



# A documentary film for Ilocano cultural preservation

Karla Auria S. Galeon  
Mariano Marcos State University  
Philippines  
Email: [kasgaleon@gmail.com](mailto:kasgaleon@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The Ilocos Region in the Philippines is a place like no other where its vast and rich history and diverse population come together in an astonishing display of culture, both in material and non-material culture. However unique and diverse the Ilokano culture is, the number of researches and studies that enrich the Ilokano culture is few. When the people are not educated about cultural traditions, handicrafts, and histories, they will be easily forgotten. It is within these considerations that this study was framed. This study intended to explore Ilokano cultural preservation. Specifically, it sought to look at how Ilokano culture is manifested through traditional games, food (chichacorn, empanada and calamay) and traditional crafts (inabel and burnay), traditions in marriages, death, and festivals, and tourism (Paoay Church and Calle Crisologo), and how the Ilokano people perceive the need to preserve their culture. The study was conducted in Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur, two of the many provinces of the region. The researcher identified key informants, and conducted interviewees with these professionals in the academe, historians, tourism officers, media practitioners, and cultural experts in the Ilokano culture. The study revealed that the Ilokano culture is the product of the Ilokano history, and Ilokano culture is evidently present through material and non-material manifestations in the games, food, traditional crafts, celebrations of festivals, traditions in marriage and death, and in historical places. The Ilokano strongly agree in the preservation of their culture. However, people in Ilocos Sur are more passionate in cultural preservation than those in Ilocos Norte. The challenges identified by key informants in Ilokano cultural preservation are on the Westernized learnings and practices taught at home, non-integration of the Ilokano culture in the curriculum, the need for information literacy amongst the people, a need for mother-tongue language acquisition, resistance and passiveness from the younger generation, a need to see the significance of culture in people's lives, a need to utilize media for educational culture-based purposes, and a need for reinforcement of policies in cultural preservation.

**Key Words:** Indigenous, Conservation, Ilocano, Cultural Preservation

## Introduction

### Research Background and Motivation

The Ilocos Region in the Philippines is a place like no other where its vast and rich history and diverse population come together in an astonishing display of culture, both in material and non-material culture. The physical things that people create and attach meaning to as well as their ideas, customs and traditions, value systems, and attitudes are all crucial guides for members of a culture to use to know how to behave in their society and interpret the world [1, 2].

And yet, however unique and diverse the Ilokano culture may be, the number of researches and studies that document the Ilokano culture is depressingly meager and outdated. Most literature are in hand writing and are covered in dust in a small room of a library. Also, majority of Ilokano culture and literature is rooted in verbal traditions. One needs to speak with the old community folks to be able to record the seemingly lost Ilokano culture. This is a firsthand experience of the researcher while conceptualizing this study.

### Research Purposes and Questions



This study intended to explore Ilokano cultural preservation. Specifically, it sought to look at how Ilokano culture is manifested through traditional games, food (chichacorn, empanada and calamay) and traditional crafts (inabel and burnay), traditions in marriages, death, and festivals, and tourism (Paoay Church and Calle Crisologo), and how the Ilokano people perceive the need to preserve their culture.

#### Literature Review

The “Ilokandia” or the Ilocos Region in the Philippines is inhabited by the Ilokanos, a people believed to be of Malay origin [3]. Living in a not-so-fertile terrain forced ingenuity out of the Ilokanos. As a result, they engaged in other occupations such as loom-weaving, jar-making, and fermenting tuba (wine), and blacksmithing [4].

Being colonized by various occupations (American, Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese) in an inordinate amount time resulted to a remarkable and distinctive culture. They are said to have close family ties, loyal, sociable, cooperative, industrious, resourceful, frugal, respectful, and religious [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8].

Due to lack of literature on the history and process of making of the games, products, traditions, and heritage sites examined in this study, the researcher had to heavily rely on the information provided by the key informants and data gathered through non-obtrusive observation.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Data Collection**

This study primarily used qualitative research design, and was conducted through the means of narrative interviews and non-obtrusive observation from the key informants (KI).

An interview guide was used for the KIs to generate responses which could satisfy the problems that this study aimed to answer. These questions cover the four aspects of culture namely games, food and traditional crafts, traditions and tourism. The study included the production and development of these, along with a brief history. The set of questions also touched on the KIs’ personal opinions, experiences, theories and ideas concerning the preservation of Ilokano culture. Also, non-obtrusive observation was used in this study.

