

## Identifying Constructs of a Resilient Community of Indigenous People Towards Developing Models for Cultural Preservation

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### Abstract

In the 938 hectares hinterland of northern Iloilo resides the emerging Indigenous people known as Nagpana Ati community. Mission works from religious organizations pioneered the assimilation of the mainstream values which later was supplanted by the community development programs. With government and non-government organizations which significantly changed the behavior of the Ati people cultural preservation became complex and more challenging as their ways of life were considerably altered. Thus, this study aimed to understand the nature of Ati people in order to develop a construct model on cultural preservation thereby establishing resilient IP (Indigenous Peoples) communities. This investigation centered on the life of Ati people as affected by socioeconomic factors employed a quality research design and grounded theory as its main methodology. Immersion, focus group discussion and in-depth case study were the different methods employed. Moreover, this study aimed at providing guidelines to create a holistic extension program. The study revealed that; due to interference of the dominant culture, Ati people diverted from tribal (community) cohesiveness to being clannish, family oriented, and/or self-centered. The adoption of the *Hiligaynon* dialect and association with outsiders put them on the inferior side and triggered the desire to diffuse their traditional practices thus putting aside even the organic knowledge that are essential to sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Cultural Preservation, Indigenous People, Resilient Community, Construct, Model

### Introduction

The Ati (Aeta) or Negritos in the Spanish accounts during their occupation in the archipelago (Zell, R., 2011) are indigenous people who live in scattered, isolated mountainous areas (The Ati People..., 2016); north-eastern Luzon down to Southern Tayabas, in Panay, Negros, Palawan, Mindanao, to name just a few islands (Zell, R., 2011, p. 24). The Ati people are known to be hunters and gatherers. Each group operated within a large primary area from which they migrated to another secondary area when all possible food stuff had been harvested (Zell, R., 2011, p. 31).

Having a nomadic culture, Ati people build only temporary shelters made of sticks driven to the ground and covered with the palm of banana leaves (The Ati People..., 2016). But overtime, Ati people were able to learn the mainstream values. The modernised Ati have moved to villages and areas of cleared mountains. They live in houses made of bamboo and cogon grass (The Ati People..., 2016).

In the island of Panay, there are several groups of Ati tribes scattered in the provinces of Antique, Capiz, Aklan and Iloilo. One of the emerging Ati settlements which were observed to have significant changes in terms of social and economic activities is the Nagpana Ati (local term for Ati) community who settled in the mountains of the municipalities of Barotac Viejo and San Rafael in the northern part of the province of Iloilo.

However, in spite of the outreach programs by the religious groups, non-government organizations and later, the government line agencies, it is intriguing to note the report that 'The Philippines affords no protection to the Ati people and they have become extremely nomadic due to social and economic strain on their culture and way of life that had previously remained unchanged for thousands of years (The Ati People..., 2016).' This claim was supported by Reg Zell (2011), 'the living conditions of most of the few remaining populations of Atis are miserable; they are considered second-rate beings; they are either killed, harassed or at best

ignored (pg. 24).’ Further, Balilla, V.S. (2013) said that “in the Philippines, the lack of basic social services and high poverty have forced many indigenous people to move off their traditional lands, and the human rights violations from encroaching economic activity and continued development of regional areas are of ongoing concern.”

The Iloilo State College of Fisheries had observed similar alarming situations of the Ati people despite the development programs and support afforded to them. Since November 2016, the college had been working and studying the conditions of the people, learning their values and ways of life and studying how mainstream culture influenced them in either beneficial or detrimental ways. Thus, the We Share Extension Program was launched to assist the Ati people in developing their organic skills, open opportunities through education and preserve and promote their culture. Further, this research attempted to understand the culture and tradition of the modern Ati people and the influences brought by their association with the dominant culture and their adaptation of the mainstream dialect. Thus, this study was conceptualized.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to develop constructs and models on cultural preservation and resilient IP communities based on the profound understanding of the ways of life of the Ati people as caused by the inevitable socioeconomic factors as influenced by their association with the mainstream Pilipino culture.

Moreover, the aforementioned objectives were achieved based on generating data using the following guide questions:

1. What and who are the first influences of the the Ati people?
2. What significant changes caused by outside influences brought to the tribe in terms of norms, symbols, language, technology, and values?
3. What tradition/s or practice/s that was/were lost or diffused after contact or associations with the non Ati people?
4. What is the present living condition of the Ati people along with their contact with the non Ati?

