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## Documenting indigenous Tagbanua practices that support environmental conservation in Palawan, Philippines

Shannon E. Thomas

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## ABSTRACT

### DOCUMENTING INDIGENOUS TAGBANUA PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION IN PALAWAN, PHILIPPINES

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This research analyzes the relationship between a particular indigenous Filipino tribal society, the Aborlan Tagbanua, and their natural environment. The Tagbanua face issues associated with ancestral land loss and increased environmental degradation as a result of corporate and government interests and the arrival of migrants to their native regions. This research focuses on the ways in which the Tagbanua rely on their surrounding environment through their cultural practices and beliefs. I addressed three key research questions: How is the concept of nature embedded within indigenous Tagbanua culture and society? How have environmental challenges, such as changes in landscape due to mining or the building of roads, affected the livelihoods of the Tagbanua? Finally, are the Tagbanua people engaging in activities which help to protect their native lands, and if they are, what can be done to strengthen those actions? This particular case among the Tagbanua relates to other marginalized groups of indigenous peoples throughout the world who experience competition for resources and continual environmental degradation from outside parties.

#### Keywords:

Indigenous People; Environmental Conservation; Cultural Practices; Tribal Studies; Philippine Studies; Fieldwork; Ethnography; Anthropology; Southeast Asian Studies

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DOCUMENTING INDIGENOUS TAGBANUA PRACTICES THAT  
SUPPORT ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION  
IN PALAWAN, PHILIPPINES

BY

SHANNON E. THOMAS  
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This study examines the cultural and social beliefs that relate to the natural environment among the indigenous Filipino Tagbanua tribe of Aborlan, Palawan, Philippines. The areas that the Tagbanua have traditionally occupied are at risk of capitalist exploitations, in the form of mining pursuits. This leads to the loss of ancestral lands which connect the Tagbanua to their cultural beliefs in nature. These cultural beliefs encompass the idea that the ancestral dead are present in the form of spirit ancestors along with environmental spirit who dwell in the natural environment. Both categories of spirits are honored and appeased through cultural and ritual practice. Ancestral land loss leads to the creation of divided Tagbanua communities wherein the environment becomes detached from everyday life. Nature is at the forefront of Tagbanua cultural belief and the without ancestral lands, ritual and cultural practices are no longer enacted.

More importantly, I documented the thoughts and opinions of Non-Tagbanua and Tagbanua members in order to understand the dynamic that exists between the people and their ancestral lands. This relationship is particularly important as the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Philippines' 1997 Indigenous People's Rights Act (IPRA), an especially progressive and indigenous-oriented legislature, is accounted for in the Aborlan region. Thus, Tagbanua ancestral lands are federally protected in Aborlan.

When looking at the overall history of the Philippines it is important to note the role of the Spanish, who colonized the island, and the effects it brought to Filipinos in terms of land

tenure and ownership. Four hundred years of Spanish colonization in the Philippines introduced the Regalian Doctrine that labeled indigenous peoples as squatters on lands that they traditionally lived and depended on (Capistrano 2010). Consequently, many lands were confiscated from indigenous groups and exploited by corporate mining and logging operations for the extraction of rich natural resources, a trend that is still observed in modern Filipino society. To combat this, the Philippine national government passed IPRA, giving tribal groups of the Philippines the ability to take ownership of their ancestral lands by establishing land tenure (Therriault 2011). Under the Philippine constitution, the rights of indigenous people to their ancestral lands are federally protected. However, one major criticism of the IPRA is that it does not effectively convey concepts of land use<sup>1</sup> and ancestral domain in languages and contexts that are easily understood by indigenous peoples (Therriault 2011). Additionally, if an indigenous group aims to assert ownership over their lands they must endure a long, arduous process of filing of a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT), which often deters groups from claiming ancestral land rights (Novellino 2000).

Even so, indigenous struggle for land rights, among other social and economic struggles for rights, has recently generated global interest as the evolution of a world-wide indigenous rights movement has come to the forefront. One must first understand the concept of indigeneity, as is explained by Francesca Merlan (2009), “the term *indigenous* has long been used as a designation distinguishing those who are “native” from their

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<sup>1</sup> Land use constitutes fishing in coastal waters or extracting minerals or ore from the surrounding forests. The government prohibits activities such as fishing in Marine Protected Areas, however, if the Marine protected area falls into the ancestral domain of an indigenous group, they might be allowed access to it by laying a legal claim to the land.

“others” in specific locales” (303). Over the past decade there has been a movement to support transnational indigenous rights movements that form a collective basis for group identity (Therriault 2011). Institutional support through the World Bank, the United Nations, and various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have advocated for indigenous rights and encouraged the formation of indigenous movements in different parts of the world (Kuper et al. 2003; Niezen 2003). For instance, laws granting recognition and subsequent rights to indigenous people in settler societies, such as Canada and Australia, and post-colonial societies, such as the Philippines, have aimed to provide a voice to previously marginalized groups of native inhabitants (Brysk 2000; Niezen 2003; Yashar 2007).

In 1992, the United Nations began a campaign for the International Year of the World’s Indigenous People. In the proceeding decade a Forum of Indigenous Peoples was established to discuss indigenous issues associated with economic and social development, culture, the environment, and several other topics relevant to the status of the world’s indigenous groups (United Nations 2015). Overall, indigenous people make up about 20 percent of the total population of the Philippines (Asian Development Bank 2002), approximately 12-15 million people. The inhabitants who identify themselves as indigenous to the country rely mainly on agricultural cultivation, forest extraction and fishing resources offered from the surrounding environment (Dressler & Fabinyi 2011).

The topic of indigeneity and environment continues to be a topic of discussion in many spheres and is the main focus in this study in order to better understand ancestral land use and the ways that both the culture and environment of indigenous groups can remain intact.



Furthermore, the struggle for the preservation of native lands and the conservation of the environment continue to be critical issues in the present day. This study hopes to aid the existing literature on these topics to provide support for indigenous peoples and their respective environments. Additionally, this study offers a look at two communities of the Aborlan Tagbanua who are undergoing tremendous changes in the wake of localized development and analyzes the ways in which their relationship with the natural environment, as well as cultural practices, are affected.

### *Methods*

For the purposes of this study, a group of indigenous Tagbanua is assessed to aid in the understanding of indigeneity as a long-standing, cultivated relationship that exists between the tribe and their environment. Participant observation of physical conservation efforts carried out by a local team of conservationists was documented and analyzed along with cultural features<sup>2</sup> that the Tagbanua rely on to conserve their natural environment while perpetuating their cultural beliefs in nature. In particular, the following questions provide a basis for understanding this relationship:

1. How is the concept of nature embedded within indigenous Tagbanua culture and society?

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<sup>2</sup> I experienced two festivals, one in the mountains of Daan and the other in Bubusawin, wherein I observed traditional dances and customs of providing offerings to the ancestors. I also observed a Tagbanua craftsman while he made handicrafts in Sto. Nino.

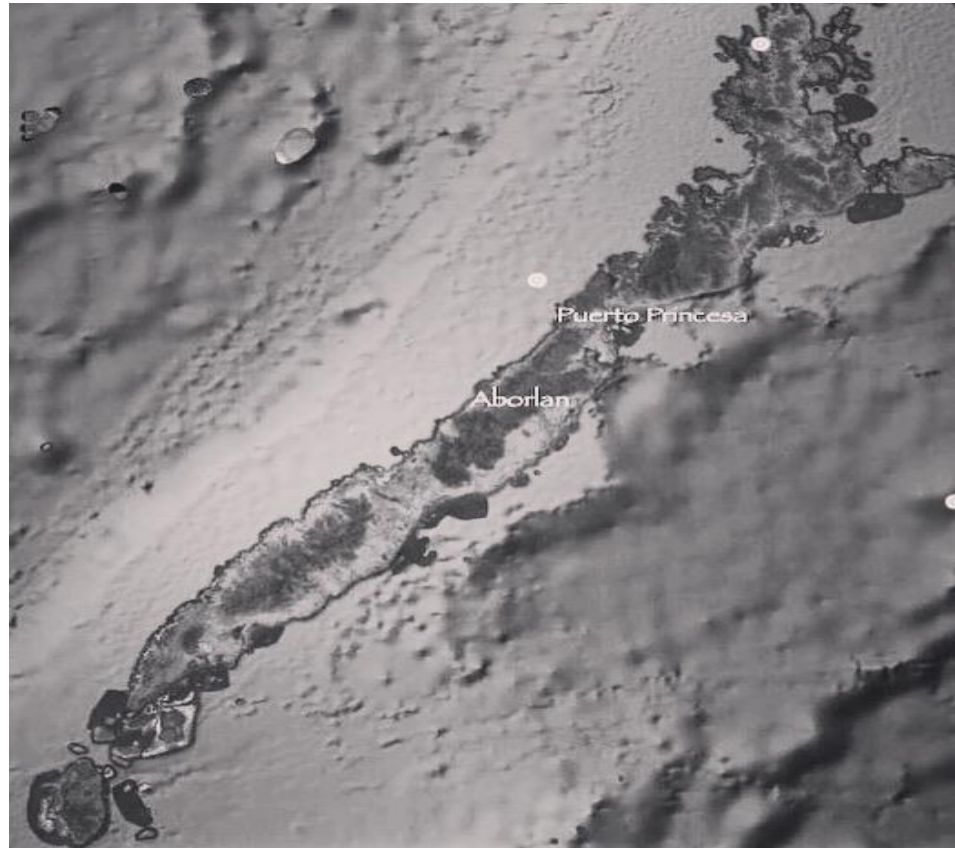
2. How have environmental challenges, such as changes in landscape due to mining or the building of roads, affected the livelihood of the Aborlan Tagbanua?
3. Finally, are the Tagbanua people engaging in activities which help to protect their native lands, and if they are, what can be done to strengthen those actions?

During my fieldwork, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven Tagbanua tribal members, a Tagbanua informant, the Chieftain of the tribe in Sitio Bubusawin, a local in Sitio Sto. Nino and a local conservation expert. All people are given pseudonyms in order to protect individual identities. Each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed and translated with the help of a Tagbanua woman who spoke English, Tagalog,<sup>3</sup> and Tagbanua. Community leaders and interviewees all gave Free and Prior Informed Consent for this research.

