The Concept of Power Among the Lumad:
Mindanao’s Largest Indigenous Community

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While most studies on the conflict in Mindanao have been framed within the Muslim-Christian dichotomy, few studies have been done on the Lumad, the largest grouping of indigenous Filipinos. This paper is not about the causes of the Mindanao conflict. Several scholars such as Thomas Mckenna and Patricio N. Abinales have already produced such works. Instead, I deal with the Lumad’s perception of power. I argue that their concept of power is formed by their intimate relationship with a violent and harsh physical environment.

My purpose in writing this paper is to provide more information about the Lumad as a collective group. By using their idea of power, I hope to answer the following question: Will the Lumad ever form a united armed resistance against the Philippine government?

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section will introduce the Lumad. It will cover the origin of their name, composition, and traditional domains. The second section will discuss power while incorporating ideas from Benedict Anderson’s *Idea of Power in Javanese Culture*, Ileto’s *Pasyon and Revolution*, and Tony Day’s, *Fluid Iron*, among others.
Lumad: Born of the Earth

The Lumad are a diverse group of people. Despite their geographic and linguistic separations, they share a common bond with their ancestral land. Lumad literally means born of the earth. It is a Cebuano Visayan word that refers to the indigenous groups of Mindanao who are neither Muslim nor Christian. Mindanao is home to roughly 3,254,549 indigenous peoples. They comprise about 22.8% of the population. Of this number, 2.1 million belong to the Lumad group making them the largest grouping of indigenous Filipinos.

There are 18 Lumad ethnolinguistic group recognized by the Philippine government. However, there are probably about twenty-five or more. Owing to the isolation of these groups, the Philippine census has never been consistent. The Lumad are the Subanen, Manobo, B’laan, T’boli, Mandaya, Mansaka, Tiruray, Higaonon, Bagobo, Bukidnon, Tagakaolo, Banwaon, Dibabawon, Talaandig, Mamanua, and Manguangan.

Traditionally, the Lumad occupied most of the provinces in Mindanao, but are concentrated in varying degrees in the hills and mountains of Davao, Bukidnon, Agusan, Surigao, Zamboanga, Misamis, and Cotabato.
Power in Lumad Society

The Lumad perceives power as a divine energy that is both mysterious and intangible. It dwells in nature, particularly in forests, and manifests itself in trees, stones, animals, and people. It expresses anger through natural calamities such as typhoons, droughts, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, and happiness through bountiful harvests. It has to be constantly appeased.

Particularly significant for the study of power in the Lumad society is the Javanese idea of power of formlessness or intangibility, divinity, and manifestation in inanimate things in nature. According to Benedict Anderson, “power in traditional Javanese political thought is seen as an intangible, mysterious, and divine energy that animates the universe…[and] manifested in every aspect of the natural world, in stones, trees, clouds, and fire.”8 Power is also a concrete force that cannot be destroyed or created, but can be accumulated by concentrating power from the periphery towards the center. In contrast, Western idea of power is abstract and defined by people’s relationship to others.9

Reynaldo Ileto contends that the “Javanese idea of power derives basically from the animistic conception of a ‘formless, constantly creative energy’ permeating the universe, a conception which amalgamated with Brahmanic, Buddhist, and Islamic elements to produce a uniquely Javanese theory of politics.”10

To understand the Lumad’s perception of power is to study their culture within the context of their physical environment. Mindanao’s indigenous communities practice Kaingin (Swidden farming) also known as slash and burn. “Swidden” is the technical
term for the field cleared in the forest for a family’s annual cropping. A careful study of the positions of the stars will indicate when rice will be planted.\textsuperscript{11}

The Tiruray of Cotabato start this process by selecting a new swidden site based on its soil type, suitable kinds of growth, and availability. The swidden site used by the family the previous year is allowed to grow, not to be cut and burned for years. Once a plot is selected, the farmer and a few helpers clear the undergrowth to mark the site. This process is also ritualized to ensure good harvest. They wait for a sign of good omen from a call of a forest bird believed to communicate with spirits. As soon as the sign is received and the offering of rice from the previous year’s harvest is made, the swidden is slashed. The remaining debris will then be burned. The women plants corn as soon as the swidden cooled.\textsuperscript{12}

