

A Legend of the Subanen “Buklog”

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INTRODUCTION

The term *Subanen* is given to a group of Philippine ethnic tribes that inhabits areas in Zamboanga del Sur and Zamboanga del Norte peninsula and the mountain areas of Misamis Occidental on the island of Mindanao. *Subanen* means “riverdweller.”

The tale of the origin of the *buklog*¹ came from the Subanens in the municipality of Lapuyan, located on the northern shore of Dumanquilas Bay in Zamboanga del Sur. The name Lapuyan is derived from the Subanen word *gepuyan*, which means “a place for cooking.”

Long ago, when the Subanen were still in their hunting and fishing stage, they would come to the bank of the river to cook their food after a long and tiring hunt for wild pigs in the area. They called the place *gepuyan*, which in turn became the name *tubig gepuyan* which was later Hispanized to *Rio de Lapuyan* or Lapuyan river.

THE TRIBAL ORAL HISTORY

One of the ancient Subanen leaders who settled along the coast on the banks of the Lapuyan river was Gomotan Raja.² A tall *balono* tree which was believed to have been planted by him several centuries ago is still standing on the bank of Canon creek, a tributary of Lapuyan river.

At about this time other Subanen leaders were settling in other parts of Zamboanga del Sur. One of them was Gomotan Sangira. He settled in Megusan near Kumalarang and later his clan occupied the Guillian hill near Lapuyan. Gomotan Sangira had three sons, Palaganding and Raining, who were twins, Gomeed, and a sister named Bulaw.³ They were known to be good swordsmen, and tales have been

told of their bravery and how they fought singlehandedly the invading Maranao⁴ groups who were spreading Islam to other neighboring tribes. They defeated the Maranaos in many encounters. Thus, the Subanens continued to maintain their culture in that part of Zamboanga del Sur.

Palaganding, the son of Sangira, reigned over the Lapuyan Subanens in the early part of the 18th century. It was during his time that the Subanens had extensive trading with the Joloanos⁵ of Sulu. They exchanged carabaos and horses with porcelain trade jars from Borneo. During this time marriages, too, were taking place. Bulaw was married to a Salimba from Dinas and they became the ancestors of the Lingatangs in that area, while Raining and Palaganding became the ancestors of the Imbings and the Huminises of Lapuyan.

After the death of Gomotan Palaganding, his son Gomotan Lumang became the tribal leader and ruled over his people in the mid-18th century. He settled in Guillian, a historical hill in Lapuyan. His reign ended when he was captured and killed by Joloano pirates while fishing in Dumanquilas Bay with his oldest son Teletep, who was also captured and brought to Jolo and who later became the great ancestor of the Yusas of Jolo. It was then that Thimuay Imbing, a younger son of Gomotan Lumang, took over the leadership of the Lapuyan Subanens, ca 1890–1920. It was also during this time that the leadership title was changed to *thimuay*.⁶

Thimuay Imbing encouraged his people to raise cattle and domestic animals. They also engaged in *kaingin*⁷ where they planted upland rice, corn, cassava, yam, and other subsistence crops. It was also during the leadership of Thimuay Imbing that the Subanens in Lapuyan stopped their nomadic existence. He also maintained good relations with the Muslims and Christianized Filipinos as well as with the Spaniards and later on with the Americans. In return the government allowed him to govern his people according to their customs and traditions.

After his death in 1920, Datu⁸ Lumok Imbing, his second son, succeeded him. He continued his father's work, and he also planted coconuts and encouraged his people to settle permanently in one place and plant coconuts. He also encouraged them to go to school to get an education.

The present leadership of the Subanen tribe in Lapuyan continues to maintain their traditional practices in spite of Western influences.

It was through one of the trips to this area to collect Subanen folklore that this researcher met Thimuay Mangura Vicente L. Imbing, the first Subanen trained to be a medical doctor.

