

## **Sagayan: The Dance of Meranao Royalty**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper examined the origin and historical background of Sagayan war dance, the dance of Meranao Royalty. Specifically it seek to answer the following aspects of Sagayan war dance 1) To determine the meaning of Sagayan war dance; 2) To describe how Sagayan war dance is being performed by the players including its traditional costumes and significance; and, 3) To describe the implications of Sagayan war dance in terms of good leadership and governance. The study used the descriptive design involving qualitative research techniques with the support of various Meranao materials found in the libraries of Mindanao State University main-campus, and other public and private schools located in Marawi City and Lanao Del Sur, which is the setting of the study. Aside from the materials found in the library, the researcher conducted personal interview to key informants who are knowledgeable on Sagayan war dance. The results shows that in most occasions, Sagayan war dance is performed before any celebration or gathering. The study concludes that the Sagayan war dance conveys masculinity and bravery, attributes needed by leaders in the discharge of public duties.

*Keywords* - Social Science, Sagayan, research, dance of meranao royalty, bravery, origin of darangen epic, description design, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

The term "Meranao" or "Maranao" is derived from the word ranao which means "lake", hence, Maranao means people of the lake (Saber and Madale, 1975). The Maranao population was 989,579 as of the 2001 census, making them the largest Islamic ethnolinguistic group in the Philippines.

The traditional home of the Maranao is the area surrounding Lake Lanao, the second largest in the Philippine Archipelago next to Laguna de Bay in Luzon. Located in Lanao del Sur, it bears the border of Lanao del Norte, the area is roughly triangular in shape with a 28.8 km-long base. The surface is approximately 780-2300 m in above sea level. This elevation results in a temperature far more pleasant than in the surrounding areas.

On the northern tip of the lake lies Marawi City, the premier urban center of the province of Lanao del Sur. In Basa Iranon (Maranao language), "Marawi" literally means a "place where things are inclined or center" (Saber, 1975). The city is bisected by the Agus River, which is the only outlet of the lake to the sea to the north, and which feeds Maria Cristina Falls-now the major source of hydroelectric power throughout Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte.



The Maranao language spoken in the Lanao provinces is part of a subgroup of language called "Danao languages". The others included (also illanun or iranun), spoken by a group of sea-based people between Lanao and Maguindanao, spoken mainly in Maguindanao and North Cotabato.

The earliest Maranao historical records, found in the salsila or oral traditions are about the Kingdom of Bumbaran from where we came, the ancestors of the present-day Maranao. Legend says that when the first Muslim missionaries came to preach Islam, the inhabitants of Bumbaran refused to be converted. The entire Kingdom then sank into what is now Lake Lanao. Only four people survived and they became the ancestors of today's Maranao.

In short, the Darangen is viewed as an embodiment of beliefs, practices, norms, behavior, thinking, ritual and other activities, which may be social, political, cultural, religious, intellectual adopted by the Maranaos (Francisco 1977).

In general, the Darangen has greatly shaped Maranao history, society, culture and institutions. For instance, the concept of datuism which revolves chiefly in political, social and economic aspects of this institution is believed to have originated from the Darangen. Dr. Mauyag M. Tamano, former president of the Mindanao State University in Marawi City, stated “in the past, the datu’s power, authority and rank in the (Maranao) society constituted a style of life based on the legendary culture of the lost civilization of the city-state of Bembaran, the pre-Islamic Kingdom form which Maranao royalty is believed to have sprung” ( Tamano 1969)

Saber (1961) further emphasized that in traditional societies, like the Maranaos, the literature-both oral and written-functions in various ways. The Darangen as a body of tradition, apart from the story that it presents, has more or less functioned as a bond that has stabilized Maranao society through the vicissitudes that it underwent in its history. It serves as a bible in which faith in their continuity was anchored, for its was and still respected as a record of *andang sa muna*, “the ways of the ancestors”. At present, the epic stands side by side with the Koran as a strong foundation of Maranao culture.

