural practices despite external pressures from colonization and modernization.²⁵ Their traditional ecological knowledge has played a crucial role in preserving the region's biodiversity and promoting sustainable environmental practices. This knowledge is passed down through generations and is deeply embedded in their cultural rituals and daily lives.²⁶

The Cordillera region stands out for its geographical grandeur and cultural richness. Indigenous groups such as the Ifugao, Kankanaey, and Ibaloi embody a deep connection to their environment through traditional practices and belief systems. Understanding their way of life provides valuable insights into the region's cultural and ecological significance, highlighting the importance of preserving their heritage and integrating their knowledge into contemporary environmental stewardship.

Cultural and Religious Contexts

Before the arrival of Christianity in the Cordilleras, the indigenous peoples, including the Ifugao and other Igorot groups, practiced animism. Their belief system revolved around the idea that spirits inhabited nature and that the forces of the natural world were sacred and interconnected with human life. This animistic worldview imbued daily life with reverence for natural elements such as mountains, rivers, and forests, which were seen as home to ancestral spirits and deities. These beliefs informed their agricultural practices, rituals, and community organization, fostering a deep spiritual connection to the land.

²³ C. Abordo and D. Coronacion, "The Construction of Indigenous Lands and Domains in the Cordillera and Its Impact on the Quest for Regional Autonomy," *ASSEMBLEA: An Online Journal of Political Science* 1, no. 1 (2019), 1–19.

²⁴ F. Laugrand, A. Laugrand, J. Tamang, and G. Magapin, "Exchanges with the Dead: Exhuming Human Remains among the Ibaloy of Upper Loacan (Philippines)," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 176, no. 4 (2020), 475–503.

²⁵ H. Patterson, E. Bowles, S. Chiblow, D. McGregor, C. Kozmik, and J. N. Popp, "Environmental and Socio-Cultural Impacts of Glyphosate-Based Herbicides: Perspectives from Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science," *Frontiers in Conservation Science* 4 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcosc.2023.1186399>.

²⁶ M. T. G. J. Ting, A. C. Bagsic, M. M. Equilos-Ryan Jaen, M. L. P. Respicio, and C. R. T. Tan, "Modernity vs. Culture: Protecting the Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines," *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008), 77–98.

The transition from animism to the adoption of Christianity was marked by resistance in some parts of the Cordillera, with many communities integrating Christian beliefs with their indigenous practices, creating a unique blend of spirituality. However, the core animistic values emphasizing nature's sanctity and the guardianship of ancestors over the land remained influential in the region's cultural identity.²⁷

Studying Indigenous environmental practices within cultural and religious contexts is crucial for understanding their full significance and potential applications.²⁸ Indigenous environmental stewardship is often intertwined with religious beliefs and rituals that promote ecological harmony. In the Cordillera, ancestor reverence plays a significant role in environmental management. These practices are rooted in a belief system that views ancestors as guardians of the land, thus ensuring that environmental stewardship is a communal and sacred responsibility. This perspective contrasts sharply with Western approaches, often separating spiritual beliefs from environmental management.

Understanding these practices within their cultural and religious contexts provides valuable insights into their effectiveness and sustainability. For example, Ifugao's forest management practices are guided by spiritual beliefs that emphasize the interconnectedness of all life forms. These beliefs foster a sense of stewardship that extends beyond immediate human needs to encompass long-term ecological health.²⁹ This holistic approach underscores integrating cultural values with environmental policies to achieve sustainable outcomes.

The spiritual dimensions of these practices contribute to their effectiveness by fostering a deep sense of responsibility and connection to the environment. Auger³⁰ argues that cultural continuity, including traditional environmental practices, determines Indigenous health and well-being. This continuity ensures that environmental stewardship is embedded in the daily lives of Indigenous communities, reinforcing sustainable practices.

The history of religious groups and missionaries in the Cordillera region of the Philippines reflects a complex interplay of indigenous traditions and external influences. Early Spanish missionaries in the 16th century sought to Christianize the Igorot people, yet their efforts were resisted mainly due to the mountainous terrain and strong indigenous beliefs.³¹

²⁷ R. Yzagada, "The Rise of the Igorots: Spanish Colonization in the Cordilleras," *Yzagada's Blog*, April 23, 2021. <https://yzagada.com/2021/04/23/the-rise-of-the-igorots-spanish-colonization-in-the-cordilleras/>.

²⁸ R. W. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013); N. I. Sinthumule, "Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Its Role in Biodiversity Conservation: A Systematic Review," *Frontiers in Environmental Science* 11 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fenvs.2023.1164900>.

²⁹ Camacho et al., "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge," 3–8.

³⁰ M. D. Auger, "Cultural Continuity as a Determinant of Indigenous Peoples' Health," *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 7, no. 4 (2016), 1–24.

³¹ W. H. Scott, *The Discovery of the Igorots: Spanish Contacts with the Pagans of Northern Luzon* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1974).

By the American colonial period in the early 20th century, Protestant missionaries introduced educational and health programs, mainly through the Episcopal Church, which established a significant presence in the region.³² Catholic missions, however, persisted and expanded under orders like the CICM (Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary), which built institutions like Saint Louis University to serve as centers for education and evangelization.³³ These missionary activities were often met with tension as they sought to supplant indigenous spiritual practices, though they also contributed to socio-economic development in the Cordillera. Today, Christian and indigenous spiritualities coexist, reflecting the region's pluralistic religious landscape.

