

Material Culture Behind the Dances of the Higaunon in Bukidnon

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the role of material culture in the ethnic dances of Bukidnon, particularly among the Higaunon people. Specifically, it sought to answer the problem of how material culture, expressed through dance implements and attire, reflects the beliefs and practices of the community. To achieve this, selected dances, Dinugso, Pamumulakaw, Pig-agawan, and Saut, were analyzed based on their representative beliefs. A descriptive-qualitative design was employed in the study, guided by Indigenous methodology. Data were gathered through participant observation, informal interviews with community members, and content analysis. The findings revealed that material culture reflects the lifestyle, spirituality, and values of the Higaunon people. These traditions are preserved and cherished due to their deep reverence for Magbabaya, the supreme deity. Material culture in the dances serves as a bridge between ritual and belief, enabling communication with the spirit world and strengthening cultural identity. Based on the results, it is recommended that material culture not only be preserved in museums but also replicated and revitalized for continued community use and transmission to younger generations.

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INTRODUCTION

Culture shapes an individual's perspective and way of life within society. This perspective is rooted in beliefs, traditions, lifestyle, and other unifying factors that connect people through shared customs, aspirations, and viewpoints (Hobson et al., 2018). Understanding these cultural elements, especially as they relate to unity and identity, provides the foundation for studying distinct groups such as the Higaunon tribe.

The Philippine Constitution highlights culture's role in fostering national identity and unity. Article XIV, Sections 14 and 15 emphasize preserving, enriching, and evolving a national culture within the principle of unity in diversity. This provision underscores the significance of understanding and preserving indigenous practices. By focusing on the Higaunon tribe, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper appreciation of Filipino cultural diversity and to highlight the semiotic role of material culture in sustaining indigenous worldviews.

While there is considerable ethnographic work on Indigenous groups in Mindanao, a gap exists in studies that analyze Higaunon dances through the lens of semiotics. Fay-Cooper

Cole's (1956) *The Bukidnon of Mindanao* provides detailed documentation of lifeways and traditions, and Garvan's (2006) *The Manóbos of Mindanao* offers an extensive account of ritual practices. However, neither focuses on dance implements as symbolic carriers of belief. More recent works, such as Brandeis (2008) on indigenous musical instruments and Barroso et al. (2014) on heritage preservation, similarly stop short of examining how material objects in performance act as semiotic signs that communicate spirituality, identity, and social values. This study addresses that gap by interpreting the material culture of Higaunon dances as symbolic expressions of belief systems, thereby integrating ethnographic tradition with semiotic analysis.

The need for this research is rooted in the urgency of preserving and revitalizing Indigenous cultural knowledge amid pressures of modernization and globalization. Documenting and analyzing the semiotic meanings of implements, such as cloths, bells, shields, and nets, ensures that their symbolic value is not lost but transmitted to future generations. Moreover, by linking material culture to belief, this study affirms the continuing significance

of Indigenous epistemologies in understanding Filipino identity.

The Higaunon people believe that all material and non-material components of culture have origins in what is seen, heard, experienced, and, most importantly, felt. Material culture consists of visible, tangible elements such as implements, clothing, equipment, houses, and food, while non-material culture includes customs, traditions, literature, music, dance, beliefs, religion, government, and livelihood (Griswold, 2012). Their cultural expression becomes particularly vivid in their traditional performances. Women dancers, recognized for their skill and artistry, wear garments dyed with plant-based pigments and adorned with beads, shells, and coins. Their attire, hairstyles, and accessories testify to cultural creativity and identity. Furthermore, their dances, through sound, symbols, and movement, function as semiotic expressions of their worldview, embedding beliefs within material culture and ritual performance. Hence, this study aimed to examine the role of material culture in the ethnic dances of Bukidnon, particularly among the Higaunon people. Specifically, it sought to answer the problem of how material culture, expressed through dance implements and attire, reflects the beliefs and practices of the community. To achieve this, selected dances, Dinugso, Pamumulakaw, Pig-agawan, and Saut, were analyzed based on their representative beliefs.

