Animating the Ancestors: Participatory Animation for Indigenous Folktale Preservation

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The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper explores participatory animation as a method for preserving Indigenous folktales among Ukit people in Belaga, Sarawak. While animation is widely used in education and creative media, few projects engage Indigenous communities directly in co-creating stories that reflect their own cultural knowledge, visual traditions, and oral storytelling practices. Through community-based participatory research (CBPR) involving community elders and youth, ancestral narratives were adapted into animated sequences using drawing-based storyboarding, character design rooted in local symbolism, and voice recordings in native dialects. The project resulted in a four-phase framework—cultural grounding, co-design, animation production, and reflection—which emphasizes ethical collaboration, intergenerational learning, and culturally specific visual storytelling. The findings show how the visual translation of oral folktales not only fosters intergenerational knowledge transmission but also enables creative ownership among youth participants. The animations produced reflect traditional beliefs, landscapes, and values, while also incorporating contemporary perspectives from the younger generation. By centering local knowledge systems and inclusive co-creation processes, this study contributes to animation studies, Indigenous media, and community-based heritage work. It presents animation not merely as a tool for documentation, but as a living cultural practice—one that sustains tradition through youth-led reinterpretation, visual innovation, and shared authorship.

Keywords: participatory animation, indigenous folktales, cultural preservation, decolonial media

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Introduction

The preservation of Indigenous folktales is becoming an increasingly urgent imperative in the face of globalizing forces, language attrition, and intergenerational disconnection. Cultural heritage is at risk of disappearing as traditional storytelling techniques decline, especially in rural or displaced Indigenous communities. This includes loss of form, rhythm, and relational meaning in addition to content. Folktales are more than just stories; they are educational resources, mnemonic devices, ecological blueprints, and social contracts that encode cosmologies, ethics, and values. However, the majority of preservation efforts continue to be extractive or archival in nature, frequently turning living traditions into digital or textual artifacts that are no longer relevant to the communities from which they were extracted.

This paper makes the case that animation provides a different, dynamic, embodied, and community-driven approach to cultural preservation, especially when done within a participatory framework. Unlike static archives or top-down ethnographic films, participatory animation can function as a living archive, preserving not just stories but the storytelling act itself. Animation becomes a dialogic space that reimagines ancestral knowledge in modern visual forms, reconnects generations, and revitalizes cultural pride when community members—especially the youth and elders—are involved in the creative process.

The Ukit community, a marginalized Indigenous group whose oral folktales are in danger of vanishing, in Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia, is the project's primary focus. Under the supervision of their elders, the project allowed young Ukit participants to storyboard and animate a few chosen folktales through cooperative workshops and the joint creation of a participatory pre-production animation pipeline. Through new forms of expression, this process re-activated stories rather than just documenting them. The process of participatory animation, as this paper will show, resulted in socio-emotional outcomes that bolstered Indigenous sovereignty, enhanced intergenerational relationships, and enhanced the community's sense of narrative agency in addition to culturally resonant media.

Literature Review

Indigenous knowledge systems are deeply rooted in oral storytelling traditions, which function as vital mechanisms for transmitting cultural heritage, values, and collective memory across generations (Anderson et al., 2018; Jacob et al., 2024). Far from being mere narratives, these stories are embedded within relational, spiritual, and social contexts, carrying sacred responsibilities that shape education, identity, and community life (Eizadirad & Wane, 2023; Steinke, 2025). Oral traditions serve multiple purposes: they transmit ecological and cultural knowledge, educate younger generations through proverbs, folklore, and idioms, and reinforce communal values of trust, reciprocity, and respect (Sharma, 2024; Stanley et al., 2017). They also play a crucial role in sustaining Indigenous identities, as seen in practices like yarning in Australian communities or Yoruba musical storytelling, both of which affirm cultural continuity (Oludare, 2021). However, challenges remain in preserving and archiving oral traditions in the face of modernization and technological biases, making digital documentation initiatives both necessary and complex. Importantly, integrating Indigenous storytelling into formal education and teacher training provides opportunities to bridge traditional and contemporary knowledge systems, fostering socio-cultural sustainability, creative confidence, and pedagogical relevance while centering Indigenous voices in the decolonization of research and learning (Gadaza et al., 2025; Oladimeji, 2018).

