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Research Article

Resilience at the Margins: Developing the Cultural Agency Model Through a Concept-Driven Integrative Literature Review of the Badjao Experience

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ABSTRACT

The Badjao are an indigenous group living at sea in the Philippines, marginalized and generationally poor. A literature review of Badjao experiences of marginalization and resilience is used to provide insight into the interrelated cultural, social and structural forces that shape those experiences. It employs a concept driven integrative literature review to synthesize scholarly articles, NGO reports, policy documents and selected contextual sources into five recurring themes. The five major themes were cycle of deprivation, structural barriers, access and opportunity, support systems and growth, and cultural adaptation and agency. The synthesis shows that structural neglect, lack of legal identity and limited access to education and livelihood sustain deprivation and exclusion but culturally anchored support systems and inclusive opportunities can foster resilience and agency. This study proposes the Cultural Agency Model as a framework for understanding empowerment as an outcome when communities are recognized, engaged and supported in culturally appropriate ways. The model acknowledges the dynamic interaction of constraining and facilitating forces and proposes that sustainable culturally responsive systems can create conditions that facilitate opportunities for increasing agency and transformation. The model does not frame some behaviors (often stigmatized in marginalized groups) as deficits but as adaptive responses to identity and survival, shaped by context. Although constrained by its dependence on secondary sources, the study does provide a conceptual basis for future participatory research. The Cultural Agency Model offers a conceptual path toward understanding inclusive development as the co-creation of empowerment through systems of recognition, belonging and self-determination.

Keywords: *Access and opportunity, Badjao empowerment, Cultural adaptation, Cultural agency model, Cycle of deprivation, Structural barriers, Support systems*

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Introduction

Poverty-alleviation programs in the Philippines have been in place for decades, yet many Badjao communities remain displaced and socially and economically marginalized. Historically, their access to institutions and opportunities has been limited by their marginalisation – as historical research has indicated (Sather, 1995). Traditionally, the Badjao are associated with life at sea but some have moved to urban areas where income is uncertain and good employment is hard to find. These conditions may limit their choices of livelihood to informal activities such as street begging (Andal, 2025; Hirai, 2015; Tamayo & An, 2019). When divorced from the context of the conditions under which they occur, these activities are often misunderstood or stigmatized. They are not the product of a single cause, but the combined effects of poverty, displacement, social exclusion and the need to cope with changing environments. An intervention could be to provide food, shelter or temporary livelihood assistance but not address the root causes. Only programs which react to immediate needs can alleviate suffering temporarily, but they do not modify the conditions that make poverty and exclusion transmissible from generation to generation.

Poverty, lack of access to education and social exclusion were documented in studies of the Badjao and other indigenous peoples. It has underlined how communities culturally encode ways of surviving hardship and navigating change (Hirai, 2015; Miole, 2024; Silda et al., 2024). What is less clear is the impact of the blend of people's responses to hardship, the support available to them and the structures which limit their choices, on both survival and the capacity to act, and how this can be understood in relation to the wider society and economy. This may be due to Bandura's social cognitive theory (2001). This shows how behavior is a continuous interaction between our own beliefs and behaviors and the social context we are in. There is no fixed way of life. They learn from other people. They are developed from experience. They change with the change of circumstances and sources of support. Within this perspective, agency involves more than learning how to respond to one's environment. It is also interested in the ways in which people exercise some influence over their actions and

circumstances within the opportunities and constraints available to them. Taken together with a cultural perspective, this points out that learned responses to marginalization may be compatible with efforts to preserve identity, protect autonomy, and maintain meaningful participation in community life. Sasaki and Baba (2024) proposed a cultural level that takes into account reactions of marginalized groups under threat of their identity and participation. Their work shows adaptation is not a passive process. Or is it the protection of cultural identity, the defense of autonomy and the search for ways of participation in the face of exclusion? All these frames suggest that the Badjao experience is not reducible to poverty or resilience. We need a cultural story that tells us how structural barriers, learned responses and available support combine to shape survival and capacity to act.

A concept-driven integrative literature review is the approach to this research as it explores the inter-relatedness of deprivation, structural exclusion, access and opportunity, support systems, cultural adaptation, and agency in the Badjao experience. Rather than seeing street begging exclusively as a moral or social failure at the individual level, the review considers the extent to which it might be a survival response set within a context of displacement, social exclusion, limited livelihood opportunities and social learning. This review is organized around the following questions: (1) How does the literature describe the conditions through which deprivation and disadvantage are reproduced across generations in Badjao communities? (2) What structural barriers does the literature identify as limiting Badjao access to recognition, education, livelihood, social services, and meaningful participation? (3) How does the literature describe the role of access and opportunity in expanding the choices and possibilities available to Badjao people and communities? (4) How does the literature explain the role of family, community, institutional, and other support systems in resilience and growth? (5) How does the literature describe cultural adaptation and agency in the ways Badjao communities respond to changing conditions, preserve cultural identity, and exercise choice within structural constraints?

Material and Methods

Literature Identification and Conceptual Scope

Literature was identified through a concept-driven search intended to assemble sources relevant to intergenerational poverty, cultural adaptation, support systems, and empowerment, with particular attention to the Badjao experience. The terms “Badjao,” “Indigenous poverty,” “street begging,” “learned behavior,” “support systems,” and “agency and empowerment” were used in varying combinations. Boolean operators (AND and OR) and quotation marks were applied when useful to narrow or connect concepts. Because the purpose was conceptual integration rather than exhaustive coverage, sources were prioritized according to their capacity to clarify the relationships among structural barriers, cycles of deprivation, access and opportunity, support systems, cultural adaptation, and agency. The literature search and iterative source identification were concluded in June 2026, which served as the cutoff for materials considered in the final review corpus.

