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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Cultural Healing Rituals and Practices Used by Ati Traditional Healers

Leonor S. Rosales<sup>1</sup> and Victoria A. Gepty<sup>2</sup> ✉

<sup>1</sup>Teacher III, Basic Education Department, Aklan Catholic College, Andagao, Kalibo, Aklan Philippines

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor 1, College of Teacher Education, Aklan State University, Banga, Aklan, Philippines

**Corresponding Author:** Victoria A. Gepty, **E-mail:** [aguilarvictoria71@gmail.com](mailto:aguilarvictoria71@gmail.com)

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to establish the healing rituals and beliefs of *Ati* (Indigenous People) traditional healers in Aklan, Philippines. The study was anchored on interpretivism, which seeks to comprehend and interpret human activity and participants' experiences. The research used narrative analysis as a qualitative method of research. The study was conducted at Numancia, Aklan, Philippines. This included six (6) participants; the *Sorhana* (traditional healer) was the main participant, while the chieftain, two elders of the community, and the two *Ati* members served as validators to the answers of the *Sorhana* (traditional healer). An interview guide, observation notes and audio-visual materials (photography, video and audio recordings) were used to gather data. The result revealed that the *Ati* (Indigenous People) continues to believe in *Sorhana* as their traditional healer who was guided by the *tamawo* (spirits that guide) and *kalag* (spirits of the dead) and has the power to diagnose illness and fight mystical invisible elements. The *Sorhana* (traditional healer) has the ability and authority to perform healing rituals in the *Ati* (Indigenous People) community. The healing rituals in the *Ati* (Indigenous People) community were; *Pagbagting* (beating of the agong), *pag – orunungon* (paying in exchange for healing), *pagpatupad* (appointing of the traditional healer), *pagpalupad* (releasing of chicken), *pag – anagas* (renaming of the sick), *pagbutbot* (eliminating diseases), and *pagtabog* (expelling the evil spirits). The *Ati* (Indigenous People) are animistic while also believing in a supreme being. Acculturation happened in the culture of *Ati* (Indigenous People) by adopting the Roman Catholic celebration like *Semana Santa* (holy week) and believing in the resurrection offered by Jesus Christ.

**KEYWORDS**

Ati, Sorhana, Healing Rituals, Practices, Beliefs

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**1. Introduction**

Indigenous people have a peculiar culture creating a rich and rooted way of living. The *Ati* (Indigenous People) in Numancia, Aklan, Philippines, belongs to the Indigenous Cultural Communities registered by the National Commission of Indigenous People. These *Ati* (Indigenous People) strive to build and maintain their own language, culture and traditional healing ritual that characterizes the *Ati* (Indigenous People) identity healing and beliefs in its traditional way.

Additionally, the *Ati* (Indigenous People) are known for their animistic beliefs (Salmorin, 2021). The belief in the unseen elements and spirits of the *Ati*'s (Indigenous People) ancestors influenced the process of *Ati*'s (Indigenous People) rituals and healing practices.

According to the United Nations (2019), the indigenous people's culture is under threat of extinction due to technology and industrialization advancement. In fact, Manzano (2021) stated that the *Ati* of Numancia, Aklan, Philippines, is losing most of their cultural and linguistic indigenous practices faster than communities in non-urban areas. The limited studies about the rituals, healing practices, and beliefs of indigenous peoples, particularly of the *Ati* (Indigenous People), are among the factors that contributed to losing their culture.

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This research would like to emphasize the importance of documenting and preserving indigenous people's cultural healing practices, establishing the cultural healing practices and rituals of the *Ati* (Indigenous People), and promoting awareness and appreciation of the culture of the *Ati* (Indigenous People).

## **2. Literature Review**

The *Ati* (Indigenous People) of Panay were nomadic in nature, according to Manzano (2021), Valdeavilla (2018) and Grey (2015). But as the years passed by, these Indigenous People organized their own community on a communally bounded and defined territory bonded by their own culture (PSA, 2017). Through this created group, *Ati* (Indigenous People) developed their own unique tradition as seen in their way of living, beliefs, and rituals amidst the presence of modernity (Martinez, 2019; Alejandro, 2020; Maatubang, 2015; Grey, 2015; Regrario et al. 2007).

The *Negritos*, also known as *Ati* (Indigenous People) in Western Visayas, are the principal indigenous people (NCIP; Manzano 2021). Other terms identified to *Ati* (Indigenous People) are the Aeta, Agta, Ayta, Batak or Mamanwa (Gavino, 2020). They have dark skin, curly hair, flattened nose and bodies covered with thick hair (Alejandro, 2021). Although *Ati* (Indigenous People) have their own language, it was replaced by *Kinaray-a* (Visayas; Remaining Treasures of the Indigenous People, 2015). As the *Ati* (Indigenous People) group members are associated with the nearby community, their language becomes threatened (Alejandro, 2021; Samar, 2012).

