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The Kalinga legend of sleeping beauty: Cultural symbols and their role in indigenous identity and social cohesion

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Abstract

This study investigates the cultural symbols embedded in the Kalinga legend of *Sleeping Beauty* and their significance in reflecting indigenous values, beliefs, and identity formation. The research aims to explore how symbolic representations within the legend function as moral and cultural instruments that strengthen social cohesion and sustain collective memory. Employing a qualitative and interpretive research design, the study utilized symbolic and textual analysis, supported by semi-structured interviews with Kalinga elders and cultural bearers. Data were collected from both oral and written renditions of the legend and analyzed within the lens of Kalinga cosmology, oral tradition, and indigenous worldview. Findings reveal that the legend's prominent symbols—including the tribal war, *mengor* (hero), Mount Patukan, *sawali* wall, glass of water, *moma*, *ullalim* chant, *salidsid* dance, *allap* textile, *tadok* dance, seven-day ritual, and *inandila* (rice delicacy)—serve as repositories of collective identity, ecological ethics, and ancestral wisdom. These symbols encapsulate Kalinga values of unity, courage, resilience, and reverence for nature and kinship, while storytelling emerges as both a cultural and pedagogical act that reinforces moral formation and intergenerational continuity. The study concludes that the Kalinga *Sleeping Beauty* legend transcends its portrayal as romantic folklore, embodying instead an indigenous philosophy that interlinks land, spirituality, and moral consciousness. Its rich symbolism offers deep insights into the community's worldview and resilience. Practically, the study underscores the importance of integrating indigenous narratives into formal and non-formal education to promote cultural preservation, moral development, and environmental awareness, thereby advancing inclusive, decolonized, and context-based approaches to learning and sustainability.

Keywords: Cultural symbols, Indigenous identity, Kalinga legend, Oral tradition, Sleeping beauty, Social cohesion.

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1. Introduction

Stories and legends serve as powerful vessels for preserving cultural heritage, transmitting values, beliefs, and social norms across generations [1, 2]. Among the indigenous narratives in the Philippines, the Kalinga legend of Sleeping Beauty stands out for its fusion of romantic tragedy and symbolic meaning. In contrast to the European attention to matters of enchantment, the Kalinga tale describes a love that transcends tribal conflict and leads to a transformation in which a woman is turned into Sleeping Beauty Mountain (Mount Patukan), a sacred monument around which memory and identity continue for the community.

In recent decades, however, elders in Kalinga have expressed concern over the erosion of traditional cultural values and the weakening of social cohesion, particularly among younger generations. Traditional community values — such as respecting one's elders, loyalty, respect for ancestors and social responsibility that were originally transmitted through oral traditions and ritual practices are becoming less emphasized over modern influences [3, 4]. Although some research on the Philippine indigenous oral traditions has examined textual conservation, historical context and storytelling devices [3, 4] there are scant studies on how symbolic aspects of these narratives operate as emblems through which we can access indigenous worldviews and mechanisms for social unity. This lack is most apparent in the Sleeping Beauty legend, which has seldom been treated as a storehouse of symbols and cultural meaning.

This study seeks to address that gap by closely identifying the symbolic elements of the Kalinga Sleeping Beauty legend as seen in terms of how cultural symbols articulate indigenous belief, negotiate identity construction, and maintain community solidarity. It also examines the practice of storytelling as an instrument for preservation and transmission of culture in modern education. Notwithstanding its economic and cultural significance, the legend has an environmental ethical connotation: Mount Patukan serves as a geocultural symbol reflecting the Kalinga people's connection to nature. Recent environmental research has emphasized how identity and cultural heritage inform environmental stewardship [5], how local practices impact ecosystem health [6] and communities serve as spaces of sustainability learning [7].

