

Describing the Meanings, Functions and Modifications of the Traditional Subanen Costumes

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Abstract

The traditional costumes of the Subanens are cultural expressions of this tribal group in Mindanao, Philippines. Retention of the authentic Subanen costumes is necessary for the survival of the cultural and tribal identity. This study examined the particular meanings and functions embedded in the traditional costumes and the present modifications pervading in the garments. A series of key informant interviews was conducted in Misamis Occidental and Zamboanga del Sur, with the Subanens selected as key informants according to their knowledge and authority to provide information. Results showed that the traditional costumes of the Subanens are representations of the beliefs, practices, and experiences of the natives. The garments in terms of their original designs, colors, materials, and accessories suggest for a variety of meanings and functions. However, modifications are apparent in the garments caused either by adaptation to the modern day clothing and style, cost of cloth and decorative materials, consent of tribal leaders, or lack of consultation by local government agencies with the Subanens as to the specifics of the traditional costumes. This study may enable the Subanens to realize the significance of their traditional costumes in fostering tribal identity and may motivate them to revive the use of replicas of the garments used by their predecessors.

Keywords: accessories, colors, designs, garment changes, tribal identity

Introduction

The largest tribe among the ethnic groups in the country, the Subanens or Suba'anun, are people who live near rivers in Zamboanga Peninsula (Lu, 2005). This indigenous group dwells in different geographical territories called 'banwas' with boundaries set by this body of water.

Many ethnic communities with cultural views on their costumes thrive in Mindanao. The Bagobos in the Province of Davao del Sur, for example, believe that their traditional clothing conveys a number of cultural meanings describing exactly what they are as a group of people (Quizon, 2007; Calefato, 2004). The Bagobos assert that their traditional garments do not merely serve the clothing purpose; they point to the tribal identity of the group (Quizon, 2007). Thus, maintaining specifics of costumes is important for the preservation of own cultural identity and legacy (Shoup, 2007; Alajaji, 2012).

Clothing conveys information and should be viewed as symbolic texts representing ideas and values (Curta, 2005). Palestinian costume reflects the wearer's heritage, ancestry and affiliations in terms of color and pattern (Stimson, 2011). Embroidered Palestinian dresses convey special meanings and symbolism that indicate the wearers' identity (Adas, 2002; Skinner, 2011). Similarly, Japanese Noh costumes are indicative of the country's complicated history (Updike, 2010). In Nigeria, costumes are worn especially on occasions when ethnic identity of people of Edo Kingdom is to be emphasized (Nevadomsky, 1995).

Ratha (1997) points out that through established clothing and bodily markers, tribesmen can be identified by members or non-members of the tribe. However, ethnic and customary dress nowadays are subjected to change making the retention of distinct identity of the clothing uncertain (Maynard, 2004). Modernizing the geometric motifs and icons of tribal costumes makes them more attractive even though the new appearance no longer identifies the ethnic group (Namiki, 2011).

In the case of Subanen costumes in Zamboanga Peninsula, less attention is given as to the originality and meaning of their appearance. Indiscriminate changes occur on the garments caused either by conscious or unconscious disregard of the cultural underpinnings. Contemporary Subanen costumes become indistinctive of the tribe, and the meanings that the garments embody become blurred. In festivals hosted either by local government or academic institutions, participants display varying costumes in terms of colors, design, and type of cloth despite emulating one tribal group

only- the Subanens. There appears to be a habitual inattention to the specifics of the costumes that are supposed to foster the tribal existence in the peninsula. This study was conducted to establish the cultural implications that the Subanen tribal costumes possess. It also sought to identify the inherent functions inhabiting the traditional costumes making various forms of modifications unwarranted.

Materials and Methods

This study used the descriptive research design utilizing the qualitative technique. In this design, mapping of different Subanen traditional costumes was done. The qualitative information on the meanings, functions and modifications of the costumes were gathered and presented. The key informant technique of Tremblay (1957) was the descriptive survey method used to obtain the information. The face-to-face key informant interview was used in eliciting information from members of the Subanen tribe, especially the tribal leaders called as ‘Timuay’ or ‘Gukum’ (male tribal leader), ‘Timuay Libon/Bae’ (female tribal leader), ‘Balyan’ (priest or tribal doctor),’ or ‘Gomotan’ (overall tribal leader), as key informants. The sampling design was purposive since the selection of the key informants was based on their knowledge of the Subanen costumes and the roles that the leaders have in the tribe.

