



## **Blaan T'logan: The Marker of Tribal Identity**

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### **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Aims:** To determine the identity and practices of the Blaan tribe of Kiblawan, Davao del Sur, Southern Philippines.

**Study Design:** This study used the historical approach.

**Place and Duration of Study:** The study was conducted at Kiblawan, Davao del Sur, Southern Philippines for 6 months.

**Methodology:** Historical approach was used through the tribe's oral tradition and elders' revelations, triangulated by the tangible and immovable cultural property.

**Results:** Just like the other tribes in the Davao region, the Blaan tribe has also their own unique beliefs and culture. The stories they believed in were obtained from their ancestors. Believing to these stories had become part of their daily living. To preserve their customary practices, the Blaan elders constructed the T'logan which the tribe considered a sacred community house, where several significant socio-cultural and political activities were held. The T'logan became a marker their identity and symbolizes community prestige, honor, pride and strong social cohesion. It was greatly valued by the tribe members since it embraced spiritual, social, and political significance. It was a place where disputes were settled, alliances were forged, marriages were officiated and other community rituals.

**Conclusion:** Cultural preservation during this technologically advanced era and liberalized time is not easy. However, the unity of the Blaan elders and members is the key to reviving and promoting

their beliefs and cultural practices not only for the tribe members but for the outside communities. Moreover, studying and dissemination of the Blaan tribe's customary beliefs and cultures is a contribution which the educational institutions can do best.

**Keywords:** *Blaan; T'logan; Kiblawan; oral history.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Blaan tribe is one of 11 tribes inhabit in Davao Region, in the Philippines. The name Blaan was believed to originate from the word "bla," meaning "adversary" and the suffix "an," which means "race". Blaan tribe are also called Bira-an, Baraan [1,2]. The Blaan is known to one of the most colorful and exotic tribes in Mindanao [3].

The Blaan tribe arrived in this previously unidentified archipelago about seven thousand years ago. They were one of the most significant non-Islamic indigenous groups in the Philippines. This tribe originated on the broad plain that spans southward from the shores of Buluan Lake to the Bay of Sarangani [4]. In Davao del Sur, Blaans live in the municipalities of Magsaysay, Matanao, Kiblawan, Sarangani, and Sulop; however, the Blaans occupy almost 90% most of the province of Sarangani except the town of Kiamba; the whole of General Santos City [5].

The Blaan tribe is famous for their rich and interesting heritage, ethnic arts and handcrafts like the brass ornaments and traditional beadwork. Colorful native costumes from abaca and decorated with embroidery, buttons, beads and heavy brass belts with numerous tiny bells are worn by the Blaan women, making their approach heard, even from a far distance. The sequin-like Capiz shells called "takmon" were used to give a distinct design and color to their clothing. The intricately beaded wooden comb and the *swat san salah* was a must for women [6]. The Blaans have developed their weaving method with abaca fiber. Elders perform Blaan belief system ceremonies prior to weaving, although only the weavers are aware of the weaving design. It is believed that the designs to be weave are passed down to the dreamer by the prulong (fairies), who are regarded nature's guardians. Their handicrafts and customary attires are worn at practically every ceremony and are regarded priceless assets that are offered as dowries during weddings and used to settle disputes between warring clans as payment for crimes done against a person or clan [7]. Blaans are also musically rich. Their

known musical instruments are made of wooden lutes, flutes, and bamboo tubes with strings are commonly with their rituals and dances which imitate forest birds during the mating season. Female dancers scurry to safety, burying their heads under the *malong*, a tubular cloth, but aggressive male follows them in any directions [8].

A Blaan community is organized under a local *Fulong* who has sovereign authority over an area depending on his own influence. This position is inherited by the firstborn [9]. Close family ties have always been recognized as one of the core values of Blaan families and are deeply embedded in their culture. The family usually lives within one compound. It consists of more than one spouses and extended relatives living together [10].

Blaan is one of the 11 tribes in Davao Region. Knowing their traditional beliefs and cultural practices was essential so that people of the region can appreciate their uniqueness compared with the other tribes. Moreover, reading the tribe's stories which reflected their traditions can give someone wider perspective of the world. As mentioned by Dehino and San Jose [11] studying cultural stories serves as a personal study and may give insights into the ulterior meaning and function of the tales. Thus, understanding their customary beliefs and cultural dimensions would become basis on how people could link with the tribe.

### 1.1 Research Questions

1. What are the myths and legends of the Blaan tribe in Kiblawan?
2. What are the cultural practices of the Blaan in Kiblawan?

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Research Instruments

The research instrument used in this study was a researchers-made interview guide. DBM and San Jose [12] said that interview guide, as an instrument, is used to 'dig information' which are

relevant to the study. In this study, the interview guide questions were based on the research questions.