Framework of the Study

Every society has its own culture that must be valued and preserved. Culture is shaped by experiences, beliefs, traditions, and practices that guide people's ways of living and forms of expression. In the Philippines, this importance is recognized by the Constitution. Article XIV, Sections 14 and 15 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution emphasize the preservation, enrichment, and promotion of national culture, especially indigenous heritage. This study supports that vision by examining how the material culture of the Higaunon people in Bukidnon reflects their beliefs through dance.

The focus of the study is on the implements, clothing, and instruments used in Higaunon dances. These objects are not just decorative or functional; they carry meaning. To analyze these meanings, the study uses semiotics, the study of signs and symbols. Semiotics is a reliable framework because it helps explain how objects represent ideas, beliefs, and values. According to Charles Sanders Peirce, a sign consists of three parts: the representamen (the form the sign takes), the object (what it refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning understood by the observer). This model helps explain how a red cloth in a courtship dance, for example, can symbolize love or acceptance.

Through semiotic analysis, this study looks at how material items in Higaunon dances serve as signs that reflect deeper beliefs. Each item used in the dances, such as a bell, shield, or cloth, has a purpose that goes beyond its surface. It may be used in prayer, healing, or storytelling, and the meaning depends on how the community understands and uses it. This shows how beliefs are embedded in material forms. By studying how these signs are used, what meanings they carry, and how they function within rituals, the study draws out how material culture expresses the Higaunon people's view of life, spirituality, and tradition.

The dances of the Higaunon people are rooted in their environment and daily life. They reflect experiences related to prayer, work, courtship, and conflict. These experiences are not only acted out through movement but also communicated through the objects the dancers hold or wear. As these items are interpreted through semiotics, they become keys to understanding the tribe's beliefs. In this way, material culture becomes a mirror of their worldview, and semiotics becomes a bridge for understanding how their beliefs are made visible and meaningful in performance.

Material Culture of the Higaunon Behind the Dances

During the Kaamulan Festival, the identity of their attire is evident from the seven ethnic groups of Bukidnon, with designs and colors representing their affiliation with the

Bukidnon, Higaunon, Talaandig, Manobo, Matigsalug, Tigwahanon, and Umayamnon tribes. Their weaving contains spirituality. Rituals are conducted before gathering the materials for weaving and other tasks. Everything they do is first offered to Magbabaya, their supreme god.

According to Rana (2024), rituals, the basis of meaning in clothing designs, and even the proper role of clothes in creating a character, convey a story that is believable and meaningful. It should be emphasized that a modern garment signifies a more sophisticated understanding of style. Clothing that features images from a specific period represents a range of symbols and meanings. Each design and form of clothing conveys a cultural message.

METHODS

This research is a descriptive-qualitative study grounded in Indigenous methodology. Indigenous methodology centers the voices, worldviews, and cultural practices of Indigenous peoples and values knowledge systems that are rooted in lived experiences and traditions. It emphasizes respectful engagement with the community, reciprocity, relational accountability, and a deep understanding of context. As Smith (2012) emphasizes in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Indigenous research methods prioritize participation, trust-building, and cultural immersion rather than relying solely on detached observation.

In line with this approach, the study was conducted in Impasug-ong, Bukidnon, where the researcher engaged directly with members of the Higaunon community. However, prior to the gathering of data, the researcher obtained permission from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and performed rituals to ask permission from the tribe as a form of respect. Data collection involved not only participant observation, but also informal interviews and guided conversations with tribal elders, ritual leaders (baylan), and performers. These interactions provided rich narratives and explanations about the meanings of the materials used in the dances, the stories behind each performance, and the beliefs they represent.

The use of interviews was essential to gain emic perspectives, that is, insights that come from within the culture itself, ensuring that interpretations remained faithful to Indigenous knowledge.

During participant observation, the researcher attended community gatherings and rituals, documenting dance performances and the use of implements, attire, and instruments. This was complemented by content analysis of field notes, oral accounts, and visual documentation (e.g., photos and video recordings of dances). This layered approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how material culture reflects and enacts belief systems within the Higaunon way of life.