THE LEGEND OF THE BUKLOG:

The tale of the origin of the *buklog* was told to Thimuay Mangura⁹ Vicente L. Imbing by his grandfather, Datu Lumok Imbing, who was the tribal leader from 1921-1958, and who in turn had heard it from his great ancestor Thimuay Imbing who ruled his people in the late 1800s. This story has been retold many times over and is a tale known to the *balians*¹⁰ or shamans who specialize in the *buklog* rituals. The tale embodies sacred rites and beliefs associated with the various rites of passage among the Subanen people. The ceremony is still practised by the tribe.

Here then is the tale:

A long, long time ago, there was this man, the son of the union of an earthling and a supernatural, who lived on earth for a thousand years. His name is Jobrael. Sometimes he is called Jobraim. This Jobrael who lived for a thousand years was considered overstaying by Diwata Magbabaya. This Diwata Magbabaya is the Supreme God, the creator of heaven and earth.

One day, Diwata Magbabaya summoned Palmot, one of his trusted messengers from heaven. He said, "You go down to earth and tell Jobrael that he is already overstaying; his time is up and he has to come back to heaven where he belongs."

The angel Palmot went down to earth, and he looked for Jobrael and when he found him he delivered the Creator's message.

Jobrael argued and said, "I do not like to go back to heaven, I still want to stay here on earth."

The messenger had no choice but to go back to heaven without Jobrael. He told Diwata Magbabaya what happened. "Jobrael refuses to obey your orders, he likes to continue living and staying on earth."

When Magbabaya heard this, he told Palmot, "You go back to earth, bring this kettle with you" (the kettle is similar to the one in which you boil water), but instead of containing water, it was filled with rice bran, which is very light. "The moment," Magbabaya continued, "you reach earth, you put this on the ground and you let Jobrael lift this kettle up, if he can lift it up, then, I will permit him to continue staying on earth."

Palmot brought the kettle full of rice bran to earth and he placed it on the ground as he was instructed by Magbabaya. He called Jobrael, he said, "There is a kettle sent by the Creator, if you like to continue your stay here on earth you better lift this up, if you cannot lift it, you will by all means have to go back to the Creator." (Fig. 1)

Jobrael held the kettle and when he tried to pull it up, the whole earth followed (it was like a magnet); when he tried to turn it, the whole earth turned around seven times with it. So Jobrael, in order to show



FIG. 1. Magbabaya's kettle.

that he can really challenge Magbabaya, the Supreme God, jumped and tried to pull the kettle up. When he did that, he realized that his human body was left on earth, and that he was already in spirit form, floating, flying around. (Fig. 2)

He then floated around a bit, and he drifted towards the east. When he reached the east, Jobrael was surprised to see so many people, and they were celebrating, dancing and making merry. So, he asked, "Why are you having this celebration here?"

The people answered, "Don't you know, that Jobrael the over-staying person is now dead? That is why we have to celebrate."

Jobrael answered, "No, I'm still alive, I'm still around." Getting no response from the people he floated to the west, he witnessed the same thing, he met people who were celebrating because "Jobrael was now called by God."

Again, Jobrael insisted, "No, I'm still alive, I'm here, I'm the



FIG. 2. Jobrael's struggle with the kettle.

one." But this statement did not have any effect on the people.

He floated to the north, to the south, it was the same scene that he saw, people were having a celebration because Jobrael at last was recalled to heaven. He could not convince the people that he was still around and very much alive. Finally, he was thrown to heaven and caught and imprisoned by the messengers of the Supreme God, Magbabaya.

The Creator said, "You Jobrael are trying to defy my orders, because of this you will be imprisoned here in heaven and you will not be permitted to go anywhere, anymore."

Jobrael answered, "What will happen to my son and family on earth?"

Magbabaya said, "Your son will be given seven years to stay on earth, after which he will also be recalled back to heaven."

Once again, Magbabaya sent his messenger Palmot to earth to look for the son of Jobrael to deliver him the message.

Inasmuch as he was still single his friends said, "We better look for a wife for the son of Jobrael because he has only seven years to stay on earth and he has no descendants yet."

