

## **Exploring Rituals as Integral Non- Material Culture of Subanens in the Zamboanga Peninsula**



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**ABSTRACT:** Subanens occupy a vast territorial domain, constituting seven major sub-groups in specific localities in the Zamboanga Peninsula, Philippines. These Indigenous people perform rituals throughout the different stages of their lives. This study was conducted in Lakewood and San Miguel municipalities in Zamboanga del Sur, while in Katipunan and Mutia in Zamboanga del Norte. The research highlighted the indispensability of rituals among Subanens in the peninsula. Folk narratives were gathered orally and directly from the Subanen tribal leaders and elders as the informants of the study. Among the narratives gathered, six exemplify the conduct of rituals as a core non-material culture of Subanens. The analysis made on the narratives disclosed that rituals serve several functions aside from these Indigenous peoples' act of reverence to God as the Supreme Being. Thus, amid the passing of time, they remain steadfast to the ritual practice as a mark of their cultural identity. More importantly, rituals are indispensable for them to perform as a means of precaution and to ensure sound well-being in their lifetime.

**KEYWORDS:** catastrophe, elders, Philippines, precaution, supernatural

### **INTRODUCTION**

The conduct of rituals is predominant in indigenous cultures. In the Subanen tribe, *Balyans* alone, as spiritual intermediaries, can conduct rituals for domestic or communal reasons. They can see entities that other moral beings cannot see. *Balyans* can make supplications to powerful entities co-existing with ordinary humans for the latter to be cured of physical infirmities or tragic eventualities supernatural can inflict on humans.

Rituals are led by a spirit medium known locally as *balyan* or *suruhano* (Roxas, 2005). Different ethnic groups have many rituals, and different rituals of the communities have different significations (Chou et al., 2017) with the sacred activities having symbolic meanings (Lee, 2015). Rituals that foster the well-being of people consider their conduct as essential to their lives at they may address survival issues. The performance of rituals requires the strict adherence to their details. Deviance to the prescription means the failure of the ritual and entails consequences (Gruenwald, 2003).

Rituals are the means for communication, interaction, and co-existence with non-humans, who continuously remind people that the world is not exclusive to humans (Apffel-Marglin, 2011). These rites are human reactions to various causes, like events in nature or culture (Modéus, 2005). There is a special engagement or an obligation (Turner, Abrahams, & Harris, 2017) requiring the use of material culture (Grimes, 2011). Powerful obligations mean giving a gift to the animating forces of the landscape with material offerings and the sacrifice of domestic animals (Jordan, 2016).

The study of ritual as a non-material culture of Indigenous people is often based on the concrete and the perceivable. At the same time, the subtle and the underlying significations are disregarded, if not trivialized. Thus, an in-depth study of the Subanen ritual through the lens of the folk narratives and supplemented by the very perspective of the Indigenous people themselves can shed light on their non-material culture leading to an understanding and a better appreciation of these people's cultural heritage and indigenous identity.

### **MATERIAL, METHODOLOGY, AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Material of the Study**

The study observed the firsthand gathering of folk narratives directly retrieved from Subanen tribal leaders and elders from the four municipalities included. The narratives gathered served as the resource for identifying the significance and functions of rituals among the Subanens. Among the narratives gathered by the main author, several texts were specifically selected as indicative of rituals performed by Subanens. Considering the variability of the conduct of rituals among the Sub-groups of these Indigenous people, the localities from where the narratives were taken were specifically indicated in the paper. Lines were lifted from the narrative texts showing the act and the reasons why Subanens perform rituals.

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### Methodology

The main author gathered the narratives through oral narrations by the key informants, who were the tribal leaders and elders of the research locales included in the study. The actual story-telling in the mother tongue of the key informants in a specific locality was followed by transcriptions performed by the informants themselves. However, in the Municipality of Katipunan, a professional translator trained in the orthography of the *G'taw D'Ayu* language made the transcriptions. The narratives in the Subanen language were also translated into the Bisayan language for the main researcher to understand for translation to the English language. With the English versions, six narratives were chosen for implicitly or explicitly indicating the conduct of rituals. Specific lines were lifted for analysis and interpretation.

