

ANALYSIS OF MINDANAO FABLES: CONTEXT, SYMBOLISM, AND CULTURAL MESSAGES

Charmine P. Comendador ¹, Dr. Charisa L. Canubas ²

¹ Imbayao National High School

² Central Mindanao University

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze four fables from Mindanao, along with their context, symbolism, and cultural messages. Through the analysis of "Lalapindigowa-i: Kung Bakit Maliit ang Beywang ng Putakti," "Si Haring Tamaraw at ang Daga," "Ang Aso at si Ipis," and "Naging Sultan si Pilandok," it was discovered that these fables possess a profound connection to the natural environment, social structure, and collective values of indigenous communities in Mindanao. These fables serve as instruments to pass down cultural lessons and wisdom, showcasing rich symbolism that portrays values such as cooperation, resilience, intelligence, and respect for nature. This research highlights the importance of these fables as living cultural heritage of the Mindanaoan communities and how they maintain traditions and collective identity amidst modernization and change.

Keyword: Fables, Mindanao, Symbolism, oral tradition, ethnic culture

1. INTRODUCTION

The fables of Mindanao originate from the rich oral traditions of various ethnic groups in the region. These stories are passed down from one generation to the next, serving as instruments for preserving Mindanao culture. Even before the arrival of Spanish and American colonizers, fables were already used to teach life lessons, explain natural phenomena, and uphold valued cultural principles.

Mindanaoan fables often reflect the close relationship between people, nature, and animals, signifying their identity as indigenous farmers, fishers, and hunters. The interactions between humans and animals in these fables symbolize the deep appreciation the Mindanaoans have for nature as a source of life and wisdom.

In today's fast-changing and globalized world, preserving and nurturing indigenous cultures and traditions has become a challenge across the Philippines. One of the oldest methods for passing on knowledge, values, and wisdom to future generations is through fables and folk stories. Mindanao, as one of the richest regions in the Philippines in terms of culture and tradition, maintains a robust tradition of fables that serve as mirrors of their worldview, way of life, and social values.

Studying Mindanaoan fables is not simply about analyzing stories but embarking on a journey into the rich culture embedded in every narrative. According to Eugenio (2017), fables and folk stories serve as "repositories of a community's collective memory and wisdom." They carry lessons, values, and outlooks on life vital to the formation of a culture's identity.

Arrogante et al. (2016) note that animals, often the main characters in fables, symbolize human traits and behaviors. For example, snakes represent betrayal, monkeys' trickery, and turtles' slowness.

Fables are part of a vast and rich tradition of oral literature worldwide. Within the Philippine context, particularly Mindanao, fables embody the region's rich culture and history. Silongan (2017) affirms that Mindanaoan fables are a form of literature playing a vital role in spreading traditions and moral lessons. These stories are told to both young and old through oral narratives connected to daily life.

His study emphasizes the vibrancy of Mindanaoan fables and how they function as an art form conveying the values, beliefs, and perspectives of the people in the region.

According to Corpus (2016), a fable is a story emphasizing animal tales representing human traits. Fables are not only for children but also for

adults to realize valuable life lessons beneficial to all.

This research aims to contribute to the documentation and preservation of Mindanao's rich oral tradition and the understanding of the deep culture embedded in each fable. Through analyzing fables, one can see a reflection of the cultural and social significance of Mindanaoan communities and how these stories illuminate their unique identity.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The general aim of this study is to analyze the fables found in the Mindanao region. Included in this study are the specific objectives:

1. To discuss the context or background of the fables being studied,
2. To identify the symbolism that reflects the culture of Mindanao, and
3. To uncover the messages conveyed by these fables.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This research is based on five major theories that illuminate the analysis of Mindanaoan fables: Archetype Theory, Structuralism Theory, Deconstruction Theory, Cultural Theory, and Semiotics Theory. Each theory provides a unique perspective for understanding the symbolism, structure, and cultural messages within the fables.

