***Original Research Article***

**UBAYA: EXPLORING THE SACRED INDIGENOUS RITUAL**

**OF MANABONIANS IN NORTHERN PHILIPPINES**

**ABSTRACT**

This study explored the *ubaya* as an indigenous ritual practiced by the Muyadan (Ammutan) Tinguian tribe of Manabo, Abra. The *ubaya* emphasizes their strong ties to their ancestors and encourages unity and cooperation among the community. The ritual,s led by a *baglan* (ritual leader), is to seek Kabunian’s blessing for a bountiful harvest and protection against diseases and illness. This study utilized an ethnographic thematic approach, combining structured interviews, thematic analysis, and participant observation. Two *baglan* leaders and ten community members from different barangays of Manabo, Abra, who witnessed and participated in the ubaya ritual served as study participants, contributing their knowledge of the ritual's historical context, procedures, symbolism, and its function in expressing the community's indigenous identity and customs. The findings revealed two types of *ubaya* rituals. One is the *duklos* which is performed over two to three days in response to a pandemic or epidemic, animal or crop outbreaks, wars, and calamities. The other one is the *pinatuk*, which is performed in a single day to express gratitude to Kabunian and to offer prayers to the deceased. Despite the influences of modernity and external pressures, the *ubaya* is still a living tradition that reflects the tribe's unique knowledge system and practice. This study promotes the preservation of *ubaya* as an essential manifestation of the indigenous knowledge and spirituality of the Muyadan Tinguian people, highlighting its continuing cultural relevance.

*Keywords: ubaya ritual, baglan, Tinguian, Muyadan tribe, Manabo, cultural identity*

**INTRODUCTION**

There are numerous indigenous communities across the six provinces that comprise the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), including Abra. Abra's main indigenous tribe is the Tingguian, also known as Tinguian, Tinggian, or Itneg. Tinguian which is used interchangeably with the word "Itneg," is derived from the phrase iti uneg (the interior) or with the combination of the prefix "i-" (place of origin) and the word Tineg, a prominent river and region in Abra. The Tingguian were historically divided into two groups: valley (wet cultivators) and upland (dry cultivators), each with their own but related religious customs (Benedito et al., 2023).

The Tinguians as a people consists of twelve ethnolinguistic sub-groups, including the Adasen, Banao, Binongan, Balatok, Belwang, Gubang, Inlaud, Moyadan, Masadiit, Maeng, Mabaca and Agta. However, the Muyadan tribe was formerly known as the Ammutan tribe and the self-assured Ammut were believed to be their ancestor (Weygan, 2021).This tribe in Manabo is well-known for its rituals and worship of nature, which may be connected to or a part of the wider range of Tingguian ritual life (Guquib, 2013).

Rituals are considered a fundamental aspect of indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSP), particularly among ethnolinguistic groups. Long before the colonial period, it had been embedded in the Philippine customs and traditions serving as both practical and spiritual frameworks for day-to-day living and communal governance (Biangalen-Magata et al., 2021). Doctolero (2021) supports this viewpoint by emphasizing the practical and spiritual aspects of indigenous healing rituals in the Cordillera led by ritual experts which is critical in dealing with natural disasters and health problems.

The *ubaya* ritual is one of the indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSP) in Abra, specifically in the municipality of Manabo. In the Cordillera Administrative Region, the term *ubaya* refers to a community-wide suspension of labor, particularly agricultural activities. As part of a wider social and spiritual observance meant to preserve harmony with nature and guarantee agricultural success, community members abstain from working in the fields during this period. Additionally, elders use this period to carry out rituals that remove evil spirits and harmful influences in order to safeguard the community. In other ethnolinguistic groups in Cordillera, the phrases *te-er, to-or, sedey,* *far-e,* and *tungro* are also used to convey the same idea of the ritual (Lapniten, 2020).