Databases and Sources

Sources were searched through academic search platforms and databases, such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, ERIC, JSTOR, and Philippine E-Journals to include international and Philippine scholarship. Policy and institutional context were also obtained from official publications of United Nations (UN) agencies, Philippine government agencies and non-governmental organizations. The preference was for sources published from 2000 to 2025 to highlight recent evidence. Older works were considered when they were necessary for the theoretical or historical setting of the review. While the review was mostly conducted on scholarly sources, a few official webpages, press releases, and organizational reports were retained as contextual grey literature when they documented recent programs, policy developments, or community-level conditions relevant to the Badjao. These materials were meant to be a supplement to, not a replacement for, the scholarly evidence. They were to provide context to recent institutional actions and community level developments that have not yet been captured in peer reviewed literature.

All materials were assessed for relevance, identifiable authorship or institutional responsibility, specificity of evidence and consistency with scholarly or official sources.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were considered for inclusion when they addressed deprivation, structural exclusion, resilience, cultural adaptation, support systems, or empowerment among Indigenous or economically marginalized communities and offered conceptual or contextual relevance to the Badjao experience. Scholarly sources were required to be published in English, available in full text, and grounded in empirical research or theoretical analysis relevant either to the Philippine setting or to the framework’s core concepts. Earlier foundational works were retained despite the general date preference when they were essential to the review’s theoretical or historical framing, including Bandura’s social cognitive theory and Sather’s account of Badjao marginalization. Scholarly opinion pieces, editorials, anonymous webpages, and materials lacking adequate evidentiary support were excluded. Official webpages, press releases, and advocacy materials were retained only as contextual grey literature when they supplied recent institutional or community-level information not readily available in peer-reviewed sources. Such materials were used for contextual illustration and were not treated as the sole basis for deriving the five themes or the Cultural Agency Model.

Source Evaluation and Selection Process

Potential sources were iteratively assessed for thematic relevance, credibility and contribution to the conceptual purpose of the review. Titles, abstracts, executive summaries, or webpage descriptions were first screened for relevance to deprivation, resilience, and empowerment, with specific consideration to the Badjao. The relevant full texts of the materials were then assessed for their empirical, theoretical, historical or contextual contribution and relevance either to the Philippine setting or the core concepts of the framework. We excluded materials that were not thematically relevant, that lacked identifiable provenance, that were not sufficiently supported by evidence, or that

did not make a clear conceptual contribution. Contextual grey literature was only retained under the criteria described above and remained distinguishable from scholarly sources and official reports in the synthesis. Since this study was designed as a concept-driven integrative literature review, rather than a systematic review, PRISMA-style counts of initial records, duplicates, title and abstract exclusions, and full-text exclusions were not kept. The final corpus consisted of 45 sources selected for conceptual relevance and synthesis. The number 45 should not be taken to mean that the corpus is an exhaustive and systematic representation of all the literature available on the Badjao.

Thematic Analysis Procedure

A concept-driven thematic synthesis was applied to the final corpus of 45 sources. Each source was examined for empirical findings, theoretical propositions, or contextual information concerning conditions that perpetuate deprivation, forms of structural exclusion, access to education, livelihood opportunities, legal identity and social services, relational or institutional support, and culturally shaped responses to adversity. Relevant findings, theoretical arguments, and contextual observations were assigned provisional descriptive codes, including intergenerational poverty, disrupted schooling, livelihood insecurity, discrimination, legal invisibility, community support, cultural continuity, adaptation, and self-determination. Codes were compared for conceptual similarity and explanatory relationship, consolidated where they overlapped, and organized into five higher-order themes: Cycle of Deprivation, Structural Barriers, Access and Opportunity, Support Systems and Growth, and Cultural Adaptation and Agency. A source could contribute to more than one theme when it addressed several dimensions of the Badjao experience. The Cultural Agency Model was then developed by mapping Cycle of Deprivation and Structural Barriers as constraining forces; Access and Opportunity and Support Systems and Growth as enabling forces; and Cultural Adaptation and Agency as the central process through which these forces shape movement toward empowerment and belonging.

Limitations

The study is a conceptual and non-exhaustive review and, therefore, has several limitations. The main limitations are the lack of peer-reviewed research specifically focused on the Badjao, the reliance on selected official and organizational materials for recent contextual information, the dominance of non-Indigenous authorial perspectives, and the exclusion of non-English sources that may contain culturally grounded knowledge. This language restriction may have favored perspectives represented in English-language academic and institutional literature while underrepresenting locally expressed or vernacular understandings of Badjao experience. While different source types allowed for comparisons between scholarly, institutional and contextual accounts, the synthesis offered here is provisional and should be refined through participatory research with Badjao communities.

Thematic Findings from Literature

Contextual Framing. This section synthesizes the literature into five interrelated themes that explain the conditions that constrain and enable Badjao marginalization, resilience, and agency. There are five themes, namely Cycle of Deprivation; Structural Barriers; Access and Opportunity; Support Systems and Growth; and Cultural Adaptation and Agency. The central integrative theme in the model is Cultural Adaptation and Agency because it captures how communities respond to constraints, exercise choice, and pursue culturally meaningful futures. The Cycle of Deprivation and Structural Barriers are limiting forces. Access and Opportunity and Support Systems and Growth are enabling forces. The strength of the forces varies across contexts. This organization of the synthesis allows the discussion to consider the reproduction of disadvantage and the conditions that may support agency and empowerment. The framework therefore considers resilience to be a product of the complex interaction between structural constraints and culturally responsive opportunities and support. Where Badjao-specific evidence was limited, studies from other Indigenous, marginalized, or relevant populations were used only as

broader conceptual or theoretical lenses for interpreting processes such as resilience, social support, coping, and empowerment. These studies are not treated as direct evidence of Badjao experiences, and their relevance to Badjao communities remains to be established through culturally grounded primary research.

