

From Ritual to Dialogue: The Evolution of Indigenous Land Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Jones K. Liwan

Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, Saint Mary's University

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous communities have long depended on culturally rooted systems to manage disputes and sustain social harmony. This study examined the historical development of land conflict resolution in Liwon, Asipulo, Ifugao, focusing on traditional mechanisms, their transformation, and the cultural values that continue to guide community-based justice. Using a historical research design, data were collected through interviews with elders and supported by secondary sources. Findings revealed that land disputes were traditionally resolved through elder mediation, bultong or ritual wrestling, and unggub or dart ordeal, all of which emphasized ancestral authority, communal participation, and reconciliation. These mechanisms gradually changed after Asipulo became an independent municipality in 1992 and as cadastral surveys, land titling programs, and formal legal procedures were

introduced. Ritual-based systems shifted from judicial use to cultural expression, while the tongtongan emerged as a hybrid process combining traditional dialogue with barangay-level legal requirements. Despite these transformations, values such as pihyew or moral restraint, binnaddang or collective cooperation, respect for elders, and the prioritization of harmony remain central to resolving conflicts. Future research may explore how other Indigenous communities adapt their conflict resolution systems amid changing legal and cultural environments.

Keywords— ancestral practices, conflict resolution, cultural values, indigenous justice, reduced inequalities

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a universal aspect of social life and, when managed constructively, can promote cooperation and social transformation (Ragandang, 2018). Conflict resolution therefore plays a critical role in maintaining social harmony, encompassing negotiation, mediation, and other processes aimed at de-escalation and mutual understanding (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2019). Recent research emphasizes the importance of culturally grounded and community-based approaches, particularly in Indigenous settings where traditions and relationships shape the dynamics of dispute settlement (Rakgwata & Tumelo, 2024).

Across the world, informal and restorative systems have gained recognition for their participatory and reconciliatory nature. Restorative justice frameworks prioritize accountability and relationship repair over punishment, with studies demonstrating their effectiveness in reducing recidivism and strengthening community cohesion (Herman, 2017; Shem-Tov et al., 2024; Hobson, 2022). These principles closely align with the long-standing dispute-resolution practices of Indigenous Cultural Communities, where dialogue, ritual, and elder mediation remain central and resilient despite modernization pressures (Ubink, 2018; Tohari, 2025).

In the Philippines, numerous Indigenous groups continue to uphold customary justice traditions. The bodong of the Kalinga operates as a peace pact system (Ragandang, 2018), while mankusjon among the Ibaloi relies on elder-led settlements recognized alongside state mechanisms (Panaten et al., 2023). Similarly, the tampuda hu balagen of the Manobo employs ritualized reconciliation between clans (Ragandang, 2018). These practices emphasize consensus-building, elder authority, and restorative values—elements also embedded in the Indigenous justice systems of the Cordillera. Their continued relevance is affirmed in national frameworks such as the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997.

Despite this significance, Indigenous conflict resolution remains underexplored in Philippine scholarship, with existing studies focusing more on heritage and ritual than on dispute-management systems that sustain social order. There is a need for deeper historical analysis, as Indigenous mechanisms evolve in response to colonization, state law, and local governance.

Guided by this gap, the present study examines the historical development of land conflict resolution in Liwon, Asipulo, Ifugao. By documenting traditional mechanisms, tracing their transformation, and identifying the cultural values that persist, the study contributes to cultural preservation, community empowerment, and broader discussions on restorative and Indigenous justice. More importantly, it affirms that Indigenous conflict resolution is not a relic of the past but a living system that continues to guide communities toward harmony and resilience.

Statement of Objectives

This study aimed to examine the historical development of land conflict resolution in Liwon, Asipulo, Ifugao. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Describe the traditional land conflict resolution mechanisms practiced in Asipulo;
2. Analyze how these traditional mechanisms have changed or transformed over time; and
3. Identify the cultural values that have persisted despite these transformations.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the understanding that conflict resolution is both a cultural and social process that evolves across time while remaining deeply rooted in the moral, spiritual, and communal values of Indigenous societies. In Liwon, Asipulo, Ifugao, traditional mechanisms of dispute settlement serve not only as practical means of resolving disagreements but also as instruments for preserving social order, transmitting moral values, and strengthening cultural identity. To analyze the continuity, evolution, and relevance of these practices, the study draws on four complementary frameworks: Restorative Justice Theory, Conflict Transformation Theory, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs), and Legal Pluralism. Together, these perspectives illuminate how indigenous conflict resolution systems remain culturally grounded, socially significant, and resilient amid shifting legal and societal contexts.