This boundary-setting emphasizes a worldview in which ecological balance and spiritual order are closely linked to the well-being and harmony of the society. Therefore, the ritual is more than just a break from farming; it is a sacred celebration that upholds indigenous identity and continuity while strengthening traditional values via community involvement and spiritual cleansing (Degawan, 2020). Moreover, Peyron (2024) asserts that rituals enhance people's everyday lives by promoting harmony and unity, strengthening social relationships within groups, and promoting cultural values.

Rituals turn everyday occurrences into significant communal experiences that uphold cultural heritage and group identity. Furthermore, it helps to build a sense of continuity, connecting individuals to their ancestry whether in the form of traditional ceremonies, everyday actions or stories (Bartolome, 2024).

In both developing and industrialized countries, rituals continue to influence people's lives as living manifestations of ancient wisdom, demonstrating the timeless value of indigenous knowledge in a society that is becoming more modernized (Fiar-od, 2024). However, the *ubaya* ritual, like many other Tinguian indigenous traditions, faces significant challenges that threaten its continuation, similar to the study Cultural Practices of the Indigenous Peoples (IPS) of San Emilio, Ilocos Sur, which emphasizes the declining participation of youth in traditional cultural practices due to increasing attraction to modern lifestyles and digital entertainment, the death of ritual experts, and the lack of formal documentation (Absolor et al., 2023).

In light of these instances, this study aims to explore the *ubaya* ritual of Manabo, Abra. Moreover, this study focused on the documentation of the sacred indigenous ritual that must be preserved for future generations to uphold and appreciate. Hence, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What is the historical background of the *ubaya* ritual in Manabo, Abra?

2. Who are the key participants in the ritual and what roles do they play?

3. What are the procedures and symbols involved in the *ubaya* ritual?

4. How does the *ubaya* reflect the indigenous identity and traditions of the

Tingguian community?

5. What initiatives can be made to ensure the continuity and appreciation of these

rituals for future generations?

**METHODOLOGY**

This study used an ethnographic thematic approach to systematically observe and document the *ubaya* ritual of the Muyadan Tinguian tribe in Manabo, Abra. To obtain a deeper knowledge of the ritual, the researcher is immersed in collecting a range of data, such as field notes, recordings, documentation, structured interviews and through participant observation. Thematic analysis, as defined by Bernard was used to analyze and interpret the data, wherein similar and shared meanings across interviews are treated and identified to answer the different themes of this study. Snowball method was utilized to select participants, beginning with initial contacts such as barangay leaders, who then recommended more informed individuals. A total of twelve (12) participants who were from various barangays of Manabo, Abra who had actively participated in and witnessed the *ubaya* ritual were the participants of this study. For the actual interviews, the questionnaire was translated into Ilokano to facilitate communication. Following data collection, written responses and recorded interviews were translated and transcribed from Ilokano to English for wider dissemination. The entire research procedure was conducted with ethical consideration and results were distributed to participants for member-checking and validation in order to guarantee cultural accuracy and validity.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents and gives meaning to the collected data, grouped into three themes; (1) the historical foundation of the *ubaya* ritual, (2) *ubaya's* reflection of Muyadan identity, and (3) challenges to the preservation of the *ubaya* ritual. The first theme, the historical foundation, explains the origin of the *ubaya* ritual, answering questions such as where, why, and how the ritual came to be part of the Tinnguian community culture. The second theme, *ubaya's* reflection on Muyadan identity, shows how the ritual is used and performed reflecting the Muyadan tribe cultural identity. The last theme discusses the challenges in the preservation of the *ubaya* ritual and the actions that are expected from the community and the government for its continuity.

**Historical Foundation of the *Ubaya* Ritual.** The indigenous cultural heritage of ethnolinguistic groups in Cordillera forms the historical foundation of the *ubaya* ritual. According to Degawan (2020), this ritual varies in names among ethnolinguistic groups in the Cordillera such as as *te-er, to-or, sedey, far-e, and tungro* while the Muyadan tribe of Abra refers to it as *ubaya* which exists in two types.

