

## INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ENGAGEMENT TO MAINSTREAM LOCAL POLITICS: A SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES NARRATIVE

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### *Abstract*

This study focuses on a specific indigenous community in Mindanao, Philippines – the Bukidnon Tribe. The Bukidnon Tribe is one of the well-documented and well-researched tribes in the region and is also a recipient of various projects in the past. This paper primarily aims to answer the question, whether the Bukidnon Tribe have mainstreamed their presence in local politics. With the implementation of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA), the traditional political institutions of the different tribes are now nationally recognized. With that in place, this study has the following specific questions: a) how engaged is the Bukidnon tribe in local politics, b) how are the traditional political institutions of the Bukidnon tribe survive in relation to engagement to mainstream politics, and c) what are the political influences and effects of the past projects given to the tribe. Results show that through the IPRA, which mandated an IP representative for every local government unit (LGU) in areas with IP population, the indigenous communities are assured of representation. Because of presence of the IP representatives in LGUs, the other members of the tribe are encouraged to further recognize and participate in mainstream political activities such as voting in elections and consultation with regards to policy formulation. The results also indicated that the tribe recognizes the value and importance of their traditional political institutions, thus, they themselves strive hard for its preservation despite all the external factors brought by the projects. From the results, it is suggested that educating the mainstream society about the rich political culture of the tribe as a method to ease the penetration of the IPs to local politics as there will be greater respect for cultural diversity.

*Keywords: Indigenous People, Political Engagement, Mainstream Politics*

### INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is composed of more than a hundred million people and in the data of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples in 2013, the Philippines' indigenous population has reached 14 million, roughly about 13 percent of the total

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population. The history of the Philippines, as written in most books, usually highlight the national struggles under the Spanish, American and Japanese occupations of the Christianized Filipinos only. The Moros and the highlanders, the indigenous peoples, although not visibly accounted for in most of our books, should be given importance in history and today's society.

The Philippine government recognizes and promotes the rights of indigenous peoples or of so-called indigenous cultural communities and this also means the merging of the various indigenous or cultural groups into one body politic, with the view of granting the minority all the rights and privileges enjoyed by the majority and getting them involved in the common efforts to advance the national interest. Many of these indigenous peoples and communities are found in the few remaining forested areas, most of which have now been declared protected areas. The State recognition of IP rights is embodied in the Philippine Constitution (Article II, Section 22) and reiterated in Section 13 of RA 7586, the National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) Law of 1992.

The indigenous peoples are among the poorest and the most disadvantaged social group in the country. Illiteracy, unemployment, and incidence of poverty are much higher among them than the rest of the population. They generally live in geographically isolated areas with lack of access to basic social services and few opportunities for mainstream economic activities, education, or political participation. In which all this can be attributed to physical segregation and socio-cultural exclusion.

In recent years, the Philippine Government has made major policy reforms in order to address the serious problem of the lack of tenurial security among IPs and local communities. The enactment of the Indigenous People Rights Act (IPRA) RA 8371 by the Philippine Government in 1997 goes beyond the contract-based resource management agreements between the state and the community. It guarantees the access of indigenous peoples to basic services, among other things Recognition of and respect for fundamental human rights are safeguarded. The law (RA 8371) contains specific provisions that ensure that indigenous peoples, just like other human beings, will enjoy these rights: the right to life, development, and civil liberties; political rights; freedom of association; nondiscrimination; equal protection; and right to peace and social justice.

While some indigenous peoples had already large influence in the political context of their respective local town or province, still, in most cases they are largely dependent of the will of, and negotiations with the national government. Nevertheless, forms of oppression, marginalization, and exclusion are faced by indigenous peoples in all possible contexts and political settings.