Power in Lumad society is a divine energy. No Lumad would ever begin the agricultural cycle or any other event without invoking the help of spirits. They believe that they are surrounded by a force that should be feared and at same time revered. This force is nature. Since nature is all encompassing, so is this power manifested in trees, stones, animals, and humans. Spirits exists because they control this power. These spirits or gods have many names that correspond to different rituals. There are spirits for agriculture, fertility, childbirth, marriage, and death. There are also inexhaustible lists of spirits that cause sickness, calamities, failure, and death. No one has ever seen these spirits, but everyone profess to have felt it. This illusiveness characterizes power as intangible and mysterious.

The idea of power among the \textit{Lumad} is formed by their intimate relationship with their physical environment. It is directly related to nature, because they have to contend
with a harsh and unpredictable environment. On the surface, Mindanao looks like a paradise teeming with life. Centuries of volcanic activity made Mindanao’s soil fertile. Thick forests once covered this island. In actuality, it masks an island frequented by typhoons, tidal waves, draughts, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions.\(^{13}\) Two of the biggest earthquakes and tidal waves that killed at least six thousand people and left ninety thousand people homeless in the Philippines occurred in Mindanao in the fifties and seventies.\(^{14}\)

For generations, the Lumad lived in this unforgiving environment and were able to survive and thrive. With all the calamities besetting Mindanao, they turn to religion to find answers. Spirituality gives them a sense of control over an entity/energy that is otherwise beyond their power.

Since the Lumad understands that nature is without a doubt unconquerable, those who have the ability to concentrate this force are believed to possess great powers. According to Cacayan, the “shaman woman who was once considered superior, may be equal to her male counterpart in status, but she is special in that she renders her gift not only through healing, but also through hard work, nurturance, creation, and peacekeeping.”\(^{15}\) The babaylan or shaman belongs to a special group of people that can communicate with spirits. They act as intermediaries between people and the supernatural.

A babaylan in Mindanao can be a woman or a man. On the physical level, men who become babaylan take on the feminine appearance by dressing in feminine clothing.\(^{16}\) According to contemporary Filipino scholars, a babaylan embodies both
feminine and masculine elements that transcends the physical but is deeply rooted to
nature.  

Every Lumad group has a babaylan. They are referred to as *Djin, bailan,*
*babaylanes,* and *mananambal* among others. Usually their position is hereditary, but
their powers are passed down directly from *Magbabaya* or their supreme God. Among
the Sama Dilaut of Tawi-Tawi in the Sulu Archipelago, the most powerful babaylan is a
woman who still attracts a following even after death. 

There is at least one babaylan in each clan. They possess different powers. Some
can heal, others can tell the future. They may share a certain view of the spiritual world,
but they perform rituals in distinctive ways. Since the Sama Dilaut do not have a
formal political system, the babaylan holds an important leadership role in their society.

The babaylan are the earliest form of public leaders among the Lumads. They
influence the decisions of datus or chiefs. Datus not only seek their advice for everyday
rituals, but also during critical battles. Their influence in local politics made them a
major threat to proselytizing Catholic missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth
centuries. Carolyn Brewer states that Christian missionaries with the collaboration of
Zambal men and boys banished the shaman women and eradicated their influence.

Lumad leaders are also expected to concentrate power from nature. Datus
possessing the magical powers of babaylanes are highly regarded. The datus of the
Manobo are appointed through their physical prowess. The datu is what Southeast Asian
scholars call a “man of prowess.” According to Tony Day, a man of prowess uses
strength and spirituality to attract a following and form a hierarchical state situated on or
near a mountain, which is both a symbol and source of supernatural power.”
However, physical prowess is not the only requirement to the datuship. The datus of the Dulangan Manobo of Northeastern Mindanao are chosen by their families because of their strength, wisdom, and magical powers. Chiefs who possess all these characteristics become very influential. They can also be a bagani or warrior, but they have to meet certain requirements to earn the following titles: Hanagan, Tinabudan, Kinaboan, Luto or Linamburan, Lunugan, and Lipu. The bagani is a violent institution that awards titles through victories in battles. They are not a military force under the authority of the datu, but a separate entity controlled by their clans. One of the ways they concentrate power is through blood letting.

