Empowering the Magbukún Ayta through Co-Design Oral History: Asserting Ancestral Domain in Morong, Bataan[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how co-designed, participatory approaches to oral history documentation function as mechanisms of Indigenous empowerment in the assertion of ancestral domain rights. Anchored in debates on Indigenous land rights, oral history, and decolonizing research methodologies, the study responds to a gap in existing literature and practice that privileges legal and institutional outcomes while giving limited attention to the epistemic processes through which Indigenous communities generate, validate, and authorize knowledge for state recognition. Focusing on the Magbukún Ayta of Sitio Kanawan in Morong, Bataan—whose ancestral domain overlaps with state-protected areas and development zones—the paper analyzes how oral histories, participatory mapping, and a tactile "string timeline" methodology were collaboratively developed

to meet the requirements of the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT).

Drawing on more than two decades of sustained ethnographic engagement, the study demonstrates that ancestral domain assertion is not merely a legal or administrative task but an epistemic and cultural practice rooted in collective memory, relational authority, and Indigenous knowledge systems. It argues that participatory oral history, when grounded in long-term relational accountability and Indigenous epistemic authority, enables communities to engage state processes without relinquishing cultural sovereignty.

Keywords: Ancestral domain, Indigenous epistemologies, Participatory oral history, Decolonizing methodologies, Magbukún Ayta

Introduction

In Philippine history, Negrito groups—including the Ayta—are widely recognized as among the archipelago's earliest inhabitants (Jocano, 1998; Delfin et al., 2011). Their long presence across forested, coastal, and upland environments reflects deep ecological adaptation and mobility. Ayta histories are primarily transmitted through oral tradition, situating collective memory, place, and kinship at the center of historical knowledge. Among the Magbukún Ayta of Morong, Bataan, oral accounts recount that Apo Alipon and Lola Moray were the first Ayta couple to settle in the area, migrating from Zambales in search of safer and more sustainable living conditions. These narratives locate the origins of the present-day community in what is now Barangay Mabayo.

The toponym *Mabayo*, remembered as the site where Apo Alipon and Lola Moray first encountered *tawó* (non-Ayta newcomers), refers to the early presence of outsiders in the area (Castro & Cabalza, 1999; community oral histories). While some secondary sources speculate that these outsiders may have included early Moro traders or settlers, such interpretations remain tentative and are best understood as scholarly inference rather than community-established historical fact. What is clear in both oral tradition and ethnographic accounts is that early encounters with non-Ayta groups shaped Magbukún strategies of mobility, boundary-making, and social differentiation. The ethnonym *Magbukún*, meaning "on their own," reflects a deliberate assertion of distinct identity and settlement separate from Ayta kin groups in Zambales.

Historically, the Magbukún Ayta practiced a semi-nomadic lifeway shaped by ecological conditions and social contingencies. Mobility was oriented around access to hunting and foraging grounds, arable soil, and reliable water sources, as well as the need to avoid illness, conflict, or misfortune (Regpala et al., 2010; Salonga et al., 2010). Rotational farming and land fallowing were common, with families returning to previously cultivated areas after periods of regeneration. Sites such as Anito (now Sitio Anito) hold particular historical and spiritual significance, remembered as spaces where

cosmological beliefs, subsistence practices, and kinship norms were transmitted across generations. These practices underscore the centrality of land not merely as territory, but as a living archive of memory, identity, and social order.

Indigenous struggles for ancestral land rights are often narrated through legal recognition, policy reforms, or development outcomes. While important, such accounts tend to obscure the epistemic labor that precedes recognition: the collective work of remembering, narrating, validating, and translating Indigenous relationships to land into forms legible to the modern state. In the Philippine context, this tension is especially pronounced. Although the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997 formally recognizes ancestral domain, its mechanisms—most notably the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT)—require Indigenous communities to produce written histories, maps, and development plans that conform to bureaucratic and technocratic standards. These demands often sit uneasily with Indigenous knowledge systems grounded in oral tradition, relational memory, and non-linear conceptions of time and place.