Earlier, Madale (1981) had pointed out that the living testimonies of events mentioned in the epic narrative “Darangen” did actually happen. These highly valued landmarks serve as link between the present and the past. Activities and festivities mentioned in the text are revived or replayed during the significant social gatherings and occasions as are believed to have happened in the past.

As such, these gatherings and occasions are based (*riyawat*) on the reenactment of activities in the past like Prince Bantugan’s preparation for battle. This was the time that *Sagayan*, a cultural event that features Maranaw dances was introduced into the Maranao society (Madale 1981). This *Sagayan*, the dance of royalty, warrior dance is complemented by another dance, one that depicts women wearing colorful costumes and walking gracefully in fluid motions with their arms waving in the air.

Usually, Maranao dance forms can be classified into those which are reenactments of some episodes in the Darangen epic, and those which are adaptations from the epic. It requires a very talented performer, someone who can perform the intricate steps with ease, poise, and fitness. Body movements are calculated to convey something; the fingers, the way of the hips, and every step. The performer must be single, with beautiful and supple body. There is much swishing of the fan and swaying of the hips as the performer reenacts the adventure of Prince Lomna (Saber and Madale 1989).

Today, in some cities and provinces dominated by Muslim population, sagayan has become the most popular cultural event to highlight their celebrations like anniversaries, enthronements, weddings, kandori and other traditional activities. Sagayan has attracted more tourists to come and document the uniqueness of this Meranao historical event.

## FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored on concepts that both the “Radia Indarappatra” and the “Darangen” epic are seen as *salsila*, which are genealogical accounts of the peopling of Ranao. The former is a narrative “prose” tale, and the latter, an epic in “verse” in terms of language. The former is in contemporary Maranao, while the latter is in classical Maranao/ Iranun which can be understood only by few of the older people.

In relating these Maranao oral tradition, the narrator, particularly (one who recites the chain of descent-lines) tends to link together the characters of the two tales, those of the “Radia Indarappatra” is being considered “foreign” while those of the Darangen as indigenous.



The present-day dancers in the Sagayan interpret the character of Prince Bantugan, the Principal hero of the epic "Darangen" as being fearless and skillful with his sword, the *kampilan*. The legendary Prince was so skillful with the sword and shield that he could kill hundreds of his enemies at a time

Saber and Madale (1975) mentioned that when Bantugan was talking to his sweetheart he was making wide sweeping gestures, as if he were actually fighting in a battle. The sagayan is not an ordinary dance but a dance of royalty. The *kampilan* used by sagayan dancers is a thin sheet of sharp steel punctured with five or seven holes, through which hairs from the beard of a goat and the eyebrow of a sheep are tied. Through each of the seven holes, seven strands of hairs hang. Each hole is colored red, black and yellow.

In the Darangen epic, when Prince Bantugan swings his *kampilan*, he uses his *Magerag*, a shorter sword, which is his last weapon of defense. The *kampilan* is

usually tied to a warrior's wrist, always handy in case of an attack.

Sagayan portrays the warriors from the Maranao-Maguindanao epic "Darangen". This epic, written sometime in the 14th century, tells the story of Princess Gandungan, who was caught in the middle of a forest during the earthquake. Her loyal slave accompanied her throughout her ordeal until she was saved by her Prince.

The "Darangen" is an epic that originated from the original leaders of Mindanao. It reveals the adventures of many heroic warriors. The tale proves that early forms of music, metal work and warrior arts were already in existence many centuries ago.

The Darangen epic mentions three major kingdoms, namely Illyan a Bumbaran, Gindolongan, Marogong, and Kadaraan Sandaw. Bumbaran is also known as Tangkal a Baaraantakan. Both names means the place where the sun rises. Sometimes, it is referred to as Mimbala's which means a place where a river cuts across, which could be the present Agusan River. Bumbaran is also the favorite abode of the Gods which makes it a very powerful kingdom.

