

## THE SUBANEN BUKLOG

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### Introduction

This presentation is based on field research carried out by the writer among the Subanens in the Zamboanga peninsula; Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga del Norte, and in Misamis Occidental, over a period of some fifteen odd years, in an attempt to describe and document some important aspects of Subanen culture particularly their folklore. The project was generously funded by Toyota Foundation.

By folklore, I choose Archer Taylor's broad definition and scope of the area which includes the whole of traditional culture - materials that are handed on by tradition either by word of mouth or by custom and practice. Folklorists are also particularly interested in other verbal subject matter like legends, myths and epics which reflect beliefs and value systems or those folk traditions which do not rely upon verbal communication in fixed forms such as folk medicine, food, festivals, taboos, folk aesthetics, etc.

Data for this paper were gathered from various places that still practice the *buklog* festival, although, I have also interviewed several informants in different places who have valuable information regarding the subject matter. Facts about the Subanen Buklog will be presented in this paper, some interpretations, to be sure, are unavoidable, but I have done it very objectively and sparingly. Supporting information have also been gathered from Limpapasiocon, Sindangan and Zamboanga del Norte Subanens. These areas have celebrated the *buklog* and this researcher had the opportunity to participate and also observe the activities.

### The Subanens

The term is given to a group of Philippine ethnic community that inhabit areas in the Zamboanga or Sibugal peninsula, and the mountain areas of Misamis Occidental. The name means river-dwellers, from the word *suba*, river, and "nun", "nen", or "non" an adjective postfix indicating origin or habitation. This term was applied to the tribe and to the Moros and Christians of Zamboanga peninsula who are coast dwellers. Probably, the term was first applied to the Subanens by Christian and Moros, but it is now well known to the tribe and used by it. It is not, however, the only term applied by these people to themselves. A Subanen when asked as to who he is will often answer *tau bukid*, or *tau buid*, hill man.

Many years ago the coastal areas of Zamboanga peninsula and Misamis Occidental were home to the nomadic, timid and shy Subanen, but they were always harassed by other tribes particularly the dominant Moros who were inhabiting the nearby islands and were constantly marauding the shoreline inhabitants to capture and later sell them as slaves. Then, later the Islamized Moros were also trying to convert them to Islam. Folk oral history has it, that only one of the four brothers accepted Islam, the rest fled and settled somewhere else. The group is also continually being pushed farther into the interior by Christian settlers and their *kaingins* have been taken over by Christian homesteaders. These people had no recourse but to move deeper and deeper into the forest and stayed there for many generations. It was only when they were converted to Christianity or have been influenced by their Christian neighbors that they stopped their nomadic life and settled in places they found abundant with food and the soil is fertile. The Subanens are relatively friendly and peace-loving people, but because of the many years of constant harassment from the more dominant groups, they learned to fight back. Their epics and folktales have accounts of their ancestors being good swordsmen and fine warriors. Their men and women fought side by side to survive. Through the centuries they struggled to gain some form of identity as a people, to maintain their cultural heritage and also be able to continue practising the traditions handed down to them their ancestors.

A traditional Subanen in his lifetime would wish that he can sponsor or put up a *buklog*. But because of the cost involved in the festivities most Subanens die without having fulfilled their dream.

By and large, the Subanen Buklog is a socio-religious activity. Perhaps one can safely say that this is one of the few Subanen observances that involves the whole settlement or community. When word circulates around that a family is going to put up a *buklog*, the women prepare their fineries, i.e., clothes and ornaments, and the men hone their expertise in dancing especially on the platform where tournaments in the form of who can topple his opponent by tripping his feet while dancing around the pestle or *pathaw*. They also prepare their own contributions of *gasi* or rice wine. If they had experience death in the family, and wished to "send" goods to their dearly departed, they can also prepare clothes and signify to the main sponsor their desire to do so, provided that the Buklog is celebrated for the benefit of the dead. Most of the preparation goes to the sponsor.

While an average traditional Subanen will be able to verbalize some aspects of his culture, it is not easy to get him to talk about what he believes in. In most conversations one can infer that they acknowledge the existence of a supreme being who wills life and death, the existence of environmental spirits who are either benevolent or malevolent, and who will have to be propitiated or appeased when one incurs their anger, or have trespassed their territory. Hence the Subanen observes the *buklog* for various reasons. According to my informant Thimuay Vicente Imbing, the *buklog* can be offered as fulfillment of a promise upon recovery from illness, a bountiful harvest of crops and most importantly, in memory of the dead. The said activity has also sub-categories, like a *buklog* can be for prestige purpose or when a Subanen assumes leadership in the community.

