

**EXPLORING THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE
AND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES OF IPs
IN MINDANAO***

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Introduction

There are around 3,254,549 IPs in Mindanao and Sulu (NSO 1990) constituting about 22.8% of the total population. Thus, almost a fourth of the island's present population is made up of so called IPs who have retained vestiges of their non-western cultures, suffer a cultural lag and, since they are not assimilated, constitute part of today's minoritized cultural communities. Their growing minoritization in Philippine society has necessitated the adaption of radical measures such as Ancestral Domain in recognition of their cultural distinctiveness. This paper explores the native meanings of their cultural landscape such as territorial boundaries, cultural areas and niches, etc.

*The Agricultural Worldview and the Concept
of Stewardship of the Earth*

A people's belief is colored by its perceptions of the origins of the world and in life these beliefs are affirmed and sustained by one's experiences. An agricultural worldview is

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necessarily circumscribed by the cycles of sowing and harvest and around these two main activities agricultural societies have built their myths and legends about the origins of the world. The myths of the Tagakaulo and B'laan were woven around a handful of earth and even body dirt from the gods as important elements of creation. For the Bagobo, the pestle and mortar for pounding rice were instrumental in the recreation of an old and decrepit world into a new one where the first peoples of the world called *mona* began to have babies even though they were already very old. The Ata of Talaingod believe that Manama created all things in this world. The first man and woman were created from blades of grass, woven together until the human figure was formed. Manama made four couples who became the ancestors of the Ata and other neighboring tribes (Cole 1913). A present version states that the first to be created out of soil was the earth. What was left over of this material was made into the first man and woman. The third to be created was the chicken (Gloria & Magpayo 1997). The Dulangan Manobo of Lebak, Sultan Kudarat say that Namula, the supreme god created all things, including man. Their god made everything in the world in order for man to live. All other gods called *effi* (spirits) are conceived as protecting certain places or things such as caves or the *nonoc* (balite tree). These are the native shrines guarded by different *effi* whose permission must be sought before any activity in their domains is undertaken. The Higaunon of Bukidnon believe that Magbabaya created the world for men and animals then the god delegated Talabugta whose name means " - of the earth" to provide for the various needs of man. The Mamanua of Surigao fear the all- powerful god who is also called Magbabaya among other lesser supernaturals. The Mamanua who were originally hunters and gatherers have a great fear of thunderstorms. One of the awesome powers of Magbabaya is to make thunder and

lightning which are held to be punishment for various transgressions such as the violation of taboos, e.g. incest. According to the Mamanua myth, in the beginning there was only one kind of man. Then lightning struck the earth and men. Those who were scorched black became the Mamanua (Maceda, 1964). Their great fear of thunderstorms has given rise to many beliefs such as driving the point of the bolo into the ground to stop a thunderstorm. They observed a special ritual for a full moon. As the moon waxes, they reduce fires to a smaller blaze out of respect for the celestial body and its phenomenon.

It would seem that the creators of the abovementioned myths have shied away from the notion of man as the overlord of creation as evidenced by the primacy of the earth (In creation man was only created next to earth or nature). Although these myths say that nature was primarily made for the use of man, man himself does not own it and uses it only with the permission of the god who made it. Moreover, the creator-god is not alone in the disposition or overlordship of nature's bounty. At the beginning of time, there were lesser gods who were delegated and given authority over the resources of the earth. Man, the user of these resources is obliged to secure permission from the particular spirit which "owns" and exercises guardianship over the resource. The stewardship of the land and other goods of the earth does not belong to man but to the spirits or *diwata*, a class of lesser supernaturals with which man has a more or less direct relationship mediated only by the performance of specific rituals to secure the *diwata's* consent and goodwill. Man has unlimited freedom to any of these resources provided he/she performs the necessary rituals and ceremonies. The principle of reciprocity permeates the worldview reflected in these myths. No user is allowed to help himself or herself to any of the earth's resources without the corresponding

obligations which at the very least is the acknowledgement of the guardianship of the *diwata* or spirit concerned. Hence, there is no absolute ownership of earthly goods. As such, no one may arrogate to himself or herself the earth's resources or use them to exhaustion. The precept that these resources belong to the gods require man to use them with respect to the real owners thus proscribing wantonness and violence in their use.

