

# Mainstreaming Cultural Practices into the Local Incident Management Protocols in Bontoc, Mountain Province

## Institutionalizing Indigenous Political Institutions in DRRM Response

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### Abstract

Incident management is constantly improving even in indigenous communities. The coexistence of a traditional incident management approaches and a government disaster management system in Bontoc, Mountain Province is evident today. Using a qualitative research design, this study explored the traditional practices observed in managing incidences in Bontoc. All data were collected through in-depth interviews among police responders, firefighters, health workers, community elders, and personnel from the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction Office and Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Office. It was found in the study that despite the adoption of the government concept of incident management, the people in Bontoc, are integrating cultural practices in incident management. They perform rituals before,

during, and after responding to any emergencies such as drowning, search of missing persons, fatal accidents or killings, landslides, and even fire incidents. These traditional practices are believed to enhance the safety and security of the responders and increase their resilience. In spite of this, the continuity of these practices is endangered by the absence of knowledge transmission and budgetary allocation. In order to integrate and institutionalize traditional practices into the incident management process of Bontoc, an inclusive incident management framework must be established, as indicated by the findings.

**Keywords:** Incident management, policy framework, cultural practices

### Introduction and Statement of the Argument

Cultural practices have been part of the crisis management in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). Rituals like *kapyá* or *inom* are performed by elders in Mountain Province before responders will set out to do their job. Also, *daw-es*, a cleansing ritual, is conducted after an incident.

Regional accounts indicate that during crises such as landslides, forest fires, or missing persons, communities consistently rely on the concept of *Ogogfo* (in Bontoc) or *Abuyog*. This concept embodies a spontaneous yet organized system of mutual aid and volunteerism. Cuevas and Gabriel (2020) observe that

indigenous communities in the Cordillera possess a distinctive form of social capital that formal Incident Management Systems (IMS) often struggle to replicate. Local elders frequently assume the role of informal incident commanders, utilizing traditional communication networks to coordinate rescue operations well before government assistance is mobilized.

In Bontoc, Mountain Province, the practice of *Tengao*, a sacred day of rest, functions as a distinctive cultural mechanism for incident management. Whereas modern systems may implement lockdowns, *Tengao* is a culturally mandated pause typically declared following a disaster or during an outbreak. Reports from the Philippine Information Agency (2023) demonstrate that Cordilleran communities have utilized these traditional boundaries to manage health incidents, indicating that cultural compliance frequently surpasses legal compliance in these contexts.

Despite these advantages, integrating these practices into formal policy frameworks remains challenging. Ramos (2022) identifies a discrepancy between the rigid, hierarchical structure of standard Command and Control (C2) systems and the horizontal, consensus-driven decision-making characteristic of the *ato* or *dap-ay*, which are traditional ward centers. Recent policy papers advocate for culturally congruent incident management, wherein the incident command post includes a designated liaison for the Council of Elders to ensure that operations respect sacred sites.

Furthermore, the concept of *inayan*, a cultural prohibition against causing harm, provides a robust ethical framework for public safety. The formalization of these cultural elements indicates that the Cordillera region is progressing toward a model in which technical expertise and traditional practices are integrated (UNESCO 2019).

Therefore, this policy brief bridges the gap between traditional and modern approaches to incident management in Bontoc. Investigating traditional processes, integration efforts, encountered challenges, and framework development can lead to more inclusive and effective responses.

## Objectives

1. To determine the traditional practices observed in incident management in Bontoc; and
2. Develop a policy on the integration of traditional practices into the incident management system of Bontoc.

## Conceptual Framework

This research is anchored on the Culture Competence Theory and System Theory. Culture Competence Theory emphasizes understanding and respecting diverse cultural values, beliefs, and practices to improve service delivery and outcomes (Cross et al. 2016). This theory describes the deep-seated respect of indigenous people to their culture and beliefs practiced in handling incidences.

Aligned with this, Ackoff (1971) explained that System Theory views organizations and communities as complex systems with interconnected components. System Theory can be used to help understand how different elements of the incident management framework interact and influence each other, informing holistic improvement strategies. With the intention of this study to investigate the influence of traditional practices with the incident management system in Mountain Province, System Theory sheds light into how and when the traditional practices can be incorporated to develop an inclusive incident management system. This theory can guide the adaptation of the incident management framework to consider the unique cultural context of Mountain Province's communities.

Figure 1 shows that a better understanding of the traditional practices observed during incidents, their effect on incident management, and identifying the challenges in integrating cultural practices into the incident management system will become the basis for developing an inclusive incident management framework. However, the framework is also guided by the concepts of Culture Competence Theory and System Theory.

