

“From Utility to Ethnic Symbol: Exploring the Evolution of the Tamaraw FX as A Symbol of Igorot”

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the enduring popularity of the Tamaraw FX in Benguet, northern Philippines, through Cultural Ecology and Symbolic Interactionism. Using autoethnography, the research reveals that its appeal stems from its adaptability to Benguet’s agricultural lifestyle and rugged terrain. Owners modify the vehicle to enhance engine power, increase ground clearance, and install carriers for transporting highland vegetables. Aesthetic modifications, such as Igorot symbols and taglines on stickers and mudguards, further reinforce cultural identity. Cultural Ecology, as proposed by Julian Steward, explains how societies adapt to their environment. In Benguet, modifications to the Tamaraw FX respond to both ecological demands and cultural expression. Meanwhile, Symbolic Interactionism, as articulated by Herbert Blumer, highlights how the Tamaraw FX gains symbolic meaning through social interaction. Over time, shared meanings transform it from a tool of practicality into an emblem. By integrating ecological adaptation and social meaning, this study underscores how the Tamaraw FX has evolved beyond function, becoming a cultural marker deeply embedded in Benguet people’s identity.

Keywords: Tamaraw FX, Cultural Ecology, Symbolic Interactionism, Igorot Identity

INTRODUCTION

The Tamaraw FX, a vehicle developed by Toyota and introduced in the Philippines in the late 1990s, was once a popular choice due to its utilitarian design and affordability. However, as newer car models entered the market, its popularity declined in many lowland areas. Despite this, the Tamaraw FX remains widely used in Benguet, where an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 units are still in operation [12].

Benguet, a province in the northern Philippines, is home to a predominantly Igorot population. Agriculture has long been and still one of the major sources of employment for the people in the province. Car ownership, in general, significantly enhances mobility, providing access to employment, education, and social opportunities [10]. With that, owning a car in farming areas is often seen as a crucial aspect of livelihood, facilitating access to essential services, markets, and opportunities that are otherwise distant. The role of transport is very crucial because it is a stage in production technique which get completed only when the commodity is within the reach of the final consumers [1]. Furthermore, transport is regarded as a crucial factor in improving agricultural productivity. It enhances quality of life of the people, creates market for agricultural produce, facilitates interaction among geographical and economic regions and opened up new areas to economic focus [2]. As transportation plays a vital role in improving mobility, studies have shown that personal vehicles contribute to economic growth and social development in these communities, reshaping their way of life. A lack of transport opportunities has been shown to be a barrier to accessibility and social inclusion in contemporary society, especially among people living in rural and sparsely populated areas [7].

Our family initially bought a Tamaraw FX as a reliable service vehicle to transport vegetables from our farm to the market and over the years, I eventually inherited the vehicle and used it as my personal means of transportation when I moved to the lowlands for work. It was during this time that I began to notice how people in the lowlands associated the Tamaraw FX with the people of Benguet. Over time, the car seems to have evolved beyond its utilitarian purpose into a marker of Igorot identity. Previous studies suggest that vehicles can hold symbolic and social significance, reflecting an individual’s status, lifestyle, or cultural background [9].

These observations lead to a central question: How has the Tamaraw FX transitioned from a utility vehicle into a cultural symbol in Benguet? This study seeks to explore: Why does the Tamaraw FX remain popular in Benguet? What distinct characteristics define Tamaraw FX units in the highlands? What does this phenomenon suggest about identity and material culture today? By examining these questions, this research aims to understand the sociocultural significance of the Tamaraw FX and its role in shaping highlander identity

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global consumer goods, such as cars, are not merely adopted as functional tools but are reinterpreted and adapted by local communities to align with cultural and social identities [4]. These adaptations reflect the active role of communities in imbuing objects with meanings that transcend their original utilitarian purposes. An automobile can symbolize nearly any aspect of its owner's identity, and can reflect who the owner is as well as who he aspires to be [8]. The hugely expensive Rolls-Royce, a by-word for quality and luxury, is owned by notable figures in British institutional life and frequently features in national tabloids as a signifier that celebrities, pop stars and self-made businessmen have 'made it' [5]. Modified cars hold significant emotional value, often seen as extensions of themselves and reflections of their personalities [13]. These perspectives highlight how automobiles transcend mere transportation, becoming powerful symbols of personal and social identity. Whether through luxury, modification, or cultural adaptation, cars reflect not only an individual's status and aspirations but also the deeper meanings communities attach to them.

