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Traditional Mëranaw Leadership in Contemporary Society: Implications for Community-Based Peacebuilding, Cultural Preservation, and Leadership Education

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Mëranaw leadership remains important in community governance, conflict mediation, cultural preservation, and social cohesion despite changes associated with contemporary governance. This study examined the roles, leadership foundations, enthronement practices, and challenges experienced by Datus and Sultans in selected communities of Lanao del Sur. A qualitative descriptive approach using interviews, supplementary questionnaires, and documentary sources was employed. Traditional leaders retain cultural and moral authority, particularly in conflict mediation and community guidance, although limited institutional recognition, resource constraints, and changing leadership practices affect their roles. The findings provide an evidence base for community-based peacebuilding, leadership education, intergenerational cultural learning, and stronger collaboration between traditional institutions and community stakeholders.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional leadership continues to influence community life in many indigenous and culturally distinct societies even where formal democratic and administrative institutions have become the dominant structures of governance. Traditional leaders may retain social legitimacy because their authority is connected with customary knowledge, collective identity, community recognition, and locally accepted mechanisms for resolving disputes. Such institutions can contribute to social cohesion, community participation, conflict mediation, and culturally grounded decision-making [1, 2]. Traditional leadership should therefore not be understood only as a historical institution but also as a contemporary social mechanism whose functions may coexist with formal governance structures.

Among the Mëranaw people of Lanao del Sur, the institutions of the Datu and Sultan have historically occupied important positions in social organization and traditional governance. Their authority is associated with lineage, customary legitimacy, community recognition, Islamic principles, and the traditional structures expressed through concepts such as *adat*, *taritib*, and *igma*. Traditional leadership historically involved differentiated political, judicial, religious, and community functions, and the appointment of traditional leaders was closely connected with qualifications, genealogy, customary procedures, and social responsibilities [3]. Within contemporary Mëranaw communities, Datus and Sultans also remain associated with conflict resolution, community guidance, customary governance, and cultural preservation.

The position of traditional leadership, however, has changed as contemporary political institutions, electoral systems, statutory structures, and modern administrative arrangements have expanded. Traditional leaders may continue to possess cultural legitimacy while having limited formal authority, financial resources, or institutional recognition. Unclear boundaries between traditional and elected leadership can generate tensions concerning authority, responsibilities, representation, and access to resources [4, 5]. Such tensions do not necessarily eliminate traditional leadership; rather, they may alter its functions and increase the need for cooperation between customary and formal institutions. Conflict mediation is one area in which traditional leadership may retain particular community relevance. Traditional leaders frequently use mediation, negotiation, consensus-building, and culturally embedded norms to manage disputes and restore social relationships [6]. Evidence from an indigenous community in the Philippines similarly indicates that conflict management is shaped by multiple levels of interaction and by leadership qualities such as impartiality, humility, and community legitimacy [7]. These findings are especially relevant to the Mëranaw context because conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and maintenance of social order remain central functions associated with the traditional roles of Datus and Sultans. Traditional leadership also has an educational dimension. Cultural knowledge is transmitted not only through formal schooling but also through family relations, community institutions, religious activities, customary practice, and interactions between elders and younger generations. Community-based education can therefore provide a mechanism for maintaining local values while adapting them to contemporary social conditions. Leadership can contribute to the transmission and transformation of local cultural values through collective learning and community participation [8]. Indigenous knowledge and leadership may similarly provide resources for peace education and culturally responsive learning when local wisdom is translated into educational practices [9].

This educational dimension creates a meaningful connection with community service. Findings concerning traditional leadership can provide an evidence base for proposed activities such as intergenerational cultural-learning sessions, conflict-mediation workshops, leadership mentoring, community dialogues, documentation of customary knowledge, and collaboration between traditional leaders, educators, youth, and local institutions. Such activities should not be interpreted as interventions already implemented in the present study. Rather, they represent possible community-service applications derived from the experiences and needs identified by participants.

Despite existing studies concerning Mëranaw culture, the Lanao Sultanate, customary leadership, and governance, less attention has been given to integrating contemporary evidence on the roles, leadership qualifications, challenges, conflict-resolution functions, and educational implications of Datus and Sultans. Important contemporary concerns include declining authority, limited institutional recognition, leadership qualifications, dual governance, and the continuing community relevance of traditional leaders. These issues suggest a need not only to document traditional leadership but also to consider how its socially constructive functions can inform community-oriented educational and peacebuilding activities. Therefore, this study examined the contemporary roles and responsibilities of Datus and Sultans, the customary foundations and qualifications associated with their enthronement, and the challenges affecting traditional leadership in selected communities of Lanao del Sur. It also interprets the findings in relation to community-based peacebuilding, cultural preservation, leadership education, and collaboration among traditional leaders and other community stakeholders. The contribution of the study lies in connecting qualitative evidence on contemporary Mëranaw leadership with a practice-oriented community-service perspective without treating the proposed activities as interventions already implemented or evaluated.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Traditional Leadership in Mëranaw Society