My fieldwork over the course of 7 months, from August 2016 to March 2017, focused on documenting Tagbanua cultural and environmental beliefs in conjunction with local conservation activities in Aborlan, Palawan, Philippines. This research was funded by a Fulbright-Hays research grant through the American-Philippine Fulbright Commission. With the help of the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) and the local establishment of Palawacana, I was able to conduct my fieldwork approximately two hours from the main island hub of Puerto Princesa in the Aborlan Municipal District (Figure 1). Additionally, all of my research was made possible with the knowledge of an informer who served as my guide and translator as well as volunteer Tagbanua and Non-Tagbanua interviewees.

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<sup>3</sup> Tagalog is the national language of the Philippines.



**Figure 1: Palawan Island: Study Site in Relation to Main City**

### *Research Context and Background*

This thesis examines the cultural and social beliefs that relate to the natural environment among the Tagbanua of Aborlan, Palawan, Philippines. Palawan is the country's largest province, comprising 1,769 islands and an assemblage of 87 cultural groups (Eder 1990). Of these cultural groups, only the Pala'wan, Tagbanua, and Batak remain indigenous to Palawan due to an influx of migrants to the region who have displaced other groups which historically lived on the island (Fox 1982; Eder 1990). The Tagbanua of Aborlan have a long history of

resettlement caused by the influence of migrants from other areas of the Philippines and foreign countries.

Palawan is categorized as a frontier province due to the arrivals of migrants to the area. The island has grown rapidly over the past few decades due to an abundance of natural resources available for exploitation (Eder 1990; Fabinyi 2012). In turn, Palawan's indigenous peoples have experienced resource competition with migrants, which has resulted in the loss of lands, and forces them to participate in illegal logging, cyanide fishing, and swidden agriculture in order to compete with the activities of the new residents (Eder 2008, Theriault 2011).

Before I started my fieldwork, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History provided me with background information on Palawan and its indigenous people as told through the lens of Lt. E.Y. Miller and his wife Florence G. Miller. Lt. Miller was appointed as the American Governor of Palawan from 1905 to 1910. I became interested in the actions of Lt. Miller during his time as Governor of Palawan and was fortunate to be able to study materials, photographs, and correspondence belonging to him and his wife.

Between June and July 2016, I participated in a fellowship program through the Smithsonian Institution that allowed me access to museum artifacts and documents. I came across a collection of items from Palawan island donated between 1904 and 1923 by the Millers. Lt. Miller had acquired indigenous materials and gifts while serving as Governor of the island in the early 1900s. Additionally, I learned that he set up a Tagbanua 'reservation' that aimed to educate the indigenous populations in Aborlan. The school was originally called the Farm

Settlement School in Aborlan. This school still exists, though it has changed overtime<sup>4</sup> and is located near the Tagbanua villages. During this resettlement process, Lt. Miller acquired woven baskets, blowguns, and photographs (Figures 2a & 2b).



**Figure 2a: End of Tagbanua Dart Blowgun (Courtesy of Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History)**



**Figure 2b: Woven Tagbanua Baskets (Courtesy of Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History)**

The information I gathered during my time at the Smithsonian gave me insight into how the Tagbanua lived in Aborlan at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in terms of material culture and

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<sup>4</sup> The school is now Western Palawan University and has been moved from the original placement of the Farm Settlement School.

dress.<sup>5</sup> Despite the wealth of material culture, the Millers did not allude to any of the cultural aspects of Tagbanua life or relationship with their natural environment. Figure 3 was the most useful in understanding the Tagbanua that Lt. Miller encountered as it shows two women cultivating rice, thus interacting with the natural environment on a subsistence level.



**Figure 3: Tagbanua women cultivating rice (Courtesy of Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History)**

Ultimately, this information allowed me to understand the evolution of Tagbanua culture over time, as they would have used blowguns during Miller's occupation of Aborlan, but they have since lost this practice in the present day. The Tagbanua I studied explained that blowguns had been replaced by the use of guns, therefore, they were no longer needed or used.<sup>6</sup> In previous decades the Tagbanua wore handmade clothing fashioned out of bark cloth fibers. Men wore loincloths (Figure 4) while women wore grass or woven bark cloth skirts.

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<sup>5</sup> Photographs gave me examples of how the Tagbanua dressed during Miller's time. For instance, bark cloth items and clothing made from grasses.

<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Fox (1982) alludes to the absence of the blowgun in the Tagbanua he studied in 1950-51.



**Figure 4: Tagbanua man wearing bark cloth loincloth (Courtesy of Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History)**

Miller had provided descriptions on the back of the photographs<sup>7</sup> which provided me with the earliest form of ethnographic documentation of the Aborlan Tagbanua. Similar to the use of blowguns, the Tagbanua I studied no longer wear bark cloth items or weave baskets. Still, seeing these objects allowed me to observe the changes that have taken place over the past century among the Aborlan Tagbanua in terms of changes in dress and material use. Ultimately, this experience provided me with a historic view of the Tagbanua before entering the field. The

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<sup>7</sup> It is not clear how Miller came into possession of these items or if he took the pictures himself.

present study was designed to assess whether the Aborlan Tagbanua experience competition of local resources and determine the local environmental and cultural impacts.

### ***Literature Review & Theoretical Framework***

Since the beginning of human society, people have managed to develop a balanced relationship with their natural environments. In many parts of the world, such as North American, Hawaii, and Madagascar, people had initially been invasive to the regions, causing major extinction events of large mammals.<sup>8</sup> Alvard (1998) explains that after waves of extinction events, prehistoric people were able to reach an equilibrium with the natural environment. These types of relationships have proven necessary for the success of both humans and their environments and are trends that are observed among some of the world's present indigenous populations.

Previous studies on conservation aimed at determining the ways that humans, as a whole, have harmed the earth's biosphere. For example, the Matsigenka of south-eastern Peru traditionally used bows to hunt, however, the introduction of guns has led to a depletion of black spider monkeys (*Ateles chamek*). This example outlines the impacts of increased pressure on natural resources as a result of the introduction of new technologies (Levi et al. 2009). While the Matsigenka have traditionally maintained a healthy balance with the natural ecosystem, their behaviors have changed, thus, leading to unsustainable practices.

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<sup>8</sup> Semi-recent examples of this are observed in the overhunting and subsequent extinction of the passenger pigeon and near extinction of wild bison in North America.



Colchester (2000) explains that many advocate groups stress the need for people-free ecosystems based on the harm that people cause through resource extraction. Human interference in forest ecosystems, "...inevitably results in a loss of biodiversity, notably through the elimination of top predators".<sup>9</sup> Among the riverine groups Yanomami and Ye'kuana of Venezuela, Colchester (2000) notes that permanent settlements have endured a significant depletion of resources in the surrounding areas. This is largely explained by the introduction of shotguns which have replaced traditional bow and arrows. Though there is no evidence of species extinction in this region since the shift in preferred hunting weapons, Colchester (2000) does note that caiman (*Caiman crocodilus*) populations have been overhunted.

A separate example of the nomadic Penan of East Kalimantan is discussed by Rajindra K. Puri (1996) where urbanization and manipulation of the landscape by migrant Indonesians cause the Penan to adopt swidden cultivation, intensified agriculture, and permanent settlements in areas that they have not traditionally occupied. Until about 1960, the Penan were nomadic hunter-gatherers who relied heavily on the surrounding ecosystems throughout their home range. Puri (1996) explains that the shift in Penan locale and cultivation practices has negatively impacted the landscape of the East Kalimantan valley as floral and faunal species traditionally manipulated by the Penan no longer occur on a grand scale.

In the work titled *Conserving Nature in Culture*, authors Dove, Sajise, and Doolittle (2005) address the changing outlook on matters of environmental conservation, "The past

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<sup>9</sup> Colchester (2000): 1365

approach to conservation has been to ask the questions: What are local communities doing that is inimical to the environment and how can we counter it?" (p. 14). While this is a worthwhile question as many parts of the world have experienced environmental degradation due to human interaction, it should be acknowledged that current conservation strategies need to incorporate the successes of groups of people who help support it, as is discussed below. Based on this idea, Dove et al. (2005) poses a second question asking, "What are these communities doing that supports environmental conservation and how can we strengthen, or at least not weaken, these activities?" (p. 7). Ultimately, Dove et. al (2005) suggests that emphasis should be placed on understanding knowledge systems that are traditional to individual indigenous societies and the management of environmental services. Previous developments in both anthropological and ecological studies of inhabitants in tropical forests in South American and Southeast Asia have worked to reframe these questions and address the role of humans in conserving the environment, instead of harming it (Balée 1993, Aumeeruddy & Bakels 1994).

An example from Central Sumatra by Aumeeruddy & Bakels (1994) illustrates the villagers of Keluru's sacred regard for the natural environment. The Keluru believe in the economic benefits of the forest (i.e. water for rice field irrigation) and have spiritual beliefs in animism which lead them to actively protect wildlife and maintain the region's biodiversity.

Similarly, Fox (1982) describes the Tagbanua as having a "fortunate balance" between sacred forested areas and grasslands. Based on this belief, slash and burn agricultural practices are prohibited in sacred forest area. Fox (1982) notes that the Tagbanua preserve forested land

that holds spiritual value, thus, inadvertently providing benefit to forests regions (p. 164).

Earlier findings in ecological studies reveal the interdependence of rainforests, and other ecosystems, upon external factors that allow ecosystems to flourish (Kat 1999). Dove et al. (2005) further explains, “Findings in ecology show that rainforests, like many ecosystems, do not remain productive when they are indefinitely in stasis; they require periodic human or natural disturbances to revitalize, maintain, or enhance ecosystem structure and function” (p. 80). Previous scholarship was unaware of the dynamic nature of the natural world and the need for variable disruptions to facilitate growth (Pickett et al. 1992). Researchers are now beginning to understand that change is often the norm in ecological settings and natural and that human disturbances are sometimes necessary for proper ecosystem functionality in some environments (Scoones 1999, Zimmerer 2000). This shift in the understanding of ecosystem functionality is explained by Dove et al. (2005), “Disturbance is necessary in many kinds of ecosystems, and change is the norm” (p. 54). Thus, the “balance in nature” metaphor has gradually been replaced by a new paradigm in ecology that stresses the non-equilibrium of ecosystems and the possible role of humans as an integral disturbance factor.

