

THE SAMAYAAN AS PUBLIC LIMINALITY<sup>1</sup>  
*Some Ethnographic Notes*<sup>2</sup>

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Foreword

This paper was originally intended as part of the critical preface of Series 6 of the *Ulahingan Epic*. As a religious observance and a special feast, the Samayaan has always been one of the contexts in which the *Ulahingan*, the epic recounting the heroic exploits of the Manobo ancestors, is chanted. Based largely on personal observations of the actual Samayaan celebration, this paper focuses on the central significance of this occasion to the life of the Arumanen-Manobos of the Libungan area. Although the discussion in this paper concentrates on the present observance of the festival and its accompanying rituals, a brief historical background of the traditional celebration has been provided to trace the extent of continuity as well as of change in the nature and character of the festival over time. More than mere description, however, this paper not only explores the Samayaan as performance but critically examines the transformations in both the structure and symbolic processes and meanings of the festival and the factors underlying such transformations.

1 "Public Liminality" is a phrase borrowed from Victor Turner's studies on traditional rites and rituals (Turner 1977).

It refers to a specially-marked occasion of a public nature involving an entire community. This specially-marked occasion plays an important role in the life of the community in terms of liberating members for a certain period of time from ordinary, day-to-day concerns and from the observance of norms, temporarily distracting them from harsh and oppressive realities, and rejuvenating them by providing an enhancement of experience through participation and enjoyment of the festival. For the Arumanen Manobo, the public liminality of the Samayaan fulfills these special functions of the festival.

2 Paper delivered at a lecture-performance for the special convocation marking the College of Arts and Sciences Week, 14 February 1995, Audio Visual Theater, Silliman University. The information in this paper is based on a firsthand observation of the Samayaan Festival during my ten-day fieldwork in North Cotabato from December 20 - 31, 1994. Along with my personal observations, a series of interviews with the members of the Arumanen-Manobo community provided the necessary information for this paper. The funding for this fieldwork, independently sourced by the members of the Ulahingan Research Committee, was provided by the Luxembourg Government through its local agent, Mrs. Marie Paul Neu.

### Introduction

As a festival celebrated to thank the Supreme Being and the ancestral spirits for a bountiful harvest, the Samayaan in the past was originally sponsored by individual Manobos who have had a particularly rich rice harvest. Since harvest time varies, the traditional celebration did not occur on a specific date. The occasion, however, was not only a festive day; it was also a holy day as the people thanked their diwata for the harvest and asked them for their blessings of a bountiful harvest for the next season, for good health, and protection from accidents and suffering. Among the Arumanen Manobo, the object of the prayer is the Supreme Diwata, Kerenen, and the diwata of the harvest, Ivebasuk (Maquiso 1977: 29).

Over time, the initiative for calling the people to such a celebration became part of the *timu'ay's* (the tribal leader) responsibility and his place also became the designated celebration venue. Among the Livunganens<sup>3</sup>, the community of Barongis has always been the center of the celebration. It is a widely accepted view that the conferral of Pañares Bidangang, who was at that time also the Regional Director of PANAMIN<sup>4</sup>, of the title of *timu'ay* in April 1975, also marked the development of the Samayaan celebration as an official calendrical event scheduled every 27th of December in Barongis. Bidangang's then concurrent position as director of PANAMIN ushered in the entry of active government participation as co-sponsor of the celebration. There is reason to believe that, among other developments, the official sponsorship of the Samayaan by the government at this time marked the beginning of the integration of the Manobos and other indigenous communities into the established political structure through the cultural management of such agencies as the present Office of the Southern Cultural Communities (OSCC) and its predecessors.

From then on, the Samayaan ceased to be an individually-sponsored event but since then also became a regulated communal activity performed on specially-designated space on the grounds of the Manobo church (*bintana*) around the sacred shrine known as *edsandaran*. Whereas the *wali'an* (religious leader) traditionally led the ritual procession, in the contemporary Samayaan *timu'ays* dressed in white perform the rites. Furthermore, this celebration now includes as part of the ritual process, the conferral of the *timu'ay* title to the newly-appointed tribal leader at the Barongis public square. With the addition of this secular ritual, the evolution of the Samayaan into its present form suggests a political dimension. The addition of distinctive ritual styles became the means of establishing religious and political legitimacy as well as male authority.

