

Revisiting the Kagan Tribe's Saumpi Dance: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

This study revisits the *Saumpi* dance of the Kagan tribe in Mindanao, Philippines, using anthropological, performance theory, and cultural heritage frameworks. Through qualitative ethnography, it documents key dance movements, musical instruments, attire, and ritual practices integral to *Saumpi*. The findings show that the *Saumpi* dance serves as a living archive of Kagan identity, transmitting collective memory, values, and spiritual beliefs across generations. It highlights the dance's role in fostering community cohesion and sustaining intangible heritage during social transformation. It also emphasizes the need for revitalization strategies to preserve the *Saumpi* and similar indigenous traditions, ensuring their continued relevance and transmission.

Keywords: qualitative ethnography, musical instruments, ritual practices

1. Introduction

Preserving cultural practices and traditions is important for the wellbeing and identity of indigenous groups. Dance is particularly important for sustaining culture in these communities. It is more than just movement; it also represents culture, history, and shared values. Burnette et al. (2018) noted that these traditions, deeply rooted in tribal life, help indigenous groups remain connected to their heritage and strengthen their cultural identity.

Philippine dances have developed from the everyday experiences of Filipino communities (Şuşu, 2018; Egorov et al., 2019). As essential repositories of cultural heritage, these dances demonstrate the syncretism inherent in Philippine cultural traditions (Patterson et al., 2018). They reflect the socio-historical realities of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras (Cruz & Tullao, 2015; Uhrinová et al., 2016; Acuña, 2018) and are transmitted across generations as both expressive forms and cultural symbols. The integrative character of these dances promotes communal identity, continuity, and cohesion among diverse religious and cultural groups (Yin, 2015; Chen, 2019; Lobo, 2022).

Scholarly inquiry has illuminated the intricate relationship among dance, cultural identity, and heritage preservation within indigenous communities. Research consistently demonstrates that traditional dances function as embodied texts, serving as repositories of collective memory, resistance, and spiritual practice, rather than as mere performances (Salazar, 2018; Sone, 2020). Among the Kagans, also known as Kalagans, an Islamized group from Mindanao, Philippines, dance and music are integral to rituals, weddings, and community celebrations. These rituals, which often seek to invoke spirits or commemorate significant milestones, feature traditional musical instruments such as the *kulintang* and *agong*.

However, contemporary economic, social, and technological changes have accelerated the erosion of dance heritage, thereby threatening the sustainability of indigenous dance as a cultural form (Georgios, 2017; Villones, 2020). Declining student engagement in indigenous dances poses significant pedagogical challenges for educators responsible for transmitting intangible cultural heritage. Although higher education curricula in the Philippines, particularly in Bachelor of Physical Education programs, have incorporated folk dances to preserve them, these efforts remain inadequate. The *Saumpi* dance, which is central to the Kagan Tribe's cultural identity, exemplifies this decline as its presence diminishes in both educational and community settings. This trend demonstrates the challenges that traditional practices face in maintaining relevance amid widespread digitalization and rapid information exchange. The symbolic and narrative depth of the *Saumpi* dance emphasizes the urgent need for revitalization; without deliberate intervention, such cultural expressions and the heritage they represent are at risk of disappearing (Pascua & Villanueva, 2020).

This study examined the fundamental dance steps, musical instruments, and customs associated with Kagan's *Saumpi* dance, and their integration into Kagan's cultural heritage. This research is essential for preserving and understanding the distinctive traditions and expressive forms of various ethnolinguistic groups. The Philippines encompasses a wide range of indigenous dances, each reflecting the respective community's history, beliefs, and values. By documenting the components of the Kagan *Saumpi* dance, this study contributes to a broader appreciation of the nation's cultural diversity and underscores the significance of safeguarding intangible heritage for future generations.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

This study adopts an anthropological perspective that treats dance as both a cultural practice and a social ritual (Radcliffe-Brown, 1994). Dance fosters social cohesion, reflects cultural symbols, and shapes both individual and collective identities. According to Sachs (1997), dance has been integral to societies throughout history, serving as a form of communication and a mechanism for reproducing social systems. Bourdieu (1994) argues that dance operates as a specific language, structured by the spatial, temporal, and power dynamics unique to its context. Polhemus (1993) maintains that dance is a learned cultural practice that expresses and embodies the material, physical, and symbolic dimensions of culture. In the case of indigenous dances such as the *Saumpi* of the Kagan tribe, theoretical concepts are enacted through practice. The *Saumpi* serves as a living archive of Kagan identity, values, and beliefs; its ritual movements and restricted participation embody intangible heritage and facilitate the transmission of tradition across generations.

