

Between People and Place: Folklore Pertaining to the Natural Environment in a Farming Community in Argao, Cebu

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ABSTRACT

A study in folklore is a study of a people's way of life, thus, by looking through folklore pertaining to the natural environment, we can have a better understanding of how peoples perceive, interact and value the natural environment they live with. Based on qualitative research in a farming community in a mountain barangay in Argao, Cebu, the Philippines, a harmonious interplay between the people and their place is expressed in a variety of forms of intangible cultural heritage. This paper documents the values behind the interplay between culture and nature as embedded in various forms of local folklore pertaining to the natural environment considered culturally and economically significant to the community's way of living. Specifically, it focuses on (1) local folk beliefs, (2) rituals and practices performed and (3) the folk narratives and stories relating to the natural environment. Drawing on the concept of associative cultural

values attached to landscapes, the unwritten local knowledge onto the natural environment transmitted from generation to generation illustrates the intimate relationship between the people in the farming community and their natural environment. Nowadays, however, folklore has become a less understood integral component of culture, and some factors have caused its devaluation, unlearning and discontinuation, especially among the younger generation. Moreover, it presents the urgency of collaborative efforts between the natural and social sciences to multiply the values of landscapes and strengthen the relevance of conservation on the ground.

Keywords

folklore, natural environment, culture and nature, associative values, landscapes, traditional knowledge, Mangaw, precolonial values, Mount Lantoy, Argao, Cebu, Philippines

1. Introduction

Argao is one of the oldest towns in the province of Cebu, Central Visayas, the Philippines. A beautiful, well-known heritage town, it is home to many local cultural heritage sites, including the Spanish-era buildings that furnish its town centre; the traditional hand-woven *hablon*, a local cloth; local pastries such as its renowned *torta*; and the Flores de Mayo, a centuries-old Catholic ritual (Amper 2015). Argao is a first-class municipality and a known tourist destination for its rich natural and cultural resources, from the coast to the upland areas. In its rugged interior, the Mount Lantoy Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) is situated where endemic species in Cebu Island are found. Moreover, surrounding Argao's rich forest patch dwells the abundance of local folklore that now reverberates dimly in Cebuano memory.

Folklore – any learning, excluding all that is transmitted through writing – is virtually identical to culture, particularly to most non-literate societies (Bascom 1968). Teves (1970) similarly points out that, the more you study it, the more you will become aware of how folklore is deeply interrelated with the total culture of a people. Folklore is also deemed remnants of past lifeways and, at the same time, the set of practices that defines community membership (Noyes 2004). Further, folklore serves as a cohesive force that stabilises, sanctions and validates social institutions, and it is considered an educative device in the transmission of culture (Bascom 1953; Smith 1959). Moreover, folklore reflects the identities of a people, as it provides insights into the complexity of the human mind; it also provides a panoramic view of the cultural, ecological and special life of a people, or a small group (Upadhyay 2016).

This paper highlights folklore as a fundamental form of intangible cultural heritage because it has value to the community and is passed down from one generation to the next. As defined by the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), it 'means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the [...] cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities [...] recognize as part of their cultural heritage. [...] in response to their environment [and] their interaction with nature'. Folklore also demonstrates the people's local knowledge of the natural elements they deem important; at the same time, it expresses symbols of coexistence with the supernatural sphere. Moreover, folklore pertaining to the natural environment is a product

of the interactions between culture and nature, which illustrate human–environment relationships. Often, these relationships are spiritual, lack material manifestations and are attached to a particular natural space or feature. Such landscapes are categorised as associative cultural landscapes. The World Heritage Convention guidelines (2019) define associative cultural landscapes as having absent or insignificant material cultural evidence but holding 'powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element' and represents the combined works of nature and of humankind. Buggey (2000, 23) further points out that associative cultural landscapes 'are defined by cultural values related to natural resources [...]. In language, narratives, sounds, ceremonies, and social customs are found the cohesive evidences'.

This paper seeks to widen our understanding of how peoples perceive, interact and value their natural world by examining the local cultural values behind the interplay between culture and nature as manifested in the varying forms of local folklore that specifically pertains to the natural environment. These integral components of culture have enlivened the landscape that defines Sitio Cabalawan – a farming community in Baranggay Tabayag, Argao, Cebu, Philippines. The main part of this study seeks to document on the ground the local folklore pertaining to the natural environment, which the local community considers culturally and economically significant to their way of living. Specifically, the paper focuses on (1) local folk beliefs, (2) associated rituals and practices and (3) the folk narratives based on the narratives, knowledge, descriptions, personal experiences, perspectives and memories of the local people in Cabalawan. Also, this paper looks closely into the factors that have caused the discontinuity of this intangible aspect of cultural heritage as well as the relevance of a conservation effort that safeguards both cultural and natural resources.