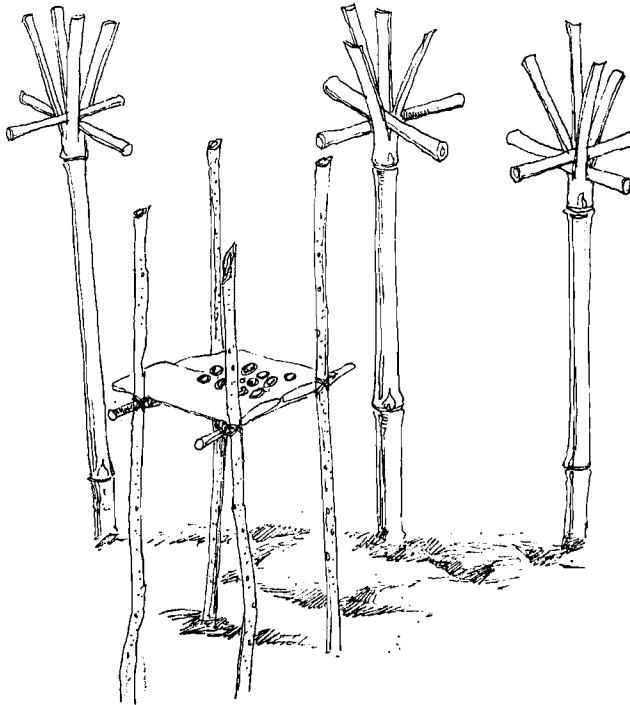


FIG. 3. The offering of betel nut and lime.

So they went on a quest to look for the right woman to become the wife of Jobrael's son. They went to the east, to the west, to the north, it was all the same, they could not find a woman that will match, or that was fit to be the wife of the son of Jobrael. Then, finally, they went to the center of the earth. There they found a Gomotan.

This Gomotan had a daughter who was also very beautiful and very intelligent. His companions decided, "Now we have found a match for the son of Jobrael." And they let him get married.

Although they were now married, she did not submit to him as a wife. She refused to offer food or the betel nut chew (*mamaq*) to the son of Jobrael. They were also living separately. When asked about this situation she replied, "We have to do something because you will only be staying here on earth for seven years."

On the first year of their marriage, after harvest time, she gave instructions to her people to mount crosses on the ground facing the east. On these she told them to offer betel nut and lime. The people followed exactly what she had told them to do, because they believed she was a very wise woman. (Fig. 3)

The following year, she again requested the people to make an altar. The platform is square-like, on it offerings were also placed.

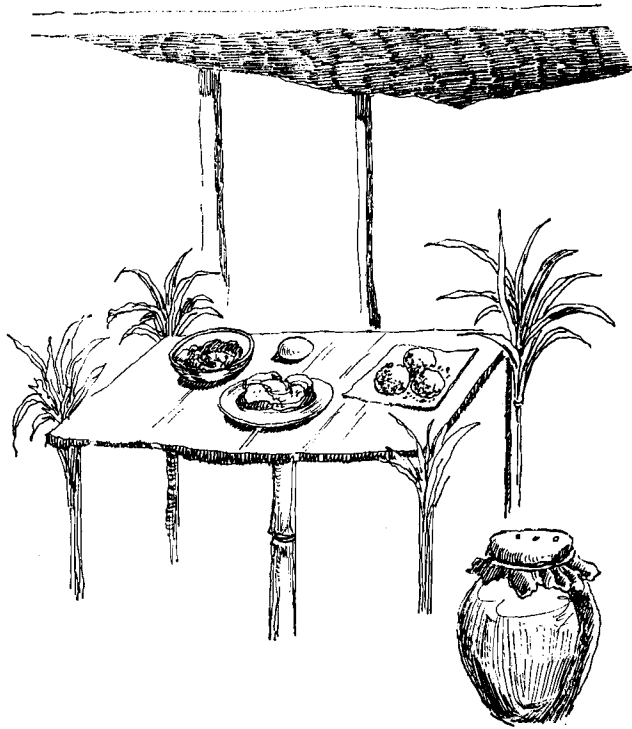


FIG. 4. The altar for the *sala*.

