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**FEATURE**

**The Axiological Relevance of the Tumba-tumba  
Festival in Paoay, Ilocos Norte, Philippines**

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**Abstract.** *This study explored the Tumba-tumba festival celebration of Paoay, Ilocos Norte in the Philippines. During the celebration, different huts are put up with altars inside them that have a lot of food offerings. The study explored the value and meaning of the folk practices. The studied used the ethnographic observation, documentation, and interviews of the participants of the 10 districts during the celebration. The tradition was the blended values of Ilocano and religious faith. The participants were devoted in the preservation of the culture but few knew the meaning of the food offerings. In the practice of the tradition, the participants were not aware that they were performing different fields of the arts. The local government organizes other activities to promote the festival but these usually result in divided interests of visitors towards the real value of the tradition. The local government therefore, as the key factor in the preservation of the cultural values of the tradition, is recommended to develop and increase the awareness of the program during the festival to promote its real meaning for the younger generation to emulate.*

**Keywords:** Tumba-tumba, Festival, Paoay, Culture, Tradition, Ilocos Region, Philippines

**Introduction**

Salanga (1984) stated that before the arrival of the Spanish rule in the Ilocos Region, the land was originally inhabited by Negritos, then the Malays that settled in the mountains and was later divided into three different groups as the Isneg, Tinguian, and the Ilocano. The Isneg and Tinguian were pushed into the interior. There they developed a dialect and culture. The lowland settlers built villages near bays or coves called “looc” or “loco” in native dialect and were therefore referred to as the “Ilocanos”. Thus, the different aspects of Ilocano folk culture began.

From agriculture came the crafts and industries, the music, dance and games, and folk literature. The people introduced a cycle of customs and belief practices, the different delicacies, and medicine. The Spaniards found the Ilocano settlers and revolutionized them with their religion. The earliest estimate of the population of the region based on the “encomienda” (list of tribute payers) was 80,000. From then, traditions arose into practice including the belief on “atang”; that is, the offering of food for the dead. Paoay’s popularity became known for its rich culture and unique festivals. This fourth-class municipality in the province of Ilocos Norte, in the Philippines is just located 5 kilometers away from the heart of Batac City, which was known to be the home of great leaders.

Tracing back the roots of their festival, it all began during the early Spanish rule in Ilocos Norte when the Augustinians spearheaded the spiritual conquest and founded Paoay and other neighboring provinces in 1593. The Royal Decree in February 2, 1818 divided the Ilocos province into two province: Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur. Paoay was a town annexed to Ilocos Norte. The town was known for its hand-woven blankets, towels, and pillow cases. Crops like rice, corn, tobacco, sugarcane, and vegetables were their agricultural products. Aside from religion, the best legacy left by the Spaniards in the town was the St. Augustine Catholic Parish Church, better known as Paoay Church. According to the Ilocos Norte official website, Paoay was derived from the phrase, *makapaway kami*, which means, “We can live alone.”

The strong religious influence of Catholicism left includes religious rituals held like the Tumba-tumba during All Saint’s Day. Tumba-tumba is celebrated every 1st of November in the town of Paoay. Mrs. Luz Reyno-Carpio, a retired Division’s Superintendent and Municipal Cultural and Tourism Council Consultant said, that the real essence of “*Tumba has been celebrated for generations to honor the dead. No records explain why old folk called the event Tumba-tumba.*” According to Sayre (2008), a culture that comes from the stories that survived without writing is called *oral culture*. Some of these cultures have been passed down over the centuries from generation to generation, by word of mouth. Sayre (2008) describes these similarly to the Neolithic cultures regarding social practice of agency, myths, and rituals. This paper focuses on the values, meaning and practices of the festival. It may also be a source for local history in social studies and Ilocano studies, and in teaching values; hence, it calls for other future research that would help to increase this knowledge.

The study aimed at exploring the cultural awareness on the cultural values of the Tumba-tumba festival by specifically tracing the evolution and meaning of the foods offered and identifying the significant artistic practices within the festival. It shall

serve not for posterity but as a tool to preserve the value of the tradition for generations of Ilocanos.