The study included selected Subanens in the cities and municipalities belonging to the different ‘banwas’ or territories of the tribe in the provinces of Misamis Occidental and Zamboanga del Sur (Figure 1). Ozamiz City is found in Banwa Labo; Oroquieta City is part of Banwa Plilan-Layawan. The municipalities of Lopez Jaena, Plaridel, and Sapang Dalaga belong to Banwa Langaran. The municipality of Dumingag is part of Banwa Dumingag of Zamboanga del Sur.

The number of key informants from each ‘banwa’ varied, depending on the availability of the key informants. The researchers had an initial meeting with a number of tribal leaders in Ozamiz City and in Dumingag Municipality so that the objectives of the study could be presented. They signed documents of informed consent after understanding the significance of the research. Actual interviews with the tribal leaders themselves and other key informants followed according to the dates of their choice. In the case of key informants from Oroquieta City, Lopez Jaena Municipality, Plaridel Municipality, and Sapang Dalaga Municipality, the researcher consulted their ‘Gomotan’, the Provincial

Tribal Leader of Misamis Occidental, about the research that was to be conducted. The ‘Gomotan’ signed the informed consent and facilitated for the attendance of the ‘Gukums’ in the places aforementioned. The ‘Balyans’ who were present during the scheduled date first performed a ritual prior to the actual interviews. All other key informants signed the documents of informed consent.

The number of Subanen informants consisted of the following: twelve key informants from Ozamiz City; one from Oroquieta City; four from Lopez Jaena Municipality; two from Plaridel Municipality; two from Sapang Dalaga Municipality; and five from Dumingag Municipality. The Subanen costumes were examined in terms of designs, color, style, materials, and accessories. The data gathered in the different study areas were grouped together according to commonalities in terms of religious beliefs, practices, and experiences of the Subanens as signified by the design and colors of their traditional costumes.



Figure 1. Locations of study areas (Source:<https://maps.google.com.ph/> with modifications: red dots-Misamis Occidental Province; blue dot-Zamboanga del Sur Province)

Results and Discussion

Traditional Subanen Garments: Materials and Design

The origin of clothing (not simply ornamentation or decoration) is a human response to environmental conditions and the need for protection from elements which cause discomfort (Cordwell & Schwarz, 1973). With respect to the Subanen tribe, the key informants revealed that in the early times when the use of cloth was not yet known to the natives, the Subanens used the bark of the tree called “Hanagdong” to cover themselves. The men wore it in the form of ‘bahag’ or ‘g-string,’ while the women ‘tapis’ wrapped around their waists. Since the bark of ‘Hanagdong’ tree tended to stiffen and contort when dried up, the natives made use of the abaca which proved to be more convenient to use. They invented weaving instruments that could make ‘abaca’ in a fiber form. Since then, the Subanens wove for their upper and lower garments.

The informants claimed that the Subanens in the early times produced different colors using selected plants and trees to dye the white fibers of abaca. Yellow was from a ‘Galig’ tree; black from a ‘Bulante’ tree; red from ‘Marugo’ grass, and green from ‘Antebayotek’ grass. The Subanens pound the leaves of grass or pieces of wood from the said trees and boiled until they produced the desired colors. They soaked the white abaca fibers until the colors of the liquids were absorbed. The Subanens produced different colors of abaca fibers which they wove together to produce colorful garments. Although blue is observable in the old Subanen costumes examined in this study, the source of the color could not be explained by the key informants. This conforms to the assertion of the eighty-year-old ‘Gukum’ in Lopez Jaena that only the colors white, black, green, yellow, and red made the original Subanen garments.

The above-mentioned indigenous discoveries by the Subanens depict their collective ability and willingness to utilize the bounty of nature providing them not only food and shelter but also clothing. The preparation of colors for the beautification of their garments suggests that despite the lack of formal education, the Subanen predecessors were creative and resourceful.

During the interviews conducted, the informants cited that the development of innovative clothing started when ‘barter system’ took place with the coming of the Chinese. Aside from the use of abaca, the natives began using other types of cloth without changing the tribal appearance of their garments. However, the subsequent coming of

Spaniards and Muslims drove the Subanens far into the hinterlands. Being displaced from their original dwellings to avoid hostilities, they experienced the scarcity of clothing which prompted the male Subanens to go back to the wearing of a 'g-string,' without any upper garment. When geographical and political struggles ended, the 'barter system' or exchanging of goods with the Subanens resumed. Tan (2008) cites that the coming of Islam in the Philippines facilitated trading with intercultural and economic interactions for people thriving in different locations.