In the study by Del Castillo et al.,³⁴ these Indigenous Peoples possess distinct cultural traditions and religious beliefs. The Cordilleran inherit these practices from their elders and integrate them into everyday life.³⁵ Their religious practices involve animal sacrifices, offerings to ancestral spirits, and herbal remedies. These beliefs also influence their approach to environmental conservation, as they consider nature sacred and emphasize protecting and preserving it.³⁶

Cordilleran Indigenous people navigate a blend of traditional religious beliefs and modern practices, particularly Christianity. While many have adopted Christianity, they often integrate their Indigenous traditions into their Christian practices, resulting in hybrid religious expressions.³⁷ This fusion illustrates the complexity of religiosity among Cordilleran and highlights the interplay between their cultural heritage and contemporary spiritual practices. Understanding this blend offers insights into their cultural identity, values, and environmental attitudes.³⁸

Socio-cultural, Religious, and Political Challenges

In continuing research on Indigenous beliefs and environmental stewardship of people worldwide, cultural and religious challenges are inevitable as part of local experiences. Experts³⁹ argue that Indigenous peoples have rich and diverse cultures based

³² M. Wieber, *Politics, Property, and Law in the Philippine Uplands* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993).

³³ Saint Louis University, "History & Institutional Statements," n.d., accessed Jan. 15, 2025, <https://www.slu.edu.ph/history/>.

³⁴ Del Castillo et al., "Religiosity among Indigenous Peoples".

³⁵ Camacho et al., "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge," 3–8.

³⁶ J. N. Molino, "An Exploration of Cordilleran Students' Christian Environmentalism (CE) and Environmental Awareness (EA): Towards a Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Response to Laudato Si?," *Journal of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication* 20 (2022), 224.

³⁷ J. F. Aguilar, "The Role of Culture in Indigenous Peoples' Education: A Case Study of Cordillera Schools," *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 6 (2018), 8–15.

³⁸ Del Castillo et al., "Religiosity among Indigenous Peoples".

³⁹ D. Champagne, *Social Change and Cultural Continuity Among Native Nations* (Lanham, NY; Toronto; Plymouth, UK: Altamira Press, 2007).

on a profound spiritual relationship with their land and natural resources. They claim that indigenous societies do not have dichotomies such as nature vs. culture. Indigenous peoples do not see themselves as outside the realm of nature. However, in the contemporary era, I observe that in Cordillera, in the northern part of the Philippines, social, religious, and political institutions have greatly affected the traditional ways of the Indigenous people. Traditionally, one salient characteristic of Indigenous cultures is that they are based on a collective perspective; today, this might no longer be the case.

Since the advent of modernity and economic capitalism, the Indigenous traditional religious and cultural practices have been threatened by individualism and the claim for private property. Capitalism is an economic system marked by private ownership of property and driven by profit motives.⁴⁰ This individualistic and capitalist mentality resulted in environmental problems of biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change.⁴¹ These environmental problems were being intensified by so-called development programs that are designed for resource extraction, especially in the homelands of indigenous peoples. Bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, along with multinational corporations, often implement projects that disregard indigenous rights and their deep connection to nature, leading to resistance that is frequently suppressed through force, deception, or state military intervention.

The encroachment of free market capitalism primarily drives the erosion of traditional ecological and spiritual values in Indigenous communities.⁴² These communities, which once united against external threats like corporations and corrupt government officials seeking to exploit their ancestral lands, are now adopting the values they previously opposed. Younger generations, swayed by capitalist ideals, increasingly see their land as a resource to be exploited for profit, undermining the community's deep spiritual connection to the land. This change weakens the communities' ability to resist outside pressures and creates internal rifts, as some members support resource extraction while others strive to protect the land.

⁴⁰ S. C. Dimonye, "The Contributions of Modern Capitalism to Modernity: Focus on the Philosophical Perspectives on Development" (Authorea Preprints, 2024).

⁴¹ Lauren Pollock, "How Capitalism Is a Driving Force of Climate Change," *The People, Ideas, and Things Journal*, Special Issue: Pandemics & Politics (2020), accessed Dec. 15, 2024, <https://pitjournal.unc.edu/2022/12/24/how-capitalism-is-a-driving-force-of-climate-change/>.

⁴² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development, Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples (ST/ESA/328)* (New York: United Nations, 2009), https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/SOWIP/en/SOWIP_web.pdf.

Gregory E. Sterling⁴³ emphasizes that addressing issues requires more than scientific or political efforts; it demands a profound ethical and spiritual transformation. He argues that humanity's responsibility as stewards of creation, the imperative for intergenerational equity, and the need for social justice—especially for the poor disproportionately affected by climate change, necessitate action led by moral conviction and community engagement, akin to the religious leadership in the civil rights movement.

Significance of Studying Indigenous Practices

Indigenous knowledge can be broadly defined as the knowledge that an indigenous (local) community accumulates over generations of living in a particular environment.⁴⁴ In the Philippines, indigenous groups like the Ifugaos of the Cordillera Mountains continue to thrive in their self-sufficient communities. Despite changes in Indigenous knowledge systems, practices promoting forest sustainability remain strong.⁴⁵ Studying Indigenous environmental practices is not only an academic exercise but a practical necessity in the face of global environmental challenges. As climate change and ecological degradation intensify, there is growing recognition of the value of Indigenous knowledge systems in addressing these issues. Preserving and applying traditional ecological knowledge can enhance contemporary environmental strategies and contribute to more effective conservation practices.⁴⁶

Indigenous knowledge provides critical insights into sustainable resource management practices, offering valuable contributions to holistic and practical solutions.⁴⁷ Collaborative conservation initiatives involving Indigenous communities have achieved superior environmental conservation and community well-being outcomes. Integrating diverse knowledge systems, such as religious beliefs, alongside Indigenous wisdom can foster innovative approaches and mitigation strategies for addressing longstanding environmental challenges.⁴⁸ In forest management contexts, indigenous knowledge offers profound insights into local ecosystems, essential for

⁴³ Gregory E. Sterling, "From the Dean's Desk," *Reflections: Crucified Creation: A Green Faith Rising*, December 8, 2024, <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/crucified-creation-green-faith-rising/dean-s-desk>.

