

## Revisiting Subanen History through Analyses of Flora and Fauna in Subanen Folklore

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### ABSTRACT

Given the limited number of available literature on Subanen culture and history, scholars and researchers are drawn to study the monologues of Subanen folklore to extract truthful historical accounts, separating myths from facts. Through the three published epics subject to this study, significant characteristics of Subanen history are identified through the lens of the key flora and fauna. These factual historical references add up to the whole Subanen identity in the Philippines' diverse cultural and socio-political landscape.

## INTRODUCTION

Mindanao is home to several non-islamic indigenous groups called *lumads*. The biggest among these is the Subanen whose ancestral domains cover the entire Zamboanga Peninsula area. As of March 31, 2018, subanen ancestral domain claims totals to 255,924 hectares according to an NCIP Report published by the Department of Energy.

From being lowland settlers, Subanens have been gradually pushed from the river-banks to upland forest sanctuaries. Finley(1913) claimed that the Subanens have been carried away to involuntary service by the Moros and Filipinos and their nomadic settlements in the plains turned to remote and almost inaccessible communities in the mountainous areas because of raids and exploitation by the Moros and Filipinos.

Prior to colonization and the introduction of Islam, the Subanons practiced monotheistic and pantheistic religion where they worship earthly and celestial deities and spirits (Imbing, 1990). The Subanons were perceived as the only Pagan people of Mindanao and somewhere a representative of a Malay race with a primitive character (Finley,1913). Subanen mythology and folklore reflects this character of the Subanens.

This paper attempts to identify the key flora and faunas depicted in three major Subanen epics and analyze them for reference to actual history. This will also seek to give credence to the historical value of the three epics.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

### *Ginguman: The Guman of Dumalinao*

The Guman of Dumalinao: A Suban-on folk Epic by Malagar (1980) tells the epic story of how *Datu Phunbenwa*, *Gbai Selaga*, *Ba-e ri Dliyang'n*, their daughter, and a young man *Sakandal* fought to protect the ancient kingdom of *Thubig Dleyagen*, from invaders who are after its rich and plentiful resources. There is a wide variety of flora and wildlife found in the text- small birds, huge creatures, rare plants, common herbs, and even endangered species are among them. The most significant and specific are Abucay (fauna) and Coconut (flora).

### *Ag Tobig Nog Keboklagan: A Suban-on Folk Epic*

The folk epic *Ag Tobig nog Keboklagan* (The Kingdom of Keboklagan) by Ochotorena (1981) revolves around the hero character Taake, the son of Timoway, and his heroic adventures in the kingdom of Keboglogan - meeting Pintawan, fighting the *datus* of Keboglogan, vanquishing his enemies, reviving the Kingdom of Sirangan. The Keboglogan's kingdom is being portrayed as weak and vulnerable. It treats its enemies as evil who are unforgiving to intruders. The end part of the narrative tells the reconciliation between the moro and subanen tribes. The narrative tells the intermarriages of princes and princesses of neighboring kingdoms to strengthen their kinship and end conflict (Inte, 2009, p99). The *Ag Tobig nog Keboklagan* makes reference to a number of floras- *mamaq* (betel nut or areca nut) and faunas- eel, horse, dogs, warty pig, *limokon*.

### *Keg Sumba Neg Sandayao*

This 6,577-verse story of *Keg Sumba neg Sandayao* by Resma(1982) followed the heroic journey of a young Datu who was born with exceptional qualities. It spoke of rituals, Sandayo's travel to a land outside of the Subanen's kingdom, and endless fighting.

Just like the *Ag Tobig nog Keboklagan*, the *Keg Sumba neg Sandayao* also made reference to *mamaq* or betel nut chewing which could suggest that the epic was made at almost the same historical point of Subanen history as the *Ag Tobig nog Keboklagan*. It made mention of bamboos, rice, warty pig, crow, Bolognese tree, and octopus.

### METHODOLOGY

This research uses a combination of practical and historical- biographical approach in literary review of the three most important Subanen literary pieces as follows: the *Ginguman* or *Guman*, the *Ag Tobig nog Keboklagan* or The Kingdom of *Keboklagan*, and *Keg Sumba neg Sandayao* or The Tale of Sandayo. This paper does not seek to rely on the literary merits of the literatures but rather on the practical reference of the narratives to actual history of the Subanen.

### DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

#### *Guman: History of Infighting and Subjugation*

The epic *Ginguman* is reminiscent of Subanen's dark past. Its text refers to a segment in history where abucays used to be abundant and yet at the same where their ancestors have struggled to survive against their invaders. Gangoso (2023) suggests that this lack of inherent culture of political consciousness that will drive the Subanens to participate in a much broader political struggle can be attributed to their historic avoidance of conflict which most scholars misinterpret as a culture of peace. Truth be told, the Suban-ons were already subjugated by the Visayans and Moros prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. No doubt they were considered as the lowest class during the sixteenth century and the stigma of being so remains to this day. The *Ginguman* epic is evidence of this historical fact.

The *Abucay* mentioned in the epic is a literal representation of the abucay, discovered flying throughout the realm through the lines:

*"Countless abukay fly  
Over its outlet to the sea;  
White birds fly  
From its mouth to the sea"*

The *Abucay*, also known as the *Cacatua haematuropygia* or Philippine cockatoo, is a critically-endangered species of cockatoo that is native to the Philippines. The bird features a small psittacine with crimson undertail coverts and a helmet crest.

*Abucay* is known to inhabit the lowlands and are often found in mangrove, riverine, and open pastures. This species was widespread in the Philippine Archipelago during the 16th century. By 1998, the bird was almost

extinct with as little as 23 were alive and not until in 2015 that conservation efforts brought the numbers back to thousands. Also, Abucay is rarely documented in Mindanao and most of its remaining numbers can be found in Palawan island today except in Siargao (*Katala Foundation Inc.*, n.d.). The reference to this *abucay* in the text is evidence that the *guman* narrative has been passed from one generation to the other and its origin may date back to pre-hispanic occupation because abucay is referred to in multitudes in the epic.

As of the sixteenth century, the Suban-ons were subjects to the Sama Lutaw and were valued suppliers of beeswax, cinnamon, deerskin, dyewood, rattan, and resin - as well as caged live civet cats for export to Japan (Scott, 1994). There was no mention of abucays as among the faunas they supply to the Sama Lutaw but it could be deduced that the Suban-ons also hunt and capture these birds for consumption or trade and such practice could have widely contributed to the dramatic decline of the said species to near-extinct levels. While *Guman* was only published in 1980, there was no way the literature could have originated recently since abucay was already extinct in Dumalinao and in the adjacent hinterland areas.

The Coconut (*Cocos nucifera* L.) is used in a literal and figurative way in *Guman*.

*“Thrown were corpses  
Around the mountain slopes  
And on top of coconut trees  
Like flying birds”*

*“Shouts of victory arose  
That made coconut leaves stand”*

Coconut is a naturally-growing plant in the Philippines and has been widely planted for farm production for centuries. Coconut is native to Southeast Asia and the islands between the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Lima et al., 2015). On a global scale, the coconut was believed to be widely domesticated by southeast asian and austronesian people throughout the Neolithic era. Its farm value was promoted through seaborne migrations throughout the Asia Pacific and as far as the Pacific Islands. Indeed the Suban-ons were aboriginal in origin and thus they were no exception to aboriginal communities in Southeast Asia to farm coconut. The literal use of the coconut tree in the *Guman* text is indicative of the widespread presence of the said plant in the Subanen domains. This could indicate that the conflicts between the Subanen and foreign tribal groups occurred during the pre-hispanic occupation.

Narratives of bloody conflicts in the *Guman* could suggest that the Suban-ons must have valiantly fought the invaders from Visayas and Sulu archipelago before they were eventually defeated and enslaved. The *Guman* was all about the Subanen defending their territory and there was no mention of them attacking the kingdoms of their invading enemies except for one that spoke of the rescue of their captured ladies. We could infer that the Subanen fought against the invaders from the south and from the north but the sophistication of the Visayan political-economy and their military drive for the expansion of their territories towards the western mindanao island proved too

much for the Subanens to resist. With no centralized political structure and a still primitive economic and political system, the Subanens were eventually enslaved by the Visayans in the north and by the Sama Lutaws in the South, the latter being partly subjects to the Boholanos. The Subanen Datus became subservient to the Boholano overlords and to the Sama Lutaws long before the Spaniards came (Scott, 1994).

### ***Ag Tobig nog Keboglagan: Quest for Identity***

The *Ag Tobig nog Keboklagan* makes reference to a number of floras and faunas. *Mamaq* or a betel nut chewing was mentioned. Betel nut (*Areca catechu* L.), also known as Areca nut, is a native plant in southeast asian regions. It is also occasionally found growing spontaneously and is believed to be possibly indigenous to the country after being discovered once in Palawan's primary forests. Betel nut chewing is popularly practiced in many rural areas of Subanen domains even today although it is observable that cigarettes have replaced them in peri-urban areas.