The traditional costumes worn by the Subanen men consisted of upper and lower garments with headdress and other accessories. The tight-fitting garment that was generally black made up the men's upper garment called as 'Sub' (Table 1). The clothing was only folded into two and then cuts were made on the sides to form sleeves and on the top to make opening for the collar. To seal the cut portions of the clothing, abaca fibers or thick type of threads with colors red, yellow, green, and white were sewn manually in alternate and conspicuous manner.

Aside from the pious signification that the black garments had, it was practical on the part of the Subanens to use them especially that tilling the uplands served as their primary means of survival. Alongside the use of abaca fibers, the Subanens had the eventual use of 'Tetoron' or 'Oxford' type of cloth which could dry up easily for immediate reuse. Thus, they clothed themselves according to the dictates of their beliefs and the necessity to meet daily needs. The plain cut of the garments could also mean that the Subanens viewed clothing basically for the physical and physiological needs of the body, thus their garments did not have elaborate designs.

Table 1. Traditional male garments of Subanens

Garment/Name	Description	Color of Clothing	Wearer	Occasions/Activities Used
Upper- 'sub'	- tight-fitting	-black	- all men	- household and farm activities, rituals, festivals, special gatherings
	- long sleeves			
	- decorated with thick threads with colors red, green, white, and yellow	- white	- 'Gukum' also 'Balyan'	- weddings, rituals
		- white	- 'Balyan'	-christening 'kanubata'
		-white	- all men	- 'buklog,' a weeklong festivity
Lower- 'salwal'/'sandyawa'	Types:			
	1. 'binugis'/'purol'	-black	- all men except the 'Balyan'	- household and farm activities, rituals, festivals
	- short pants			
	- tight starting from the thigh up to the hips			
	- loose waistline bust fastened using an abaca belt called "b'liangen"			
		-black	- all men except 'Balyan'	-'bityala' or a gathering intended for the settlement of an internal tribal conflict
	-white	-'Balyan'	-household and farm activities, rituals, special gatherings	
	2. 'pinusuan'/'kinantyo'	-black	-all other men	- wedding
	- long pants			
	- tight starting from the ankle up to the hips			
	- loose waistline but fastened using an abaca belt called "b'liangen"			
		- white	-'Balyan'	-wedding
		- white	-bridegroom	-wedding
		-white	-'Gukum'/'Timuay'	- wedding
		-white	- all men	-'buklog'

Table 1. Continued: Traditional male garments of Subanens

Garment/Name	Description	Color of Clothing	Wearer	Occasions/Activities Used
Headdress- 'tulapok' / 'mamandyo'	- square piece of cloth - medium size - striped			
	Types of folding:			
	1. 'tinugaya'			
	- 'tulapok' enclosing the head and tied at the left side	-combination of colors such as green, white, yellow, red, black	-bridegroom - 'Gukum'	-wedding -rituals and 'bityala' or a gathering intended for the settlement of an internal tribal dispute
	2. 'tinampad'			
	- 'tulapok' enclosing the head and tied at the front	-combination of colors such as green, white, yellow, red, black	-all men except bridegroom	- wedding and other communal gatherings
		- white	- 'Balyan'	- any special occasion or gathering
	3. 'manumpilot'			
	- 'tulapok' being folded diagonally and tied at the back	- white	- 'Balyan'	- when curing illnesses
Accessories- 'sabat' / "bitak'l"	-necklace made of beads	-Combination of black, white, green, yellow, red	-all men	-anytime
"g'lang"	-round-shaped bracelet made of gold	-golden yellow	-all men	-anytime or during special occasions
"sing'l"	- round-shaped anklet made of gold	-golden yellow	-all men	-anytime or during special occasions

Originally, in the Subanen tribe, a 'Balyan,' who served as a tribal doctor and at the same time a tribal priest, could be identified through the white upper garment 'Sub' and the lower garment 'salwal' he wore. The men's lower garments were of two types: (1) the 'binugis' or 'purol', (short pants), and (2) the 'pinusuan' or 'kinantyo' (long pants). As a 'Baylan' wore white 'sub' and white 'salwal,' even at a distance, the Subanens could readily identify if the one coming was a 'Balyan.' When attending a 'buklog,' a weeklong festivity of the Subanens, a 'Balyan' also wore the white upper and lower garments; other Subanens attending the occasion were likewise expected to wear the white garments believing that

their god could identify them gathered together in fellowship and unity. A 'Balyan' wore the white garments when invited to attend a tribal christening called 'Kanubata.' When he would perform a ritual, he also wore the white 'Sub' together with the white long pants/lower garment (salwal) called the 'pinusuan.' Even up to the present, the role of a 'Balyan' is to perform all rituals and to attend to the illnesses of his tribesmen, but not to officiate weddings which are done by a 'Gukum.'