Likewise, this analysis draws on cultural performance theory, which offers a framework for understanding culture as enacted in everyday life (Littlejohn & Karen, 2009). In the context of the *Saumpi* dance of the Kagan tribe, the theory positions the dance as a site where cultural values, social hierarchies, and communal identities are both expressed and negotiated through lived experience. The *Saumpi* dance, as a form of performance, illustrates how narrative and theatricality are embedded within ritual practice, functioning as both the subject and method of cultural expression. Cultural performance theory thus enables an examination of the *Saumpi* dance as an observable, bounded event—characterized by temporal boundaries, designated performers and audiences, specific settings, and structured choreography—that both reflects and shapes the social reality of the Kagan community.

This study also views the field of cultural heritage. Culture serves as a cohesive force, maintained through the preservation of structures and practices collectively referred to as cultural heritage. These tangible and

intangible components reflect a society's social characteristics and historical continuity. The preservation of the Kagan tribe's *Saumpi* dance exemplifies intangible cultural heritage by encapsulating communal values, social norms, and intergenerational knowledge. As a performative tradition, the *Saumpi* dance sustains the group's distinct identity and links contemporary practices with ancestral customs. This perspective aligns with Kokko and Dillon's (2011) observation that societies preserve such elements to ensure continuity and with Ar's (2015) assertion that intangible heritage shapes social norms. Tangible heritage includes architecture and archaeological sites, while intangible heritage, such as the *Saumpi* dance, comprises traditions and rituals that illuminate both past and present civilizations. However, as Şentürk (2012) notes, the significance and visibility of such heritage depend on changing historical contexts.

In summary, this study examines the *Saumpi* dance of the Kagan tribe using anthropological, performance theory, and cultural heritage frameworks. The analysis demonstrates that the *Saumpi* dance functions as both a cultural and social ritual, fostering social cohesion, articulating identity, and facilitating the transmission of tradition. Through the lens of cultural performance theory, the research positions the *Saumpi* dance as a context in which cultural values, social hierarchies, and communal identities are enacted and negotiated. The dance is further interpreted as an intangible cultural heritage form that represents the Kagan community's collective values, social norms, and historical continuity. The ongoing preservation and practice of the *Saumpi* dance sustain Kagan identity and connect contemporary life with ancestral customs, underscoring the dynamic relationship among performance, heritage, and community.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This qualitative ethnographic study examined the cultural and symbolic meanings in Kagan traditional dances by analyzing narratives, bodily expressions, and ritual performances. Employing a cultural anthropological framework, the research was consistent with established ethnographic methodologies in performance studies (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Ethnography offers a comprehensive framework for documenting cultural practices and meanings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). In the context of the Kagan tribe's *Saumpi* dance, this methodology is particularly salient. Studies on rural heritage preservation indicate that cultural continuity relies on intergenerational engagement and contextual adaptation (Smith, 2006), both of which are evident in the transmission and performance of the *Saumpi* dance. Integrating preservation into everyday and ceremonial practices, such as the *Saumpi*, supports the maintenance of archival and lived heritage. In Philippine heritage studies, ethnographic methods enable the systematic documentation of indigenous rituals, folk performances, and traditional livelihoods, ensuring that preservation strategies for cultural expressions such as the *Saumpi* dance align with local rationales rather than external frameworks.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The sample population comprised key informants from the Kagan community in Davao Oriental. Snowball sampling identified participants with extensive knowledge of the dances, choreography, symbolic meanings, and related oral traditions. Initial contacts included local cultural leaders and dance practitioners, who referred additional knowledgeable individuals. Bernard (2017) opines that this method provided access to cultural bearers and tradition keepers, which is essential in studies of indigenous knowledge systems.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection utilized multiple ethnographic methods, including immersion and participant observation, key informant interviews, and documentation of environmental context and artifacts. The participant-observer stance facilitated direct engagement with Kagan dance practices, rituals, and musical expressions, yielding nuanced, insider insights (Spradley, 1980). Semi-structured interviews elicited data on the meanings of dance movements, costume symbolism, music, and historical origins. Additionally, systematic documentation encompassed musical instruments (e.g., *agung*, *kulintang*, and *gimbal*), costumes, and ritual paraphernalia integral to ceremonial performances.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis employed a descriptive-evaluative framework that included interview transcription, thematic coding, and interpretive analysis of bodily gestures within cultural narratives. Thematic analysis identified recurrent movement patterns, such as *kumpas*, *tob aw panawagtawag*, *tabuk*, and *lugpat*, and their significance in the *Saumpi* dance. These patterns were examined as artistic and communicative modalities that express Kagan identity, collective memory, and value systems. The integration of narrative interpretation with cultural analysis offered a comprehensive perspective on Kagan's *Saumpi* dance, framing it as both a performative text and a dynamic cultural archive (Taylor, 2003).

