

Tribal Blaan Courtship Dance: An Ethnography

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Abstract

This ethnographic study documents and analyzes the traditional courtship dance of the Blaan tribe in Barangay Assumption, Koronadal City, South Cotabato, Philippines. Despite the rich cultural heritage of the Blaan people, no formally recognized courtship dance existed prior to this research. Through in-depth interviews with six Blaan elders and participatory observation, the study co-created *Maral Aksibal* ("courtship dance"), characterized by expressive hand gestures using the *siebay* (malong) and rhythmic

footwork without fixed counts. The dance culminates when a dancer places the *siebay* on the *tananggong*, symbolizing performance closure. Findings reveal a generational gap in cultural knowledge, with younger Blaan members largely unaware of traditional courtship customs. The study underscores the importance of cultural preservation and recommends the developed dance as an instructional module for Physical Education and cultural revitalization efforts.

Keywords: Blaan tribe, courtship dance, Maral Aksibal, ethnography, cultural preservation, indigenous dance, South Cotabato, Philippines, traditional dance, cultural heritage, dance documentation

Introduction

Philippine traditional dances serve as vital connections to ancestral spirits and cultural identity, evolving through history and foreign influences while maintaining unique regional characteristics (Alejandro & Abad-Santos, 2002). Among indigenous groups, the Blaan tribe of South Cotabato is renowned for vibrant cultural expressions, yet their courtship dance traditions remain undocumented. This study addresses this gap by investigating Blaan courtship practices through Aquino's (1965) dance documentation framework, which examines elements like historical context, costumes, and movement patterns. The research responds to the urgent need for cultural preservation, as younger Blaan generations show declining knowledge of traditional customs (Yamut, 2008). By characterizing the *Maral Aksibal* courtship dance, this study provides foundational material for educational modules and cultural revitalization in Blaan communities.

Methods

Employing a qualitative ethnographic design, the study engaged six pure-blooded Blaan elders (aged 40+) from Barangay Assumption, selected through purposive sampling based on community influence and dance knowledge. Following ethical protocols from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, data collection involved:

1. **Community Engagement:** Multi-stage consultations with tribal leaders, including Memorandum of Agreement negotiations
2. **Participant Observation:** Documentation of dance movements and rituals
3. **Semi-structured Interviews:** Focused on dance history, costumes, and musical accompaniment
4. **Triangulation:** Cross-verification of oral histories with material artifacts

The researcher collaborated with elders to choreograph *Maral Aksibal*, subsequently evaluated by dance experts. Data analysis followed Schumacher's (2005) qualitative methods, emphasizing emergent themes from participant narratives.

Results

Key findings include:

1. **Dance Characteristics:** *Maral Aksibal* features four figures: (I) approach, (II) circling courtship, (III) *siebay* placement (marriage proposal), and (IV) celebratory ensemble dancing. The *almafa* step (stomping with torso bends) forms the foundation, accompanied by *tananggong* drum rhythms.
2. **Cultural Symbols:**
 - Costumes: Women wear *lbung* blouses with intricate beadwork; men don *saul tabih* shirts with *fais* (ceremonial blades)
 - Props: *Siebay* cloth transforms into a courtship token
3. **Generational Knowledge Gap:** Elders demonstrated comprehensive dance knowledge, while youth participants struggled to recall traditional steps, highlighting cultural erosion.

The co-created dance integrates authentic Blaan movements with performative structure for educational adaptation.

Discussion

The study reveals how *Maral Aksibal* encapsulates Blaan cosmology, where dance mediates human-spirit relationships (Unabia, 1985). Its improvisational nature contrasts with Western choreographic conventions, reflecting indigenous concepts of time and social interaction. The *siebay* ritual mirrors Blaan marriage customs, where textile exchange symbolizes union.

These findings align with global indigenous dance studies showing how performance preserves ecological knowledge (Patterson et al., 2018). However, the observed generational disconnect suggests acculturation pressures from mainstream Philippine society. The researcher's collaborative methodology offers a model for ethical cultural documentation, addressing power imbalances noted in postcolonial research (Parahoo, 2006).

Limitations include the single-community focus and reliance on elder memory. Future studies should expand to other Blaan subgroups and investigate dance's role in intertribal relations with the T'boli.

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