

Reviving Heritage: Itawit Building Rituals and Sustainable Architecture

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Abstract. This article dives into Itawit construction rituals, stressing its importance in the cultural identity and architectural practices of the Itawit people of Cagayan Valley, Philippines. It describes five main stages of these rituals: *Arte*, *Makergo*, *Patunak*, *Mattaliguni*, and *Aggunet*, all of which demonstrate a great regard for the environment and a spiritual connection to nature's invisible aspects. The study emphasizes how these rituals direct the construction process and represent sustainability principles by incorporating socio-environmental issues into traditional activities. Using locally obtained materials and involving the community in the construction process, Itawit architecture showcases ethno-sustainable techniques that respect cultural legacy and environmental sensitivity. The findings highlight the necessity of keeping these rituals as essential components of Itawit identity, as well as providing useful insights on sustainability that extend beyond their cultural setting. This investigation calls for the identification of indigenous knowledge systems as critical to contemporary sustainability discourse, supporting a holistic concept of architecture that balances human activity with the natural world.

Keywords:

Itawit, Building Rituals, Sustainability, Indigenous architecture, Cultural Heritage

Introduction

Rituals, especially in the Philippine archipelago, is distinct since it shows traces of Prehispanic practices of animism. In the Philippines, ethnic groups practice rituals in different aspects of their lives: from womb to tomb, so to speak. In the case of building construction rituals, an example in the Philippines would be the consideration on how the Bakunawa (Panay's legendary sea dragon) moves in the interior of the house, considering its

clockwise movements as well as how to capture and neutralize the Bakunawa using the building's post. While the subject is not new, it has been extensively discussed by early scholars of Philippine ethnohistory and ethnography as a subject of special interest in the Cordilleras as well as in Mindanaoan cultures. (Perez, Encarnacion, Dacanay, Fortin, & Chua, 1989; Scott, 1994) However, in the Cagayan Valley of the Northern Philippines, few have been studied *in detail* samples of building construction rituals of different ethnic groups, much less accessible data or books related to them nor have architects themselves systematically studied these rituals conducted by ethnic groups. Despite that, some scholars have shown interest in these ethnic groups and their culture even after the Spanish colonial period (since much of the historical texts also included accounts related to indigenous cultures and traditions). Examples of these historical texts are by Fr. Diego Aduarte, O.P. (1640), Fr. Juan Peguero, O.P. (1690), Fr. Julian Malumbres, O.P. (1918), all of which also contain "Christian biases" when writing about indigenous rituals or activities by labeling them "pagan" and even "demonic" in nature.

Cagayan Valley, like other Regions in the Philippines, is a vast area inhabited by different ethnic groups like the Atta, Ibanag, Itawit, Malaueg, Yogad, Gaddang, Isinay, and so on. These groups, believed to be mostly Austronesian in descent, have been known to be linguistically and culturally related. Historically, their culture (for instance, headhunting) is also related to other cultures along the greater Austronesian extent – from the Pacific Islands to Madagascar. (Bellwood, 2017; Keesing, 1962; Scott, 1979; Coballes and dela Cruz, 2021; Tan 2021) At present, the Itawit settlements are identified in the Middle and South of Cagayan Province, specifically along the towns of Amulung, Tuao, Piat, Santo Niño, and even Rizal (Middle Cagayan) and Enrile, Iguig, Peñablanca, Solana, and the city of Tuguegarao (Southern Cagayan). Manzolim and Quilang (2015) also notes Itawit settlements are known in two barangays in Echague, Isabela, namely Tuguegarao (compare Malumbres, 1918 p. 378) and Salay.

The latest literature that deals with Itawit building construction rituals would be the works of Bangi (2019) and Manzolim and Quilang (2016) (compare Rocero, 1981). The former talked about the *Patunak* ritual (which will be discussed here) and the latter about the *Patunak* and *Sisiwa* – both studies among the first to be academically published works of Itawit building construction rituals. The purpose of this work is to enrich the information on the previous studies, as well as directly relate these rituals to the Indigenous architecture and "philosophy" (or design philosophy/process) of the Itawit based on oral accounts of elderly Itawit and shamans. (See also Dessein, Soini, Fairclough, & Horlings, 2015; Fox, 2006; Fernandez, 2015; Ching, 2007) The result would not only contribute to the existing knowledge and literature on Indigenous knowledge but also a potential on its implications to policies and lessons from their thought process in the construction of their Indigenous

dwellings as an expression of their sustainable architecture (see also Soini & Birkeland, 2013).

