

Administration of Indigenous Justice System of Ati Tribe: Narratives of Mediators

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Abstract

This study explored the administration of the Indigenous Justice System of the Ati Tribe in Loay, Bohol through the narratives of tribal mediators. Anchored on Restorative Justice Theory, Legal Pluralism Theory, and Transformative Mediation Theory, the study examined the mediators' experiences, coping strategies, and aspirations in resolving conflicts within the tribe. A qualitative research design using transcendental phenomenology was employed. Ten members of the Ati mediating council, including the Indigenous focal person, served as informants. Data were gathered through a validated interview guide and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that the mediators found purpose in community service and described a shift from punitive practices to peacebuilding through dialogue, advice, reconciliation, and respect. However, they also encountered challenges related to social change, generational differences, communication gaps, resistance among community members, and the influence of formal legal systems. The mediators coped through patience, empathy, resilience, barangay coordination, and commitment to community harmony. Their aspirations focused on preserving Ati language, identity, respect, forgiveness, youth participation, legal awareness, and stronger mediation capacity. The study concludes that the Ati Indigenous Justice System remains a culturally grounded and evolving community-based justice practice. The study supports SDG 16, SDG 10, SDG 11, and SDG 17 by promoting inclusive justice, reduced inequalities, sustainable communities, and institutional partnerships. Its sustainability impact lies in strengthening cultural preservation, community peacebuilding, governance responsiveness, and the recognition of Indigenous justice practices within broader legal and social systems.

Keywords: Ati Tribe, Community Mediation, Cultural Sustainability, Indigenous Justice System, Legal Pluralism, Peacebuilding, Restorative Justice, Transformative Mediation

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the administration of the Indigenous Justice System of the Ati Tribe in Loay, Bohol, particularly through the narratives of tribal mediators. It recognizes that Indigenous communities possess distinct cultural, legal, political, and social institutions that shape their ways of resolving disputes, preserving harmony, and maintaining identity. The study is grounded in the view that Indigenous justice systems remain significant not only as cultural practices but also as mechanisms for access to justice, peacebuilding, human rights protection, and culturally responsive governance.

Indigenous peoples have long been recognized as communities with individual and collective rights. In 1994, the UN General Assembly declared 1995–2004 as the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, followed by the Second Decade from 2005–2015. The UN Declaration recognizes the rights of Indigenous peoples as individuals and as collective groups, including rights connected to land, culture, and self-governance (Art. 1 of the UN Declaration). It also states that Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions while retaining their right to participate in the life of the State (Art. 5). Access to justice remains a central concern for marginalized communities. The 2018 Geneva Forum (ICJ 2018) emphasized that Indigenous justice systems may enhance access to justice, but they must also be strengthened through legal reform, education, and collaboration with state institutions to ensure consistency with human rights principles. Across societies, mechanisms for resolving conflicts exist because dispute settlement is a basic requirement of social order. Gulliver (1979) states that every society has its own mechanism of handling disputes/conflicts. In the Philippines, Republic Act 8371, or the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA), was enacted to address the concerns of Indigenous communities that had received marginal attention for decades. Conflict resolution among Indigenous groups requires an understanding of their social structure, organization, history, and culture (Jocano, 2000). Different Indigenous groups in the Philippines practice distinct forms of dispute settlement. Among the Kalinga, the Pagta or Law of the Bodong contains binding provisions governing offenses in villages covered by the peace pact (Naganag, 2019). Among the Panay-Bukidnon, the practice of Kantang

reflects a culturally rooted response to murder and grief, where vengeance is viewed as a shared community obligation (Rio, 2016, p. 76; Rio, 2016, p.78). In Mindanao, rido may be resolved through traditional intervention by Sultans, Datus, or councils of elders, and in some cases through initiated or forced marriage to restore relations between rival families (Pailig Foundation, 2007). Given these varied Indigenous conflict-resolution practices, the Ati Tribe of Loay, Bohol provides an important research context. The richness of Ati culture and its approach to minor and major conflicts create a relevant site for examining how Indigenous justice is administered. This study aims to bridge the gap in comprehensive research on the conflict resolution of the Ati Tribe in Loay, Bohol, Philippines, and to explore the experiences of tribal mediators in dispute resolution. Its findings may guide policymakers and practitioners in handling cases involving tribes and Indigenous peoples while promoting justice and human rights within the criminal justice system.

