



FEATURE ARTICLE

The Indigenous Ikalahan women of the Philippines

Exploring their role in forest stewardship through narrative portraits

Elaine Anne Parlade

Introduction

This article highlights the vital role that women, particularly those in Indigenous communities such as the Ikalahan tribe from the Philippines, play in forest stewardship. Through the Narrative Portraits method, the author conducted a walking interview with Asami Segundo — an Indigenous Ikalahan woman and founder of the women-led group, Ikalahan-Kalanguya Youth Organization for Sustainable Development (IKAYO) — visually documenting the conversation through photographs and audio. These immersive elements offer insight into the ways in which Ikalahan women engage with and protect their forests.

“We must ensure our voices are heard in a way

that fosters true understanding and meaningful

integration of our perspectives into policymaking.”

Asami Segundo, Ikalahan woman

Above: Ikalahan women elders in Imugan, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines.
All photos and videos: Elaine Anne Parlade

These elements also illuminate Asami's reflections on the central role of Ikalahan women in sustainable forest stewardship. These women not only advocate for environmental protection, but also actively foster the transfer of

intergenerational knowledge, ensuring that Indigenous practices and values continue to shape their forest management efforts. Through their commitment and leadership, women like Asami are mobilizing the next generation to safeguard both their cultural heritage and the environment.

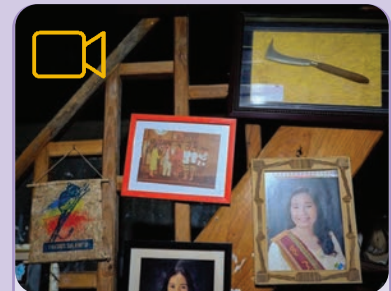
This article incorporates the Narrative Portraits method, integrating photographs and audio from an interview with Asami Segundo, founder of the women-led initiative, Ikalahan-Kalanguya Youth Organization for Sustainable Development (IKAYO). Her reflections and stories result in a co-created narrative that illustrates their connection to a particular place and issue. These multimedia vignettes offer an intimate glimpse into Asami's reflections on the role of Ikalahan women in forest stewardship and how their contributions are interwoven with the broader cultural and environmental changes occurring in the community.



Click on the icons for links to the videos

The Ikalahans

Nestled in the mountain forests of the barangay of Imugan, Nueva Vizcaya province in the Philippines is the Ikalahan-Kalanguya Indigenous group, whose connection to the forest is deeply embedded in their identity and way of life. The word *Ikalahan*, meaning “forest people,” reflects their close relationship with the land they steward, from cultivating food to protecting water sources. For example, in their language, distinct words exist for various types of washing — for dishes, laundry or bathing — all reliant on water sourced from the waterfalls and streams they carefully safeguard. These natural water sources, nourished by the forest's ecosystems, meet their practical needs and also support their farming systems and cultural traditions.



Asami reflects on how elders, especially women, have shaped her understanding of forest stewardship and cultural preservation.

Click [here](#) to see the video

One of the reflections that deeply resonated during the conversation with Asami was her insight: *“Being Ikalahan doesn’t mean that we have forests because of us, but rather, being Ikalahan means that we are here because of the forests.”* This profound perspective captures the essence of the Ikalahan worldview, where the land and forest are inseparable from the community's survival and cultural identity. For the Ikalahans, the forest is not simply a resource to be managed, but the very foundation of their existence and heritage.



Asami, representing the Ikalahan community, participates in an online meeting from a café overlooking the Imugan forests.

Among the country's 150 cultural communities, comprising over 17 million Indigenous peoples (Poffenberger, 1999; UNOPS, 2024), the Ikalahans stand out as pioneers of community-based forest management. Their recognition stems from decades of resisting land-grabbers and government projects, culminating in the landmark 1974 Memorandum of Agreement No. 1. This agreement established the 14,730-hectare Kalahan Forest Reserve, granting the Ikalahans the authority to sustainably manage their ancestral lands while preserving their cultural heritage (Dolom and Serrano, 2005). The Ikalahans' proactive efforts extend beyond legal recognition; they have continuously deployed traditional ecological knowledge and community-led initiatives to safeguard biodiversity, water resources and vital forest



Imugan Falls, a vital source of water for the Ikalahan community.

Kalahan Academy and listening to her Elders, she came to realize that the forest is the source of life for the Ikalahans. The role of women Elders in maintaining cultural ties to the forest and passing down Indigenous knowledge has been pivotal in shaping her understanding.

As leaders in community-based forest management, the Ikalahan community not only safeguards their land, but also relies on the active involvement of Indigenous women. Their roles — specifically those of women Elders in knowledge transfer

— are central to preserving both the forest and cultural traditions.

Swidden farming and forest stewardship

When asked about the role of women in forest stewardship, Asami immediately brings up swidden farming, or *inum-an* — an indigenous practice rooted in crop rotation and forest fallow cycles (de Luna et al., 2019). Historically, the Ikalahans made the transition from a lifestyle of hunting and gathering to *inum-an*, a system that balances agriculture with forest regeneration. Traditional gender roles were integral to this balance; men typically prepared the site, including clearing and conducting the controlled burn, while women focused on planting and tending the crops (Rice, 2001).

