

Unravelling the *Gbeklug* of the Subanens through the Lens of their Folk Narratives



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ABSTRACT: Folk narratives are rich repositories of the cultures of Indigenous peoples. For example, the Subanens in the Zamboanga Peninsula, Mindanao, Philippines, have several folk narratives that can shed light on their material and non-material cultures. This ethnographic study explored the *gbatad* (culture) of the Subanens, as depicted in the folk narratives called the *gukitan* or *sinugel*. The study's research locales were the municipalities of Katipunan and Mutia in Zamboanga del Norte and San Miguel and Lakewood in Zamboanga del Sur. A first-hand gathering of the folk narratives was conducted to produce a corpus of folk narratives as the primary data from which the Subanen *gbatad* was identified. Actual narrations were done by the tribal leaders and select tribesmen who served as the key informants of the study. In addition, focus group discussions were made to elicit the cultural underpinnings of the narratives. The research resulted in the gathering, transcriptions, and translations of 79 narratives, in which two of them talked about a *gbeklug*, the most sacred communal gathering among the sub-groups of the Subanens in the Zamboanga Peninsula. *Gbeklug*, which stands prominently as a marker of the cultural identity of these Indigenous people, requires strict adherence to the process and the materials needed for the construction of the *gbeklugan* (platform). The performance of such a grand festivity demands utmost caution from all people in attendance.

KEYWORDS: culture, gathering, narratives, Philippines, Subanens

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples worldwide possess material and non-material cultures that distinguish them from others. They utilize what the natural environment offers them based on their ancestors' practices, indulgence, and associated beliefs and values. Amid the passing of time, cultural communities perpetuate specific materials for rituals, communal gatherings, and daily subsistence.

As a mirror of culture, folklore provides an autobiographical ethnography that presents people's descriptions of themselves and their values (Abrahams, 1971; Dundes, 1980). It conveys traditions (Popescu, 2011) and cultural norms that are useful and pleasurable to people (Toelken, 1996). In this light, a narrative can be a means of raising consciousness, creating a shared history and group identity, preserving and transmitting culture (Smith, 2000). Narratives entail the truth of fact and the actual past (Scholes, Phelan, & Kellogg, 2006) and offer a patterned structure expressing significant and universal human experiences (Stephens & McCallum, 2013). The events of the remote past reported as narrative (Jarmon, 2003) are the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected (Herman & Verbaeck, 2005). The historical component of narratives entails knowing the veracity of happenings in the distant past (Scholes, Phelan, & Kellogg, 2006).

The belief of Indigenous peoples like the Subanen on the existence and power of invisible spirits whose beneficence, compassion, and approval they seek through rituals and prayers manifest their closeness and reverence for the sanctity of creation (Valdez & Hansel, 2015). A ritual study in a narrative context might provide insights into the rituals' signification (Wright, 2001). On the part of the Subanens, they believe in spirits as guardians of nature; thus, they perform *pamuhat* or *kano* (rituals) (Roxas, 2005).

The highest rituals performed in the Subanen tribe are those conducted during a *gbeklug*. The kinds and quantities of the ritual offerings and the process of the construction of the *gbeklugan* require accuracy and utmost prudence as possible determinants of the outcome of the communal gathering. Rituals for a grand festivity like the *gbeklug* entail lavish preparations and serve an essential and crucial function - to ensure that the tribesmen can live their lives free from unwarranted interference or misfortune brought about by forces that are beyond the human capacity and strength to overcome.

Many studies were conducted on the Subanen culture. However, only a few researches were made focusing on the narratives. Also, only a few Subanen folks have kept their oral tradition in their memory, specifically about the performance of *gbeklug*. One Subanen legend is accessible online, the "Legend of the Subanen Buklog" by Imbing and Viernes-Enriquez (1990). *Buklog* is revered as the most sacred and well-celebrated festival of the Subanens (Berdon-Georsua, 2004).