On the other hand, a 'Gukum' used the black clothing for different special occasions, except when officiating weddings, he wore all white garments. When a 'Gukum' was at the same time a 'Balyan', he always wore the all-white garments. During weddings, bridegrooms also wore all white garments, the 'sub' and the 'pinusuan.' Grooms could be identified through their garments. Other men in the tribe could wear black short pants 'binugis' in different occasions but not during weddings. Tribesmen who attended weddings used the black 'pinusuan' as the lower garment required for the occasion and other special gatherings, while the short pants 'binugis' were for every day or casual wear. When a 'Gukum' was to settle a tribal dispute, he was to wear the black 'pinusuan' while others the 'binugis.'

The 'binugis,' the pants that were short and tight-fitting starting from the thigh up to the hips had a loose waistline that was to be folded, inserted and be tied with a native string called rattan. The other garment called 'pinusuan' was long pants that were also tight-fitting, starting from the ankle going to the hips, with the waistline that was also loose and therefore had to be fastened just like the 'binugis.' In the absence of garter the Subanens used a native belt called "b'liangen." It was made of abaca fibers with width of three inches and length of two meters with tassels on both ends. The belt bore the colors red, yellow, black, and white woven alternately. However, as for the present time no traditional lower garments for male Subanens exist.

The distinction of the garments observed before as to what was required according to the occasions the Subanens attended means that the Subanens were decisive in observing propriety according to communal judgment. They were firm in distinguishing what was suitable for daily use and what was proper for solemn and sacred gatherings of the tribe. This implies that despite being considered as indigents, the Subanens were endowed with a clear sense of understanding and adherence to their customary practices that all tribesmen were expected to abide by. As of

the present, the wearing of specific color and type of garments is no longer observed.

Still being used even up to the present is a piece of small cloth called 'tulapok' which serves as the headdress of all tribal men as an indication that they belong to one group. The way the Subanens fold the 'tulapok' depends on the occasion they attend. The folding can be of three types: (1) the 'tinugaya' for a bridegroom in a wedding, and for a 'Gukum' during rituals or settlement of disputes; (2) the 'tinampad' for all other Subanens attending any special occasion including weddings; and (3) the 'manumpilot' for a 'Balyan' when curing illnesses. These manners of wearing the 'tulapok' may mean that the Subanens are conscious about the identification of the wearers and the occasions being attended. The Subanens ascertain that members of the tribe are accorded with due distinction and recognition in relation to the other members of the tribe.

The native accessories that were used before by the Subanen men were the bracelet "g'lang" and the anklet "sing'l." Women also wore these accessories. The wearing of these accessories was indicative of the high economic status of the wearers. The necklace called "bitak'l" or 'sabat' that is still used even up to the present is made of beads of different colors such as black, white, golden yellow, and red made up the necklace. Traditionally, only Subanen men and women who had the economic capacity to acquire the "g'lang" (bracelet) and "sing'l" (anklet) that were made of gold could wear the accessories mostly during special occasions. With the eventual realization of the great worth of these accessories, the Subanens hid or buried them to keep away from the interest of lawless individuals. Consequently, finding samples of these accessories for present-day examination becomes difficult.

Even children could wear the 'sabat' or "bitak'l," but the 'pimulakan' (design) was simple compared with that of the old. Kuehling (2012) points out that, necklaces represent cumulative knowledge, wealth and prestige. Presently, the wearing of the native necklace is still common among the Subanens, especially by the tribal leaders in case of special gatherings. According to Greene (2002), tribesmen once defined the wearing of beads as one form of traditional costume jewelry but now it can be worn by anyone who desires.

The Subanen women wore the traditional costumes consisting of upper and lower garments with headdress and other accessories. Also called 'sub,' the white or black upper garments of the women were similar to that of the men's in terms of cut and decorative colors and materials

(Table 2). However, aside from the use of threads of various colors, the women made a profound use of glittering objects like sequins and small beads also of different colors.

Tribal women covered their lower bodies with the garment called 'tapis' and fastened it using the same belt used by men. The medium-sized, lower garment was made of multiple colors with length from the waist to ankle. In case of weddings, brides used the white 'sub' and the white 'tapis.' A Timuay Libon or Bae, a female tribal leader, used a white 'sub' and multi-colored 'tapis' as a sign of leadership in the tribal community.

