



# PROFILING ON CULTURAL PRESERVATION OF THE BLAAN TRIBE OF KIBLAWAN, DAVAO DEL SUR, PHILIPPINES

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## ABSTRACT

*The Philippines is culturally rich in diversity and ethnicity among indigenous peoples (IPs), embracing more than a hundred divergent ethno-linguistic groups with known specific identity, language, socio-political systems, and practices. It has always been the tangible and intangible beliefs and culture of Indigenous peoples, and the physical aspects of the environment, as well as the weather, is controlled by the spirits. The Blaan tribe is one of the authentic indigenous tribes in the Philippines and is known to possess a great cultural heritage. The profiling of the preserved cultural heritage was done through in-depth focus group discussion, audio recording, and the gathering of important cultural documents. The belief system, indigenous knowledge systems and practices, dispute settlements, traditional land resource use and management, tribal birth and healing practices, rites and ceremonies, entertainments, traditional clothing and games. In this study, the Blaan tribe from Sitio Atmurok, Bulol Salo, was able to manifest the preservation of their cultural practices and indigenous traditions. The study used a qualitative descriptive research design and a purposive sampling strategy, with data collected from elderly and representative respondents through structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). During the interview, there was also a recording. The descriptive research approach was used for this study because it allowed the researcher to get first-hand knowledge of the Blaan tribe's experiences and how they influenced their culture and religious growth. The researcher was able to give a broad overview of the B'laan Tribe's traditional beliefs and practices in Sitio Atmurok, Bulol Salo, Kiblawan, Davao Del Sur, Philippines. Despite the introduction of various religions into the tribes, general customs, notably belief systems, have been preserved. This research would be recommended to the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples so that they may witness the beauty of general customs, especially belief systems that have survived despite the absorption of other faiths into the tribes.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Blaan, Indigenous, Cultures, Tradition, Authentic*

## INTRODUCTION

The endeavor to safeguard cultural heritage is based on the features of our past that we treasured and passed on to subsequent generations. The merit of that heritage which has been preserved is a vital part of cultural identity. A cultural identity is formed and maintained in a multitude of ways. A great deal of all this was transferred orally through generations (Salang, 2008). Fortunately, the world recognizes the value of cultural heritage preservation as manifested by the overwhelming support of UN member countries when

they drafted the international treaty called the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972. The treaty aimed to make efforts toward the identification, protection, and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world, which is regarded as having exceptional value to humanity.

Southeast Asia highlights the rich diversity of indigenous peoples in far-reaching environmental spotlights. Though they are frequently clustered together in terms of their socio-political status as relatively weak



and marginal communities within the present nation-states, there are various ways to differentiate between them on the basis of modes of livelihood, or specific cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics (Barnes and Gray, 1996).

In the Philippines, Indigenous Peoples (IPs) make up a significant component of the population. Section 3, Article II RA 8371 defined indigenous peoples as self-identified groups of homogeneous societies who, since time immemorial, have lived as organized communities on communally bounded and defined territories, sharing bonds of language, customs, and traditions, and who have become historically distinct from the majority of Filipinos (Section 3, Article II RA 8371). There are more than 40 different ethnic groups. Most of these can be found on the island of Mindanao, the second largest and southernmost island in this tropical archipelago. The Blaan is a tribal community of Southern Mindanao; the name stems from the composed words Blaand and Anwhen. The word Blaan means our counterpart tribe (De Jong, R. 2016).

So far, there have been limited publications documenting the cultural practices of the B'laan Tribe in Southern Mindanao, Philippines. The identification of cultural practices is an important initiative to preserve the rich culture of the Blaan Tribes in the Philippines. The goal of the project is to document the cultural identity of Sitio Atmurok, Bulol Salo, Kiblawan, Davao del Sur, Philippines. This study aims to contribute to mainstreaming the importance of preservation of Blaan cultural practices by identification of the existing cultural practices of the Blaan tribe, namely: belief system or religion, Indigenous knowledge system and practices, Traditional Resource use and management, and Entertainments and Pastimes..

