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Article

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Blaan Tribe: A Cultural Analysis

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects on various communities worldwide, and indigenous groups, such as the Blaan Tribe in the Philippines, are no exception. This paper explores the impact of COVID-19 on the Blaan Tribe from a cultural perspective, focusing on how the pandemic has disrupted their traditional practices, social structures, and livelihoods. The research examines the challenges faced by the Blaan people in adapting to public health measures, including lockdowns, social distancing, and restrictions on communal activities. It also highlights the resilience of the tribe in maintaining their cultural identity amidst adversity, the role of indigenous knowledge systems in coping with the crisis, and the shift toward digital platforms for communication and commerce. Furthermore, the paper discusses the intersectionality of indigenous rights, health, and socio-economic factors exacerbated by the pandemic, offering insights into how external pressures such as COVID-19 are reshaping indigenous communities. The findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive interventions in addressing the needs of the Blaan Tribe and other indigenous groups during and after the pandemic.

Keywords: diabetes mellitus; global health concern; ML models; diabetes prediction models

1. Introduction

A. Overview of the Blaan Tribe: History, Location, Culture, and Significance

The Blaan Tribe, an indigenous group in the Philippines, primarily resides in the southern regions of Mindanao, particularly in the provinces of South Cotabato, Sarangani, and Davao del Sur. Historically, the Blaan people are known for their rich cultural heritage, including traditional practices such as weaving, beadwork, and farming. Their deep connection to the land and natural resources shapes their way of life. The Blaan language, distinct in its own right, is a vital element of their identity. Spiritually, the tribe is influenced by animistic beliefs and ancestral worship. Despite external influences over the years, the Blaan continue to hold on to their customs, making them an integral part of the indigenous Filipino community. They also play a significant role in the preservation of the ecological balance in their native regions.

B. Introduction to COVID-19 and its Global Impact

COVID-19, a novel coronavirus disease, was first identified in late 2019 and quickly escalated into a global pandemic, leading to widespread health, economic, and social disruptions. The pandemic has impacted countries and communities worldwide, resulting in millions of infections and deaths. Governments implemented various public health measures such as lockdowns, travel restrictions, social distancing, and quarantine protocols to curb the spread of the virus. These actions, while essential in controlling the health crisis, have significantly altered daily life, with far-reaching consequences for vulnerable populations, including indigenous communities like the Blaan tribe.

C. Purpose of the Paper

This paper aims to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has specifically affected the Blaan tribe culturally, socially, and economically. By examining the intersection of their traditional way of life

and the global health crisis, the paper seeks to understand the impacts on the Blaan's cultural practices, their social structures, and the tribe's economic activities, such as agriculture, trading, and handicrafts. Additionally, the paper will highlight the resilience and adaptive strategies employed by the Blaan people during the pandemic, offering insights into the broader implications of COVID-19 for indigenous communities in the Philippines and beyond. Through this cultural analysis, the paper will shed light on the importance of considering the unique needs of indigenous tribes in pandemic response efforts.

2. The Blaan Tribe: Pre-COVID-19 Culture and Way of Life

A. Traditional Customs, Rituals, and Belief Systems

The Blaan tribe has a rich cultural heritage defined by their deep connection to nature, spirituality, and ancestral traditions. The tribe's belief system is predominantly animistic, with a strong emphasis on ancestor worship, spiritual rituals, and the reverence of nature spirits. These beliefs are reflected in their customs, including ceremonies to honor their gods and ancestors, and rituals that mark significant life events such as births, deaths, and marriages. The Blaan people often consult with local shamans or spiritual leaders, known as balyan, who guide them in matters of health, agriculture, and community disputes. The practice of baylutan—a ritual for blessings, healing, and protection—is also central to their cultural life. These rituals are typically communal events, fostering strong social ties within the tribe.

