

TRANSFORMATIVE EMBODIMENT IN INDIGENOUS DANCES: TOWARDS A PERFORMATIVE SUSTAINABILITY MODEL

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Abstract:

The study proposes a novel Performative Sustainability Model based on the analysis of meanings of symbols present in the Bukidnon Dances using Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory. The findings show that the symbols common in Bukidnon Indigenous are the foot, hand, head, and body movements of the dancers; the distance between them and the materials they use such as white and red cloths, and spear. These symbols represent the movements of certain animals in Mt. Kitanglad and the cultural practices of as courtship, rituals, war, and weaving. Animals being mimicked in the indigenous dances are found in the air, the trees, the waters, and the land. The cultural practices imitated in the dance movements are usually performed in reverence to guardians of nature, utilization of natural resources, natural tendencies of choosing purity and peace. The dances' mimesis to the elements of nature signifies recognition and respect to the guardians of nature, and failing to perform these activities means the absence of guidance and providence. It means that the indigenous dances communicate the interdependence between animals and people on nature and transform attitude towards the environment. Based on this, a Performative Sustainability Model (PSM) is proposed. This research outcome offers a significant contribution to the area of environmental sustainability through art and culture as exemplified in indigenous Bukidnon dances. The originality of this work lies in its exploration of performative art in fostering environmental awareness and sustainability.

Keywords: indigenous, semiotics, dance, mimesis, sustainability

Introduction

Indigenous dances serve as symbolic communication which transform environmental behavior and reframe sustainability conversation. Meaningful gestures in indigenous dances make them a symbolic language tool for communication [Welch, 2019], irrespective of tribes, religion, tradition, and profession [Akas and Egenti, 2016]. They are effective in transmitting environmental messages and fostering positive environmental behaviors [Yemer, 2021]. To Purser [2016], they articulate meaning, specifically through the use of somatic precision in and through movement. By artistically representing the interdependent relationship between humans and nature, these dances heighten audience awareness of the need for mutual respect and sustainable coexistence with the environment.

The transformative potential of these dances lies in their ability to change viewers' perspectives and contemplate the consequences of environmental degradation and species extinction [Unsicker, 2016]. As a form of art, these dances influence social change by shaping ideas, attitudes, and calls to action. As a folk media, they shape public understanding and attitudes towards complex environmental challenges like deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change [Yemer 2021; Mago & Anand, 2023]; and promote awareness, engagement, and interaction, playing a critical role in linking health, environment, and development [Singh & Agrawal, 2023]. As a result, such performance inspires hope for a resilient future and sparks reflection on issues like climate change and the inheritance of the earth [Unsicker, 2016]. They will also encourage audiences to take concrete actions towards environmental preservation.

Indigenous dances have the potential of reframing sustainability conversations as they lighten the emotional burden of the environmental crises, replacing distress with hope and empowerment. To Mosko [2018] and Petaraki [2015], indigenous performance art can gently articulate the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, motivating at-risk communities to nurture and

sustain their environment. As such, indigenous dances serve as powerful media for conveying environmental messages, transformative behavior, and reframed sustainability initiatives. As a form of performative art, indigenous dances are foundational to sustainability transitions, offering new ways of imagining, contextualizing, and operationalizing sustainable practices [Pekkarenin, 2025] and [Moore et al, 2025]. This performative approach of utilizing a dynamic cultural practice of indigenous dancing offers pathways to engage communities meaningfully and foster sustainable environmental behaviors. Examining how sustainability is lived and practiced daily through indigenous dancing can deepen understanding of how individual and collective actions contribute to or hinder sustainability transitions [Corvellec, 2016, as cited in Hallin, 2020].

Despite their rich potential to convey environmental messages and promote sustainable practices, indigenous dances are often overlooked in mainstream environmental communication and development programs. In particular, there is a noticeable gap in research focusing on how indigenous dances-like those of Bukidnon people in the Philippines, serve as powerful conveyors of environmental awareness and sustainability values.

Given the urgent challenges posed by climate change and the risk of cultural loss among indigenous groups like the Bukidnon, research that explores the potential of indigenous dances in reframing environmental issues is both timely and necessary. Being an artistic embodiment of human and nature coexistence, indigenous dances can also be studied in order to formulate a sustainability performative model.

