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Ritual and Power Among the Tagabawa Bagobos of Davao,  
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## Introduction

In the course of my dealings with the Tagabawa Bagobos in the Davao district of the island of Mindanao in the Philippines, I noted their reference to the word *tolus*. Oftentimes, it is used to mean *power*, but occasionally, it referred to *a spirit that guides the artisan in his work*. The word *tolus* was briefly mentioned by Fay-Cooper Cole (*Wild Tribes of Davao District*) in his 1913 ethnographic work on the Tagabawa Bagobos. In his account of traditional Bagobo metal working, he indicated that the blacksmiths are under the care of the *Tolus ka gomanan*, a powerful spirit for whom the *Gomek-gomanan* ritual is conducted, indicating the beginning of the agricultural cycle. This paper therefore aims to uncover indigenous concepts of power reflected both in Bagobo blacksmithing and in the ritual of the *Gomek Gomanan* ritual.

Among the *barangays* in Davao where the Bagobos are still the majority, only two continue to practice traditional blacksmithing: Sibulan and Tudaya. Since accessibility to both places is known to be difficult, there is less contact between their inhabitants and the lowland Christians. Because it was easier to reach, Sibulan was chosen as the locale for my study. Fieldwork was carried out in Lower Eggit, as it is known

to be the major stronghold of traditional Bagobo belief and practices.

## The Bagobo

The Bagobos are the earliest settlers of Davao. They are composed of three distinct dialectical groups:

1. Guiangan (Guanga, Gulanga, and Jangan)
2. Obo (Ubu' and Ubbu')
3. Tagabawa (Tahavawa')

All used to wear similarly beaded costumes, highly incised and decorative brass ornaments such as armlets and leglets, and to carry identical baskets and woven *abaca* knapsacks, which were similarly covered with beads, bells, shell sequins, and cotton pompoms. Nowadays, however, only the Tagabawa Bagobos of Sibulan and Tudaya appear to retain these tangible markers of their ethnic identity.

## The community

Sibulan is one of the Tagabawa Bagobo settlements in the foothills of Mt. Apo. Stationed here is the mother

church of the Lanahan sect, a Bagobo millenarian movement, which is highly instrumental in preserving many of the age - old traditions. The cult was originally formed to restore the *status quo ante*, in which the normal incidence of illness and death was acceptable. It blames the current problems - health problems and inexplicable meteorological upsets - on the fact that the Bagobos are being swayed from the old ways (1). Thus, the maintenance of traditional ways of doing things is something of which these Tagabawa Bagobos are very conscious. For instance, to instil its sense of importance among the Lanahan members, every member of the group is required to own a set of traditional clothes that should be worn at least once a month during their regular Lanahan rites and ceremonies.

## Bagobo blacksmithing

Although every Bagobo community in the past had their own *gomanan* or forge, only Sibulan and Tudaya have managed to retain theirs.

### Parts of the *Gomanan*

The bellows of the Bagobo forge (*gomanan*) are two upright cylinders (*piopa*), about a metre high, hollowed out of small tree trunks, with pistons (*ploppok*) ringed with chicken feathers set so as to collapse on the return stroke. They are alternately raised and lowered by the blacksmith's apprentice to produce a steady draught. Both cylinders have a bamboo outlet (*tayhop*) near the bottom that leads to a common stone receptacle (*pliyop*) which concentrates their draught into a charcoal fire (*tam-mob-bok/subhanan*). The anvil (*landasa*) is a piece of iron set in a heavy wooden block, and the smith's tools are a hammer used for flattening metal (*maso*), a

hammer used for shaping metal (*buntok*), a pair of tongs (*hopet/kumpit*), and an assortment of ordinary bolos for cutting the red-hot metal (*hos-song, silsil*).

### The *Tarauman* and his *Tolus*

Apo Agbak was the oldest Bagobo in Lower Eggit when I interviewed him in 1994. He died four years later at the age of 119. He also happened to be the community's master *tarauman* or blacksmith. It appears that only one person at a time could then be acknowledged as such in a Bagobo community. In the case of Lower Eggit, two other Bagobos (Eric Agos, his son and Datu Delapeña Erano) who would alternate as assistants to the *tarauman*, were capable of working in the forge, but did not do so since Apo Agbak, despite the fact that he had by then ceased to work for two years due to his weak physical state, was still alive. This custom is explained in their belief that the power of the *tolus ka gomanan* is bestowed only to, and through, the master *tarauman*.

