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Identifying the *Subanens* among the *Lumads*: A Case Study on *Subanen* Culture in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 codified the use of Indigenous Peoples as reference to the ethnic minorities of the Philippines. Government officials and volunteers from the non-governmental organizations [NGOs], and the academic institutions, however, use the term *Lumad* as a reference to all ethnic minorities in Mindanao that share no common narrative. This paper is a case study exploring the lifestyles, and culture of the *Subanens* of Guimad, Ozamiz City, and whether they befit the existing *Lumad* Narratives. The use of term *Lumad* as reference to the *Subanens* of Guimad, Ozamiz City and all other ethnic minorities should be evaluated in order to guarantee that the distinct diverse identities, and cultures of these ethnic minorities are not reduced into a common, singular narrative.

INTRODUCTION

In 1997, with the passage of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act has codified the terms Indigenous Peoples into the Philippine Law – making it the legal term standards referring to the present minorities in the Philippines. In the southern part of the country, however, particularly in Mindanao, a new term in reference to the organized minorities in the island particularly used by non – government organization [NGOs] and even several government workers have come to surface – the *Lumad*, which coined in reference to the non – Christianized, non – Islamic minority communities in the island (Quizon, C., (2012).

The first formal use of the term *Lumad* was presented by Karl Gaspar in his argument about the *Lumad* – Mindanao multisectoral alliance set up in Davao del Sur in 1983, arising out from a desired voice for a pure and organized *Lumad* group that can respond to the rising ideological conflict imposed by the church in Mindanao (Alejo, A., 2001). The alliance, however was only limited and highly concentrated of Manobo tribes in Davao del Sur. Despite this, the term then started to become a reference to an organized group of Indigenous peoples, regardless of tribal affiliations in Mindanao.

Patterned from Gaspar's argument, Albert Alejo (2001), in his book *Generating Energies in Mount Apo*, argues that the reference of the term *Lumad* is intended to the organized alliance that emerged, faded and regrouped with their multisectoral partners which, at a time, was protesting against the building of power plant in Mount Apo by the Philippine National Company that started in 1989 and ended in 1993. Alejo (2001) even propagated the idea of the Alumahad, the most widely known cluster group of the *Lumad*-Multisectoral alliance, consisting of eleven Manobo tribal communities in Mindanao, and became their protesting arm. The *Lumads*, through the

Alumahad, were then identified as an organized critical opposition of the local governments in Mindanao. From this narrative, Alejo presented a definition of the term *Lumad* that is ideological in meaning and political in practice with exclusive traces of cultural affiliation towards the Manobo tribes of Davao del Sur.

A more general and modernistic definition of the term *Lumad* was coined as a Cebuano noun term referring to “a native, natural – born citizen” (Wolf, J., 1972), and as a verb meaning “to stay or stick long onto”, derived from something as “*mulumad ku*” (Gaspar, K., 2000). Therefore, the term in its modern definition means a native of local descent that has stuck to his heritage and distinct identity.

Patterned from the abovementioned definition was the term in reference to a study conducted by Cherubim Quezon entitled *Dressing the Lumad Body: Indigenous People and the Development Discourse in Mindanao*. Quezon argued, after a personal field study, that the definition of the “specific term *Lumad* depends on performing a non - specific role. It relies on the erasure or blurring of group identities, deriving its resilience and power to the inability or the unwillingness of a dominant culture, including its nationalist, environmentalist and social justice sectors, to come to terms with the segmentation of institutions that come face to face with indigenous communities” (Quizon, C., 2012).

This means that the term *Lumad* was imposed by a dominant culture, preferably by the Christian or *bisaya*, as a general reference to all non-christian, non-muslim ethnic minorities. She justified that the *bisaya* had a big role in such imposition for the fact that these are the same people who acts within the government, responsible for the welfare of these ethnic minorities, and those in the NGOs who in their own capacity, assist in the

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sustainability of these Indigenous Peoples. In simple terms, Quizon (2012) argues that by using the term *Lumad*, one denies a whole complex ethnic identity that predates the era of Catholicism or Islamization or any by-product of colonialism.