While the whole Darangen epic narrates the exploits of Bantugan, some books are focused on his other brother (Kkapaesandalan a Morog); his sister Lawanun, while the youngest is the heroine in *Taratakan a Oray*. The dance itself involves leaping, turning, jumping, kicking and the rolling movements of a warrior ready to defend his master in battle. It highlights many complicated hand and foot movements. The warriors move in a magic-like trance, and the elders believe that the motions drive away evil spirits, while welcoming good fortunes. The warriors follow the music and rhythm of a Kolintang and other musical instruments including gongs and drums (Saber and Madale 1989).

Sagayan is complemented by a woman in colorful costumes dancing gracefully with a pronounced movement of her arms in a dance known locally as Kasiduratan, accompanied by the Agong and Kolintang. Today, some local government agencies and even other institutions are patronizing Sagayan war dance to highlight their occasions.

On the other hand, the name Maranao may have come from the root word ranao (lake) and could be a latter development. Theoretically, the great Lake has been peopled by the waves of migration from the coastal areas. This theory is supported by studies in linguistics and of Maranao phonological system as well as by archeological evidence. At least, what is certain is that both the Maranao and Maguindanao can trace descent from the Iranun/Illanun and that their languages are mutually intelligible.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of the study was to trace the origin and historical background of Sagayan: Dance of Royalty. Specifically, it sought to: 1) describe the origin of sagayan and meaning; 2) describe how sagayan is being performed by the players including its traditional costumes and significance; and; 3) describe the implications of sagayan in terms of good leadership and governance, 4) come up with recommendations and suggest plans of action for the promotion and preservation of sagayan.

## METHODOLOGY

The study utilized the descriptive design as major means of the gathered data. The researcher used the Meranao culture materials found in the libraries of the Mindanao State University main campus and Dansalan Jr. College and other schools within Marawi City and Lanao del Sur. These were used to determine and validate the analysis and interpretation of data gathered on sagayan. Key informant interviews were also conducted with authors who have written books on Meranao culture. In most occasions, the researcher had the chance to actually observe how sagayan is performed by the players. The method used helped enhance the gathering of first-hand information about sagayan activity. Informed consent was obtained from the key informants to comply the research ethics protocols.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sagayan or war dance originates from the epic. It is a reenactment of Prince Bantugan's preparation to rescue her sister Princess Lawanen, unluckily, it was her fiancé who rescued Princess Lawanen. This particular episode "Kalid a Dempas" describes the minute details of all the movements of the warrior. The manner of holding the Kampilan and the logistics of warfare are all depicted.

First, the hero takes his kapasti or headdress with embedded mirrors. He then puts on his clothes which have the colors of the rainbow. He takes his klong or shield made of hardest wood and from which small bells hang, he gets his shining kampilan which is as blinding as the sun when it glitters. Very slowly, he moves to the left then to the right, and then moves around very gracefully. Each step and movement he makes is accompanied by a recitation, invoking the guidance and support of the unseen benevolent spirits. When the hero removes his kampilan

halfway from its scabbard, half of his enemies are killed. At the height of the war, the hero is not able to see his enemies; hence, he defends only on the sound of the rattling shields (Madale, 1989).

Sagayan is a Philippine war dance performed by both Maguindanao and Meranao depicting in dramatic fashion the steps of their hero, Prince Bantugan. He wears his armaments. Performers depicting fierce warriors would carry shield with shell noisemakers in one hand and double-bladed sword in the other attempting rolling movements to defend the master. According to Dominquez (2007), the term sagayan comes from the Tausog word of “sagay” meaning head-hunter.