#### **Data Analysis**

Purposive sampling was performed to identify the KIs to be interviewed. The KIs include a retired cultural program officer of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Regional Office in Bangkok, Thailand, the NAKEM Founder and Program Coordinator for Ilokano and Philippine Drama and Film in the University of Hawai’i at Manoa, Honuulu, Hawaii, the National Folk Artist for burnay, a prominent calamay maker in Candon City, Ilocos Sur, professionals in the academe, historians, and cultural experts in Ilokano culture. An interview with each of the KIs approximately lasted for two (2) hours, and were recorded in audio formats. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed through coding. A category is devised to enable the researcher to define and explain the underlying meaning of these elements.

This study uses the socio-cultural tradition as it looks at the ways of understanding meanings, norms and rules that are worked out interactively in communication. It is one of the Traditions in Communication by formulated by Robert Craig, which represents the “discovery” of communication within the intellectual traditions of sociology and anthropology.

### **Results and Discussion**



## **Reflection of Ilokano Culture through Games**

### ***Love for entertainment***

According to KIs #1 and #9, Ilokano games were developed as after-work entertainment for the adults. KI #5 also shares that siatong was not only played by the children but also by the adults. As for the kids, KIs #2 and #9 agree that they made use of games to alleviate their boredom.

### ***Ingenuity and creativity***

Ilokano games might have been adapted from other people according to KIs #1 and #2. Ilokanos have been exposed to different people due to inter-regional trading and colonization. The Ilokanos made their own mark on these games by uniquely naming them (KI #1) and using the resources available to them (KIs #2, #6, and #8). According to KI #1, bawang base is called as such because of the prevalence of garlic in Ilocos.

Kadangkadang in other places uses coconut shells while the Ilokano version uses a bamboo pole because bamboos are abundant in Ilocos. Lipay is the Ilokano version of bowling which uses the seed of the same plant name that grows along rivers (KI #8).

### ***Community kinship***

These games developed the Ilokano community. KI #5 said that these games developed the belongingness of a person to his/her community. Additionally harmony, camaraderie, and cooperation are also built. KI #6 also agreed by saying:

“...when you play these games, that is our way of socializing and it doesn't matter whether children are from poor families or from middle class families. They always play together regardless of the economic status of the family. You play together, you don't talk about family problems, you don't talk about the status of the family, so you just play to enjoy.”

## **Reflection of Ilokano Culture through Food**

### ***Frugality.]***

In the narrated history of chichacorn, a mother in Salbang, Paoay, Ilocos Norte didn't want the binatog (boiled corn) that she wasn't able to sell go to waste. She experimented frying the binatog and so chichacorn was born according to KI #8.

Likewise, frugality is also being shown in calamay. KI #1 revealed that calamay was developed as a poor recreation of cakes. Ilokanos wanted to taste cakes but due to poverty they weren't able to, so they developed the Filipino version, and the bibingka was discovered. But still, bibingka required many ingredients so it was further economized and so the calamay was born.

The high inclination to save of Ilokanos, misread by non-Ilokanos as characteristic of the typical tightwad or kuripot is evident in the high average savings rate of the region throughout the years [4].

### ***Patience and industry***

It takes patience and industry to make Ilokano food. The calamay is a good example. The researcher had a firsthand experience in making calamay. It took four (4) hours for the whole process of calamay to be cooked. From the gathered notes using time-in-motion, the calamay makers started getting coconut meat at 6:00 in the morning. The mixture of glutinous flour, sugar, and coconut meat needs to be continuously stirred for the whole four (4) hours. After the calamay has been cooled for 30 minutes, panagipinas is done in which portions of individual calamay are painstakingly divided. After this, each of the calamay is packaged in transparent plastic.



Meanwhile, empanada also exhibits patience and industry. According to KIs #6 and #8, these are portrayed in every step in making empanada: from making and kneading the dough, shredding of papaya, boiling balatong (mung beans), up to the actual frying of the empanada. KI #8: “We can see industry, cooperation or oneness. Shredding the papaya requires patience as well as pounding the rice for the flour.”

### ***Resourcefulness, creativity, and inventiveness.***

Empanada is another thing that Ilokanos adapted from the Spaniards. Ilokanos made use of locally available resources to recreate empanada since they couldn't afford it due to poverty. The empanada dough is made up of rice flour and glutinous flour. An achuete, or a native coloring ingredient, is added to the mixture to make it appear orange when cooked. In Ilocos Sur, the atchuete is not used so their empanada has a golden yellow color instead. Close family ties and cooperation.

