

AN EXPLORATION OF THE TRADITIONAL LOCAL INDIGENOUS FOOD OF THE SUBANENS (A CASE STUDY)

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ABSTRACT: *The study aimed to explore the exploration of traditional local indigenous foods of the Subanens. The study utilized a descriptive-qualitative method of research employing a phenomenologic approach to research. Eighteen (18) key informants, who are tribe elders, mothers, and native cooks in the community of Subanen of Zamboanga, were interviewed. Narrative and thematic analysis was utilized to document the results of the study. Findings of the study revealed several traditional local indigenous foods such as glompan nog gabi (coconut milk with taro), glompan nog pusao (coconut milk with banana blossom), bu glompan nog paku (coconut milk with fern), gasi or pangase (rice wine), huevos lagah (boiled eggs), tuba (coconut wine), and pancit (noodles) with their significant historic meanings or values to the life and culture of the Subanens of Zamboanga was documented. Embedded in the participants' responses were the interpretative actions among the indigenous foods that constitute beliefs and culinary practices (past and present) of Subanens of Zamboanga City. A significant conclusion was derived that different indigenous techniques for food preparation are at risk of being forgotten due to social-cultural changes taking place in the community. The study, therefore, recommends that indigenous foods, methods, and techniques shall be recorded in reference guidebooks, with drawings or photos and the process of gathering and preparation. In addition, the policymakers introduce action plans or interventions that could help preserve IP cultural beliefs and culinary practices through the assistance of organizations such as NCCA and UNESCO for formal compilation. Further study on other indigenous food customs and culinary traditions could likewise be explored to be part of the Philippine Indigenous Cuisines compilation as recommended.*

Keywords: interpretative, culinary practices, indigenous techniques, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Cultures generate a feeling of identity, order, and security in people's lives. Through people's formal and informal interactions, culture defines the social structure, decision-making, and communication styles. Likewise, it could also influence people's attitudes, beliefs, practices, and values about food, good health, and disease prevention. Besides, it is a fact that culture and its heritage are significant in preserving vital and living elements of civilization. There is an underestimation of the risks of losing our cultural expressions, such as oral traditions, which have an intangible character. However, various factors could contribute to the extinction of indigenous people's intangible heritage and indigenous knowledge.

Even local communities often do not see the importance of preserving their cultural heritage and traditions. Sometimes, they consider their cultural heritage backward and hinder their ability to access "modern society" and economic wealth.

Furthermore, studies on food have illustrated broad societal processes as political-economic value creation, symbolic value creation, and the social construction of memory and identity [1-4]. The study of food among indigenous communities has been an area of interest among researchers [5- 8].

But not about preserving the indigenous foods, customs, and culinary practices that will form part of the culinary heritage contribution of native locals regarding their local identity. Studies have linked food's biological and nutritional aspects with its social and cultural symbolic elements, making it a central topic for ethnographic investigation [9- 11]. In which this research design is a discourse in the conduct of this study. The culinary industry and professional chefs are a new area of ethnographic inquiry.

Hence, one way of preserving local community treasures is through the preservation of indigenous food culture. Native food culture describes the mode of food production, distribution, consumption, and re-use of by-products of foods by Indigenous peoples. It also emphasizes food as an ethnic marker, construction of identities and cultures. People learn to eat their traditional foods, discover their culture, who they are, and who they are not. The acquisition of indigenous food culture is from indigenous knowledge, which is also grounded in indigenous worldviews. This study explored the traditional local indigenous foods of Subanen of Zamboanga City, intending to preserve these people's food culture, native cuisines, and practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A study examined the evidence of nutrition and epidemiologic transition in Inuit communities where traditional knowledge and traditional food are used as a basis for a community health-promotion effort to help enhance overall quality, including healthy market food preferences. The latest Inuit diet in the Baffin community involves a mixture of traditional and market food. Caribou was the most consumed traditional food. Overall, 41% of energy was obtained from conventional food, among 62% of respondents reporting traditional food consumption within the past 24hours in the community health screening. Simultaneously, 58% of adults said consuming an average of two cans of carbonated beverages in the previous day, amounting to 10% of energy intake. Furthermore, the percentage of n-3 fatty acids in plasma as a marker of traditional food consumption was adversely related to the percentage of transfat in plasma as a marker of unhealthy market food choices (Spearman $\rho = -.44$, $p\text{-value} \leq .01$). The data illustrate the replacement of traditional food with

unhealthy market food choices [12].