Materials and Methods

The research design of this work is Grounded Theory, where inductive logic was used to gather, analyze, and interpret data and later build theories based on the coded, thematized, and available information gathered (Ignatow & Mihalcea, 2018; Groat & Wang, 2013). This study initially surveyed local Itawit individuals, sourced available literature, as well as contacted local authors about Itawit building construction rituals. Since many of the respondents were met during the COVID-19 period, the data gathering entailed more online interactions like chats and calls to build rapport with them. All of the respondents are from Cagayan, hence this study grouped the sources of data from two distinct geographic zones of Cagayan: (1) Middle Cagayan or MC (Tuaao, Piat, Santo Niño, Amulung) and (2) Southern Cagayan or SC (Solana, Enrile, Tuguegarao, Iguig, and Peñablanca). Later, some of the respondents were met face-to-face, following safety protocols, and interviewed using guided questionnaires. Informed consent forms were also used and explained to the interviewees in Itawit the contents of the interview. In total, the interviewees (face-to-face) of this study were narrowed down to only six (N=6), two of which were shamans (1 from Concepcion, Amulung, Cagayan, and 1 from Cattaran, Solana, Cagayan).

Results and Discussions

After the interviews, fieldnotes and transcripts of portions of the conversations were encoded, coded, and thematized for the different ritual stages or steps in the Itawit building construction process. Initially, it is thought that the most popular ritual *Patunak* is the first to be conducted, but based on the interviewees (N=5), the sequence for SC in the Itawit building ritual is (1) Arte → (2) Makergo → (3) Patunak; while the shaman interviewee from MC (N=1), the sequence for them is extended as (1) Arte → (2) Makergo → (3) Patunak → (4) Mattaliguni → (5) Aggunet. It is further discussed below.

First, the “Arte” is the art of divination for the Itawit that is based on their sacred book called “*Arte anna Planetarios*” – a handwritten document that includes omens, signs, good and bad days in each month, and the good and bad hours for each day. The Arte is not strictly used only for building rituals, but is also consulted in special occasions like marriages. A shaman (MC) added that his copy of the *Arte* book is a family heirloom. (See Figure 1) Only shamans and some privileged people can secure a copy of the *Arte* by hiring a copyist (or *mamalasig*), who manually copies the book, and sometimes pays with a full-grown pig or a large sum of money. It is believed that the purpose or origin of this practice is that the book was written as an interpretation of the ancient practice of reading signs, where the ancient Itawit

observed the stars, clouds, animals, and insects for luck and omens. Both shamans interviewed (as well as the elderly) agrees that before constructing a house, this process of referring to the Arte is the first stage of to ensure grace and health to the building's occupants.

Mararacay a fecha tac Cadabulan			
Enero	tiene	8	dias Malo 1° 2, 4, 5, 6, 11, 16, 30
Febrero	@	4	@ @ 1° 6, 7, 8
Marzo	@	4	@ @ 15 16 17 18
Abril	@	2	@ @ 7 15 @ @
Mayo	@	3	@ @ 7 17 20
Junio	@	1	@ @ 1°
Julio	@	2	@ @ 15 15
Agosto	@	2	@ @ " " 15 18
Septiembre	@	2	@ @ 16 18
Octubre	@	1	@ @ 15 17
Noviembre	@	2	@ @ 15 6 7
Diciembre	@	2	@ @ 15 6 7

Horas a maracay tac cada dia			
Domingo	Alas	2	del mañana Alas 12 del dia y la noche
Lunes	@	9	@ @ 7 del tarde y la 11 del noche
Martes	@	3	@ @ 6 @ @ y la 8 @ @
Miercoles	@	11	@ @ 12 y 2 @ @ y las 12 @ @
Jueves	@	4	@ @ 4 @ @ @ y las 7 @ @
Viernes	@	11	@ @ 3 del 2 dia y las 6 @ @
Sabado	@	9	@ @ 9 del mañana y las 5 del tarde

Figure 1. A portion of an Arte book of a shaman in Amulung (MC). Source: H.S. dela Cruz, with permission.