Theoretical Framework

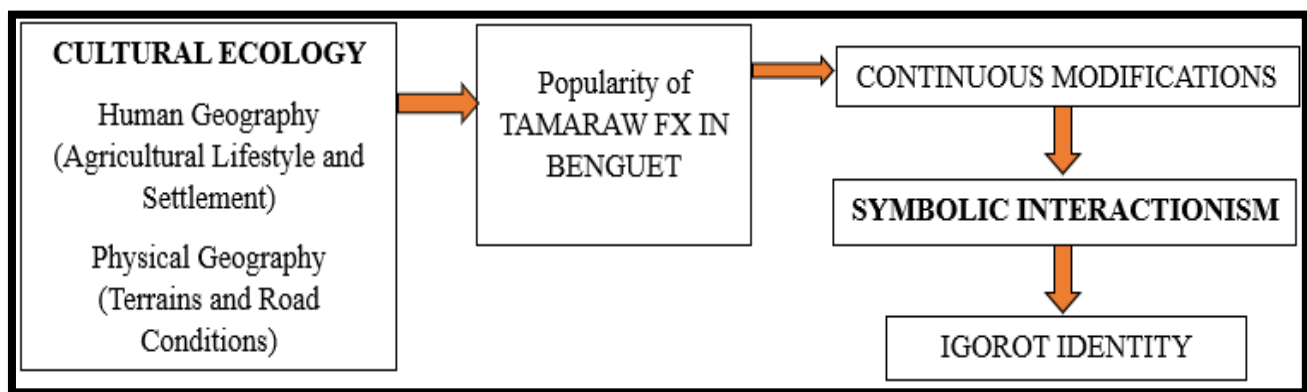


Figure 1. Paradigm of the Study

Figure 1 illustrates the interconnected elements central to our exploration of how the Tamaraw FX evolved into a symbol of Highlander. This serves as a guide for understanding how cultural ecology contributes to the popularity of the FX in Benguet and how, in turn, its popularity makes it a symbol of highlander identity. Referencing this framework throughout the discussion enables a detailed exploration of how these elements interact with each other.

Cultural Ecology, examines how human societies adapt to their environment through cultural practices and material modifications [11]. This framework is particularly useful in analyzing how the Tamaraw FX remains a relevant and widely used vehicle despite its discontinuation. The theory suggests that human groups modify technology, tools, and objects to fit the ecological and geographical demands of their environment. The Tamaraw FX's continued popularity in Benguet is not just a matter of economic utility but also a result of its deep integration into both Human Geography (ways of life) and Physical Geography (landscape requirements). By using Cultural Ecology as a framework, this study highlights the interplay between environmental adaptation and cultural significance in explaining the Tamaraw FX's sustained relevance and it also underscores how geography and culture shape the choices people make regarding transportation.

Symbolic Interactionism is a sociological perspective developed by George Herbert Mead and further expanded by Herbert Blumer. It provides the foundation for understanding how individuals and communities assign

meaning to objects, symbols, and social interactions [3]. This theory emphasizes the role of human interpretation in shaping social reality, focusing on how people construct meanings through social interaction and how these meanings influence behavior. In the context of this study, Symbolic Interactionism is used as a framework to explain how the Tamaraw FX, originally marketed as a utility vehicle in the late 1990s, has acquired meanings beyond its practical function. Through social interactions, the Tamaraw FX has evolved into a symbol of ethnic identity. In Symbolic Interactionism meanings are negotiated and modified through interaction [3]. The application of Symbolic Interactionism in this study allows for an in-depth exploration of how different social groups in Benguet construct and maintain the symbolic value of the Tamaraw FX. By analyzing interviews and observations, this research aims to uncover how the vehicle's meaning has shifted over time and why it remains significant despite the emergence of newer alternatives.

METHODOLOGY

Author's Experience and Positionality

This study was inspired by my personal experiences as a Tamaraw FX owner and driver. Our family originally purchased the vehicle for agricultural purposes, particularly for transporting vegetables from farms to markets in Benguet. Over time, the Tamaraw FX became part of my daily life both in the highlands and in the lowlands where I traveled for work.

While driving the Tamaraw FX in lowland areas, I often encountered comments and assumptions linking the vehicle to Igorot or highlander identity. Many people immediately assumed that I was from the Cordillera simply because I drove a Tamaraw FX. These repeated experiences made me realize that the vehicle carried meanings beyond its practical function as transportation and had become socially associated with highland culture and identity.

