



## Exploring the throne: Creative indigenous artisanship and notes to sustainable Yantok chair production

Jandy S. Danzalan\*

*Office of the Director of Center for Indigenous Peoples Education, Philippine Normal University  
North Luzon, 3306, Aurora Alicia Isabela, Philippines*

Article published on November 15, 2024

**Key words:** Artisanship, Chair production, Cognitive innovation, Creativity, Indigenous knowledge

### Abstract

There is overwhelming literature that explores the *Yogad* Tribe community. However, scant research focuses on their *Yantok* chair production, specifically on how the artisans shared creativity, indigenous knowledge, and ways of facilitating creative indigenous artisanship against the ubiquitous synthetic *Yantok* chair in the market. While the study of creativity requires an in-depth analysis of the subject, including how cognitive innovation transpires, it is still interesting to understand and operate these constructs in the study. I plan to problematize how indigenous knowledge or practice and cognitive innovation interplay within the community of *Yogad* artisans in their *Yantok* chair production. Subscribing to creativity and cognitive innovation tenets, I conducted this focused ethnographic study that spans a month to make headway in proving the creativity of *Yantok* chairs. It is likewise a fitting agenda to discuss inputs that empower the community to rekindle and sustain their passion in their industry.

\*Corresponding Author: Jandy S. Danzalan ✉ [danzalan.js@pnu.edu.ph](mailto:danzalan.js@pnu.edu.ph)

## Introduction

The *Yantok* chair has been considered the premium rattan product of the indigenous artisanship of the *Yogad* Tribe, an indigenous community known for *Yantok* chair production in the Philippines. While there has been extensive research exploring the *Yoga* Tribe, especially on their language (Davis *et al.*, 2007; Grande, 2008), rituals, and literature (Galot, 1988; Sabio, 2016; Toquero, 2008), and education (Quirante, 2018), there is a glaring absence of empirical research focusing on their shared creativity, indigenous knowledge, and ways of facilitating the creative indigenous artisanship against the dominating synthetic and imitation of the *Yantok* chair in the market.

Suppose one were to argue that both are creative, I advise against the sole use of subjective measures, taking the presence of a spectator (Colton *et al.*, 2011) but rather observe creativity as "relative to a context and a norm" that necessitates both "effectiveness relative to the given norm and originality relative to the given context" (Colin, 2017, p. 29). It is equally important to ask the epistemological question of knowing creativity and what it constitutes. However, addressing this question leads to the problematization of the valuation of creativity that depends on various dimensions (Kristensen *et al.*, 2017). For this very reason, I had much interest in exploring this subject while thinking about how this study could best contribute to resuscitating in advance the soon-to-be dying industry and intangible heritage of the *Yoga* Tribe in the Northern Philippines.

Considered the 'cream of the crop' among the other rattan wood products of the *Yogads*, the *Yantok* chair has established great prominence in the province of Echague in Isabela and neighboring provinces. Like how a throne is visualized, the artisans ensure that *Yantok* chairs are made with magnificence and aesthetic elegance. These distinct features are not only for its architectural designs as they are likewise engineered with durability despite lightness and cultural imprints, arguably constituted by other

significant aspects of cognitive innovation, indigenous knowledge, and cultural processes ((Denham and Punt, 2017). The *Yantok* chair production has proven its economic significance in the region. However, while *the Yantok* chair soared high to fame, internal and external pressing issues exist, including but not limited to the competition against the synthetic chair embodying similar designs and the decreasing young generation following the traditions of *Yantok* chair production.

Understanding the dynamics of indigenous knowledge, cognitive innovation, and sustainability within the *Yogad* artisan community warrants a deeper exploration, considering the gaps in current research. Prior studies have touched on aspects of indigenous practices (Mellegard and Boonstra, 2020), and highlighted the importance of cognitive innovation (Denham and Punt, 2017) and creativity (Colin, 2017) in various contexts. However, a comprehensive investigation specifically focused on how these elements intersect within the *Yogad* artisan community remains notably absent.