There is an association between the traditional foods processed by women of the North Eastern region to their socio-cultural, ecological, spiritual life, and health [13]. The processing and preparation of local foods show the creativity and treasure of food heritage among tribal women and their progressive learning to sustain the life and ecosystem as a whole. Looking to the diversities in local foods, an attempt has been made to explore the ethnic foods made of domestic soybean, bamboo shoot, tree bean, "lai patta" (leafy mustard), and "rai" (Brassica juncea (Linn.) Czern. & Coss.) from different selected tribes of Northeast India. Tribal women of the North-Eastern region have a wide variety of ethnic foods made of soybean, bamboo shoot, "lai patta," tree bean, and "rai." In each state, the procedure in the preparation of these foods is different based on the culture. There is variability in the materials used in the food, climate, and overall knowledge of the processing and preparation. The foods involved in the dietary system were nutritionally rich and culturally significant in various festivals and ceremonies. Ethnic foods prepared and consumed by women cannot be seen in the isolated mode. Instead, it is a complicated dynamic in which nutrition, health, food security, culture, ethics, subsistence economy, and ecological sustainability are integral parts. A policy framework with clear directives on recognizing traditional foods and associated knowledge systems are urgently needed.

The study on Bhils supports the survey data, which reports that their preference is on goat, chicken, and fish. Bhils consume the food cooked daily. Leftovers are only included sometimes in their next meal. All the family members eat their meals together in both the Panchayat Samities. There was no difference in the food pattern of males and females in the family. All the members eat the same kind of food. There is no compulsion to eat food on the same plate. Each member eats food on a separate plate[14].

Another study focused on indigenous people's cultural practices and beliefs in Dumingag, Zamboanga Del Sur. The triangulation method was utilized through a direct participatory observational approach using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The majority of the Subanens' educational attainment is elementary level, and farming is their only source of income. Their houses are made of light materials. Subanens had several instruments and dances, which are played and performed during gatherings and special occasions. They ate vegetables, root crops, and aquatic foods to survive. They offer native wine called "pangasi" during ceremonial celebrations, assemblies, and rituals. Their unique skill was making native products. The Gukom or Timuay was the highly respected leader of the tribal group and was empowered to lead ceremonies and mediate or settle tribal problems and disputes. The Shaman (Suruhan) is also recognized because of his capability to cure illness. He could see and talk with supernatural beings. Subanens manifested many differences regarding rituals and ceremonial celebrations. They had unique beliefs originating from their ancestors and were preserved for a long time [15].

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a descriptive-qualitative method of

research employing a phenomenological approach. It identified key informants of the study: the tribe elders, native cooks in the indigenous community of Subanens of Zamboanga. The researcher utilized at least seventeen key resource persons initially for the qualitative method through an in-depth interview but depending on the information saturation. However, additional key informants were tapped to supplemental information from the initial ten key resource persons using a snowballing technique.

For accomplishing this present study, In-Depth Interview (IDI) guide questions were prepared and utilized to gather information from the respondents.

Narrative and thematic analysis was utilized to document the results of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Subanens of Zamboanga City have their particular way of preparing local indigenous food. Table 2 presents the traditional local indigenous food/drinks of Subanens of Zamboanga City.

Table 1: Traditional Local Indigenous Food/Drinks of Subanens of Zamboanga City

Name of Food/Drinks	Other Local Name
Gata-Gabi	Glompan Nog Gabi
Gata-Pusao	Glompan Nog Pusao
Gata-Paku-paku	Bu Glompan Nog Paku
Rice Wine	Gasi or Pangase
Water	Agua
Coconut Wine	Tuba
Pancit	Pancit

The Subanens also have other foods which they usually prepare for everyday and simple occasions. The mothers prepared glompan nog gabi (gata-gabi). They could not live without vegetables and coconut milk.