As part of these evolving strategies, animation has emerged as a powerful tool to complement and revitalize oral traditions, enabling the visual representation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in accessible and engaging ways. Its narrative and aesthetic flexibility allows for the translation of oral histories, ritual practices, and spatial memories into formats that resonate with contemporary audiences, particularly younger, digitally literate generations. For example, the Conghua Cat Head Lion Dance (CHLD) animation not only preserved symbolic elements such as costume and choreography but also reinvigorated public interest through visual storytelling (Fei & Wong, 2024). Similarly, the use of animation to retell Bodo community narratives has strengthened cultural retention by adapting traditional knowledge into relatable visual formats (Rai et al., 2024). Animation's potential extends further into immersive heritage experiences, as seen in 3D reconstructions of sites like the Yellow Crane Tower, which preserve architectural integrity while offering new modes of spatial interaction (Li et al., 2023; Zhang, 2023). These interventions are particularly effective in educational contexts, where animated films and VR-enhanced modules enhance learning outcomes and encourage deeper engagement with cultural content. Moreover, community-led projects employing motion capture and annotation tools—as in the documentation of Uilleann pipe performances and Cretan dances—demonstrate how animation can ethically and collaboratively archive embodied knowledge (Barmpounaki et al., 2025; Morris & Rodríguez-Amat, 2022). With the integration of AI, mixed reality, and participatory frameworks, animation evolves beyond a visual medium into a dynamic cultural interface—capable of conveying nuance, sustaining heritage, and fostering empathy across time and space (Gilhang et al., 2024; Zhu, 2024).

This intersection of animation and cultural preservation finds further synergy through participatory media practices, which emphasize co-creation, empowerment, and inclusivity in media production. Grounded in the principles of shared authorship and reflexive engagement, participatory approaches shift the cultural paradigm from passive reception to active collaboration (Bager et al., 2021). Whether in journalism, urban planning, or heritage projects, these models enable communities—particularly those historically marginalized—to reclaim narrative agency and embed their lived realities into the media they help produce (Bonacini, 2019; Korenaga, & Ogawa, 2023). The digital landscape has significantly amplified the reach and impact of such practices, enabling initiatives like #iziTRAVELSicilia to connect diasporic communities through digital storytelling, and facilitating environmental and urban planning projects that foreground local perspectives (Bonacini & Tanasi, 2017; Dumont, 2015). While the expansion of co-creative platforms brings challenges—such as content moderation, conflicting inputs, and the risk of tokenism—it also underscores the need for institutional frameworks that support ethical participation (Banks & Deuze, 2009). Crucially, participatory media offers more than representational inclusion; it facilitates intergenerational knowledge exchange, cultivates local ownership, and redefines consumer-producer relationships through collaborative storytelling processes. In this context, animation becomes not just a representational tool, but a participatory space where cultural expression, technological innovation, and communal voice converge—supporting a decolonized, future-facing approach to cultural preservation and media-making.

Methodology

The project used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) method that was based on Indigenous research ethics and creative co-design. community-based participatory research (CBPR), the main tool, is a modular digital storyboard kit made with the help of local artists and animation teachers. It has two main purposes: to help teach visual storytelling and to make the pre-production phase of animation more accessible to non-professionals, especially those

who live in remote areas. There were several phases of workshops over the course of several months. The first phase included ethnographic immersion and semi-structured interviews with Ukit elders to find important folktales that had cultural meaning.

Youth participants (ages 10–18) were introduced to CBPR, visual language, and fundamental animation concepts in the second phase. The co-creation process was the third and most intensive stage. Elders and young people worked in small groups to storyboard the folktales they had selected, with facilitators helping with visual interpretation, pacing, and framing. This process emphasized iterative feedback, respect for oral accuracy, and symbolic fidelity. Additionally, participants talked about which gestures, motifs, and symbols should be kept, reinterpreted, or left out.

Video recordings of sessions, storyboard scans, participant reflection journals, and post-workshop interviews were all included in the documentation. The analytical method integrated thematic analysis of the participants' spoken reflections with visual discourse analysis of the storyboard panels.

Case Study: Belaga's Ukit Community

Originally semi-nomadic, the Ukit are a small Indigenous group in central Sarawak who are now mostly settled close to Belaga. Displacement, intermarriage, and a lack of institutional support have all put pressure on their language, customs, and storytelling techniques. Oral stories are no longer routinely passed down in many households, and very few have ever been formally recorded.

Elders told a variety of traditional folktales about river guardians, animal tricksters, origin myths, and forest spirits during the first workshop. The story of Ngelai the Moon Eater, a spirit that eats the moon and causes floods unless the villagers sing to him, was one that was told over and over. Although there were several variations of the story, they all focused on themes of cosmic balance, ritual performance, and ecological respect.