Self and Group Identity

In this cosmological worldview, man is seen as a creature whose identity is earthbound. Group identity is even more geographic and locational in its etymology, e.g. the Subanon of the Zamboanga Peninsula, the Matigsalog of Davao City and Tagakaulo of Davao del Sur are riverine peoples as indicated by their common use of the root word for river, i.e. *suba*, *salug* and *ulo* (*sa tubig* or headwaters). The Maranao and some Maguindanao are lakeside dwellers, *ranao* and *lanao* being words for lake. The Tausug of the Sulu Archipelago live where the ocean current (*su-ug*) favors their economic and trading activities. Similarly, the Samal Laut and the Badjaos are popularly known as sea nomads who spend a great deal of time at sea which is their chief source of livelihood. Forest peoples such as the Manguangan and Dulangan Manobo whose names are derivations of the word for forest (*gulanga* or *dulanga*) will have to be distinguished from those who live at the edge of forests namely the Mandaya and Mansaka, the root word *daya* and *saka* meaning interiors and "to go up", respectively.

On the other hand, the names Manobo and Bagobo came from the root word for man, *ubo* (Ibid). While myths contain a

people's view of the world, legends explain the origin of places, things or natural phenomena. The group identity of the Bagobo of Sibulan in Davao del Sur may be understood from a legend about the Bagobo's origin from the mythical beings called *mona*, particularly from the first Bagobo couple named Tuglay and Tuglibong whose descendants were almost decimated by a long and severe drought. However, the last pair of children was saved by a mythical sustainer of life, the last stalk of sugarcane whose limitless juice revived the last pair who lived long enough to beget the present Bagobo of Sibulan.

Although the legend is localized, the etiology explains as well the origins of other peoples of Mindanao for the legend says that during the long drought, the children of Tuglay and Tuglibong left Sibulan in pairs, to live in other parts of Mindanao. Thus they begot the present descendants of the whole island. The legend is significant in that the explanation of the origin of the Bagobo is anthropomorphic. According to Spanish chronicles, the Bagobo of Sibulan were one of the few peoples in Mindanao who could trace their genealogy to eleven generations of forebears. The Bagobo are one of the few peoples whose group identity is not linked to a geographic feature in the environment even though Sibulan or Subu-wan is the name of the river where their historic settlement is located up to the present time. It may be that the Bagobo have some claims to a kind of cultural hegemony in southeast Mindanao. The Jangan and the Matigsalog of Davao City profess affinity with the Bagobo and would often answer to the same name.

The Manobo on the other hand, are the most dispersed people in Mindanao. They are most numerous in the two Agusan provinces and are found as well in the Misamis, Davao and Cotabato provinces. There are smaller groups who have

distinguished themselves with a somewhat different identity, e.g. the Dulangan Manobo of Sultan Kudarat province, and the Arumanon and Kirentekan Manobo of Cotabato Province. The qualifying appellation indicates the place where they are found.

Culture Areas and Economic Niches

Geographers and culture specialists have paid particular attention to small differences in the environment such as seashore vs. inland, hills vs. floodplains, grasslands vs. forests, etc. that have great significance in identifying culture areas. Culture areas are generally carved out of a specific geographic space to serve as human habitation while the interplay between space and a human group produces a culture (Wagner and Miksell 1962). However, a culture area is more than just the geographic space because of the paramount role played by a human group whose interactions with the physical space produce the aggregate of human habits which is known as culture. Environmentalists believe that the human potential is to a large extent influenced, if not determined by the kind of environment which a human group uses for habitation.

Under such a framework, coastal peoples will be fishermen and boat-builders such as the Tausug of the Sulu Archipelago who are traditionally maritime and sea-going peoples. Upland inhabitants such as the Mandaya, Mansaka and Manobo are horticulturists, hunters and gatherers. They may be joined by the Manguangan and Dulangan Manobo and most probably the Jangan whose forested environs would predispose them to again, horticulture, hunting and gathering. Still some IPs live at the edge of forests rather than inside them.