The literature frequently mentions the eel (*Anguilliformes sp.*), one of the many fish species abundant in Philippine waters. A freshwater variety called *igat* is abundant in the Subanen domains. The giant mottled eel (*Anguilla marmorata*) remained to be an abundant species in Subanen territories.

Horse (*Equus sp.*) is a domesticated, hooped mammal. Subanens were domesticating horses long before the conquest of their territories by Visayan tribes. Horses were introduced to the Subanens by the Samas who were trading with Malays and Chinese. Subanens are still using horses today, although rural development of roads have caused the introduction of modified motorcycles as primary means of transporting goods and people.

The mention of dogs (*Canis sp.*) would indicate that the epic was made at a time when trade existed between mindanao and foreign merchants, particularly with the Chinese. Dogs were not endemic to the Subanen areas or in the Philippines in particular.

The Philippine warty pig (*Sus philippensis var.*) is one of the island of Mindanao's endemic pig species. In Subanen domains, wild pigs were abundant and a primary source of food to their aboriginal ancestors. It was also among the forest produce supplied by the Subanen to their Boholano overlords who were in turn engaged in trade with foreign merchants. Even before the arrival of Europeans in the Philippines, pigs were already introduced by Chinese traders before the latter importation of various exotic European breeds (Bondoc, 2008). Hunting for food or trade of these pigs by the Subanens must have contributed to the decline of its population making the said faunas as among the critically endangered wildlife species today.

In the epic line "*as Taake sinks into the depths of the sea, he laments, Had the limokon sounded I would not have come*" The *limokon* referred to in the narrative must be some kind of wild pigeon endemic in Mindanao considered as *omen birds* by Subanens as well as other indigenous tribes in Mindanao (Ochotorena, 1981, p.420). If a *limokon* calls (*koro-koro*), a person traveling must immediately

turn back from the direction where the bird sounded from. It is considered an omen or a warning and cause for bad luck (Blair, 1906, p.70).

### *Keg Sumba Neg Sandayao: Subanen Celebration*

Bamboos were mentioned in the epic. Bamboos (*Bambusa sp.*) are endemic and native to the southeast asian regions. *Bayog* is a local term for a variety of bamboo that is abundant in Subanen domains. This type of bamboo was introduced to the Subanens by the Malays and had been an essential construction material for them. Traditional subanen dwellings before the sixteenth century were built using bamboo materials.

Rice (*Oryza sativa L.*) was referred to in the narrative as a key ingredient in producing rice wine called *gasi* or *pangasi* in *Subanen language*. Rice wine was both a commercial and ceremonial product for the Subanens. The tradition of *gasi* by the Subanen would predate their enslavement by the Boholanos. *Dawa* (*Setaria italica*) is a foxtail millet, a perennial grass that grows abundantly in Subanen areas.

Like the *Ag Tobig nog Keboklagan*, the Philippine warty pig (*Sus philippensis* var.) was also used in the narratives. The pig was used in the epic as a ritual sacrifice. With reference to the part where on Sandayao was able to kill the pig, it could be inferred that it was a huge wild pig rather than a domesticated variety. Historically speaking, the presence of wild pigs in enormous size could indicate that Sandayao's time would refer to period where wild pigs of such size rarely existed already. This could indicate that unlike the *Guman* which only spoke of Subanen defensive battles against the invaders, the *Keg Sumba neg Sandayao* spoke of a time where the Subanens were even though a divided kingdom by itself that could leverage peace pacts with other tribes.

*Dalandaw* (*Oriolus steerii*) is a medium-sized bird mostly found in wet lowlands. *Sumosum Crow* (*Corvus (enca) samarensis*) is one of the four species of crows in the Philippines and is believed to exist in Subanen lands during the period of Sandayao. Both birds were presented as mythical creatures and their mythical reference survived in subanen beliefs to date.

There was reference to a *Bolongis* tree in the epic's text but its exact identity remained unknown. In Subanen beliefs, the *balete* tree is considered as a mythical and magical tree that often serves as a place where mythical creatures exist or as a gateway to another dimension and the *bolongis* in the epic might be the same as the *balete*, with no further evidence to support as such.