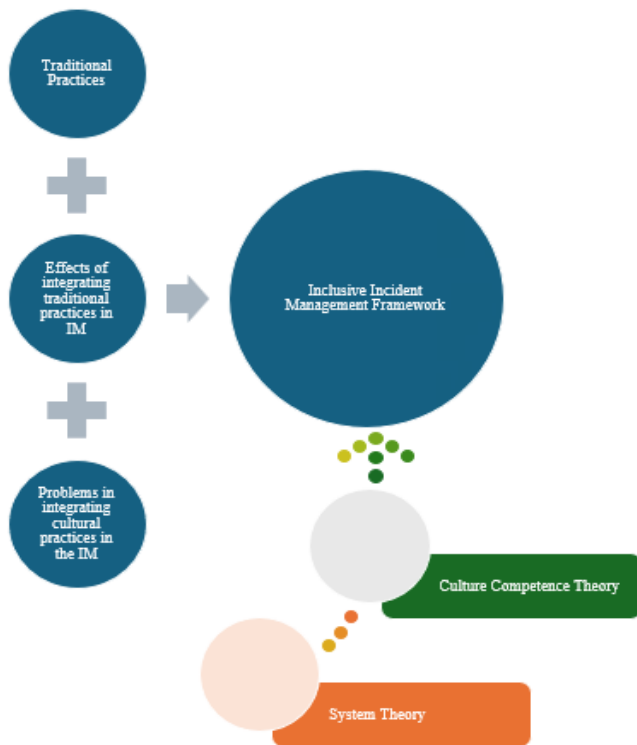


Figure 1. Concept Map

## Materials and Methods

### Research Design

This research utilized the qualitative research design that provided deep and rich understanding of the experiences, perspectives and traditional knowledge of various stakeholders on the traditional practices in managing different types of incidences in Mountain Province.

### Population Selection/ Sampling Method

The purposive sampling technique was used to identify elders, local leaders, and emergency responders who usually participated in managing incidences in Bontoc. The emergency responders are composed of personnel from the Philippine National Police (PNP), Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction Office, and Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Office. These informants are believed to possess the knowledge and expertise needed in determining the traditional practices in managing different sorts of incidents in Bontoc (study objective 1), as well as comprehending the implications of incorporating traditional practices in incident management (study objective 2).

To ensure quality of information, the following criteria were used in selecting the participants:

- a. a. Elders should be 60 years old and above; have been residing in Mountain Province for the past 10 years and have performed a traditional practice in three incidences;
- b. b. Local leaders should have been elected in an office and should have an experience in facilitating an incident management where traditional practices were employed; and
- c. c. Emergency responders should be in the services for more than 10 years and should have participated in at least three incident managements where traditional practices were employed.

### Data Gathering Tool

In-depth interviews were used to gather data from the informants to capture experiences and perspectives on the traditional practices in managing different types of incidents in Bontoc, and to understand the effects of integrating traditional practices in the incident management. An unstructured interview guide was prepared by the researcher which was content validated by the target participants and a tool validator at Mountain Province State University. A focus-group-discussion (FGD) was also utilized among the Bontoc Local Government Unit officials to further enhance the proposed framework.

### Data Gathering Procedure

Upon the approval of the research proposal, the researcher coordinated with the agencies and local government units regarding the interview schedules. An activity design was approved for the gathering of data. After the interviews, the researcher identified the traditional practices commonly observed by the informants before, during and after managing incidences. The identified problems were used to develop a proposed framework on enhanced incident management that integrated traditional practices. All results were duly interpreted, analyzed and discussed.

### Data Analysis/Treatment of Data

Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the responses of the participants gathered through in-depth interviews. The researcher read the responses for her to become familiar with the answers before coding the similar responses. The codes were reviewed again

and similar codes were clustered into more specific codes. Once the codes are finalized, interpretation and discussion followed.

### *Ethical Consideration*

The researcher adhered to the ethical standards in the conduct of research. The researcher requested the participants to sign the Informed Consent Form before any data gathering was made. This was done after explaining to the informants the nature of the research. All names and leading identifications were not disclosed in the research paper to ensure the integrity of confidentiality of the informants.

## Results and Discussion

### *Traditional practices observed in incident management in Mountain Province*

After a careful analysis of the interview responses, the themes emerged are categorized into three phases: Pre-response, During Operation, and Post-Incident Response. Several traditional practices are performed in each phase.

#### *A. Pre-response*

In this stage, community members and professional responders who volunteer to join in the incident response and management gather at a certain location. If responders from other agencies are involved, they gather at the municipal ato. However, if community members are the ones only involved, they may gather at the ato in their respective barangay or at a portion of the road in their barangay. Here, the elders open a bottle of liquor or *basi* and say a prayer asking for the protection of the responders.