This altar will be hung inside the *sala* or living room of the house. Underneath, the altar is supported by a bamboo post. The altar was then decorated with *buri*¹¹ leaves, or palm-like leaves called *pisa*. On this altar offerings will be placed, the blood of the chicken butchered for the occasion, a boiled egg, rice moulded into balls and pieces of pork meat boiled without salt. Beside the altar is placed an earthen jar containing rice wine or *gasi*.¹² (Fig. 4)

Then, after harvest, on the third year of their marriage, the wife of the son of Jobrael instructed her people to make an altar; buntings of cloth of black and yellow colors were decorations. Then she instructed them to cut wood and make carvings on it. This altar was later placed in the *lamin*,¹³ which is located in the ceiling of a Subanen house. (Fig. 5, Fig. 6)

On the fourth year of their marriage, the wife of the son of Jobrael told the people to procure a large earthen jar. She then instructed them to mount bamboo sticks inside the jar, to tie them with strings and to place on the tips of the bamboo sticks *mosala*¹⁴ colored strips of cloth and Subanen sweets tied on the tips of the bamboo sticks. This jar, the wife of the son of Jobrael said, was to be placed near the main post

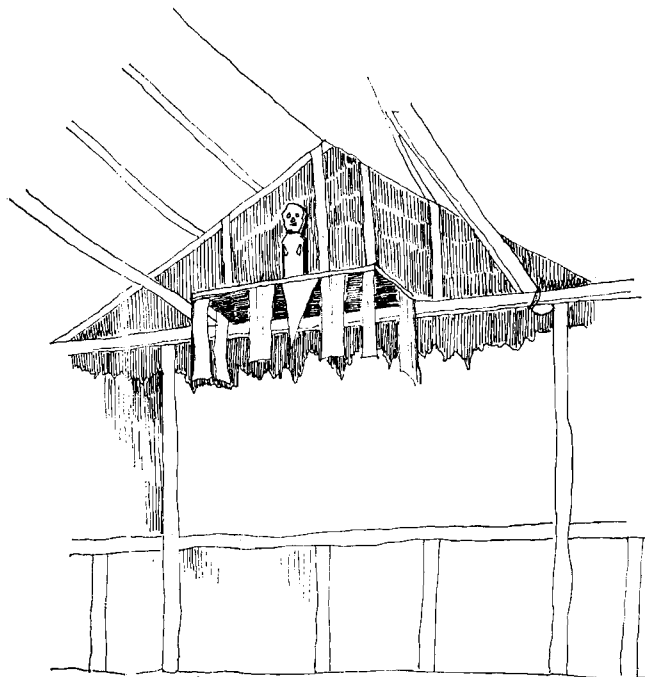


FIG. 5. The altar in the *lamin*.

of the house. (Fig. 7)

Meanwhile, the people wondered if the wife of the son of Jobrael was being given instructions by Diwata Magbabaya, because she was able to execute all of these offerings. But of course, they knew that she was also a very wise woman, so they did not question or doubt her wisdom, but instead followed all of her instructions.

On the fifth year, she requested the people to go to the forest and gather a certain kind of wood to be used for a post. She told them to bring this to the house, after which she asked the *balian* to apply some "medicine" on the post, and to offer prayers to prevent evil happenings, sickness or any untoward incidents to take place in their community. (Fig. 8)

Then, on the sixth year, she told her trusted people to go to the forest to gather a special kind of wood called *bayug* to be made into a mortar. She gave specific instructions that the tree, after it is felled, had to be carried on the shoulders of the men instead of having the carabao drag or pull it. When they went to the forest, they beat the gong and were chanting prayers. They got the trunk of the *bayug* tree as per instructions and brought it back to the house and presented it to the woman. She then called the *balian* to hew a mortar out of the wood, and told her people to have this placed under the house. She

