

Living Knowledge Across Generations: Indigenous Knowledge, Transmission, and Cultural Continuity among the Sama-Bajau in Rural Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examined the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) practiced by the Sama-Bajau community in Dolho, Bato, Leyte, the everyday processes through which knowledge is transmitted, and the conditions that shape its continuity. Twenty adults aged 18-50 participated in in-depth, open-ended interviews. Transcripts were analyzed through repeated reading, horizontalization, descriptive coding, clustering of meaning units, development of textural and structural descriptions, and synthesis of the shared essence. Interpretation drew on transcendental phenomenology, Rogoff's learning-by-observing-and-pitching-in perspective, Berry's acculturation framework used as a sensitizing rather than exhaustive lens, and a social-capital and institutional-access perspective. Findings identified three interrelated knowledge domains: rituals and healing practices; fishing, ecological familiarity, and the role of experienced fishers; and symbolic and material expressions in attire, religious affiliation, and the transition from Palao to Luma housing. Transmission occurred through Sama-Bajau language use, storytelling, observation, guided participation, and practical involvement in family and community activities. The evidence most directly supports overlapping processes of cultural retention, selective adaptation, and pressure toward language shift. Literacy difficulties, dependence on translation, and unequal access to services are interpreted as structural and institutional conditions rather than as community-selected acculturation strategies. Because no participants older than 50 were interviewed, claims about deeper historical memory are limited to adult participants' recollections of learning from older relatives and recognized knowledge holders. The study recommends community-led intergenerational documentation, direct participation of elders in future research, culturally responsive education, language-supportive public services, and preservation initiatives that recognize Sama-Bajau members as knowledge holders and decision-making partners.

Keywords: Cultural Continuity; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Intergenerational Transmission; Sama-Bajau; Transcendental Phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous communities in the Philippines sustain cultural traditions, environmental knowledge, and social systems developed through long engagement with place and community life. Among these communities, the Sama-Bajau are widely associated with maritime livelihoods, coastal settlement, mobility, and fishing knowledge. In this study, Sama-Bajau is used as the locally recognized designation of the community in Dolho, Bato, Leyte; Badjao is retained only when it appears in participant statements or in the titles and terminology of cited sources. The Dolho community is situated in a coastal setting where Sama-Bajau families interact regularly with Bisaya-speaking residents and with schools, barangay offices, health services, religious organizations, and market systems. Such interaction creates opportunities for exchange while also placing pressure on language use, livelihood practice, and cultural transmission (Gonzaga & Pratama, 2025).

Indigenous knowledge is not adequately understood as a collection of static customs. It is a living body of knowledge, practice, value, and interpretation that is sustained through social relationships and repeated

participation. Within Sama-Bajau life, this includes rituals, healing, ecological knowledge, fishing practices, symbolic representations, oral traditions, and everyday ways of teaching children. Scholarship on Indigenous education and living heritage emphasizes that knowledge persists when communities continue to enact it, transmit it, and determine the conditions under which it may be shared (Banes & Baniqued Dela Cruz, 2021; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2022; UNESCO, n.d.-a).

Research on Sama-Bajau and Badjao communities has examined maritime identity, diaspora, settlement change, coastal livelihoods, cultural adaptation, education, and exclusion (de Juan, 2018; Macalandag, 2023; Maglana, 2016; Stacey & Allison, 2019). More recent work in Bato, Leyte, has also shown how bonding, bridging, and linking social ties shape the community's access to assistance and collaboration with institutions (Gonzaga & Pratama, 2025). However, fewer studies provide a localized account of how multiple domains of knowledge are practiced together, how adults understand their intergenerational transmission, and how institutional and environmental conditions alter the settings in which transmission occurs.

The study therefore addressed three questions: (1) What Indigenous Knowledge Systems are practiced by the Sama-Bajau community in Dolho, Bato, Leyte? (2) Through what everyday processes is this knowledge transmitted across generations? and (3) What conditions challenge or reshape its continuity? The contribution is deliberately bounded. The participant group consisted of adults aged 18-50; consequently, the study documents adult participants' experiences and recollections rather than presenting direct testimony from the oldest community knowledge holders. This boundary is made explicit throughout the revised manuscript to avoid overstating historical depth.