### Related Literature

This study tracks similar celebrations that relate to culture and practice of “honoring the dead.” McArdle (2015) states that the “Día de Los Muertos” or “day of the dead” (see Figure 1) is celebrated every 1<sup>st</sup> of November to offer food for the dead, create altars, perform rituals, and go on processions just like the Tumba-tumba festival. This holiday celebrated by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans is rooted in the ancient Mesoamerican culture blending with Spanish-European Religion (Roman Catholic) inspired by a distinct American style of art in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Their offerings for the dead are called “Ofrenda” in Spanish and every object has its meaning. They believe that the water they serve quenches thirsty spirits (Garciaagodoy, 1998). The images and foods like bread and rice, including water and other beverages, are also part of the Tumba-



Figure 1. Día de los Muertos altar  
Photo credit: vmiremontes.

tumba festival because they are all rooted in a similar Christian origin. Tracking the symbol of the foods that should be offered is based in the Bible in the book of Leviticus 1 to 7. The instructions for a sacrifice is that there should be a dedicated five Levitical offerings that will be used in the rituals. They are described as the five kinds of sacrifices such as (a) burnt offering (Lev 1:6-9), (b) meal offering, (c) peace offering, (d) sin offering (Lev 4:1-4), and (e) trespass offering (Lev 6:5-7) [*The Five Levitical Offerings*, n.d.].



Figure 2. Photo taken at Ghost Festival in Hong Kong.

According to Flores (2009), other unique rituals in honoring the dead are also celebrated in China. The Chinese Ghost Festival is celebrated every 7th month of the Chinese lunar calendar (Figure 2). The Chinese believe that ghosts can still visit them from the afterlife. The feast includes burning ghost money for the spirits. In the Christian feast, the tradition also offers food. This celebration originated from Buddhist and Taoist cultures in India.

The influence of one culture contributes to another because in India, the Hindu believe that the loved ones of the dead could bring the dead contentment or comfort (Figure 3). In Russell's paper (as cited in Sonsona, 2015, p. 168), "Filipinos were mostly animistic when it comes to religious beliefs and practices influenced by the Spanish culture. Most are revered the departed spirits of the ancestors through ritual offerings because the spirits could be blamed for poor harvests, illness, and bad luck generally. Filipinos believed that proper ritual feasting of the spirits would appease them, and result in good harvests, healthy recovery of the ill, and the fertility of women." This is not just a manifestation with the spirits but also an aspect of religiosity. McLean (2009, p. 25)



Figure 3. Ritual of Tarpan.  
Photo by BhaskarMallick.

states, "Religiosity manifests culture sharing and understanding for each member of the community." Therefore, religion and culture encompass each other. According to Manzolim and Quilang (2016, p. 868), "Culture is connected to the people's social values, their beliefs, faith in their religion and their customs." Cultural heritage delivers synergy to the previous generation in order to understand their history. For only the older generations of today can explain to the present the ways to appreciate the value of a cultural tradition. The information given then serves as a guide in creating preservation programs for cultural values of a tradition. In the central regions of Mindanao, Saranza (2016, p. 307) states that the preservation of Higaonon tribe's culture "identified that the Kaamulan Festival is the only means to preserve their culture." The festival can be celebrated throughout the year for different purposes like giving gratitude for their bountiful harvest, victory celebration, wedding, baptism and reunion.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

As the researcher, I used the qualitative ethnographic approach as an observer, tourist or reflective practitioner, and in-depth field interviews with the participants during the festival. The participants were clustered in their districts. Every district was made of three barangays. The photo documentary of the festival presented the foods described from the participants' perspective regarding their meaning and cultural value.

**Research Setting**

The town of Paoay is located in the west coastal plains of Northern Luzon (18°03'19" N 120°30'58 E). It is a fourth-class municipality in the 2<sup>nd</sup> district of the province of Ilocos Norte, Philippines bordered by the City of Laoag on its north, the town of Currimao, Ilocos Norte on the south, the City of Batac on the east, and the West Philippine Sea on the west. The town has a land area of 76.24 square kilometers with a population of 24,866 based on the last census in 2015. It is composed of 31 barangays. In the Tumba-tumba festival competition, these 31 barangays of Paoay are grouped into 10 districts. The majority of the districts was composed of three barangays except for one district that has four barangays. This district had four small barangays in Paoay. Each of the 10 districts set up their own Tumba-tumba huts around the main roads of the UNESCO's Paoay Church as entry for the competition.