Traditional leadership refers to forms of authority whose legitimacy is derived substantially from customary practices, lineage, social recognition, cultural norms, and established community institutions. In the Mëranaw context, this authority is closely connected with the Datu and Sultanate systems. The Lanao Sultanate developed a differentiated leadership structure involving sultans, datos, religious leaders, judges, advisers, and other customary office holders, with leadership roles associated with lineage, qualifications, and specific political, social, and religious responsibilities [3]. Several indigenous concepts are particularly important for understanding this system. *Adat* refers to customary rules and normative practices regulating social relations and community life. *Taritib* refers to ordered customary principles and protocols that structure relationships, rights, responsibilities, and leadership arrangements, whereas *igma* refers to consensus-based customary decisions or ordinances. *Pulok-Loksen* functions as a council of elders involved in consultation, deliberation, mediation, and community decision-making. Traditional leadership is therefore not defined only by possession of a title. Legitimate traditional leadership is associated not only with lineage and customary recognition but also with wisdom, moral integrity, competence, responsibility, and commitment to community service. This distinction becomes especially important when analyzing contemporary concerns regarding individuals who possess traditional titles but are perceived as insufficiently prepared to perform the responsibilities associated with them.

Because several culturally specific concepts are central to the interpretation of traditional Mëranaw leadership, **Table 1** presents their conceptual meanings and operational interpretations within the context of the present study. These definitions establish the cultural and analytical context for interpreting leadership legitimacy, community responsibility, conflict resolution, and customary governance in the study. In addition to these principal concepts, several indigenous Mëranaw terms are associated with leadership hierarchy, customary justice, kinship, and communal cooperation. **Table 2** summarizes these terms to support consistent cultural interpretation throughout the study. These terms demonstrate that traditional Mëranaw leadership is closely interconnected with kinship, customary justice, collective decision-making, community cooperation, and cultural identity.

2.2. Leadership Legitimacy, Enthronement, and Community Responsibility

The legitimacy of traditional leadership commonly depends on socially recognized rules concerning succession, qualifications, customary practice, and community acceptance. In the Lanao Sultanate, leadership appointment has historically involved genealogy, customary qualifications, religious principles, and the recognition of established leadership structures [3]. Enthronement can be understood as the customary process through which a Datu or Sultan is selected and installed according to lineage, qualifications, customary procedures, and community acceptance. Contemporary leadership legitimacy may nevertheless require more than hereditary qualification. Community members may evaluate leaders according to their capacity to mediate disputes, provide guidance, exercise moral judgment, maintain cultural responsibilities, and respond to changing community needs. This suggests that traditional leadership contains both ascribed and performance-based dimensions. Lineage may establish eligibility, whereas continued recognition can depend on the ability of leaders to fulfill the social responsibilities attached to their positions. This relationship has important implications for leadership education. If traditional authority depends partly on competence and ethical performance, intergenerational mentoring and culturally grounded leadership development may help maintain continuity between customary legitimacy and contemporary community needs. Such education should not replace customary selection mechanisms but may strengthen knowledge, conflict-resolution skills, cultural understanding, and community-service orientation among emerging leaders.

2.3. Traditional Leadership and Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is one of the most consistently documented functions of traditional leadership. Traditional leaders may provide locally accessible mechanisms through which interpersonal, family, land, clan, or community disputes are addressed using negotiation, mediation, restorative practices, or consensus. Traditional leaders often rely on inherited moral values and culturally recognized procedures when intervening in disputes [6]. Comparable Philippine research also shows that indigenous conflict-management processes operate through complex social relationships and depend strongly on leader legitimacy and behavior [7]. Within the Mëranaw context, Datus and Sultans participate in conflict mediation, customary justice, peacebuilding, and community decision-making. Participants reported that traditional leaders continue to perform these functions despite reduced authority in some contemporary settings. This continued role provides a strong basis for connecting traditional leadership with community-based peacebuilding.

Table 1. Conceptual and operational definitions of key terms used in the study.