Tribal women before wore the 'magpandyo' (headdress) which was a square piece of cloth made of abaca fibers woven together in different colors, green, yellow, red, and black combined. The cloth served as protection from sunlight when working in the farm or when walking to attend special occasions. The women removed the 'magpandyo' when they arrived home, or at venues for special gatherings. This implies that the headdress of the women did not bear any significant cultural symbol or meaning in contrast to the men's. When 'barter system' took place with the Muslims, the 'magpandyo' of the Subanens were small pieces of cloth that had the same type and color with the Muslim women's 'patadyong'.

Key informants attested that some mapped specimens of garments designed with parallel lines made of abaca fibers in different colors found at the front and edges of the garments, were approximately hundred years old (Figures 2-3).

Table 2 Traditional female garments of Subanens

Garment/Name	Description	Color of clothing	Wearer	Occasions/Activities used
Upper- 'sub'	- tight-fitting - long sleeves - decorated with thick threads such as red, green, white, and yellow	- black	- all women	- household and farm activities, rituals, festivals, special gatherings
		- white	-Timuay Libon/Bae	- wedding, special gatherings
		- white	- bride	- wedding
Lower- 'tapis'	-rectangular piece of clothing starting from the ankle up to the waist - waistline fastened using an abaca belt called "b'liangen"	- white	- all women	- 'buklog,' a weeklong festivity
		- combination of colors such as white, green, yellow, red, black	-all women	- household and farm activities, rituals, festivals
		-white	-bride	- wedding
Headdress- 'magpandyo'	square piece of cloth -medium size - stripe	-white	- all women	- 'buklog,' weeklong festivity
		-combination of colors such as green, white, yellow, red, black	-all women	-farm activities
Accessories- 'sabat'/'bitak'l'	- necklace made of beads	-Combination of black, white, green, yellow, red	-all women	-anytime
"g'lang"	-round-shaped bracelet made of gold	-golden yellow	-all women	-anytime
"sing'l"	-round-shaped anklet made of gold	-golden yellow	-all women	-anytime



Figure 2. A black female upper garment that is approximately a hundred years old taken from Ozamiz City, Misamis Occidental.



Figure 3. A white female upper garment that is claimed to be more than a hundred years old taken from the Municipality of Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur.

Colors and Meanings of Traditional Subanen Costumes

The traditional clothing of the Subanen tribe is black or white but is embedded with designs made of other colors like red, yellow, and green. Each color connotes special meanings (Table 3). The costumes with respect to colors and designs serve as unique cultural expression revealing the way of life of the natives as to their religious and ceremonial practices, beliefs in supernatural beings, association with the natural environment, livelihood and health, social structure, and tribal principle. Cordwell and Schwarz (1973) contend that costumes that shape behavior apparently do so in direct correspondence to values that indicate cultural focuses.

Table 3. Colors and meanings of the traditional Subanen costumes

Color	Meanings
Black	- A symbol of night as the time of worship of the tribe
White	- A mark of distinction of tribal authorities - A signification of the peace-loving personality of the Subanens - A sign of special tribal gatherings like the 'buklog'
Red	- A sign of blood for the defense of the tribe's ancestral domain - A representation of 'chili' in 'pangasi' as a tradition for tribal gatherings and festivity.
Green	- A representation of nature as the source of food, medicine, shelter, and clothing for the tribe's existence
Yellow	- An expression of the tribe's belief in supernatural entities

Na and Wang (2013) assert that black, as color of the garment, has a protective function. This conforms to the belief of the Subanens that the black garment can shield them against eclipse. More importantly, the natives believe in the existence of the supernatural being whom they call 'Apo Gambabaja' also called 'Apo Asog.' The Subanens worship this god during nighttime, making the black-colored clothing a representation to this religious practice. Up to the present, the Subanens do their worship twice a month- during 'Mandawan' or new moon and 'Subang' or full moon.

The white traditional costumes of Subanen manifest their hierarchical social organization. A 'Timuay Libon,' the leader of the tribal women, used to wear the white garment, and members of the tribe were expected to observe respect toward the wearer recognized as having tribal authority and function. A 'Balyan' used the white clothing as a distinction of his role in the tribal community- a healer of sickness and a medium for contact with the tribe's god and supernatural entities. Thus, the traditional costume was an expression of the Subanen political and social systems. Also, the white garment and white abaca fiber or thread on black-colored clothing represents the tribal principle of the Subanens who claim that they are peace-loving people who believe in fellowship and respect toward other people. They refrain from aggressive attitudes and hostile acts. The Subanens believe that conflicts within the tribe can be dealt with through amicable resolution. Nevertheless, since the Subanens claim that they are the first inhabitants of the Zamboanga Peninsula, they assert that they will

defend boldly their ancestral domain even with their own blood. This assertion is suggested by the red lines found on the their traditional garments.