## 2.2 Research Design

This study used the historical information and triangulated with the in-depth interviews conducted among the elder-participants of the Blaan tribe. It can be noted that Blaan tribes were found in the different areas of Davao del Sur, Davao Occidental, and South Cotabato; thus, their cultures may vary.

## 2.3 Data Collection

In the collection of information from the participants, the research followed the four steps mentioned by San Jose [13]. These steps were asking permission, formulation of research questions, conduct of interview, and analysis of information.

Asking permission. During this stage, the researcher asked permission from the National Commission of Indigenous People (NCIP). Under the Philippine law, all studies concerning Indigenous People (IP) was the concern of this office. The NCIP endorsed the researcher to the Blaan tribal council. After which, the research asked the consent of the Blaan tribal council and the elders regarding the conduct the study. Before the conduct of formal interviews, the research strictly observed the interview protocols such as confidentiality, withdrawal, and benefits. It was done to address the ethical guidelines.

Formulation of research questions. During this secondary stage, the researcher constructed the interview-guide questions. The interview guides were given by the researcher to the expert validators for face, content, and construct validity.

Conduct of interviews. At this stage, the researcher conducted the focus group discussions among the 20 selected elderly participants. The average age of the participants was 68 years old.

Analysis of information. After the interviews, the researcher transcribed the recorded information and submitted to a data analyst for interpretation.

## 2.4 Research Participants

The research-participants were purposively chosen by the Blaan tribal council based on the goal of the study. The council chose 20 elderly

who had the knowledge of the Blaan cultures.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Creation Story

According to the elders, Blaans dubbed the earth as "*Banwe* or *Tah Tana*." When there is sunlight, they describe the world as *Fye Tana*. It is *Se Tana* when the wind blows and the sky rumbles and thunders. If all while the sun shines and the rain falls at the same time, they call it *Mayaw Tana*. They believed in their supreme god *Mele* who created the universe. There was once a time when there was no land but only darkness. The land was known as *Tah Tana*, the sky was known as *Tah Labun*, the ocean was known as *Mahin*, the rivers were known as *Salwen* or *Bay Eel*, the stars were known as *Blatik*, and the mountains were known as *Bulol*. The changes in weather is seen also in Tagalog mythology. Mapulon, the god of seasons and a lesser divinities assisting Bathala, causes the unpredictable weather [14].

The elders believed that they were made from ashes and given a human form. Eyes and a nose were also made. When *Se Weh* designed the nose, he placed it in such a way that water could not easily enter it when it rained. The figures created from ashes were then cooked and transformed into human beings. The ones that are brown have been cooked to perfection. This particular aspect of creation has similarity with the Christian creation in Genesis, where Adam, the first man was formed from ashes.

### 3.2 The Good and the Bad Dieties

Creeks used to be straight, not zigzagging. *Fye Weh* wanted everything to be straight, with the streams as blagon (hearts), the sand as rice, and the water as oil and dugos, so that the people would have a good, smooth life. The bad one, *Se Weh*, however, wanted the creeks to be full of stones so that people would perish if they tripped and banged their heads on the stones. He also wanted the waterways to be in a zigzag pattern so that fighting tribes could hide. Because of *Seh Weh*, people have a rough existence. A good spirit has no enmity for mankind and does not inflict anger on people. On the other hand, the purveyors of death, known as *busaw* or *gaman*, are the wicked spirits. These spirits persuade people into committing crimes that result in death. It is simple to pacify the spirits of trees

(ampun kayo), water (ampun eel), or hills/mounds (amfun bungtod). However, if they are insulted, they may be given a token (damsu) to ask forgiveness, which is usually granted. According to Danchevskaya (N.D.) the existence of the good and the bad spirits are both essential for the understanding of the world, as without evil, humans would never know what is good. In native American mythology, it is impossible to draw a clear line between good and evil because they are intertwined, but also they also keep the universe in check.

### 3.3 Blaans God

Blaans' god Mele's has no gender and its features are unknown. Nobody has ever seen Mele except those people whom it was chosen to be his associates (Mabatun) in the eighth heaven. Mele is also called as *Ftabo to*, meaning "one who gives life to human beings." Mele created the horses and other animals so that people who have offended the tribe can pay for their wrongdoings. Mele expects all human beings who look to Mele for life without death to obey him (immortality). Disobedience to Mele is a crime that must be punished. Relating to the folk literatures of Luzon island, Scott [16] mentioned that Mele is known as Abba, the highest-ranking deity described as the creator of everything. His origin is unknown but this powerful deity could also be cruel to those disobey him.