The *tolus ka gomanan*, or the spirit of the Bagobo forge, is said to be the source of the creative power of the blacksmith. Before the forging process is carried out, the blacksmith always invokes him. This explains why the word *tolus* in Tagabawa Bagobo also means 'power', as it is the reason for the prestige the *tarauman* has in the Bagobo community.

The prestige of the blacksmith is also a natural consequence of his having to work with iron. Iron, being a primary component of soil, is considered as one of the four essential elements believed to have made up the universe. And it appears that blacksmithing is the only profession wherein these four elements - earth, air, water, and fire - are all present in the production process. Air is blown through the bellows of the forge

thus producing the fire necessary for smelting iron, and water is used to cool and temper the metal. All these explain the Bagobo perception of iron as a sacred object.

### Blacksmiths and secular power

Bagobo ironwork, however, is also important in daily life. For the Bagobo *datu*, the iron sword, is a must both in time of peace and time of war. In the fieldwork I conducted in Sibulan, Davao, in 1995, I documented the fact that his sword is considered the most important part of a man's apparel; the sword of the Bagobo *datu* is both a weapon for defence and a symbol of power (2). There is also a secular basis for the Bagobo blacksmith's prestige. In the first place, traditional iron artisans in the Philippines were few and scattered, consequently they were considered specialists (Hutterer 1977; Dizon 1983; King 1993: 117; Junker 2000). And according to William Henry Scott, smithing was considered the noblest profession in the sixteenth century Philippines because only the wealthiest *datu* had the means to import the raw materials.

Blacksmiths were the suppliers of all metal tools, including *swidden*, farmers' bolos, so they exercised control over the means of agricultural production. To quote Father Alcina (1668a, 3:105), *it is certain that no profession was more profitable than the blacksmith's; and as the greatest chief were the best iron-workers, he was most honored and esteemed* (3). William Dampier echoes this in his account of his visit to Mindanao in 1686, stating that there were but few tradesmen in Mindanao, but the most prestigious were the blacksmiths, alongside goldsmiths and carpenters. He also observes that there were *several blacksmiths who work very well, considering the tools that they worked with* (4).

Scott infers that the blacksmith's prestige was further enhanced by his socio-political power, due mainly to his access to the trade network. Secondly, as the guardian of pyrotechnic knowledge, he monopolised the manufacture of iron implements (5) and naturally, assumed a position of importance in a community engaged in agriculture and warfare. Moreover, in time of war, he provides the elite with the swords which would give them a distinct military advantage.

There are thus two reasons why blacksmiths are held in such high regard - one sacred, the other, secular. The sacred lies in the people's reverence for iron; the secular lies in the blacksmith's control over the means of production of implements pertaining to agriculture and defence.

## Gomek Gomanan ritual

Both the sacred and secular regard for power among the Tagabawa Bagobos are echoed likewise in the Gomek Gomanan. This ritual takes place every January in Sibulan, marking the start of the agricultural cycle for the Tagabawa Bagobo.

### Early accounts of the ritual

The earliest documentation of the pre-planting festival of the Tagabawa Bagobos was made by the Jesuit, Mateo Gisbert, in 1886. In his account, he writes that a feast accompanied by the sacrifice of a human victim was carried out by the Bagobos before the beginning of the agricultural cycle. (Gisbert 1886: p.234) Since Fay-Cooper Cole did not witness the practice of human sacrifice in the study he conducted among the Tagabawa Bagobos between 1912 and 1913, his manuscript reflects his doubt as to whether such a sacrifice actually accompanied the rice-planting ceremonies. However, he refers to the pre-planting festival as the *Ginem*, *the greatest of all Bagobo ceremonies*. He indicates too that the ceremony was carried out *to gratify the spirits that they will be pleased to increase the wealth of all the people* in the community. Laura Benedict explains the question regarding human sacrifice in her 1916 study; she refers to the pre-planting festival as *Ginum*. She clarifies that, although human sacrifice is part of the *Ginum*, it was not an essential part.

Although this sacrificial rite is often a constituent element of *Ginum*, and of funeral services and so forth, yet, from another point of view it may be regarded as a ceremonial unit in itself, and is characterised by the types of chanting, the form of the altar, the ritual recitations, and other elements common to many ceremonies. Furthermore, the special crises that may necessitate such a sacrifice do not necessarily coincide with the date of a festival, so that *paghuaga* (human sacrifice) may become an isolated ceremony (6).