Aside from red as having defensive connotation, the color represents the ‘chili’ in ‘pangasi,’ the native wine of the Subanens. The wine plays an important role in the tribal gathering like the weeklong festivity called ‘buklog’ which fosters camaraderie and unity in the tribe. One of the highlights of this special occasion is their indulgence with the ‘pangasi.’ This wine produces burning or hot taste since one of its ingredients is the ‘tapay,’ a baked mixture with substantive amount of ‘chili’ in it. The spice serves as a preservative for the native wine concoction that is made of cooked rice called ‘ginaman,’ boiled cassava, rice husks, and water kept inside a jar called ‘tibod’ and be seasoned for one year in preparation of one of the most awaited events of the Subanen tribe. Pitts (2003) cites that the communal rituals of indigenous cultures recognize the body as a significant resource for social and spiritual life.

Green is an indispensable decorative color in the Subanen costumes with a number of tribal communities reflecting the image of betel leaves on their white traditional garments (Figure 4). The Subanens customarily use green betel leaves as one of the ingredients of ‘tilad,’ a requirement in rituals in their communication with their god and other unseen beings. Also, old or young natives chew (‘mamâ’) green betel leaves as a tribal practice believing that these leaves have edifying effect as evidenced by the complete set of teeth of aged Subanen natives. Rooney (1993) points out that betel chewing is an old and widespread tradition of a great number of people in Southeast Asia. De Bortoli and Maroto (2009) note that green is associated with nature and environment. The Subanens assert that green plants have therapeutic effects on different diseases. They express deep attachment and dependence on the natural environment as source of food, medicine, shelter, and clothing. Cordwell and Schwarz (1973) point out that “clothing plays a symbolic role in mediating the relationship between nature, man, and his sociocultural environment.”

The yellow lines on the traditional costume connote that in the place called ‘Saglupan’ where the sun rises and sets, invisible yet powerful beings live. Apart from piety toward their god, the Subanens believe in the presence of unseen entities that also inhabit the earth. The natives adhere to the concept of animism postulated by Harvey (2005) - a ‘belief in spirits’ or ‘non-empirical beings.’ For other key informants, red, white,

yellow, and green are colors of the rainbow which is believed to be one of the belts of 'Si Bae Bulan,' a deity who constantly cooks and offers porridge to anyone who arrives in her heavenly place. The colors found on the Subanen costumes signify tribal beliefs in supernatural beings.



Figure 4. The image of betel leaf sewn at the back of the white garment.

Other Subanens assert that the different colors on their traditional costumes may also represent the colors of some birds that were once abundant in the forests as home of the early Subanens. The birds include the black hawk, the white birds called 'abucay' or the Philippine cockatoo presently considered as endangered species (IUCN, 2013), the yellow birds called 'antulihaw' or oriole which the Subanens believe to be capable of foretelling sunny or rainy seasons, and the green birds called 'langag,' 'koeliklia,' and 'lusisi' or parrot considered before by the natives as special pets that could be trained to speak. This association between the colors reflected on the Subanen costumes and those of the birds aforementioned shows how much the Subanens have appreciated and valued the bounty that nature offers.

Functions of the Traditional Subanen Costumes

Russian ethnographer Petr Bogatyrev (1971) asserts that "in order to grasp the social function of costumes we must learn to read them as signs in the way we read and understand a language." He adds that, "function of a costume is an expression of the attitudes of the wearers" and "the function may relate to the costume itself (as an object) or to the various aspects of life which the costume (as a sign) is indicative of." These views imply that clothing should be viewed not only on its surface

value, but also on its significance to the wearer with respect to tribal or social affiliation.

Based on the interviews conducted with the Subanen informants, the traditional costumes serve the following important functions: (1) a mark of tribal identity; (2) a symbol of authority; (3) an indication of place of origin; (4) a sign of attendance in important or special gatherings; and (5) a note for the avail of privileges. However, this is wanting in many respects. There exists a glaring shift in the type of materials, colors and designs, not doing justice to the culture treasured in the hearts of the Subanen.