All fieldwork was conducted in accordance with established ethical protocols, encompassing informed consent, community authorization, and sustained cultural sensitivity. The research prioritized respect for indigenous autonomy and foregrounded Kagan's agency and contributions to the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage through dance.

3.5 Ethical considerations

To ensure cultural appropriateness and enhance interpretative depth, this study employed an indigenous research framework that acknowledges and respects the knowledge systems and epistemologies of local communities (Smith, 2012). In partnership with the Public Information Offices of the various municipalities of Davao Oriental, historical and sociological data were triangulated with oral histories and ritual observations to validate accounts and situate the *Saumpi* dance within its broader cultural context.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Basic Elements of the Kagan Tribe's *Saumpi* Dance

The *Saumpi* dance serves as a medium for spiritual connection and leadership selection, illustrating how ritual performances legitimize authority and reinforce social hierarchies. These themes are central to the anthropology of religion and politics. Additionally, the dance's invocation of ancestral authority and spiritual power aligns with anthropological research on the importance of ancestor veneration across societies. The symbolism of the heart and navel of *Umpo Agwason*, for instance, can be examined through symbolic anthropology, which investigates how physical symbols and rituals communicate complex social values. Overall, from an anthropological perspective, the *Saumpi* dance functions as a dynamic social institution that maintains group cohesion, transmits cultural values, and perpetuates the spiritual legacy of the Kagan people. Participant A shared:

"The Saumpi dance began a long time ago. It is now performed less frequently because Islamic law forbids it. The navel of our ancestor, Grandfather Agwason, is inherited, and this is how we select modern royalty. Where Umpo Agwason's heart is, the new Bai and Datu are chosen. This is what he left us. The Saumpi dance was a ritual of the ancient people" (Participant A).

The integration of ritual within dance fulfills both symbolic and theological functions. Rituals such as the Kagan tribe's *Kasamungan* and *Saumpi* serve as spiritual dialogues with the *Umpo Agwason* (Supreme Being) and illustrate what Sone (2020) refers to as “embodied cosmologies,” where faith, culture, and movement converge. Similar practices are observed among the Subanen (Jocano, 2000) and the Dayak of Borneo (King, 2001), in which dance serves both as an act of worship and as a means of political expression.

Indigenous Philippine dance practices are intrinsically linked to ancestral traditions, serving as mechanisms for historical transmission and spiritual continuity. These rituals strengthen community identity and function as expressions of cultural resilience. The *Saumpi* dance, for example, is grounded in mythological tradition and is attributed to *Umpo Agwason*'s emergence from split bamboo, a foundational narrative that performers ritually reenact. This synthesis of myth, ritual, and ancestral reverence illustrates the significance of dance in sustaining the Kagan's cultural values.

