

Subanen Identity and Locality in the Local and Regional Philippine Landscape

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ABSTRACT

The Subanens are the biggest indigenous peoples group in Mindanao occupying a vast area of historical ancestral domain in the Zamboanga peninsula. As a cultural minority group, the Subanens are in constant struggle to establish their identity and part in the country's democratic space, sharing a common aspiration with other indigenous groups to pursue their right to self-determination and the preservation of their right culture and traditions. This paper presents how Subanen history and culture has come to possess a distinct indigenous identity in Mindanao's cultural-political landscape.

Keywords: subanen, indigenous peoples, lumad

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 or RA. 8371 defines Indigenous Cultural Communities or Indigenous Peoples as “ a group of people or homogenous societies identified by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as organized community on communally bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed and utilized such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have, through resistance to political, social and cultural inroads of colonization, nonindigenous religions and cultures, became historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos“.

The law recognizes the inclusion of peoples as indigenous on account of their historical ancestry which predates the establishment of current political boundaries. These are the communities which carry a distinct cultural, economic and political character compared to the general population. It takes into account the patterns of resettlement and displacement from their traditional ancestral domain areas.

In the entire Philippines, there are at least forty (40) indigenous peoples groups which are mostly distributed in remote islands and hinterland regions of the country. Examples are the Negritos, the Mangyans and Igorots, and there's the lumad groups in Mindanao, the latter are those who are not part of the muslim groups. In Western Mindanao, particularly the Zamboanga peninsula, the Subanens are the dominant lumad or indigenous groups.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted using qualitative non-structured research methods that combine deep historical analysis of relevant literature with in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions and ethnographic case studies.

III. THE SUBANON/ SUBANEN

The Subanens are an ethnic group indigenous to the Philippines, originating and living in the Western Mindanao region that is presently partitioned into four provinces, namely: Misamis Occidental, Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, and Zamboanga Sibugay.

The term “Subanen” was used to refer to this particular indigenous group because they were historically settled along the river banks of Zamboanga peninsula. The term Subanen is derived from the word *suba* which translates to river or a body of water. In the Subanen language, the term *sumuba* means to go upstream while the term *mosog* means to go downstream. As people from different ethnic groups and religions immigrated and settled in the area, the term Subanen was given to the ones who were originally living at the upstream regions of the rivers for discernment. The term may have been originally given to them by the Christian settlers who immigrated in the area. The “Subanon” is more popularly used interchangeably with “Subanen” in the local setting.

Subanens have been pushed from the river-banks to their forest sanctuaries. The Subanen have never left their home country except as they have been carried away to involuntary service by the Moros and Filipinos (Finley, 1913). Originally occupying the entire land area to the coast line, they have been gradually driven back into the most inaccessible portions of the mountainous interior by the raids and exploitation of their long-time enemies, the Moros and Filipinos. Prior to colonization, Subanens were nomadic and often migrated from one place to another referred to as *phemelesen* (people carried by the wind) or *getaw mepasig* (people carried by the current). It was only during the 19th century period that they began permanently settling in certain areas. In recent years, they are predominantly found on the western flank of Mindanao, residing in the 67 municipalities spread throughout the three provinces namely: Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga Sibugay, and in some rural villages within the cities of Zamboanga, Dipolog and Pagadian. In addition, some Subanen are also found in the neighboring province of Misamis Occidental.

There are six early Subanen geographical divisions based on their riverine domains namely: Getaw Thebed/ Getaw Pengolis in the Thebed River constituting the areas of Labangan and Tukuran, Getaw Balangasan, in the Balangasan River of Pagadian City; Getaw Sibugay in the Sibuguey River covering the areas of Bayog, Imelda, Siay and Diplahan; Getaw Danaw of Danaw (Lake Wood) in the municipality of Lakewood and Kumalarang; and there is Getaw Sindangan, Dibaloy and Salugnon of Guiwan, Guikwan River; and lastly, Getaw Malindang in various river networks of Mt. Malindang range comprising Misamis Occidental towns (Georsua, 2004).