5. What are the present living practices and/or livelihood of the Ati people?

6. What changes observed in the social and economic conditions of the Ati brought by their association with the non Ati?

7. How do Ati people perceived or view their culture and ways of life as affected by the social and economic development?

8. What are the aspirations of the Ati people as regards to preservation of their culture and establishing a resilient IP community?

### **Methodology**

This study utilized the qualitative research method employing the in-depth case study approach and immersion. The case study attempts to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the event under study and to develop more general theoretical statements about regularities in the observed phenomena (Fidel, R., 1984). This method allows the researcher to carefully examine and establish a well-founded reason of the conditions, desires and aspirations of the Ati people in regard to the concept of preservation of their culture and tradition. The researchers blend in with the community and became part of the Ati community in order for them to be see deeper the conditions and aspirations of the Ati people and provide a wider perspective on the meaning of the stories, experiences and feelings disclosed by the interviewees (Crossman, <http://sociology.about.com/>).

The researchers made dialogues with the Ati people on establishing a community development program that are based on their tradition, ingenuity and available resources in their 938 ha. ancestral domain. The researchers immersed in the community every weekend to observe and study their ways of life. A total of 10 months weekly visit and immersion were done to complete the data collection for this study.

Moreover, the study utilized the grounded theory. As explained by Glaser, B. G. (*n.d.*), grounded theory is the systematic generation of theory from systematic research which leads to the emergence of conceptual categories. These concept/categories are related to each other as a theoretical explanation of the action/s that continually resolves the main concern of the participants in a

substantive area. With this explanation, the researcher would try to establish the constructs and models on how to preserve the culture of the Aeta people that are anchored on their collective aspirations and further create an IP community model based on the principle of community resiliency.

We should note that the elements of community resilience are both physical and perceptual (Leykin, et al., 2013 citing Ungar 2011). Leykin, et al. (2013) citing several authors emphasized that the elements of community resiliency are highly tied to the ability to overcome emergency situation include social capital, social cohesion, collective efficacy, social support, sense of trust, and attachment to place. Leykin, et al. (2013) further pointed out that these community elements are interconnected and together form unique community structure.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The Contact with the non Ati and the Changes in their Culture Thereafter**

In 1948, three years after the end of the World War 2, while the Philippines was on the process of rebuilding the country, an American soldier and a Baptist evangelist, not known to many has embarked on a significant work that brought changes and development in the lives of the Ati people in the island of Panay. The man was called Dr. Harper.

In the account of the tribal chieftain and some key informants (Ati elders) "*Dr. Harper observed that the Ati people were deprived and neglected by the government.*"

In one of the trips of Dr. Harper around the island of Panay, he met Mr. Sevro Elosendo in Sitio Litik, Barangay Cag-an, Anilao, Iloilo where he observed that these people were wearing *bahag* (for men) and *patajong* (for women).

In the conversation between Dr. Harper and Mr. Sevro Elosendo:

Dr. Harper: *Do you want to study? I want you to become a pastor.*

Mr. Elosendo: (in an effort to speak English) *What is (a) pastor?*

Dr. Harper: *You study the Bible, the word of God.*

It was not clear how well the two has conversed and how they came up with an agreement but, Mr. Elosendo was brought to the Doane Baptist Seminary in Iloilo City where he was taught to read and write by the American missionaries. This marks the new life for Ati man and the rest of his people.

Mr. Elosendo finished his Bible schooling at the Baptist seminary and became the first Pastor of the Ati tribe in Panay. This pioneered the formal organization and recognition of the Ati people which marked the beginning of the notable and important transformation in the lives of the Ati people.

The first Baptist ministry for the Ati was established in their community in Sitio Litik, Barangay Cag-an in the municipality of Anilao. Later, because of their nomadic behavior and through their recollection, they moved to a more favorable location where they would establish permanent settlement. This was the emerging Ati society called "Nagpana Ati community." This is located in the mountains of the municipalities of Barotac Viejo and San Rafael in the northern part of the province of Iloilo. The story of Nagpana is written by the authors in a different research in an effort to document and archive the history of the Ati people in Panay.