The study is relevant to Indigenous education, cultural documentation, and local governance. For educators, it provides community-grounded material for culturally responsive learning. For researchers, it demonstrates the value of combining phenomenological description with complementary interpretive lenses rather than forcing all findings into a single theory. For schools, health workers, local governments, and community organizations, it underscores that cultural preservation depends not only on community willingness but also on equitable language support, livelihood conditions, environmental protection, and institutional recognition.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Transcendental Phenomenology

The study is grounded methodologically in transcendental phenomenology (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). This approach seeks to describe a phenomenon as experienced by participants by identifying significant statements, shared meanings, textural descriptions of what was experienced, structural descriptions of how it was experienced, and a synthesis of the common essence. It is appropriate because the inquiry asks not only which practices exist, but how community members understand, enact, and transmit them in everyday life.

Intergenerational Learning and Cultural Transmission

Rogoff's (2014) learning-by-observing-and-pitching-in perspective provides a focused explanation for the transmission processes described by participants. The perspective emphasizes attentive observation, increasing participation, contribution to shared activity, and learning embedded in family and community endeavors. It is especially useful for interpreting fishing apprenticeship, participation in rituals, storytelling, and children's involvement in community activities. UNESCO's work on living heritage likewise stresses that cultural knowledge remains viable when the social spaces and relationships that enable person-to-person transmission are sustained (UNESCO, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Acculturation and Institutional Access as Complementary Lenses

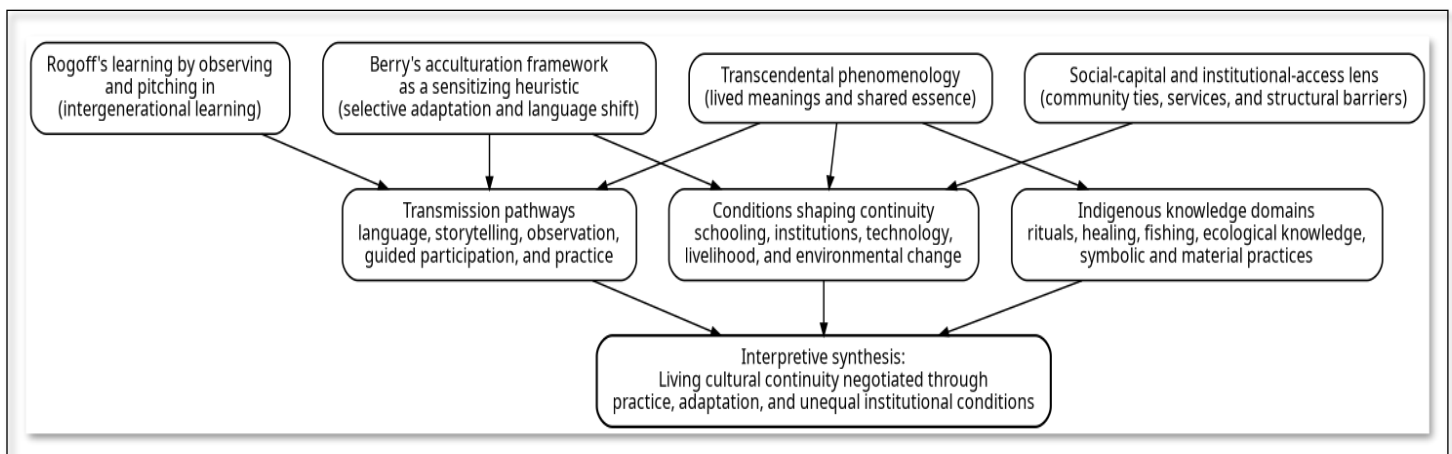
Berry's (1997) acculturation framework is retained but used cautiously. Its categories are not treated as mutually exclusive boxes, as equally present in every theme, or as direct labels chosen by participants. Instead, the

framework functions as a sensitizing heuristic for two empirically supported processes: selective adoption of external practices while retaining cultural meanings, and pressure toward dominant-language use. The revised analysis avoids automatically classifying ritual retention as separation or institutional hardship as marginalization.