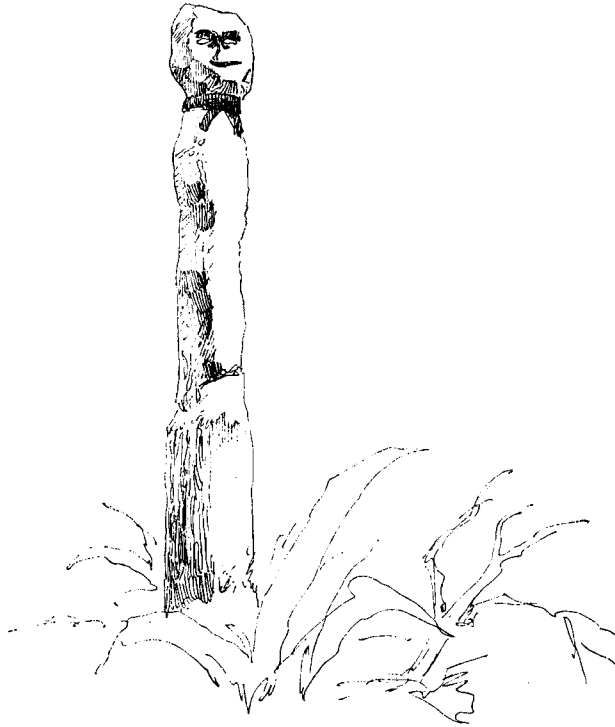


FIG. 6. A carving for the altar in the *lamin*.

told them to cover it with *nipa* leaves to protect it from people who might step or fall on it. Then she told the people to play the gongs, to dance and also to butcher a pig for the occasion. (Fig. 9)

The following year—the last year that was given by the Creator to the son of Jobrael so he can continue living on earth—the wife then gave an order to her people to go to the forest and gather a special wood called *labalud*. She told them to cut eight trunks of this kind of wood. This time they brought it back to the house by having a carabao pull the sled where they placed the tree trunks.

A few days later she instructed them to dig eight holes in square formation, the holes three meters equidistant from each other. On these holes a center post was placed or mounted facing the east. This is the first post that they erected in the platform site, facing the house. On this post, the *balian* applied some “medicine,” after which the other remaining seven posts were mounted.

Then she told them to prepare the bamboos, which were split and flattened. These she said were to be used as the flooring of the platform. Since they were not to use nails as they did not have them yet, the posts and the floorings were tied instead with rattan vines which they also had

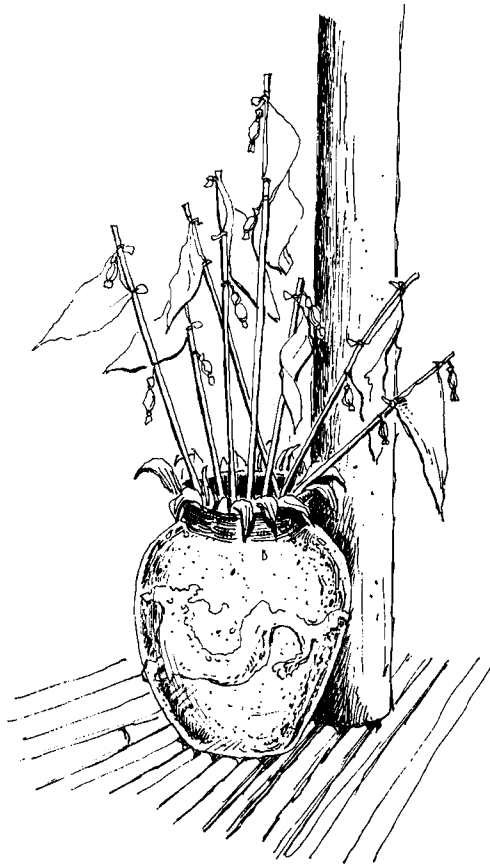


FIG. 7. The jar with bamboo sticks and *mosala*.

gathered from the forest. All told, the platform construction was completed by sundown and there was much feasting, dancing and drinking of *gasi* to accompany the construction of the platform by the people of the wife of the son of Jobrael. (Fig. 10)

