

Ancestral Veneration (*Pag-Umboh*) Practice Among the Sama in Tawi-Tawi, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Ancestral veneration or the pag-umboh among the Sama people is considered one of their important cultural traditions. To understand the Sama's devotion and perseverance in the pag-umboh ritual, this research investigates the ancestral veneration ritual among Sama in the four municipalities of Tawi-Tawi, namely Sitangkai, Tabawan-South Ubian, Banaran, and Bongao. The researcher interviewed ten key respondents from these four municipalities with a total of forty resource persons. This study primarily discusses the nature and significance of ancestral veneration. It also examines the factors that contribute to or reasons for the persistence of pag-umboh among the Sama in Tawi-Tawi. This research emphasizes that the pag-umboh is a socio-religious and cultural ritual performed by the Sama during the rice harvest season and at times of sickness or calamity. In the pag-umboh ritual, the Sama recognizes the ancestors' or umboh's ability to intercede in human affairs. The ritual promotes inclusivity and connectivity between the living and the dead. It is held to reminisce and show respect to their ancestors, and to prevent scourging inflicted by them. Furthermore, the pag-umboh among the Sama continuously persists as it gives the Sama a sense of security, protection, and distinctiveness. Thus, the pag-umboh shapes and influences Sama's social, cultural, and religious being.

KEYWORDS

ancestral veneration, pag-umboh ritual, Sama, Tawi-Tawi

Introduction

The Sama or the Bajau people are a distinct group scattered throughout various regions of Malaysia, Indonesia, and southern Philippines. They are culturally and linguistically diverse (Pugh Kitingan, Hussin, and Baptist 2005). A sub-group of Sama people is also found in Basilan, Davao, Zamboanga, and the Sulu archipelago, and some of them inhabit the area around Kota Kinabalu (Kuris 1979, 77; Nimmo 1965, 421). The Sama Dilaut are also known as Bajau Laut, and others call them Sama Pala'au. These similar Sama names imply people of the sea, in contrast to *aa dea* (land people) (Sather 2001, 3). Congruently, Bajau in Indonesia also named

themselves Sama Dilaut (Nuraini 2012, 144). The sea functions as the Sama Bajau or Sama Dilaut's home and refuge, where they can freely live and move (Bottignolo 1995).

Many of the Sama boat-dwellers have preserved their indigenous beliefs (Nimmo 1990, 3). Due to the influence of the Islamic faith, *Tuhan* is a term substituted with Allah. Tuhan as a supreme deity is the creator of human beings and everything that exists in the land (Baptist and Regis 2012, 111). In Semporna, the Sama understand Tuhan and *Saitan* as two entities that existed in the beginning, and Tuhan created the *umboh* or the first-ever human ancestor (Sather 1997, 18). According to Jumala (2018, 169), the first umboh or ancestor refers to Adam and Eve, and it also pertains to the dead ancestors.

The Sama people believe in the importance of balancing the physical and spiritual worlds. They engage in rituals with the elements of dance, music, and other similar materials to create an equilibrium between the two worlds (Hussin and Baptist 2019, 10). To maintain connectivity to the spiritual realm, rituals become an essential part of the Sama's faith, and they honor their ancestral spirits, the umboh or *omboh* (Baptist and Regis 2012, 109). As mentioned by Bottignolo (1995, 18), one of the annually celebrated rituals among the Sama is the *Umboh Pai Bahao* (harvest of the new rice). Around September during the harvest season, the Umboh Pai Bahao is celebrated for a duration of about three months. The offering of the harvest signifies self-offering among the Bajau. The offering of rice serves as a manifestation, reminder, or pledge of Sama's dependency on their umboh for guaranteeing them provisions and comfort (Bottignolo 1995, 85-86). Hussin (2012, 4) also affirmed that the term umboh used in the pag-umboh means ancestors or deceased parents. Thus, the Bajau acknowledge the omboh or *arwah* as ancestors (Pugh Kitingan, Hussin, and Baptist 2005, 209). They believe in the power of umboh. The supplication in the pag-umboh ritual itself is addressed to the umboh to seek help or protection from danger; to have long life; to cure sickness; and other requests or prayers (Hussin 2012, 8). The pag-umboh celebration is not based on a seasonal cycle due to the unfamiliarity of the Bajau with agricultural work. The appearance of the unhusked rice in the market is the determining factor for the beginning of the ritual. This ritual is considered a family feast and not a mass celebration (Bottignolo 1995, 19). As Jundam stated (1990, 60), ancestral veneration has been one of the significant traditions of the Sama. The pag-omboh/pag-umboh is celebrated as a mandatory practice of the Sama people all over Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. As cited earlier, the pag-umboh ritual serves to connect the living and the dead, and its execution is based on the lunar calendar, held for three days and nights (Hussin 2012, 4).

