

Research Article

The Influence of Aeta Traditional Healing Practices on Tourism Development in San Felipe, Zambales: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Cultural tourism worldwide places indigenous communities at an important paradox between creating economic advantages and challenging the commodification of intangible cultural heritage. This interplay was explored through the effect of Aeta traditional healing on tourism development in San Felipe, Zambales. There is limited scholarly knowledge about the subtle, human qualities of the actors involved. This phenomenological study was conducted to investigate the meaning of such lived experiences. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten purposively selected key informants (Aeta healers, LGU leaders, tourists). Thematic analysis revealed that Aeta healing is not merely a practice but a profound spiritual calling and a cornerstone of cultural identity. However, its intersection with tourism is shaped by multifaceted dynamics, a broad spectrum of readiness among healers, a critical knowledge and policy gap within the LGU, and a community-wide ethical negotiation to prevent exploitation, embodied by the principle of *kusang loob* (voluntary giving). The study concludes that sustainable integration requires a co-created, empathetic framework that prioritizes cultural sovereignty and ensures the Aeta are the definitive agents of tourism development centered on their heritage.

Keywords: Aeta, Cultural Tourism, Indigenous Knowledge, Phenomenology, Sustainable Development, Traditional Healing

1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous communities worldwide possess extensive traditional knowledge that gives them a unique view on health, sustainability, and cultural identity (UNESCO, 2023). In the Philippines, this is especially true for the Aeta of San Felipe, Zambales, whose long history of healing is at risk of being lost or exploited by tourists (GMA News, 2024). Existing literature recognizes the significance of indigenous knowledge systems in health and heritage preservation (Teves et al., 2023; Andalan et al., 2024); however, a substantial gap persists in comprehending the intricate, human experience associated with this phenomenon. Contemporary research frequently engages in discourse about indigenous communities rather than with them, lacking the phenomenological depth necessary to formulate genuinely ethical and sustainable policies (Smith, 2021). Moreover, the specialized literature on cultural tourism and indigenous heritage often emphasizes external, structural viewpoints, such as policy frameworks and economic models (Madrid, 2024; Rahmadian et al., 2021), rather than the internal, lived experiences of the culture-bearers. This creates a critical void: a profound lack of understanding of the internal, lived experiences of the Aeta healers, community members, and local stakeholders who are at the heart of this complex interplay.

The challenges faced by the Aeta in San Felipe are not isolated but reflect broader patterns across the Asia-Pacific region, where indigenous communities in Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Pacific Islands navigate similar tensions between cultural safeguarding, protection of sacred practices, and the pressures of tourism development. By situating the Aeta experience

within this regional context, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how indigenous healing traditions can be integrated into tourism in a manner that respects cultural sovereignty and promotes sustainable development.

Without this critical, human-centered comprehension, tourism development projects risk becoming culturally insensitive, exploitative, and unsustainable, ultimately jeopardizing Aeta cultural sovereignty. To address this gap, this study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach aimed at understanding the lived experiences of stakeholders as Aeta traditional healing practices intersect with tourism growth. Specifically, the research sought to: 1) delineate the nuanced typologies of Aeta healing practices and their implications for tourism; 2) map the spectrum of readiness among Aeta healers for tourist engagement; and 3) evaluate the facilitative role of the Local Government Unit (LGU) in this process. By centering these human experiences, the study promotes a more empathetic and grounded understanding, which is essential for achieving sustainable, community-driven tourism development aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). A conceptual framework was developed (Figure 1), which illustrates the dynamic interaction between Aeta Traditional Healing Practices and Tourism Development, as influenced by the lived experiences of primary stakeholders.

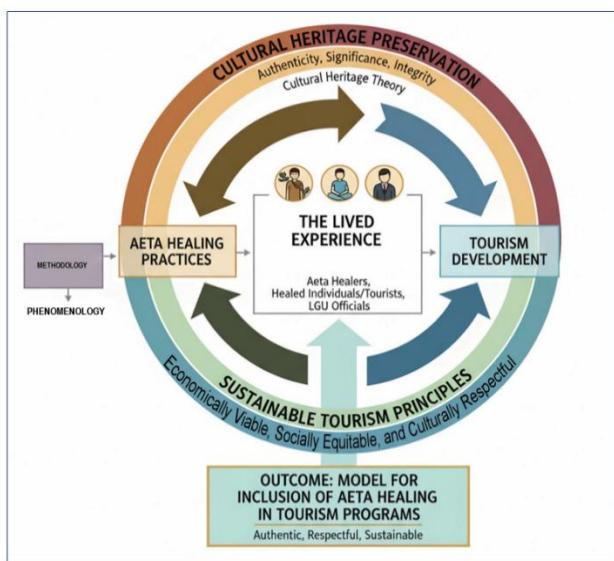


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Interplay of Lived Experience, Context, and Outcome