Based on the findings, the first type is the *pinatuk,* also known as the normal *ubaya,* which is performed in a single day to express gratitude to Kabunian and to offer prayers for the deceased. The second is the *duklos,* which is performed over two to three days in response to a pandemic or epidemic, animal or crop outbreaks, wars, and natural disasters. This practice is deeply rooted in the traditions of numerous indigenous tribes in the Cordillera and has been passed down from different generations, through narratives and performances to preserve common knowledge and values. As a result, significant support for community involvement is essential, emphasizing the need of allowing local people the authority to take management of their cultural assets (Hiswara et al., 2023).

Respondents who were questioned about the origins of the *ubaya* ritual claimed that it has been there for ages and has developed alongside the indigenous populations of Abra and some community members accept the duty of educating future generations on how to preserve it. However, the community can participate in the *ubaya* ritual but only those who possess the ability of a *baglan* (ritual expert) can perform the ritual. This ritual is done twice a year or even more depending on emergency cases in response to a pandemic or epidemic, animal or crop outbreaks, wars, natural disasters, offering prayers to deceased and expressing gratitude to Kabunian (deity).

A respondent shared his knowledge about this cultural practice:

Sakbay na tayo palang sinakop ti taga-sabali a lugar ket adda ti makunkuna nga Ubaya. Haan nga napukpukaw daytoy nga ritwal gapwen ta naipasapasa daytuy iti henerasyon ket adda latta tumawid wenno tumakder nga Baglan wennu agdawdawak. Gapo metlang ti pammati ken panagmaymaysa ti komunidad nu apay nga inggana atta ket adda palang ti Ubaya. (A ritual known as Ubaya existed long before we were colonized by people from other countries. The ritual has survived because it has been passed down from generation to generation, and there are still Baglan, or spiritual leaders, who continue to perform it. Moreover, due to the community's faith and unity the ritual still existed.)

At present, the *ubaya* ceremony remains a vital component in the Tinguian culture. By extending its practice into modern settings with the help of local government and Indigenous Peoples' Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs), it has demonstrated cultural adaptability and resilience. It also actively encourages the ritual to younger generations, guaranteeing that it will continue to be an important symbol of cultural continuity and unity among the people.

***Ubaya*’s Reflection of Muyadan Identity.** The *ubaya* ritual is an integral part to the Tingguian community which embodies their cultural ideals of unity, cooperation, and shared support. These cultural values were strongly shown in the process of the *ubaya* ritual.A respondent supported this idea by saying:

Nu ti maubra nga ritwal ket duklos tunggal mayat nga miyembro ti barangay ket mapan umyan ti bantay. Daytuy nga panag-umyan ket maawawagan nga “akkab”. Mapan kami ti alas nuebe ti rabii ket no alas dos wenno alas tres ti bigat ket mangrugi kami agtitinnulong agbirok agijay root nga mausar para iti ritwal. (When the duklos ritual is to be done, every willing member of the barangay gathers and goes up the mountain. The act of going up is called 'akkab'. We leave about nine p.m., and by two or three a.m., we begin helping one another in looking for roots for the ritual).

Another respondent reinforced this idea by sharing:

Agtitinnulong kami mangbirok ti otik nga maparti. Iti duklos nga ubaya, duwa wennu tallo nga otik ti mabiruk ngem iti pinatuk nga ubaya met ket uray maysa laeng. Nu awan makaited ti otik ket agtitinnulong kami nga mangited iti kwarta nga paggatang iti otik. Haan pay nga basta basta maubra ti ubaya gapwen ta nu adda kumuntra nga umili ket daksen mi ti ag-ubaya ta haan nga nabirtud. Masapul nga agmaymaysa ti umili nu ag ubaya. (We help one another in finding a pig to be used in the ritual. One pig will do for the pinatuk form of Ubaya, but two or three are required for the duklos. If no one is able to provide the pig, we donate money to purchase it. Moreover, the Ubaya ritual cannot be executed if there is a community member who disagrees with it since the ritual would not be virtuous. The community should be united when performing an ubaya.)

This finding is in corroboration to the study of Kaur (2024) wherein he claimed that indigenous performances and rituals bring communities together for shared experiences and communal engagement, making them an effective instrument for fostering social unity. Community members can negotiate shared ideals, strengthen social ties, and enforce orders through performances during festivals, rituals, or significant events.