Cycle of Deprivation. The cycle of deprivation refers to conditions through which poverty and exclusion may be perpetuated across generations. In a Badjao community in Cebu City, Hirai (2015) found that low and unstable household income was associated with food insecurity, children's engagement in begging and other income generating activities, and interrupted schooling. Tamayo and An (2019) similarly reported the persistence of begging among some Badjao households in Batangas City, and noted inadequate or unsustainable livelihood opportunities as a continuing concern in spite of skills-based interventions. Research in two Sama Bajo fishing settlements in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, also discovered that poverty and prosperity were influenced by the seasonality of livelihoods, gendered access to fishing income, environmental pressures and patron-client relationships offering economic support but possibly reinforcing dependence (McWilliam et al., 2021). Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory accounts for the fact that survival practices can be learned through observation and environmental reinforcement. However, these findings are not to be interpreted as evidence of begging as an intrinsic or universally accepted Badjao cultural practice.

Yet, the livelihood activities on the street are not an endemic or ubiquitous cultural trait of all urban Sama-Bajau households. These activities are said to occur when families have limited choices to meet their daily needs because of displacement, social exclusion, and lack of access to schooling and steady jobs (Andal, 2025; Hirai, 2015). In this sense, poverty is not just income poverty. "Poverty is the lack of elements of life such as health, education, employment, housing and mobility" (Amir-ud-Din et al., 2018). This could mean that problems in one area compound problems in other areas, helping to perpetuate disadvantage among Badjao communities. In the same vein, Ghatak (2024) observed that small doses of financial

aid may provide short-term relief but they are often not sufficient to help households escape poverty when low savings, poor health, limited education and skills, limited productive assets and limited access to credit still prevail.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD, 2025) documentation recently provided an example of an infrastructure need identified in a Sama-Badjao community. The program was designed to enhance safety and access in that community. This example, however, is to be understood in its local context and not as a picture of the conditions of all Badjao communities. Major hurdles include social protection, employment opportunities and access to basic resources that continue to impede efforts to reduce poverty (World Bank, 2023; UNDESA, 2025). Another concern is education. "The right of indigenous peoples to education that respects their cultural identity is recognized by UNESCO (2023)." As also noted by UNDESA and CIKS (2023), indigenous knowledge should play a significant role in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. These sources indicate a wider concern. Responses need to make sense in the culture, knowledge and realities of the communities themselves, but material needs also need to be met.

The Cycle of Deprivation does not mean that the Badjao are intrinsically poor. But there is hardship, and the emotional toll of marginalization and exclusion from institutions can limit what people can do. Yet hardship is only part of the picture. At the same time, resilience can be seen in relationships, cultural practices, families and communities. Other Indigenous groups have demonstrated the significance of culture, spirituality, and social and psychological resources in health and resilience (John-Henderson et al., 2023). Indigenous youth also reported increased connectedness when learning from elders, family and peers and learning through cultural and community life (Heid et al., 2022). The studies were not conducted among the Badjao. But they help us understand why programs should build on the strengths communities possess rather than the challenges communities face. Miole (2024) makes a similar argument regarding an Indigenous education in the Philippines. Communities must have a real voice; indigenous knowledge must

be respected and dialog with government needs to continue as policies are implemented.

Structural Barriers. Structural barriers are experienced even in the most mundane encounters with government offices, schools, hospitals and other public institutions. Institutional practices can determine who gets noticed, who gets supported and who gets ignored. These aren't new issues. Over the years, many have been generated by laws, administrative rules and institutional practices. Good intentions can only go so far if policies are not implemented fairly or if existing systems continue to be skewed in favor of dominant groups. Many Badjao families do not have civil-registration documents. A person without a birth certificate or other documents may not be able to attend school, access healthcare, social protection, or other government services (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, 2021; UNHCR & UNICEF, 2024). "Birth registration creates a legal identity of a person and can have an influence on the access to rights" (UNICEF, 2019). The absence of documentation is thus more than a matter of paper. It can determine whether someone is formally recognized and able to access services available to other citizens.

You can see the effect of these barriers in school, too. Silda et al. (2024) interviewed six Badjao adolescents in a community in Surigao City. Their experiences revealed a number of problems including stereotyping, bullying, discrimination, language and communication barriers and exclusion from social groups. The study also pointed out how students can surmount these challenges with the help of the community and the government. Although the subjects' stories are from one community, they reflect the impact of society's attitude and of how institutions respond to their needs on the school experience of a Badjao learner.

Promises of inclusion do not always translate into meaningful access in practice. Their effectiveness depends partly on how policies are implemented and whether Indigenous communities retain a meaningful voice in the process. In the case of the Philippine Indigenous Peoples' Education policy, there is a need for

continuous dialogue, cooperation and participation of indigenous peoples in the policy formulation (Miole, 2024). On paper, a policy may be inclusive, but exclusion can persist in practice without meaningful participation. Similar patterns were observed in five villages of Indonesian Bajau. The marginalization of the Bajau in coastal co-management arrangements is due to limited institutional support, limited community influence in decision making and weak policy recognition (Ariando and Arunotai, 2022). Their findings indicate that participation may be symbolic and not substantive if social and cultural differences are not properly addressed.

Structural barriers are not only about lack of access to services and opportunities. They can also, over time, influence people's feelings of acceptance and ability to participate. Bandura's (1986) theory of reciprocal determinism is a useful framework to understand this process. It describes a continuing interaction between the personal factors, human behaviour and their environment. When people are repeatedly denied access, or recognition, they can start to feel like they don't belong. They may also become less likely to participate, speak up, or take initiative. Structural exclusion, then, works not only through material deprivation and institutional constraints. It can affect people's relationships, their sense of belonging and their belief in the value of their participation.