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Thus, the retrieval of the narratives can be an avenue for preservation before the narratives reach the point of extinction. Unfortunately, nowadays, the act of story-telling by the elderly tribesmen is infrequently done as the young generation of Subanens seldom appreciates this. Hence, exploring the *gbeklug* of the Subanens can shed light on the sanctity and requisites of the conduct of this tribal affair.

MATERIAL, METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Material of the Study

The materials used in this paper are the selected narratives gathered firsthand by the main author/researcher. Through an in-depth examination of the narratives, several narratives related to the conduct of *gbeklug* among the Subanens were identified. Furthermore, specific lines were extracted to exemplify these people's non-material culture and its corresponding significations. The adherence of the tribal peoples to the conduct of *gbeklug*, as presented in this study, is still prevalent even in contemporary times.

Methodology

The folk narratives delivered orally by the informants in their tribal language were transcribed for analysis. After the transcriptions, the key informants translated the narratives into the Bisayan language the authors speak. Translation of the texts into the English language subsequently followed. A thorough review of the narratives ensued, allowing the authors to identify the non-material cultures depicted or conveyed. Specific portions of the pertinent narratives were extracted and grouped according to commonalities. The excerpts were then analyzed based on their significations or symbolic meanings as representations of the *gbeklug* of the Subanen sub-groups included in the study. Only two narratives were used for this paper, those that talk about *gbeklug*.

Literature Review

All cultural practices have signification as a core feature of the entirety of social life (Tilley, 1994). Life is possible only when human see their environment as a vital part of their existence. Thus, Indigenous peoples relate with the life around them (Salmon, 2000). The beliefs in fate, God, just reward, and just punishment talk about life events that are hard to elucidate in material terms (Cantril, 1935).

The narrative world (or story world) hides the actual ontological structure of a text. The possible worlds theory claims the multiplicity of worlds as applied to narrative texts (Bell & Ryan, 2019). According to the UNESCO Framework of 2003, intangible cultural heritage is recreated continuously by people responding to their environment and interacting with nature and their history, providing them with a sense of identity and continuity (Jackson & Kidd, 2011). Tribal communities often rely on their shamans or *gbelyans* as their traditional healers to provide herb lore to cure illnesses. They believe that these traditional healers communicate with the world of spirits (Pizon, Nuñez, Uy, & Senarath, 2016). Such a spirit medium known locally as *balyan* or *suruhano*, male or female, leads the conduct of rituals (Roxas, 2005), as one endowed with power passed down directly from *Megbabaya*, or the Supreme God (Clariza & Lanzona, 2005).

A religious ritual is a means of communicating more than what is spoken to convey the intended hidden meanings (Cox, 2016). Subanens consider their traditional black clothing to represent night as the time of worship to their God (Villanueva & Jomud, 2013). Powerful obligations mean offering materials gifts and sacrificing domestic animals to extraordinary entities in the environment (Jordan, 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most solemn and profound rituals are performed during the *gbeklug* (also spelled *bhekug*, *buklug*, or *buklog*) of the Subanens, entailing several rituals from beginning to end. It is a tribal festivity performed for a specific purpose, such as healing the physically-stricken, thanksgiving for a good harvest, or honoring a newly-chosen tribal leader. *Gbeklug* remains the well – celebrated gathering of the Subanen tribesmen. The main author witnessed such tribal gathering in the Municipality of Lakewood, Zamboanga del Sur. A few narratives gathered depict the conduct of *gbeklug* among these Subanen people. For example, “The Story about a *Gbeklug*” (Municipality of San Miguel) speaks of the preparation made by the Subanen folks for the tribal gathering to take place. The following is an excerpt of the narrative:

Dunni dyangha su nga getaw nga Subanen di bhenwa Kulasihon, San Pablo, bu miggalimpan ilan mehatag di bhekug. (**There was a time when the Subanen people in Culasian, San Pablo, made a preparation for a *gbeklug*.**)

According to the Subanen informants, a *gbeklug* can last for a week or even a month, with endless dancing on a platform or the *gbeklugan* (an elevated wooden structure where a communal and festive dancing takes place). In this gathering, rules are strictly obeyed by those present, not only to observe the sanctity of the gathering but also to avoid a stiff punishment from unseen entities believed to be witnessing the event.

