

Narratives of Valor and Hope: Sumuroy's Heroism and Leadership in Folk Literature

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative textual analysis study explored on the folk narratives of Sumuroy, a local hero in the province of Northern Samar, Philippines. With the rich folklore in the locality, Sumuroy is not only considered a historical hero, but a mythical one. This paper specifically identified heroic values, attributes, and concepts of heroism mirrored in the folk narratives about Sumuroy and ascertained leadership style/s reflected in the folk narratives about Sumuroy. The salient findings revealed that Strength and bravery were the most prevalent values and attributes of Sumuroy. Further, the tales pictured him as a transformational-democratic leader. He opposed against the oppressive and demoralizing policies of the Spaniards and started the revolution to forward his vision for his beloved town and its people.

Keywords: *Folk Hero, Folk Narratives, Heroic Attitudes, Leadership Styles*

INTRODUCTION

Literature exists in human actions and lives in human experiences. It opens varied lenses where one can view the beauty of different meanings and perspectives. Its influencing meanings and knowledge prompted people to express their experiences, ideals, aspirations, emotions, norms, and beliefs in a more creative way – thus, the emergence of folklore. Folklore, as an oral tradition, is a part of people's culture. It constitutes literature from a group of people sharing a commonality such as myths and legends that are orally passed down through generations.

For more than 300 years, the Filipinos experienced oppression, indoctrination and death under the Spanish regime. This made them thirst for freedom and urged them to put an end to the cruelty of the Spaniards. Northern Samar took part of this bloody

revolution through the leadership of Agustin Sumuroy, a native of Palapag, Northern Samar.

Sumuroy's courage and wit had made him known in history that considers him now as the hero of Northern Samar. As a way of commending the hero, Palapag folks used the mighty name of Sumuroy in their tales, which through oral means, were transmitted from generation to the next, commemorating his deeds and victories. The personal accounts of Sumuroy have already been written by historians as well as the researchers of folk literature from the place. However, his chronicles and conquests do not end with the historical tales alone. These have also legendary and mythical accounts which are more exciting and stirring, that mostly, have not been retrieved and studied yet. Even worse is the reality that the tradition bearers in the vicinity are already passing away bringing with them to the grave, stories and other narrative accounts about the pride of Northern Samar.

Furthermore, these historical and literary narratives about Sumuroy are significant springboards for an interdisciplinary inquiry on history and literature which will highlight his heroism and leadership as part of Northern Samar's glorious past. The province could use the heroism of Sumuroy based on historical and archival documents about him which will be hopefully supplemented by these oral narratives.

However, this contention is challenged by the present deteriorating popularization and appreciation of Sumuroy's heroism caused by some factors, to wit: (1) the Tagalog-centric orientation of Philippine historiography and literature; (2) the lack of historians and scholars studying regional and local histories; (3) the advent of science and technology and the influence of gadgets in the lives of the modern generation in Northern Samar, thus, majority of them

have little knowledge about the hero; and (4) the basic education curriculum [with erroneous reference materials] which does not highlight important local historical and literary figures like Sumuroy.

This reality intensifies the need to re-introduce the heroism of Sumuroy to Norte Samareños, yet, the process of re-orientation should be contextualized to address and respond to the present development and growth agenda of the province especially that it remains in the list of the poorest in the country with issues on poverty, corruption, insurgency, and natural disasters and calamities confronting its people. Revisiting Sumuroy's heroic values and attributes and his revolution will foster a strong sense of identity and nationalism (Pinca, 2000).

Hence, this paper tried to describe and analyze the heroism and leadership of Sumuroy using folk narratives. It specifically identified heroic values, attributes, and concepts of heroism mirrored in the folk narratives about Sumuroy and ascertained leadership style/s reflected in the folk narratives about Sumuroy.

The historic and beautiful town of Palapag is a third class municipality in Northern Samar, Philippines, with 32 barangays and with a land area of 17, 960 hectares. The name is derived from the local word "palpag" which means pulping or pounding. It is geographically located in the northernmost part of the Samar island facing the Pacific Ocean. The people of Palapag (Palapagnons) depend on copra-making, farming and fishing. The dry and the rainy climate, as well as the land and water features of the area, determine the sources of living and economy of the town and its people (Acquiat and Comedia, 2014).

According to *Filipinos in History* (1994) and *Ang mga Pilipino Sa Ating Kasaysayan: A Centennial Resource Book* (1998), Sumuroy led the Samareño Revolt on 1649 to 1650. He was born to a babaylan in Palapag and became a "chieftain and leader" of his people in their struggle against the Spaniards. A skilled sailor, he worked as a castellano and pilot at a "small fort" in his native town, and as such he was exempted from paying the tribute or rendering the required *servicio* to the government.