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study utilizes a qualitative descriptive type of research and a purposive sampling method is employed whereby data is obtained by structured interviews and focus group discussion (FGD) on the elderly and the representative respondents. Recordings were also done during the interview. The descriptive research method is considered appropriate for this study as it helped the researcher obtain first-hand information based on the experiences of the Blaan tribe and its significant impact on their culture and faith development.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Geographically, Sitio Atmurok, Bulol Salo is the farthest barangay of the municipality of Kiblawan, Davao del Sur, Philippines, with an estimated distance of 90.20 km. The remote geographic location of the Sitio

Atmurok, Bulol-salo (shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2) might be a factor in maintaining the homogeneity of the tribes, thus the preservation of the cultural heritage as highly favorable. In terms of geography, it reveals that the Blaan ancestral domain claimed area is recognized only into two classifications: alienable and disposable. The former covers nine thousand thirty-six and one hundred sixty-five (9,036.165) hectares, more or less, or thirty-five-point sixty percent (35.60%), and the large remaining area is timberland, which is about (16,351.4044) hectares, more or less, or sixty-four-point forty percent (64.40%). The ancestral domain area consists of open forest, wooden grassland, cultivated annual crop, shrub land, natural grassland, and closed forest. The Blaan ancestral domain is situated in the mountainous range of the municipality of Kiblawan, Davao del Sur. The terrain of this entire ancestral territory is generally hilly to mountainous, which about six thousand eight hundred seven and forty-one (6,807.041) hectares is approximately twenty-six-point eighty-one percent (26.81% is thirty to fifty degrees (30-500 Celsius) (Municipality of Kiblawan ADS DPP, 2020).

The B'laan tribe appears in the early scientific and anthropological literature of this century. The term B'laan is applied both to the linguistic group and to the group of indigenous people who occupy a defined territory on the island of Mindanao. Prior to American occupation, the Blaan occupied the hills behind the west coast of Davao Gulf, extending north to Bagobo territory and west into the Davao-Cotabato watershed. The B'laan tribe are Malay people occupying mainly the interior region between the Bulatukan River and the Sarangani Islands and its bay, particularly the municipalities of Kiblawan, Matanao, Magsaysay, and Sulop, and partly in Malita, Don Marcelino, Jose Abad Santos, and Sarangani Island. The Blaan tribe is one of the largest tribes on the island of Mindanao. They are one of the eighteen non-Muslim ethnic groups. The Maguindanaons regard the Blaan as friendly people. Where "bila" means "friend" in the Maguindanao dialect (Municipality of Kiblawan ADS DPP, 2020).

### **A. Belief System**

The Blaan believed that they descended from a sister and a brother, namely Flasab and Bli. Flasab married a stranger believed to be a merchant Arab and a missionary. She left her brother behind, who took care of their domain. Bli was believed to be the ancestor of the Blaan tribe. The Blaan were descendants of Mamalo-Tambunaway. The brothers, Mamalo and Tambunaway, lived near the mouth of the Rio Grande de Mindanao. When the Arabs came and introduced the Islam faith, Tambunaway stayed behind; Mamalo fled to the

mountains and refused to embrace the Islam faith. The tribe practices indigenous rituals for almost everything that they do because of their belief in the supremacy of the great creator named Malu or D'wata, who is the source of everything. The Blaan tribe is a strong believer in interdependency with the environment and must respect the will of the Creator. They are not allowed to touch or destroy any creature or object without his permission. Moreover, the worship is performed at Sabak (shown in figure 6). The findings of the study are similar to the findings of Francisco et al. (2021) in his study on the cultural practices of Blaan pupils whereby they believe in spirits and gods. Similar findings were also reported on the religious beliefs of the Blaan Tribe from Davao Del Sur (Franca, G. (2021)). Moreover, the recognition of supreme ruler D'wata as the creator of everything, a provider of graces, and has direct influence on the daily lives of the tribe also acts as a punishment to all who disobey his will (Sumaljag, M. (2008).