The Higaunon whose name means "inhabitants of the thicket" may be cited as an example. The Higaunon cultivate and likewise exploit the forests for livelihood. The Subanon, Tagakaulo, Dibabawon and Matigsalog who are riverine dwellers would live close to the other groups who exploit the river and a similar environment and would thus exhibit many kindred traits with the peoples with whom they interact. Lakeside inhabitants such as the Maranao, Maguindanao and T'boli would have a tendency to be more culturally contained with a more pronounced cultural distinctiveness.

All these do not imply that a culture in order to be distinct must be absolutely unique or have a monopoly of certain cultural traits. In a much broader sense a culture area is not simply contained within the specific environment that a group inhabits. Many cultural traits are disposed to expansiveness and often exceed ethnic and geographic boundaries. The phenomenon of cultural borrowing and diffusion explains the wide distribution of traits just as similar environments could evolve the same cultural characteristics.

The presence of other cultures in the same culture area gives rise to a heightened cultural awareness which is aroused by contact with other cultural groups (Weiss 1962). Ethnic boundaries persist despite the constant flow of peoples between them (Barth 1970). Weiss had said that the fixing of boundaries is based not only on objective overt differences but on a more subjective motive which underlies the feeling of ethnic distinctiveness. This is the instinct of self-preservation which brings us to the idea of economic niches.

For purposes of this paper, an economic niche is synonymous with culture area given an ecological and

environmental context. In a scenario of interacting cultural groups exploiting the same economic niche, e.g. *kaingin* (horticulture) in upland environments any of the following may occur (Ibid) :

1. They may occupy distinct niches in the environment and be in minimal competition over its resources. Interdependence will be greatly limited and articulated only through trade.
2. They may monopolize separate territories in which case competition over the same resource will be articulated in politics.
3. When two or more groups are in occupation of the same niche with time, one will tend to displace the other.

If an ethnographic map of Mindanao and Sulu were to be drawn we would see that all the above are observable at different times in the culture history of Mindanao. More than a hundred years ago, the description of the island would fit the first two scenarios while the present situation would be aptly represented by the third and last description. The present scenario would thus argue for the recognition of the indigenous rights of Ancestral Lands and Domain as a fundamental right based on prior occupancy. Considering that the displacement of the original inhabitants took place under duress by means of the superior and different culture of the successive occupants, a recognition of the indigenous rights of IPs has become incumbent on the mainstream society. Since the displacement of native peoples occurred simultaneously with the gradual demise of their customs and traditions, this recognition of native rights must of necessity recall and reinstate the autochthonous

precepts and meanings of the old social order for only then can such rights be operationalized because they are couched in native meanings that are understood by IPs.

Ethnic and Territorial Boundaries

In a study of 10 indigenous communities around Mt. Apo, one of the important components of the political order was the question of Ancestral Domain in which the subject of territorial boundaries drew the most comments from the IPs. The Bagobo of Lumondao (Davao City) were incredulous and with considerable skepticism immediately declared that they did not believe that Ancestral Domain would be implemented. The T'boli of Lake Sebu were ignorant about it as were the Ata of Talaingod. The T'boli said that the only basis for making territorial claims among them was a certification from their barangay captain. The findings of the study showed that for most of the IPs, individual and family property rights conform to the present legal requirements of Torrens title and are marked by the *muhon* (concrete marker) while political boundaries are those defined by political demarcations into regions, provinces, cities, municipalities and barangays rather than the culture area of the Manobo, Bagobo, B'laan, etc.

On the other hand, five groups of IPs had clear ideas about what constitute their respective ancestral domains. The Matigsalog of Davao City stated that their cultural and ancestral domain covers the territories around the Davao River and that any movement of peoples would require a redelineation of their ancestral domain. It may be that some Matigsalog are still practicing horticulture or *kaingin* which requires field rotation involving periodic movements of peoples. It was surmised

that the statement described the ancient methods of extensive cultivation requiring new swidden fields at the end of one or two agricultural cycles. This ancient indigenous technology was associated with frequent movements of peoples in search of new and fertile clearings. The abandonment of old swidden fields allowed them to regenerate and climax once more into mature forests.