The Sama traditions in Tawi-Tawi have guided their lives directly and indirectly, and these practices profile their socio-cultural identity and continuity (Jundam 1990, 55). To shed more clarity and understanding on the ancestral veneration

or the pag-umboh among the Sama people in Tawi-Tawi, this research highlights ancestral veneration practice among the Sama in the four islands of Tawi-Tawi: Sitangkai, Tabawan-South Ubian, Bongao, and Banaran. By stressing the pag-umboh practice among the Sama, this work sought to examine the pag-umboh ritual and its essence, and also to scrutinize the reasons for the persistence of the pag-umboh.

Methodology

This study was conducted during the pag-umboh season in Tawi-Tawi in 2005. The researcher led ethnographic fieldwork in Tawi-Tawi's four Sama municipalities: Sitangkai, Tabawan-South Ubian, Bongao, and Banaran. These islands were chosen due to their convenience to the researcher's location and travel routine. The researcher focused on the four central municipalities and identified ten key respondents/informants from each area. The researcher conducted both formal and informal interviews with forty resource persons. Each of the ten respondents from the four municipalities were randomly selected. The random informants were all pag-umboh practitioners in their different municipalities. Some of the key informants were interviewed days before they actually performed the ritual, while others had given their consent for an interview on the day of the pag-umboh. The researcher used a cassette recorder to record the interviews. Participant-observation technique of data collection was also utilized. In addition, the researcher used questionnaires about the practice to determine the Sama's knowledge of the ritual. Belonging to the Sama tribe himself, the author formulated questionnaires in Sinama (Sama language) and later translated them into English.

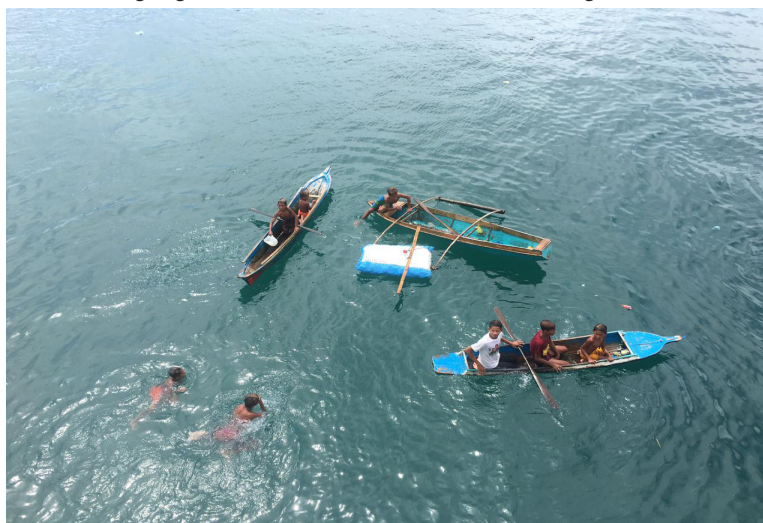


Figure 1. Sama Bajau kids, shipping port (Jambatan Kappal), Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, 2005