**Usong (Gathering).** Community members who desire to participate in the response visit the ato or location where individuals typically congregate in the early morning to inquire about the day's itinerary. This is referred to as *usong*, which translates to "join" and "be informed." Prill-Brett (1987) noted in her study that abled men join the search of a drowned or missing person, where a representative from each family will be sent to help in the search.

Verbal communication has been the primary mode of communication until the present day, although mobile phones are employed to coordinate elder

gatherings. Therefore, it is necessary for individuals (typically males) to proceed to locations where people congregate to acquire the information. The information is further disseminated through word of mouth when individuals who attended the gathering return home and inform their neighbors about the plan.

**Kha-eb/kapya (Send-off).** If people gathered during the agreed time, an elder will open a bottle of *basi*. He says a prayer to ask for the protection of all individuals joining in the response operation. This process is called *kha-eb* or *kapya*. According to Informant 2 mentions that:

*"Masapol ay maikha-eb nan malegwatan nan umey in anap wennu nan umey maki angnen sinan ngag man ay insidinte ta maikasiw cha sinan aksidente."*

(There is a need for the send-off for those who will be joining the search or do the activity for them to be spared from whatever accident).

However, there were two informants who mentioned that this practice slows the response time. Informant 7 said:

*"Nu maminsan, bumabayag si responde nan kapya tay masapol ay mas-ed una nan tapi na saet in kapya nan am-ama."*

(Sometime, *kapya* delays the response because we need to wait for the others to come before an elder performs the *kapya*).

Another informant also explained:

*"Mamin ano ay mas-ed una nan mang ikha-eb sakbay kami marubwat tay maid mang ammo ay en kapya ka office."*

(There were several occasions where we need to wait for an elder to perform the *kha-eb* before we respond because nobody in the office knows how to do it).

#### *B. During Operation*

Currently, volunteers from the community respect the incident management strategies of authorities such as the local government, PNP, and BFP. However, some community members can still suggest intervention measures such as the conduct of *mang-mang* and seeking the help of the spiritual healers like the

*mandawak, mannulong, or in sup-ok.* There are several beliefs and practices observed by responders during operation either individually or as a group.

**Mey-an (Being careful).** A community member must take into account a number of observations when departing their residences for an emergency response. One of these is to ensure that no one in the household sneezes (*agkhisi*) or farts (*umuttot*). Additionally, elders and older individuals are particularly concerned with ensuring that their bags do not collide with the door or the door frame (*sokchud*). Informant 2 emphasized the significance of remembering these items, as they may result in unfavorable circumstances, such as an injury or accident, for the individual departing the residence. This belief posits that the individual's safety will be guaranteed until they return home by exiting the house safely and exercising caution.

While carrying out functions as a responder, meyan is ultimately observed by all individuals. In the context of this study, meyan may not be a traditional practice, but rather a broader concept of being careful in all aspects. It encompasses refraining from consuming food or water from the resources of another community, refraining from spewing in the presence of others or in public if located outside the community, and refraining from becoming separated from the group. Still, it is important for all responders to exercise caution while conducting response activities to avoid being harmed or injured.

**Mang-mang (Butchering of pig or chicken).** Mang-mang is a general term that refers to the ritual of butchering a poultry or swine as an offering. *Chaw-es* and *changtey* are among the types of mang-mang conducted in dealing with disasters, calamities, or incidents that result in injury and death. A family or the members of the ato can perform these chaw-es, but *changtey* is performed for the community. The animal to be used in the ritual is contributed by members of the ato if mang-mang is to be performed for welfare of the whole community. As Evangelista-Leones (2004) cited Prill-Brett (1988: 21), members of the *ator* have the responsibility to contribute for all expenses and services for *ator* ceremonies.

In cases where incident response is going on for days, the elders suggest to the family concerned to do the mang-mang ritual. As Informant 3 explained:

“*Nu waday nan adi pulos ma anapan, in mang-mang si manok nan elders ngem adi cha sibfan chi. Ipatang cha chi enbhkana ay sumaa cha.*”

(If the missing person is not yet found, the elders will cook a chicken but will not eat it. They will just place it on a table and come back to it when they come home).

From the testimonies of the informants, this practice is implemented in the event of drowning and the search for a missing person to ascertain whether the individual is shortly found or will require additional time. The bile of the chicken will be examined by the elders. If the bile is not obscured by any fat or meat (*cherway*), it indicates that the individual will be located shortly. Conversely, if the bile of the chicken is obscured or partially visible (*ekeb*), it will require a bit more before the missing individual is located.

