

Folk Narratives of Balawarte in Uson, Masbate

Mark Philip C. Paderan¹, Eda Mae Conde Buenvenida², Darwin Sabang Munez Cuyos³, Giefe Terena⁴

¹University of Nueva Caceres,

²Cataingan National High School,

³Tomas V. Rivera National High School

⁴Dalipe National High School

Corresponding author's E-mail: markphilip.paderan@unc.edu.ph

Corresponding author's E-mail: buenvenidaeda@gmail.com

Corresponding author's E-mail: darwincuyos28@gmail.com

Corresponding author's E-mail: giefe.terana001@deped.gov.ph

Abstract

Mystery, as viewed by the society, is usually stated by an outsider in a certain locality who sees unusual occurrence thus, series of inquiry is rolled down to seek for understanding of a phenomenon that cannot be answered by science hence, can be unlocked through the collective narratives that the folks treasured and continuously shared. These narratives form part of folklore in a society that is bound to vanishing when left undocumented. An hour travel from the heart of Masbate is where the small town Uson in which a Balawarte is found. This is a symbolic rock-sculpture of Mary on the seaside of the town of Uson but has created a lot of stories therein which form part to answer the mystery. This ignited the researchers to explore the significant narratives on this existing phenomenon. Through this, the researchers explored the historical and cultural significance of Balawarte in Uson. Also, the researchers inquired about the different narratives of it. The study is an ethnographic and folkloristic approach were used such as structured and unstructured interviews to gather the narratives. The narratives were transcribed and analyzed using Thematic Analysis to get the historical, cultural, and folkloristic contribution of it in society.

Keywords: Balawarte, Folk Narratives, Masbate, Thematic Analysis, Uson,

INTRODUCTION

Mystery in a certain locality is a universal experience across culture from ancient to post-modern millennium. This mysterious magical belief remained oral lore that is being passed from one person to another generation after generation. Magical mysteries remain in the shadows of folklore and has not been recorded. Lumbera (1997, p. 87) explained the scarcity of the local materials in the Philippines which includes the folklore and also the men who shall scholarly gather the data in our regions and locality, thus, national literary identity is not established because of lack of documentation and scholars who study the different folklore.

Folklore is viewed by Isabelo as a resource that is a very significant contribution when gathered in the national transformation and not something mere ethnological but a national project that has to be gathered because it contains the inner psyche of the aborigines that matters to the national identity. (Mojares, 2013) Through Mojares' study on Isabelo's Archive, many have been read and have been resurfaced from the ground roots of the community and more of it has to continuously be dug up in different regions to record and preserve what has been in the strong memory and practice of people and society. This folklore study helps in understanding the richness of the national and even in the regional culture. Also, it facilitates the discovery of the roots of distinctive communities, the past, the commonality of varied cultures and of course our own folkloric identities. Although studies on folklore are already in its leap, it has to be continued for many is at the brick of extinction. This is why Fernandez (1996, p. 33) stated that "it is imperative to retrieve these folklores and local culture before they are lost forever or changed by modernity, mass media, and even wrong-headed government efforts." There is much to be done and much to

accomplish in shaping the oral literature in the Philippines and this is the reason why researchers are continuously pursuing studies that would benefit our cultural heritage for societal and cultural development.

Through this burden on folklore, an initiative on conducting this study on “Balawarte” at Poblacion, Uson, Masbate has been made possible through the researchers in Masbate. It is a coastal component city in the island province of Masbate and serves as a gateway in Bicol Region’s gateway to Visayas and Mindanao in the Philippines. (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020) An hour away from Masbate City is a Municipality of Uson in which oral lore on Balawarte is circulating and a narrative on mysteries on it was collected by the researchers. Balawarte is a sculptured image of Mary (mother of Jesus) at the rock-islet formation a bit far from the shore of the Municipality of Uson. The narratives collected from the residents to experienced, and received the stories on Balawarte have created anxieties and queries in their minds for they could not decipher the implicit meanings of it that they have been carrying for a long time and have been shared generation to generation.

Folklore nowadays has been used as a mechanism to reconstruct ancient beliefs, customs, and rituals. This study will also address the one aspect of folklore studies that helps us to understand the rich folklore and mystic tradition of our ancestors.