As both a researcher and a Tamaraw FX owner, I occupied an insider position in this study. This allowed me to better understand the cultural and social meanings attached to the vehicle within Benguet communities. At the same time, I remained aware that my personal experiences could influence my interpretations. To address this, reflexivity was practiced throughout the study by continuously examining how my assumptions and experiences shaped the research process. These experiences ultimately became the motivation for exploring how the Tamaraw FX evolved from a utilitarian vehicle into a cultural symbol associated with Igorot identity.

Research Method and Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative research approach using autoethnography as its primary method. Autoethnography combines personal experience with cultural analysis, allowing researchers to connect individual experiences with broader social and cultural realities. Through this approach, the study examined how personal experiences with the Tamaraw FX reflected wider community perceptions and cultural meanings in Benguet.

Data were gathered through reflexive self-narratives, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. Reflexive self-narratives documented the researcher's experiences and reflections as a Tamaraw FX owner and driver. Participant observation involved direct engagement with Tamaraw FX owners and communities, focusing on the vehicle's everyday use in transportation and agricultural activities, as well as the ways it was modified and socially perceived.

To strengthen the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted using purposive sampling. Participants included a local mechanic experienced in repairing and modifying Tamaraw FX vehicles, farmers who regularly used the vehicle for agricultural transport, and Tamaraw FX owners and drivers from Benguet communities. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their perspectives regarding the practicality, durability, and cultural significance of the Tamaraw FX.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview responses, observations, and personal narratives were coded to identify recurring themes related to transportation, environmental adaptation, cultural

identity, and the symbolic meanings attached to the Tamaraw FX. To enhance trustworthiness and minimize bias, triangulation and reflexive journaling were employed throughout the research process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their voluntary participation. Consent was obtained prior to conducting interviews, and participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for academic purposes. As both a researcher and a member of the community being studied, the researcher also practiced respect, honesty, and sensitivity in interpreting and presenting the participants' experiences and narratives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Revisiting the Emergence of Tamaraw FX in Benguet

The Tamaraw FX first gained prominence in Baguio and Benguet in the late 1990s and early 2000s when it was introduced as a taxi service vehicle. Its spacious design and durability made it a practical choice for public transportation. However, over time, it ceased to be used as a taxi due to stricter transport regulations, which required modern safety features and emissions compliance that the Tamaraw FX could no longer meet. Despite this, the vehicle remained widely used in Benguet, raising the question: How does the Tamaraw FX continue to enter and thrive in the province?

A key factor in its sustained presence is the ongoing trade between lowland and highland vehicle owners. Many Tamaraw FX units that are no longer in use in the lowlands are sold to highlanders who actively seek them out. Highlanders prefer buying second-hand Tamaraw FX units from the lowlands because they have already proven their durability in rugged terrains. This continuous cycle of vehicle acquisition and adaptation has allowed the Tamaraw FX to maintain its relevance in Benguet.

Popularity of FX in Benguet

With my interview to the key informants, observations, and personal experiences I highlight three main reasons for its enduring appeal: compatibility with the environment, ease of maintenance, and fuel efficiency. The Tamaraw FX's ability to handle uphill terrain makes it highly suited for the highland's terrain just like Benguet, which have steep, rugged roads. Despite being older than newer car models, the FX maintains a steady pace on both highways and more challenging Farm-to-Market Roads. Its popularity can be attributed to its durable 2C diesel engine and versatile design, making it ideal for navigating difficult, uphill roads. As mentioned by a local mechanic: "The Tamaraw FX became popular in Benguet because of its durable 2C diesel engine, which is ideal for the highlands' tough terrain. Its design and rear counterweight enhance stability and performance on steep, slippery roads." Farmers also appreciate the flexible seating configuration, which allows for both passenger transport and cargo loading. As noted by one of my key informants: "If you need to transport passengers, the rear seats are conveniently designed to accommodate them, with easy access for boarding. Additionally, if you require extra space for baggage or merchandise, such as items sold by local sari-sari store owners, the rear seats can be effortlessly folded down to create ample storage capacity."