Objective of the Study

Patterned from the abovementioned *Lumad* narrative, this study looks into the ritual practices and the belief system of the Subanen community in Guimad, Ozamiz City and explores through their ritual practices and belief system whether they befit the existing *Lumad* narrative. Further, this study will elaborate on whether the *Subanens* of Guimad, Ozamiz City identifies and even refers to themselves as *Lumad*, and if they do, present the reasons for such adherence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides the narratives of the *Lumads* presented by authors from available literatures. This review looks into the struggles, challenges, achievements, identity and definition of the *Lumads*, particularly in Mindanao. This is crucial as this review will lay the foundation from which the argument and analysis on whether the *Subanens* of Guimad, Ozamiz City has parallel struggles, challenges and achievements, making subject to be referred to as Albert Alejo (2018), in his publication entitled Strategic Identity: Bridging Self-Determination and Solidarity among the Indigenous Peoples of Mindanao, the Philippines, “introduces the concept of ‘strategic identity’ as a bridge between the indigenous peoples’ struggle for self-determination and their search for solidarity in the context of globalization.” Alejo’s argument is grounded into looking at the “self” within the context of self-determination of the *Lumads* and their stakeholders. In his analysis, Alejo presented three steps on how inclusion of the *Lumads* for holistic development can be achieved. In Alejo’s (2018) publication, he presented one of the problems continually faced by the *Lumad* community is the border conflict that the *Lumads* face against the Muslims.

The ancient *Lumad* rituals Dyandi and Pakang traditionally recognizes the boundaries of the territories belonging to the *Lumads* and the Muslims (Alejo, A., 2018). However, with the government imposing its rule on assigning territories for the *Lumads* and the Muslims, such mutual respect for territorial boundaries is disrupted. To resolve this, the *Lumads* proposed that the ancient covenant pact between the *Lumads* and the Muslims be renewed and revitalized in order to pacify the border conflict of their territory. However, the issue remains that land disputes, under the IPRA Law has to be settled in judicial courts and not in tribal manner.

While the *Lumads* sure had an existing border conflict with the Muslims, these two shares much more in common. Authors Cristina J. Montiel, Rudy B. Rodil, and Judith M. de Guzman (2012) in their book The Moro Struggle and the Challenge to Peace Building in Mindanao, Southern

Philippines argued that the *Lumads* and the Muslims share more in common than any other indigenous peoples in the county. These authors traced back the history of the island of Mindanao from Spanish colonial period and argued that both were influenced by the effects of Spanish colonialism, religion per se (Montiel, C., Rodil, R., & de Guzman, J., 2012). Islam and the animistic belief system of the *Lumads* certainly proved their resistance against the Spanish colonial influences.

Highlighting on the Muslim’s struggles to claim their ancient domain, the authors included the *Lumads* in the case. During American annexation, the Muslims and the *Lumads* found themselves together facing the agrarian reforms of the Americans. In 1903, with the implementation of the Public Lands Act under the Torrens System, the ancient local lands of the Muslims and the *Lumads* were registered and titled into private ownerships – a practice that is new and alien to both ethnic groups.

The Muslims, bounded by one faith, banded together and created the Bangsamoro to solidify their determination. The problem was for the *Lumads*, they’re too few in number, too small as a group, too sporadic, and insisted that they’re Bangsamoro. Making their case for their ancient land difficult to champion. But this was not the case for all the members of the organized *Lumad* group. The *Teduray*, an ethnic minority of the *Lumads*, joined the Bangsamoro and in the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD). Their case was simple, geographically, they’re already part of the Bangsamoro deep within Maguindanao. But geography is not the only thing that bounds the *Teduray* and the *Maguindanaoan* together. These cultures believe that they originated from the same ancestry, the brothers *Mamalu* and *Tabunaway* (Montiel, C., Rodil, R., & de Guzman, J., 2012). Therefore, the connection between the *Teduray*, a *Lumad* minority, and the *Maguindanaoan*, a Muslim minority, is not just linked by geography but even by culture and tradition.