Figure 1 above is a portion of the book *Mararacay a fecha tac Cadabulan* (Bad days in every month) and *Horas a maracay tac cada dia* (Bad hours in each day). Photo source: Harold S. dela Cruz, 2022, with permission.

Second, the “Makergo” (contraction of “*Maki-ergo*”, literally “to talk” or “to appeal”) is done when choosing a location for the structure to be built, according to both shamans of Amulung (MC) and Solana (SC). This practice of petitioning is for the unseen elements residing inside the land known as *Kutu-Lusak*. A shaman places a glass of water on top of a flat framework above the ground, uttering a petition to the unseen elements, the shaman of Amulung (MC) says:

“Ikayat nu ballalaman nga mappatadag nak chaw nga sular, ikwak yaw danum; nu mari nu ikayat azazzanan nu gafu ya danum cha basu.” (“If you let me build unto this lot, I am leaving you this water. Reduce the water if you won’t let me build.”)

The glass will be left overnight, and the water shall be observed if it was reduced the following day. If the glass of water is intact, the unseen elements agreed with the petition.

The reduction of the glass content means the elements do not agree with the petition. Also, if the water inside the glass was defiled (*matapangan*), like any kind of insect died inside of the glass of water, the unseen elements do not agree with the petition (see also Figure 2). In some cases (like in Solana [SC]), three glasses of water are placed above the ground and laid in a triangular formation. At the center is a lump of salt and adjacent to one side of the triangular formation is a small wooden cross. A *balulang* (open-latticed basket) is turned upside-down covering the setup. If one or two of the three glasses of water were defiled, the position of the principal column of the house to be built will be moved away from the defiled glasses.

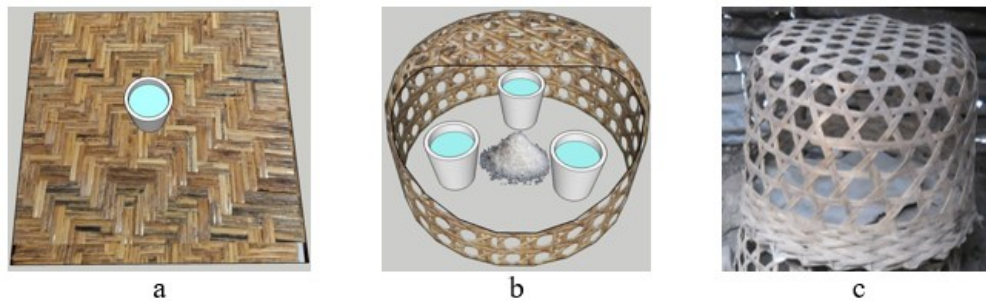


Figure 2. Elements for the Makergo ritual

Figure 2 above shows (a) a glass of water is placed at the center of a bamboo mat, (b) Cutaway view: three glasses of water in a triangular formation with a lump of salt at the center. All are then covered with a *balulang* (c). This is interpreted based on the account of the shaman in Cattaran, Solana, Cagayan, (c) photo of a *balulang* or corn basket.

Third, after identifying the good day and hour from *Arte* and ascertaining the good location of the building in the *Makergo* ritual, *Patunak* is ready to begin. The *Patunak* is a process wherein offerings as envisioned by the shaman are placed on the first and principal column of an Itawit building. In all Itawit towns, particularly the carpenters and shamans, they consistently say that the *Patunak* is located “*Hiraya ya Silawan*” (Southeast) of the building (Fig. 3). Based on oral accounts, it is said that this placement of the principal column in the Southeast portion of the building is based on the Itawit belief that avoids the spirit realm in the North and the bad omen facing the West, and destructive winds from the Southwest. The rising of the sun and moon from the East is regarded as a source of grace. Death is directly related to the North, as such, every deceased Itawit should be laid down with his head oriented at the North. One idiomatic expression about someone who died is uttered as: “*Nappatazzilog (nappa-hilod) igginan*” (“He went North”). The placement of the cornerstone in the Southeast, in this sense, evades the death-related North and therefore keeps away the building occupant from ill-fate. With this in mind, it answers why construction begins with two children who are not orphaned for the occupants’ families to be kept away from death.