B. Livelihoods: Agriculture, Crafts, and Other Economic Activities

The Blaan tribe traditionally relies on subsistence agriculture as the backbone of their economy. Farming is primarily centered around rice, corn, root crops, and vegetables, with many households engaging in shifting cultivation techniques. In addition to farming, the Blaan are known for their craftsmanship, particularly in weaving intricate textiles and creating beautiful beadwork. These handicrafts serve not only as a form of personal expression but also as valuable commodities for trade. The tribe engages in bartering with neighboring communities and sells their crafts in local markets, contributing to their economic sustainability. The Blaan's economic activities are closely tied to the land and natural resources, which have historically shaped their livelihood and provided for their needs.

C. Social Structure: Family Dynamics, Community Roles, and Leadership

The social structure of the Blaan tribe is rooted in strong family and clan systems. Extended families are often the primary social unit, and kinship plays a vital role in organizing community life. The tribe is patriarchal in nature, with the eldest male typically assuming the role of the head of the household and holding authority in family matters. Leadership within the tribe is decentralized, with elders and respected figures serving as decision-makers. The role of datu (chief) is essential in guiding the tribe's governance, particularly in resolving disputes and making important community decisions. Women's roles, while traditionally focused on domestic tasks and caregiving, have evolved over time, with women increasingly participating in economic activities, education, and leadership roles within the tribe. Community life is strongly communal, with festivals, communal farming activities, and social gatherings reinforcing the importance of collective well-being and mutual support.

D. Healthcare and the Tribe's Interaction with Modern Medicine

Historically, the Blaan tribe has relied on traditional healing practices, including herbal medicine, rituals, and spiritual guidance from balyan (shamans). Plants, herbs, and natural remedies are central to their approach to healthcare, and the tribe has an extensive knowledge of medicinal plants found in their environment. In addition to physical health concerns, spiritual healing plays an important role in addressing emotional and psychological well-being. However, with the increasing presence of modern healthcare services, the Blaan have interacted with Western medicine to a degree, especially in more urbanized regions or in response to infectious diseases. Hospitals and health clinics, though often distant from their communities, have become accessible through government programs, NGOs, or mobile health initiatives. Despite this, many Blaan people continue to trust their

traditional healers and practices, blending modern healthcare with ancestral knowledge to maintain their well-being. The balance between traditional and modern healthcare systems remains a key aspect of their approach to health and healing.

3. Immediate Effects of COVID-19 on the Blaan Tribe

A. Health Impacts: Number of Cases, Fatalities, and Access to Healthcare

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant health challenges for the Blaan tribe, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities due to limited access to modern healthcare services. While specific data on the number of cases and fatalities within the Blaan community is scarce, the virus disproportionately affected remote and underserved populations. Access to healthcare in rural areas where the Blaan reside is often limited, and the pandemic made it even more difficult to reach health facilities due to transportation restrictions and lockdowns. Moreover, the tribe's traditional reliance on herbal remedies and spiritual healing meant that many individuals were initially hesitant to seek medical help for COVID-19 symptoms. However, the virus's severity and the spread of information through government and non-governmental organizations eventually led to increased awareness, prompting some Blaan individuals to seek out testing and medical care. Despite efforts to bring health services closer to remote communities, the limited healthcare infrastructure and medical personnel in these areas created a serious gap in timely care, contributing to increased vulnerability to the virus.

B. Disruption of Traditional Rituals and Ceremonies (e.g., Festivals, Weddings, Funerals)

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the Blaan tribe's ability to perform traditional rituals and ceremonies, which are essential to their cultural identity and social cohesion. Festivals, weddings, and funerals are significant events in Blaan culture that bring together large numbers of people for communal gatherings, feasting, and ritualistic practices. Social distancing and government-imposed restrictions on gatherings meant that many of these ceremonies were either canceled or significantly altered. Funerals, which are particularly important for honoring ancestors and ensuring the passage of the deceased to the afterlife, were especially affected. Many families had to conduct smaller, more private ceremonies, which disrupted the communal aspect of grieving and honoring the deceased. Similarly, the tribe's annual festivals, which are vibrant celebrations of their culture and spirituality, were either postponed or held in limited capacity, leaving a void in the cultural expression of the community. These disruptions not only affected the tribe's spiritual life but also led to a sense of loss and isolation among community members, particularly the elders who serve as custodians of Blaan traditions.