This paper examines these tensions through the experience of the Magbukún Ayta of Sitio Kanawan in Morong, Bataan. Over the twentieth century, the community experienced repeated displacement driven by overlapping land claims associated with state-led development projects, conservation initiatives, and private economic interests. Today, their ancestral domain overlaps with the Bataan National Park, the Subic Bay Freeport Zone, and the Bataan Technology Park—an intersection that has resulted in evictions, restricted access to forest resources, and the disruption of sacred and burial sites. These processes have rendered land tenure precarious and placed Magbukún lifeways in sustained tension with national development agendas.

While IPRA provided a legal pathway for asserting ancestral domain rights, it also posed a fundamental challenge: how could a community whose historical knowledge is transmitted orally

and collectively meet the documentary demands of the state without relinquishing epistemic authority or cultural integrity? Addressing this challenge required more than technical compliance; it demanded internal consensus-building, intergenerational dialogue, and careful governance over what knowledge could be documented, shared, or withheld.

Responding to gaps in existing literature that privilege legal outcomes over Indigenous knowledge-making processes, this paper asks: how can co-designed, participatory approaches to oral history documentation function as mechanisms of Indigenous empowerment in the assertion of ancestral domain rights? Drawing on more than two decades of sustained ethnographic engagement with the Magbukún Ayta, the study examines how oral histories, tactile timelines, participatory mapping, and collaborative writing were developed to support ancestral domain claims while remaining grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and cultural authority.

Rather than treating ancestral domain recognition as an endpoint, this paper foregrounds process. It argues that empowerment emerges through the collective articulation of history, the negotiation of memory, and the assertion of epistemic sovereignty in engagements with the state. By situating the Magbukún Ayta experience within broader debates on Indigenous land rights, oral history, and decolonizing research, the study offers a Philippine case that is both contextually grounded and analytically relevant to global discussions of Indigenous self-determination.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, participatory, and decolonizing research design grounded in long-term ethnographic engagement with the Magbukún Ayta community of Sitio Kanawan, Morong, Bataan. Rather than treating Indigenous knowledge as extractable data, the research recognizes Indigenous epistemologies as authoritative systems governed by cultural protocol, relational accountability, and collective consent (Smith, 1999; Battiste, 2000).

The methodological orientation is explicitly process-focused, examining how historical narratives, territorial memory, and cultural authority are collaboratively produced, validated, and mobilized in engagements with state institutions, particularly in relation to ancestral domain recognition.

Researcher Positionality and Long-Term Engagement

The study is based on more than two decades of sustained engagement with the Magbukún Ayta. From 2004 to 2009, the author resided in the community's former settlement—now part of the Bataan Technology Park, Inc.—and participated in livelihood initiatives, cultural documentation, health and education programs, forest protection, and preparatory work for the community's Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT). This extended residency enabled participant observation and longitudinal ethnographic documentation of belief systems, land-use practices, governance, and social change.

The author's role evolved over time from an external development practitioner to a trusted collaborator (*kaibigan* and *katiwala*). This positionality was negotiated through sustained presence, transparency, and continued engagement beyond formal project timelines. While it facilitated access to sensitive narratives, it also imposed ethical limits on documentation and representation, reinforcing the author's facilitative—rather than authoritative—role.

Co-Designed Participatory Methods

Research methods were co-designed with community elders, tribal leaders, women, and youth. With Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), the author documented selected aspects of Magbukún Ayta life, including oral histories, customary law, territorial knowledge, and Indigenous ecological practices. These materials supported the application for a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT), the formulation of the Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan (ADSDPP), and the

development of a community-defined Socio-Cultural Development Index (SCDI).

Primary data collection methods included community assemblies, focus group discussions (FGDs), informal and semi-structured interviews, and participatory workshops. Community assemblies were attended by adult members of the Magbukún Ayta community, with participation intentionally limited to Ayta members. Non-Ayta residents were excluded in accordance with community protocols governing decision-making and the sharing of Indigenous knowledge.

Participatory workshops formed the core of the research process and involved purposively selected community representatives. Participants included five members of the Council of Elders aged 60 years and above; eight Tribal Council members aged 30 years and above; ten women representatives within the same age bracket as the Tribal Council members; and ten youth participants aged 15 to 20 years. Participant selection was guided by customary leadership structures, principles of gender representation, and the importance of intergenerational inclusion.