Another notable idea these authors presented is how they divided the demographics of Mindanao. The authors divided the demographics of Mindanao into three categories. The first, the Christians who the authors have described as the migrant settlers from the northern parts of the country. Second, the Muslim minority who, despite the different tribal affiliations are bounded by the same religion. Third, the *Lumads* who the authors claimed to umbrella the 30 different tribes and subtribes of Indigenous Peoples with no common background (Montiel, C., Rodil, R., & de Guzman, J., 2012).

The land issue faced by the *Lumads* has always been staggering. In regard with this issue, no one is perhaps more credible than the Mindanao Historian Rudy Rodil (1993). In his book The Minoritization of the Indigenous Communities of Mindanao and The Sulu Archipelago, Rodil, adopting the classification made by Loethiny S. Clavel (1969) in her book They Are Also Filipinos, presented the categorization of the ethnic minorities in Mindanao.

Rodil presented the minorities as group of ethnic communities who have been marginalized from the

panoply of government welfare. This marginalization is manifested through their struggle in claiming for their ancestral land. Such struggle gave birth to the use of the term *Lumad* in 1980 at the heat of the Marcos regime, when “an atmosphere of militarization, human rights violations, poverty, land grabbing, undue intrusions by multinational corporations, and government neglect against the tribal minorities” occurred (Rodil, R., (1993). In order to further the *Lumads*’ cause for their ancestral land, the church of Mindanao assisted in forming the first coalition of *Lumads* which stated as Tribal Filipinos until its formal founding congress called as *Lumad-Mindanao* in 1986. The coalition was composed of more than 70 local and regional ethnic minorities in Mindanao that share common cause in claiming their ancestral lands (Rodil, R., (1993). Under their struggle for their ancestral land, the ethnic minorities of Mindanao banded together and for the first time are collectively called under one name – *Lumad*, a Cebuano term which means indigenous. These *Lumads* included the *Ata*, *Bagobo*, *Banwaon*, *Blaan*, *Bukidnon*, *Dibabawon*, *Higaunon*, *Kalagan*, *Mamanwa*, *Mandaya*, *Manggunangan*, *Manobo*, *Mansaka*, *Subanon*, *Tagakaolo*, *T’boli*, *Tinray*, *Ubo*. Under a singular name, these diverse ethnic minorities established *Lumad* as an identity that can be at par with the Muslims and Christians of Mindanao.

Rodil’s use of the term *Lumad* however was certainly not plucked out of the air. It was patterned from the released documents of the Commission of National Identities (CNI) cited by Leothiny Clavel in the publication *They Are Also Filipinos* published in 1969. As per the book, the ethnic minorities of the Philippines are geographically classified between Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao – Sulu. While the ethnic minorities of Luzon/Visayas are presented individually as distinct ethnic minorities, the ones in Mindanao are divided between ethnic minorities under the Moro share their common faith, while the ethnic minorities under the classification of the *Lumad* share nothing more than their struggle for self – determination and their ancestral domain, which is all true for all other ethnic minorities.

Yet we see the non-Muslim ethnic minorities in Mindanao – Sulu being enveloped into one umbrella term – *Lumad*. With the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, the term *Lumad* has since been changed into Indigenous Peoples. However, the use of the term *Lumad* is still prevalent by the government, the NGOs and even the general public (Quizon, 2012).

These literatures share several commonalities. The identity *Lumad*, a Cebuano term, is imposed to refer to the non – Muslim ethnic minorities in Mindanao who share nothing more than their struggle for self – determination in claiming their ancestral land in Central Mindanao. While the struggle for self – determination cannot be abridged, the terminology *Lumad* as a reference to all and general ethnic minorities in Mindanao should be evaluated to guarantee that the distinct diverse identity of these ethnic minorities is not reduced into a common, singular narrative, defeating the purpose of self – determination.

