



Dumiwata: A Starting Point for Inculturated Christianity among the Subanen

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to advance the inculturation of Christianity and transform the “discorded faith” among the indigenous Subanen by grounding missiological practice in their indigenous belief system. It seeks to demonstrate how the Subanen belief in Dumiwata in conversation with the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit might result in the mutual enrichment of both belief systems. Implications for an inculturated catechesis are outlined.

INTRODUCTION

As with other aspects of their culture, Subanen religious life was affected by the encounter with the expressions of Christianity passed on by settlers and the missionaries who came in their wake. Dominated by pre-Vatican II thought and approaches, Christian mission focused primarily on conversion, incorporation into the church, and liturgy. Christian practices were dominated by lowland cultures alien to the distinctive Subanen indigenous belief system and their identity as *Lumads* (non-Muslim indigenous people). Without seeing the relationship between Christianity and their deeply-held indigenous belief system, the Subanen stood on ruptured ground in a crisis of identity, which affected their religious life.



OVERVIEW OF THE SUBANEN INDIGENOUS BELIEF SYSTEM

The Subanen indigenous belief system revolves around *Apo Gumulang*; his son *Dumiwata* (the most powerful of all spirit-beings); and a multitude of spirit-beings inhabiting nature. *Apo Gumulang* is the ancient Father who created the heaven and earth, the ruler of the Universe, and the giver of life to the first human beings. He is commonly referred to as *Magbabaya* or Lord. He has no beginning and “his living presence is seen in nature—in his creation like trees, hills, mountains, cliffs, rivers, and seas.” *Apo Gumulang* is also believed to be very merciful and compassionate towards the human beings whom he sees as his children.

Dumiwata, son and servant of *Apo Gumulang*, is also referred to as *Magbabaya* and is known to be co-ruler and co-governor with *Apo Gumulang*. It is *Dumiwata* whom *Apo Gumulang* sends to responds to human pleas for help. Although separate from *Apo Gumulang*, *Dumiwata* is believed to be united with him in nature and power.

The Subanen also believe in other spirit-beings in nature. They are human-like spirits who guard and protect God’s creation.

METHOD IN INTERRELIGIOUS INCULTURATION

For missiologist Peter Phan, indigenous belief systems form the “blueprint” of cultures, shaping worldviews, lifeways, and relationships, including the rejection or affirmation of God or gods. Not only does religious faith endow human experience with a new dimension, it also provides the conviction and motivation at the root of culture itself. Assimilation and the mere imposition of Christian meanings are therefore inadequate if Christian mission is to take root. As a remedy, Francis X. Clooney suggests the development of an intercultural theology using the methods of mutual and critical correlation in comparative theology. This entails “finding similarities and differences, and reading by means of coordination, superimposition, conversation, tension, and collage.” I will use this framework in my exploration of an approach toward an intercultural theology of the Holy Spirit among the Subanen.

Convergences

There are two main convergences between Subanen and Christian notion about the deity: One in “being” with the Father and the “invisible hand” of the Father sent into the world.

One in “being” with the Father

Just as Christian doctrine holds the Holy Spirit as distinct yet inseparable from the Father, so do the Subanen believe about *Apo Gumulang* and *Dumiwata*. For them, “had there been no *Apo Gumulang*, there would be no *Dumiwata*, hence, they cannot be separated.” *Dumiwata* is one in being with *Apo Gumulang*, and the latter cannot exist without the former. This also resembles the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit as the “Spirit of the Father,” one inseparable from the Father, “uncreated without limit and eternal.” Christian and Subanen belief systems both see “relationship” as a category in their deity/deities. The difference in the belief systems lies in that the Subanens ascribe to *Apo Gumulang* powers that are superior to those of *Dumiwata*.