Since the government has given recognition to indigenous tribal communities nationwide, the Subanens realize the significance of their tribal identity and the impact of their traditional costumes. The establishment of National Commission for Indigenous People (NCIP) has helped them become integrated into the political and social mainstreams of the society, fostering the tribe's distinct cultural identity. Common among the key informants of the study is the view that their traditional costume is a mark of tribal identity. It can indicate that they are Subanens or first inhabitants of the Zamboanga Peninsula prior to the coming of non-Subanen settlers they call as 'mga g dumagat.'

Holman (1980) states that "the language of clothing used in one social system, one situation, and one role was partially decoded and its meaning explained in terms of attributions to the users." For the Subanens, the wearing of traditional costumes especially by their tribal leaders signifies authority which commands respect and recognition from inside or outside the tribe.

Though the tribe itself is composed of twenty-four sub-groups, the traditional costumes can distinguish the Subanens from the other ethnic communities in the country. Different tribal groups in various locations possess distinctive costumes signifying the place of origin of the wearers. Shoup (2007) asserts that a well-exposed observer can tell the place where a person is from and whether one is a Muslim or a Christian.

The existence of modern types of garments provides the Subanens the option as to what to wear. Thus, they use the traditional garments only during special gatherings like meetings, festivals, rituals, and weddings. Horton and Jordan-Smith (2004) assert that costume as a semiotic resource can be used to communicate the concept of group affiliation. Cordwell and Schwarz (1973) cite that the lively spirit of the festival may be highlighted with the use of festival clothing worn only during special occasions.

The traditional costumes of the Subanens also provide them with special privilege. Especially when they wear the native costumes, they can readily avail of free medical services in public hospitals. Also, Subanen applicants are given the priority for government employment as long as they meet the necessary requirements.

Thus, the wearing of the traditional costumes can help the Subanens in different respects. Aside from the preservation of tribal identity and heritage, traditional costumes foster for group affiliation as a distinct indigenous group in Zamboanga Peninsula. The wearing of these garments likewise aids the Subanens in availing government privileges. These prove that the tribal garments of the Subanens are significant for their existence and cultural survival. Tarlo (1996) cites that “in India clothes have a special meaning since they are capable of retaining the very essence of the people who wear them.”

Modifications of the Traditional Subanen Costumes

Enninger (1982) claims that folk costume signs are distinctive and suggestive of specific meanings. However, the key informants of the study claimed of the gross modifications of the original design, colors and decorative materials of the supposed traditional costumes of the Subanens. If during the early times the Subanen garments were either black or white only, worn as clothing for everyday or special use, the red clothing has become vivid if not equally dominant in present-day Subanen costumes (Figure 5). The change in color of the clothing makes it indistinctive to that of the Higaonons of Bukidnon and other nearby provinces. This is exemplified in the upper costumes of the tribal women in Ozamiz City. Upper costumes provided to them by the local authorities have become red with conspicuous puffs on the shoulders, in contrast to the absence of cut from the sleeves up to the collar of the white or black old Subanen garments. This implies an oversight of the cultural identity that the costumes embody.



Figure 5. A contemporary Subanen costume from Ozamiz City, Misamis Occidental.

Unlike before wherein four colors of abaca threads were visibly sewn at the edges of upper garments for male and female natives, the costumes now bear red, yellow, and green laces instead of thread or abaca fibers. Likewise, some costumes for male Subanens make use of tassles attached at the back or at the edges of the garments, a kind of decoration that was not present in the garments of the early Subanen generations (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Tassles at the back and edges of the upper garment.

The ‘Oxford’ or ‘Tetoron’ type of cloth that the Subanens used alongside the abaca fibers for clothing is now replaced with the glittering Satin cloth (Figure 7). Yet, the former is indicative of the rustic life of the Subanens who make a living out from farming the vast mountain fields and fishing from the rivers, making the idea of the use of ‘Satin’ as a sophisticated type of cloth impractical and out of context. It appears then that the making of the traditional costumes for contemporary use is no longer based on what is according to the tribal existence but on what is attractive or appealing to the viewers. Kuper (1973) states that clothing as a bundle of cultural symbols has been dealt with somewhat eclectically and indiscriminately.



Figure 7. The use of satin cloth for tribal costume.

Traditional garments before were almost similar to one another because the Subanens themselves were the ones who cut and sewed their clothing manually. They also did the actual putting of sequins and beads on the garments according to how their predecessors had them. Unlike the present time, the making of the costumes is relegated entirely to dressmakers who might be unconscious of the cultural significance of their finished products. In fact, the wrap-around ‘tapis’ as lower garment of the females used to be from the waist to the ankle has become skirt with slits at its sides or back (Figure 8). Other skirts have the length just a little below the knees (Figure 9). Updike (2010) stresses that nothing mutates quite so quickly as fashion.