Similar concerns appear in global reports. Undesirable inequalities in access to education, decent work and social protection continue to undermine efforts to eradicate poverty, UN-DESA notes (2025). According to UNICEF (2023) children and families in vulnerable urban communities are especially affected by poor housing, weak infrastructure and limited access to basic services. Inclusive policies alone may not remove these conditions. Exclusion can be built into how institutions operate, how policies are made and how communities are treated. Overcoming these barriers thus requires changing institutional practices and relationships between communities and institutions. It also means that marginalized groups have a real voice in decisions that affect their lives.

Access and Opportunity

Access and Opportunity are concerned with the real conditions for people to take part in society and pursue the goals they have set for themselves. These conditions include legal recognition, education, employment and access to public institutions and services, but they are not equally available to everyone. They are not all over the place. Lack of civil registration documents, low levels of education, insecure livelihoods and limited access to public services can constrain a person's choices. Aquino (2024) conducted a qualitative study of Sama Dilaut participants in the southern Philippines and found a number of interrelated capabilities such as knowledge and education, cultural and spiritual continuity, multiple livelihoods, and participation in social and political leadership. All these capacities together allow the people to exercise their rights and freedoms. Legal identity is therefore important. Cheong et al. (2025) demonstrate how postcolonial citizenship regimes continue to produce statelessness for Filipinos in Sabah, including the Bajau Laut. UNICEF Philippines (2025b) also states that in the Philippines, the absence of birth registration denies access to services and opportunities. The registration of a child's birth is therefore more than a bureaucratic matter. It also provides a legal basis for participation and recognition in public institutions.

Material deprivation remains widespread among children globally. A joint analysis by UNICEF and the World Bank estimated that around 356 million children were living in extreme poverty before the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF & World Bank, 2020). "Many children may find this hardship makes it more difficult to attend school, get medical care and meet other basic needs. Local projects are able to circumvent some of these barriers in practical ways. A KALAHI-CIDSS footbridge in Isabela City, which was built with the participation of one Sama-Badjao settlement, enhanced residents' access to schools, commercial areas and nearby communities (DSWD, 2025). The project was developed in response to a need expressed by the community and demonstrates the importance of involving residents in decisions about local infrastructure. It is, however, only one initiative and should be seen in its specific context. But UNESCO (2017, 2023) points

out that educational opportunity is about inclusion, cultural relevance and respect for Indigenous peoples' rights, not just physical access.

Access does not always mean opportunity. A similar distinction was found in an educational context in Araidiri, Papua New Guinea, where access to schooling did not, in itself, guarantee that students were receiving the full benefits of education. Teaching approaches that responded to existing capabilities, learning needs and circumstances were also required by students (Narsico, 2024). People also have to believe that they can use the resources they have. This is known as self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001), which can influence whether a person engages in and continues with an activity despite adversity. But this confidence does not grow in a vacuum. How people perceive the opportunities and the constraints around them matters. The access programs should not force Badjao communities to give up their culture or just adapt to the dominant way of life. Inclusion is having access to the resources and institutions without losing the sense of one's own cultural identity, community priorities and the right of communities to determine their own course.

Small fishing communities in Indonesia provides a useful example. A review of 20 livelihood programs by Stacey et al (2021) showed greater success when community needs were addressed in a wider context and there was community engagement. The programs also sought to build local capacity. It was important for government, civil society and private sector groups to work together and facilitators needed to understand the context. Little follow-up monitoring occurred. This makes it difficult to know whether the benefits were sustained. The Philippines is also expanding access to social protection and housing. The community mortgage financing and the Bangsamoro Social Protection Plan are examples of these efforts (Presidential Communications Office, 2025; UNICEF Philippines, 2025a). But it remains unclear whether these efforts will lead to long-term empowerment and resilience.

There may be an opportunity, but it may not be very achievable. People can be marginalized if they get little support or if institutions turn a blind eye to their circumstances. A school can be opened, a livelihood program can be done or

a public service can be provided. Family bonds, community networks and responsive public agencies can help address this gap. Spada et al. (2024) described an association in an analysis of data from 34 European countries over the period 2015-2019. "Countries that scored higher in indicators of education and cultural investment tended to have lower levels of poverty." This pattern cannot be applied directly to the Badjao as the social, economic and institutional context of the countries studied is different. But it shows the larger problem identified by UNDESA (2025) that deficiencies in education, employment and social protection persist, leaving many people excluded from the gains of poverty reduction. People need more than just a resource that is available to really make a difference. They also need institutions which listen to them, respect their culture, involve them in decision-making and provide support which they can actually use.

Support Systems and Growth

Support Systems and Growth are the relationships and institutions that can help people stay resilient, protect their psychological well-being, and develop their capacities in the face of long-term hardship. Support may come from family, friends, mentors, community groups, public agencies and non-governmental organizations. Direct evidence specifically on Badjao for some of these psychosocial processes is still limited and studies from other settings are used here only to help explain the possible connection between support and resilience. For instance, Cao et al.'s (2024) study of 665 university students in China found that social support was positively related to psychological resilience. Coping mechanisms partially mediated this relationship. The setting is very different from Badjao communities; however, the study helps illustrate how support and coping may intersect.

More pertinent evidence is coming from the Sama Bajo communities themselves. Social resilience of 240 respondents from three communities in Wakatobi National Park was studied by Tadjuddah et al. (2023). They found resilience associated with local social ties, livelihoods and access to human and financial resources. But the three communities differed from each other. Thus, resilience may be

different in different contexts. Shuhaimi et al. (2023) also associate empowerment with better access to information, resources, support and learning opportunities. The studies point to a simple notion: support is important, but it needs to fit the relationships and conditions within the community. Institutions can help people by increasing access to resources and opportunities.