### 3.4 Mlabat

The Blaans had a prophet named Mlabat, a well-known leader with numerous properties and money, as well as two wives. He called all of his relatives one day and told them that he had a dream that God was about to call him to the eight heavens. Mlabat will soon be a Mabatun, a God's friend, and will ascend to paradise. He urged his entire family to be ready for the event. Not all of his relatives believed him, and some had severe doubts. Mlabat's brother-in-law was the first to defy him, telling him to stop working on his kaingin and instead prepare to accompany him to paradise. Mlabat also warned his brother-in-law that if he sees splinters of wood from the trees he's chopping change into butterflies (kalbangi), he should return home right away because it's a sign that Mlabat is about to ascend to paradise. Mlabat's brother-in-law, on the other hand, continued to cut trees for his kaingin until late at night. When he arrived, he witnessed Mlabat's entire house raised from the ground, with Mlabat inside. Mlabat's in-law was transformed into a bug (miw). Mlabat also warned his sister-in-law

not to keep washing clothes in the river because he would soon ascend to heaven and take her with him. Mlabat informed his sister-in-law that turning her falo falo (a piece of wood used for destroying garments) into a fuh (bird) would be a symbol of Mlabat's ascension to heaven. The sister-in-law turned into a fuh for not listening to Mlabat.

Mlabat's second wife, whom he urged not to dig camote (sweet potato) any longer because he was going to heaven and would take her with him, was the third person who defied him. His wife insisted, saying she'd boil the camote so they'd have something to eat when they went to paradise. Mlabat warned her that when the camote's daludol transforms into kyawit (bracelet) and the camote itself transforms into byokong (shells pounded into lime for producing betel nut chew), Mlabat would ascend to paradise. Mlabat was gone when his wife finally finished digging for camotes and went home, as punishment, she turned into a donkey.

Mlabat had to cross through the seventh heaven (banwe fanggula) before reaching the eighth heaven (banwe fanggula). Reaching the eighth heaven, Mlabat had to cut his way through a thicket of yellow bamboo with many thorns; pass through Falimak (agong) – the gods told Mlabat that hearing the sound of his Agong meant he had already crossed the second heaven; Ye-el Banwas (water that gives eternal youth) – god told Mlabat to drink this water with his right hand. Mlabat regained his youth when he accomplished this. God commanded him to offer his first wife and children, who were with him, a drink with his left hand. His family was likewise given eternal youth as a result of his actions. Mlabat began to feel sorry for his relatives who had been left behind, and he requested if god could bestow eternal youth on them as well. Mlabat was also concerned that he had only heard god's voice and not seen god up to this point. God, on the other hand, urged him not to be concerned since he would soon see god. When he and his family reached the seventh step, they all raised their right hands to the sun at the same time. They all bent their heads when they saw god, shining in his splendor. Happiness, sickness, and anxiety were no longer sensed in the eighth heavens. Everyone had the appearance of Mlabat, and they all lived blissfully in the presence of god. This is where everyone hopes he or she will end up. God provided all Mlabat required from these eight heavens, known as banwe fanggula. God also told him that he would have to travel for 80,000 years to return

to Earth. This was due to Mlabat's concern for his people who had been left behind in banwe fanbaya (earth).

As a result, god enabled him to return to earth via a dream. When Mlabat witnessed his relatives' plight, he prayed to god to grant them various powers and make them amloos so that regular people would seek them assistance. This is why the Blaans believe that forests, streams, trees, stones, and other natural resources have owners or spirit protectors who must be consulted before using them. At the same time, the amloos' assistance may be sought for medical assistance or cures. The story of Mlabat revealed that somehow Blaans folk stories resemble that of the Christian belief [17]. Like Jesus, Mlabat is full of compassion for the people albeit Blaans and Christians beliefs are not comparable.

### **3.5 Caring for Pregnant Women**

The Blaan elders believed that when a Blaan woman's menstrual period changes and palpitation occurs, it's obvious that she's pregnant. The appetite grows as well, with a preference for sour fruits. They describe a pregnant lady as always irritated, having aggressive behavior and is quickly elicited. Because of the multiple changes occurring at the same time, people in the community easily misconstrued the situation for laziness. When a woman becomes pregnant, she seeks the advice of a midwife. When blood comes out the vagina after a severe stomach discomfort, it's time to celebrate give birth. The described the face of a pregnant woman ready to give birth transforms into something terrifying.

Pregnant ladies are given extra attention by the Blaans. Giving them all of their favorite foods is one example. Another way is to provide protection from evil spirits. The herbal combination worn around the belly is said to protect them from evil spirits. Tubli is a concoction made up of kalmingi or kisol (to ward off evil spirits), ufos tbo (to shrink the placenta and make birth easier), and tafong tambasal (to lessen the size of the placenta and make delivery easier) (same use the ufas tbo). In the event of an unplanned pregnancy, the woman wears a veil to conceal her stomach. Malong can also be worn as a cloak.