Instead, what appears to be central to the pre-planting ritual is the blessing of the forge and all the products manufactured through it by the local *panday*. Cole refers to this as the *Gomek Gomanan* ritual. Of even greater importance are the smiths, who are also under the care of a powerful spirit for whom the *Gomek-Gomanan* ceremony is celebrated each year, just prior to the planting time. H.U. Hall elaborates on this in his 1916 report for the Museum of the University of Philadelphia.

During his stay in Sibulan he was able to confirm that, although the practice of offering human blood was no longer practiced by the Tagabawas, the *Gomek Gomanan* remained an important and necessary part of their agricultural cycle. In fact, unless it is carried out, work in the fields cannot resume. When, in December, Orion appears in the sky, this is the signal for the celebration of the great yearly sacrifice and for making all things ready for rice-planting. Offerings of rice cooked in bamboo tubes are made at the smith's forge to which the men bring their working knives and other tools used in connection with the cultivation or clearing of the fields. The smith calls on his patron spirit to come and eat of the food and accept the tools here dedicated to him. These tools will be used in field-work, although they now belong to the spirit, and compensation must be made to him if a knife be sold or otherwise disposed of. For the next three days no man must do any work. At the end of that time the workers go to the fields and set up in the middle of each a receptacle containing an offering of areca nuts intended for Manama, the Creator. In return for this, Manama is expected to keep mischievous spirits out of the field and to grant health, large crops and riches to the owner.

### Documentation of the ritual in 1995

I first observed the *Gomek Gomanan* ritual during my visit to Sibulan in 1995. Since the most important occupation for the Bagobo is the production of rice, preparations begin annually with the consecration of the tools to be used in clearing the forest to make way for sowing the rice. All who are to make new clearings or assist others in such work gather at the *gomanan* or forge, located behind the house of the *tarauman* or *panday*, to take part in the ceremonies honouring the *Tolus ka Gomanan*, the spirit of the forge. Traditionally, new knives and other metal implements are made during the ceremony, and these are blessed together with the old tools.

Before the ceremony started, the forge was prepared. All the blacksmithing tools were brought out, the fire was set, and water for tempering was placed in the bamboo container. I noted that bottles filled with sacred oil had been placed beside the cylinders of the forge.

**The ritual process was basically as follows:**

a. *Maghalad*. The ceremony began with the offering of

any amount of coins; these, they referred to as *rasyon* or offering to the *Tolus ka Gomanan*. These coins were individually placed in a depression on the *halaran* or cemented slab near the forge. Eventually, these coins would be removed from the *halaran* and carried to the summit of Mt. Apo sometime in May or December, their so-called pilgrimage months. There, these coins are left in a secret place where, over time, they 'melt' and become part of the mountain.

b. *Maghikay sa pagkain*. Everyone who takes part in the ritual contributes food to be offered to the *Tolus ka Gomanan*. Among the foods offered are roast pork, venison, coconut, and food cooked with coconut milk. Most important, though, among the ceremonial foods offered are chicken meat and blood, particularly that which comes from a white-feathered chicken, and biko made out of *omok*, red-grained rice which turns dark purplish-red, almost black, once boiled. White-feathered chicken symbolizes a soul so pure that it is believed to cleanse one's mind and one's entire being, while red-grained rice reminds the participants of a region in the home of the dead called *Kag-bunoan*, a place reserved for those slain by the sword or by the spear (products of the *gomanan*). It is also believed that in *Kag-bunoan* there are suggestions of blood everywhere as well as death by violence. Hence, all plants are of blood-red colour, and the spiritual bodies of the inhabitants retain the scars of their wounds. This explains why tools which are traditionally used for defence are also incorporated into the offering (cf. the concept of *pamalugu* below), reminiscent of those days when the Bagobo were still a warrior class.

c. *Mag-ampo sa pagluto*. While waiting for the food to be prepared, the participants take turns in praying to the *Tolus ka Gomanan*, the spirit of the forge.

d. *Pamalugu or pagbendisyon*. Group singing follows prayer and this indicates the moment of *pamalugu* or ceremonial washing. Water, applied by means of a bunch of green leaves and twigs with medicinal value, is placed on the head of everyone attending the ceremony. This process is meant to ensure the participants naturalisation in to the world of the spirits, as well as to induce a feeling of restfulness and content as they confront the *Tolus ka Gomanan*. This is viewed, then, as a form of benediction for both the person attending the

ceremony as well as for his agricultural produce; the effect of this so-called benediction is meant to take effect over the whole year, that is, until the next *gomanan* ritual.

e. *Magpanday*. If the *tarauman* or *panday* is physically fit, the production of knives and other metal implements follows. However, since when I was there, Apo Agbak was not physically fit to work, it sufficed that the forge was fired. His son, now *Barangay* Captain Eric Agos, was entrusted with the task of working on the pistons to maintain fire in the forge during the entire ceremonial process.

f. *Bunyag sa laot*. Since the ceremonial blessing of the tools was set to take place a week later, I did not witness this that year. The *panday* told me that the blessing of all the iron tools, both old and new, takes place by praying to the *Tolus ka Gomanan*, while sacred oil (*lana*) and water are poured on the metal implements. As soon as this is done, everyone can then begin their work in the fields.

