

## **Subanen Rituals on Communal Gatherings in Selected Communities of Misamis Occidental and Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines**

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### **Abstract**

Preservation of intangible cultural heritage such as rituals provides a tribe with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity. Subanen is one of the tribal groups in Mindanao, Philippines which performs different rituals. However, little is known about the rituals of Subanen living in the provinces of Misamis Occidental and Zamboanga del Sur and the challenges encountered to sustain these practices that could become a barrier in understanding the tribe's way of life and transmitting this tradition to the next generation. The purpose of this study is to describe the Subanen rituals on communal gatherings and occasions. This descriptive study utilized the qualitative research survey method through face-to-face interview with 21 Subanen key informants. The findings of the study showed that the Subanen tribe has various rituals in celebrating communal gatherings such as festivals and meetings, and occasions such as birthdays, weddings, christening, wakes, and interment. The Subanen people as a tribe are able to sustain their belief system in respecting nature and all living creatures, especially to the spirits which they also believe living among them. Although they have a strong belief and knowledge in the ritual materials to prepare and executing the rituals, they are having a hard time looking for Bilians/Balyans to perform the rituals. Aside from that, they also have a problem financially since performing rituals are costly. The findings may enlighten other people about their way of life, their customary beliefs, and how they are able to preserve their culture for the next generation.

**Keywords:** belief, christening, culture, festivals, weddings

## **Introduction**

Subanen tribe in the Philippines is one of the largest among the ethnic groups in the country (Lu, 2005). The term ‘Subanen’ is derived from the word ‘suba’ meaning river, or mouth of the river, or upstream, and the Subanen people are referred to generally as the ‘gbansa Subanen’, meaning the Subanen nation (Hapalla, 2002). The Subanen group is dispersed over a wide area of the Zamboanga Peninsula (Mabini et al., 2014) and dwells in different geographical territories called ‘banwas’ (Villanueva & Jomuad, 2013).

Subanen are animists because they have a worldview that non-human entities such as animals, plants, or inanimate objects or phenomena possess a spiritual essence (Mabini et al., 2014). Animism is particularly widely found in the religion of indigenous peoples (Bird-David, 1999). Belief in the god and spirits makes the Subanens god-fearing and is depicted in their great respect for others and for nature (Elgado et al., 2013). The perception of these beliefs is mediated by cultural interpretations, in combination with a range of other factors proper to each community and household at a specific time and place which will influence how people are going to prepare themselves or not (Dekens, 2007). Each culture has its own distinctive animistic beings and its own specific elaboration of the soul concept according to Harris (1983). Preservation of intangible cultural heritage such as rituals provides the Subanen tribe with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity.

The Subanens performs rituals to please their gods, the mechanisms through which beliefs are fulfilled (Prabhakar & Gangadhar, 2011). In South Africa, rituals are practiced in time of drought and also during activities such as wedding or traditional gatherings, normally called ‘molato’. An example of this ritual is the rainmaking ritual which is believed to influence the weather conditions in order to cause rain or drought either for good or for destruction (Semenya, 2013). In the south western Indian state of Kerala, the Kurumbas tribe performs a secondary burial ritual called ‘Cîru’ which is described as an elaborate process and is the formal ceremony by which

the souls of the dead of a fixed period are cheerfully sent to the world of the spirits with the accompaniment of song, music, and blood sacrifice (Poyil, 2009).

In the Philippines, Subanen tribe has different rituals performed in different gatherings and occasions. These rituals are not commonly seen by the non-Subanen community because these are usually performed within the locality of the Subanen tribe. Previous works about Subanen in Zamboanga de Sur deal with oral and written literature, rights to prior informed consent, music, costumes, linguistics, and education (Aleo, 2002; Cariño, 2005; Santos, 2007; Lobel & Hall, 2010; Villanueva & Jomuad, 2013; Villanueva & Baluyos, 2014; Hambre, 2015). There were also studies about Subanen on knowledge and practices on disaster, ethnofarming practices, and ethnomedicine and its threat (Mabini et al., 2014; Quilo et al., 2015; Valdez & Hansel, 2015; Valdez & Canapi, 2015; Pizon et al., 2016; Bag, 2017). Very few studies were conducted with Subanen rituals and the challenges encountered to sustain these practices (Imbing & Viernes-Enriquez, 1990; Mabini et al., 2014).

The objective of this study is to describe the Subanen rituals on communal gatherings and occasions. It also aimed to describe how the Subanen tribe prepares the things needed for the ritual in celebrating festivals and meetings, and occasions such as birthdays, weddings, and christening. The data from interviews with the Subanen themselves can be unique or different because the description comes from the perspective of other groups of Subanen. The findings may enlighten other people about their way of life, their customary beliefs, and how they are able to preserve their culture for the next generation.