Institutional barriers are interpreted through a complementary social-capital and access perspective. Gonzaga and Pratama (2025) distinguish bonding ties within Sama-Bajau families and community networks, bridging ties with civil-society and neighboring groups, and linking ties with government institutions. This perspective is useful when participants describe dependence on translation, literacy barriers, schooling, health services, and barangay participation. It allows the analysis to locate exclusion in unequal institutional relationships rather than presenting it as a cultural preference or acculturation strategy.

Together, the four lenses serve different purposes: phenomenology describes lived meaning; Rogoff explains participatory learning; Berry helps interpret selective adaptation and language pressure; and the social-capital and institutional-access lens explains how relationships with institutions enable or constrain continuity. The resulting framework recognizes overlap and avoids assigning one theoretical category to every finding.

Figure 1. Theoretical and conceptual framework of the study.



METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Site

The study employed a qualitative design using transcendental phenomenology to explore the Indigenous Knowledge Systems of the Sama-Bajau community in Dolho, Bato, Leyte. The design centered participants' descriptions of cultural practice, transmission, adaptation, and challenge. Consistent with phenomenological inquiry, the researchers practiced epoche or bracketing by deliberately examining assumptions about Indigenous culture, livelihood, religion, education, and modernization and by returning interpretive claims to the participants' accounts.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected purposively because the study required adults with direct experience of Sama-Bajau cultural practices, livelihood knowledge, family transmission, and preservation challenges. Initial consultation with community leaders supported culturally respectful recruitment. This consultation informed participant identification but did not constitute a full community-based participatory research design.

Twenty participants, regardless of sex and occupation, were included. Their ages ranged from 18 to 50 years. As legal adults, they could provide informed consent and could speak from an intergenerational position as recipients of knowledge from older relatives and as possible transmitters to children and younger community

members. No participant older than 50 was interviewed. Accordingly, the study does not describe its participants as community elders and does not treat adults' accounts as substitutes for direct elder testimony. References to older knowledge holders in the findings indicate people described by participants, not additional research participants.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through in-depth, open-ended, face-to-face interviews guided by the three research questions. Questions invited accounts of rituals, livelihood practices, symbolic representations, language use, storytelling, observation, guided participation, schooling, institutional encounters, modernization, and environmental change. Each interview lasted approximately 35 minutes. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and de-identified using participant codes beginning with P and the interview sequence number. Responses in Sama-Bajau, Cebuano, or another local language were translated for analysis and reporting with attention to preserving the meaning of culturally specific terms.

Data Analysis and Coding

Analysis followed phenomenological reduction in six connected stages. First, the researchers read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the breadth and context of the narratives. Second, horizontalization was used to identify statements relevant to IKS, intergenerational transmission, and continuity challenges, initially giving each relevant statement equal analytic value. Third, descriptive codes were assigned to the significant statements. Fourth, overlapping or vague statements were reduced and related codes were clustered into meaning units. Fifth, meaning units were compared across interviews and organized into themes that represented shared patterns while retaining differences in emphasis. Finally, textural descriptions explained what participants experienced, structural descriptions examined the conditions shaping those experiences, and the two were synthesized into an account of the shared phenomenon.

The theoretical lenses were applied after the empirical themes had been developed. This sequence reduced the risk of forcing data into preselected categories. Rogoff's perspective was applied to observation, guided participation, and community contribution; Berry's framework was used only where the data supported selective adaptation or dominant-language pressure; and the social-capital and institutional-access lens was used to interpret relationships with schools, barangay offices, health services, and other institutions.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Credibility was supported through in-depth interviewing, audio recording, verbatim transcription, repeated transcript review, and the use of participant statements as evidentiary anchors. Transferability was strengthened through description of the locale, participant boundaries, and cultural context. Dependability was supported by a consistent interview process and a transparent sequence from significant statements to codes, meaning units, and themes. Confirmability was supported through repeated checking of interpretations against the transcripts and through a documented analytic record consisting of de-identified transcripts, coding notes, theme-development records, and reflexive journal entries; this record functioned as an audit trail.

Reflexivity was treated as an ongoing responsibility rather than a single procedural step. The researchers acknowledged that their academic, cultural, and institutional positions could shape what they noticed and how they interpreted Sama-Bajau narratives. Reflective notes were maintained before, during, and after interviews to identify assumptions, emotional reactions, field impressions, and possible interpretive bias. Claims were revised when they extended beyond what participant accounts could support.