⁴⁴ Rudolph C. Rýser "Indigenous Peoples and Traditional Knowledge." Center for World Indigenous Studies, 2011. <https://www.cwis.org/document/indigenous-peoples-and-traditional-knowledge/>.

⁴⁵ Camacho et al., "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge," 3–8.

⁴⁶ Nathan J. Bennett, T. S. Whitty, E. Finkbeiner, J. Pittman, H. Bassett, S. Gelcich, and E. H. Allison, "Environmental Stewardship: A Conceptual Review and Analytical Framework," *Environmental Management* 61, no. 5 (2018): 597–614, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00267-017-0993-2>.

⁴⁷ Heather Patterson, Ella Bowles, Susan Chiblow, Deborah McGregor, Cory Kozmik, and Jesse N. Popp, "Environmental and Socio-Cultural Impacts of Glyphosate-Based Herbicides: Perspectives from Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science," *Frontiers in Conservation Science* 4 (2023): 1186399, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcsc.2023.1186399>.

⁴⁸ Patterson et al., "Environmental and Socio-Cultural Impacts."

safeguarding natural resources.⁴⁹ Incorporating traditional practices into geopark management also enhances community engagement and fosters the preservation of cultural heritage.⁵⁰

Indigenous Beliefs and Worldviews in the Cordillera

In Cordilleran beliefs, the land is considered sacred, with a profound cultural and spiritual significance. The concept of ancestral domains is central to their worldview. These domains are not seen as private property but as sacred heritage passed down through generations. They represent a continuum of life, culture, and identity.⁵¹

Rituals and ceremonies are crucial for maintaining the sanctity of the land. For example, the *pagtatawid* ceremony, which involves the transfer of land stewardship, is performed to seek the approval of ancestral spirits. This ceremony ensures that new stewards respect and uphold the land's sanctity, highlighting the sacred relationship between the Cordillerans and their ancestral domains.⁵² Such practices are spiritual and practical, ensuring the land is managed sustainably. By integrating rituals with land management, the Cordillerans balance spiritual and ecological needs, demonstrating a holistic approach to environmental stewardship.

Allad-iw⁵³ explains that for the Cordillerans, land is not merely a resource but a fundamental aspect of their identity, culture, and existence. Their ancestral lands encompassing territories, waters, and resources are considered sacred and integral to survival. This deep connection is rooted in their traditional practices of sustainable resource management and collective ownership, where land is seen as a shared inheritance passed down through generations. The Cordillerans' relationship with their ancestral lands is not defined by individual ownership but by collective responsibility and stewardship.⁵⁴ Their

⁴⁹ A-K Yahaya, "Indigenous Knowledge in the Management of a Community-Based Forest Reserve in the West District of Ghana," *Ghana Journal of Development Studies* 9, no. 1 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.4314/gjds.v9i1.8>.

⁵⁰ Sharina Abdul Halim and Nor Azizah Ishak "Examining Community Engagement in Heritage Conservation Through Geopark Experiences from the Asia Pacific Region," *Kajian Malaysia* 35, Supp. 1 (2017): 11–38, <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2017.35.supp.1.2>.

⁵¹ Arline Santiago, "The Cordillera Indigenous Peoples' Right To Land," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2013), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/IPeoples/EMRIP/RightToLand/SantiagoPhilippinesCordillera.pdf>.

⁵² Caridad B. Fiar-od, "Cordillera Rituals: Their Features and Significance," *ICBE – Cordillera Rituals as a Way of Life*, April 3, 2021, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.icbe.eu/cordillera-rituals-as-a-way-of-life/948-cordillera-rituals-their-features-and-significance>.

⁵³ A. L. Allad-iw, "Ancestral Land Rights to Own, Use & Control Resources: A Must for Cordillera Autonomy," Cordillera Peoples Alliance, October 28, 2014, <https://cpaphils.wordpress.com/>.

⁵⁴ Joan Carling, "The Cordillera Experience," *Asia Society*, October 2001, <https://asiasociety.org/cordillera-experience>.

struggle for land rights stems from a historical context of colonial dispossession and a continued fight against development projects that threaten their way of life. The concept of land for the Cordillerans is not simply about ownership but about preserving their cultural heritage, ensuring their future, and maintaining a harmonious balance with the environment.⁵⁵ The discourse on land and resources among the Cordillera people can only be understood within the context of their beliefs and day-to-day practices.

"To claim a place is the birthright of every man. The lowly animals claim their place, how much more man? Man is born to live. *Apu Kabunian*, lord of us all, gave us life and placed us in this world to live human lives. Moreover, where shall we obtain life? From the land. To work the land is an obligation, not merely a right. In tilling the land, you possess it. Thus, land is a grace that must be nurtured. The land is sacred. The land is beloved. From its womb springs our Kalinga life."⁵⁶

These were the words of a Kalinga warrior chief, Macliing Dulag, explicitly describing the Cordillera peoples' concept of land. Like most Indigenous peoples worldwide, the Cordillera peoples equate land with life, both given by the Creator. Land, in this sense, includes all the resources below and above the earth's surface.

