

Laudato Si': Claiming the Cultural Identity of the Subanen People in the Mount Malindang
Ranges

A Research Paper

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ABSTRACT

This research is an attempt to present the ecological status of the Philippines and how can the school collaborate with the local people especially the indigenous people help in responding to the call of Pope Francis on Laudato Si' 145: Many intensive forms of environmental exploitation and degradation not only exhaust the resources which provides local communities with their livelihood, but also undo the social structures which, for a long time, shaped cultural identity and their sense of the meaning of life and community. The disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, or even more serious, than the disappearance of a plant or animal species. The imposition of a dominant lifestyle linked to a single form of production can be just as harmful as the altering of ecosystems.

Laudato Si' 146: In this sense, it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions.

INTRODUCTION

The Philippine environment faces significant degradation due to destructive and extractive activities driven by both foreign and local corporations. Logging, mining, corporate plantations, and other extractive practices have led to deforestation, reducing the forest cover to just 23.3% of the country's land area, far below the ecologically healthy level of 54%. The Philippines is the 5th most affected country by climate disasters from 1998 to 2017, according to the Climate Risk Index 2019. (IBON, 2020) In 1940, on the eve of World War II, the Philippines had more than 20 million of its total land area of 30 million hectares, classified as forest lands. By 1975, total land had shrunk to 10 million hectares. Within a few decades after independence in 1946, these forests were heavily exploited through the grant of timber concessions. (Sicat, 2015)

Despite the requirements imposed by the timber license agreements on replanting and selective logging, the practice was more patently different. Loggers had little interest in long-term commitments as the short-term provided them immediate income, wealth, and stature in the community. IBON Foundation criticizes the Philippine Mining Act of 1995, which exacerbated the exploitation of the country's mineral resources by local mining firms. This exploitation came at the expense of the environment, people's livelihoods, culture, and national sovereignty. (IBON, 2020)

As of 2022, only 21% of Mindanao is covered by forest. This makes Mindanao highly vulnerable to ecological calamities in the face of climate emergency. Mount Malindang, is part of the Malindang Range Natural Park in Mindanao. As of the 2010 Census, about 49,897 Subanens individuals live in this area (Raluto, 2022). Forest composition of Mount Malindang; over 50% of the forest is classified as lower montane(lower part of a mountain), and over 30% is classified as upper montane (upper part of a mountain), or mossy forest. Currently, only about 2.5% of lowland forest remains, often in patches interspersed among secondary scrub, totaling about 5% of the area. (IBON, 2020) This mountain used to protect many of the neighboring provinces from typhoons but in Dec 2022, the provinces experienced massive flooding.

The Subanens are an ethnic group indigenous to the Philippines, originating and living in the Western Mindanao region that is presently partitioned into four provinces namely: Misamis Occidental, Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur, and Zamboanga Sibugay. (Gangoso, 2023)

ISSUES FACING OF THE SUBANEN

Climate change susceptibility, legal and land rights conflicts, cultural eroding, social marginalization, environmental degradation, and health and well-being difficulties are just a few of the many challenges that the Subanens must contend with. Large-scale mining and logging operations have drastically decreased the amount of forest cover, which has an effect on the natural habitat of Subanens and reduces biodiversity, both of which have an impact on customary farming and hunting methods. Corporate plantations have grown, and mining and logging concessions granted to businesses have resulted in the exploitation of natural resources and the eviction of several Subanens from their ancestral lands. Younger generations are becoming less connected to their legacy as a result of rapid urbanization and the influence of popular culture, which have undermined traditional language, habits, and customs. The Subanens encounter social challenges such as inadequate attention to their issues and restricted prospects for growth, and they are frequently underrepresented in politics and the educational system. High rates of morbidity and nutritional deficiencies are the result of poor access to healthcare services, changes in land use, and changes in food sources. The Subanens are additionally exposed to exploitation and forced relocation due to unclear and contentious land ownership laws and lax enforcement of Indigenous rights. Finally, the challenges of sustaining their traditional livelihoods have been made more difficult by environmental deterioration, which has made them more susceptible to natural disasters and climate change(Sebrero, 2023).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

With the massive ecological destruction, the Subanens are also losing their cultural identity since they have to prioritize their survival over their culture. During the initial visit and conversation with some of the families and leaders are known as "timuay", there is a deep longing to claim their cultural identity again.

RESEARCH AIM

This research aims to explore initiatives led by Holy Cross High School of Kolambugan, Inc. that empower the Subanen people to reclaim their cultural identity. This study will provide practical examples of how we can contribute, in small but meaningful ways, to support indigenous communities.