The common Philippine octopus (*Octopus vulgaris*) can be found in the waters of Zamboanga peninsula. There are several species of octopus existing in Philippine waters. In the epic, the octopus referred to is a mythical giant creature that can devour a ship. This creature provides no significance to the Subanen history but the sea (lowlands and bay areas) are considered as where evil looms. The Subanens shun the sea because from the sea came the collectors of tribute (Christie, 1909).

## CONCLUSION

For Scott (1994), Mindanao epics are but aristocratic forms of literature where protagonists are more like those who belong to the ruling class of the community. A more formal approach to literary criticism would suggest that they cannot be used to represent historical facts.

In modern literary criticism, characters are drawn from the realistic conception of the period by which the authors or characters have lived or existed. The characters portrait allegorical dimensions (Scholer, 1958). Disregarding a formalist approach in literary criticism and through literal and practical analyses of the floras and faunas found in three important Subanen epics as a lens to decrypt historical facts, it could be fairly deduced that the Subanen's history is marred with bloody and painful subjugation by both local and foreign actors. The three epics are but accounts, in literary form, of the Subanen's history. The epics are also a reflection of Subanen's egalitarian worldview.

Decades prior to Magellan's arrival in Visayas, the Subanens in the northern peninsula (Zamboanga del Norte today) were already under the rule of Rajah Kalanaw whose center of authority is stationed in Quipit (Labason today). The Spaniards prior to the sixteenth century learned very little about the subanens except that they were living in scattered settlements along the riverbanks or streams. Pigafetta himself witnessed this as he was rowed upstream from Quipit for two hours to reach Chief Kalanaw's house (Scott, 1994).

Prior to their subjugation to the boholanos and Lutaws, the Subanons were already advancing in terms of politics and economy. In fact, they began practicing slavery within their people and even made as a requirement of a mourning ritual the sacrifice of a slave (Scott, 1994). But at a time when the Subanen's were still progressing towards establishing a centralized kingdom as evidenced by the war between rival sub tribal communities and *datus*, the Visayans had long advanced to a new phase in their political-economic stage of civilization where expansion of their territories along with their broadening participation in global trade especially with Ternate and chinese traders became a necessity. Infighting between warring sub tribes and their lack of common aspiration to establish a unified kingdom that could possess the might to defeat an invasion was a factor in the Subanen subjugation.

The Sultanate of Ternate's attack in Bohol in 1563 triggered a massive relocation of royal Boholanos to northern mindanao. And during the early stage of the 16th century, the Visayan Pagbuaya subjugated the Suban-on population with the aid of the Sama Lutaws who, at that time, were subjects of Maguindanao or Sulu princes. Pagbuaya established a company of Boholano warlords in Subanen territories. The Guman may have originated during the time of the expansion of Boholano's control of the Zamboanga peninsula, right before the introduction of Christianity in Mindanao. By then the Subanens were either practicing paganism or Islam; and, were either subjects of the Visayans or paying tributes to the Sultanate of Sulu (Samas and Tausugs) as in the case of

Subanens in the southern peninsula, or to the Sultanate of Maguindanao as in the case of Subanens in Moro Gulf.

The conquest in western and northern Mindanao was an easy feat for the Spaniards because their Boholano vassals had the Subanens already under their control and enslavement long before Legazpi made a blood compact with Rajah Sikatuna on March 25, 1565. That the Jesuit Francisco Combes (1667) claimed that Pagbuaya's great grandson Pedro killed in hand-to-hand combat more than 200 enemies of God, referring to Subanens, before reaching the age of thirty was nothing less than a manifestation of the brutality the Subanens experienced when the Spaniards began imposing their religion towards the natives. The infamous Lorenzo Kabiling, a Boholano warlord, was collecting 10 reels from the Spaniards for every Suban-on pagan subjugated in 1718 (Scott, 1994).

How grim and dark the past is, the literature analyzed in this paper provide a more politically-correct view of Subanen history. The various claims that the Subanens have not been conquered by the Spaniards are not true. Further, the description of the Subanen as a fourth nation in Mindanao by Father Francisco Combes (1667) is but a romanticized view of Subanen history from his perspective as a Spanish friar and authority in Mindanao history of Christianization who enslaved the Subanen through the Visayan vassals. As a matter of fact the sufferings and misery of the earlier Subanen are reflective of its current political and cultural identity.

#### **FURTHER STUDY**

It is hoped that further studies be made on Subanen history in the context of the Mindanao and the moro and lumad setting. Studies on Subanen history are primarily based on the accounts of colonial writers and there are very limited attempts at conducting research using qualitative indigenous approaches.

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