The firsts of the converts of now Pastor Sevro Elosendo were his cousins: the brothers; Agustin Ganancial, Narciso Ganancial, Domingo Ganancial and their father, Feliciano Ganancial. However, from among the tribe, two groups had separated because they cannot accept this change of religion. These groups settled in the island of Guimaras.

The Ati people in the new settlement totally abandoned their animistic belief and adhered to the Christian (Baptist) teachings. As of today, over 95% of the Ati in Nagpana, a community of more than 800 individuals are Baptist.

Following the conversion of the Ati people to the Christian faith and eventual settlement in Nagpana Ati community, the former of the municipality of Barotac Viejo, the late Raul Causing had shown great sympathy to the Ati people. On the account made by the narrators, "*Si Mayor Causing guid ang nagsapopo sa mga Ati* (It's Mayor Causing who really took good care of the Ati)." This is the hallmark the formal recognition of the existence and respect for the Ati people by the government. From then on, government line agencies had

conducted outreach and assessment of the presence of the Ati people: in 1960s by the Commission on National Integration (CNI), 1960s to 70s by the Philippine Association of National Minorities (PANAMIN), 1977 by the Office of Muslim Affairs and Cultural Communities (OMACC), 1986 to 1996 by Office for the Southern Cultural Community (OSCC) and later and in the present, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP). Other individuals who made significant contacts with the Ati people were: the Japanese Bible translator (1980) and Mary Friedberge, peace corps volunteer (1982) who initiated the creation of the Nagpana Minority Association (NAMIAS) and the approval of the group by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) under the Bureau of Rural Workers. The first priority program of this organization was the acquisition of the land (Ancestral Domain). The result of this endeavour was the Presidential Proclamation No. 56 in 1986 enacted by the then President Corazon Aquino granting the 938 ha. of land as ancestral domain for the Nagpana Ati community. Later, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) brought various social support and programs and the Department of Education (DepEd) with the establishment of the elementary school for the Ati in the community. As of now, the Nagpana Ati community has produced five(5) teachers of which two (2) have already retired, five (5) professionals who worked in the government, one (1) seafarer and one (1) nurse.

Aside from the Nagpana Ati community, there are other five (5) IP communities in the municipality of Barotac Viejo; other neighboring towns also cuddle other Ati groups such as the municipalities of Anilao, San Enrique, Dingle, Lemery, and San Rafael. Other Ati communities in Panay are found in the province of Aklan; known for the Ati-atihan festival which was derived from the word Ati (means Ati), the province of Capiz and the province of Antique.

### **Culture and Traditions that were Totally Abandoned**

#### ***Animistic Beliefs and Rituals***

With the conversion of the Ati people from Animistic to Christianity (Baptist), everything that they believed and practiced were totally abjured.

As Animists, Atis believed that every place is governed by a god. For instance, there is a god that governed the fountains, rivers, rocks, trees, etc. Everyone who passes by, stays or uses the place has to ask permission from the god who owned or guard the place.

During burial, the Atis perform rituals to determine whether the person died of natural or unnatural death. Natural death as they perceived is due to natural consequences like old age, diseases or ailments. The unnatural death however, is due to supernatural devices or media which caused someone to die such as witchery or the like.

In their rituals, before the dead is brought to the burial ground, a rope is tied on the feet and the body is hang on the *tuwangan* (a piece of wood to hung the corpse), the elder will ask,

*“kon natural and imo pagkapatay abi mag mag-an ka* (if you died a natural way, will you weigh lighter as you are lifted up),” then the body becomes lighter as it is lifted.

*“kon indi natural imo pagkamatay abi mag bug-at ka* (if your death is unnatural, will you weigh heavier as you are lifted up),” then the body becomes heavy.

There are accounts that these really happened and according to the narrators, they had experienced this phenomenon themselves. Since their conversion to the Christian belief, they were able to ask their preacher or pastor to explain these phenomena. Their explanation of the pastor is based on the Biblical belief that there are evil media that are capable of making or creating unnatural events.