In the mid-2000s, I was the Campus Minister of Holy Cross High School. I attended the assembly of the Sisters Association in Mindanao Assembly. Many members of this association are ministering to the indigenous people. During that assembly, a group of Their children showed us their reality. Their place was highly militarized and they needed to move to a safer place. That means they also have to leave their livelihood. Life was so hard for them yet support could not reach them because the military would block any support for them. This was because they were suspected as rebels. That experience broke my heart and moved me to be connected with them. The nearest I could get is the Subanen rea here in the Mount Malindang Ranges. The parish priest at that time was also trying to help them. Organizing and helping them with education and livelihood. I connected with him so I could take students for exposure so that we could engage with them and at the same time help us to understand their reality. The students who went with me (they were in several groups) realized how different their stories and realities were from the book they read as well as from the feedback they heard. They were very welcoming and generous even in their scarcity. They are hard working but they still are very poor. That was life-changing for most of us who had the chance to engage with them. For me, it made me grow in my desire to help them.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research involves several key steps. Qualitative Research establishes connections with the local government, indigenous leaders, parish priests, and the military (this is the first and foremost since the place is highly militarized). Following this, conducting interviews and gathering oral histories will provide valuable insights into the cultural identity, history, and ecological knowledge of Mount Malindang. Finally, a collaborative approach will be employed throughout the research process to ensure that the local's knowledge is included and respected.

The Subanen focused in this study are residents of Sitio Tonggo of Tudela, Misamis Occidental. Information was gathered through visits and interviews with the Subanen people, who originally came from various locations across the Mindanao Peninsula, typically near water sources. Due to logging activities in Mount Malindang, they frequently relocated to follow deforested areas, where they practiced farming. They cultivated root crops, vegetables, and corn, selling some produce while consuming the rest. This nomadic lifestyle continued for many years until logging ceased due to severe deforestation.

INTERVIEW WITH THE SUBANENS

According to Julie, one of the Subanen I have interviewed, life was very hard for them in the past. In 1988, they were asked to leave Namut, the place where they had their farms because if they remained in that place, they were suspected as rebels. Some of them stayed in the forest for almost one year to hide from the military. But the time came that they had nothing to eat in that forest so they moved to another place known as Don Victoriano to find food. Their men decided to go back to their huts in the middle of the forest because they still had some chickens left there. However, when they were near the place they were surprised to see smoke and hear noise. From the distance, they realized that the military was already occupying their huts. They went back quietly to Don Victoriano to make sure that the military would not find them. They then decided to come to Tonggo, near the military post so they won't be suspected as rebels. There was also a time when they were hidden by the parish priest in the parish from the military. However, the military discovered it so the priest told them to go ahead and investigate them and find out by themselves if they were rebels. At that time, the military was rude and harassed them. Julie said that he was very scared when interrogated by the military because the gun was pointed at him. But he faced them and told them that he was only working on his farm for a living. When they were in dire need of food, many people from the town (Tudela), wanted to give them food supply. However, the military will not allow them to do that because they were told that they were supporting the rebels.

One of their culture is working on a communal farm. They still tried it but it is not working anymore because the values of other Subanen have changed. Some opted to work on their own. Another reason is that most of them now are not using their land for farming. Many just borrow the land of their neighbors but then when the owner will just take it anytime they want to use it. Another is using the stone to mill their corn or rice before cooking. Some of them still kept their stone mill but seldom use it now because most of them now are buying rice. They are limited to plant corn because as mentioned above, there is no land to farm. One of the practices they have that I remembered when I visited their homes and farms last 2005, my attention was caught in the corn field where the part had been harvested but part of it has still the fruits. According to Julie, they used to do that to make sure they would have enough food. While the part that had been harvested, they could start planting again. While the remaining will sustain them for food.

DISCUSSION

Holy Cross High School through the support of the Sisters of Mercy Ministry Fund Grant tried to help a group of Subanen improve their livelihood. The Sisters of Mercy through the initiative of the late Sr. Socorro Largo, RSM converted a barren area into a forest. It is about 17 acres. This is where the project is located.



Reforested Area of the Sisters of Mercy



Area Facing our Property

Sister Elva de Castro, the Campus Minister of Holy Cross High School, and Mr. Jonel Baba accompanied them in this project. There are thirty (30) participants and they are divided into four groups. One group will focus on Organic Agriculture, another group will focus on making trails within the forest, another will focus on food processing and marketing and one group will focus on education.



“Galingan ug Mais” or Corn Mill made of Stone



“Maisan” or Cornfield

RITUALS AND LANGUAGES

Table 2. Different rituals performed by the Subanen.