Figure 2. Island of Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, 2005

The Pag-umboh Ritual among the Sama in Tawi-Tawi

During the interview in Sitangkai with Musa Hadji Malabong, he mentioned the three types of pag-umboh being performed as the need arises. These are the *Pag-Umboh Pai Baha-o* (pag-umboh of the new rice), *Pag-Umboh Pai* (pag-umboh of the rice), and *Pag-umboh Buwa Saloka* (pag-umboh of the coconut tree). The *Pag-umboh Pai Baha-o* is the most important rite among the three, as it is celebrated once a year during the rice harvest season. It is also the grandest feast among the Sama, and the tradition demands that all families observe it whether or not there is a particular need to ask for help from umboh. The other two remaining rituals are considered minor practices derived from the *Pag-Umboh Pai Baha-o*. They may be performed at any time; the *Umboh Pai* is considered more powerful than the *Umboh Buwa Saloka*. Hadji Malabong added that the differences between the two are linked to the fact that agricultural life develops in the periodic succession of two seasons. The two seasons are recognizable from their principal products: coconut and rice. While coconut has been available throughout the years, rice is a seasonal product. In this sense, the *Umboh Buwa Saloka*, which finds its liturgical time at the end of the rice season, may be regarded as a minor variant suggested not only by cultic precepts but also by convenience.

Furthermore, Julsiti Nurullaji narrated that the vital role of the pag-umboh may be traced to a legend of the Sama of Banaran. Long ago, the said Sama had no rice to eat. With their fish, they searched for rice with which they would barter their catch. They met a *Salip* (Sharief) who was willing to exchange his rice with their fish on the condition that the Sama must first perform a *duwa-a* before eating.

Upon reaching their house, they immediately ground the rice, then cooked and ate it but forgot to pray. Soon, they all got sick. When Salip learned this, he told them that they should quickly perform the *duwa-a* and come back to have more rice. Due to this tale, every rice harvest season, the Sama dutifully perform the *duwa-a*, which falls under *Timpo Satan* or seasonal wind. In addition, Jarani mentioned that the pag-umboh ritual had been practiced even during ancient times. The ritual has been subjected to some changes or modifications on many islands in Tawi-Tawi. Despite modernity, the constant observance of pag-umboh proves the deep attachment of the Sama to their umboh.

According to Aripullah Khamsa, in the observance of the pag-umboh, the room where it is held must be bare except for things needed in the rite. No appliances like beds, *sala* sets, TV sets, and no decorations should exist. There should be no electric lights. Only oil lamps are used. The worn clothes of the participants in pag-umboh must be clean and not usually worn in their daily activities. Notably, the ritual leader (*mag-umboh* or healer) wears clean clothes or new ones. In addition, Nagalain Mallain mentioned that all the materials needed for the ceremony are kept in the *Baul Djin* or the trunk of the spirit. The pag-umboh is held at the house of the mag-umboh (healer); the house must be big and spacious enough to accommodate a hundred people who will join the celebration.

Furthermore, ritual specialist Imam Persing Alih added that there is a sacred place in their dwelling, which is the headwall in the corner of the house (window-like opening). Here, the umboh positions himself when he visits the house where the pag-umboh occurs. He said the observance of pag-umboh has no specific day, but it can be celebrated only for two or three months, starting around the beginning of September when the rice is harvested. The pag-umboh usually lasts three to five days, starts at noon, and ends at sunrise. The people involved in the ritual sit on the floor at the start. Then, the celebrant receives the symbolic material presented to him. According to Imam Persing, first, the incense is put in a bowl with glowing embers. Next, the people surround the *panggungan* (sacred place) beside the headwall. Then, the celebrant takes the offering and prays in the sacred place. The prayer goes as such: "Oh our ancestor spirits! Give us long life, more sustenance, and keep us far from misfortune in this world and the day after death, O our ancestor; ask the Almighty God on our behalf; for blessing; more sustenance and to be saved from sickness."

Afterward, the leader of the rites reads a prayer or some verses from the Quran, such as "I seek refuge with Allah from Satan, accursed devil. In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate. I beseech the forgiveness of Allah, the Mighty, the external, the generous whom there is none to be worshipped but He, the living, the eternal, for every sin and mistake, and I turn repentant unto Him, and I ask forgiveness of Him." Aside from these prayers, they likewise mentioned other similar praises and words from the Holy Quran.