However, the details of the narrative revealed that the *gbeklug* was held without the presence of their mightiest *balyan* named Luhaya. It led to the fateful outcome of folks who attended the gathering. The giant who had no garment on, deliberately blocked the passage of the water in the river and pretended to be unwilling to accept the invitation made by the tribesmen for the creature to join in the festivity. However, the folks insisted, paving the way for the huge and sinister entity to bring disaster to the

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gathering. Not before long, most of the people within the place where the *gbeklug* was held were transformed into stones. The following is an excerpt of the narrative:

Haguna na gumehbek su gunlu, su lahelun getaw hetu mhebal ilan bhatu su ghelun minam pu tu bheklug. Su herateng nu bhelyan methaen su helunen mebal ilan bhatu, sa su dyanen lak gapuen kihtuh dlamen hetu lak dan bhal bhatu haguna tiluan nen dah ran pehnug su gapuen. (As the giant ran, the more than a hundred folks who attended the *gbeklug*, turned into stones. When the *balyan* arrived, all the people in the *gbeklugan* had been petrified except her grandchild who stayed in the attic as was told.)

The excerpt conveys that without the strongest spiritual leader, the ordinary tribesmen served as an easy prey of the sinister creature. The folks did not realize that the giant they unwittingly invited was an evil entity, wanting to bring doom to the people supposedly attending a tribal festivity. Though already late, the *balyan* succeeded in cursing the giant as a retribution to the petrification of her tribesmen.

The narratives on people turning into stones justify why Subanens holding a *gbeklug* in contemporary times, perform several rituals discreetly as a potent means of safeguarding the *gbeklug* from horrible eventualities. Prudent performance of a *gbeklug* entails specific processes and materials, especially related to the construction of the *gbeklugan* platform. Failure to follow what is prescribed for a *gbeklug* entails untoward outcomes, either fighting among the tribesmen, or petrification of them all. Any error committed jeopardizes the gathering that unless a prompt spiritual intercession by a *balyan* is made, a horrendous outcome is inevitable.

Moreover, the narrative, "Origin of *Gbeklug* by Raw Bulawan," (Municipality of Lakewood) describes the preparation for the conduct of *gbeklug* as a tribal gathering. The following is an excerpt of the narrative:

Mibeklug ditu Thimbabuy. Ngalan tu gbeklug – gaku Thindeg. Megwit ditu gumanuk mangawag dari mekhanu. Bhetang ditu gbinalay bu ditu sinulambi. Hin megwit de gusa telepulu getaw. Hin telepulu gmanuk dlebuyu, telepulu gbabuy, telepulu gunsu, muha telepulu gumanuk. (They held a *buklog* in Timbaboy. The *buklog* was called *Gaku Thindeg*. Native chicken eggs were brought for the ritual. They placed a *binalay* (four-post altar) and *sinolambi* (one-post altar). There were thirty people who carried a deer. There were also thirty wild chickens, thirty pigs, thirty earthen jars, and thirty eggs.)

The narrative speaks of the presence of a huge deer brought to the *gbeklugan*. The animal serves an ominous sign for an impending misfortune. According to the informants of the study in the locality, in any tribal gathering of the Subanen people, especially a *gbeklug*, a deer is never part of the ritual offering; therefore, it should not have been brought then to the celebration. With the error of judgment by the people, they became objects of the evil entity, *Kunumun*, which could make anyone vulnerable to committing a grave mistake, a catalyst of chaos. In the narrative, Sendwa coveted the wife of his brother Mendwa who eventually slew his spouse, and the people fought among themselves. The informants of the study further emphasized that a *gbeklug* needs to be safeguarded in the highest form by the *balyans* in attendance since the event can turn out tragically if an evil entity finds any slightest opportunity to spoil the sanctity of the gathering.

The informants claimed that the conduct of *gbeklug* entails a number of rituals, from the onset of the tribal gathering until its conclusion. Chants are uttered, offerings are given, and earnest prayers are spoken in the native tongue, believed to repel unwanted 'guests.' In this light, every stage of the *gbeklug* requires the seeking of permission from the Supreme God referred to as *Diwata Megbebeya*.