### Literature Review

A religious ritual is a particular instrument of communication that goes beyond the explicit content into the realms of implicit symbolic meaning (Cox, 2016). The *Mgay Bari*, or 'ancestral spiritual ritual' of the Truku tribe in East Taiwan, entails the ancestral spirits giving a blessing to the harvest and the importance of thanksgiving (Chou et al., 2017). The Igorots in the Philippines consider animal sacrifices, like chicken, pigs, and cattle, as central to rituals, usually depending on the type of ritual (individual or community) and according to the elders' behest (Botangen et al., 2018).

No *lumads* perform agricultural activities without first invoking the help of spirits. They believe that they are surrounded by a force that should be feared and, at the same time, revered (Clariza & Lanzona, 2005). The belief in the spirits as guardians of nature required the performance of *pamuhat* or *kano* (rituals) by the Subanens to ask for guidance in locating endowed sites (Roxas, 2005). Thus, many people with shamanic practices have maintained beliefs and values that honor rituals (Metzner, 2013).

Both natural and supernatural forces often intervene on behalf of helpless and oppressed individuals (Barden, 1991). Nevertheless, while the Subanens acknowledge the power of nature and the metaphysical in shaping their lives, they do not leave their fate to nature passively. Instead, they actively negotiate what will become of them, especially during calamities, by conducting rituals as they communicate with the non-humans and the metaphysical (Quilo, 2015).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The conduct of rituals is the most prominent non-material culture of the Subanens. They worship the God in heaven, addressed by different names (*Apu Megbabaya/Apu Gembabaja* or *Diwata*). These Indigenous people offer prayers in rituals to recognize God as the Creator of all. Hence, throughout the different life stages of these people, specific rituals are performed based on their belief that a Supreme Being exists and that powerful and invisible beings co-exist with humans. The performance of specific rituals is a must for this indigenous tribe.

In this study, folk narratives were gathered from the very mouths of the elders and leaders of the Subanen tribe, offering a greater sense of authenticity despite the inherent subtlety of their symbolism. Through the actual story-telling by the folks themselves, the cultural imprints in the narratives, specifically on the rituals, illuminate as details of an ancient or distant past start to unfold. In the research conducted, the tellers of the narratives were the best resource of the cultural underpinnings or insights of the number of narratives gathered from no less than the tribal leaders and elders themselves as inheritors of the oral legacy of their ancestors. Swisher (1996) claimed that authenticity entails listening to the voices of people and making sure that they are heard as to the stories they tell using their perspective. Stressing the individual identity in the context of a cultural community is necessary (Grim, 1996).

The selected narratives used in this paper unveil the meaning and indispensability of rituals. The Subanens perform the sacred rites as they deem necessary to live and co-exist with humans and non-human beings. Rituals are their highest form of recognizing that there are forces far above mortal existence. Several folk narratives were gathered firsthand to exemplify the various functions of rituals.

In the narrative "The Origin of Rice" (Municipality of Katipunan), the people were given rice freely and bountifully for daily subsistence, with less labor. However, a man grew weary of making *buos* (rice storage) that he had beaten the huge rice grains until they broke into small pieces, like in their present form. Out of such man's impatience and ungratefulness for the bounty given to people, rice was withheld from them. It was only after the display of remorse and the conduct of a ritual that *diwata* restored the earthly provision. The following is an excerpt of the narrative:

*Miksaba su getaw bu' minengi nek gampun seg binaalen. Sala gendaw, itu pipeteginep su getaw ne medlekanu medlegawun giin sek gulun tubig ay ritu begay puli' suk palay. Tineluan su getaw ne megbetang giin nek pinggan bu' tebunaan nek penepeten neng mitem...Sek pegbuwasen run su penepeten mi'ita'en ned duuning mekikaa' ne dlegas nek palay nek meseled ritu. (Such a man felt remorse and asked for forgiveness for what he had done. One day, he was made to dream of performing a ritual by the water source from where rice could be given back to him. He was told to put a plate and a black cloth. As he opened the fabric, he saw the tiny grains of rice wrapped in it.)*

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Subanens believe that rituals are essential to conveying the truthfulness of intentions and expressing remorse for an error committed. Thus, when tribesmen believe they have transgressed a supernatural entity, they perform a ritual as a peace offering. The narrative depicts the outcome of one's actions. As a recipient of a favor, a person is expected to express gratitude instead of insolence.

