

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE CONCEPT OF MARI-IT AS A REGULATOR OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES IN GUIMARAS ISLAND, PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

Folklore are oral traditions which are commonly told and retold among members of a certain community in the forms of stories, legends, narratives, beliefs, and taboos. This research explores the persistence of the concept of *mari-it* (literally, “dangerous”) as a regulator of environmental resources in Guimaras Island, Philippines. The research made use of two of the indigenous research methods identified in Sikolohiyang Pilipino as appropriate in Philippine culture. To select the barangays to be the study sites for this research, the indigenous variant of the interview, *pakikipagkuwentuban* (“story-telling”) was used. On the other hand, data required for this study was gathered through another indigenous research method, *pagtatanong-tanong*, a Filipino word which means “asking questions”. This research finds that folklore particularly the belief in the concept of *mari-it*, serves as a regulator of natural resources since it limits people’s activities in some areas which are believed to be the dwelling places of spiritual beings. As a result, natural resources in these places remain undisturbed or their exploitation is minimal. It is recommended to make use of these oral traditions to promote ecological consciousness and awareness among people. We can incorporate these oral traditions to our ecological conservation practices that can develop further our environmental management efforts.

Keywords: folklore, oral traditions, environmental resources, environmental management

1) INTRODUCTION

“Ando, a resident of Gigantes Island, was in the process of constructing his house with galvanized roofing. Since the materials are far more costly than the usual temporary materials used like cogon and nipa, he had to earn more money. Therefore, in 1988 he decided to dive for tipay (seashell) in Olympu, a very deep fishing ground of 40 fathoms, located about 50 miles from Gigantes Island. An hour after diving, he recalled that three years earlier—one of his men died mysteriously in the same spot. Even so, Ando was not fazed, and he continued diving in Olympu, accompanied by three of his men. They had oxygen tanks and attached to their belts was a rope which could be shaken to signal that the dive wanted to be pulled up. On his first visit to the diving area, Ando had a very rich harvest of tipay. The scene underwater looked like a beautiful garden with tipay-looking flowerpots in a row. It was too beautiful to be true and tempting for a second visit. So, Ando went back in the afternoon to continue his rich harvest as he needed more money to construct his house. The following day, he travelled back to the same spot; however, his third visit proved fatal. The rich harvest was a sign that he should not have returned. When he shook the rope and his companions pulled him up, he fainted on the boat. He was able to reach the shore, but he died just upon docking. Before his death, he was able to tell his companions that a hairy man underwater hit him with a hard vine” (Magos, 1997, pa. 44).

Supernatural encounters like this which describe stories of how human beings interact with those from spiritual world, are one of the most common forms of folklore in the Philippines. Folklore are oral traditions which are commonly told and retold among members of a certain community. These oral traditions come in a form of stories, legends, narratives, beliefs, and taboos (Magos, 1997) and are handed from one generation to another in which the latter becomes the new storyteller (Vicerra & Javier, 2013).

Consequently, people have started to acknowledge the role of folklore to channel messages of environmental importance to the populace. As a result, studies about folklore and its implications to environmental education have entered the popular research niche. In a quantitative study of Binag (2015), it was argued that belief systems have a considerable effect on environmental attitudes and can play a major role in ecological conservation practices. The study made use of the descriptive-correlational research method to describe the ecological traditional beliefs and practices of the people that could help protect and preserve the environment, particularly-flora and fauna. The study found that ecological beliefs and practices have a direct bearing to ecological conservation practices and recommends the dissemination of these beliefs and practices to the younger generation through oral and written method.

In a study conducted by Camacho, Gevaña, Carandang, and Camacho (2015), the concept, and importance of the *muyong* system in promoting sustainable forest management was explored. The study found that *muyong* is generally a practice that corresponds to a mutual connection between man and his environment. This system has been part and imparted to Ifugao culture as expressed in terms of respect in customary laws and land rights; revegetating previous swidden farms for soil and water conservation; stand management for sufficient wood and fuel wood supply, and biodiversity protection.

The study of Amlor and Alidza (2016), examined the causes of environmental degradation in Ghana, despite crafting cultural laws that ensure the protection and management of their natural resources, and establish the relationship of folklore and environmental conservation. It was found that folklore can be utilized to address problems relating to environmental management and conservation in the country. Furthermore, it was also observed that folklore, with emphasis to folk songs, invokes moral underpinnings. This in turn guaranteed conformity to people's social norms which in result infused discipline, instilled fear and called for commitment to proper environmental management.