Being inseparable from and being of the same nature as the ancient Father, *Dumiwata* is likewise referred to as *Magbabaya* that is, Lord and Divine. This is parallel to the Christian understanding about the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

The “Invisible Hand” of the Father sent into the world

Another convergence between the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit and the Subanen notion of *Dumiwata* is in role and function. Christians believe the Holy Spirit continues the mission of God and of Jesus for the renewal of the world. St. Irenaeus of Lyons characterized the Word and the Holy Spirit as the “hands of the Father.” From the Catholic perspective, the Word is inseparable from the Holy Spirit, who continues the Father’s work of “revelation, sanctification, and salvation.”

The Christian understanding about the role and function of the Holy Spirit is discernible in the Subanen belief about *Dumiwata*. For the Subanen, it is also through *Dumiwata* that *Apo Gumulang* sustains and cares for his creation. It is through *Dumiwata* that *Apo Gumulang* responds to the supplication of his people and continues to govern and watch over all the human beings in the world. The work of *Dumiwata* is to carry out the will of *Apo Gumulang* especially in sustaining and protecting creation. Both the Christian and the Subanen belief systems view the Father as sending the Holy Spirit/*Dumiwata* to the world. Both traditions also recognize that the Spirit/*Dumiwata* transcend the world.

Divergence: Son and Servant vs. "Lord, Giver of Life" who proceeds from the Father and the Son

The most apparent difference between the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit and the Subanen belief in *Dumiwata* lies in the relationship with the Father. For the Subanen, *Apo Gumulang* and *Dumiwata* share a father-and-son relationship in which *Dumiwata* is a servant, subordinate to, and dependent on *Apo Gumulang*. Although believed to be inseparable, they do not necessarily act as one, nor do they constitute one singular reality.

In Christian trinitarian doctrine, the Holy Spirit is not the Son, but the "Lord and Giver of Life" who proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Father and the Holy Spirit are two different persons, yet there remains to be one Godhead. The acts of the Holy Spirit are also the acts of God the Father Himself. The Holy Spirit does not act outside of the being of God because the Spirit is the Spirit of God.

*Sāsuguān bu Māgbābyā (Servant and Lord): A Possible Basis
for a Subanen-Christian Theology of the Holy Spirit*

This section seeks to bring into critical dialogical relationship the convergences and divergences between the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the Subanen belief in *Dumiwata*. It also seeks to highlight ways by which they may mutually enrich each other.

First, the Subanen belief in *Dumiwata* can be enhanced by the Christian emphasis on the intimate and equal relationship between the Father and the Holy Spirit. As *Dumiwata* does not act outside the very being of *Apo Gumulang*, who simply cannot be without *Dumiwata*, who also in turn cannot be without the Father, it can therefore be said that *Dumiwata*, while remaining distinct from *Apo Gumulang*, is also the Spirit of *Apo Gumulang*. This way, *Dumiwata* is not just a representative, but a revelation and a true expression of the very presence of *Apo Gumulang*. From this perspective, there can be one Godhead.

The emphasis on the oneness of God and the Holy Spirit may facilitate the introduction of Jesus into local culture. By highlighting the dynamic equivalence between *Dumiwata* and the Holy Spirit, the figure of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God may now be presented. Christian doctrine holds that the Holy Spirit is not just the Spirit of God, but also the Spirit of Jesus. Translated into the Subanen context, the belief in *Dumiwata* parallels the Christian faith in Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. Following such logic of relationship, it can be said that *Dumiwata* is not just the Spirit of God, but he is also the Spirit of Jesus! Here, the “sonship” of *Dumiwata* might also be linked to the “sonship” of Jesus. It can also be added that *Dumiwata* as the dynamic equivalent of the Holy Spirit is also the one who continues God’s work of salvation on earth.

Highlighting the Spirit as the primary agent of mission could also facilitate the adoption of missional consciousness into the local culture. Not only does *Dumiwata* respond to the needs of humans and all of creation, he also moves people to serve others, most especially those who are in need. In this way, people share in his mission.