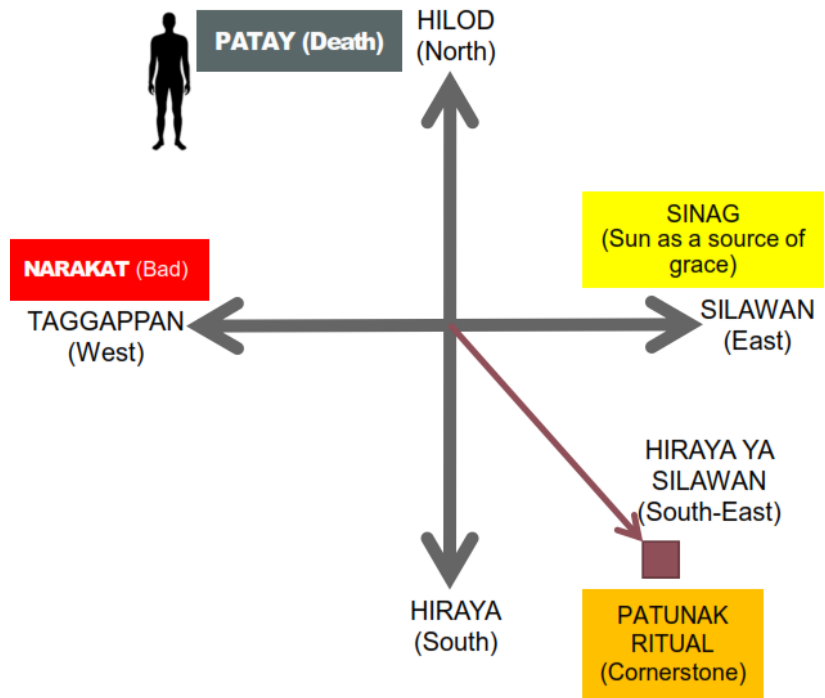


Figure 3. Location of the Patunak.

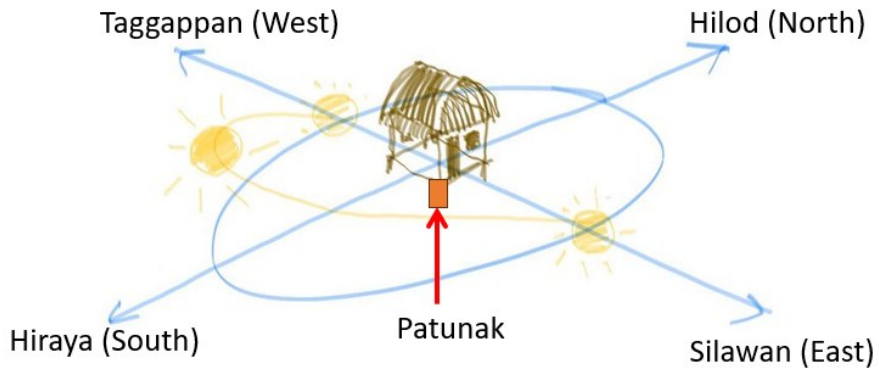


Figure 4. Placement of the Patunak based on cardinal directions.



Figure 5. *Patunak* ritual in Iguig (SC)

Figure 5 shows an example of a *Patunak* ritual in action: (a) A simple prayer is offered for the departed ones – relatives or ancestors, (b) Two unorphaned children (boy and girl) traditionally begin the work, (c) Offerings are given, (d) Offerings are placed in a niche of soil at the foundation. Presented above is the *Patunak* ritual conducted in barangay San Vicente, Iguig, Cagayan. Note that the ritual is still practiced even if the building materials being used are steel and concrete. Photo source: Aris Tuliao, with permission.

Elders still recall that the *Kutu-Lusak* tells the shaman what they ask for to be included in the *Tarug* (the offering itself), which explains the varying offerings in different Itawit communities. The chicken and the pig are the only animals accepted to be offered as part of the *Tarug*. Their meat, blood, and so on are placed on saucers or bowls as explained earlier. Any offering derived from an animal with a horn is unacceptable.



Figure 6. *Patunak* offering (*Tarug*).