3 The Arumanen-Manobos who live in the area of and around the municipality of Libungan, North Cotabato.

4 PANAMIN - Presidential Assistance to National Minorities, one of the early government agencies established to look after the welfare of the indigenous communities.

### *The Samayaan Ritual Phases*

As in many events with their roots in traditional ceremonies, the Samayaan consists of distinct celebration modes with their own specific activity taking place within specified domains. These celebration modes consist, on the one hand, of the ritual-religious event and, on the other, of the festival event of dancing and feasting. Within the traditional ritual field of the Samayaan, however, these modes of celebration, albeit hierarchically arranged, were integrated in the total ritual process as a sequence of phases or episodes comprising the Samayaan liturgical structure. In the contemporary celebration a third event of a political nature, the conferral of the *timu'ay* title has been added.

As performed, the Samayaan celebration modes begin with an offering ceremony consisting of the ritual *memaan* (betel chew), food wrapped in banana leaves, and eggs which the women arrange on top of the shrine or *edsandaram*. The shrine itself is decorated by white and yellow rectangular pieces of ritual cloth known as *tubao* representing both the spirit and the human realms respectively. Incense collected from the sap of trees is then burned in a coconut shell. The aromatic smoke emitted by this sap, by dispelling human smell, is believed to draw the spirit towards the celebration. *Wali'ans* then begin chanting prayers invoking the spirits. Even at this stage, spirits could take possession of a *wali'an's* body, as happened at the last Samayaan, and the usual ritual conversation between the spirit and the ritual participants takes place.

The ritual phase that follows commences with the *pamaya*, the anticlockwise procession around the shrine. Among the Arumanens, this procession is led by male *wali'ans* and *timu'ays* who, while carrying a pair of white cocks, chant a prayer addressed to the Supreme Diwata and to the diwata of harvest. Following them behind is the crowd of women, children and other male participants who respond to the prayer in a chorus of "yeee" and a shout called a *salyada*. This procession is normally done seven times around the shrine but could break up anytime as soon as the spirit enters either one or more of the *wali'ans*.

The entry of the spirit is signified by visible transformations in the physical well-being of the *wali'an*. These visible transformations are manifested in a trance-like behavior in which one or more of the *wali'ans* get into a state of agitation, tremble, and begin to speak in a strange tongue. One of the worship leaders then acts as a medium to interpret to the people the conversation between the spirit and the entranced *wali'an*. The conversation that ensues includes a number of questions the spirit, through the *wali'an*, asks the crowd. Questions such as what the people want from the spirit; what problems they face; what they feel about the festival and the preparations that have been made. The spirit answers through the *wali'ans*. In this state, the entranced *wali'an* has always been observed to cry and the tears he sheds have been interpreted as signifying joy and gratitude. The spirit is believed to have left the body when the entranced *wali'an* suddenly falls to the ground.

The tossing of yellow rice and a fresh egg into the air marks the beginning of the next ritual phase which is the *bulangan*. In this phase a pair of white roosters are made to fight and their blood collected for the ritual purification. In the Manobo belief system, the direction in which the rooster's beak points when it is at the throes of death is replete with symbolism. When the direction of the rooster's beak points east, this is supposed to signify good luck and prosperity for the coming year as opposed to the direction of the west which signifies bad luck and hardships. Blood dripping from the wounded rooster is collected in a big shallow receptacle for the ritual cleansing. During this rite, performed by tribal elders, the rooster's blood, combined with special kinds of leaves, is brushed on the palm of the person and made to drip out through the base of the fingers symbolically wiping out bad luck and misfortune.

As soon as the religious rite is over, the festival atmosphere takes place with the women taking over the grounds to prepare it for the dancing that follows. It has been observed that at the *pamaya* women and children occupy a background, rather secondary role as members of the crowd or as chanters who perform the *salyada*. In this phase of the celebration, however, they are responsible not only for performing the dances and providing the entertainment, but even in setting up the instrument (consisting of a gong hanging from a bamboo carried by two women) and playing them. As in many traditional rites, gender is a determining factor for participation in specific ritual phases of the Samayaan festival.

