The Healing Ritual Context of the Magunatip Dance of the Murut in Sabah, Malaysia

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Magunatip is one of the most popular traditional dances among the Murut ethnic community in the Interior districts of Sabah, Malaysia. Once performed in healing rituals, the modern-day Magunatip is mainly performed during celebrations such as bride wealth exchange ceremonies, weddings, and harvest festivals. Based on oral sources, Magunatip is believed to have evolved either from a folk game played during paddy pounding sessions or a ritual invoked during healing ceremonies. This paper presents an investigation on the healing ritual context of Magunatip as told in the form of legends by elderly Murut informants. By analysing the healing ritual context of Magunatip, the significance of the dance in relation to the culture and traditional beliefs of the Murut community could be ascertained.

Keywords: Magunatip Dance, Murut, Legends, Ritual Context, Healing Ritual.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Murut community is the third largest indigenous ethnic group residing in the state of Sabah, Malaysia. A 2010 population census in the State identified the 97,000-strong community to be mostly centered in the Interior District of Sabah. Owen Rutter,8 an early ethnographer engaged in field work in Borneo perceived the Murut of the remote Interior to be the most interesting subject among all the North Borneo native tribes:

For here (North Borneo) one may find man (the Murut) in his primitive state, still almost untouched by outside influences: he is, as it were, a living fossil; in the course of centuries, his habits and customs, handed down with rigid conservatism through the ages, can have changed but little, and he represents a standard of culture that must have been prevalent among the primitive races of Southeast Asia two thousand years ago.

In Rutter’s study,8 the Murut of Sabah is classified into two main groups i.e., “Hill Murut” which consists of seven subgroups and “Plains Murut” with three. Although each subgroup has its own specific name like Tahol, Bookan, Paluan, Nabai, Kolor, Timugon, Sembakung, Selungai, Tengura, Serudung, Kalamakan, Beaufort and Keningau Murut, the term ‘Murut’ is the common generic name used by other local communities since they belong to the same Murutic family. The Nabai for example is one of the selected Murut subgroups in this study.

Based on the Sabah Population Census Report in 2010 (Department of Statistic Malaysia), out of a total of 97,300 Muruts in Sabah, 28,200 are found in the Tenom district, followed by 27,900 in Keningau and 23,600 in Nabawan. These three districts are homes to an estimated 82% of the total Murut population in Sabah at present day with the majority residing in the Interior districts of Keningau and Tenom (Sabah Map 1). Our informants are from the Paluan, Nabai and Timugon Murut subgroups.

Before the emergence of the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) in Sabah (formerly known as North Borneo) in the late 19th century, like many other tribal groups in Borneo, the Murut lived in longhouses, and were occasional headhunters. Slavery was practiced to a certain extent in connection with inter-tribal warfare. Traditionally, the economy of the Murut revolved around swidden agriculture with sago, hill rice and cassava as staple foods. This diet based on subsistence farming was supplemented with fish, birds, and hunted animals such as deer and wild boar, and a variety of wild vegetables and fruits.10

Ismail Abbas and Shaong,2 who examined the traditional dances of Sabah, reported that there are four types of Murut traditional dances namely the Lansaran, Andui-andui, Anggalang and Magunatip. The first three dances are not the focus of this study.

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The focus of this paper is the healing ritual context of **Magunatip**—a popular traditional dance among the Murut people which involves long bamboo poles placed vertically and beaten against each other to create a rhythmic flow of pulsating music. The term “**Magunatip**” has its origin from the Murut word *atip*, “to press between two surfaces.” The dance involves dancers jumping between the moving poles without getting their feet or ankles trapped or whacked. As such, **Magunatip** dancers must possess a good sense of timing and also be agile in their movements (Appendix 1).

Interviews with elderly Murut informants indicate that this dance to be an age-old tradition, and has been performed since the time of their great grandparents. Not many of these elders could offer any information on the origins of the dance or its original or intended purposes. Although **Magunatip** remains one of the most recognizable traditional dances in Sabah, there is yet to be any in-depth study on its role or significance in the healing rituals of the Murut community.