TERM	CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION	OPERATIONAL DEFINITION
<i>Adat</i>	A system of customary laws, traditions, and normative practices regulating social relations, governance, justice, and cultural life among the Mëranaw.	Refers to customary rules, norms, and practices observed by Datus and Sultans in governing social relations, resolving disputes, and preserving Mëranaw cultural identity in the selected communities.
<i>Agama</i>	A localized socio-religious community unit within the Mëranaw Sultanate system that integrates governance, culture, and religious life.	Refers to the traditional community structure within which Datus and Sultans exercise leadership authority and implement customary and Islamic-based governance practices.
<i>Datu</i>	A traditional Mëranaw leader belonging to the noble class (<i>Kadatuan</i>), whose authority is grounded in lineage, wisdom, moral integrity, and community recognition.	Refers to a recognized traditional leader who participates in governance, mediates conflicts, and supports the application of <i>adat</i> and <i>taritib</i> within the community.
<i>Sultan</i>	A high-ranking traditional authority within the Mëranaw Sultanate system responsible for leadership and customary governance within a recognized jurisdiction.	Refers to a traditional leader who oversees governance, conflict resolution, cultural preservation, and coordination with other Datus in the selected communities.
<i>Traditional leadership</i>	An indigenous governance system in which authority is derived from customs, lineage, cultural legitimacy, and communal recognition.	Refers to the roles, authority, and functions exercised by Datus and Sultans in maintaining peace, resolving conflicts, and preserving cultural heritage.
<i>Taritib</i>	An ordered system of customary laws and protocols regulating relationships, leadership hierarchy, rights, obligations, and social conduct among the Mëranaw.	Refers to customary rules and protocols guiding succession, authority, and decision-making among Datus and Sultans.
<i>Igma (Ijma)</i>	Collective customary ordinances established through consensus among elders, leaders, and community representatives.	Refers to consensus-based decisions used by traditional leaders in resolving disputes and formulating community agreements.
<i>Shariah Law</i>	Islamic legal and moral principles derived from recognized Islamic sources and governing aspects of Muslim life.	Refers to Islamic principles integrated into traditional leadership practices and used alongside <i>adat</i> in governance and dispute resolution.
<i>Pulok-Loksen</i>	A council of elders responsible for advising traditional leaders and participating in customary governance and decision-making.	Refers to respected elders who assist Datus and Sultans in consultation, mediation, and community decision-making.
<i>Conflict resolution</i>	Processes used to settle disputes through negotiation, mediation, consensus-building, and related mechanisms.	Refers to customary approaches used by Datus and Sultans to address family, clan, land, and community disputes.
<i>Governance</i>	Systems, processes, and institutions through which authority is exercised and collective decisions are made.	Refers to traditional leadership processes used by Datus and Sultans to maintain order, apply customary norms, and coordinate community affairs.
<i>Enthronement</i>	The traditional process of installing a leader into a recognized position of authority according to customary rules, lineage, and community acceptance.	Refers to the qualifications, procedures, and customary practices involved in selecting and installing a Datu or Sultan.
<i>Mëranaw Sultanate</i>	An indigenous political and social system composed of interconnected leadership units governed through <i>adat</i> , <i>taritib</i> , <i>igma</i> , and Islamic principles.	Refers to the traditional governance structure operating within the selected areas of Lanao del Sur in which Datus and Sultans exercise leadership functions.

Table 2. Glossary of indigenous Mëranaw terms relevant to traditional leadership and community life.

TERM	DEFINITION
<i>Bai-a-Labi</i>	A high-ranking Mëranaw woman leader or queen recognized for wisdom, authority, and community respect.
<i>Kabugutan</i>	A designated heir of a Sultan who may assist in traditional leadership responsibilities.
<i>Kadatuan</i>	The noble class within Mëranaw society from which Datus are traditionally selected.
<i>Kali</i>	An Islamic judge who addresses cases according to Islamic legal principles.
<i>Kapagupakat</i>	A customary consensus-building process used to facilitate agreement and peaceful settlement between conflicting parties.
<i>Kapamagogopa</i>	A system of mutual assistance and communal cooperation similar to collective community support.
<i>Kapamamanikan</i>	A customary practice indicating indirect acknowledgement of responsibility by an offending party.
<i>Kapangangawid</i>	A customary system of assigning material or moral compensation to an offending party.
<i>Katabananga/</i> <i>Katetebanga</i>	A system of communal cooperation in which members contribute resources for social obligations and community needs.
<i>Kaseselai</i>	A customary principle in which decisions may be undertaken for community benefit and later accepted through recognition and respect.
<i>Kokoman</i>	The judicial or dispute-resolution function traditionally handled by elders and respected community leaders.
<i>Kokoman a Kitab</i>	An Islamic-based judicial process grounded in Qur'anic principles and traditionally presided over by a <i>Kali</i> .
<i>Pulok-Loksen</i>	A council of elders involved in advice, customary governance, policy deliberation, and enforcement of <i>adat</i> .
<i>Soko/Suko</i>	A sub-community division within a larger Mëranaw settlement structure.
<i>Torogan</i>	A traditional ancestral house associated with nobility and leadership.
<i>Tolonganaya</i>	A kinship-based social structure organizing families and clans within Mëranaw society.
<i>Turugan</i>	A central governing structure associated with the traditional Mëranaw Sultanate.

From a community-service perspective, these findings can inform proposed conflict-mediation workshops, dialogue activities, peace education, and collaborative forums involving traditional leaders and other community stakeholders. Such activities could facilitate knowledge sharing without assuming that traditional mechanisms should replace statutory or formal dispute-resolution systems.