This framework demonstrates the dynamic interaction between Aeta Traditional Healing Practices and Tourism Development, as influenced by the lived experiences of primary stakeholders. Phenomenology offers the tools to elucidate the essence of this principal phenomenon. The two contextual domains, cultural heritage preservation and sustainable tourism principles, surround and inform this core relationship. The ultimate aim of exploring this complex interaction is to synthesize rich, real-world insights toward developing a model for integrating Aeta healing into tourism that is authentic, respectful, and sustainable.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research utilized a qualitative phenomenological methodology to examine the impact of Aeta traditional healing practices on tourism development in San Felipe, Zambales. The chosen approach emphasized depth, context, and the subjective interpretations that participants attributed to this intricate phenomenon, transcending empirical data to reveal fundamental lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2023). This methodological choice is further substantiated by an expanding corpus of academic literature that promotes phenomenological and narrative methodologies in research involving Indigenous communities. These approaches are in line with decolonizing methodologies because they treat Indigenous voices and worldviews as valid sources of knowledge. This goes against the historical trend of research that is external and objectifying (Smith, 2021).

Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in the municipality of San Felipe, Zambales, a locale strategically selected for its significant Aeta population and the active interface between their preserved cultural heritage and a developing tourism industry. Participants consisted of ten (10) purposively selected individuals from three key stakeholder groups to ensure a holistic understanding, five (5) Aeta traditional healers and community elders, three (3) Local Government Unit (LGU) officials

involved in tourism and cultural affairs, and two (2) tourists who had personally undergone an Aeta traditional healing ritual. Theoretical data saturation guided the final sample size, with recruitment ceasing when subsequent interviews no longer yielded new substantive themes.

Instruments

The primary research instrument was the researcher, who utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews to collect comprehensive narrative data. An approved interview guide with open-ended questions and phenomenological prompts like "Can you describe your experience of...?" was used to help people talk about things. A panel of three experts in qualitative research, indigenous studies, and tourism development carefully checked the guide for face and content validity. To add important context, the study also used participant observation and detailed field notes to record non-verbal cues and the setting.

Data Collection

The process of gathering data began with getting the right permits and ethical approval. Before working with individual Aeta participants, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and local community leaders worked together to make sure that the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) was strictly followed. Everyone who took part signed a form giving their full consent. In-depth interviews, conducted in Filipino at times and locations selected by the participants, were recorded in both video and audio formats and subsequently transcribed verbatim. A strict data management protocol was put in place. This included systematically anonymizing all data and storing it securely on encrypted, password-protected devices for five years. After that, all files will be permanently deleted, following institutional ethical guidelines.

Data Analysis

The gathered data underwent analysis through thematic analysis, adhering to the structured six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process consisted of (1) becoming acquainted with the data through multiple readings of transcripts; (2) creating initial codes; (3) identifying themes by organizing codes; (4) evaluating potential themes; (5) delineating and labeling themes; and (6) compiling the final report. This approach facilitated the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) that encapsulated the essence of the participants' lived experiences. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, the researchers employed peer debriefing and maintained analytic memos throughout the process, which allowed for reflexivity and validation of the thematic structure.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A rigorous thematic analysis of the interview data revealed nine major themes that capture the core of the participants' lived experiences. This section consolidates these into three central findings that directly address the research objectives.