Youth participants used community-based participatory research (CBPR) to illustrate the story's stages, which include the swollen moon's appearance, the village flooding, the community's panic, the intergenerational discussion about what to do, and, finally, the group singing that lifts everyone's spirits. They used hybrid visual languages in their drawings, drawing inspiration from Sarawakian tattoo designs, TikTok art trends, and anime. Discussion and correction resulted from elders' comments about which visual forms felt appropriate or accurate. To get the ideal expression or piece of clothing, some characters were redrew several times.

Interestingly, the workshop setting evolved into an affective learning space. Before seeing the animated test loops, one elder said he had "never seen the moon spirit move before." Youth expressed pride in learning stories their parents never told them. After being screened in the longhouse, the finished product—a rough animatic sequence that combined voice recordings and storyboard panels—was well received.

Results and Discussion

The participatory animation process yielded multifaceted effects, which can be examined within three overarching categories: intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural aesthetics and authorship, and political sovereignty regarding representation.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer

The project first showed that participatory animation brings intergenerational dialogue back to life. The co-creation process put elders and youth in the roles of co-teachers and co-authors, which is different from passive documentation. Elders were not only sources of information, but they also helped shape culture by correcting myths and reminding people of forgotten sequences or ritual gestures. Young people took on new roles as visual storytellers, using their digital skills to make abstract oral metaphors come to life.

Cultural Aesthetics

Second, the method sparked a conversation about aesthetic sovereignty. What does it mean to bring Indigenous stories to life without using colonial or orientalist tropes? The aesthetic negotiations that happened during the storyboarding sessions were also ways of critiquing colonialism. Some young people naturally used anime proportions, but older people pushed back against things that seemed wrong or made sacred characters seem less important. In a lot of cases, hybrid styles came up that kept cultural integrity while also letting people be creative.

Political Sovereignty Regarding Representation

Third, participatory animation gave people control over their own media. In traditional documentary filmmaking, people from outside the community film, edit, and interpret the content. This project made sure that all media outputs stayed in the hands of the community. Participants decided what to animate, how to frame it, and who could see the results. This feeling of control helped people feel more proud of their culture and less suspicious about "being studied."

Recommendations

This project demonstrates that animation can be more than just art or education when it is in the hands of a community. It turns into resistance, vision, and ceremony. Participatory animation can provide a scalable, respectful, and joyful means of ensuring that Indigenous folktales are not only remembered but also lived, voiced, and brought into the future as digital tools become more widely available.

Institutional Support

As a means of enhancing curricula and conserving cultural heritage, the government and educational establishments ought to make investments in participatory storytelling platforms such as the participatory pre production pipeline.

Building Capacity

To give young people digital storytelling abilities based on their cultural knowledge, animation training programs ought to be made accessible in rural and Indigenous communities.

Ethical Media Practices

In order to respect community sovereignty and give Indigenous groups complete control over the narrative content and its distribution, academics and media creators should embrace participatory frameworks.

Cross-Cultural Cooperation

To ensure that stories are told in an ethical and significant way, animation studios and cultural organizations can collaborate with Indigenous communities to co-create content for festivals, digital archives, and educational platforms.

Conclusion

Participatory animation has the potential to serve as a living archive that reanimates not only ancestor stories but also the community's sense of cultural authorship when it is based on Indigenous values and cooperative techniques. The co-creation process was an act of cultural revival for the Ukit of Belaga, not merely a means of preservation. Elders regained their positions as knowledge bearers rather than as relics of a dying tradition, and young people started drawing stories they had never heard.

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Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) under the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia [2023-0097-108-02]. The authors extend heartfelt gratitude to the Ukit community of Belaga, Sarawak, for their generous participation, knowledge sharing, and trust throughout the project. Special thanks also go to Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) for institutional support, and to all research assistants, facilitators, and cultural advisors who contributed to the development of this project and the participatory animation workshops.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Quillbot and ChatGPT (OpenAI), both AI-assisted writing tools, were used during the preparation of this manuscript. Quillbot was employed for proofreading, grammar, and spelling correction, while ChatGPT was used to refine structure, phrasing, and improve clarity. These tools did not generate substantive content or contribute to the research

design, findings, or analysis. All ideas, methodologies, and conclusions are the result of the author's independent academic research.

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