The research of Adu-Gyamfi (2011) argued that indigenous beliefs and practices are earth-friendly and consistent with biodiversity more so than modern or Western ways of life and can eventually lead to successful ecological practices that enhance ecosystem conservation. The article found that beliefs and practices of the Akan people of Ghana, which highlight their moral import and commitment to environmental preservation, results in a sustainable use of the environment, enforced by some taboos regarding ecosystem conservation.

In an article prepared by Ojating (1997), folklore is regarded not just as merely superstitious beliefs, but as an active tool that plays a positive role in society since strict observance of the rules can bring about the orderly behavior of people. In Nigeria, trees are believed to have supernatural powers serving as dwelling places for gods and spirits of the land and communities.

The study of Magos (1997) explored the role of folklore in sustainable development. By employing an ethnographic research approach, she explored people's concept of *mari-it* (dangerous zones) among six barangays in Panay Island, Philippines, and explained how this indigenous concept serves as a regulator of environmental resources. She also included some stories regarding incidents which took place in these alleged *mari-it* places which serve as reminders of the taboos that relate to such places.

The importance of the present study emerged from the fact that based on the various literatures presented, folklore has a considerable effect on environmental attitudes and can, therefore, play a major role in ecological conservation practices. This study aims to add to these growing literatures by exploring the persistence of the concept of *mari-it* (literally, “dangerous”) as a regulator of environmental resources in Guimaras Island, Philippines.

2) METHODS

To satisfy the objectives of this paper, two of the indigenous research methods identified in Sikolohiyang Pilipino as appropriate in Philippine culture were used. To select the barangays to be the study sites for this research, the indigenous variant of the interview, *pakikipagkuwentuban* (“story-telling”) was used. This method permits a free flow of opinions and experiences. In using this method, one must be aware against deviating too much from the topic of discussion (Yang & Lu, 2007). In his Philippine history classes, the researcher mentioned the word *mari-it* and many students who were interested in the topic joined the *kuwentuban*. The places mentioned by the students and the stories regarding incidents that happened in these *mari-it* places were then noted by the researcher. The barangays mentioned were then visited and some locals were interviewed for confirmation.

Data Gathering Technique

Data required for this study was gathered through another indigenous research method, *pagtatanong-tanong*, a Filipino word which means “asking questions”. With this indigenous research method, the repetition of ‘tanong’ to ‘tanong- tanong’ indicates seriousness of purpose in which the researcher is very eager to come up with answers to his questions. *Pagtatanong-tanong* has four major characteristics: (1) It is participatory in nature; (2) The researcher and the informant are equal in status; (3) It is appropriate and adaptive to the conditions of the group of informants in that it conforms to existing group norms, (4) It is integrated with other indigenous research methods (Pe-Pua, 1989).

Study Sites

San Miguel. This is one of the coastal barangays in the municipality of Buenavista and lies on the northern coast facing the municipality of Dumangas that belongs to the neighboring province of Iloilo. This barangay is considered a rich fishing ground and during the first half of the year 2018, San Miguel had a population of 703. The primary livelihood amongst its people is fishing, supplemented with farming for those who own rice fields. Many of the households near the sea have boats which are used primarily for fishing. The barangay can be reached by a 27-minute vehicle ride from MacArthur’s Wharf Ferry Terminal, one of the commuters’ gateways to the province of Guimaras. Barangay San Miguel was named after the late Don Miguel Jayme. This barangay used to be a sitio of Barangay Navalas but due to the increase in its population and through the efforts of the late Teniente del Barrio Alfredo Fernandez Jr., San Miguel was separated from Barangay Navalas and became an independent barangay in 1944.

Cabalagnan. A coastal barangay located in the municipality of Nueva Valencia, the people in this village depend heavily on fishing with people living near the coast owning a fishing boat. The barangay can be reached through a 55-minute vehicle ride from Jordan Wharf Ferry Terminal. The name of the barangay was taken from the word “Kabalagunan” which means vine all over. Older residents claim that the name of the barangay “Kabalagunan” but was changed to Cabalagnan following modernization.

Lawi. This coastal barangay is in the municipality of Jordan, capital town of Guimaras. Lawi also houses a marine protected area especially intended for turtles. The primary livelihood of the people is fishing. As of 2018, it had a population of 2221. The barangay can be reached through a 33-minute vehicle ride from Jordan Wharf Ferry Terminal. The name of the barangay was believed

to be taken from the tail of a rooster locally known as “*iwi*” which corresponds to the shape of the river found in the barangay.

