

The Indigenous Justice System of the Mamanwa Tribe in Jabonga, Agusan Del Norte

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Originality: 98%

Grammar Check: 95%

Plagiarism: 2%

ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received: 13 Oct 2025

Revised: 20 Nov 2025

Accepted: 27 Feb 2026

Published: 17 Aug 2026

Keywords: *Criminology, indigenous justice system, restorative justice, phenomenological design, Jabonga, Agusan del Norte, Philippines*

Indigenous justice systems remain a vital, if often under-documented, mechanism for maintaining social order in communities worldwide, yet no published study had examined the justice system of the Mamanwa Tribe, one of the oldest Indigenous groups in Mindanao. This study documented, for the first time, how the Mamanwa Tribe of Jabonga, Agusan del Norte, Philippines, conducts, demonstrates, structures, and procedurally implements its indigenous justice system. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design. Six conversational partners participated: three tribal Elders in a focus group discussion and three ordinary tribe members in individual in-depth interviews, with data analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings showed that Mamanwa justice is fundamentally restorative, centered on community cooperation, the *sala* atonement practice, and forgiveness mediated by the *Dakola* (tribal leader), with grave offenses such as murder and rape explicitly referred beyond tribal jurisdiction to the barangay or government. Reconciliation is formalized through the ritual practices of *Oyagdok* and *Kahimonan*, and justice is administered through a collaborative, tripartite leadership structure, the *Dakola* for judgment, the *Malaas* council for counsel, and the *Bataon* for enforcement, selected through a community-anchored process based on integrity rather than heredity. Procedurally, the system requires summoned parties, corroborating witnesses, and formal documentation, mirroring safeguards

recommended under the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act. These findings support restorative justice theory's emphasis on relational repair over retribution while revealing the system's dependence on communal trust and its explicit, self-imposed jurisdictional limits, providing the first documented reference for Mamanwa customary law and a foundation for tribal, governmental, and academic engagement with it.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous justice systems remain a vital, if often overlooked, mechanism for maintaining social order in communities worldwide. Across continents, Indigenous Peoples continue to rely on customary institutions, elders, and ritual practices to resolve disputes and preserve communal harmony, frequently operating in parallel with, or in tension against, the hybridized justice systems imposed through colonization and globalization. In Cameroon, for example, Indigenous communities such as the Ngie clan of Ambanasom's fictionalized *Dudum* remain caught between colonial-derived Western judicial systems and their own Indigenous Knowledge Systems, a tension that has eroded the transmission and legibility of customary justice across generations (Beh & Fonyuy, 2020). In South Asia, the Panchayat system, comprising the Gram Panchayats and Nyaya Panchayats, illustrates how customary dispute-resolution institutions have been partially absorbed into constitutional and statutory frameworks, as seen in India's Gram Nyayalayas Act of 2008, enacted to restore local access to justice after the Panchayati Raj Institutions were reduced to largely administrative rather than judicial bodies (Chakraborty, 2021). Similarly, pastoralist communities in Kenya, such as the Turkana and Pokot, continue to rely on Indigenous conflict-management mechanisms and peace treaties to manage interethnic tension despite the erosion of these systems near urban centers (Nganga, 2019). In East Asia, Taiwan's Indigenous court units illustrate how customary dispute practices are formally, if imperfectly, integrated into state judicial infrastructure through designated ad hoc Chambers of Indigenous Courts within the Judicial Yuan, though ethnographic research within these units finds that non-Indigenous actors, state law, and majority-language proceedings continue to dominate in practice, limiting how fully Indigenous dispute-resolution norms are actually incorporated (Upton, 2020).