Previous studies in anthropology recognize that tropical lowland forest in Southeast Asia and elsewhere provide evidence of selective human modification of the natural landscape. Over time human interference has increased the overall integrity of forest ecosystems. Empirical work from the Amazon (e.g., Balée 1993, Raffles 2002, Roosevelt 1989) has been the basis for research that shows the role that humans play in this system of exchange that is proven to be mutually beneficial for both humans and the environment in

terms of a give and take relationship that helps to sustain human livelihoods while successfully managing aspects of the environment that are useful to a particular group of people. Other works that support this claim come from Africa (Fairhead & Leach 1995, Fairhead & Leach 1996) and parts of Malaysia and Indonesia (Aumeeruddy & Bakels 1994, Dove, 1983, Peluso & Padoch 1996, Puri 2005). Even so, policymaking efforts in Southeast Asia have turned towards a conservation paradigm modeled after the United States National Parks system.

In previous decades, the U.S. aided in the forcible removal of native peoples from the natural landscape in order to gain access to resources, preserve the integrity of the natural environment and preserve biodiversity (Terborg 2004). It is argued that removal of native people from their ancestral lands places pressures on natural resource bases caused by outside inhabitants (e.g., Hirsch & Warren 1998; Peet et al. 1996; Takeuchi et al. 2005) and limits access to resources needed for survival, oftentimes leading to unstable activities<sup>10</sup> which result in environmental degradation (Eder 1990; Guha 1989; Peluso 1992;). In the U.S., management of national park ecosystems has proven difficult as it is now recognized that earlier inhabitants, of what is now “park land” had a system of mutualism where the natural landscape was manipulated for its resources for humans who, in turn, aided in the creation of healthy, prosperous ecosystems. This has led to shifts in policy whereby certain disturbances, like wildfires, that are necessary for environmental well-being<sup>11</sup> are enabled by the U.S. government. The national park service allows

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<sup>10</sup> Unstable activities might include illegal logging of timber or cyanide fishing.

<sup>11</sup> Maintaining biodiversity and ecosystem functioning are indicative of environmental well-being in a given environment.

wildland fires to burn on park lands, although monitored and aided by human intervention, as wildfires serve an important service for the region's ecology (National Park Service 2008). The U.S. Wildfire policy was reversed in the 1970s to restore the viability of national parks as it had been found that fire helped promote ecosystem vitality and rejuvenation. Prior to this, all wildland fires were suppressed by the U.S. government. Without fires, sequoias trees (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) could not regenerate, leading incense cedars (*Cedrus decurrens*) to take over the forests of Yosemite (Dove et al. 2004, 14). Rebecca Solnit (1994) explains, "Sequoias rely on disturbance for regeneration—the heat from forest fires allows the cones to fall and burst and release their seeds (298).

By trying to suppress fire events in Yosemite National Park, the natural landscape had been altered, therefore, leading the U.S. government to reverse fire policy. Since this time, the reversal in U.S. fire policy has proven effective at maintaining biodiversity of endemic species in Yosemite. Solnit (1994) recounts the words on a plaque at Yosemite that reminds the reader of former interactions between indigenous inhabitants and their natural environment:

By setting fire to the meadows, and allowing natural fires to burn unchecked, the Valley's Native American inhabitants burned out the oak's competitors and kept down the underbrush for clearer shots at deer. With leaf litter burned away, it was easier to gather acorns—the Indian's main food source. (301-2)

Ultimately, the case of the U.S. National Park system provides an example of the loss of indigenous life and the potential ecological failures that can amount from the removal of native inhabitants from the landscape. William Cronon (1996) explains that by separating humans from their ancestral lands, the natural landscape may become increasingly

vulnerable to natural disturbances. Cronon (1996) supports the idea that, in some cases, it is more practical to view local and indigenous inhabitants as a part of ecosystem functioning, as they often provide integral conservation methods through traditional practices and beliefs (i.e. Native Americans and manipulation of wildland fires). Earlier conservation strategies focused strictly on non-human factors that influence the functioning of ecosystems while ignoring the role of human intervention.

Over the past years, scholarship on the topic of conservation has shifted in order to integrate the livelihood needs of local communities and the successful promotion of biodiversity conservation (Wells 1992). Environmental Department Deputy Director Andrew Steer discusses this in a World Bank Discussion Paper stating, “Indigenous peoples, especially when they have not been displaced from their ancestral homelands, possess quite sophisticated environmental knowledge and are frequently excellent resource managers” (Davis 1993: iii). Presently, these discussions are being revisited as both researchers and policymakers alike begin to recognize that in some capacities indigenous practices can potentially provide ecosystem benefits.

The topic of conserving nature while preserving indigenous culture is the focal point of discussion on biodiversity in Southeast Asia. This topic brings together scholarship on the biological and social history of Southeast Asia and the benefits of human activity on the forests they call home. As discussed by Dove et al. (2005), “Humans in Southeast Asia have a long history of manipulating the environment in ways that enhance the conservation of useful and needed natural resources” (p. 7). Thus, there is a great need to explore and understand the role that humans play in the natural landscape and promote these activities

instead of inhibiting them. Several scholars have identified a relationship that exists between the environment and society which needs to be understood in order to implement proper policymaking decisions in the present day (Rambo & Sajise 1984; Broad & Cavanagh 1993).

There is a historical pattern of environmental degradation in ecologically vulnerable areas around the world and in order to change the status of the world's ecosystems in peril these events must be analyzed (Ludwig et al. 1984). I used two frameworks for this type of analysis; cultural ecology, or the conceptual perspective that aims to analyze and understand the relationship between humans and the natural world (Sutton & Anderson 2014) and political ecology, which aims to understand the political forces at work in a particular environment (Robbins 2011). Political ecology was useful for understanding the politicizing factors that affect the natural environment of the Tagbanua through the economic and social dynamics of the region. Cultural ecology recognizes that environmental issues affect all peoples and cultures and aims to understand the relationships between environmental issues and current and past populations, thus, this framework was helpful when looking at environmental stressors among the Tagbanua in Aborlan.

### ***Chapter Organization***

This thesis is arranged into five chapters. This chapter offers an overview of the present study, a review of the literature, theoretical framework and methods used to guide the study, as well as the organization of the forthcoming chapters. Chapter Two provides a background on the

Tagbanua in terms of ethnographic and environmental setting. Chapter Three addresses Robert Fox's (1982) descriptions of the Aborlan Tagbanua that he encountered in the early 1950s along with data gathered from interviews with Tagbanua members and the tribal Chieftain in the present day. Chapter Four outlines local conservation efforts in Aborlan along with responses from three interviewees regarding sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) conservation efforts, mining threats, and protection of mountain lands. Chapter Five offers a summary of data collected in the previous chapters and analyzes Tagbanua culture and local practices that support the natural environment. Chapter Five concludes with questions for future research on the Aborlan Tagbanua and their relationship with the natural environment.



## CHAPTER 2

### TAGBANUA ENVIRONMENTAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

Palawan island is approximately 278 miles in length and 30 miles in width at its widest point. Of the Philippines' islands, Palawan ranks fifth in terms of total land area at 4,549 square miles<sup>12</sup> Palawan's capital city of Puerto Princesa is located approximately one hour south of Manila by air. Palawan is the closest Philippine province to the South China Sea in the west and the Sulu Sea in the east (Figure 5). Roughly 30 miles of open ocean separate the southern tip of Palawan from Northern Borneo indicating that people inhabiting these two land masses could possibly share ethnological similarities.<sup>13</sup>

The Tagbanua in this study are found on the western side of Palawan (Figure 6), in the municipality of Aborlan, in the barangay<sup>12</sup> of Napsan, and in the villages of Bubusawin and Daan. These villages are about 58 kilometers (km) or 2 hours south, of Puerto Princesa by vehicle, and are close to the town of Santo (Sto.) Nino. From the town center of Sto. Nino it is about 3 km east to the Tagbanua mountain village of Daan and about 2 km northeast to the Tagbanua village of Bubusawin.

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<sup>12</sup> Fox (1982; National Statistics Office 2010 Census

<sup>13</sup> Fox (1982) describes the use of dart blowguns and the ritual use of swings as shared cultural traits that are not found in the Northern areas of Palawan (5).



**Figure 5: Map of Philippines in relation to Palawan Island**



**Figure 6: Map of Study Sites**

The municipality of Aborlan is documented as having 32,209 residents in total.<sup>14</sup> The 2010 Census of Population and Housing carried out by the National Statistics Office surveyed Napsan as having a total population of 2,370 residents. Additionally, the barangay of Napsan has about 14,655.17 total hectares of land area, making this region the third largest rural barangay in terms of land area.<sup>15</sup> This area faces west towards the South China Sea.<sup>16</sup>

Napsan has the lowest population density and has only seen moderate development over the past few decades. Fox (1982) describes Aborlan as a difficult place to reach, “There are approximately ninety miles of unsurfaced roads in Palawan which fan out from the provincial capital, Puerto Princesa. In the 1930s the road from Puerto Princesa...was extended to Aborlan and daily bus service was available in 1950-51” (25). This bus trip would have taken almost half a day and would stop along the way to pick and drop off passengers. Fox mentions that the construction of roads and available transportation led to the immigration of Filipinos from the Visayan region to areas that were traditionally occupied by the Tagbanua, a trend that is still observed today.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This number includes the populations from Aporawan and Napsan.

<sup>15</sup> ECAN Resource Management Plan of Puerto Princesa City (2017-2022)

<sup>16</sup> Also, known as the West Philippine Sea.

<sup>17</sup> I met many Filipinos in Aborlan who claimed to have immigrated from the southern part of the Philippines, particularly Mindanao, due to political conflict and violence in the region.

### *Notes on Climate*

In terms of climate, Palawan island is similar to the vast majority of the rest of the Philippines with tropical temperatures<sup>18</sup>, high humidity, winds and rainfall. The study region usually experiences a short dry season from November to May and a rainy season between June and October. Weather events have become more severe over the past several decades, with increases in powerful winds and cooler temperatures.<sup>19</sup> All of these conditions have a direct effect on the Tagbanua in terms of livelihood.