In the Subanen tribe, tribesmen offer rituals before the planting period, especially of rice, hoping to have a bountiful harvest. After a good harvest, they perform another ritual as a thanksgiving to God and other entities believed to have made it possible. Hence, the non-material of the Subanens requires the tribesmen to show humility in asking a favor and giving recognition to whom it is due; otherwise, they lose the favor given to them.

Harvested rice (*parai*) is a requisite of ritual offerings to deities. Some rituals and ceremonies are a part of Lotud's social and religious life (Pugh-Kitingan & Baptist, 2009). In Africa, rice is a staple, a major item of sacrifice to ancestors (Akiwumi, 2003). The narratives and the related studies and literature convey that rice serves as the main food of many people worldwide. There are lores and corresponding beliefs on rice and the different functions it serves. For Indigenous peoples like the Subanens, rice is more than a means to meet gastronomical needs. It signifies a dimension of spirituality.

Furthermore, aside from rituals conducted to foster reconciliation between man and non-humans, a ritual is performed by the Subanens to seek favor from invisible entities. They recognize that man does not have the sole discretion of the natural environment and that a peaceful co-existence with other entities is a must. Thus, seeking approval from powerful unseen beings is indispensable for these Indigenous people.

In the Subanen tribe, the *gbatad* on '*peles*,' or payment as a requirement, signifies an exchange of the favor being sought by a human from a non-human entity. Nevertheless, such payment is within the capability of the folks to meet, just like offering one chicken. The following is an excerpt of the narrative entitled "The Origin of Rituals" from the Municipality of Katipunan:

*"Meliyagu rema ne taunen mu ini piru kina'enlan telesan mau ay dluagar u maini," laung nug memenuwa. ("I may allow you to have it tilled, but you have to pay me because this is my place," the engkanto [human-like supernatural entity] said.)*

Furthermore, the same narrative concluded with the man advising his kin to perform rituals before clearing any land, as conveyed in the following excerpt:

*Su getaw miktabal ritu sed duma, "Se gendi' pa medlilik se gulangan arun taunen, kina'enlan neng megdulang reli' ay duunig memenuwa neng mikengel run nini ne embaya' penengiran arun su ngag memenuwa endi' mengilabet sek tempu nek pinlilik niyu." (The man then told his kin, "Before you cut trees for clearing, you need to make an offering first because a certain engkanto lives on it that you must seek permission so the engkanto may not cause trouble when the time comes that you till it.")*

The excerpts explain why the Subanens firmly believe that other supernatural entities inhabit the world, in which prudence needs to be observed by human beings. When the man sought the *engkanto's* approval of the site the mortal wanted to till, the supernatural entity first declined, claiming ownership of the place as its abode. Later, the *engkanto* yielded to the favor sought on the condition that the man offered a chicken, which ensued.

The traditional practice of the Subanens requires that in any use of the natural environment, permission must be sought from the immortal 'dwellers' inhabiting the trees, land, air, rocks, and water. Thus, the narrative conveys that the human offered one chicken that the *engkanto* required. This implies further that only after the man met what was demanded could he assume the use of the land safely.