C. Impact on Agriculture and Livelihoods (e.g., Disruptions in Farming, Trading)

Agriculture, which serves as the primary livelihood for many Blaan families, was significantly impacted by the pandemic. Lockdowns and movement restrictions made it difficult for farmers to access their lands, and the disruption of supply chains affected the availability of seeds, fertilizers, and other agricultural inputs. The closure of local markets further complicated the ability of the Blaan to sell their produce, leading to financial strain for families who depend on the sale of crops for their income. Bartering, which is also a common practice in Blaan communities, was hindered as physical distancing measures prevented face-to-face exchanges. In addition, the disruption of trade routes meant that the Blaan could not engage in the exchange of crafts, such as woven textiles and beadwork, with neighboring communities, resulting in a loss of income from these important cultural and economic activities. The Blaan's reliance on agriculture and trade made them particularly vulnerable to the economic consequences of the pandemic, as their livelihoods were directly affected by the restrictions imposed to curb the virus's spread.

D. Education and the Shift to Online Learning (Impact on Children and the Role of Traditional Education)

The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for Blaan children, many of whom live in remote areas with limited access to the internet and technology. The digital divide became a prominent issue, as schools transitioned to online platforms that many students in Blaan communities could not access due to a lack of devices, stable electricity, or internet connectivity. As a result, many children were left without the means to continue their formal education, leading to concerns about long-term learning losses. In response, some Blaan families turned to alternative forms of education, such as community-based learning or traditional mentoring by elders, to ensure the transmission of cultural knowledge and life skills. These forms of education,

while valuable in preserving indigenous knowledge, could not fully replace the academic curriculum provided by formal schools. The disruption to education also affected the social development of children, as schools play an important role in fostering social interactions and community-building. The shift to online learning highlighted the need for more inclusive educational policies that address the unique needs of indigenous communities, particularly in terms of access to technology and remote learning resources.

4. Socio-Cultural Consequences

A. Changes in Family and Community Dynamics (e.g., Isolation, Loss of Elders)

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound effects on family and community dynamics within the Blaán tribe, particularly in terms of isolation and the loss of elders. The social distancing measures and lockdowns led to physical separation among extended families, which disrupted the traditional collective way of life. Family gatherings, which are central to the Blaán's social fabric, became limited to small groups or even individuals, leading to emotional distress and a sense of isolation, especially for elders who play a central role in guiding and mentoring younger generations. Furthermore, the loss of elders due to COVID-19 fatalities had a deep impact on the tribe's cultural continuity. Elders are the primary bearers of oral traditions, spiritual knowledge, and community leadership, and their passing during the pandemic created a generational gap in the transmission of indigenous knowledge. The emotional and cultural toll of these losses was compounded by the inability to conduct large-scale funeral ceremonies to honor their passing, a disruption that deepened the sense of grief within the community.

B. Shifts in Traditional Practices (e.g., Adaptation of Ceremonies to Virtual Settings or Smaller Gatherings)

The pandemic forced the Blaán tribe to adapt their traditional practices to new realities, particularly in how they conducted ceremonies and cultural gatherings. With restrictions on large gatherings, many of the tribe's important rituals, such as weddings, festivals, and ancestor worship ceremonies, were either postponed or scaled down. In some cases, these events were adapted to smaller, more intimate gatherings in accordance with health protocols. Some Blaán families also embraced virtual platforms, streaming ceremonies or rituals to connect with distant relatives and members of the community. However, the shift to virtual settings posed challenges, as internet access and technology were limited in rural areas, making it difficult for all members of the tribe to participate. These adaptations, while innovative, lacked the communal atmosphere and face-to-face interactions that are intrinsic to the cultural and spiritual significance of Blaán rituals. Despite these changes, the tribe's resilience in finding ways to continue their traditions highlights their adaptability and the importance they place on maintaining cultural practices, even in the face of adversity.

