

Understanding the Birth and Death of Yakans: Towards Development of a Cultural Preservation Program for the Young Yakan Learners

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Abstract

The Yakan people has been known to be one of the cultures that have unique characteristics. Majority of them are living in the province of Basilan, the southern part of the country. This research primarily aims to document the cultural practices during the birth and death of Yakans of Basilan. It is a descriptive qualitative in nature. In order to meet the research objective, the researcher conducted a short community immersion and interview with the recognized leaders of the community. The data gathering was administered in three (3) phases; pre-survey, analysis and documentation and analysis and documentation. Upon the birth of a Yakan, paggungting or baptism of a newly born Yakan is being celebrated. This is the blessing of the baby Yakan to become Islam and to save the child from eternal damnation. During the pagtimbang (weighing), Yakans believe that some angels and spirits have certain ownership, and rights over children who happen to be born either during the month of "Sappal" or any Saturday of the year. One of the cultural practices on the death of Yakans is known as the pagkubul (death). Yakans believed that through this, the deceased is remembered and after burial, the one who wore the costume is already the recipient of it which serves as a remembrance of the departed ones.

Keywords: *birth, death, yakans, development, cultural preservation program, learners, paggungting, pagtimbang, pagkubul*

Introduction

The Yakans are the indigenous people of Basilan and live in the city of Lamitan. Even though the Yakans are Muslims, they still follow pre-Islamic religious practices like rituals for planting and harvesting, birth and death, and worship of spirits and ancestors. According to Jundam (1983), they speak a dialect of Sinama and Tausug called BahasaYakan. The Yakans are essentially farmers who cultivate upland rice, the most valuable of all crops, as well as coconut, cassava, abaca, lanzones, cacao, and com. In order to guarantee a plentiful harvest, upland rice planting and harvesting are accompanied by rituals and prayers. The region is home to a lot of coconut palms, which are harvested for copra and other uses.

The Yakans' life cycle is littered with taboos derived from Islamic and pre-Islamic beliefs. In order to avoid compromising the health of both the mother and the baby during conception, the mother needs to be fed everything she wants. The lekkad ceremony is held after the first trimester of pregnancy. At this ceremony, the panday, or village midwife, prays for the safety of the mother and child from evil forces while massaging the woman's abdomen. After a back massage, coconut oil and chicken eggs are used to relax the muscles in the midsection. Certain foods, like twin bananas, which could cause twin births, should not be eaten by a pregnant woman. To ensure that the unborn child will be smart, obedient, healthy, and live a long life, coitus is only allowed on Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays during the final month before delivery (Pamaman, 2011).

Sherfan (1973) also noted during his immersion that newborns are given names immediately after birth. Muhammad and Fatima are the most popular names for males and girls, respectively. As part of the pagtimbang rite, the child is placed on a scale supported by a blanket, and offerings are hung on the left to offset the child's weight. As the child is weighed, four imams lead a ritual prayer. The ceremony is also conducted when a child is born on an unfortunate day. The pagtimbang decides in favor of the baby despite the bad spirit Malikidjabaniya's claim to it. The pagtamat is the Quranic graduation ceremony. Prior to puberty, young children are anticipated to have learned to read and study the Quran.

Yakans believed that when a person is dead, his or her soul journeys to ahirat (judgment place), where it awaits its fate: whether it will go to heaven or hell. On the day of judgment, charitable deeds will be rewarded. Each sin committed on earth corresponds to a certain spot in narka (hell). This is the fate of adulterers, murderers, and

prostitutes who are not saved by Quran and Muhammad faith. Even faithful leaders who have sinned on earth are subject to punishment in hell (Jundam, 1983).

Several studies in the Philippines assert that the Yakan are one of the tribes with a unique culture, especially on the island of Mindanao. They are naturally artistic, as evidenced by their weaving and other craft skills. Thus, their culture is extremely diverse. Each society has its own culture, as culture is a broad notion that represents society. Components of cultural heritage are significant because they mirror society and its social traits. Kokko and Dillon (2011) assert that humans have generated certain life-sustaining components. It is possible to refer to a society's cultural legacy as the traditional components that have endured throughout history and connect it to a certain way of life. According to Tweed and Sutherland (2017), cultural heritage is an urban trait that represents the specific structure of a city and fosters a sense of belonging among its citizens.