Table 1
Emergent Themes and Frequency Across Stakeholder Groups

Theme	Description	Healers (n=5)	LGU (n=3)	Tourists (n=2)	Total Prominence
1. Typology of Healing Practices	The distinction between physical <i>hilot</i> and spiritual/ritual practices.	4	2	2	8
2. Spiritual Calling & Cultural Heritage	Healing as an inherited, spiritual practice central to self-identity.	5	0	0	5
3. Efficacy & Transformative Impact	The perceived effectiveness of the healing and its deep personal impact.	5	1	2	8
4. A Spectrum of Tourism Readiness	Direct experiences with and attitudes towards tourist engagement.	5	3	2	10
5. Challenges: Skepticism & Legitimacy	External and internal pressures (religious criticism, self-doubt).	3	2	0	5
6. Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer at Risk	The methods, challenges, and urgency of passing knowledge to youth.	5	0	0	5
7. The LGU's Bridging Role & Knowledge Gap	The government's facilitative role and its lack of specific knowledge.	0	3	0	3
8. Pragmatic Integration with Modern Medicine	The conscious coexistence and referral to modern healthcare.	4	3	0	7
9. Preservation vs. Commodification	The tension between sharing culture and avoiding exploitation.	3	3	1	7

Note. Prominence represents the number of participants within each stakeholder group whose data contributed to the identification of the theme. It indicates the theme's relevance across the dataset, not its quantitative weight.

The Spiritual and Practical Typologies of Healing

As indicated in Table 1, the distinction between healing typologies was a prominent theme (Total Prominence = 8). The data revealed a critical nuance often homogenized in literature. Aeta healing is not a monolith but a nuanced system comprising distinct typologies. A clear differentiation emerged between physical *hilot* (manual therapy for ailments like sprains) and spiritual/ritual practices like *pag-aanito* or *tawas* (for afflictions attributed to spiritual causes). This finding is vital for tourism development, as each typology caters to different markets (wellness vs. cultural/spiritual tourism) and carries vastly different cultural sensitivities. Presenting them as a single "healing experience" risks misrepresentation and the trivialization of sacred traditions. This empirically validates and adds specificity to the broader categories discussed in related literature (Martinez, 2019; Andalan et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the theme of "Spiritual Calling & Cultural Heritage" was unanimously emphasized by the healers (5 out of 5) but was absent from the accounts of LGU officials and tourists (see Table 1). The healers' narratives defined their practice not as a learned profession but as a spiritual calling or inheritance (*pamana*), often involving an "espiritu na manggagamot" (a spirit that heals). This profound spiritual grounding and ontological gap in understanding provide powerful empirical validation for Cultural Heritage Theory, illustrating intangible heritage as a dynamic, living process of identity-making (Canet, 2025; UNESCO, 2023). This underscores that the practice is a sacred tradition, fundamentally distinct from a commercial service.

A Spectrum of Readiness and the Challenge of Continuity

A central finding, prominent across all stakeholder groups (Total Prominence = 10, see Table 1), was the diverse spectrum of readiness among Aeta healers to engage with tourism. This continuum ranged from active engagement such as a community chieftain treating international visitors to deep reluctance rooted in *biya* (shame/shyness) or a fear of being perceived as fraudulent. This internal diversity complexifies the often homogenous portrayal of "community" in tourism planning and warns that even community-based tourism (CBT) models can marginalize less confident voices if they assume uniform participation (Gutierrez, 2019; Madrid, 2024).

This reluctance is compounded by significant challenges ("Challenges: Skepticism & Legitimacy," Prominence=5), including external religious skepticism that frames their gifts as diabolical and internalized self-doubt. These pressures directly threaten the intergenerational transfer of knowledge ("Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer at Risk," Prominence=5), which the study found to be fragile and informal. Healers expressed hesitation to pass on their knowledge, explicitly citing the "hardship" (*mahirap ang manggamot*) of the role. This finding provides urgent, human depth to the literature on knowledge transfer, revealing that the threat is as much a matter of personal sacrifice and intergenerational empathy as it is of external cultural erosion.

The Governance Gap and the Ethical Imperative of *Kusang Loob*

To provide a consolidated view of the most pivotal findings, Table 2 presents a triangulated summary of four core themes, highlighting the convergent and divergent perspectives of the key stakeholders.