IV. SUBANEN LANGUAGE

Unlike the other regional languages in the Philippines, Subanen is considered by many linguists as a dialect cluster rather than a monolithic language, like the Bikol languages (Chua, 1973). In general, its grammatical structure is different from that of Tagalog and Cebuano in general. Unlike the diverse Bikol languages, the Subanen language does not have a standard dialect. This is because there is no common office that is regulating the language and that the language itself is not widely written nor spoken by the majority of the population in Misamis Occidental and Zamboanga Peninsula. Today, the number of speakers is dwindling down in favor of more widely spoken languages like Filipino (Tagalog), Cebuano, or Chavacano (J. Hapalla, personal communication, August, 2018). Except for some highly remote rural communities, Subanen is rarely heard in urban areas today. Many among the younger generation do not speak nor understand the language and reasons vary from discrimination to inapplication to mistransmission from the previous generation or a combination of factors.

V. SUBANEN RELIGION

Traditionally, the Subanens practice their indigenous religion which is monotheistic and pantheistic, albeit there is no official name for it. The Subanen indigenous religion does not systematically follow any dogmas and beliefs vary depending on their place of origin. Both the Islamic and the Christian faith has also, in a sense, indirectly affected the Subanen worldview and cosmology as newer ideas from these two Abrahamic religions have been adopted.

The Subanen religion is not similar to the Middle Eastern monotheistic faiths wherein there’s a consistent single revelation that is given from time to time, but are vouched by the *gbalyans* or shamans who play a big role in the affairs concerning the natural world and the supernatural world. *Gbalyans* are sometimes referred to as the medicine men because of their capability to use the plants, flowers, and everything else in nature to either harm or cure a person. *Gbalyans* can be either male or female.

The Subanens believe that there are two worlds that are in parallel but interrelated to each other: the divine world where the *diwatas* live and the mundane world where humans, plants, and animals live.

These two worlds share the same natural signs of the sky (sun, moon, and the stars), and have three layers: the upper world/*dlangit* (sky), middleworld/*dlupa* (earth), and the underworld/*gbaya* (sea) (Imbing, 2002).

The *dlangit* refers to a place beyond the sky that the human eye can see. It is where the heavenly bodies are situated while the term *kawang* refers to the visible sky where the birds and the clouds can be seen. This is the place where the *diwatas* reside who can either be benevolent or indifferent. Meanwhile the term *gekbus dlangit* or *bos dlangit* is considered to be the highest place of the upper world where the pure spirit and supreme god *Diwata Migbebaya* resides while the other seven ruling spirits occupy the seven layers or mountains below *gekbus dlangit*. Between the layers and earth live the *hindagaw*, a powerful but evil heavenly being that wanders to and fro to block or steal any heavenly blessings away from men. The *dlupa* is the location for all men, plants, and animals. While all men belong to this world, it is possible to visit other worlds according to Subanen mythology through dreams, visions, or collusions from the *busao* or evil spirit. In many Subanen epics, people can travel to other worlds through the help of a spirit and a *gbalyan*. The *gbaya* or *dagat* (sea) is the place for all the souls of the dead as well as the demons, evil spirits or *dlatnawa*, and the serpent. *Diwata Migbebaya* who resides in the highest heaven or *gekbus dlangit* has other names that define him. He is also called *Golay Diwata* or *Apo Gulay* (pure spirit god), *Diwata Minal* (creator), *Pephonpunan* (highest Subanen god), *Pedlob-padata* (maker of heaven and earth), *Diwata Dhumingag* (the unseen), *Apo Asug* or *Apo Dipulog* (master and divine redeemer), and *Apo G* (Georsua, 2004).

Unique to the other ethnic groups of the country is the Subanon's set of rituals, *buklog*, that utilizes a huge dancing platform to which a log is attached that hits a hollowed sounding board on the ground. The Buklog performs both communal and integrative functions. The Subanen's economic, social, political and ritual life are intertwined to constitute a single system and are motivated by shared tenets of cultural survival- consulting the spirits, working with nature, sharing with others (Georsua, 2004).