1.1. Methodology

Data are largely based on semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted during a week-long fieldwork session in December 2014, with the local people in the farming community. Although this study is an individual endeavour, the fieldwork was supported by a handful of local mountaineers. The first few interviews were conducted with convenience sampling. After being gaining 'access' to the community, I then utilised snowball sampling to identify key informants. Informants were selected based on their knowledge of the local

folklore. This study has a total of eight informants. My key informants are primarily farmers – namely Simeon Arobo, 76; Besing Arobo, 73; Andres ‘Ale’ Arobo, 62; Wilfredo Arobo, 49; Saning Alconera, 44; and couple Felisa Villacruz, 60, and Crispin Villafuerte, 74 – except for the youngest, Cristine Alconera, 23. She is ‘Noy Saning’s daughter and ‘Noy Ale’s niece, whom I enterprisingly interviewed while we stayed at ‘Noy Saning’s home for an extended period for safety during the passing of a tropical storm. All of them are native residents in Cabalawan except for ‘Noy Saning and ‘Nong Crispin, who came from the neighbouring villages of Conalum and Tiguib, respectively; both of them migrated to Cabalawan by marriage a long time ago. ‘Nong Simeon, ‘Noy Ale and ‘Nang Besing Arobo are siblings but have lived separately and distantly in the community. Remarkably, five of the interviewees share the same kin, which shows that the community is clustered with a common kinship. Interviews and interactions with the locals were done in Cebuano, the local language. Interestingly, I have observed in the latter part of the fieldwork that people responded quite differently to similar questions; I had to be flexible to

revise interview guide questions when necessary. This prompted me to conduct the succeeding interviews in an unstructured way. This supports what Berg (2007, 94) states: ‘not all subjects will necessarily find equal meaning in like-worded questions—in short, that subjects may possess different vocabularies’. Other qualitative research methods, such as informal interviews, deep hanging out with the local people and field observations, were also done in the locality. The knowledge that came from books, mass media or information, and programmes propagated by local government units are carefully delineated from the data. In another week-long fieldwork session in April 2015, further informal interviews, deep hanging out and field observations took place. Qualitative data systematically collated from interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded thematically, and then analysed descriptively.

1.2. Research Setting

The Municipality of Argao is 66 km south-east of the highly industrialised provincial capital of Cebu (Figure 1). It consists of 45 barangays from coastal to upland areas where fishing, farming and tourism play important roles in the local economy, which capitalises well on natural and cultural resources (Figure 2). Argao is a well-cited spatial reference for a number of popular Visayan folk narratives, such as the legend of Maria Cacao and the tale that includes the borrowing and golden boat motifs (Olofson and Uy 1989; Alburo 1998, 65; Seki 2001; Mojares 2002). Interestingly, Argao bears its local versions of the narratives.



Figure 1
Argao highlighted in the map of Cebu Island.
Source: Mike Gonzalez (The Coffee) - English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, commons.wikimedia.org



Figure 2
Crossing the shallow portion of the Argao River; one of my earliest treks to Mount Lantoy as a backpacker.
Photo: Kent Wesley Rasines, 2010



Figure 3
A view of Mount Lantoy from a stormy morning in Sitio Cabalawan.
Photo: Andie Mil Sabaricos, 2014

In the rugged interior of Argao stands a remarkable mountain peak named Mount Lantoy – a landmark situated by the Argao river (Figure 3). Mount Lantoy is renowned, especially by tourists and natural scientists, for its entrancing natural resources: the forest, flora and fauna, karst formations and waterfalls, among others. Mount Lantoy is a designated KBA that is home to many endemic species of animals and plants, such as the critically endangered Cebu flowerpecker (BirdLife International 2018) and the endangered Cebu cinnamon (Lillo et al. 2019), among others. Also, Mount Lantoy is a specially distinctive spatial reference of the legend of



Figure 4
In the foreground is Ale Arobo's dormant farmland, Cambares is in the middle ground and Mount Lantoy is in the background.
Photo: Ian Dale B. Rios, 2014



Figure 5
Upland terrace farming in Sitio Cabalawan.
Photo: Ian Dale B. Rios, 2014

Mangaw (Albuero 1998; Seki 2001). Mountains, as well as caves and forests, are widely associated with myths in the Philippines; it is believed that supernatural providers inhabit these natural sites (Mojares 2002). According to Amper et al. (2018), Mangaw is an entity that lives in Mount Lantoy – a sacred site in the uplands – and whose name is called upon during sacred rituals.

Mount Lantoy is most accessible in Cambares – a popular campsite area for backpackers – located in Sitio Cabalawan, a quiet sub-village in Baranggay Tabayag (Figure 4). One of Argao's mountain villages Baranggay Tabayag has rough terrain and is approximately 45 minutes away from the town centre by *habal-habal* or motorcycle. The barangay is a rain-fed, relatively dry environment and a known agricultural community that mainly produces corn. Baranggay Tabayag also has a rich agricultural heritage (Figure 5). It is the site of numerous colossal *parils* – terraced rock wall structures locally engineered and crafted for agricultural use and associated with beliefs, rituals and ceremonial practices. *Parils* are traditional systems of water and soil management and conservation and are believed to have been built around the late 1800s to the early 1900s or even earlier (Amper et al. 2018). Furthermore, Sitio Cabalawan is a farming community that is well within the perimeter of the Mount Lantoy KBA. Various forms of folklore that pertain to the natural environment abound in the landscape. People in the farming community value their surrounding landscape socioculturally and economically. It has shaped their lifeways and livelihood as expressed in their local folklore pertaining to the natural environment.