### **B. Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices**

The title of the patriarch or hereditary leader is called Fulong (shown in figure 4). The Blaan leader is chosen by the community from among their nobles. A man or woman is qualified to become a Fulong (leader) for as long as they belong to a Fulong libun (family or former leader or wiseman). The community's choice of a Fulong need not be directly communicated to the person chosen when people begin approaching him for help or assistance. Once chosen, the Fulong must be brave, loyal to his people, trustworthy, honest, kind-hearted, merciful, generous, hospitable, and friendly to be considered a good leader. With the help of the community's elders, the Fulong serves as the community's lawmaker, law enforcer, and judge. The Fulong has sovereign authority over an area dependent on his own influence. This position is heritable by the firstborn. After the Fulong, there was the Dad Tua de Banwe, or Council of Elders, who were called Fulongs but lower in rank than the chief Fulong. This finding was also supported by Sumaljag (2008) in her study, whereby she cited the tribe's recognition of God as a provider of abundant blessings and the powerful ruler of the universe.

#### **B.1. Customary settlement of committing a crime**

Kasfala, also known as the process of dispute settlement or dispute resolution, was practiced (shown in figure 5). The term "Kasfala" can be used to refer to a traditional meeting of the Blaan elders, a gift exchange ceremony, and finally dispute settlement. The term also implies a type of friendship or brotherhood pact, formed through the process of and as a result of dispute settlement.

**Sbangan System** (Fine) is the appropriate penalty or punishment is thereafter imposed on a party who has been adjudged to commit a mistake. Amicable settlements may be in terms of valuable materials like *patakya*, *bo-os*, *kuda*(horses), *Kamagi* or any antique tools.

**Safngayo/Safgat/Sdak** (*Pangayaw*) usually occurs when a member of a family is killed by a member of another family. The bereaved family organizes a group of about 10 persons to take revenge or kill any member of the offender's family. A period is set for this purpose usually lasting for about two weeks or more-*safgat* in Blaan term. The *pangayaw* ends when the aggrieved person is satisfied with his revenge. A *pangayaw* may nevertheless be averted by a *dyandi* (Blood compact). The *Fulong* summoned both parties, then killed a white chicken, lit a fire, and cut rattan, to symbolize the end of the conflict. They call upon the spirit who takes away life and pledge that whoever betrays the *dyandi* shall die.

#### **B.2. Tribal Birth Practices**

The Blaans have various beliefs related to pregnancy. They believe that no one should block the door when birth is taking place. They also discourage pregnant women from eating "twin" fruits to avoid conceiving twins. A pregnant woman is not allowed to tie a cloth or handkerchief around her belly since this might cause the baby's umbilical cord to get all tangled up, endangering the baby. It is customary for Blaan visitors to give a gift to a woman who has given birth to her eldest child; visitors may not leave the house unless they have given the customary gift. The newborn baby must wait for nine days before he/she is bathed for the first time; he/she is bathed with steamed leaves of daon gulo or flunggo. These findings are similar to Sumaljag (2008), whereby it emphasizes social activities for common welfare, like feasts, rituals, and family routines. The Blaans highly appreciated the importance of a family as the basic social unit in their society.

#### **B.3. Healing Practices**

At Molong in Blaan, these men and women conduct ceremonies to help heal the sick, secure good crops or thank the deities for their help and watchfulness. They have considerable influence over all the spirits, but they are particularly close to the *almagol* (Blaan term for the soul). The *almo-os* takes a chicken in his hand and while five or six assistants dance, she chants, appealing to the spirits to see the good things that are being prepared and to be pleased to return to the sick man. The healing rituals called *Simo di Tana* are employed for ordinary illnesses. Here, two kinds of spirits are called for assistance, the *Lafun* and *Lo-us Klagan*, the latter being



the more powerful of the two. The ritual is conducted in the house of the sick. The pressing healer is called Tamlo Tagen. Only one chicken is used in the ritual. Simo di tana is called for the more serious cases. The ritual is held off the ground. It involves three almo-os and three spirits, namely the Lafun, the Lo-us Klagan, and the Balyan. These spirits are called to assist in the healing of the sick.

