



Article

Preserving Heritage Through Leisure: An Ethnographic Exploration of Recreational Activities and Cultural Dances in Isabela

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Abstract

This study documented and analyzed the traditional recreational activities and cultural dances of selected communities in Isabela, Philippines, as vital expressions of intangible cultural heritage. Using a qualitative ethnographic design, it aimed to (1) describe these practices, (2) examine their role in heritage preservation, and (3) analyze their socio-cultural meanings. Fieldwork in three municipalities known for cultural festivities employed participant observation, interviews, and focus group discussions with elders, practitioners, youth, and local historians. Data were thematically analyzed and validated through triangulation and member checking. Findings showed that recreational activities such as patintero, tumbang preso, pabitin, and sungka served not only as games but also as informal spaces for teaching cooperation, respect, and intergenerational solidarity. Cultural dances, including Gaddang and Ibanag courtship and harvest dances, were revealed as living narratives of identity, reflecting agrarian life, family honor, and thanksgiving rituals. These traditions remain resilient through adaptation, with schools and barangays integrating them into projects, festivals, and even modernized performances. Nonetheless, challenges such as migration, digital entertainment, and declining youth participation threaten continuity. Adaptive strategies like school-based inclusion and blending traditional with contemporary forms help sustain relevance while preserving authenticity. The study concludes that Isabela's recreational activities and dances transcend entertainment, serving as heritage vessels that sustain cultural memory, foster community pride, and embody resilience. It emphasizes the urgent need for culturally grounded policies and educational initiatives to safeguard these living traditions for future generations.

Keywords: *ethnography, intangible cultural heritage, cultural dances, recreational activities, heritage preservation*

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Introduction

Cultural heritage is a living testament to a community's history, identity, and values. In Isabela, Philippines, traditional recreational activities and cultural dances are not merely forms of entertainment; they are vibrant expressions of collective memory and local artistry. Often performed during town fiestas, harvest celebrations, and community gatherings, these practices embody narratives of ancestral traditions, agricultural cycles, and indigenous creativity. However, in the face of rapid modernization, urban migration, and the growing influence of digital entertainment, the continuity of these heritage practices faces unprecedented challenges. Preserving them requires more than archival documentation; it demands active community participation, cultural transmission, and integration into contemporary leisure life.

Leisure, when rooted in tradition, becomes a conduit for cultural preservation. Recreational activities such as traditional games and community dances in Isabela reflect both social cohesion and intergenerational bonding. Cultural dances, from the graceful sway of agricultural-themed performances to courtship-inspired choreography, provide artistic expression and encode histories, moral lessons, and symbolic meanings. By exploring these practices ethnographically, this study seeks to uncover the nuanced interplay between leisure and heritage and how communities negotiate the preservation of cultural identity amidst shifting social contexts.

This research aligns with broader heritage conservation initiatives in the Philippines, echoing national and local policies recognizing intangible cultural heritage as integral to sustainable cultural development. It moves beyond theoretical preservation frameworks by situating cultural practices within everyday life, where leisure becomes a dynamic platform for continuity and adaptation.

Isabela, known as the *"Rice and Corn Granary of the North,"* is a province rich in both agricultural productivity and cultural diversity. Its people comprise various ethnolinguistic groups, including Ilocano, Ibanag, Gaddang, and Tagalog settlers, each contributing to a vibrant tapestry of customs, rituals, and leisure traditions. Recreational activities in Isabela, such as pabitin, patintero, tumbang preso, and community parlor games during festivals, coexist with highly stylized cultural dances performed in school programs, civic events, and barangay celebrations. These cultural dances, often accompanied by indigenous music or folk songs, reflect deep agricultural ties, social narratives, and historical influences from pre-colonial to Hispanic periods.