When Military Governor Diego Fajardo ordered the implementation of the *polo y servicios* which forcibly recruited laborers to sustain the shipbuilding industry in Cavite, the Palapagnons, headed by Sumuroy, openly opposed the cruel and inhumane policy and

attempted to negotiate with the colonial government through the Spanish friar Miguel Ponce Barberan. The failure of the Spanish officials to respond to and address the concerns of the natives resulted to the death of Barberan on June 1649 which signaled the start of the insurrection. The uprising in Palapag reached the nearby villages and other seaside towns of Samar and was extended to Sorsogon, Albay, Camarines, and Masbate, down towards Leyte, Cebu, Bohol, Camiguin, Iligan, Cagayan, and even Zamboanga.

The cunning and leadership skills of Sumuroy made his force undefeated amidst the combined efforts of his enemies led by Capt. Gines de Roxas, Silvestre de Rochas, Francisco Ugbo, and Alonso Macon with the Pampangos and the Lutaos of Zamboanga bringing with them their *sampans* at *caracoas*. However, the frustrated Spaniards offered amnesty and rewards to the revolutionaries who would surrender and give information about Sumuroy. On July 1650, Sumuroy met his own death at the hands of his fellow rebels. With his death, the rebellion ended, too.

Mojares, in his paper about Lapulapu in folk tradition, forwarded that in the silence of history, local folk tradition steps in to fill in the vacuum with its own order of "facts", thus, making the "hero of history" a "hero of tradition" (1979). The narratives of the Palapagnons about Sumuroy verify that the people have considered him not just a historical figure, but also, as a mythical and legendary character. The oral narratives about Sumuroy manifest the rich oral tradition of Palapag which supplements the scarcity of official and archival documents about the local hero.

The tales about Sumuroy suggest that the hero was a giant who could easily cross the ocean, extend a part of his body long enough to cross a river, create a creek every time he urinates, and leave huge footprints along the rocky shores of Palapag and other nearby towns (Acquiat and Comedia, 2015). He was also pictured as a skilled sailor and fisherman whose spear and net created a big hole in Mayongpayong Rock Formation in Mapanas. Moreover, there are more incredible landmarks in Northern Samar that have somehow been attributed to Sumuroy's superhuman size and strength just like the big footprint known as the Big Foot Foot located near the Capul Lighthouse (Dela Cruz, 2014).

These narratives, just like scientific history, justify the supreme leadership of Sumuroy in the context of his time. The tales may have been influenced by the

informants' creative imagination, this, however, does not dispute the locals' perceptions about their hero whom for them is strong, witty, and powerful.

The production of literatures about the struggles and uprisings of Filipinos from the margins of the society has remained a challenge for Filipino historians. The work of Sturtevant (1976) on popular uprisings in the Philippines from 1840 to 1940 highlighted peasant struggles in the lens of a foreign historian. In his narratives and interpretation, he highlighted the rise of social banditry in the Philippines exemplified by *tulisanismo* among marginal and peasant groups during the late 19th and early 20th century. He mentioned about the Pulahanes of Samar and General Vicente Lukban of Catbalogan (Samar) who were perceived as social bandits by the American colonial government. This etic construction about the peasant forces in Samar was supported by early American studies and publications. This is a clear manifestation that the lack of archival documents and the Western orientation of early Philippine historiography should be countered by the emergence of a new and a more liberating force in Philippine history which shall examine historical facts and consider historical perspectives within the context, agenda, and interests of the Filipinos.

This new framework is evident in Tirami-Wada's work on the history of the Sakdal movement (1992). Her work was based on recent Philippine historiography on the anti-Spanish and anti-United States (US) Revolutions which has given deeper insights on the role of the Filipino masses in struggles. She stressed that the study of the peripheral groups is difficult to undertake due to the lack of materials, such as archival material. Even assuming that there are adequate sources, one must analyze and interpret them, since usually they were not written by the people who were directly involved, and therefore often lack the viewpoint of the participants. At times, the historian has to search elsewhere for non-conventional materials, it is up to the historian how to utilize them, based on historical methodology.