Although originally, *ubaya* allows only men to perform the ritual and do the *akkab* (going up to the mountain), as well as male pigs to be butchered, *ubaya* ritual has adapted to contemporary ways of promoting gender equality, with women included. Thus, the ritual has a cultural adaptation and resilience, which spread into contemporary contexts demonstrating its ability to remain relevant across generations. It highlights how women use political engagement, education, and moral leadership in families and communities to support the development of their countries and foster communal cooperation. Participation by women in religious and social activities fosters harmonious coexistence and strengthens national unity (Ndubuwa et al., 2019).

Spiritual leaders like shamans, priests, or elders lead rituals that frequently include highly structured movements, music, and chants. Indigenous peoples use these performances as a means of communicating with their ancestors, connecting with the supernatural realm, to guarantee the well-being and success of the community. Rituals call forth the spirits of gods, ancestors, and the environment to guarantee the community's health, the land's fertility, defense against an illness, and guidance during uncertainty (Nnaemeka et al., 2019).

In the *ubaya* ritual of the Muyadan tribe, they refer their ritual expert as the *baglan*, who performs the ceremonies alongside with their elders. Anyone in the community can help and participate in the *ubaya* but not anyone can be a *baglan*. At present, there are just two *baglan* left, with only one being regarded an *agdawdawak* (a human who can be possessed by a spirit). A respondent explained:

Nu naparti iti otik wenno baboy basaen ni baglan diay dalem na. Makuna nga mayat iti risulta iti naubra nga ubaya nu iti dalem wenno apro ket haan nga nangisit, awan sugat na ken awan ti tuldok na nga puraw. Ngem no adda dagituy, kabigatan na metlang ket maubra iti sapnak wennu sangasang tapno makontra iti madi nga resulta iti naubra nga ubaya. Nu iti klase iti ubaya ket duklos, maubra iti panagdawak ket maubayaan iti pinpinaing (a stone believed to be inhabited by a spirit) isu diay makisarita iti agdawdawak iti pinaing, ti awag dituy ket dyam (akin to a ritual chant). Ti ubaya ket magansaan ken matadekan metlang. (If the pig is already butchered, the baglan read its internal organs, which are divided into four parts. If the internal parts, particularly the liver and bile, are not blackened, have no wounds, and have no white spots, then the Ubaya ritual is thought to have been successful and the community's prayer has been answered. However, if these signs appear, then a 'sapnak' or counter-ritual must be performed to avoid bad outcomes from the Ubaya. If the Ubaya is duklos, the ceremony includes summoning and communicating to the 'pinpinaing' (a stone believed to be inhabited by a spirit). The invoker (the agdawdawak) communicates with the pinaing via a dyam (akin to a ritual chant). The Ubaya is accompanied by gongs and dancing).

Another respondent expounded:

Duwa iti klase iti ubaya. Umuna ket isu iti pinatuk wennu kunkuna mi nga normal nga ubaya. Daytuy ket maubra iti maysa nga aldaw. Mapasamak iti pinatuk nu pagyamanan iti nasagana nga ani ken nu panagkararag ti natnatay kasla kuma idi tawen nga 2010 nga nagsasaruno iti natay dituy umili. Iti duklos met ket maubra iti duwa wennu tallo nga aldaw. Maubra daytuy nu adda sakit nga agdama wennu nagwaras, pallak iti animal wennu pagey, didigra ken nu bagyo. Maubra daytuy tapno maiyadayo iti umili iti saksakit wennu haan nga nasyaat nga pasamak. Ti naudi nga pannaka ubra iti duklos ket idi napasamak iti pandemya nga covid-19. Nu maubra iti ubaya, haan nga mabalin nga sumrek ti tao iti sabali nga balay, awan iti rumwar wennu sumrek nga sabali nga tao iti pagilyan nga Manabo. Haan pay nga mabalin nga agtrabaho wennu mapan taltalon iti umili. (There are two types of Ubaya. The first is called pinatuk, or the normal Ubaya, and it is performed in a single day. It is done as a way to express gratitude for a bountiful harvest or as a prayer offering for the deceased, like what happened in 2010 when the community experienced consecutive deaths. The duklos, on the other hand, is performed over two or three days and is carried out when there is a pandemic or epidemics, animal or crop outbreak, disaster, or calamities. It is done to protect the community from illness or unfortunate events, and the last time a duklos was performed was during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the Ubaya is held, no one is permitted to enter another house. No outsider is permitted to enter the municipality of Manabo, and no member of the community is permitted to work or go to the fields.)