As per instructions of the wife of the son of Jobrael, in all of the seven years of yearly activities that she had given for her people to fulfill, they always had to butcher pigs and provide food and drinks for the people who were involved in the various stages of the ritual. There is also the continuous beating of the gongs day and night to provide accompaniment for the dancing from the time they have started gathering the materials which were ordered by the wife of the son of Jobrael. (Fig. 11)

And so it came to pass that in the seventh year, Palmot the messenger of the Creator Magbabaya was again sent back to earth to fetch

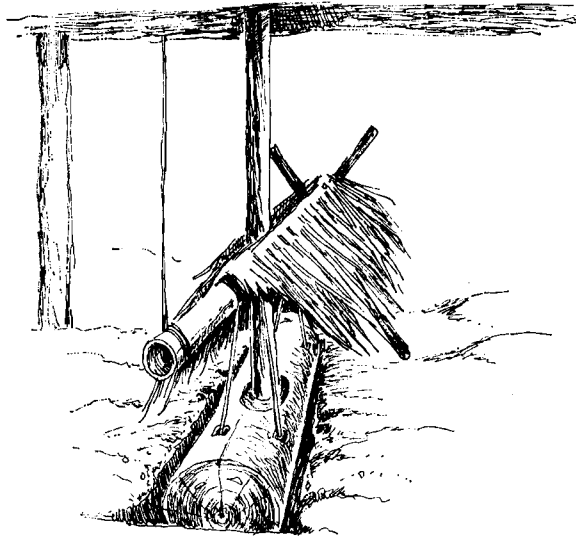


FIG. 8. The post installed for protection.

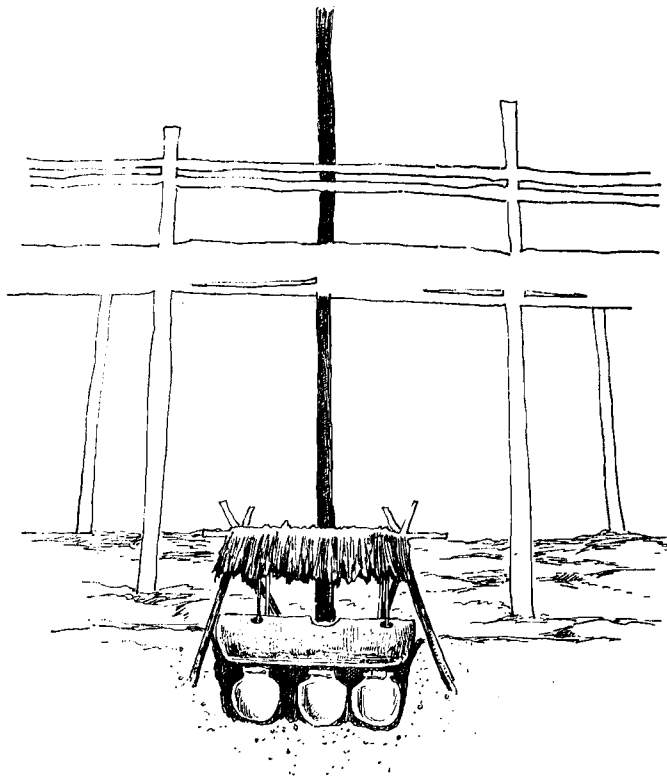


FIG. 9. The mortar placed under the house.

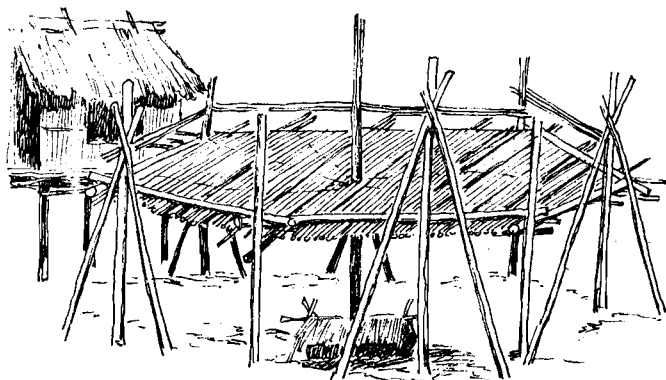


FIG. 10. The bamboo platform in front of the house.