The Archetype Theory, introduced by Carl Jung (1968) in his book "The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious," refers to symbolic characters representing fundamental human traits. In Mindanaoan fables, animals like the Pilandok serve as archetypes of intelligence and cunning, reflecting humanity's ability to overcome challenges through wit. This use of archetypes demonstrates how cultural values are conveyed through characters.

Structuralism Theory, developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) in "Course in General Linguistics," aims to analyze the structure of the text. In the context of fables, the relationships between elements such as animals, events, and symbols express deeper concepts like justice and power. For example, the Sultan as a powerful leader in some fables reflects the structure of governance and social stratification in Mindanao.

Deconstruction Theory, advanced by Jacques Derrida (1967) in "Of Grammatology," seeks to examine contradictions and divisions within texts. Mindanaoan fables reveal tensions between traditional beliefs and modern perspectives. For instance, in the story of Datu Sidungan from Maguindanao, the contradiction between his physical appearance and the expected respect as a leader emphasizes the complexity of the message.

Cultural Theory, based on the studies of Stuart Hall (1997) in "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices," focuses on analyzing the context and symbolism of culture. Mindanaoan fables contain intricate symbolism that expresses traditional beliefs and rituals. For example, the ritual for Kabinang (a god) shows how spirituality is valued as part of the culture.

Semiotics Theory, according to Roland Barthes (1977) in "Elements of Semiology," studies the meaning of symbols. In fables, animals like the Pilandok or cow bear symbolic meanings related to culture. For example, Kabinang is used as a representation of a god to express the importance of spirituality and morality. This helps deepen understanding of how symbolism highlights cultural messages.

The integration of these five theories—Archetype, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Cultural, and Semiotics—allows for a comprehensive analysis of Mindanaoan fables. These stories are not merely simple tales; they are significant cultural artifacts conveying complex meanings about the traditional life, beliefs, and values of the region.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research is an analysis of Mindanaoan fables, aimed at identifying their context, symbolism, and cultural messages. The researcher employed a qualitative design within the descriptive research type to analyze, present, and discuss the collected data. Mindanaoan fables were examined through content analysis.

The primary research instrument used in this study consisted of recorded and documented fables from ethnic groups in Mindanao. The researcher analyzed this text to determine their context, symbolism, and embedded cultural messages. Attention was also given to the cultural context and history of the ethnic groups to achieve a deeper understanding of the fables.

This study comprises the following steps: (1) Collection of fables from ethnic groups in Mindanao; (2) Examination of the context of the fables, including the cultural and historical backdrop in which they were created; (3) Identification and analysis of the symbolism contained in the fables and how these symbols reflect Mindanaoan culture; (4) Analysis of the messages conveyed by the fables and how they function as instruments for passing cultural knowledge and preserving traditions; (5) Documentation of data; and (6) Data analysis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on its objectives. The fables analyzed originate from various ethnic groups in Mindanao.

3.1. Context of Mindanaoan Fables

"Lalapindigowa-i: Kung Bakit Maliit ang Beywang ng Putakti"

The fable "Lalapindigowa-i: Kung Bakit Maliit ang Beywang ng Putakti" comes from the culture of the Maranao, an ethnic group in Mindanao. This fable is based on research by Dr. Nagsura Madale and reflects Maranao traditions and beliefs, such as a man having two wives and a simple rural lifestyle. It forms part of their explanation of natural phenomena and the physical characteristics of animals. The story depicts a putakti (a small insect) named Lalapindigowa-I, a hardworking farmer with two wives, Odang (a shrimp) and Orak (an egg).

It is an etiological tale, a type of fable that explains how an animal or natural phenomenon acquired a particular trait.

According to Wrigglesworth (2016) in his book "Folklore Categories of the Maranao People," etiological tales like "Lalapindigowa-i" play a significant role in the Maranao's understanding of their natural environment. Such fables provide more than simple explanations; they carry deep cultural meanings and values.

This fable is told within the context of Maranao society, where explaining natural phenomena is a way of building a connection to nature and the spiritual forces believed to inhabit their surroundings. According to Demetrio (2018), the Maranao, like many indigenous groups in Mindanao, maintain a profound connection with

the natural world, and their fables act as bridges between the physical and spiritual realms.