Despite their cultural richness, these heritage practices are increasingly under threat. Globalization and the rise of technology-based entertainment have altered the leisure preferences of younger generations, resulting in reduced participation in traditional games and performances. While government agencies like the National

Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) promote cultural preservation, localized efforts that directly engage communities remain crucial. An ethnographic approach is particularly relevant in capturing these practices lived experiences, meanings, and motivations, ensuring preservation strategies are grounded in authentic cultural contexts rather than imposed from external frameworks.

By focusing on Isabela's recreational activities and cultural dances, this study positions leisure as a pastime and a vital cultural resource. Documenting and analyzing these practices in their natural settings can yield insights into the mechanisms of heritage transmission, the values embedded in leisure activities, and the socio-cultural resilience of rural communities in the face of modernization.

Scholars have long argued that leisure is more than mere relaxation; it is a socio-cultural construct shaped by community values and historical contexts (Kelly & Godbey, 2018). In rural societies, leisure activities often serve dual purposes: fostering social cohesion and reinforcing cultural norms. In Southeast Asia, traditional games and dances function as recreation and informal education, teaching values such as cooperation, respect, and resilience (Caballero & Ocampo, 2019). In the Philippine context, leisure linked to cultural heritage becomes a form of community-based preservation, wherein cultural identity is transmitted through play and performance.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2003) identifies dance as a vital domain of intangible cultural heritage, as it encapsulates community history, rituals, and identity. In the Philippines, cultural dances such as tinikling, pandanggo sa ilaw, and region-specific performances often tell stories of agricultural life, courtship, and historical events (Reyes, 2017). These performances are sustained through festivals, school programs, and tourism initiatives, yet their survival hinges on active community involvement and adaptive relevance. In Northern Luzon, including Isabela, cultural dances are frequently tied to agricultural cycles, symbolizing thanksgiving, abundance, and unity.

Ethnography offers an immersive methodology to capture cultural practices lived experiences and meanings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Studies on heritage preservation in rural settings reveal that cultural continuity depends on intergenerational participation and contextual relevance (Smith, 2006). By embedding preservation within the community's daily and festive life, researchers and practitioners can ensure that heritage is archived and actively lived. In Philippine heritage studies, ethnographic methods have proven effective in documenting indigenous rituals, folk performances, and traditional livelihoods, ensuring that preservation efforts align with local cultural logics rather than external impositions (Alejo, 2020).

While existing literature on Philippine cultural heritage recognizes the importance of traditional games and dances, much of the scholarship focuses on historical documentation or tourism promotion, often neglecting the everyday, leisure-based contexts in which these practices thrive. Few studies have examined the intersection of leisure and heritage preservation in rural Northern Luzon, particularly in Isabela, where agricultural cycles, community gatherings, and cultural performances are deeply interwoven. Additionally, a lack of ethnographic research foregrounds the perspectives of practitioners, community elders, and younger participants in sustaining these traditions. This study addresses this gap by situating heritage preservation within the lived reality of recreational and performative practices, offering grounded insights into how leisure can serve as a dynamic vehicle for cultural continuity in the province.

Research Objectives

1. **To document and describe** the traditional recreational activities and cultural dances practiced in selected communities of Isabela, highlighting their historical roots and cultural significance.
2. **To examine** how these leisure activities and cultural performances contribute to preserving, transmitting, and revitalizing local heritage across generations.
3. **To analyze** the socio-cultural meanings and community values embedded in these practices through an ethnographic lens, identifying factors that sustain or threaten their continuity in the modern context.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic research design to explore and document the recreational activities and cultural dances of selected communities in Isabela for heritage preservation. The ethnographic approach was chosen because it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, meanings, and socio-cultural contexts in which these leisure practices were performed. The study was conducted in three purposively selected municipalities known for their active cultural festivities and traditional recreational practices. Selection was based on documented or observed heritage-based leisure activities, the availability of cultural dance groups, and community willingness to participate in the research.

