

# REVISITING THE TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF THE ITAWIS ETHNIC FAMILIES OF ISABELA, PHILIPPINES

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## Abstract

*The Itawis is one of the indigenous groups of Isabela, Philippines, along with the Ybanags, Yogads, and Gaddangs. In Cagayan Valley, two groups of Itawis are found: one from the Province of Cagayan and the other, from Echague, Isabela. This study was conducted to determine what is left of the traditional practices of the indigenous group "Itawis" of Echague, Isabela, Philippines that are gradually vanishing due to the modern way of living or due to acculturation. The study used the descriptive research method. The researchers, who belong to the minorities themselves, gathered the data of the study through immersion with the living cultural masters and through participation in the rituals. Other data were gathered through interview with the remaining members of the minority group. The rituals were documented, noted, and were explained by the elders. Frequency and percentages were used. The findings showed that the Itawis women still observe some practices in giving birth, in caring and feeding the baby such as "passa", "tappe-tappet", "baraga", "iyaw", "alintugurayan". The "botiso and lallay" in baptism, the "passerbi" in courtship, the "intrega" and "pamonek" in marriage and "patunak" in building a house were some of the identified rituals still practiced by the Itawis.*

**Keywords:** Social Science, culture, traditions, indigenous people, descriptive design

## I. INTRODUCTION

Culture is a set of unique spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group. It encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, values systems, traditions and beliefs (UNESCO, 2001). Culture gives people a connection to certain social values, beliefs, religions and customs. Cultural heritage provides an automatic sense of unity and belonging within a group to better understand their previous generations and the history of where they

come from. The Philippines is an archipelago endowed with rich natural resources, a rich history, diverse cultures, and many ethno-linguistic groups. The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) identifies 95 distinct tribes, which include the Islamic or Muslim groups in 14 regions of the country with an estimated population between 12-15 million members of the total population in 1995. The Office of Northern Cultural Communities (ONCC) and Office of Southern Cultural Communities (OSCC) also reported that the Indigenous Peoples' populace is composed of 110 ethno

linguistic groups with a total population of 11,320,476 from Regions 1 to 13.

Indigenous peoples' communities can be found in the interiors of Luzon, Mindanao, and some islands of Visayas. They continued to live in their isolated, self-sufficient communities, at the time when most lowland communities had already been integrated into a single colony under Spain in the 1700s and 1800s. They were able to preserve the culture and traditions of their tribe as reflected in their cooperative work exchanges, their communal rituals, their songs, dances, and folklore.

But with the long years of colonial rule in the Philippines and the invasion of migrants into indigenous peoples' territories, many influences have been introduced that gradually changed the indigenous way of life. Indigenous communities at present are still characterized by these phenomena but are definitely no longer in their pure and natural state, showing varying degrees of influence from outside culture. Due to this, the world under the auspices of UNESCO is now working towards the preservation and protection of cultural heritage. This is evident in Article 11 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which stipulates that, Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs including the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures. Article 34 also states that, Indigenous peoples have the right to promote, develop and maintain their institutional structures and their distinctive customs, spirituality, traditions, procedures, practices and, in the cases where they exist, juridical systems or customs, in accordance with international human rights standards (UNDRP, 2006).

Moreover, Art. 2, Sec. 22 of the Philippine Constitution also recognizes and promotes the rights of indigenous cultural communities within the framework of national unity and development. Art. XIV,

Sec. 17 of the Philippine Constitution also provides that, the State shall recognize, respect, and protect the rights of indigenous cultural communities to preserve and develop their cultures, traditions, and institutions. It shall consider these rights in the formulation of national plans and policies. *[Philippine Constitution, 1987]*

Hence, the Indigenous People's Rights Act of 1997 (RA No. 8371) was formulated to recognize, protect and promote the rights of indigenous people, creating a national commission of indigenous people, establishing implementing mechanisms, appropriating funds, therefore, and for other purposes. Sec. 29 further stipulates that the State shall respect, recognize and protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples to maintain and protect their culture, traditions and institutions. It shall also consider these rights in the formulation and application of national plans and policies *(NCIP, 1998.)* Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines refer to a group of people or homogenous societies recognized by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as organized communities on communally bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed and utilized such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have, through resistance to political, social and cultural inroads of colonization, non-indigenous religions and cultures, become historically differentiated from the majority of the Filipinos. *(NCIP, 1998.)*

In Region 2, the province of Isabela is inhabited by several lowland Indigenous groups. The Itawes, being one of the recognized Indigenous groups of Region 2 along with Ybanags, Yogads, Ilocanos, and Gaddangs, are known to be a group of people who had been sharing customs, language, and others. Ethnologists distinguish Itawis with its own dialect and

characteristics form of shelter, clothing, art, social structure, and other attributes. All groups of Itawis are agricultural and depend mainly on their crop for subsistence. They share belief relating to sacred trees and mountains and to animal sacrifice for reading omens.