3. Findings: The various forms of folklore pertaining to the natural environment

3.1. Supernatural beliefs

There is a wide variety of cultural beliefs upheld by the people in Cabalawan – but beliefs that particularly pertain to the natural environment invariably involve the coexistence between the human world and the supernatural sphere. It essentially revolves around the existence of the unseen supernatural beings – nature spirits that live alongside humankind. Locally, they are called *engkanto*, *engkantado* or, commonly, *engkantohanon*, and they possess supernatural powers but do not go beyond that of Ginoo, or God. 'Motuo kog mga engkantado' ('I believe in nature spirits), Wilfredo Arobo professes, 'pero di magpakita lagi' ('yet not one of them have ever revealed themselves to me'). These beliefs are especially valued among the people in the local community who repute the natural environment as a vital source of their livelihood and way of living; and these beliefs are commonly associated with mountains, forests, rivers, trees, subsistence crops and karst features. Ale Arobo believes that nature spirits are created from *kahitas-an*, or from the heavens. He further expresses that, 'Ang Ginoo pud mismo ang nagbutang ani nila sa sapa, kahoy ug uban pa' ('It is also God himself who put them in rivers, trees, among others'). Nature spirits are also believed to have characteristics quite similar to people: some are good, some are dreadful and some just play tricks on you without reason. The following subsections will account the varying forms of nature spirits as collectively described by the local farming community.

3.1.1. Guardians of good harvests

Engkanto, *engkantado*, *engkantohanon* and *diwata* are the varied names of the nature spirits usually associated with agricultural rituals and practices done beside the *baol* or *uma* (farmland) (Figure 6). Invisible to human eyes, they are believed to guard the cornfields to keep the worms and other pests away, and their presence ensures a successful harvest. Besing Arobo delineates them, 'Ang mga nagbantay sa baol, mga engkantohanon. Dili ka kakita pero naa gyud na sila' ('The *engkantohanon*, the guardians of farmlands. You cannot see them, but they are actually there'). They are the guardians of good harvests, and Mangaw, a well-known *engkantohanon* who lives in Mount Lantoy, is said to be the principal guardian of good harvests. His name has always been heard and called upon during agricultural rituals. Local farmers believe that providing *halad*, or food offerings, to these



Figure 6
Baol and *uma* means farmland and can be used interchangeably.
Photo: Ian Dale B. Rios, 2014

engkantohanon guarding their cornfields throughout the season will ensure a successful harvest. This belief is strongly manifested in two rituals, namely, *hiso* and *panuig*. It is believed that these rituals must be seriously observed and performed; otherwise, the *engkantohanon* might deny the *halad* or, worse, misfortunes might happen to them. That is also why such rituals must only be performed by someone who has the proper knowledge and skill to do it.

3.1.2. Treedwellers

Trees, especially the huge and aged ones, are believed to be inhabited by nature spirits, named *abat*, *bakol*, *engkanto* or simply *nagpuyo* ('dweller'). This belief is strongly associated with a ritual performed prior to cutting down a tree. Simeon Arobo cautions, 'Mangamuyo gyud kung moputol og kahoy – mangayog tabi, hinganlan, mananghid' ('Perform the ritual if one plans to cut down a tree – pay respect, call its name, ask permission'). These treedwellers have a reputation of being malignant when provoked, especially when their trees are not given due respect, thus one always has to ask permission from them, through a ritual, before cutting down a tree. Simeon Arobo explains: 'kita ug sila parehas ra, kinsa may ganahan nga putlon o gub-on imung balay?' ('Us and them are just the same. Is there anyone who wants their own house cut down or destroyed?'). Treedwellers are believed to cause illness or worse – death to those who recklessly cut down their trees without proper rituals. One instance was when a man named Agpo died a few days after he cut down a colossal *balayong* (a large hardwood tree) he found

in Cambares. Agpo had already been warned that nature spirits dwell in it and that the Department of Environment and Natural Resources prohibits it. People who wish to cut down an inhabited tree seek help from 'Nong Iko, a ritualist in the community known for his unique abilities to see and communicate with unseen beings. If one wishes to cut down an inhabited tree, one could ask help from 'Nong Iko, who could transport the treedweller inhabiting that tree to another one, so one could cut it down without experiencing any harm. On the other hand, treedwellers are also known to help people and are deemed beneficial in some instances. Christine Alconera shares her experience of a *tugas* (molave) that stands nearby their house believed to be inhabited by a treedweller. They name it *silingan* (neighbour). She remembers in day, her baby sister, would stop crying; to her astonishment, the milk bottle had been emptied as if it was already fed to in day. They believed the treedweller did it. However, despite the eerie occurrences that happened within their home, because they turned out to be helpful, her family never meddled with the *silingan* as long as they would not be harmed.

3.1.3. The river

The Argao river is richly associated with supernatural occurrences and encounters. The locals believe that damages to bridges are caused by the *engkantohanon* as their boats pass under it. The river, too, is believed to cause illnesses to those people who make unnecessary noises while in the river. A *batang* is a boat for the *engkantohanon*. A *batang*, to the naked eye, is driftwood floating in disguise. However, it is quite different from other driftwood because it unusually floats upstream. Crispin Villafuerte explains: 'Gilamat lang ta. Pakahoy-kahoy lang pero ila nang barko. Kahoy lang sa atong panan-aw pero sa tinuod barko na nila' ('We are only put under an illusion. It never really is driftwood as it appears in our naked eyes – it's their boat').

3.2. Rituals and practices

Rituals associated with the natural environment are generally called *pangamuyo*. The *mangamuyo* is the person who performs the ritual. *Diwataan* and *dulotan* are also common verbs for such rituals. Besing Arobo explains that 'diwata sa tanom' is done to 'pakan-on ang nagbantay nga mga engkantohanon' ('feed the guardians of good harvests'). There are many *pangamuyo* practices in the locality; essentially anchored in supernatural beliefs, they hold various purposes in the community. The following subsections are the collated personal accounts from my key informants.