“Our ancestor, Umpo Agwason, came from a split bamboo. Because of this, before the Saumpi dance begins, the dancers first stand on the bamboo. Since he came from there, that is how the practice is done” (Participant C).

Anthropological analysis positions the *Saumpi* dance as integral to the *Kasamungan*, a structured healing ritual involving music, dance, and spiritual invocation, presided over by the Datu and Balyan as ritual specialists. The *Saumpi* addresses illness, mediates conflicts, and fulfills various spiritual functions, underscoring its therapeutic and symbolic significance. Participant A articulated:

“The Kasamungan ritual and the Saumpi dance are the same, especially when a family has problems or illnesses. The Saumpi dance ritual is believed to heal sickness. The Saumpi dance is the same as the Kasamungan ritual, and this ritual cannot be found in other tribes” (Participant A).

Sacred ceremonial dances such as the *Saumpi* serve as dynamic sites for the production and maintenance of cultural meaning from an anthropological perspective. These dances integrate artistic performance with ritual practice, enabling the transmission of collective values, social norms, and spiritual knowledge across generations. Within the Kagan context, the *Saumpi* mediates relationships with ancestral spirits, reinforces group identity, and ensures the continuity of indigenous healing traditions. This demonstrates that ritual dance serves both symbolic and pragmatic functions within the community.

“Our ancestors were the ones who owned the saumpian. They were the ones who had this ritual. The Saumpian was used to treat illness... First, we would be covered by the people, then the healer would call the names of our ancestors, asking them to heal the sick person. That is why, for us, this is the traditional healing practice of the Kagan” (Participant C).

The potency of the dance derives from its ancestral ownership, which requires it be performed exclusively within the appropriate spiritual context. Participant C shared:

“That Saumpian is really only for healing. It cannot be danced on just any occasion. This is because the owner of that dance is very powerful. It is powerful because the owner is our ancestor, Grandfather Samaw” (Participant C).

Cultural heritage studies emphasize that traditional medicinal rituals integrate dance and chant to invoke healing spirits and natural forces. These practices demonstrate the essential connection among movement, spirituality, and health, with ritual dance functioning as both an embodied heritage and a symbolic act to restore equilibrium between the physical and spiritual realms.

From the perspective of cultural heritage studies, the *Saumpi* dance ritual exemplifies the safeguarding of intangible heritage through structured practice, spiritual preparation, and symbolic acts. Initiated by the *tuob* (fumigation) and the *budyong* (conch-shell trumpet), the dance enacts ancestral reverence, spirit possession, and healing, core elements that reinforce the Kagan community's collective memory and cultural continuity.

The elements of the *Saumpi* ritual—spiritual inheritance, identity, and healing—are central to the community's intangible cultural heritage. As a ritual embedded within the *Kasamungan* ceremony, it sustains ancestral connections, fosters unity, and exemplifies cultural resilience.

In sum, the *Saumpi* dance plays a key role in preserving Kagan's spiritual, social, and cultural traditions. Anthropologists view it as a means of supporting leadership and spiritual authority. Its roots in myth and ritual help people share symbols and pass on culture. During the *Kasamungan* healing ritual, specialists use the *Saumpi* to address illness and resolve conflicts, while calling on ancestors enhances its healing and identity-shaping power. In cultural heritage studies, the *Saumpi* is regarded as a salient example of how to protect intangible heritage, as its organized practices, spiritual focus, and symbolic acts help preserve memories and strengthen the culture.

4.2 Basic Dance Steps and Movements

Viewed through the lens of cultural performance theory, the *kumpas* is not merely a technical step but a performative act that enacts and communicates cultural meaning. Its synchronized, expressive execution materializes communal rhythm, discipline, and emotional intensity, transforming individual movement into a collective cultural statement central to the *Saumpi*'s identity. Participant A narrated:

“Kumpas is when you move your feet forward and backward. However, you need to time your foot movements with the rhythm of the instruments... As the music guides you to move, you must execute the Kumpas with the same passion... Kumpas is the moment when you move your feet to the proper timing so that you will not be struck by the bamboo. You move and dance with your feet, and this is the most important step” (Participant A).