This practice is also done in other types of incidents. Agoot (2018) mentioned in her article that the performance of *chaw-es* was observed by Talubin residents after the Florida Bus accident in February 2014. Meanwhile, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lapniten (2020) cited that *changtey* was performed on two separate occasions by two different elders to protect the people of Bontoc and the whole Mountain Province.

**Kakan.** There are situations when a group of community members need to expand their search operation to other barangays or municipalities. They take extra precaution by touching the soil in a foreign community and tasting it while saying a prayer for protection. Each individual is advised not to eat food offered to them by stranger or drink from water sources to avoid becoming ill. Before eating as a group, an elder will say a prayer and all members of the group will partake from their food rations. This practice espouses the idea of being safe from eating and drinking unknown food that may cause poisoning. The concept of *kakan* is also viewed in the practice of the incident command system where the responders are advised to eat and drink from food packs provided by the incident management team (NDRRMC n.d.).

### C. Post-Incident Response

After responding to incidents, the responders and community volunteers gather at the ato or at the municipal ato to rest. This practice is derived from the traditional practice and belief that all individuals involved in responding to incidents, especially when someone died, should gather or rest before going home. Until today, the *kapyra* or *kha-eb* and *chaw-es* rituals are practiced as a group or individually.

**Kha-eb/Kapya.** The concept of this ritual is identical to that of the send-off for all responders who are joining the operation. This is conducted during the afternoon of the incident response operation, which may persist for several days if incident management has not yet been completed. The purpose of this ritual is to pray for the safety and tranquility of all individuals, which is what sets it apart from the send-off.

As Informant 3 said:

*“Miyangnen nan kapya ta umnepan nan leng-ag nan inmey naki fachang.”*

(Kapya is performed for the peace of mind of all those who came to help)”. Also, Informant 8 added).

*“Siya cha na nan ma angnen ta kawis nu sumaa cha nan takho ya kawis cha, ta mikasiw cha sinan malas.”*

(These are performed for the people to go home safely and for them to be protected from any adversity).

**Chaw-es (Cleansing ritual).** Chaw-es is a ritual where a pig or dog is butchered and shared with relatives and individuals present. In situations where a person helped in the response of an incident where someone died, that person will host the performance of a chaw-es. Elders, usually relatives, are invited to perform the ritual. The purpose of this is to cleanse the spiritual aspect of a person, especially when he touched a cadaver. Informant 2 explained:

*“Chaw-es can be performed in the ato so that all ato members will be cleansed from any bad luck but it can also be performed by an individual in their house. Its main purpose is to free the person of the images seen during the incident. It is also performed with the belief that the person will be protected from anything harmful.”*

Additionally, Informant 1 stated that chaw-es is utilized when responders, including police officers, nurses, firefighters, and other community members, are traumatized by the situation to which they were called. She added: “It was only when we did chaw-es that I was able to sleep since the Florida Bus Accident. After that, my fears are gone and I became more composed in responding to incidents reported to our station.” She disclosed that it was her initial experience responding to a significant disaster in which numerous individuals sustained severe injuries and lost their lives.

The testimonies suggest that chaw-es is crucial for the well-being of responders. The responders are able to manage stressful events and overwhelming experiences through the traditional practice. It aids in the restoration of spiritual and emotional fortitude, as well as the development of resilience in individuals. Additionally, it is believed that chaw-es provides protection to individuals who perform it.

## Summary and Conclusion

The people in Bontoc are integrating cultural practices in incident management despite the adoption of the colonial concept of incident management system. They perform rituals before responding to any emergencies such as drowning, search of missing person, fatal accidents or killings, landslides, and even fire incidents. Traditional measures are also observed during and after incident operations. These traditional practices are perceived to contribute to the safety and security of the responders and in making them resilient. However, budgetary allocation and the lack of knowledge transfer threaten the continuity of these practices.

## Implications and Recommendations

Based on the foregoing findings, an inclusive incident management framework needs to be developed to institutionalize and adopt the traditional practices into the incident management process of Bontoc, Mountain Province. Integrating traditional practices into the existing framework is what renders it inclusive. An inclusive incident management system framework acknowledges the inclusion of cultural practices: Kha-eb, mey-an, kapya, and chaw-es. By developing this framework, the problem on budget allocation for the traditional practices needed to be performed in emergency situations will be addressed since the materials needed is included in the budget allocation of the Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council of the Bontoc municipality.

To address the concern on knowledge transfer, it is suggested that the municipal Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative and barangay IPMRs will render duty hours at the municipal hall, as members of the DRRM council. This is to make their services available at all times.

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## Acknowledgement

The researcher extends her gratitude to the personnel of Bontoc Municipal Police Station, Rurak Health Unit-Bontoc, Bontoc Municipal Fire Station, Municipal and Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Management Offices, and to all elders and individuals who patiently provided the needed data.

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