#### **The Story of Marikudo and Maniwang-tiwang**

The popular account of the Barter of Panay, the story of Marikudo and Maniwang-tiwang were told even up to the generation of the Chieftain. However, the researchers observed that this story is really important for the present generation. According to the Chieftain, ‘Tatay Osting’ or Pastor Seviro Elosendo, had shared the story to him. However, as to the source of this story whether it is translated from generation to generation of the Ati people or shared by the missionaries or other non Ati people is unclear.

#### **Learned or Adapted Practices**

*Kaingin*

The Atis are nomadic people. They are food gatherers and relying on the produce of the fields and the forests for sustenance. As mobility became difficult for the Ati people caused by social and economic activities of the non Ati people, food resources gradually depleted. This development compelled the Ati people to adapt and find permanent settlement. In the case of the Nagpana Ati community, the Atis constructed permanent houses and learned the ways of life of the Illongo people.

In this case, livelihood becomes a primary concern. The Atis learned to practice *kaingin* (cutting of trees for making charcoal). According to the respondents, they learned this culture from the *Panay Bukidnon* (another IP group found only in the island of Panay). The researchers would like to note that the *Panay Bukidnon* has joined the Nagpana Ati community and were formally accepted by the Ati people.

*Kaingin* is a destructive human activity. In this case, the Ati people, with their ways of life that are in harmony with the nature had been altered and became contributors to the destruction of the natural environment and biodiversity. Today, it could be observed that the forest reserved for their hunting in the 938 hectares ancestral domain is slowly deforested and the wild crops and animals gradually depleted.

#### **Values and Ways of Life that were observed that slowly diminished**

##### ***Tribal Cohesiveness and Close Family Ties***

'Close family ties' is an Asian culture... therefore the Filipinos, therefore the Atis.'

Since Ati people are closely knit and living in small family groups, respect and regard to elders is sacred. However, with the association and blending in of the Ati people to the mainstream, this value was observed to diminish. The authority of the chieftain and the blessing of the elders are not anymore a matter of great concern. Their lives are now centered on the effort to improve their status of living which means, social and economic development is foremost and important for them.

##### **Culture and Traditions that could be Preserved**

##### ***Dialect***

The Ati people have their own dialect called "*Inati*." With intermarriages and association

to the dominant culture, their own dialect is dimmed to be forgotten. For instance, school children going to Illongo schools have to learn and adapt the ways and dialect of the Illongo people. As noted in the interview, "some kids are not anymore speaking our dialect," Despite the parents and the elders are still speaking *Inati*, the Ati families are not anymore keen to use their local dialect in their day to day conversation. Among the dialects they used in their conversation or somehow influenced their own dialect are *Hiligaynon* (primary medium of communication of Illongo people), *Karay-a*, *Cebuano*, and *Ilocano*.

##### ***Hunting***

Hunting is a very interesting topic concerning the culture of the Ati people. Since time immemorial, Ati people are know of their hunting abilities, their craftsmanship of forging bow and arrow and the formula for making poisons they used to kill their prey. Despite the modernization, Ati people are still hunting although, occasionally due to the degradation of the forests. The Ati people still keep this tradition since their delicacies-the exotic foods, are tied on their ability to hunt.

##### ***Herbal Medicine***

The organic knowledge of the Ati people regarding herbal medicine were not well documented and researched. The Ati people had survived for centuries and in fact believed to have been the first inhabitants of the Philippines had generated knowledge on cure and medicine for ailments and diseases. Until now, the Ati people are still collecting and processing herbal medicines for their use and source of income.

##### ***Weaving***

The Ati people are known to be excellent weavers of *maram-an* (refers to wallets, bags or baskets made of local materials such *buri* and *nito*). *Buri* and *nito* weaving is one of the primary sources of income for several Ati families. They carefully design and create wallets, bags, fruit trays, etc.

##### ***The Impact of Development***

In general, the Ati people welcome the modern development in their social and economic lives and they perceived that today's ways of life is better compared from the past. However, the Ati people believed that this development caused the gradual

depletion of the natural resources and the production of health hazard food products is not a good development yet, they need to adapt and survive.