In terms of Cultural Theory, this fable highlights the deep relationship the Maranao people have with their environment. The story explaining why the putakti's waist is small is not just a simple tale but a means to express their respect for nature and their beliefs about the origins of things.

"Si Haring Tamaraw at ang Daga"

This fable is an animal tale, a type of story that uses animals as main characters to present values, lessons, and cultural messages. This fable comes from the Manobo, one of the largest ethnic groups in Mindanao. It reflects their beliefs about leadership and interpersonal relations. Rooted in the forest, the tamaraw (a buffalo species) is respected due to its size, speed, and strength.

Manuel (2009) in his book "Philippine Folk Literature: An Anthology" mentions that animal tales are among the most common types of fables in the Philippines, often used to teach moral lessons and values. In the context of Mindanao, particularly among the Manobo people, the tamaraw symbolizes strength and power, while the rat usually represents intelligence and quick thinking.

This fable occurs within the traditional leadership system in Mindanao, where governance plays an essential role in the daily life of the community. MacDonald (2019), in his study "The Principles of Power in Indigenous Philippine Societies," confirms that the concept of power and leadership among indigenous Mindanaoan communities often centers on cooperation, mutual understanding, and respect, despite hierarchical structures.

According to Archetype Theory, the tamaraw can be regarded as an archetype of leadership and power, while the rat symbolizes intelligence and strategic thinking. Their interaction in the story demonstrates how different characteristics can work together to overcome challenges. In the context of Structuralism Theory, the relationship between the tamaraw and the rat illustrates a balance between strength and intellect within society.

"Ang Aso at si Ipis"

This fable is commonly found in various communities in Mindanao, but it is particularly

well-known among the Meranaw. The indigenous people of Mindanao are recognized for their rich oral traditions, including epics, legends, and fables.

According to Kiefer (2011) in his book "Folk Tales," Mindanaoan fables often depict interactions and relationships among different animals, reflecting social dynamics and power relations within their region. The dog, being a domesticated animal, often symbolizes loyalty and dependence, while the cockroach, as a resilient insect, commonly represents endurance and the ability to survive under any condition.

This fable occurs within the Meranaw community that has strong Islamic influences. Stone (2019), in his study "Mindanao Cosmology and Social Structure," notes that Mindanaoans strongly value the concept of proper behavior or "marayaw addat," which refers to correct conduct and actions in all situations. The fable "Ang Aso at si Ipi" provides important insight into these values through the interaction between two animals and shows how love for others can free them from dire circumstances. This story reflects their appreciation for good manners and the importance of respecting all living beings.

Using Deconstruction Theory, this fable can be examined to show the tension between greed and fulfilling promises. The dog's decision to be greedy contradicts his expected loyalty and responsibility, illustrating contradictions in human behavior. Through Semiotics Theory, the dog and the cockroach can be seen as symbols of different aspects of human conduct. The dog represents greed and selfishness, while the cockroach symbolizes loyalty and diligence.

"Naging Sultan si Pilandok"

"Naging Sultan si Pilandok" is one of the most famous stories about Pilandok, a character renowned for his intelligence and cunning nature. This story originates from the Maranao, an ethnic group around Lake Lanao in Mindanao. It narrates how Pilandok used his wit to deceive people and become a sultan.

According to Saber (2016) in his study "Darangen: The Epic of the Maranao," the Maranao have deep respect for intelligence and the ability to overcome challenges through cleverness. The character Pilandok reflects these values. Madale (2019) adds in his book "The Muslim Filipinos"

that Pilandok is an essential part of Maranao literature, symbolizing the human capacity to succeed through intellect and strategy. The fable occurs within the context of traditional leadership in Maranao society, where the sultan wields significant power and influence. Pilandok's rise as sultan shows the society's openness to accepting unexpected leaders, provided they have the necessary intelligence and skill.

Through Archetype Theory, Pilandok can be considered an archetype of the clever trickster. His ability to deceive others and succeed demonstrates human capability to use intelligence to achieve goals. In the context of Structuralism Theory, the fable highlights the relationship between power and intelligence. Pilandok's role as sultan shows how intelligence can be used to gain power and how power can be used to maintain control over society.

