“Kuglong” and “Salurej”: An Ethnographic Study of the Matigsalug Tribe

Edgar R. Eslit
St. Michael’s College, Iligan City, Philippines
edgareslit@yahoo.com

Abstract: “Kuglong” and “Salurej”: An Ethnographic Study of the Matigsalug Tribe explores a complex relationship in the local sphere of ethnic people. In concept, there need not be a conflict between literary and cultural studies. This study is not committed to a conception of the literary object that folk cultural studies must disavow. Folk and cultural studies arose as the application of techniques of literary analysis to other cultural materials presented in all media. It delights Folk and cultural items as real ‘texts’ to be read rather than as objects that are simply there to be counted as in cases with many folk and cultural studies. Hence, contrariwise, good folk and cultural study must gain better impact when it is studied as a particular social practice and works are related to other discourses as pointed out in this study.

Keywords: “Kuglong”, “Salurej”, Ethnography, Matigsalug Tribe

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Damiana Eugenio, a renowned Filipina folklorist, said that there is still no universally accepted definition of the word “folklore”. But any bit of knowledge handed down from generation to generation, which describes or depicts the beliefs and lifestyle of the ancestors of a chosen ethnic group, is rendered unique to that group, and is respected as folklore.

Folklore is usually transmitted by word of mouth. Oral traditions are very common among the indigenous tribes still existent in the Philippines. What most students of folk literature do, basically, is transcribe and interpret...
what is related to them by the storytellers of a tribe. The preservation of the knowledge of our elders can be carried out in many ways, and they are not inaccessible to anyone who would seek them.

Recently, interest in folklore seems to have diminished. With the swift pace of modern living, looking back at our roots through spyglasses such as the study of folklore seems more and more difficult, if not pointless. The Filipino youth, especially, are more concerned with looking forward as the rest of the world hastens toward a technological future. We do not want to be left behind, after all. But if we were never meant to look back, why does the ancient saying “Ang dimaron ong luming ong sapinanggalingan ay di makararatingsapa roonan (Whoever does not look back at a starting point, will not arrive at a destination)” remain in our lips? Why do we remind ourselves of the necessity of stopping to pay respect to our forebears and the advice they could still give?

This paper is dedicated to the presentation – or, should I say, representation – of native Filipino folklore. It aims to favor the lore of the Matigsalug people (I prefer not to call them tribe, for like the word ethnic, it may create negative connotation), as everyone is aware of the diversity of tribal affiliations still present in our everyday lives. It means to declare that the tales spun during one tribe’s journey through life and time is no longer for the enjoyment and convenience of the members of that tribe alone, but for the whole world. Hence, in this paper, I’ll be discussing my two days or 3-day encounter with the Bukidnon’s Matigsalug people.

**METHODOLOGY**

Conducting a study in Folk Literature pushed me into a higher plane of inquiry as I confronted “literature, culture and language” with my own limited cognition for sensing -- making me aware that my “serious” topic about the Matigsalug Chants as part of their lore is being highlighted. Here, other than observing the Matigsalug’s chants, their culture, utterances, and expressions, their way of behaving and doing in a certain place are also considered. Another focus is made by observing their Datus and chanters perform their chants. Since I don't have the luxury of time and for pragmatic reasons such as immediate respondents, I decided to explore the world of the Matigsalug-Manubos in Sinuda, Kitaotao, Bukidnon on July 12-15, 2013 in a very limited perspective. Together with my Professor Dr. Christine G. Ortega, her son Rex, her staff and my two other Ph.D. classmates, Hydee Villanueva and Estrella Alfabeto, we were able to conduct our objectives successfully. Who would want to discuss an encounter with a tribe to discuss about “lore” and “chants” in the open without feeling the eerie mode and negative reaction for a first timer like me? Yes, the topic would sound unusual and even disregarded by some as strenuous in terms of scholarly pursuit in the local setting because of its nature, yet, given the beauty of its existence, it tickles my nerve as well as the edges of my bones. I believe it deserves special attention.