After the prayer (*duwa-a*), the prepared food (*jajamuhan*) is eaten together, and the excesses will be brought to the house and eaten by members of the families. The *dulang jajamuhan* is traditionally believed to have a blessing. Cooked rice with coconut milk and *buwas kuning* (yellow rice) are used as an offering. Sugar is not used; otherwise, there will be a curse. Rice is eaten without viands or anything else. If rice is eaten with viands, there will be consequences. The Sama who practice the pag-umboh are not supposed to invite their friends and neighbors to eat after the prayer. This is because the prepared food or *dulang jajamuhan* is intended only for concerned observers of the rituals, which are believed traditionally to be blessed. Nevertheless, if they come to the house where the pag-umboh is held, they may be asked to eat as well. The closing ceremony is straightforward. The celebrant approaches the sacred space and speaks to umboh. He explains that the ceremony will end and asks the umboh not to be upset. With this prayer, the sacred ritual is completed, and the umboh goes away.

On the other hand, Alpha Kayani mentioned that the Sama might unburden themselves before the umboh during the rite, asking for personal favors like healing a sick family member. When a sick person is prayed over in the ritual, it is necessary to remain near the umboh. He drinks a glass of water with incense in it. It is tough to separate a sick person from the umboh, even during emergencies. It provides them with a solid link to their ancestors. Practicing it gives them a sense of continuity with their cherished traditions. It gives them a mechanism by which they can ask for favors from Tuhan, such as good health, healing of sickness, and other requests. Kayani likewise believes that the intense fear of retribution from the umboh motivates them to observe the rite at least once a year. Punishment may take the form as a severe illness, deformity in the family, or bad luck. He said that the ritual is not a collective celebration involving the whole community but a family affair. Those involved in the celebration must help produce all the materials needed for the rite. The person who has been cured of illnesses by the mag-umboh (healer) must pay or make a donation to them.

According to Panglima Jupurani, umboh is the first Sama. In the celebration of the pag-umboh, the umboh is at the center. The head presides over rites symbolizing the themes of ancestors and vegetation. Traditionally, it was Umboh Adam himself who taught the Sama about the pag-umboh. On the other hand, Sarawi mentioned that since the beginning of time, this practice had been handed down from generation to generation. The people have their own lineage of pag-umboh. It is a special skill and privilege that cannot be taught to anybody but must be passed down the ancestral line, from father to son or daughter.

In another narration, Ammalsani Jupurani asserted that the Sama community had practiced pag-umboh since ancient times. As the years pass, there may be some modifications to the practice. However, many Sama, especially in Banaran, Sitangkai, Tabawan, Bongao, and other islands, remain deeply attached to their

umboh. He confirmed that pag-umboh is practiced mainly by members of the family if someone gets sick. They usually perform it during harvest time. The father usually leads the ceremony together with the Imam. As part of the requirements, they usually cook yellowish rice. He also mentioned that pag-umboh is a traditional way of thanking Umboh Adam and their way of not forgetting their forefathers. Failure to perform it would mean a curse to the family. The curse would weaken one until he could no longer work to feed himself. So, one has to promise that he has to perform the pag-umboh to relieve the pain.



Figure 3. The photograph of Indalbasa with the Imam during the pag-umboh preparation in Brgy. Luuk Bangka, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, 2005

According to Aukasa Indalbasa, the pag-umboh ritual is performed by a *Kamata-an* (household) as a rite of intercession. The ritual is almost exclusive when life is in danger, such as during sickness or childbirth. For any illnesses, the pag-umboh ritual is considered the most effective remedy. The form of pag-umboh is modified. First, the sick person becomes the center of attention, which is the quintessential element of the entire liturgical action. From the start, the ill person lies down on the *tepoh* (mat) with the head towards the headwall, resting on the *u-an* (pillows) that delineate the front of the sacred space. Afterward, in the execution of the pag-umboh, the Imam leads the rite and first takes the coconut before placing it in the sacred space while briefly holding it over the head of the sick person and saying the prayer. The *duwa-a* is read both in the Arabic language and in the *sinama* dialect.