Data were gathered through prolonged field engagement, which included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions

(FGDs). Participant observation was undertaken during local fiestas, barangay celebrations, and community gatherings where cultural dances and traditional games were naturally integrated into leisure time. Field notes, photographs, and video recordings were used to capture the details of movements, costumes, musical accompaniments, and social interactions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with cultural practitioners, community elders, dance instructors, local historians, and youth participants to elicit narratives about these practices' origins, meanings, and perceived significance. Focus group discussions with community members further validated and enriched the data, providing multiple perspectives on heritage sustainability through leisure.

All data collection activities adhered to ethical research protocols. Before fieldwork, informed consent was secured from all participants, and permissions were obtained from local government and cultural affairs offices. Data were analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. Transcribed interviews and observation notes were coded manually and through qualitative data analysis software to identify recurring themes related to cultural transmission, community identity, and challenges to heritage preservation. The triangulation of methods, combining observation, interviews, and FGDs, ensured the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The ethnographic process provided a nuanced portrayal of how recreational activities and cultural dances functioned as leisure and living vessels of Isabel's cultural heritage.

Results and Findings

Document and Describe the Traditional Recreational Activities and Cultural Dances Practiced in Selected Communities of Isabel

The study successfully documented and described a wide range of traditional recreational activities and cultural dances practiced in the selected communities of Isabel, revealing their deep historical roots and enduring cultural significance. Recreational activities such as *pabitin*, *sungka*, *patintero*, and *tumbang preso* were observed not merely as amusement games, but as social mechanisms that foster cooperation, strengthen communal bonds, and reinforce values such as respect for elders, teamwork, and fair play. As recounted by community elders, many of these activities trace their origins to pre-colonial and early colonial periods, evolving through generations yet retaining their original structure and symbolic functions within rural life.

Similarly, the cultural dances documented in this study, including Gaddang, Ibanag courtship dances, and agricultural-themed performances, demonstrated a rich

tapestry of movements, costumes, and musical accompaniments that reflect the agrarian lifestyle and ethnolinguistic diversity of Isabela. For example, harvest dances, performed during fiestas and post-harvest celebrations, incorporated gestures mimicking planting, reaping, and offering harvests to ancestral spirits. On the other hand, courtship dances conveyed narratives of love, respect, and family honor, often accompanied by indigenous instruments such as the kulibit and bamboo percussion. Oral histories shared by cultural bearers revealed that many of these dances originated as rituals tied to agricultural cycles, religious devotion, or community rites of passage.

The study affirmed their role as living expressions of Isabela's intangible cultural heritage by situating these recreational activities and dances within their historical and cultural contexts. Far from being static traditions, they have adapted to contemporary settings while preserving core symbolic elements, thus serving as vital conduits for transmitting collective memory, identity, and cultural pride across generations. This ethnographic documentation preserved valuable cultural knowledge and underscored the urgent need to integrate these practices into the province's heritage preservation policies and educational programs.

Recreational Activities as Vessels of Community Bonding

This theme underscores the profound social nature of traditional recreational activities in Isabela. Far from being solitary pastimes, these games are interwoven with communal celebrations such as fiestas, harvest festivals, and town anniversaries. They serve spaces where individuals of different ages, social backgrounds, and even barangays come together in enjoyable and friendly competitions. These gatherings also act as informal venues for cultural learning, where younger participants are introduced to traditional play mechanics, etiquette, and local customs through direct participation. The consistent presence of such activities in major social events indicates that these games are viewed not simply as entertainment but as essential traditions that help maintain a sense of community solidarity.

Participant Responses:

"Kapag may fiesta o pista, lagi naming nilalaro ang patintero at tumbang preso. Bata man o matanda, nakikilahok. Parang nagkakaisa ang buong barangay." (Whenever there is a fiesta or town celebration, we play patintero and tumbang preso. Both children and adults participate, and the whole community becomes united.)

"Dati, pagkatapos ng anihaan, may mga palaro tulad ng sipa at pabitin para sa lahat. Nagiging pagkakataon ito para magkita-kita ang mga tao." (Before, after the harvest season, there were games like sipa and pabitin for everyone. It became an opportunity for people to gather.)