The *ubaya* ritual highlights the Muyadan tribe's connection to nature, their ancestors, and the community's welfare. According to Guquib (2013), the *baglan* together with the community play a crucial role in preserving this vital practice. The custom reflects larger Cordillera traditions in which rituals are employed for both practical and spiritual purposes, such as maintaining communal unity, attracting blessings, and preventing bad luck (Ethnic Groups Philippines, 2020). The *ubaya* is a crucial aspect of the Muyadan tribe's spirituality, cultural identity, and social system.

**Challenges in the Preservation of the Ubaya Ritual.** The passing of ritual experts capable of performing the Ubaya ritual, particularly the Baglan who can conduct the "panagdawak," is one of the main challenges to its continued existence. The study by Absolor et al. (2023) supports this, stating that the death of ritual experts is one of the uncontrolled factors affecting the continuation of indigenous traditions. Further highlighting the widespread loss of indigenous knowledge and ritual practices around the world when ritual experts and knowledge holders disappear (Fernández-Llamazares et al., 2021). As respondent stated:

Maysa nga pannubok iti panagtultuloy iti ritwal nga ubaya ket no awan ti tumawid nga baglan. Duwa lang iti adda nga agdama nga baglan ket maysa lang kinyada ti agdawak. (One challenge in preserving the ubaya ritual is the absence of a baglan; at present there are only two baglan, and only one performs the panagdawak.)

Furthermore, the presence of various religious sects has weakened the faith and trust in the *ubaya* ritual. This is further backed up by the statement of one of the respondents:

Mariknak nga haan nabirtud unay iti ritwal nga ubaya gapo na ta haan kasla idi gapwen ta umado iti naduma-duma nge relihiyonen. Adu ti umili nga haan mamati kadaytuy nga ritwalen su nga daytuy nga taw-en keta awan pay naubra nga ubaya. (I feel that the ubaya ritual is no longer as sacred as it used to be, perhaps because various religions have spread. Many people in the community no longer believe in this ritual, which is why this year, no ubaya has been performed yet.)

Lastly, the lack of interest of younger generations for these traditional practices, particularly the *ubaya* ritual, is also a challenge in preserving the ritual. Traditional practices that are sometimes seen as outdated by younger generations include dance, rituals, and oral traditions. Growing industrialization and westernization are causing youth to disregard their culture and become more attracted to western culture, which is a key sign of cultural loss (Asencio & Cadorna, 2023).

Still, some respondents emphasized that community initiatives can help preserve the ubaya ritual. They proposed that by incorporating the ceremony into community initiatives and school curricula, educators and community leaders can play a crucial part in reviving tradition. As one respondent stated:

Mayat nga maisuro kuma daytuy nga ritwal iti pag-adalan, nu apay ken kasatnu daytuy nga ritwal nga maububra gapwen ta bassit laengen nga agtutubo iti maka ammo iti ubaya. (It would be good if this ritual could be taught in schools — the reasons behind it and how it is performed — because only a few young people today know about the ubaya).

In order to foster and maintain traditional customs, community institutions such as schools, elders, parents, and the church must work together. This is evident in studies on indigenous cultural preservation, such as those that concentrate on the Tingguian culture of Abra. To engage the youth and guarantee transmission across generations, these initiatives include integrating traditional practices into community events and school curricula (Llaneza, 2021).