Ethical Considerations

As this study was conducted as part of an academic course requirement, it was exempt from formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. However, the research was conducted under the ethical supervision of the course adviser and adhered to standard research ethics. Participants received information about the study's purpose, the

voluntary nature of participation, their right to decline questions or withdraw, the intended academic use of their narratives, and the measures used to protect confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained before interviews. Audio files, transcripts, and participant codes were handled securely, and identifying details were excluded from reporting. The inquiry sought to protect participant dignity and respect community cultural integrity.

Methodological Boundaries

The study has four important boundaries. First, the age range of 18-50 excludes direct testimony from older community knowledge holders and may limit access to longer historical memory. Second, the study relies on interviews rather than prolonged observation of rituals, fishing, healing, or household teaching. Third, translated excerpts may not reproduce every semantic and cultural nuance of the original language. Fourth, the study concerns one localized community and does not represent all Sama-Bajau groups in the Philippines or maritime Southeast Asia. These boundaries guide the scope of the claims and the recommendations for further research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis produced three connected areas: knowledge domains practiced in the community, processes of intergenerational transmission, and conditions shaping continuity. The discussion begins with participants' accounts and then applies the complementary lenses described above. The theoretical interpretation is intentionally bounded: no single framework is treated as sufficient for all findings.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems Practiced by the Sama-Bajau

Table 1 Major Indigenous Knowledge Systems described by participants

Knowledge Domain	Illustrative Participant Statements	Interpretive Emphasis
Rituals, ceremonies, and healing	“We have weddings called Igal-Igal or Kawin...” (P4, P9); “We also have a ritual for thanksgiving called Maghinam...” (P1, P, 16, P19); “We also have tambalan called tawalan which uses tayhop and other Badjao herbs.” (P2, 8, 12, P15)	Living heritage, communal recognition, care, spirituality, and embodied knowledge.
Fishing and ecological livelihood knowledge	“We have fishing practices for us to feed our stomachs.” (P5, P13, P3, P17); “The fishermen are called Magay-Magay.” (P6, P7, P10, P11); “They conduct rituals before fishing...” (P14, P18)	Subsistence, identity, practical apprenticeship, ecological familiarity, and recognized expertise.
Symbolic and material expressions	“We are known for our tribal attire...(P20, P2, P5)”; “Our religious belief was initially Islam...” (P7, P15, P19); “Initially, our houses floated in the sea called Palao, but nowadays... Luma.” (P11, P3, P6, P9)	Visible identity, settlement change, religious history, and adaptation of material culture.

Participants described rituals, healing, livelihood, and symbolic practices as interconnected rather than separate cultural artifacts. Igal-Igal or Kawin, Maghinam, tambalan or tawalan, tayhop, and herbal remedies were associated with celebration, thanksgiving, care, spiritual interpretation, and social recognition. These practices are best understood as living heritage because their significance is produced through enactment and shared meaning, not merely through preservation as objects or performances (UNESCO, n.d.-a). The data do not require labeling cultural retention as separation; continued ritual practice may coexist with schooling, religious change, technology use, and participation in local institutions.

Fishing knowledge emerged as both a means of subsistence and a field of expertise. Participants referred to experienced fishers or Magay-Magay and to ritual preparation associated with fishing. Such knowledge is

practical, ecological, and relational: it is developed through attention to marine conditions, repeated participation, and recognition of experienced practitioners. This pattern is consistent with scholarship describing Sama-Bajau maritime knowledge as embedded in mobility, livelihood, and relations with coastal environments (Macalandag, 2023; Stacey & Allison, 2019). Environmental change therefore affects not only income but also the activities through which knowledge can be demonstrated and learned.

Attire, religious affiliation, and housing were described as visible and material expressions of identity. The transition from water-based Palao to land-based Luma illustrates that cultural forms can change while selected meanings continue. Change should not be interpreted automatically as either cultural loss or successful integration. Its meaning depends on whether community members retain agency, whether younger generations understand the practice, and whether external conditions constrain their choices. Phenomenological interpretation therefore gives priority to participants' meanings rather than assigning a fixed acculturation category to each material change.