Indigenous justice systems are among the oldest mechanisms for maintaining social order, resolving conflict, and preserving communal harmony. These systems are rooted in cultural norms, kinship ties, customary laws, and collective decision-making. In the Philippines, Indigenous justice systems among the Cordillera peoples, Lumad, and Bangsamoro Indigenous groups are anchored in communal decision-making and traditional authority. Practices such as the bodong among the Kalinga, dap-ay community councils in Benguet, and kasabutan agreements among Lumad communities emphasize reconciliation, communal responsibility, and reparation rather than punitive sanctions (Prill-Brett, 2014; Macdonald, 2019). The literature also shows that Indigenous communities face external pressures that may affect their customary processes. Studies by Rosaldo (2015) and Gatmaytan (2020) show that while communities attempt to maintain their customary systems, pressures from national policymakers, legal agencies, and economic actions often undermine Indigenous Autonomy. Globally, Indigenous justice systems such as rangatahi and marae-based courts incorporate Maori values and have shown measurable reductions in recidivism by emphasizing healing, identity, and reintegration rather than punishment (Jackson, 2019). The Navajo Nation's Peacemaking Program integrates harmony or hozho and family involvement, making it a global model for culturally embedded restorative justice (Yazzie & Zion, 1996; Bluehouse, 2010). Canadian Indigenous justice institutions such as sentencing circles and community justice committees address colonial harms and support offender accountability and victim healing (Napoleon, 2016). Conflict is viewed as an inevitable social phenomenon because people frequently place opinion against opinion and interest against interest (Nader, 1986). In Africa, conflicts have involved land/border disputes, resource control, ethnic cleavages, and wars of liberation, with 80 violent changes of government recorded in 48 Sub-Saharan African countries between the 1960s and 1990s (Bello and Olutola, 2016). Boege (2018) explains that Indigenous institutions, customary norms, and traditional authorities may coexist with formal state structures through hybrid political orders. Connolly (2019) highlights that Indigenous restorative processes involve dialogue, collective decision-making, and culturally grounded rituals led by elders or community leaders. These leaders guide parties toward accountability, resolution, and reintegration. Traditional dispute processes are closely linked to social norms, kinship relations, and communal expectations. According to Nader and Todd (1978), many Indigenous communities rely on mediation, negotiation, and reconciliation rather than adversarial procedures. Tusso (2011) emphasized that conflict resolution is a hereditary way of solving conflict based on culture, practices, beliefs, faiths, and rituals in a holistic manner. Utne (2001) states that Indigenous conflict resolution does not simply solve disputes between two sides but also heals damaged relationships, corrects wrongdoing, and restores justice within the wider community. Osamba (2001) likewise explains that culturally prescribed resolution methods emphasize reconciliation, fairness, forgiveness, tolerance, and coexistence rather than determining winners and losers.