METHODS

The reference of the word *Lumad* towards all Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines exacts the erasures of distinct local identity. Ironically, the usage of the word only started during mid-1980s. Hence, the country’s Indigenous Peoples predate the use of this word. Therefore, it is imperative that the governing body, the non – governmental organization, and even the academe be made aware and responsible for the usage of such word as it limits and blurs the identity, and the cultural expression of this identity to nothing more than that of an assimilated culture.

To come up with substantial narrative in fulfilling the objective of this study, a case study approach was utilized. The data gathering process was conducted during the immersion of the researcher in the Subanen community of Guimad, Ozamiz City, Philippines in the month of August 2022. The *Subanens* in the community were treated as key informants who were interviewed regarding their lifestyle, and their daily life. The researcher was also able to gather information by attending the rituals of the *Subanens* in the community. Generally, the narrative in the study were either based on the testimonies taken from key informants’ interviews, and also the observations of the researcher while being present in the performed rituals of the *Subanens*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Identifying and locating the *Subanens* within the City of Ozamiz in Mindanao is not a very difficult task. Locating a community that preserves the Subanen identity, however, is a different task. There are only very few communities within the City where the settlers are predominantly, if not all, are *Subanens*. One of these present community is the remote area of Guimad, located in the hinterlands of the City. To go to the area, I had to hitch a ride from Bagakay to Cogon, then to Kinuman Norte, a remote barangay in the City of Ozamiz, since no public utility vehicle is routed to the area. From Kinuman Norte, I had a local guide walk me towards one of the remaining Subanen areas in the City. After almost 3 hours of walking, I reached Guimad and was welcomed by a serene silence of the community where the households have nothing in difference from the usual simple households found in the city. Their houses are made of stones and bricks and are covered by the usual aluminum roof which they commonly refer to as sin. The landscape of their houses, just like the ones that can be seen in the city, are designed by flowers of bougainvillea.

My guide introduced me to his acquaintance in the area, Ilaha Cambongga, a Subanen resident of Guimad. Contrary to my expectation, Ilaha wears nothing alike the pamphlets describing a Subanen. Instead, she wears a blue tank blouse tucked into checkered skirt. Ilaha is 18 years old studying Criminology in one of the local universities of the City. Her education is made possible because of the 4Ps scholarship offered by the government. She greeted me with *gumpa gundan*, a Subanen greeting

of peace and welcome but is generally used to greet someone in reference to the day of the day. Therefore, if one receives the greeting in morning, it would mean good morning, and if in the afternoon, then the greeting would mean, good afternoon (Elarte, 2022). Ilaha took me to their house where several residents are in group. I asked if they're having a meeting of some kind but Ilaha responded that the gathering is just about chitchats and is usual specially at lunchtime and frequently happens in their house because of their veranda and their store. Ilaha generally speaks Subanen but since she has been studying in the City, she is also very fluent in Cebuano and in English, which made our conversation very easy for me. Everyone I met looks very familiar and usual to me. They also speak fluent Cebuano but when they spoke with each other, they switch to their dialect, which I knew nothing of. Within the gathering, I noticed several youths, one in attendance was Rio, Lix and Merian who are 18, 19, and 16 respectively.

Just like Ilaha, Rio and Merian are studying in the local university in the city while Lix never had any education and has since been helping his father, Alfredo Baot, in the *uma* in producing maize, a crop sufficient in the highland. The land that the Baot farms, situated just below their house in the community, has been cultivated by the family since Alfredo's memory can stretch. The areas covering Guimad is considered to be part of the ancestral domain upheld to be protected and reserved for the subanen minorities under the Misamis Occidental Provincial Ordinance Resolution Number 425-17 authored by Hon. Dodge L. Cabahug Sr. which aimed to promote the agricultural development of the ancestral domain of the province through the Department of Agriculture. This could perhaps be the reason why the residents of Guimad, as well as the Baot family, has been an effective asset in agricultural production.