3.2. Symbolism in Mindanaon Fables

"Lalapindigowa-i: Kung Bakit Maliit ang Beywang ng Putakti"

The fable "Lalapindigowa-i" is rich in symbolism that reflects Bagobo culture. The putakti, as the main character, is not just a simple insect but a powerful symbol of transformation and adaptation. The small waist of the putakti, as explained in the fable, symbolizes sacrifice and change necessary to survive in an ever-changing environment.

The characters represent duties and flaws, such as Lalapindigowa-i (the putakti) symbolizing the hardworking farmer and faithful spouse, showing dedication to family. The tightening of the belt and the shrinking waist symbolize the loss of support and failure in one's responsibilities. Odang (shrimp) and Orak (egg) represent laziness and dereliction of duty. Their being cooked in the pot shows the punishment for being abusive or lazy.

In the context of Cultural Theory, this fable reveals the deep connection of the Bagobo people with their environment. The explanation of why the putakti's waist is small is not merely a simple story but a way to express their respect for nature and their beliefs about the origins of things.

According to Garvan (2021) in his study "The Bagobo of Mindanao," insects like the putakti play an important role in the cosmology of indigenous people in Mindanao. They are often regarded as

messengers or intermediaries between the physical and spiritual worlds. In the context of the fable "Lalapindigowa-i," the transformation of the putakti may symbolize a spiritual journey or transformation necessary to reach a higher state of consciousness or connection with the spiritual realm.

The setting of the fable—the forest and natural environment—is also symbolic of Mindanao's rich ecosystem and the deep connection of Mindanaoans to their natural surroundings. According to Demetrio (2019), Mindanao, like many indigenous groups living there, holds a holistic view of nature, in which humans are not separate from the natural world but a part of it.

Food and cooking symbolize caring. Delivering food to the field symbolizes caring for the family. The refusal of the wives to bring food shows failure in duty and loss of affection.

The pot is a symbol of mistakes. The cooking of Lalapindigowa-i's wives in the pot signifies mistakes and defeat caused by one's own faults. It also implies consequences of laziness.

"Si Haring Tamaraw at ang Daga"

The fable "Si Haring Tamaraw at ang Daga" contains rich symbolism that reflects the culture of Mindanao. The tamaraw, as a king, symbolizes power, authority, and leadership. Its strong presence and impressive strength represent the traditional concept of leadership among indigenous Mindanaoan communities.

On the other hand, the rat, though small, seemingly powerless and often ignored, symbolizes intelligence, creativity, and adaptability. Its ability to compete or interact with the stronger tamaraw highlights the Mindanaoan value placed not only on physical strength but also on cleverness and strategy.

According to MacDonald (2009), power dynamics in indigenous Mindanaoan communities are often complex, where formal authority (symbolized by the tamaraw) can be challenged or influenced by other types of power, such as wisdom or intelligence (symbolized by the rat). The interaction between the tamaraw and the rat in the fable offers important insight into understanding these complex dynamics.

The cage, as a symbol of tests and mistakes, represents the challenges or trials in life. King

Tamaraw's escape from the cage trap demonstrates finding solutions to problems.

The fable's setting—the kingdom of animals—also symbolizes the natural hierarchy and social order within indigenous communities. However, as shown in the story, this hierarchy is neither fixed nor immutable but can be challenged and reshaped according to different situations and conditions.

The tamaraw symbolizes strength, power, and leadership, while the rat symbolizes intelligence, cunning, and being small but capable of success. Their relationship points to the potential for cooperation between strength and intellect.

Through Archetype Theory, the tamaraw can be seen as an archetype of leadership and power, while the rat symbolizes intelligence and cunning. Their interaction demonstrates how diverse traits can collaborate to overcome challenges. Structuralism Theory also views their relationship as illustrating a balance between strength and intelligence in society.

"Ang Aso at si Ipis"

The fable "Ang Aso at si Ipis" carries symbolism reflective of Mindanaoan culture, particularly among the indigenous Meranaw. The dog, as a domesticated animal, symbolizes loyalty, trust, and connection to humans. In the Mindanaoan context, it can represent community members close to those in power or with higher social status.