Other studies reinforce the cultural and relational foundations of Indigenous conflict resolution. Hwedi and Rankopo (2009) noted the role of spiritual and cultural mechanisms, institutions, and values. Kevin Avruch and Peter Black (1991) argue that dialogue allows practitioners to prioritize cultural differences, local contexts, and inclusivity rather than Western-centric structures. The UN Special Rapporteur (2004) identified a human rights protection gap in justice systems affecting Indigenous peoples, especially in criminal justice, contributing to their lack of confidence in national systems of justice. Related studies from different regions also show the continuing relevance of Indigenous justice. Nakata (2007) highlights kinship structures in Indigenous Australian conflict resolution. Chavez and Ramirez (2023) emphasize reciprocity and communal work or minga in Andean communities. Adeyemi (2022) shows how Yoruba customary courts rely on community leaders and function alongside formal legal systems. Johnston (2023) demonstrates how Indigenous legal traditions in Canada contribute to restorative justice through dialogue and reconciliation. Gonzales and Herrera (2022) show how Mapuche mediation in Chile remains rooted in reciprocity and spiritual beliefs despite state legal pressures. Chua and Santiago (2023) explain that Lumad conflict resolution uses community councils and oral agreements to maintain harmony, while Matsuda (2022) discusses the Ainu people's use of storytelling and ancestral wisdom in mediation. The role of elders is also central. Chandler and Lalonde (1998) highlight the importance of Elders in Indigenous communities, particularly in justice and conflict resolution. Hand, Hankes, and House (2012) contrast traditional Indigenous restorative justice systems with European-based justice systems in the USA and emphasize the resilience and creative resistance of Indigenous peoples. Nursoo (2018) discusses the need to address colonial legacies in the Australian legal system through Indigenous legal traditions and a pluralist-pluralist paradigm. Taylor and Bartel (2022) emphasize cultural connection and healing through yarning circles with Indigenous adults in the Australian Criminal Justice System. Roach and Rudin (2000) discuss the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the Canadian Criminal Justice System and the implications of the R v

Gladuae decision. Khaw (2016) stresses the importance of recognizing and integrating Indigenous justice systems within broader legal frameworks while ensuring consistency with international human rights. Wallace (2024) calls for culturally sensitive reforms in response to the persistent disadvantages faced by First Nations people in the Australian Criminal Justice System. Hewitt (2016) advocates a justice system that respects Indigenous traditions while applying Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms in a way that considers Indigenous needs and rights.

Locally, the study is situated in the Ati Tribe of Loay, Bohol, an Indigenous community whose justice practices remain connected to culture, mediation, and communal peace. The province of Bohol is culturally and historically significant, and Loay is identified as a coastal municipality with historical, cultural, agricultural, fishing, tourism, and local craft-based livelihood activities. The Ati Tribe of Loay migrated from Panay Island in the 1970s, established its presence along the Loboc River, and integrated into the local community through farming and trade. The Ati community also participates in cultural events where traditional dances, music, and crafts are showcased, with approximately 50 families reported in the tribe. Nationally, the study is anchored in the Philippine legal recognition of Indigenous peoples. Republic Act No. 8371, or IPRA, recognizes, protects, and promotes the rights of Indigenous Cultural Communities and Indigenous Peoples. It upholds their right to self-governance, traditional systems, cultural integrity, and social justice (Molintas, 2004; Doyle, 2009; Prill-Brett, 2007). IPRA also reinforces the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination and cultural preservation (United Nations, 2007). Republic Act 9285, or the Alternative Dispute Resolution Act of 2004, also supports access to justice by integrating ADR mechanisms and customary dispute resolution practices into the legal framework (Panganiban, 2005). Globally, Indigenous justice systems are recognized as culturally grounded alternatives or complements to formal legal systems. The experiences of Maori, Navajo, Canadian Indigenous communities, Aboriginal peoples, First Nations groups, Mapuche communities, Andean communities, Yoruba customary courts, Ainu communities, and Indigenous Australian groups show that Indigenous justice is shaped by dialogue, kinship, restoration, reconciliation, cultural identity, and community healing (Jackson, 2019; Yazzie & Zion, 1996; Bluehouse, 2010; Napoleon, 2016; Nakata, 2007; Chavez and Ramirez, 2023; Adeyemi, 2022; Gonzales and Herrera, 2022; Matsuda, 2022; Taylor and Bartel, 2022).