Table 2
Triangulated Perspectives on Core Themes

Theme	Aeta Healers	Tourists/Visitors	LGU Officials
1. Spiritual Calling & Heritage	PARTICIPANT 1: "Mayroong... espiritu na manggagamot... Hindi ko maitiwalag ang kultura namin..."	PARTICIPANT 9: "Sinasabi ng mga tao doon nakagalaw daw ako ng bahay ng isang engkanto..."	PARTICIPANT 8: "Laking hilot talaga ako... talagang meron kaming isang manggagamot..."
2. Efficacy & Impact	PARTICIPANT 1 & 02: "Talagang maraming gumaling..."	PARTICIPANT 9: "Guminhawa yung pakiramdam ko... wala nakong takot."	PARTICIPANT 7: "Masaya kasi... masarap yung hilot nila... naiintindihan mo din bakit..."
3. Tourism Readiness Spectrum	PARTICIPANT 2 (Open): "Masaya kami... napapalayo na pala yung mga kaalaman namin." PARTICIPANT 5 (Hesitant): "Kung mga babae? Mahihiya ako..."	PARTICIPANT 10 (Promoter): "I rerecommend ko po... dapat bang itaguyod? Oo..." PARTICIPANT 9 (Hesitant): "Para sakin hindi kasi... matatakot sila..."	PARTICIPANT 6: "Bago sakin... open naman din ang LGU to look at that."
4. Preservation vs. Commodification	PARTICIPANT 1 & 02: "Kusang loob kung may maibigay... Ayaw ko, anak."	[Not directly addressed]	PARTICIPANT 6: "We should not commodified their culture... may pag galang dapat tayo."

Note. This table provides a triangulated summary of select core themes. The quotes presented are illustrative exemplars chosen for their clarity and representativeness in capturing the essence of each theme from the respective stakeholder group's perspective. A theme's presence for a stakeholder group indicates it was a prominent and meaningful pattern within that group's collective narratives, not that every participant identically expressed it.

The study identified a critical implementation gap at the governance level. While the LGU had adopted a progressive, facilitative ethos as a "bridging leader" (a theme exclusive to their group, Prominence=3 in Table 1), this intent was critically hampered by a self-identified "knowledge gap." As evidenced in Table 2, an LGU official explicitly stated that traditional healing was "*Bago sakin*" (new to me). This finding provides a specific, operational example of the broader observation that indigenous perspectives remain marginalized in policy and planning (Madrid, 2024).

A paramount concern permeating the data from both healers and the LGU (Prominence=7, see Table 1) was the conscious negotiation between cultural sharing and commodification. This ethical stance was embodied by the healers' foundational economic principle of *kusang loob* (voluntary giving), where compensation is a heartfelt donation, not a fixed price (see Table 2). This cultural mechanism actively resists the commodification of their spiritual service. The LGU's parallel theoretical stance against "exploitation" (Table 2) demonstrates a strategic alignment in principle. This theme provides the lived-experience core for the imperative of "Ethical Tourism Practices Safeguarding Cultural Integrity" (Angeles & Angeles, 2024), establishing a clear boundary that any tourism development must respect.

4. CONCLUSION

This phenomenological inquiry concludes that the essence of the Aeta healer's lived experience is a profound sense of purpose rooted in a spiritual calling, which exists in dynamic tension with modernization pressures and a deeply personal calculus regarding tourism. The potential for tourism is intrinsically linked to the authenticity and efficacy of the healing practices but is critically contingent on a nuanced approach that respects the wide spectrum of individual readiness among practitioners.

The study demonstrates that a sustainable and authentic model for integrating Aeta healing into tourism cannot be externally imposed or based on standard commercial frameworks. The well-documented chasm between the LGU's facilitative intent and its capacity for action must be closed by a foundational investment in cultural mapping and deep ethnographic engagement. Ultimately, success hinges on co-creating a framework through continuous trilateral dialogue--one that innovates economic models honoring *kusang loob*, establishes robust cultural protocols, and empowers the Aeta as the primary agents and beneficiaries of their cultural heritage. This approach ensures that tourism acts as a supportive force for cultural preservation, guided by the community's own meanings and aspirations.

It is important to note that this study, while providing in-depth phenomenological insights, is based on a small sample within a specific community. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable to all Aeta communities or other indigenous groups. However, the rich qualitative data offer valuable contextual understanding that can inform similar contexts in the Asia-Pacific region.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of the Philippine Merchant Marine School (Reference No: PMMS-IRB-2025-003). The research strictly adhered to ethical protocols for research involving indigenous peoples. The principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) was secured through dialogues with the Aeta community leadership and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) Regional Office prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without consequence. All data were anonymized and stored securely.

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