Second, the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit may be enriched by the Subanen emphasis on *Dumiwata* as the servant and minister of *Apo Gumulang* and his people. The Christian perspective underlines the Lordship of the Holy Spirit, but it does not emphasize enough the Holy Spirit as the one who serves, ministers, and responds to needs of God's people. The Holy Spirit is the source and catalyst of God's mission. More than that, the Holy Spirit is also the minister and servant of God's people especially the poor, the oppressed, the excluded, and the marginalized. Here we have a paradox in that the Holy Spirit is both Lord and Giver of Life as much as the servant and minister of God's creation. The lordship of the Holy Spirit is anchored in his servanthood and his servanthood is the basis of his Lordship. Hence, the Holy Spirit is *Sàsuguàn bu Măgbàbyà*, Servant and Lord!

Summary

This possible basis for an intercultural theology of the Holy Spirit shows on one hand, how other cultures, particularly that of the Subanen, can further enrich our understanding of the Holy Spirit, and how on the other hand, Christian tradition might deepen Subanen understanding of the relationship between their indigenous belief system and the Christian faith. What is implied here is the acknowledgement of the cultural limitedness of every faith expression and religious tradition. The humble recognition of cultural limitedness of our expression of the mystery of the Christian faith can open up greater possibilities for growth and mutual enrichment. It allows us to deeply listen and appreciate the workings and promptings of the Holy Spirit in other cultures and religious traditions.

CONCLUSION: A POSSIBLE METHOD FOR AN INCULTURATED CATECHESIS ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

Catechesis: Inculturation at the Grassroots

In order to have meaningful impact on the life of the local community, an inculturated or intercultural theology, will need to have practical applications. One such application is catechesis, which for Phan, “is an expression of the enterprise of inculturation.” An inculturated catechetical method “requires a syllabus or materials which take a cultural theme as the starting point and which are sufficiently flexible to allow the teacher to use the resources of the local community.”

It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate a catechism for two reasons. First, an inculturated catechism necessitates its expression in the Subanen language. Second, the catechism needs to be an ongoing project in which the local community, as the primary agent of inculturation, interacts, consults, and participates. It would be better if the catechists are community members themselves. With the community providing “the criteria for authenticity and success because it is the life of the community which is in question,” the missionary’s role is to guide and facilitate the process. The missionary’s attempt to undertake the whole process by himself or herself might result in cultural domination or imposition. It is recognized that Subanen community members be empowered and trained to lead the drafting and implementation of the catechetical program and that their creativity and sensitivity to community ethos, needs, and aspirations be given free expression.

Applying the “Seven Principles” in a Proposed Inculturated Catechesis on the Holy Spirit

First Principle: No catechetical method is universally applicable

Based on the de Rhodes system, no catechetical method is applicable in all contexts and situations. One has to discover the route first through immersion in the life and culture of the local community. From here, a method using cultural sensibilities, themes, and other realities as points of entry could be developed. This paper suggests that the catechist can use the Subanen belief in *Dumiwata* as a starting point.

Second Principle: Affirming the indigenous belief system

After identifying the cultural theme that will serve as entry point, the second step is to affirm the beautiful and good aspects of the identified theme. The goal is “to build in the hearer’s mind a firm foundation on which the rest of their faith can be supported.” At this stage, the catechist affirms the presence of the Spirit in the indigenous belief system of the Subanen by way of underlining their belief in *Dumiwata*. The facilitator can highlight the good points and the “rays of truth” in their belief, particularly *Dumiwata*’s divinity as the son of *Apo Gumulang* and his role as the servant who cares for God’s creation and supports people in trouble. The catechist can emphasize that such belief brings to the fore their faith and trust in the Father who is merciful and loving towards his creatures. The facilitator can further highlight that the Subanen belief in the providence and protection of *Apo Gumulang* through *Dumiwata* shows their desire for harmony with all God’s creatures, prosperity, and deliverance from the ways of the evil one.