### *Tagbanua livelihoods*

Fox (1982) describes the Tagbanua as swidden agriculturalists of Malay descent. The Tagbanua of Aborlan own and manage their own lands, thus, Tagbanua livelihoods consist mainly of swidden agriculture where sections of forest area are cleared for rice paddy cultivation. This is done by clear cutting an area, burning it, and then planting dry rice crops. After cultivation, fields are left to regenerate until they can be cleared and cultivated again. Along with rice paddy fields, vegetables, root crops, and trees are also planted on Tagbanua lands in Bubusawin and Daan.

Additionally, some Tagbanua make a living producing craft goods for sale. During my fieldwork, I was able to observe a local Tagbanua craftsman, Don, in the Sitio of Sto. Nino<sup>20</sup> who builds furniture made of rattan wood (*Calamus rotang*) (Figure 7). Each piece of furniture

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<sup>18</sup> Average temperatures between about 78 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit throughout different seasons.

<sup>19</sup> This information was provided in an interview with a local conservation expert.

<sup>20</sup> Most Tagbanua do not live in Sto. Nino, however, I was told that this craftsman had been “educated” and chose to raise his family and run his business in town.

is tied together with small strands of rattan, this process is done without the use of nails. The craftsman burns tiny holes into the furniture and threads each rattan strand through the holes, tying them tight at the end. He explained that the entire process of making one chair takes about three to four days, for larger items, like a shelving unit, it takes him about one to two weeks depending on the size. Before he can construct any of the goods he must take a day's hike up the mountain to gather the rattan wood. In some cases, he said that he must take a few days to gather all the materials needed, as he cannot carry all the required materials at one time.



**Figure 7: Rattan wood stored at Don's home in Sto. Nino.**

Fishing livelihoods are less common on the coast, although fishing is often done in the rivers and streams on Daan Mountain. Because the rivers and streams are categorized as part of the Tagbanua's ancestral domain, they are the only ones allowed to fish there. I observed many local fishermen in the coastal village of Sto. Nino engaging in fishing practices, but never any of the Tagbanua. This is dissimilar to other groups of Tagbanua who live in other areas of Palawan. For instance, Michael Fabinyi's 2012 book titled *Fishing for Fairness*, describes Tagbanua of

Coron Island, Northern Palawan who maintain legal control of their ancestral lands and waters and provide livelihoods for themselves through means of fishing. Coron Island is a popular tourist destination and an ideal location for commercial fisheries due to rich natural resources that are found in this area. The fact that the Tagbanua of Coron have legally protected lands and waters eliminates the opportunity for tourism or resource exploitation from outside parties on domains that are categorized as ancestral Tagbanua lands. Fabinyi (2012) explains that residents and developers criticize the Tagbanua for not reaping the economic benefits of their lands:

Some in the tourism industry resented what they saw as the Tagbanua's efforts to gain control of the economic benefits of tourism without maintaining or investing in such attractions. (29)

Those who wish to profit from Coron Island do not understand the Tagbanua's actions, however, they continue to allow the Tagbanua the means to maintain their livelihood as fishermen. In other cases, the Tagbanua of Coron have become involved in the tourism industry by using their fishing boats to transport tourists or accepting money from foreigners to swim in their waters. However, the Tagbanua of Coron still experience problems with environmental degradation and resource conflict from illegal fishing activities. Fabinyi (2012) explains the dilemma of the poor, moral fisherman who's humble fishing practices are viewed as "legal", whilst "illegal" activities are presumably tied to wealthy intruders who capitalize on the local fisherman's inability to intervene (93). In some cases, local fishermen turn to unsustainable fishing practices to compete with wealthy politicians and intruders.

The case that Fabinyi (2012) presents is different to the Aborlan Tagbanua as they are not a coastal group and they have not yet experienced the effects of tourism on a grand scale as the Tagbanua of Coron have. The Aborlan area is void of tourism despite the beautiful natural scenery that is fundamentally untouched by the globalized world. Most Tagbanua in Aborlan

rely on rice and vegetable cultivation, fishing from nearby freshwater systems, and hunting of wild game. Many Tagbanua of the younger generations leave the tribe to go to school in the nearby towns, some even travel to Puerto Princesa for school or work.

While living in Puerto Princesa I met many people who claimed to be part Tagbanua, by either their mother or father. I never came across a full-blooded Tagbanua in the city. I repeatedly asked these half-Tagbanuas how their parents had met and they often gave similar responses, stating that their Tagbanua parent left the tribe to work in Puerto Princesa or nearby village and met their mother/father. These individuals usually could not speak the Tagbanua language, though there were a few who claimed they could say a few words. None of them were able to speak about Tagbanua culture or relationship with nature. I learned from the Tagbanuas that I interviewed that this is a common trend, many people from their communities leave to find jobs or to be schooled in Puerto Princesa and do not come back but become enveloped into modern society.

Tagbanua livelihoods are largely differentiated depending on the area of Palawan in which the tribe<sup>21</sup> resides. The Tagbanua I studied do not live near coastal regions which now accommodate the newly constructed road and subsequent local communities, but reside further inland towards the mountainous regions of Aborlan. These regions are densely forested except for areas that are used for farming. Rice paddy cultivation is still commonly practiced and serves as a means for survival among the Tagbanua along with traditional farming of crops for human consumption. Many Tagbanua sell their produce and/or rice to locals nearby, thus, earning a living through land cultivation. Fishing is typically done in the rivers and streams found on

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<sup>21</sup> Tribe refers to each individual tribal village as there are different tribal villages of Tagbanua in Palawan.

Tagbanua lands, however the abundance of marine life caught is typically low. Therefore, many Tagbanua either buy or trade for fish and other marine resources with locals in the town. Even so, a common trend is for younger Tagbanua to leave the tribe for schooling or work.

Ultimately, Tagbanua livelihoods are simple subsistence level methods of survival that have supported the tribes in Aborlan for the past several hundred years.<sup>22</sup> Matters of culture tie into the livelihoods of the Tagbanua in terms of ritual significance which mandates the honoring natural elements of the land. In the next chapter, the components of Tagbanua culture which deal with the natural environment are observed through interviews and stories recounted by tribal members.

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<sup>22</sup> Fox (1982): 23



### CHAPTER 3 ABORLAN TAGBANUA CULTURE

The Aborlan Tagbanua believe that nature and the spirit world are connected. This chapter presents interviews with Tagbanua tribal members and the Chieftain of the tribe of Bubusawin on the topic of cultural practices and beliefs in nature. Cultural practices and beliefs shape Tagbanua activities in terms of cultivation of crops, ritual practices to honor ancestral spirits, protection of revered forest areas, and practices believed to ward off evil or heal an afflicted individual. These practices and beliefs are embedded into Tagbanua life as there has not traditionally been a separation between the natural world and the supernatural world.<sup>23</sup> They believe they are just visitors and, therefore, they honor and respect the forests that they call home.

These views have not changed even though the Tagbanua have adopted Christianity as a result of missionization. Some of the earliest accounts of Tagbanua society were documented by missionaries in the Aborlan region. Missions were set up in the northern area of Palawan island by Spanish missionaries in 1660 by five Recollect fathers, however, these missions were too far away from the Tagbanua of Aborlan. Fox (1982) ascertains that the presence of Christian migrants eventually introduced Christianity to the Aborlan Tagbanua. Even so, I did not observe churches, religious materials (i.e. crosses), or ceremonial Christian gatherings among the

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<sup>23</sup> Before visiting the Tagbanua tribes, I was warned by a half-Tagbanua in Puerto Princesa to abstain from wearing brightly colored clothing, speaking loudly, or smiling too much as the Tagbanua might think I was an evil spirit and could try and curse or poison me.

Tagbanua in Bubusawin or Daan. Fox (1982) gives an explanation for the absence of such Christian features by stating the differences between the Tagbanua and their Christian neighbors, "...material culture is indistinguishable...the differences between the two groups lie beneath the surface, so to speak, in religious beliefs and practices, world view, and social organization" (33).

Prior to the start of my fieldwork I sought to gain insight on Tagbanua culture before conducting interviews and meeting tribal members. In order to gather context into Tagbanua cultural beliefs, I relied heavily on the only real form of ethnographic documentation of the Aborlan Tagbanua as written by anthropologist Robert Fox titled *Tagbanua Religion and Society*. Fox's fieldwork, while published by the Philippine National Museum in 1982, was actually conducted between October 5, 1950 and March 2, 1951 while he was employed as an anthropologist for the museum from 1947 to 1951. Based on this, I entered my fieldwork with the expectation that much of Fox's observations would have inevitably changed over the course of 67 years. While some of my assumptions held true, I noticed similarities between modern day Tagbanua society and the Tagbanua society of 1950, as was originally described by Fox. For example, Fox (1982) describes the Tagbanua as having a "fortunate balance" between sacred forested areas and grasslands. Based on this belief, slash and burn agricultural practices are prohibited in sacred forest areas. Fox (1982) notes that the Tagbanua preserve forested land that holds spiritual value, thus, inadvertently providing benefit to forests regions (p. 164). During my fieldwork, I found that sacred forests are still prevalent in Tagbanua culture, as is discussed in depth below.

Of the Tagbanua I interacted with, many times when discussing cultural and ritual belief, especially surround ancestral lands, two distinctions were made. The first regarding the spirits of the ancestors, who are the principal causes for sickness among living Tagbanua relatives. If the

recently deceased believe they have been forgotten or if promises to them have not been fulfilled by their living kin, sickness is caused by the ancestral spirits to remind the living of their presence. Fox (1982) describes this in great detail, "...the spirits of the ancestral dead are 'living' members of the society, for the Tagbanua do think of them as participating in the ritual and social life of the living. The spirits...are also thought of as a social and cultural support. The success of the rice crop, of hunting and fishing activities...or of ritual relationship with other supernaturals, are all attributed to the added help of the spirits of the dead" (161).