**Participants**

There are 10 participating districts during the festival. A district is composed of three barangays. The barangay council of these three barangays were the participants. The council consists of 10 barangay officials namely: Barangay Captain, seven councilors, secretary, and a treasurer. Each district has 30 participants based on the number of barangay officials, and they are required to present a Tumba-tumba hut. The participants collaborate in the preparation and installation of their entry. Sample size is based on Creswell (2008) and Polkinghorne (as cited in Bickman & Rog, 2009) that the recommended sample size should be between 5 and 25.

**Data Collection**

I observed and documented the festival for the last 9 years. Few clippings were found in the library and most of the data were collected from the semi-structured interviews of the participants in every Tumba-tumba hut for the 10 districts. I also gathered information from available documents in the Mariano Marcos State University Library in Batac City, Ilocos Norte, Philippines. With permission from the participants, conversation was audio-recorded and photos were documented from the participants.

According to Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey (2005), purposive sampling of the participants who willingly share their stories during the observation of the activity provides data about their culture and practices. A semi-structured interview guide provided answers to what is the value of their tradition and the meaning of the foods served on the altar. I transcribed, coded, and analyzed

the collected data to identify concepts and themes. Coding according to Rubin and Rubin (2011) is the process of labelling the data according to concepts and themes.

### **Data Analysis**

Halliday (1978) discusses codes about the place of language in the semiotic scheme of things which he called “social semiotic” of place, and social group in which meanings can be expressed through language and other codes like photography. The data was then analyzed from the interviews of the most knowledgeable participants in every Tumba-tumba hut during the event. The interviews and observations were noted and recorded (van Manen, 1997; Yin, 2003). The description of the participants was put into statements and then arranged to themes based on the objectives of the study.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The Tumba-tumba Festival of Paoay became the highlight of Ilocos Norte’s Araria Festival held during Halloween. The municipal government of Paoay made the Tumba-tumba Festival a competition for all the 10 districts. Every year the competition has a certain theme designated by the organizers. The value of this study therefore resulted in various themes based on the following objectives: (1) values, (2) meaning, and (3) practices.

Looking back on how the tradition of Tumba-tumba began since the Spaniards’ arrival in the Philippines and how Catholicism was taught to the people centuries ago, no records were written because the elders did not continue the tradition of the mentors. However, the social value has been treasured in such a way that it can also be passed along as the tradition to the next generation. The deep faith and belief are the town’s tribute to souls and their responsibility towards the Ilocano tradition of offering foods.

### **Value for Family**

Based on an interview with the Municipal Tourism officer, “The festival symbolizes solemn reunion of the living towards their dead loved ones . . . originally, it is a practice of atonement for the souls of the dead.” To understand Filipinos, one has to appreciate that love is central to family and completely accepted to include their love for even those who have departed. The Filipino family, including the Ilocano families, believe in the strong ties, loyalty, parental values, and child rearing practices that influence their personality. For the Filipinos, the family is the source of one’s emotional strength, personal identity, and material support.

### Blended Values: Ilocano and Devotion

According to Antonio (2013), the Ilocano values show the industriousness and diligence of the Ilocanos in earning a living, despite the limited and infertile soil of the Ilocos region. (Figure 4). This pattern of culture for the celebration of Tumba-tumba Festival is rooted in the belief of the Roman Catholic Church based on the novenas and prayers written in the



Figure 4. Women preparing foods of District 5.



Figure 5. The 9 dishes of District 2.

Ilocano language.

The presence of foods, icons, and symbols show the blending of Christian faith and the Ilocano culture of offering food to the dead known as “atang” (Salanga 1984). Originally, “atang” is a practice and belief imparted by the Catholic religion to the early Ilocanos. One ‘kagawad’ (councilor) of Barangay Nagbacalan, explained that she had devoted

herself in the preservation of the tradition. “I don’t really know how this event started. I just know that we have to preserve this tradition and listen to what the elders say because they are the ones who really know what it means by ‘tumba’” (Sales, 2013, p. 1).