The procurement for the support of the Ilokano family is highly expected of all able family members [9]. This is why empanada-making is a family affair in which even other blood relatives are included according to KIs #6 and #8.

KI #6: “If you look at the empanada makers in Vigan, it is only one family. So it is intergenerational. So it really something that is kept within the family.”

KI #8: “Look at the empanada makers in Batac. They are all related. They might be related by blood or by marriage. We can observe here the close family ties of the Ilokano family.”

Nana Menchi (Tomas Abrojena) and Nana Rosa (Rosalinda Abrojena) are the two most famous chichacorn makers in Ilocos. Nana Menchi popularized chichacorn in Vigan while Nana Rosa built the chichacorn industry in Ilocos Norte according to KI #6. It was reported that Nana Menchi and Nana Rosa are in fact sisters-in-law [10].

### **Reflection of Ilokano Culture through Traditional Crafts**

The Ilokano traits and values reflected in traditional crafts are simplicity, frugality, resourcefulness, industry and creativity.

#### ***Simplicity***

KIs #5, #6, #8, and #9 all agree that the simplicity of the designs of abel speaks of how simple Ilokanos are. Comparisons are made between inabel and other looms and weaves in Mindanao. It could be seen that inabel is more subdued in designs as well as in colors.

KI #8: “If compared to the weaves in the South, inabel is much simpler. Why is it so? Look at the pinakbet, or an Ilokano house. It portrays the simplicity of Ilokanos. Why? We have limited natural resources here in Ilocos compared to the South.”

#### ***Frugality***

According to KI #5, the preference of dark colors speaks of Ilokanos' frugality. Dark colors would mean that Ilokanos would get to wear them for a longer period of time. In KI #5's words: “You don't want it to go to waste. If possible you don't want to change clothes frequently, even using it twice. You don't immediately wash it for you don't want to waste soap and water. That's our culture.”

#### ***Resourcefulness***

According to KIs #2 and #6, Ilokanos have gotten the art of burnay-making from the Chinese, but they used a Grade-A clay abundant in their locality to make a version of their own.

KI #7 is the National Folk Artist for burnay. The informant shared to the researcher his Chinese roots.

“Panagburnay came from the Chinese. My father got here in 1922. My father is Chinese and my mother is a Filipina. In 1961, I began helping him.”

Industry and Creativity.



Burnay-making is a tedious process. The researcher was able to try making burnay in the Pagburnayan in Vigan City, Ilocos Sur. Burnay-makers and their trusty carabaos step on the mud to get the perfect consistency for shaping. Afterwards, a clump of clay is put on a potter's wheel for shaping. Every burnay is unique as the clay follows the imaginative mind and hands of the maker. When the maker is satisfied with the shape and design, it is now ready for cooking. It is cooked in a high temperature ground kiln. Similarly, inabel consists of numerous processes according to KI #8. There is the preparing and dyeing the yarn from cotton or sagut, to arranging different colors of yarn to produce the desired design, and operating the wooden handloom with the synchronized movement of both hands and feet. Inabel is a beautiful and strong fabric that it was a major export during the Galleon Trade [11].

## **Reflection of Ilokano Culture through Traditions**

### ***Religiosity***

Ilokanos regard their relationship to the Almighty God as a sacred thing. This is evident in their traditions especially in the celebration of festivals. Even before the coming of the Spaniards, the Ilokanos were already into festivals (KI #2). It was mainly to thank, request, and appease the gods for certain aspects of lives of Ilokanos back when they were still Pagans. According to KI #9, the purpose of festivals shifted from this to celebration of saints which are patrons of their places. This is evident in the dedication of names of barrios and towns.

KI #1 has said that festivals were a means to reinforce Catholicism to the people. Guling-Guling Festival stems from Ash Wednesday during the Lenten Season in which Catholics acknowledge that they came from dust and will also return to dust when they die.

### ***Kinship***

According to KI #1, Ilokanos used festivals as a means to mingle and enjoy each other's company.

In an Ilokano marriage, it does not only concern the couple and their families. The community is also involved in this life event.

### ***Respect to fellow human beings***

Traditions in marriage are rooted from Ilokanos' deep respect to their parents. KI #6 narrated a story about a marriage that didn't push through because the parents weren't able to agree on terms during the pinagpapatangan. Parental inclusion is also evident in the danon or panaguli. This is as a way of respect adds KI #6.

Death practices show the high regard of Ilokanos to human beings according to KI #1.