**The Aspirations of the Ati People on Cultural Preservation**

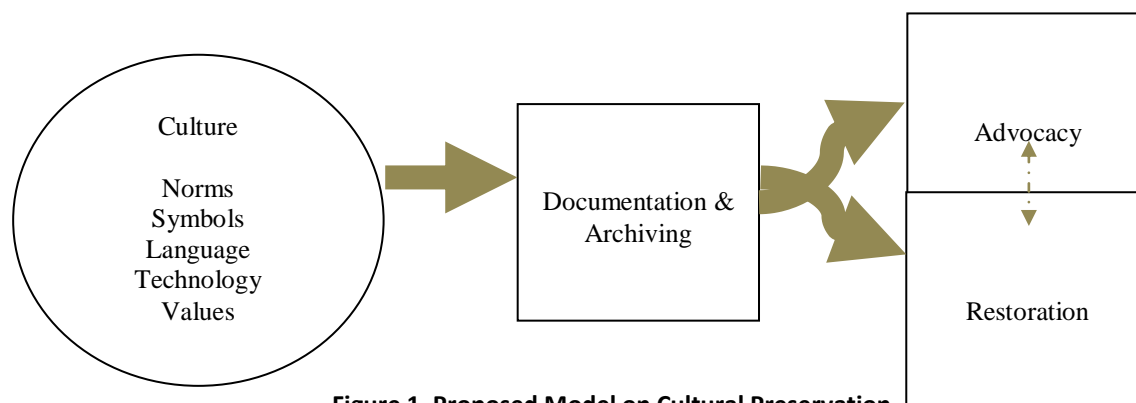
The Ati people believed that their culture will be preserved through the young generations through keeping their organic belief, practices, values and dialect alive. They perceived that if Ati born children lived or stayed in their community, they would embody their culture while changes will happen along with the overall development of the community. On the other hand, if the Ati lived outside of their community, they tend to discharged their culture and adapt new ways that are partly or entirely different from their ways and beliefs. For instance, as shared by the respondents, the Ati people of Kabilo, Aklan and Antique have

totally forgotten their dialect and the younger generations are not speaking their dialect anymore. They attributed this phenomenon to the bullying and racial discrimination by the *Uta* (non Ati).

**The Aspirations of the Ati People on Establishing Resilient IP Community**

“Prepare for the Future!” This is the fundamental principle of the Ati people as regards to the environmental, social, economic consequences that are affecting or may be affecting them in the future. The Ati people believed that in order to establish a Resilient IP community, they need to prepare the present and the future generations through establishing the value of close family ties (social cohesion & collective efficacy), agricultural production for food security (livelihood) and continuous learning and training (education).

From the results and discussion presented, the following models are proposed.



**Figure 1. Proposed Model on Cultural Preservation**

There are four components in the proposed model. The first is the identifying and defining the Ati ways of life and tradition based on the following components of culture: (1) norms, (2) symbols, (3) language, (4) technology, and (5) values. After the specific cultural practices were clearly defined, the next process is to document and archive the materials through conducting intensive research. From documentation or archiving, we may proceed to either advocacy or restoration. Through advocacy, we were able to provide awareness among the Ati and non Ati people of the importance of preservation of the