The second distinction made concerns environmental spirits, who inhabit the natural areas, including the sacred forests. Fox (1982) explains that social life among the Tagbanua encompasses plants, animals, and natural phenomena. Animals which they believe take on the role of ancestor spirits and environmental deities that inhabit different areas of the environment (i.e. skyworld or forests) act as reasons for occurrences such as sickness, death, good and bad luck.<sup>24</sup> There is a distinction between ancestral spirits and environmental spirits, that is those spirits who dwell within nature. Environmental spirits are responsible for watching over the natural areas, as this is their home. They are the guardians of the sacred forests, rivers, and lands of the Tagbanua and are noted to also cause sickness if elements of nature are misused or degraded. The ceremonies and rituals that are performed by the *masikampus* in Bubusawin and Daan are done specifically to appease the environmental spirits. Instances of ceremonies wherein rice wine is offered to the environmental spirits are an important part of maintaining positive relations with the spirits who inhabit the surrounding natural areas.

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<sup>24</sup> Fox (1982): 176

Harold Olofson of the University of San Carlos, Cebu City published an article in 1995 in which he recounts a three-day ethnographic field study in Aborlan in 1979. His study was aimed at determining whether Fox's account of sacred forest areas was still applicable to the Aborlan Tagbanua almost 30 years later. Olofson (1995) writes that sacred forests were still very much intact in Aborlan, perpetuating what he calls "traditional conservation based religion". This chapter provides the results of interviews with three Tagbanua individuals regarding sacred forests and other relationships between the Tagbanua and nature as driven by cultural belief.

### *Sacred Forests*

Fox (1982) documented the Tagbanua use of spiritual mediums, referred to as *babaylans*, who maintained responsibility of sacred forests by engaging in ritualized activities in order to appease the environmental deities who resided there. *Babaylan* can be categorized as a shaman or shamaness,<sup>25</sup> who is usually a female<sup>26</sup> but who also sometimes is a male. Fox (1982) explains that *babaylans* are those who, "...converse with environmental-spirits, who are 'possessed' by deities and ancestors in ceremonies" (148).

Olofson's three-day study allowed him to locate one *babaylan* in 1979, the shamaness Rufina that Fox mentions in his 1950-51 study. The number of *babaylan* Fox encountered in his study far exceeds the amount that Olofson was able to find.<sup>27</sup> Even so, I expected to encounter

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<sup>25</sup> Terminology used by Olofson (1979) to describe female *babaylan*.

<sup>26</sup> Fox (1982) notes that twenty out of thirty-one *babaylan* in the villages he surveyed were women.

<sup>27</sup> This could have been caused by the fact that Olofson only spent 3-days in the region, and therefore, did not have the opportunity to survey the area for more *babaylans*.

*babaylan* over the course of my fieldwork, however, when I inquired I was told that there are no longer any practicing *babaylan* in Bubusawin or Daan. My informant explained that over the past several decades many Tagbanua communities had been converted to Christianity and the shamanic tradition had slowly vanished from these regions. All shamanic duties are now performed by the *masikampu*<sup>28</sup>, or tribal chieftain.

Still, I was informed that the sacred forests are present in Bubusawin and Daan. I conducted three interviews on the topic of sacred forests and all three interviewees gave me similar responses stating that no one can go there. One Tagbanua informant, Teresa explains:

“Only the *babaylan* or *masikampu* is allowed to go there...you cannot just enter, you have to respect those area[s] because that is where the spirits live and if you go there or destroy the nature there you will upset the spirits and they will make you sick. Then the *babaylan* or *masikampu* has to go to the sacred forest to offer gifts and make the spirits happy again.”

In addition to sacred forests there are rivers, streams, and caves where spirits dwell and these areas must be monitored by the *babaylan* or *masikampu*. The *babaylan* is able to speak directly to the spirits and goes alone into the sacred forest or area to offer gifts and perform rituals to placate the environmental entities. The *masikampu* brings two girls who dance and sing while they pray to the spirits. Teresa told me that the spirit will speak only to the *babaylan* or *masikampu*:

“...the spirit will enter their body and will speak, but it is not the *masikampu* speaking. They will not know [what was said] that’s why they bring the girls because then they tell them what the spirits say.”

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<sup>28</sup> From the Spanish title Maestro de Campo (Fox 1956: 16).

This is similar to what Fox (1982) refers to as ‘possession’ of those who communicate with environmental spirits. The occurrence explained above indicates that this tradition has been carried on by the tribal chieftain in the absence and loss of the *babaylan* practice.

### *Conserving Nature in Culture*

Carla<sup>29</sup> recounted a story of the brother of the *masikampu* who suddenly started acting irrationally; yelling and warning people not to go near a large boulder in a nearby stream. He warned the village that there was a spirit there, and it was observed that he displayed uncharacteristic and abnormal behavior. It was explained that the people were unhappy about this warning because there are many large eels underneath the boulder which can be caught and eaten, however those who ignored the warning fell ill after visiting the site of the boulder. The *masikampu* went to the area to offer gifts to the spirit, in this case a white chicken, and prayed while two girls danced around him. Carla explains that she watched this from far away and heard the spirit speak through the *masikampu*. Following the ritual, the *masikampu*'s brother was normal again and the people who had fallen ill recovered. She said that everything stayed this way for four months until the *masikampu*'s brother started to act abnormally again. A few days later he was found lying dead on the boulder, although he looked as if he was “peacefully sleeping”. Carla explained:

“...the ritual was done wrong, it was not the right way so, the *masikampu* had to go out and do the ritual and pray to the spirit again. Then people could fish there again and no one was sick.”

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<sup>29</sup> Carla served as my main contact and informer throughout my fieldwork, providing translation assistance and Tagbanua contacts.

This type of ritualistic behavior to appease environmental spirits is often at the forefront of Tagbanua belief. If someone is sick a ritual must be done and offerings must be given to the spirits to help heal the sick person. If a woman is struggling during childbirth a ritual is done to ensure the safety of the mother and baby with the use of incense and offering of a chicken. These types of rituals are always done in areas of nature or incorporate the calling upon environmental-spirits, as nature is the gateway to the spirit world. The Tagbanua regard the environment and the environmental-spirits as holding power necessary for their survival, thus, the aforementioned examples give some insight into the importance and value that is placed on the natural environment.

### *Tagbanua Planting Rituals*

Fox (1982) talks about his observations between the Tagbanua and local groups of monkeys that were relatively tame, allowing the Tagbanua to approach and get fairly close without conflict between the two parties. The Tagbanua would not chase after the monkeys or get upset by their presence but would let them be. He explains, “Even in instances when monkeys are feeding on cultivated plants, the owner will do nothing or will simply walk towards them, his presence being sufficient to cause them to leave...if an individual annoys the monkeys, he will become ill and mimic their voice and gestures – one explanation for rare instances of insanity”.<sup>30</sup> Based on this observation by Fox (1982), I was curious to see whether this interaction between the Tagbanua and the local monkey populations had remained the same over the years.

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<sup>30</sup> Fox 1982: 173

I asked Carla's husband, Mario, about this relationship between the Tagbanua and monkeys and he explained that many Tagbanuas send dogs after the monkeys or try and shoo them away, however, the monkeys always come back and eat the crops. Even so, he affirmed with me that annoying the monkeys by shooing them off does not make you crazy, as Fox had surmised in the previous decades.<sup>31</sup> Mario told me that one year he and his wife planted rice and monkeys had come and eaten half of their rice crop, a very devastating occurrence for their family. An old man who lived nearby came and told them that they needed to pray over their crops while walking around the periphery of their land:

“When he saw us shouting and using dogs to make the monkeys go away...he told us to circle our rice with these [particular] roots...put the roots on the boundaries of [our] plants. He told me ‘go out and find these four different roots and if you have the roots come back to me and I will tell you the words you need to speak,’ but I didn't do that so what happens to him doesn't happen to us, and what happened to him is very good...we saw him do that on his own land and the monkeys never bothered his rice. He just walk[ed] around his land singing very quietly...praying for his rice to be safe and it was. We didn't listen to the old man; I wish we did.”

The old man had told Mario to come over and learn the prayer to protect their crops but Mario didn't follow through; an action that he later regretted. He wished that he had learned the old man's prayer in order to protect his rice fields from the monkeys. The actions of the old man that Mario describes align with Fox's description of the relationship between the Tagbanua and the monkeys as a peaceful co-existence, however, Fox says nothing of the method of planting roots and praying over the land.

I asked if it would be possible to visit the old man who knew how to keep the monkeys away with his prayers and I was informed that he had died a few years ago. Based on that, it

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<sup>31</sup> The notion that annoying the monkeys makes a person crazy might have been followed by the Tagbanua in previous decades but, it is clearly no longer believed by the younger Tagbanua generation.



would seem that the newer generations have lost this practice of monkey management and it has resulted in great loss of rice yields, according to Mario. Thus, this is the reason that younger Tagbanua families like, Carla and Mario no longer rely of farming livelihoods but instead have moved down from the mountain to work jobs in the town, she as cashier in a local shop and he as a carpenter.

### *Interview with the Masikampu*

I was particularly interested in speaking with the head of the Tagbanua, as many people I spoke with indicated that the *masikampu* is the one who is closest to nature, responsible for appeasing the environmental spirits. I was unable to talk with the *masikampu* in Daan, however, I was able to interview his wife, Gina. She told me of that her husband's relationship with nature is not only important for him but for the entire tribe, as well. Gina explains:

“...what the *masikampu* does is for the good of the tribe and for the spirits in the nature, without this the relationship between us and the nature cannot exist. It is important for the *masikampu* to do the rituals and speak to [the environmental spirits].”

The belief that the *masikampu* is responsible for the entirety of the tribe in terms of maintaining peace between the people and the environment reveals the interconnectedness that exists between humans and nature in Tagbanua society.

In Bubusawin, I had the opportunity to interview the tribal chieftain, *masikampu*, with the help of my informant Carla. I was interested in hearing his perspectives on nature and its importance to the tribal community. I visited the *masikampu* during a tribal festival held in Bubusawin. Before the festival could start the *masikampu* had to bless the area and ask the

ancestral and environmental spirits for permission to use the space. I later asked him about this practice:

“...we must respect the spirits that dwell here and ask that they let us celebrate here today otherwise they might be angry. We must bless the land; we are just visitors here.”