The cockroach, conversely, symbolizes laziness and abusiveness but also demonstrates perseverance and love for friends through self-sacrifice for the freedom of the dog. It also represents survival or resilience and the ability to live in any condition. Within the Meranaw indigenous community, the cockroach may symbolize marginalized or less powerful members who nonetheless have their own ways of facing social challenges.

According to Kiefer (1989), animal interactions in Mindanaoan fables often reveal complex social dynamics and power relations within communities. The interaction between the dog and cockroach in this fable provides important perspective on these dynamics, especially on how seemingly powerless individuals can use their

own resources and strategies to cope with their situations.

The setting of the fable—the everyday environment where the dog and cockroach live—is also a symbol of daily life and community interaction in the Mindanaoan region. It reflects the value Mindanaoans place on everyday experiences and how these play a crucial role in shaping their cultural identity.

Through Deconstruction Theory, this fable can be analyzed to show the tension between greed and fulfillment of promises. The dog's decision to become greedy contradicts its expected loyalty and responsibility, reflecting contradictions in human behavior.

"Naging Sultan si Pilandok"

The fable "Naging Sultan si Pilandok" is a folk tale from the Maranao that presents symbolism with deep meanings related to the culture and society of Muslims in Mindanao. Through these symbols, Maranao life lessons and values are conveyed.

Pilandok symbolizes intelligence, cunning, and the ability to use his mind to achieve his goals. His becoming a sultan symbolizes the triumph of intelligence over power.

The Sultan represents power and authority. His eventual death demonstrates the downfall of power when it is not used wisely.

The cage symbolizes imprisonment not only physically but mentally as well. It represents obstacles that must be overcome to attain success.

The sea symbolizes the challenges and changes in life. Pilandok's journey across the sea illustrates his journey toward achieving his goals.

Through Archetype Theory, Pilandok can be regarded as an archetype of the clever trickster. His ability to deceive others and succeed shows the human capacity to use intelligence to reach objectives. In the context of Structuralism Theory, the fable portrays the relationship between power and intelligence. Pilandok's role as sultan shows how intelligence can be used to gain power and how power can be employed to maintain control over society.

3.3. Messages of the Fables

"Lalapindigowa-i: Kung Bakit Maliit ang Beywang ng Putakti"

The fable "Lalapindigowa-i" carries a profound message that reflects the values of the people of Mindanao. One of the primary messages is the concept of transformation and adaptation as necessary processes for survival and growth. The physical change of the putakti—having a small waist—is a symbol of the ability to adapt to change and hardship.

According to Wrigglesworth (1991), etiological tales like "Lalapindigowa-i" not only explain natural phenomena but also carry deep lessons about life and existential truths. In the context of this fable, the message may be about the importance of accepting change and facing the challenges of life.

"Lalapindigowa-i" is significant as part of Philippine literature depicting Maranao culture and tradition. It highlights the value of being hardworking, faithful, compassionate, and content as keys to achieving good fortune. The fable serves as inspiration showing how life lessons can be applied to overcome difficulties.

The message and moral of this fable emphasize the importance of diligence and responsibility in life. It demonstrates that diligence can lead to positive outcomes but also cautions that excessive work may negatively impact health and personal life. The fable also teaches the value of balance in life, where work should be accompanied by self-care and care for family.

"Si Haring Tamaraw at ang Daga"

The fable "Si Haring Tamaraw at ang Daga" conveys a message about responsible leadership and the importance of humility in a leader. The story teaches that true strength of a leader lies not only in power but also in the ability to listen to and learn from others, even those who may seem lesser than him. According to Jundam (2019), such messages are "central to traditional political values."

The story imparts life lessons such as forgiveness and cooperation. In the fable, King Tamaraw forgives the Rat after he makes a mistake, and in the end, it is the Rat who saves King Tamaraw from danger.

The story also communicates the message of social reciprocity and mutual respect. It suggests that harmonious relationships between leaders and their followers depend on reciprocal respect and

acknowledgment of each other's worth. According to Rixhon (2020), such messages "reflect the democratic underpinnings of traditional governance systems in Mindanao."