Nowadays, **Magunatip** is mostly performed during celebrations such as bride wealth exchange ceremonies, weddings and other celebrations. Apart from the Murut people, **Magunatip** is also performed by other Sabah indigenous communities such as the Dusun in Tambunan and the Kwijau in Keningau.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

The research data for this study were obtained from field trips conducted in the Sabah Interior districts of Keningau, Nabawan and Tenom. Since in-depth and focus group interview methods could yield exploratory, descriptive and detailed information, these were chosen as the methods of choice for the data collection.

The selection of interview subjects was by means of introduction by Village Heads or Native Chiefs of the community who recommended informants they deemed reliable and knowledgeable on the ritual context of **Magunatip**. During these interviews, informants were asked about matters pertaining to the ritual context or aspect of the dance (Appendix 2).

### 3. ORIGIN OF **MAGUNATIP**

According to the informants of this study, the origin of **Magunatip** is closely related to a folk game that was once played during paddy pounding sessions. Based on the oral source, the **Magunatip** was a form of entertainment. Once the paddy pounding session was over, the farmers who were taking a rest would place on the floor the two long poles with one end tied to the other. On the floor, with their impromptu contraption, they would then try to trap the foot of whoever happened to pass by. To avoid being trapped, the passer-by would have to be very nimble and able to quickly lift up his or her foot in rhythm with the clapping sticks. This created much laughter and merriment among the culprits and their intended victims. Such an enjoyable game eventually evolved into a dance to be performed in pairs.

Initially, the game was played without any musical accompaniment. Only the loud hitting sound of the *alu* against the wooden surface and the clapping noise produced by the two poles served as a guide for the dancers to time their steps in and out of the *alu* (Informants: Nasip Ampiu, Madis Suman, Mansur Sarbini and Nuar @ Selamat Jaimi). However, over time, the striking sound of the *tagunggak*, a traditional bamboo idiophone, was incorporated as the musical accompaniment for this game which eventually evolved into the **Magunatip** dance.

The modern **Magunatip** performance often begins with a solo male dancer taking the role of a warrior performing the *mabihialang*, accompanied by a group of four to six Murut women dancing the graceful *anggalang* to the music from a traditional orchestra of six large gongs, 25 *tagunggak* (bamboo idiophones) and a tambor (drum). The *gayang* (sword)-wielding warrior is dressed in resplendent traditional Murut bark jacket and loin cloth. The women are adorned in elaborately beaded and embroidered costumes known as *limpur*.

### 4. HEALING RITUAL CONTEXT IN **MAGUNATIP**

Before the advent of Christianity and Islam in Sabah, the Murut had their own form of religious beliefs. The concept of God was told in the form of a myth with different Murut ethnic groups ascribing various names for their Creator. The Tahol Murut, for instance, referred to their Creator as ‘Aki Kaalung;’ for the Timugon Murut, the given name was ‘Aki Kapuuno.’ The concept of a God and all ‘His’ creation of this world, including good and evil spirits, was similar. Timugon Murut tells the tale of creation by Aki Kapuuno who was responsible for creating the earth, the stars, the sun, moon, human beings, animals, plants, spirits and everything else in the universe. When Aki Kapuuno created life and substance for the well-being of his people, he unintentionally created the spirit world as well.

The traditional Murut generally believes in the existence of a physical world where human beings inhabit and a parallel spirit world populated by various kinds of unseen beings. Other than the human soul and animal spirits, the belief is that spirits inhabit almost every part of the natural environment—the forests, mountains, rivers, caves, and the earth beneath. The spirit known as *ambiluo*, for instance, resides among their paddy crops. Every crisis or misfortune encountered in life, be it natural disaster, a failed harvest or a debilitating illness, is often associated with rogue or malevolent spirits. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the traditional belief system of the Murut is characterized by rituals and rites presided over usually by aged priestesses or ritual...
specialists. This belief concept is not vastly dissimilar to those of other indigenous ethnic groups in Sabah such as the Dusun, Kadazan, Rungus, and Kimaragang.