3. Research Aim

This paper aims to propose a performative sustainability model by interpreting the representation symbols used in Bukidnon indigenous dances to determine their environmental essence and sustainability implications. Objectively, this paper (a) determines the symbols used in the Bukidnon indigenous dances; (b) identifies the environmental themes portrayed in the meanings of symbols employed in Bukidnon indigenous dances; and (c) formulates a performative sustainability development model.

4. Research Methodology, Methods, and Materials

This qualitative research involves semiotic and interpretative analysis employing an in-depth analysis of relevant literature, including books, articles, and studies on indigenous dances and their association with the environment and its sustainability. The literature review aims to provide a theoretical foundation for the study and to identify the key concepts and themes related to indigenous dance and the environment, and implications for sustainability. The study also includes semi-structured interviews with expert Bukidnon dance masters to gain insights into their perspectives on the symbols and meanings of their indigenous dances concerning environmental concerns and sustainability. This study was conducted in Daraghuyan and Baleteon, Dalwangan, Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, Philippines on February 2024 to July 2025. Instruments used in gathering data were: audio interviews (semi-structured), field notes, camera, and audio/video recorder. Before data gathering, posting of the research, consultative meetings, and MOA signing activities with the tribal council and the barangay local government officials were conducted. The process was documented using a video recorder and observers' field notes. These audio data were transcribed and analyzed based on the objectives of the study. In analyzing the data gathered, the study employed Peirce's Semiotic Theory, specifically the categories of (1) representamen (icons, indexes, symbols) –the observable semiotic elements in the indigenous dances; (2) object-the cultural and historical elements associated with these signs; and (3) interpretant-the meaning inferred from the interaction between the representamen and the object. In this study, representamen or the symbols are determined through the description of the steps of the indigenous dances; the object refers to the elements by which the symbols are associated; and the interpretant refers to the meaning of the dance steps concerning the environment. The use of semiotic interpretation in understanding indigenous dances is a good way of understanding the communicative ability of dance movements, especially in unfolding the organized codes and systems of a group of people [Cenabre-Galindon, 2022]. This semiotic-

interpretive methodology is used as a framework for collecting and interpreting the indigenous dances of the Bukidnon. This approach is particularly suited to exploring the deep contextual understanding and interpretation of symbolic meanings and embodied environmental knowledge embedded in Bukidnon dances.

Participants

Participants were the Bukidnon dancers, including elders and members of tribal councils from *Daraghuyan* and *Baleteon*, Dalwangan, and Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, Philippines.

Data Collection

Data collection was done through immersive observation during dance performances and community activities. It also involved video recording of indigenous dances, providing visual data for detailed analysis of symbolic gestures and group dynamics, supporting interpretive analysis.

Sampling Procedure

Participants were selected through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was appropriate given the specialized and close-knit nature of the Bukidnon communities. This method facilitates access to key cultural knowledge holders and ensures trust and rapport within indigenous contexts.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using semiotic-interpretative content analysis, allowing identification of indigenous dance symbolism, environmental values, and sustainability dynamics. This iterative process involved coding dance steps and visual data, followed by interpretive synthesis grounded in participants' perspectives [Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017]. Reflexivity was maintained throughout to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and minimize bias (Berger, 2015). The performative sustainability model was formulated based on the analysis of the interpretants or the symbols and meanings that highlight environmental concerns and sustainability.

Ethical Considerations and Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC)

Ethical rigor was ensured through adherence to FPIC principles, respecting indigenous sovereignty, and cultural protocols. The tripartite Memoranda of Agreement (MOA) between the community, the proponents, and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) formalized community consent. Additional agreements with Barangay officials further reinforced local governance endorsement. Institutional ethical clearance was obtained from the CMU Ethics and Review Committee, ensuring compliance with research ethics standards.