Originally, the Itawis tribe is found in the province of Cagayan, where they usually settle on river banks. However, due to migration, two groups of Itawis are known in Cagayan Valley; one is the Itawis group of the Province of Cagayan and the other from Isabela, particularly in Echague, which is the focus of the study. Two barangays were identified to be inhabited by Itawis in Echague and these are Barangays Tuguegarao and Salay.

Today, one could hardly identify tribes and people's group anymore due to the increase of inter-tribe marriages. Some of their practices had been consistently confronted by modernization and development, which seriously endanger their traditional cultures or would cause its total obliteration. As stated by Javier (1996), indigenous societies in various parts of the country today are consistently confronted with the battering impact of modernization and development, which are seriously endangering their natural environments and rapidly eroding their traditional cultures. Cultures then are in danger of extinction if nothing is done to avert their gradual death. The need to understand and preserve these vanishing genuine ethnic culture and faith is not only indispensable but also imperative. It is just a matter of time that the indigenous practices disappears or are transformed completely, thus, there appears to be an urgent need to document these systems or practices.

### 1.1. *Locale of the Study*

Echague is a town known during the Spanish time as "CAMARAG", adopted from the name of a big tree common in the place. Camarag, was founded in 1752 and

ecclesiastically placed under the patronage of St. Joseph on May 12, 1753 (Echague,2013). Echague, the "QUEEN TOWN OF THE SOUTH" is located at the Southern portion of Isabela some 60 km away from Ilagan, the capital town. It is bounded on the north by the municipality of San Isidro, Alicia, Angadanan and San Guillermo, on the east by the municipalities of Dinapigue; on the south by the municipality of Jones, San Agustin; on the west by the municipality of Santiago City (Echague,2013).

It has a total population of 68,848, which is unevenly distributed in sixty four (64) barangays having different ethnic groups speaking a number of dialects. The total household population is 12,678 where 51.79% speak Ilocano; 23.7% speak Yogad; 4.99% Itawis; 3.05% Ibanag; while other dialects spoken by other household are Bicol, Gaddang, Zambal, Bontoc, Cebuano and Chavacano. Echague, also known to be the "Yogad country" in Isabela is the only municipality where you can find Yogad speaking people. However, out of the 64 barangays of Echague, two were identified as "Itawis barangays" considering that majority of its inhabitants are Itawis people. These are Barangays Tuguegarao and Salay. Based from the study conducted by Manzolim and Quilang on the migration pattern of the Itawis of Echague, most of these Itawis people came from the province of Cagayan. Marriage and livelihood is their main reason why they migrated and settled in Tuguegarao and Salay, Echague, Isabela.

### 1.2. *Framework*

The National Commission for Culture and the Arts supports the preservation of the people's cultural heritage. As stated in section 7, Republic Act 7356, "it is the duty of every citizen to preserve and conserve the Filipino historical and cultural heritage and resources. The retrieval and conservation of artefacts of Filipino culture and history shall be vigorously pursued."