#### B.4. Blaen Burial/Funeral Rites, Practices and Beliefs

The evening following a death, the friends gather and throughout the night sing of the virtues of the diseased and of their own sorrow. The body is placed on a mat in the center of the house and, for three days, is watched over by the relatives, who, during this time, obtain music, dancing, shouting, or loud talking. The women cease from weaving and the men refrain from all labor. A breaking of this taboo would result in the certain death of the offender, for the spirit of the dead man is still near at hand and he is sure to wreak his vengeance on those who show him disrespect. Finally, the body is wrapped in mats and is buried some distance from the house. All the people return to the dwelling, where the headman makes a cup out of leaves, having placed in it a narrow belt or string, while all the men almost. The burial can be *Abnangkay* or *Sufeng*. *Abnangkay* is a Blaen burial custom that involves wrapping the dead in a rolled mat, binding this with *lu-es* or rattan, and burying it. It was explained that leaving the body alone in the house is an expression of love. Death is usually associated with *tasu*, or bad luck/bad spirits, whereas in *Sufeng*, corpses are merely tied several feet up a tree. This usually occurs when someone has been killed in a running battle in the forest. In terms of harvest, rituals were also performed (shown in figure 7). These findings were also reported in the study by Guéguen, C. (2010).

#### B.5. Myths, Legends and Beliefs

Dawata/D'wata, they think, is the Supreme Being, the Creator. They also believe in the constellation Blatik Fali Orion, which directs and indicates the sowing season. Furthermore, Almugan is an omen bird that makes a sound and predicts whether a crop will be excellent or terrible. Furthermore, Sumaljag, M., reported on these findings (2008).

#### B.6. Rites and Ceremonies

In calling for rain, a small woven mat referred to as *igem*, is placed in a river. The mat is then weighted down with rocks, so that it will not float or be swept away by the current. The mat should remain in the river until the rain begins to fall. The biting of a piece of wood is believed

to be an effective means whereby the malevolent effect of negative or bad omens can be negated or dispelled. Various dances were also made depending on purpose; *Aral dmulak* is a dance depicting hunting with bow and arrow. In this dance drama, three hunters hide under an *amlat* (bird shelter) built under trees of thick foliage, where birds flock to feed and rest. *Amti*, *Muhag Sugem*, *Asbulong Kanfu De Dafeng* are dances for fishing, gathering honey, Healing ritual, and courtship dance. During harvest season, rituals together with dancing were also performed.

#### C. Traditional Resource Use and Management

Blaen subsistence and economic practices are inherently and essentially land-based. The forest is the market and a food source. The Blaens were nomadic in search of fertile soil and were dependent on the forest. The Blaens adhere to a sedentary form of agriculture and engage in other economic endeavors for their subsistence and development. The Blaens observed certain rituals in their planting cycle. In these rituals, they make offerings to their deities, requesting signs to know where to best make a clearing for a particular planting season. One of these is the *mabah*, or offering to the deities requesting omens that would help them choose the fields for planting. Blaens practice swidden farming as their main agricultural method. They grow rice, corn, sugarcane, bananas, papaya, and other root crops. Before the initiation of any farming or planting activities, the Blaen first perform a ritual called *damsu* dedicated to *Fon Tana*, believed to be the owner of the land; *Fon kayo*, the owner of trees; and the owner of wild pigs or white chickens, requesting them not to destroy their agricultural crops and to *Fon Tana*, requesting him to watch over their rice or corn fields. After determining the soil to be fertile and the performance of rituals, they proceed with the process of *kamlo*, or *mlamfas*, which means underbrushing of the soil. After clearing the field, *amleh*, or planting, starts then. They have two traditional methods commonly used by the tribe: the *mahak* and the *sabud*. *Mahak* is done by pinching in the hole on the ground and placing the seeds in the hole, while *sabud* is simply done by spreading the seeds in the field. Similar findings were also reported by Sumaljag (2008), whereby it emphasizes value pertains to livelihood and materials as needed for survival. The tribe recognizes the existence of plants, fishes, animals, trees, and water as basic needs of the people for economic survival. The tribe is also dependent on food and livelihood.

