

EXPLORING THE SHARED AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY OF THE TANDULANEN TAGBANUA THROUGH THE NARRATIVE OF LIVED EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the lived experience of Tandula-nen Tagbanua identity in Palawan as expressed in the oral tradition, where identity is a process and not a legal category. Their social life was organized around the Inogtula-ne (the story of the tibor), a sacred jar that held spiritual power. These stories were the foundation of group identity, which, before the advent of mainstream interventions, regulated social order, land relations, and moral conduct. This research uses a storytelling approach to collect data, an ethnographic approach based on everyday encounters, conversations, and storytelling with the elders and Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs) in different settlements. This study finds identity not in territorial fixity but in narrative continuity, tracing the movement of identity from place- and object-based to collective lived experience of displacement and engagement with imposed law. The results indicate that the Tandula-nen identity emanating from a singular, place-based sense of self expressed through the Tandol, becomes a plural but collective identity, moved through space, now signified through the stone. This research informs non-indigenous people about the voices of Indigenous Peoples in defining who they are, not just what is in the general definition of indigeneity imposed by the law.

Keywords: *Tandula-nen Tagbanua, inogtula-nen, Tibor, IPRA law, state law, indigeneity*

INTRODUCTION

Who are Indigenous peoples, and what makes people Indigenous? In the Philippines, these issues are addressed through the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, which defines Indigenous Peoples or Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs) as groups that have retained their historical continuity from precolonial societies and have maintained their distinct social, cultural, political, and economic institutions (Republic Act No. 8371, 1997). IPRA provides legal recognition and protection but tends to define Indigenous identity as fixed and bounded, emphasizing continuity with ancestral traditions and historical difference from the majority population.

This legal framing poses important questions about the fluidity of Indigenous identity. While attention is paid to who is legally Indigenous, there is less focus on how Indigenous identities are in a constant state of negotiation, transformation, and redefinition in response to social change. Such definitions may inadvertently play into processes of "othering" by framing Indigenous Peoples as inherently "different" from the rest of the population. In contrast, Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) establishes the principle of self-determination, which holds that all people have the right to determine their own political, social, economic, and cultural future. Legal categories alone cannot account for Indigenous identity in this perspective, but it must also be considered from the standpoint of Indigenous people lived experience and self-identification.

This paper, in response to this concern, examines the narratives of the Tandula-nen Tagbanua of Northern Palawan to explore the ways Indigenous identity is understood, expressed, and negotiated from within the community. Following Corntassel's (2003)

argument that the question of “Who is Indigenous? The question of who “ is best answered by Indigenous peoples themselves, and this study privileges Indigenous voices over externally imposed definitions. It explores how identity is created through shared ancestry, oral traditions, attachment to territory, collective memory, and contemporary experiences of marginalization, adaptation and cultural continuity.

The study also indicates that Indigenous identities are not singular and are not static. Colonial legacies, Christian missionary influence, intermarriage, migration, economic transformation, and state-centered legal frameworks that regulate Indigenous life inform the identity of the Tandula-nen Tagbanua (Clifford, 2001). These forces intersect and shape community members’ understanding of who they were, who they are, and who they might become. Identity thus becomes a continuous process of negotiation rather than a static cultural condition.

The oral tradition or *inogtula-nen*, is the core of this process of transmission of historical memory, cultural knowledge, customary values, and collective experiences of the Tandula-nen Tagbanua. Oral narratives are repositories of the past and living systems of knowledge that maintain community identity and territorial affiliation (Cruikshank, 1998; Finnegan, 1992; Vansina, 1985). Sacred objects such as the tabor become culturally and spiritually significant in these stories and symbolize collective memory and Indigenous notions of social order (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Hoskins, 1998; Jocano, 1998).

This study contributes to Indigenous Studies by exploring *inogtula-nen* and other lived experience stories, in an attempt to bring Indigenous storytelling to the forefront as a way to understand identity formation and self-determination. It views Indigenous Peoples as holders of knowledge and as agents of their own histories, not as objects of study. In so doing, the study supports calls for Indigenous-centered approaches to research (Smith, 2012) and contributes to broader efforts to challenge dominant representations of Indigenous identity in law, academia and state institutions (Corntassel, 2003; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Palawan is inhabited by a variety of Indigenous Peoples, including the Agutaynen, Batak, Kagayanen, Molbog, Palaw’an, Taw’t Bato, Tagbanua, and Cuyonon (PSA Regional Statistics Office MIMAROPA, 2020). But these communities have also undergone significant cultural changes through increased migration, intermarriage, religious conversion, and integration into mainstream society. Many of the younger Indigenous people do not speak their ancestral languages or have only a limited knowledge of traditional practices and increasingly identify themselves as Palaweno rather than as members of their Indigenous groups. These developments raise important questions about the continuity and transformation of an Indigenous identity in Palawan.