The Philippine Constitution and the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act 8371 recognize, protect, promote and fulfill the rights of these Indigenous People (UNDP Org, 2013).

To highlight one culture of the *Ati* (Indigenous People) is their healing practices and rituals; this has been passed down from generation to generation (Labastida, 2016; Nomoto, 2020). The *Ati* (Indigenous People) believes in unseen elements (Bacabac, 2013; Cruz-Lucero et al., 2018;) that intermingle with humans. These spiritual beings can harm people; thus, the intervention of *Sorhana* (traditional healer) through rituals/ceremonies can appease the angered deities (Alleydog, 2022; Javier, 2018). Along the rituals are the *tuob* (fumigation), boiling ritual as to National Commission for Culture and Arts (2022) definition, *Mangmang*, petitioning the *anito* for the wellness of the sick person (Philippine Alternative Medicine, 2017), and *pabulag sa palag*- (ritual detaching the soul of the deceased person from the attached member of the family) (Cruz-Lucero et al., 2018).

## **3. Methodology**

The researcher used narrative analysis as a qualitative method of research, guided by the view of interpretivism. Narrative analysis was utilized to understand the culture of *Ati* (Indigenous People) healers in their rituals and practices in healing. Data were gathered through an interview guide, audio-visual material (photography, video and audio recording), field notes and observation.

Selected participants were the *Sorhana* (traditional healer), the chieftain, two members of the council of elders, and two community members identified by the chieftain. The *Sorhana* (traditional healer) is the traditional healer of the *Ati* (Indigenous People) community who performs the rituals in the community, so she has complete knowledge of healing and community rituals. On the other hand, the chieftain and the two members of the council of elders (one male and one female) represented the *Ati* (Indigenous People) community in official meetings of the community. And the two *Ati* (Indigenous People) members selected as participants possess knowledge about the healing rituals and beliefs. All the information provided by *Sorhana* (traditional healer) was validated and confirmed by the other participants.

The majority of the participants were female. All of them have curly hair and dark skin. Further, they can speak *Inati*, *Kinaray-a*, and *Akeanon*.

The researcher wrote letters asking permission and assistance from the following authorities: the National Commission of Indigenous People (NCIP) and the *Ati* community chieftain.

Upon approval of the application letter by the National Commission of Indigenous People (NCIP), the researcher complied with the Exercise of Free and Prior Informed *Consent* (FPIC) by the National Commission of Indigenous People (NCIP) by conducting the disclosure meeting, the Memorandum of Agreement signing, and the validation.

After securing the Memorandum of Agreement, the gathering of data started. The participants were requested to sign a written consent letter stating that they were willing to participate in the study and that they fully understood its purpose. The researchers explained the details of the letter of consent and the nature of the research and informed them of their rights, responsibilities, and extent of participation in the research. The participants were given time to contemplate and decide whether to continue participating. Upon the approval of the participants, the researchers introduced the topic of the research and the summary of

questions to forewarn the participants and give them a chance to withdraw participation. The researchers prepared guide questions for systematic data collection.

The researchers analyzed the data also by categorizing the data based on its topic and the statement of the problem. The transcription of interviews, pictures, audio recordings, and observations was also used to interpret and analyze the information gathered.

#### 4. Results and Findings

The following findings highlighted the descriptive analysis from the accounts of interviews and observations guided by the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study:

1. The *Sorhana* (traditional healer) was the *Ati's* (Indigenous People) traditional healer in Numancia, Aklan, Philippines. The *Sorhana* (traditional healer) had the primary responsibility for the community's rituals and healing practices. The *kalag* (spirit of the dead) and the *tamawo* (guide spirits) chose a *Sorhana or Sorhano* (traditional healer). Because the role of *Sorhana* (traditional healer) was inherited, the *tamawo* (spirit of the dead) and *kalag* (guide spirit) chose from the *Sorhana's* (traditional healer) blood relatives. The chosen one would go through the *pagpatupad* (appointing of the traditional healer) ritual to affirm his/her anointment. After the ritual, the *Sorhana* (traditional healer) would then be granted the *kinaadman* (power to heal).

2. The traditional *Ati* (Indigenous People) rituals were used to heal people and fight evil forces. Since rituals involve encountering powerful unseen elements, rituals must be performed only by the *Sorhana* (traditional healer) of the community. The *Ati* (Indigenous People) had several healing rites, including the *pangluy-a* (the diagnosing of illness using ginger), *pagbagting* (the use of *agong*), *pagpatupad* (appointing of traditional healer), *pagpalupad* (releasing of chicken), *pag-anagas* (renaming of the sick), *pagbutbot* (eliminating diseases), *pagtuob* (fumigation), *patabog* (expelling evil spirits), and *pag-orunungon* (paying in exchange of healing). Part of the ritual was the use of *agong*, an antique hollow-shaped bowl. The *Sorhana* (Traditional Healer) used *agong* (antiquw hollow – shaped bowl) in rituals to summon the *tamawo* (guiding spirits) and *kalag* (spirit of the dead).