On the other hand, the narrative entitled "Pusung and the Giant" (Municipality of Katipunan) implicitly depicts a distinct cultural practice of the *G'taw D'Ayu*. According to the informants, whenever a tribal community in the locality has an important undertaking that requires the conduct of rituals, these tribesmen engage in cockfighting, but without any monetary bet, with the activity considered sacred being part of a ritual. Cockfighting is done as a form of animal offering on behalf of the lives of people for whom the rituals are intended and an act referred to as *dlasuk*. The following excerpt depicts a negotiation between the *Pusung* and the giant:

*Sek sigi na megandyu su Gunlu' miliyag si Pusung. Laungen, "Ala, meliyagu mektari' ita ma'ad bu' meddaagu su gembagel mu neg balay bu' su dlaun neg bandi' mu, naku'na. Peleliyan mu na rema aanay su nga getaw bu' mekpelayu'a seg benuwa nami." (As the giant kept on urging, Pusung acquiesced. He said, "All right, I agree that we will have a cockfight, but if I win, your big house and all your possessions will be mine. You must also stop eating people and go far away from this place.")*

In the narrative, *Pusung* yielded to the request of the giant on grounds favorable to him and his people. The agreement between the giant and *Pusung* has to be construed metaphorically. The *G'taw D'Ayu* informants believe that illnesses may not be caused by natural physiological infirmity but by malevolent entities. Thus, the lives of the fowls losing or winning the fight are offered together as a part of a ritual for the sick so that an imminent and untimely death may be avoided. With its cultural significance, cockfighting is conducted by *G'taw D'Ayu* during important tribal gatherings or activities requiring the performance of rituals.

Furthermore, Subanens believe in the strong connection between man and supernatural creatures in the environment. These people fulfill a tradition that needs to be adhered to amid the passing of time. The narrative "Origin of Rituals among Subanens" (Municipality of San Miguel) conveys that Indigenous Peoples perform rituals to fulfill the indebtedness of a mortal to a

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metaphorically non-human entity, the Monkey. After having spared the man from imminent death, the animal demanded that a 'share' be accorded to it in any aspect of people's existence over time. The following is an excerpt of the narrative:

*Talu tu gutung, "Mangate, hini pasareta. Sumpat manumpat hin tupwan mu subay dunray gilasurun. Ba di mu pagbataren su pasad duni malighugen." Sa ma pasareta, sampay nandaw magkanu ray Subanen.* **(The Monkey then said, "Mangate, let us make an agreement. From generation to generation of your kind, I must have a share. If this agreement will not be fulfilled, you shall experience adversity." Because of such agreement, Subanens have to perform rituals even up to the present time.)**

The excerpt above expresses a stiff warning given by the Monkey that the agreement is observed throughout the Subanen lineage. Failure to abide by the agreement entails a punishment to the tribesmen – a curse to any folk who willfully ignores it. According to the informants of the municipality, contemporary Subanens who opt to depart from the tradition of making offerings during harvests experience profound hardship, or unusual malady, especially on the part of the children. Only through the intercession of a *balyan* through the performance of a ritual called *kanugutung* can man's plight be addressed or healed. The tribal leaders claimed that unseen entities of varied sizes, usually with hideous and filthy appearances, feast on the offerings. However, ordinary human eyes cannot perceive the actual consumption, which the *balyans*, as spiritual intermediaries, can. Thus, the conduct of rituals remains an observable non-material culture of the Subanens.

On the other hand, the Subanens have accounts of the great deluge just like any other people in the world. The narrative on "The Origin of Ritual" (Municipality of San Miguel) tells how several Subanen ancestors survived the flood as they sought refuge in the high mountains in the Zamboanga Peninsula. The following excerpt of the narrative speaks of the reason for the conduct of a ritual involving the shedding of animal blood:

*Simbeg ni Apu Batu, "Nandaw mehsabut tita. Haguna genat tu dyan ta tegel muha he piningi ningi, mehtiyen na su tubig. Da di eta midhaga huleg puli su pehnusu, ma teng su dyangha puli na sap su ghembagel tubig, dairun nay hengayan ta.* **(Apu Batu replied, "Now, we shall agree. Because of our perseverance in prayer, the waters finally subsided. We have to perform a ritual. If we do not do it, maybe the time will come when the waters will return, and we will have no other place to go....)**