Figure 8. A Subanen costume with a slit at its back (Ozamiz City).



Figure 9. A red upper costume with a knee-length lower costume. (Ozamiz City)

The presence of beads on the costumes as a reminder of the ingenuity of Subanen predecessors in decorating their garments with indigenous materials is not observed anymore. Similarly, the sequins, including a variety of beads, could provide a historical account of the barter system that the Subanens ventured into with the Chinese merchants arriving in Zamboanga Peninsula, but these were no longer in place.

In the case of the Subanen community in Ozamiz City, the tribesmen pointed out that the glaring costume modifications are caused by the absence of consultation with the Subanens by local government authorities. During the previous annual festivals held in the city, the Subanens were simply given the costumes with colors and designs chosen and decided solely by the Office of Tourism.

On the contrary, the informants from the Municipality of Dumingag stressed that changes in the costumes are subject to the approval of their tribal council. A prior consultation is carried out by the designated government office before a sample costume could be reproduced and distributed to the tribesmen and even to the local employees of the municipality. This conforms to what Bogatyrev (1971) claims that folk costume is decided by the collective members of a group who decide any change in the costume.

The tribal leaders coming from Lopez Jaena, Plaridel, Sapang Dalaga, and Oroquieta, claimed that monetary consideration and influence from the external environment are the primary factors for the changes in the traditional or native garments that are now worn as costumes. Strict adherence to the supposed Subanen wear, with respect to the colors and designs entails money. Moreover, modern type and styles of clothing lure the Subanens to move away from what used to be tribal garments of the previous generations of the Subanen tribe.

The various reasons for the modification of garments prove that traditional costumes are endangered of being eventually stripped off with their original appearance. It is very likely that should changes in the traditional costumes persist, authentic replicas of the Subanen tribal garment will eventually perish.

This study did not include an individual recording of the specific years of the costumes the key informants wore during the interviews. It also did not delve into the various traditional garments used in festivals held in the research areas included in the study.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The colors and designs reflected in the traditional Subanen costumes are rooted on the ways of life of the Subanens, as to how they once lived and have survived amidst the passing of time. Once considered as everyday wear, the original Subanen costumes with respect to their appearance are not accidental but are representational to the unique existence of the Subanens as first inhabitants of the Zamboanga Peninsula. Though now used for special occasions, authentic traditional costumes can provide outright distinction of the Subanens from the rest of the aboriginal groups in existence. The traditional garments which possess specific cultural underpinnings require recognition that is beyond compromise. However, indecision by Subanens and non-Subanens alike for the retention of the exact Subanen costumes may eventually lead to the total extinction of the sartorial identity of this tribal group in Mindanao. The various modifications of the traditional costumes undermine the distinctive identity markers of the Subanens and the primary function of the garments- the preservation of tribal identity in garment or textile form. The present alterations may lead to the eventual loss of the costume identity of the Subanen tribe.

Subanen communities have to take the necessary step to produce and to use the replicas of their traditional garments to foster tribal identity and cultural preservation. Local governments and academic institutions that emulate the Subanen tribe take the initiatives to adhere strictly to the nuances of these traditional costumes through informative consultations with this indigenous group. Studies about the attitudes of Subanens toward tribal identification in relation to their own wearing of their traditional costumes need to be conducted. Similarly, there is a need to trace the history of the changes as to type of material used, colors, and designs of the costumes used during festivals outside of the Subanen community.

In general, the Philippine government has to perform active and decisive steps to preserve the Subanen heritage as well as those of other tribal communities in the country through constructions of museums in every district or province. Traditional costumes have to be displayed for awareness and appreciation of the contemporary generation. Similarly, other countries establish special institutions that would monitor and ensure the preservation of the authentic tribal costumes that truly represent various indigenous cultural groups in their respective geographical areas.

Acknowledgment

The researchers recognize the valuable assistance extended by Misamis University, Ozamiz City, for the conduct of the study. Due recognition is also given to Ms. Adelfa Kaamino, Federated Timuay Libon of the Province of Misamis Occidental, for her willingness to serve as a regular research assistant throughout the conduct of the research. Likewise, Gomotan Edwin Ending, Bayani Nanong, and other tribal leaders together with their other selected tribal members are deeply appreciated for their willingness to participate in this research and for the informative inputs they had given.

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