

Research Article

Talibong: A Material Culture Study

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study applied Material Culture study and Ethnography as research methodologies to describe and understand Talibong, an ancient sword, a material culture and identity of the people of Libacao, Aklan. This study was conducted in the remote town of Libacao in the Province of Aklan in the Philippines. This study has seven participants who are known locally as “panday” or blade smith and were identified to be making Talibong since they were young. The data collection strategies that were employed are participant observation, focus group discussion and in-depth interviews. Photographs and audio recordings were also used while gathering data. The set of data were analyzed using Jules Prown’s model of material culture analysis employing description, deduction and speculation. The findings of the study revealed that Talibong is an old age tradition practiced by the people of Libacao, Aklan. This has been culturally identified with the Libacaonons for centuries and it is an heirloom identified with the people. Rituals that are century old are practiced in the making of Talibong to ensure the safety of the blade smith while making it and protection to the owner of the Talibong. Talibong is a symbol of bravery, power and affluence. Talibong during the early times were made purposely for defense, a weapon for war. It is a material culture that is identified with the people of Libacao, Aklan, hence the expression of the locals: “ginacagnat ru talibong kung indi kaabu” (The Talibong gets sick when it could not slash).

Keywords: Bladesmith, Culture, Ethnography, Heirloom, Material Culture, Rituals, Talibong

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture and heritage reflect and shape the values, beliefs, and aspirations of the people thereby giving them their sense of identity (Hoffman 2003). This sense of identity is a product of the people’s preserved cultural heritage which is important in keeping their integrity and identity as a people. This identity, according to Gell (1992), is simultaneously embodied in their persons and objectified in things – things that produce effects on persons. Such things or objects serve to objectify cultural meanings, individual experiences, and identities (Gell 1992). Thus, things, objects, or material culture of a given society are a pervading facet of human life, a manifestation of, and an influence on cultures, social structures, sense of agency, identity, and power structures (D’ Toole and Were 2017). In many ways, material culture is the most obvious element of culture (Glassie 1999). Émile Durkheim saw material culture as one of the social facts that functions as a coercive force to maintain solidarity in a society (Woodward 2007). The material culture of the people acts as primary data for understanding the people’s culture, thereby rendering it a significant contributor in heritage conservation and preservation of the people’s cultural identity (Chevalier 2012).

It is through this cultural identity where Aklanons as a people became identified with some known cultural patterns that they became famous for. Aklanons refer to people who are born in the province of Aklan in the Philippines who speak their language and adhere to their culture. Folk belief is that Aklan derived its name from a river called Akean, that when the Spaniards came in the earliest times, they could not pronounce the word Akean properly that they uttered Aklan (CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Arts 1994, 2:245). A Libacaonon is an Aklanon who lives in Libacao, a town in the province of Aklan. A landlocked municipality surrounded by mountainous sceneries and Aklan river’s prominence, Libacaonons are said to be friendly and hospitable (Tutay 1979). Libacao is a place where Aklan’s ethnic cultures, habits, traditions, and practices were spared from outside influence like “hongaw” (arranged marriage), “dupli” (polygamous marriage), and “bas-ing” (offering of gifts to settle feuds), thereby considering it a repository of Aklan’s ethnicity and culture (Dela Cruz 2011). Libacaonons are described as clannish, often