“Ang mga larong tradisyonal, lalo na kapag pista, ay hindi lang pampalipas-oras. Pinapalakas nito ang ugnayan ng magkakapitbahay.” (Traditional games, especially during fiestas, are not just for passing time. They strengthen the relationships between neighbors.)

The persistence of these recreational activities suggests that they play an indispensable role in sustaining social cohesion in rural communities. They serve as platforms for intergenerational interaction, where elders transmit not only game rules but also stories, proverbs, and moral lessons embedded in the play. From an ethnographic perspective, these events function as cultural touchpoints reinforcing a shared sense of belonging and identity. The implication for heritage preservation is clear: revitalizing and integrating these games into contemporary events is not merely a matter of nostalgia but a strategic move to strengthen communal ties and maintain intangible cultural heritage in everyday life.

Cultural Dances as Living Narratives of Heritage

Cultural dances in Isabela are more than aesthetic performances; they are narrative art forms that encode historical experiences, social roles, and agricultural cycles. The choreography often imitates specific actions such as planting rice, harvesting corn, or performing courtship gestures, transforming everyday practices into stylized movement sequences that audiences can interpret and appreciate. Costumes, music, and performance contexts are equally important, embodying local life's colors, textures, and sounds. These elements are often preserved through strict adherence to traditional designs and rhythms, which ensures cultural continuity even as performances adapt to modern venues like schools and tourism events.

Sample Participant Responses:

“Yung Gaddang dance namin, hindi lang basta sayaw parang kuwento ito ng mga ninuno namin tungkol sa pagsasaka at pasasalamat.” (Our Gaddang dance is not just an ordinary dance it is like a story from our ancestors about farming and thanksgiving.)

“Kapag may sayaw ng Ibanag, makikita mo sa galaw ng kamay at paa ang mga gawaing-bukid at courtship.” (When there is an Ibanag dance, you can see in the movements of the hands and feet the agricultural work and courtship rituals.)

“Ang mga kasuotan sa sayaw namin ay galing pa sa mga lola namin, tinatahi pa rin sa parehong disenyo.” (The costumes in our dance come from our grandmothers, and they are still sewn in the same design.)

From an ethnographic lens, these dances act as “living archives” of the community's collective memory. They bridge past and present, allowing current generations to experience and embody their ancestors' knowledge, values, and

worldviews. The fact that these dances are still actively performed in communal and formal events indicates that they remain socially relevant. For cultural preservation, this suggests that safeguarding the integrity of choreography, costume, and musical accompaniment is as vital as ensuring opportunities for performance and community engagement. By framing these dances as cultural narratives, policymakers and educators can emphasize their role as a heritage resource that fosters identity, pride, and cultural resilience.

Intergenerational Transmission and Adaptation

This theme reflects the community's conscious efforts to sustain cultural heritage through intentional teaching and adaptation. Elders, parents, and educators take on active roles in transmitting traditional games and dances to the younger generation, recognizing the risk posed by changing leisure habits and the dominance of digital entertainment. Adaptations such as integrating modern dance steps into traditional routines or institutionalizing cultural performance projects in schools are used to maintain relevance without completely abandoning authenticity. These efforts also demonstrate the flexibility of heritage practices, which can evolve in form while preserving their symbolic essence.

Participant Responses:

"Tinuturuan pa rin namin ang mga kabataan ng mga laro at sayaw, pero minsan ay pinaghahalo na nila sa modernong galaw." (We still teach the youth traditional games and dances, but sometimes they mix them with modern movements.)

"Yung mga apo ko, mas sanay sa cellphone, pero kapag fiesta, tinuturuan ko sila ng pabitin at mga sayaw para hindi mawala." (My grandchildren are more used to using cellphones, but during fiestas, I teach them pabitin and dances so that these traditions will not disappear.)

"Ginagawa na naming proyekto sa eskwela ang mga tradisyonal na sayaw para matuto ang mga bata." (We now make traditional dances a school project so that children can learn them.)