Within maritime Southeast Asia, the Dayak people of Kalimantan, Indonesia, one of Borneo's oldest Indigenous groups, maintain customary institutions such as the *kedamangan*, led by the *Damang* (customary peacemaker), which enforces customary law and administers restorative sanctions, including monetary fines and ceremonial reconciliation, to preserve the value the Dayak call *Belom Bahadat*, or a life lived with decency (Wulandari, Suryani, & Prasetyo, 2022). Comparable customary institutions among the Ngaju Dayak employ penal mediation, involving both victim-offender mediation and family and community group conferencing, to resolve criminal disputes while avoiding displacement of state criminal procedure (Wulandari et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, Indigenous Cultural Communities and Indigenous Peoples (ICCs/IPs) are legally entitled, under the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 (Republic Act No. 8371), to use their own justice systems, conflict-resolution institutions, and customary laws, provided these remain compatible with the national legal system and internationally recognized human rights (Republic Act No. 8371, 1997, Sec. 15). Among the Higaonon of Agusan del Norte, disputes are resolved through *paghusay*, presided over by the *Ininay/Inamay* (Supreme Chief) and a council of *Datu*, culminating in the *Tampuda* reconciliation ritual once a dispute is settled (Ragandang III, 2017). Among the Kalinga of the Cordillera, the *Bodong* peace-pact institution regulates intervillage relations through a four-stage process of ceasefire, token exchange, negotiation, and formal celebration (Ragandang III, 2018). Other Philippine groups, including the Ifugao (through *monkalun*-mediated negotiation, *bultong* wrestling matches, or *uggub* ritual contests), the Tinggian (through the *lalakay* council of elders), the Maranao (through the kinship-based *kokoman-akambetabara* system), the Subanen (through the oral customary law of the *Thimuay*), and the Manobo (through *pangayan* retaliation and the *tavagan* restitution system), each maintain distinct customary mechanisms for adjudicating wrongdoing (Ragandang III, 2018; San Jose, 2021). These studies collectively demonstrate that Philippine Indigenous justice systems converge on restorative, elder-mediated, and ritually anchored dispute resolution, yet each tribe's specific institutional structure and terminology remain distinct and under-documented.

Despite this growing body of literature on Higaonon, Kalinga, Ifugao, Tinggian, Maranao, Subanen, and Manobo justice practices, no published study has examined the justice system of the Mamanwa Tribe, one of the oldest Indigenous groups in Mindanao. This literature gap motivated the present study, which sought to document, for the first time, how the Mamanwa Tribe of Jabonga, Agusan del Norte conducts, demonstrates, structures, and procedurally implements its indigenous justice system. The findings are intended to serve tribal Elders and Leaders in formalizing their justice practices, to guide the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and local government units in supporting indigenous justice mechanisms, and to provide future researchers a documented reference on an Indigenous justice system that had not previously been studied.

FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on restorative justice theory (Braithwaite, 2002), which conceptualizes justice not as retribution but as the repair of harm through dialogue, accountability, and the restoration of relationships among victim, offender, and community. This framework explains the Mamanwa practice of *sala* (atonement) and the ritual reconciliation processes of *Oyagdok* and *Kabimonan*, wherein material restitution and spiritual practice jointly repair the social fabric disrupted by an offense. The study further draws on the naturalistic inquiry framework of Guba and Lincoln (1985), which guided the researchers' approach to establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in a phenomenological account of

a previously undocumented Indigenous justice system, consistent with the broader qualitative inquiry principles that credibility in cross-cultural, community-based research depends on prolonged engagement and methodological transparency (Creswell, 2013). This framework is applied with explicit attention to the postcolonial context in which Indigenous justice systems operate, recognizing that documenting such systems on their own cultural terms, rather than through an imported Western evaluative lens, is itself part of respecting Indigenous communities' psychological and epistemic self-determination (Duran & Duran, 1995).

OBJECTIVES

This study examined the indigenous justice system of the Mamanwa Tribe in Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) 237, Jabonga, Agusan del Norte, through the following specific objectives: (1) described the fundamental values and principles that govern the conduct of the tribal justice system in resolving disputes; (2) demonstrated, through documented practices and cases, how the tribal justice system resolves conflicts, integrates ritual reconciliation, and enforces its decisions; (3) identified the composition, hierarchical structure, and selection process of the leaders and councils comprising the tribal justice system; and (4) documented the procedural steps, evidentiary requirements, and jurisdictional scope followed by the tribal justice system in handling disputes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design, which enabled the researchers to characterize and interpret the complex, lived experience of Mamanwa tribal justice administration (Alhazmi & Kaufman, 2022), following the structured approach to bracketing, horizontalization, and thematic synthesis established in the phenomenological research tradition (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Site

The study was conducted in Jabonga, Agusan del Norte, Philippines, among Mamanwa community members connected to the Calinawan Clan within CADT 237.

Participants

Six conversational partners participated: three tribal Elders, knowledgeable in dispute settlement, punishment, and community leadership, who composed the focus group discussion (FGD); and three ordinary Mamanwa Tribe members with discernment of the justice process, who composed the individual in-depth interviews (IDI).

Instrumentation

Data were gathered using a researcher-developed interview guide aligned with the study's four objectives, administered with the assistance of a dialect translator when necessary, and recorded through voice recordings.

