

The Dance Description of the Ata Manobo Dances in Talaingod, Davao del Norte¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to document and support the indigenous dances of the Ata Manobo in Talaingod, Davao del Norte. It provides essential data on the dances of the Ata Manobo, the cultural characteristics of the dancing movements, and the preliminary dance description analysis.

The researcher immersed in the community to document their eight dances. She conducted key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and direct participant observation.

In analyzing different dance movements of the Manobo, the researcher used the technique of Labanotation. Labanotation or Kinetography Laban is a notation system for recording and analyzing human movement (Guest, 2005).

The "Manobo Tribal Council" identified eight Ata Manobo dances, namely *Aabaka*, *Bangkakow*, *Inamungan*, *Kalasang*, *Tagudturan*, *Pungko*, *Natarin Kulutawi*, and *Pungko*. According to their elders, out of these eight dances, three reflect human activity in the community for harvesting, planting and manual rice grinding (*Aabaka*, *Bangkakow*, and *Inamungan*), one dance for survival activity or war dance (*Kalasang*), one dance for a social event (*Tagudturan* or a tribal hip-hop dance), one dance for ceremonies and rituals (*Pungko*). There is also an expression of mourning and sadness (*Natarin*), as well as a courtship dance (Kulutawi).

This research study intends to contribute to the developing frameworks in analyzing the cultures and practices of the Ata Manobo. It also proposes to become the group's tangible dance learning material for younger and future generations that aim to keep their cultural identities.

KEYWORDS

indigenous dances, Ata-Manobo, performance studies, Mindanao and Sulu Studies

One of the most significant challenges of ethnolinguistic groups is cultural revolutionary change (Sharma 2004). Many scholars have argued that it is due to contacts with other cultures, which somehow leads them to change their own lifeworlds. In consideration of this cultural condition, expressive cultures such as dances, music, and different types of craft are profoundly affected and have led to a degeneration of "indigenous" life (Sharma 2004). It is also remarkable to note that majority of the traditional systems in the Philippines are undocumented and commonly passed on from generation to generation through oral tradition. The initiative of documenting cultural and traditional knowledge contributes to the continuation and protection of cultural identities and historical continuities of ethnolinguistic groups (Yamut 2009).

Dance is a performance art form consisting of purposefully selected sequences of human movement. Pusnik (2010) defines dance as the most common form of human expression through movement. It has both an aesthetic and symbolic value, and is acknowledged by performers and observers within a particular culture. Thus, dancing exists in every cultural group.

This research study intends to contribute to the developing frameworks in analyzing the cultures and practices of the Ata Manobo. It also

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proposes to become the group's tangible dance learning material for younger and future generations that aim to keep their cultural identities. The research study aims to identify and describe the different movements in various Ata Manobo dances. Furthermore, it plans to translate the documented dances into descriptive analyses by using the Labanotation method. Labanotation or Kinetography Laban is a notation system for recording and analyzing human movement (Guest 2005). It records action from the moving person's point of view, which conforms to the ethnographic practice of taking into account social meanings attached to particular kinds of social action (Feinberg and Santos 2015). The researcher follows the following steps for Labanotation or Kinetography Laban: (a) record the dances accentuating the body movements; (b) translate the dance movements into descriptive analysis; and (c) analyze each body movement and find the corresponding notation. However, the comprehensive and rigorous notation of dances is not provided in this study.

While the research study utilizes the descriptive method of research, it aims to weave relevant information on Ata Manobo's socio-cultural, political, and economic spheres to the expressive cultures that are their dances. The researcher immersed personally in the community of the Ata Manobo in Talaingod, Davao del Norte. She conducted key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and direct participant observation. She also took pictures and recorded dance videos, as what anthropologists and other social scientists do to understand indigenous knowledge (Mensah et al 2014).

During the field work, eight Ata Manobo dances were documented: *Aabaka*, *Bangkakow*, *Inamungan*, *Kalasang*, *Tagudturan*, *Pungko*, *Natarin*, *Kulutawi*, and *Pungko*. For this particular study, however, only three were translated to descriptive dance analyses. The researcher needs more time for data validation and analysis of each dance movement detail with the Manobo dance experts and Manobo Tribal Council.