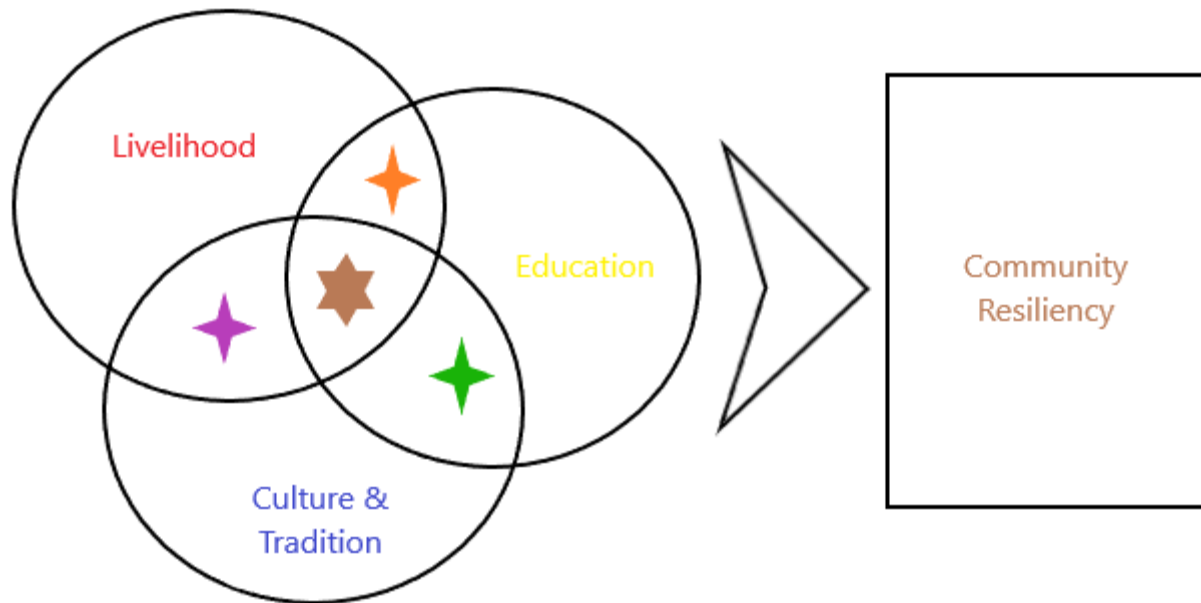
Indigenous culture towards promoting respect and acceptance for all. On the other hand, restoration is a process of rebuilding and recreating indigenous symbols, tools, materials, etc. for the education or promotion of the Ati culture. Advocacy and restoration could be done vice versa. It is necessary to establish a center for cultural preservation in the locality, in Ati schools or schools where Ati children study in order to raise awareness both the Ati and non Ati people the respect and acceptance of the Ati people.

**Table 1 Analysis of the Preservation of the Ati Culture**

Culture		Example/s of the culture that should be preserved	Present Condition
Component	Description/Definition		
Norms	Social expectations that guide behavior (www.chegg.com)	The mutual relationship between the existence of humans and the environment	From non sedentary to sedentary behavior, the Ati tend to convert the forest into agricultural land and practice kaingin system thereby changing the landscape of the forest and threatening the biodiversity that is essential to environmental protection and sustainability.
Symbols	Cultural representation of reality (www.cliffsnotes.com)	Written history of the Ati people.	No written accounts on the history, ways and life of the Ati people that could be used to educate the present generation on the value and importance of their existence.
Language	A system of verbal & sometimes written representations that are culturally specific & convey meaning about the world (www.cliffsnotes.com)	<i>Inati</i> (the local dialect of the Ati people)	No written translation of their dialect to the major dialects and language of the Filipinos. Children are not anymore speaking their local dialect.
Technology	Is the application of scientific knowledge to the making of tools to solve specific problems.	Traditional knowledge and practices (ex. herbal medicine, production of bow & arrow, weaving abilities)	No formal study of the indigenous knowledge of Ati people as regards to herbal medicine and they gradually stop the production of bow and arrow as hunting becomes limited due to changes in the environmental conditions and the ways of life of the Ati people.
Values	Person's or society's beliefs about good behavior and what things are important.	Tribal cohesiveness	The focus of the Ati people is pivoted to family or self development due to the outside influences.

**Table 2 Description of the Components of Cultural Preservation**

Components	Description
Culture	The Distinct and unique features and characteristics of the Ati people based on the norms, symbols, language, technology, and values.
Documentation & Archiving	Keeping of the artefact and written accounts of the history, music, arts, etc. of the Ati people.
Restoration	Encourage the use of their native dialect among the Ati people and restoring their beliefs and practices that are essential for sustainable economic growth and social development.
Advocacy	Conduct advocacy/information dissemination regarding the Ati culture and promote equality and acceptance of the IPs and eliminate bullying and racial caste.