The *kumpas* movement in the *Saumpi* dance embodies the group's identity and cultural values. *Kumpas* functions not only as a technical or artistic element but also as a ritual that enables participants to express and share collective meanings. When *kumpas* aligns with the music and the *balyan*'s gestures, individual actions become a communal experience, fostering social cohesion and spiritual connections. Consequently, *kumpas* sustains the *Saumpi* dance as a living tradition that represents the Kagan community's values, beliefs, and ancestral ties. Participants B and D shared:

*“It really depends on the sound. The dance depends on the music. If the playing is soft, then the dancing is also gentle. If the music is fast, then the dancing is also fast... Your movements or dance steps depend on the music, or on the dance of the *balian*” (Participant B & D).*

Each principal *Saumpi* dance movement functions as a performative act that communicates ritual meaning. *Tob Aw Panawagtawag* synchronizes the dancer's actions with spiritual intent to invoke Umpo Agwason. In contrast, *Tabuk*'s rhythmic bamboo strikes facilitate communication with the spirit world, illustrating the relationship between physical gesture and spiritual efficacy.

Kumpas Aw Malabang's circular movement disperses disruptive spirits and maintains ritual balance. *Lugpat* highlights the dancer's agility and spiritual sensitivity. The final movement, *pagiyak*, employs slow, expressive gestures to signify spiritual closure, underscoring the dance's performative narrative of communal healing and transition.

The *Saumpi* commences with the *tuob* incense ritual, which initiates the performance's spiritual dimension. The dancers' shouts, gestures, and rhythmic movements indicate spirit possession and delineate the ritual's temporal boundaries, thereby manifesting the transition between spiritual presence and absence. Participants C and D shared:

"The Saumpi begins after the tuob incense ritual, signaled by instrumental music. Dancers' gestures and shouts express spirit possession, with the dancer's movements guiding the start and end of the performance, marking the transition of spiritual presence" (Participant C & D).

The core movement of the *Saumpi* dance, *kumpas*, represents the Kagan cultural and spiritual identity by integrating rhythm, emotion, and ancestral connection. Dance and spirit possession are closely connected, with *kumpas* serving as both an artistic expression and a spiritual response, thereby transforming the dance into a collaborative ritual event. There is an intrinsic relationship between music and movement in indigenous dance traditions. Musical elements guide choreography and expressive quality, ensuring ritual authenticity and supporting cultural continuity. Rhythm and melody are essential components of the meaning and symbolism of indigenous performance.

The *Saumpi* dance serves as a central ritual within Kagan society, maintaining social order, facilitating the transmission of cultural knowledge, and embodying ancestral beliefs. As an element of intangible heritage, it preserves collective memory and supports cultural continuity. When considered as a cultural performance, the *Saumpi* dance enacts and revitalizes communal identity through music, dance, and ritual, positioning it as both a means of preservation and a dynamic expression of Kagan cultural life.

4.3 Music and Instruments

The *Saumpi* ritual incorporates a musical ensemble comprising *agung*, *kulintang*, and *gimbal*, each fulfilling a distinct function: *agung* establishes the rhythmic foundation, *kulintang* provides melodic structure, and *gimbal* controls tempo to facilitate movement and trance states. These instruments serve as the sonic nexus that unites dancers, musicians, and ancestral spirits. Their coordinated performance generates a rhythm regarded as spiritually inherited, which is considered essential for invoking and sustaining ancestral presence, as evidenced by Participant A:

"The instruments used in the dance are the agung, kulintang, and gimbal... the agung produces a resonant bass sound, the kulintang provides the main melody, and the gimbal gives the rhythm to the performance" (Participant A).

The rhythmic beating of drums, gongs, and bamboo instruments is fundamental to ritual performances, signaling the commencement of ceremonies and fostering a spiritual environment. These sounds are believed to summon spirits and invite their participation, while simultaneously providing structure and timing for dancers' movements. The integration of auditory and spiritual elements establishes the instruments as both functional guides and symbolic conduits, facilitating connections between participants and the divine and reinforcing the ritual's cultural authenticity.