The dearth in authentic and scientific historical documents and evidences consider literature as an effective source of narratives exalting heroes, leaders, and other important individuals who are obscured, inarticulate, and silences of history (Maceda, 1996). Reliving heroic narratives should aim to liberate and glorify the silences in history. It should counter traditional biographical narratives which is based on

who are famous and powerful (Javar, 2006). A great example would be the study on the poetry of Benigno Ramos in the context of the Philippine society during his time. This attempt successfully celebrated his endeavors and feats not just as a political leader but also as a literary figure (Tolentino, 1980). The narratives about Sumuroy, just like the poems of Ramos which did not only describe his personal life but also the ideals behind the Sakdal movement, is an innovative way to recount his heroism and his vital role in history amidst limits of historical sources.

Folklore expresses how early people interpreted their experiences, their fears, sentiments, passions and hopes. All these revelations validate their social order and their explanation of natural phenomena before the advent of science; thus, leading to a fuller reconstruction of prehistoric life and a better understanding of historical traditions which are the bases of contemporary culture and society (Lopez, 2006).

Historians find that oral traditions, although seldom factually accurate in all details, furnish insights into grassroots attitudes toward historical events. Mojares (1979) made it clear also that folk history (as expressed, for instance, in folktales) is of a different order from "scientific history", or "history" as it is generally conceived. The folk's sense of history is different from our own. Though "folk memory" may not yield what we consider historical facts, it nevertheless contains historical values as important as the bare facts. The Palapagnons made Sumuroy their mythical and legendary hero. The hero of history has become the hero of tradition as reflected in the narratives which do not present incidents in the life of a real man, but as what Raglan (1956) argues, of ritual incidents in the career of a ritual personage. Sumuroy, as a hero is historical, but his folk narratives are not, for these were created to satisfy the mythical and legendary demands of the people's tales.

Coben (2009) featured the non-fixity of the verbal arts and the ways in which these cultural productions are active processes engaged with ongoing political, economic, and cultural struggles, and in many cases, are important media for social transformation and change. The people of Palapag, who were and are still living in the bondage of poverty and insurgency, may have created stories about a local hero whose potentials and power are seen to be their saving hands from these threats and eventually, lead them to prosperity. The folkloric stories about Sumuroy do not

dwell on historical facts, they focus and tell the perspectives of the people about a historical figure in the context of their present social milieu.

E. Arsenio Manuel made the first survey of what he interchangeably called “heroic narratives,” “folk epics,” and “ethnoepics” of Christian, pagan and Muslim Filipinos while Damiana Eugenio preferred to use the term “heroic narrative,” appropriating the word “heroic” (from heroic epic) from Hellenic tradition (1975) Heroic legends are short prose accounts of episodes in the life of great men: culture heroes, epic heroes, prominent men in history, and semi- historical characters. We have culture heroes about whom no epic poems have been composed and whose exploits have been recorded only in legends (Eugenio, 1982).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative inquiry is specifically a textual analysis and interpretation of the folk narratives. The heroic values and attributes and the leadership style of Sumuroy were deduced from the Palapagnons’ mythical and legendary tales about their local hero.

Interpretivism suggests that both reality and knowledge are constructed and reproduced through communication, interaction, and practice (Tracy, 2013). It is based on the basic tenet that reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, 2000; Neuman, 2000; Schwandt, 2000, as cited by Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). In this paper, the construction of Sumuroy’s heroism and leadership, which needs to be re-introduced to the present generation, was based on the socially, culturally, and historically transferred knowledge of the local folks immortalized by different literary accounts.

Geertz interpretivism and thick description views researchers as “cultural interpreters” who provide vivid descriptions that unpack values, beliefs, and action in a group, society, or organization (Tracy, 2013). Sumuroy’s heroism and leadership were symbolically constructed and reconstructed based on the researcher’s interpretation of the local people’s portrayals as narrated in their tales.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following tales from the studies of Pinca (2000) and Acquiati and Comedia (2015) were used in this paper:

1. An Tinamakan sa Libas (The Footprints in Libas)

2. An Pagtilais san Bato sa Dapdap (The Whetting of the Boulder in Dapdap)
3. Sa Kanya Pagraya (On Catching Fish)
4. An mga Tul-an sa Mapanas (The Bones in Mapanas)
5. An Bantugan nga Tawo (The Famous Man)
6. Dagku gud nga Siki (Very Large Feet)
7. An Ginbalayan (The Dwelling)
8. Maram-an (Betel-nut-chew)
9. Baraka an Naraya (Entrapped Baraka)
10. An Ayam ng Ataman (The Pet Dog)
11. An Paglata san Utod nga Ulo (When the Cut-off Head Spoke)
12. Unum Kadupa an Likos (Six Meters in Diameter)
13. Si Sumuroy, An Taga-Palapag (Sumuroy, A Native of Palapag)
14. An Sungkod ug Sadok (The Cane and the Sadok)
15. Napo, An Bag-o nga Kasili (Napo, The New Kasili)

The tales used in this paper were narrated by the informants who were residents of Palapag and passers of the test of folkloricity. They were screened and chosen based on the formal criteria given by Damiana Eugenio – should belong to the age bracket of 60 and above, not senile, had not visited other places for more than a month, not fully exposed to technological media, studied at least grade three.