Another reason for the Tamaraw FX's continued popularity is its affordability and ease of maintenance. From personal experience, replacing engine parts is inexpensive, and local mechanics confirm that the FX is easier to repair than newer car models. "The FX remains popular because it is easy to maintain. Its simple engine design and manual transmission make repairs more affordable compared to modern cars like the Toyota Innova, which have complex systems like a computer box." Another key factor would be the availability of parts in the market: "Replacement parts for the Tamaraw FX are easy to find, making repairs simple. In contrast, parts for other cars can be harder to get. This availability is one reason why the Tamaraw FX is easy to maintain." Fuel efficiency is another significant factor in the Tamaraw FX's sustained use. As an owner, I can confirm its low fuel consumption, making it a practical choice for long-distance travel and frequent trips across Benguet's mountainous roads. To gain more insight, I consulted our local mechanic about fuel efficiency differences between diesel and gasoline engines. "The FX is fuel-efficient, but it depends on the engine type. Diesel engines

are more fuel-efficient than gasoline ones, which use up fuel faster” Beyond personal transportation, the Tamaraw FX plays a crucial role in Benguet’s farming community, where rugged terrain and dispersed rural settlements demand a reliable and adaptable vehicle. Designed with a powerful engine, the Tamaraw FX is well-suited for the steep and winding roads of the Cordillera, ensuring that farmers can transport essential supplies to their fields and bring harvested produce to market without difficulty. Its spacious interior allows for efficient loading of goods, whether sacks of vegetables, farming tools, or even passengers, making it a versatile workhorse.

More than just a mode of transport, the Tamaraw FX is a practical investment for farmers due to its fuel efficiency and ease of maintenance. Unlike modern vehicles with complex electronic systems, the FX’s straightforward mechanical design allows for quick and affordable repairs. This is where local mechanics play an indispensable role. Many of them, having honed their skills through hands-on experience, have mastered the art of maintaining and repairing the Tamaraw FX. Their expertise ensures that these vehicles remain roadworthy despite years of use, reinforcing their status as a staple in Benguet’s transportation landscape. The availability of spare parts further contributes to the Tamaraw FX’s longevity, making it a practical and cost-effective choice for farmers who rely on it for their livelihood. Moreover, the Tamaraw FX serves as a crucial link between rural homes and main highways, bridging the gap between isolated farms and essential services. In many ways, it is more than just a vehicle—it is a lifeline that sustains both the mobility and economic activities of Benguet’s farming communities.

Benguet Tamaraw FX

After analyzing data on the Tamaraw FX's presence in Benguet, I noticed its deeper significance. While FX vehicles are rare in the lowlands, my experience of being associated with a "highlander aura" while driving one reinforced its symbolic connection to highlander identity. Revisiting my informants, I identified distinct features that characterize a highlander-owned Tamaraw FX. First would be the performance wherein highlanders favor diesel engines for their durability in rugged terrain and more capable in uphill’s. A defining upgrade is the turbocharger, enhancing power and efficiency. While not all FX vehicles have one, local mechanics confirm its popularity for carrying more passengers and transporting goods. Farmers benefit from increased load capacity and better uphill performance.

The physical characteristics of highlander-owned Tamaraw FX vehicles distinguish them from their lowland counterparts. Through my observations I highlight the following exterior features. The topload/carrier is commonly used for transporting vegetables and passengers' belongings, often featuring stainless steel accents for durability and aesthetics. The elevated look is another notable feature, where owners lift suspensions and install larger wheels to improve handling on rough roads while enhancing the vehicle’s appearance. Additionally, aesthetic enhancements include upgraded lighting for better visibility, mudguards with personalized words or phrases for self-expression, and stainless accents that give the vehicle a polished finish. Decals and stickers frequently display Igorot symbols like warriors, gongs, and heritage-related text, reflecting cultural pride. Some designs also incorporate elements of the cowboy lifestyle, influenced by American culture, such as cowboy hats and country song lyrics, blending local and foreign influences in self-expression. These modifications are more commonly observed in Tamaraw FX vehicles in the highlands.



Figure 2 & 3. Image of the Tamaraw FX in Benguet

In contrast, Tamaraw FX units in the lowlands rarely feature such extensive modifications, often retaining their factory specifications or only having minor customizations. The difference in modifications highlights how vehicle owners adapt their FX to their environment.



Figure 4. Image of the Original Tamaraw FX

Cultural Ecology and Symbolic Interactionism

The enduring popularity of the Tamaraw FX in Benguet, despite its initial release in the late 1990s, can be explored through the lenses of Cultural Ecology and Symbolic Interactionism, two sociological frameworks that offer insight into the vehicle's continued relevance to the people of the region.