Indigenous environmental stewardship is characterized by a deep connection to the land and a holistic view of ecological systems. Traditional practices, such as cultural burning and rotational farming, are grounded in extensive knowledge accumulated over generations. For example, Adlam et al.,⁵⁷ emphasize the role of Indigenous cultural burning in managing fire regimes to enhance biodiversity and reduce wildfire risks. These traditional methods often outperform modern approaches in terms of ecological sustainability and resilience.⁵⁸

In the Cordillera region, the Ifugao people's forest management practices are informed by spiritual beliefs that underscore the interconnectedness of all life forms. This practice involves rituals that honor the environment and ensure its sustainable use.⁵⁹ Such

⁵⁵ Allad-iw, "Ancestral Land Rights.," Carmie A. Pacos, "Cordillera Peoples Alliance: Land Is Life, the Struggle Continues," *Agshan Online*, April 20, 2018, <https://agshanonline2018.wordpress.com/2018/04/20/cordillera-peoples-alliance-land-is-life-the-struggle-continues/>.

⁵⁶ Jose Mencio Molintas, "The Philippine Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Land and Life: Challenging Legal Texts," *Arizona Journal*, November 2015, accessed January 15, 2025, http://arizonajournal.org/wp-; Cruz v. Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources, G.R. No. 135385, Supreme Court of the Philippines, December 6, 2000. https://lawphil.net/judjuris/juri2000/dec2000/gr_135385_2000.html.

⁵⁷ Christopher Adlam, D. Almendariz, R. W. Goode, D. J. Martinez, and B. R. Middleton, "Keepers of the Flame: Supporting the Revitalization of Indigenous Cultural Burning," *Society & Natural Resources* 35, no. 5 (2021): 575–590, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2021.2006385>.

⁵⁸ Adlam et al., "Keepers of the Flame," 575–590.

⁵⁹ Camacho et al., "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge," 3–8.

practices demonstrate the efficacy of integrating cultural values with environmental management strategies, offering a model for contemporary conservation efforts.⁶⁰

Moreover, incorporating Indigenous perspectives into environmental management fosters greater respect and collaboration between Indigenous communities and policymakers.⁶¹ This integration can lead to more inclusive and culturally sensitive environmental policies crucial for achieving sustainable development goals. The revitalization of Indigenous practices, supported by research and policy initiatives, can contribute significantly to global efforts to combat climate change and promote ecological resilience.⁶²

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Indigenous cultures worldwide have developed complex systems of environmental stewardship deeply rooted in their spiritual and cultural beliefs.⁶³ These systems are not merely practices but are embedded in a worldview that perceives nature as sacred and interconnected with human life. In the Philippines, indigenous knowledge has been acknowledged for its role in sustaining production systems, with numerous studies validating its technical and scientific reliability. It was not until the 1992 Earth Summit that the Philippine government formally recognized the potential of these indigenous knowledge systems. Before this, researchers, development workers, and lawmakers in the Philippines focused on finding "modern" methods to achieve their goals.

Research shows that Indigenous practices, such as traditional fire management and rotational farming, effectively preserve biodiversity and prevent environmental degradation.⁶⁴ These methods, informed by centuries of observation and experience, often outperform modern techniques in terms of sustainability and resilience. For instance, cultural burning, practiced by various Indigenous groups, helps reduce fuel loads, prevent large-scale wildfires, and enhance biodiversity.⁶⁵ Such practices highlight Indigenous

⁶⁰ Camacho et al., "Traditional Forest Conservation World Agroforestry Centre, "Making Landscapes More Resilient for People and Nature: 2020 Year in Review," 2020, accessed January 15, 2025. <https://www.worldagroforestry.org/best-of-2020>.

⁶¹ Camacho et al.; World Agroforestry Centre, "Making Landscapes More Resilient."

⁶² Jessica Hernandez, Julianne Meisner, Kevin Bardosh, and Peter Rabinowitz, "Prevent Pandemics and Halt Climate Change? Strengthen Land Rights for Indigenous Peoples," *Lancet Planetary Health* 6, no. 5 (2022): e381–e382, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(22\)00236-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(22)00236-0).

⁶³ Clinton L. Beckford, Clint Jacobs, Naomi Williams & Russell Nahdee, "Aboriginal Environmental Wisdom, Stewardship, and Sustainability: Lessons from the Walpole Island First Nations, Ontario, Canada," *The Journal of Environmental Education* 41, no. 4 (2010), 239–248.

⁶⁴ Cathy Smith et al., "How Policy Interventions Influence Burning to Meet Cultural and Small-Scale Livelihood Objectives," *Ecology and Society* 29, no. 1 (2024), 135, <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-14850->

⁶⁵ Adlam et al., "Keepers of the Flame," 575–590.

traditions' deep environmental knowledge and efficacy in contemporary conservation efforts.

Traditional Environmental Practices

The Ifugao's *muyong* system is a traditional forest management practice where privately owned woodlots are carefully tended to provide essential resources like water, fuel, and food. The term "*muyong*" describes privately owned woodlots among the Tuwali subgroup of the Ifugao. This system reflects Ifugao's deep cultural connection to the environment, combining sustainable silviculture, agroforestry, and natural regeneration techniques to maintain the health of the forest and surrounding agricultural terraces. The *muyong* supports their physical needs and preserves their cultural practices and ecological balance.⁶⁶

Furthermore, *lapat* system is a traditional forest conservation strategy practiced by the Isneg and Tingguian peoples of Abra Province in the Philippines.⁶⁷ It involves designating specific forest areas as off-limits to resource extraction for a period ranging from a few months to several years, depending on the area's need for ecological recovery. This practice helps in the natural regeneration of forests by allowing trees, plants, and wildlife to recover from previous disturbances.

During the *lapat* period, activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering are prohibited, with some systems also imposing restrictions on harvesting specific plant and animal species.⁶⁸ The *lapat* system is an effective way to sustainably manage natural resources and ensure their availability for future generations, as seen in areas like Bucloc, where it is enforced through both customary and local laws with designated individuals responsible for monitoring compliance.⁶⁹

Dolom and Serrano⁷⁰ also mentioned that the Ikalahans, a subgroup of the Ifugao tribe in the Caraballo Mountains, have developed a range of traditional practices for

⁶⁶ Camacho et al., "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge/Technologies," 3–8.