When the entertainment ends, the crowd and ritual participants move over to the barangay public square for the next ceremony, the conferral of the *timu'ay* title whose central symbol of authority is signified by the ceremonial crowning of the yellow scarf around the head of the new *timu'ay*.

Feasting follows after at the home of the barangay leader and at the homes of Manobo residents.

### Samayaan Festival Structures

In her studies of festivals, Beverly Stoeltje points out that event structures and social structures of participation operate to create festival reality (1992: 264). According to Stoeltje, the multiple activities of a festival do not take place randomly but follow an order either officially or unofficially agreed upon. This order often consists of an opening ceremony, ritual, drama and contest, the feast, dance and music, and a concluding event (Stoeltje 1992: 264 - 66). In the same manner, the activities of the Samayaan exhibit the multiple phases Stoeltje identifies and in a similar kind of ordering. The following event structures were included in the Samayaan festival:

- (a) an Opening Ceremony in the form of the ritual offering and chants invoking the spirits ;

- (b) the Ritual proper dramatized in the procession or *pamaya* enacting a religious purpose; in this phase diwata and the ancestors are acknowledged and the spirit communication through the trance takes place;
- (c) Drama or contest exemplified by the *bulangan* as symbolically a fight between good and evil;
- (d) Dance and music involving women and children;
- (e) Secular ritual involving the ceremonial coronation of the *timu'ay*;
- (f) The Feast which contextualizes food such as the special dish of meat cooked in coconut milk, set aside in a special place such as the barangay captain's house, where large groups can eat together. The feast is furthermore symbolically significant in two ways. On the one hand, the social act of eating the festival food implies that festival participants ingest their tradition; on the other hand, it confirms their identity as a group.
- (g) Concluding event - the Samayaan celebration also follows a pattern from formal opening to informal conclusion, characterized by increasing spontaneity and intensity. This phase of the Samayaan, in contrast to the opening ceremony, exhibits less structure and more personal expressions as socializing continues in the backyards, front yards, streets or in the shade of trees.

In describing the characteristics of "cultural performances,"<sup>5</sup> Bauman points out that first of all, "these are *scheduled event*, set up and prepared for in advance." In addition, "these [cultural performances] are *temporally bounded*, with a defined beginning and end"; these are also "*spatially bounded*. . . , enacted in a space that is symbolically marked off." A fifth and central feature of cultural performances that Bauman mentions is that "these are coordinated public occasions, open to view by an audience, and to collective participation" (Bauman 1992: 46). As such, these are occasions for people to come together. These characteristics were similarly evident in the Samayaan. As a scheduled event, the contemporary celebration of the harvest festival takes place every 27th of December. Likewise, the spatially bounded space for the Samayaan ritual performance is the Manobo sacred ground around the edsandaran shrine. Within these boundaries of time and space, the modes of the Samayaan celebration are programmed within a liturgical structure.

For the Arumanens, the Samayaan festival is the most prominent performance context within the Manobo community for which Manobos living in distant areas would willingly walk long distances to attend. Being a community-based festival, the Samayaan offers the members of the Manobo community a number of alternatives for wide participation

<sup>5</sup> The phrase "cultural performances" was first used by the American anthropologist Milton Singer to refer to the most prominent performance contexts within a community and which share a set of characteristics.

though not everyone attends the same activities. Nevertheless, since its general purpose is relevant to all group members, the festival tends to attract separate social interests, recognizing difference within the confines of the social group. Both the young and the old attend; both men and women have roles; both outsiders and insiders alike have spaces accorded to them; and both the well-to-do and the poor walk on the same ground. Being socially based, participation and integration constitute one of the ends of festivals like the Samayaan.

Needless to say, the "public liminality" (Turner 1977) of the Samayaan fulfills a vital function in the life of the Manobos. In a community that provides little scope for leisure, this yearly celebration allows the Arumanen Manobos a temporary respite from their everyday structural position in family, lineage, and tribe. It frees them for a certain period of time from the performance of mundane bonds and normal day-to-day duties, and provides a temporary distraction from harsh and oppressive realities. Involving as it does elaborate performance and ritual forms and the most accomplished, prominent, as well as revered tribal elders, the Samayaan events are heightened occasions, providing Arumanens living in scattered and remote mountain areas an enhancement of experience through participation and enjoyment in this festival.