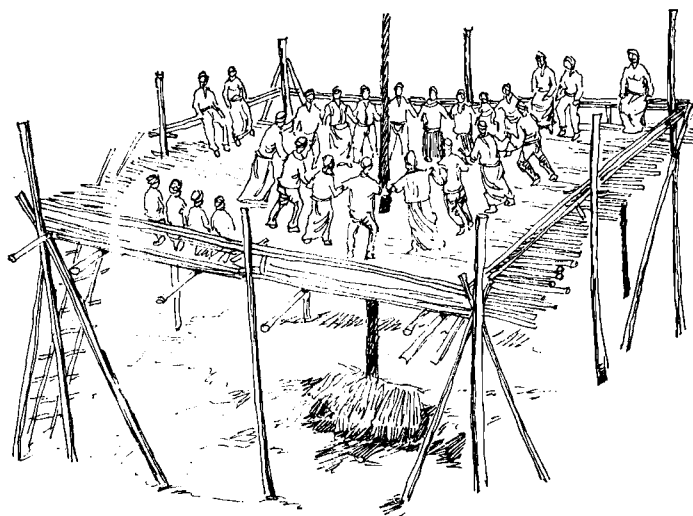


FIG. 11. People dancing at the *buklog*.

the son of Jobrael. When he arrived on earth he looked for the son of Jobrael. Finally, when he couldn't find him on earth, he went to the center of the earth, the place where the son of Jobrael and his wife lived.

Upon reaching the center of the earth and finding the son of Jobrael, Palmot said, "I am here to get you now as ordered by the Supreme Creator, you have to go back to heaven for your time is up already."

Upon hearing this, the wife of the son of Jobrael answered and said, "No, you cannot get the son of Jobrael now, you see"; she told Palmot, "we have made all these things, and we do not even know how we will call or name all of them. Perhaps if you can give us the names

of what we have made, then maybe you can bring my husband back to heaven with you."

She continued, saying, "Inasmuch as I have not even offered any food or betel nut chew to my husband, you cannot get him now, because we have not been living together. We have to make or perform all these things, even if we do not know what we would call all of these."

Palmot could not do anything. He scratched his head and said, "I myself do not know the name of all these. I will have to go back to the Creator and ask him what this is all about."

So Palmot, the messenger of the Creator, went back to heaven. When he reached heaven, the Creator asked him, "Where is the son of Jobrael? Did I not tell you to bring him back?"

Palmot replied, "Yes, oh, Supreme Creator, but when I reached earth, I had to look for him. When I finally found him, I was confronted by his wife who told me I couldn't bring her husband back to heaven because she said they will have to know the name of the things that they have made in behalf of her husband, the son of Jobrael. Since I do not know them myself, I had to come back here to ask you."

The Supreme Creator said, "Why don't you describe these things to me?"

Palmot then proceeded to describe the figures that the wife of the son of Jobrael made beginning from the first year of their marriage.

The Creator said, "Ah, that is what you call the *salangsang*. You tell the people on earth that is how it should be called."

Then Palmot continued to describe the various activities and materials produced and made by the people for the wife of the son of Jobrael.

The Creator called the altar constructed during the second year, out of the seven years he had permitted the son of Jobrael to stay on earth, *binalay*.

The altar and offerings given during the third year were called *palasanding*. The bamboo sticks tied with rattan and decorated with *mosala* and mounted in an earthen jar, were named *banghaso*.

Then the Creator said, "The mortar is to be called *dulugan*, and the pestle, *pathaw*; the master post, *guinghoram tumayam*; the wood that is flexible and does not break easily will be called *labalod*." The naming of the various parts was completed up to the seventh year by the Creator.

And, finally, Diwata Magbabaya declared the whole structure and its attendant activities as the *buklog*.