Research Workflow Diagram

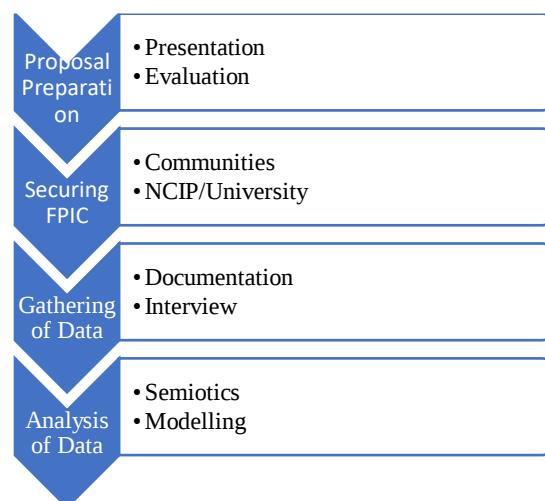


Fig. 1. Schematic Diagram of the Study

5. Results

This paper aims to propose a performative sustainability model using the meanings of symbols used in Bukidnon dances. Objectively, this paper (a) determines the symbols used in the Bukidnon indigenous dances; (b) identifies the meaning of symbols portrayed in Bukidnon indigenous dances; and (c) formulates a performative sustainability model.

A. Bukidnon Dances

The Bukidnon indigenous dances are the *Binanog* (Eagle) Dance, *Binak-bak* (Frog) Dance, and *Inamo* (Monkey) Dance. Other dances emulate human activities like the *Dugso* (worship) Dance, Courtship Dance, *SedSed* (straw) Dance, and *Saut* (War) Dance. All of these are performed with the accompaniment of the drum (*tambul*). This drum is made from a log of wood whose length approximately matches its diameter. It is covered with skin at both ends, but as it is standing on the ground on one drumhead, only one skin is beaten with two sticks. The changes of the beats produced by the drum determine the change of the movement, but there is no specific count per step (Saway et al., 2017b).

During the performance of the *Binanog* (Eagle) dance, performers slowly mince forward while swaying/waving both hands upward like gliding (one hand is raised a bit higher than the other alternately). Both hands are circled inward, and placing right foot is placed in front. Waists are bent, and eyes are directed towards the ground. This is followed by a half turn to the left with the left foot forward while both hands remain swaying upwards, then downwards (left hand is raised a bit higher than the right alternately). The mincing steps and the bending movement of the body follow the direction of the lower hand, just like a bird gliding in different directions when flying. Mincing steps continue towards the right while swaying both hands with open palms, waving side-wards alternately from left to right; feet moving from the right to the left in a circling motion. Then hands are swayed upwards the downwards while spreading them like wings and moving backwards. A full turn to the left follows while the body remains bent, and both hands still swaying as if flying like a bird. Exit is performed by fast mincing steps backwards to the back while the hands still swayed alternately from left to right.

Like the *Binanog* (Eagle) Dance, the *Binakbak* (Frog) and *Inamu* (Monkey) dances also imitate the movement of named animals while hunting for food. *Binakbak* dancers, positioned as a frog, sit with both legs spread and both hands placed between. Putting their weights on their hands, they jump in different directions along with the rhythmic beat of the drum. They jump as if catching mosquitoes in the air and bend to drink water in the river. This movement is repeated until the drum beats signal the end of the dancers' exit. This is also evident in the *Inamu* (Monkey) Dance, but instead of the water, the dancers act like monkeys jumping from one tree to the other. They also scratch their heads and act like eating something. They jump in one direction at one time and in the opposite direction at some other time in the dance. They also exit when the drum stops its beats to signal the end of the dance.

In *Dugso* (Worship) Dance, women form in circle holding hands closer to their shoulders. As they look down, their left foot are pointed forward alternately with the right as they move to the right. This is repeated several times to the right until they reach the full circle. The same steps are done to the left until they reach the full circle. The dance ends with the drum signals through the ending rhythmic beats. This dance is performed during community rituals. Their rituals embody their reverence for the *Magbabaya* (God) and the guardians of nature (spirit guardians) through thanksgiving and supplication for the blessings they have received, for the protection they gained, and for their healthy minds and bodies. Most of the rituals are spearheaded by a Tribal Chieftain who is gifted with the ability to summon guardian spirits to partake in the offerings and hear the pleas of the communities.

Inagung (Courtship) dance is performed by three dancers (usually a man and two women). It starts with the woman mincing towards a man while waving a red cloth to her right and left shoulder

alternately. The man is also mincing with his right hand raised to his right, then left, while facing the opposite direction each time. Their bodies are bent while mincing. Both turned to face each other (the man raised his hands sideways at shoulder level). Another dancer (still a woman) joins them. Like the first woman, she is waving a cloth, but it is colored white. She also minces and waves her cloth sideways alternately to the left and right. All dancers are moving in a circle following the same steps of mincing and waving hands alternately to the left and right. The second woman finds a chance to place her white cloth on the man's shoulders. When done, she needs to block the man from the other dancer who is also finding the chance to remove the white cloth and place her red cloth on the man's shoulder. Later in the dance, the first woman managed to remove the white cloth and replace it with her red cloth. But the second dancer /woman also removes it and places her white cloth on the man's shoulder. She then threw it away and held the man's hands, and they exited the dance floor.