#### D. Entertainment

The Blaen are also rich in entertainment, such as music. They have unique musical instruments called Falimak, Loring, and Faglong. A Falimak is primarily used to



accompany a dance during the marriage ceremony, while a Loring is a musical instrument made of bamboo (shown in figure 9). It is played through blowing, and the melody or tempo depends on the windblown from the mouth. Moreover, Faglong is a two-stringed boat-shaped lute. Its two strings are made of metal, with one played as a drone and the other strummed to produce a melody using the pentatonic scale.

### D.1. Traditional Clothing

The Blaans are famous for their rich and colorful cultural heritage, ethnic art and handicrafts like the brass ornaments and traditional beardwork. Colourful native costumes woven from abaca and decorated with embroidery, buttons, beads and heavy brass belts with numerous tiny bells are worn by the women of the Blaans (shown in figure 3). The sequin-like Capiz shells called *takmon* are used to give a distinct design and colour to their clothes, among the women, the intricately beaded wooden comb, the *swat san sanlah* is a must. It is believed that the designs were imparted to the dreamer through the *I'nilong* (fairies), who are considered guardians of nature. The female skirt is made of hemp-*nabal* in Blaans term. The authentic upper garment made of either hand woven abaca fiber with embroidery or cotton with intricate beadwork- *ansef* in Blaans term is a symbol of ethnic pride reflective of their rich cultural heritage. The Blaans men wear long-sleeved jackets with intricate embroidery (*ansif*), usually the handiwork of Blaans women. They also wear tight fitting shorts with elaborated embroideries called *salwal*.

### D.2. Traditional Games

The horse (kora) is revered as a game or sport animal among the male Blaans culture, among other things. Horse fighting is frequently associated with Blaans celebratory events such as weddings (samsong) and feasts (Safkaon). However, on rare instances, horse fighting is regarded as a separate event from other rituals.

## CONCLUSION

The researcher was able to provide a general perspective on various cultural beliefs and practices of the B'laan Tribe situated in Sitio Atmurok, Bulol Salo, Kiblawan Davao Del Sur, Philippines. The general practices particularly on belief systems are still retained spite of the infusion of other religions on the tribes. They are still able to infuse modern religion with the traditional practices. One of the exceptional practices that are worth emulating on the B'laan tribe are the customary conflict resolution and the process of choosing a leader or a "*Fulong*" whereby an emphasis on integrity, seniority and respect of the tribes and the

belief that their leader is chosen by God. Moreover, the healing practices which rely on medicinal plants located in their area are so relevant today as one of the basis in discovering new bioactive compounds in the science of Ethnobotany. The B'laan tribe of Sitio Atmurok proved to be one of the authentic B'laan tribes as they preserved the oldest beliefs and practices.

## RECOMMENDATION

This study would like to recommend it to the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples for them to be able to see the beauty of the general practices, particularly on belief systems that are still retained in spite of the infusion of other religions into the tribes. The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples might use this data to be able to spread awareness and at the same time educate young individuals on traditional dispute resolution, as it is one of the unique traditions worth copying of the B'laan tribe. In addition, the dry cultivation of a wide range of food plants, especially rice, is the foundation of the culture, which is complemented by food collecting and hunting. The process of cultural transformation is well underway.

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