According to a recent study by Benedito (2023), Dacuycuy (2023), Navarro (2023), Suarez (2022), Ancheta (2022), and Rabago (2021), preserving cultural traditions through written texts is a part of a society's continuing cultural traditions, and this can be accomplished by developing educational resources including contextualized learning modules, mobile-based learning applications, and learning activity packs (LAPs), and contextualized learning materials (CLMs).

Despite modernization and external factors, the *ubaya* ritual is still executed. The transfer of this crucial cultural heritage can be continued by encouraging collaboration among schools, elders, families, and religious institutions, as well as the use of innovative educational methods like mobile learning applications and contextualized learning resources. Ultimately, sustaining the *ubaya* ritual is about more than just safeguarding a custom; it is also about ensuring the community's cultural identity and continuity for future generations.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The Muyadan Tinguian tribe's *ubaya* ritual demonstrates the lasting strength and endurance of indigenous cultural heritage in Northern Philippines. The *ubaya,* which is deeply rooted in the community's historical and spiritual relationship to their ancestors and the natural world, represents not only a sacred tradition, but also a vital expression of identity, unity, and communal responsibility. Even as the world changes rapidly around them, and despite the pressures of modernization, the Muyadan people have kept this ritual alive, showing just how adaptable and meaningful their ancestral knowledge remains today.

The two types of *ubaya,* the *duklos* and the *pinatuk,* shows the ways of the community in addressing both social crises and spiritual needs. The *ubaya* ritual, whether used to seek protection during pandemics and disasters, express gratitude for blessings, or offertory prayers to the deceased, it is indeed a powerful community mechanism for healing, social unity and cultural preservation. The *baglan's* leadership and the active engagement of community members emphasize the practice's collaborative nature, strengthening shared values such as cooperation, respect, and harmony with the environment.

In addition, the *ubaya* ceremony highlights the Muyadan tribe's distinct identity and values, in which spirituality, environment, and social order are intertwined. Moreover, a strong sense of belonging and continuity across generation is developed as a result of the ritual's emphasis on mutual support and community involvement. Importantly, the inclusion of women in the ceremonial process demonstrates the dynamic nature of indigenous traditions, which may embrace modern values like gender equality while maintaining essential traditional concepts.

The *ubaya* ritual, however, has certain obstacles at present and in the near future. The decline in youth involvement, a lack of ritual experts, and the fear of cultural loss need a collaborative effort by the community, local government, and cultural institutions. Documentation, education, and active advocacy of indigenous customs are critical for preserving this tradition. By recognizing and supporting the *ubaya*, stakeholders can ensure that this sacred ritual is preserved as a living tradition, enriching the cultural landscape and spiritual lives of the Muyadan people for future generations.

In a nutshell, the *ubaya* ritual is more than just a tradition. This represents indigenous resilience, identity, and wisdom. Preserving and promoting such rituals not only honors the past, but also enables indigenous communities to handle the challenges of modern life with cultural pride and spiritual fortitude. The continuous practice and appreciation of *ubaya* demonstrate the critical significance of indigenous knowledge in creating sustainable, harmonious, and culturally rich societies.

**RECOMMENDATION**

A long-term, multi-sectoral approach is highly recommended to ensure that the *ubaya* ritual and the Muyadan Tinguian tribe's larger cultural legacy remain intact and preserved. Schools should improve the implementation of indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSP), such as the *ubaya*, into the curriculum by using culturally responsive teaching and integrating elders as resource speakers to increase students' appreciation and participation. Families and community leaders must encourage youth participation in rituals and celebrations to foster the transmission of knowledge and values between generations. Furthermore, the *ubaya* ceremony should be thoroughly documented, studied, and promoted by local government agencies working with cultural organizations to ensure that both its material and immaterial components are conserved for upcoming generations. Cultural pride and identity can also be strengthened by initiatives that honor and revive historic customs, such as local museums, cultural festivals, and community workshops. Stakeholders can preserve the *ubaya* rite as a living tradition by cooperating across the fields of education, family, government, and community. This will guarantee that it continues to be a dynamic representation of solidarity, fortitude, and indigenous knowledge despite modernity and changing times.

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