The festival was known to be regularly practised in Subanen country, but for some reasons or another only a few places now observe the *buklog* festival. An informant in Lapuyan told me that some places do not practice putting up the *buklog* because of their fear of *binalay* curse or petrification, or turning to stone. They even have evidences to show for it. In Lapuyan, they still observe

the *buklog*, but with much discussion and deliberation among the tribal leadership. Perhaps, this is brought about by the conflict of religious ideals, since most of the Lapuyan Subanens have been converted to Christian Alliance Protestantism, which has taken root or is now deeply rooted in the hearts of Subanens living in this area. The Lamassons' were the first American Christian missionaries who worked with the Subanens as early as 1920. Lapuyan is even known as "little America" because you can communicate with the Subanen in English. The first time I visited these people in 1977 I was really caught by surprise when I went to the market to drink coffee when someone behind me asked if I wanted cream with coffee. I turned my back and was met face to face with a very old woman, who had wrinkled face, about two or three teeth remaining...asking me, if I wanted cream to go with my coffee. Anyway, this was my introduction to Subanen country. Linguistic communication with other groups of Subanens in other places was not at all difficult, in Sindangan for instance, they spoke Visayan quite fluently, in the Limpapa-Siocon area they either spoke Visayan or Chavacano, and those who have resided in the lowland areas, speak Visayan, English or Tagalog. In other places Subanens are either Roman Catholics or Protestants.

While the festival of the *buklog* has been mentioned so many times in the epics, folktales and legends, it is, however, only in E.B. Christie's, *The Subanons of Sindangan Bay* that the *buklog* is described in detail. His work has been of great help when I was doing my own field research in an effort to establish traditional Subanen customs, practices, oral literature and other form of folklore.

Generally, when a man or his family decides to give a *buklog*, for some reason or another, he begins to store rice, and to collect a large number of chickens, pigs, and eggs. A festival of this sort lasts three to seven days, and is frequently participated by a large number of persons coming from the locality and nearby communities, so that consumption of food and *gasi* (rice beer) is enormous, relatively to Subanen resources. As the time for the feast approaches, friends and relatives from all the surrounding localities bring contributions of food and very frequently the guests at the festival bring with them some small contribution in the way of a chicken, several pieces of eggs or a measure or two of rice but in

spite of aid rendered by friend and guests, it is safe to say that most of the food and drink are usually furnished by the hosts.

The *buklog* festival derives its name from the platform that is erected for this purpose. It is prepared as a structure some 10 to 18 ft. high, although in Limpapa the height was about 40 ft. above the ground, consisting of a highly resilient platform supported at the corners by upright beams. A beam passes through the middle of the platform which above extends like a maypole and below reaches to a short, thick log, laid on the ground. The log is hollowed out like a drum and is laid over a number of large earthen jars sunk in the earth which serve as resonators. A few leaves and sticks are interspersed to prevent the jars from breaking. A cross-piece which joins the long central pole or beam to the platform makes it go up and down with the latter as the Subanen dance around the pole. The long beam as it comes down strikes the hollow log and makes a loud booming sound which animates the dancers. This is actually their only music.

The materials needed for the platform have also been prepared and gathered months before the actual construction begins. In fact, my informant, Datu Agdino Andres from Sindangan, said that even during the gathering of the wood to be used for the platform, some ceremonial offerings have already been made, and certain taboos are also observed. For instance, the log used for the mortar comes from the *bayug*. While it is being cut and carried down from the forest, the Memwati singer or chanter asks the *bayug* tree god to protect them from harm and that He be with them as they celebrate the *buklog*, this goes with the *dlebalod*, another type of wood which is used for the posts and beams. The Memwati chanter addresses the tree god for their blessing and protection. The *bayug* becomes the impersonation of the god, the moment it is taken or cut down, and Subanens treat it with reverence and respect. The pestle could either be made of *bakhawan* (a certain tree species that grow in marshy places) or *ilang-ilang*, and should be felled or cut down together with the tree for the mortar. This, too, is also given some form of respect, i.e., the wood is carried, never dragged on the ground.

The *buklog* platform cannot be constructed until the idol (fetish or carved representation of Apo Asog) on one of the pots is carved.

A series of purification rites are also done. After this is done, the men who earlier had dug eight holes for the posts that will hold the platform, will start mounting the posts. As in the previous activity, and as the poles are being put up, there is music and dancing. The pole with the fetish (idol) is the main post which is placed into the second hole facing north, the idol facing east. The posts are placed not straight up but radially, going outwardly. This is done so that the flooring made out of split bamboo swings sideward and forward as the dancing is done on the platform. During the placing of the posts into the hole, the outkitchen is also built. *Balaba* or bigger strips of rattan are used to hold the wood together. No nails are used in putting up the *buklog*.