⁶⁷ Molintas, *Inayan*.

⁶⁸ Molintas, *Inayan*.

⁶⁹ Camacho et al., "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge/Technologies," 3–8.

⁷⁰ Wilfredo B. Dolom and Rodolfo D. Serrano, "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge/Technologies in the Cordillera, Northern Philippines," in *Traditional Forest-Related Knowledge and Sustainable Forest Management in Africa*, ed. J. A. Parrotta (Helsinki: IUFRO World Series, 2005), 197–223, available at https://www.academia.edu/18838156/Traditional_forest_conservation_knowledge_technologies_in_the_Cordillera_Northern_.

sustainable agriculture and water conservation. According to Walpole et al.⁷¹ their agricultural methods include the *Inum-an* system, which involves site selection, clearing, burning, planting, weeding, harvesting, and fallowing to maintain soil fertility and productivity. *Gengen*, or terracing combined with composting, and *Day-og*, a composting technique, are used to conserve soil and nutrients. The *Balkab* system employs vegetative terracing with tiger grass to prevent soil erosion, while *Kinebbab* involves leaving fields fallow to restore fertility.⁷² *Tuping* refers to rock walls built to prevent soil erosion, and *Pamettey*, a homemade pesticide made from local plants and ash, is used to protect crops from pests. These traditional methods reflect the Ikalahans' deep understanding of their environment and commitment to sustainable land management.⁷³

Dictaan-Bang-oa⁷⁴ highlights the sustainable water management practices of the Kankanaey in Besao, Northern Philippines, which are deeply rooted in traditional religious beliefs and customary laws. Central to these practices are principles such as *inayan*, a moral code discouraging harmful actions, and reverence for *nakinbaey*, spiritual beings associated with water sources, which ensure sustainable use of natural resources. Rituals like *legleg* and communal systems such as *dumapat* facilitate equitable water distribution and resource maintenance through collective decision-making and labor-sharing. Complementary to these cultural practices, the community uses sustainable forestry, including reforestation and selective logging, to protect water sources. Despite challenges from resource disputes and modern agricultural demands, these indigenous frameworks—blending cultural traditions with local governance—demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of the Kankanaey in preserving ecological balance and communal well-being.⁷⁵

The Kankanaeys practice a mindful approach to keeping their water clean. They refrain from spitting and using soap or chemicals near their water sources. Even the remains of humans or animals are not permitted to pass through these areas. Offending the *nakinbaey* can lead to the abandonment of the water source, resulting in a reduced supply

⁷¹ P. Walpole, G. Braganza, J. B. Ong, G. J. Tengco, and E. Wijanco, eds., *Upland Philippine Communities: Guardians of the Final Forest Frontiers* (Research Network Report No. 4, Berkeley: Center for Southeast Asia Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1993).

⁷² Youn, Yeo-Chang. "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge/Technologies in the Cordillera, Northern Philippines." *Forest Policy and Economics* (2012). Accessed Jan. 15, 2025. https://www.academia.edu/18838156/Traditional_forest_conservation_knowledge_technologies_in_the_Cordillera_Northern_Philippines.

⁷³ Dolom and Serrano, "Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge/Technologies," 197–223.

⁷⁴ Eleanor Dictaan-Bang-oa, "Traditional Water Management Practices of the Kankanaey," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (2010), accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/traditional-water-management-practices-kankanaey>.

⁷⁵ Dictaan-Bang-oa, "Traditional Water Management Practices."

or a complete cutoff.⁷⁶ Therefore, it is crucial to hold a cleansing ritual led by community elders, with all water users participating, to honor and appease the *nakinbaey* that resides in the water source.

The significance of water in Kankanaey life is also expressed in local poetry, such as the piece presented by Gaongen⁷⁷ at the George Town Literary Festival in Malaysia, titled “The Strength of Water.” Gaongen’s poem explores the dual nature of water as both a powerful, destructive force and a nurturing, life-sustaining element. It underscores water’s role in the cultural and spiritual practices of the community, emphasizing the need for respect and harmony.⁷⁸ Abance⁷⁹ features thirty-three rituals from the Benguet Kankanaey that incorporate water as a vital element. Other rituals not included in her book but discussed in interviews and recordings also highlight water use, such as *basabas*, *dasadas*, *sepyat*, and more.

Doctolero⁸⁰ notes that mainstream society often dismisses the Kankanaeys’ rituals and belief systems, which label them paganism. Many educated individuals and families from the Cordillera peoples express that they have neglected and abandoned their cultural beliefs, leading to a sense of alienation from their heritage. Some educational and church institutions even reject cultural identity. A less informed perspective claims that these cultural beliefs and traditions are manifestations of evil. Consequently, many indigenous people feel confused and uncomfortable showcasing their practices and beliefs.

However, traditional forest management practices face various challenges and threats.⁸¹ *Muyong* owners enhance depleted areas through enrichment planting but often rely on fast-growing exotic species due to the scarcity of native seedlings, risking biodiversity loss. Development projects have also led to inappropriate practices, such as clearing *muyong* forests for non-traditional uses. The Ifugao Rice Terraces, crucial for water management, are deteriorating due to inadequate site management and declining local interest. The *lapat* system in Abra faces threats from pilferage. Meanwhile, the Ikalahans have effectively used their traditional practices, such as terracing and composting, to manage and conserve forests despite past threats from land conversion.⁸²

⁷⁶ Dictaan-Bang-oa, “Traditional Water Management Practices.”