Restorative Justice Theory provides a lens for understanding how indigenous mechanisms emphasize healing, accountability, and the restoration of relationships rather than punitive action. Herman (2017) argued that restorative justice seeks to repair harm and rebuild trust through inclusive dialogue, while Pavlacic, Kellum, and Schulenberg (2022) demonstrated that restorative processes promote empathy and cohesion by actively involving all affected parties. These principles resonate strongly with Indigenous contexts, where rituals, communal participation, and moral responsibility are central to dispute settlement. As noted by Hewitt (2016) and further illustrated by studies such as those published in the *California Law Review* (2023), Indigenous justice practices predate colonial systems and reflect longstanding cultural traditions that prioritize harmony, reconciliation, and collective well-being.

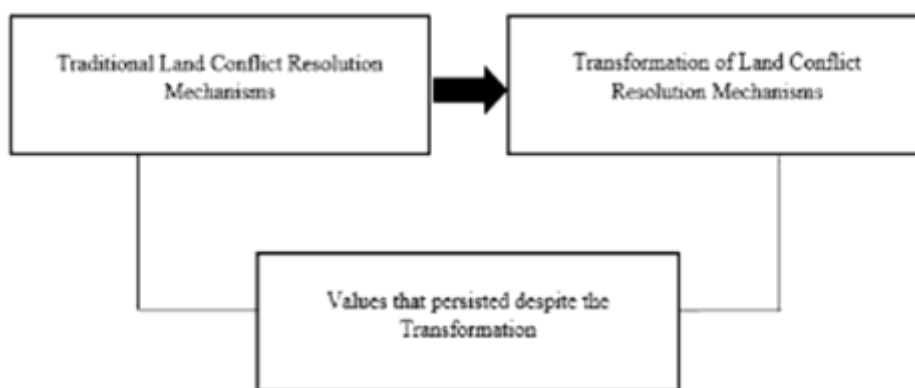
Conflict Transformation Theory reinforces this culturally grounded perspective by framing conflict as a dynamic process that can lead to constructive social change. Lederach (1997, 2014) emphasized that sustainable peace emerges not from suppressing conflict but from transforming the relationships, structures, and historical tensions that produce it. This involves addressing emotional, relational, and cultural dimensions of disputes while fostering dialogue and rebuilding trust. Bloomfield, Fischer, and Schmelzle (2006) similarly argued that genuine peacebuilding requires long-term transformation rather than temporary settlement. In the context of Liwon, the community's use of rituals, consensus-building, and dialogue exemplifies how indigenous practices go beyond resolving immediate disputes to restore social balance and reinforce enduring communal harmony.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) further ground the study by highlighting the intergenerational knowledge, moral values, and governance traditions that shape community life. Abdo (2024) described IKSPs as holistic epistemologies transmitted through oral tradition, lived experience, and collective participation. These systems guide community relationships, resource management, and mechanisms of social regulation. Rakgwata and Tumelo (2024) and Nakyam (2023) showed that IKSP-based conflict resolution

emphasizes reciprocity, empathy, and mutual responsibility, underscoring its restorative and relational nature. Scholarship by Garing et al. (2023) and Teshale (2014) added that indigenous governance systems foster resilience, solidarity, and cultural legitimacy, enabling communities to sustain social cohesion even amid external pressures.

Legal Pluralism also provides the analytical lens for understanding how indigenous conflict resolution systems persist within the broader Philippine legal framework. This perspective recognizes the coexistence of state law and customary law, allowing Indigenous communities to exercise their own culturally grounded mechanisms alongside formal institutions. Legal pluralist approaches explain how traditional practices adapt to changing contexts without losing their moral authority or cultural significance. This framework is essential for examining the contemporary relevance of Liwon's practices, particularly in navigating the interplay between customary norms, national legislation, and modern governance structures.

Taken together, these four frameworks offer an integrated and culturally sensitive foundation for examining the conflict resolution mechanisms of Liwon. Restorative Justice highlights the healing-oriented nature of indigenous practices; Conflict Transformation illuminates their capacity to rebuild relationships and foster long-term harmony; IKSPs situate these practices within rich cultural and epistemological traditions; and Legal Pluralism explains their endurance and adaptability within a modern legal environment. Through these interconnected perspectives, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how the people of Liwon sustain peace, resolve disputes, and preserve cultural identity through their enduring and evolving indigenous conflict resolution practices.



