

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*, Ileta'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.¹ Mindanao is home to roughly 3,254, 549 indigenous peoples.² 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.³

There are 18 Lumad ethnolinguistic group recognized by the Philippine government. However, there are probably about twenty-five or more.⁴ Owing to the isolation of these groups, the Philippine census has never been consistent.⁵ The Lumad are the Subanen, Manobo, B'laan, T'boli, Mandaya, Mansaka, Tiruray, Higaonon, Bagobo, Bukidnon, Tagakaolo, Banwaon, Dibabawon, Talaandig, Mamanua, and Manguangan.⁶

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.⁷

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.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 plant corn as soon as the swidden cooled.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 exist 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 professes to have felt it. This illusiveness characterizes power as intangible and mysterious.

The idea of power among the *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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ 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 datu or chiefs. Datus not only seek their advice for everyday rituals, but also during critical battles.²⁰ 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.²¹

Lumad leaders are also expected to concentrate power from nature. Datus possessing the magical powers of babaylanes are highly regarded. The datu of the Manobo are appointed through their physical prowess.²⁴ 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.”²⁵

However, physical prowess is not the only requirement to the datanship. The datu 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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 datu have also ascended the chieftainship.²² 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. Iletto 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.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.”³² The chief must also support a large number of daily callers that come to their house through the fees they receive.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.³⁴

Tony Day also comments that chiefs extend their power to their members through their protection contingent to their proper behavior.³⁵ This is similar to Javanese culture where power is not a result of their wealth; rather wealth is the result of their power.³⁶ Another sign of power in Javanese culture according to Anderson is manifested through the leaders’ sexual prowess.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.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.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.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.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."⁴²

The philosophy behind the Lumad customary law is based on appeasement to maintain harmony.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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

1. Gloria, Heidi K. and Magpayo, Fe R., *Kaingin: Ethnological Practices of 7 Upland Communities in Mindanao*.

2. Manaligod, Ruffa, ed., *Tribal Filipinos and Ancestral Domain: Struggle Against Development Aggression* (Quezon City: A Tabak Publication, 1990), xviii.

3. Ibid.

4. Gloria, Heidi K. and Magpayo, Fe R., *Kaingin*, 13

5. Ibid.

6. Manaligod, Ruffa, ed., *Tribal*, xviii.

7. Ibid.

8. Anderson, Benedict R. O'G., "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture." *In Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. by Claire Holt, Benedict R.O.G. Anderson, and James Seigel. (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1972), 7.

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10. Iletto, Reynaldo, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*. (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979), 24.

11. Schlegel, Stuart, *Wisdom From the Rainforest*. (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 91.

12. Ibid., 92

13. Agoncillo, Teodoro, *History of the Filipino People*. 8th ed. (Quezon City: Garotech Publishing, 1990), 3

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15. Cacayan-Agnes N. Miclat, *The Shaman Woman's Dream: How Can We Worship God Without the Forest*. (Davao City: Hinabi Women's Circle, 2002), 33.

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

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17. Ibid.
18. Nimmo, H. Arlo, *Magosaha: An Ethnology of the Tawi-Tawi Sama Dilaut*. Manila, Ateneo de Manila Press, 2001), 152.
19. Ibid., 148.
20. Gloria, Heidi K. and Magpayo, Fe R., *Kaingin*, 138
21. Review of *Shamanism, Catholicism, and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines, 1521-1685*, by Carolyn Brewer. Babaylan Collective. <http://www.babaylancollective.com>
22. Manuel, Arsenio E., *Manuvu' Social Organization*. (Quezon City, University of the Philippines Press, 2000), 329.
23. Cacayan-Agnes N. Miclat, *The Shaman*, 35
24. Gloria, Heidi K. and Magpayo, Fe R., *Kaingin*, 134
25. Day, Tony. *Fluid Iron*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 21.
26. Gloria, Heidi K. and Magpayo, Fe R., *Kaingin*, 134.
27. Ibid., 135-136
28. Iletto, Reynaldo, *Pasyon*, 25.
29. Anderson, Benedict R. O'G., "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture." Quoted by Reynaldo Iletto, *Pasyon*, 24.
30. Manuel, Arsenio E., *Manuvu'*, 329.
31. Ibid., 32.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Anderson, Benedict R. O'G., "The Idea," 15.
35. Anderson, Benedict R. O'G., "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture." Quoted by Reynaldo Iletto, *Pasyon*, 24.

36. Anderson, Benedict R. O'G., "The Idea,"6.
37. Anderson, Benedict R. O'G., "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture,"
quoted in Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, 24.
38. Manuel, Arsenio E., *Manuvu'*, 33.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 30.
42. Ibid., 352
43. Ibid.
44. Burton, Erlinda M., *The Concept of Justice Among the Indigenous
Communities of Northeastern Mindanao: A Comparative Study of
Customary Laws and Resolution Conflicts*. (Cagayan de oro City, Research
Institute for Mindanao Culture, 1991), 61.
45. Ibid., 62.
46. Ibid., 42.

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