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored on Restorative Justice Theory by Howard Zehr (2002), supported by Legal Pluralism Theory by John Griffiths (1986) and Transformative Mediation Theory by Robert Baruch Bush and Joseph Folger (1994). Restorative Justice Theory redefines crime not merely as a violation of law but as harm done to individuals and relationships. It emphasizes healing, accountability, restoration, victim needs, offender responsibility, and community participation. It promotes practices such as victim-offender mediation, restorative circles, and community conferencing, where dialogue replaces punishment and offenders are encouraged to acknowledge harm and make amends (Zehr, 2002). The theory is relevant to Indigenous Justice Practices, Relational Justice, and Victim-Centered Approach, particularly because many Indigenous communities use reconciliation, peacemaking circles, and community mediation to resolve conflicts (Zehr, 2002). Legal Pluralism Theory by John Griffiths (1986) supports the study by recognizing that multiple legal systems coexist within a single society. Law is not created only by the state but also by communities, religious institutions, and social groups. Legal pluralism challenges legal centralism and explains how customary practices, religious laws, international human rights law, corporate regulations, and treaties may interact within the same legal landscape (Griffiths, 1986). This is relevant to the Ati Tribe because their Indigenous justice system exists alongside barangay mechanisms, national law, and state institutions. Transformative Mediation Theory by Robert Bush and Joseph Folger (1994) supports the study by emphasizing empowerment and recognition rather than mere settlement. It views conflict as a crisis in human interaction where people feel weakened in decision-making and disconnected from others. Transformative mediation promotes meaningful dialogue, self-determination, empathy, personal growth, and relational transformation, making it particularly relevant in communities where long-term relationships must be preserved (Bush and Folger 1994; Bush & Folger 1994).

The study addresses the limited comprehensive research on the Indigenous justice system and conflict-resolution practices of the Ati Tribe in Loay, Bohol. Although many studies have discussed Indigenous justice in other local and global contexts, the specific narratives of Ati tribal mediators remain underexplored. This gap is significant because mediators directly participate in resolving disputes, preserving cultural practices, maintaining peace, and negotiating the relationship between Indigenous customs and formal legal systems. A critical evaluation is necessary to highlight the roles of mediators in conflict resolution. The related literature emphasizes that integrating Indigenous practices with modern legal frameworks can produce more culturally responsive and inclusive strategies. Recognizing and respecting these traditional mechanisms preserves Indigenous heritage while offering valuable insights for peacebuilding, justice, and human rights. This study therefore explores the experiences of Ati mediators, how they cope with challenges in performing their roles, and their aspirations for improving mediation within the tribe.

This study aligns most strongly with SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions because it focuses on Indigenous justice, mediation, access to justice, conflict resolution, human rights, and culturally responsive legal processes. By examining how Ati mediators administer justice within their community, the study contributes to stronger, more inclusive,

and more culturally sensitive justice institutions. The study also supports SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities because it highlights the rights, experiences, and justice needs of Indigenous peoples, a group historically exposed to marginalization and limited attention in formal governance systems. Its focus on IPRA, cultural integrity, self-governance, and legal recognition supports the reduction of institutional and social inequalities affecting Indigenous communities. It is also connected to SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities because Indigenous justice systems help preserve cultural heritage, strengthen social cohesion, and promote peaceful community life. The Ati Tribe’s mediation practices support community sustainability by maintaining relationships, reducing conflict, and protecting Indigenous identity. Finally, the study relates to SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals because it emphasizes collaboration among Indigenous mediators, the National Commission on Indigenous People, Local Government Units, NGOs, policymakers, and practitioners. Such partnerships are necessary to strengthen Indigenous justice systems, improve dispute resolution, and support culturally grounded governance.