In his 53 years living in Guimad, Alfredo shared that he's never once received any education, nor has he tried voting. He said that the only time he sees visitors from the city in their community is during election campaigns and are gone soon after. While some of his neighbours vote, Alfredo refused to do so due to his discontent about the officials and politicians helping him and the community. This is why he farms "sendan, sendaw". Alfredo also has never gone into the city, that his crops are only taken by the buyers who comes into Guimad to pick up all his produce. Their food and supplies on the other hand are bought by his daughter, Rio, who studies in the city and comes home every week.

In the whole duration of our conversation, Alfredo, Ada, his wife, never once mentioned or used the term *Lumad* in our dialogue. The Mindanao historian, Rudy Rodil presented the idea that the *Lumad* is a Cebuano term in reference to the indigenous peoples (Rodil, R., 1993). Alfredo, on the other hand, in our conversation, never referred to himself as Indigenous People, more so *Lumad* but only Subano or Subanen. This may be because Alfredo, having received no education, deprived him from

the majority's reference to their community as *Lumad*.

Their lifestyle is remote, even considering they are geographically located just three barangays from the city. If a member of Alfredo's household falls sick, they need not go to the city to seek treatment from the hospital. Instead, they resort to the *gukom*, the spiritual leader, Tay Aleng, for his healing, which accordingly is always effective.

After the conversation with the Baots and being curious about speaking to the spiritual leader, Ilaha took me near the far end of the community to speak to Tay Aleng. In his golden years at 78, Tay Aleng is considered as the community's *gukom*, or spiritual leader, but he's also referred to as *timuay* or *balyan*. The *gukom* speaks very limited Cebuano and switches to subanen which prompted me to ask Ilaha to stay so she can translate Tay Al'eng. We ran into Tay Al'eng doing *peluto*, a preparation for cooking. I noticed his late for his lunch which is unusual for elder people, so I asked where he came from. He said he came from Guigona where he led in performing the *Buklog*. *Buklog* is a ritual prayer dance is led by the *gukom* and participated by the *Subanens* of the community.

The prayer, led by the *gukom*, is offered to invite the spirit of the Magbabaja, who is believed by the *Subanens* to be the creator, the guide and provider of everyone and everything. Only the *gukom* is believed to be able to communicate to the Magbabaja. However, the participation of the whole community through the ritual dance, as a non-synchronous festive dance, is supposed to reinforce the prayers of the *gukom* for the Magbabaja to bless the land in order to produce bountiful harvest. The *Buklog* has to be performed throughout the duration from planting to harvest in order to preserve the blessing of the Magbabaja.

This led me to thinking if there was no *gukom* in Guigona since Tay Aleng had to walk to the other barangay to perform the *Buklog*. He responded that there are two *gukoms* in Guigona but he had to go since the *Buklog* is one of the biggest rituals of the *Subanens* and is better performed by several *gukoms*. In each Subanen community, there is no definite number as to how many *gukoms* there are. So, how does one becomes a *gukom*? Unlike the Roman Catholic where one has to study and be ordained by the church prior to becoming a priest (Jay, E., 1980), in becoming a *gukom*, there is no definite process. Being a *gukom* is also neither hereditary nor can it be done through appointment by any member of the community.

In the subanen culture, becoming a *gukom* is a selection made only by the Mababaja. The only criteria into becoming a *gukom* is that one must be able to communicate to the Magbabaja. The Magbabaja, the creator, the guide, and the provider, has no physical form therefore needs the *gukom* in order to carry out its intent, which includes the blessing, acceptance of birth, and the healing of the sick. There's also no definite time as to when the Magbabaja selects a *gukom*.

For Tay Aleng, it happened when he was 49. He had a dream speaking to someone he cannot recognize but only hear, telling him to wake up and go to Lito's house, his neighbor, as his daughter will die before the daybreak. When he came into the household, Lito was wiping his daughter with damp cloth, perhaps in order to relieve the temperature. Tay Al'eng moved drastically and acted as instructed by the voice that he's constantly hearing. Accordingly, Tay Al'eng repeated the words he heard from the voice in his head and whispered it to the ears of the child.