VI. SUBANO IDENTITY

Despite historically occupying the vast majority of the areas in Zamboanga peninsula, the Subanens are always considered a minority in western

Mindanao. While muslim minority groups such as Tausugs, Meranaws, Iranun and Maguindanao are equally present in provinces of Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga Sibugay and Zamboanga del Norte, the Subanen are almost identical to an undertone minority.

At one hand, the term Subano as an identity is attached to a low-class and countryside character which compels many community members to denounce and abandon their language and subano identity. To be identified as a Subano in the lowland and urban areas will predispose one to a vulnerability of discrimination and low-economic status. Subanen cultural masters argue that the current generation of young indigenous community members who enrolled in urban schools hide their identity to avoid bullying and a feeling of shame (N. Mangilay, personal communication, August, 2018). They tend to adopt the dominant non-indigenous culture with ease and with no sense of guilt that they have turned their back from their indigenous subano identity. On the other hand, the Subano identity has been claimed by convenience among community members and non-members due to several political and economic opportunities attached to it. These include scholarships, employment, community grants and even exemption to some government regulatory policies.

Since Cebuano is the most-widely spoken language in western Mindanao, the Subanens speak both the indigenous language and Cebuano, although the younger generation no longer speak the indigenous language. The Cebuano speaking majority in the urban areas have become so dominant and enforcing to the coexisting Subanens that the latter are forcibly integrated and have adapted to a cultural identity far from their indigenous one.

In a culture of peace workshop conducted by the author in 2018, non subanen participants listed as among their predisposed negative biases against the subanens as "dirty", "having posed poison alchemy", "shy" and "uneducated". The same cohort of individuals posted positive biases towards the subanen such as "hardworking farmers", "friendly and non-aggressive " and "sincere ".

In Regional and National politics, Subanens have no representation in the national legislation. While the Philippines through the partylist system provides marginalized sectors including the indigenous groups the opportunity to get representation in the lower house, the Subanens neither have the resources nor the political leveraging strength to participate in national

politics. They have no influences nor spaces of participation in national politics. In local government units however, there are several municipal local executives or mayors as well as councilors who are known to identify themselves as members of the Subanen indigenous community. The presence of Subanons occupying key local government positions provide the Subanen's the space for promoting its culture, albeit limited to the conduct of mardi gras type festivals featuring contemporary subanen dances, costumes and music.

VII. SUBANEN ANCESTRAL DOMAINS

According to an NCIP Field Office Report published by the Department of Energy, the Subanen in Region IX has a total of 255,924 hectares of ancestral domain claims as of March 31, 2018. In Zamboanga del Sur, there are ancestral domain petitions in the municipalities of Dinas, Guipos, San Miguel, Tabina, Margosatubig, Josefina, Ramon Magsaysay, Tukuran, Vincenzo Sagun, Tambulig, Molave, Aurora, Sominot, dumalinao, San Pablo. Ancestral domain claims in Zamboanga Sibugay towns of Alicia, Talusan and Olutanga are shared by Subanens and Samal. There are also vast claims of ancestral domain areas in Ipil, La PaZ Zamboanga City, Tampilisan and Tungawan Sibugay areas. In Zamboanga del Norte, Subanen ancestral domain claims are in Gutalac, Godod, Salug, Dipolog City, Polanco, Pinan, La Libertad, Sibutad, Rizal, Mutia, Dapitan City and several small areas of Subanen tribal communities. These ancestral domain claims are in various stages of application where some are merely identified based on concentration of Subanen population and subject for verification while some are already being petitioned for delineation and recognition. A common sentiment among Subanen tribal leaders is the sluggish and highly bureaucratic process of ancestral domain claim.