The study contributes to multidisciplinary sustainability by connecting Indigenous studies, criminology, legal anthropology, peacebuilding, governance, human rights, and community development. Its cultural sustainability lies in documenting and valuing the Ati Tribe’s justice practices, thereby supporting the preservation of Indigenous identity, traditional mediation, and intergenerational knowledge. Its governance sustainability is reflected in its potential to guide culturally sensitive policies and strengthen the relationship between Indigenous justice systems and formal legal institutions. The study also contributes to socio-economic and community sustainability because peaceful dispute resolution supports social cohesion, reduces conflict, and helps communities function more harmoniously. Its institutional sustainability is evident in its usefulness to NCIP, LGUs, NGOs, and future researchers who may use the findings to improve Indigenous rights advocacy, policy reform, mediation support, and justice-related interventions. Overall, the study affirms that Indigenous justice systems are not merely traditional practices but living institutions that can contribute to inclusive justice, cultural preservation, and sustainable peace.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative research method to examine the lived experiences of the informants in their natural setting. Specifically, the researcher adopted transcendental phenomenology, which is based on the principles identified by Husserl (1931) and translated into a qualitative method by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas’s (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology focuses less on the researcher’s interpretation and more on describing the experiences of the participants. The study emphasized Husserl’s concept of bracketing, where the researcher set aside personal experiences and assumptions as much as possible to examine the phenomenon from the perspective of the informants. Moustakas (1994) explained that transcendental phenomenology involves identifying a phenomenon, bracketing personal experiences, collecting data from persons who experienced the phenomenon, identifying significant statements, developing themes, and describing both the textural and structural meanings of the experience. This design was appropriate because the study sought to understand the essence of the mediators’ experiences in conflict mediation within the Ati Tribe.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the Province of Bohol, particularly among the Ati Tribe of Loay, Bohol. Bohol is located in the Central Visayas region of the Philippines and is known for its cultural heritage, natural attractions, and historical significance. It is the 10th largest island in the country, with approximately 4,821 square kilometers, 75 municipalities, and one city, Tagbilaran, which serves as its capital (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). The province is bounded by Cebu to the west, Leyte to the northeast, and Mindanao to the south across the Bohol Sea. It has over 1.3 million people, predominantly Cebuano-speaking, with Spanish and pre-colonial Filipino influences (Commission on Population and Development, 2021). Bohol is also a major tourist destination known for beaches, dive sites, river cruises, wildlife encounters, and heritage tours (Department of Tourism, 2022). The specific locale, Loay, is a coastal municipality located about 18 kilometers east of Tagbilaran City. It is historically and culturally significant and is known for the Loboc-Loay River Cruise, agriculture, fishing, tourism, basket weaving, and local crafts. The Ati Tribe of Loay migrated from Panay Island in the 1970s in search of livelihood opportunities. Led by Leopoldo Segovia, they settled along the Loboc River and integrated into the local community through farming and trade. The tribe also participates in cultural events where they present traditional dances, music, and crafts to promote appreciation of their Indigenous identity. As of recent reports, the Ati Tribe in Loay, Bohol comprises approximately 50 families.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The informants of the study were ten members of the mediating council of the Ati Tribe, including the Indigenous focal person of Loay, Bohol. They were selected because of their direct experience and active involvement in mediation within the tribe. Their participation provided diverse perspectives on the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of Ati mediators in administering their Indigenous Justice System.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study involved ten informants who were selected based on their direct relevance to the research objectives. The selection focused on individuals who were actively engaged in mediation for at least three years and were willing to share their experiences. Individual interviews were conducted with the ten participants to gather detailed narratives regarding their role in conflict mediation.

2.5 Research Instrument

The researcher used an Interview Guide for in-depth interviews to gather detailed narratives and insights from the mediators. The instrument was validated by the research adviser, a panel of experts, and the dean of the Graduate School. It also included an informed consent section to formally invite the participants and ensure their voluntary participation. The open-ended questions were organized around the study objectives: the experiences of mediators, the strategies used to cope with challenges, and their aspirations for improving conflict mediation.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