While the Ikalahan women's contributions are often seen in their role in planting, their impact extends far beyond that. They bring extensive knowledge of Indigenous farming methods such as *gengen* (composting on infertile farms with sweet potato vines), *balkah* (contour cropping), and *day-og* (in-situ composting on sloping land), which are vital for maintaining soil fertility and land productivity (Camacho et al., 2010; Dizon et al., 2008). Women

ecosystems, which ensures the long-term sustainability of both their land and way of life.

Asami, an Ikalahan woman, has dedicated her life to the preservation and advancement of her community's cultural heritage. She wears many hats — serving as a volunteer technical and liaison officer for her community, the Regional Coordinator for Southeast Asia of the Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) Consortium, and the founder of the women-led IKAYO. Through IKAYO, she works closely with Indigenous youth to promote intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural preservation and empowerment.

Asami did not fully grasp the value of the forests as a child, but after attending the



A house in the heart of Imugan's forest, where the community lives in close connection with the land.



Asami explaining the roles of Ikalahan women in swidden farming and forest conservation.

[Click here](#) to see the video



also expertly select and manage sweet potato varieties to ensure optimal growth while sustaining the surrounding ecosystems. Although some of these traditional methods have gradually fallen out of use as the community has reduced cultivation on steep slopes to allow forests to regenerate (Dizon et al., 2008), Asami highlighted how women continue to be knowledge holders, passing on Indigenous forestry and farming practices to younger generations.

This role was also evident in the author's undergraduate research, which documented Ikalahan women Elders demonstrating traditional swidden farming tools while sharing their historical significance. These implements (see



Top: An Ikalahan Elder demonstrating (left) how a kayabang (basket) is carried with an uyon (head strap); and (right) how a dopdop, a traditional tool, is used for planting and harvesting crops. Above: Essential tools for swidden farming — knife and bolos (cutting tools) — shared by Ikalahan women Elders.

photos) are not only used for farming and harvesting, but are also carefully maintained and passed down, embodying the community's sustainable forestry practices. All the photos that appear here (page 156) are from that 2014 fieldwork, which, although not publicly available, captured how women sustain sustainable forestry and cultural practices through intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Over time, the role of women in forest conservation has expanded. In addition to farming, they now engage in forest restoration efforts such as collecting seeds, gathering wildlings, potting and preparing seedlings. Asami shared that women nowadays are also involved in the technical aspects of forest stewardship, including conducting forest inventories, GIS mapping, geotagging, and managing forest resources. Their role in conservation continues to evolve, which demonstrates their deep commitment to both the land and the future of their community.



Asami talks about challenges and opportunities for Ikalahan women. [Click here](#) to see the video



Ikalahan women's impact on forest stewardship and the rise of IKAYO

The Ikalahan community's forest stewardship is deeply tied to their cultural identity, and the growing involvement of young women in leadership roles reflects this connection. Asami's journey of understanding the forest's importance began with attending the Kalahan Academy and engaging in community exchanges where Elders shared their knowledge. Her shift in perspective mirrors a broader trend where youth, particularly young women, are stepping into leadership, not only in forest stewardship but also in community advocacy.

Key institutions, such as the Kalahan Educational Foundation (KEF) and its Kalahan Academy, have been instrumental in preserving Ikalahan culture and promoting education. These institutions, alongside intergenerational dialogues with Elders, laid the foundation for IKAYO's formation in 2023. Emerging from the youth's commitment to sustaining traditional knowledge, particularly in forest stewardship and swidden farming, IKAYO fosters cultural continuity, environmental stewardship and community vitality.

Primarily led by young women, IKAYO emphasizes intergenerational knowledge exchange and youth leadership. The Ikalahan women Elders have played a crucial role in mentoring and inspiring these young leaders, reinforcing a gradual yet essential process of empowerment supported by the community and institutional structures.

Challenges and opportunities

Although IKAYO symbolizes hope for the next generation of Indigenous leaders, significant challenges persist. Despite foundational support from institutions such as KEF and the Kalahan Academy, limited local livelihood opportunities hinder youth engagement in leadership and community development. As Asami shared, the scarcity of relevant jobs in the community prevents many young people from applying their education. Even as a licensed forestry professional, Asami faced similar challenges on returning to Imugan, highlighting the gap between young professionals' aspirations and the opportunities available to them.

This gap is also reflected in the personal symbols of Asami's journey, such as her graduation portrait and the farming tools displayed in her home (see photo, page 160). These encapsulate both her educational achievements and the cultural significance of her upbringing, which emphasizes the tension between her professional aspirations and the limited local opportunities.

The lack of stable employment forces many Indigenous youth to seek work in nearby towns or the rest of the country or abroad, distancing them from their culture and from potential leadership roles. For young Indigenous women, the challenges are even more pronounced. Community-based roles are often confined to teaching, farming or politics — important jobs, but not always aligned with their professional training or personal aspirations.

The situation is further exacerbated by the lack of sustained funding for community institutions. Short-term, project-based funding limits the potential of initiatives, preventing them from creating lasting programmes that could empower young women and foster long-term community engagement.