Components of culture include social lifestyle as well as customs and traditions. Societies may feature specific cultural qualities, or they may integrate aspects of various civilizations. Culture, a unifying characteristic of society, can be maintained across time. The preserved cultural structures could be classified as cultural heritage. It is impossible to exaggerate the significance of cultural legacy to the survival of society. Efforts to protect cultural heritage and raise awareness have intensified in recent years.

According to Kadafar (2021), the topic of cultural heritage was incorporated into a number of courses offered through the educational system, and early awareness was prioritized. In this perspective, social studies is one of the most essential subjects. Consequently, cultural heritage was incorporated into the social studies curriculum and textbooks. It is crucial for the active teaching of cultural heritage to ascertain the extent to which cultural heritage elements are incorporated into the social studies curriculum, which is one of the courses with the highest level of content, as well as the cultural heritage awareness of social studies students. Cultural heritage is vital for the maintenance of a society's distinctive structure.

Additionally, Bozok (2018) argued that the elements that have endured for centuries constitute the common social heritage. Consequently, it is essential for individuals to acquire knowledge of elements of cultures other than their own. Therefore, they will respect diversity. Cultural elements of different cultures can be incorporated into curricula, textbooks, and in-class activities in order for students, particularly those of younger ages, to gain awareness and knowledge of other cultures, which will aid in learning the value of respecting differences. This will increase students' understanding and awareness of this topic. As a result, this study was carried out to serve as a baseline for a cultural program that could be developed to support cultural preservation among young Yakans in the Zamboanga Peninsula.

Related Literature and Studies

Yakans of Lamitan, Basilan

Yakan refers to the majority Muslim population of Basilan, an island south of Zamboanga City. The Spaniards referred to them as Sameacas and viewed them as unapproachable and occasionally hostile people (Wuff 1978, Haylaya 1980: 13). The Yakans have Malay characteristics. Small in stature, with brown skin, slanted eyes, and black hair, they resemble the Dyak of North Borneo, prompting speculation that they originated from this island (Jundam 1983:7). Lamitan is one of the seven municipalities that comprise Basilan. Lamitan's location and land area are roughly positioned between 122 01'05" and 122 02' east longitude and 6 31'37" north latitude. It is bordered on the west by Isabela City, the provincial capital; on the east by Tuburan Municipality; on the south by Tipo-Tipo Municipality; and on the north by Basilan Channel. It has a total surface area of 20,445 hectares, divided between 45 barangays.

Basilan is located in Muslim Mindanao's Bangasamoro Autonomous Region (ARMM). It is occupied by the Yakan, Chavacano, Sama, Tausug, SamaDilaut or Badjao, and Visayan ethnic groups. According to the 2000 census, the total Yakan population was 153,635, with 137,545 living in Basilan and 16,085 in Zamboanga City. They constitute 41% of Basilan's total population of 332,828 people, outnumbering the province's four other ethnicities.

The town of Lamitan was given its name by the first Spanish explorers from Isabela. Moros were celebrating a Mohammedan festival at the time the Spaniards arrived. When the adventurers inquired about the name of the location, they were informed that "Lamihan" is the name of the local festival. Similarly, the Spaniards misunderstood the response and named the location Lamitan. The Yakans, the indigenous people of Basilan, account

for 29% of the island's population and 64% of the Muslim population. According to Beyer, the Yakans are predominantly of Malay descent, with their ancestors believed to have been Indonesians of the short Mongol race.

Daily Survival of Yakans

Yakans are primarily farmers. Their land is rich in trees and plants that provide them with a source of income. Among them are coconuts, abaca, pineapple, lanzones, rice, and cassava. According to IngerWuff's documentation, some of these crops are grown on plantations (1970). The Yakans were blessed with a bountiful harvest by the abundant land and natural resources provided by the verdant forest and the abundant water supply that surrounded them. They are regarded as some of the most skilled weavers in the southern Philippines. In addition to weaving techniques known as *suwahpendan* (embroidery-like embellishment) and *suwahbekkat*, they produce colorful textiles with tiny motifs that are visually appealing (cross-stitch-like embellishment). The spaces on the warp are filled with intricate geometric patterns. A technique that has distinct categories for each motif and restricts the use of each category to a particular motif or design. The only significant craft in their community is weaving.

The Yakans accept labor as an inevitable component of daily life. The working hours are not precisely defined because the majority of jobs are not identical. According to age and gender, each is comparable to two facets of the other. When one family member is unable to work, another will take his place. Although there is a clear distinction between the work of men and women, a woman will perform a man's duties when he is absent. There is uncertainty regarding the future of employment. Work is divided. People do not desire solitude. It is common for a number of relatives or neighbors to assemble at one location, then another, for planting, harvesting, or even repetitive tasks. The Yakans prefer this arrangement to working independently on the same task. If a Yakan farmer believes he has enough food for his family and has sold enough for profit, he will allow the remaining crops to rot in the field.