They prepared the following ingredients: gabi or taro (leaves, stem, and roots), chili, salt, pepper, ginger, garlic, Lime grass, coconut milk, and dried fish. They prepared a big pan and put all ingredients into the pan. Placed on top the salt, chili, and the dried fish, put the pan into the fire. They waited until the coconut milk boiled. Once it started boiling, they waited again for another for 3-5 minutes to ensure that the coconut milk is well-cooked. Then, they removed it from the fire, and it is now ready to serve. I observed that they do not mix the ingredients while cooking, they only press the ingredients until it is cooked.

In another attempt to observe the Subanen mothers cooking, I witnessed this during the preparation of glompan nog pusao (gata-pusao). The ingredients are the following: pusao (flowers), chili, salt, pepper, ginger, garlic, Lime grass, coconut milk, and dried fish. They prepared a big pan and put all ingredients into the pan. Placed on top the salt, chili, and the dried fish, put the pan into the fire. They waited until the coconut milk boiled. Once it started boiling, they waited again for another for 3-5 minutes to ensure that the coconut milk is well-cooked. Then, they removed it from the fire, and it is now ready to serve. It is prevalent for them not to mix the ingredients while cooking; they only press the ingredients until cooked.

Before my last week, the "Boilan's" wife asked me to witness her preparation of bu glompan nog paku (gata-

paku-paku). They prepared the ingredients: paku-paku or ferns (leaves and stalk), chili, salt, pepper, ginger, garlic, Lime grass, coconut milk, and dried fish. They prepared a big pan and put all ingredients into the pan. Placed on top the salt, chili, and the dried fish, put the pan into the fire. Another thing I observed and is that all their foods have coconut milk and chili pepper. Even if they have shrimps or fish (eel) caught from the river, they still mix them with vegetables and coconut milk. Do you have a unique way of preparing and cooking foods and ingredients? I asked them. One informant replied that they do not wash the vegetables; they only clean them thoroughly to remove the dirt, cobwebs, or insects. How come you do not wash the vegetables? She explained that vegetables should not be washed because it will make the person eating the food have itchiness, and the leaves will be withered or drooped, especially the gabi.

I observed that when you prepare the chili pepper, you pound on them together with salt. How come it was prepared like this? There is no meaning, but it is a technique they use here so that it will be easier to pound on the chili pepper since it is no longer slippery due to the presence of the salt.

I also noticed that you tied them together when you prepared the gabi leaves; why is this so? They tied the leaves so that during cooking, they will not be over-cooked. So when they eat, the leaves are still whole and complete. How is the cooking done? It is effortless. Place all the ingredients in one pan, including the coconut milk, then start the fire. But they cannot be mixed; they can only press them so that the leaves will be soaked with coconut milk. While waiting for the coconut milk to boil, they can place the pounded chili pepper and salt, including the dried fish. However, there should be no mixing.

It only shows that in this indigenous group, all the cooking is done by boiling. It is validated by the observations and responses of the villagers in the Subanen community. Aside from the vegetables, what else do you cook here?

Sometimes they cook chicken, but still, they mix it with coconut milk and vegetables. Even shrimps or fish (eel) from the river still combine with vegetables and coconut milk. It is not complete if there is no chili pepper in the coconut milk. These food preparations affirmed what [16] expounded that food has eating codes that define an individual's place within society and serve to maintain social order actively.

People symbolically consume identity through their food and drink choices. Eating is an intensely personal act. What people eat communicates to others their beliefs, cultural and social backgrounds, and experiences. There are various reasons they exclude foods from their diet, from essential health necessities to deep religious and cultural beliefs. What is interesting is the function that food has in creating people's identities. It is across over psychological, anthropological, and also semiotically. It is how the meaning is being expressed. It is something that all humans share is also something that they use to differentiate themselves daily. And the same is true for the Subanen of Patalon.