3.2.1. For good harvests

There are two important rituals performed to ensure good harvests: *hiso* and *panuig*. When the corn begins to bear flowers, locally termed *mubanay* or *mubulak-bulak*, *hiso* is performed to provide *halad* (offering) to the *engkantohanon* who guard the cornfields from damages caused by worms and other pests. A chicken or two are killed as sacrificial offerings. The *mangamuyo* walks around the *baol*, or cornfield, several times and spills the blood extracted from the sacrificial chickens on all corners of the *baol*. This performance is called *libot-libot*. After the performance, people usually feast on the food's offerings. *Panuig*, on the other hand, is performed after every successful harvest as a *halad* (offering), *pahalipay* (felicitation) and *pasalamat* (thanksgiving) to the *engkantohanon*. The performance is similar to *hiso*, but the banquet is more lavish. A table is placed right where there is a successful harvest, which is then laid with young banana leaves on which *mais kan-on*, or staple corn, is served. If your product is rice, then cooked rice is served over the banana leaves. Four chickens are killed as sacrificial offerings, which will be torn into pieces and then laid on top of the *mais kan-on*. Saning Alconera elaborately recalls the performances of his late father-in-law who was a *mangamuyo*: the sacrificial chickens must only be torn into pieces by bare hands and not by any knife. They have to be cooked but must not be salted – they must taste bland. Circling the food offerings are six *tagay* (shot glasses) of *tuba* (coconut wine), and two glasses of water are placed adjacent to each other. The *mangamuyo* then performs the *libot-libot*. The number of *tagay* of *tuba* dictates how many times the *mangamuyo* walks around the banquet table, but the number of times sometimes varies. While walking around the table filled with food offerings, the *mangamuyo* recites speeches that cannot be understood by distant observers. This recitation is locally called *sampit-sampit*. *Sampit* is a verb that involves calling names. *Sampit-sampit* in this context means 'to invoke'. Wilfredo Arobo recounts: 'sampit-sampitan ang gihalad nga sud-an nga mura bag naa silay sampitan nga mga dili makit-an' ('the food offering are invoked as if they are calling someone that cannot be seen').

During my second fieldwork session in barangay Tabayag, a traditional farmer and ritualist named Simplicio Arobo was enthusiastic to have his agricultural ritual documented and even set a schedule the following day to have his actual performance documented. However, he called off the schedule, as he was frightened

by the fury of his mother – who is visually impaired due to old age – upon learning that the ritual would be documented by outsiders. His enthusiasm vanished, and the documentation never happened. Importantly, the *mangamuyo* should not disclose to anyone the speeches recited in the *sampit-sampit*, as these are exclusively for the *engkantohanon*; otherwise, misfortunes might happen. Felisa Villacruz similarly upholds the potency of this ritual, affirming that solemnity must be observed to avoid committing a sin that may result in non-acceptance. Unfortunately, we have only little information about what is recited during the *sampit-sampit*, since none of my key informants are ritualists. It is said, however, that ritualists call many names, but it is Mangaw who lives in Mount Lantoy whom they principally invoke during the ritual. Afterwards, the *mangamuyo* literally grabs a handful of food offerings, then tosses it to both the eastern and western sides of the farmland. This particular enactment is intended for those *engkantohanon* who were not on time to feast on the food offerings during the main part of the ritual, Saning Alconera further recalls. Finally, after the whole performance, people may feast on the banquet to celebrate and give thanks for the grace of a successful harvest. This ritual is believed to be very important in the farming community, especially among the elderly farmers. Relatively similar rituals that involve invoking the nature spirits and food offerings are common in Visayan fishing communities (Kawada 1996).

3.2.2. Tree-cutting ritual

Simeon Arobo, Besing Arobo and Crispin Villafuente – informants already in their 70s – concur that, before one cuts down a tree, one must appeal and ask permission from the nature spirits who dwell in it. To determine whether the request is permitted, with a hatchet, one must hack the tree with a heavy blow. If the hatchet penetrates and jams the trunk, wait for about three to four hours. If you have a watch, keep track of your time. Watch over the hatchet jammed in the tree trunk. It is strongly advised not to leave it. If the hatchet falls, that means the request is denied; if it does not fall within the allocated time, the dweller has agreed to move to another tree and allows for the tree to be cut down. Crispin Villafuente simplifies: 'kung mopilit, ihatag ang kahoy; kung matagak ang atsa dili ihatag ang kahoy' ('if [the hatchet] jams, the dweller agrees to give the tree; if the hatchet falls, the dweller refuses to give the tree'). Simeon Arobo shares some of the lines he uses before he cuts a tree: 'kining kahoya akong gihigugma ug akong gamiton ug putlon. Pananglit

kung naay nagpuyo, pahawa kamo kay ugma ako ning gamiton ug putlon. [...] atsa, kung mahulog – di putlon. Kung di – putlon ko' ('this tree that I adore, I plan to use and cut down. If ever someone dwells in it, leave the tree, for tomorrow I will cut it down so I can make use of it. [...] hatchet, if it falls – I'll leave it alone. But otherwise – I'll cut it down'). 'Nong lko, known for his special ability, did things uniquely, as he could plead to tree dwellers to relocate to different trees. Besing Arobo recalls: 'si lko maoy sugoon nga pabalhinon ang nagpuyo sa kahoy aron mahimong maputol ang kahoy' ('to cut a tree, lko was the man to be asked to relocate a treedweller').