The informants revealed that in the olden times, it was a taboo for Magunatip to be performed on ordinary days i.e., it should only be performed during certain ritual ceremonies. A study by Ismail Abbas and Shaoqin reported several ritual ceremonies where Magunatip played a very important role. Among these was the Mansislad ritual performed for healing the ill whose soul was believed to have left its physical body and prevented by other evil spirits from returning to its human host. The ritual was also to appease the spirits of skulls procured from head hunting forays or as spoils of war in the past. Apart from this, Mansislad was conducted to ward off the spirits of those who died in the war and to prevent them from disturbing the villagers.

Another ritual was the Magintan Taduk aimed at luring spirits in the paddy fields back to the paddy storage house and to ensure a bountiful harvest. After the Magintan Taduk ritual, the Magunatip would be performed together with drinking and feasting to entertain guests present at the ceremony. In this context, Magunatip was not part of the ritual. The dance was also performed during the Mansayau ritual held to celebrate the return of headhunters from raids and incursions, shifting from an old longhouse to a new one, or launching a newly built boat into the river for the first time.

Based on the oral sources of this study, the dance performed in ritual ceremonies is referred to by different names. According to Muskin bin Ungou, the dance during the Angkalatung healing ceremony is known as Kumanisp. This ceremony will be conducted whenever any unfortunate incident has occurred. Its primary purpose is to chase away the evil spirits that are bringing illness and misfortune to the community.

The origin of the Angkalatung healing ceremony is narrated in the form of a legend: once there was a local chief named Aki Kumugu (the term Aki or aki, “grandfather,” is used to address elderly people among the Muruts) who was able to see spirits or supernatural beings. One night, while Aki Kumugu was hunting in the forest, he chanced upon a large house which was brightly lit and filled with noises. Out of curiosity, he peeped through a small hole in the wall and saw many sick people lying on the floor. He realized that the occupants (spiritual beings) were in the midst of an Angkalatung ritual to heal the sick with the Kumanisp dance. He slipped away quietly so as not to be noticed by the spiritual beings. At the break of dawn, Aki Kumugu could not find the house; the entire house had simply disappeared. This made him wonder whether what he had witnessed the previous night was real or merely an illusion.

The following night, Aki Kumugu returned to the same location in the forest. To his surprise, the brightly lit house had resurfaced. The same healing ceremony was being conducted by the spirits. This time, he was determined to see how the Kumanisp dance was performed in the ritual. Aki Kumugu noticed the dancers putting their feet in and out tandem with the rhythmic beating of the bamboo poles that were hit against each other. Each of the dancers simultaneously held and beat a small gong. Aki Kumugu’s first-hand observation of the ritual had provided him with enough knowledge to perform the Angkalatung ritual to help the sick people in his village. This tale, as narrated by Muskin bin Ungou (informant), is none other than an etiological legend accounting for the origin of the modern Magunatip.

The act of putting one’s foot in and out of the bamboo poles beaten together forms the basic movement of the Magunatip. Such a dance performed in ritual ceremonies to heal sickness is rooted in the traditional belief among the Murut that illness is caused by unseen spiritual beings, either malevolent or simply mischievous.