The Levitical offering in the Catholic values were observed in the Tumba-tumba. The nine different foods commonly offered in every Tumba-tumba altar are rice-based. According to the Bible’s *Levitical offering*, during the time of Moses, peace offering was the unleavened cakes or cereals but since the folk do not produce cereals, they offer local foods made of rice like pop rice, and rice cake or “binagcal” to express vow to one’s life especially God and all the gratitude to praise Him. For the Roman Catholics, nine is believed to symbolize the heavenly number while six is the reverse (Figure 5). It is the number of the conception of life in the womb of a mother as literally representing the 9 months before a baby is delivered. At the same time, number 9 represents the souls’ 9-day journey towards the afterlife. An egg is usually placed on the top of rice, symbolizing thanksgiving for the pet or poultry product. The rice serves as a stand for the egg. The baduya, sinuman, patopat, bichobicho, and pinitpit at the altar symbolize Levitical meal offering cooked with oil and unleavened (Figures 6 & 7). In the interview about the meaning of foods, the arrangement of the food came out with similar answers like they just learned from

their elders especially the cooking of the traditional Ilocano delicacies. “I learned cooking baduya, tirukas and pinitipit from my mother” said one female participant.

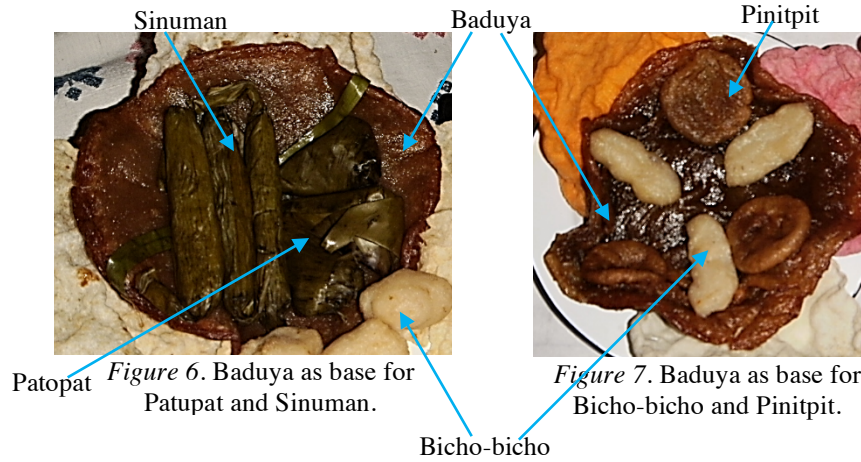


Figure 6. Baduya as base for Patopat and Sinuman.

Figure 7. Baduya as base for Bicho-bicho and Pinitipit.

**Product of Labor**



Figure 7. Rice can be offered uncook and cross-shapewith

In the quest for meaning of the foods, no good response was given based on the interviews from all the 10 districts during the event except for the egg on cross-shaped rice (Figures 7). About the symbols, it is surprising that not all the 10 Tumba-tumba huts could provide the meaning of the foods served at the altar. The elders in the Districts 2 and 5 said that the food offering follows a practice thought out by their elders. The symbol of the egg on rice was explained by a Barangay Kagawad of Brgy. Pasui in Paoay. The egg on the rice is an offering, “The rice represents their thanksgiving from the blessings of their agricultural products while the egg represents the poultry products.” He stated that it symbolizes the product of labor and a thanksgiving offer for the fruitful harvest. The event represented fetishism. According to Marx (as cited in Harrison, Wood, & Gaiger, 1998), the products of labour are inseparable from the production of commodities. These thanksgivings are produced by a popular old Filipino socialization culture of sharing called “Bayanihan.” Folk observed it for their offerings and giving things from their own devotion like foods they have been



nurturing in their yard. The fruits can be consumed by the owner in his or her yard. These foods were actually called according to Marx, the “product of labor” that was given freely as an offering to the spirits of the dead.

**They Were Artists from their Practices**

Women play a vital role in the preparation of the Tumba-tumba. The elderly women usually spearhead the preparation but now the female barangay officials from the district handle most of the task (Figure 8). The value for the preservation has led the folk to become installation artists, food stylists, and interior decorators ever since they inherited the tradition. The tradition has been applied in food styling even if the folk were not aware that they actually did a tradition of food styling that promoted a visual environment celebrated over a century. The presence of the people’s social engagement to participate was sustained until the judging and the put-away. In the put-away, all the foods left were given to the volunteers who helped in packing the exhibits.