3) RESULTS

In the village of San Miguel, fishing and farming are the common livelihood of the people. Village folk still fish using traditional fishing gears such as fishing nets and *labay* (longlines). A ritual called *tuob* is then performed to these fishing gears because they believe it will bring them a bountiful catch. The village folk believe that God did not just create humans to inhabit the earth, but spiritual beings as well. Some trees, locally known as *bubog* (calumpang trees) and *lunok* (balete trees) are considered as *mari-it* and believed to be the dwelling places of the *engkantos* (environmental spirits). There are also *bakbawan* (mangroves) in the village that are off-limits and frequently visited by the village folk because they are considered *mari-it* and become a breeding ground for fish and other marine species. The waters surrounding the nearby *Siete Pecados*, a group of seven islands located between Buenavista, Guimaras and Dumangas, Iloilo, are normally avoided by fisherfolk as they are also believed as *mari-it*. Therefore, fishing here is seldom undertaken and fishing exploitation is minimal.

Like San Miguel, the village of Cabalagnan is also a coastal community. Here, the most common fishing gears used are nets, traps, hook and line, long line and fish pen. Many villagefolk own small non-motorized *baroto* (boats) manned by one or two persons and fishing is *targeted* only in shallow waters. Before these small non-motorized *baroto* can start fishing, a ritual called *daga* (blood letting) is performed. Blood from a pair of white chickens, both *munga* (hen) and *sulog* (rooster) is shed in these *baroto* and this serves as a protection from dangers originating from spiritual beings inhabiting the sea. Just like in the village of San Miguel, the *tuob* ritual is then performed and is believed to bring bountiful harvest for the fishers. The deep *kantilado* (shelf) waters near Romaganrang rock (natives call this as *bato-riit*) are avoided by the fisherfolk as this is believed to be a dwelling place and a harbour for ships of the *engkantos*. The folk mentioned two types of *engkantos* on board these ships: first are *murokpok* that usually harm humans by hitting them and can be fatal; and secondly the *bana* (also spelled *bawa*) that can easily wring a person’s neck when provoked and are commonly seen at the surface of Romaganrang rock. The people in this village also believe in the existence of *siyukoy* (half-man, half-fish sea monster), *katam* (mermaid) and *divata* (fairy) guarding a *manlot* (a giant clam). Since the deep *kantilado* (shelf) waters near Romaganrang are considered *mari-it*, the area has traditionally served as a natural habitat and sanctuary for marine species.

Like Cabalagnan, the village of Lawi is also a fishing community. Fisherfolk use nets, traps, and hook and line for their trade but unlike Cabalagnan, motorized boats are now used. *Daga* and *tuob* are two rituals that persist in the village. The *daga* ritual is performed before sea vessels can fish, a similar ritual with a similar rationale to that of the village of Cabalagnan. On the other hand, the ritual of *tuob* is performed every Tuesday and Friday, days of the week that are considered days of the *mari-it* beings. *Tuob* is considered a cleansing ritual to cleanse the *sabid* or enchantments caused by *engkantos* that could obstruct or impede a bountiful catch. The population also believe that marine creatures like *pawikan* (sea turtles) and *lumba-lumba* (dolphins) should be protected and conserved because they are regarded as “friendly” to humans demonstrated by stories of these animals, saving humans from drowning, and even protecting them from shark attacks. They also believe that both the land and the sea are *mari-it*, and as dwelling places of the *engkantos*, but consider the latter as more *mari-it* than the former. Fishing is traditionally avoided in some areas of the sea because it is regarded as *mari-it*. These areas are believed to be the home of *ukoy* (same with *siyukoy*, a half-man, half-fish sea monster) and other spiritual beings. Moreover, they believe that fisherfolk who wish to fish in these areas should first secure permission from the *taglugar* (native spiritual beings inhabiting the area) by throwing coins or a piece of bread into the water. The first catch is usually thrown back into the water to appease the *taglugar*. Generally, fisherfolk

are also expected to be silent whilst fishing in these areas for fear of disturbing the *taglugar*. As a result of these beliefs, the exploitation of marine resources in these areas is minimal.

Following the argument of Magos (1997), folklore in the context of this study as expressed in the belief in the concept of *mari-it*, serves as a regulator of natural resources since it limits people's activities in some areas which are believed to be the dwelling places of spiritual beings. As a result, natural resources in these places remain undisturbed or their exploitation is minimal. The following are some stories about incidents that happened in some places in Guimaras that are considered as *mari-it* and serve as a reminder to the people of the taboos on *mari-it* places.