2.4. Dual Governance and Institutional Collaboration

Traditional and formal leadership systems may coexist within the same communities. This arrangement can provide complementary forms of legitimacy and community engagement, but it can also create ambiguity regarding authority, responsibilities, resources, and decision-making. Studies of dual governance systems have reported conflicts between traditional leaders and elected representatives when institutional boundaries are poorly defined or when one system receives substantially greater formal recognition and resources than the other [4, 5]. Similar concerns are evident in the Mëranaw context, where participants described overlapping leadership roles, unequal access to resources, and limited recognition of traditional institutions. Some participants perceived elected political positions as more attractive because they provide formal resources and administrative authority that traditional positions may lack. A community-oriented response to this issue does not require merging

the two leadership systems. Instead, collaboration can focus on clearly defined areas of common concern, including conflict prevention, cultural activities, community consultation, youth development, and local peacebuilding. Structured dialogue among traditional leaders, educators, civil-society actors, youth representatives, and local institutions may help identify roles that are complementary rather than competitive.

2.5. Cultural Preservation and Community-Based Leadership Education

Traditional leaders can function as custodians of cultural knowledge because their authority is embedded in customary institutions, historical narratives, social norms, and community practice. Cultural preservation therefore involves more than maintaining ceremonial traditions; it also requires mechanisms through which knowledge is transmitted, interpreted, and applied across generations. Community-based education provides one such mechanism. Local leadership can support the transmission and adaptation of cultural values through community learning, religious education, collective participation, and interaction among generations [8]. Local wisdom can contribute to educational approaches concerned with peace, identity, and social relationships [9]. For Mëranaw communities, potential educational activities may include discussions of *adat*, *taritib*, *igma*, conflict mediation, cultural responsibilities, leadership ethics, oral histories, and the historical functions of the Sultanate. These activities should involve traditional knowledge holders while remaining accessible to younger community members. The aim would not be to romanticize traditional institutions but to support critical and culturally grounded understanding of their continuing social functions.

2.6. Community-Service Implications of Traditional Leadership

Community service in this context can be understood as organized knowledge-sharing and capacity-building activities that connect research findings with identified community needs. The present study did not implement or evaluate a community-service intervention. Nevertheless, its findings can provide an evidence base for designing future activities in four interconnected areas. First, community-based peacebuilding may use the conflict-mediation experience of traditional leaders as a resource for dialogue and conflict-prevention activities. Second, leadership education may support intergenerational mentoring focused on ethical leadership, community responsibility, cultural knowledge, and mediation skills. Third, cultural preservation may involve documentation and community learning concerning customary concepts, leadership practices, oral histories, and cultural institutions. Fourth, stakeholder collaboration may create forums in which traditional leaders, educators, youth, community organizations, and local institutions discuss shared community concerns. These applications should be interpreted as proposed extensions of the research findings rather than as outcomes demonstrated by the present study. The conceptual relationships among traditional leadership foundations, contemporary governance, leadership interaction, and community functions are summarized in **Figure 1**. Traditional leadership is shaped by legitimacy, enthronement, leadership capability, and conflict-resolution functions while operating alongside contemporary political leadership within local governance.

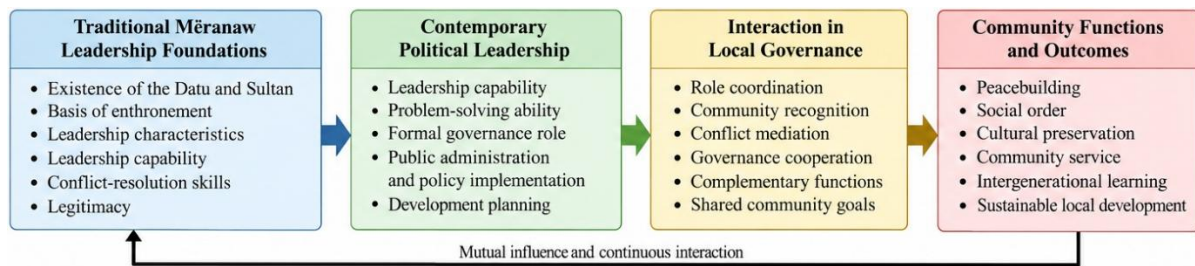


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of traditional Mëranaw leadership and its relationship with contemporary local governance.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the contemporary roles, responsibilities, leadership foundations, enthronement practices, and challenges experienced by Mëranaw traditional leaders. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' interpretations, experiences, and perspectives concerning traditional leadership rather than to test causal relationships or estimate population-level effects. The study did not evaluate a community-service intervention. Community-service implications were developed after interpretation of the qualitative findings and are presented as proposed applications for peacebuilding, leadership education, cultural preservation, and stakeholder collaboration.