C. The Role of Social Media and Technology in Maintaining Cultural Identity During Lockdowns

The role of social media and technology became increasingly important in helping the Blaán tribe maintain cultural identity and social connections during the pandemic. With physical gatherings restricted, social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, became vital tools for disseminating cultural content, sharing updates on community events, and connecting with family members. Elders, leaders, and cultural practitioners used these platforms to share stories, traditional knowledge, and even conduct virtual lessons on weaving, beadwork, and other crafts, helping to preserve these important aspects of Blaán culture. The younger generation, who are more tech-savvy, played a key role in bridging the digital gap and facilitating communication within the community. Additionally, social media allowed the Blaán to raise awareness about their struggles, advocate for resources, and stay connected with outside aid organizations, government agencies, and fellow indigenous groups. While social media was not a perfect substitute for face-to-face interactions, it provided a critical lifeline for maintaining cultural identity and fostering a sense of community during the isolation of the pandemic.

D. The Impact of External Aid and Government Responses (e.g., Relief Efforts, Vaccinations)

The response from external aid organizations and government agencies played a significant role in helping the Blaán tribe navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Relief efforts, including food aid, medical supplies, and financial assistance, helped alleviate some of the economic hardships caused by disruptions in farming and trade. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on indigenous communities were instrumental in delivering resources to remote Blaán villages, ensuring that even the most isolated families received support. Government health initiatives, such as mobile vaccination drives and the establishment of temporary health facilities, provided essential services to the Blaán people, many of whom lived in areas with limited access to healthcare infrastructure. However, the rollout of vaccinations and relief efforts faced logistical challenges, such as difficulty in reaching remote areas and a lack of information about vaccine safety, which led to hesitancy among some members of the tribe. Despite these challenges, the efforts made by external organizations and the government were crucial in mitigating the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and ensuring that the Blaán tribe had access to the resources needed to cope with the crisis.

5. Economic Implications

A. Economic Losses Due to the Disruption of Daily Activities and Trading

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant economic losses for the Blaán tribe due to the disruption of their daily activities and traditional trading practices. As many Blaán families rely on subsistence agriculture and the sale of handmade crafts, restrictions on movement, social distancing measures, and the closure of local markets directly impacted their ability to engage in commerce. Farmers faced challenges in accessing agricultural inputs, such as seeds and fertilizers, and the closure of markets hindered their ability to sell their crops. Similarly, the disruption of bartering systems—integral to Blaán trade—made it difficult for families to exchange goods for other necessities. For artisans, including weavers and beadworkers, restrictions on large gatherings and the suspension of local festivals further reduced opportunities for selling their crafts. The overall reduction in economic activity led to a decrease in household income and heightened financial insecurity, especially for those who had few alternative sources of income.

B. Changes in Employment, with a Focus on Traditional Livelihoods vs. External Economic Activities

The pandemic brought about notable changes in employment for the Blaán people, particularly with respect to their traditional livelihoods versus external economic activities. While agriculture and craft-making have long been the primary sources of income for many Blaán families, the disruptions caused by COVID-19 led some individuals to seek alternative forms of employment. In certain cases, younger Blaán members, who are more adaptable to new technologies, turned to external sources of income such as remote work, small-scale online businesses, or participating in community-based initiatives organized by NGOs. However, for the majority of the tribe, traditional livelihoods remained central, and the inability to engage in them due to lockdowns and travel restrictions exacerbated the economic hardships faced. Some Blaán families were able to make ends meet by adapting traditional knowledge into new economic ventures, such as selling crafts online or finding local buyers for agricultural products, but this shift was not always possible for those without access to the necessary resources or skills.