The framework illustrates how traditional land conflict resolution mechanisms in Liwon serve as the foundation from which contemporary transformations emerged. It shows that while these mechanisms have adapted over time in response to social, legal, and cultural changes, their core principles remain intact. The lower component highlights the enduring values such as harmony, respect for elders, and communal dialogue that continue to guide conflict resolution despite these transformations. Overall, the diagram emphasizes both change and continuity within the community's indigenous justice practices.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

Conflict is a universal aspect of human interaction that emerges when individuals or groups hold differing needs, values, or interests. Rather than viewing conflict as purely destructive, scholars argue that it can foster cooperation and social transformation when managed constructively (Ragandang, 2018). This understanding has led to various approaches to conflict resolution through negotiation, mediation, and arbitration that aim to de-escalate disputes and prevent future tensions (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2019). Recent studies further highlight the importance of culturally grounded and context-sensitive approaches, particularly in communities where social relationships and traditions influence how conflicts unfold (Rakgwata & Tumelo, 2024). Informal and community-based systems often prove more accessible and participatory than formal legal mechanisms, allowing communities to address disputes in ways that align with their local norms and values.

Globally, the movement toward reconciliatory and relationship-oriented processes is evident in restorative justice frameworks, which prioritize healing, accountability, and the repair of social bonds. Empirical studies show that

restorative practices can reduce recidivism, promote empathy, and strengthen community cohesion (Herman, 2017; Shem-Tov, Raphael, & Skog, 2024; Hobson, 2022). These principles closely reflect Indigenous justice systems which have long used rituals, dialogue, and collective decision-making to maintain harmony and restore balance (Ubink, 2018). According to Tohari (2025), Indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms remain resilient despite modernization pressures and continue to influence contemporary discussions on justice because they reinforce community identity and social cohesion.

In the Philippines, Indigenous Cultural Communities continue to uphold customary conflict resolution practices that work alongside state legal institutions. The bodong peace pact system of the Kalinga, the mankusjon mediation of the Ibaloi, and the tampuda hu balagen reconciliation ritual of the Manobo illustrate the significance of elder authority, communal participation, and restorative values in Indigenous dispute settlement (Ragandang, 2018; Panaten et al., 2023). In the Cordillera, elder-led assemblies persist in resolving disputes involving land, marriage, and interpersonal relationships, reflecting traditions rooted in consensus-building and collective responsibility (Prill-Brett, 2017). Despite their importance, these mechanisms remain underexamined in Philippine scholarship, with most studies focusing on heritage and ritual rather than on Indigenous systems of dispute management. This gap underscores the need for documenting and analyzing conflict resolution practices in communities such as Liwon in Asipulo, where historical mechanisms have evolved in response to colonization, state law, and modernization while preserving enduring cultural values that sustain community harmony.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a historical–narrative qualitative design to document and interpret the evolution of land conflict resolution practices in Liwon, Asipulo, Ifugao. This design allowed the reconstruction of past events, customs, and dispute-settlement processes based on community memory and oral tradition, emphasizing continuity and change in Indigenous mechanisms.

Research Locale

The research was conducted in Barangay Liwon, the newest barangay of Asipulo, located in a mountainous agricultural area where gardening and rice farming are predominant. Frequent land-related disputes and the sustained reliance on elders for settlement made the locale suitable for examining Indigenous conflict resolution.

Participants

Using snowball sampling, three (3) elder participants—all aged 60 and above, long-term residents, and recognized cultural authorities—were identified as key custodians of local history and customary law. Their involvement in past disputes or community decision-making qualified them as credible sources. All participation was voluntary.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted in the local dialect. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and took place in participants' homes or customary meeting areas, depending on their preference. After explaining the study's purpose, written informed consent was secured. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and later transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The study used thematic analysis. First, open coding was applied to identify initial concepts from the transcripts. These codes were then organized through axial coding to connect categories and refine relationships. Finally, thematic coding was performed to develop overarching themes that captured continuity, transformation, and the cultural values underlying conflict resolution practices. Themes were compared against secondary literature and interpreted through restorative justice, conflict theory, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices.