resulting in blind loyalty and obedience to the family and the clan, thus sometimes resulting in differences and feuds. It is believed that from this nature where the Libacaonons are identified and became known and feared for their Talibong, a special sword and a tangible cultural heritage of the people, a material culture that is highly recognized. Talibong is historically known to be the fighting sword of the people of Libacao and the province of Aklan, brandished by various generations of Libacaonon warriors who fought foreign invaders throughout the centuries (Dela Cruz 2014). Talibong became historically known when during the Japanese invasion of Banga, another town in Aklan, a group of local guerrillas formed the Bolo Battalion which was made up of Libacaonons, who later raided the Japanese garrison in the town of Banga armed with only their Talibongs, thus the popularity of the sword and the identity of the people. Talibong is a material culture that reflected the sentiments and values of the Libacaonon. It is a kind of bolo used by the people and their ancestors during conflicts and tribal wars; sometimes it was used to settle grudges with other members of their family. It served various purposes either in the home, during war, as a gift, and as a bride price. Talibong is known for its sharpness, which is also the meaning of the word, “matarum”. It was a weapon created and made for defense and armaments. The weapon was a symbol of power and affluence during the early times (De Juan 2009). Talibong, the fighting sword of Aklan, and is popularly known to the people of Libacao has been identified as a tangible heritage that needs to be preserved and culturally recognized.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study made use of a qualitative approach for Talibong as a material culture and identity because qualitative methods generally aim to understand the experiences and attitudes of participants, to explore the phenomenon being studied and to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Ethnography is the process of discovering and describing a particular culture. It involves the researcher in an intimate and personal activity as they attempt to learn how the members of a particular group see their worlds; it works in describing a culture (Spradley and McCurdy 2012). It aims to understand another way of life from the point of view of the native. The goal of ethnography, as Malinowski (1948) puts it, is “to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world.”

The aim of using ethnography is to find meaning and symbol in Talibong making thereby creating a cultural identity of the people. The participants who very well know this cultural heritage with their knowledge, expertise, and experiences in Talibong making were able to share their views on the tradition. The inherent and attached value of Talibong as a recognized heritage of the people embodied and reflected the cultural beliefs of the Libacaonons given the history it provided. The people put value on this material culture that it continues to become part of the Libacaonons' household even up to the present. To understand the setup, ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviews, field notes, and artifact analysis were made to gather data.

These tools were provided in order for the researcher to have better understanding of the lives of the participants and give their own perspective on their literacies and living, and afforded an in-depth understanding of their own perceptions about their cultural identity. Ethnography was used to find meaning and an understanding in Talibong making which created the cultural identity of the people. Within this context that the study on Talibong emerged as a cultural experience that the blade smiths are able to live and tell. The relationship that emerged from the researcher and the key informants are essential elements to back up the claim-being a cultural identity of the people of Libacao, Aklan.

Data Collection

There are a variety of methods of data collection used in qualitative research. In this particular study, the following techniques were employed to gather and analyze the data related to the research questions: participant observation, focus-group discussion and in-depth interviews. The interview was conducted using “Aklanon”, the language of the blade smith.

Data Analysis

As this study is qualitative and employed material culture study and ethnography to understand the narratives of the blade smiths, the data that were collected by the researcher appeared in words based on what was provided by the blade smiths taken from the interviews, observations and discussions conducted. Such form of data requires some sort of processing before they are available for further analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Field notes that were gathered during the interview, observation and group discussions with the key informants were recorded, and transcribed by the researcher.

In the use of material culture analysis, J. Prown (1982) proposed three stages of analysis: the analysis proceeds from description which is recording the internal evidence of the object; deduction, which is interpreting the interaction between the object and the perceiver and lastly, speculation which is framing hypotheses and questions which lead out from the object to external evidence for testing and resolution. In the description of the object under study, substantial analysis is applied by which description begins with an account of the physical dimensions, material and articulation of the object (Prown, 1982). To determine physical dimensions, the object is measured and weighed. After substantial analysis comes a description of the materials used – what they are and how extensive were they used in the making of the object under study, moreover, patterns of distribution of these materials. Finally, according to Prown (1982), the ways in which the materials are put together in the fabrication of the object which is the articulation of the object must also be noted. Substantial analysis according to Prown (1982) is a description of the physical inventory of the object under study using all forms technical apparatus appropriate and available to use. In this stage of the analysis, talibong is carefully described based on how it is seen physically by the researcher and how it is described by the blade smiths.

Material culture refers directly to both the subject matter of the study-the material-which in this case, talibong and to its

purpose-the understanding of culture. As the study uses material culture as its focus, two approaches used and popularized by Bernard Herman, a leading pioneer in the study of material culture, were applied, these are the object-centered approach which focused on the object (Talibong) itself and the object-driven approach to which the focus is shifted towards an emphasis on understanding how objects relate to the people and culture that made and used them.