Focus group discussions were conducted separately with elders, women, and youth to ensure culturally appropriate spaces for dialogue and to encourage open participation. Informal and semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key knowledge holders to elicit detailed narratives related to oral history, territorial boundaries, customary practices, and experiences of displacement.

Collaborative writing and iterative validation were integral components of the methodology. Draft narratives, maps, and analytical interpretations were collectively reviewed during workshops and community assemblies, enabling participants to clarify meanings, correct inaccuracies, and determine which forms of knowledge could be publicly documented. This process of co-writing and consensus-building extended throughout the ten-month research period and ensured that the resulting documentation

reflected community-authored knowledge rather than externally imposed interpretations.

Decision-making regarding what knowledge could be recorded, translated, or shared was collective and guided by community-defined protocols (Moll et al., 2020; Greenhalgh et al., 2016). Beyond documentation, the process functioned as internal capacity-building, fostering intergenerational dialogue, strengthening community governance, and reinforcing cultural continuity.

Oral History, Tactile Timeline, and Validation

Oral history documentation was undertaken as a culturally mediated process. Elders served as custodians of historical authority, while youth participated as co-facilitators. To organize non-linear historical memory, a tactile "string timeline" was developed through workshops. Narrative fragments were positioned along a string marked by generational intervals and collectively reviewed, rearranged, and contextualized using maps, dramatizations, and embodied demonstrations.

Validation relied on consensus-building rather than external triangulation alone. Elders and tribal leaders reviewed each narrative element to determine its accuracy, cultural appropriateness, and level of disclosure. Sensitive knowledge was excluded from public documentation or restricted to legal use. Ethical practice throughout the study emphasized FPIC, ongoing consultation, and respect for Indigenous knowledge governance.

Through these methods, the research functioned not only as data generation but as an empowering process through which the Magbukún Ayta strengthened cultural authority, internal cohesion, and their capacity to articulate ancestral domain claims on their own terms.

The Magbukún Ayta of Kanawan: History, Social Change, and Land Relations

Negrito groups, including the Ayta, are widely recognized as among the earliest inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago (Jocano, 1998; Delfin et al., 2011). The Magbukún Ayta of Morong, Bataan trace their origins to migrations from Zambales, remembered through oral traditions recounting the journeys of ancestral figures such as Apo Alipon and Lola Moray. These narratives situate the emergence of the present-day community in what is now Barangay Mabayo and reflect an Indigenous historiography grounded in place, kinship, and mobility rather than linear chronology.

The ethnonym *Magbukún*, meaning "on their own," signifies a deliberate assertion of autonomy and collective identity distinct from Ayta kin groups in Zambales. This self-identification articulates a long-standing orientation toward independence and self-governance that continues to shape Magbukún engagement with non-Indigenous settlers and state institutions.

Historically, the Magbukún Ayta practiced a semi-nomadic lifeway characterized by seasonal mobility, rotational farming, and land fallowing. Movement was shaped by ecological conditions—access to hunting grounds, arable soil, and water sources—as well as social contingencies such as illness, conflict, and death (Regpala et al., 2010; Salonga et al., 2010). Sites such as Anito (now Sitio Anito) are remembered as centers of family life and cultural transmission, where cosmological beliefs, subsistence practices, and social norms were passed across generations.

These places continue to function as anchors of collective memory within the ancestral domain. Land, in this context, is not merely territory but a living archive of history, identity, and social order.

Displacement, State Intervention, and Resettlement

The arrival of non-Ayta settlers in Mabayo, which oral historical accounts suggest occurred during the pre-Spanish period, marked a critical turning point. Although early relations were largely peaceful, growing competition over land and resources eventually led to displacement. Magbukún families relocated to areas along the Boton River and later to Triboa, continuing semi-nomadic movements along the slopes of Mount Natib. Despite mobility, places such as Mabayo, Anito, Kaymaho (Manggitara), Tayaong, Bayandati, San Isidro, and Lemon remain embedded in collective memory due to their ecological and spiritual significance (Salonga et al., 2010).