Heroic Attributes and Concepts of Heroism Strength/ Strong and Bravery/Brave

Strength is one of the attributes that celebrate the valor of a hero in a folk narrative. In the tales about the cunning and greatness of Sumuroy, the hero is projected to possess supernatural power, hence, his great strength which allows him to perform tasks beyond the capacity of an ordinary human. In most of the tales, Sumuroy is projected as a giant who uses his size and strength, not only in fishing, but more importantly, in battles especially when he led the insurrection against the Spanish rule.

This clearly suggests that a hero, for the early Ibabaonons, should be capable of accomplishing great responsibilities, not only for himself but for the community. The giant image of Sumuroy projected him not only as a skillful fisherman but also as a great warrior to whom the Spaniards are afraid of.

The popularization of this perception about Sumuroy may be attributed to the fact that even a large number of Spanish armies and allies did not succeed in overthrowing his supreme leadership. This supports the contention that in folk narratives, people consider their heroes to carry supernatural powers, hence, in Sumuroy's case, he is both a hero of history and tradition.

Bravery is also one of the heroic qualities of Sumuroy. It is very evident in the tales that there were many instances where he single-handedly fought against and defeated the Spanish colonizers. He would even challenge his enemies to bring more forces for them to be able to defeat him. His skills and bravery are in perfect blend in facing and defeating the forces sent by the colonial government. This projection about the local hero suggests that bravery is imperative, and in the case of Sumuroy, the narratives describe a person, and a hero, who risks his own life to defend his territory and ideals.

These qualities are very evident in the following lines:

When Sumuroy became intoxicated with alcohol, he would start beheading the Spanish soldiers but would spare three of them and would challenge for another group of soldiers to come saying, "Return to your ship and bring more of your comrades." (The Famous Man)

His footprint had marked on the rock in Nipa, near Nagbubtac. The footprint has never been erased until now due to his supernatural powers. He could cross Batag Island, by just walking in the sea. When he wished to catch enormous fish like baraka (grouper), he would usually go fishing. (Entrapped Baraka/ Grouper Fish)

Strategies/ Strategist, Innovation/Innovative, and Wit/Witty

The narratives clearly picture the hero to be a man of wit. He is not only brave and strong, more than that, he maintains a plan for the defense of his camp and thinks first before he initiates an attack. One of his best weapons against his enemies is his knowledge about the terrain. His choice of camp, Kasili, enabled him to use the sloping- feature of the mountain to defeat the Spaniards. His knowledge about shortcuts and routes also allowed him to either penetrate the enemies' base without being noticed or escape from an attack.

The retrieved and translated tales consider Sumuroy an effective strategist. This affirms that in Philippine

heroic narratives, the hero is not only known for his strength and bravery, but also for his cunning.

The following lines/passages support this claim:

He, with his allies would climb up the mountain to cut toog (Rosewood tree) which were six meters in diameter and slid them down to crush the enemies. The rolling trunks crushed the Spaniards who were staying at the edge of the mountain. (Six Meters in Diameter)

Whenever Sumoroy visited Napo, he put his staff standing and wore his hat on the top of it. (Napo, the New Kasili)

Strength of Mind/Strong-minded, Determination/Determined and Obedience/Obedient

The tales narrate not only the valor of Sumuroy but also the strengths of both the native fighters and the Spanish armies. The Palapagnons' main advantage in the revolution was their knowledge of the terrain while the Spanish armies took pride of their weapons. Amidst the fact that his force was overpowered by the military training and advanced weaponries of the enemies, Sumuroy was resolute and unswerving that they would triumph over Spain's trained military force. Armed with traditional cane and spears, he led the revolution and fought hard against the demoralizing policies of the colonial government. There were instances in the tales when he needed to combat the Spanish forces alone, but his perseverance in bringing back order in his town, made him victorious. Amidst the great number of the enemy's forces, his optimism and fortitude inspired the Palapagnons to respond against the tyranny and oppression. The sheer determination of the strong-minded hero made his feats more meaningful and worthy of emulation.