In the object-centered approach, attention will be given to the physicality of the object being studied. Talibong as a material culture is described according to what is seen externally with description about its texture, size, color, etc. This is the same with how Prown (1982) would discuss how a material culture should be analyzed, starting with the description of the object being studied. In the object-driven approach, the study will shift from the description of the physical attributes of talibong, the object, but will then focus on how this object relate to the cultural beliefs and development of the people leading towards their identity.

Research Locale and Participants

This study was conducted in Libacao, a town in the province of Aklan during the Academic Year 2019-2020. Libacao, officially the Municipality of Libacao, (Aklanon: Banwa it Libacao; : Banwa sang Libacao; Tagalog: Bayan ng Libacao), is a 3rd class in the of Aklan, . According to the 2015 census, it has a population of 28,241 people. Libacao is 31 kilometres (19 mi) from the provincial capital Kalibo.

The participants of this study were the blade smiths or commonly known in Libacao as “panday”. They were identified using purposive sampling. Since some of the blade smiths/panday are residing in some areas of Libacao, Aklan, and its neighboring towns it was deemed proper to make use of purposive sampling in identifying the participants. The rationale for selecting the key informants of the study was based on: first, the recommended list provided by the Local Government of Libacao’s Tourism Office through their local tourism officer, Reinnette DalaTeodosio. Second, the blade smiths identified were recommended by the Office of the Sangguniang Panlalawigan Aklan and were also the same blade smiths actively participating in the annual “Talibong Festival” sponsored by the Provincial government of Aklan, showcasing the artistry and craftsmanship of the blade they made, like Junior Redecio a blade smith for more than 30 years, Dionesio “Nono” Teodosio, a blade smith for more than 50 years and Juveth Merano, although young at the age of 31 but has learned the craft of blade smithing from his father and grandfather since 12 years old. Third, they have been into the craft of Talibong making for more than twenty years and that talibong making has been in the family tradition for generations.

Lastly, the blade smiths identified are also known popularly known by the people of Libacao and are willing to participate in the study. Moreover, the researcher also incorporated the narratives provided by the informal participants acting as secondary informants in the study like the Municipal Mayor of Libacao, Aklan, the Tourism Officer and a Barangay Kagawad who each contributed their knowledge about Talibong and also have vital experiences with how it contributed to the Libacaonons culturally.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Qualitative Findings and Interpretation

Generally, this study aimed to describe talibong as a material culture and identity of the people of Libacao, Aklan. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions: What are the significant contributions of talibong to the people of Libacao, Aklan that contributed to the creation of their cultural identity? What is the use and purpose of making talibong? How is talibong, the object, related to the culture and the people who make and use it? How would you describe the physical appearance of talibong in terms of shape, size, texture, color, design, and decorations? What are the materials used in making talibong?

A qualitative research approach using material culture study as methodology and ethnography as the method was employed in the conduct of the study. Using purposive sampling, a total of seven bladesmiths were identified and selected based on the inclusion criteria set by the researcher to participate in the study.

The findings suggest that Talibong is a sword closely associated with the people of Libacao, Aklan, for generations. It is an heirloom recognized not only by the Libacaonons but also by the entire Province of Aklan and its neighboring provinces. Talibong making is an ancient cultural craftsmanship accompanied by ritual practices that have been handed down for generations. These practices ensure the safety and strength of both the owner and the bladesmith. According to the narratives of the bladesmiths, talibong symbolizes bravery, power, and affluence from earlier times, reflected in the local expression: “ginaeagnat ru talibong kung indi kaeabu” (the talibong gets fever if it could not slash). One is considered brave and powerful if seen with a talibong. The history of the “Bolo Battalion” further contributes to the notion that Libacaonons are brave due to their talibong, which was used to fight Japanese invaders in Aklan.