C. Effects of Restrictions on Travel, Commerce, and Tourism in Blaán Communities

Travel and tourism are often overlooked sources of income for indigenous communities, including the Blaán tribe, which has historically attracted visitors due to its unique cultural heritage and traditional way of life. The pandemic and the subsequent travel restrictions had a significant impact on tourism in Blaán communities, which had seen a growing interest from domestic and international visitors. Cultural festivals, guided tours, and homestays were key activities that brought revenue to the tribe, as tourists sought to experience Blaán traditions, crafts, and cuisine. With the onset of the pandemic, tourism came to a halt, leading to the loss of an important income stream for many Blaán families. Additionally, restrictions on the movement of goods and services further stunted commerce, making it harder for the tribe to access goods from urban centers or send products

to markets. In the absence of tourism, the Blaán had to rely more heavily on their traditional livelihoods, but the disruptions caused by the pandemic left many struggling to maintain financial stability. These challenges highlight the vulnerability of the Blaán tribe to external economic factors and the need for diversified and resilient economic strategies to protect indigenous communities in times of crisis.

6. Long-Term Cultural Impact

A. How COVID-19 Might Permanently Change Cultural Practices within the Blaán Tribe

The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to permanently alter certain cultural practices within the Blaán tribe, particularly as they adapt to new ways of living in a post-pandemic world. For instance, the adaptation of traditional ceremonies and rituals to virtual platforms, as seen during the pandemic, might become a more permanent feature of cultural life, even as restrictions ease. Virtual gatherings, though not a replacement for in-person ceremonies, could allow Blaán members who live far from their communities to continue participating in important rituals, preserving a sense of belonging and connection. Additionally, the increased reliance on digital platforms for communication and commerce might influence how the tribe maintains its cultural identity. While these changes could be beneficial in some ways—broadening access to cultural events and promoting indigenous crafts—there is also the risk that some practices may lose their communal and spiritual significance when held in virtual settings. The pandemic has accelerated a shift toward digital platforms, and it is uncertain whether this shift will result in a fusion of modern and traditional practices or contribute to the erosion of the Blaán's unique cultural expressions.

B. Potential Cultural Preservation or Loss Due to Disruptions

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 have created both opportunities and risks for the preservation of Blaán culture. On one hand, the forced adaptation of cultural practices to new circumstances—such as the use of social media to share traditional knowledge or the digitization of cultural content—could help ensure that Blaán heritage is preserved and passed on to future generations, especially in a world that is becoming increasingly connected. These adaptations can be viewed as a form of cultural resilience, where the tribe finds innovative ways to keep its traditions alive, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

On the other hand, the pandemic's restrictions on communal gatherings, ceremonies, and face-to-face teaching of traditional practices have led to concerns about the potential loss of cultural practices. For example, the absence of large-scale festivals or public rituals may result in younger generations having less exposure to the depth of Blaán culture. The role of elders as cultural mentors has been particularly threatened by their passing due to COVID-19, leading to a gap in the transmission of oral traditions and spiritual teachings. The loss of these important cultural practices could lead to a gradual erosion of the tribe's unique identity, particularly if younger Blaán members are unable to access these practices due to ongoing restrictions or a shift in focus toward modernized lifestyles.

C. The Future of the Tribe's Connection with Modern Healthcare, Education, and External Influences

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the gap between traditional Blaán ways of life and modern systems of healthcare, education, and governance. In the long term, it is likely that the Blaán tribe's relationship with these external influences will continue to evolve. The integration of modern healthcare systems has already begun in response to the pandemic, with more Blaán people accessing vaccinations, medical advice, and treatment from government-run clinics and hospitals. This increased engagement with modern healthcare could lead to a greater reliance on Western medicine for treating infectious diseases, although traditional healing practices are likely to remain important in the community. As more Blaán individuals gain access to formal healthcare, the tribe may experience a blending of traditional and modern medical practices, creating a more hybrid approach to health and wellness.