The significant roles of his parents and his co-leaders in the revolution were always acknowledged by Sumuroy. He would usually consult his father, who was a *babaylan*, before he would come up with important decisions. He would always follow the will of his father and respect the suggestions of his colleagues especially Pedro Caamug of Catubig. In one of the narratives, Sumuroy immediately obeyed the command of his father when he was tasked to kill Father Barberan to signal the beginning of the uprising. Just like other Philippine heroic narratives, the role of the parent/s is crucial in the adventures and deeds of their obedient and respectful sons/heroes.

The following passages are affirmative of these traits:

Sumuroy travelled from Bubuyaon to fight the Spaniards here in the valley. This place was a densed forest before.

*Sumuroy used only his cane as a shield and weapon.-
The Cane and the Sadok*

Nationalism/Patriotism/Patriotic

The town of Palapag was very important to the Spanish colonial rule. Its location was included in the route of the galleon trade and became the seat of the Spanish rule in the Ibabao region. The tales suggest that the people of Palapag welcomed and embraced Christianity. Sumuroy was in fact an assistant of Father Barberan before he founded the revolution. Sumuroy directly expressed his opposition to polo y servicios and other repressive policies of the colonial government. His conviction was strong that the Palapagnons and the Filipinos were not deserving of the unjust treatment. He mobilized his people and reached other towns and provinces to campaign against the oppressors. The early manifestation of Sumuroy's patriotism may suggest that even during his time, Filipinos had already their concept of a nation or bayan. It may not be as complex as compared to the present structure but it was very clear that for Sumuroy, that the dignity and freedom of the people or natives of a nation or bayan should be respected.

The nationalist Sumuroy is pictured in this passage:

Sumuroy was famous and honored in Palapag. He fought against the Spaniards to represent the plight of the Filipinos. – Sumuroy, A Native of Palapag

These are the most prevalent heroic traits and concepts of heroism embedded in the retrieved and translated tales about Sumuroy. Strength and bravery are still necessary for modern day heroes and leaders. But this time, strength does not connote something supernatural and does not always mean physical – modern day heroes need to have a more holistic definition of strength for them to serve and contribute to the community [country]. It is in the same lens that bravery is not only proven in the battlefield, it becomes a moral and nationalistic characteristic of upholding and fighting for what is right for the betterment of the great majority. Furthermore, heroism today is not only about dying for one's country, it is about doing good things for the country, and by that, it entails carefully planning and thinking about future course of actions which will not only

affect the individual person but also the society in general.

All this leads to the reality that heroism, just like leadership, is simply not for everyone. Certain qualities and qualifications must be possessed and met. Right decisions and sacrifices are to be made too. Sumuroy's heroism was immortalized by the locals' oral tradition because he is beyond the ordinary man/Filipino during his time.

Leadership Style

When Governor Fajardo ordered that Visayan men be forced to work in Cavite shipyards, Sumuroy, with the guidance of his father Juan Ponce, organized an insurrection against the colonial rule. In the retrieved accounts, Sumuroy, as one of the leaders of the revolution, constantly consulted and planned with his companions. The group held meetings at Juan Ponce's house asking for the babaylan's pieces of advice. In fact, it was Juan Ponce who personally chose Sumuroy to be the perpetrator of Father Barberan to signal the start of the revolution. The solid defense system of his army is a manifestation of his strong leadership. He was seen having meetings with the natives of Palapag discussing the goals of the revolution and motivating and inspiring people to partake in the insurrection. This is one of the reasons behind the numerous failed attempts of the Spanish government to silence the uprising.

The tales also convey that Sumuroy leads by example. He did not only plan and give commands but also led actual revolutions and attacks. There are tales where Sumuroy is described as bloodthirsty but this does not discredit his effective and efficient leadership capabilities. The rapid growth of the revolt which reached Luzon and Mindanao in a span of one year is attributed to his democratic style of leadership. He consulted elders and allows members to communicate and participate in decision-making. This was best manifested when other towns in Samar and provinces communicated with him to establish alliance and strengthen the revolution. He would always consult other leaders of the revolution like Pedro Caamug.

These existing historical and folk narratives about Sumuroy upholds that the local hero has qualities of a transformational-democratic leader. He opposed against the oppressive and demoralizing policies of the Spaniards and started the revolution to forward his vision for his beloved town and its people. He felt that there was an immediate need to change and transform

the colonial society and Filipinos should be more assertive about it.

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