Supportive relationships do more than help people cope with adversity. They can also increase self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (2001) as a person's belief that he or she can organize and execute the courses of action required to meet a particular goal. These beliefs are affected by an individual's own conduct, by observing others' behaviors, by the reinforcement they receive, and by how they interpret their emotional and physical responses. But encouragement might not be enough. Dennerlein and Kirkman (2023) found that empowering leadership was not as effective in an organizational setting when people had no access to resources, information and sociopolitical support. They didn't include Indigenous communities in their study, but it speaks to a larger point. Where there are no surrounding structures to support them, people can be encouraged to take initiative, but they still cannot act. Another example is from Mountz et al. (2023) and their participatory action research project with university students with foster care experiences. Validation, peer support, connection to resources, collective action and empowerment were key themes in the project. This environment is different to that of the Badjao, but it demonstrates how people can develop confidence and agency, when they are heard and connected with others and meaningful opportunities to participate. For Badjao communities this means that the enabling relations need to be connected with access to resources and institutions which provide real opportunities for action.

Support starts at home in the Philippines but also means giving young people a real voice in decisions that affect their lives. UNICEF Philippines (2024) calls for the greater involvement and support of the youth. Young people shouldn't be treated as if they're just recipients of a program. They have the right to express their opinion and to take part in the life of the

community and the institutions. Families offer support. Similarly, Serrano et al. (2023) in their study on senior high school learners in Metro Manila reported that learners with higher family support also reported lesser depression, anxiety, and stress. However, the cross-sectional design of the study does not permit us to confirm the causal relationship between lower scores and family support. But these sources mention two important sources of support. Young people need good relationships and local institutions that listen to them.

Poverty is not seen in global policy as a problem that can be solved by income support alone. The Sustainable Development Goal framework recognizes the interlinkage of poverty eradication with education, gender equality, decent work, reduction of inequalities and development of safe and inclusive communities (UNDESA, 2025; United Nations Statistics Division, 2025). These areas are viewed as inter-related issues because progress in one is likely to be difficult to sustain if there are serious gaps in the others. Likewise, UNICEF (2023) emphasizes the importance of inclusive urban development and access to safe and adequate services for children and families in vulnerable communities. Services can't simply be there. And they should be shaped and responsive to the conditions of the people for whom they are intended. In sum, these perspectives suggest that support is more likely to be empowering when it is sustained, respectful of community culture, participatory in decision-making and supported by material resources and institutions that address real needs.

Cultural Adaptation and Agency

Cultural Adaptation and Agency consider how communities understand and respond to changing circumstances, how they maintain or modify cultural practices and how they make a space for action within the constraints placed upon them. Some Badjao communities have changed their maritime livelihoods, movement patterns and social practices as people and families respond to urbanization, displacement and limited economic opportunities (Andal, 2025; Hirai, 2015). The same responses were also reported by the Sama Bajo fishing communities in Southeast Sulawesi. The communities, with their diverse marine-based livelihoods

and long experience of seasonal change, responded to the crisis as reported by Wianti and McWilliam (2023). But they did so in the midst of great market upheavals, food supply problems and health risks.

Do not think that flexibility means they have total freedom of choice. Some changes may be pragmatic responses to exclusion rather than freely chosen, culturally preferred or personally empowering. Sasaki and Baba (2024) suggest that cultural survival and autonomy are active processes in which marginalized groups respond to pressures on their identity and participation. Bandura (2001) also explains agency through the interaction of others' behavior, the individual's beliefs and opportunities or constraints in the environment. Adaptation can thus be by pressure or by choice. Hard times can change a person's ways just to survive. But they may also want to hold onto their identity and want to have some control over their future.

Sometimes mobility and street begging are framed as elements of the Sama-Bajau culture. Andal (2025) warns against this view and links these experiences to exclusion. This also makes us realize that we should not look at Badjao children only through the prism of their struggles. They have cultural identity and connect with their communities and they are still able to exercise agency even in difficult circumstances. Silda and colleagues (2024) studied Badjao adolescents in a community in Surigao City undergoing cultural transition. They discussed experiences of discrimination, community support, resilience and traditional practices. This study gives a deeper view of the lives of these young people, though the small and localized sample prevents us from generalizing to all Badjao communities. Some families in Cebu and Batangas have no income during times when there is no work and cannot meet daily needs and may resort to begging or other informal livelihoods (Hirai, 2015; Tamayo & An, 2019). These activities should not be regarded as one pattern of Badjao culture. Sometimes they are just ways of coping with tough conditions.

Life on the sea is more than a way of life for many coastal communities. The ocean is also associated with knowledge, cultural identity and intergenerational relationships (Allison et

al., 2023). The Sama-Bajau communities' research is also an effort to preserve cultural practices in the face of changing social conditions (Andal, 2025; Silda et al., 2024). The conservation policies in Wakatobi National Park have not always been sensitive to the livelihood and culture of Sama-Bajau fishers. Fishers responded with alliances, criticism of authorities and continued use of local resources (Lynch & Turner, 2022). Their answers were also different by gender, ethnicity and class. So the community members were not feeling the policies in the same way.

Community engagement is key, but public programs can help. Tamayo and An (2019) stated that some health, education and birth registration programs improved some aspects of quality of life of the Badjao respondents in Batangas City. However, the authors suggested that the planning process should involve more community participation and more attention should be given to the Badjao culture and traditions. In Andal (2025) the Sama-Bajau children are viewed differently. The review does not depict them as passive victims or their culture as a liability. It also examines their cultural identity, collective action and agency. Part of the reason they are marginalized is because they are not part of the larger social system.