The Blaans have a different views on pregnancy. They think that no one should stand in the way of a child's birth. They also advise pregnant women

to avoid consuming "twin" fruits in order to avoid having twins. A pregnant lady is not permitted to tie a cloth or handkerchief around her tummy since this could twist the baby's umbilical chord, putting the newborn in risk. Also, passing behind a woman's chair while she is eating is forbidden. It is thought that the infant will inherit the characteristics of whoever sits in the pregnant woman's chair. Blaans visitors are expected to provide a present to a woman who has recently given birth to her eldest child; visitors are not permitted to leave the house until they have given the traditional gift. The newborn baby must wait nine days to be bathed for the first time, which is done using steamed baongon/lagundi leaves. However, abortion is common among Blaans, especially when a pregnancy is unintended. When there is no known father for a child or when the father is already married to someone else, abortion is done.

Pregnancy and childbirth are also fraught with superstitions. From dawn to dusk, bad spirits are everywhere, thus pregnant women are not allowed to leave the house, especially at night. Pregnant women are not allowed to leave the house when it is raining and the sun is shining at the same time (mayaw tana). The umbilical cord is severed using bagakay. After delivery, the mother is given a herbal drink made from maltaan, afnay, bamboo, nito/sluan, and kufil kwang roots. The mother could consume anything except bangulan banana, eggplant, patola, ube (yam), and gabi (taro), which could cause the baby to shrink or irritate the pregnant woman's navel.

During delivery, the expectant woman is usually cared for by her mother or grandmother. A community midwife may also be called upon to assist with birthing. If a midwife arrives late, he can only enter the house through the window to keep the mother and baby safe from illness. A mother who has recently given birth is not permitted to sleep for fear of dying while sleeping. The newborn is given a name by both the mother and the father. When the spouses visit the grandfather's home, the latter's spouse names the infant. The names may be inspired by sangteh or anggud, Fulong heroes, or tree names.

### **3.6 Construction of Blaan T'logan for Cultural Preservation**

It is a tangible immovable cultural property established in 2005 of by B'laan community of

Sitio Atmurok, Bulol-salo, Kiblawan, Davao del Sur. It was built under the leadership of Fulong M. Maguling, the chieftain and shaman of the tribe. The ownership of this structure is private and communal. It was built through community labor with funding assistance from the National Commission of Culture and the Arts (NCCA). Culturally, the T'logan is considered a sacred community house, where the several significant socio-cultural and political activities are held. The entire structure is made of wood (post, floors, roof and minimal walls) with a floor area of about 160 square meters approximately. It is raised from the ground of about 10 feet. The space below the structure is used as a socialization area. However, in the center, one can find a 3-dimensional relief map that shows entire territory which is recognized as the ancestral domain of the Blaan in Atmurok, Blol-salo, Kiblawan.

The second level with a wooden floor is considered as the meeting place. A third structure, forming an apex of the structure measures of approximate 3 x 4 meters (floor) and an elevation of about 10 feet. This space, akin to a prayer room, is reserved only for spiritual functions.

The T'logan is a marker of the Blaan's identity. It symbolizes community prestige, honor, pride and strong social cohesion. It is greatly valued by the members of the community since it embraces spiritual, social, and political significance. It is the place where disputes are settled, alliances are forged, marriages are officiated and other community rituals are held.

The establishment of the T'logan by the community leaders is a concrete manifestation of their desire to preserve their culture. Jasin and Mokodompit [18] pointed out that putting a structure for the tribe is a fundamental move to internalizing and preserving customary beliefs; Monyamane and Bapela [19] added that the structure allows tribe members to apply, practice, and enjoy their traditions.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Cultural preservation during this technologically advanced era and liberalized time is not easy. However, the unity of the Blaan elders and members is the key to reviving and promoting their beliefs and cultural practices not only for the tribe members but for the outside communities. Moreover, studying and dissemination of the

Blaan tribe's folk stories and customary beliefs is a contribution which the educational institutions can do best.

#### **CONSENT**

Consent letters were given to the participants; objectives, length of the interviews, and withdrawal clause were also presented. Likewise, the participants were assured that the information obtained were used for research purposes only.

#### **ETHICAL APPROVAL**

To address the research ethics, the researcher conducted protocols to handle the confidentiality of the participants' identity and the information gathered. Protocols were observed in gathering information. Permission from the National Commission for Indigenous People was obtained.

#### **COMPETING INTERESTS**

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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