Asami, Imugan, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines.

Asami emphasizes the importance of governmental recognition of Indigenous peoples' knowledge and rights, including incorporating free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) and self-determination, especially in terms of policy- and decision-making. Such recognition is critical to creating an environment where young Indigenous women can thrive as leaders.

Asami envisions a future where Indigenous peoples' voices, especially those of women, are respected, their rights are upheld, and their traditional knowledge is recognized as vital to addressing modern challenges such as biodiversity loss and climate change. She

highlights the importance of amplifying Indigenous peoples' perspectives in policymaking, emphasizing that their on-the-ground experiences and innovative approaches can bridge the gap between technical policies and lived realities. Through storytelling, Asami underscores how Indigenous communities navigate these challenges, offering insights that inspire genuine understanding and action. She also stresses the need for policymakers to engage meaningfully with the diverse worldviews of Indigenous peoples, moving beyond token consultation to ensure that their voices are integrated into decision-making processes.

Conclusion: carrying forward the legacy of forest stewardship

Ikalahan women have long been central to forest stewardship, shaping the preservation of their community through farming, knowledge-sharing and cultural traditions. Their leadership, particularly in guiding the younger generation, has been essential in maintaining both the forest and cultural practices. As Asami reflects, however, despite their significant contributions, barriers — such as limited local opportunities, unstable or short-term funding for community-led initiatives like IKAYO, and inadequate institutional support — often hinder women's full



A foggy Imugan mountain village.

potential in forest management and leadership. These challenges are compounded by societal norms that, despite progress, still undervalue women's contributions in certain spaces.

Asami's reflections highlight the need for systemic change. She envisions a future where Indigenous women are not only recognized but actively supported as leaders in forest management and cultural preservation. This future requires long-term investments in education, leadership development, and community initiatives, fostering a place where women can thrive and contribute their invaluable knowledge. She also emphasizes the importance of recognizing Indigenous rights and knowledge, through processes such as FPIC, to ensure that women and youth can participate fairly in decision-making processes.

Her hope lies in the next generation, guided by the wisdom of their women Elders and the emerging leaders of IKAYO. The youth, inspired by the resilience and leadership of women, are reconnecting with their heritage and stepping forward to protect their ancestral lands. When Indigenous women, supported by their communities, are given the resources and opportunities they need, their leadership can drive social, cultural and environmental renewal.

“ It's also important for us to
share our stories... We need to
listen to people on the ground.
Indigenous peoples, who are
deeply connected to the land,
are part of this ground. For
us, the earth is not separate
from our lives — it is our life. ”

Asami Segundo, Ikalahan woman



Descending from the mountains of Nueva Vizcaya.

Asami's journey reflects the power of empowered Indigenous women as cornerstones of forest stewardship and community resilience. By addressing the systemic barriers they face and elevating their voices, the wisdom and vision of these women will continue to guide the future of their forests and communities for generations to come.

References

- Camacho, L. D., Combalicer, M. S., Yeo-Chang, Y., Combalicer, E. A., Carandang, A. P., Camacho, S. C. and Rebugio, L. L. (2010). Traditional forest conservation knowledge/technologies in the Cordillera, Northern Philippines. *Forest Policy and Economics*, 22, 3–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2010.06.001>
- de Luna, C., Garcia, J. and Pulhin, J. (2019). *The Kalahan Educational Foundation: On the ground initiative for forest conservation and culture preservation*. FFTC-AP. <https://ap.fftc.org.tw/article/1607>
- Dizon, J.T., Puhin, J.M. and Cruz, R.V.O. (2008). *Impacts of forest tenure reform in an ancestral domain area: The case of the Kalahan Educational Foundation in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines*. Center for International Forestry Research, Rights and Resources Initiative Project, College of Forestry and Natural Resources and University of the Philippines Los Banos Foundation, Inc.
- Dolom, B. and Serrano, R. (2005). The Ikalahan: Traditions bearing fruit. In: Durst, P. B., Brown, C., Tacio, H. D. and Ishikawa, M. (Eds.). *In search of excellence: Exemplary forest management in Asia and the Pacific*. RAP Publication. <https://www.fao.org/4/ae542e/ae542e00.htm>
- Poffenberger, M. (1999). *Communities and forest management in Southeast Asia*. Berkeley, California: WG-CIFM Committee, Involvement in Forest Management. <https://iucn.org/resources/publication/communities-and-forest-management-southeast-asia>
- Rice, D. (2001). Community based forestry management: The experience of the Ikalahan. *Forests, Trees and Livelihoods*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14728028.2001.9752381>
- UNOPS (United Nations Office for Project Services). (2024). *Towards inclusion for indigenous peoples in the Philippines*. United Nations Office for Project Services. <https://www.unops.org/news-and-stories/stories/towards-inclusion-for-indigenous-peoples-in-the-philippines>

Author affiliation

Elaine Anne Parlade, Junior researcher, BOKU University and European Forest Institute - Forest Policy Research Network, Vienna, Austria (aineparlade@boku.ac.at)



Asami's graduation portrait is displayed in her home, alongside farming tools.