3.2.3. Subay-subay

Elderly couple Felisa Villacruz and Crispin Villafuente share a custom when within the river's territory, 'mangayog tabi kung mulabay og sapa; mananghid' ('pay proper courtesy if one passes by a river; ask permission'). If one gets sick for offending the river, one may want to consult a *tigsubay*, a person who does the *subay-subay* – the medical ritual to determine the cause of and appropriate remedy for illnesses, Cristine Alconera remembers. Causes of illnesses may be natural or supernatural. *Subay-subay* is done by placing an egg on a *lapad*, or a flat-bodied bottle of Tanduay, a local commercial rum. If the egg stands vertically, the sick person has offended the *engkantohanon*. If so, the sick person has to go back to the portion of the river where the offence was committed to light some candles and offer chickens. The *tigsubay* determines the number of chickens to be offered. The *tagtungod*, or those who have responsibility for the offender (perhaps the parents) will have to pay for the chickens.

3.3. Folk narratives

The following are the different themes or motifs of folk narratives circulating in Cabalawan that relate to the natural environment.

3.3.1. Mount Lantoy

The locals say that there used to be many golden horses on Mount Lantoy. Wilfredo Arobo says that supernatural beings Mangaw and Maria Cacao are husband and wife, and the couple lives in Mount Lantoy. Simeon Arobo narrates an incident when the forest was purposely burned, 'gisilaban ang mga kahoy, nihilak si Maria kay siya may nagpuyo. Nihilak si Mangaw ug Maria' ('Maria cried when the trees were put to flames because she lives there. Maria and Mangaw cried'). Stories abound

about Mount Lantoy's forests disorienting people so that they lose their way in the thick of its woodland. People who have lost their bearings are described as *gimino* – that is, the forest had cast a spell upon them.

3.3.2. *Hulmanan*

There are caves and pits in a place named Kabulaw on Mount Lantoy. Locals also call them *bangag*, which generally means 'caves or pits'. *Bangag* are usually referred to as *hulmanan* – literally, a venue where people can borrow items. It is told that, once upon a time, people could borrow plates, cooking utensils, wedding gowns and other things. All they had to do was write down the items they wished to borrow on paper and leave it at the mouth of the cave or pit. The next day, the desired items were already there waiting to be claimed. These items were usually borrowed for weddings, fiestas or special events. However, there had been just one instance when a borrowed item was shattered. From that moment on, not a single item has been lent to anyone else. Besing Arobo, who lives alone in the forest, says that couple Maria Cacao and Mangaw own the *hulmanan*.

3.3.3. *The trees*

Tales of personal sightings and encounters of *engkantohanon*, especially around huge aged trees, are countless. Simeon Arobo says 'Basta dagkong kahoy ug karaan, naay sugilanon' ('Every big old tree has stories to tell'). Cristine Alconera also accounts that the bamboos beside their house is the 'agianan' or passageway for the 'di ingon 'nato' ('not like our kind') and 'dawende' ('dwarfs').

3.3.4. *The Argao River*

The river overflows with stories every time its floods. Locals in the community pass on the word that the *engkantohanon* are again navigating their ship in the river. It is said that their ship shines very brightly and is accompanied by the sounds of bells. The river becomes loud with chit-chat and laughter. Simeon Arobo says that a great flood occurred in the 1950s, and something glimmering was seen floating – a golden boat. Since then, because of such sightings and stories of the golden boat, Argao is known to have become a prosperous town, Crispin Villafuerte accounts. Another related story circulating in the community is that of Maria Cacao. When the river overflows and the bridge over it is destroyed, it is an indication that Maria Cacao's ship (a variation of this story includes Mangaw) had passed by the river, bringing

cacao with her, and she is off to some place abroad or to Manila.

3.4. Learning and transmission; unlearning and discontinuity

The various forms of folklore pertaining to the environment in the farming community are transmitted from generation to generation through word of mouth or demonstration and imitation. The eldest informant, Simeon Arobo, sums it up thus: 'Sinunod lang gyud ni – ginikanan pa sa ginikanan' ('This is simply transmitted – from the parents of our parents'). Folk narratives in particular are transmitted through word of mouth. Typically, it is done in a kind of social gathering in the afternoon, usually after a hard day's work, where the younger ones listen to their parents or grandparents while they discuss the tales and then trace or go through the details. This discussion is also referred to as *subay-subayon*. Associated rituals and practices are also transmitted through word of mouth but essentially through demonstration and imitation. And because families in the community are close-knit, children normally see their parents or grandparents do it until, eventually, they, too, learn how to do it themselves.

Although eminently valued by the few remaining elderly in the farming community, the various forms of folklore pertaining to the natural environment are highly subjected to discontinuity. While it persists in the consciousness and memories among the locals, the cultural values that generate meaning are no longer intact – and some factors have caused its discontinuation. Nowadays, belief in supernatural beings, and associated rituals and practices, are seldom revered and complied with or practised by the younger generations – the sceptical generation. The old people, too, appear uninterested in retelling the tales of the olden times to the youth, who are mostly unwilling listeners and never believers. 'Kung dili motuo – pasagdan lang' ('If they don't believe it – just let them be'), comments Simeon Arobo. Although some of the youth still believe in the rituals performed by their parents, they do not know how to perform them. 'Ang mga batan-on nagsunod gihapon sa agi sa ilang ginikanan apan dili na kamao mostorya' ('Those youths still follow the path of their parents but are incapable of orally performing the rituals'), says Besing Arobo. Even the children of Iko – the well-known ritualist – were not able to carry on the torch. Eventually, ritualists as knowledge holders will age and pass away without someone to hand down the tradition. It is said that being unable to comply with the rituals is