In the *Sedsed* (Straw) Dance, the dancers, usually women, start with short mincing steps alternately performed with skipping in between while moving forward. While hands are lifted and moved in a circular motion mimicking the act of harvesting *Sedsed* (plant straws for weaving), mincing is performed in place. This step is repeated twice. Their hands change position as if putting the gathered *sedsed* to the ground and tying them in bundles. This step is repeated twice. Mincing commences again while eyes are lifted upwards and sideways as if looking for another *sedsed* to harvest. This step is repeated twice. Harvesting actions begin again while mincing. After all straws are gathered, dancers shout the word "*Daraghuyan*", the name of the cultural community. The next step also involves mincing while hands are mimicking the act of peeling the *sedsed*, then the weaving action follows. The dance ends with the retreating steps of the dancers while acting as if they are bringing the woven basket made of *sedges* with them.

The *Saut* (War Dance) imitates the fights between the *baganis* (warriors) of the conflicting tribes. The use of war implements like *bangkaw* (spears) with *pigkulu-kulu ha manggad* (waded cloth) usually colored red and white attached to its upper end and a *Kalasag* (war shield). This dance is performed either solo or in pairs. The dancers' hands are raised upwards, accompanied by a loud *kulahi* (shout). They perform forward and backward leaps before they strike by shouting and banging their shields, which produces a loud sound.

B. Symbols and Meanings in Bukidnon Dance

The Bukidnon Dances contained symbols and meanings that portray the day-to-day movement of animals and human beings. The Bukidnon indigenous dances are mimetic, in which dance steps symbolize animals' life cycles, daily plights, nurturing the young, and the food gathering techniques like the *Binanog* (Eagle) Dance, *Binakbak* (Frog) Dance, and *Inamo* (Monkey) Dance. Other dances emulate human activities like the *Dugso* (worship) Dance, Courtship Dance, *SedSed* (straw) Dance, and *Saut* (War) Dance. Animals and birds are food sources among the *Bukidnons*. The *Bukidnons*' knowledge of the medicinal and food potential of plants and animals is revealed to them by nature guardian spirits [Saway et al., 2017].

The gestures in *Binanog* dance, in the form of dance steps, are symbols that symbolically convey the different movements of the eagle. The beginning of the dance is where the performer slowly minces forward while waving both hands sideways and upward signifies that the eagle is ready to fly. When the dancer minces a bit faster while waving hands alternately and turning left, then right, it indicates the eagle is gliding in different directions. The circling of the dancer's hands inward, while placing her right foot forward, means that the eagle is flying fast, as if catching prey. Bending the dancer's waist while directing her eyes towards the ground is an indication that the bird is about to pick its prey. The dancer's half turn to the left with the left foot forward, while both hands swaying upwards, then downwards, means that the bird is now flying back to its nest. The next slow mincing steps and the bending movement of the dancer's body while alternately lowering hands mean that the bird is feeding its young. The dancer's full turn to the left while the body remains bent, and both hands still swaying, signals that the feeding is already done. These steps are repeated with the accompaniment of the drum. The changes in the drum beats are a signal of the changes in the steps

or position of the dancers, which also means the changes in the movement of the eagle. Exit is performed by fast mincing steps towards the back side of the dancing space.



Fig. 2. *Binanog* (Eagle) Dance

Like the *Binanog* (Eagle) Dance, the *Binakbak* (Frog) and *Inamu* (Monkey) dances also imitate the movement of the said animals while hunting for food. The *Binakbak* dance, performed by barefoot boys, showcases the features of a *Bak-bak* (frog) as seen in nearby creeks, rivers, and springs. The dance steps where dancers seem to be sitting with both legs spread and both hands placed between. The dance also portrays their movement of jumping in different directions to catch their prey like mosquitoes and bending to drink water.