3.2. Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in selected areas of Lanao del Sur, Philippines, including Marawi City, Balindong, Tugaya, Ragain, and Butig, where traditional leadership structures remain present. The participants consisted of twenty key informants comprising seventeen Datus and three Sultans, all aged fifty years or older. These participants were selected because of their knowledge of and experience with traditional Mëranaw leadership practices. Purposive sampling was used to identify informants whose roles and experiences were relevant to the objectives of the study. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative inquiry when participants are deliberately selected because they can provide information-rich perspectives concerning the phenomenon being investigated [10].

3.3. Data Collection

Data were obtained through face-to-face interviews, supplementary questionnaires, and documentary sources, including local and national archival materials. In-depth interviews served as the primary source of qualitative data because they allowed participants to describe their experiences, interpretations, and observations concerning the roles of Datus and Sultans, leadership qualifications, conflict resolution, recognition, and changes in traditional governance. A structured interview guide was used to provide consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on issues they considered important. Supplementary questionnaire responses were used to identify additional perspectives concerning leadership capability, recognition of traditional leaders, and perceived changes in leadership standards. Documentary materials were used to provide contextual information concerning traditional leadership practices and institutions.

3.4. Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved familiarization with the collected information, identification and coding of meaningful content, examination of recurring patterns, and organization of related codes into themes concerning leadership roles, legitimacy, conflict resolution, institutional recognition, leadership transformation, and relationships with contemporary governance. Thematic analysis provides a flexible approach for identifying and interpreting patterned meaning across qualitative data [11, 12]. The analysis focused on representing the participants' experiences and perspectives while distinguishing participant-based findings from interpretations. The resulting themes were subsequently examined for their practical implications for community-based peacebuilding, leadership education, cultural preservation, and stakeholder collaboration. This interpretive step did not constitute evaluation of an implemented community-service program.

3.5. Trustworthiness

The study considered the qualitative principles of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability when interpreting the data. Consistency in the interview process, use of participants with substantial knowledge of traditional leadership, consideration of documentary sources, and systematic thematic organization were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Because the participants were purposively selected from specific communities in Lanao del Sur, the results should be interpreted as contextually grounded qualitative findings rather than as statistically generalizable estimates of all Mëranaw communities.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from participants. The study also emphasized respect for the cultural context of Mëranaw communities and for the knowledge shared by traditional leaders. Because traditional leadership and customary knowledge can involve culturally sensitive information, interpretation should remain attentive to the distinction between scholarly analysis and community authority over cultural meanings.

3.7. Community-Service Interpretation

The community-service component of the present paper is an interpretive extension of the qualitative findings, not a separately implemented intervention. Themes relating to conflict mediation, leadership continuity, cultural knowledge, community guidance, and institutional coordination were examined to identify potential areas for future community-based activities. Four practice areas were considered: community-based peacebuilding, leadership education, intergenerational cultural learning, and stakeholder collaboration. Proposed activities derived from these areas are intended to provide directions for future university-community or institution-community engagement and should therefore be empirically evaluated before their effectiveness is claimed.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Continuing Roles of Datus and Sultans in Contemporary Mëranaw Society

The findings indicate that traditional Mëranaw leadership remains socially and culturally relevant despite substantial changes in contemporary governance. Participants consistently

described Datus and Sultans as leaders who continue to provide community guidance, participate in conflict mediation, support religious and customary activities, and contribute to the maintenance of peace and social relationships. However, their contemporary authority was perceived as less extensive than in earlier periods. Participants frequently contrasted past and present leadership. Earlier traditional leaders were described as individuals whose authority depended not only on hereditary status but also on their ability to lead, resolve disputes, and command community respect. One Sultan explained:

“Before, a datu or sultan was truly capable of leading the people and resolving conflicts, but now, some leaders hold titles without fulfilling their responsibilities.”

This perception suggests that traditional leadership is undergoing transformation rather than disappearance. The institution continues to possess cultural and moral significance, but its practical authority increasingly depends on leadership performance, community recognition, and the ability to respond to contemporary social conditions. This is consistent with studies indicating that traditional leadership may remain influential even when formal state institutions assume greater administrative authority [1, 2]. The findings therefore distinguish between traditional title and effective traditional leadership. Possession of a title may provide customary legitimacy, but participants also emphasized competence, wisdom, responsibility, and service to the community as important characteristics of respected leaders.

4.2. Leadership Legitimacy, Qualifications, and Enthronement

A recurring concern among participants involved the qualifications associated with becoming a Datu or Sultan. Traditional legitimacy remains strongly connected with lineage and customary procedures, but participants indicated that lineage alone was insufficient to guarantee effective leadership. Wisdom, moral integrity, leadership capability, knowledge of customary practices, conflict-resolution ability, and willingness to serve the community were repeatedly emphasized. This finding corresponds with descriptions of the Lanao Sultanate in which leadership positions are associated with genealogy, customary qualifications, Islamic principles, and differentiated responsibilities [3]. The contemporary findings extend this understanding by showing that participants also evaluate leaders according to their actual performance. The perceived weakening of leadership standards was associated with concerns that some contemporary title holders may not possess the knowledge or capabilities traditionally expected from their positions. The issue is therefore not simply whether customary succession continues to exist, but whether succession produces leaders who can perform the social responsibilities associated with traditional authority. From an educational perspective, this finding points to the potential value of intergenerational leadership education. Experienced traditional leaders may serve as knowledge holders who can introduce younger or emerging leaders to customary principles, ethical leadership, mediation, community responsibility, and culturally appropriate decision-making. Such activities would not replace established enthronement practices but could strengthen the preparation of individuals expected to assume traditional leadership responsibilities.