Research Ethics Protocol

Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could decline or withdraw without adverse consequences. The researchers requested approval from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) in Butuan City and coordinated with the NCIP Jabonga office to identify knowledgeable participants. Informed consent was obtained before interviews; recordings were used only for research analysis; and participant identities were protected through coded identifiers. Member checking, peer debriefing, and participant verification were used to strengthen trustworthiness. The free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of the community was secured through NCIP Caraga Resolution No. 01, Series of 2024, dated February 25, 2024, and further evidenced by the Certificate of Securing Consent of the elders, leaders, and member-respondents, issued by the Regional Director of NCIP Caraga on February 26, 2024.

Data Collection

The researchers personally approached respondents, secured informed consent, and conducted FGDs and IDIs using the interview guide, recording all sessions through voice recordings for subsequent transcription and translation.

Data Analysis

Vernacular responses were transcribed and translated into English, then analyzed through the three iterative steps of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify, code, and organize recurring patterns into essential themes, assisted by a data analysis expert. Credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were established through peer debriefing, member checking, adviser-maintained audit records, and thick contextual description of the setting, following the naturalistic inquiry criteria of Guba and Lincoln (1985); no claim to generalizability beyond the studied context is made.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conduct of the tribal justice system

Five essential themes describe the conduct of the Mamanwa justice system: peace and cooperation, sala (atonement), forgiveness and reconciliation, the restorative justice approach, and the limitations of tribal justice.

TABLE 1*Essential themes on the conduct of the Mamanwa justice system*

Theme	Core idea
Peace and cooperation	Community unity and mutual help are the foundation for achieving justice and peace
Sala	The offender offers atonement (money, livestock, or goods) once fault is determined
Forgiveness and reconciliation	Offenders unable to meet restitution may appeal for forgiveness through the <i>Dakola</i>
Restorative justice approach	Time is given for offenders to fulfill obligations rather than face immediate punishment
Limitations of tribal justice	Grave offenses (e.g., murder, rape) exceed tribal jurisdiction and are referred to the barangay or government

Conversational partners consistently described cooperation as the precondition for justice: "It's just mutual cooperation. How can justice be achieved if there's no cooperation in the community?" (FGD). When a dispute is confirmed, the *Dakola* determines fault and requires the offender to render *sala*, commonly money, livestock, or tools, "as long as both parties reach an agreement and the problem is resolved" (IDI_3). Even in serious wrongdoing, the system preserves space for forgiveness: an offender unable to meet the victim's demand "will appeal for forgiveness from the tribe" while the *Dakola* "will do everything necessary to continue maintaining peace and justice" (IDI_2). However, this restorative capacity is bounded: "for major offenses like murder or rape, the tribe does not handle these cases as they must be reported to the barangay or the government" (FGD).

These findings affirm that Mamanwa justice is fundamentally restorative rather than punitive, consistent with restorative justice theory's emphasis on repairing relationships and restoring social peace over retribution (Braithwaite, 2002). The reliance on cooperation and collective participation as prerequisites for resolution likewise reflects social cohesion theory, wherein group solidarity strengthens a community's collective capacity to resolve conflict (Putnam, 2000). At the same time, the clear jurisdictional ceiling on grave offenses illustrates a structural constraint documented broadly across tribal justice systems: informal, community-based mechanisms consistently lack authority over serious felony-level offenses and must cede jurisdiction to formal state courts (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011). The Mamanwa case, read against restorative justice theory, both supports the theory's claim that community-anchored dialogue and atonement can resolve most everyday disputes, and exposes the theory's limitation once harm exceeds what community-level restitution can repair.

Demonstration of the tribal justice system's conduct

Five themes emerged describing how the tribal justice system operates in practice: mutual agreement as a resolution method, summoning the offender,

symbolism and spirituality in reconciliation (through *Oyagdok* and *Kahimonan*), transparency and awareness, and the prevention of recurrence.