The Ata Manobo

The Ata Manobo are found in the northwestern portion of Davao del Norte, Bukidnon, and Compostela Valley. There is now a town called Talaingod in Davao del Norte – it is about 101 km North of Davao City. The town was created under Republic Act 7081 on 2 July 1992 and is now classified as a second-class municipality in the province of Davao del Norte. Talaingod is composed of three barangays or villages, namely: Barangay Dagohoy, Barangay Palma Gil, and Barangay Sto. Niño. Seventy-two percent (72%) of the inhabitants of Talaingod are Ata Manobo (Kalinawa Art Foundation). In 2015, The Indigenous Peoples Human Rights Defenders (IPHRD) Network reported that a total of 114,000 hectares of land had been approved by the National Commission of the Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) as the ancestral domain (AD) of the IPs in Talaingod, and a portion of Kapalong and Sto. Tomas in Davao del Norte.

The term "Ata" refers to the people who dwell in very high places or at the peak of the mountain, while "Manobo" means "human." The use of the term "Ata" becomes complex as it is similar to "Agta", which more commonly refers to Negrito groups in Luzon (Ragragio and Paluga 2019). The term "Ata" is believed to have derogatory connotations for Manobo leaders, so they identify those who live in the highlands as "Pantaron Manobo" and "Talaingod Manobo". The previous terms are taken after the locales and spaces of their ancestral domain. Despite these labels, the Ata Manobo, Pantaron Manobo, and Talaingod Manobo consider each other as kin who share a common language and material culture (Ragragio and Paluga 2019).

The Ata Manobo travel to the lowland (población) whenever they trade their cash crops and procure their basic needs. And so they are exposed to the different ways of life of the people in the población. During these trips, they observe contemporary dances and music, and imitate and follow them. According to the group's elders and leaders, only three out of ten members from the younger

generation are still familiar with their indigenous dances. This socio-cultural reality affirms the earlier speculation that expressive cultures, such as dancing, weaken through time.

The municipality of Talaingod in Davao del Norte is also known for the presence of government forces and communist elements. The existence of these groups in their community has caused displacement for the Ata Manobo, especially those living in remote areas. This is one of the reasons why the group moves from one place to another, and prefers to live away to avoid such conflict. In a situation like this, cultural practices are affected and interrupted, including their dances, since they need to secure their welfare and survival. The Ata Manobo recognize the datu or chieftain as their leader who holds authority over the entire community. They also have a tribal chieftain who attends to all complaints that involve Lumad actions and mobilities (Caduaya 2019). At present, the Ata Manobo elders as well as other “tribal leaders” are working jointly to continue pushing for the development and transformation of Talaingod.

The Eight Dances of the Ata Manobo

According to the Ata Manobo elders, out of their eight dances, three reflect human activities in the community; *Aabaka*, *Bangkakow*, and *Inamungan* (harvesting, planting, and manual rice grinding); one dance for survival activity, *Kalasang* (war dance); one dance for a social event, *Tagudturan* (tribal hip-hop dance); one dance for ceremonies and rituals, *Pungko*; one expression of mourning and sadness, *Natarin*; and a courtship dance, *Kulutawi*. These dances are often unstructured, which means that the Ata Manobo dancing movements do not follow specific measures, as they do not have ingress and egress. The length of the dances is dependent on the state of mind and feelings of the dancer/chanter as they dance. Thus, Ata Manobo dance movements are incomparable and exclusive.

Dances	Description
Aabaka	This dance is performed when reaping Abaca fibers. The pulling of the trunk is portrayed in the dance.
Bangkakow	This dance is performed when asking the divine grace of <i>Manama</i> (Creator) for a good harvest. This dance is also known as the log dance. It is usually performed by a total of six performers: four of them are female dancers who move rhythmically around the <i>bangkakow</i> or log, and the other two are male dancers who beat the log as accompaniment to their dancing movements.
Inamungan	This dance is known as the harvest dance. In this event, the entire members of the <i>sitio</i> or community join together to celebrate their bountiful harvest.
Kalasang	This dance is known as the <i>pangayaw</i> or war dance. The dance is performed by two male dancers depicting a fight using a <i>bangkaw</i> (an arrow) and <i>kalasang</i> or a shield.
Natarin	This dance is performed by two dancers: one male dancer and one female dancer. It is also performed when someone from the group passes away or loses something. The dancing movements show the expression of mourning and sadness.
Kulutawi	This dance is known as the courtship dance. There are two dancers: one male dancer and one female dancer. The dance routine depicts the movements of the birds as they fly and hop to woo each other.
Pungko	<i>Pungko</i> means sitting down. This dance is a ritual dance and performed by a disabled person who beseeches complete healing from <i>Manama</i> (Creator).
Tagudturan	This dance is known as the “hip-hop” dance. There are usually two dancers: one male dancer and one female dancer whose dance movements are in a fast beat.