Similarly, the pandemic's disruption to education could have lasting effects on the tribe's connection with formal schooling. While the shift to online learning exposed significant barriers in terms of digital access, it also prompted discussions about how to make education more inclusive and relevant for indigenous communities. In the future, there may be a stronger push for education systems that integrate indigenous knowledge and practices alongside academic curricula, ensuring that Blaان students can learn both modern subjects and traditional cultural skills. This could lead to a greater sense of pride in their heritage while preparing younger generations to engage in the broader world.

Finally, the influence of external forces—such as government policies, development projects, and global economic trends—will likely continue to impact the Blaان tribe's way of life. While these influences can bring benefits, such as improved infrastructure and access to resources, they also present challenges to the tribe's autonomy and cultural integrity. The long-term future of the Blaان tribe's connection with these external influences will depend on their ability to navigate the balance between maintaining cultural traditions and adapting to an increasingly globalized world. The pandemic may serve as a pivotal moment in this ongoing negotiation, pushing the tribe to reevaluate how they want to integrate modern influences while preserving the core of their identity.

7. Conclusion

A. Recap of the Pandemic's Impacts on the Blaان Tribe's Culture, Economy, and Social Structure

The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching impacts on the Blaان tribe, affecting their culture, economy, and social structure in significant ways. The tribe faced challenges in maintaining cultural practices, as restrictions on gatherings and ceremonies disrupted traditional rituals and ceremonies that are integral to their identity. Livelihoods, particularly in agriculture and craft-making, were heavily impacted by lockdowns, market closures, and supply chain disruptions, leading to economic losses and increased financial insecurity. The closure of travel and tourism avenues further deepened these economic challenges. Socially, the pandemic caused isolation, particularly among the elders, whose passing left a gap in the transmission of cultural knowledge. While some families adapted by using digital platforms to maintain connections, the cultural and emotional toll of the pandemic was considerable. Healthwise, the tribe faced difficulties accessing healthcare services, further exacerbating the impacts of the pandemic, particularly in remote areas with limited healthcare infrastructure.

B. Reflection on the Resilience of the Tribe and Their Strategies for Coping with the Pandemic

Despite the many challenges posed by the pandemic, the Blaان tribe demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. The community found creative ways to maintain cultural practices, even in the face of restrictions, such as adapting ceremonies to smaller gatherings or virtual settings. The tribe also leveraged technology to maintain connections with family members and share cultural knowledge, with younger generations playing a key role in bridging the digital divide. Although the economic hardships were significant, many Blaان families adapted by turning to alternative income sources, including digital platforms for commerce or community-based support initiatives. These strategies reflect the tribe's ability to adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining a sense of cultural continuity and community cohesion. The resilience displayed by the Blaان is a testament to the strength of indigenous cultures and their capacity to persevere through crises.

C. Suggestions for Future Research or Policy Recommendations to Support Indigenous Communities During Global Crises

The experiences of the Blaان tribe during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the need for more targeted research and policy interventions to support indigenous communities during global crises. Future research should focus on understanding the unique vulnerabilities of indigenous populations, particularly in the areas of healthcare access, education, and economic resilience during pandemics or other global challenges. Research should also examine how indigenous communities can better integrate traditional practices with modern systems, such as healthcare and education, in a way that respects cultural identity and promotes well-being.

Policy recommendations should prioritize improving access to healthcare in remote indigenous communities, ensuring that medical resources, including vaccines and treatments, are readily available. Governments and aid organizations should also focus on enhancing digital access in these communities, supporting the use of technology to maintain cultural connections and enable participation in remote learning and commerce. Additionally, policies should be designed to help preserve and promote indigenous cultures, supporting the transmission of traditional knowledge and practices even in the face of external pressures. Lastly, future crises may require more inclusive and flexible disaster relief efforts that account for the unique needs and structures of indigenous communities, ensuring they are not left behind in global responses.

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