The use of Indigenous methodology ensured that the study was not only descriptive but also respectful of cultural protocols. It validated the significance of Indigenous voices and perspectives in interpreting the symbolic meanings of dance and material culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The dances of the Higaunon in Bukidnon reflect the traditional characteristics of this Indigenous group, allowing them to express their culture and historical traditions. These dances are based on stories passed down through generations, shaped by the people's experiences, observations, emotions, discoveries, and lessons learned. According to Tulio (2008), dance can express ideas and emotions and even narrate stories. Dance was the first medium of storytelling before the introduction of writing. It is also used as a form of storytelling that is passed down from one generation to the next.

Cultural dances often reflect significant events in their lives. The ethnic dances of the Higaunon are used to showcase and introduce various aspects of their culture, including rituals, weddings, thanksgiving, celebrations, courtship, and prayers. Ethnic dances such as *Agawan* (a courtship dance), *Dinugso* (a prayer dance), *Saut* (a battle dance), and *Pamumulakaw* (a fishing dance) are integral to their traditions. The dances are performed with material implements

to identify, understand, and emphasize the role of these implements in fulfilling prayers associated with rituals and dance. The meaning and symbols of the Higaunon's material culture are preserved and valued because of the strong Higaunon tradition that these implements aid in connecting with the deity Magbabaya.

Courtship (Dance of Pig-agawan)

The *Pig-agawan* is a traditional Higaunon courtship dance that dramatizes the emotions and rituals surrounding the pursuit of love (Figure 1). It depicts a scenario in which multiple suitors attempt to win the affection of a young woman. The narrative reflects the emotional intensity and social dynamics of courtship within the Higaunon community. The dance expresses how love emerges, develops, and is tested through rivalry. Through stylized movement, the dancers act out the connection between friendship and romantic love, culminating in a moment of decision by the woman.

Figure 1
Pig-agawan



Material Culture: Red Cloth (Dance of Pig-agawan)

The primary material used in this dance is a square-shaped red cloth, held and presented by the male dancers (Figure 2). The red cloth symbolizes passionate, sincere love. It is more than a decorative item; it is a visible expression of a man's emotional intent and hope for a romantic connection. During the performance, a suitor places the red cloth on the woman's shoulder. If the cloth is allowed to fall, it signifies rejection

or disinterest. If the woman chooses to hold the cloth, it implies acceptance and reciprocated feelings. In this act, the cloth becomes a powerful communicative tool, used to express desire, vulnerability, and respect.

The male dancers explicitly use the red cloth, and its movements and placement are deliberate and symbolic. It conveys the suitor's willingness to express his love openly and honorably. Through this ritual, courtship is enacted with dignity, patience, and clarity, qualities that are deeply valued within Higaunon tradition.

The beliefs associated with the use of the red cloth stem from the Higaunon view of courtship as a respectful and intentional process. It is seen as an act that should reflect sincerity and readiness for commitment. The cloth also signals the woman's agency and choice, reflecting the community's value of mutual respect and emotional honesty. By embedding meaning into the cloth and its use, the dance transforms a simple object into a powerful symbol of relational dynamics and traditional ethics. In doing so, the red cloth functions not only as material culture but as a signifier of belief, used to embody love, consent, and cultural order.

Figure 2
Square-shaped Red Cloths



Praying (Dance of Dugsu)

The *Dugsu*, also called *Dinugso*, is a traditional Higaunon prayer dance performed primarily by groups of women during rituals

such as the *Kaligaon* (Figure 3). It is a sacred expression of gratitude and supplication, often offered to thank the spirits for blessings of abundance, health, and answered prayers, or to ask for continued protection and prosperity for the community. The performance is always tied to ritual contexts, which may include the lighting of a ceremonial fire (plan), offerings of food on the *bangkasu* (ritual table), the chewing and offering of betel nut, and prayers led by the *baylan* (spiritual leader) or the *pamamayok*. In this way, the *Dugsu* serves as a living form of prayer, an act that merges dance, ritual, and devotion into one communal expression.

Figure 3

Dinugso Dance



Material Culture: Tela na Pula at Puti

The dance showcases the red and white cloth as essential elements. The dancers hold the cloth, with the red cloth in their right hand and the white one in their left (Figure 4). The holding of the fabrics could be interchanged, with the white fabric in the right hand and the red one in the left. During the performance, it is also possible to see the dancers holding the white fabric on both sides, left and right.