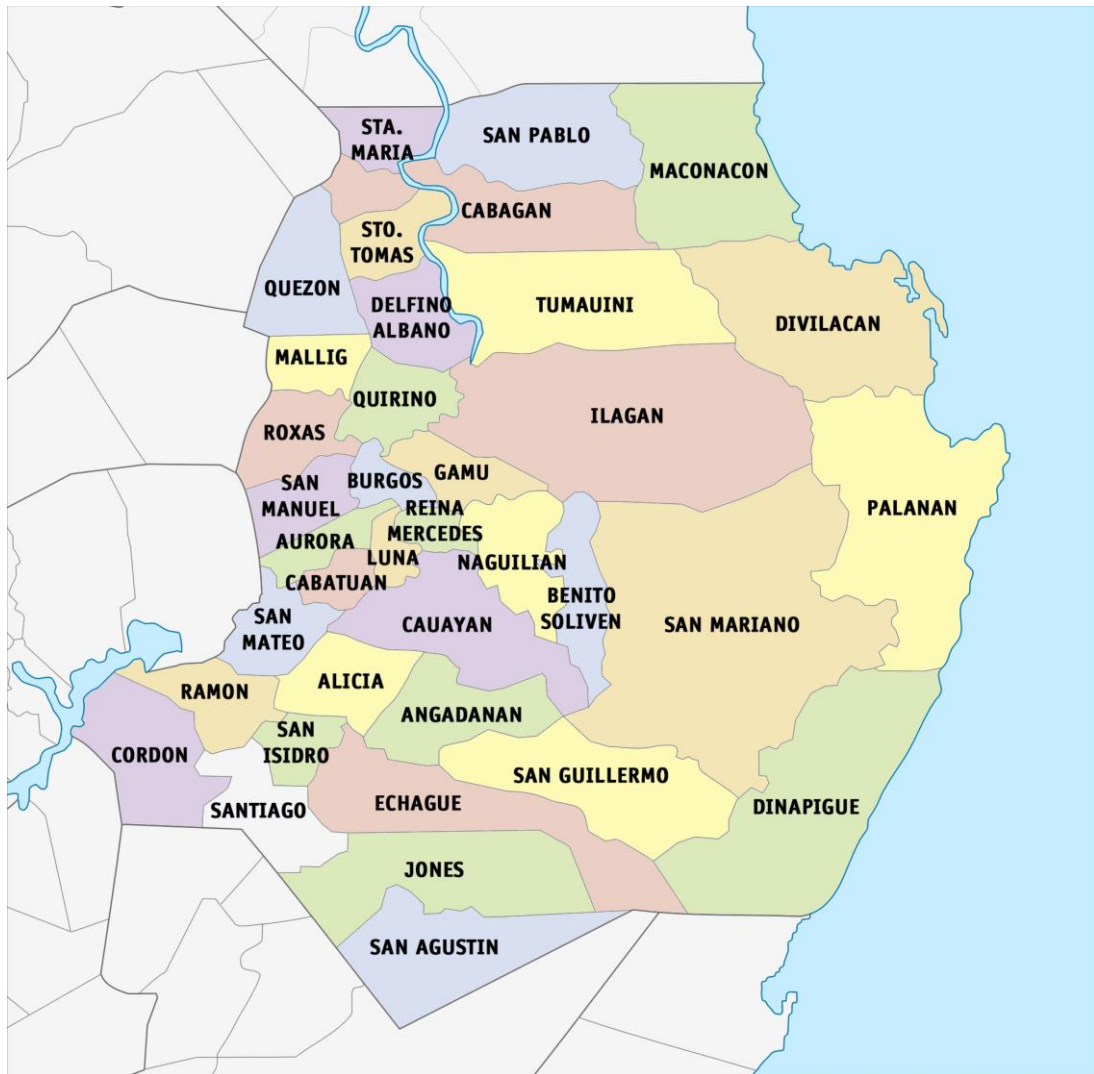


Fig. 1 shows the map of the province of Isabela, highlighting the municipality of Echague.

The UNESCO declares that there are two approaches to preserve cultural heritage: one is to record it in a tangible form and conserve it in archives; the other is to preserve it in a living form by ensuring its transmission to the next generations.

*REPUBLIC ACT 7356* discussed that traditional practice is defined as the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc., from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice.

In this study, the different cultural practices of the Itawis of Barangays Salay

and Tuguegarao, Echague, Isabela, Philippines were documented and explained by the Itawis people themselves who served as respondents. Preservation of the different practices of the Itawis will give an overview of their way of life, thus will lead to the appreciation, better understanding and promotion of their culture.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Design

The study used the descriptive research method. The study focused on the



traditional practices of the Itawis families along giving birth, caring newborn babies, baptism, courtship, marriage, burial and building a house.

## 2.2. Research Locale

The study was conducted at the two identified Itawis barangays of Echague Isabela namely: Tuguegarao and Salay. Majority of the inhabitants of the two identified barangays are native speaking Itawis people.

## 2.3 Participants

The study involved 162 families who were identified as respondents. The native or genuine Itawis between the husband and wife was given priority to represent their family during the conduct of the interview. Elders or cultural masters were also interviewed to validate some of the findings and to know the variations on the old and new practices that were noted.

## 2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Before the study was conducted, a request letter was furnished to the barangay captains seeking permission to conduct the study. The lists of Itawis families were also obtained from the Office of the Barangays to determine the number of respondents or families involved in the study. Triangulation was utilized using direct participatory approach, in depth interview and a focus group discussion. The rituals were documented using cameras wherein the variations in the old and new practices were noted and explained by the elders in an interview with the aid of tape recorders and field notes. Data were analysed using content analysis and interviews to validate the findings with the respondents or key informants. Frequency counts and percentage were also used to describe the common practices of the Itawis families of Tuguegarao and Salay, Echague, Isabela.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 3.1 Common Practices of the Itawis

Findings show that “AMMALANG” one of the oldest rituals of the tribe is still practiced by Itawis woman after giving birth. This is done by braiding two pieces of clean cloth placed in a pot or metal plate with a “bagang” or coal in it. The cloth is being burned from its tip to the other end and it is placed near the mother or on the mother's bed. This ritual ensures the good health of the mother.

Likewise, majority of the women in both barangays are still engaged with the “HILOT”. This is a practice of the women after giving birth wherein their body is being massaged every morning for a period of nine days. Based from the result however, there are 41.98% who no longer practice hilot due to the influence of advance technology and due to their adherence to medical practitioners advises.

After giving birth, the mother may suffer from lower abdominal pain, which according to the Itawis is called “PANULAN”. Due to the pain, the mother is not allowed to move and to take a bath for a period of 5 to 9 days after giving birth. This is also one way to avoid being relapsed. It is evident from the result however, that some of the Itawis women no longer practice this because most of them are giving birth to the hospitals, health centers, and birthing stations. More so, the Department of Health now discourages giving birth at home hence, the respondents adhere to the health practitioners' advises. The prohibition is clearly stipulated in the Administrative Order 2008-0029 titled, “Implementing Health Reforms towards Rapid Reduction in Maternal and Neonatal Mortality,” or the “No Home Birthing Policy” and the DOH updated the policy, called The Maternal, Newborn, Child Health and Nutrition (MNCHN) Strategy.