*Figure 8. Women arranging the foods.*

**Installation Art**

Men prepare the carpentry set-up of the hut. This process starts with the construction of the hut (Figure 9). The hut is made of used bamboo and coconut leaves (Figure 10). The construction is a voluntary effort of the Ilocano diligence and industriousness. The structural construction of the hut is the only common duty of the male barangay officials.



Figure 9. Bamboos were used for the construction of the hut.



Figure 10. Coconut leaves were used in the roofing.

**Food Styling**

The arrangements of the foods in the Tumba-tumba are the visual representation (Figure 11 & 12). According to Joseph Kosuth (as cited in Stiles, 1996, p. 842), if the object's "reason to be" is purely aesthetic, then the object is a decorative object that simply need "to add something to make it more attractive" and relate directly to an individual's taste.



Figure 11. Tirukas used as base for other foods.



Figure 12. Tirukas arrange like flowers in an altar.

**Interior Decoration: The Altar**

The interior design and decoration define the theme of the Tumba-tumba. The presentation of the interior decoration was based on the theme or motif task to every district's local industry like *Abel* products, pottery, agricultural, and fishery products (Figures 13 & 14).



Figure 13. House-like interior of District 2.



Figure 14. District 9 showcase their Abel products.

**Visual Weights**

Visual weight refers to density and whether the item is dark or light in color (high contrast) and its size (Bellingham, Bybee, and Rogers, 2008). Density is either the food item is dark or light to make the featured food stand out, combined with other foods with lighter density. Food colors and sizes complement with proper distribution of visual weight.



Figure 15. Different presentation of the food but the ambiance are rendered in common

### **Conclusion**

The municipal government added an attraction to the celebration to make it more wholesome for visitors. For almost 9 years of Tumba-tumba celebration, the event was held as a competition against each barangay instead of the districts. Every barangay has their own Tumba-tumba hut. Over the past 3 years, the municipal government, realizing the difficulty of judging and visiting all the presentation of every barangay, decided to cluster the barangays into districts. Each district composes three participating barangays and all the Tumba-tumba huts are now brought closer along the processional road of the town. The Tumba-tumba became a lot easier to visit and judge. Each of the clusters is given a designated place to install their Tumba-tumba hut along the streets around the Paoay Church. This setup makes all the Tumba-tumba huts easier to visit for the visitors. It saves time to judge the 10 Tumba-tumba huts instead of the 31 Tumba-tumba huts of the barangays of Paoay. Presently, the festival has become the highlight of Ilocos Norte's Ar-aria Festival held during Halloween. The municipal government organizes horror booths to attract more visitors. In 2015, the horror booth or horror house collected a regular admission of ₱25 and V.I.P. admission of ₱50 from visitors. It is noticeable that there were more visitors in the horror booths than in the Tumba-tumba huts. The creepy and silent solemn ambience of the tradition are now affected by the loud excitement of the horror house. It further affects the real culture and value of the Tumba-tumba Festival. Visitors must not be misguided that the real significance of the festival is found inside the Tumba-tumba huts and not in the horror booth.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made based on the findings, discussions, and conclusions of this paper.

1. The municipal government of Paoay should bring back the old ambience of the festival by discontinuing the horror booth so as not to confuse visitors from identifying the cultural values and the meaning of the festival.
2. In the preservation of the Tumba-tumba Festival, a brochure or pamphlet must be made available and free for download from the Ilocos Norte official website during Halloween to impart awareness about the cultural values of the festival that shows the traditional sacredness of offering food for the dead and not about the horror booth.
3. The local government can also promote awareness by distributing brochures in every Tumba-tumba hut during the celebration.

4. Education plays an important role to preserve the culture of the local history. Establishing a partnership between a local Ilocano historical society and the local government of Paoay should be developed to sustain the preservation of the cultural values of Paoay for the younger generations to appreciate.

A further related study should be conducted to expand the knowledge learned in this study.

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