After the proposal hearing, the researcher prepared the necessary research documents, including the transmittal letter, interview guide, and informed consent form. These were validated by experts and the adviser to ensure ethical and methodological soundness. After approval by the research ethics committee and the granting of protocol clearance, the researcher proceeded with data collection. The researcher first secured approval of the interview guide and then sent a formal request to the National Commission on Indigenous People to conduct the study among the Ati Tribe in Loay, Bohol. The letter was issued by the University of Cebu-Graduate School and signed by the thesis adviser. After permission was granted, the researcher presented the purpose and objectives of the study to the IP Focal and barangay officials, who assisted in identifying mediators willing to participate. The individual interviews were conducted in a private and confidential setting. With informed consent, audio recording was used to capture the responses accurately for transcription and analysis. Throughout the interviews, the researcher maintained sensitivity, empathy, and a non-judgmental approach to encourage honest sharing.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study used thematic analysis to examine the data gathered from interviews, detailed notes, and observations. The researcher first became familiar with the data and categorized relevant segments according to the research questions. These codes captured the key ideas, experiences, and emotions expressed by the participants. Relevant codes were then organized into themes and sub-themes to represent the depth of the participants' narratives (Moustakas, 1994). The analysis followed an iterative process in which the researcher repeatedly reviewed the data, refined the themes, examined relationships, and addressed discrepancies. The themes were then interpreted in relation to the research objectives, theoretical frameworks, and existing literature. Member checking was also optionally conducted to allow participants to confirm whether the identified themes accurately reflected their experiences.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study observed ethical measures to protect the well-being, rights, and dignity of the Ati mediators. Beneficence was observed by ensuring that the research process was beneficial and could support programs responsive to the culture and justice system of the Ati Tribe. Non-maleficence was upheld by minimizing possible harm through voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymized data collection and storage, respectful handling of sensitive topics, and emotional support when needed. Justice was observed through fair participant selection based on informed consent and voluntary participation, while data analysis was conducted with awareness of possible power imbalances. Autonomy was respected by allowing participants to make informed decisions, speak in their own words, and have their preferences and concerns considered throughout the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Experiences of the Informants in the Performance of Their Roles

3.1.1 Finding Purpose in Service

The findings showed that the mediators viewed their role as a meaningful form of service to the Ati community. They expressed happiness and fulfillment in guiding fellow members, giving advice, helping settle conflicts, calling people for gatherings, and contributing to the preservation of tribal culture. Their service was not motivated by compensation but by commitment, responsibility, and the desire to maintain peace and unity within the tribe. This finding reflects the mediators' deep cultural and personal commitment to their role. Serving as mediators and peacekeepers was not merely a functional task but a responsibility connected to identity, tradition, and community continuity. This theme is supported by Transformative Mediation Theory by Bush & Folger (2005), which views conflict resolution as a process that strengthens individuals and relationships through empowerment and recognition. The narratives show that mediation is inseparable from Ati identity because it serves as both an obligation and a privilege in maintaining peace within the community.

3.1.2 From Punishment to Peacebuilding

The findings revealed that the Ati community has gradually moved away from traditional punitive practices and has adopted more dialogic and reconciliatory forms of conflict settlement. Informants explained that instead of applying severe punishments, disputes are now commonly settled through face-to-face dialogue, advice, mediation, and reconciliation. They also recognized the influence of government laws in shaping their current practices, especially in avoiding punishments that may conflict with the formal legal system. This shift demonstrates how the Ati Indigenous Justice System now prioritizes restoration, relationship repair, and social harmony over punishment. This approach aligns directly with Restorative Justice Theory, which views crime or wrongdoing not as an offense against the state but as harm to people and relationships (Zehr, 2002). In the Ati context, elders and mediators facilitate dialogue so that parties can express experiences, acknowledge harm, and work toward mutual resolution. The movement from punishment to peacebuilding strengthens community values of unity, interconnectedness, accountability, and shared responsibility.

3.2 Negative Experiences Encountered by the Informants

3.2.1 Facing Struggles of Social Change

The findings showed that Ati mediators experienced challenges brought by changing social conditions, generational differences, and the influence of modern systems. Some younger members were described as less obedient to tribal teachings and less connected to traditional practices. Informants also reported opposition, disrespect, and difficulty in maintaining cultural authority as the community increasingly interacts with mainstream norms and state systems. These experiences show that administering Indigenous justice requires continuous negotiation between tradition and modernity. The findings are best understood through Legal Pluralism Theory, which recognizes the coexistence of state law, customary norms, community rules, and informal practices within a shared social space (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988). In the Ati Tribe, customary justice operates alongside Philippine national laws, barangay mechanisms, and external agencies. This coexistence creates tension, but it also shows the resilience of Indigenous justice within a changing and legally plural society.