The conduct of *gbeklug* requires strict adherence to both the process and the materials needed for the construction of the *gbeklugan*. The cutting of the trees serving as the base structure of the *gbeklugan* and the gathering of bamboo poles require the conduct of a ritual as a means of seeking permission from the invisible entities inhabiting the *gbeklug* materials. The tribesmen participating in all the stages of activity are well aware of the implication of any untoward happening in the course of constructing the platform and the outcomes that will ensue. For instance, as soon as the tribesmen start carrying on their shoulders the lumber taken from the forest, they are not to put them on any ground but to the place of the *gbeklugan* only. If one stumbles while the lumber is on his shoulder, it foreshadows the near end of one's life. Thus, the folks delegated to transport the *gbeklugan* materials pray earnestly to earn the blessing and favor of the *Diwata* to be spared from an ominous mishap.

One of the rituals conducted during a *gbeklug* is the *gampang*, the rites held in the water, the river, or lake. The ritual is meant to prevent the malevolent spirits in the water from entering the place where the *gbeklug* is held. Moreover, to safeguard further the festivity, rattan strings are tied around the area of the *gbeklugan* so that sinister, invisible entities in the land domains, cannot enter the ground where the festivity is held. At the entrance of the area of the *gbeklugan*, the ritual offering called *gilet* is also performed in which the food offering placed was intended to those spirits prohibited from entering the place that the Subanen tribesmen sanctified.

Furthermore, the giving of *sangat* is also done in a *gbeklug*, as claimed by the informants from the Municipality of Lakewood. The *sangat* is one of the processes observed before the actual dancing in the *gbeklugan* commences. It is an offering given by every person attending the *gbeklug*, by every tribesman or non-tribal guests. The *sangat* is a means of asking forgiveness for any trespasses committed against the Supreme God, so the mortal's attendance in the gathering be spared from any form of distraction or temptation. The offering can be of any amount as willed by the one giving, but the offering has to be in pairs, two

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one-peso coins, two five-peso coins, or two paper bills of any amount, which have to be identical. The said offering is placed in the white clothing formed as a purse and hanged in the *nipa* hut structure attached to the *gbeklugan*.

After the *sangat* is given, the tribal leaders go to the surface of the *gbeklugan* in which a prayer is offered, and the rules of the *gbeklug* are laid and usually determined by the most respected tribal leader in the area. Violations to the rules entail significant amounts of penalties that are made known to all people in attendance, Subanens, or not. Thus, everyone is cautioned to observe the propriety of actions and words to avoid being penalized in the course of the gathering. The utterance of foul or cursing expressions, and display of aggressive and demeaning actions are considered grave offenses that insult the solemnity of the gathering, giving warrant to the imposition of monetary sanctions to the erring participant, a tribesman or not. A *gbeklug* can last in a week or month. Tribesmen hosting the gathering ensure adequate provision in terms of food and wine are in place depending on the duration of the festivity. Dancing on the *gbeklugan* is continually performed until the conclusion of the *gbeklug*, which also ends in a ritual.

The conduct of *gbeklug* is the most distinct non-material culture of the Subanens. It is central to their *gbatad* as Indigenous people. Subanen tribal leaders and elders are equipped with the intricate knowledge of the process and rules in the conduct of *gbeklug*, which remains the most celebrated festivity among the members of this Indigenous tribe.

CONCLUSION

The folk narratives or the *gukitan* handed down through oral transmission are viewed as a valuable resource in understanding the non-material culture of the Subanen people, for example, the *gbeklug*. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the word-of-mouth needs to be anchored on the perspective of the narrators, who are knowledgeable of the symbolic representations conveyed in the narratives. Furthermore, the culture of the Subanens may not be explicitly expressed in the narratives, as it requires well-grounded discernment. Thus, a reader or listener who is not of the tribe may not fully grasp the meanings behind the lines of the narratives but can be adeptly identified and expounded by those who have lived with the culture itself.

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