Studies of festivals (Stoeltje 1992; Bauman 1992) have also shown that motivation for participation may be as varied as the demonstration of religious commitment, the display of gain or social prestige, the public statement of political sentiments, participation in cultural events or display of special skills, and social interaction that allows for the exploration and negotiation of many kinds of relationships. Participation in the last Samayaan very well demonstrated these various motivations.

First, for a majority of Manobos who come to this celebration from both near and far, the observance of religious commitment remains the central motivating force. Second, the holding of this festival provides an excellent opportunity for individual Manobos to display the success of their harvest and/or their improved social and economic status. This was particularly true in the traditional Samayaan in which the celebration was a form of thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest. In the present celebration, the Samayaan is an occasion for successful Manobos to display social prestige. For instance, an interesting aspect of the ritual phases is the public acknowledgment of the presence of socially prominent Manobos. Third, as part of the festival modes, the conferral of the *tim 'uay* title, which is always preceded by a tribal council, is an occasion for making public the community's political sentiments. Fourth, since cultural performances are part of its celebration modes, the Samayaan offers plenty of opportunity for display of performative skills. May be included here among the special skills are dancing and the ability to chant or *ulahing*. Finally, as an annual gathering, the entire period of Samayaan celebration is

an occasion for family or tribal reunions as well as the formation of new relationships and alliances.

### Samayaan, Ritual, and Politics

The Samayaan exemplifies the two common perceptions of ritual as a form associated with the concerns or practice of religion and as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers” (Rappaport 1992: 249). In the religious sense, the Samayaan dramatizes the concern with the relationship between the Supreme Diwata and man. This concern is embodied in the ritual phases of the Samayaan with explicitly religious purpose and characteristics such as those performed around the shrine. These ritual phases incorporate changeless messages signified by the invariant order of the Samayaan ritual’s canon. For example, men’s relationship with transcendent deities and the central role the male *wali’ans* play as sources of sacred knowledge.

At the same time, these ritual phases also contain messages dependent on variations in rituals. Variations in rituals may depend on the quality of preparation, the people behind the preparation, or on the relative prosperity or difficulty of the times, among other factors. Among the possible variations include elements such as the type and quantity of *memaan* ritual offerings, the number of rounds the procession makes around the shrine before the spirit enters the body of the *wali’ans*, the number of cocks involved in the cockfight or the kind and number of participants involved, as well as the secular ritual involving the installation of the new *timu’ay*. As ritual providing the occasion for periodic sacralization of time and space, the Samayaan binds the ritual participants in a shared community and protects them from social and supernatural disturbance. Together with the communal meal that accompanies it, this ritual celebration heightens social solidarity and provides participants with a sense of continuity.

As symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive, the Samayaan includes events with implications outside religious contexts. This is particularly evident in the way its symbolic processes lend themselves to sociopolitical uses. Viewing the Samayaan performance as a political discourse reveals the hierarchical structure of the traditional Arumanen society — the highest ruling class represented by the *timu’ay* followed by the religious leader or *wali’an* on whose person sacred knowledge is believed to reside. The former represents secular political power; the latter religious power. Between the two of them specific responsibilities in managing the ritual processes are assigned. Below them are the ordinary members of the community.

As a performance frame, the Samayaan ritual functions to reinforce both political and religious legitimacy through dramatic presentation of cultural symbols associated

with the prevailing tribal ideology. Apart from defining the boundaries between secular-political power and religious power, the Samayaan is also an affirmation of male authority signified by the peripheral role women play both in the ritual and political domains. In contemporary Barongis, the annual reenactment and dramatization of Samayaan celebration represents an affirmation of these traditional values. The highly visible involvement of the established political authority represented by government agencies such as the Office of the Southern Cultural Communities and a number of elected officials in the guest list of the last Samayaan suggested, not just the authorities' interest in the preservation of a cultural heritage, but their recognition of the potent implications of these values for political legitimacy.