Figure 6 shows the arrangement of the offering for the ritual. (a) The prepared elements of the *Tarug* are a *bannay* (dwarf cardamom) and a pot with rice cake; (b) after excavating the first foundation, a small “cave” or niche is done for the offering not to be disturbed during the pouring of concrete. This set of the offering was conducted in Catagamman, Tuguegarao City, Cagayan. Photo source: George Andal, with permission.

According to a practice of the *Tarug* in Amulung (MC), it is usually composed of one red bead (“*kiring*” in Itawit) with red string, one black bead with red string, one severed pig’s head, one pair of fragile saucers with rice cakes (one saucer as the container of the offering, and the other as the cover), one pair of fragile saucers with cooked chicken (one saucer as the container of the offering, and the other as the cover), one pair of fragile saucers with *maman* (betel nut) or tobacco produce (one saucer as the container of the offering, and the other as the cover), and one clay flask of wine. Additional pairs of clay pots (three pairs) were used for the salt, rice, and water. All of these should be arranged carefully in the *lalaggang* (cauldron) and another *lalaggang* is used as a cover. Some are composed of one bead with red string, three fragile saucers with bread and biscuits, and three small clay pots with cooked food and rice cakes. In other cases, it is composed of one bead with red string, fragile saucers with cooked meat, small clay pots with cooked food and rice cakes, and one clay flask of wine. A *Tarug* that is disturbed by humans is said to cause illness and sickness to the building occupant. Old people still recall the illness, insanity, and in some cases making a person fly or climb walls and roofs is said to be an effect of a disturbed *Tarug*. In these cases, a shaman is being called and will advise the preparation or replacement of the contents of the *Tarug*. A *Patunak* that does not include a *Tarug* will have its occupant ill in the future, hence the shaman will advise the preparation of a *Tarug*. A simple prayer is offered for the departed ancestors. The construction begins with two children (boy and girl) who are not orphaned, after which the construction (whether voluntary or hired) is continued until a convenient depth for the foundation is reached.

Patunak also requires the inclusion of other elements into the caved section of excavated pit such as the *bannay* (Dwarf cardamom), *nammurangngan* (Eleusine indica), *baggat* (rice), *asin* (salt), *kikkid* (cabibi shells), *daha-manuk* (chicken blood), and clam shells. The (1) *bannay* or Dwarf cardamom (literally “comfort”) is said to bring comfort to the building; (2) *nammurangngan* or Goose grass to ward off mosquitoes and wood-boring beetles/insects from the building; (3) *baggat* (rice) to make the family live by the day and never go hungry; (4) *asin* is as a symbol for the blessing and preservation of the family; (5) *kikkid* to make the building cozy; and (6) *daha-manuk* (chicken blood) is also offered sometimes directly to the soil or placed in a bowl-like vessel. The shaman will just cut the flesh of the chicken (usually at its toe) and the blood will be placed in the first column erected at the *Patunak*. The chicken will be freed into the open and be let alone.

Offering vessels can vary depending on the economic (or even social) status of the owner to offer the *Tarug*. For example, these can be (1) *lalaggang* or cauldrons without ears or handles, (2) clam shells, (3) kabibe shells, (4) clay saucers, (5) *losa* or ceramic saucers, and (6) coconut shell. The largest *Tarug* offering would fill the *lalaggang* with a pig's head, gin, glutinous rice inside plates, beads, and even silver, and more can be added depending on the suggestions of the shaman, hence a large vessel is covered with another *lalaggang* of the same size. This large *Tarug* is the one typically asked from rich owners. The same concept of containing *Tarug* offerings using bowl-like or bowl-shaped vessels and covering them with the same material as its container has evolved through time, depending on the capability of the owners and their socio-economic status.