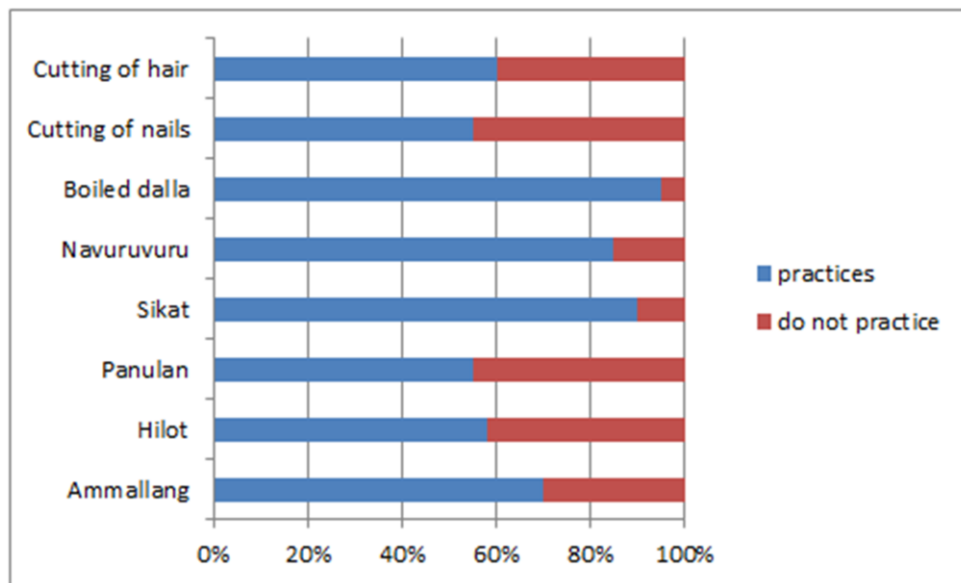


Figure 1. Practices on giving birth

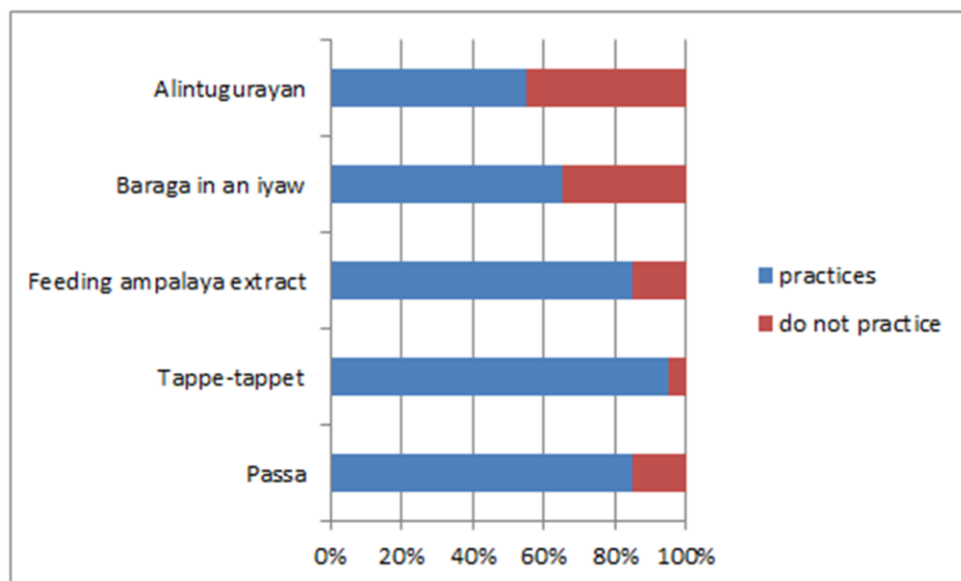


Figure 2. Practices on caring new-born babies

As a practice, the mother is likewise asked to wear “*SIKAT*”. Sikat is a piece of cloth folded to a desired length used to tie the waist and hips. Tying the upper and lower hips with a cloth is believed to give strength and to bring back the body in shape.

Moreover, the mother can only cut her nails after a week and her hair after a month after giving birth. Due to the influence of modernization, some of the respondents believed that cleanliness should be given utmost priority considering that taking care of the newborn entails proper hygiene.

The mother is not also allowed to eat “NAVURUVURU” (hairy, itchy) vegetables because this is not good for the health. According to them, eating this kind of vegetable may cause the itchiness of the private parts of the mother. Likewise, eating “KANDUL” or hairy melon, a kind of vegetable is not also allowed. This is believed to cause the mother’s stomach to bulge.

The mother is also advised to boil leaves of CITRUS FRUITS and “DALLA” or lagundi, (a large native shrub that grows in the Philippines used as herbal medicine) when she will take a bath 5-9 days after giving birth. This practice is believed to ensure the mother’s good health.

### 3.2. Taking care of newborn baby

In the olden times, the Itawis people in both Barangays used a bamboo sheet to separate the mother’s umbilical cord from that of the baby. However, because of the innovations in science now a days, the practitioners make use of the new trends in assisting the mother in giving birth.