Symbolic anthropology highlights how cultures create meaning through symbolic forms. Geertz [8] defined culture as system of messages encoded in symbols, and Turner [9] emphasized that mythic and ritual symbolism conveyed to its audiences multilayered social, spiritual, and psychological meanings. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) situate knowledge as relational, integral and connected to land and spirituality. Battiste [10] describe IKS as grounded in ancestral wisdom and environmental responsibility, while McGregor [11] introduces the concept of "Indigenous environmental ethics," where nature is understood as a living relative. Wilson [12] adds that identity and knowledge are inseparable from the land in Indigenous worldviews. Hall [13] views identity as fluid and discursively formed, while Clifford [14] and Nagel [15] explore how myths and collective memory contribute to a sense of belonging and cultural continuity.

In Kalinga culture, mountains in indigenous cosmology are often associated with ancestral spirits and collective memory, symbolizing sacredness and the intertwining of land and identity [16]. Traditional architectures, such as the sawali wall are a testament to core values of simplicity, sustainability and community living [17]. Betel chewing (moma) is central to social bonding and politics, reflecting trust and relationships of reciprocity [18]. Rituals of traditional courtship such as the salidsid dance express the idea of mutual respect and public involvement in life change [17], whilst the tadok dance represents unity and community celebration through shared rhythm and movement amongst many others [16]. The epic chant called ullalim, which upholds values such as courtship, sincerity and ancestral wisdom, serves essential oral tradition in cultural identity [16, 17].

Previous research emphasized the ethical and mnemonic function of Filipino indigenous rituals [19], while others underscored the symbolic power of natural landmarks in oral traditions as carriers of ancestral memory [1, 2]. The bodong as indigenous peace pact becomes relevant in peace education for modern generation [20]. The mengor represents morality, courage and social responsibility Wilson [12], whereas the notion of tribe conveys kinship, collective identity, and social cohesion [18, 21]. Traditionally, storytelling, as a form of oral knowledge transfer in Kalinga town serves as an alive archive where narratives serve and re-serve to strengthen community memories and social ethics [18], coinciding well with the conceptualization that communities are educational spaces for waste governance and environmental learning [7].

These findings contribute to the unique and innovative nature of this work that embeds an indigenous legend into the symbolic anthropology and environmental discourse, thus creating a novel method in combining cultural identity, oral

tradition, and sustainability. This research is a contribution to indigenous literature studies and sustainability discourse, as it shows that listening traditions are alive in collective identity and ecological ethics as part of its interpretation in curriculum indigenization and peace building.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive design focused on uncovering and interpreting meanings embedded in oral narratives. The study was conducted in Tabuk City and neighboring municipalities of Kalinga Province, Northern Philippines from January to June 2025. Five Kalinga elder community members, including storytellers and cultural informants over sixty years of age were purposively sampled [22] on the basis of reputations as traditional knowledge holders, providing first-person accounts from life histories and authoritative cultural knowledge.

The data collection included textual analysis, interviews and literature review. A textual analysis of written and oral versions of the Sleeping Beauty legend was performed using established procedures for qualitative document analysis [23]. Elders and storytellers were chosen for semi-structured interviews to evoke insider meanings of symbols, their social and ethical implications, as well the effectiveness of each in contemporary Kalinga life. Interviews were all recorded, when necessary translated, and transcribed for analysis following standard ethnographic interview procedures [24]. Verbatim transcripts of audio-recordings were written in Microsoft Word (Version 16.0). Relevant academically produced literature on Kalinga culture, Philippine folklore and symbolic anthropology were also analyzed for purposes of giving context and validation to findings.

Data analysis followed in three stages, and was carried out using thematic analysis approaches [25]. First, the legend texts were annotated for repeatedly occurring terms, such as Mount Patukan and the mêngor (warrior), and ritual activities like the tadok dance. Second, interview transcripts were analyzed thematically, with codes clustered into themes such as identity, resilience, unity, and ancestral reverence. Third, findings were triangulated across textual sources, interviews, and literature to ensure validity. Coding was performed manually without specialized software. To ensure trustworthiness, methodological triangulation was combined with member checking. Selected participants were asked to review interpretations of the legend to confirm cultural accuracy, enhancing credibility and reducing researcher bias [26].