In the *Saumpi* ritual, music serves as a spiritual signal that initiates communication between the living and their ancestors. The ritual commences with a vocal invocation in which the names of ancestral spirits are recited. This invocation occurs only once and is closely linked to the *tuob*, or ritual fumigation, which signifies the opening of the spiritual gateway. The combined use of sound and scent prepares the environment for ancestral presence and possession. Participant A articulated:

"There is a vocal chant at the beginning when we call upon our ancestors... the moment the tu-ob is performed, that is when we call upon our ancestors. This reflects the belief that

music and ritual actions must occur together for spiritual activation. They only call upon the spirits once the ritual has begun and the person has undergone smoke inhalation” (Participant A).

Music in ritual contexts functions as a spiritual conduit, connecting the physical and metaphysical realms. In addition to providing rhythm, music communicates emotions and intentions that language cannot express, synchronizes ceremonial actions, and enhances ritual immersion. Furthermore, music promotes communal unity by generating shared emotional and spiritual resonance, thereby reinforcing collective identity. Within the *Saumpi* ritual, music, dance, and instruments are fundamentally interconnected, constituting the core of the ceremony. Participant C shared:

“The dancer first listens to the music. After hearing it, they begin to dance continuously... when the musicians see that no one is dancing anymore, they also bring the playing to an end” (Participant C).

In the *Saumpi* ritual, music serves as a conduit between the physical and spiritual realms, directing both dancers and spirits through rhythm and melody. The *agung*, *kulintang*, and *gimbal* delineate specific phases of invocation, possession, and release, while also invoking ancestral presence and preserving the ritual’s sacred atmosphere. In the absence of music, spirit-summoning and trance-induction are less effective, underscoring music’s dual function as both prayer and a spiritual bridge that sustains ritual and ancestral connection.

The *Saumpi* ritual demonstrates profound spiritual and cultural ownership of its music and instruments, which are regarded as ancestral inheritances rather than mere artistic expressions. The *agung*, *kulintang*, and *gimbal* are revered as sacred vessels that embody ancestral presence, with their rhythms and melodies perceived as the voices of the ancestors. This relationship positions the community as stewards of ancestral wisdom, responsible for maintaining the ritual’s spiritual integrity and authenticity.

Saumpi music is therefore imbued with ancestral stewardship and identity. Although similar instruments are found throughout Mindanao, the community asserts spiritual ownership of the *Saumpi* sound and its technique, treating it as religious heritage transmitted across generations rather than as a collective artistic practice. This conviction is articulated in the acknowledgment of Participants C and D:

“We cannot claim that this belongs to us alone... however, the Saumpian dance originated from us, and we are its custodians... This sound belongs to us. This sound and the way it is played belong to us” (Participant C & D).

The creation and performance of indigenous musical instruments constitute acts of cultural ownership, embedding community identity, tradition, and environmental connection within musical expression. In the *Saumpi* ritual, music is essential to spiritual connection, serving as a ritual language that renders invisible spiritual forces audible and embodied. This process sustains harmony among individuals, ancestors, and the divine. The *agung*, *kulintang*, and *gimbal* function as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms, facilitating altered states, possession, and healing. In the Kagan community, music expresses ancestry and spiritual heritage, with each instrument—*agung* (bass gong), *kulintang* (melodic gong array), and *gimbal* (drum)—playing a vital role in shaping the performance’s rhythm, mood, and sacred atmosphere.

4.4 Attire and Accessories

Within the *Saumpi* ritual, traditional clothing and accessories demonstrate the interrelationship between social status, spirituality, and ancestral identity. These garments are regarded as sacred and facilitate dancers’ connections with both the community and their ancestors. Items such as the *dagmay*, *malong*,

tiyangtangan, and *ginagutan* reflect regional and Malay influences, illustrating the persistence of cultural practices through migration, intermarriage, and adaptation. As Participant A explained,

“Long ago, people only wore dagmay or malong. The Malong was a major influence from the Malay people of Malaysia” (Participant A).