The Subanen are also into the production of their wine. This wine which they call "gasi or pangase," shows the importance of wine in their celebration of special occasions

such as fiestas and rice planting. During the interview, I learned that rice winemaking is always part of any event in the village. The villagers explained the importance of the wine rice, which is part of every event or celebration in their village. There are three primary raw materials needed in the production of gasi or pangase wine. These are cassava tubers, also called "kamoteng kahoy," rice hulls (rice husks), and "tapay," which is a concoction made from 24 to 60 species of plant herbs.

Among the main ingredients, tapay (consists of 24-60 herbs) is the most crucial component in pangase wine production. The quality and spirit of the wine depend on how the tapay is made and its degree of proportion in the mixture. One essential ingredient that should always be present in the tapay concoction is *Blumea balsamiferu*, or "gabon." In its preparation, the Subanen tribe believes that weather plays a vital role in determining the quality and taste of tapay. Sweet or bitter tapay is produced during the dry season; sour or tasteless mixture results during the rainy season. The source of tapay is usually from the tops and roots of several herbs. The amount and specification of the mixture is a guarded secret passed to a selected few throughout the generations.

According to the "Boilan," it is not easy to produce gasi or pangase. The process includes collecting the primary raw materials such as cassava tuber, rice hull, and "tapay" concoction, comprising 24-60 species of plant herbs, peeling of the cassava tubers, and thoroughly washing it. It should be made certain that the cassava tubers are clean before cooking; cooking the peeled cassava tubers for forty (40) minutes; removing the cassava tubers from the kettle and chopping uniformly, and letting the cooked and chopped cassava cool for 20 minutes; pulverizing one (1) measurement of "tapay" and spreading it thoroughly on the cooked and chopped cassava tubers for mixing; mixing the cassava tubers and "tapay" thoroughly and applying the mixture into a flat surface area; putting the mixture in the rattan basket "bukag" filter and sealing it with banana leaves for 2-3 days (called 'inaman'); after 3 days, the stored mixture (called "inaman") is mixed with ¼ kg or more of rice hull; then, the resulting mixture is placed inside a ceramic jar (called "tibod or bandi"), sealed and stored for 2 weeks to 3 years for fermentation process; the jar is labeled with the date of storage or sealing; and after a week, the fermented product is ready for consumption. The longer the wine is stored, the more it can produce its juice called "lihing" (Subanen term) and taste better if stored longer for a few months or years.

I asked the informants what food do they prepare during Subanen weddings or "Bisala"? It means that what the Subanen are practicing is already a mixture of Christianity and their traditional beliefs. They were able to embrace their faith, combining both. Do you have drinks or juices in the community? Water is essential to them since it signifies the freshness of life. According to the informant, it gives a fresh start and cleanses the mind and the body. On the other hand, the wine from the coconut provides heat to the body and makes it active.

What about during birthdays or "kolombigi," what do you usually prepare? It is a must for the Subanen to get an animal not to kill it but to make a small wound for the blood to appear during birthdays. Even a drop of blood is

needed to be rubbed on the celebrant's body for him/her not to be sickly.

Another important fact that I learned is that they also eat frogs taken from the river. I asked them, what is the reason for this food? The frogs are used to help the males or guys increase their libido to improve their marital life.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After an in-depth analysis of the data gathered from the participants, the researcher was able to draw the following conclusions and recommendations that the different traditional local indigenous foods are the following: glompan nog gabi (coconut milk with taro), glompan nog pusao (coconut milk with banana blossom), bu glompan nog paku (coconut milk with fern), gasi or pangase (rice wine), huevos lagah (boiled eggs), tuba (coconut wine), and pancit (noodles). There are eight different local indigenous foods of Subanens and mainly used coconut as their main ingredients. The study underscores the need to recognize traditional food products, processes, and culinary traditions unique to several cultures and communities across the country not to bring these indigenous people's contribution at risk of being forgotten due to social-cultural changes that are taking place in many parts of the country and the world. The government, through the National Indigenous Group of the Philippines to spearheads the compilation of indigenous people's foods, cooking methods, and techniques as reference guide-books including its historical meanings and interpretation for the preservation of IP food beliefs and culinary practices through the assistance of organizations such as NCCA and UNESCO.

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