3. Results

3.1. Key Cultural Symbols in the Kalinga Sleeping Beauty Legend

The analysis identified thirteen primary cultural symbols: (1) tribal war - representing inter-tribal conflict and peace-building values; (2) mengor - a person of exceptional courage and strength, a protector of the oppressed, an excellent leader; (3) tribe - defining the scope and boundaries of communities; (4) Mount Patukan - symbolizing steadfastness, perseverance, and eternal love; (5) sawali - woven bamboo mat representing joyful and simple life; (6) glass of water - symbolizing a life protected and welcome and assurance of safety; (7) moma - a social and ritual practice for bonding; (8) salidsid - the Kalinga courtship dance; (9) allap - cloth signifying consent; (10) tadok - communal dance expressing solidarity and collective joy; (11) seven days ritual - proving the sincerity of commitment; (12) inandila - special Kalinga delicacy signifying importance and sacredness; (13) ullalim - a traditional Kalinga epic chant that narrates heroic tales, courtship stories, and cultural values [16, 17].

3.2. Participant Accounts of Cultural Symbols

Tribal conflict: Participants reported that during conflicts between neighboring tribes, the Kalinga elders would give immediate preventive measures to all community members in the village not to go out of the boundaries. This persisted until disagreements were settled through peacekeeping services such as the intertribal dialogues or the bodong (peace pact).

Mengor: Participants described the mengor as someone who defended the poor and oppressed through acts of bravery. However, they noted that contemporary Kalinga society now values education, moral integrity, and nonviolent leadership over physical valor.

Tribe: Elders shared that for safety, it was imperative to know the tribal affiliation of people since a broken family bodong affected all individuals within and such an offence impacted the whole tribe.

Mount Patukan: Elders said the mountain had long been revered for its legend of two lovers who were separated by tribal war and the woman was turned into a mountain. This narrative evokes themes of purity, resilience, and connection to ancestral land.

Sawali: Participants described traditional bamboo houses as the venues for close family gatherings and story-making, which create identity and sense of community. They compared this to modern-day homes, where material pursuit outweighs emotional bonding.

Hospitality: Participants explained that offering water signifies acceptance into the family and kinship network. Sharing moma initiates courtship when a woman accepts the offering from a man.

Courtship rituals: The giving of the allap serves as consent and cultural authority to participate in the salidsid dance. The tadok dance and gong playing are governed by social norms: gongs are played only during celebrations, never during mourning.

Seven-day ritual: Participants described how the groom visits relatives' homes, where families slaughter animals for shared meals (salu-salo), symbolizing welcome and reinforcing communal bonds.

Inandila: Participants emphasized its significance due to difficult preparation, making it more meaningful than ordinary delicacies for special occasions.

Ullalim: Participants explained that suitors have used ullalim to convey their intentions of marriage through poetic chanting, and it enabled the women to reciprocate in kind with their ullalim, producing mutual understanding anchored on cultural dignity.

4. Discussion

4.1. Symbolic Meanings and Cultural Functions

This reference to tribal conflict symbolizes a historical reality in Kalinga society, as tribal affiliation and territorial integrity were strictly upheld and sometimes enforced in battle. However, embedded within this is the value of peace-building through bodong (peace pacts), which remains a core principle of Kalinga cultural identity. The memory of conflict remains a reminder of the importance of unity, diplomacy and inter-tribal courtesy [18]. Studies have shown that Kalinga elders are central in conflict resolutions and are instrumental for community stability through traditional laws, and rituals [18, 20, 27].

The mengor embodies the Kalinga concept of heroic leadership with its roots being courage, strength and protection of the weak [12, 16]. The evolving perspective also echoes the ways that indigenous communities always negotiate between the traditional and modern constructs of identity and leadership [28-30]. The word tribe in the legend mirrors how Kalinga's as people identified themselves with a strong sense of belonging and identity through their clan associations and also based on geographical localised clusters [18, 31].