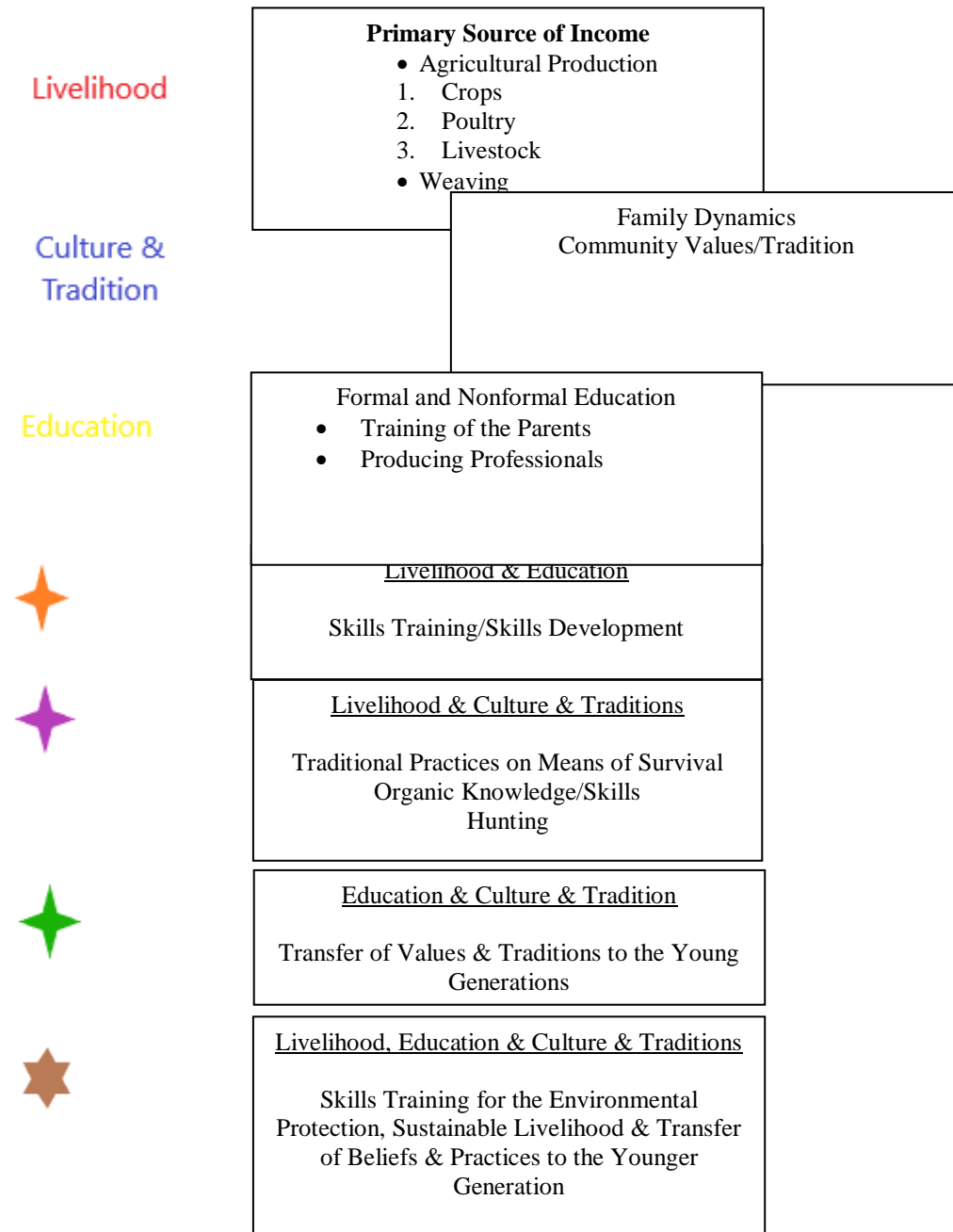
**Figure 2. Proposed Model on Establishing a Resilient IP Community**

The figure above illustrates the proposed model on establishing a resilient IP community. As shown, there are three inter-lapping components that were found necessary to establish a resilient IP community: (1) livelihood, (2) education, and (3) culture and tradition. Livelihood is the primary and essential to the overall development of the Ati people. The Ati people had manifested resiliency through adaption to the changing environment and responding to the challenges. For instance, nomadic activity is not anymore viable for the Ati people thus, they settled to favorable place to live and exist along with the non Ati people.