At the level of global policy, UNESCO (2023) and UNDESA and CIKS (2023) argue that Indigenous peoples have a right to education and that their knowledge should be included in sustainable development. A similar point is made by UNDESA, UN-Habitat and UNDP (2024) who argue the case for development efforts appropriate to local conditions and giving local people a stronger role in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. These principles thus provide a framework for understanding cultural adaptation through the lens of agency. Communities can keep their identity, adjust to changing conditions and take advantage of arising opportunities. But this does not mean adaptation implies cultural weakness. And it can't be told as a simplistic story of resilience where communities can overcome every barrier in isolation. The people can express themselves in creative and meaningful ways but their choices are limited by factors outside their control. This synthesis thus locates agency in structural conditions that may constrain or enable it.

Empowerment means creating spaces where communities can build on their own knowledge and cultural strengths, while also making serious efforts to dismantle the external barriers that limit their potential.

Pathways of Belonging as an Ideal Outcome

The Cultural Agency Model proposes an outcome known as Pathways of Belonging. This is more than a formal inclusion. This means Badjao people and communities are acknowledged, listened to and have a real voice in decisions that impact their lives. But this can be hard when families have problems that have gone on for many years. When food is not available, children are out of school and livelihoods are precarious, daily survival can quickly become the priority. Education, health care and sustainable ways of earning a living are therefore important (Hirai, 2015; Tamayo & An, 2019). Belonging means to have a legal identity as well. A birth certificate or other document of civil registration provides a person with formal recognition and can ease access to public services (UNICEF, 2019; UNHCR & UNICEF, 2024). Getting services that should be available can be difficult without those documents too.

In the model, Access and Opportunity are not simply the giving of a service or resource. It's also important whether Indigenous communities can actually use it in ways that suit their circumstances, cultural values and priorities. Access should provide people with other choices without necessarily compromising their identity or mandated ways of life (UNESCO, 2023). There are programs on enhancing access to housing and social protection, such as community mortgage financing and the Bangsamoro Social Protection Plan (Presidential Communications Office, 2025; UNICEF Philippines, 2025a). But support doesn't mean empowerment has necessarily taken place. It takes time to see whether communities can make good use of that support, whether it meets their priorities, and whether it actually makes a difference to their lives.

Relationships can make people stronger. Family, friends, peers and community organizations can encourage and help out in practical ways and provide a sense of belonging. This kind of support can assist people to deal with challenges and care for their wellbeing. Some

sense of how this would happen we get from studies outside the Badjao community. Cao et al. (2024) related social support, coping and resilience. Similarly, Mountz et al. (2023) found that participatory settings may enable youth to connect with peers, resources, and work together around shared concerns. The findings are from other settings and cannot be applied directly to Badjao communities. But they show why those who need help should also help create it. UNICEF Philippines (2024) points out the need to involve and support young people. For Badjao communities, it means asking the young people, their families and other community members what kind of support they need. It also raises the question of how to give support. Support is most effective when it is grounded in community relations and culturally and contextually sensitive to the people.

Being part of something is more than having access to services, opportunities and programs. For Badjao communities it also means preservation of their cultural identity and the right to be consulted on decisions that concern their future. These pathways are thus important in understanding Cultural Adaptation and Agency. Andal (2025) illustrates how Sama-Bajau communities modify their livelihood practices and social actions to changing circumstances but also retain key elements of their cultural identity. Also, part of the process is their relation to the sea, where knowledge and identity related to the sea remain central in the community's life (Allison et al., 2023). This is also mirrored in current policy trajectories. UNDESA and CIKS (2023) and UNESCO (2023) advocate for development approaches that respect Indigenous knowledge and cultural rights and enable communities to participate in the definition of their own priorities. Pathways of Belonging links recognition, access, support, cultural continuity and participation. It is not only the needs of everyday life. It's about empowering Badjao to take the lead in making meaningful choices, staying connected to their culture and having a say in the development of their communities.

Model Development

The literature reviewed here suggests that there is no single or easy path to empowerment for marginalized groups such as the Badjao.

Taking poverty, support, resilience or agency in isolation cannot fully explain their experiences. Communities should also not be expected to move from hardship to empowerment in a fixed sequence. Empowerment arises out of the ongoing interplay of forces that constrain people's choices and conditions that enable them to act. Badjao people and communities may face serious deprivation and exclusion. Yet they draw on cultural knowledge, connections and experience to adapt, survive and exercise agency. This co-existence is something to recognize. It avoids the presentation of the Badjao as simply victims and also avoids the assumption that resilience alone can triumph over structural barriers without substantial support.

These insights inform the Cultural Agency Model that integrates five themes: Cycle of Deprivation, Structural Barriers, Access and Opportunity, Support Systems and Growth, and Cultural Adaptation and Agency. These are not separate elements of the Badjao experience for the model. Instead, they can reinforce or undermine each other. A livelihood opportunity may offer a little real choice if structural barriers remain or support is lacking. That is, resilient relationships and cultural competence may help people to deal with similar difficulties. As these forces operate in different communities and contexts, agency may be limited or amplified differently. In the model, cultural agency is not an end state people reach once and for all. It is an ongoing process shaped by the extent to which people are acknowledged, included, able to maintain their cultural ties and given meaningful opportunities to contribute to decisions that affect them.

The model also assumes these relationships can change and reoccur over time. Reinforcement of constraints occurs when the effects of deprivation and structural barriers persist to limit access, undermining existing supports and diminishing people's opportunity to make meaningful choices. Pathways to Empowerment describe movement in the opposite direction. Better access, support, recognition and participation can create more opportunities for people to lead and help communities deal with emerging issues. These pathways are not fixed. One community may be more empowered in one domain but struggling in another domain.

Gains may also be lost if the conditions that made them possible are not maintained. The feedback loops in the model are built on this continuing tension between constraints and enabling conditions. The empowerment here is not a mere escape from marginalization, but a process that can move forward, recede or turn back with changing circumstances.

