

# Landscaping and Locating Identity in the Mt. Malindang Diaspora<sup>1</sup>

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The paper examines the Subanen communities in the Mt. Malindang environs in the province of Misamis Occidental as they have been historically establishing their ancestral domain. It is argued that ethnicity, as basis of identity, cannot be understood in isolation from concrete historical and ecological processes. Drawing on an ongoing research on resource utilization and biodiversity, it focuses on the landscaping of four Subanen communities, taking into account their dynamic interaction with migrant settlers. Patterns of in-migration, nature of inter-ethnic relations, and the socioeconomic processes are described in the context of how these have implications to the creation of their landscape and identity claim or assertion.

## ETHNICITY AND THE MT. MALINDANG RANGE

Ethnic-cultural issues have remained latent and unresolved in contemporary times. Particularly in the context of the cultural diversity and the inter-ethnic dynamic in Mindanao, ethnicity has become an ambiguous basis of identity. Early anthropological approaches view ethnies as something given and permanent. Language, religion, tribe, territoriality and social organization are commonly used as distinguishing elements of an ethnies or ethnic group. These are, in fact, the very same stipulations in the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA). However, in the reality of the Mindanao diaspora, such distinctions are not heuristic, if not nebulous. Historically, ethnicity in Mindanao has been in a constant flux.

Notwithstanding what seems to be the fluidity of the concept of ethnicity and identity, the question of resource sovereignty is undeniably a fundamental basis of cultural distinction. Indigenous peoples have acquired such distinction in the global political order of the '90s largely because of their historical claim to their homelands and experiences of marginalization and territorial disenfranchisement. The location and nature of the resource itself condition the appropriation or claim of particular local or regional groups. The Mt. Malindang range is one of the early regions that served as crossroads of resource invasion.

During the period of Spanish rule, there was a persistent drift of Visayan in-migrants to the northern coasts of Mindanao, including Misamis Occidental, largely prompted by a search for better farming opportunities. Some historical accounts indicate that in 1903, half of the Visayan-speaking settlers in Mindanao lived in the northern provinces and around 70,000 had arrived in Misamis via Dapitan around 1900 (Noorduyn et al. 2002). Similarly, the arrival of the first Muslims in the region forced Subanen to retreat into the hinterlands. As early as this historical period, therefore, the Subanen have already been victims of incursions into their traditional homelands. As Christie (1909:12-13) wrote, "As the Christian Filipinos hem in the Subanuns from the sea on the north, north-east and south-west, so a line of Mohameddan villages borders the sea on practically all the south coast of the Subanun country and part of the west".

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The US colonial administration initiated 'pioneer settlement' in the entire island of Mindanao (Pelzer 1945). The immediate postwar period of the 1950s witnessed a massive exodus of both Visayans and Ilocanos across Mindanao, following the postcolonial government's transmigration programs. As a consequence, the Subanen were further forced to move to the interior as Visayans from Bohol, Negros and Siquijor and a sprinkling of Luzon migrants progressively dominated the coastal and lowland areas of Zamboanga Peninsula. The Subanen have been reported to yield land they used to till to the migrant settlers. As in the ancestral domains of other indigenous peoples in Mindanao, lands being cultivated or left to fallow were exchanged for what the Subanen had in scarce quantities - salt, kerosene, cigars, etc. Logging concessions further exacerbated the loss of ancestral lands of the Subanen.

## **CLOSING THE FRONTIER AND THE MT. MALINDANG NATIONAL PARK**

In 1971, Republic Act (RA) 6266 declared 53,262 hectares of the Mt. Malindang Range a national park and watershed reservation of which 45,000 hectares was still forested, the rest already opened and cultivated. It has several craters, the biggest of which is an eight-hectare crater lake at Duminagat. The lake has been an outstanding attraction and is believed to be sacred, particularly to the Subanen. The Park was one of the original components of the National Integrated Protected Area System (NIPAS), declared under Republic Act 7586 of 1992. Pursuant to the law on the NIPAS, the Mt. Malindang Range was declared a protected area (PA) and its peripheral areas as a buffer zone and is now known as the Mt. Malindang Range Natural Park (Presidential Proclamation 228, August 2, 2002). This has reduced the size of the park proper or the core protected area to 34,694 hectares, and the remaining area has been redesignated as buffer zone.

Protected areas are established to protect biodiversity. Mt. Malindang became a full-pledged protected area with the very recent approval of the Mt. Malindang Range Natural Park Act of 2004 (RA 9304, approved July 30, 2004). Some 80% of the PA's population are Subanens or with Subanen lineage but the proportion of immigrant settlers is still increasing. Such is the current landscape of the ethnic dynamics in the remaining forest resource in the Mt. Malindang Range as seen in the three upland barangays in the municipality of Don Victoriano (more popularly called Don Vic) and a barangay in Oroquieta City within this region.