The Matigsalog's claim to cultural homogeneity and identity is based on the traditional exploitation of the Davao river. Notwithstanding the presence of other groups such as the Dibabawon who exploit the upper (*ibabaw*) reaches of the river and despite the frequent movements of both peoples exploiting the same resource with the same technology, it is remarkable that each has maintained a separate group identity. This can only mean that each group has kept to its own culture area and economic niche. Culture contact is carried on in observance of ethnic boundaries and territorial limits. When ethnic boundaries are breached and territorial limits crossed over, this would mean that a radical change in the group's social order has taken place to such an extent that a redelineation of the group's ethnic boundaries would be required as the Matigsalog said.

The Jangan regard the whole district of Calinan as their ancestral domain. Up to the present, they constitute the biggest IPs in this District. Even as they conceded the loss of their lands to Visayan and other Christian migrants the Jangan enumerated a list of cultural tests, e.g. having been born in the area, being able to speak the Jangan language and possession of the Jangan native attire, that would legitimize one's claim to ancestral territorial rights in the area.

The Spanish writers of the 19th century perceived an affinity between the Jangan of Calinan and the Tagabawa of Davao del Sur and North Cotabato provinces. Both answer to the name Bagobo as already mentioned earlier in this paper. The apparent culture area would be the environs of Mt. Apo. Then as now, the Jangan are found north of the volcano while the Tagabawa inhabit the southern regions. Some Manobo groups are also found on the western flank which is the North Cotabato side. The economic niche is also historically horticulture which has survived at least for some Tagabawa and Manobo in spite of migrant inroads. The Jangan, being nearest to the urban centers of Davao City appeared to have adapted to a more modern economic niche - employment.

All three groups look to Mt. Apo as the historic and cultural roots of their respective group identities. The Bagobo mythical origin is steeped in folklore about their gods, Mandarangan and his consort, Darago who live on Mt. Apo and to whom human sacrifices were periodically offered by the Bagobo of ancient times. The antiquity of the Bagobo of Sibulan has already been mentioned. The river Sibulan derives its source from the lofty heights of Mt. Apo.

The Manobo regard the volcano as the "navel of the world" emphasizing the critical role of Mt. Apo in their birth and survival as a people. Although the Manobo are widely dispersed their cultural areas in the different parts of Mindanao are well-defined and historically established. More than a hundred years ago the Spaniards already noted that among the Manobo of Agusan, territorial boundaries were strictly observed. The Spanish missionaries in fact regarded the Manobo's stubborn attachment to their settlement as the biggest obstacle to resettlement or *reduccion*. It required all the

charisma of the missionary to persuade a Manobo to leave his home in the fastnesses of the forests and mountains. The tenacity with which they clung to their ancestral homes and lands was considered by the missionaries as proof that the Manobo believed and exercised rights of ownership over property. They marked out mountains, rivers, and wide spaces of land as their property to be used only by families and members of their tribes (Cartas de los Padres Misioneros de la Compania de Jesus de la Mision de Filipinas, 1897).

The present Manobo cited in the aforementioned study said that their burial grounds are considered as markers of their lands and territorial boundaries. The burial caves of the Dulangan Manobo at Salangasang, Lebak (Sultan Kudarat province) would then be an important landmark for delineating the territorial boundaries of the Dulangan Manobo.

Among the Higaunon, communal territorial boundaries were strictly observed to the extent that no Higaunon would pass the territory of a datu who was not his chief. It was customary to carry the *quiap*, a large spear encrusted with silver and whose lower end was made of metal. For a token fee, it was given to those who needed to travel through the lands of other chiefs who when shown the *quiap* immediately recognized it as belonging to another chief and therefore a peer. Hence, not only was safe conduct allowed to the travellers but some amenities had to be provided as well to him or her as custom dictated (Blair and Robertson, 1907).

The B'laan can identify certain streams, rivers, hilltops and other landmarks as territorial boundaries. They also named the plant called *lagotonon* as a boundary marker. In the study, the B'laan were one of those who were able to articulate their

perceptions of the government and its impact on IPs. The B'laan observed that the devolution of political power to local units resulted in a more effective control over the IPs social and political life. Reflecting on the overall impact of the modern Philippine government on native peoples, the B'laan said that due to population increases the natives' territorial lands had to be re-apportioned among the present inhabitants who include non-native migrants. As a result, their lands became increasingly smaller while the contraction of IP territories in turn caused a diaspora of native peoples.