## Documentation of the ritual in 2003

My second documentation of the *Gomek Gomanan* ritual took place January 2003. This was carried out to examine nuances in the ritual and to see whether changes had occurred after almost a decade. Although all the steps involved in the ceremonial process of the *Gomek Gomanan* ritual were carried out as above, there were some changes in the order and manner of delivery. At the start of the ceremony, I observed that bottles of oil were no longer placed beside the *gomanan* or forge. An account of the ritual follows.

a. *Magpanday*. Unlike the *Gomek Gomanan* ritual which took place in 1995, this time some tools were actually made. Three *pandays* were present - Datu Delapena, Allan Ambe, and Gerry Agos. Since Apo Allan, the oldest *panday*, was not feeling well, he had previously asked Gerry to carry out the entire process of *pagpanday* during the *Gomek Gomanan* rite. Nonetheless, Apo Allan, being the most senior, had to be present during the ceremony, and just like Apo Agbak in 1995, wore a *putong*. All throughout the *Gomek Gomanan* ceremony, Gerry worked at the forge and only stopped occasionally to pray and participate in the 'feeding of the tools' (see below).

b. *Maghalad ug mag-ampo*. As Gerry started to work in the forge, the ceremony began with the offering of coins as *rasyon* to the *Tolus ka Gomanan*. The offering was done after each participant in the ceremony said a prayer in a voice audible to all. However, since guests from other *sitios* were present, there was not enough time for everyone attending the ritual to come forward and pray individually. Instead, one representative from each *lanahan* group came forward and stood near the *gomanan* to pray and offer any amount of coins he or she wanted to the *Tolus ka Gomanan*.

c. *Maghikay sa pagkain*. Among the ceremonial food traditionally offered in the past, only *biko* made out of *omok* rice was evident. No meat was offered; instead, a variety of root crops was laid on the ground in front of the forge. Among these were boiled *kamote*, yam, and cassava in *suman* form. Aside from these, ground corn kernels sauteed with brown sugar, biscuits and milk were also offered.

d. *Pamalugu* or *pagbendisyon*. Although an elder residing in Sibulan presided at the ritual of ceremonial washing in 1995, a female elder from Tudaya was asked to preside this time. Since Apo Agbak, head of the Lanahan sect in Sibulan, passed away in 1998, an elder from Tudaya, Apo Adok, was the one entrusted with the task of leading the group. His so-called 'right-hand', Merlyn Ayong, was designated to preside over the *pamalugu*; she is said to have the *panaad* or gift for giving sound advice and proposing solutions to problems.

e. *Bunyag sa laot*. I was informed that, since I was no longer new to the community, the blessing of the tools would be enacted on the same day in my presence (7). So after the *pamalugu*, everyone brought out their iron implements and placed them on the ground in front of the forge. And all those who wanted to do so took part in what they referred to as 'feeding the tools' (*pakaon sa laot*), which simply involved getting a small amount of food from each of the food platters previously offered to the forge and sprinkling this on top of the tools. While everyone else was focused on 'feeding the tools', Apo Allan gave special attention to the forge itself by getting a small amount of *omok* (purplish-red *biko*) and placing this on different parts of the forge. I also observed him

pouring coffee on it.

After the tools were fed, everyone started to prepare for their work in the field.

## Comments and analysis

Although the *Gomek Gomanan*, at first glance, is primarily a re-affirmation of the Tagabawa Bagobo's belief in the *tolus ka gomanan* and its importance in agriculture, the ritual can also be used for social manipulation. First and foremost, it reaffirms the position of the *panday* in a traditional Tagabawa Bagobo community. Not only is he the source of agricultural implements, but through the *Gomek Gomanan*, on him also depends the efficacy of the tools and the assurance of a good harvest.