## **THE SUBANEN COMMUNITIES AND HISTORY**

The 1990 population of Misamis Occidental is 424,365 of which 60,224 are Subanen. The coastal and lowland areas are dominated by migrant Bisaya and further inland, the foothills and mountains, Subanen communities are to be found (TESDA 2001). The name Subanen (also known as Subanun, Subanon, Subanu, Suban'on) means "river dwellers". This comes from the root word *suba*, which means "river" to both the Bisaya as well as to Muslims in Sulu. "Nen" or "nun" is an adjective suffix indicating origin. The Subanens were given their name by the moros and the early Christian missionaries. The Subanens considered themselves as *Tau bukid* or "people of the hills". Early researchers on the Subanens pointed to the well-developed swidden agriculture, alternatively called shifting cultivation, of the Subanens (Christie 1909; Finley and Churchill 1913, Frake 1957) where they selected a forest land, cleared it, planted crops, and after some two harvests, would abandon it in favor of another forest land. The Subanens, however, are frequently seen using the rivers to go from place to place, and this may have created an image of them as river dwellers. Their perception of themselves as *Tau bukid* apparently remains, as some key informants well into their 60s say that their children would prohibit them from speaking and acting like they come from the hills ("*ayaw pag-binukid*").

Historical accounts, however, point to the Subanens as dominantly occupying the coastal and lowland areas of the Peninsula during the Spanish times and the American colonial rule. They were forced to move to the hinterlands to avoid the marauding activities of some Moros, and eventually, the Bisaya from across different provinces in the Visayan region. As settler in-migration progressed, they were pushed further into the mountains maintaining their traditional swidden cultivation system.

From scant and oral history accounts, the four barangays - Duminagat, Gandawan, Mansawan and Mialen - are originally Subanen communities. Of the four Subanen barangays, Mialen is the closest to the relatively more urban Oroquieta City. The migrant Bisayan culture appears to have crept into that of the Subanen even as the Subanen dominated the area. The lake was initially referred to as *danao*, or *tubig sa tiwala sa kagulangan* (water in the midst of the forest) but the Bisaya equivalent is said to be *duminagat* which, accordingly, was how the early Bisaya loggers originating from the lowlands would call the lake. Eventually, the community was referred to as Duminagat.

The migrating Subanens, like other indigenous peoples in the Philippines, were traditionally swidden cultivators. They took into account several factors when they identified specific settlement sites in the Park region. These included the suitability of the land for farming, the availability of nearby sources of water, trees and even herbs to cure ailments, as well as accessible sites for hunting and fishing. As spirits are believed to be guardians of nature, *pamuhat* or *kano* (rituals) were performed to call on these spirits for guidance in determining the sufficiently endowed site. These spirits are also believed to have found their abode among trees, mountains, lakes and rivers. It was also customary, therefore, to perform rituals, such as the *pailis*, and *diwata*, before cutting big trees, before commencing the kaingin and the farming cycle, and even before fishing and hunting. The rituals seek permission for resource use and supplications for a bountiful yield. Likewise, these are performed for thanksgiving. These rituals were previously often accompanied by lavish offerings (*paghalad*) consisting of boiled rice, unsalted and half-cooked pork or chicken meat, eggs, local bottled wine and some cigars. Rituals were led by a spirit medium known locally as *baylan* or *suruhano*, who could either be a male or a female. The *baylan* or *suruhano* is placed in high esteem by the Subanens as s/he is believed to be capable of visiting the spirit world and contacting the spirits and deities to intercede for favors being asked. S/he is therefore one who is seen as possessing the wisdom and the character that befits the role. To facilitate planting and harvesting crops, *hunglos*, a form of labor exchange, is practiced among the Subanens.

## LOGGING AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGES

The Subanen communities are logged over areas that have been converted into agricultural lands and settlements. Around the lake where the forest was thickest, timber poaching accordingly started in the 1950s. The Bisaya migrants, who were more entrepreneurial than the Subanen, initiated timber trading. Eventually, logging concessions within the Duminagat area was granted in the late 1950s. Subsequent timber licensing agreements (TLAs) were approved for Gandawan and Mansawan in the early '60s. The logging companies hired some Subanens together with the Bisaya for their labor requirement.