Systems of Intergenerational Transmission

Table 2 Principal pathways of intergenerational knowledge transmission

Transmission Pathway	Illustrative Participant Statements	Interpretive Emphasis
Language-mediated teaching	"We used to speak the Sama-Bajau language..." (P1, P9, P11); "Due to our children's dominant use of Cebuano..." (P13, P11, P7)	Language carries meanings, categories, oral memory, and culturally specific instruction; dominant-language use may narrow these channels.
Observation and guided participation	"We allowed our children to observe and actively participate with the elders...(P20)"	Learning occurs through attention, imitation, contribution, and increasing responsibility in shared activities.
Storytelling and adaptive learning	"Storytelling serves as a significant method..." (P2, P4); "...accounts recalled houseboat life, settlement change, adjusted fishing methods, and children's barangay participation. (P8, P14)	Narrative links past and present while allowing knowledge to be recontextualized under changing conditions.

Transmission occurred through language, observation, participation, storytelling, and practical involvement. Rogoff's (2014) perspective clarifies why these processes matter: children and younger members learn by attending ongoing activity, joining at an appropriate level, and gradually contributing. This interpretation is more precise than treating transmission solely as a response to acculturation. It explains how knowledge is learned within families and community activities even when no formal lesson is announced.

Sama-Bajau language use was described as an important medium of instruction and socialization, while participants also observed increasing Cebuano use among children. Language shift is the clearest area in which Berry's framework is informative because it may indicate pressure toward dominant-language participation. Even here, the process should not be reduced to a single strategy: children may use Cebuano for school and wider communication while still learning selected Sama-Bajau terms, stories, practices, and identities. The relevant issue is whether bilingual or multilingual participation expands opportunity without displacing the linguistic forms through which cultural knowledge is most fully expressed (Nakata, 2024; UNESCO, 2022, 2024).

Storytelling connects younger members to experiences of houseboat life, fishing, movement, settlement, and community values. It also permits reinterpretation: stories can retain cultural memory while being told in new settings and through new media. UNESCO emphasizes that oral traditions remain viable when opportunities for interaction between older and younger generations are maintained (UNESCO, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). The present

findings support this principle, but direct elder interviews are still needed to document longer historical sequences and knowledge that adult participants may not possess.

Conditions Shaping Cultural Continuity

Table 3 Conditions that constrain or reshape knowledge practice and transmission

Condition	Illustrative Participant Statements	Interpretive Emphasis
Literacy, schooling, and institutional communication	“Even though it is difficult for us to read and write...” (P11, P17, P19); “The assigned Barangay Health Worker translates for us...” (P3, P5, P7); “We emphasize to our children the importance of education...” (P10)	Institutional mismatch, dependence on intermediaries, aspiration for education, and unequal access to services.
Technology and changing consumption	“We also embrace modern technology...” (P11, P13); “We also engaged in online shopping...” (P6, P9)	Selective adoption that may expand access without necessarily displacing cultural practice.
Environmental and livelihood pressure	“Modernization often leads to environmental degradation...” (P15, P15, P18)	Reduced access to marine resources weakens both livelihood and the everyday settings for ecological learning.

Participants' accounts of reading and writing difficulty, thumbmark use, and reliance on a Barangay Health Worker for translation point to a mismatch between institutional procedures and the community's linguistic circumstances. These experiences are not evidence that community members have chosen marginalization. They indicate unequal access to communication, documentation, and services. A social-capital perspective is more appropriate because effective participation depends on reliable linking relationships with schools, health systems, and government agencies (Gonzaga & Pratama, 2025).

Education was described as an aspiration for children's employment and future security. The key tension is therefore not education versus culture, but the form of education offered. Schooling can support broader participation while also strengthening Sama-Bajau identity when local language, knowledge, and community participation are treated as legitimate educational resources (Banes & Baniqued Dela Cruz, 2021; Victor & Yano, 2015). Conversely, schooling can weaken transmission when dominant-language literacy is presented as the only valid form of knowledge.