Originally, talibong was made for defense and warfare, primarily for the warring class. Most talibong makers crafted blades for the nobility, incorporating materials such as silver, gold, or brass. Additionally, talibong was used for dowry giving during courtship or marriage and was considered a prized possession if offered by the groom’s family to the bride’s family. Bladesmiths believed that owning a talibong provided protection in wars, which is why its use was restricted to warfare. Rituals were an essential part of talibong making, as following these practices was believed to prevent harm to the owner.

Affluence was indicated by owning a talibong made of “sapot”—a silver talibong considered rare and only affordable to the nobility. Power was associated with the use of talibong during warfare, dispute settlement, and dowry. The owner’s power was further emphasized by the talibong’s exclusive use for special occasions. Currently, bladesmiths use scrap metal or “molle” for making blades, whereas their ancestors used silver, gold, or brass. Carabao horn, including that of an albino carabao, was used for the handle or “pueo.” The shape of the talibong depends on the customer’s order, traditionally either sloped like a “bakutan” or

straight like a “linamay.” The length of the blade is often determined by ritual counting using a string, typically resulting in a length of 31 inches including the handle.

Talibong, as a part of Libacaonons' material culture, has also shaped their cultural identity. This identity is evident in how outsiders react when a Libacaonon is seen with his talibong. As the Mayor of Libacao noted, “Libacaonons during the days never leave their homes without their talibongs,” underscoring its significance in their identity.

Talibong as a material culture is described externally, including its texture, size, color, etc., following Prown's (1982) approach to analyzing material culture, which emphasizes starting with the physical description of the object. Moving beyond the object-driven approach, this study shifts focus to how Talibong relates to the cultural beliefs and development of the people, contributing to their identity. Recognized as tangible heritage of the people of Libacao, Aklan, Talibong warrants the application of material culture study as a relevant methodology in this research.

This qualitative study also centers on understanding Talibong as a cultural identity of the people of Libacao, Aklan, thus cementing its status as cultural heritage and tradition. Creswell (1994) defines qualitative research as an inquiry that explores social problems through distinct methodological traditions, focusing on diverse perspectives on reality.

The narratives of identified blade smiths served as primary data, crucial for substantiating claims regarding cultural identity. These individuals possess unparalleled insight into the cultural heritage, as noted by Dela Cruz (2019). Kumar (1989) underscores the value of key informant interviews, highlighting their ability to provide confidential information and unique perspectives that enrich understanding.

Secondary informants were also consulted to complement the insights gathered from key informants. As a material culture study, Talibong serves as primary data in understanding the identity of the Libacaonons.

This study aims to deeply understand the heritage and tradition surrounding Talibong and its evolution into a cultural identity of the people. To achieve this, the researcher employs material culture study as an approach to qualitatively describe the insights of key informants, particularly the blade smiths (panday).

The present study has elucidated Talibong as both a material culture and an identity marker of the people of Libacao, Aklan. This sword is believed to have existed among the Libacaonons even prior to the Spanish colonization of the Philippines. Material Culture study and ethnography served as the primary research methodologies, enabling a comprehensive exploration of Talibong as a sword deeply embedded in the cultural life of Libacao, Aklan.

The findings underscore that Talibong has been integral to the cultural fabric of Libacao, serving not only as a weapon for defense and dispute settlement but also as a symbol of prestige and a cherished heirloom. Rituals performed during Talibong-making rituals are believed to ensure the safety and protection of both the bladesmith and the future owner, thereby honoring ancestors and preserving tradition. These rituals are considered foundational by bladesmiths, who pass them down to subsequent generations.

However, economic constraints pose a significant challenge, as younger generations exhibit less interest in bladesmithing due to its limited financial prospects. To address this, the Provincial government of Aklan hosts the annual “Talibong Festival” to promote and preserve this craft, encouraging both bladesmiths and younger individuals to engage in and learn about Talibong-making.

The key informants—experienced bladesmiths—attest to the significance of Talibong as a material culture and a defining element of the identity of the people of Libacao, Aklan. Without Talibong, they argue, the Libacaonons would not have earned their reputation for bravery, encapsulated in the local saying: “ginaagnat ru talibong kung indi kaeabu.”