Na mboh, ampunun na si: (name of the sick person) bang niya dusa na makaam, la anin na sakkina, saltah pakosogun na baran, Min batenaan Mag-mboh sadja na kami makahaba waktu Pag-umboh maka mbal kam takalipat kami mareum jantung kami.

(Our ancestors' spirits forgive him [the sick person] if they had mistaken you and remove/cure their sickness, make his body strong. So we will observe pag-umboh at every prescribed time, and we won't forget you in our hearts).

The leader-Imam apologizes for possible mistakes that have caused the sickness and may become a hindrance to healing. Then, while holding the coconut high, about ten centimeters above the sick person, he moves it along the body down to

the feet then back up to the head. The healer's local Imam repeats the action three times to make sure that the ritual has taken effect, and puts the coconut in the appropriate sacred place behind the head of the sick person. Then, according to the rite, the liturgical action is repeated with the other coconut or rice baskets. Finally, the Imam-healer reads the Arabic prayers (Quranic verses).

Alpha Kayani also said that once the preceding prayers are recited, and after the salutation "Salam" is said, the participants shake hands in a Muslim manner. The family members kiss in the *pag-ombuan* (a sacred place where the pag-umboh is held). Immediately after the *duwa-a*, the offering of food for the spirit in the pag-umboh is undertaken by the Imam. The yellow rice is solely for the mag-umboh or practitioners who are expected to partake in a little of the food. The remaining *jamu* is eaten together, while the rest of the excess food will be brought to the house and eaten by family members,

In the case of Titina Eshmail, she mentioned that when she got sick, she was brought to different hospitals in Bongao for treatment several times for almost two months. Still, her illness was neither cured nor removed. She was then brought to Banaran during the pag-umboh ritual, and was finally cured of her sickness. Furthermore, Unneng Samsulaya also affirmed that when he got sick, he was brought to the hospital many times for diagnosis and treatment. Still, the doctors could not tell what sickness he suffered from. When he and his relatives performed the pag-umboh rituals, he was cured without taking any medicine. On the other hand, a Bilal who was inflicted with a certain sickness was about to abandon the said ritual belief system since it was tabooed by Islam. However, because of the efficacy of the ritual, he still performed the pag-umboh ritual during the prescribed time. Aukasa Indalbasa likewise mentioned that since there is a mosque present in their area, he and his family almost abandoned and forgot the observance of the pag-umboh ritual for almost fifteen years. However, when his son Alson got sick, he was brought to the clinics and hospitals for treatment and diagnosis for almost three months, but Alson did not recover from his illness. But when the observance of pag-umboh was performed, his son finally recovered.

To the Sama, a person who performs the pag-umboh ritual as prescribed by custom and tradition can extend and share the blessing given to him by the umboh to the members of his household (*kamataan*) and relatives (*kampung*), as well as to the entire community (*kawman*). Meanwhile, if an individual fails to observe the required rituals, the *sukut* or *busung* (curse) of the umboh can result in sickness, mental and physical disabilities, and economic misfortunes, which can also extend to *kamatay* (death) of the *kampung* and the *kawman*. This punishment is believed to be inflicted by displeasing the umboh when one does not observe the proper pag-umboh ritual.

Conclusion

Various ethnic groups in many places still commemorate venerations of their ancestors and observe parallel approaches to honor their deceased progenitors. The ritual has become the living's mystical practice of remembering and reconnecting to the dead. Ancestral veneration has existed as part of people's diverse cultural heritage that offers a significant impact on their present lives and reality. Although the origin or the cradle of the pag-umboh ritual has been somehow incomprehensible and cannot be specifically determined, it is certain that the Sama people have practiced the ritual for many Sama Bajau generations.