Color symbolism in *Saumpi* attire conveys moral values, lineage, and social rank. Yellow represents *Barabangsa*, which includes nobility, royal lineage, and spiritual authority. Red signifies bravery and vitality, both central to Kagan’s identity. These symbols visually reinforce ancestral prestige. Participants B and D shared:

“The color yellow symbolized Barabangsa, which meant the nobility or the ruling class... Red symbolizes the bravery of the Kagan people” (Participants B & D).

The authenticity of dance elements, including movements, costumes, and musical instruments, serves as a deliberate form of resistance to cultural homogenization resulting from modernization and global media. Scholars such as Terada and Maceda (2000) and Manjula and Kumar (2024) argue that preserving these artistic details is essential to maintaining indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. Likewise, De la Cruz (2019) asserts that traditional dance attire in indigenous communities holds significant cultural and symbolic meaning, indicating tribal affiliation, social status, and ritual function. The choice of color, material, and design is intentional: red denotes bravery, white represents purity, and beads are believed to provide spiritual protection. These costumes embody identity and ancestral heritage, thereby reinforcing both cultural continuity and ritual significance. Additionally, attire defines gender roles: men wear the *kubaw* headdress and women the *musaha*, which visually distinguish responsibilities and help maintain spiritual balance (De la Cruz, 2019). Participant B explained,

“The kubaw is what men wear on their heads. For women, the headdress is called musaha” (Participant B).

The *tiyangtangan* is an A-line dress that the balyan once wore in the *Saumpi* dance. It facilitated easy movement and demonstrated ritual authority. Although it is now rarely seen, it remains a strong symbol of ancestral tradition. According to Participants A and C,

“In the old times, our ancestors used the tiyangtangan, but no one uses it anymore today... fitted at the hips and widens as it reaches the feet, adorned with attached designs that enhance its beauty” (Participant C).

“This (tiyangtangan) was used to call upon the spirits, to invite good spirits to join and drive away bad spirits... The tungkaring produces sound when the balyan is performing the dance” (Participant A).

The *kasag* (shield) serves as both a symbol and a practical tool. The sound marks ritual readiness and high status, particularly during invocations of esteemed ancestors. A practitioner remarked,

“We use the kasag to produce sound. It signifies a high rank and is used to call upon our ancestor, Lolo Aguason” (Participant D).

The elements of the *Saumpi* dance, including costumes, accessories, and props, represent heritage, identity, spirituality, and continuity. Each component establishes a connection between the Kagan people, their ancestors, neighboring Moro tribes, and Malay origins. In addition to their aesthetic function, colors communicate values, fabrics indicate lineage, and ornaments invoke spiritual presence. The attire functions as a cultural archive, integrating history, faith, and a sense of belonging within ritual performance.

The *Saumpi* dance demonstrates that ritual expertise, spiritual discipline, and generational transmission are essential for the preservation of indigenous practices. Participation is restricted to the *balyan* and individuals recognized by lineage or spiritual calling, underscoring the dance's sacred nature and the interplay among skill, role, and ancestral authority in maintaining community identity.

Skill-based performance is fundamental to the *Saumpi* dance, as the dancer serves as a conduit for ancestral energy. Every movement holds spiritual significance, rendering mastery crucial to the ritual's authenticity and efficacy. As one elder explained,

“Only those with knowledge are allowed to dance everything that must be performed. You must know all the steps and movements; if you are skilled in the dance, then you may join” (Participant A).

Eligibility for the *Saumpi* dance performance is determined by ritual qualification rather than talent alone. The *balyan* must demonstrate moral purity, spiritual discipline, and mastery of ritual knowledge, which ensures that only individuals with ancestral sanction participate and that the sanctity of the dance is preserved. One elder noted,

“Only those knowledgeable may participate, specifically the balyan and individuals well-versed in the ritual... One cannot become a balyan unless they are pure in body. They must be free from sin and from vices” (Participant A).