Intergenerational transmission is critical to the survival of intangible cultural heritage. The blending of old and new forms may seem like a compromise. However, it is an adaptive strategy that allows traditions to resonate with contemporary youth while safeguarding their core meanings. From a preservation standpoint, this approach bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, ensuring that heritage remains a living, evolving part of community life rather than a static relic. The communities' willingness to adjust teaching methods through festivals, family

gatherings, or formal education indicates a resilient cultural system capable of navigating societal change while maintaining identity continuity.

Leisure Activities and Cultural Performances Contribute to the Preservation, Transmission, and Revitalization of Local Heritage Across Generations

The preservation, transmission, and revitalization of local heritage in Isabela are deeply intertwined with its traditional leisure activities and cultural performances, which function as living vessels of identity and intergenerational connection. Far from mere forms of entertainment, these practices, ranging from patintero and sipa to the Gaddang and Pinilisa dances, serve as dynamic platforms where values, historical narratives, and community bonds are reinforced. In communal settings such as fiestas, harvest celebrations, and barangay gatherings, older generations assume the role of cultural mentors, guiding the youth in the technical execution and the symbolic understanding of these traditions. These encounters safeguard authenticity and adapt creatively to the changing preferences of younger audiences, ensuring that heritage remains relevant in contemporary contexts. Through this continuous cycle of teaching, performing, and innovating, leisure and performance in Isabela transcend the boundaries of play and art, becoming active agents in sustaining the province's rich cultural legacy.

Leisure Activities such as Informal Heritage Classrooms

Traditional leisure activities in Isabela, such as patintero, tumbang preso, sipa, and pabitin, operate as informal yet effective heritage classrooms. They allow younger generations to learn local customs, values, and skills outside formal school settings. These activities embed cultural norms such as teamwork, respect for rules, and resourcefulness, all while fostering intergenerational interaction. Festivals and barangay gatherings provide natural venues where older community members act as facilitators, ensuring that these games' mechanics, symbolism, and etiquette are passed down. In doing so, these activities maintain cultural continuity and serve as a living repository of collective memory.

Participant Responses:

"Kapag tinuturuan namin ang mga bata ng patintero, tinuturuan din namin sila ng pagiging patas at disiplina." (When we teach the children patintero, we also teach them fairness and discipline.)

"Doon sa mga palaro tuwing pista, naipapakita sa mga bata kung paano magpahalaga sa tradisyon." (During the games at fiestas, children learn how to value tradition.)

“Para sa amin, hindi lang laro ang patintero at sipa, kundi paraan para matutunan ng kabataan ang ugali ng pagtutulungan.” (For us, patintero and sipa are not just games, but ways for the youth to learn the attitude of cooperation.)

Leisure activities become organic tools for heritage preservation because they provide an immersive learning experience where cultural knowledge is transmitted through play. This experiential learning mode is more engaging for young people than purely didactic instruction. The intergenerational interaction in these settings reinforces community bonds and ensures that traditional practices remain relevant. From a heritage management perspective, incorporating such activities into school programs and local festivals can institutionalize their role as cultural transmitters.

Cultural Performances as Living Heritage Archives

Cultural dances such as the Gaddang, Ibanag, Baile de Bakal, and Pinilisa are living archives that store and display historical narratives, agricultural practices, and courtship rituals. These performances preserve choreography and the intangible meanings behind movements, costumes, and music. Elders and seasoned performers often serve as custodians of these traditions, mentoring younger dancers through observation, participation, and oral storytelling. As these performances are staged in formal (school events, competitions) and informal (barangay fiestas, community gatherings) settings, they serve as dynamic cultural touchpoints connecting audiences to their ancestral heritage.

Participant Responses:

“Kapag sumasayaw kami ng Gaddang, naaalala namin ang mga kuwento ng lolo’t lola namin tungkol sa buhay sa bukid.” (When we perform the Gaddang dance, we remember our grandparents’ stories about life in the fields.)