The most consequential displacement occurred in the 1970s with the establishment of the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) under the Marcos regime. Ayta families were forcibly evicted from Lemon (Bayan-bayanan), and the subsequent conversion of the site—now Bataan Technology Park, Inc. (BTPI)—resulted in the destruction of water sources and the concealment of ancestral burial grounds. These interventions constituted not only physical dispossession but the erasure of culturally meaningful landscapes.

Following displacement, families resettled in Sitio Kanawan due to its access to freshwater. Although Presidential Proclamation No. 192 (1987) designated 165 hectares as the Kanawan Negrito Reservation Area, this recognition provided only partial protection and did not resolve broader ancestral domain claims.

Demographic Change and Social Relations

Despite repeated displacement, the Magbukún Ayta maintained a distinct cultural identity and historically upheld boundaries with *tawó* (non-Ayta). These boundaries shifted during the political unrest of the 1970s, when resettlement brought closer proximity to settler communities (Salonga et al., 2010). Wage labor—particularly domestic work among Ayta women—introduced new forms of interaction that gradually reshaped social norms.

Intermarriage, once prohibited, emerged in the late 1970s and contributed to new social categories: *kulot* (Ayta), *mestizo/a* (mixed descent), and *unat* (non-Ayta). While *mestizo/a* individuals are generally accepted, leadership positions remain reserved for *kulot* Ayta, reflecting enduring norms of cultural authority (Figure 1).

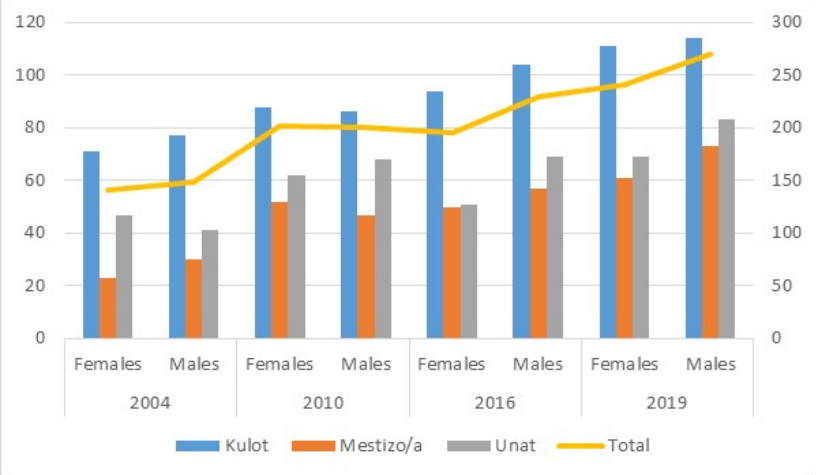

Figure 1. Ethnicity distribution by gender, 2004-2019

Community surveys conducted by the author in 2004, 2010, 2016, and 2019 (see Table 1) indicate steady population growth alongside increasing social diversity. These demographic shifts form the context within which ancestral domain claims and cultural preservation efforts are negotiated.

Table 1. Population distribution, 2004-2019

Ethnicity	2004		2010		2016		2019	
	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males
Kulot	71	77	88	86	94	104	111	114
Mestizo/a	23	30	52	47	50	57	61	73
Unat	47	41	62	68	51	69	69	83
Total	141	148	202	201	195	230	241	270

Indigenous Lifeways, Ecological Knowledge, and Land Ethics

Magbukún Ayta lifeways are deeply rooted in spiritual and ecological relationships with the forest (Amazona, 1951; Jocano, 1998). Although wage labor has increased, particularly in nearby towns and economic zones, the forest remains central to identity, subsistence, and well-being. Ethnographic accounts emphasize that bodily and emotional health are inseparable from movement through forest landscapes, underscoring the embodied nature of land relations.

Subsistence activities include hunting, gathering, honey collection, and small-scale swidden agriculture (*gasak*). These practices are structured by seasonal rhythms: honey gathering occurs between December and May, while hunting is concentrated during the rainy season to avoid harming pregnant animals. Gendered divisions of labor remain relatively egalitarian, and ecological knowledge is transmitted intergenerationally through daily practice.

A foundational principle of Magbukún culture is communal land ownership. Ancestral domain is understood as a collective inheritance and moral responsibility rather than private property (Motin et al., 2006). Oral narratives attributed to Apo Alipon emphasize collective care for land, an ethic embodied in the name *Kanawan*, derived from ritual acts of oath-taking and communal commitment. This moral economy prioritizes restraint, reciprocity, and care for vulnerable members of the community.