Ritual	Description
'Buklog'	It is a week-long celebration of the Subanen as a thanksgiving to their good harvest.
'Samaya'	It is a ritual for thanksgiving (as general).
'Pangamo'	It is also a ritual for thanksgiving performed after recovering from an illness
'Palunto'	It is a ritual for remembering the dead and to leading them the way to heaven.
'Guwayan'	It is a ritual performed for all the dead relatives of a certain family.
'Gbla-i (bla-i)'	It is a union between man and woman. The community will celebrate it together with the couple's family. A dance called 'Pangalay' is also performed only by the couple during the ceremony.
'Kanubata' (Baptismal)	It is usually scheduled at the time of infancy of the child but it is also being performed for grown-up members especially in religious conversions.
'Magbinukid'	It is a ritual performed to stop the coming natural disaster.
'Kanobiton'	It is a ritual performed when there is drought.
'Nuglupa'	It is a ritual asking permission to cut down trees before 'Peles' (the process of cutting down trees for a certain celebration) is being done.

Different Rituals Performed by the Subanen (Elmedulan & Villanueva, 2017)

Ritual is a mode of communication that unites the spiritual and the material, the scientific and the unique, the uranic system, everyday expectations, the past and the present, and other fundamental structures that support the growth of the individual (Yazdani et al., 2016). The Subanen value rituals, particularly those that have to do with the natural world. According to Subanens, these ceremonies are their means of expressing respect to the spirits and requesting their consent whenever they ask for a favor. When they mistreat nature, which is the spirits' home, these rituals also assist them in appeasing the spirits (Mabini et al., 2014).

When the decision was made by the group to start clearing the area to make a pathway, a ritual was made. According to the “sorohano,” he spoke to the other “creatures” living in the area asking permission to work there. He told all of us who were present that we had permission as long as it was for the good of the place and everyone. No bad words are allowed. The process in this project helped them embrace their culture. They used their language when they talked to one another. They helped in the planning and the decision-making. They also apply their cultural practice of having rituals for important activities. Their spiritual leader the “Timuay” or could also be a “Sorohano” will lead the ritual.

Sahop ri Pamilya (Members of the Family)			
SUBANEN SOUTHERN	SUBANEN CENTRAL	FILIPINO	ENGLISH
ama	amay	tatay	father
ina	inay	nanay	mother
phated” dlibun/Dla’-ih	manong	kapatid	brother/sister
manong/manang	manang	kuya / ate	older brother/sister
Apo dlibun	lola	lola	grandmother
Apo dla’ih	lolo	lolo	grandfather
yoy	dadi	tiyo	uncle
anti	mami	tiya	aunt
Dhe’lan	katagsa	pinsan	cousin
gipag	bayaw na bai	hipag	sister-in-law
bhilas	bayaw na mama	bayaw	brother-in-law
phenugangan dla-ih	ugangan na mama	biyanang lalake	father-in-law
phenugangan dlibun	ugangan na bai	biyanang babae	mother-in-law
gmanak dla-ih	gamangken na mama	pamangking lalake	nephew
gmanak dlibun	gumangken na bai	pamangking babae	niece

Sample Table of the Dialects Used by the Subanens (Mangangot, N.D.)

CONCLUSION

They felt happy we had this project. They have the chance to speak their language with one another as they work together. They can practice “Hunglos or Alayon”, which is collaborative work. They felt empowered and respected. They are inspired to teach their children to speak their language which they are losing in formal schools. At the end of their work, food packs are given to them which include rice, the most valued by everyone. It is also challenging for me and my partners in this project. We need the virtue of humility since they have many beliefs and practices that are very different from ours. We need to be open and learn from them. There is a need for constant dialogue; the need to listen to them. There is also the need for patience. It is truly stepping out of our comfort zones. They helped us experience compassion, hope, and creativity. Their greatest desire is for their culture to be taught to their children, ensuring the continuation of their practices. Their cultural dances, rich with meaning, need to be understood and not just performed. They also recognize the need for a Subanen language teacher in schools to prevent their language from being forgotten.

Working on this project gave me a sense of fulfillment since it has been my heart’s desire to work for the environment as well as the indigenous people who are continuously displaced. To be an environmentalist also calls for protection and helps them. I felt privileged to work with them on this project. Their simplicity, honesty, and hard work deepen my commitment to the fourth vow of the sisters of Mercy: to serve the poor, the sick, and the uneducated. I felt my relationship with them helped me to be more rooted in my Mercy mission and with joy. The Subanen are the poorest of the poor in our society. Pope Francis ‘ call to care for them rings loudly in my heart.

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