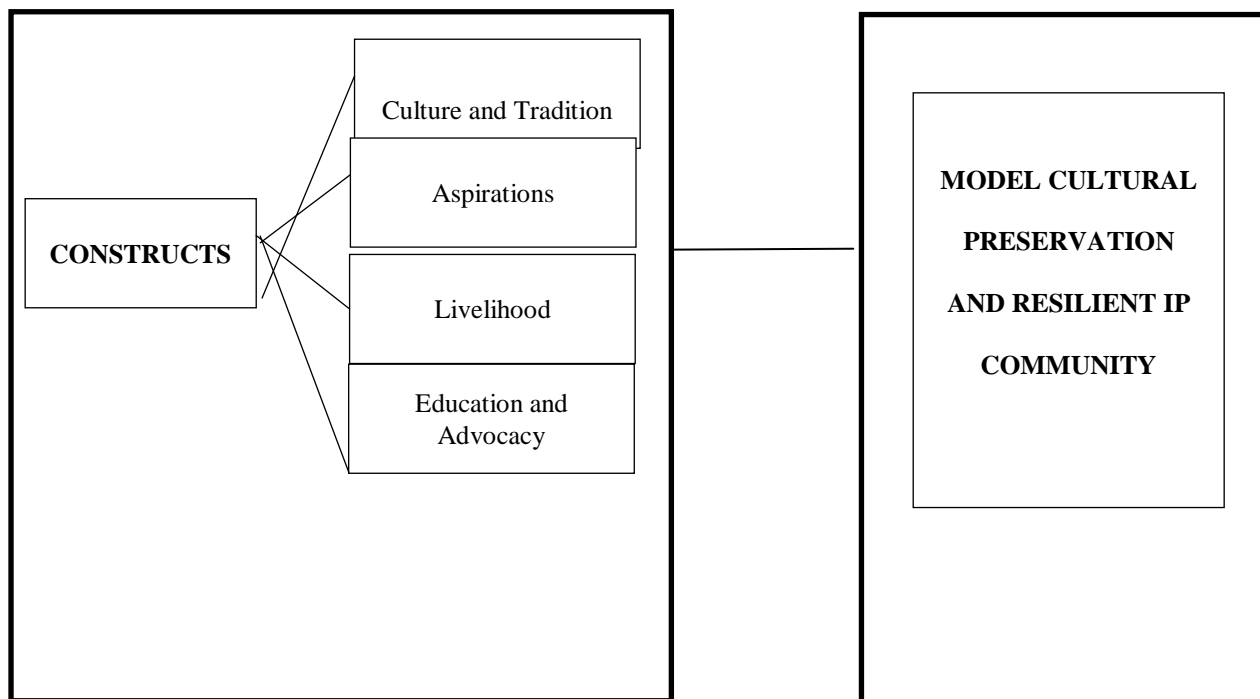
In modern time, education becomes a fundamental agent for them to adapt to the fast changing development. Formal education for the school age children and nonformal education for the parents or out-of-school youth would be a primary agent for the Ati people to be adaptable

and be able to respond to the consequences and challenges in the social, economic and environmental factors. Through education, Ati people would be able to understand their existence and their value as people and as a race and develop a sense of pride and dignity among them

Preservation of the Ati culture and tradition would be a single factor that would identify them as people. Dignity and pride among them would be agents to ensure their collective and united effort to respond to the challenges and consequences of the future. This is essential to the establishment of the elements of community resiliency such as social capita, social cohesion, collective efficacy, social support, sense of trust and attachment to the place (Leykin, et al., 2013).



The following is the proposed method of developing construct for cultural preservation of a resilient IP community.



### Conclusion

After the thorough analysis and discussion of the result, it was concluded that the necessary elements to cultural preservation are the identification of the norms, symbols, language, technology, and values that are essential to the holistic development of the people. The next process involves documentation and archiving to establish written accounts and physical evidences of their culture. This would be followed by either advocacy or restoration and vice versa. Advocacy is the promotion and dissemination of the Ati culture, promote equality and acceptance and prevent bullying and racial discrimination against the minority group. Restoration on the other hand is the rebuilding and reliving the Ati traditions and practices.

In developing construct for cultural preservation and resilient IP community, the following components should be considered; culture and

tradition, aspirations, livelihood, and education and advocacy.

### Recommendation

With reference to the results of the study and the conclusion drawn, the researchers recommend that the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples shall facilitate the process of Ati cultural preservation based on the following components: identification of the culture that should be preserve, facilitate the documentation and archiving and conducts advocacy and restore the culture by teaching and reliving among the present generation the culture of the Ati people.

Moreover, to establish a resilient IP community, the NCIP may work with other government line agencies in facilitating the skills training, agricultural production and restoration and promotion of their culture and tradition.

It is further recommended to other researchers to validate the result of this study.

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