Mount Patukan serves as a powerful symbol of eternal love, perseverance, and the sacredness of place. In Kalinga cosmology, mountains often embody the spirits of ancestors and the memory of significant events [16, 32-34]. The sawali or woven bamboo wall represents the simplicity, joy, and resourcefulness of Kalinga domestic life [17, 18, 35, 36].

Hospitality rituals (glass of water and moma) symbolize social connection, reciprocity, and communal bonding [12, 18, 37-39]. Courtship and marriage rituals (salidsid, allap, tadok, seven-day ritual, inandila) embody cultural values of love, respect, mutual consent, and community integration [12, 16, 17, 40]. Ullalim operates as a multilayered symbol representing sincerity in courtship, cultural identity, social harmony, and the sacred power of the spoken word [16, 17].

The relationships of these symbols unveil an advanced mechanism of social control and cultural perpetuation. Personal narratives stressed the symbology is not a standalone object but weaves together imagery together that influences many aspects of Kalinga life. For example, the act of courtship moma offering only acquires importance in the overall context of bodong peace structures, tribal territories and family honor. This interconnectedness reveals the Sleeping Beauty myth as not only a source of entertainment, but rather as a living cultural program that instructs children how social conduct plays out in complex ways, how community peace can be sustained and ancestral wisdom revered. The fact that the legend unites several symbolic elements in the single narrative is an indicator of the complexity and integrity of indigenous knowledge about morality, society, and ecology.

4.2. Cultural Symbols, Identity, and Social Cohesion

The cultural symbols found in the Kalinga Legend of Sleeping Beauty embody deep layers of meaning that reflect the core beliefs, worldviews, and cultural identity of the Kalinga people. All these physical and ritual symbols, from Mount Patukan to the sawali wall, from sharing a moma to presenting a glass of water and performing the ullalim represent aspects of the Kalinga heritage: veneration for ancestral domain, respect for other people, cooperative order, and sanctimony of ties. These processes resonate with the perception of Filipino indigenous rituals as potent applications of social ethics and cultural memory [19], natural landmarks that store emotional potency and ancestral association [1, 2], ritual sharing as mechanisms for generating sociability and trust [41, 42] while oral performance reaffirms a sense of collective identity and the substance of community norms and action in language play [43-47]. In these highly symbolic cultural performances, the Kalinga signal that their very identity is inseparable from the natural world and oral traditions that keep their cultural memory alive [48, 49].

The results demonstrate that cultural symbols operate at both individual and collective levels, their functioning paradoxically producing multiple layers of social cohesion. At the personal level symbols such as the allap cloth or ullalim chant script dating and marriage appropriate behavior in ways that allow choices to be made within cultural parameters. At the collective level, these same symbols strengthen group relation by marking Kalinga practices as different from neighboring communities and modern influences. This dual function of the ritual is especially clear in the case of the seven-day version, which respondents referred to as both a trial of individual resolution and an outward confirmation of familial and community ties. The ceremony converts intimate feelings into public spectacles that draw kin relations tighter and underscore social responsibility. In this way it indicates the how indigenous sense of *communitas* is produced not by abstract principles but embodied and repeated symbolic acts that tie individuals to their social groups over time.

4.3. Storytelling as Cultural Transmission

The Kalinga Sleeping Beauty legend provides an important vehicle not only for the representation of aspects of Kalinga culture, but also in the performative process itself, through which that culture is preserved and transmitted. And as an oral tradition, it acts as a living repository of values, cosmologies and social bonds [12]. The participants also noted that, traditional stories save culture symbols that express ancestral values, ethical principles, and the life styles of indigenous people. From the symbolic anthropology views [8, 9], these symbols are texts that Kalinga read and maneuver in the world. In Indigenous Knowledge Systems [10] education is holistic and relational, and storytelling serves as an important medium for intergenerational learning.