4.3. Institutional Recognition and Resource Constraints

One of the strongest themes concerned limited institutional recognition and unequal access to resources. Participants explained that elected government officials generally have formal budgets, salaries, administrative structures, and institutional authority, whereas

traditional leaders frequently perform community functions without comparable financial or organizational support. One Datu stated:

“Some prefer to become elected officials because there is budget and salary, unlike traditional leadership which relies only on respect and service.”

The finding illustrates a structural difference between traditional authority and formal political office. Participants did not necessarily describe traditional leadership as irrelevant; rather, they indicated that its ability to perform community functions may be constrained when leaders lack material and institutional support. Comparable studies of traditional governance systems have identified similar tensions concerning institutional recognition, access to resources, and the relationship between traditional authorities and formal administrative structures [2, 4]. Resource inequality may also influence leadership choices by encouraging individuals to seek elected office where formal authority and institutional resources are more accessible. For community-service planning, these findings suggest that useful support does not necessarily require transforming traditional leaders into government officials. Universities, educational institutions, civil-society groups, and local stakeholders could instead cooperate with traditional leaders in clearly defined areas such as peace education, mediation training, cultural documentation, leadership development, and community dialogue.

4.4. Dual Governance and the Need for Role Clarification

The study found that Mëranaw communities operate within a form of dual governance in which traditional leaders coexist with elected political officials. Participants recognized the importance of both systems but also described overlapping responsibilities, differences in authority, unequal resources, and occasional uncertainty regarding their respective functions. One participant explained:

“We have two leaders—the elected officials and the traditional leaders—but sometimes their roles overlap or are not clearly respected.”

This observation corresponds with research on dual governance systems showing that tensions can emerge when traditional and elected authorities perform related functions without clearly defined institutional boundaries [4, 5]. The coexistence of both systems is therefore not inherently problematic; difficulties arise when responsibilities, legitimacy, and mechanisms for collaboration are unclear. Participants generally favored cooperation rather than competition between the two systems. Traditional leaders possess cultural legitimacy, community knowledge, and experience in mediation, whereas formal officials have statutory authority and institutional resources. These characteristics can be complementary when areas of cooperation are clearly identified. A community-service approach could therefore facilitate structured stakeholder dialogue involving traditional leaders, local officials, educators, youth representatives, and other community actors. Such forums could focus on areas where complementary participation is particularly appropriate, including peacebuilding, cultural preservation, youth guidance, community consultation, and conflict prevention.

4.5. Conflict Resolution and Community-Based Peacebuilding

Conflict mediation emerged as one of the most important continuing functions of Datus and Sultans. Participants described traditional leaders as individuals who intervene in family,

clan, land, and community disputes and who use culturally recognized approaches to encourage settlement, reconciliation, and social harmony. The findings indicate that traditional leaders continue to participate in conflict resolution, mediation, religious activities, and community-based decision-making even as their political authority has declined in some settings. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that traditional leaders can remain important community mediators because their legitimacy is grounded in culturally recognized norms, relationships, and forms of social authority [6, 7]. Conflict resolution in this context should not be interpreted simply as enforcement of authority. The Mëranaw concepts identified in the study emphasize consultation, consensus, customary rules, moral responsibility, and community relationships. Such mechanisms can provide culturally grounded resources for peacebuilding while remaining complementary to formal legal institutions. These findings offer a clear community-service implication. Universities and community organizations could develop proposed peacebuilding and mediation activities in collaboration with traditional leaders. Potential activities include facilitated dialogue, conflict-mediation workshops, documentation of customary dispute-resolution practices, youth peace education, and intergenerational discussions on the values underlying reconciliation and social responsibility. The present study did not implement or evaluate such activities. Their effectiveness would therefore require future empirical assessment.

4.6. Transformation from Governing Authority to Cultural and Moral Leadership

Participants perceived a general decline in the direct political authority of traditional leaders compared with earlier periods. Some described present-day titles as more symbolic than before. One participant stated:

“Today, being a datu or sultan is sometimes just a title; the power is no longer the same as before.”