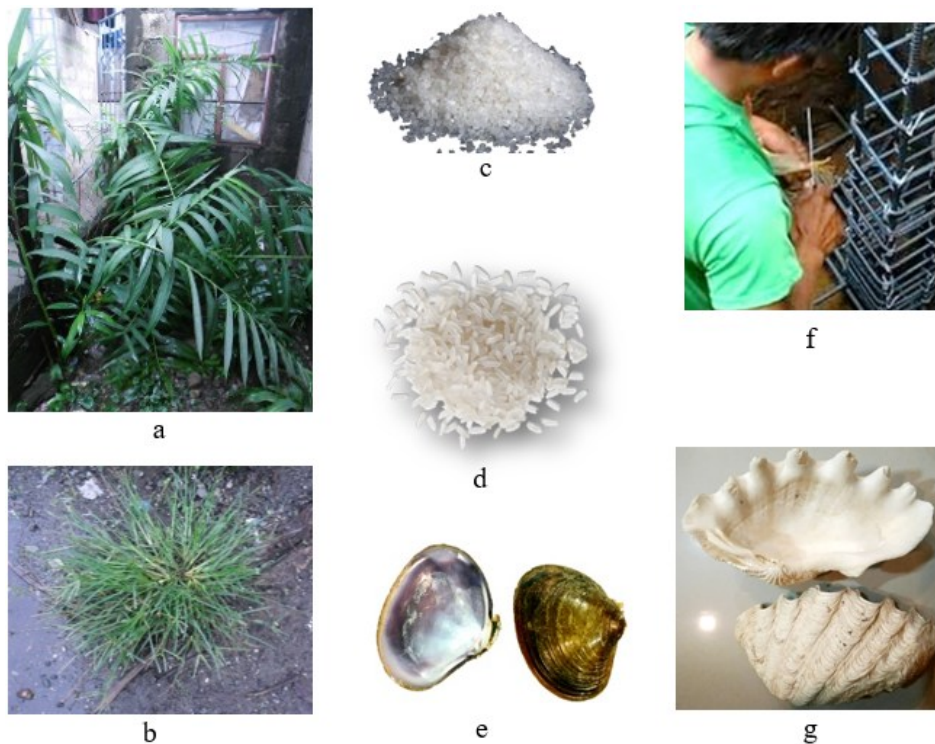


Figure 7. Patunak elements

Patunak elements: (a) *bannay* (Dwarf cardamom), (b) *nammurangngan* (goose grass), (c) *asin* (salt), (d) *baggat* (rice), (e) *kikkid* (kabibe shell), (f) *daha-manuk* (chicken blood), and (g) clam shells. Photo sources: (a), (b), (c), (d), (e), and (g) Michael T. Tabao; (f) Harold S. dela Cruz.

Omens and taboos are also considered in the Patunak ritual. For instance, the *lappang* (owl) – its singing or its landing in any part of the house is regarded as a bad omen, and the construction will be stopped. Also, the appearance of a *hiryan* (snake) during the ritual is considered a demon's sign and is regarded as a bad omen, in that the construction will be

stopped. (EN) Another point to be considered is the appearance of a *vullungun* (rainbow), which halts the ritual process. (IG) The ritual can't also proceed if the clouds block the sun, as the sun is the symbol of grace. (AM, IG) An injury of any of the workers during the *Patunak* is regarded as a bad omen. Offerings that are not allowed in the *Patunak* are animals with horns (eg. carabao, cow, goat, etc.), hence only allowing pigs or chicken to be offered.

Fourth is the *Mattaliguni* ritual. In this phase, two elderly men bring three things: salt, water, and rice. The night before the entire family will occupy the house, two elderly men sleep in the house to hear the house lizards' sound. When a house lizard's sound is heard along the window, the family should prepare simple food when moving inside the house. On the other hand, if they hear the lizard's sound at the door, the family should prepare plenty of food and delicacies to invite good grace.



Figure 8. An *alipat* (house lizard) in Tuguegarao City.

Finally, *Aggunet* is done in the early morning when all of the household items are brought inside the house. After that, they shed a chicken's blood and sprinkle it first on the *Patunak* column, then on the remaining columns, and all of the doors and windows. This was done as protection from evil spirits and to give good luck to the owner.

In the narrated process as described and shown, it can be said that there are two facets of the building ritual of the Itawit: (1) their respect for the unseen and (2) their deep understanding and connection with nature and its forces. Their respect for the unseen elements was shown by asking permission from the *Kutu-Lusak* before constructing a house, which is delineated in the signs and omens that animals show during the process as shown in the ritual *Makergo*. For example, the death of ants or insects even before the structure is built is a sign that they value life and that the future structure will harm the local habitat. This ancient practice of identifying sites shows that indigenous knowledge and understanding have been in place with the Itawit culture of constructing buildings. Their reverence (sometimes, fear) and understanding of nature and forces are shown by the indigenous understanding of the effects of celestial bodies through signs and forces of nature through their usage of the cardinal