The *masikampu* was very knowledgeable on the topic of sacred forests in Bubusawin and Daan due to the fact that he had traveled around these regions a lot. He informed me that there are two sacred forests in Bubusawin and seven in Daan. Having asked him why there were only two sacred forests in Bubusawin, he explained that over the past several decades Tagbanua lands had been sold to or taken over by migrant Filipinos. Despite this, he assured me that environmental spirits still dwell in the areas that are now occupied by outsiders:

“...these lands are enchanted, there is much power there. Even when there are changes [in landscape]. The spirits become angry at the changes and will move but sometimes they stay. That is why all of these lands are alive because there is history...the spirits are always there.”

Additionally, he explained that the Tagbanua rely on the spirits to give them the things they need to survive through the natural environment. This was the reason they were holding a festival, to give thanks to nature and the spirits. He explained:

“The spirits enjoy the rice wine, that is why we drink rice wine and leave out jars of rice wine for the spirits...they are happy this way. We must keep them happy by doing this, by showing we are grateful.”

Fox (1982) discusses this custom of providing ancestral spirits with rice wine, “The underworld is a mirror of the earth except...there is no rice-wine. The dead have not lost their taste for this ‘perfect’ intoxicant, however, so that the wine becomes the best means to lure the dead to participate in rituals with the living and to ‘convince’ them not to cause sickness but to help their relatives achieve a full life” (250). Rice wine serves as the Tagbanua’s method of appeasing the ancestral and environmental spirits into keeping the tribe free of illness and

welcomes them to the ritual. It acts as a peace-offering, according to the *masikampu*. The function of rice wine serves the same purpose among the Tagbanua of Bubusawin, as Fox (1982) has illustrated in the above quote. Though the Tagbanua that Fox (1982) studied are from the western side of the island while the Tagbanua from Bubusawin are from the eastern side, the tradition of offering rice wine to ancestral and environmental spirits is a practice that has persisted in the Aborlan region. Ultimately, the *masikampu* explained to me that the function of offering rice wine provides the spirits an incentive to emerge from where they reside in the natural world and join them, to sing, dance, and drink:

“The spirits are in nature, that is where they live so, we can’t just go and ruin nature, we have to respect nature and respect the spirits.”

Based on interviews with the *masikampu*, Mario, and Carla, I learned how the Tagbanua work with nature to ensure spiritual balance with spirits using rice wine, manage pest control of crops using ritual prayer, and protect sacred forest areas. The Tagbanua of Aborlan follow these traditions as a way of managing the environment while also ensuring that the spiritual integrity of their lands are in equilibrium. Without this, they believe that sickness will fall to the people who have caused a disruption to the equilibrium and will be punished by the spirits. Cultural belief directs Tagbanua practice and ways of living, all with the notion that nature is an important part of their existence. The next chapter will discuss matters of nature and changes in environmental landscape that have the potential to be particularly profound to the lives of the Aborlan Tagbanua.

## CHAPTER 4

### ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES IN ABORLAN

Aborlan has changed rapidly over the past decade with the construction of new roads and other infrastructure such as, churches, municipal buildings, and markets. What used to be a rocky four-hour bus drive from Puerto Princesa has now become a less-rocky two-hour, air-conditioned van ride to Aborlan due to the construction of a cement road. This has happened over the past seven or eight years, according to Carla, and is a continuing project. Even so, there are sections of the road that have been left unfinished or simply do not exist. Development is slow in this area as it is not a government priority, and tourists do not venture to the southern part of Palawan due to security threats and lack of accommodations. Thus, southern Palawan is frequented by the occasional backpacker eager to observe sea turtles and see the area's waterfalls and beaches. Large utility vans have become a way for some in Aborlan to earn a living by making regular trips each day back and forth from Puerto Princesa, carrying the occasional traveler, local residents, and goods for the small town sari-sari<sup>32</sup> stores.

On a larger scale, corporate mining operations are prevalent in southern Palawan based on large nickel and iron ore deposits found in the mountain regions. Mining has not yet reached Aborlan, however, a Chinese-owned, large scale retailer has set up plans for building a shopping center near Bubusawin, Sto. Nino, and Daan. Many local people in the area are excited about the prospect of having a mall in their area, however, they do not seem aware of the grand scale of

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<sup>32</sup> Small family run convenience stores specific to the Philippines.

impending changes. By 2018, two separate cell towers are to be put up in the area, as presently there is no internet or cell service available. Currently, there is no cell or internet service anywhere in Bubusawin, Sto. Nino, and Daan. The Tagbanua are especially unaware of the scale of the changes that are to come, as is evident in the below interviews. Based on the inevitable changes to ensue, I made an effort to understand things that are being done currently to conserve the natural environment at a local level, among the local community and the impacts and implications these efforts have on the Tagbanua. The conservation efforts discussed below are actions that have taken place long before news of development reached Bubusawin, Sto. Nino, and Daan and the people in the interviews are invested in promoting conservation in these areas. This chapter gives three examples of local conservation efforts in Aborlan as supplemented by interviews from three individuals regarding each activity. Protection and fostering of turtle hatcheries, resistance to mining, and forest conservation are all discussed as activities that are currently taking place.

### *Effects of Sea Turtle Conservation*

Local conservationist, Raine, works in the Aborlan area as a part of the Conservation Leadership Programme.<sup>32</sup> Her work in Aborlan revolves around the monitoring of sea turtle hatcheries and the viability of sea turtle populations in this area. Additionally, Raine offers mentorship and training to future conservation leaders in Palawan in order to foster conservation initiatives and sustainable development. I was lucky to meet with Raine through a mutual

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<sup>32</sup> The Conservation Leadership Programme provides grant funding for conservation projects through funding by British Petroleum and conservation organizations Birdlife International, Fauna & Flora International, and the Wildlife Conservation Society. Raine is currently employed as a mentor under a grant for the protection of sea turtle conservation in Palawan.

contact at the Palawacana Foundation in Aborlan and was able to interview her on her activities and thoughts regarding sea turtle conservation and its effects not only on the biodiversity of the region but on the Tagbanua, as well. When asked about the benefits of sea turtle conservation on the local Tagbanua community, Raine explained:

“...turtles tie into the biological integrity of Aborlan and without them the Tagbanua face a disruption in the balance of nature as they know it...For example, the turtles we find here [in Aborlan] eat jellyfish and without them there is a spike in the amount of jellyfish that we find in coastal waters”.

An increase in numbers of jellyfish make it harder to fish and produce lowered levels of fish yields. The Tagbanua in Bubusawin rely on fish that they either purchase or trade for. Sea turtle populations have a direct effect on the rest of the marine ecosystem and make it possible for coastal sea life to remain in a state of equilibrium.

Raine describes the importance of educating the Tagbanua and local community about the importance of conserving sea turtle populations in order not to disrupt the balance in nature.

Raine explains:

“A lot of locals dig up turtle eggs to sell and eat...Tagbanua are sometimes sold turtle eggs. Our job as stewards of nature through the Conservation Leadership Programme is to educate the Tagbanua and locals that preserving turtles leads to [greater] biodiversity and a healthy ecosystem.”

I was invited by Raine to accompany her monitoring team on an overnight trip in Aborlan to ensure that the turtle hatchery was still intact, and even witnessed some of the hatching turtles.

Based on my conversations with Raine she is very passionate about letting people in the surrounding area know why turtle conservation is important for the well-being of everyone in the community. Specifically, for the Tagbanua, an abundance of viable sea turtles in Aborlan can lead to greater biodiversity of sea life and greater opportunities for food resources.



**Figure 8: Sea Turtle Hatchery in Sto. Nino.**

Although the group of Tagbanua that I have interacted with are not typically coastal fishermen, they often purchase sea-caught fish from local markets in towns near the coast.

However, many times fish prove expensive or scarce based on the season. Raine explains:

“...if we can tell the Tagbanua that turtles will actually help the coastal ecosystem, increasing biodiversity and provide a greater amount of fish available for purchase, then it’s possible that they might come down from Daan or Bubusawin to help foster turtle conservation [like we are].”

These plans are something that Raine believes might take some time but can be achieved.

This potential system of mutualism between sea turtles and the Tagbanua plays into the indigenous regard for nature as a sacred entity. The work that Raine is doing in Aborlan aims to

help foster this relationship and provide a safe space for sea turtles to lay eggs and successfully spawn young sea turtles while showing locals and Tagbanua alike that these actions are beneficial for the community.

I asked Carla about beliefs regarding sea turtles among the Tagbanua in order to understand if sea turtle conservation is actually an activity that holds any significant value to the Tagbanua. She explained that sea turtles, among other animals, are viewed as ancestral spirits that take form of native animal species. Therefore, sea turtles are not consumed as a food source for the Tagbanua but are regarded as sacred ancestral beings. Fox (1982) illustrates this relationship between the Tagbanua and the animal world, "...the belief in the transmigration of the ancestral dead...has produced an oblique tolerance towards the larger animals in the proximate environment. Then, of course, the Tagbanua are relatively secure economically. They do not depend for subsistence upon the many forces of insects, reptiles and mammals. There is at any rate an incidental conservation by the Tagbanua of the fauna and flora" (174).

The 'incidental conservation' that Fox describes seems to still hold true among the Tagbanua of Aborlan and their relationship with sea turtle populations. Though sea turtle eggs are sometimes consumed, Carla explains that this is an exception to the belief that Tagbanua ancestors inhabit the bodies of grown, developed sea turtles. Sea turtle eggs are not regarded as a taboo food source.

### ***Mining Pursuits***

I interviewed Carla on the matter of protecting ancestral lands and she spoke passionately about mining operations in neighboring areas, as well as, the potential for mining in Bubusawin and Daan. Carla explained that in 2006, a foreign mining company came to the village to



propose buying the entirety of the mountain and surrounding lands. This particular mining company had bought Tagbanua lands south of Aborlan in previous years, turning what was beautifully forested land into, as Carla describes:

“...desert, it looks just like [a] desert now...the company arrived with someone from, I don't know if he was a Chinese, a Taiwanese, he's a foreign[er]...he told the chieftain to [give them] permission to do the mining here. They had an interpreter from [nearby village] ...a Tagbanua, but an educated<sup>33</sup> one. A lot of Tagbanuas [are] employed by the mining company...and the [nearby village] area, if you look at the environment, the nature, the forest, now it is not a forest! It looks like [a] desert...and they dig so deep. It goes deeper and deeper and deeper.”