In Maguindanao, they define sagayan as a dance of nobility, gallantry, and honor depicting fierce warriors carrying elaborate painted shields and double-bladed swords. Sagayan dancers wear a three-tiered skirt in the strand tricolor of red, green, and yellow, with brightly colored headgear embellished with feathers, mirrors, tassels and other trimmings. Secular and spiritual in nature, sagayan is performed on different occasions like weddings or healing rituals. Although it is an ancient dance, the sagayan has endured the test of time in the hearts of Maguindanaoans and continues to live and flourish as an undying testament to their noble ancestry and exciting history (Aliwan Fiesta Website).

The Sagayan war dance provides tremendous implications in the area of leadership. The dance that shows the warrior’s masculinity and bravery, implies that these desirable values and qualities could be adopted by leaders in attaining common goals and objectives as well as promote local governance. Good warriors make good government functionaries and can be depended upon in implementing development goals for the welfare and interest of the people.

For instance, the traditional political institutions of the Maranao is a vital force to reckon with. Despite the introduction of modern institutions, they survived and still play a significant role in the lives of the people. These traditional institutions are vital as far as the people’s identity is concerned and are considered as the embodiment or symbols of Maranao tradition. They constitute a part of their past and therefore should be preserved.

Even up to the present, the sultans and datus, as well as the religious leaders in the community, are looked upon by the people for leadership and guidance. The people’s strong faith in their leaders have been attributed to their religious beliefs, their maratabat and their strong adherence to their adat. (Saber, Tamano, Warriner, 1960)

Aside from masculinity and bravery, sagayan war dance also manifests other behaviors, values and qualities such as encouragement, solidarity or unity, which

are the basic principles in attaining human destiny particularly in the area of total human development as one major component of the civil society.

The performance of these leaders' roles by virtue of the traditional offices they occupy elevated them to positions of prestige and influence. The traditional leadership is useful as a mechanism for change especially among those who strongly integrated within the institutional network of their communities. As such, responsible leadership from within should be developed and eventually utilized to bring about the development of the area.

There is therefore a need to work through religious and traditional leaders to promote and facilitate awareness for change. The municipal officials and other local leaders in the community, may be likened to the sagayan war dance, who are willing to defend and protect their constituents against any invader. This behavior does not only connote masculinity but bravery as well. When adopted and duplicated in the local level, these values could be translated into development action and enhance the socio-economic condition of the people toward building strong community.

The Maranaos as a "rank-conscious" group does everything under any circumstance if only to safeguard their "Maratabat" (pride) which is a manifestation of their rank. To an outsider, such peculiar behavior and idiosyncrasies can be interpreted as "Kayabangan". However, to a Maranao, such behavior and idiosyncrasies are manifestation of being conscious of his rank not only in exhibiting peculiar behavior but also by displaying flags, musical, instruments, and other material possessions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Maranao myth asserts that all Maranaos trace their descent from either an epic hero or from Mohammed. Hence, in relation to others, they see themselves as superior beings or as royalty in relation to commoners. They recognize affiliation with other Moro groups, but to others, especially Christian Filipinos are thought of as foreigners.

They recognize kinship ties with people of Borneo and Sulu archipelago, but their closest affiliations are with the Moro groups that adjoin their boundaries, especially the Maguindanaos of the western coast of Mindanao. Lake Lanao is the center of the Maranao territory. Maranao literally means "people of the lake".

So far, the most extensive study on Radia Indarapatra is Nagasura T. Madale's Ph.D. dissertation, "A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Radia Indarapatra: A Meranao

Folk Narrative” (1981). Madale claims that, the narrative, contains the origin or beginning (po-onan) of Maranao genealogy, hence a history. The narrative as a genealogy (salsila) is one of the two basic references in tracing one’s own descent line. In Maranao, this is called “sa dorog a bangensa” (one chain of royal descent line). In other words, the narrative is the earliest oral account of the ancestors (apo) of the Maranaos that serves as a link between the present and the past.

Activities and festivities mentioned in the text are revived or replayed during significant social gatherings and occasions and are believed to happen in the past. As such, these gatherings and occasions are based (riyawat) (Madale 1981).