Below is a matrix showing the summary and the described display of the various shapes, size, textures, color, designs and decorations of talibong.

Table 1

The Matrix on Talibong and its physical appearance

Shape	elongated, straight and sloping
Texture	handle is rough, blade is smooth and polished
Color	handle and sheath are colored brown because of the wood used and the blade is colored like silver or when not polished is grayish brown
Design	the blade's design is either elongated straight or sloping
Decorations	old coins, carved wood, flowers and insect decorations are carved on its handle and sheath

Table 2

The Matrix of the different type of blades of Talibong

Bakutan	It is described to be beveled on its edge and flat on one side and chiseled on the other, It is described to be larger than the other
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	types of talibong, its blade length is 31 inches with the handle.
Linamay	Is elongated and is measured at a standard size of 31 inches depending however on the height of the owner.
Ginunting	Is usually used by Libacaonons on close hand to hand encounters. The blade is shaped like a beak because the tip is curved downward; the “ginunting” is the official sword of the Philippine Marines
Kinampit	Looks like a ginunting but its tip is cut diagonally which is distinct



Figure 1. The physical appearance of talibong

A Talibong is an elongated and straight sometimes sloping type of a sword made and used by the Libacaonons. According to Roming, the blades made by the Libacaonons are of different types, there is the “*bakutan*”, a typical sword characterized among the Visayans. It is described to be beveled on its edge and flat on one side and chiseled on the other. According to Roming, this indicates if the owner is left or right handed. The sword has various shape and sizes and it has a very distinct appearance because its blade is mostly straight from the tip to its base. It is described to be larger than the other types of Talibong forged in Aklan which is why it is known to be primarily a powerful slashing weapon. Nono also makes the same type of bakutan blade. The other type of blade forged is the “*linamay*” which is elongated. The “*ginunting*” is usually used by Libacaonons on close hand to hand encounters. The blade is shaped like a beak because the tip is curved downward.

4. CONCLUSION

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The basic ethical principle to be maintained in doing research include doing good, not doing harm and protecting the autonomy, wellbeing, safety and dignity of all research participants (Iphofen, R. Research Ethics in Ethnography/Anthropology, 2011).

The key informants must be able to choose freely to participate in the research. They must be given enough details and information about the research so that they may know up to what extent their participation to the research will be. Since the study on Talibong used human subjects it is the primary concern of the researcher to safeguard the interest and personality of the key informants of the study. The research was conducted with full compliance to ethics norms. Among the significant issues that were considered are consent and confidentiality. In order to secure the consent of the key informants, the researcher explained in details the purpose of the study and was able to discuss the importance of the study and how vital their participation is. The key informants were given the decision to participate or withdraw from participating even during the research process; this is to make sure that they were not forced to participate in the study. The confidentiality of the key informants was practiced by not disclosing their names or personal information in the study. Moreover, confidentiality and maintaining anonymity was made sure by the researcher using pseudonyms for each of the "panday". Although anonymity can be a complicated issue in providing pseudonyms is a helpful way to hide any identifiable information about the participants (Wiles et al. 2012) Although the seven participants voluntarily allowed the researcher to use their full names to be used for the study. The researcher opted to keep the key informants names anonymous by assigning them pseudonyms to prevent the occurrence of any possible issues in the future as well as it being part of the ethics pledge in doing research. The key informants allowed the researcher as well to use their quotes from the interview and group discussions in the study and no key informant was forced or harassed in any way during the course of the interactions with the researcher and the entire duration of the study.

The key informants were clearly and fully informed about their rights during the entire process of the study, these rights included voluntary participation, the purpose of the study and its intended use, what their participation meant, risks involved and that their participation was free from coercion. "Informed consent is a particularly important ethical issue in research involving migrants," Takabwirwa (2010). The key informants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study anytime during the process. The Aklanon dialect was used to clearly explain all the information as the participants could understand better using their own Aklanon dialect.

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