Based from the result of the study, majority of the respondents still practice the “passa”, “tappe-tappet” and the feeding of extracted fresh ampalaya leaves. “PASSA” is a cloth used to tie the waist of the baby to protect the navel and to strengthen his body. “TAPPE-TAPPET” is the patting of the buttocks of the baby right after delivery. According to them, patting of the buttocks makes the baby cry and when it cries, the heart will become stronger. Feeding the baby with extracted fresh “AMPALAYA” (bitter gourd) syrup is also a practice of the majority. According to them, this helps remove the toxins being swallowed by the baby in the womb during the mother’s pregnancy.

The result also shows that 58.02 % still practiced baraga. “BARAGA” is a tradition which is done by placing the baby in

an “IYAW” or “bilao” so that the baby will not be easily frightened. Bilao is large woven tray or winnowing basket used for removing rice chaff. It is where the baby is placed during the practice of “baraga”. While some practice this, others no longer practice it since the influence of science has now greater impact on them. The decreasing number of a person who is skillful enough to carry out the said ritual is another reason considering that the execution entails mastery and utmost care.

Likewise, 51.85% also practice the putting of crushed “ALINTUGURAYAN” (akot- akot), clay that an insect built or form inside the house as its shelter, and this is applied at the navel of the new born baby to avoid infections of the navel. Some of the Itawis nowadays believed in modern ways on how to clean their babies’ navel and that is by wiping it with cotton and alcohol. Moreover, medical practitioners discourage them to engage in such practice, thus teaching them the proper way of cleaning or taking care of the baby’s navel.

As a practice, the dried navel of the baby is also wrapped with a cloth or gauze and it is being hanged on the highest part of the house. According to them, hanging will lessen the child’s tendency to be suffering from stomach ache or gas pain.

It is also believed that the nails of the newborn should be cut only after a month and the hair should be cut after a year.

### 3.2 On Baptism

The usual practice of baptism is being observed by the families in both barangays. They believed that “pagwiwisik” or sprinkling is a means of removing their original sins. They also believed that while the ceremony of baptism is on-going, the candles of the God-parents should not die because this symbolizes bad luck. When the ritual is done in the church, the parents should be the first one to go out carrying the baby

because this is believed to give good luck or good fortune.

Itawis also observe "*BOTISO*" or celebration during baptism. It is here where they practice "*LALLAY*". This is done by passing the baby from one person to another while dancing. The relatives and other visitors dance with the baby and offer a gift called, "*GALA-GALA*" (a new practice of the Itawes). The gifts to be given can either be in kind or monetary.

### 3.4 On courtship

Though modernized courtship like the use of cellphone and the internet is now becoming a trend in both barangays, the traditional way is still practiced. The man will court the girl by visiting her in her house or sometimes, courtship takes place whenever there are gatherings like "*BAYLE*", a celebration at night during wedding.

Based from the result of the study, 58.02 % still practiced the traditional way of courting a lady which is "*passerbi*". "*PASSERBI*" is a stage in courtship where the man is obliged to render services to the family of the woman. In the olden times, the man is asked to serve the family of the woman for two years. If the man commits mistake in doing different work or task like plowing the fields, fetching water, washing clothes, "*mamalbag*" (cutting of wood), and others, he will be given back or returned to his family. This is still being practiced now a days but with a shorter period of time. This practice ensures that the man will give the best services to the family that he will soon have. Some of the respondents however no longer practice the giving of services to the family of the women instead; he is introduced to the family of the women to be acquainted, familiarized or to build a closer relationship before marriage.

### 4.5 On marriage

Result shows that majority of the respondents' still practice "*pamonek*" and

other marriage rituals. "*PAMONEK*" (pamamanhikan), is the day when the family of the groom goes to the house of the lady and asks for her hands. During the "*pamonek*", both families discuss and decide about the different preparation for the wedding day. Both parties have to choose carefully the date of the wedding to ensure the couple's good way of living in the future.

Likewise, the immediate family of the groom also practices "*INTREGA*". This is the time when the family of the groom gives material gifts to the woman or to her family which is being agreed upon by both parties during the "*PAMONEK*". If the groom decided to give a pig, the pig must be forced to cry while delivering it to the house of the lady. The result however shows that *intrega* is no longer a must for some of the respondents instead the man is obliged to shoulder all the expenses during the wedding.

A side from what is given during the "*INTREGA*", the family of the groom is also asked to give "*DOTE*" or dowry to the family of the bride. The dowry is either monetary or material things. This depends on the arrangement or agreement of both parties.

Before the day of the wedding, an offering or "*ATTANG*" of the bride and the groom's used clothes (preferably the bride and the groom's underwear), an egg, wine or liquor, and a piece of tobacco is done to ensure good weather during the day of the wedding. Likewise, the bride and the groom are not allowed to see each other before the day of the wedding. According to them, seeing each other may cause the non-pursuance of the wedding or it might cause the death of either the bride or the groom.