“Ang bawat galaw sa Ibanag dance ay may ibig sabihin na galing pa sa mga ninuno.” (Every movement in the Ibanag dance has a meaning that comes from the ancestors.)

“Yung mga kasuotan, sinusunod pa rin namin ang disenyo para hindi mawala ang orihinal na anyo.” (We still follow the original costume designs so that the authentic look will not be lost.)

These cultural performances embody and transmit local heritage through a multisensory experience. Viewers and participants absorb history, symbolism, and identity through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic cues. The act of performance ensures the ongoing revitalization of traditions, especially when adaptations are carefully balanced with authenticity. Integrating these dances into school curricula and cultural tourism initiatives could amplify their role as heritage preservation tools while providing economic incentives for communities to sustain them.

Intergenerational Collaboration and Adaptive Revitalization

The preservation and revitalization of heritage in Isabela relies heavily on collaboration between generations. Elders provide historical accuracy and authenticity, while the youth contribute innovation and energy. This dynamic often results in adaptive forms of traditional leisure and performance, such as integrating contemporary music into cultural dances or blending traditional games with modern sports elements. These adaptations make the traditions more appealing to younger audiences without entirely diluting their cultural essence. The co-creation process ensures that heritage is not static but a living, evolving entity responsive to social change.

Participant Responses:

"Tinuturuan pa rin namin ang kabataan ng mga sayaw at laro, pero minsan dinadagdagan nila ng modernong galaw para mas magustuhan." (We still teach the youth dances and games, but sometimes they add modern moves to make them more appealing.)

"Nakikita ko na kapag pinaghahalo ang bago at luma, mas interesado ang mga kabataan." (I see that when we mix the old and new, the youth become more interested.)

"Ginagawa naming proyekto sa paaralan ang mga larong tradisyonal para matutunan ng mga estudyante at hindi na makalimutan." (We make traditional games a school project so that students will learn them and not forget.)

Adaptive revitalization acknowledges that cultural transmission must evolve to remain relevant. Communities create sustainable heritage practices by allowing flexibility in form while protecting the essence of traditions. The intergenerational exchange fosters mutual respect: the community elders see their traditions carried forward, and the youth see themselves as active participants in cultural continuity. This process aligns with UNESCO's concept of *"living heritage,"* wherein traditions survive by resisting change and strategically integrating it to meet contemporary needs.

Socio-Cultural Meanings and Community Values Embedded in these Practices Through an Ethnographic Lens

The socio-cultural meanings and community values embedded in Isabela's traditional leisure activities and cultural performances reveal a living heritage that binds people to their identity, moral principles, and shared history. These practices, whether expressed in the rhythmic footwork of the Gaddang dance, the cooperative strategies of patintero, or the festive gatherings of barangay celebrations, embody

values of cooperation, respect, and reciprocity while serving as tangible affirmations of belonging. Viewed through an ethnographic lens, they emerge not merely as recreational or artistic expressions, but as dynamic cultural systems sustained by intergenerational transmission and adaptive revitalization. Nevertheless, in the modern context, pressures such as migration, digital entertainment, and shifting leisure preferences threaten their continuity, making community-driven adaptations essential. In blending tradition with innovation, Isabela's people demonstrate resilience, ensuring their cultural legacy remains relevant and deeply rooted in the province's collective consciousness.

Embodied Expressions of Identity and Belonging

Traditional leisure activities and cultural performances in Isabela serve as embodied expressions of community identity, reinforcing a sense of belonging among participants. The games, dances, and rituals are not isolated but in collective spaces, barangay plazas, school grounds, and festival stages, symbolizing shared history and collective pride. Elements such as local dialects in chants, indigenous patterns in costumes, and region-specific choreography root the practices firmly in the cultural landscape of Isabela. These performances act as public affirmations of "*who we are*" as a people, allowing residents to locate themselves within a broader cultural narrative.