Women carry cloth as they dance. The symbolism in using these fabrics depends on the concept the dancers wish to convey. It is believed that the use of fabrics serves as a tool for people to communicate with spirits. Red fabric is used and waved to ward off evil spirits from a sick person or to prevent illnesses that have not yet affected other members of the tribe. Meanwhile, white fabric is used when calling or inviting benevolent spirits to guide the tribes in

their activities. The movements of the hands and arms of the *binaylan* (ritual specialist) are often associated with expressions of gratitude and prayers, seeking power from what is believed to be the divine.

According to the tribal leaders, a ritual is to be performed, the *Baylan*, also known as *Binaylan*, dances as part of the ceremony. If the ritual is for someone who is ill (casting out illness), the dancers use red and white fabrics in their performance. The red fabric is held in the right hand, while the white fabric is held in the left hand. The dancers wave these fabrics as the *Baylan* speaks.

The *Baylan* communicates with the Fallen Angels, who govern various domains and their respective dwellings, which include *Tagawahig* (water), *Tagabato* (stone), *Tagabugta* (earth), *Dalama* (shore or cliffs), and *Tagakalasan* (forest). The *Baylan's* prayer involves asking the Fallen Angels to return the *Gimokod*, or spirit, of the afflicted person so they may heal and drive away the evil spirits inhabiting their body. The red and white fabrics symbolize implements for spiritual communication during rituals. Red drives away evil spirits, while white invites benevolent ones, as waved by dancers under the guidance of the *Baylan*.

Figure 4

Red and White Cloth



Battle (Dance of Saut)

The *Saut* is a traditional Higaunon martial dance performed to embody conflict, defense, and courage. It has two primary purposes: first,

to drive away evil forces such as the *aswang* (mythical creatures), and second, to express anger or opposition toward enemies during times of conflict. The dance dramatizes causes of warfare within the community, including misunderstandings, rivalry in courtship, abuse of power, territorial disputes, and the denial of tribal recognition and respect. According to Brandeis (2008), the *Saut* is widely known among the Bukidnon and certain Manobo groups, and it may be performed by one or several dancers. Musical accompaniment from instruments such as the *agung* (large gong) and *tambul* (drum) enhances the atmosphere, mimicking the intensity of battle and creating an auditory representation of struggle.

Material Culture: Kalasag (Shield)

The central material implement of the *Saut* is the *kalasag*, a traditional wooden shield crafted from the *ligupa* or *Andalugong* tree (*Trema orientalis*) (Figure 5). It is reinforced with natural fibers and adhesive from the stingless honeybee (Balay Hu Kuyut), demonstrating Indigenous knowledge of durable materials. The shield's circular central design symbolizes strength and the ability to weaken enemies, while horizontal lines strengthen its structure against splitting. Its curved edges prevent entanglement in combat, making it both functional and symbolic. In the dance, the *kalasag* is wielded by male warriors alongside a spear (*bangkaw*) (Figure 6), recreating battle scenes. The performers use the shield defensively, embodying valor, readiness, and the collective warrior spirit of the Higaunon. Together with the sounds of the *agung*, the shield creates a visual and auditory performance of conflict, dramatizing the reality of struggle and resistance.

The *kalasag* reflects more than martial readiness; it carries symbolic weight as a cultural artifact linked to Higaunon identity (Figure 5). Its use in the *Saut* is grounded in the belief that the shield embodies both physical and spiritual protection. The dance signifies that defending oneself, one's community, and one's territory is not only a physical necessity but also a sacred duty. By enacting these martial traditions, the *Saut* preserves memories of historical struggles

while reinforcing values of bravery, unity, and resilience. The shield becomes a signifier of collective identity, ensuring that the Higaunon's history of defense and survival is remembered and honored through performance.

Figure 5
Kalasag (shield)



Figure 6
Pana (arrow)



Pamumulakaw (Fishing Dance)

Pamumulakaw (fishing) is an activity performed by men to catch fish near waterfalls and rivers (Figure 7). It is depicted in a dance that shows the proper way of handling the *arang/bedyo* (fishing net), *buu* (basket), and *suloy* (a fishing spear or stick) used in fishing. The dance also highlights the skills and abilities of men in fishing. The *Pamumulakaw* dance revolves around the theme of work. Although Bukidnon does not have access to the sea, it does not mean that fishing activities are absent. Fishing is done in rivers and near waterfalls. The movements of the hands mimicking waves or scooping gestures represent the actions involved in catching fish.