In the 19th century, the Spanish missionaries suggested that the original home of the B'laan was the region around Lake Buluan which they shared with the Maguindanao, a large Muslim group. Today, B'laan communities are found all over the provinces of Davao del Sur, South Cotabato and Sarangani. Over this extensive culture area they have been able to preserve their traditional economic niche of horticulture without surrendering or losing ethnic identity to other groups of IPs as well as migrant.

Among the Ata the antiquity of residence determine territorial claims. A three generation cycle was said to be sufficient to establish such an antiquity. In addition, the testimony of one's relations, friends and acquaintances help establish the validity of the claims. The testimonies of their datu and elders also validate claims while planting fruits and bamboo trees help secure territorial boundaries.

The traditional culture area of the Ata was the Tuganay-Libuganon-Salug river complex in what is now the modern province of Davao. The vicissitudes of history have caused some changes in this ancient landscape for today the people

known as Ata are mainly concentrated in the modern municipality of Talaingod. The present Ata is one of the most severely threatened by marginalization and minoritization. Over the last ten years, the Ata population has dwindled from 1.2% of the province' population to 0.07% in 1990 (NSO 1980 and 1990).

Four other groups, namely, the Bagobo of Marilog, T'boli of Lake Sebu, Tagabawa of Makilala and the Tagakaulo of Sta. Maria failed to articulate their thoughts on Ancestral Domain. It must be pointed out that with the exception of the T'boli, the abovementioned groups, in particular the Bagobo, have a high incidence of intermarriage with Visayan and other Christian groups. The Bagobo had already expressed their doubt about the implementation of Ancestral Domain. At the time of this study, the Bagobo of Lumondao was a severely threatened community. The peace and order situation was precarious while outbreaks of cholera and dysentery put grave strains on the community. It could be that their responses were colored by the circumstances they were experiencing at that time.

A surprisingly passive reaction on Ancestral Domain was that of the T'boli who had the most well-preserved traditions among the nine groups. They did not appear to be very communicative about Ancestral Domain, except to say that a certification from their barangay captain was sufficient to establish a land claim. From the observations made by this researcher, the T'boli seemed to know least about Ancestral Domain. Although a local radio station was making daily broadcast about Ancestral Domain just outside the municipal boundaries, within the barangay community at Lamdalag, the T'boli respondents did not appear to be aware of it. It may be mentioned in this connection that although the T'boli were

governed by municipal leaders who were also T'boli, at Lamdalag the barangay captain was a Visayan who has lived with them for a long time. During the barangay assembly for the introduction of this research project, the barangay leaders who were non-T'boli spoke on behalf of the T'boli respondents who remained passive throughout the entire assembly proceedings.

Undoubtedly, Ancestral Domain rights will be a major breakthrough towards stabilizing IP communities in Mindanao. It will ease the pains of acculturation and provide for a more orderly transition from marginalized communities to integrated cultural units within the national body polity. A stable cultural minority is an asset to the society as a whole and is to be preferred to marginalized groups with a dependent status.

Concluding Remarks

This brief paper has explored the native meanings of ethnic and territorial boundaries. As have been shown, the concept of territorial boundaries is intrinsic in each culture. The delineation of ethnic boundaries cannot be confined to geographic interpretations. It is necessary to look into the characteristics of the culture that give substance and meaning to ordinary terms. One must first consider the worldview which describes the world in native terms and categories. These terms and categories are native abstractions of reality and are often clothed in metaphorical terms although sometimes these may be expressed in anthropomorphic speech. It is instructive to consider the group identity or name which

locates the particular group in a specific geographic context. In turn, an understanding of this geographic milieu will explain specific cultural traits that result from the interplay between the environmental space and the human group that inhabits it. This paper has shown that the different group identities of IPs in Mindanao indicate their respective culture areas and economic niches. Their myths, legends and traditions demonstrate the antiquity of their bonds with the environment. Overall these, their view of the world defines fundamental precepts and principles such as the spirits' stewardship of the earth. These fundamentals have served as their guidelines in appropriating and protecting their social space.