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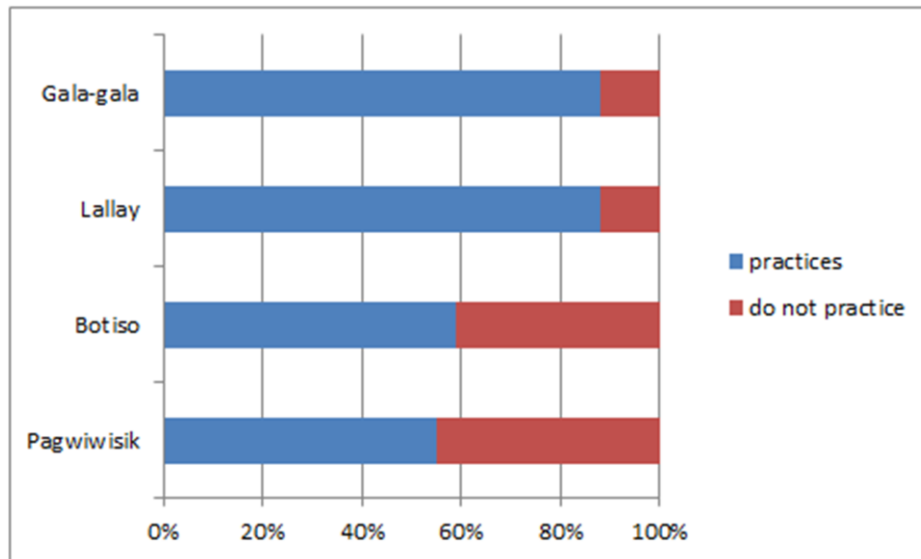


Figure 3. Practices on baptism

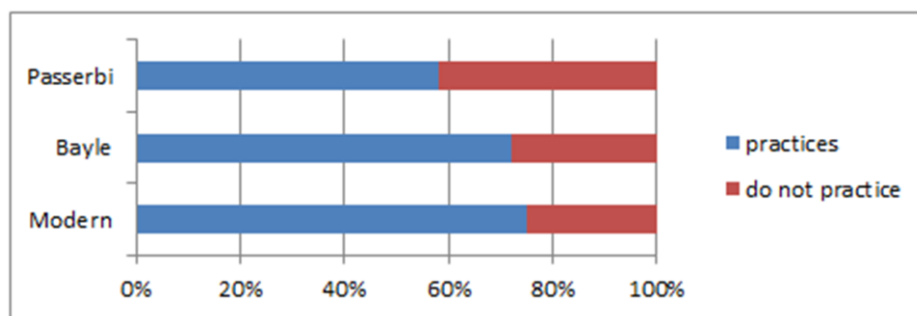


Figure 4. Practices on courtship

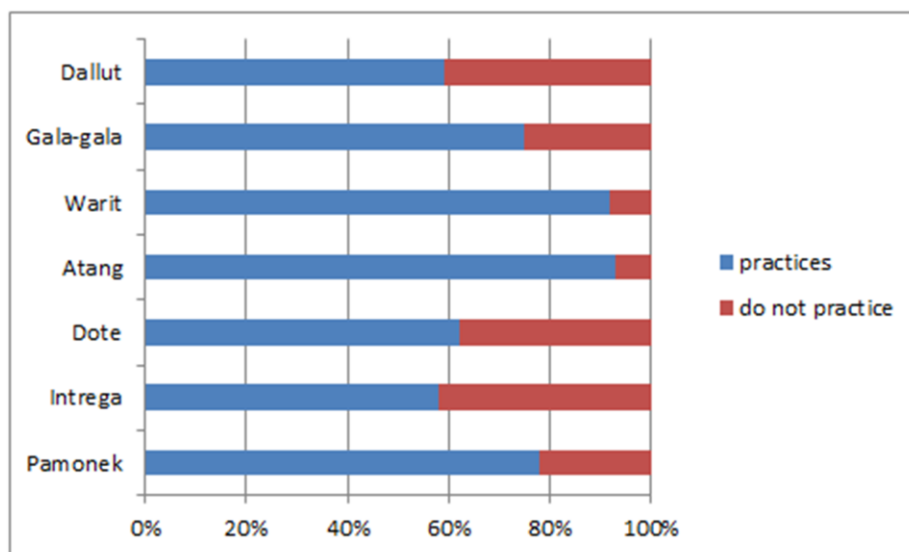


Figure 5. Practices on marriage



Figure 6. "Pamonek" and "Intrega" ritual



Figure 7. The "Gala-gala" ritual

During the wedding day, the groom should be the first one to arrive at the place where the wedding ceremony will take place. Riding in the same vehicle is not allowed because this portends bad luck.

During the ceremony, the candles should be lighted simultaneously. The rings should be handled with utmost care because once this is dropped; it would mean separation of the husband and wife. The "aras" or several peso coins should not also be dropped because once this is dropped; it would also mean that the wealth of the family is at stake. After the ceremony, the bride should secretly step on the foot of the groom so that she will be the one to lead the family or the husband to be "under-the-saya".