Technology and online consumption were not described uniformly as threats. Their use may represent selective adoption, particularly when new tools assist communication or livelihood while rituals, stories, and community relations remain meaningful. Environmental degradation and livelihood instability present a more direct challenge. When access to fishing grounds or marine resources declines, fewer opportunities remain for younger members to observe skilled practice, learn ecological signs, and participate in work. This connection between landscape change and knowledge transmission has also been observed in other Indigenous contexts (Fabinyi et al., 2022; Malapane et al., 2024).

Cross-Theme Interpretive Synthesis and Theoretical Boundaries

Table 4 Interpretive lenses, supported uses, and limits of inference

Lens	Supported Use in this Study	Boundary or Alternative Explanation
Transcendental phenomenology	Describes shared meanings of ritual, livelihood, identity, teaching, and institutional encounter.	Does not by itself establish causal relationships or represent all Sama-Bajau communities.

Rogoff: learning by observing and pitching in	Explains observation, guided participation, apprenticeship, and contribution to family/community activity.	Applies to learning processes; it does not fully explain institutional exclusion or environmental change.
Berry: acculturation as a sensitizing heuristic	Helps interpret selective adaptation and pressure toward dominant-language use.	Categories overlap and are not treated as mutually exclusive. The data do not justify claiming that all four strategies are equally present.
Social capital and institutional access	Explains how community ties and relationships with schools, health services, and government affect participation.	Institutional barriers are structural conditions, not evidence of a community preference for marginalization.

Across the themes, the Sama-Bajau experience is best described as living cultural continuity negotiated through practice, adaptation, and unequal institutional conditions. Rituals, fishing, healing, storytelling, attire, housing, and language are not preserved in identical form. They remain meaningful when community members continue to enact, explain, and adapt them within relationships that support transmission.

Berry's framework contributes to the interpretation but does not explain the entire phenomenon. The data most clearly show selective adaptation and dominant-language pressure. Cultural retention may occur alongside broad social participation, and institutional barriers may arise even when community members actively seek education, health care, and civic involvement. Rogoff's participatory-learning perspective and the social-capital lens therefore provide necessary alternatives: one explains how knowledge is learned; the other explains why institutional access may remain unequal.

The phenomenological essence is not simple preservation or inevitable loss. It is the effort to keep knowledge socially useful and recognizable while everyday life changes. Participants' narratives show agency in continuing rituals, teaching children, using technology, pursuing schooling, and adapting housing and livelihood. At the same time, agency operates within environmental, economic, and institutional constraints. Cultural resilience should therefore not be used to excuse inadequate language support or exclusion from services.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the Sama-Bajau community of Dolho remain active in rituals and healing, fishing and ecological practice, and symbolic and material expressions of identity. Knowledge is transmitted through language, storytelling, observation, guided participation, and contribution to shared activities. Continuity is shaped by selective adaptation, language pressure, schooling, institutional communication, technology, livelihood insecurity, and environmental change.

The revised interpretation does not claim that all four of Berry's acculturation strategies are equally or independently demonstrated. Berry is most useful for understanding selective adaptation and pressure toward dominant-language use. Rogoff's framework better explains participatory transmission, while the social-capital and institutional-access perspective better explains reliance on translators, literacy barriers, and unequal access to services. This theoretical division of labor produces a more cautious and empirically grounded account.

Community-led intergenerational documentation should involve recognized elders, adults, and youth in deciding what may be recorded, how it may be used, and what knowledge should remain restricted. Future research should directly include participants older than 50 and may use intergenerational interviews or small group conversations to compare memory, terminology, and practice across age groups. Such data collection should occur only with renewed informed consent and the approval or exemption required by the relevant ethics body.

Schools serving Sama-Bajau learners should integrate local knowledge and language into culturally responsive materials and activities, while public institutions should provide language-appropriate communication and interpretation. Health workers, barangay personnel, and educators can strengthen linking relationships by involving community representatives in program design rather than treating them only as service recipients. Livelihood and environmental initiatives should also recognize that protecting marine access and ecological practice supports both economic security and knowledge transmission.

Finally, preservation initiatives should recognize Sama-Bajau members as knowledge holders, authors, and decision-making partners. Documentation, education, and policy should support the continued use and community control of knowledge rather than remove cultural expressions from the relationships and places that give them meaning.

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