In the story, Apu Mutaw and Apu Batu agreed to perform a '*dhaga*' (ritual) after the water receded during the great deluge. More important than the expression of gratitude for the end of the flood, the ritual served as a supplication for a calamity not to recur. The following is an excerpt of the narrative:

*Mitubus medhaga meshebut nilan, "Genat nandaw bah dumni meheseselebu, na mahteng, subay di ta shilingawan ni peddhaga pa din a puli muha di etah metepu."* **(After they did the ritual, they made an agreement, "From now on, if there would calamity that would come into our lives, we need to do a ritual so it may not come back.")**

The narratives depict rituals as a means of the Subanens asking God to spare humanity from future catastrophes. Performing a ritual to avoid an untoward phenomenon is also these people's recognition that mortals cannot withstand the forces of nature. Rituals serve as humanity's hope to live away from unfavorable conditions. Thus, rituals are indispensable to the Subanens. Spiritual conduct is their means of protecting themselves from harm - a potent shield from unwanted occurrences.

Furthermore, the historic fight between the Getaw Kilawan and the Getaw Lanaon (Subanens), as conveyed in the narrative, "The Battle between the Subanens and the Lanao People" (Municipality of Mutia), involved the conduct of *dhaga* or ritual. In the narrative, the Lanaon people, headed by a Sultan, and the Subanen tribe, led by renowned leaders of the tribe, entered into a sacred contract for the cessation of hostilities upheld from one generation to the next, especially that the two groups realized the blood relations of their ancestors. Thus, the *bakung sa pekpepuli*, or law on reconciliation is observed in the narrative as conveyed in the following excerpt:

*Miktalu si Sultan, "Di na ita megpuli megbunu key ita mekpated. Mekpated lawng i kaapuan neng magulang ta. Nami na gapu ig layi, niyu na gapu ig libun." Binal dajun nilan i piksugutan dyandi pigujunan... Migbal ilan nek kandugu ne iningatan nek dal ne nge getew bu ngeg gempya ne ngag layi nek Subanen.*

**(Then the Sultan said, "Let us not fight again, for we are brothers. Our ancestors were siblings, our grandfather, and your grandmother." They then made a pact called *dyandi* as agreed upon... They made a blood compact that all people and renowned Subanen leaders witnessed.)**

According to the informants of the narrative, blood compact as a form of ritual is done only when an undertaking is of the highest importance and has a lasting impact on the Subanens, involving these indigenous folks and people of different ethnicities. The momentous event which occurred in Giliyan Labo (now Ozamiz City) remains vivid in the memories of the aged Subanen folks whose ancestors spoke of it as one of the significant accounts in the Zamboanga Peninsula.

The aforementioned narratives emphasized that Subanens conduct rituals for specific reasons and at any time they deem necessary for their performance. In the rituals attended and participated by the main author, variability of the conduct of rituals was observed, not only in terms of ritual materials but also in terms of the ritual process. Nevertheless, they all point to the sanctity of such acts though the requisites and manner of conducting rituals varied. The main researcher/author herself witnessed the rituals' indispensability.

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Before the data gathering commenced in the Municipality in Mutia, a ritual was performed in which the main researcher was the one who smeared the chicken blood on the hands of the *Getaw Ginsalugen* tribal leaders who served as the informants themselves. The process was a gesture of request to the Subanen ancestors to permit the tribal leaders to hand down their oral heritage to the researcher, who is not a member of the tribe.

On the contrary, in the municipalities of Lakewood and San Miguel, the *balyans* officiating the rituals were the ones who smeared the chicken blood on the hands researcher and her companion (husband) as a form of blessing and permission for the retrieval of the folk narratives as an oral legacy from the ancestors. In the case of the Municipality of Katipunan, the butchering of the chicken and use of its blood during a ritual as a pre-requisite of the data collection was not performed. Instead, before the ritual started, the *mayana* leaves with a betel nut intricately nestled were put in a conspicuous space nearby, together with an egg, a lighted candle, and a glass of *tuba* (coconut wine), claimed by the *G'taw D'Ayu* as offerings to those entities around so the latter might not cause disturbance or untoward incident, especially during the event. When the ritual commenced, a burning incense placed in a coconut shell was passed around eighth times among the elders and tribesman, as well to the researcher and her companion, with intermittent prayers offered by the *balyans* present.