The *Inamu* (Monkey) Dance is also an imitation of the activities of the *Amu* (monkey) as



Figure 3. *Binakbak* (Frog) Dance

they jump from one tree to the other, scratch their heads, act like eating, look, and jump in different directions when looking for food. Monkeys are eaten by the *Bukidnons* to cure their body aches [Saway et al., 2017a].



Figure 4. *Inamu* (Monkey) Dance

Dugso (Worship) dance is an imitation of the dance rituals the *Bukidnons* perform every time they gather and implore for guidance, forgiveness, protection, and good health. Through these rituals, they also show thanksgiving for the blessings they have received, for the protection they gained, and for the healthy minds and bodies. The circle formation while dancers hold hands and raise them closer

to their shoulders and their synchronized movement in *Dugso* (Worship) Dance, shows their unity and oneness in summoning, called *Pandalawit* (act of calling nature spirit), the presence of the *Magbabaya* and the *Alambitun* (nature spirits) like the *Tumanud* (nature guardian spirits) [Saway, et al., 2017a]. Their deep respect and reverence are shown when they look down while dancing. Their unwavering faith and reassurance that they can remain steadfast as long as they are one in prayer and supplication is shown by their steady clasp of hands until the end of the dance.

Inagung (Courtship) dance symbolizes the man's responsibility to choose the right partner before marriage. The red and white cloth carried by two women dancers represents their characteristics. The man's shoulders, where these clothes are placed by women dancers, show that he is the one responsible of choosing between



Figure 5. *Dugso* (Worship) Dance

them. It is shown in the dance that the first woman dancer puts her red cloth first, and when the other dancer comes, she finds the chance to replace it with her white cloth. The man moves along with the woman whose cloth is on his shoulder, while the other looks for a chance to steal and place her cloth on the man's shoulders. All dancers bent their waists, which is an indication of respect to each other. As the dance progresses, the two women alternately place their respective cloths, but toward the end of the dance, the white cloth stays with the man, and the two exit together.



Figure 6. *Inagung* (Courtship) Dance

In the *Sedsed* (Weaving) Dance, the dancers mimic the harvesting, gathering, and weaving of the weaving materials used for making baskets, ties, fishtraps, winnowing baskets, and others. Among these materials are many kinds of *Balagen* (vines), rattan, or bamboo [Saway et al, 2017a]. The women's short mincing steps alternately performed with skipping and looking upward in between while moving forward indicate that they are walking towards the forests to look for weaving materials. When hands are lifted and moved in a circular motion, it mimics the act of harvesting and when they lower their hands, they are now placing the harvested weaving materials on the ground for tying. The continued mincing while eyes are lifted upwards and sideways shows that they kept looking for other materials to harvest. When they shout *Daraghuyan*, it is a signal that they are ready to do the peeling of the outer skin of the plant, then weave it. This is performed with the continued mincing steps until they turn backwards and exit as if they are ready to bring their baskets home.



Figure 7. *Sedsed* (Weaving) Dance

The *Saut* (War Dance) imitates the fights between the *baganis* (warriors) of the conflicting tribes. The use of war implements like *bangkaw* (spears) with *pigkulu-kulu ha manggad* (waded cloth) usually colored red and white, attached to its upper end and a *Kalasag* (war shield). This dance is performed either solo or in pairs. All of these war implements signify material protection that would save them from harm. The movement of hands that are raised upwards, accompanied by a loud *kulahi* (shout), signifies bravery and would ignite either anger or fear among the opponents. The forward and backward leaps show their strategic positioning while preparing to attack or devise a strategy to outsmart the opponents. Most of the fights between these tribes are caused by land boundary disputes or customary law violations, such as marrying a woman without the formal tribal marriage or killing another tribe's members. It can be noted that land for them needs to be protected, and they even declare war if their rights to this land are violated. Their land is their source of livelihood, food, medicine, and a place for worship. Sacred areas for rituals are well-protected, as well as the vegetation around.



Figure 8. *Saut* (War) Dance

C. Performative Sustainability Model

The study introduces the Performative Sustainability Model (PSM), built on the idea that mimetic dances—like those from Bukidnon—do more than entertain. They act as powerful symbols, transforming how people talk and think about sustainability. These dances do not just mimic nature; they tell stories about human connection to the environment, stirring empathy and shifting attitudes, behaviors, and values toward ecological awareness. When dancers embody the flight of an eagle or the rhythms of the forest, they're not just performing; they're communicating a deep respect for nature and encouraging audiences to care and act.