The Cultural Agency Model is not a cookie-cutter intervention that can be replicated everywhere. Rather, it provides an entry point through which to understand how barriers and sources of support intersect, particularly where traditional programming may not consider cultural realities and more ingrained structural issues. The model encourages policy

makers, educators, development practitioners and community leaders to ask not only what services or opportunities are being offered, but also whether they are appropriate to the relationships, culture and real circumstances of the people they are meant to serve. Therefore, Badjao perspectives and priorities should shape the understanding of problems and the design of responses. In the model, Pathways of Belonging is not something that institutions can just give to a community. It must be created with the community through acknowledgment, meaningful access, dependable support, respect for cultural continuity and authentic participation in decisions that impact their lives.

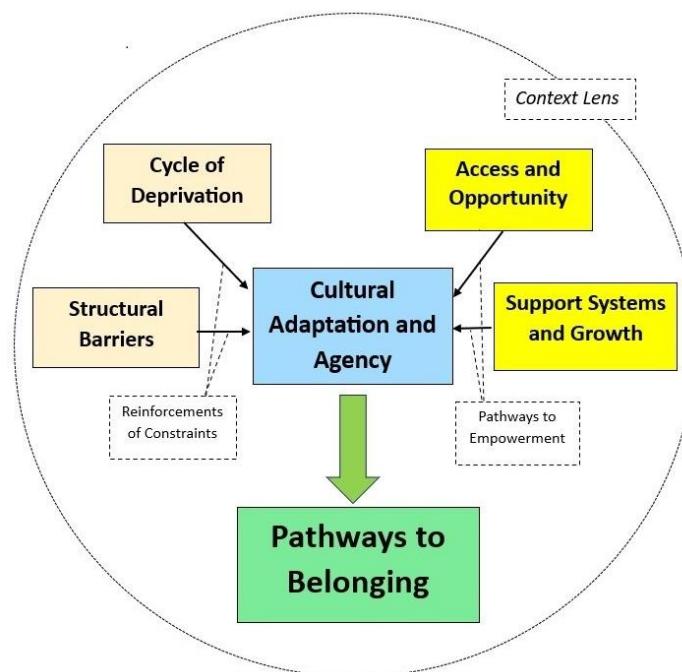


Figure 1. Cultural Agency Model

For Badjao communities, empowerment is unlikely to be a single or straight path. What becomes possible depends on how the five themes interact in a particular community and set of circumstances. For instance, a community might have access to a service, but still be excluded from decisions about how the service is delivered. And this is the reason why Cultural Adaptation and Agency are the core of the Cultural Agency Model. It shows how communities react to change, how they safeguard their identity, and how they make choices even when

their choices remain limited. Relationships identified throughout the literature served as the rationale for this theme to be placed at the heart of the model. Empowerment, in the model, is something that is built with communities, not delivered to them. It develops when people are acknowledged, involved, capable of upholding cultural independence and provided with significant opportunities to act upon their own choices (Bandura, 2001; Sasaki & Baba, 2024). Cultural adaptation and agency, therefore, have no predetermined end. This process

requires continuing efforts to break down barriers while building on the knowledge, relationships and capacities that already exist within communities.

Cycle of Deprivation describes how one hardship breeds or exacerbates another on the constraining side of the model. Low income can mean that families cannot meet food needs, children's schooling is disrupted and adults have to depend on precarious livelihoods. Together, these conditions can function to entrench exclusion and reinforce disadvantage across generations (Hirai, 2015; Tamayo & An, 2019). Structural Barriers can make it even more difficult to break this cycle. Without birth certificates or any other form of civil registration, people may be unable to attend school, access healthcare, receive social protection or acquire legal recognition (UNICEF, 2019; UNHCR & UNICEF, 2024). These are not just about accessing services. They also limit people's resources, recognition and opportunities to make meaningful choices and act on them. When multiple conditions exist and are not addressed, disadvantage can continue to exist even when individuals and families are trying to improve their circumstances.

On the empowering side of the model, Access and Opportunity and Support Systems and Growth describe conditions that can expand the space for decision and action. Material resources matter, but to give them alone is not enough. People also need to feel recognized, to have reliable relationships and to deal with institutions that understand and respond to their situation. Culturally responsive education, sustainable means of livelihood and civil-registration documentation can provide access to institutions, participation and greater agency over the future (Miole, 2024; Tamayo & An, 2019; UNICEF Philippines, 2025b). Findings from other communities also point to family, community, and institutional support being linked with greater resilience and less psychological distress (Cao et al., 2024; Serrano et al., 2023). Although these findings cannot be applied directly to Badjao communities, they help explain why opportunities may be easier to use when people receive encouragement, trust those around them and can rely on responsive institutions. Access and support do not create agency by themselves. They can, however, give

people more choices, a stronger voice and a better chance to act on what matters to them.

Sustained change may require two things at once: break down the barriers and reinforce the conditions that allow people to act over time. The Cultural Agency Model does not present this change as a series of steps. Badjao communities will face different mixes of barriers, resources and sources of support and the model should be seen in relation to each setting. If the model is used to guide practice, opening access to a program or service alone will not suffice. People would also need ongoing support from the relationships and institutions that help them to make meaningful use of the opportunity. The cited housing and social-protection initiatives point to appropriate policy directions, but the long-term contributions of these efforts to community growth remain unknown and need to be evaluated over a longer period (Presidential Communications Office, 2025; UNICEF Philippines, 2025a). Cultural Adaptation and Agency therefore represents an ongoing process that informs what support should look like. It requires approaches that listen to communities, respect their culture and give them real power over decisions about their development (Miole, 2024; Silda et al., 2024).