The Ata Manobo dance movements are replete with inimitable cultural characteristics of the group such as the virtues of being caring and humble. According to some Ata Manobo elders and leaders, being caring and humble are attributed to the group's concern with the needs of their other members. The group's cooperation resembles how the available flora and fauna in the mountains share their bounty of gifts.

These dance movements also manifest involvement in the Ata Manobo social activities and ways of living, like planting cash crops such as abaca, rice, and corn, etc. Overall, the virtues mentioned earlier have taught Ata Manobo to defend and protect their lands because it is the "only source of their life." Here are some of the Ata Manobo dance movements: *banloy* (the swaying of hips); *hug-ot* (the act of pulling the abaca trunk); *kios* (floor scratching); *kotong* (straightening the body after bending [*popoko*]); *kuddol* (bending of knees); *popoko* (body bending); *pulutawi* (wooing movement); *sadiow* (staying on the post, swaying of hips/body, and stamping of feet with or without chanting); *sikal* (walking movement); *takurang* (forcefully stamping the feet; this movement is performed when crushing rice and corns); *pangadiow* (two male dancers in a fighting position, both of them carrying an arrow for beating and a shield for protection); *pungko* (both legs crossed together and hands making bouncing movements); and *undok / muduko* (the bowing of head).

Three Ata Manobo Dances with Descriptive Notation

1. *Aabaka*

One of the cash crops of the Talaingod Manobo is abaca. According to the elders, the harvesting work is backbreaking, especially for the male Manobo, since they are the ones who do the labor. To be able for them to make the harvest activity easier, particularly in reaping abaca fibers, *Aabaka* is performed, since the pulling of the trunk of the abaca tree is portrayed in the dance. In the past, *Aabaka* is performed during the abaca harvest season. However, because of cultural changes, at present, it is danced on special occasions like festivals, social gatherings, etc. A female and a male dancer usually perform this dance. The female dancer/chanter uses *saluroy*, a two-foot-long bamboo guitar instrument, while the male dancer/chanter uses *kudlong*, a wooden guitar-like musical instrument with two strings (Bajo 2004).

The female dancer positions herself on one post while swaying her hips gracefully and stamping her feet with fine (meaning "little" or "tiny") steps. The male dancer portrays the pulling of the trunk of the abaca plant while moving closer to the female dancer and making a full clockwise turn. The length of the dance is dependent on the state of mind and feelings of the dancers/chanters. It is important to stress, however, that the recorded dance lasted only two minutes. Moreover, the counting (cts) or the repetitions of the dance movements are based on the beats of their accompaniment.

The female dancer with the *saluroy* instrument

1. Bend the knees (*kuddol*) and sway the hips (*banloy*) gracefully with fine stamping steps while turning obliquely forward right and left. 40 cts.

The male dancer with the *kudlong* instrument

1. Bend the body (*popoko*) and knees (*kuddol*) with fine stamping steps while moving forward to partner and away from partner. 8 cts.

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| 2. Bend the body (<i>popoko</i>) and knees (<i>kuddol</i>) with fine stamping steps while moving obliquely forward, as if pulling the Abaca trunk. | 8 cts. |
| 3. Bend the body (<i>popoko</i>) and knees (<i>kuddol</i>) with fine stamping steps while moving closer to the female dancer and making a full clockwise turn. | 8 cts. |
| 4. Bend the body (<i>popoko</i>) and knees (<i>kuddol</i>) with fine stamping steps while moving forward and backward; to and from the position of the female dancer. | 8 cts. |
| 5. Bend the body (<i>popoko</i>) and knees (<i>kuddol</i>) with fine stamping steps while moving closer to the female dancer and making a full clockwise turn. | 8 cts. |

2. *Natarin*

One of the virtues of the Manobo is caring. Thus, the welfare of the group's members is their primary concern. They usually join together in celebrations and momentous occasions. Also, in a situation of grieving and mourning, they have an empathetic and sympathetic attitude. They show their concern to those affected individuals by dancing *Natarin*. This dance is performed when someone from the Ata Manobo dies or when an important treasure or trinket is lost. It involves two dancers: one male and one female. The dance movements show expressions of mourning and sadness. The female dancer/chanter also uses *saluroy* while the male dancer/chanter uses *kudlong*.

The female dancer is one meter apart from the male dancer as they chant one after the other. They stay on their respective posts as they chant. Also, they moved simultaneously, either clockwise or counter-clockwise. The length of the dance is also dependent on the state of mind and feelings of the dancers/chanters. The recorded dance lasted for three minutes and 24 seconds. Moreover, the counting (cts) or the repetitions of the dance movements are based on the beats of their accompaniment.