Well, together with the whole team, in the conduct of my observation and interview, what I found tough was the subdual use of the flashy personal pronoun “I” and the possessive pronoun “my” in the presentation of my discussion and in the informal talks with the local folks I have interviewed because I was with them for three (3) days and some of them became my close acquaintance. Anyway, to avoid the inclusion of personal biases in this paper, my approach selected the impersonal and objective view for the necessary narrative depiction of their responses which I used in my discussion. Considering that language and culture orientation is just one of the many ways to viewing reality, this study adopted the narrative-descriptive construct. I normally believe that what people know and believe to be true about the world is “constructed or created and reinforced and supported as people interact with one another over time in specific social settings” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

For my data gathering procedure, I utilize the combination of information from my library readings, observations, interviews, and pictures to show the significance of the Matigsalug's culture as depicted in their chants and other practices which I found significant in the conduct of my study.
Objectives of the study

I admit an assimilation of multiple objectives sunk into my mind while doing this paper. I was confronted with the question(s) on how to answer my assignment in LS 312 (Malayo Polynesian Linguistics) under Dr. L. De la Cruz which my classmates and I were given task to do the comparison of cognates that can be found in the Matigsalug dialect to that of the Sebuano language. Second, the intention to comply my other project in LS 315 (Semiotics) under Dr. N. Balgoa about Visual Semiotics of which can be observed in the use of signs and symbols among the Matigsalug People. Such assimilation though did not hamper my mind to redirect my attention to discuss my narrative insights about my encounter with the Matigsalug people.

Overall, our main objective though was to listen to Matigsalug chanters, gather the narrative, and observe the evaluation of the aesthetic responses and validations of the audience over the chanting during a focused group discussion (FGD).

I affirm the relative truth of my description is based on my objective understanding of my sources and the respondent’s dynamism our interviews. My style of describing the respondents however, is hoped to capture some sense of objectivity for the sake of academic presentation.

Theoretical background

This paper is anchored on three theories. First is on Oral tradition. While folklore can contain religious or mythic elements, it equally concerns itself with the sometimes mundane traditions of everyday life. Folklore frequently ties the practical and the esoteric into one narrative package. It has often been conflated with mythology, and vice versa, because it has been assumed that any figurative story that does not pertain to the dominant beliefs of the time is not of the same status as those dominant beliefs. Thus, Roman religion is called “myth” by today’s dominant religions. In that way, both “myth” and “folklore” have become catch-all terms for all figurative narratives which do not correspond with the dominant belief structure.

“Folktales” is a general term for different varieties of traditional narrative. The telling of stories appears to be a cultural universal, common to basic and complex societies alike. Even the forms folktales take are certainly similar from culture to culture, and comparative studies of themes and narrative ways have been successful in showing these relationships. Also it is considered to be an oral tale to be told for everybody (Boscom, 1981).

Vladimir Propp’s classic study Morphology of the Folktale (1928) became the basis of research into the structure of folklore texts. Propp discovered a uniform structure in Russian fairy tales. His book has been translated into English, Italian, Polish and other languages. The English translation was issued in USA in 1958, some 30 years after the publication of the original. It was met by approving reviews and significantly influenced later research on folklore and, more generally, structural semantics. Though his work was based on syntagmatic structure, it gave the scope to understand the structure of folktales, of which he discovered thirty one functions. Derrida’s concept of archewriting does not obey the distinction between writing and speaking (Boscom, 1981).

Second is Cultural. Folklorist William Bascom states that folklore has many cultural aspects, such as allowing for escape from societal consequences. In addition, folklore can also serve to validate a culture (romantic nationalism), as well as transmit a culture’s morals and values. Folklore can also be the root of many cultural types of music. Country, blues, and bluegrass all originate from American folklore. Examples of artists which have used folkloric themes in their music would be: Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, Old Crow Medicine Show, Jim Croce, and many others. Folklore can also be used to assert social pressures, or relieve them, for example in the case of humor and carnival.
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Thirdly, is Rituals. Many rituals can sometimes be considered folklore, whether formalized in a cultural or religious system (e.g., weddings, baptisms, harvest and festivals) or practiced within a family or secular context. For example, in certain parts of the United States (as well as other countries) one places a knife, or a pair of scissors, under the mattress to “cut the birth pains” after giving birth. Additionally, children’s counting-out games can be defined as behavioral folklore. For the Matigsalug people, they used chickens for the Pamuhat (ritual).

Looking at these theoretical premises, one can deduce that the Matigsalog people in Sinuda, Kitaotao, Bukidnon were bonded in terms of culture and folk practices based on the above theoretical background, hence, they are material springboard in my discussion.

DISCUSSION

The Matigsalug people are group of people who are found in the Tigwa-Salug Valley in Bukidnon. “Matigsalug “ is a term, which means “people along the River Salug”. The Matigsalug men wear short tight-fitting pants that are of knee length and are hem and turbans for the head decorated with beads and fringed with goat’s/horse’s hair. They are the respondents in this study.