Legend of Barangay Calaya. The story dates to the distant past, a time of glorious and happiness of the folk people in Baladyaw (old name of Calaya). The people were very much concerned with their daily lives, particularly on how to propagate their crops to secure a bountiful harvest. This barangay has few residents but there is an abundance of natural resources. The people are also united and very helpful to one another especially during any calamities. One day, a stranger visited the barangay with bad intention. He planned to dig and mine believing there was an abundant presence of gold bars in the barangay, and this worried the people. The miners cut down big trees and destroyed places identified as *mari-it* by the people. After this event, the barangay suffered famine because trees, plants and grass withered; rivers and streams also dried up. The people suffered hunger after what the strangers did to the place. The village folk asked themselves what happened to their barangay where all plants had withered or "*laya*". But after seven weeks of praying to Senora Delos Remedios, there was a heavy rain and plants and grass that had died started to bloom. Hence, the village folk decided to name the place Calaya, a way of remembering what happened to their place in the past. According to the older residents who knew this story, the destruction of the places which were considered *mari-it* angered supernatural beings living there and they made the trees, and other plants and grass to wither, and rivers and streams to dry up. Even today, some species of trees in the village are not cut down because they are believed to be dwelling places of *engkantos*.

This next story tells about a relationship formed between humans and a *divata* as told in the legend of Ayangan village in Sibunag, Guimaras. It reminds people that certain areas in the environment are guarded by environmental spirits, thus human beings have no right to do everything that they want.

Legend of Barangay Ayangan. In a peaceful place in the island of Guimaras, there was a very capable leader who takes good care of his people. Rumor has it that this leader was well loved by his people because he was deemed "*angayan*" (suited) to lead his people. He makes sure that everyone in the community partake on the blessings that come from their surroundings. This generosity has caught the attention of the fairy that lives in the big tree along the riverbank. One evening, the fairy appeared to them and told them that as a reward for their goodness, she shall bestow upon them gold that they can only "*ayag*" (sieve) in the river. The people were very thankful to the fairy. From then on, they were joyfully sieving gold in the river, until their place became renowned for "*ayagan*" (sieving) gold. As the number of people increased, a group of bandits planned to take-over the place while the people were exhausted from sieving all day. They planned to invade the place and kill the inhabitants, but because of the help of the fairy, their ill intentions were foiled, and all these bandits died. Their place also became renowned as "*binayangan*" because it became a place of wake (*binayangan*) for the tragic death of the bandits. In the fear that this tragedy would happen again, the fairy moved the gold that was sieved from the river to the mountainous parts of the island. From then on, the remaining inhabitants lived on their own. In the end, the elderly connected the stories of "*Angayan*", "*Ayagan*", and "*Hinayangan*", that became the village of *Ayangan*.

4) DISCUSSION

This paper explored the persistence of the concept of *mari-it* as a regulator of environmental resources in Guimaras Island, Philippines. Data drawn from the three villages showed that some communities along the coastline of Guimaras still adhere to the use of traditional fishing gears. Village folk believe that marine creatures like *pawikan* (sea turtles) and *lumba-lumba* (dolphins) should be protected and conserved. *Daga* and *tuob* are two rituals that are common in these villages. These rituals are performed to protect them from dangers that can be brought by spiritual beings and to have a bountiful catch. The village folk believe that God did not just create humans to inhabit the earth but spiritual beings as well. Furthermore, people from these three villages believe that some areas both on the land and the seas are dwelling places of spiritual beings such as *sijukoy* or *ukoy kataw*, *divata*, *murokpok*, *baua*. Some spiritual beings also inhabit some species of trees and mangroves namely *bubog*, *lunok*, and *bakhawan*. Village folk usually avoid contact and frequent visits to these areas because if they intrude on spirits' dwelling places, they could induce maladies, and even death and will demand for payment and propitiation. Also, the two stories presented showed how the concept of *mari-it* serves as regulator of natural resources since it limits people's activities in some areas which are believed to be the dwelling places of spiritual beings. As a result, natural resources in these places remain undisturbed and the exploitation is minimal. This study affirms the contention that folklore as oral traditions have a considerable effect on environmental attitudes and can, therefore, play a major role in ecological conservation practices. We must strike a balance between preserving these oral traditions but not let them prevent us from progressive development. It is recommended to make use of these oral traditions to promote ecological consciousness and awareness among people. We can incorporate these oral traditions to our ecological conservation practices that can develop further our environmental management efforts.

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