It was accordingly a prayer from the Magbabaja that's trying to serve the girl. He laid the girl to sleep and then instructed Lito to get his biggest rooster, bleed it outside his house, burn the feathers, and cook soup for his daughter to eat in the morning. All these was instructed from the voice Tay Al'eng kept hearing. Accordingly, Lito was pessimistic, but running with no other option, followed Tay Aleng's instruction. Tay Aleng patiently waited until the daybreak hoping the child would see if his prayers work and Lito to fee his daughter the soup he made from the rooster he offered. The child woke and Tay Aleng new that he has performed a Magkano [Mgkano], a subanen spiritual healing, and that he's become a gukom. Since then, the story propagated and the residents of Guimad and even outsider frequents to Tay Aleng, seeking healing. Performing a magkano, is a burden he finds too heavy.

While Tay Aleng has saved countless lives, he never guarantees its effectivity, especially for outsiders or those who are visiting him, hoping for his healing. Since the healing is from the bentayan, or guidance from the Magbabaja, the belief and faith of the Magbabaja is also crucial for the magkano to be effective. Even Ilaha has received the healing of Tay Aleng. It was when she came from the City on a weekend and started to vomit. The vomiting became frequent that her family decided not to allow her to eat anything, hoping it would stop her from vomiting. Since she had taken no food, Aliha remembered that she started vomiting sourly substance that she cannot bear. Tay Aleng helped and prayed over Ilaha while making her drink a pangasi, a concoction made from cassava vinegar and some other ginger. Without diagnosing what caused her vomiting, Ilaha was healed and started to believe the potency of Tay Aleng's healing. The Magkano is also performed by Tay Aleng after a birth which signals the acceptance of birth to the Subanen community. The family offers the best produce they have for the Magbabaja to accept and in turn provides benatayay to the family to raise the child as a subanen.

CONCLUSION

The authors Cristina J. Montiel, Rudy B. Rodil, and Judith M. de Guzman (2012) in argued that the term *Lumad* was born out of the Indigenous People's struggle from self-determination in claiming for their ancestral domain. The *Subanens* of Guimad, Ozamiz City in Mindanao Philippines, however, have been cultivating their

farmlands without the interference of any outside forces and are even protected by local and provincial ordinances. Hence, there's no sense in including these *Subanens* into the *Lumad* Narrative.

The reference of the Cebuano term *Lumad* to the *Subanens* is never even practiced, said, or mentioned by the *Subanens* in all our conversations. Never have they ever referred to themselves as *Lumad*, much less as Indigenous Peoples. This is evidence that the terminology and use of the term *Lumad*, is imposed by dominant cultures to the ethnic minorities such as the *Subanens*. The continued practice by Tay Aleng of Magkano, a spiritual healing, and buklag, and the faithful of the *Subanens* to the Magbabaja, are all manifestations that they're able to preserve their distinct culture, belief system, and their identity, far from the influence brought by colonialism, by the dominant cultures of the Cebuano, and even by the other ethnic minorities. This proves that such rich and distinct cultural minority is diminished if they are continually referred to as *Lumad*, which may give the impression that they're culture, beliefs, and practices are nothing different from other ethnic minorities. The continual use of the term *Lumad* is the gradual erosion of their cultural identity from the outsiders' outlook.

With the available reference and data, this study implies that the *Subanens* of Guimad, Ozamiz City in Mindanao, Philippines has a rich ethnic, cultural identity, different and distinct from other ethnic minorities. Further, this study also implies that there is a need for the government and academe to take charge in preserving this culture and in admonishing the use of the term *Lumad* as a reference to all ethnic minorities in the Mindanao. With this, the researcher highly recommends that a study on how the cultures and identities of other ethnic minorities reflect to the *Lumad* narratives. This should be done so we can fully achieve our academic goal of celebrating the distinct cultures of our ethnic minorities that make up the identity of a Filipino.

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