## Materials and Methods

This descriptive study utilized the qualitative research survey method. The study adopted the purposive sampling in the selection of respondents. The face-to-face recorded interview was carried out in gathering information from the members of the Subanen tribe who were

the key informants or respondents of the study using the key informant technique of Tremblay (1957).

The respondents in this study were the 21 Subanens who have been known in the community as knowledgeable of their beliefs and practices in performing the tribal rituals. The ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’/ Suruhano (tribal priest and doctor) or ‘Gomotan’ (overall tribal leader), the tribal leaders which are called ‘Timuay’ or ‘Gukum’ (male tribal leader) and ‘Timuay Libon’/‘Bae’ (female tribal leader) were selected as respondents for each Subanen community included in this study. These key informants are pure-blooded Subanen who have unmixed ancestry or descent and hold position in the community. The study of Mabini et al. (2014) about the indigenous knowledge and practices of Subanen in response to natural disaster also chose their respondents based on position in the community as ‘Timuay’ or chieftain and as elderly.

This study was conducted in seven selected Subanen communities located in the provinces of Misamis Occidental and Zamboanga del Sur in Mindanao island. Four barangays were sampled in Misamis Occidental, namely, Bongbong, Montol, Gala, and Sitio Tipan in Stimson Abordo. Sindangan and Siayan were the two barangays sampled in Zamboanga del Sur. Before the data gathering, informed consent to conduct interviews in the community and to document the research process was obtained from the ‘Timuay’ or Chieftain of each of the study areas.

The ‘Timuay’ and one member of the Subanen tribe helped the research team in explaining to the target key informants the purpose of the study and in securing the informed consent. The objectives of the study, the anonymity and confidentiality of the responses, the voluntary participation with the right to refuse participation indicated in the consent form were emphasized and discussed with the target key informants. The interview was scheduled based on the availability of the respondents of the study. All the target informants participated voluntarily in the study.

## Results and Discussion

### *Ritual materials used by Subanen for communal gatherings in selected communities of Misamis Occidental and Zamboanga del Sur*

Similar with other tribes, the Subanen prepares different things before performing a certain ritual. Table 1 shows the list of materials used in performing the Subanen rituals. These items are being used in different rituals performed by the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ or ‘Suruhano’, the tribal priest and doctor. Based on the interview with Subanen respondents, they are the only ones who can perform the tribal ritual. They are also believed to see and communicate with supernatural entities or creatures, both good and bad. Subanen believes in the existence of another world not seen by the natural eye (Hapalla, 2002). According to the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ or ‘Suruhano’, the ‘Balaan’ or ritual is preferably performed during full moon because it enhances their abilities to see and communicate with the supernatural entities. Furthermore, the neighborhood can identify who are the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ or ‘Suruhano’ in the place because of their ability to treat or heal diseases, hence, they are also commonly called as ‘mananambal’.

**Table 1. Ritual materials used by Subanen for communal gatherings in selected communities of Misamis Occidental and Zamboanga del Sur.**

Native name	English name
‘Itlog’	Eggs
‘Kamangyan’	Incense
‘Manok ihalas’	Native Chicken
‘Baboy’	Pig
‘Mam-on / Buyo’	Betel leaf Pepper/Apog
‘Uway’	Rattan
‘Bugas’	Rice
‘Sungkod’	Cane
‘Daang sinsilyo’	Old coins
‘Pinggan’	Old plates
‘Agong’	Gong
‘Pangasi’	Rice wine
‘Mayana’	Painted Nettle
‘Palaspas’	Palm fronds

Based on the information gathered during the interview, the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ or ‘Suruhano’ usually uses the eggs in identifying the disease by performing ‘Tigi-tigi’ in treating or healing such diseases. In this process, the egg is put for a few minutes on a particular area or part of the person’s body that has the illness, ache or discomfort. The study of Mabini et al. (2014) documented the use of eggs in Subanen rituals called the ‘Magbinukid’, ‘Kanobitan’ and ‘Lapiraw’ that are believed effective to stop drought, typhoon or landslide. Accordingly, the Subanen performs ‘Magbinukid’ to ask ‘Magbayaya’ to not allow another landslide to occur. ‘Kanobitan’ is another ritual performed to cease a dry spell or drought. ‘Lapiraw’ is also a ritual believed to stop drought by asking help from ‘Magbabaya’ to send rain so the Subanen could start planting rice and other crops. For the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ or ‘Suruhano’, the egg is a must in performing different rituals since it is believed to attract spirits because it is white. Those attending the rituals are the ones bringing the eggs.

Another item that the Balian’/Balyan’ or “Suruhano” used in performing rituals is the ‘Kamangyan’ or incense. It is believed to call the attention of the spirits and transmit their messages to them. Aside from ‘kamangyan’, rice (‘bugas’), rattan (‘uway’), betel leaf pepper (‘mam-on/buyo’), painted nettle (‘mayana’), native chicken (‘manok ihalas’) and pig (‘baboy’) are also used as offering for the spirits in performing rituals. The ‘palaspas’ or palm fronds are used in some Subanen rituals for driving away bad spirits.