While some literature acknowledges the significance of indigenous knowledge in craftsmanship Mellegard and Boonstra (2020), a nuanced understanding of how it interacts with cognitive innovation to foster creativity within this community remains an unexplored terrain. Moreover, while sustainability has been discussed broadly, its application tailored to empower communities like *Yogad* artisans in sustaining their craft has received limited attention.

Hence, this study aims to fill this crucial gap by delving into the intricate interplay between indigenous knowledge, cognitive innovation, and sustainability within the *Yogad* artisan community. By examining these dynamics, the study seeks to shed light on how these factors influence and shape the creativity and longevity of traditional craftsmanship. Ultimately, the findings aim to offer practical insights and strategies that can empower the *Yogad* artisans to revitalize and sustain their passion and industry.

## Materials and methods

### *Research methodology*

Focused ethnography, as described by Knoblauch (2005), involves short-term, immersive field visits complemented by intensive data analysis through interviews and documentation. It emphasizes immersion in the natural context of the studied culture or practice, allowing for a deep understanding of the subject matter.

### *Data collection methods*

The research involved firsthand experience and observation within the natural context of craftsmanship, allowing for a rich exploration of the subject. Structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation of the rattan chair production process were conducted to gather detailed insights from participants. Active participant observation was employed alongside information gathered from key informants within the Yoga Tribe Community, aiding in understanding the nuances of rattan chair production. Group discussions were held to gather collective insights and perspectives on the art and architecture of rattan chair production (Bernard, 2017).

### *Sampling*

Convenient sampling was employed to select participants representing various roles within the community, including household heads, eldest members, manufacturers, and weavers. This approach facilitated accessibility to willing participants for the study (Rudolph *et al.*, 2015).

### *Data collection tools*

Systematic and predefined interview protocols were utilized to gather specific information about the art and architecture of rattan chair production. Visual and audio recording devices were used to supplement data collection and support subsequent analysis.

### *Data analysis*

The collected data from various methods underwent thorough analysis to derive meaningful insights into the art and architecture of rattan chair production.

Recordings facilitated in-depth review and analysis of nuanced details captured during field visits and interviews.

## Results and discussion

### *On the issues of creativity: Yantok chair and the synthetic*

Ambiguity rests on the conceptual definition of creativity. This idea further led Colin (2017) to problematize this premise and conduct a conceptual analysis of the standard definition of creativity. The study found two-fold ambiguities: One relative to a particular context and a set of norms against one that measures originality and effectiveness (Wiggins, 2006). The second considers the spectator's stance, taking the presence of a judge (Colton *et al.*, 2011). Arguing that "creativity requires both originality and effectiveness" should be rephrased with "creativity concerning a context and a norm requires both effectiveness relative to the given norm and originality relative to the given context" (Colin, 2017, p. 29) highlights how *Yantok* chair differs from its synthetic, imitated version. While the proliferation of this version goes beyond comparison, the mechanization of how synthetic chairs are made antagonizes its bleak process—cultureless.

Proving that a *Yoga* chair is creative enables me to observe and become personally critical of the creative processes— from the minute details of planning to the intricacies of polishing (Fig. 1). All processes sprung from indigenous knowledge, the collective understanding of skills and philosophies developed by the *Yogad* Tribe with their interactions with natural surroundings. For one, I posit that the *Yantok* chair is more creative as it undergoes indigenous processes, from harvesting, processing, curing, bending, assembly, winding, braiding, and weaving the rattan, the primary material of the *Yantok* chair. Second, dissimilar to the synthetic chair, the *Yantok* chair is made of indigenous materials, such as *panantagan* (assembly wood), *pagkayas* or *iblu* (shave), *iskwala* (carpenters square), *dual* (knives), *raga* (hacksaw blade), among others. Following the distinct measures and incorporating indigenous designs in

making the *Yantok* chair ensures creative quality and arguably adds dignity to the community.