The dance also demonstrates the correct use of implements like the *arang/bedyo*, *suloy*, and *buu* for fishing.

According to *Bubuli*, dancing the *Pamumulakaw* or performing rituals for fishing is done as a *pamuhatbuhat* (ritual) to seek guidance from the water deity so that the fishermen will not be harmed or disturbed by malevolent spirits. The dance of *Pamumulakaw* serves as a way to inform the water deity of their intent to fish, seeking blessings to catch an abundance of fish. A group of fishermen carries out fishing, as solitary fishing is prohibited. Collective fishing allows the ritual to be conducted appropriately, highlighting its significance and importance as a tradition of the Higaunon tribe. This is rooted in their belief that the fish are under the care and protection of the water deity. The *Pamumulakaw* dance, or the ritualized act of fishing, is performed as a *pamuhatbuhat* (ritual) to seek guidance from the *diwata* (spirit or deity) of the water, ensuring safety and avoiding harm from malevolent spirits. Dancing *Pamumulakaw* is a way of showing respect to the water *diwata*, asking for blessings and a bountiful catch.

A group of fishermen goes fishing, as individual fishing is prohibited. In collective fishing, the *pamuhatbuhat* ritual is performed, which is significant. It is a tradition of the Higaunon tribe, who believes that the water *diwata* guards the fish.

Figure 7

Pamumulakaw (Buu, Bedyo, and Suloy)



CONCLUSION

The culture of the Higaunon in Impasugong, Bukidnon, is evident in both the material and non-material aspects of their dances, rituals, and faith. Through their presentation of selected dances, they showcase the richness of their culture, utilizing musical instruments such as the *agong*, *bantula*, *kulintang*, and *tambul*, as well as their vibrant attire and accessories. Each piece of clothing and jewelry, from *panika*, *bukala*, *arites*, *saliyaw*, and *singgil* to patterns such as diamonds, triangles, and curved lines, holds profound meanings that reflect the Higaunon's beliefs, perspectives, and connections to their environment and spirituality.

The material objects used in dances and rituals are not merely decorative; they are essential elements that facilitate spiritual connection and relationship with their deity, *Magbabaya*. Performing rituals with complete equipment is believed to increase the likelihood of success in their requests or prayers.

The material culture of the Higaunon carries meanings and symbols rooted in their faith and traditions. Each instrument, garment, and design is not just a physical item but a representation of their belief in *Magbabaya* and their relationship with nature. Their culture serves as a pathway for deeper understanding and greater appreciation of their identity. By integrating both material and non-material aspects into their rituals, they bring themselves closer to fulfilling their prayers and aspirations.

RECOMMENDATION

Grounded on the results and findings of this study, which revealed the deep cultural meanings embedded in Higaunon dances and their associated material culture, the following recommendations are proposed. These are intended to preserve Indigenous traditions, strengthen cultural education, and ensure that future generations continue to appreciate and practice these heritage expressions in meaningful ways.

Cultural Preservation through Archiving

Musical instruments, tape recorders, USB files, authentic clothing for both men and women, and films of dances should be systematically preserved in a museum or library. This ensures that tangible and intangible aspects of Higaunon culture are documented and safeguarded for both current and future learners and researchers.

Sustaining Material Implements for Practice and Livelihood

Dance equipment should not only be displayed in museums but also reproduced for livelihood and educational use. The continued crafting and utilization of these implements ensure that Indigenous knowledge systems remain dynamic, while also providing sustainable opportunities for the community.

Authenticity in Dance Education and Performance

Students who perform Indigenous dances must follow the required steps and rituals associated with each performance. This practice maintains cultural authenticity and guards against misrepresentation, while fostering respect for the values, beliefs, and traditions of the Higaunon people. Musical instruments, tape recorders, USB files, authentic clothing for both men and women, and films of dances should be placed in the museum or library.

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