VIII. CONTROVERSIES IN SUBANEN ANCESTRAL DOMAIN

While Indigenous Peoples Rights Act recognizes the state's obligation to ensure that the indigenous communities are given representation and venues for participation in the development and implementation of policies pertaining to education, health and local development, there have been lots of controversies hounding the indigenous peoples. There are indigenous groups who cry widespread

mistreatment and exploitation of indigenous groups to date.

Lumad groups in Mindanao have been very politically active in their cry against killings, harassments, and displacement or land-grabbing due to development aggression. For some groups, the law fails to protect the indigenous peoples. In many indigenous communities, health care services and education are missing and difficult to access.

During the Marcos regime, the New People's Army, being the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, had among its members in the western mindanao areas a huge numbers belonging to the Subanen indigenous population. In the past three (3) decades, the NPA's have been fighting against global mining operations in the Subanen areas. Since large-scale open-pit mining operations have greatly devastated the areas deemed sacred to Subanen traditional religious beliefs, the anti-mining campaigns of the Subanen have brought them closer to the communist groups.

The NPA has five (5) political fronts in Zamboanga Peninsula which are within the historical ancestral domain areas of the Subanen today. Front Kara is situated in Zamboanga del Sur province, particularly in the towns of Lakewood, Dumalinao, Baganian peninsula, Kumalang and Imelda which are areas with high concentration of Subano population. Front Joji embraces the southern part of Mt. Malindang mountain range which includes the Salug valley towns of Tambulig, Molave and Josefina as well as Misamis Occidental towns of Tangub, Ozamiz and Bonifacio. The NPA's Front Sendong is situated in the northern part of Mt. Malindang including the towns of Aloran, Oroquieta, Lopez Jaena, Plaridel and Calamba connecting the front Joji to the zamboanga del norte NPA areas. Front BBC is situated in the Subanen's ancestral domain areas in Zamboanga del Norte to parts of Zamboanga Sibugay while NPA's Front JBSis is in the Subanen's Sindangan and nearby areas. The presence of this left-wing armed group in the Subanen communities is driven by the political controversies affecting the indigenous groups. Islamic armed groups have no significant presence in Subanen ancestral domain areas.

During the Duterte administration, several Subanen leaders participated in the government's drive against insurgency by campaigning against the

continued presence and intrusion of the NPA's into the Subanen ancestral domain areas.

IX. CONCLUSION

Unlike other indigenous peoples groups who have a well-defined manifestation of collective identity and historical struggle for self-determination, the Subanen's people's common political vision is limited to ancestral domain claims. There and then, their political aspirations have rarely gone beyond their tribal interest although there have been some historical accounts that suggest the Subanen have joined-hands with other ethnic minority groups to advance common cause and political agenda. But these are primarily driven by left-wing parties who have been known to include among its overall political agenda the aspirations of the Subanens and other ip groups. Without the left-leaning non-state actors who advance the Subanen's interest along with other indigenous groups in the country, the Subanen's have no prominent historical records of collaboration with other tribal groups in the country. For example, compared to other indigenous groups such as the Cordilleras who have a rich history of collective identity and have achieved lasting legacies of political struggles, the Subanens have very little political victories in our nation's history. For the Cordilleras, the 1987 Philippine Constitution called for the establishment of an autonomous region for the Cordillera, many areas in the Cordillera region have been declared as protected areas, and the key policy measures adopted by the government such as the Chico Dam project during the Martial law times are among the many legacies of collective and broader political struggles. But the Subanen's, despite having a well-defined cultural identity, to date remains a politically-disunited indigenous group.

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. It is entirely inaccurate for scholars to call it a culture of peace when tribal communities will choose to abandon their villages due to abuse and occupation without fighting. Avoiding conflict when political oppression such as land -grabbing and cultural subjugation is far from the definition of peace.

It is noteworthy to state that the Subanen's aspirations as in indigenous group is similar to those of other lumad groups in Mindanao and to those indigenous peoples elsewhere in the Philippines. As an indigenous group seeking to establish their own identity in the country's democratic space, they are facing political marginalization as well as economic and social minoritization from the national government.

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