PSM rests on the belief that art—especially indigenous performance—can spark real change. Through movement and ritual, these dances become a living message about the importance of environmental stewardship. The model draws from different fields: performance studies, ecology,

culture, and the arts. It treats art as more than a vehicle for beauty or tradition—here, it's a tool for activism, a medium to inspire people to protect the planet.

Central to PSM are a few big ideas. First, transformative media: these dances advocate for the environment in a way that facts and figures rarely can. Watching a Bukidnon dancer mimic the plight of an eagle or the loss of a forest, people start to see the world differently. The performance taps into emotion, making viewers feel the urgency of climate change and biodiversity loss. It's that emotional spark that moves people, not just to think, but to act—whether that means refusing to hunt endangered birds, choosing sustainable foods, or protecting the forests that shelter so many species.

These performances do something else, too: they keep culture and environmental action tightly linked. Rituals before the dance, like offering thanks to the spirits of Mount Kitanglad, remind everyone that nature isn't just a backdrop—it's sacred. This cycle of ceremony, dance, and action strengthens community identity and encourages ongoing care for the land.

PSM also reframes how environmental campaigns reach people. Instead of relying on lectures or pamphlets, Bukidnon dances use art to tell their story. The message lands softly but sticks—audiences, pulled in by music and movement, end up absorbing messages about climate change and conservation almost without realizing it. The performances avoid overwhelming audiences with doom and gloom. Instead, they offer hope and highlight ways everyone can help, big or small. This artistic approach brings in more people, especially those who might tune out a standard environmental campaign.

In short, PSM argues that performative arts can do what data and policy sometimes cannot—they touch hearts, build empathy, and motivate real, lasting change for the environment.

A real holistic approach

This sustainability model isn't just about ticking boxes — it pulls everything together through policy and a strong link between education and conservation. For real change, we need more than rules. Picture this: before anyone gets permission to log, officials join in Bukidnon dances like the Binanog. It's not just a ceremony — they literally feel what it means to protect nature. Schools can take this further. Imagine students learning about ecoliteracy by actually analyzing dance movements to figure out how many eagles (or other animals) the land can support. And science doesn't have to be dry — students could explain aerodynamics by breaking down Binanog choreography. Suddenly, sustainability isn't just a word; it's something you move through and understand with your whole body and mind.

Taking risks seriously — and actually managing them

Of course, when you bring tradition and culture into the spotlight, there's a risk people will just turn it into another show for tourists, stripping away the meaning. So, this model sets up some guardrails. Only certified practitioners, trained in species biology, can perform Binanog dances. Communities also get benefit-sharing contracts, meaning some of the tourism money goes straight into things like forest patrols. There's another challenge, too: when young people move away, traditional knowledge can fade. Here's one way to keep it alive — gamified apprenticeships on mobile apps. Kids can earn badges for mastering animal mimicry routines, keeping traditions fresh and fun. If all this works as planned, you get stronger stewardship, healthier ecosystems, and communities that are ready for whatever comes next.

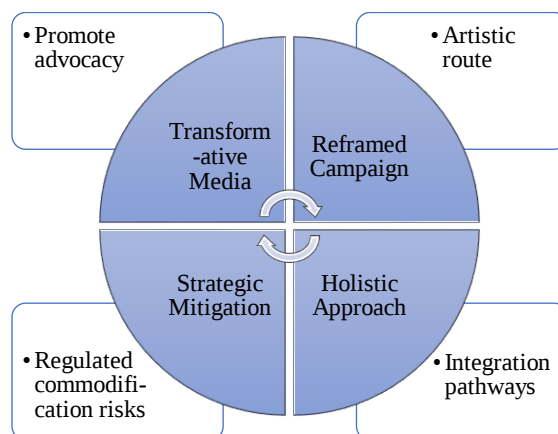


Figure 9. Performative Sustainability Model(PSM)