TABLE 2

Essential themes on the demonstrated practice of the Mamanwa justice system

Theme	Core idea
Mutual agreement as a resolution method	Disputes are settled through consensus between the parties, restoring peace of mind
Summoning the offender	The offender and a witness are formally summoned; no case proceeds without evidence
Symbolism and spirituality in reconciliation	<i>Oyagdok</i> (peace offering) and <i>Kahimonan</i> (a day-and-night ceremony) formalize forgiveness
Transparency and awareness	Community members serve as witnesses or informants and learn the resolution process
Preventing recurrence of offenses	The <i>Dakola</i> counsels the offender to prevent repetition of the wrongdoing

Resolution begins with summoning: "the offender must be summoned, and there must be a witness or someone who can testify" (FGD), since "a case cannot be resolved without evidence" (IDI_3). Once fault is established, reconciliation is formalized through *Oyagdok*, in which a wooden structure and offerings, including *mambon* (betel nut), *apog* (lime powder), tobacco, a chicken, and candles, symbolize sincere repentance, and through *Kahimonan*, a day-and-night ceremony of invocation, traditional dance (*Sayan*), and song (*Tud-om*) led by the *babaylan* (spiritual leader) (FGD). Community members participate as witnesses and informants, which both ensures transparency and transmits knowledge of the justice process across the community (FGD; IDI_2). Once a resolution is reached, the tribal leader counsels the offender "so they do not repeat their wrongdoing" (FGD).

This evidentiary and ritual structure mirrors the emphasis on witness testimony and documentary corroboration found in alternative dispute resolution generally (Shah, 2019), while the community's active participatory role as witness and informant reflects Indigenous peoples' broader assertion of self-determination in maintaining their own legal traditions (Van Schilfegaarde, 2024). The *Oyagdok* and *Kahimonan* rituals affirm restorative justice theory's proposition that reconciliation requires not merely material restitution but symbolic and relational repair (Braithwaite, 2002); comparable customary ceremonies, such as the *Tumbang Anoi*-derived penal mediation of the Dayak Ngaju, likewise combine fines with ceremonial apology to reintegrate offenders and deter recidivism (Wulandari et al., 2022). Where the theory is tested, however, is in the system's continued reliance on the moral authority of the *Dakola* and community consensus; without a codified evidentiary standard, the system's fairness rests substantially on communal trust rather than procedural safeguards, a critique that formal legal systems are structurally designed to address.

Composition and structure of the tribal justice system

Five themes describe the composition of the Mamanwa justice system: the *Dakola* (tribal leader), the *Kamalas-an* (council-selecting body), the *Bataon* (assistant/information officer), the community, and the collaborative, hierarchical nature of the overall system.

TABLE 3

Essential themes on the composition and structure of the Mamanwa justice system

Theme/role	Function
Dakola	Presiding officer; renders final judgment in disputes
Kamalas-an (council)	Family representatives who select seven Malaas (council of elders)
Malaas	Council of elders that advises the <i>Dakola</i> and selects the <i>Bataon</i>
Bataon	Assists in implementing decisions and enforcing peace
Community	Serves as witnesses, informants, and upholds decisions reached

Procedurally, "both the accused and the victim are summoned, along with the person responsible for the issue," and "there must be a witness or informant who can testify about the incident" before the *Dakola* assesses fault and the *Malaas* advises on judgment (FGD). The system's jurisdiction is explicitly bounded to "conflicts that involve violations of human rights, land disputes, and misinformation" (FGD; IDI_3), with more complex cases referred to higher authorities. Evidentiary practice places particular weight on corroborating witnesses, such as a neighboring landowner in land disputes (FGD; IDI_1). Once fault is established, penalties are calibrated to offense severity, and the *Dakola* may mediate forgiveness where an offender cannot meet the imposed restitution (FGD). Finally, the system maintains formal documentation: "a secretary is assigned to record all discussions, from the initial mediation to the final judgment," supported by photographs and signed agreements (FGD; IDI_2).

This procedural design directly reflects both the letter and the spirit of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act, which affirms ICCs/IPs' right to resolve land conflicts and disputes according to customary law before resort to formal courts (Republic Act No. 8371, 1997, Sec. 7[h]), and which directs the NCIP to assist Indigenous communities in documenting cases resolved under their own justice systems as a reference for future disputes (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, 1998, Sec. 4). The Mamanwa's formal documentation practice therefore anticipates, at the community level, exactly the kind of record-keeping that Philippine Indigenous-rights policy is designed to encourage, and it addresses a documented weakness in many alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, namely, insufficient monitoring and record-keeping that undermines long-term credibility (Gatmaytan, 2002). The system's explicit jurisdictional boundary for grave crimes further corroborates the broader finding, across Indigenous justice systems internationally, that community-based mechanisms are most effective and most

legitimate when confined to disputes proportionate to their evidentiary and enforcement capacity, while serious crimes are properly routed to state judicial systems with formal prosecutorial authority (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011).