likened to the selling of a parcel of land. The land is an inheritance and an invaluable source of subsistence, but, these days, it has become inevitable that one has to sell it for economic practicality. Folk beliefs and rituals have already been deemed impractical by some people, especially those who no longer till the land. In addition, the children of some farmers have migrated to Cebu City in search of 'greener pastures'. In exchange for employment in the industrial world, they have left the land with only their time-worn parents to caretake it. It is the older generations that are most affected, since they are the ones who value the local folklore the most. Moreover, government regulations that restrict their agricultural activities also mean a restriction of traditional agricultural practices. But the most significant factor in this study is Catholic evangelisation, the religion introduced by the Spanish colonisers. 'Sauna, motuo kog mga diwata' ('I used to believe in nature spirits'), Cristine Alconera divulges while holding her crucifix necklace, 'kay sa akong lola man ko nagdako' ('because I grew up with my grandmother'), she continues. Now that she has grown up and has been evangelised, she is adamant that such beliefs are of no importance or value. Wilfredo Arobo, whose late parents were ritualists, likewise explains, 'wala na ko anang pangamuyo kay na seminar na man ko sa Charismatic' ('I don't get involved with the rituals anymore since I've already been through the Charismatic [seminar]'). In this manner, the local belief systems have been reduced to *tuo-tuo*, or mere superstitions. Consequently, this intangible component of a culture where rituals, practices and folk narratives are essentially anchored is unlearned by demonising it through evangelisation. Simeon Arobo ruefully remarks, 'Ang uban o ang bag-ong tubo dili na motuo kay hinganlan og diyos-diyos o Satanas' ('Some people or the new generation do not believe in it anymore, for it is labelled as false God or Satan').

However, despite its devaluation, the rituals and practices are still performed today by elderly farmers – but in concealment! After a couple of 'extra questions' (Lune and Berg 2017), one elderly informant (name withheld) eventually discloses, 'Di na mi motug-an kay samok [...]. Ang panuig i-atol na lang og pista ug dili na mubanha kay masuko ang pari' ('We don't tell the truth anymore so to prevent conflict [...]. The *panuig* would coincide with the fiesta, unbeknown to the priest lest he might get mad'), then she gently chuckles. The fiesta, which entails the veneration of patron saints, has been a cultural practice since the colonial period and is wholly accepted by the

local Catholic church. For the sake of cultural continuity, native farmers have strategically responded by literally concealing their local culture behind it. Other people who have unlearned the local folklore have not entirely devaluated it. A middle-aged informant (name withheld) admits that, although he has unlearned the value of the rituals after being evangelised, he does not regard them as demonic. He still joins the feasting of the banquet after the *panuig* is performed, but he never tells his wife about it.

4. Discussion

4.1. Associative values in the human–environment relationship

The findings of this paper show that the local folklore pertaining to the natural environment in the farming community in Sitio Cabalawan is the product of the interplay between people and their immediate environment. At the same time, the interplay is reflective of how its people perceive their surrounding natural world as evident in their folk beliefs, rituals and practices, and narratives, as it actively shapes their livelihood and lifeways. Economically significant and perceptively remarkable natural elements and features in the environment have been animated by the community through personification and, on a wider scale, have been venerated as a place where supernatural beings dwell. Moreover, determining the local cultural associative values attached to the elements in natural ecosystems is a fundamental approach to widen the understanding of local landscapes. Furthermore, folklore is a vital yet fragile component of a culture where its fragility is its ephemerality, and it is 'less stable through time and more fragile if its roots and anchor in the tangible world outside our minds is not a building or a geological feature' (Robischon 2015, 21). Pertaining to this, the way local cultural expressions and the values of the farming community are attached to the tangible natural elements, such as mountains, rivers, karst features and hardwood trees, is a remarkable feat in terms of prolonging the ephemerality and ultimately in transmitting these cultural values and educating the members of their society. This goes to show that, in landscapes associated with cultural values, the tangible qualities of the natural environment are not only biophysical components of the ecosystem but are also vessels of associative cultural values. Such interplay between culture and nature illustrates that both the people and the elements of the natural environment make up the entirety of the landscape. Furthermore, this

interplay epitomises the interdependence of the tangible and intangible elements.

Folk belief systems that essentially involve the supernatural sphere have culturally multiplied the value of the natural environment – in addition to its biophysical values – by giving it intangible cultural heritage values. For instance, the peoples' association of the *engkantohanon* to the natural elements animates and personifies the natural environment – which concurrently expresses the integration of them as a people as part of the landscape's entirety. Another instance is their manifestation of fear of getting ill from defying certain cultural customs while within the river's geographical dominion, where their concept of the illness expresses their acknowledgement of the natural environment and of the existence of natural resources as living entities capable of causing harm when provoked. In accordance with this belief system – for instance, the belief in treedwellers, forest spirits and the guardians of good harvests – cultural traditions that are harmonious with the natural environment are developed by the people in Cabalawan. The local conception of the natural environment is defined by how they perceive and interact with it following how they integrate their folk belief systems in it. This integration also means that the existence of the natural environment is not solely confined within the physical dimension. Thus, cultural significance widens the value of the elements in the natural environment. Moreover, local folk beliefs about the environment bind people together, forge a cultural identity and greatly shape their worldviews and influence their day-to-day activities and decision-making processes.