At home, women prepare food and weave fabric. The Yakans are regarded as one of the Philippines' greatest weavers. If not involved in agriculture, they work in weaving. One month is required to complete a single piece of Yakan-woven fabric due to its fineness. The major colors are violet, turquoise, green, yellow, and red, and typical patterns include stripes and squares. Yakans are also great mat weavers. The leaves of buri trees or pandan, which are abundant in the area, are used to create colorful mats with exquisite designs.

The Yakan Life and Features

The Yakan reflect Malay characteristics. Small-framed with brown skin, slanted eyes, and black hair, they resemble the Dyak of North Borneo, prompting the hypothesis that they are descended from this tribe. They speak a language known as BahasaYakan, which is related to SamaDilaut and a dialect of Sama and Tausug. These languages all belong to the Austronesian Malayo-Polynesian language family. BahasaYakan is written using the Arabic script, adapted for sounds not found in Arabic.

The number of children in the Yakan family ranges from one to ten. Typically, there is a one- to two-year gap between children. Contraception is impractical in Yakan communities. When children arrive, they are welcomed and received with open arms. The Yakans prioritize family. They accommodate their children. The mother is anticipated to spend considerable time nursing the infant. Children love being with grownups and listening to their conversations, which are not modified to appeal to their age group. Other siblings are responsible for male or female younger siblings. In the Yakan family, the children must obey the mother, while the father is the authoritative figure. The younger brothers must obey the older brothers. A wife serves her husband without questioning his actions. When Yakan children marry, it is traditional for them to reside with their parents for a time before seeking independence.

The panday, who helps the woman who is about to give birth, is also aided by the pregnant mother's mother or by any woman with prior expertise in childbirth. As soon as the infant is born, the first words uttered spoken by those presents are "Ya Allah, yarasallullah" (Allah, we thank you for giving us a child), so that the child hears the holy words of Islam first. Apart from black and white, diapers can be found in any hue. Bamboo splints with sharpened edges are used to cut the umbilical cord. These and the placenta are buried close to the house, preferably beneath a coconut tree, so that the child will live and perish in its native land. (Pamaran, 2011).

Moreover, Jundam (1983) showed that both boys and girls undergo pag-islam (circumcision) at a young age. The circumcision, which is accepted as a religious and cleansing ceremony, prepares the boy for adult obligations and marriage. The Yakan female circumcision, *pagsunnat*, is performed between the ages of four and five. In preparation for the ceremony, a *tawal* (whispered prayer) is spoken in the child's ear during the *pagpandih* (bathing process). The

girl's pag-islam consists of carefully scraping the labia majora. The Kah Dayang (circumciser) ensures that no bleeding occurs. Another tawal is spoken, and the female circumcision ceremony concludes. Girls are not permitted to disclose the start of their first menstruation to anybody other than their mother and sisters. Young women wrap an anting-anting around their hips to conceal their virginity and increase their sexual allure. In the past, teeth filing (maglegnas) was performed with the beginning of puberty.

Yakans are a peaceful people that are willing to battle when challenged. They always carry a Yakanpira, kalis (kris), or barung for self-defense. Before adopting the Islam of Mohammed, the Yakans were pagans. Indonesia only recently converted to Islam. The "langgal" church has always been the focal point of Yakan communal life and the hub of religious practice. The head is the "Imam," a cleric who serves as both the religious and community leader. The Imam is seated on a rug with the Qur'an on a pillow in front of him. The provision of water for washing purposes. A drum, dyabar, summons Yakans to prayer. Morning prayer (subhu) is performed at 5:00 AM (2 rakaats), noon prayer (dzuhur) is performed at 12:00 PM (4 rakaats), afternoon prayer (azur) is performed at 4:00 PM (4 rakaats), sunset prayer (magrib) is performed at 6:15 PM (3 rakaats), and evening prayer (isa) is performed at 7:25 PM (4 rakaats).

Rakaats signifies bowing. The Yakans observe the month of Ramadan (Bulan Puasa) from the new moon until the following new moon. From sunrise to sunset, everyone refrains from eating, drinking, smoking, chewing betel nuts, and playing. Only those who are ill, menstruating, or pregnant are excluded. The authority among the Yakans resides in the chief. The headman is the group's chieftain. The laws are his, as a member of the community. When problems emerge, the village chief advises and represents his people in reaching an acceptable resolution.