Second, the *Gomek Gomanan* also strengthens the position of the elders in the community since their directions regarding the community's agricultural practice are relayed through the ritual. For instance, rice rolled within *abaca* fibres, traditionally offered in the past, was no longer offered in the ritual conducted in January 2003, indicating that rice would not be planted that year. The members of the community had been advised by the elders not to plant rice because there had been too little rain for it to grow. In place of rice, grated corn was offered, indicating that corn would be the primary crop planted that year. I also noticed the absence of the bottles filled with oil previously placed beside the forge during the ritual. Oil in Sibulan is made sacred as it is offered to the *tolus ka gomanan*. Since more people have begun taking prescription drugs, the supply of sacred oil does not need to be replenished as often, and thus, the elders have agreed to its omit it from the ritual.

Moreover, the *Gomek Gomanan* further strengthens the spirit of *sinabbadan* (*bayanihan*), which refers to the traditional Bagobo practice of taking turns in helping one another to carry out those activities in the community which require additional manual labour, e.g. planting or harvesting on a wide piece of land, or house construction. Since the *Gomek Gomanan* ritual takes place in the premises of the *datu*, he and his family take it upon themselves to prepare a generous amount of food to be served for the feast during and after the ritual. In return, the people in the community feel obliged to help clear the *datu's* fields or plant his land. However, it must be made clear that the spirit of *sinabbadan* can be

carried out beyond the ritual of exchange embodied in the *Gomek Gomanan*, since this is practiced at anytime and with any members of the community.

Lastly, the *Gomek Gomanan* ritual reveals that it was also once used to encourage the people in the ways of the warrior. A remnant of past practice is the *putong*, which the presiding *panday* wears for the duration of the ritual. The *putong* is worn around his head and is supposed to indicate that he is (or was) a warrior, and that human blood has been shed through his hands. Moreover, the offering of the *omok* or red colored rice also serves to remind the people of *Kag-bunoan*, the place especially reserved for the souls of dead warriors and for those who have been slain by the blade of the sword (whose source is the forge or the *gomanan*). Thus the ritual reveals not only social relationships but also power relationships. It can be manipulated by individuals or groups attempting to alter or make statements about their relative position within the perceived social order.

## Conclusion

All of the data presented reveals how central the concept of the *tolus is* in a Tagabawa Bagobo community. In a place like Lower Eggit where the economy is based on agriculture, the *tarauaman*, or local blacksmith, has a position of power both in the realms of the sacred and the mundane. As a shaman and presider over the *Gomek Gomanan* ritual, he is the medium through which people can call on the *tolus ka gomanan*, and as a producer of agricultural implements, he exercises control over their means of earning a living. Moreover, by presiding at the *Gomek Gomanan*, his forge becomes a venue for social manipulation.

This paper has focused only on the blacksmith, his work, and the ritual which celebrates his forge, *pandayan* or *gomanan*, but his role, involvement, and participation in power relationships which cover both the sacred and the secular exemplifies the role of any indigenous artisan (e.g. weaver or brass caster) in a Philippino ethnic community. We see here once again that the Western tendency to separate the sacred from the secular does not apply among Philippino ethno-linguistic groups. ☪

## NOTES

1. This was previously documented by Kenneth William Payne (1985:76) in his dissertation on medical anthropology.
2. Myths of various ethno-linguistic groups in South East Asia also indicate this. The Itnegs of Patoc, Abra, tell the story of Silag and Sayen. The legend tells of two brothers of great physical stature, and how one of them drove away evil elements using a mystical sword. One episode tells how Sayen advised the hunters to lure the *Iboa* (a spirit that appears as a bloated human and eats cadavers from unprotected graves) into the town where he had a forge. At the appointed time, Sayen stood ready with a steel red-hot in his furnace. When the hunters came, followed by the *Iboa*, Sayen thrust the burning steel into the *Iboa*'s throat. In the Paraton of Indonesia there is the tale of Ken Angrok (Gandring) the murdered *empu*, who lays a curse on the *kris* which brought death to the children and descendants of the founder of the Singhasari kingdom. The *Itneg* sword and the Indonesian *kris* were weapons used against malefactors and malignant spirits as well as in war.
3. Scott, William Henry. 1994. *Barangay - Sixteenth Century Philippine Culture and Society*. (Quezon City, Ateneo de Manila University Press)
4. Dampier, William. Dampier in the Philippines. pp. 1686-1687 in BR XXXIX (Cleveland)
5. Dixon. 1983. *ibid*.
6. Benedict, Laura. p.79.
7. This was not possible during Fay Cooper Cole's visit to Sibulan in 1913, since women were not then even allowed to go near a forge when work was in progress.

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