⁷⁷ Gawani Gaongen, “The Strength of Water,” *Words Without Borders*, November 2022, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2022-11/the-strength-of-water-gawani-gaongen/>.

⁷⁸ Gaongen, “The Strength of Water.”

⁷⁹ Sybel Abance, *Ated: Understanding Timeless Values Ingrained Within a Fading Kankanaey Tradition* (Baguio City: Messenger of Hope, 2020).

⁸⁰ Jaime A. Doctolero, “Indigenous Healing Ritual in the Context of Ecological Disaster,” *MST Review* 23, no. 1 (2021): 1–1.

⁸¹ Camacho et al., “Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge/Technologies,” 3–8.

⁸² Camacho et al., “Traditional Forest Conservation Knowledge/Technologies,” 3–8.

Rituals and Ceremonies as Integrated Part of Sustainable Practices

The Indigenous cosmology of the Cordillera in the Philippines is rooted in a profound understanding of the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm.⁸³ This worldview is reflected in the Cordilleran peoples' daily practices and environmental stewardship, who view the natural world as a living entity imbued with spiritual significance.

For instance, Jacoba and Dubao⁸⁴ presented the central role of the *emambunong* in the traditional culture of Benguet, particularly in Kabayan. The *emambunong* is deeply respected within the community as a mediator between the human and spiritual realms. Their role is integral to maintaining harmony and addressing transgressions involving spirits, especially during sacrificial rites. Spirits are seen as coexisting with the human community, particularly in sacred places such as Mount Pulag. This belief underscores the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual worlds in indigenous traditions, with the *emambunong* facilitating communication and ensuring the community's adherence to cultural and spiritual norms. For example, The Kankana-ey, Ifugao, Bontoc, and Tingguian peoples of the Cordillera share a deep spiritual connection to their land, with each group practicing sustainable traditions tied to the environment.⁸⁵ The Kankana-ey honor the spirits of mountains, rivers, and forests through rituals and agriculture. The Ifugao view their sacred rice terraces as a symbol of harmony with nature, celebrated through rituals like the *Hudbud* epic.⁸⁶ The Bontoc and Tingguian also revere ancestral spirits in natural spaces, using ceremonies like the *Pechen* peace pact and *Gawiga* when myths to maintain harmony between the human and spiritual worlds.⁸⁷

In Cordilleran cosmology, the natural world is deeply intertwined with the spiritual realm. Indigenous beliefs hold that humans, nature, and spirits are interconnected in a delicate balance. This interconnectedness is central to their environmental practices, where maintaining harmony with nature and its spirits is crucial. Indigenous groups believe that disrupting this balance can lead to ecological and spiritual consequences.⁸⁸

⁸³ Del Castillo et al., "Religiosity among Indigenous Peoples," 751.

⁸⁴ Rico Casta Jacoba and Brigido Dubao, "A Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Eco-Spiritual Grounding," *Journal of the Religion and Social Communication* 20, no. 2 (2022), 181.

⁸⁵ Igorotage, "The Kankana-ey People of the Cordilleras," *Igorotage*, January 27, 2024, accessed January 20, 2025, <https://www.igorotage.com/blog/kankana-ey-people>; Aswang Project, "Kankanaey Beliefs," *The Aswang Project* (2024), accessed January 15, 2025. https://www.aswangproject.com/philippine-mythology/cordilleran-beliefs/kankanaey-beliefs/#google_vignette.

⁸⁶ Igorotage, "The Kankana-ey People of the Cordilleras"; Aswang Project, "Kankanaey Beliefs."

⁸⁷ Igorotage, "The Kankana-ey People of the Cordilleras"; Aswang Project, "Kankanaey Beliefs."

⁸⁸ Jacoba and Dubao, "A Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Eco-Spiritual Grounding," 181; Aswang Project, "Kankanaey Beliefs."

Essential spiritual beliefs guide these practices. For instance, ancestral spirits, known as *anito*, are revered as guardians of the land and its resources.⁸⁹ These spirits are believed to influence the community's well-being, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with them is essential for prosperity.⁹⁰ Nature deities, associated with rivers, mountains, and forests, also play a significant role. Rituals and offerings honor these deities, ensuring their favor is retained, and natural resources are used sustainably.⁹¹ For example, the dance rituals performed to honor spirits are integral to agricultural practices. During these ceremonies, offerings are made to appease the spirits and seek their blessings for a bountiful harvest. Such rituals reflect the deep spiritual connection between the Cordillerans and their environment, underscoring the role of spirituality in guiding environmental stewardship.⁹²

Syncretism in Beliefs and Practices

Syncretism in the Cordillera region showcases the merging of indigenous beliefs with Christian teachings, resulting in a distinctive blend of spiritual practices. A prominent example of this syncretism is the combination of Christian rituals with indigenous ceremonies. For instance, the traditional Ifugao ritual that honors ancestral spirits, which includes offerings and prayers for a fruitful harvest, has been adapted to incorporate Christian prayers and hymns while preserving the essential spiritual intent of the ceremony.⁹³ Likewise, the influence of the Catholic Church is evident in how indigenous communities observe Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter, often integrating indigenous symbols and practices, such as traditional dances or rituals, alongside Christian elements.

Cordillera rituals, deeply rooted in the indigenous knowledge and oral tradition, remain integral to the Igorots' daily lives, blending customary laws, ancestral practices, and Christian influences introduced during colonization. Rituals serve diverse purposes, from seeking blessings and expressing gratitude to appeasing spirits and fostering community solidarity. They often involve prayers, chants, animal sacrifices, and symbolic props like

⁸⁹ Jacoba and Dubao, "A Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Eco-Spiritual Grounding," 181

⁹⁰ Jacoba and Dubao, "A Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Eco-Spiritual Grounding," 181; Igorotage, "The Kankana-ey People of the Cordilleras."