Cultural Heritage and Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs)

Cultural heritage among the Magbukún Ayta encompasses language, oral history, ecological knowledge, ritual practice, and governance systems. These Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) are dynamic frameworks through which the community interprets, manages, and defends its relationship with land (Posey, 1999; Battiste, 2002).

Ritual practices such as *taysak* (asking permission from spirits before clearing land), *namamakan* (thanksgiving prior to harvest), and *hapayan* (ceremony before tree cutting) express cosmological relationships with *anito* (ancestral spirits) and reinforce moral accountability to ecological systems. Sacred sites are not fixed monuments but emerge through relational encounters. Some are intentionally excluded from public maps to protect their sanctity, demonstrating Indigenous governance over sacred knowledge.

Community-based assessments reveal both continuity and erosion of IKSPs. While ecological ethics and communal governance persist, language use among youth declined sharply between 2004 and 2019. Traditional attire, instruments, and rituals associated with weddings and funerals are now rarely practiced, though some customs endure selectively. Elders frame these changes as cultural erosion intensified by environmental degradation, media exposure, and integration into non-Indigenous economies.

Knowledge, Process, and Indigenous Empowerment

The co-designed documentation of oral history emerged within a context shaped by distrust toward extractive research practices (Smith, 1999). Community strategies of selective disclosure reflect Indigenous governance over knowledge rather than resistance to history-making. Following sustained engagement, the council of elders authorized the documentation process and designated the author as facilitator, affirming that historical authority resided with the community.

A tactile "string timeline" was developed to organize non-linear historical memory. Narrative fragments were positioned relationally rather than chronologically and collectively reviewed through discussion, mapping, and embodied demonstration. Validation relied on consensus-building, with elders serving as arbiters of accuracy, appropriateness, and disclosure. This process challenged positivist historiography and affirmed Indigenous epistemic authority.

Participatory mapping translated relational geographies into cartographic forms required by the state (Poole, 1995). For the Magbukún Ayta, mapping was an epistemic and political negotiation—balancing state legibility with cultural values emphasizing non-confrontation and relational continuity (Kurashima et al., 2018). Decisions regarding boundary assertion were guided by ethical considerations as much as territorial claims.

Development Planning, SCDI, and Process as Empowerment

The Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan (ADSDPP) and the Socio-Cultural Development Index (SCDI) extended this epistemic strategy into development planning and evaluation. By defining development priorities and indicators on their own terms, the Magbukún Ayta asserted control over how progress is measured and negotiated. Longitudinal data revealed material gains alongside cultural decline, underscoring the limits of conventional development frameworks.

Taken together, oral history, mapping, IKSP revitalization, planning, and evaluation demonstrate that Indigenous empowerment emerges through sustained, collectively governed processes rather than singular legal outcomes. Ancestral domain assertion, in this case, is as much about reclaiming epistemic authority as it is about securing legal recognition.

Conclusion

This study examined how co-designed, participatory approaches to oral history documentation, mapping, planning, and evaluation function as mechanisms of Indigenous empowerment in the assertion of ancestral domain rights. Using the case of the Magbukún Ayta of Sitio Kanawan in Morong, Bataan, the paper addressed a gap in existing literature and practice that tends to emphasize legal recognition and institutional outcomes while giving limited attention to the epistemic processes through which

Indigenous communities themselves generate, validate, and govern the knowledge required for state recognition.

The findings demonstrate that ancestral domain assertion is not merely a legal or administrative exercise but a deeply cultural, epistemic, and political process grounded in collective memory, relational authority, and Indigenous knowledge systems. For the Magbukún Ayta, practices such as oral history writing, the construction of tactile timelines, participatory mapping, and the formulation of the Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan (ADSDPP) were not neutral technical requirements imposed by the state. Rather, these processes became sites of internal negotiation, intergenerational dialogue, and cultural reaffirmation. Through them, the community translated non-linear, place-based histories and relational geographies into state-legible forms while retaining control over what knowledge could be disclosed, shared, or protected.