The Mt. Kitanglad Range Natural Park (MKRNP) in northcentral Mindanao is home to three non-Christian and non-Muslim indigenous groups who refer to themselves as Talaandigs, Higaonons and Bukidnons. These indigenous inhabitants are known collectively as Bukidnon, a Bisayan word for "people from the mountain,"



and they share a common culture and a common language, the Binukid. Also, all of them face the same struggles; that of their ancestral domain claim and the recurring socio-economic and even political marginalization.

Many IP scholars and social-development advocates believe that the recognition of indigenous people's rights through the provision of tenurial security over their land provides the better incentive to use the land in a sustainable manner. Yet, as demonstrated in MKRNP, even if a formal state recognition has yet to be issued in their favor, indigenous peoples have long and unceasingly demonstrated their traditional authority over this sacred mountain range (Canoy and Suminguit, 2001.)

In the last two decades, traditional structures in MKRNP are rediscovering their cultural foundations. This illustrates how much the leadership of the Talaandig, Higaonon, and Bukidnon peoples, either through united or independent initiatives of their *datus* and *baes* (women chieftains), have advanced their struggle for recognition, governance, and co-management in MKRNP.

Kitanglad Integrated NGOs and other anthropologists (Burton and Canoy 1991; Cairns 1995; Gatmaytan 2001; Saway 1998; Suminguit et al. 2000) have studied and found that the indigenous peoples of Mt. Kitanglad have exercised strong and critical leadership, shown a high level of awareness in development and conservation programs, and tested their ability to pursue collective actions.

IPRA mandated an IP representative in all LGUs where there are IP communities to ensure that they will have a voice in the government and as a province, Bukidnon fulfilled this already. The representatives at all local government unit levels have also been trained by nearby universities and NGOs on skills necessary to carry out representation and were also introduced to the mainstream legislation processes.

Even with the aforementioned leadership strengths and capacities of the indigenous cultural communities in Bukidnon, the members of the tribes are still considering themselves as politically marginalized. Many would still consider to be discriminated in the supposed many privileges assured to them by the passing of the IPRA. Thus, the research proponent finds it ripe and important to explore the narrative of the tribal political institutions, political engagement and participation of the IP community, especially the Bukidnon Tribe.

Definitely, the results of this study will be of use specially in line with the nationwide drive to understanding the Indigenous Cultural Communities, not only in Northern Philippines but those in Mindanao as well. The results will give us a clearer picture as to the experiences, struggles and successes alike, of the IPs that may help the mainstream society to fully embrace the IP sector as part of our national identity and ultimately achieve genuine national integration.



## **THEORY**

The continuing issues and problems regarding the freedom and security of land tenure of the Indigenous Communities including their political participation suggests that there is an underlying factor that limits their engagement to the mainstream politics.

In discussing the Ancestral Domain, the Indigenous People is most often considered as one solid homogenous society. As a community, the indigenous people are considered as the “odd ones” who have their own unique culture and traditions. But community per se does not mean having same needs, perceptions and experiences specially about land marginalization and political participation or disenfranchisement. In most researches done on the IP, the elders have always been seen as the ones very active in engaging to community activities, although the youth are also expected to be proactive. Their failure to follow the customs and traditions may mark them as being lured by modern ways who might renounce their customs and traditions. The disappearance of culture and tradition is not only a feared possibility but a problem that needs to be remedied in so far as local politics and economic subsistence is concerned. This paper will try to make visible the Indigenous Peoples’ experiences with regards to the implementation of the IPRA. It will explore their struggles and victories while participating in the process of IPRA implementation be it in pursuing their community’s security of land tenure or asserting their political identity. This is putting into consideration their engagement to mainstream politics during opportunities provided by national laws or by their communal initiatives.

This study in particular, will use a general inductive approach for the qualitative data analysis. The primary purpose of using an inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies. Key themes are often obscured, reframed, or left invisible because of the preconceptions in the data collection and data analysis such as those used in hypothesis testing research.