6. Discussion

Most of the Bukidnon Dances are mimetic of nature, specifically movements of the animals (eagle (*Binanog*), frog (*Binakbak*), monkey (*inamu*). These dance steps, specifically the hand, feet, head, and body movements of the dancers, portray animals' life cycles, daily plights, nurturing the young, and food-gathering techniques. Its performance in different rituals highlights the importance of preserving the cultural integrity of the dance and the role of community leaders in promoting cultural awareness and preservation. In addition to being sources of food and medicine, some of these animals are believed to be given by guardians and spirits to give warnings related to nature that are unknown to humans [Saway, 2017a]. *Bak-bak*, for instance, can be used as medicine and food. Being edible, breastfeeding mothers eat them for abundant milk and use them as *talimughat* (a cure for relapse, especially after giving birth [Saway, 2017a]. The *Binanog* (eagle) dance, for example, is a dance that mimics the *Banug* or *Agila* (eagle), considered a sacred bird among the *Bukidnons*. These birds are believed to carry objects as big or heavy as a child [Saway, 2017a]. This involves mincing forward with 8 counts accompanied by a fast beating of the drum (Celeste, 2020).

In addition to dances which portray animal movements, some *Bukidnon* dances also portray the community's cultural activities like the War Dance, *Dugso* (worship dance), *Inagung* (courtship dance), *Sedsed* (Straw Dance), and *Saut* (War Dance). These dances portray how warriors participate in wars, perform ritualistic dance, courtship, and harvesting practices. To Sachs [in Blanariu, 2013], these are figurative dances which imitate animal postures and agricultural labor.

This mimicry shows that their dances are imitations of nature, and their daily activities are concerned with nature. Performance of this sort is a portrayal of the value these communities have for the animals and the close relationship that they have with them. Their daily encounters have taught the communities master how these animals reproduce, nurture their young, and gather food. Performed at the Binanog Festival in Lambunao, Bukidnon, the *Binanog dance* attempts to replicate the *banog* or hawk in Cebuano. According to legends, Lambunaonons' forefathers, who lived in the mountains noticed that hawks were taking the chickens. They followed the raptors in the forests and became fascinated by the flight patterns of male hawks chasing the female hawks (Alcantara, 2023).

Their dances also manifest their beliefs and practices, and reverence for nature. For example, *Dugso*, worship dance, is an imitation of paying respect to the guardians of nature, and for supplication for protection and forgiveness. The *sedsed* (straw dance) also shows the process of harvesting and weaving the *sedsed* (straws) to make mats, baskets, and others. This means that they depend on nature for their livelihood. The act of selecting *sedsed* to harvest is a manifestation that they choose the mature plants in weaving, leaving the young plants to grow in time and will be readily available when they need to use them for weaving. The war dance imitates the fights between *baganis* (warriors) of conflicting tribes who are in conflict due to disputes pertaining to the boundary and violation of customary laws, like killing a member of the tribe. Being treated as a way of honoring

the spirits of nature and preserving the cultural heritage and traditions of the Bukidnon people, these dances serve as an artistic expression that reflects their deep connection with nature and their environment (Chartrand, 2013).

This means that there is a close relationship between these communities and their natural environment. Their consciousness and worldview are shaped by their environment, and they are fully aware that protecting and preserving them also means their survival. As such, these communities and nature are one in establishing resource sustainability through nature. In addition, the sustainability of these natural habitats of fauna and flora in the mountainous areas of Dalwangan, Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, will also ensure their protection from natural calamities like floods and typhoons.

These findings are consistent with related literature and studies on the importance of preserving cultural heritage and traditions, particularly in the context of indigenous communities [Tocmo, 2025; Kumar et al., 2015]. The mimetic feature of the *Bukidnon* Dances is also consistent with studies on the basic features of indigenous dances, specifically in Carol-an [Salvallon, 2025; Brandeis, 2008], and the importance of mimicry in indigenous cultures [Gabawa, 2018].

The Bukidnon dances' gestures, which Welch (2019, in Santana, 2024) called "embodied symbolic communications," cut across the barrier of language and culture, which provided a reflective mirror for the indigenes to change from bad to good. According to Akas and Egenti [2016], these indigenous performance serves as a watchdog. The mimetic empathy in *Bukidnon* Dance "says" things that indigenous people found hard to express in words (Purser, 2016); creates and communicates meaning and truth through the enactive metaphors expressed in movement (Welch, 2019, in Santana, 2024). Thus, mimetic empathy generation portrayed in these dances generates ecological empathy through the interplay of performance elements and implied ecological impacts. For instance, the imitation of the eagle's wing kinematics reinforces the species' keystone role in forest ecosystems; the flight path dance choreography maps avian migratory corridors for habitat protection; and the dancers' synchronization models ecosystem interdependence through collective movement.