Cultural ecology refers to the relationship between human societies and their environments, particularly how culture and technology adapt to and modify the physical landscape. In the case of Benguet, the Tamaraw FX is a prime example of how human geography and physical geography influence the survival of a particular technology. The province is characterized by its mountainous terrain, narrow, winding roads, and unique climate. These conditions require a vehicle that is both durable and adaptable. The Tamaraw FX, with its sturdy build and simple engine design, has proven itself capable of surviving the harsh terrain of Benguet. Its fuel efficiency is an important factor, as it allows farmers and local residents to transport goods through rugged landscapes without incurring prohibitive fuel costs. Farmers often rely on the Tamaraw FX to navigate the challenging topography while carrying agricultural products to market or to other parts of the province.

The vehicle's ability to withstand the physical challenges of Benguet, combined with its efficient use of fuel and simple mechanics, has cemented its place in the daily lives of the community. The modifications made by its owners have enhanced its capacity to handle the local terrain, further aligning the vehicle with the cultural and environmental demands of the region.

Symbolic Interactionism on the other hand focuses on how people create meanings and identities through social interactions, particularly in relation to objects and symbols. Initially, the Tamaraw FX was seen purely as a practical tool for transportation. However, over time, it evolved into a symbol of identity for the people of Benguet, particularly the Igorots or highlanders. As the vehicle became ubiquitous, it was not merely recognized as a functional mode of transport but began to represent the people who owned and used it. The modifications made to the Tamaraw FX by its owners—such as adding custom features tailored to the region's unique conditions—transformed it into something more than just a car. It became a reflection of the local culture, resilience, and adaptability of the people who lived in the mountainous areas of Benguet. Through these modifications, the Tamaraw FX has become emblematic of the highland community. People from outside the province, upon seeing a modified Tamaraw FX, often associate it with the Igorot identity. The modified vehicles have come to serve as a marker of cultural belonging, signaling that the owner is from Benguet or another similar region in the Cordillera. In this way, the Tamaraw FX has transcended its role as a mere vehicle and has become a symbol of both status and regional identity.

Limitations And Future Directions

This study focused primarily on the experiences of Tamaraw FX owners, mechanics, and farming communities

in Benguet. Consequently, the findings largely reflect the vehicle's role within rural and agricultural settings and may not fully capture the perspectives of owners in urban environments or other social contexts. As this research employed autoethnography, my personal experiences, cultural background, and connection to the Tamaraw FX inevitably influenced the interpretation of the data. Although reflexivity, interviews, and triangulation were utilized to minimize bias, complete objectivity remains difficult to achieve within an autoethnographic framework.

The study also relied on personal narratives and a limited number of participants, which may have constrained the range of perspectives represented. Furthermore, the research concentrated on the contemporary cultural significance of the Tamaraw FX and did not extensively examine historical records, quantitative data, or the views of younger generations regarding newer Tamaraw models. Despite these limitations, the study provides meaningful insights into how the Tamaraw FX evolved from a utilitarian vehicle into a cultural symbol associated with highlander identity in Benguet.

Future research may broaden the understanding of how vehicles become markers of identity within local communities. While this study primarily utilized autoethnography supported by interviews and observations, future scholars may adopt wider qualitative approaches such as focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and community-based surveys involving Tamaraw FX owners, drivers, mechanics, farmers, and younger generations across Benguet and other Cordillera provinces. Comparative analyses between original and modern Tamaraw models may also reveal how durability, adaptability, aesthetics, and cultural meaning shape people's attachment to the vehicle.

Further studies may examine how the Tamaraw FX acquires different meanings across highland and lowland communities, as well as how modernization, vehicle modification culture, social media representation, and changing transportation systems influence its symbolic value among younger generations. Expanding the research to other areas in the Cordillera may also contribute to a deeper understanding of transportation, material culture, and ethnic identity in contemporary Philippine society.

CONCLUSION

The Tamaraw FX's enduring popularity in Benguet is not just a matter of nostalgia or preference but a cultural and ecological response to the challenges posed by geography. Through modifications that improve its adaptability, the vehicle has evolved into a localized tool for mobility, demonstrating how technology is shaped by human needs and environmental factors. The Tamaraw FX remains a dominant vehicle in Benguet's highlands because it matches the region's rugged terrain and agricultural way of life. Its utility, affordability, and adaptability have ensured its survival despite newer vehicle models entering the market. This case highlights how practicality influences cultural attachment, proving that vehicles can become more than machines they can represent the identity of the people who rely on them.

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