Participant Responses:

"Kapag sumasali kami sa mga laro at sayaw, para bang ipinapakita namin kung sino kami bilang taga-Isabela." (When we participate in the games and dances, it feels like we are showing who we are as people of Isabela.)

"Yung mga sayaw namin ay hindi lang aliwan, ito ay simbolo ng aming kasaysayan at pinagmulan." (Our dances are not just entertainment; they are symbols of our history and origin.)

"Kapag nakikita ko ang mga kabataan na sumasayaw sa pista, nararamdaman kong buo pa rin ang aming pagkakakilanlan." (When I see the youth dancing during the fiesta, I feel that our identity is still intact.)

These practices function as cultural markers, making the distinct heritage of Isabela communities visible. Participants reaffirm their connection to place and people by engaging with them, strengthening community resilience against cultural homogenization. From an ethnographic perspective, the performance itself is as important as the content; it is in the gathering, the shared labor of preparation, and the mutual recognition among participants and audience that cultural belonging is produced and sustained.

Community Values of Cooperation, Respect, and Reciprocity

Ethnographic observation reveals that traditional games and performances are infused with values that govern social relations in Isabela: cooperation, mutual respect, and reciprocity. Games like patintero or tumbang preso require coordinated teamwork and adherence to rules, while dances involve synchrony, deference to leaders, and collective rhythm. Beyond skill and artistry, these practices serve as social training grounds where participants internalize behavioral norms that sustain harmonious community life. These values are transmitted implicitly and embedded in the structure and flow of the activities.

Participant Responses:

"Sa mga laro, natututo kaming magtulungan at magbigay-daan sa isa't isa." (In the games, we learn to help each other and give way to one another.)

"Kapag sayaw, kailangan marunong kang makinig sa kapwa mananayaw para sabay kayo sa galaw." (In dancing, you need to listen to your fellow dancers so you can move in sync.)

"Laging sinasabi ng matatanda na mas mahalaga ang respeto kaysa panalo." (The elders always say that respect is more important than winning.)

By embedding moral and social codes into recreational forms, communities ensure that such values are continually reinforced across generations. It is imperative in rural and semi-urban Isabela, where social cohesion is key to addressing everyday challenges. However, as youth increasingly engage in individualistic digital leisure, the communal reinforcement of these values faces potential erosion. Sustaining these practices requires deliberate community planning to keep them visible and participatory.

Modern Pressures and the Risk of Cultural Erosion

While traditional leisure and performance practices are valued, they are threatened by modern forces such as urban migration, digital entertainment, and changing leisure preferences. Younger generations often favor mobile games, social media, and globalized music over local activities, reducing opportunities for transmission. Economic pressures also contribute, as many young adults migrate for work, leaving fewer active participants in community events. The decline in intergenerational interaction diminishes the informal mentorship system that once sustained these traditions.

Participant Responses:

"Mas gusto na ng mga kabataan ang cellphone kaysa maglaro sa labas." (Young people now prefer using their cellphones over playing outside.)

“Minsan, wala nang sumasali sa mga sayaw dahil mas gusto nilang magpahinga o manood ng TV.” (Sometimes no one joins the dances because they prefer to rest or watch TV.)

“Kapag umalis ang mga kabataan para magtrabaho sa ibang lugar, wala nang magpapatuloy sa mga tradisyon.” (When young people leave to work elsewhere, there is no one to continue the traditions.)

These challenges indicate that heritage continuity is not guaranteed; it requires intentional interventions. Ethnographic findings suggest that revitalization efforts must address both content and context—modernizing aspects of the practices to appeal to youth while preserving their cultural essence. School-based heritage programs, digital archiving, and traditions integration into tourism can counteract the decline. Without such measures, the gradual detachment of youth from traditional forms may lead to their eventual disappearance.

Adaptive Strategies for Continuity

Communities are not passive in the face of cultural change; they employ adaptive strategies to sustain their traditions. These include integrating traditional dances into school programs, holding annual barangay-wide game tournaments, and creating hybrid performances that blend modern music with traditional choreography. Such adaptations maintain youth interest while allowing elders to transmit cultural knowledge. The flexibility in form without abandoning symbolic core elements has proven effective in keeping traditions alive in changing social environments.