The workers start digging the hole for the mortar or the hollowed out log. At this time they start to play music in their agongs, dancing this time is done by a female. The jars are also laid in their place. It is now late in the evening, the *buklog* structure has just been completed. Musical instruments and the Memwati singer continues singing, describing everything that is taking place. Her songs are extemporaneous compositions, based on traditional tunes, melodies that are exclusively used for *buklog* activities only.

The *balian* now prepares for the formal opening of the structure. Three chickens are brought in. A female dancer starts dancing, she is joined by another female, music and dancing continues, the *gasi* or rice wine is also brought out and a table is decorated by palm fronds of *pisa*, cooked rice wrapped with coconut leaves in the shape of a crocodile, the feet are represented with unripe banana fruit, and the tail, midportion and eyes, of boiled eggs. Music and dancing stops; the *balian* invites the elders to go up with him to the *buklog* structure after having passed incense on the table where the offering for the *diwata* is placed. He passes incense on the *gasi* jars, prayers are said by the *balian*, then he puts on his bolo, and together they go up the ladder leading to the *buklog* platform. Prayers are said and everyone is invited to take a sip of the *gasi*. The chicken and pig is also brought up the platform, incense is also in place, a porcelain bowl and two plates are placed in front of the Thimuay (or tribal leader), who goes up the platform with the *balian*, *gasi* jars are also brought up.

The pig and white chicken are tied to the floor of the platform near the pestle. The blood of the chicken will be shed down the hole so that it will fall directly on the wooden or hollow drum, below the elevated platform. At one corner to the east and west of the *buklog* are altars, these are where offerings are placed. Then the *balian* invites people to come up the platform, mostly elderly men and women, no young girls are permitted. They are made to dance, so that the hollowed drum underneath the platform will sound. The tied pigs gets loose, blood is flowing through his mouth and nose, it is permitted to run around the platform; after a while the pig is caught and tied to the floor again. The dancers have to continue dancing until they are able to produce a "good sound". It is the *balian* who determines this. Finally a "good sound" is produced and another set of seven persons are invited to come up the *buklog* platform, and dancing continues.

The *balian* is ready to make the offering, gets out his bolo and hands it over to the sponsor of the Buklog, the rooster is killed, blood flows down the pestle and the pig is butchered too. With the white rooster and the pig killed, the *buklog* is formally opened. Everybody is enjoined to come up the platform and dance. Those who had been dancing and tired may sit on the benches on the sides of the platform provided for them. Those who are old and can no longer dance but want to participate can still go up and just sit on the side.

The activity goes on for three to seven days - for as long as there are people who would want to go up the *buklog* and dance. It is the obligation of the host to serve food and drinks. While the activity goes on, extemporaneous singing by the *balian* continues, gongs are beaten, stories are told, there is a renewal of ties and friendship. Meanwhile the *balian* sits in a *phintuan* or a small hut just outside the house and he continuously beats the porcelain bowl. The *buklog* comes to a close with the *balian* going about the house with a lighted torch...and a piece of grass and leaves, putting them in a basket and upon reaching the hearth, puts out the torch. Lastly, the *balian* leaves the house with his assistants but the activity i.e., dancing, eating, socializing continues. Incense is burned and the chanter or Memwati sings describing what is going on. If for example the *thimuay* or datu observed unusual things happening then he informs the *balian* to pray more to avert the

curse of the *binaloy*. If, signs of turning to stone is taking place then the datu will be forced to kill the *balian* and his blood will be sprinkled on the people to prevent them from turning to stone.

### Concluding Remarks

The description gives some idea of the atmosphere in which the religious ceremonies of the *buklog* are performed. It is apparent that there is nothing that can properly be called solemnity. While the dancing, eating and drinking among the people go on, it is the *balian* and his assistants who carefully perform the ceremonies; for the Subanens the less they mix in the delicate matters of the supernatural world, the safer for them.

The *buklog* exemplifies man's concerns for himself, his fellow-men and his environment. The very fact that when he or a member of his family gets sick, he makes a promise to put up a *buklog* conditional on the recovery of that sick member which he has to fulfill otherwise he will incur the ire of the *diwatas*; for a Subanen believes that becoming sick could be caused by environmental spirits because one has displeased that spirit or an ancestral spirit has been neglected and to remind the living causes a member of the family to get sick. The *buklog* shows environmental concerns, especially so when the materials that are to be used for the platform are gathered. These are not cut down without the proper rituals and offerings.