3.2.2 Communication Gaps and Dispute Confusion

The findings revealed that communication difficulties affected the mediation process. Informants experienced misunderstandings, unclear expectations, emotional tension, stubbornness, and confusion among disputing parties. Some mediators also felt exhausted because they carried multiple responsibilities, including addressing financial needs and managing community members who resisted cooperation or misunderstood their intentions. These struggles reflect the importance of communication, recognition, and mutual understanding in mediation. Transformative Mediation Theory explains that mediators facilitate shifts in the parties' perspectives by encouraging understanding, mutual respect, and active participation in dialogue (Bush & Folger, 1994;2005). When disputants fail to express grievances clearly or misinterpret one another, conflicts may persist or escalate. The Ati mediators' experiences show that effective mediation requires patience, cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and the ability to bridge generational and intercultural differences.

3.3 Coping with Challenges in the Performance of Their Roles

3.3.1 Leading with Heart and Resilience

The findings showed that the mediators coped with challenges through patience, empathy, tolerance, persistence, and emotional commitment. Despite difficulties such as stubborn community members, limited understanding among some individuals, alcohol-related disputes, and disrespect from younger members, the mediators continued to perform their duties. Their motivation came from respect, trust, gratitude, and their desire to protect the welfare of the community. This theme reflects compassionate and culturally grounded leadership. The finding resonates with Transformative Mediation Theory, which emphasizes empowerment and recognition in conflict situations (Bush & Folger, 1994;2005). The Ati mediators draw strength from cultural identity, ancestral teachings, and lived experience, enabling them to guide disputants with confidence and compassion. Their leadership style shows that mediation is not only procedural but also relational, emotional, and community-centered.

3.3.2 Preventing Conflict, Cultivating Peace

The findings indicated that Ati mediators prevent conflict by addressing tensions early, seeking help from barangay or government authorities when necessary, discouraging alcohol-related disputes, and maintaining community harmony through dialogue. When local mediation becomes difficult or ineffective, mediators refer matters to higher authorities while still attempting to preserve peace within the tribe. This finding shows that Ati mediators operate between Indigenous traditions and formal legal processes. The theme is supported by Legal Pluralism theory (Griffiths, 1986), which explains how customary norms, barangay mechanisms, and national legal systems may overlap in the administration of justice. The mediators' ability to shift between tribal dialogue and formal assistance demonstrates how they prevent conflict escalation while protecting both cultural autonomy and lawful resolution.

3.4 Aspirations to Improve the Mediation of Conflicts

3.4.1 Tradition Meets Transformation in Mediation

The findings showed that the mediators aspired to preserve Ati language, identity, respect, forgiveness, and traditional values while also improving their mediation practices. They expressed the need for youth to appreciate tribal values and continue the practices inherited from elders. At the same time, they recognized the need for training, legal knowledge, documentation skills, and stronger coordination with government agencies. This theme shows that the mediators do not view modernization as the abandonment of tradition. Instead, they see transformation as a way to protect and strengthen their Indigenous Justice System. Legal Pluralism Theory explains that Indigenous communities operate within dynamic environments where customary norms, barangay legislation, and national IP laws overlap and influence one another (Woodman, 1998; Tamanaha, 2008). The Ati mediators' aspirations reflect their desire to remain culturally grounded while improving the legitimacy, clarity, and sustainability of their mediation system. This also resonates with Tamanaha's (2008) view that communities in plural legal contexts may pursue reforms that preserve autonomy while improving functional effectiveness.