directions for their buildings can be seen in the ritual *Patunak*, considering the correct placement of doors and windows for the health of its occupants. This ancient knowledge and application of the effects of the celestial bodies (the sun and the moon) and the cardinal directions (North, East, West, and South) are common with the Austronesian neighbors of the Philippines. (Fox, 2006) *Mattaliguni* again comprises natural elements: salt, water, and rice, where the night before the entire family will occupy the house, two elderly men sleep in the house to hear the house lizards' sound. Finally, *Aggunet* is when the household items are brought inside the house, in the early morning they shed a chicken's blood and sprinkle it first at the Patunak column, then the remaining columns, and all of the doors and windows. Realizing this deep connection makes this section aptly applies building construction rituals as a "socio-environmental sustainable" expression of the Itawit.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study identified Itawit's animistic belief and attachment with the unseen beings influencing their architecture as distinct from the modern Christian tradition. Spirituality (or animism which is common to Asian building traditions), in this discussion, has shown remarkable similarities with the Itawit of Middle and Southern Cagayan to the point that it is "systematized" and has its process throughout the pre-construction to the post-construction phase of any Itawit structure. This "religion" or the systematized process in the case of building construction tradition that is well observed throughout the Middle and Southern Cagayan has its place in their architecture, which makes it one of the strongest points of being a modifier in their building traditions. As discussed earlier, spirituality as a modifier of ethno-sustainable architecture constitutes several aspects: (1) the role of the shamans in each community, (2) building rituals, (3) omens, as well as (4) taboos, and in this respect, the Itawit's spirituality is focused on their relationship with the unseen elements of nature and with the departed kin or ancestors.

Mediums, whether in the role of the shaman or of the purpose of each offering, are attempts to link themselves with the natural world. As such, animism or their spirituality is significant to the idea of their sustainable architecture since it is an expression of (1) their respect for the unseen and (2) their deep understanding and connection with nature and its forces. Furthermore, rituals help protect and conserve several ecological constituents found in offerings such as enumerated in Fig. 6. This protection of important ingredients in their rituals goes even on nurturing the said species in their respective localities. Their respect for the unseen elements is evident in the ritual *Makergo* - asking permission from the *Kutu-lusak* before constructing a house, which was delineated in the signs and omens that animals show during the process of their attempts on connecting and reconciling themselves with these unseen personifications of elements around them. Even the death of ants or insects even

before the structure is built is a sign that they value life and that the future structure will harm the local habitat. This ancient practice of identifying sites shows that indigenous knowledge and understanding have been in place with the Itawit culture of constructing buildings.

There is also the danger of the gradual loss of the practice of building construction rituals of the Itawit due to age or worse, the death of carpenters, elders, and shamans, and the transferring of the knowledge to the younger generations is less frequent. This, actually, have been a challenge in identifying and even locating practitioners of animism among the Itawit community, hence the very limited number of respondents. It can be said that actions can be done to document, protect, and preserve these expressions of cultural sustainability by researchers, the government, and other cultural agencies.

Environmental sensitivity is an innate aspect and quality that has been recognized in Itawit architecture, hence being sustainable. As discussed, the attached spiritual implications of plants and elements for offerings are well memorized and transferred via oral tradition. Environmental sensitivity is a crucial aspect of the building tradition that plant growth and seasoning of materials are diligently noted to suit their needs individually and as a community.

This study also led to the conclusion that people, nature, and elemental beings have direct connections with each other, hence the gradual development of ritualistic steps in making sure that buildings are safe, comfortable, and conform with the community's tradition. Furthermore, the modifiers of their architecture (i.e., people, nature, and elemental beings) merit recognition, respect, and preservation of their beliefs, requirements, and wishes as reminders of their holistic relationship with each other. This recognition of their spirituality as an expression of ethno-sustainability, in effect, promotes cultural continuity and development to the new and child-bearing generations. In a wider scope, spirituality can encompass almost all elements of Itawit architecture, hence encouraged to maintain its vitality as an intrinsic portion of their culture.

Disclosure regarding conflicts of interest (COI)

The author of this paper has no conflict of interest whatsoever including any relevant financial or nonfinancial competing interests to report.

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