The pag-umboh ritual is a socio-cultural and religious ritual performed by Sama families during harvest season, especially during sickness. It is performed with the presence of necessary materials and with the company of a spiritualist who addresses prayers to the ancestors. The Sama pag-umboh is accomplished in a common traditional style but may also be modified with the corresponding purpose of connecting to the umboh. The essence of pag-umboh's execution creates a link that promotes inclusivity and connectivity between Sama's deceased ancestors and the living family. It is performed to please the ancestor. The pag-umboh also signifies Sama's acknowledgment of their umboh's ability to intercede in human affairs. It demonstrates their faith in the umboh's willpower to positively or negatively affect the overall condition of the living.

Furthermore, based on the practitioners' narratives, pag-umboh is observed to reminisce and show respect to the ancestors. The ritual proves Sama's reliance on and trust in the umboh. The ancestral veneration is continuously persisting among the Sama in Tawi-Tawi due to the ritual's efficiency and convenience. The manifesting healing effect when one is tormented with sickness encourage the Sama to constantly practice pag-umboh. Also, the fear of possible retribution motivates the Sama to unceasingly engage in the ritual. The pag-umboh is fulfilled to save the Sama people from any curse, anger, danger, or sickness that may be inflicted by the ancestors or spirits. It serves as a mechanism to ensure the continuity of life, especially of family lines. The persistent observance of the pag-umboh rites presumably assures the Sama's good health, long life, and productivity in economic activities. The rituals' belief system correspondingly minimizes the psychological agitations and emotional stresses of the Sama. Pag-umboh is part of their social, cultural, and religious beliefs that influence their way of life. Thus, the perseverance of the pag-umboh shows that the Sama's rich cultural heritage remains intact despite accepting Islamization and modernization. The Sama's ancestral veneration signifies how a certain cultural ideology influenced the entire being of a particular community. The Sama pag-umboh practitioners do not regard the observance of the pag-umboh ritual as an act of backwardness, but rather as an essential and integral part of their cultural values. For centuries, the Sama's unchanged customs and traditions have manifested their socio-cultural continuity and identity.

Recommendation

Studies and research focusing on Sama's cultural traditions and indigenous beliefs in Tawi-Tawi are quite a few and limited. To enrich further research materials and literature, the author encourages and recommends every academic scholar and researcher to undertake future studies on the socio-cultural and religious acculturation of the Sama people in the Philippines. Hence, the acculturation process is not only continuous but also complex. The researcher likewise suggests that readers continue digging deeper into other cultural practices of the Sama people to advance our understanding of their social and cultural existence.

Endnotes

1. Musa Hadji Malabong (pag-umboh practitioner, Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi), interviewed by the author, October 5, 2005.
2. Julsiti Nurullaji (bilal of the mosque in Kasanganan, Banaran), interviewed by the author, October 12, 2005.
3. Layhani Jairani (pag-umboh practitioner, Sitangkai), interviewed by the author, October 5, 2005.
4. Aripullah Kamsa (pag-umboh practitioner, Kasulutan, Bongao), interviewed by the author, September 15, 2005.
5. Nagalain Mallain (pag-umboh practitioner, Tabawan), interviewed by the author, November, 15 2005.
6. Imam Persing Alih (pag-umboh practitioner, Kasulutan, Bongao), interviewed by the author, September 15, 2005.
7. Alpha Kayani (pag-umboh practitioner, Banaran), interviewed by the author, October 12, 2005.
8. Madrigal Sarawi (pag-umboh practitioner, Banaran), interviewed by the author, October 12, 2005.
9. Ammalsani Jupuranii (pag-umboh practitioner, Tabawan-South Ubian), interviewed by the author, October 20, 2005.
10. Aukasa Indalbasa (pag-umboh practitioner, Brgy. Luuk Bangka, Bongao), interviewed by the author, October 9, 2005.
11. Titina Eshmail (pag-umboh practitioner, Banaran), interviewed by the author, November 11, 2005.
12. Unneng Samsulaya (pag-umboh practitioner, Kasulutan, Bongao), interviewed by the author, October 10, 2005.

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