Conducted through the ullalim, and accompanied by ritual food, dance and music, storytelling creates multi-sensory experiences that convey moral guidance and historical memory across generations [16, 17]. This supports the "living archive" conception of oral tradition [2] and is consistent with results that indicates communities to be learning spaces for sustainability and value generation as well Suyeno, et al. [7]. It transmits core cultural values like honor, courage, loyalty and respect for ritual and community. Reinforced by frequent repetition, the story is one way in which oral history becomes implanted within individuals as they grow up and 'absorb' their ancestors' ways of seeing the world and how things should be done. Storytelling has thus served as an intergenerational bridge for the past and present and future of Kalinga identity [18].

The pedagogical effectiveness of the Sleeping Beauty legend is its concretizing abstractions into embodied narrative. It does this by displaying morals as principles, not rules; its lessons are taught through the actions of characters whose choices have tangible results. As elders detail how the lovers' love transcended tribal limits, or how their doom was due to conflict, listeners are taught lessons of loyalty, sacrifice and that war is not without its costs through emotional rather than lecture-style engagement. Participants commented that this type of narrative pedagogy is especially useful with young people who can engage on moral issues vicariously through story, build ethical reasoning through narrative analysis and discussion. This kind of education also retains cultural flexibility; as contexts change, fresh readings can arise even as the basic narrative remains constant and intact, allowing the legend to address contemporary challenges such as modernization and cultural erosion without losing its traditional essence.

4.4. Positioning Within Literature and Educational Framework

Although previous Philippine folklore research reported the legend [3, 4], limited discussions were made on its symbolism and relevance today. This study contributes to the knowledge by deciphering the legend using symbolic anthropology and indigenous knowledge paradigms, which has shown how oral tradition is an effective source for cultural identity, social integration and ecological ethics [1, 5-7, 50].

Indigenous stories serve as dynamic vessels of cultural transmission, ethical formation, and identity-building. Acknowledging their pedagogic possibilities, the study suggests a conceptual framework for considering Indigenous stories as instruments of cultural education. Figure 1 presents the framework that places story at the center of learning, with four central dimensions to support this: symbolic literacy, education for values, identity construction and storytelling as pedagogy. The model privilege dynamic cultural continuity, where Indigenous culture is seen to be adaptive as well as responsive. Principles emphasized are respect, participation, intergenerational exchange and community commitment as well as sustainability.