**Fig. 1.** *Yantok* chairs from the *Yoga* tribe community

*Yantok* chair varies in size and shape by form, comprising circular, cylindrical and spherical furniture artifacts. The classic rocking chair, *and adore*, the feeding highchair, *wiwi*, the senior chair, comes in a shell-type chair, *pointing (kori)*, *la mesa*, *divan*, and many more are the most popular and admired rattan furniture in the *Yoga* Tribe community. The *kori* is a sala set that takes a crucial role in the *Yoga* Tribe as it promotes the familial unity for which it was designed.

What is passed from one generation to the other is not the mere production itself but the exemplifications of unique indigenous knowledge that breathes within the intricate skill of artisanship. The creativity of the *Yantok* chair, from its patterned designs to its structure, is gauged using the history of arts that is intensified within the community, the significance of cultural imprints as reflected in the designs (*sold hiya*, *diamond*, *sensilla*, etc.), the indigenous knowledge applied by the artisans across times, including the contemporary art patterns and comments of art connoisseurs and historians. This measure that the skilled weavers and homemakers have highly considered, or full-time artisans, meticulously

interweaves as they take pride in their creativity and culture.

*On cognitive innovation and indigenous artisanship*  
The creativity that coincides with *Yoga* Tribe's indigenous knowledge is the thrust of the *Yantok* chair. Though synthetic rattan chair has been ubiquitous in the market, the aesthetics of *Yantok* chair remains insuperable. I argue that the distinct features of *Yantok* chairs boil down to the indigenous knowledge and the quintessence of cognitive innovation that has been unexplored within the very fabric of the *Yogad* Tribe community. Subscribing to Gummerum and Denham (2014), I contend that what I have observed on the production of the *Yantok* chair, spanning for a month or so, is a result of an "integrative concept that recognizes the fundamental links between the innovator, the innovation, the contextual challenges and consequential reverberations through society" (Gummerum and Denham, 2014 p. 586). In other words, the production itself has an interdependence of relationship among the *Yogad* Tribe artisans, the environment where *Yantok* was collected, and the product itself that likewise shows impacts of external factors. Marchand (2012) dubs this shared mutual relationship the "brain-hand-tool relationship disclosing the inseparable relation between mind, body, and environment.

Cognitive innovation, however, is distinct from creativity and the social proliferation of novel ideas and artifacts (Punt and Denham, 2017). As I observed, the *Yoga* Tribe demonstrated what Kristensen *et al.* (2017) called "traces of recursion" of work that links to their "societal processes and community knowledge" (p. 52). The process is a more dynamic yet encompassing way of constructing knowledge, information exchange, skills application, and self-thinking among the *Yogad* Tribe artisans. Exploring how the *Yogad* Tribe can best facilitate creative indigenous artisanship requires an in-depth understanding of cognitive innovation. Cognitive innovation

provides a better paradigm of how indigenous knowledge can espouse novel ideas within the community. In the process, each *Yoga* Tribe community member varies as to how they rationalize and appreciate what new information brings to the table, affecting individual response, the system, and even the social network. Therefore, whichever change or interaction within the system and amongst themselves affects how they respond to the challenges ahead of them.

With a series of observations and interactions with the community, I could not help but situate myself as a *Yoga* Tribe member. This process enables me to understand better why they give much importance to the *Yantok* chair, a throne that signifies an elusive power. The *Yantok* chair embodies the imprint of their indigenous culture and tradition. It further serves as a stern reminder amongst the community that as long as *Yantok* chair exists in every household, they remain part of the Filipino family.