⁹¹ P. Chunhabunyatip, N. Sasaki, C. Grünbühel, J. K. M. Kuwornu, and T. W. Tsusaka, "Influence of Indigenous Spiritual Beliefs on Natural Resource Management and Ecological Conservation in Thailand," *Sustainability* 10, no. 8 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10082842>.

⁹² Caridad B. Fiar-od, "Cordillera Rituals: Their Features and Significance," *ICBE – Cordillera Rituals as a Way of Life*, April 3, 2021, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://icbe.eu/cordillera-rituals-as-a-way-of-life/948-cordillera-rituals-their-features-and-significance>.

⁹³ Carl Johnson G. Anacin, "Syncretism in Rituals and Performance in a Culturally Pluralistic Society in the Philippines," *The Social Science Journal* 52, no. 1 (2015), 40–45.

rice, fire, and carved figures to convey spiritual and environmental harmony. Elders or designated officiants, respected for their cultural knowledge and integrity, lead these ceremonies, reflecting moral values and practical customs, such as land rights acquisition and conflict resolution. Despite modernization and migration affecting these practices, rituals significantly preserve cultural identity, environmental stewardship, and spiritual connection among Cordillera communities.⁹⁴

Implications and Challenges of Indigenous Environmental Stewardship

The increasing acknowledgment of Indigenous environmental practices underscores their significance for global ecological management, particularly in an accelerating climate crisis. Bennett et al.⁹⁵ suggest that incorporating Indigenous knowledge into contemporary environmental strategies bolsters conservation and sustainable development efforts. Furthermore, Black and McBean⁹⁶ emphasize that enhancing Indigenous involvement in environmental decision-making can improve health outcomes and conservation initiatives. By integrating Indigenous viewpoints, policies can become more inclusive and culturally attuned, promoting effective and equitable environmental management that leverages the deep ecological insights of these communities.

However, the Cordillera region faces significant challenges due to industrial activities like mining and deforestation, which threaten traditional practices and local ecosystems. Mining has led to land degradation, disrupted traditional agricultural and forest management systems, and caused soil erosion and water contamination, undermining Indigenous practices' sustainability.⁹⁷

Additionally, external pressures from government policies and commercial interests often worsen these problems, placing economic development above environmental conservation and neglecting Indigenous land rights, further marginalizing these communities.⁹⁸ In response, it is crucial to implement efforts to preserve Indigenous

⁹⁴ Fiar-od, "Cordillera Rituals: Their Features and Significance."

⁹⁵ Bennett et al., "Environmental Stewardship," 597–614.

⁹⁶ Kerry Black and Edward McBean, "Increased Indigenous Participation in Environmental Decision-Making: A Policy Analysis for the Improvement of Indigenous Health," *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 7, no. 4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2016.7.4.5>.

⁹⁷ Janica Timblique, "Case Study: The Environmental and Social Costs of Illegal Mining in the Cordillera Region of the Philippines," SSRN Working Paper, 8 pages, Industrial Technology (Meneses Campus), October 1, 2024, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4964066.

⁹⁸ Amnesty International, "Indigenous Peoples," Amnesty International, November 30, 2024, accessed January 20, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/indigenous-peoples/>.

knowledge, such as educational programs and community-based initiatives, to revitalize traditional practices and incorporate them into modern environmental management.⁹⁹

Reclaiming Cultural Identity

I would like to argue that securing land rights and enacting laws to regulate environmental degradation is no longer enough for ecological well-being. Restoring the spiritual and emotional ties between people and their land is crucial for the community to thrive. This task is both a religious and cultural challenge. The task must re-emphasize that Indigenous peoples worldwide should profoundly re-connect to their environment, viewing it as the foundation of their lives, spirituality, and cultural identity.¹⁰⁰ Indigenous worldview must, once again, re-emphasize collective coexistence, mutual respect, and cooperation, contrasting Western resource-centric approaches.¹⁰¹

Reclaiming the lost identity can also mean re-integrating Indigenous environmental practices with modern conservation. In this way, efforts to promote environmental preservation offer a promising approach to sustainable development in Cordillera. Developed over generations, Indigenous knowledge provides valuable insights into local ecosystems and sustainable resource management. For example, Ifugao's *muyong* system for managing forests surrounding rice terraces is an effective conservation practice that can complement contemporary approaches to forest and agricultural sustainability.¹⁰²

Moreover, collaboration between Indigenous communities, government agencies, and NGOs is crucial in blending traditional wisdom with scientific research, creating more effective conservation strategies.¹⁰³ Reaffirming cultural identity through environmental stewardship is crucial for strengthening community resilience. Practices intertwined with cultural rituals, such as agricultural and forest management ceremonies, maintain a strong sense of identity and social cohesion.¹⁰⁴ Balancing tradition with modern challenges, such

⁹⁹ Beverly Laltoog, "Empowering Indigenous Communities: The Pursuit of Quality Education and Peaceful Societies," *Inclusive Society and Sustainability Studies* 4, no. 1 (2024), 43–56, <https://doi.org/10.31098/issues.v4i1.2055>; H. Mekonnen, Z. Bires, and K. Berhanu, "Practices and Challenges of Cultural Heritage Conservation in Historical and Religious Heritage Sites: Evidence from North Shoa Zone, Amhara Region, Ethiopia," *Heritage Science* 10, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-022-00802-6>.

¹⁰⁰ Carling, "The Cordillera Experience."

¹⁰¹ Carling, "The Cordillera Experience."

¹⁰² Molintas, *Inayan*.