During the months when there is no labor in the fields, the men remain at home to entertain guests, pay visits, or gamble. Positive discourse is always appreciated. The practices of cockfighting and bullfighting are recreational. In addition, they like activities like weaving, gardening, playing musical instruments, and dancing. The majority of Yakans cannot read, hence newspapers are rarely found in their houses. Yakans spend their leisure time engaging in economic and aesthetic interests. They speak "Bahasa" Yakan, which is a variety of the Samal or Siana and Lansug languages (Jundam 1983; b 7-8). It is written in a refined Malayan Arabic script, with adaptations to sounds not found in Arabic (Sherfan 1976).

On the Cultural Preservation

In his study, Kadafar (2021) discovered that the majority of students considered mosques to be physical cultural heritage elements, followed by palaces, towers, castles, madrasahs, bridges, heritage landmarks, historic sites, fountains, and traditions and customs, as well as traditional dishes, oral traditions, performance arts, and crafts as non-physical cultural heritage elements. The majority of students noted that cultural heritage was essential because it was passed down from ancestors, it enables us to learn about the past, it reflects us, helps us to remember the past, it is our culture, it is our history, for the perpetuity of our state, to learn about previous lessons, and it should be preserved by state protection, accompanied by allowing it to live on, promoting awareness, claiming it as a heritage, recognizing, and caution.

According to Sağ (2018), cultural heritage comprises relics of millennia of human experience. In social studies courses, cultural heritage should be valued, and both physical and intangible cultural heritage components should be taught. According to ÇengelciKöse (2012), education in social life should foster sensitivity to cultural components. Additionally, both physical and nonphysical aspects of cultural heritage should be taught. Social studies is one of the courses that will contribute to this topic. Hence, cultural heritage aspects could be incorporated more heavily into social studies curricula to increase students' knowledge of cultural heritage through education. Elements of cultural legacy are the most essential components that define a society and reflect its character. Since cultures attach importance to pieces of their cultural history, their social identities will not disappear and will continue to exist.

According to Deren (2006), cultural heritage is a broad notion that encompasses a number of audiovisual productions, despite the fact that most people associate it with buildings and historical relics. For instance, traditional dances and Mozart's symphonies are all examples of cultural heritage. According to Şentürk (2012), cultural legacy also comprises passed-down customs, tales, and other values. According to Ar (2015), the most often reported traditions in the survey were shaped by regional variables. Traditions develop over time and represent the cultural diversity of a community.

Research Objective

1. Document the cultural practices during the birth and death of Yakans of Basilan.

Methodology

This study is a descriptive qualitative in nature. In order to meet the research objective, the researcher conducted a short community immersion and interview with the recognized leaders of the community. The old and young Yakans of Basilan in the municipality of Lamitan, were the respondents of this study. The key informants were: the director of the Yakan Family Cultural Ensemble, a member of the Yakan Ensemble, the granddaughter of Datu Kalun (founder of Lamitan) and the founder of the *Lami-lamihan* festival. The data gathering was administered in three (3) phases as explained below:

Phase I – Pre-survey. The researcher went to Lamitan, Basilan to gather data about the Yakans' traditional costumes. The researcher also visited a friend who is a member of the Lamitan Yakan Family Ensemble and asked for information on how to contact the natives who could give factual information about the study.

Phase II – Analysis and Documentation. Observation was done by the researcher with the use of a video camera and still camera. Interview was employed to obtain the primary data which consisted of topics on costumes of both Yakan male and female, and their functions and cultural significance to their rituals. The terminologies used to describe the various pieces of costumes were properly recorded and presented in this research.

Phase III – Analysis and Documentation. After the still pictures were produced, interviews through personal questions were conducted to get necessary information about the Yakan costumes and to further authenticate the gathered data. Analysis and documentation were based on the information gathered from the Yakan natives according to the appropriate textile, designs, accessories, and materials, as well as the manner of wearing their costumes and its functions and cultural significance to their rituals.

Results and Narration

On the Cultural Practices on the Birth a Yakan

PAGGUNTING

As narrated by the participants, *paggunting* or baptism is the blessing of the baby Yakan to become Islam and to save the child from eternal damnation. This is performed only on three (3) weekdays: Wednesday, which represents strength and popularity. The Imam cuts the hair of the baby and cleanses it with coconut milk. In the process, a religious chant in an oration during the ritual is sung. The child is dressed in an *olos* wrapped around as a diaper and carried by the mother using a sling-strap *saputangan* or *tadjung* around her shoulders. The use of traditional garments signifies that the celebrant is a true-blooded Yakan. The *olos* used during this ritual is made of woven material or expensive textile.