More than a product that it represents, from its appearance and architectural designs to its innate characteristics, the *Yantok* chair is evidence that *Yoga* Tribe exemplifies cognitive innovation. Drawing ideas from Denham and Punt (2017), the *Yogad* Tribe practices cognitive innovation as they share an indispensable mutual relationship with the environment (primary source), the individual and mental processes (the innovator and indigenous knowledge), in producing the innovation (designs, *Yantok* chair in general). I never failed to notice how the *Yogad* Tribe members remain grounded in their rituals— from the basic to the most intricate production process. They remain faithful in the recursive function of taking the never-ending terrain of exploration, innovation, and construction to understand better their individuality, including their social and cultural manifestations as reflected in the designs of the *Yantok* chairs. This process involves from the ground, starting from ideation and completion of design, up to the marketing of the product, intertwining creativity, and indigenous artisanship (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Interdependence process of *Yantok* chair production

However, due to pressing issues, both internal and external, the *Yoga* Tribe members are challenged to become more open and embrace the idea of innovation. In "A View from the Bridge," Denham and Punt (2017) problematized cognitive innovation, wherein the exploratory process of individual construction of knowledge, skills, and thinking process in the propagation of novel ideas allows me to contemplate the importance of a *Yogad* Tribe member who recognizes her crucial role in the re-imagination of their culture of production, or what Maranan (2017) even called the 'reinterpretation' of the self-perception, society, and the environment in general.

#### *Notes to sustainable Yantok production*

Amidst the difficulties of staying known and appealing in the market, other issues persist, such as the decreasing number of young generations following traditional *Yantok* chair production, underpaid artisans, and less chair production. To address these issues, I propose some inputs developed during my stay in the community.

#### *Foster intergenerational*

The collective memory and values of the *Yoga* Tribe community of artisans must be passed, within the Tribe, from the old generation to the new using literature. In the study of Galot (1988), it was

revealed that most participants failed to remember any Yogad literature. The material can promote more active and collaborative efforts amongst the artisans in the community, especially those who are young.

#### *Promote indigenous knowledge*

Indigenous knowledge is one of the keys to sustainable social and economic development. It should be fully embraced, practiced, and valued within the community. Through inter-community training, the sharing of indigenous knowledge can be intensified.

#### *Intensify programs for technology-mediated products*

While the creativity of the *Yantok* chair heavily rests on the manual indigenous labor, it does not antagonize the possibility of technology mediation in the surface process. There is a need to intensify the training program offered by the Philippine Department of Science and Technology's Forest Products Research and Development Institute (DOST-FPRDI). Likewise, the Yoga Tribe community of artisans should be open to integrated methodology.

#### *Strengthen product promotion*

The *Yantok* chair production can be saved and ensured its prominence in the field through product promotion by national and local government units. It is likewise fascinating to reflect on how the *Yantok* chair can penetrate the international scene, boosting not only the ingenuity of the *Yogad* Tribe artisanship but also the heritage that it carries.

#### *Ensure quantity check*

To ensure the availability of materials primarily used for the *Yantok* chair; there should be an inter-producer quantity check of the products. Not only that it can guarantee sustainable production but also the consumption of their *Yantok* furniture.

#### *Safeguard equal compensation*

One of the core reasons why a *Yogad* Tribe artisan decides not to continue the production of the *Yantok*

chair within the kin is the sad reality that they are underpaid. In the interview, the artisans revealed that they received 300 pesos per day regardless of the number of furniture being assembled. This assembled furniture is now then given to the weavers. These weavers are homestay. The weavers' fee for a complete sofa set is 500 pesos, and according to the weavers, it takes two days to finish a sofa set. The owner will now sell the product into the market, amounting to 3,500- 4,500 pesos.

#### **Conclusion**

This study argues that the creativity of the *Yantok* chair is not on the surface. It likewise critiques what it makes more creative than its counterpart—the synthetic, imitation version. While it is true that deciding creativity requires an in-depth understanding of the process and system within the *Yogad* Tribe community of artisans, it is arguably essential to explore cognitive innovation and indigenous knowledge to exemplify the needs for the Tribe to persevere and continue to create and re-create their designs. It is also essential to consider some of the sustainable inputs I made during my stay in the field. What seems more significant to contemplate is how this study can contribute to the Tribe. As mentioned, despite the remarkable livelihood importance of *Yogad's* distinctive industry, the craft is under constant threat because of the intense competition with emerging synthetic products, unorganized marketing techniques, lack of modern equipment and governmental support, and lack of interest of the youth. We are challenged to help *Yantok* chair production continue its creative indigenous artisanship.

