

# Cultural Practices in Relation to the Utilization and Conservation of the Señora River and Other Community Practices

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This research investigated people's cultural practices related to the river. Data were gathered using a Focused Group Discussion to supplement the responses to the questionnaires and actual site observations including interviews and visits. It was found out that both religious (mainly Roman Catholicism) and cultural beliefs are practiced interchangeably by the local people. Local culture and practices have contributed to the respect and realization of the limitations of the natural resources. People used indigenous ways of healing practices using plants from the riparian area of the river.

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**KEYWORDS:** cultural practices, river conservation and utilization, animism, folk healing, community practices

## INTRODUCTION

Siquijor Island is well-known for its mysticism, religious rituals, folk healing and other cultural practices (Pontenila & Reynolds, 1971; Dumont, 1992; Mascuñana, Pioquinto, & Schales 1999; Seki, 1994; Mascuñana & Mascuñana, 2008).

The local people of Siquijor (Siquijodnon) believe on supernatural beings (Mascuñana et al. 1999; Mascuñana & Mascuñana, 2008) or local deities residing in the so-called "sacred places." Such belief has been regarded as contributory towards the preservation of natural resources and reduced exploitation (Acheson, Wilson, & Steneck,

1998; Agrawal, 1995; Alcorn, 1993; Altieri, 1994; Berkes, 1989; 1998; 1999; Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2000; Berkes & Folke, 1998; Berkes, Folke, & Gadgil, 1995; Berkes, Kislalioglu, Folk, & Gadgil, 1998; Brookfield & Padoch, 1994; Callicott, 1994; Chapman, 1985; Child & Child, 1993; Colding, 1998; Colding & Folke, 1997; Dei, 1993; Denevan et al., 1984; Dwyer, 1994). This in turn will result to improved resilience of the ecosystem (Holling, 1973; Alcorn & Toledo, 1998; Begossi, 1998; Berkes et al., 1995). According to Berkes (1999), resilience is high in ecosystems believed by the locals as “sacred places.” Berkes (2002) also argued that cultural or “traditional ecological knowledge” plays an important role in conserving natural resources.

Previous anthropological studies done in Siquijor (e.g. Mascuñana et al. 1999) described folk healing that utilizes certain plants in the preparation of decoction both for healing and sorcery (Mascuñana & Mascuñana, 2008), and most of them emphasized the mysticism and religious aspects only. However, this present study presents the beliefs and practices of the local people which may unconsciously help protect the natural ecosystems such as the Señora River in Lazi, Siquijor.

## METHODS

This study interviewed 249 respondents (all household heads) in the eight barangays along the Señora River. Methods included focused group discussions (FGDs), a questionnaire, and a structured interview guide. Prior to the interview, request letters or permit to conduct research (PCR) documents explaining the intent of the research were disseminated to the respective executive heads (e.g., mayor and barangay captains).

Ranking and frequency of the responses on their cultural beliefs and practices were obtained from the questionnaire. Content analysis of the responses on the open-ended sections of the questionnaire was also done. The answers were supplemented by data from the FGDs.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

More than a dozen cultural practices were identified during the conduct of the study. However, only those perceived as directly related to the utilization of the river ended up in the present report.

(A separate paper describing the other cultural practices is being prepared for publication elsewhere.)

Out of the 249 respondents, majority (about 90%) considered the river a “sacred place” and they refrained from overexploiting the river using destructive methods as a way of respecting the “unseen inhabitants of the river.” Likewise, 77 (30.92%) avoided using the river during Tuesdays and Fridays while 95(38.15%) avoided the river during Holy Week. Over 100 respondents (n=102) said that women refrained from using the river during menstruation

The locals’ belief in the existence of the supernatural beings is superceded by their religion for they feel secure in using the river when they pray (18.16%) or make the sign of the cross (supposedly asking for protection) which is a Roman Catholic practice (22.16%). After the prayer, they recognize the presence of other entities by asking permission from the spirits to allow them to use the river (18.02%). These practices revealed how animism and Catholicism are incorporated into local culture. However, given the minimal percentage distribution of the cultural practices, this diminishing practice poses additional threat to the exploitation of natural resources.

As is the case elsewhere, such belief has been regarded as contributory towards the preservation of natural resources due to reduced exploitation (Acheson et al., 1998; Agrawal, 1995; Alcorn, 1993; Altieri, 1994; Berkes, 1989; 1998; 1999; Berkes et al., 2000; Berkes & Folke, 1998; Berkes et al., 1995, 1998; Brookfield & Padoch, 1994; Callicott, 1994; Chapman, 1985; Child & Child, 1993; Colding, 1998; Colding & Folke, 1997; Dei,1993; Denevan et al., 1984; Dwyer, 1994), which in turn will result in improved resilience of the ecosystem (Holling, 1973; Alcorn & Toledo, 1998; Begossi, 1998; Berkes et al., 1995).

Berkes (1999) underscores enhanced ecosystem resilience in areas believed by the locals to be “scared places.” In this study, it is the semi-subterranean stream in the upstream station that has been considered *bintan* (synonymous with “sacred” in other cultures) by the locals. It is noteworthy to mention that the surrounding vegetation appears intact. The freshwater shrimps (*Macrobrachium australe*) and the freshwater cyprinid Spotted Barb (*Puntius binotatus*) were of relatively larger size as compared to heavily exploited areas.

In one interview, a folkhealer revealed that herbs were gathered weeks before the Holy Week (Personal communication, Pedro Anos). The mixture of oil and herbs were used in healing sick people, as well as in making business and personal potions. Some of the

plants used for this concoction were derived from the riparian area of Señora River such as are *pangagos*, *hambalante*, and *bangkunayong-kumalom* (tree). Based on the folkhealer's description of these plants, these belong to at least two families, including the Family Moraceae.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The cultural practices suggest the interdependence of local communities and the river. Beliefs on supernatural beings may have contributed to the preservation of certain areas of the river and adjacent forested areas. It is recommended that the present investigation be further pursued. There is also a need to document and verify some of the cultural practices, particularly folk healing.

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