PAGTIMBANG (weighing)

The Yakan participants believe that some angels and spirits have certain ownership, and rights over children who happen to be born either during the month of "*Sappal*" or any Saturday of the year. These spirits are serpents called "*Malikidjabania*". God, they believe, intervenes and states that the child's early existence can be justified, through what the Yakans call "*Pagtimbang*", a kind of court solution in which the quarrel between the parents and the evil spirits is settled. To ensure their victory, the parents choose to hold the session on earth.

Materials needed are:

- Three gantas of rice – for the child's physical strength.
- One live chicken – for the soul of the child/his life.
- Baskets of native cakes – for the child's skin.
- A bottle of kerosene – for the child's blood and perspiration.
- One half kilo of salt – for the salt found in the human blood.
- Water – for strong spiritual life.
- Two to three yellow squash – for human waste.

There is a symbolic meaning attached not only to the identity of these numerous items but also to their total weight, which must be equivalent to that of the baby. This is determined by placing both offerings and the child on the balance scale held by and *olos* or *tadjung*. The offerings are to be given to the devils that lay claim to the ownership of the child. Four people must be present in this ceremony:

1. An Imam (high priest) to represent the earth in the baby's body, the flesh.
2. One person to represent the water element in the human body.
3. The third person to represent fire, which is the blood that makes us move and gives strength.

4. The fourth person represents the wind, which enables us to walk, move from one place to another. The Imam starts saying a prayer understood by the devils believed to be present during the ceremony. The prayer names all the items in the offering and tells the devil that the items mentioned are given as a substitute for the child's eternal life. At the end of the prayer, the child is acquainted and delivered from the ordeal of facing trial in the hereafter where he would most probably be a loser. The identity that celebrant is supposed to hide the identity to evil spirits that are believed may hinder the child from having a successful ceremony.

On the Cultural Practices on the Death of Yakans

PAGKUBUL (Death)

During the hundred-day celebration “*apus*”, a “*langkapan*” (grave marker) is made and placed where the body of the deceased was previously lying before its funeral. The costume of the deceased is arranged on the grave marker, as it was on the body at the funeral. Oftentimes, the *langkapan*, is decorated with a canopy and four flags, all of the white cloth. Decorating the grave marker with the costume and canopy is usually done before reading the Qur'an in the afternoon. The purpose of the grave marker is more than just marking a grave. It symbolizes a boat on its way to the next world. This *langkapan* characteristic of the Yakan grave is peculiar to the, consisting of two long boards connected with short ones. These may be painted with geometric patterns like that of the Yakan woven cloth. After the body has been shrouded with white cloth, it is placed in a room of the house with the head towards the north. Usually, the body will lie on the mattress stuffed with “*kapok*” covered with a mat. Over the body of the deceased, is his/her favorite costume set as to how it is worn. A bowl of rice and *batawi* are wrapped in white cloth and placed on a pillow over the head of the dead Yakan. An offering called “*mahal*” is held as a dedication to the spirit of the deceased. It is believed that “without the offering, the spirit of the dead has no value”. Before the body is removed from the house, the favorite and best costume of the deceased will be worn by a close relative. Accordingly, Yakans believed that through this, the deceased is remembered and after burial, the one who wore the costume is already the recipient of it which serves as a remembrance of the departed ones.

Conclusion

Many of the Yakans' beliefs and practices from an earlier religion have been preserved and are, to a large extent, integrated into their Muslim rituals and lives. Ceremonies are also held in relationship with the life cycle: after birth, at the end of Quranic studies, at weddings, and in a series of ceremonies following death. Because of this distinct culture, it is essential to be preserved and passed down through the generations. Presently, the country's promotion needs have increased the need for cultural preservation. The educational system has an impact on this issue as well. Students' awareness and knowledge of their surroundings have significantly improved as a result of the recent implementation of the near-to-far principle for younger age groups, particularly in the social studies curriculum. It is essential to preserve cultural heritage through literature, knowledge, ideas, language, and history. Regardless of whether or not we fit into the culture of the Philippines, Filipinos have a responsibility to preserve the country's heritage and culture by maintaining its relevance long after its creation.

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