By foregrounding oral history as an epistemic practice rather than a methodological tool, this study contributes to debates on Indigenous historiography, land governance, and development planning. The use of collective validation and consensus-building challenges positivist assumptions about singular historical truth and affirms multiplicity, memory, and cultural protocol as foundations of historical authority. In this respect, the paper extends existing discussions of oral history by showing how Indigenous communities actively mediate the transformation of memory into text under conditions of political and bureaucratic constraint.

Methodologically, the study offers an empirically grounded account of decolonizing and participatory research as a long-term, relational process. The longitudinal nature of engagement underscores that trust, consent, and collaboration are not procedural checklists but ethical commitments that unfold over time. The co-design approach documented here illustrates how research can function simultaneously as knowledge production, capacity-

building, and political articulation, while remaining accountable to Indigenous governance over knowledge.

The Magbukún Ayta experience also speaks to broader debates on Indigenous development. While formal recognition through mechanisms such as the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) and the ADSDPP has enabled the community to assert rights and negotiate with state and private actors, these gains coexist with ongoing challenges, including cultural erosion, economic integration, environmental degradation, and uneven institutional support. The community-defined Socio-Cultural Development Index (SCDI) makes visible the limits of conventional development metrics and affirms cultural integrity as a central dimension of well-being that is frequently marginalized in state and donor-driven evaluations.

Ultimately, this study argues that Indigenous empowerment cannot be reduced to legal recognition alone. Sustainable and just outcomes require sustained support for Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, and governance structures, as well as recognition of Indigenous peoples' epistemic authority in defining history, territory, and development. For scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, the Magbukún Ayta case underscores the need to move beyond extractive and state-centric approaches toward genuinely relational engagements that recognize Indigenous communities as active producers of knowledge, history, and futures. Only through such approaches can ancestral domain recognition become not merely symbolic, but a durable foundation for self-determination and cultural continuity.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 (RA No. 8371) and was governed by community protocols, collective validation, and ongoing consent. Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) was obtained from the Magbukún Ayta community. The research formed part of community-initiated documentation to support ancestral domain claims and cultural preservation and therefore did not require separate institutional ethics review beyond that granted through collective consent and customary decision-making processes.

ENDNOTES

[1] Presented at *Dialogo*: Philippine Studies Goes Global 2024: International Conference on Philippines Studies held on 27-28 November, Manila, Philippines.

[2] This research was conducted within the context of a long-term and evolving relationship between the author and the Magbukún Ayta community of Sitio Kanawan. The author's positionality cannot be reduced to a single role or moment of engagement. Over more than two decades, he occupied multiple and overlapping positions, including development practitioner, research facilitator, Indigenous Peoples' rights advocate, and, over time, a trusted outsider (*pinagkakatiwalaan*). These shifting roles shaped both access to knowledge and the ethical responsibilities involved in its documentation, interpretation, and circulation.

The author's acceptance as an "adopted" community member emerged gradually through sustained presence, reciprocity, and accountability rather than through formal designation or claims of cultural belonging. This relational status did not erase asymmetries of power inherent in research relationships, nor did it confer authority over Indigenous knowledge. Decisions regarding which histories, spatial knowledge, and cultural practices could be documented, translated, or made public remained under the collective governance of elders and tribal leaders. Throughout the research process, the author's role was explicitly facilitative rather than authoritative, guided by community-defined protocols, collective validation, and ongoing consent.

This positionality required continual reflexivity, particularly in navigating the risks of over-identification, romanticization, or uncritical advocacy. While long-term engagement enabled trust and access to sensitive narratives, it also heightened ethical obligations to avoid instrumentalizing relationships for academic production. To address these tensions, the research emphasized public readings, consensus-based authorization, and community oversight to ensure that representation and interpretation remained under Indigenous control.

Reflexivity in this study is therefore understood not as self-disclosure for its own sake, but as an ethical practice grounded in relational accountability. The author remains accountable not only for how knowledge is produced and circulated, but also for how it may be taken up or misused by external actors. This responsibility extends beyond the completion of the research and reinforces the central argument of this paper: that decolonizing and participatory research requires sustained commitment, respect for Indigenous epistemic authority, and a willingness to remain answerable to the communities with whom knowledge is co-produced.

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