THE RESPONDENTS

To hasten my data gathering procedure, the research team and I only topped two groups of chanters (couples), two translators/interpreter (Datus Kiram and Briggs), and twenty audience (all coming from the same tribe). Heydee Villanueva, Estrella Alfabito and I served as facilitators during the discussions. See the map below for their location.

The Matigsalug People

Based on my readings, the Matigsalug people are the Bukidnon groups who are found in the Tigwa-Salug Valley in San Fernando, Bukidnon. “Matigsalug “ is a term, which means “people along the River Salug”. Oral tradition has said that their original settlement was at the mouth of Salug River, which is now Davao City. They are the splinter group of the Manobo immigrants (Malayo-Polynesian origin) whose last jump off area to the mainland is the Sulu archipelago.

Pressures from inland pirates caused the Matigsalug to move further up the Salug River, and even further inland also when the Muslims and others of Indonesian origin came and harassed them in their lowland and mid-latitude habitation. At present, the Matigsalug are around 100 kilometers from their original coastal location.
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Their Way of Life

The Matigsalug, in earlier years, practiced a hunting-and-gathering lifestyle with minimal agriculture efforts. Very recently, by the influence of migrant farmers and businessmen from northern Philippines and the island provinces, the Matigsalug shifted to sedentary land cultivation with more or less permanent villages.

What remains of their earlier lifestyle is now found in their cultural and artistic expression. This is evidenced by their costume of bright colored mid-rib blouses and short skirt, and with skillful hunting and gathering techniques. This early lifestyle is also shown in their music, songs, dances, poetry, epic, spiritual expressions and chants.

Their Clothing and language

The Matigsalug men wear short tight-fitting pants that are of knee length and are hem and turbans for the head decorated with beads and fringed with goat’s/horse’s hair. Although often classified under the Manobo tribe, the Matigsalug is a distinct sub-group of indigenous people from the Manobos. They speak the Matigsalug dialect which is different from the Sebuano language.

Datu Talingting performs the "Pamuhat" ritual. With him is Datu Lambu-Lambu. I later learned from him that the ritual was done to ask permission from the spirits for the success of our activities. Early on, we were informed by my classmate and guide, Estrella Alfabeto, to bring three chickens (color white, red and black). These three colors are very significant among the Matigsalug people for they imply spiritual and cultural significance in all their undertakings. In the case of the ritual, the red colored chicken signifies strength and bravery, black for benevolence and invincibility, and the white for peace. This, of course, associated with the different spirits to where the three chickens are offered.

After the pamuhat ritual, Datu Talingting requested us to introduce ourselves. Our professor, Dr. Christine G. Ortega introduced the team members to them while Estrella Alfabeto explained the objectives of our visit. After that, Datu Talingting recounted some of their tales. The elders or should I say Datus pieced together stories passed down through generations about Datu Gawilan, their supreme leader, their legends and the different spirits that guarded their place. I regret that I could not understand the original language they used, but it was fascinating to hear their stories got into my mind. The Datu in attendance were Datu Brigido Lacaran, Martin Dumacon, Benito Lumilang, Leo Eneran Lacaran and Manuel Lacaran. Later, I have known from Datu Mekeeyam (Brigs) that the Datus themselves can be classified according to the following categories: “Bagani” the warrior, “Potingno” (next to Bagani) and “Soloyno” the local setio leader. We had it done inside the Federation of Matigsalug-Manobo Tribal Councils, Inc. (FEMMATRICS) hall.
In the afternoon, it proved to be more exciting. At around 3 O’clock, we had the chance to listen to the first group of Matigsalug chanters, Datu Antonio Tandangan and his wife BaeLaunaTandangan. They presented 3 chants. The first one was about the “pamuhat”, followed by the adventure of DatuGawilan, and the “Eroplano” airplane Chant. What is notable about the three chants is that they don’t have definite titles—only descriptions. The titles were given by Brigido D. Lacaran or DatuMekeeyam (means attractive in English) who served as our translator. He made mention that the audience are more knowledgeable than the chanters in regards to naming the kind of chants presented by the chanter; hence, they are entitled and more capable in naming the chants than the chanters themselves. I got mental reservations about his explanation though. Other than the translations made by DatuMekeeyam, what is more alluring is the way how the chanters made use of the two ethnic musical instruments, the Kuglong and Salurej (see pictures next page). The chanters used them while they chant. They blended so well with the voices and words of the chanters while chanting. I got the chance to photograph and record their chants.