The Tagbanua is considered one of the first inhabitants of Palawan among the Indigenous groups of the province. In Northern Palawan, Guieb (2011, 27-28) identified three major Tagbanua groups, the Silananen, Calamianen, and Tandula-nen. Traditionally, the Silananen relied on forest resources, and the Calamianen on fishing and inter-island mobility, while the Tandula-nen developed livelihoods related to the land and the sea (Guieb, 2011; Samulde, 2019). The historical movements, intermarriage, and social interaction have also influenced these communities, including their interactions with other Tagbanua such as the Kâ-luranen and Apurawnen (Marian Adion 2025, personal communication).

Previous studies have documented the historical and cultural development of Tagbanua communities in Palawan. Fox (1986) mapped the connections between Tagbanua groups in the north, centre and south of Palawan, noting the role of migration in shaping present day Indigenous communities. The Tagbanua people are scattered geographically but they are still

culturally, orally and kinship connected. Much of this knowledge is now held mostly by community elders and younger generations are more and more exposed to external cultural and institutional influences.

The enactment of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) has given legal recognition to Indigenous communities and greater opportunities to assert rights over ancestral lands and domains. However, scholars point out that legal definitions of indigeneity do not always represent the complex and dynamic ways in which Indigenous peoples perceive and express their identities (Theriault, 2019). For the Tagbanua, identity is not only a matter of legal recognition, but of lived experiences, oral traditions, social relationships and continued encounters with larger political, religious, and cultural forces.

In the context of these changes, it is important to explore Indigenous narratives in an attempt to understand how the Tagbanua identity is maintained, negotiated, and redefined through time. This study is about the inogtula-nen (oral narratives) of the Tandula-nen Tagbanua of Northern Palawan. In analyzing these narratives, the study examines how community members interpret their past, respond to contemporary change, and construct Indigenous identity in changing social and cultural contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative ethnographic research design to understand the changing identity of the Tandula-nen Tagbanua through their oral narrative (inogtula-nen). Ethnography was chosen because it offers deep insight into community experiences through extended engagement, observation, and interaction. The researcher had a prior connection with the community that built rapport, allowing for access to participants and local knowledge.

The study also used Indigenous research methods, such as storytelling and yarning, which are acknowledged as important ways of generating and transmitting knowledge in many Indigenous communities (McIvor, 2010). Storytelling-based approaches are similarly found to be useful Indigenous research methods to document and understand Indigenous knowledge systems (Drawson et al., 2017). The study is also informed by the work of Vansina on oral tradition, particularly his emphasis on ethical engagement and respectful interpretation of Indigenous narratives (Vansina, 1985).

Data collection was initiated following the approval of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and FPIC from the Tandula-nen Tagbanua community and other relevant stakeholders. The research permit was approved in February 2024 and subsequently, the study was endorsed by the NCIP Central Office to the NCIP Region IV-B Office.

The data were collected through participant observation, informal conversation, storytelling, and semi-structured interviews with community leaders, including the Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs), elders, and community members. A guide questionnaire was prepared, but fieldwork was mainly conversational and participant-led rather than inflexible interview schedules. The approach is in line with Indigenous methodologies that emphasize relational dialogue and knowledge that comes about organically through interaction (Bagele, 2012; Drawson et al., 2017).

Questions were only asked where clarification was needed, as is normal ethnographic practice. This approach aligns with Galman's (2019) recommendation that ethnographers should avoid imposing preconceived expectations and instead facilitate meanings and insights to emerge from community experiences. Audio and video recordings, field notes and

observations documented oral traditions, lived experiences and conversations around identity, ancestral land and community life.

Recorded interviews and conversations were transcribed and analyzed thematically. The analysis focused on how the Tandula-nen Tagbanua make, negotiate, and transform their collective identity through oral narratives. Themes of ancestry, territory, cultural continuity, Indigenous rights, and social change received special attention.