Rituals and practices done for the natural environment are generally communication performances to the supernatural sphere; these performances strongly express people's beliefs and veneration to the environment, which they regard as economically and culturally significant. The people benefit from the resources they get from the natural resources while the natural environment shapes and influences their lifeways. Such interplay has generated associative cultural values that are favourable in conserving the natural resources and, at the same time, create an environment that is beneficial to humans. For instance, farmers source most of their housing materials from the forests, but the belief in the tree-dwelling spirits and the associated tree-cutting ritual potently discourages indiscriminate and reckless logging activities (Figure 7). These cultural expressions



Figure 7
Virtually all the materials of 'Nang Besing Arobo's modest folk house came from the forests.
Photo: Ian Dale B. Rios, 2014

reflect sustainable use of resources and serve as the checks and balances of the landscape. Considering that 'the almost complete deforestation of Cebu Island has apparently led to the extinction of many native trees, birds, and other wildlife' (Lillo et al. 2019, 359), studies in such folklore in the local cultural context provides useful insights into our present-day challenges concerning the management of our natural resources. Rituals *panuig* and *hisu* also are traditional expressions of their gratitude for the forests and mountain as sacred places where the beneficial supernatural beings dwell – that is, these rituals express their perception of the natural environment as having agency, which contemporary Cebuano society no longer expresses.

Folk narratives with environmental associations (*hulmanan* and golden boat) often carry stories of events that seem to have happened in the past, encounters and experiences with supernatural occurrences or explanations of natural and social phenomena – all of which correspond to their belief systems. Although the local people may not have concrete evidence of such stories and legends to provide to their listeners, these folk narratives circulating in the farming community certainly contain the people's collective memory of the immemorial past. Moreover, how these folk narratives are embedded in the natural environment is another way to look at how the people give meaning to their environment. These are also cultural indications that people are consciously connected to their surrounding natural environment. Folktales associated with the natural environment function as vehicles to carry and sustain important sociocultural values and belief systems from one generation to the next. The tale of the *hulmanan*, for instance, is an effective way

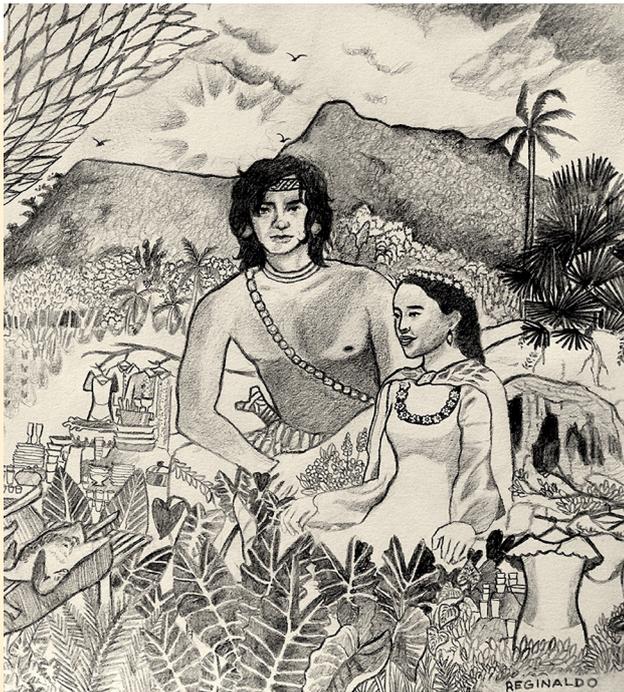


Figure 8
An artist's rendition of the legend of couple Mangaw and Maria Cacao of Mount Lantoy.
Illustration: Reginaldo Cañete Caintic Jr., 2020

to educate the members of the community about the value and proper ways of borrowing things (Figure 8).

4.2. Devaluation and demonisation

Reducing these integral components of cultural heritage as mere superstition and demonising it disowns and insults the Indigenous Filipino cultural identity towards the natural environment and mocks the harmonious relationship between humankind and the natural world. Similarly, even Fr. Francisco Demetrio, S.J. (1978), a devout Catholic priest himself, confronts the demonisation of the religion of the early Filipinos and asserts that such local belief systems 'cannot [...] be called the work of the devil pure and simple' (Demetrio 1978, 129).

4.3. Patrimonial value sprouting from precolonial roots

Much like the artefacts unearthed in archaeological excavations – studying folklore, through qualitative research methods, provides us titbits of our forebears' non-material culture. Passed down from one generation to the next, belief in the existence of Mangaw as a forest spirit exclusively dwelling in Mount Lantoy and the