KI #1: "We have a deep respect to human beings, and even if they die, we need to give an ultimate respect. We venerate them because we believe that we will see each other once more. They have contributed to our life and it's always the Ilokano tendency, that Ilokano love, that Ilokano culture to return something. And if that person is dead, you give something back to the dead."

## **Reflection of Ilokano Culture through Tourism**

### ***Entrepreneurial skills***

The researchers observed that numerous stalls and vendors offering tourists souvenirs and Ilokano material culture are present in Calle Crisologo and in the vicinity of Paoay Church.

According to KI #1, tourism has a way of commercializing culture. Money is needed to sustain culture.

KI #1: "...tourism by culture would be economic. And it has to come up with money and so, what you're going to do with the culture, you commercialized the culture."

Collective mind. When Calle Crisologo was nominated to be one of the New 7 Wonders of the world, all Ilokanos came together in the promotion and votation.



This socially beneficial idea, something to be proud of, assumes a life of its own and spreads throughout society without the benefit of planned and funded campaigns [12].

### **Passion in the preservation of cultural heritage sites**

The researchers observed while walking along Calle Crisologo, people, locals and tourists alike, respect the place. They do not drive their motorized vehicles along the cobblestones. Only kalesas are permitted to pass through as to keep the ambience of the place. According to KI #2, the house owners are willing to retain the original structure of the houses. They are also amenable to follow the set of rules and guidelines in renovations imposed by the local government of Vigan and UNESCO stated in the Vigan Ancestral House Manual.

### **Ilokano People's Perceptions in Preserving their Culture**

Interview with KIs revealed that Ilokanos see the following reasons as threats to Ilokano cultural preservation: non-integration of Ilokano way of life at home, non-integration of cultural learnings in the curriculum, inadequacy in information literacy, refusal to use Ilokano language, non-adoption from the younger generation, failure to see the significance of culture, insufficient use of media for educational culture-based purposes, and weak reinforcement of policies.

KI #6 and KI #9 reiterated that Ilokanos need to know, be aware of, and learn their history before truly appreciating their cultural heritage. When one learns their history, one gets to connect with the roots of one's ancestry. Although the Ilocos province is divided north and south in its geographic landscape, the people have a unified outlook in preserving their culture despite challenges they are facing now.

Non-integration of Ilokano way of life at home. KIs #9 and #1 highlighted the importance of the family in cultural preservation. They both observed that parents tend to teach westernized ideologies to children such that Ilokano culture may come in second, if not, none at all.

The family plays a crucial role in establishing children's dispositions, and learning. Parents should be able to pass on to their children the traditional way of how Ilokanos do things because that is what cultural preservation is all about. KI #9 states that:

"The practices in our beliefs, traits, language and methods of doings. This is important because children were first thought in our home. Example is pagmamano and saying "po" and "opo". But if parents refused to teach these, how will the children do these? How can they pass it on to their children?"

Non-integration of cultural learnings in the curriculum.

One challenge in preserving Ilokano culture is its non-integration in the academe. Ilokanos need to know, and be taught of traditional ways of life, that they may continue practicing, and teaching these to the next generation. KI #9 says:

"Cultural artifacts like books, policies and regulations in school should be focused on. Example of this is playing the kadang-kadang, piko, tumbang preso and the first games of children before swimming and basketball. We put sports in our curriculum but our traditional games are gone. Same with the food that we give to our children. Instead of buying them junk food or fast food, we can give them bibingka, calamay, and puto bung-bong. Children nowadays just know McDo and JCo."

KI #6 also added though that in Ilocos, particularly in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, they have been integrating in their curricular development Ilokano culture, as well as contextualizing and localizing the courses offered from elementary to college.

This is also the same with the Mariano Marcos State University in the City of Batac, Ilocos Norte. Ilokano subjects are being introduced to tertiary curriculum, and Ilokano literature is now a part of classroom discussions.



### Inadequacy in Information Literacy.

One challenge in cultural preservation identified is the issue on information literacy. When Ilokanos are information literate, they demonstrate the ability to locate, filter, and use the needed information for the betterment of their lives. This is a reflection of how cultural perseverance is manifested in digital form. As with the new technology around us, Ilokanos may now record, store, and retrieve information which explains, and discuss Ilokano culture. The challenge which stems out of information literacy is connected with information and communication technologies which most Ilokanos have access to, but have not explored thoroughly for the preservation of their culture.

### Refusal to use Ilokano Language

KI #1 echoed most of the interviewees' recommendation that first and foremost, Ilokanos should go back to language.