The study also looked at the cultural role of material culture, especially the tabor, as a cultural object integrated into oral stories and community memory. Earlier narratives have underscored the symbolic and spiritual significance of the tabor, whereas more recent narratives have highlighted ancestral land claims and the implications of the IPRA.

The focus of the analysis was on Indigenous perspectives and local meanings, rather than applying analytical tools from outside. In the spirit of Nimmo (1994), narratives, observations, and community experiences were analyzed in their own cultural context to better understand how the Tandula-nen Tagbanua articulated and experienced identity. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research with Indigenous Peoples. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the NCIP and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) was obtained from the participating community. Participants were informed about the aims of the study, procedures, and the purpose of the data.

To ensure accessibility and understanding of the participants, written consent forms were translated into Filipino. Permission was gained to record interviews and conversations. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Where appropriate, verbatim excerpts from recorded narratives were retained in the analysis in order to accurately represent. The study sought to follow the principles set by Vansina (1985) in working with oral traditions, namely respecting Indigenous knowledge, community ownership of narratives, and the cultural meanings embedded in the stories shared by the Tandula-nen Tagbanua.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

Results

This study examined how Tandula-nen Tagbanua identity is expressed through oral tradition; how shared stories shape identity transformation; how the state's definitions of indigeneity intersect with self-defined identity; and how the community negotiates singular and plural identities. The findings suggest that the identity of Tandula-nen is primarily expressed through Inogtula-nen, the oral tradition of the community, rather than through state-defined categories of indigeneity. Oral narratives serve as repositories of collective memory, historical continuity, and cultural knowledge that enable community members to define themselves relative to lived experiences and ancestral connections (Smith 2012; Cruikshank 1998; Vansina 1985).

In the past, the tandol was the main marker of Tandula-nen identity. Elders called it the rocky space between land and sea that was a symbol of territorial belonging and social identity (Samulde 2019; Basso 1996; Tuan 1977). But what we can see in current narratives is a movement away from an identity based in place to a more mobile and symbolic mode of identification. As younger leaders and community members draw more from the *bato* (stone),

which symbolizes resilience, continuity, and strength irrespective of physical location (Marcos (Tagbanua), Hoskins 1998; Appadurai 1986).

The findings also suggest that the process of identity transformation is informed by collective experiences of displacement, migration, poverty, religious conversion, discrimination and interaction with state institutions. Stories are the vehicle for these lived experiences, which are preserved and passed on, allowing community members to reinterpret and sustain their identity across generations (Hall 1996; Cruikshank 1998; Halbwachs 1992). Religious affiliation, especially Christianity, has been incorporated into contemporary Tandula-nen identity without displacing Indigenous self-identification (Cannell 1999; Robbins 2007).

The study likewise found out that the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) serves both as a framework of recognition and a mechanism of empowerment. Although IPRA provides an official legal definition of indigeneity, Tandula-nen Tagbanua leaders use IPRA's provisions strategically to reclaim ancestral domains, guarantee representation, and claim Indigenous rights (Republic Act No. 8371, 1997; Niezen 2003; Theriault 2019). This has made oral histories and genealogical narratives politically important as proof for land claims and Indigenous self-governance.

Finally, the results indicate that the Tandula-nen simultaneously assert a single collective identity and acknowledge internal plurality. Although the names Tandula-nen, Silananen and Kâ-luranen still have historical significance, newer narratives stress a common Tandula-nen identity based on common ancestry and experience (Fox 1982; Novellino 2010). Identity is thus understood as both singular and plural, holding together a collective unity, while allowing for a diversity of experiences and expressions (Hall 1996; Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

Findings

The findings suggest that it is more fruitful to see Tandula-nen identity as a fluid and constantly negotiated process than as a stable cultural category. Similar to research on Indigenous identity formation, oral tradition is a way of preserving the past, as well as a mechanism through which communities reinterpret their relationships to land, history and contemporary realities (Cruikshank 1998; Smith 2012). The evolution of *tandol* from a territorial marker to the symbolic *bato* demonstrates how Indigenous identities evolve in response to shifting social, political, and environmental conditions, while remaining rooted in ancestral memory.