This study will regard the IPs as perceptive agents that understands and analyzes the situation affecting them and their community, capable of responding to or changing the conditions in their own unique way. This inquiry wants to explore the ways in which the IPs define their identity in the midst of tensions between tradition and the influences or interventions outside of the community in the context of ancestral domain and political participation. It will also try to explore the articulation of indigenous identities within and outside their communities amidst the pressures; conversely, it will look into how the exposure to external influences impacted the manner they relate and engage to local mainstream politics. It will also try to discuss how the application for the ancestral domain title is motivated by the importance of preservation of their culture and tradition and that through the process of their participation, the Bukidnon Tribe will be able to confidently assume their cultural identities either inside or outside of their community.



**RESEARCH METHOD**

The methodology of this proposed research is purely qualitative analysis. It involves a review and critique of materials from various sources such as interview and focus group discussions. Other sources include documentation by NGOs supportive of the IPs struggle, opinions of Bukidnon LGU personnel, and proceedings of meetings attended by IP leaders.

**Research Environment**

The Tribu Bukidnon communities residing within the MKNRP has been chosen as the primary subject of the study because it is one of the largest IP groups found in Mindanao. The communities of Daraghuyan/Inhandig and Balete-on were also recently awarded their CADTs. Tribu Bukidnon was chose out of the seven known tribes thriving in the province of Bukidnon, primarily because their communities are centrally located in a state-proclaimed Natural Park. This alone provides a unique blend and layers of national and customary legal laws that govern them.

The locale of the study is in the foot of Mts. Dulang-dulang and Kitanglad. Politically, the abovementioned communities are part of Brgy. Dalwangan, Malaybalay City, Bukidnon. The Balete-on community covers 466.7 hectares of their Ancestral Domain, while Daraghuyan/Inhandig community covers at least 4,200 hectares of Ancestral Domain and is named after one of the sacred peaks of the Kitanglad range.

Their territory is declared as a full-pledge protected area on November 9, 2000 pursuant to Republic Act No. 8978 otherwise known as the Mount Kitanglad Range Protected Area Act of 2000 and was awarded with a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title on September 17, 2013 headed by Bae Inatlawan for Daraghuyan and Datu Felix of Balete-on. Aside from that, they still practice their cultural traditions despite the persistence of modernization.

The Province of Bukidnon as well prides itself as the first province to have fully implemented the mandatory IP representative mandated by IPRA.

**Research Respondents**

These key persons have the necessary knowledge and experience relevant to the questions in this research and were interviewed.

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Profile/Position</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
1. Datu Billy Lumigoy	Datu, Spokesperson Balete-on Bukidnon Tribe
2. Bae Inatlawan	IPMR      Barangay      Dalwangan, Malaybalay City Chieftain, Daraghuyan and Inhandig



Respondents	Profile/Position
1	2
	Bukidnon Tribe Communities
3. Datu Pagalongan	Tribu Bukidnon Balaghusay
4. Datu laguidliran	Balete-on Council of Elders
5. Nanay Pangging	Daraghuyan and Inhandig Council of Elders

Other members of the Council of Elders were also interviewed as well as some youth in the communities.

**Research Instruments**

The primary data gathering tool used for this research key informant interview. The researcher also facilitated a focus group discussion to extract information from the members of the Council of Elders of the Bukidnon tribe. Traditional and other necessary research protocol was also observed in the conduct of this study.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The results of this study show that the presence of the Indigenous Peoples (IP) mandatory representative assured representation of the IPs concerns and endeavors. Through this representative, the communication between the mainstream local government and the tribe has been closer, thus their political relationship is enhanced. It can be said as enhanced in the sense that the tribe now has knowledge of the activities in the government. The tribe also now, through the representative, participate in the formulation of projects and activities by the local government. According to *Bae Inatlawan*, they are now informed of the government projects and activities that could help the members of the tribe. Another IP leader, *Datu Billy Lumigoy*, said that they became more interested in participating in governance because they saw IPs like them, are given a chance to talk and be heard during the project planning and other activities. With this, the tribe is saying that what they are experiencing now is a far cry from what they could do in the last few decades where, aside from physical distance, the marginalizing factors such as poverty and lack of education drives them further away from political participation. Prior to instating mandatory representatives, the tribe is only limited to the periodic participation during elections, where only a few members of the tribe participate. Now that a person ‘like them’ is in the seat, the members are encouraged to have a closer relationship with the government. It is as if, accordingly, that the cultural barriers have been bridged by the representatives.