After this, the Creator said, "Since the wife of the son of Jobrael has done this, we do not have the right to get him to return to heaven. They have offered these things for him, his wife has redeemed her husband now."

And so the son of Jobrael stayed on earth for many years and he lived together with his wife and grandchildren.

“That is the story of how the Subanens came to know about the *buklog*,” Thimuay Mangura Vicente L. Imbing said. “Perhaps,” he continued, “this might as well be the origin of other related rituals and celebrations in our Subanen culture.”

“You know, some of the rituals here that have been observed within the seven-year period are also part of our rites of passage, like the putting up of a *banghaso* during our wedding ceremony, or the setting up of a *binalay* or the *salangasang* during healing ceremonies.”

With these statements Thimuay Imbing concluded our conversation regarding the *buklog*.

NOTES

* The legend presented here was collected by Viernes-Enriquez from her informant Thimuay Vicente Laras-Imbing, while on a trip to Lapuyan to document on video an actual *buklog* celebration.

The illustrations are drawn by Mr. Nonoy Estarte, painter-illustrator of the Folklore and Folklife Museum and Archives of Xavier University. He has accompanied the researcher on her fieldtrips to the Subanen, especially in the Lapuyan areas of Zamboanga del Sur.

1. The term *buklog* comes from the dancing platform constructed specifically for use during the observance of the ritual that is also named after this platform.

2. The earliest known title given to a Subanen leader.

3. She was given this name because her hair was “blonde” and she had a hairy chest.

4. One of the thirteen ethnolinguistic groups in the southern Philippines identified as Muslims. They inhabit the edge of the second largest lake in the Philippines, the Lake Lanao in Lanao del Sur; hence the term *Maranao* literally means “people of the lake.”

5. The inhabitants of the island of Jolo in the Sulu archipelago, a chain of coral and mountainous islands southwest of Mindanao and northeast of Borneo. Joloanos belong to the Tausug ethnolinguistic group. *Tausug* literally means “people of the current.” The Joloanos are largely traders, seafarers, and farmers.

6. A title given to Subanen leaders who were recognized by their Muslim neighbors and the Spanish authorities. Being a *thimuay* also implies the capability of that leader to gather his people in one place and to be able to feed and clothe them and to protect them from their enemies. The *thimuay* must be able to lead. The term *thimuay* is derived from the word *thimu* meaning “to gather in one place.”

7. Swidden farming or “slash and burn” farming.

8. A title which means “prince” or a title given to a person belonging to the upper class in Muslim society. The *datu* usually governs a small group of people and derives his income from the land, augmenting it with fees for his services as administrator of Muslim law. Although the Subanens did not accept Islam, their constant contacts with the Maranaos made them adopt this title for a Subanen chieftain. Although the title of *thimuay* is still used it is usually given to the lower ranks in the hierarchy of leadership.

9. Means “younger” or “youngest” in the family.

10. A *balian* is a folk medical practitioner who cures by going into a trance state (or altered state of consciousness). During the trance state he/she is supposed to travel into the spiritworld to take back the "lost soul" of the sick person with the help of his/her spirit helpers or guides. The term *balian* is the local dialect term for shaman. Other terms are *balyan*, *baylan*, *babaylan*, *catalonan*, *anitero*, *mandadawak*, etc. In Subanen culture, the *balian* specializes in specific rituals, i.e. *buklog*.

11. A palm bearing fan-shaped, rounded leaves.

12. Fermented rice wine. Among the Subanens the process of preparing and fermenting rice powder mixed with certain roots and bark of trees usually takes about three months, although the longer it takes the better the taste. Preparing the mixture is usually accompanied by chanted invocations "that the person who drinks the wine will be nice and happy and not become violent when he is drunk." *Gasi* is usually prepared for special occasions.

13. A sacred house or altar, believed to be inhabited by the spirits. Among the Subanens the ceiling is considered a "safe place" to keep the *lamin* so that children will not play with it. This is only removed during the *buklog* or during a curing or healing rite.

14. A backstrap-loom-woven colored handkerchief.