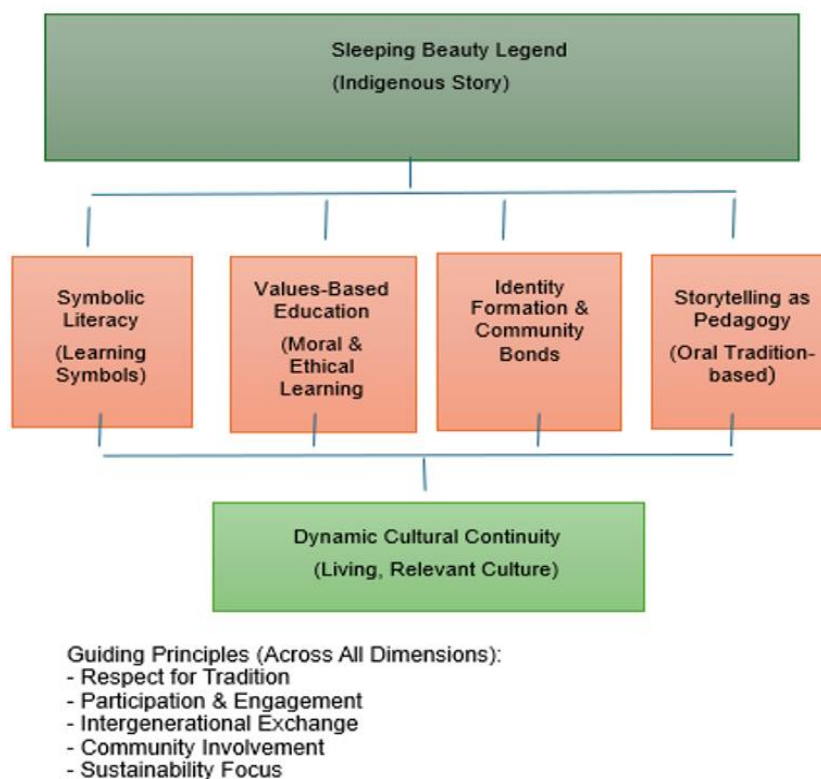


Figure 1.
Framework for Using Indigenous Stories in Cultural Education.

The framework is grounded in specific insights from the Sleeping Beauty legend and broader scholarship on Indigenous storytelling, learning, and identity formation [12, 51-54]. Indigenous narratives are not fossilized artifacts but dynamic, living sources with the power to influence present educational practice and cultural identity. Storytelling, when infused with honor and centered in deep culture, acts to weave traditional ways of knowing together with modern contexts

for learning, grow values, unite community and promote respectful relationships within an ecological cultural sustaining society.

The model addresses an important deficiency in today's education systems where indigenous knowledge is marginalized or treated as something that enriches but does not shape traditional pedagogy. By placing the story of Sleeping Beauty at the heart of learning, this framework shows how indigenous stories as primary texts can be used to teach not only for cultural identity (such as critical thinking, ethical reasoning, environmental care and social responsibility). The four dimensions operate in synergy: symbolic literacies decode cultural meanings; values-based learning transforms these meanings into ethical principles; identity formation links the learner to their roots and traditions; storytelling as pedagogy shows how knowledge can be handed on. This approach has implications for all those who labor in the field of curriculum indigenization in schools within the Philippines, and for the country's educators who continue to grapple with how to make space for indigenous content without making a farce of its inclusion. The framework offers an integrated and pliable model that honors cultural specificity while remaining manageable for non-Kalinga learners, such as those who do not come from a Kalinga background but could learn more about indigenous ways of knowing as well as an alternative source of knowledge required to address the world's pressing issues in contemporary times, such as sustainability and social justice.

5. Conclusion

More than a story of tragic love, the Kalinga Sleeping Beauty legend is one symbolic narrative of identity, social value and ecological interconnectedness. Through interpretation of the dreamscape key motifs, such as Mount Patukan, the mengor and ritual activities and oral performances themselves, it will be shown in this study that these indigenous narratives act not only as cultural repositories but also a site through which items can accrue value. The results emphasize the novelty of investigating oral tradition from symbolic anthropology and sustainability perspectives, contributing with new reflections that go beyond the preservation to address issues related to cultural resilience and ethical formation.

This research extends indigenous literary studies and the sustainability conversation, arguing that oral traditions are not mere detritus of memory but active processes of constituting identity and rhetorizing ecological ethics. The proposed framework frameworks for integration of indigenous narratives into education in the suggested modality, highlights their importance in curriculum indigenization and peacebuilding as well as social cohesion. Thus, the research contributes to the attainment of Global Sustainable Development Goals especially Quality Education (SDG 4) and Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions (SDG16).

However, the research is constrained by its examination of only one legend in one cultural group and dependence on a small number of elder informants. Although this ensured these groups' culture-sensitive methods and emic perspective, the results of the study are not generalizable to other Philippine indigenous peoples. Future studies may compare legends from a variety of indigenous people, include also quantitative treatment of the dynamics of culture content transmission or investigate how digital media influence oral tradition and legend.

The Kalinga Sleeping Beauty legend in summary constitutes "mountain of meanings" which protect indigenous identity, impart ethical paradigms and inculcate environmental stewardship. The story has such resilience because it speaks to the potential of indigenous storytelling to connect the history, the present and precedents for cultural continuity alongside sustainable futures.

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