Third Principle: Introducing doctrine – the Holy Spirit

After affirming the indigenous belief system, the next step is to introduce the main theme, which in this case, is the Holy Spirit. By starting with the Subanen belief in *Dumiwata*, the hearers can now have an idea about how their indigenous belief system might be related to some aspects of the Christian faith. As much as possible, the catechist should present the doctrine in a simple and understandable manner by using images and examples from Subanen culture and indigenous belief system.

Fourth Principle: Highlighting the similarities and differences

Having established the foundational teachings and features of the Subanen belief in *Dumiwata* and the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the next step would be to highlight their similarities and differences. Here the catechist can discuss the convergences and divergence between *Dumiwata* and the Holy Spirit pointed out earlier. Here, the catechist can underline the similar features, such as the relationship with the Father, the divine origin and role, as well as the divergences, especially the matter of the oneness of the Godhead and the sonship of *Dumiwata*. At this point, the catechist can also discuss how the Subanen belief in *Dumiwata* and the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit can complement and enrich one another. As shown, such a discourse will inevitably touch on the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Fifth Principle: Establishing the dynamic equivalence

After citing the similarities and differences between the Subanen belief in *Dumiwata* and the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the next step would be to establish their dynamic equivalence. The catechist here emphasizes that to a great extent, *Dumiwata* corresponds or is dynamically equivalent to the Holy

Spirit in the sense that *Dumiwata* might also be seen as the presence of the Holy Spirit in their life and culture as Subanen. This moves towards “adopting” or “using” the Subanen belief in *Dumiwata* as a means of making the Holy Spirit closer to the understanding of the Subanen. Here the catechist can introduce the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus Christ, as well. Hence, it can be said that in *Dumiwata*, Jesus has been part of their indigenous belief system from the very beginning. In this sense, Jesus, the universal man, is not foreign to their culture. It will need to be said that in the Christian narrative, the Spirit of Jesus was incarnated as part of the history of salvation. Establishing the link between the sonship of *Dumiwata* and of Jesus would also be helpful.

Sixth Principle: Bringing things back to the local situation

The next step would be to point out the significance of these beliefs to the present context of the Subanen. How would the Subanen make sense of their belief in *Dumiwata* as a way to better grasp and understand the doctrine of the Holy Spirit? Here the catechist can highlight the notion that *Dumiwata* as the presence of the Holy Spirit or the Holy Spirit as present in *Dumiwata* is the continuation of God’s mission in their present context and reality. It is through the Holy Spirit, as present in *Dumiwata*, that Jesus’s mission of establishing God’s Kingdom of love, justice, and peace is continually made present.

Seventh Principle: Toward praxis

The last step in this catechetical method is to link doctrine with praxis. Having established the intimate relationship between *Dumiwata* and the Holy Spirit and to the mission of God through Jesus, the catechist now highlights that the Holy Spirit, as embodied in *Dumiwata*, is also the Spirit that moves people to become sharers in the mission of God. It is the Holy Spirit who enlivens them to work for the hastening of the realization of God's Kingdom. Just as the Holy Spirit, as exemplified by *Dumiwata*, serves and responds to the needs of the poor and the suffering, so too are the Subanen challenged to be of service to others, especially to the poor and the needy. And just as the Holy Spirit, as embodied by *Dumiwata*, is the source of the grace of justice, peace, and harmony, so too are they challenged to work for justice, peace, and harmony. These are only some of the practical applications that the catechist can highlight toward the end of the catechetical process.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown how the development of an inculturated or intercultural theology might serve as an effective way of inculturating the Christian faith. Aware of the "discorded faith" among the Subanen, I have presented that interfacing the Subanen belief in *Dumiwata* with the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit can serve as a starting point in advancing inculturation. I have pointed out that this should be done not just theologically but also practically through an inculturated catechesis. Developed by the Subanen themselves, this catechesis can potentially promote a Subanen-Christian identity.

Inculturation in the grassroots plays a vital role "the building up of a truly local church." It is hoped that through the process, the Subanen people themselves realize and claim their power to authentically inculturate the Gospel in their life and culture and become articulators of Subanen-Christian identity.

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