Carla made it clear to me that she is appalled by the activities in the nearby town. This type of environmental degradation has the potential to completely wipe out the relationship that dictates Tagbanua cultural belief. Without forest areas, fresh waters for fishing, roots and herbs for medicinal treatments, the very foundations of Tagbanua environmental customs would cease to exist and the Tagbanua would become displaced, thrown into the modern world of which they have no knowledge. When asked further about the interaction between the foreign mining company and the Tagbanua Carla explained:

“For me, it's very terrible. I am afraid of that. The Tagbanua tribe of Sitio Daan and Sitio Bubusawin, [in] that moment, gave permission, agree to the mining companies but the barangay officials did not agree on that so, they never had the opportunity to dig, to operate, only they survey[ed] the area ... and as of now, a lot of Tagbanua [are] educated and they don't want the mining companies to dig.”

The mining company offered scholarships, housing, and medical care but Carla believes that the effects to the land are so bad that people no longer agree to sell their lands to the mining companies based on the example that they've witnessed in what was previously the nearby

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<sup>33</sup> “Educated” generally means that they have finished high school but have not attended college or any kind of professional school.

Tagbanua village. As she explained her fear of watching her ancestral lands turned into degraded desert land, she alluded to the fact that others feel the same in Aborlan. Even so, she explains that the people are divided, some want to sell their lands to avail the benefits offered by the mining company in terms of wealth, education, housing, and medical care:

“They’re misunderstanding each other, they’re fighting each other because some want to have money, want to be educated but, the leaders said, “Yes! We can be educated. We can have houses. We can support our medical needs without the mining companies, because they can harm us, it has bad effects on our environment.”

I spoke to Jay, a Tagbanua supporter of the mining activities, through an interpreter. He alluded to the fact that, while their lands would be compromised, the Tagbanua would have no need for the land anyway:

“...if we are not using our lands for farming then why are we not selling to the mining company? We could have more money and houses and education for our children. Right now we have barely anything...we could have more, we could be educated.”

I questioned Jay about the environment: Wasn’t the environment an important part of his Tagbanua ancestry? Wouldn’t the environmental-spirits that dwell in the sacred forests become angry? He responded:

“They would not be mad at us, we are not the ones tearing down the forests, the miners are. It is different because our traditions aren’t as serious as they used to be. Wherever we move to we will still have our traditions but they’ll be different. We will still have *masikampu*. We will still have our rituals.”

After talking with Jay I could see his point of view. He is a young Tagbanua man with a wife and baby and wants what is best for his family and sees selling Tagbanua lands to the mining company as a way to improve the quality of life for his family. Even so, the loss of ancestral lands ultimately leads to a loss of Tagbanua culture, through changes in traditional livelihood practices and spiritual beliefs in nature, a fact that I brought up to Jay. His response indicated that protecting ancestral lands is not a priority to him and neither is preserving the

Tagbanua culture. He explained to me that he wants to be modernized and raise his family away from Daan. Jay's identity as a Tagbanua diminishes as he attempts to adopt the livelihood of the "mainstream" Filipino who lives in town, sends his children to school and works a job where he earns income. He recognizes that his life as a Tagbanua is different from those who live in the busy city of Puerto Princesa and he wants a part of it, even if it means abandoning his roots. The sacred regard for nature that the Tagbanua consider to be a part of their culture is essentially thrown aside, incompatible with Jay's desire to integrate into urban life. He doesn't see nature as a stable method of providing all he needs for his family, as the Tagbanua traditionally believe, therefore, the idea of leaving the mountain and abandoning his culture is appealing to him.

"This is the way of the younger people now," Carla explained to me. "They do not want to be one with the land anymore, they want cellphone[s] and nice things. They do not care about the rituals. They do not care so much about [their] heritage."

I decided to ask people whether or not they believed mining should be done on the mountain. Out of 11 respondents, 4 answered yes, 3 answered no, and 4 answered that they didn't know. This discrepancy between answers of tribal members is indicative of the divide that Carla talked about previously. I asked her if she thought the mining company would come back someday in the future and she said she wasn't sure:

"When they came in 2006 they survey[ed] the entire mountain, they know what is here. But maybe they are just too busy with their mining in [nearby village]. So, maybe they won't come back."

The threat of mining poses a significant threat to ancestral lands in Daan. However, desperation among some members of the tribe has created a willingness to sell their lands in order to provide for their families or pursue what they believe is a better life. The prospect of mining in Daan directly opposes the Tagbanua's beliefs in the protection of sacred forests and their peaceful relationship with the natural environment. This opposition shows a growing

change in attitudes among the Tagbanua of Daan and their eagerness to disconnect from nature by handing over the lands they regard as sacred to mining operations in order to gain profit. They see their land as a means of earning money, thus, their beliefs in the natural environment, that it is the home of the spirits who should be honored, is virtually forgotten. The Tagbanua have not forgotten their beliefs, although some find monetary value in their lands as a viable opposition to the traditional tribal way of life. As in Jay's case, the Tagbanua who feel this way are mostly the younger generations of Tagbanua. The older generation strongly oppose this view, creating a divide, as Carla described, between members of the tribe.

### *Local Response to Land Preservation*

I was interviewed a local resident, Harold, who lives in town, in close proximity to the Tagbanua tribes in Bubusawin and Daan. He expressed his fear for the loss of lands in the mountains where he goes to hunt wild boar and collect herbs to use as natural remedies for burns, insect bites, and infections. Harold states:

“...many lands are being sold to corporations ...I'm afraid there will be no Tagbanua lands left on the mountain. These lands are important, not just for [the] Tagbanua, but for people like me, who rely on what nature gives to us.”

Harold has friends that are members of the Tagbanua tribe whom he often visits while in the mountains of Daan. Typically, he prepares himself for a 3-hour journey into the jungle, leaving at 3am and returning at 1pm with his pack full of supplies and a bolo knife.

“I enjoy being alone in the forest. I have a special set of clothes just for when I go, so that I can blend in and become one with the nature. It's peaceful and I don't want to see the forests vanish.”

He is fearful that the forests could become overtaken by the mining company wherein the local ecosystem is completely destroyed. This would eliminate his hunting activities and his collection of herbal remedies, which he has used to create a product useful for warding off mosquitos, heartburn, infected cuts, bites, and much more; he bottles and sells the product in Puerto Princesa. Thus, the forest is not only a place of solace for Harold but it has become a way for him to create a sustainable income for his family through hunting activities. Removing the forests would eliminate these activities for Harold.

Harold explained that several of his Tagbanua friends wanted to sell their lands in the mountain to make money. The idea of having native lands sold to corporate miners or developers did not sit well with him so he bought several areas of land on the mountain at 10,000 PHP (200 USD) per hectare.

“I want to create a space on the mountain where the forest can flourish. Putting all the properties I bought together will create a big area that is safe from development. I have no desire to build anything except a small shelter for when I go into the mountain. I want to plant trees and keep the area safe.”

Harold shared his aspirations for the surrounding lands and his desire to protect the forests even if some of his Tagbanua friends cannot. He noted that he still wants his friends to be a part of the lands, as it is their ancestral home, but is happy to keep it out of the hands of corporate and mining companies, eager to develop or mine the mountain.

Regarding land ownership in Daan, the Aborlan Tagbanua have a CADT and each family has their own area of land that belongs to them. I was informed by PCSD that ancestral land holdings belonging to individuals are protected from being sold unless there is a mutual agreement between two parties. As in Harold's case, he creates mutual agreements between himself and a specific Tagbanua land owner. Harold creates his own documents that both parties

sign off on and money is exchanged. However, this agreement is not legally recognized as a change in title ownership. This means it is possible that the Tagbanua Harold has bought land from could deny that the agreement between them exists if greater prospects approach them or they decide they want their lands back.

Overall, environmental protection in Aborlan is at risk of becoming overrun by the prospect of foreign investments and more particularly mining pursuits. Coastal sea turtle conservation efforts are in full swing by conservationists like Raine, however, activities such as purchasing sea turtle eggs by Tribal members poses a threat to local seas turtle populations. Educating the Tagbanua on the importance of fostering sea turtle conservation can have a profound effect on turtle populations along with the Tagbanua, who will experience greater availability in fish resources available for purchase. Additionally, the threat of mining in the area introduces significant threats to Tagbanua culture, causing them to be displaced from their ancestral lands, thus, leading to a loss of already vanishing cultural practices and beliefs. By removing the Tagbanua from their lands, the areas that they revere as sacred are no longer protected resulting in a loss of forest cover and biodiversity.

## CHAPTER 5 ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

For the purposes of this study, the Tagbanua of Bubusawin and Daan of Aborlan were assessed in order to gain an understanding of Tagbanua culture as a fostered relationship between the tribe and their ancestral lands and natural environment. To promote this understanding the following research questions were applied:

1. How is the concept of nature embedded within indigenous Tagbanua culture and society?
2. How have environmental challenges, such as changes in landscape due to mining or the building of roads, affected the livelihood of the Aborlan Tagbanua?
3. Finally, are the Tagbanua people engaging in activities which help to protect their native lands, and if they are, what can be done to strengthen those actions?

In order to address each of the target research questions I relied on interviews with Tagbanua and Non-Tagbanua individuals and participant observations in local Tagbanua festival and ritual settings. Each research question is addressed in this conclusion chapter, offering insight into Tagbanua society and its changing environment.