Nevertheless, reduced formal authority did not necessarily eliminate community respect. Participants continued to associate Datus and Sultans with cultural identity, moral guidance, customary knowledge, and conflict mediation. This finding suggests a transition from traditional leadership as a primary governing institution toward a more differentiated form of cultural, moral, and community leadership. Such transformation may allow traditional institutions to remain relevant even when administrative authority is primarily exercised by elected government. The distinction is important because relevance should not be measured only in terms of formal political power. Traditional leaders may continue to contribute through cultural guidance, mediation, intergenerational learning, ceremonial responsibilities, and reinforcement of community identity. These functions are especially relevant to community education because they provide locally grounded sources of knowledge that may otherwise weaken across generations.

4.7. Cultural Preservation and Intergenerational Learning

The findings also position traditional leaders as potential custodians of Mëranaw cultural knowledge. Participants' descriptions of leadership were repeatedly connected with customary principles, community responsibilities, Islamic values, and knowledge of traditional social arrangements. The maintenance of such knowledge is particularly important as modernization changes social structures and younger generations gain increasing exposure to national and global cultural influences. Cultural preservation should not be interpreted as maintaining every historical practice unchanged. Rather, it involves ensuring that

communities retain sufficient understanding of their heritage to evaluate how cultural principles can remain meaningful under contemporary conditions. This perspective supports the use of community-based learning activities involving elders, Datus, Sultans, educators, and younger community members. Topics may include the meanings of *adat*, *taritib*, *igma*, leadership responsibilities, community mediation, oral history, customary institutions, and ethical principles of leadership. Such activities could transform traditional knowledge from information held primarily by senior community members into a shared educational resource. In this way, cultural preservation becomes connected with leadership education and intergenerational knowledge transfer, rather than being limited to ceremonial preservation. Taken together, the findings reveal several recurring themes concerning the continuing relevance, legitimacy, challenges, and changing functions of traditional Mëranaw leadership. **Table 3** summarizes these themes together with representative qualitative evidence and their interpretation. The first area, community-based peacebuilding, builds on participants' descriptions of the continuing role of traditional leaders in mediation and conflict resolution. The second, leadership education, responds to concerns regarding leadership qualifications, competence, and declining standards. The third, cultural preservation, addresses the transmission of customary knowledge and leadership values across generations. The fourth, stakeholder collaboration, responds to the challenges created by overlapping traditional and formal governance systems.

Table 3. Major themes and supporting qualitative evidence on contemporary Mëranaw traditional leadership.

MAJOR THEME	SUPPORTING QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE	INTERPRETATION
Continuing relevance of traditional leadership	Participants described Datus and Sultans as continuing to provide community guidance, conflict mediation, religious support, and customary leadership.	Traditional leadership remains culturally and socially relevant despite reduced formal authority.
Leadership legitimacy and qualifications	Participants emphasized lineage, wisdom, moral integrity, leadership capability, conflict-resolution skills, and community service.	Leadership legitimacy combines customary eligibility with competence and actual performance.
Limited institutional recognition and resources	Traditional leaders were described as having fewer formal resources, budgets, and administrative support than elected officials.	Resource and institutional constraints may reduce the capacity of traditional leaders to perform community functions.
Dual governance	Participants described coexistence and occasional overlap between traditional leaders and elected political officials.	Clearer role coordination may strengthen cooperation between traditional and formal governance systems.
Conflict mediation and peacebuilding	Datus and Sultans were described as intervening in family, clan, land, and community disputes.	Conflict resolution remains one of the strongest contemporary functions of traditional leadership.
Transformation of authority	Participants perceived traditional leadership as becoming more symbolic in some contexts while retaining cultural and moral significance.	Traditional authority is shifting from direct governance toward cultural, moral, and community leadership.
Cultural preservation and knowledge transmission	Traditional leaders were associated with customary principles, Islamic values, oral knowledge, and community traditions.	Traditional leaders can contribute to intergenerational learning and cultural preservation.

Figure 2 summarizes how these qualitative findings can be translated into proposed community-service areas and intended contributions, while emphasizing the need for future implementation and empirical evaluation.