An offering or "WARIT", cooked food, during the wedding day should be placed in an "ALTAR". This served as an offering for those unseen creatures and for the souls of the bereaved relatives



Figure 8. Dallut ritual

The “GALA-GALA” is also practiced during the day of the wedding. This is done by letting the newly wed couple dance with a music. While dancing, the visitors also offer their gifts either in kind or monetary. They may also dance with the bride and the groom if they wish too. During the week or after the day of the wedding, “DALLUT”, a ritual of songs and dances, is still being practiced. It is a re- enactment of courtship, “intrega”, the wedding ceremony to the time when the bride and the groom have to move in another house.

This is a tradition done to ensure strong bond of the couple and for good fortune. However, due to the diminishing number of old folks in the family who usually initiate the said ritual led this practice to be taken for granted by the young ones.

### 3.5 On burial

Result shown that Itawis in barangays Tuguegarao and Salay believed that they should offer prayer for the soul of their beloved dead through “NOBENA” (novena). The “nobena” is done within nine (9) days from the day of the death of the person. It

consists of private or public prayers repeated for nine successive days in belief of receiving intercessory grace or lifting the soul of dead.

Another “nobena” is offered during the 40<sup>th</sup> and 1 year anniversary of the dead. During the “novena” “ATTANG” is also offered. Attang is the act of offering food for unseen spirits for guidance or for getting well. This is usually composed of wine, rice cake, water, tobacco, and “MAMA/ NGANGA” (betel nut/areca nut).

During the wake of the dead, immediate family members are not allowed to work especially doing household chores, to take a bath in the deceased’s house, to look at the mirror, “magsuyod” or to comb one’s hair using fine toothed comb, and to cut their nails in the house where the dead stays. This is believed to cause another death of an immediate family member.

There should always be a person at the side of the dead to look after it. An animal is not allowed to stay below the coffin