The female dancer with the *saluroy* instrument

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| 1. Straighten the body (<i>kotong</i>) while swaying the hips and stamping the feet in tune with the beat of the chanter – male dancer. | 24 cts. |
| 2. Step right (R) foot sideward; close left (L) to right (R); Step left (L) foot sideward; close right (R) to left (L). | 8 cts. |
| 3. Step right (R) foot forward followed with left (L) foot (<i>sikal</i>) while knees are bending (<i>kuddol</i>) and straighten the body (<i>kotong</i>) with head tilting downward while doing small running steps, counter-clockwise and taking small steps backward in between. This is repeated clockwise. | 8 cts. |
| 4. Step right (R) foot forward followed with left (L) foot (<i>sikal</i>) while knees are bending (<i>kuddol</i>) and straighten the | 8 cts. |

body (*kotong*) with head tilting downward then quarter turn, counter-clockwise movement with backward steps.

5. Staying on post while swaying the body side by side, and stamping the feet. 8 cts.

The male dancer with the *kudlong* instrument

1. Staying on post while swaying the body side by side, and stamping the feet as the dancer performs the chant (*sadiow*). 24 cts.
2. Step right (R) foot forward followed with left (L) foot (*sikal*) while knees are bending (*kuddol*) and straighten the body (*kotong*) with head tilting downward while doing small running steps, counter-clockwise and taking small steps backward in between while following the girl. This is repeated clockwise. 8 cts.
3. Still following the girl, the dancer executes a pivot right (R) and left (L) and continues with *sadiow*. 8 cts.
4. Staying on post and moving the right (R) foot on side while performing full turn in counter-clockwise then clockwise. 8 cts.
5. Staying on post while swaying the body on both sides with stamping of feet. 8 cts.

3. *Tagudturan*

This dance is known as tribal “hip-hop” and is usually performed when there are social gatherings. The male and female dancers move in a fast beat as they dance *Tagudturan*. Similar to the *Aabaka* and *Natarin*, the female dancer/chanter in this dance uses *saluroy* while the male dancer/chanter uses *kudlong*.

The female dancer stays on one post while swaying her body and stamping her feet. She performs with fine (“little” or “tiny”) jumping movements. The male dancer positions himself one meter away from the female dancer and moves forward and backward from his partner, to and from the position of the female dancer. The length of the dance is dependent on the state of mind and feelings of the dancers/chanters. The recorded dance lasted for two minutes and 30 seconds. Moreover, the counting (cts) or the repetitions of the dance movements are based on the beats of their accompaniment.

The female dancer with the *saluroy* instrument

1. Staying on post while swaying the body on both sides and stamping the feet (*sadiow*). 8cts
2. Fine jumping movements to the right (R). 8cts
3. Staying on post while swaying the body in both sides and stamping the feet (*sadiow*). 40cts

The male dancer with the <i>kudlong</i> instrument	
1. Bending the knees (<i>kuddol</i>) and body (<i>popoko</i>) and tilting the head (<i>muduko</i>) while stamping the feet moving forward and backward; to and from the position of the female dancer.	16cts
2. Bending the knees (<i>kuddol</i>) and body (<i>popoko</i>) and tilting the head (<i>muduko</i>) while performing around the partner.	32cts
3. Bending the knees (<i>kuddol</i>) and body (<i>popoko</i>) and tilting the head (<i>muduko</i>) while stamping the feet moving forward and step close with slight stamp on the 1 st ct.	10cts

Ata Manobo, Movements, and Lifeworlds

The three dances and the movements presented earlier articulate the vibrant cultural traditions and practices of the group. They dance to express and define their emotions and, at the same time, their ways of living. The Ata Manobo are actively engaged in social activities in the community, such as harvesting, as showed in *Aabaka* dance. They are compassionate individuals who bestow love and comfort, especially with the other members of the group who are in tribulation, as exhibited in *Natarin*. Furthermore, the Ata Manobo dances are full of energy and excitement as they are always involved in social gatherings, as revealed in *Tagudturan*. In all this, the Ata Manobo unite in all their undertakings and endeavors. They are simply incomparable to anyone else.

In the discourse of culture change, contemporary dance and music can affect and change the expressive cultures of a particular group. However with this Ata Manobo dance documentation, I expect it to be used as the group's tangible learning dance material for the younger and future generations. Moreover, the work aims to help the Ata Manobo in protecting their cultural identities and historical continuities.

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