Trustworthiness

Reliability and credibility were enhanced through peer debriefing, cross-checking of codes, and comparison of emerging themes with existing ethnographic and historical accounts. Member-sense checking was conducted informally by revisiting key points with participants for clarification.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from community elders and barangay leadership before fieldwork. Participants were informed of their rights, including confidentiality, anonymity, and the option to withdraw at any point. Coded identifiers were used in transcripts, and all data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. Cultural protocols were followed throughout data collection to ensure respect for Indigenous knowledge and avoid misrepresentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings reveal that traditional land conflict resolution in Liwon continues to rely heavily on customary mechanisms rooted in ancestral authority, communal participation, and spiritually guided processes. Respondents consistently emphasized that boundary disputes were historically resolved through elder mediation. They explained that whenever conflicts emerged, *“kamun waday lili ni karuba di puyek, daka paayag ida i Nangka-ama et pan-uungbalan da nu hipa i pahding da nunta puyek ni daka pan-piliwi,”* indicating that respected elders were summoned to discuss the contested area. Elders familiar with the land were invited to recall inherited boundaries based on ancestral memory, with testimonies and place-based recollections serving as the main evidence. Participants noted that the community preferred elders residing near or within the disputed area because they possessed deeper knowledge of the land’s history and earlier agreements.

When mediation failed to produce reconciliation, the disputants resorted to bultong, a customary wrestling ordeal used to determine rightful ownership. Respondents recounted, *“kamun talagan andi kamanpabigay di nansinumbangir, ida kamanbultung et nangamung huta mangabak, yaman i maunud,”* indicating that whoever won the wrestling match would establish the boundary. They further described the rules governing the process, stating, *“kamun hipa huta nangabak, mabalin ni higatu i mangitudu ni barbarun pegpeg or weno mabalin muwan ni nu tula huta nangipikipikan tu nunta kabultung tu, hiyaman law i pangilawan da nunta barbarun pegpeg,”* referring to two possible outcomes: either the winner drew a new line or the point where the opponent was pinned became the new marker. Respondents added that for uneven matches, representatives could be chosen, but only after a ritual performed by the mumbaki, who examined the sacrificed chicken’s bile to determine divine approval.

Another customary ordeal mentioned by the respondents was *uggub*, a ritualized dart contest used when both parties refused to yield. Participants explained that *uggub* involved each disputant taking turns throwing a palut dart at one another’s back after invoking the deities. According to their accounts, the representative who successfully struck the opponent’s back was declared the rightful owner of the contested land. Respondents emphasized that missing the target invalidated the throw, and the process was repeated until a clear winner emerged. They stated that this ritual was understood as a sacred test guided by ancestral spirits rather than violence, and the outcome was accepted as divine judgment.

The results also show that land conflict resolution in Liwon began transforming after Asipulo became an independent municipality in 1992 through Republic Act 7173. Respondents recalled significant changes following the establishment of formal administrative structures. One elder noted, *“nailugin nasukatan ida ta datin ugali nunta simukat ni mayor hi Mr. Carlos Gumangan Sr... in-uunud da ta huta kapahding idan i-Kiangan... in-ayag dad barangyan et diman nan-uungbalan mi,”* describing how disputes were increasingly brought to the barangay rather than settled solely through elder mediation. Participants consistently mentioned that cadastral surveys, land titling, and tax declarations introduced new standards of evidence. Written documents prepared by municipal assessors, DENR personnel, and survey teams began replacing ancestral memory as the

authoritative basis for determining boundaries.

Respondents observed that traditional mechanisms such as mediation, bultong, and uggub gradually lost juridical authority and became confined to cultural events, particularly during the Kulpi ad Asipulo festival. They narrated that these practices were eventually performed as heritage demonstrations rather than dispute-settling rituals. Elders acknowledged that younger generations preferred barangay procedures, written agreements, and survey-based documentation. As one respondent explained, “*wada law i linteg ni gubilnu ni masapul pa-title iday puyek isunga nalaklaka law ni maiayus iday pegpeg ni puyek*,” indicating that government titling programs now provided more definitive ways of settling land boundaries.

The results further show the emergence of the *tongtongan*, a hybrid mechanism combining traditional deliberation with formal barangay documentation. Respondents described it as a process where elders continued guiding the discussion according to customary ethics while barangay officials ensured that agreements were documented and aligned with state procedures. This hybrid approach preserved aspects of indigenous reconciliation but adhered to the requirements of the Katarungang Pambarangay system.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that Liwon’s traditional mechanisms—elder mediation, bultong, and uggub—functioned historically as community-anchored institutions rooted in restorative justice, ancestral memory, and spiritual sanction. The prominence of elder mediation affirms the centrality of customary authority, reflecting what Villaluz et al. (2023) also observed among the Talaandig, where elders’ legitimacy derives from cultural competence rather than formal power. The reliance on ancestral memory and oral testimonies underscores the role of elders as “living archives,” echoing broader patterns in indigenous justice systems across the Philippines.