3. The healing practices of the *Ati* (Indigenous People) in Aklan, Philippines, were an essential component of the *Ati* (Indigenous Healer) community's identity. In contrast to rituals, all community members were permitted to engage in healing practices. The *Ati* (Indigenous People) used medicinal materials in their healing practices. The *Ati* (Indigenous People) healing practices included *paghalad* (offerings), *pagkiyaw-kiyaw* (remembering the deceased), the use of *bunang* (red fabric), *pagtuob* (fumigant), and the eating of *bao* (turtle) meat. These practices survived despite modernization and rapid change in the *Ati* (Indigenous People) environment. As part of protecting and keeping their tradition alive, they teach new generations their healing practices.

5. The *Ati* (Indigenous People) community believed in animism, but it is mixed in with other beliefs. They believed in supreme beings, at the same time, in mystical elements. They also believed in unseen elements like *tamawo* (guiding spirits), *talunanon* (elements found in woods), *itom na duwende* (bad elf), and *puti na duwende* (good elf). They also believed in *kalag* (spirit of the dead) of their deceased ancestors that would help them in their healing practices and ethno-medicinal materials. The *Ati's* (Indigenous People) beliefs were also influenced by Christian beliefs due to the celebration of Holy Week and the use of Christian items such as crosses.

#### 5. Conclusions

This research focused on the cultural healing rituals and practices of the *Ati* (Indigenous People). The objective of this research was to collect, record, retain, and establish traditional healing methods in order to ensure the preservation of culture, highlight the importance of indigenous people's traditions, and reveal the beauty of their traditions.

According to the findings of the study, *Sorhana* (traditional healer) had an important role in the *Ati* (Indigenous People) community as she led the healing rituals. The healing process, as described by the *Sorhanas* (traditional healers), proves their belief in the deities that are present and interact with their daily lives. Appeasement to the unseen spirits can prevent harm to the *Ati* (Indigenous People) through the intercession of the *Sorhana* (traditional healer). However, there is still untold knowledge and stories in *Sorhana's* (traditional healer) life waiting to be discovered. Understanding *Sorhana* (traditional healer) more deeply can lead us to more widely to the traditions of *Ati* (Indigenous People) in Aklan, Philippines.

The *Ati* (Indigenous People) found meaning in the healing of *Sorhana* (traditional healer) and believed in her healing prowess. Performing the ritual is a passage of healing that they have to undergo to gain true and actual healing from their illnesses. The healing rituals and the healers have stories to explain the illnesses and the undertakings to find answers to the unexplained illnesses. By believing in these, the *Ati* (Indigenous People) found a solution to their health conditions. However, it cannot guarantee

the healing of serious illnesses in *Ati* (Indigenous People). Even though the *Ati* (Indigenous People) believe in rituals, it is important to treat serious illnesses by recognizing that science and professional doctors can cure illnesses.

The *Ati*'s (Indigenous People) cultural belief in healing practices is one historical and culturally oriented knowledge that is passed from generation to generation. An important source of inspiration for the *Ati* (Indigenous People) people is their young people, who they think will help sustain and preserve their culture and community. To preserve their community and pass along their traditions to the next generation, they continue to fight for equal racial treatment and high-quality education.

The acculturation happens in the *Ati* (Indigenous People) community. The influence of other beliefs widens the traditions of *Ati* (Indigenous People) from rituals and healing practices. However, acculturation could influence the *Ati* (Indigenous People) to forget their traditions, especially for the new generations, to the point that no one could be able to explain their traditions.

The study acknowledges and defines the importance and contributions of Indigenous People 's culture and traditions. The existing cultural practices of indigenous people would serve as a baseline data for developing strategies, policies, initiatives, and decisions pertaining to the protection of the local community's culture and rights, developing an appropriate plan for future activities and projects, and taking necessary actions to revive, protect, and enhance cultural awareness of the *Ati* (Indigenous People) community.

While in the field of education, the findings of this research could aid in the development of educational objectives, particularly in the area of social science. It can develop and formulate a collaborative, successful community extension program that is centered on the community's needs and assists researchers in better understanding the *Ati* (Indigenous People) healing rituals and practices.

The research is only limited to the *Sorhana/Sorhana's* (traditional healer) cultural ways of healing rituals and practices. Future researchers may conduct a more detailed research study and a documentary about the life of *Sorhana/Sorhano* (traditional healer). A research study and documentary could be used to widen the knowledge about the traditions of *Ati*. Thus, this study will be a reference point for additional in-depth studies on cultural preservation

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