As observed, since they have to relate or commune with the spirits, indigenous peoples have evolved worship rituals. "Traditional knowledge is transferred through these rituals," said one of the young Matigsalug elder or DatuKiram. Through listening and participating in the rituals, young community members get to learn these rituals and appreciate their significance.

These rituals include prayers to the spirits. Interestingly, their chants contain bits of their epics, legends and stories, which embody a community’s whole belief and knowledge systems and history. Validating the audience’s feelings, thoughts, and appreciations about the chants were also conducted by having the FGD after the chanting. Their responses were all spontaneous that even the other Datus present during the event openly cooperated.

On the aside comment, for these chant rituals and belief systems to continue to be transmitted, indigenous territories, according to DatuKiram, should remain under indigenous peoples’ full control.

Unfortunately, these belief and knowledge systems are under threat from various factors. “The whole Matigsalug ancestral domain (which covers Davao City, Bukidnon and Cotabato) is sacred,” said DatuKiram. “But our ancestral domain has been and continues to be threatened by logging, mining, politics, and religion.”
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SECOND DAY (SUNDAY, JULY 14, 2013)

The second day is full of hope and excitement. We need to listen to the second group of chanters. That day, we had Datu Jesus Uban and His wife Bae Uban. They performed the following chants: “Pagsabuka” to mean invitation. Its meaning has the contention of inviting all Matigsalog people to unite all the time and the second chant is called “Panogontogon”. The “Panogontogon” is about a servant bidding goodbye. Please see the pictures next page.

![Datu and Bae Uban with their Kuglong and Saluray presenting their chants.](image)

As divulged by Datu Mekeeyam “Brigs”, as to why their chanters come in pairs, he said that they’re actually couples. They’re bonded through an ethnic marriage rite. For them to stay together as couple, they should possess the same “hiyas” or talent in chanting to stay longer; otherwise, one of them may be tempted to have a “duay” or second wife. This right, however, is intended for the male only and not for the female especially among the Datus.

That same day, we were able to watch some of the traditional dances performed by the children dressed in costumes, who had been choreographed by a teacher at Sinuda National High School. She’s Maribel A. Ugsimar. A baffle box was attached to a player which provided the music during the dance practice but it kept on getting disconnected because of the wiring. One tribal elder was also visibly coaching the children during the dance, as some of them forgot their moves. For awhile, it gave us instant amusement. But the good thing about this observation is the consistency of what they were doing. The Matigsalug people, be it young or old, were united in preserving their culture through their activities. Here are some of the photographs:

![The SNHS dance troupe together with Haydee, Estrella and Edgar during their practice.](image)
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CONCLUDING INSIGHTS

The Matigsalug Chants travel with great ease from one storyteller to another. Since a particular story is characterized by its basic pattern and by narrative motifs rather than by its verbal form, it passes language boundaries without difficulty. The spread of a folktale through chants is determined rather by large culture areas like that of the Matigsalug’s.

Getting back into my theoretical framework, I have seen that the oral traditions, culture, and rituals are evident and alive among the Matigsalug people. Their chants show them all. And with this realization, it made me recheck Bascom’s four functions of folklore to reconcile some of my misconceptions and reservations. Boscom postulated that: 1. Folklore lets people escape from repressions imposed upon them by society; 2. Folklore validates culture, justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them; 3. Folklore is a pedagogic device which reinforces morals and values and builds wit; and 4. Folklore is a means of applying social pressure and exercising social control. In a way, the chants that I’ve heard, echo the in-depth aspiration of the Matigsalug people in Bukidnon for peace and harmony. The messages from the chanter’s voice were so vivid and that their oral tradition speak not only of the repression imposed upon them by the society, reinforce moral values, and exercising social control but also validate their culture.

Here, their oral tale, is practically true both in time and place. Certain people tell very simple stories and others tales tell of great complexity, but the basic pattern of tale-teller, chanting and their audience are found everywhere in Sinuda, Kitaotao, Bukidnon. Differing from legend or tradition, which is usually believed, the Matigsalug chants give the storyteller absolute freedom and credibility so long as they stay within the limits of local taboos and they tell tales that please their audience even if others believe that they’re just but folklore.

Finally, as long as their Kuglong and Salurej go on playing, their cultural heritage will remain alive in everybody’s heart (in our hearts—LS 305 students). Their music and chants will tell us and the whole world of their being friendly, gentle, and peace-loving people.
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