reverence of the people in the community to Mangaw as an agricultural deity – which, unfortunately, is currently vanishing – as well as the rituals directly associated with his name, provide a glimpse of our forebears' lifeways beyond the profane and how they perceived their natural world around them before the introduction of Christianity. In relation to the Spanish regime's introduction of Christianity, the local legend of Maria Cacao incorporated in the 'borrowing' motif may 'have been an addition in the later period when cacao was introduced during the Spanish regime', but its sociocultural values are still rooted in precolonial beliefs and cosmology (Seki 2001, 567). Further, such a motif is part of what Mojares states as 'a matrix of indigenous beliefs in territorial spirits and demi deities inhabiting such places as mountains, rivers, and caves' (2002, 144). Furthermore, the particular naming of Mangaw as a deity and as the principal guardian of good harvests, and Mangaw's specific spatial reference to Mount Lantoy, is truly a unique feature of cultural landscapes, particularly in Central Visayas amid modernisation. Although such reverence, a reflection of the inseparability of culture and nature, thrives only among the few remaining local farmers in today's society, Scott (1994) affirms that similar human–environment interactions had engulfed the precolonial Visayan societies, where people 'worshiped nature spirits, gods of particular localities or activities', and these activities invariably involved sacrificial food offerings, and 'these were generally benevolent or neutral and could be approached ritually for good crops [...] but they also caused illness or misfortune if not given due respect' (Scott 1994, 77–78). In addition, 'Southeast Asian peoples held vernacular understandings [...] [of] the spiritual potency of mountains, caves, forests, trees, graves, and rivers. Such understandings are described in the literature as distinct from, or else in tension with, the world religions' – such as Christianity – and thus conceptualised variously or as part of an Indigenous religious system (Allerton 2009, 239). Taking those into consideration, it can be said that interactions between people and place in Cabalawan fundamentally have precolonial roots and thus both the folklore and its associated natural environment hold a significant patrimonial value that carries the identity of our precolonial forebears. This also suggests that our precolonial forebears' cultural values promote a harmonious relationship with the natural environment, and, importantly, ignoring these aspects of our cultural heritage hence disremembers the identity of our early Filipino forebears. In this light, some authors

(Alburo 1992; Olofson and Uy 1989) have pointed out that the use of folklore is certainly relevant for national development projects. Thus, Mount Lantoy is a potential immovable national cultural treasure (Republic Act 10066) in the Philippines – a landscape wealthy in both natural and cultural values, where sacred local cultural expressions with precolonial values dwell in ecologically significant space. However, this assertion needs further multidisciplinary studies.

4.4. Safeguarding both culture and nature

The findings in this study significantly show that the landscape of Mount Lantoy, which envelops the farming community of Sitio Cabalwan, holds both locally important cultural and natural values, which are vital and fascinating subjects for conservation. Current trends in conservation consider the protection of cultural landscapes helpful in maintaining biological diversity (UNESCO 2019) and in tackling environmental challenges (Carbonell 2012). Moreover, the pursuit to conserve cultural resources is deemed a strategy for maintaining the Filipino identity (Republic Act 10066). While Mount Lantoy has already been declared as a protected KBA, emphasising the cultural dimensions of Mount Lantoy multiplies its relevance as a subject for conservation. Authors Buggay (2000), Mitchell and Buggay (2000) and Wu (2010) have emphasised the importance of the cultural dimensions of places in reinforcing the relevance of landscape conservation. Additionally, there has also been a shift from biocentric and anthropocentric conservation approaches towards a broader perspective that views culture and nature as interwoven and inseparable. To preserve the continuity of a cultural heritage that displays the harmonious interaction between people and their natural environment, it is important that its associated natural space and biophysical elements must also be preserved. As Olofson and Uy (1989, 321) point out, since 'each folklore fragment is attached to a location in the environment' where 'the environment acts as a mnemonic system for folklore', should the environment change as a result of modernisation, a piece of folklore would be threatened as well. Also, the plurality of the values in landscapes crucially requires diverse perspectives and integrated approaches in managing landscapes. In this context of the inseparability of culture and nature, multidisciplinary, integrated conservation management is imperative to safeguard the landscape of Mount Lantoy, where conservation efforts can produce holistic results from collaborative work between the natural and the

social sciences.

5. Conclusion

This study of folklore pertaining to the natural environment in Sitio Cabalwan has allowed us to better understand how people perceived the mountains and forest as spiritual places, how they interact with the natural elements with awe and veneration, and how they value their natural world as a living entity that impacts their lifeways in many aspects and decision-making processes. Examining the interactions between people and place is central in the identification of local associative values attached to the landscape. For the locals, folklore pertaining to the natural environment is not only the reflection of their worldview and the catch basin of their collective consciousness of the place they inhabit but also an intangible cultural heritage because it has value to the community and is passed down from one generation to the next. It also allows us to see a glimpse of our precolonial forebears' relationship with their natural world. These various forms of folklore are interwoven symbols and meanings that embroider a distinct tapestry of the community's expressive culture, which carries precolonial values that ensure our relationship with the natural environment remains harmonious and thus also bears the identity of the early Filipinos, our forebears. Nowadays, however, this integral component of culture is less understood, especially to the younger generations. There is a combination of factors that have led to the devaluation and discontinuation of such folklore, which needs to be addressed.

This paper shows that Argao has a rich intangible cultural heritage imprinted onto equally rich natural resources, which situates Mount Lantoy as potentially both an immovable national cultural treasure and an exceptional example of an associative cultural landscape that harbours important natural and intangible cultural values in Cebu Island, or perhaps the entire region, and therefore needs diverse conservation management approaches. This paper highlights the inseparability of culture and nature and its interplay to widen the range of our conceptualisation of cultural landscapes. It also emphasises the promotion and preservation of the intangible cultural heritage that is respectful and favourable to the ecosystem. This paper hopes to provide anthropological insights to the policymaking bodies of the Municipality of Argao in reinforcing holistic, integrated

conservation programmes that safeguard both cultural and natural resources.

The continuity of the various forms of folklore pertaining to the natural environment ensures our relationship with our natural world stays intimately intact and balanced. Folklore pertaining to the natural environment keeps humanity intimately connected to the natural world. Ensuring the continuity of this intangible cultural heritage and the integrity of its associated landscape – the natural space where the cultural expression takes place – is truly now up to us. Between people and place is a space that forges humanity’s harmonious intangible heritage.

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