### *Analysis of Findings*

It is clear that the Tagbanua in this study have changed and have lost some of their cultural practices as modernization has occurred in the area. So, what are the Tagbanua doing that promotes conservation in Aborlan, and how can these efforts be protected? Based on my discussions with Tagbanua interviewees, I found that the importance of sacred forest areas in Tagbanua culture inadvertently creates a space for forest growth and regeneration in the areas surrounding the forests. Sacred forests act as seed banks allowing the surrounding areas, used for farming, swiddening, or simply uncultivated, to quickly regenerate. Olfoson (1995) calls this “ecosymbolic” regulation wherein Tagbanua cultural belief prohibits the forests deemed “sacred” from being disrupted, while ecological stability is maintained within the forests and its surrounding areas. Thus, the concept of nature is embedded within Tagbanua culture through the protection of sacred forests. Tagbanua cultural belief plays an important role in protecting particular forest areas that are sanctified, prohibiting anyone from entering the forest aside from spiritual leaders. The Tagbanua I spoke with take this very seriously, based on the belief that serious implications will ensue anyone who defies it. Based on my conversations with Jay and the *masikampu* of Bubusawin, destruction of sacred forests areas caused by development and mining will not cause the spirits to become angry with the Tagbanua, only with those who destroy it. As the *masikampu* told me, the spirits will find a new home in nature because nature is where they dwell, in trees, streams, and large rocks.

Thus, how have environmental challenges, such as changes in landscape due to mining or the building of roads, affected the livelihoods of the Tagbanua? As development and modernization become more prevalent in Aborlan, the Tagbanua face issues associated with loss



of ancestral lands and loss of cultural practices, as their lands and culture are mutually reinforcing of one another. The fact that there are no longer any *babaylans* among the Tagbanua of Bubusawin and Daan gives a direct example of the effects of development, in this case roads enabling Christianity to reach the Tagbanua and subsequently, a shift in cultural practices and beliefs. Mining efforts pose a potential threat to the overall integrity of the Tagbanua by displacing them from their lands, creating a space for cultural loss.

Ancestral land loss, fueled by capitalist exploitations (i.e. mining) who aim to buy Tagbanua lands creates groups of fragmented Tagbanua communities wherein the environment that they depend on is suddenly removed from the equation. Without ancestral lands, ritual and cultural practices are no longer performed. This is because nature is at the forefront of Tagbanua cultural belief.

### ***Perceptions and Discussion of Local Development***

I talked with Carla about local development and what it means for Tagbanua culture. She spoke to me in terms of the Tagbanua who live in the mountains of Daan:

“Their culture, their relationship with the nature changes. Because while there was no development in the local areas, they’re still using those...tribal kinds of healing sickness, the ancestral [ways] of healing wounds, like dancing and singing and doing the rituals and the nature, especially the nature, they’re using the chemicals...those are things that I saw when I lived in Daan and development changes all of that.”

She explained that culture was very much affected by development in past years because the construction of roads allowed for goods, along with people, to reach Daan, whereas previously it was difficult to go to-and-from. This kept the Tagbanua isolated from the town, allowing culture to remain largely uninfluenced from external factors. Even the development of roads from

Puerto Princesa has allowed areas in Sto. Nino to become more developed which in turn affects the Tagbanua. As Carla stated, the Tagbanua were introduced to pesticides in order to manage their crops, thus, a loss in the practice of praying over the land and planting specific root crops to rid of pestilence as the old man mentioned above had done.

“...lots of kids, teenagers, go to the city and when [they’re] there, especially the women, they don’t want to be known as Tagbanua...they’re ashamed to be called Tagbanua. Why are you ashamed? You must not be because you have many benefits from your lands, your area, your heritage, of being you. I told them, ‘We are powerful, Tagbanua are powerful. We have the widest land, we have the knowledge of healing, the tribal kind of planting, that makes us powerful’. But still, I’ve seen many young Tagbanua leave to go to the city and change who they are and this is all because of the development.”

Development has afforded the Tagbanua access to Puerto Princesa through the construction of roads. In the past seven or eight years before road development, there were no means of reaching the city unless by foot. This would have been a three-day journey. Fox (1982) explains that in 1950-51 there was a daily bus service from Puerto Princesa to Aborlan, however, it was not widely used by the Tagbanua who had no need to travel to the city. Now, traveling to the city is easier based on road construction and transport vans. Carla explains that many young Tagbanua use this method of transport to go to and from the city. Once in the city, they want to blend in with the rest of the modern Filipino population and rid themselves of their tribal background.

However, this is not the only view of development. According to the Tagbanua craftsman, Don, development is good because the Tagbanua can use roads to transport their goods to sell and make money, otherwise, it is hard to deliver products that they have for sale. They must put their goods in the *rarong*, or carrier, and put it on their backs to carry into town. Don explains:

“...even though we have [the] carabao the roads are not good enough. The carabao can go down but not up, it is too hard. So, development is good for me, roads are good for me. I have to go up to the mountain to get supplies for my chairs, only I can't carry it all because I have to hike through [the] forest. If there was a road, I could use [the] carabao.”

I witnessed some Tagbanua going up the mountain to Daan using the traditional carabao<sup>34</sup> and cart to carry goods to and from Sto. Nino (Figure 9). The carabao moves very slowly, especially because it is difficult to walk up the incline of the mountain. The small group arrived in Daan about two hours after my informant and I, though we rode up the mountain on a motorbike. Still, the use of the carabao and cart is a useful way of not having to carry goods up and down the mountain. Unfortunately, not much can be carried by the carabao, as Don explained, because of the poor quality of the road.



**Figure 9: Use of the carabao and cart to carry goods on rocky, steep terrain up to the Tagbanua village of Daan.**

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<sup>34</sup> Local water buffalo used for plowing and transporting goods.

Many Tagbanua sell their lands to local residents in the area, such as Harold because they want money. However, unaware of the value, they end up selling their land at very low prices. Industries such as mining corporations are aware of this and take advantage of the Tagbanua, offering relatively low prices for land, while offering incentives such as education and medical care. These types of deals appeal to some groups of Tagbanua who do not have any knowledge of modernized society and corporate interest in their lands. The potential for Bubusawin and Daan becoming mining towns is high considering the mining company has made offers in the past. It is likely that they will come forth again. The Tagbanua I spoke to in both Bubusawin and Daan have mixed feelings about the mining and about the selling of their lands. Some explain that they feel connected to their lands, therefore, selling is not an option. Others believe selling their lands will provide them with greater value and opportunity.

Problems associated with housing, medical care, and education given by the mining company to the Tagbanua include stripping them of their native lands and their cultural practices related to their lands. According to Carla, this trend has been observed in the nearby town which leads to the assumption that this type of change could happen to the Tagbanua in Bubusawin and Daan.

### ***Study Limitations***

There are several limitations of this study which should be noted. First, that fact that I was unable to find any *babaylans* might have been due to the fact that I was restricted to the Tagbanua villages on the west side of Aborlan, wherein Fox and Olofson had access to the eastern groups of the Tagbanua. If I had been able to visit the eastern Tagbanua villages, I might

have gathered different results on the functions of *babaylans* in the present day, that is if there are still any practicing *babaylans* there.

Second, not being able to visit the sacred forest areas made it impossible for to me survey and measure the size of each area. This would have been useful in knowing exactly how much forested land is ritually protected by the Tagbanua. Unfortunately, I was not given the location of each sacred forest area as they are embedded within densely forested lands.<sup>35</sup>

Third, not knowing the Tagbanua language limited my ability to conduct interviews without the presence of my translator. As the vast majority of the Tagbanua only speak their tribal dialect it wasn't possible to conduct interviews independently and I had to rely on the availability of Carla to accompany me to all meetings and interviews. This proved difficult and time consuming to arrange due to the lack of technology and means of contacting her. In order to arrange plans with Carla I needed to drive directly to her house, often times unannounced. She would then have to walk to the homes of Tagbanua she knew and arrange interviews for me. Living outside of the study region made this process slow as each time I visited the region there was a possibility that Carla, or any of the Tagbanua she knew, would be unavailable. Also, Carla's Tagbanua contacts were restricted to members residing on the western side of Aborlan. This limited my access to the Tagbanua tribes living on the eastern side of Aborlan and subsequently provided me with a relatively small number of interviews and data.

Additionally, the limited time of my study inhibited me from further inquiry on the topics of development and mining. I would find it interesting to monitor Bubusawin and Daan over an extended period of time to truly judge the impacts on the Tagbanua and their environment.

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<sup>35</sup> The sacred forest areas cannot be visibly defined via Google Earth images.

### ***Research Contribution***

Knowing the potential effects of development upon Tagbanua culture and environment has great benefit to scholars and policymakers, alike, when it comes to understanding the relationship that exists between certain tribal groups and nature. This gives an example of the livelihoods that are at stake in the event of a disruptive event, such as mining or logging, and the effects that these types of activities have on the world's indigenous communities who rely on the natural environment in terms of subsistence and cultural belief. Based on these assumptions, this thesis contributes to the fields of Southeast Asian Studies and anthropology, specifically to ethnographic research among tribal inhabitants. This is achieved by presenting the relationship that exists between the Tagbanua and their environment in the midst of growing development. Additionally, it contributes to the field of traditional human-based conservation of natural resources and aids in the understanding of indigenous relationships with nature. This contribution illustrates the Tagbanua's regard for sacred forests as protected areas that hold spiritual and cultural value to the tribe in the midst of changing attitudes towards culture during a period of developmental change. The construction of roads and the prospect of mining are factors that are altering the relationship between this indigenous group and their native lands.

The research I conducted with the Tagbanua is particularly useful for the field of Filipino indigenous studies as it lays out a comparison between what Robert Fox observed in 1950-51 and the present day. Before Fox's research, only a brief look at sacred forests was conducted by Harold Olofson in 1975. My fieldwork offers an updated view of the Tagbanua, which has evolved from the descriptions provided in previous decades by Fox (1982) and Olofson (1995).

Documenting the function of sacred forests and the tradition of keeping these areas protected is crucial to maintaining cultural knowledge of the Tagbanua of Aborlan. In the wake of development in this area, it is important to keep these traditions alive by collecting the cultural and environmental narratives of the Tagbanua. It is my hope that by compiling an updated analysis of Tagbanua culture and use of the natural environment, the heritage of the Tagbanua can be preserved by sharing the findings of my research with the provincial government of Palawan. This will be done through successful relationships with the likes of the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development and the Office of the Provincial Governor, who have interests in the preservation of the Aborlan region and the status of the Tagbanua. By sharing the information of my study, it is hopeful that greater protection efforts for the Tagbanua can be implemented by the provincial government to oppose the pursuits of mining companies in the Aborlan region.

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