The ritual dance is also significant in the Agumbak ceremony performed by the Paluan Murut. The specific aim is to appease the spirits of the skulls (acquired as trophies from the bygone headhunting era) housed in the longhouses. Agumbak seeks to ward off evil spirits and avert any mischief or misfortune that might befall due to prolonged neglect of the skulls usually stowed in the lofts of the longhouses. During the ceremony, it is customary for all longhouse occupants, including guests, to participate in a ritual dance known as Tungkasip. To begin the dance, two pieces of alu (wooden pole made from belian wood, used to pound paddy) are placed horizontally on the ground and held at opposite ends by two people who beat them together to form a rhythm. As narrated by Saimon Sasuru (informant), the loud sounds produced from the rhythmic beating of the alu in this ritual is a means of warding off evil spirits. The bobolian (ritual specialist) would then move along the length of the longhouse while sprinkling dammar powder in her wake. The occupants of the longhouse and guests are required to follow behind the bobolian to perform Tungkasip. This form of collective dance movement is believed to bestow upon the dancers protection by the spirits of the skulls from other malevolent spirits.

When the ritual dance procession which is led by the bobolian reaches the spot of the alu, they will put their feet in and out of the clapping poles and cross to the other side of the poles by weaving their feet between the clapping poles. Like Kumanisp in the Angkalatung ritual, Tungkasip can be considered as one of the etiological legends for Magunatip. A notable aspect is that the dance movements of both Tungkasip and Kumanisp are similar to those of modern Magunatip; as such, it could be deduced that the origin of the present day Magunatip is closely related to the ritual dance performed in the olden days.

Other than the Angkalatung and Agumbak rituals, Magunatip is performed in various Murut rituals. One of these is the Mansayau, a ceremony conducted whenever Muruts move from their old longhouse to a new one. Mansayau is held to invite the spirits dwelling in the old longhouse to relocate to the new home. Failure by the inhabitants to hold such a ceremony would render the new longhouse devoid of ‘helper spirits’ hence rendering the occupants vulnerable to evil spirits that bring sickness and calamity. At the same time, the spirits which were left unattended or uninvited in the old longhouse would look for a new dwelling place and might inhabit human corpses or carcasses of animals.

The Mansayau ceremony led by a ritual specialist begins with the beating of gongs in the old longhouse and chanting of ritual verses. All occupants of that particular longhouse are required to participate in the ceremony as the spirits would be familiar with them. With the continuous beating of gongs and chanting from the ritual specialist, the spirits in the old longhouse are then invited to move to their new home as the old longhouse will soon be torn down. When the ceremony team arrives at the new longhouse, the ritual specialist would invite the spirits to take abode in their new home. Once the Mansayau ceremony is completed, the festive highlights of the event, the Magunatip and traditional wine drinking session, would then commence.
Apart from the Mansayau, the Magunatip performance is included in various other rituals such as during the Magintan Taduk (to appease the rice spirits) and the Maginasi (to appease the spirits of the human skulls) ceremonies. Magunatip in this instance serves solely as an entertainment value for guests present in the ceremonies.

5. CONCLUSION

This study found that Magunatip evolved from acts performed during ritual ceremonies with the dance having a very significant role in healing and non-healing rituals. The Murut believed the dance, the sounds of the beaten alu and the act of putting one’s feet in and out in tandem with the rhythmic beating of the alu assisted their ritual specialists to ward off evil spirits. The advent of Christianity and Islam among the Murut in the late 19th century saw the beginning of the ritual context of Magunatip fading away. As revealed by the informants, the modern day Murut community no longer performs the Angkalatung and Agumbak rituals. Nowadays, Magunatip performance is more commonly associated with the entertainment element in cultural functions and celebrations, stripped of any religious connotations.

APPENDIX 1. MAGUNATIP DANCE PERFORMANCE WITH DANCERS WEARING THE TRADITIONAL COSTUME OF MURUT (AUTHOR’S COLLECTION)

APPENDIX 2. LIST OF INFORMANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andy Jusit</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kampung Sook</td>
<td>Head, Rangkatin Youth Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and Dance Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Igak Batangan</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Keningau</td>
<td>Village Head/Farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musikin Ungou</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Keningau</td>
<td>Village Head/Farmer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuar @ Salamat</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Keningau</td>
<td>Head, Patikang Laut Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaimi Saimon</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Dalit, Sook</td>
<td>Village Head/Farmer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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References and Notes


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