The logging operations necessitated the opening of pilot roads to allow the transport of equipment and the hauling of logs. These called for the massive clearing of primary forests that paved the way for migrants from neighboring towns and provinces. Subanen in-migration substantially increased in the '60s. The income earned from employment in logging companies was supplemented by the planting of root crops such as camote and kanaka. These served mainly as subsistence crops. As rice was not

growing well in Don Victoriano, this has to be purchased from the cash income earned. The Subanens have been reported to have preference for rice over corn as staple food. Some enterprising women narrated picking leftovers of palay harvest in nearby Molave, Zamboanga del Norte to ensure that rice could be served, even if only occasionally, during meals. Extraction of non-timber forest products for cash and harvesting of forest-based resources supported their subsistence requirements.

Additional TLAs were granted in 1973, resulting in the employment of more Subanens and Bisaya in logging companies, which ultimately led to more settlers around the Park and more deforestation. This took place despite a legislated prohibition, embodied in RA 6266 that was approved on June 19, 1971. The TLAs in the Park were cancelled in 1982, but the logging companies were given a year to wind up their operations and to haul down previously cut trees.

Meanwhile, cash crops started to be planted in the Don Vic sites in the late 1970s. The relatively small population of settlers then, and the absence of information about RA 6266, still allowed the widespread practice of *kaingin*. Farm lots, therefore, were still fertile, and inorganic fertilizers were unheard of. The cash crops were mainly vegetables of the temperate variety, such as cabbage, carrots and Chinese pechay, and bell pepper. These vegetables were introduced by the Bisaya in the lower elevation areas and were found by Subanen settlers in the Park, through their relatives in the lowlands, to suit the cool Malindang climate. These were also found to command a high price in the market. The planting of these high value crops started to change the Don Vic landscape. The *uma* was slowly replaced by gardens. Production processes previously foreign to the Subanen took place. New relations of production, and even the value attached to land, changed. RA 6266 can be said to have hasten the process.

The employees lost cash income with the closure of logging companies. Such was replaced by further cash cropping, which meant additional garden plots, and inevitably, additional forest clearings. Spring onions started to be planted as well, and this provided good income, enabling the Subanens to repair their houses, using wood from the forest (*linaksi* or manually cut into slabs) for the floors and walls, and to replace the nipa or cogon roofing with GI sheets. Since the demand for timber did not wane, illegal timber poaching became rampant. Taking their cue from the loggers, the Subanens began selling their forest resources. While further encroachments into the forest have been banned, its enforceability has been constrained by the lack of logistics and manpower. The few (numbering only 19), ill equipped, and underpaid forest guards cannot effectively police 65 barangays in the vicinity of the Park.

A number of Subanens who previously worked in the logging companies chose to move to the lowlands to seek for other forms of employment. Lacking the requisites for employment in the urban sector, they ended up as hired labor in some small establishments. The low pay forced them to go back to the Park and cultivated their own gardens. Women who tried their luck in the nearby cities and municipalities became salesladies and domestic helpers. Some of those who were married to non-Subanen lowlanders returned to the Park with their spouses to also plant high-value crops.

It was also during this period that the peace and order situation in the lowlands became critical. Skirmishes between the military and rebels, identified by key informants as NPAs, had triggered evacuations - which eventually became additional in-migration - of Subanens or Subanen-mixed, also referred to as Libog (children of intermarriages) to the Park.

## CONTINUITIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Don Vic from the 1990s to the present is characterized by the intensification of agricultural production that radically resulted in changes in the production system and social structure and relationships, particularly among the Subanen. Reciprocity between and among Subanen and Bisaya still persists and they share seedlings and onion bulbs for their cash-cropping.

However, what used to be distinctly Subanen communities are now replaced by an ethnic mix of population. It is only in Brgys. Lake Duminagat and Nueva Vista that a Subanen cultural identity is still distinguishable. The relatively high density of households in Nueva Vista is one reason why new migrants preferred Gandawan to the more accessible Nueva Vista; the other reason is the relative abundance of cultivable lands in Gandawan. The difficulty in accessing Brgy. Lake Duminagat, as well as its cooler weather and stronger winds, make Brgy. Lake Duminagat a poor choice for settlement to new in-migrants.

The population growth has resulted in the decrease of traditional size of cultivated lands from four to six to the current average of two hectares only per household, further constrained by the legislations pertaining to the Mt. Malindang Park. Majority though has less land to till. Lands in Mt. Malindang Park are state-appropriated. Lands cultivated by households are therefore usufruct. To the Subanen, the lands are *inangkon*, most of them "inherited" from parents who were early settlers. Male and female offsprings have a right to "inherited" land. Families who have earlier settled in the Mt. Malindang Park have larger usufruct lands.

Swidden farming has been replaced with sedentary and monocrop farming system and the Subanens now begin to treat land as individual property as they could no longer open new frontiers. This outlook is also being strengthened by the NIPAS Act, which stipulates that those who have been using the land five years prior to its approval shall be regarded as tenured migrants. Local compradors and loans operations, previously alien to Subanen culture, prop the current agriculture production system.