The title Hanagan went to baganis who had killed five or more enemies during battles, but are not yet fully favored by the tagbusao or blood spirit. Tinabudan was reserved for warriors who already won divine favor and protection. They have passed the test by eating the heart or liver of a slain enemy in battle and experience trance similar to what babaylanes undergo. The baganis reach the third degree or Kinaboan and Luto after killing six to twenty five people and more than twenty-five enemies respectively. The next level, Linugan was acquired by chance when a warrior accidentally lanced a dead man in the house of an enemy. The highest title is accorded to the man who has killed the most enemies, probably from fifty to one hundred. Earning these titles does not assure ascension to the chieftainship. They also must have a following. Effective Manobo chiefs are those who are popular among their community.

Women called babaihon or woman datus have also ascended the chieftainship. Cacayan mentions a babaihon who is also a babaylan in a Manobo community in Lawa. She did not enumerate her duties but it appears that her strength is not measured by
violence, but in healing, wisdom, and performing sacred tasks such as planting, weaving, dancing, chanting, and mediating between people and spirits. 23

*Anting-anting* or amulets are part of datus and baganis possession. It is believed that amulets make them invincible. Ileto points out the importance of *anting-anting* in harnessing power among the Tagalogs. 28 Similarly, the Lumads use it to absorb an enemy’s energy. For instance, Manobo warriors are absorbing slain enemies’ power by dipping their *anting-anting* into their bloody hearts. Likewise, it is also said that baganis gain a defeated warrior’s power when they fall into a trance after eating his liver or heart. Trance signifies the entrance of spirits into the *babaylanes*.

Aside from possessing elements of power such as an anting-anting, a sign of power among *datus* and *babaihon* is their ability to attract a following. They must possess charisma, a characteristic similar to Javanese men of power, to attract a loyal entourage. According to Anderson, a leader’s inner being is manifested through certain signs that cause people to gravitate towards him [her], which includes tedja (radiance) that softly radiate from the person of power. 29

This radiance was exemplified in Datu Odog Ali’ of Pannihan. Datu Odog’s father died before he could assign one of his children to succeed him. Although Datu Odog had two brothers’ who had pleasant personalities, she was chosen to succeed the datuship. The people of Pannihan noted that Odog was a smart dresser, neat, pretty, tactful, and had worldly experience because of her trading activities. She was respected not only for these attributes, but also for her wisdom in deciding cases and arranging marriages after her father died. 30
Economically, it is wise to attract a following because it offsets the cost of being chief. Their popularity helps them shoulder the financial cost of their position, because members provide them with financial backing.\textsuperscript{31} Arsenio Manuel states that “they must be in a position to share with their people in the payment of damages that may arise from their own legal decisions but which the offender or their kinsmen themselves or the larger society itself cannot shoulder at the moment wholly.”\textsuperscript{32} The chief must also support a large number of daily callers that come to their house through the fees they receive.\textsuperscript{33} Today, they forgo such fees and accept free services such as clearing their land or giving them a share to their crops. The popular chiefs are showered with services. An unpopular chief may not receive the same favors.\textsuperscript{34}

Tony Day also comments that chiefs extend their power to their members through their protection contingent to their proper behavior.\textsuperscript{35} This is similar to Javanese culture where power is not a result of their wealth; rather wealth is the result of their power.\textsuperscript{36} Another sign of power in Javanese culture according to Anderson is manifested through the leaders’ sexual prowess.\textsuperscript{37} It is not in anywhere or at least in sources I found that sexual prowess signifies power in the Lumad society. Even though polygyny is accepted in some Lumad groups, it is rarely practiced for several reasons.\textsuperscript{38} First, it was expensive for the man to provide bride wealth to a second wife. Second, it depends on the consent of the first wife.\textsuperscript{39} Nevertheless, a datu’s wife can suggest to her husband to get a second wife to help her with her political as well domestic responsibilities.\textsuperscript{40} In some groups such as the Manobo, illicit sexual relations are severely punished and justice is implemented through pangayaw or raids by families of the aggrieved.\textsuperscript{41}
Despite the datus or babaihon’s powers, they still answer to customary laws upheld by the clan’s council of elders. Arsenio Manuel notes that “although the Manuvu [Manobo] datu is never a despot, with rare exceptions, he is more of a benevolent chief who has the well-being of the people at heart…There legal system is never punitive, except in rare instances. Rather it is corrective and remedial…The appeal of every Manuvu’ whenever there is a departure from normal behavior is to remind the citizen of his duty to observe the batassan and addat, an appeal that is also made by the old people when mediating…and by the datus themselves when pacifying would-be breakers of the peace.”  