3.4.2 Bridging Differences Through Understanding

The findings revealed that the mediators wanted stronger training, better communication skills, improved legal understanding, and more support from institutions. They also emphasized the importance of good manners, respect, discipline, sobriety, listening to both sides, and teaching the youth to value peaceful conflict resolution. Their aspirations focused on building understanding within the tribe and between the tribe and external authorities. This theme reflects the mediators' goal of creating a more harmonious interface between Indigenous and state systems. Legal Pluralism Theory emphasizes the coexistence of multiple legal orders and the need for communities to navigate layered systems through understanding, negotiation, and cultural adaptability (Merry, 1988; Griffiths, 1986; Tamanaha, 2008). In this context, the Ati mediators' aspiration is not only to settle disputes but to build mutual understanding, preserve respect for tradition, and ensure that justice is carried out in a way that responds to both cultural values and formal legal expectations.

3.5 Overall Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the findings revealed that the Ati mediators administer justice through a culturally grounded, relational, and peace-oriented process. Their positive experiences show fulfillment in service and a movement from punitive practices toward restorative peacebuilding. Their negative experiences reveal struggles with social change, generational disconnection, and communication gaps. Their coping strategies demonstrate resilience, empathy, and the use of both Indigenous and formal mechanisms to maintain harmony. Their aspirations highlight the need to preserve cultural identity while strengthening mediation through training, legal awareness, institutional support, and intergenerational continuity. The results affirm that the Ati Indigenous Justice System is not a static tradition but an evolving community-based justice practice. It remains rooted in respect, dialogue, forgiveness, cultural identity, and communal responsibility while adapting to the realities of legal pluralism and modern governance. The narratives of the mediators show that Indigenous mediation can contribute to culturally responsive justice, peacebuilding, and the protection of Indigenous rights when properly supported by community members, government institutions, and relevant stakeholders.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concluded that the Ati Tribe mediators of Loay, Bohol administer their Indigenous Justice System through culturally grounded, relational, and peace-oriented practices. Their experiences showed fulfillment in community service, a shift from punitive practices to peacebuilding, and continuing struggles with social change, generational differences, communication gaps, and overlapping legal systems. Despite these challenges, the mediators coped through resilience, empathy, patience, barangay coordination, and commitment to community harmony, while their aspirations centered on preserving Ati language, identity, respect, forgiveness, youth participation, legal awareness, and stronger mediation capacity. These findings affirm that the Ati Indigenous Justice System remains an evolving practice shaped by ancestral wisdom, restorative values, and legal pluralism.

It is recommended that Ati mediators continue grounding their mediation practices in Ati customs and traditions while strengthening their skills through culturally sensitive training in empowerment-based and relationship-centered mediation. The NCIP should support documentation, preservation, rights awareness, legal literacy, culturally appropriate mediation training, youth engagement, and advocacy for Indigenous conflict-resolution processes. The LGU should strengthen institutional recognition of the Indigenous Justice System, establish clearer cooperation pathways, provide capacity-building support, integrate Indigenous practices into local programs and policy planning, and include Ati mediators in consultations and local decision-making. The community should also promote continuing education on Ati traditions, values, and conflict-resolution practices to strengthen respect, compliance, cultural understanding, and harmony.

The study was limited to the narratives of Ati mediators and therefore did not fully include the perspectives of other community members such as elders, women, youth, or disputants who experienced the Indigenous justice process. It also

focused on one Indigenous community, making comparative analysis with other Indigenous justice systems outside the Ati Tribe limited. The study further indicates the need for deeper examination of the interaction between the Indigenous Justice System and formal legal institutions, as well as the effects of modernization, tourism, land disputes, economic pressures, and cultural assimilation on the sustainability of Ati justice practices.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards and observed respect for the rights, dignity, and cultural identity of the Ati Tribe informants. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, with the participants properly informed about the purpose, procedures, and scope of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in the collection, handling, and presentation of data, and ethical approval was secured prior to data gathering. The authors declare no conflict of interest, acknowledge the contributions of the informants and concerned institutions, and affirm that copyright ownership and authorship responsibilities were properly observed throughout the conduct and completion of the research.

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