The *pamuhat* or rituals are seldom resorted to nowadays, and only a few perform these and the rare performances would skip the previous offerings or *paghalad*, or would tone this down due to the increasing difficulty of accessing these offerings. There are a very few who reported using inorganic fertilizers and pesticides and yet perform rituals, saying that nothing would be lost in combining the modern ways with the traditional. This, they say, would ensure a good harvest, as they believe that success of crop production cannot be attributed only to the soil or the absence of pests. The spirits are still believed to take care of unforeseen factors. Others fear retribution once the *pamuhat* is completely set aside. The once functional and meaningful cooperative system, *hunglos*, is perceived no longer practical in favor of hired labor when necessary. They generally attribute the impracticality of the *hunglos* to the unpredictability of the weather and not necessarily to the changed production system.

In the mid-'90s, there emerged in Mansawan a Bisaya-based religious group called Piniling Nasud, which recruited more Bisaya to Gandawan and Nueva Vista enticing them with abundant and fertile land in the area. Rock Christ, another religious grouping scattered across Zamboanga del Norte, similarly engaged in recruitment of more migrants into the area. Local Subanen were also drawn into these groups. Subanen who have been brought to these sects have therefore shifted to a monotheistic religious belief that contrasts with their traditional beliefs in several deities. There is also the practice of

folk Catholicism or the combining of prayers and rituals, as is being done by members of the *Katolikano*, another religious grouping coined from "Catholic" and *kano* which means ritual.

Cebuano has replaced Subanen as the lingua franca. Even Brgy. Lake Duminagat Subanen who understood but did not speak Cebuano in the past have also shifted their lingua franca to Cebuano. Use of Subanen language today is generally confined to the baylan during the *pamuhat*. It is not uncommon now for the third generation members of Don Vic communities to ask their parents not to speak Subanen, especially in the presence of Bisaya. This is not out of respect for the Bisaya, however, but out of the apparent lack of cultural identification with Subanen dialect, "*ulaw mag-istorya'g binukid*" (It is shameful to speak using the dialect of the mountains).

Wearing of the Subanen traditional attire has been confined to the holding of the *pamuhat*, and only by the baylan. It has become a "costume" in the sense that it is worn only during festivities, for the purpose of dancing. A claimant of the Certificate of Ancestral Domain (CADC) from Mialen even referred to the Subanen traditional attire as their "uniform" when they attend CADC meetings or Subanen gatherings, adding that "*Maayo mi tan-awon ana sa litrato*" ("It is good to see us in that attire in pictures"). Clothes are now commonly *ukay-ukay* or used clothing from abroad, which are sold in the Nueva Vista *tabo-an* and in the sidestreets of Oroquieta. The *ukay-ukay* clothing, with its affordable cost, somehow reduces the discomfort associated with keeping the Don Vic settlers warm. It is quite a sight to see Subanens wearing the *Amerikana* or western coat, as well as winter apparel during the cooler or rainy days.

Despite the apparent weakening of the Subanen tradition, there persists a determined effort to claim their ancestral domain. The Mialen Subanen have filed for a CADC with the DENR in 1998. A similar claim is filed with the NCIP as Don Vic Subanen. As in many indigenous communities who have parallel experiences with the Subanen, contemporary claims on territory are made through their claims of ancestry (Resurreccion 1998, Duhaylungsod in press).

## CONCLUSION

Territoriality, as a focal basis for establishing and maintaining cultural identity and from which resources for physical survival are drawn, has been historically tenuous for the Subanen of Mt. Malindang. Their land-based aspirations have been continuously linked up with confrontations with invaders to their traditional homelands, including the State. While there is recognition of their ancestral domain surrounding and within the state-declared National Park, they remain in a marginalized position vis-à-vis their resources. Even within the more interior Subanen communities, the state declaration of Malindang as a national park has rendered their hold on their lands precarious, given the defined prohibitions and guidelines. As a consequence, their indigeneity and cultural identity as Subanen that presumably should have distinctively separated them from the other ethnies that settled in their traditional homelands, have been progressively weakened. Cultural differences and the sense of cultural distinctiveness appear to be fast eroding, especially amidst current realities where new forms of threats to their culture are continuously emerging.

Given the contemporary context of the Subanen communities described in this paper, the enshrinement of indigeneity and all the identity symbols and culture markers through the IPRA is, in all likelihood, resting on an "alleged community of culture" when put against its operationalization. The ongoing cultural "reawakenings" or "revivals" of indigenous communities and the claims of identity and

assertion of indigenous peoples like the Subanen, in effect, maybe taken as vindication for the historic years of disenfranchisement and deprivation of control of their traditional homelands.

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