#### **Acknowledgments**

I am wholeheartedly grateful to the *Yoga* Tribe community, especially those residing in Annafunan, Echague, and Isabela, for cooperating and sharing valuable traditional knowledge of *Yantok* chair production. I am also indebted to Sue Denham for her constructive feedback in writing and discussion.

## References

- Bernard HR.** 2017. Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Colton S, Charnley J, Pease A.** 2011. Computational creativity theory: The FACE and IDEA descriptive models. Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Computational Creativity, 90–95.  
<https://computationalcreativity.net/iccc2011/proceedings/index.html>
- Davis PW, Baker JW, Spitz WL, Baek M.** 1997. The grammar of Yogad: A functional explanation. LINCUM Europa.
- Denham SL, Punt M.** 2017. Cognitive innovation: A view from the bridge. *Leonardo* **50**(2), 184–185. DOI: 10.1162/LEON\_a\_01386.
- Galot GL.** 1988. Ang panitikang bayan ng mga Yogad: Isang pagsusuri. Saint Mary's University.
- Grande EJ.** 2008. The mother tongue proficiency of the Yogas. *UP Los Baños Journal* **6**(1), 43-49.
- Gummerum M, Denham SL.** 2014. Cognitive innovation: From cell to society. *Europe's Journal of Psychology* **10**(4), 586–588. DOI: 10.5964/ejop.v10i4.879.
- Knoblauch H.** 2005. Focused ethnography. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* **6**. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/20/43>
- Kristensen M, Loesche F, Maranan D.** 2017. We are navigating Cognitive Innovation. *AVANT The Journal of The Philosophical-Interdisciplinary Vanguard* **8**(Special Issue), 45-55. DOI: 10.26913/80s02017.0111.0005
- Maranan D.** 2017. Response to “Academic Carelessness, Bootstrapping, and the Cybernetic Investigator.” *AVANT The Journal of The Philosophical-Interdisciplinary Vanguard* **8**(Special Issue), 43. DOI: 10.26913/80s02017.0111.0004
- Marchand T.** 2013. Knowledge in hand: Explorations of brain, hand, and tool. Retrieved from [https://visa2013.sciencesconf.org/conference/visa2013/pages/Marchand\\_2012.pdf](https://visa2013.sciencesconf.org/conference/visa2013/pages/Marchand_2012.pdf)
- Mellegard V, Boonstra WJ.** 2020. Craftsmanship as a carrier of indigenous and local ecological knowledge: Photographic insights from Sámi Duodji and archipelago fishing. *Society & Natural Resources* **33**(10), 1252-1272. DOI: 10.1080/08941920.2020.1729911
- Punt M, Denham S.** 2017. Cognitive Innovation, Irony, and Collaboration. *AVANT The Journal of The Philosophical-Interdisciplinary Vanguard* **8**(Special Issue), 17-23. DOI: 10.26913/80s02017.0111.0002
- Quirante C.** 2018. The future of Yogad: An appreciative inquiry on mother tongue-based multilingual education classroom practices in the Philippines (Master's thesis, Carleton University, Ontario, Canada). Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/QuiranteYogad>
- Rudolph J, Leedy PD, Ormrod JE.** 2015. Practical research. Planning and design. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Sabio DGS.** 2016. Yoga folk songs of Echague: Reflections of life and love. Paper presented at the Asian Conference on Literature, Librarianship & Archival Science, Kobe, Japan. <https://tinyurl.com/YogadFolk>
- Toquero ES.** 2005. Yoga rituals and festivals in Isabela: Their implication to development. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of La Salette, Santiago City, Isabela.
- Wiggins GA.** 2006. Searching for computational creativity. *New Generation Computing* **24**(3), 209–222. DOI: 10.1007/BF03037332