Summary of Findings

The literature reviewed indicates that no single condition accounts for all of the Badjao marginalization, resilience or agency. What people and communities can do is shaped by circumstances that can both constrain and enable them. The evidence was grouped into five themes to elucidate these relationships: Cycle of Deprivation, Structural Barriers, Access and Opportunity, Support Systems and Growth, and Cultural Adaptation and Agency. These themes do not work in isolation. In some contexts, deprivation and structural barriers may continue to constrain people's choices even when programs or support are available. For others, strong relationships and culturally responsive opportunities may enable communities to exercise more agency even as some barriers persist. Often constraining and enabling conditions are present at the same time, creating a mixture of continued marginalisation, adaptation and growing agency.

The Cycle of Deprivation shows that hardship is rarely just one problem. Low-income families can have difficulty meeting their food needs and food insecurity and financial pressure may interfere with children's schooling and further limit future livelihood opportunities. When these challenges are multiplied, disadvantage can be transferred intergenerationally (Hirai, 2015; Tamayo & An, 2019). Structural Barriers can make the cycle even harder to break. Absence of civil registration and exclusion from institutions may mean that people are not able to go to school, access healthcare, access social protection or avail of legal recognition (UNICEF, 2019; UNHCR & UNICEF, 2024). These forces do more than just limit access to services inside the model. Together they can reduce the resources, recognition and opportunities that people need in order for them to be able to exercise their agency.

People and communities can respond to these constraining forces through Access and Opportunity and Support Systems and Growth. Yes, there is opportunity but that does not mean people can always get to it and take advantage of it. Culturally-sensitive education, sustainable livelihoods and civil registration documents that give people more meaningful choices help promote engagement (Miole, 2024; Tamayo & An, 2019; UNICEF Philippines, 2025b). In addition, supportive relationships can help people to take advantage of opportunities and to face challenges. Social support is related to psychological resilience in a non-Badjao population, and coping processes partially mediate this relationship (Cao et al., 2024). Although this finding cannot be generalized to Badjao communities, it shows that relationships can be a resource that enhances people's ability to cope with adversity. In the model, access and support are not necessarily empowering by themselves. But they can also provide the chance to widen choice, to widen the ability to act and create better conditions for longer term growth.

The question of Cultural Adaptation and Agency is the question of relation between these themes. It emphasizes the way individuals and groups preserve their cultural identity, gain strength from positive relationships, and adjust their behavior under adverse conditions (Sasaki & Baba, 2024; Silda et al., 2024). These

responses can occur even under continuing conditions of marginalization. Adaptation does not mean that barriers are absent. This theme is important to the Cultural Agency Model because it demonstrates that agency is created in and through culture and relationships with community, not outside of it. The model proposes that empowerment may be strengthened when people are simultaneously recognized, included, supported and able to maintain their cultural ties.

Overall, the synthesis suggests that movement toward empowerment may be supported when constraining conditions are reduced and culturally responsive enabling conditions are strengthened over time. Pathways of Belonging therefore represents a proposed outcome in which empowerment is co-created through systems that combine recognition, material access, relational support, cultural continuity, and meaningful community participation.

Conclusion

This concept-driven integrative literature review synthesized existing scholarship and contextual sources in an effort to understand how Badjao marginalization, resilience and agency have been described. Instead of separating out these experiences as individual issues, the evidence was grouped into five inter-related themes: Cycle of Deprivation, Structural Barriers, Access and Opportunity, Support Systems and Growth, and Cultural Adaptation and Agency. These theme relationships provided the conceptual basis for the Cultural Agency Model. The model does not see empowerment as a final state that all communities reach in the same way. Rather, empowerment is seen as a process of change that can take different forms in different communities and situations. Empowerment is more likely to occur in this process when people are recognized, included and supported, able to maintain their cultural connections and given meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

The review reveals that deprivation and exclusion are seldom stand-alone issues. A person without civil-registration documents may find it difficult to access school, healthcare or social protection. This same hardship can then be compounded by limited services, unstable livelihood opportunities and exclusion from

institutions. Also, the literature points to conditions that can help people respond. Culturally respectful access, reliable relationships and authentic opportunities to participate can enhance adaptation and provide greater agency to people. Certain Badjao communities have documented informal support systems, continual cultural practices, and communal responses to adversity. These stories reinforce the model's conceptualization of empowerment as relational and the potential for multiple expressions of empowerment across communities. In the model, Pathways of Belonging describes a proposed movement beyond being included in name only. It means meaningful participation that gives Badjao people a voice, respects their culture and allows their priorities to influence decisions that affect them.

This review has major limitations. It is based on secondary and contextual sources, not on primary evidence collected directly from Badjao people and communities. The literature chosen helps to recognize trends and develop concepts, but it cannot speak for the full diversity of Badjao experience. Communities may be different from one place to another, from one generation to another and from one local context to another and these differences may not be fully reflected in the sources available. Because the review did not involve collection of primary data, it cannot directly determine whether specific policies or interventions were successful in achieving their intended outcomes or how community members experienced them. Thus, future studies should be done with Badjao communities, not about them. Participatory and community-engaged approaches would enable different communities and generations to have a say in the questions for research and to articulate what resilience, agency, belonging and empowerment mean in their own lives. Such evidence could then be used to test, refine or contest the Cultural Agency Model.

The Cultural Agency Model has yet to be tested and refined through research with Badjao communities. It can act as a conceptual guide for policymakers, educators, development practitioners and community partners interested in understanding how barriers and sources of support interact. The model pushes them to think beyond individual programs, to

the broader relationships, institutions and cultural conditions that influence people's decisions. It also supports a move away from programs developed for communities without their meaningful involvement. Rather, Badjao perspectives and priorities should inform understanding of needs and the development of responses. Opportunity for all should not come at the expense of leaving one's identity at the door or conforming to the expectations of a dominant culture. In the model, recognition, participation and belonging are not secondary benefits that follow material support. They are vital conditions for empowerment and for giving communities a real voice in determining their own development.

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