In the Municipality of Katipunan, the ritual called *pengali* was performed during every gathering during the research. An egg, two glasses of 'tuba' or native coconut wine, 'mayana' and 'salimbangon' leaves, candles, and incense, were the ritual materials used. The ritual served as the sacred means of seeking guidance from God or *Apu Megbebaya* for the undertaking to succeed and benefit all involved. All the stages stipulated in the NCIP guidelines were undertaken for the research to materialize in the locale, including the conduct of rituals headed by the *balyan* or the spiritual leader. Subsequently, the performance of rituals was consistently observed during each data collection session. Also, a memorandum of agreement was entered into between the researcher and the tribal leaders indicating that a ritual or *dhaga* would be performed upon receipt by the tribal community of the copy of the final research output as a form of thanksgiving for the successful undertaking. In this vein, rituals play an essential role in the entire research process conducted in the research locale.

Similarly, in the Municipality of Mutia, the ritual referred to as *daga piglengaan baba* was performed before the tribal leaders and other informants recounted the narratives they inherited from their ancestors. The ritual was intended to ask consent from God or *Apu Gembabaja* and the Subanen ancestors. Apart from rice, egg, and an amount of *laga* (money) as ritual offerings, it entailed the smearing of chicken blood on the informants' hands as the researcher's means of gaining access to the oral legacy that has been intrinsically engraved as a core part of the tribesmen's lives. Also, the solemn process was performed as a venue for the researcher to signify one's altruistic motive in retrieving the oral heritage of the tribe. The informants asserted that they could not give the narratives to a non-tribal member without seeking the approval of God and their ancestors because a deliberate disregard for such a spiritual requirement would entail a daunting curse on the tribesmen, as well as the inability on the part of the researcher to decipher the cultural underpinnings in the research data.

Moreover, the rituals conducted before the collection of the folk narratives in the municipalities of Lakewood and San Miguel in Zamboanga del Sur are termed as *gurasan/ghurasan*. The said type of ritual entailed asking for permission from *Apu Mhegbabaya* (God) to tell the folk narratives. Its conduct involved cooked chickens and other ritual materials like eggs, sacred plant leaves, rice, and *gasi* (native wine or its alternative), as well as an amount of money. Only after the rituals were conducted that the tribesmen felt permitted to tell the narratives inherited from their ancestors, adherence to the spiritual activity at the onset of the telling of the narratives was a vital requirement that the Subanen tribesmen could not forego.

This study affirms that gaining an understanding of Subanen rituals is considering the insights of the Subanen tribal leaders and elders themselves. A mere observation of how rituals are conducted without seeking the words of the tribal people performing or participating in the activity entails witnessing rituals without necessarily discerning them. The rituals performed in all the research locales were a pre-requisite to telling the narratives by the informants. Without prior and solemn adherence to this traditional practice, the research could not have transpired nor been completed.

Thus, even before the actual collection and analysis of the folk narratives, the Subanen culture on the conduct of rituals was exemplified in the research process. It was a way of supplication to God and the unseen entities for the unhampered conduct of the research. The tribal leaders ensured that the conduct of rituals was abided by as deemed necessary and proper. In this vein, the rituals were vital to the collection of *gukitan* (narratives).

## CONCLUSION

The folk narratives are valuable repositories of rituals as a non-material culture of the Subanen people, with utmost consideration to the perspective and insights coming from the tribesmen themselves. The conduct of rituals is at the core of this intangible culture of the Subanens, encompassing the whole life cycle of these people. Though sub-groups vary in their rituals, these spiritual activities are directed to the same God in heaven and the supernatural entities thriving in the natural environment. For domestic or communal purposes, performing various rituals is an integral part of these people's existence. As a non-material culture of the Subanens, rituals serve as perpetual cultural markers of their indigenous identity.

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