Participant Responses:

“Ginagawa naming parte ng school program ang mga sayaw para matutunan ng lahat ng estudyante.” (We make the dances part of the school program so all students can learn them.)

“Nagpapa-contest kami ng mga larong Pinoy tuwing summer para masaya at marami ang sumasali.” (We organize contests of Filipino games every summer so that it’s fun and more people participate.)

“Pinaghahalo namin ang modernong tugtog sa tradisyonal na galaw para mas makuha ang interes ng kabataan.” (We mix modern music with traditional moves to capture the interest of the youth.)

Adaptation emerges as a pragmatic approach to cultural preservation. Communities create a bridge between past and present by reframing traditional practices in formats that appeal to modern sensibilities. This approach also fosters agency among younger generations, allowing them to shape their inherited traditions.

From an ethnographic standpoint, such evolution is not a sign of cultural loss but rather evidence of resilience and relevance.

Discussion

The ethnographic results show that traditional leisure (e.g., patintero, sipa, pabitin) and cultural performances (e.g., Gaddang, Pinilisa, Baile de Bakal) function as living vessels of identity and belonging, enacted in plazas, fiestas, and school stages. It aligns squarely with UNESCO's conception of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as their heritage and transmit across generations, with community participation central to safeguarding (Articles 1–2).

Findings that dance encodes narratives of agriculture, courtship, and thanksgiving are reinforced by local scholarship on Isabela. Ramos III's ethnographic work on the Yogad Baile de Bakal in Echague (Isabela) documents how choreography, music, and costume mediate memory and identity in public festivals, functioning as a "*living archive*" of the Yogad lifeworld (including Mengal Festival staging). The observations of choreography mimicking planting/harvest gestures and carefully retaining costume designs echo those ethnographic conclusions.

The theme that traditional games serve as informal heritage classrooms, teaching cooperation, respect, fairness, and reciprocity, converges with recent analyses of traditional Filipino games. A 2025 national study on "*Traditional Filipino games in a digital world*" reports that these games historically cultivated social bonding and physical activity, but are now declining amid the pull of individualized digital entertainment, precisely the pressure your informants cited (youth prefer phones/TV; migration drains participants).

It corroborates the "*modern pressures*" theme and clarifies the mechanism of erosion: reduced intergenerational contact and participation opportunities. The policy implication is to reinsert games into high-visibility communal and school contexts, so their communal virtues remain practiced rather than merely remembered.

The adaptive revitalization finding, schools embedding dances/games in programs, blends of modern music with traditional movement, tracks with UNESCO's "*living heritage*" ethos (safeguarding through continued practice, not museumization), where communities and bearers are the key actors, and adaptation is permissible if meanings and community consent are preserved.

The education lever noted is timely in the Philippines: EDCOM II's 2025 report argues for fixing foundational learning through contextually relevant, community-

rooted approaches, and the curricular integration of local heritage aligns with this national policy direction for fundamental education strengthening.

Methodologically, the use of thematic analysis to surface values (cooperation, respect, reciprocity), identity signals (dialect, costume), and threats (digital leisure, migration) is consistent with the six-phase Braun & Clarke framework, now widely elaborated in qualitative methods literature (familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, reporting). It supports the analytic credibility of the results and their translation into actionable themes for safeguarding.

Finally, the emphasis on school–community partnerships to counteract erosion is supported by local evidence that formalizing exposure (competitions, club programs, festival-linked projects) sustains participation. Studies on Philippine games and performance-based learning report benefits for engagement and recreation outcomes, offering a pragmatic template for the school-based components described.

Together, these sources validate the central claim: heritage in Isabela is preserved through leisure and performance when communities continuously do, teach, adapt, and stage these practices in everyday life and education systems, precisely the pattern the ethnography documents.

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