The study also shows that identity transformation is not a mere by-product of marginalization. It is rather produced through the interaction of a variety of factors such as religious conversion, migration, education, intermarriage, and contact with state institutions. Shared narratives enable the Tandula-nen to transform experiences of displacement and exclusion into resources for resilience and collective solidarity, and thus to reinforce, rather than undermine, Indigenous identity (Clifford 2001; Malkki 1992; Niezen 2003).

IPRA's relation with Tandula-nen identity is a complex tension between imposed and self-determined forms of indigeneity. Legal definitions of Indigenous peoples tend to portray them as fixed, bounded groups, but the lived experience of the Tandula-nen demonstrates that identity remains fluid, layered, and historically contingent (Niezen 2003; Theriault 2019). Community leaders do not reject the law, but instead work with it strategically to translate

Indigenous knowledge into legal language while maintaining groundings of identity in oral tradition and collective memory.

The findings also add to broader discussions of Indigenous identity by demonstrating that singularity and plurality are not mutually exclusive. The Tandula-nen have a strong sense of collective identity, but also recognize internal differences based on locality, kinship, and lived experience. This corresponds to the current understanding of identity as multilayered and relational, rather than homogeneous or static (Hall 1996; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Pożarlik 2013).

In the end, the paper argues that the continued act of storytelling is the permanent base of Tandula-nen identity. Inogtula-nen allows the community to sustain ancestral knowledge, negotiate contemporary challenges, and express future aspirations. Oral tradition thus continues to function as a cultural resource and political tool through which the Tandula-nen Tagbanua maintain their collective identity as they negotiate the realities of imposed indigeneity, legal recognition, and social change (Vansina 1985; Cruikshank 1998; Smith 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that Tandula-nen Tagbanua identity is not fixed or a singular category but a dynamic process that is constantly shaped through oral tradition, lived experience, and collective memory. The Tandula-nen, through Inogtula-nen, narrate their historical origins, their current circumstances, and their future hope, demonstrating identity as an active negotiation rather than a passive inheritance. Findings reveal a dramatic shift in identity markers from *tandol* as a place-based symbol of belonging to *bato* (stone) as an embodied and portable symbol of resilience, continuity, and ancestral connection. Simultaneously, the Tandula-nen identity is singular and plural, maintaining collective cohesion while accommodating diverse experiences, locations, religious affiliations, and social realities.

The study also finds that the Tandula-nen strategically manipulate the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) instead of accepting the law's legal definition of indigeneity. Although IPRA provides an important legal context for asserting ancestral land rights, political representation, and cultural recognition, community members continue to define themselves through oral narratives, customary practices, and lived experiences. Thus, the results suggest that Indigenous identity is always being forged between the interplay of ancestral memory, contemporary challenges, state institutions, religious transformation, and community-based self-determination.

Contribution of the present study

This study contributes to Indigenous Studies, Anthropology, and Philippine Indigenous Peoples research by showing how oral tradition operates as a repository of cultural memory and an active process of identity formation and self-determination. The study centers the voices and lived experiences of the Tandula-nen Tagbanua through the Inogtula-nen, providing an Indigenous-centered understanding of identity that challenges static, legalistic, and externally imposed definitions of indigeneity. It also shows how Indigenous communities negotiate and reinterpret state frameworks such as IPRA while maintaining culturally grounded forms of belonging, governance and authority.

Methodologically, the study contributes to narrative and ethnographic scholarship by taking oral tradition as both a source of knowledge and an Indigenous epistemological

framework. Instead of viewing Indigenous narratives as objects to be preserved, the study stresses their active role in maintaining continuity through change and in producing contemporary expressions of indigeneity.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study lays a foundation for future research, where comparative studies among other Tagbanua groups and Indigenous communities in Palawan may be conducted to explore the similarities and differences of their identity construction, oral traditions, and experiences of self-determination. Longitudinal research could also explore how younger generations continue to reinterpret Inogtula-nen and negotiate Indigenous identity within the context of migration, education, digital technologies, and increasing participation in mainstream institutions.

Further research is also recommended on the relationship between Indigenous oral traditions and legal frameworks such as IPRA, particularly in terms of how Indigenous communities use, contest, or transform state definitions of indigeneity in their struggle for ancestral land rights and political representation. Finally, Indigenous-led and community-based research approaches should be strengthened so that Indigenous knowledge remains under the authority of Indigenous peoples themselves and continues to inform policy, scholarship, and development initiatives in culturally meaningful ways.

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