The documented use of bultong and uggub aligns with accounts of ordeal-based customs described by Ragandang (2018), who noted that physical contests historically served as culturally legitimate methods for determining truth when reconciliation failed. These mechanisms embody restorative justice by producing outcomes recognized as spiritually sanctioned and publicly witnessed by the community. Their reliance on ritual, kinship ties, and sacred invocation reveals a worldview in which conflict resolution is inseparable from spirituality and communal moral order.

The transformation observed after 1992 reflects the impact of legal pluralism, where formal state systems increasingly overshadow customary authority. The respondents’ narratives coincide with Tanjung’s (2024) analysis that state law privileges written documents, cadastral maps, and technical measurements, often marginalizing indigenous oral histories. The introduction of municipal governance, cadastral surveys, and titling programs reshaped local conceptions of justice by shifting legitimacy from elders’ memory to documentary evidence. This mirrors global patterns documented in studies such as Reumi (2019), which found that indigenous communities increasingly view state mechanisms as more transparent and procedurally consistent than customary systems.

The decline of bultong and uggub as juridical tools and their transformation into cultural heritage performances illustrate the process of recontextualization, where traditions are preserved symbolically but lose practical legal authority. This pattern is further supported by Calde (2021) and Britanico et al. (2022), who observed that formal titling systems weaken customary claims by subordinating oral traditions to state-recognized property instruments. In Liwon, this has resulted in a gradual shift toward individual documentation, reflecting broader trends of commodification and bureaucratization of land relations under national legislation, including Republic Acts 11573 and 11953.

The emergence of the *tongtongan* as a hybrid mechanism demonstrates community adaptation. By integrating customary deliberation with barangay documentation, Liwon preserves elements of ancestral ethics such as dialogue, sincerity, mutual respect, while ensuring that settlements meet legal requirements. This reflects a pragmatic response to legal pluralism, allowing indigenous values to coexist with the demands of the modern state. The *tongtongan* thus represents not only cultural adaptation but also community resilience in navigating competing systems of legitimacy.

CONCLUSIONS

The traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution in Liwon were deeply rooted in communal participation, spiritual grounding, and the moral authority of elders, enabling disputes particularly land-related conflicts, to be resolved through collective dialogue and mutual accountability. While the introduction of formal state procedures reshaped these Indigenous systems, they were not displaced; rather, they evolved into hybrid forms such as the *tongtongan*, where customary deliberation coexists with barangay-level processes. This adaptive continuity demonstrates the resilience of Indigenous frameworks in sustaining harmony, justice, and social cohesion.

Theoretically, the findings illustrate how the Liwon experience enriches the discourse on restorative justice by showing that restoration in Indigenous contexts extends beyond interpersonal reconciliation to include land stewardship, kinship ties, and spiritual responsibility. The hybrid model observed in Liwon challenges conventional restorative justice theory by demonstrating that state mechanisms and Indigenous practices can coexist, interact, and reinforce each other rather than functioning as opposing systems.

Practically, the study suggests that the *tongtongan* can serve as a viable community-based approach for land governance, particularly in rural or upland settings where state processes may be slow, inaccessible, or culturally misaligned. Its emphasis on dialogue, consensus, and relational repair provides a culturally grounded model that can complement barangay and municipal conflict-resolution bodies.

In terms of policy, the findings point to the need for stronger institutional support from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and local government units to formalize and protect hybrid mechanisms. This includes recognizing customary mediators, integrating Indigenous processes into barangay-level dispute systems, and ensuring that land-related policies do not undermine cultural practices.

Limitations of the study include its small sample size, reliance on three key elders, and the specificity of the Liwon context, which may limit generalizability to other Indigenous communities. The historical–narrative design also depends heavily on memory-based accounts, which may be influenced by recall gaps or personal interpretations.

Future research could explore comparative studies among other Ifugao or Cordillera communities to assess variations in hybrid mechanisms, evaluate the effectiveness of *tongtongan* in resolving contemporary land disputes, and examine how younger generations perceive and participate in customary conflict resolution. Further investigation into the legal interface between Indigenous governance and state law would also deepen understanding of how hybrid systems can be strengthened and institutionalized.

Overall, the study affirms that Indigenous conflict resolution practices in Liwon remain vital, adaptive, and culturally grounded, offering valuable insights for both theoretical development and practical application in land governance and community-based justice.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research titled “From Ritual to Dialogue:

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