The philosophy behind the Lumad customary law is based on appeasement to maintain harmony. However, Manuel argues that this high philosophy that governs customary law is a weakness in their political structure. He states that the Manobos are prone to appease any violator regardless of the crime committed to ensure that the peace of the community remains. As a result, the violator is not brought to trial or punished except on rare occasions. The violators are integrated back into the community after damages have been paid.

The customary law of the Manobos is representative of other Lumad groups such as the Tirurays and Mamanua. In Tiruray society, the aim of the legal specialist is to calm everyone and to keep the peace. Among the Mamanuas, violators are banished in serious offenses such as murder, vandalism, and robbery. Nonetheless, punishment can be avoided through certain rituals. Granted they pay for all expenses incurred. In lighter offenses, violators are permitted to participate in social functions, but cannot come in
contact with the rest. The main concern for the members is to appease the *diwata* or spirit and prevent any retaliation from the gods.\(^{46}\)

This goes back to my argument that idea of power among the Lumad is derived from their relationship with a harsh and unforgiving physical environment. Superficially, the *Lumad* justice appears to derive from the power of the spirits. The appeasement of the spirits takes precedence over the aggrieved, because of their fear of reprisal from an angry god.

It is however designed to ensure productivity in a hostile area where crops are constantly threatened by natural forces. The customary law is based on the power of nature. It is designed to make sure that there will be food to eat for every member of the clan. It also guarantees the basic needs of its people and to ensure survival before anything else. It makes sense that banishment is only applied when there is no more recourse to a violator’s crime, because every member of the community is vital in the production of food.

On the contrary, Manuel’s criticism of the Manobo’s political system and the datu’s lack of military arm are justified when understood in the context of Mindanao society today. Colonialism brought capitalism and hierarchy in a way that ancient Lumads could probably never comprehend. The customary law was created with cooperation and survival in mind and at a time when community and tradition came first before profits.

Finally, to answer the questions I posed earlier. Will the Lumad ever form a united armed revolutionary group against the Philippine government to reclaim their ancestral land? My answer would be no. Historically, Lumads have been recruited into
the ranks of Muslim armed groups, Communist-led New People’s Army (NPA), and the Philippine Armed Forces. They have also staged separate uprisings. Despite these involvements, to form a united armed separatist group is against their customary law. The datus, if possible, would opt for appeasement, which is still the case today. The formation of a united armed group of Lumad may be possible if headed by baganis using the tradition of panqayaw or raids, but this may not be popular among the datus which also compromise the council of elders.

Equally important to consider, is that the Lumads are a separate people forced to unite to voice out their grievances against the Philippine government. The term Lumad itself is born out of foreign impositions and oppression.

In conclusion, the Lumad will continue to struggle in the face of globalization. Many will hold on to their traditional way of living. Many more will be uprooted and separated from their lands. Some will integrate into the mainstream culture while others will join military groups to fight for a new system of government…And maybe, a small group of baganis are recruiting at this moment and using the ideas of their people to form an armed group to topple the government. Who knows, it happens all the time.
Notes


3. Ibid.


5. Ibid.


7. Ibid.


9. Ibid., 9


12. Ibid., 92


14. Ibid.


16. Demetrio, Francisco and others, *The Soul Book.* (Quezon City, Philippines,
17. Ibid.


19. Ibid., 148.


27. Ibid., 135-136


31. Ibid., 32.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.


39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 30.

42. Ibid., 352

43. Ibid.


45. Ibid., 62.

46. Ibid., 42.
Bibliography