¹⁰³ Giusy Pappalardo, "Community-Based Processes for Revitalizing Heritage: Questioning Justice in the Experimental Practice of Ecomuseums," *Sustainability* 12, no. 21 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12219270>.

¹⁰⁴ Laltoog, "Empowering Indigenous Communities," 43–56.

as climate change, further enhances the relevance of these practices in contemporary conservation.¹⁰⁵

CONCLUSION

The indigenous beliefs and practices in the Cordillera play a crucial role in environmental stewardship, showcasing a profound connection between people, nature, and the spiritual world. Traditional methods such as the *myong* forest management system and sacred rituals associated with land and water emphasize sustainability and reverence for natural resources. However, the rise of modernization, industrialization, outside pressures, and greedy profit-oriented individuals threaten these practices.

It is now the time to realize that a significant opportunity exists to merge indigenous knowledge with contemporary conservation efforts, leading to more effective environmental strategies that honor cultural heritage. Collaboration among indigenous communities, policymakers, and NGOs is essential for this integration, ensuring that conservation policies are inclusive and impactful. It is not just a matter of an appeal, but rather, a categorical imperative that as we move forward, policymakers guarantee that the beliefs and the rights of Indigenous communities are upheld amid development.

Similarly, Indigenous communities are to adopt a more critical stance on receiving the Christian faith, adopting its life-giving elements, and vehemently resisting all death-dealing elements. It is also essential to engage private and public academic institutions to create a curriculum to aid in preserving cultural heritage while addressing the challenges of the climate crisis. These are vital concerns for political, religious, and academic stakeholders.

Additionally, it is an urgent call to all the Cordilleras to say enough to the oppressive systems and practices that slowly and gradually kill the life-giving elements of Indigenous beliefs and practices. In reclaiming the lost identity, one must resist all death-giving elements introduced by modernity and the selfish capitalist mentality. Nobody owns nature; we are nature. To destroy nature is to destroy ourselves.

The Cordilleran approach to environmental conservation stands in stark contrast to mainstream, lowland-centric strategies. Unlike exploitative models that prioritize economic gain over ecological balance, Cordilleran conservation is deeply rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems. This is not merely an alternative method but a radical departure from dominant conservation paradigms that often disregard Indigenous wisdom. Genuine environmental sustainability requires an urgent and deliberate fusion of Indigenous ecological practices with

¹⁰⁵ Mekonnen et al., “Practices and Challenges of Cultural Heritage Conservation.”

contemporary conservation science, ensuring policies that are not only effective but also culturally grounded.

Furthermore, collaborative frameworks must be established where policymakers, Indigenous communities, and NGOs co-create conservation strategies that uphold Indigenous sovereignty rather than impose external, often exploitative, frameworks. This entails a radical policy shift that actively defends Indigenous rights against development aggression, recognizing that Indigenous environmental stewardship is not a relic of the past but a vital, living practice essential to sustainability.

Equally crucial is the critical reception of external influences, particularly in navigating the historical and ongoing imposition of religious and economic systems that erode Indigenous values. Christianity, for instance, must be engaged with discernment—embracing its positive aspects while rejecting its colonial baggage that has historically undermined Indigenous worldviews. The education system must also be decolonized, integrating Indigenous ecological wisdom into curricula rather than perpetuating Western-centric narratives that alienate Indigenous youth from their heritage.

Beyond policy and education, true resistance against environmental and cultural degradation requires community mobilization. Indigenous communities must actively reclaim their agency, challenging oppressive capitalist structures that commodify both nature and Indigenous identity. Environmental awareness campaigns should be reframed to center Indigenous perspectives, shifting public consciousness towards recognizing that nature is not a resource to be exploited but a sacred, life-giving entity demanding respect and reciprocity.

Finally, development must be redefined—not as the imposition of external economic models, but as an inclusive, equity-driven process that aligns with Indigenous lifeways. The Cordilleran way of life is not an alternative, it is a radical assertion of environmental justice, a living testament to sustainability that challenges the destructive paradigms of modernity.

The time for passive appeals has passed. The Cordilleran way of life is not just a regional peculiarity; it is a revolutionary paradigm—one that defies the exploitative logic of capitalist modernity and offers a humanizing alternative to environmental destruction. The Indigenous peoples of the Cordillera have long understood what the world is only now beginning to grasp: that nature is not a commodity, nor a resource to be plundered, but a sacred communion of life in which humanity is intricately woven. Their forest management, their rituals, and their deep reverence for the land are not relics of the past but a prophetic challenge to the systems that have prioritized profit over life. Their struggle is our struggle—because to destroy nature is to destroy ourselves.

This is a call to liberation—not just for the Cordilleran people, but for all who recognize that the death-dealing forces of unchecked industrialization, corporate greed, and cultural erasure

must be radically resisted. The integration of Indigenous ecological wisdom into contemporary conservation is not a suggestion; it is a moral and existential imperative. It demands that policymakers abandon their colonizing mindset and recognize Indigenous sovereignty over land and tradition. It requires a reimagining of education, where young minds are not alienated from their cultural heritage but empowered by it. It necessitates a radical rethinking of Christianity, where faith is no longer used as an instrument of oppression but as a means of liberation, embracing only what nurtures life and resisting what destroys it.

Above all, it is a call to reclaim what has been stolen—identity, agency, and the sacred connection between people and land. The Cordillerans must rise, not simply to preserve their way of life but to unleash its transformative power upon the world. Their struggle is a beacon for all humanity, proving that a different way of living—one that is just, sustainable, and deeply human—is not only possible but necessary. This is no longer about survival; it is about the radical redefinition of what it means to be human in communion with the Earth. The fight for environmental justice is the fight for human dignity. The world must listen. And more importantly, it must follow.

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