The ‘Balian’/Balyan’ or “Suruhano” also used the ‘sungkod’ (cane) in identifying what they are going to offer to the spirits. Among those above-mentioned materials used for rituals, the most commonly used that the “Balian/ Balyan” or “Suruhano” offer to the spirits are native chicken, pig, egg, rice, and rice wine. Along with these offerings, the “Balian/Balyan” or “Suruhano” also performs chants called “ABA” (song) with the sound of the ‘agong’ (gong) or a ‘pinggan’ (old plate).

### ***Rituals performed by Subanen tribe***

Table 2 shows the different rituals performed by the Subanen tribe. Rituals vary as to the goals of the activities to be done. Some of these rituals are done for thanksgiving, asking permission to do something, and/or requesting for protection from harm. Subanen rituals are also performed to show respect to the spirits and to appease the spirits in giving them good harvest and good weather (Mabini et al., 2014). Subanen people were formerly dependent on nature for their livelihood, thus, their forefathers and old folks developed rituals in almost every activity which affect nature (Mabini et al., 2014). Subanen perform rituals before entering or getting near to a place where there are plenty of spirits like the forest and river.

Most of the rituals were performed with the process called ‘magpadugo’ (shedding of blood from an animal usually native chicken and pig). The ‘Buklog’/‘Gbeklug’ falls under the same pattern of prestigious feast practiced in different parts of the country (Apatan, 2012). It is also considered as the most festive of all occasions in the Subanen tribe. According to the informant, the ‘Buklog’ is composed of different rituals, these are ‘Sulampong’, ‘Sulampong Makped’, ‘Pason Diwata’, ‘Guintalegan’, ‘Galut’, ‘Gatadan’, ‘Salakad’, ‘Buklog’, and ‘Plukob’. These rituals must be performed a year before the great feast. Imbing (2002) mentioned ‘Gbeklug Mangenawa’, ‘Gbeklug Pelento’, and ‘Gbeklug Denion’ as three types of ‘Buklog’/‘Gbeklug’. The first one is performed for healing of the ill. ‘Gbeklug Pelento’ is performed in the memory of a deceased chief. ‘Gbeklug Denion’ is a feast for the final burial of the dead.

**Table 2. Different rituals performed by the Subanen.**

Ritual	Description
‘Buklog’	It is a week-long celebration of the Subanen as a thanksgiving to their good harvest.
‘Samaya’	It is a ritual for thanksgiving (as general).
‘Pangamo’	It is also a ritual for thanksgiving performed after recovering from an illness
‘Palunto’	It is a ritual for remembering the dead and to leading them the way to heaven.
‘Guwayan’	It is a ritual performed for all the dead relatives of a certain family.
‘Gbla-i (bla-i)’	It is a union between man and woman. The community will celebrate it together with the couple’s family. A dance called ‘Pangalay’ is also performed only by the couple during the ceremony.
‘Kanubata’ (Baptismal)	It is usually scheduled at the time of infancy of the child but it is also being performed for grown-up members especially in religious conversions.
‘Magbinukid’	It is a ritual performed to stop the coming natural disaster.
‘Kanobiton’	It is a ritual performed when there is drought.
‘Nuglupa’	It is a ritual asking permission to cut down trees before ‘Peles’ (the process of cutting down trees for a certain celebration) is being done.

The informant conveyed that ‘Buklog’/‘Gbeklug’ must be performed correctly by the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ so that nothing bad would happen to the attendees and the Balian/Balyan performing the ritual. Accordingly, the spirits will make them ill or turn them into rocks. The informant also added that the ‘Buklog’/‘Gbeklug’ is not performed if there are no proper Balians/Balyans to perform the rituals.

There are also rituals being performed by Subanen to give thanks to the deities for the blessing they receive like ‘Samaya’. ‘Pangamo’ is also a ritual for thanksgiving like ‘Samaya’ but it is performed after recovering from an illness. In ‘Samaya’ ritual, a ‘manok ihalas’ (native chicken) is being used by the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ as an offering to the deities, while in the ‘Pangamo’ ritual, native chicken, pig, and rice are being offered.

‘Palunto’ and ‘Guwayan’ are other rituals performed by the Subanens. ‘Palunto’ is a ritual for remembering the dead and to lead them the way to heaven while ‘Guwayan’ is a ritual performed for all the dead relatives of a certain family. The ritual is still being performed by the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ by means of offering native chicken or pig , and egg to the spirits and also offering a prayer for the dead with the use of incense.