### The "Cultural Management" of the Samayaan

Thus, one of the interesting aspects of the Samayaan as a ritual and as a cultural performance is how well its peculiar form lends itself to ideological purposes. This recalls Manning's thesis that "celebration is both culture and politics, or better perhaps, cultural politics." As an aspect of celebration, cultural politics, Manning contends, implies the processes, first, of "politicization of culture, the translation of cultural symbols, beliefs, and values into political discourse and strategy; and second, of rendering politics. . . in cultural terms. . ." In Manning's words, "celebration is a kind of 'power play,' a dramatic arena in which cultural politics assumes style, shape, and significance" (Manning 1983:16). In the cultural context of the Samayaan, the involvement of the government through the cultural management of the Office of the Southern Cultural Communities provides a striking example of Manning's thesis.

Last December's Samayaan celebration showed how ritual and festival events were put to new overtly political uses. This was clearly evident at the conferral of the *timu'ay* title to newly appointed tribal elders in which guests representing the political establishment used the occasion as platform for pre-election campaign speeches. As well, visually encoded in the spatial arrangements of guests and tribal leaders on stage were social distinctions that separated the political authorities from the tribal leaders. Official guests were accorded special seats in front of the stage while tribal leaders sat huddled on a bench at the back, a rather ironic picture underscoring the peripheral position of indigenous people even in their own community and within their own festival.

These social distinctions were furthermore articulated not only by the spatial relationship but also by the clothes and attire of the guests. Behind the sartorially trendy officials, the tribal elders paled in comparison, the yellow of their ceremonial shirts unable to disguise the age or state of wear of perhaps their one and only ceremonial costume. Beside the glimmering shoes of the guests, the bare gnarled feet and worn-out slippers of the tribal leaders were indexical signs not only of the quality of their lives but



of their marginal social position. Thus, these visual codes revealed not only the existing political status but social and economic status of the participants as well.

The social organization behind last December's Samayaan festival demonstrated some of the political and economic forces of the local government working together through the Office of the Southern Cultural Communities. Although the tribal elders supervised the ritual performance, the actual management of the entire occasion was in the hands of the Office of the Southern Cultural Communities whose direction of the festival included public relations and media-oriented techniques.

The professed aim behind the involvement of government agencies in traditional festivals such as the Samayaan is the promotion and preservation of indigenous cultures in line with the cultural policy of the national government. Needless to say, the importance of preserving the people's festivals and religious tradition as a way of strengthening community solidarity and identity cannot be overstressed. However, as Manning's thesis has shown, celebration can be very well manipulated as strategies for political ends, as the last Samayaan exemplified. Another contradiction that surfaces from this kind of cultural policy is the way the emphasis on cultural heritage represents an attempt at validating and maintaining the status quo, a situation that leaves little to be desired as far as the quality, or lack of it, of life of the indigenous communities in general and the Manobos in particular is concerned.

## Afterword

These impressions gathered from our 10 - day field work with the Manobo community in December, in particular my personal observations at Samayaan festival, prompt me now to ask questions rather than make conclusive statements. Questions such as our role as an academic community in the preservation of our indigenous cultures. It seems to me there is a need for us to define our role behind all these efforts of recuperating tradition that will have some bearing on our present celebration particularly on our choice of celebration theme. What I mean to say is that we should be fully aware that our involvement is more than just jumping on the band wagon or blindly following a trend. Or worse, one of those passing fancies that will last only as long as the College celebration lasts, which is one week! What kind of intervention should we have as an academic community in the efforts to preserve traditional cultures? Perhaps, even better, why don't we begin by looking into our own motives for doing so? As well, won't it be worth examining the particular approach to take and the attitude that must accompany such an approach?

And while we are asking ourselves these questions, perhaps, we also need to look critically at the existing strategies of intervention espoused by different groups and

government agencies and their underlying motives. What are the effects of these strategies on the people who are supposed to be their beneficiaries? And as we mull over these questions, why don't we try putting ourselves in the shoes of those people whose cultures we are trying to help preserve? That will indeed be a first step in the right direction.

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