The fable further expresses the belief in the inherent worth of all beings, regardless of their size or social status. It implies that every creature, even the smallest, has a contribution to the overall function of society. Saber (2019) notes that this belief "reflects egalitarian tendencies found in many indigenous societies in Mindanao."

"Ang Aso at si Ipis"

The fable "Ang Aso at si Ipis" expresses messages of survival, resilience, and the triumph of wit over strength. The story teaches that physical strength does not always guarantee success and that intelligence and resourcefulness may be more important traits over time. According to Cole (2019), such messages are "reflective of the coping mechanisms of indigenous peoples in facing challenges in their environment."

The story also conveys the message of adaptation and the ability to adjust to challenges. It implies that the capacity to adapt to changing conditions is crucial for survival. Wrigglesworth (2020) notes that such messages "demonstrate the pragmatic approach to survival characteristic of many indigenous groups in Mindanao."

The tale also articulates a cultural belief in the power of creativity and innovation. It suggests that disadvantaged individuals or groups can use their creativity to navigate power imbalances and find solutions to problems. Saber (2019) states that these messages are "integral to the cultural resilience of Mindanao indigenous peoples in the face of historical challenges."

"Naging Sultan si Pilandok"

The fable "Naging Sultan si Pilandok" highlights the importance of intelligence and creativity in achieving goals. The story teaches about the value of wit and strategy in attaining success. It shows that intelligence can be an effective tool to overcome challenges and accomplish goals, even in the face of obstacles. The tale also emphasizes the human capacity to be creative and tactical in problem-solving.

In the story, Pilandok is a clever and resourceful being who achieves his goals through his quick thinking and persuasion. The moral of the story is

that intelligence and creativity can triumph over physical strength and power. It shows that people must think quickly and devise strategies to overcome life's challenges.

Being intelligent and resourceful teaches that a person's true strength lies in their intellect and ability to think creatively about solutions to problems. According to Classace (2024), intelligence and resourcefulness are vital traits that individuals should possess to overcome life's trials.

The story also carries the message of avoiding greed for wealth. It teaches that greed is an undesirable trait. The Sultan became a victim of his own greed and desire to see his ancestors under the sea, which led to his demise. The lesson is to avoid greed for things we do not need and learn to be content with what we have. It highlights the importance of being grateful for what one has. Classace (2024) adds that avoiding greed is an important lesson one carries throughout life.

The story also teaches the importance of being honest with oneself and making right decisions, promoting integrity as a crucial personal value.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the conducted research, the following conclusions were drawn from the stated objectives:

1. The fables studied have deep roots in the histories of various ethnic groups residing in Mindanao, where animals are used as characters to convey lessons about right, fair, and just treatment of others. These fables serve not only as entertainment but also as a method of teaching important values and culture, particularly within the Mindanao region.
2. Mindanaoan fables contain symbolism that reflects significant aspects of the culture and way of life of the people in the region. Through animals as characters, which serve as metaphors for different human traits such as bravery, intelligence, and goodness, the values of Mindanaoans regarding their environment and society are expressed.

3. Mindanaoan fables carry important messages indicating life lessons such as honesty, unity, kindness, intelligence, and respect for others and nature. These stories show how simple characters, often animals, depict traits to be emulated or avoided to maintain harmonious relations with society and environment. Moreover, the messages teach the importance of perseverance, hope, and unconditional love, reflecting the traditional values of the Mindanao people.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the presented conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The study of fables originating from various ethnic groups in Mindanao should be continued to preserve and propagate their unique cultures, beliefs, and traditions, thereby providing ideas and knowledge to students and readers.
2. Further deepen the study of symbolism in Mindanaoan fables to better understand the cultural meanings and values expressed through animals as metaphors of human traits such as bravery, intelligence, and kindness.
3. Promote the use of fables as a primary tool for teaching important values and moral lessons in schools across Mindanao, so that traditional teachings may be imparted to the youth in a meaningful and easily understandable manner.

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