Gbla-i (bla-i) is a union between man and woman. The community celebrates it with the couple’s family. Before the day of the wedding, the family of the groom and bride will talk to each other like they are getting to know each other’s families while the bride is being hidden. If they are going to find out that what they say is bad towards the other party during their conversation, it is considered as ‘sala’ or sin (which is being identified by the ‘Timuay’ or ‘Gukum’). There are corresponding penalties to be paid for each ‘sala’ according to the expense of the other party and vice versa. The ‘sala’ is being counted through ‘balasi’/corn grains. The conversation will start during night time, usually it will take few hours, and the conversation will be over until the ‘balasi’ will run out. If both parties agree to pay directly instead of having a conversation, the bride’s family will allow the groom to see his bride, then the wedding ceremony will start right away.

The wedding will be done during day time and the ritual is being performed by the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’. The couple will sit on a chair with ‘hatsa’ (ax) and ‘sundang’ (bolo) under their feet. This symbolizes the couple which they call ‘sanglitanan sa kinasal’. During the ceremony, the couple will undergo the process called ‘padugo’ wherein the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ will use chicken blood placed in a bowl to spread it into the hands of the couple using ‘mayana’ leaves (painted nettle) seven times in one direction only. While performing the ‘padugo’, the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ is going to say a prayer for the couple. After the ritual, the couple will be following the common traditions like combing the couples’ hair, letting them drink water in the same glass, and rice grains will be thrown into them and they would perform the dance called ‘pangalay’ during the ceremony. The key informant relayed that they rarely practiced this kind of ritual today because the wedding ceremony

does not have any contract to be signed and most of the Subanens nowadays prefer to have a church wedding directly to minimize wedding cost.

‘Kanubata’ (Baptismal) is considered as a sacred practice among the tribe members. It is usually performed at the time of infancy of the child but it is also being performed for grown-up members especially in religious conversions. The ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ performs the ritual by means of offering native chicken or pig depending on the budget of the family host, and egg. It is believed that if “kanubata” is not performed, the child will become sickly.

There are also rituals being performed by Subanen to prevent calamities or natural disaster and in asking permission in cutting down trees like their ‘Magbinukid’, ‘Kanobiton’, and ‘Naglupa’. ‘Magbinukid’ is a ritual performed to stop the coming natural disaster, while ‘Kanubiton’ is a ritual performed when there is drought. On the other hand, ‘Naglupa’ is a ritual asking permission to cut down trees before ‘Peles’ (the process of cutting down trees for a certain celebration) is being done. The ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ performs all these rituals by means of offering native chicken or pig, and egg to the spirits and also offering a prayer for the dead with the use of incense. Some indigenous people around the globe use their traditional knowledge to prepare for, cope, and survive disasters and their methods and practices have originated within their communities and have been maintained and passed down over generations (Hasteh & Cunningham, 2013).

In performing the ritual, the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ also wears proper garment. In the Subanen tribe, the ‘Balian’/‘Balyan’ wears white upper garment called ‘sub’ and the lower garment called ‘salwal’ (Villanueva & Jomuad, 2013). The communal rituals of indigenous cultures recognize the body as a significant resource for social and spiritual life, thus, wearing proper garment in performing a ritual is essential (Pitts, 2003).

Based on interview, the Subanen people in the study areas nowadays rarely perform rituals. Although they have a strong belief and knowledge in the things to prepare and executing the rituals, they are having a hard time looking for ‘Bilians’/‘Balyans’ to perform the rituals

because only few of them are alive. Besides, they also have a financial constraint since performing rituals is very costly. Nevertheless, the Subanen still recognize that rituals are part of their culture.

Ritual is a communicative means for uniting spiritual and material, scientific and special, uranic system, daily expectations, past and present, and other principle structures contributing in the development of individual life (Yazdani et al., 2016). Rituals are important to the Subanen especially those pertaining to nature. Subanens believed that these rituals serve as their way of showing reverence to the spirits and also it is their way of asking permission from the spirits whenever they ask for favor. These rituals also help them to appease spirits whenever they abuse nature which is the spirits' abode (Mabini et al., 2014).

Ethnic groups in a country play an important role in the society because they possess broad knowledge in their own localities (Gadgil et al., 1993). Exploring and documenting their knowledge and practices may enlighten other people about their way of life and their customary beliefs or culture. To a greater extent, providing a platform to convey the information to the next ethnic generation is a way to preserve the culture.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Exploring the Subanen rituals on communal gatherings and occasions deepens one's understanding of the unique identity of the Subanen tribe in the society. The tribal leaders show the full knowledge in giving details on how rituals are performed. It is a manifestation that the Subanen tribe has sustained their belief system in respecting nature and all living creatures, especially to the spirits which they also believe to be living among them. The Subanen tribe in the locality must preserve their traditional knowledge and practices by passing down the culture to the next generation. It is important for the local government to carry out actions or programs that can preserve the richness of the culture of the Subanen tribe.

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