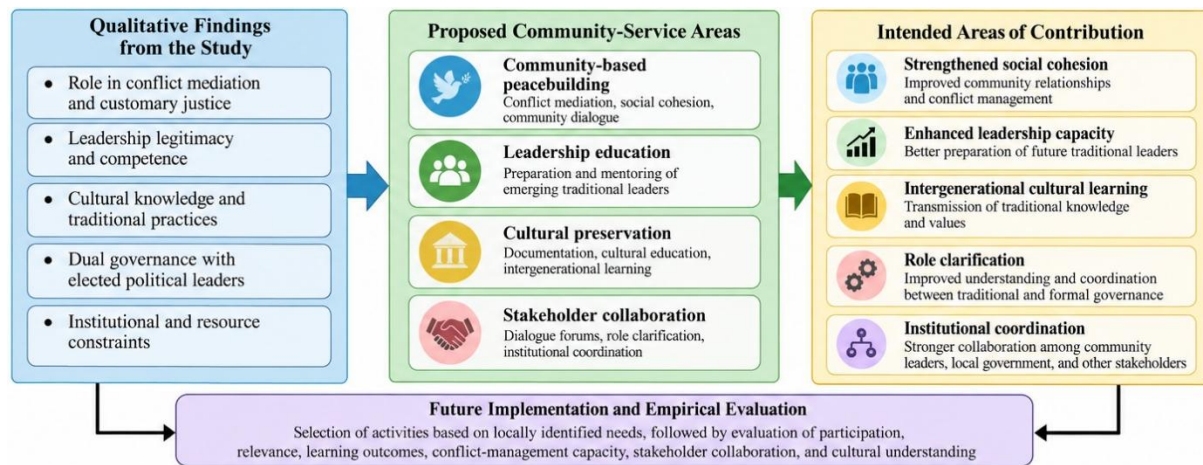


Figure 2. Proposed community-service framework based on the qualitative findings on traditional Mëranaw leadership.

Table 4 translates this pathway into specific community needs, proposed activities, and intended areas of contribution. Both should be interpreted as practice-oriented applications of the findings rather than as evaluated interventions. The framework provides a structured basis for translating the qualitative findings into potential community-service initiatives while maintaining a clear distinction between observed findings and proposed future activities.

Table 4. Proposed community-service applications based on the study findings.

FINDING FROM THE STUDY	IDENTIFIED COMMUNITY NEED	PROPOSED COMMUNITY-SERVICE ACTIVITY	INTENDED FOCUS
Traditional leaders continue to mediate conflicts	Strengthening culturally grounded peacebuilding	Conflict-mediation workshops and community dialogues	Peacebuilding and social cohesion
Concerns about leadership qualifications	Preparation and mentoring of emerging traditional leaders	Leadership mentoring and ethical-leadership education	Leadership capacity
Traditional knowledge is largely retained by experienced community leaders	Intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge	Cultural-learning sessions and documentation activities	Cultural preservation
Traditional and elected leaders have overlapping roles	Improved coordination among community stakeholders	Dialogue forums between traditional leaders and local stakeholders	Institutional collaboration
Traditional authority is becoming more symbolic	Clarification of contemporary community roles	Community consultations on contemporary leadership functions	Role clarification
Youth may have limited exposure to customary leadership knowledge	Greater youth engagement with cultural heritage	Intergenerational discussions and culturally grounded learning activities	Youth and cultural education

4.9. Implications for Community Service and Education

The findings have several implications for community service and educational practice. First, traditional leaders may be engaged not only as ceremonial representatives but also as community knowledge partners whose experiences can contribute to culturally grounded learning and peacebuilding activities. Second, concerns about leadership qualifications indicate an opportunity for intergenerational mentoring. Leadership education can combine traditional knowledge with contemporary competencies such as communication, mediation, participatory decision-making, and stakeholder coordination without altering the community's authority to determine legitimate succession. Third, peacebuilding activities can benefit from integrating culturally recognized mechanisms with broader community dialogue. Traditional mediation practices may provide an accessible foundation for discussions on conflict prevention and reconciliation, particularly when traditional leaders work collaboratively with educators and other community stakeholders. Fourth, cultural preservation can be strengthened by documenting and teaching customary concepts while encouraging younger community members to examine their contemporary relevance critically. Community service can therefore function as a bridge connecting academic institutions, traditional knowledge holders, and younger generations. Finally, the findings indicate that sustainable collaboration requires recognition of the different forms of legitimacy held by traditional and formal leaders. Future community-service activities should therefore emphasize partnership and role clarification rather than competition between leadership systems.

4.10. Limitations and Future Directions

This study involved purposively selected Datus and Sultans from specific areas of Lanao del Sur and therefore provides contextually grounded qualitative evidence rather than statistically generalizable findings. The perspectives primarily represent traditional leaders and do not capture the full range of views held by youth, women, elected officials, educators, religious leaders, or other community members. Future research can broaden participation to include these stakeholder groups and compare perceptions of traditional leadership across communities. Additional studies may also examine how younger generations understand the contemporary relevance of Datus and Sultans. The proposed community-service applications require separate implementation and evaluation. Future projects may examine whether intergenerational leadership education, peacebuilding workshops, cultural-learning activities, or traditional leader-stakeholder dialogues improve cultural understanding, mediation capacity, participation, or institutional collaboration.

5. CONCLUSION

Traditional Mëranaw leadership remains relevant through conflict mediation, community guidance, cultural preservation, and the maintenance of social relationships despite reduced formal authority and limited institutional support. The findings indicate that leadership legitimacy depends not only on lineage but also on competence, moral integrity, cultural knowledge, and commitment to community service. Challenges involving resource limitations, changing leadership standards, and overlapping traditional and formal governance require greater collaboration among community stakeholders. These findings provide an evidence base for future community-service activities focusing on peacebuilding, leadership education, intergenerational cultural learning, and institutional dialogue while preserving the distinct roles of traditional and formal leadership.

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7. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper is free from plagiarism.

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