Maranaos do not only look at the leaping, turning, jumping, kicking and rolling movements of the Sagayan dancers who are ready to defend their master in battle, but the significant message that these movements imply in the development of the country in general and the local communities in particular.

Concomitant to this concept, there is a need to work within the framework of the existing laws and regulation or structures. Moreover, since traditional values are deeply ingrained in the culture of the Meranaos, a program should be designed and devised where values and norms can be effective tools to bring about change.

## GLOSSARY

**BEMBARAN** - is one the three major kingdoms in the darangen namely; Iliyan a Bembaran, Gindolongan Marogong, and Kadaraan sa Nadlaw. Bembaran is also known as Tangkal a Borantakan. Both names mean the place where the sun rises. Sometimes it is referred to as Mimbala’ which means a place through which a river cuts across, which could be the present Agusan River. Bembaran is also the favorite abode of the gods which makes it a very powerful kingdom.

**PRINCE OF GADONGAN** - is the ruler of the second most powerful satellite state of Bembaran, the complete name of which is Gadongan Pamaloy but better known as Kodarangan a Lema. The word gadongan literally means «storehouse»

**KADARAAN SA NDLAW** - literally means “the place where one cannot see the sun except at sunset” which locates it in the West. It is also known as kadaan. Although both rulers of Bembaran and Kadaraan come from the same ancestor, Aya Diwata Mokom sa Kaadionga Lopa’, they are bitter enemies and fight all the big battles of the Darangen. The story of how feud began is related in book no. 4 Kapaesxandalan a Morog.

PARAMATA BANTOGAN- is the hero of the Darangen, the second son of Tominaman sa Rogong from his first wife. His name means «brilliant, famous, one who makes history, the pride of Bembaran». In particular episode, however, he plays a minor role as this is the story abduction of his sister, Princess Lawanen, and her rescue is done by her fiance.

MIPAESANDALAN - means the «highest flag», a powerful spirit.

KODARANGAN A LENA - is the other name of Gadongan a Pamaloy. It literally means “yellow-green which is pertified or enchanted.

KAMPILAN - is the most common weapon used for fighting, made of steel, and has three kinds of blades: curved, straight, or with two points one long and one short. When plunged into an opponent, the longer point enters while the short stump holds the victim since it is first struck at the arm holding a Kampilan and in swift movement strikes at the head for the final blow. In case a warrior loses his Kampilan, he still has his magerag, a shorter sword, which is his last weapon for defense. The Kampilan is tied to the wrist, on the ready for an attack.

SAGAYAN - The term Sagayan comes from the Tausog word of «sagay» which means head-hunter

SAGAYAN - is a Philippine war dance performed by both Maguindanao and Meranao depicting in dramatic fashion the steps their hero, Prince Bantugan, took upon wearing his armaments, the war he fought in his subsequent victory afterwards. Performers, depicting fierce warriors would carry shield with shell noisemakers in one hand and double-bladed sword in other attempting rolling movements to defend the master.

PO-ONAN - The origin or beginning of Maranao genealogy

SALSILA - Is one of the two basic references in tracing one's own descent line

«SA DOROG A BANGENSA»- One chain of royal descent

ANDANG SA MUNA- «The ways of the Ancestors»

ANONEN A RAWATEN- Means «the heights of emulation». Literally, amonen means «harmony». When there is harmony, there is organization (as in the case of the pengampong, the traditional or indigenous socio-political organization and territorial division of Lanao.

RAWATEN- Means «model» or «that which is to be emulated»

BANGENSA- Variously spelled bangsa or bangsa) has three meanings; «nation» social rank» and «ancestry of genealogical connection with a certain family from a certain place.

MARANAOS- Classify or stratify themselves socially into two: These are the mala i (big) bangensa or mapia a tao (good people) with royal descent including

the pagawidan and the pagawid and the mababa i (low) bangensa or mabeba a tao (low people) or the commoners who include freemen, artisans, small farmers, small businessmen, blacksmiths, etc.

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