This implies that Ilokanos have to learn how to speak Ilokano. When Ilokanos look at their history, they look at it through an Ilokano point-of-view, so to speak. KI #1 identified Westernized thinking as a challenge in cultural preservation.

"We see things in eye of the Americans. We see things in the eyes of the Mañilenos. It is in language, and practicing our own language, that conditions the mind to look up things in the Ilokano way."

Non-adoption from the younger generation.

KI #5 described the activities children, and the youth are doing that poses as challenges in cultural preservation.

"They resist. That's what I am saying, whenever you introduce something, which is ethnic in nature, your number one comment is old-fashion (in a negative context)."

If this mentality continues, Ilokano culture may disappear as the youth opposes using traditional Ilokano ways of life; Ilokano cultural practices, traditions, and manifestations are in the verge of being neglected.

Addressing resistance needs to start with just one, according to KI #5. By following the Law of Diffusion, when one starts and others will follow, the resistance to change may be overcome. We are conformist in nature, thus, we mirror what we see in others, and in our society [13]. As individuals conforming with our society's norms, people may adopt a new way of looking at Ilokano culture, that rather than being ashamed, as one populace they may be proud, and value their cultural heritage.

Failure to see the significance of culture.

The need to see that Ilokano culture matters, and is worth having, poses a critical component in cultural preservation. People need to see that their culture is what makes them the people they are. KI #5 also reiterated that one cannot entirely promote another culture, without knowing first their own. This is seen as a challenge because Ilokanos would sometimes forget their own culture, and imbibe those which are not theirs.

Insufficient use of media for educational culture-based purposes.

Despite the proliferation of media, and its advancement, culture-centered media tools still need to be fully utilized. This implies that there are no updated literature which speaks of Ilokano culture, and this needs to be developed into various media formats such as print, television programs, radio plugs, and educational and culture-enriching films.

### Weak reinforcement of policies

When a cultural site is protected, there are rules that protect it from abuse, and possible damage. This poses as a challenge when people visit a certain place, and disregard the rules. There are many tangible historical artifacts which we have, and KI #6 discussed such that:



“We have the cultural mapping project of Vigan and the Vigan Conservation master plan project. We have the Buridek or the children’s museum now, we have the conservation complex in San Julio Norte. These artifacts are tangible things really showcase the history of Vigan, from the pre-Spanish until the present.”

Despite having established protective rules, and policies in safeguarding cultural artifacts, the manner in which these are open for public viewing and use may pose as a challenge in cultural preservation due to people’s innate disregard for rules.

## **Conclusions and Suggestions**

This study was conducted in the two provinces of the Ilocos region – Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur to explore Ilokano cultural preservation. Specifically, it sought to answer how culture is communicated through games, food and traditional crafts, traditions, and tourism, and the perception of the Ilokano people for the preservation of their culture. The study primarily used qualitative research design and was conducted through the means of narrative interviews and non-obtrusive observation from the interviewees. The interviewees include professionals in the academe, historians, tourism officers, media practitioners, and cultural experts in the Ilokano culture. Coding was then used to analyze the data gathered from the narrative interviews.

Also, Ilokano culture is very evident in the games, food, traditional crafts, celebrations of festivals, traditions in marriage and death, and in historical places that centered in the promotion of tourism. The reflected Ilokano traits and values in these four aspects are love for entertainment, ingenuity and creativity, community kinship, resiliency and strength, frugality, patience and industry, resourcefulness, creativity, and close family ties and cooperation, simplicity, religiosity, respect to fellow human beings, entrepreneurial skills, collective mind and, passion in the preservation of cultural heritage.

Ilokanos perceive a need in preserving their culture. However, people in Ilocos Sur are more passionate in cultural preservation than those of Ilocos Norte. The challenges identified by KIs in Ilokano cultural preservation are on the Westernized learnings and practices taught at home, non-integration of the Ilokano culture in the curriculum, inadequacy in information literacy amongst the people, refusal to use Ilokano language, non-adaptation from the younger generation, failure to see the significance of culture in people’s lives, insufficient use of media for educational culture-based purposes, and weak reinforcement of policies in cultural preservation.

There is an imminent need for the Ilokano culture to be preserved. The communication of culture needs to be integrated in everyday life of the Ilokano people, that it may be viewed as a normal occurrence. Also, the rationale of Ilokano celebrations needs to be communicated to townfolk, and tourists that the sacredness of the celebrations be given due respect. As the Ilokano culture is very broad, more studies should be conducted specifically targeting on each segment and type of culture that it may be understood more. Lastly, there is a need to utilize more forms of media in the communication of Ilokano culture.

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