Both men and women may participate in the *Saumpi* dance, but spiritual authority determines who may participate. Only people recognized as *balyan* are allowed to perform, as one practitioner explained:

“There are men, and there are women. As long as you are a balyan, you can dance the Saumpi” (Participant B).

Eligibility is primarily determined by ritual competence and spiritual calling, although certain roles remain gender-specific. The act of holding the bamboo, a foundational element, is reserved for men due to its symbolic and ritual significance. As one practitioner explained,

“Holding the bamboo is strictly the role of men, no one else... The one who holds the bamboo must always be a man. This is because the dance originates in bamboo. That is why the bamboo is always present in the dance; it is never absent” (Participant C).

Although children are typically excluded, age does not preclude participation if an individual is recognized as a *balyan*. This distinction is significant because the *Saumpi* dance takes place during the sacred *Kasamungan* ritual. As one informant explained,

“Anyone of any age can perform, as long as they are a balyan, because the kasamungan is a high-level ritual” (Participant D).

The *Saumpi* dance constitutes a vital aspect of the spiritual heritage of the Kagan people, synthesizing music, movement, attire, and ritual into a cohesive expression of faith and ancestry. Distinct components such as *agung* rhythms, *kumpas* steps, and ancestral chants collectively construct a narrative centered on healing, lineage, and identity. The *Saumpi* dance functions as a means of ancestral veneration, cultural continuity, and the reaffirmation of the Kagan people's interconnected spiritual and physical existence.

The enforcement of customary laws, in determining eligibility for sacred dances, illustrates a cultural regulatory system grounded in communal respect and authenticity. This approach is consistent with the observations of Salazar (2018) and Tiatco and BonifacioRamolete (2008), who argue that indigenous performance traditions are not open-ended art forms but are instead governed by sacred protocols that safeguard their ritual integrity. Violating these protocols constitutes not only an act of disrespect but also a form of cultural desecration. The Kagan community mitigates such violations by adhering strictly to

ritual codes, a practice similarly observed among the Ifugao and Kalinga (Castro, 2011; Sannadan et al, 2024).

5. Conclusion

This study elucidates the complex cultural, spiritual, and social dimensions of the *Saumpi* dance as practiced by the Kagan tribe. Ethnographic inquiry reveals that the *Saumpi* functions not only as a performative tradition but also as a living repository of ancestral knowledge, spiritual healing, and communal identity. The interplay of music, movement, ritual attire, and restricted participation highlights the dance's significance as both intangible cultural heritage and a medium for transmitting values and beliefs across generations.

Although contemporary pressures threaten the continuity of indigenous practices, the *Saumpi* dance persists as a sacred, identity-affirming ritual central to the Kagan community life. The findings underscore the need to safeguard such traditions through culturally responsive documentation, community-based education, and the empowerment of local custodians. Preserving the *Saumpi* dance is essential for the resilience of the Kagan people and contributes to broader recognition and appreciation of the Philippines' diverse intangible heritage. Future initiatives must prioritize the active participation of indigenous stakeholders to ensure that preservation efforts are grounded in the lived experiences and aspirations of the Kagan community.

6. Implications

The findings of this study present significant implications for heritage preservation, cultural policy, and indigenous empowerment. The *Saumpi* dance illustrates the intricate relationship between ritual performance and the transmission of intangible cultural heritage, highlighting the necessity for context-sensitive strategies to protect indigenous practices. Policy interventions and educational programs should be developed to respect and reinforce the community's cultural frameworks, ensuring that preservation efforts remain participatory and locally grounded. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the critical role of cultural bearers, such as the *balyan* and tradition keepers, as central figures in heritage initiatives. Their participation is essential for maintaining the authenticity, sustainability, and continued relevance of preservation strategies. Finally, this research calls for greater recognition of the *Saumpi* dance and similar indigenous practices as essential elements within national and global heritage discourses. By centering the lived experiences and aspirations of the Kagan community, the study advocates for inclusive heritage frameworks that foster cultural resilience, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and the vitality of diverse indigenous identities.

7. References

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