A methodological limitation of this study, consistent with its bounded, single-clan phenomenological design, is that findings reflect the lived experience of six conversational partners connected to the Calinawan Clan specifically and are not intended to generalize to other Mamanwa communities or clans, whose leadership terminology or procedural emphasis may differ; the researchers make no claim to generalizability beyond this studied context, consistent with the naturalistic inquiry tradition underpinning the study's design (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Procedure of the tribal justice system

Five themes describe the documented procedure followed by the Mamanwa justice system: summoning of involved parties, limitations of jurisdiction, the importance of witnesses and evidence, a preventive approach to crime, and formal documentation.

TABLE 4

Essential themes on the procedure of the Mamanwa justice system

Theme	Core idea
Summoning of involved parties	The accused, victim, and any relevant witness are called before the Dakola and Malaas
Limitations of jurisdiction	The system resolves land disputes, misinformation, and human rights violations; graver crimes are referred externally
Importance of witnesses and evidence	A neighboring landowner or informant typically corroborates land-related claims
Preventive approach to crime	Penalties are proportionate to the offense; the Dakola may mediate forgiveness where restitution cannot be met
Formal documentation	A secretary records proceedings; photographs and signed agreements are produced

Procedurally, "both the accused and the victim are summoned, along with the person responsible for the issue," and "there must be a witness or informant who can testify about the incident" before the Dakola assesses fault and the Malaas advises on judgment (FGD). The system's jurisdiction is explicitly bounded to "conflicts that involve violations of human rights, land disputes, and misinformation" (FGD; IDI_3), with more complex cases referred to higher authorities. Evidentiary practice places particular weight on corroborating witnesses, such as a neighboring landowner in land disputes (FGD; IDI_1). Once fault is established, penalties are calibrated to offense severity, and the Dakola may mediate forgiveness where an offender cannot meet the imposed restitution (FGD). Finally, the system maintains formal documentation: "a secretary is assigned to record all

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CONCLUSIONS

The indigenous justice system of the Mamanwa Tribe of Jabonga, Agusan del Norte, is fundamentally restorative rather than punitive, organized around community cooperation, the *sala* atonement practice, and ritual reconciliation through *Oyagdok* and *Kabimonan*, administered by a collaborative, tripartite leadership structure whose members are selected for integrity rather than heredity, and bounded by an explicit, self-imposed jurisdictional limit that refers grave offenses to formal government authorities. This study's principal contribution beyond existing literature is that it provides the first documented account of Mamanwa customary justice, a system previously undocumented despite the tribe's status as one of Mindanao's oldest Indigenous groups, and situates it within the broader comparative literature on Philippine and international Indigenous justice systems. These findings support restorative justice theory's central claim that community-anchored dialogue, atonement, and ritual reconciliation can effectively repair everyday social harm, while also revealing the theory's boundary condition: the system's fairness and continuity depend substantially on sustained communal trust in the *Dakola's* authority rather than on codified procedural safeguards, and its restorative capacity is deliberately limited to disputes proportionate to its evidentiary and enforcement capacity. The Mamanwa case neither contradicts nor uncritically confirms restorative justice theory; rather, it extends the theory's applicability to a previously undocumented cultural context while clarifying the specific conditions,

communal recognition, evidentiary informality, and jurisdictional self-restraint, under which that applicability holds.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

Consistent with the researchers' stated intent to serve tribal Elders and Leaders, the NCIP, local government units, and future researchers, these findings could be translated into a plain-language documentation booklet, prepared in both the Mamanwa vernacular and Filipino/English, that records the tribe's justice values, ritual practices, leadership structure, and procedural steps in accessible form for the community's own reference and for transmission to younger tribe members. It is hoped that this booklet could be shared with the NCIP Caraga and Jabonga offices to support their statutory mandate to assist Indigenous communities in documenting their own customary justice mechanisms, and with the Jabonga local government unit to help inform coordination protocols for cases that fall outside tribal jurisdiction, such as grave offenses requiring referral to the barangay or national justice system.

Since this study represents the first documented reference on Mamanwa justice practice, it could also be made available to future researchers and to other Mindanao Indigenous communities seeking a comparative model for documenting their own customary law, potentially extending the same recognition and support that comparable documentation efforts have provided to the Higaonon, Kalinga, Ifugao, Tinggian, Maranao, Subanen, and Manobo justice systems.

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