This finding also relates to Yemer's (2021) findings that the Guna community has unique and indigenous folk media used as a source of entertainment, information, and education. Their folk music, songs, dances, campfire storytelling, traditional motifs, fairs, festivals, and folk poems were used as operative ecology preservation in the form of Environmental Communication (EC).

Singh and Agrawal (2023) have similar findings when they found that traditional folk media played a great role in sustainable development, as they communicate among the Bodo community in India on matters relating to sociocultural and political matters.

Based on these findings, a Performative Sustainability Model (PSM) is proposed. This model is grounded on the potentiality of the art, specifically the Bukidnon Dances, to transform attitude towards the environment, reframe environmental campaigns, provide a holistic approach for sustainability, and offer strategic mitigation strategies.

These indigenous dances are transformative because the wide reach of this performance art influences audiences' attitudes towards nature, environment, and sustainability. They are a constant reminder to take care of the habitats of animals and birds and the sacred areas for rituals in order to show reverence to the guardians of nature and appease other guardian spirits whom they might have offended. These cultural practices will ensure the continuous protection of the environment and the continuous provision of nature for the communities, thus ensuring the survival of nature and man. Performance of the *Bukidnon* Dances is the indigenous peoples' means of reframing the sustainability conversation so that it reaches a broader audience and targets more lasting, cultural solutions to environmental issues (Mosco, 2018), which addresses issues that are connected to the ecosphere and the environment (Petaraki, 2015).

Relatedly, Farah (2023) highlighted the potentially effective role of the performing arts in redirecting behavior and establishing social norms, and serving as catalysts for sustainable development in the stage of reflexive modernity. As such, an applied contemporary model of the

performing arts for sustainability was proposed to acknowledge the artistic interventions in society that can work to change social structures.

In addition to their functions as a transformative media to promote environmental advocacy and a reframed environmental campaign, the Bukidnon dances also provide a holistic approach to the integration of art into sustainability conversations, as these involve different pathways, such as policies and academic programs, to strengthen and sustain the environmental programs through art.

Countermeasures can be designed to limit the commodification risks of embedding cultural practices in environmental protection and sustainability initiatives. Policy restrictions in limiting research on endangered species of flora and fauna, and prohibitions of visits to sacred areas in the mountains, may be proposed to the communities and the LGUs. Revenues on eco-tourism activities that may include indigenous dance performances may be shared with the communities for the propagation of medicinal plants and herbs, and food sources of animals and birds. Other sustainability measures may include the documentation of indigenous dances through videos can be done for the young generation.

Thus, Bukidnon dances are not only cultural artifacts but a living ecological infrastructure. By harnessing the embodied power of performance—from the *Binanog's* wing kinematics to conflict-resolution rituals—communities cultivate stewardship ethics that are both culturally grounded and adaptively resilient. Future applications require tripartite collaboration with Anthropologists, in mapping performative archetypes across biocultural regions; Ecologists, in quantifying dance-informed conservation outcomes (e.g., correlating ritual frequency with species recovery rates); and Policy architects, in codifying narrative-based governance models.

7. Conclusion

Bukidnon dances are a form of performative art that has symbols and meanings that communicate environmental concerns and sustainability initiatives. Hand movements, footsteps, accessories, and implements used in the dances are symbols that signify movements of animals and birds such as the eagle, monkey, and frog. They also portray cultural practices related to rituals, courtship, war, and weaving activities. Being mimetic, these dances show how animals hunt for food and nurture their young while they thrive in the forests, mountains, and land and water forms. Similarly, the dances on cultural practices also connect to the preservation, protection, and responsible stewardship of sacred areas and vegetation. These dances show reveals *Bukidnon's* recognition of the interdependency of man and nature and that their survival depends on each other.

This finding leads to the proposed Performative Sustainability Model, which is guided by the potentiality of performative art like the Bukidnon dances to symbolically communicate environmental concerns and ignite environmental awareness and action, reframe sustainability conversations, provide holistic or integrated sustainability pathways, and offer strategic mitigation initiatives.

As such, culture becomes the foundation of sustainability. Arts and creative expressions, like Bukidnon dances, play a role in encouraging and driving sustainable transitions, being transformative, reframed, holistic, and strategic.

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