It also follows that there is an increase in participation during election, not just as voters but also as candidates. The members of the tribe are enticed with the idea of further representing not only the tribe but the non-members of the tribe as well. The self-esteem of the Tribal members increased as their political worth is also increased.





Alongside with this, there is also an increased participation in public consultations. The tribe, has found their voice in public assemblies, conducted either by the government or NGOs or private sectors, the tribe has been actively participating. The statement of *Datu Laguidliran* claiming that many of the mainstream locally elected politicians are also members of the Bukidnon tribe (this has been verified by the researcher as well).

*“Before, it was difficult to talk to the local executive head, now, it has been better.” – Bae Inatlawan.*

The tribe is given more opportunity to discuss certain relevant issues with the local government, to propose programs suited for the tribe, among other things.

On the question of how the political institutions survive in relation to their participation in mainstream politics, the tribal leader’s answer has been simple. The law (Indigenous People’s Rights Act) ensured that the government respects the indigenous political leadership. Although it is admitted that the government does not fully understand the traditional ways, the government reaches out to them. The government, on the national level, enacted laws that recognizes the tribes and their customary laws. The local governments, on the other hand, implemented these laws.

The results indicate that the tribe recognizes the value and importance of their traditional political institutions, thus they themselves strive hard for its preservation despite all the external factors brought by modern times and technology. The youth, which serves as the future of the tribe, has been specially challenged by modern and mainstream political methods. Surprisingly, political and economic problems as identified by the youth, is also perceived to be solved only by the guidance and mentoring of the young ones. This is a very essential factor in keeping the traditions and political institutions. The youth, like *Jonathan and Arlan*, showed great respect to their elders and see their selves as the future of the tribe.

*Datu Laguidliran*, confirms that the tribe welcome new methods/technology/knowledge that may help them, as long as they are assured that these methods/technology and knowledge does not interfere or go against the tribe’s IKSP.

*“the lake is deep and it is difficult to reach its bottom, but it is far more difficult to count the sand at the bottom of the lake”-Datu Laguidliran*

The above statement meant that whosoever desires to understand the tribe will have a great difficulty as the tribe is an institution in itself with very strong and ancient foundations such as the lake mentioned. Water may come and just pass through the lake, but the lake remains a lake. Such is the circumstance of the tribe as well.

There are a lot of government projects such as agricultural assistance, calamity assistance, health projects and other livelihood projects. These projects are not exclusively for the tribe, it is for the entire qualified local populace. Some members of the tribe still feel discrimination, but the elders have seen the positive



change in the mindset of the local government units and the non-members of the tribe. Interestingly, there is a great appreciation of help, be it from the government or not, because for the elders and the tribe, as long as they have the mountains and the forest, they are not poor; they have more than to get by.

Some projects and programs received by the tribe are not consistent with their tradition thus, they tend to ignore it and not force their members to oblige. Examples of these projects are mandatory birthing in Health Centers, and Agro-Forestry projects. These projects are considered generic policies or those that did not obtain Free, Prior Informed consent from the tribe. In accepting these kind of projects, the tribe had shown good discernment.

In conclusion, The Bukidnon Tribe of Mindanao have increased/improved their engagement to mainstream local politics. There are challenges, but the tribe fastidiously kept their (political) traditions. There is a strong leadership in the tribe that knows how to utilize IPRA and MKRNPA in the advancement of their political participation and identity.

## **CLOSING**

It is recommended that this study will be expanded including in its coverage the other tribes settling in Southern Philippines. Also, a comparison of their different narratives could be made.

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