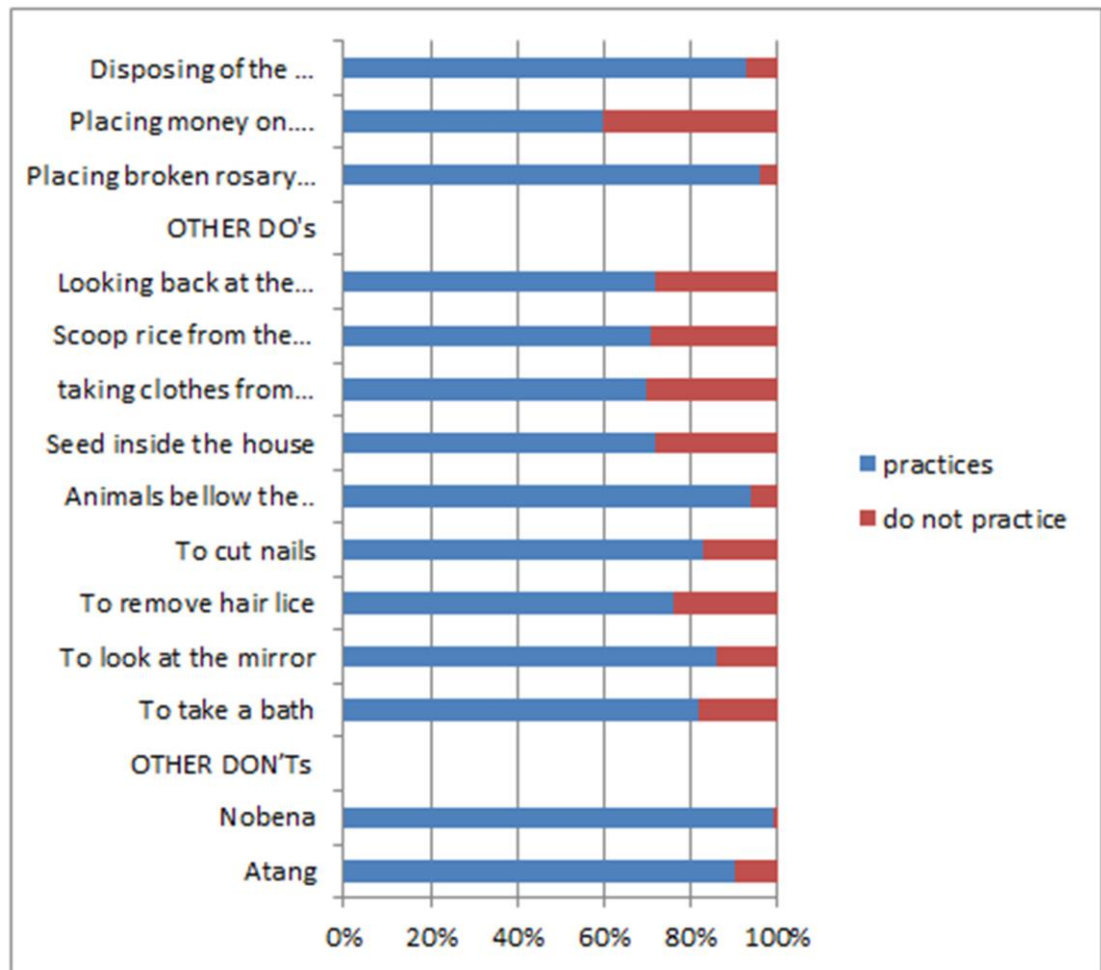


Figure 9. Practices on burial

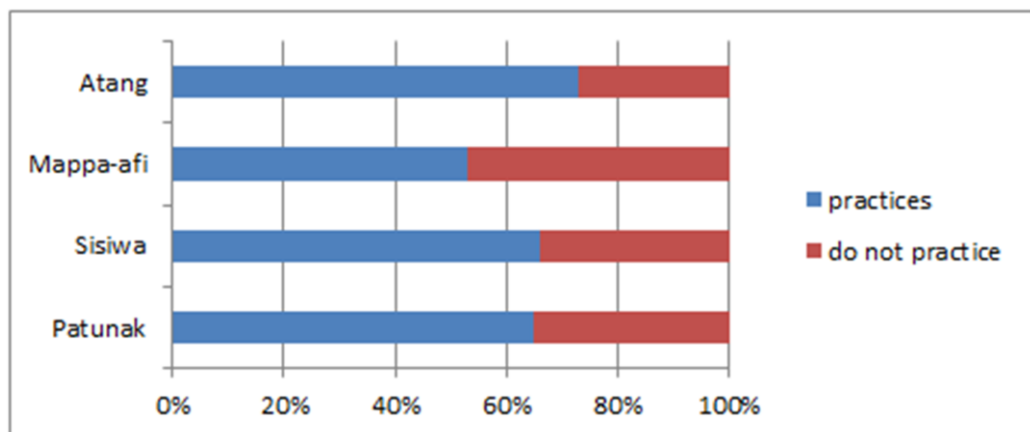


Figure 10. Practices on building a house

of the dead especially a dog. They believed that a family member will also die or it will cause them bad luck once an animal stays or passes below the coffin.

It is also a taboo on the relatives of the dead person to take clothes from the closet of the family. Likewise, the immediate family of the dead is not also allowed to take



rice or water directly from the container. Somebody should do it for them because this might cause them sickness or dizziness.

If there are seeds that are stored in the house it should be removed first before the body of the dead is taken inside the house. This is to ensure good harvest.

A chicken is decapitated outside the door where the coffin will be taken outside the house. All the people including the immediate family should come out first before the coffin will be taken outside the house. It is also advisable that the family together with their relatives should not look back into the coffin once they went outside the house because this may cause adversity to the family. Prayers are immediately offered while the coffin is taken out of the house.

Just like the Ilocanos', the Itawis also pray for their dead for nine consecutive nights after death.

As a belief to make the soul of the dead person at peace, a rosary is being cut and placed inside the coffin of the dead and money is also placed on the hands of the dead during the burial at the cemetery. Once the body is buried and all the visitors who joined the burial went home, a relative gets a handkerchief and goes around the tomb or "puntod" and call the name of the dead simultaneously. After doing the said ritual, he/she should fold the hanky and place at the altar upon reaching home.

It is believed that at the third day after death, the soul of the dead is now at peace and will now proceed to heaven. Likewise, it is only after one year after the death of the person where the relatives can dispose all the clothes and other personal belongings of the dead person. If nobody wants to use the clothes and other personal belongings of the dead person, it should be burned or buried.

### 3.6 On building a house

In building a house, the date when to start the construction of the house should be chosen well. A tradition of "*PATUNAK*" is done during the chosen day wherein the Itawis usually place shells, old coins and pour liquor on the first post that will be erected. This is to ensure that the house will have a strong foundation. Old coins should be placed on the door of the house so that the family will not experience financial problem. After the building of the house, a blood of a pig or a chicken is being wiped on the wall of the house called "*S/S/WA*". This is to give the owner of the house good luck and to drive away evil spirits

The night before the owner will move to the newly built house, a bonfire outside the house should be made and the fire should be continues. Apart from the owner, another person should sleep in the house during that night. The owner is advised to move in the house at dawn when the sun starts to rise. During the day when the owner has to move in the house, salt, a pale of water and a pale of rice should be taken inside the house first to ensure good fortune and good luck.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Based from the result of this study, it can be concluded that Itawis people have rich intangible heritage that is worth preserving as manifested in their practices such as giving birth, caring newborn babies, courtship, marriage, burial and building a house. Most of the respondents still follow their traditional practices however, there is also an increasing number of those who do not observed the practices. This is due to the influence of modernization and also to the diminishing number of elders who remind, lead and influence the younger generation in observing the different traditional practices. Their rituals are performed to strengthen family bond and to ensure good health and good luck.



Figure 11. “Patunak” and “Sisiwa” ritual

It is recommended that urgent documentation of the Indigenous Peoples systems or practices should be carried out immediately to preserve their culture as they continue to face the challenges to protect their traditional cultural heritage which are in danger of extinction considering that there is a decline in observing the practices. Likewise, young generations should be educated of these traditional practices particularly inculcating in them its importance and to revive those that were identified to be vanishing.

Itawis people should continue emulate or practice traditions that tends to enhance family relations/ bonding, and that effort should be exerted to ensure that these traditions are passed on to the younger generations.

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