In understanding and appreciating the folklore of our ancestors, we develop an understanding of their rich culture. Another motive for the study of folklore was nationalism, which reinforced ethnic identity and figured in the struggle for political independence. One of the unique reasons for this study is that folk culture is a way of establishing unity among the different people living in the place and or country. Traditional culture is seen as proof of distinctiveness among different societies and as confirmation that a culture can be based on oral tradition.

Through this, the study explored the historical and cultural significance of the Balwarte in Uson, Masbate and analyzed the narratives through thematic analysis to further the discussion on the collected data. The respondents were the old people in the community of Uson who have heard, experienced, and received a story on Balawarte in Uson, Masbate. There were 18 respondents in this study and they are original settlers in the municipality.

Moreover, this study is anchored on the polygenesis theory which states that the folklore came from many sources and causes such as versions and adaptations from the original source and has circulated crossing the geographical barriers owing to the fact that since the primal time people have been affected by the universal emotions-love, hatred, misfortune, fear, distress, jealousy, egotism, ambition, courage, kindness and so forth. In relation to this study, polygenesis theory supports the methodology of the study through interviews on the different residents who have had the version or an adaptation of the mysteries encountered by the original storytellers about the Balawarte mysteries. These narratives shall be subjected to Thematic Analysis, a method of analyzing qualitative data. This is usually applied to a set of gathered texts, such as interview transcripts in which the researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes – topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly. This follows the process of (a)Familiarization, (b) Coding, (c) Generating themes, (d) Reviewing themes, (e) Defining and naming themes, and (f) Writing up. (Caulfield, 2019) This study shall reveal the important concepts that the narratives on Balwarte exemplify.

This study may be significant to the community for it shall serve as an archival work for the barangay and may be used as a basis for the future plans of the barangay

and the community. Also, this shall serve as a good material for further studies to scholars and anthropologies who are into the study of folklore materials in Masbate city.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study is a Qualitative method that involves an unstructured face-to-face interview with the respondents in collecting data. Also, the design is generally following the Ethnographic Approach to have an interaction with the respondents to gather the data. (Logan, 2013) The respondents involve 18 old settlers of the Municipality of Uson who had experienced and heard versions or adaptations about the folklores on Balawarte in Uson, Masbate

Location

Uson according to the 2015 Census of Population in region V, the population is about 56, 168, with a density of 340 inhabitants per square kilometers or 880 inhabitants per square mile. The municipality comprises 35 Barangays with a total of 163. 20 km² or 63.02 sq mi. (Uson, Masbate Profile, 2020)

Procedure

The researchers seek the permission of the Barangay Officials to solicit support on identifying the respondents of the study. Then, researchers explained the research goals to the respondents and made sure that ethics was considered. The researchers then started the unstructured interview to gather their stories about the mysteries in Balawarte and recorded their stories through cellphone recorder and notes. After, the stories were transcribed and the narratives were analyzed using the thematic analysis.

RESULTS

Unwritten Brief History of Balawarte

The accounts of the respondents were the primary basis on this historical background of the Balawarte in Uson, Masbate. The Balawarte was originally situated on the rocks on the shore of the municipality. This has been an islet found a bit far from the shore. The respondent recalled it as a sculptured image of Mary Mother of Jesus by Mr. Cesario Clemente after World War II and has planned to be connected to the land of Uson.

In Philippine history, American and Japanese colonized the country for quite some time and war broke between the two colonizers and Uson was one of the places war also took place. During the Japanese conquest in 1944 to the shore of Uson, they have mistakenly seen the islet as a US ship in the evening and has thrown a bomb at it. The big islet was not totally destroyed but has affected the greater part of it, some diminished and the only thing that has remained was the place where the image was sculptured. It has become the talk of the town as years pass by as they encounter several experiences and stories with regard to the mystery that this Balawarte shows and does to the residents who come nearer to the place.

The plan for the construction of the project has been pending since then because of the folklores and budget allocation. As of writing, the Local Government Unit of Uson has already started Phase 1 of the construction of creating a bridge and a park to connect Balawarte to the mainland. The Balawarte has been renamed to “Nuestra Del Rosario” which is the celebrated patron saint in the municipality. The construction project planned to create a bridge that connects the park from the mainland Uson to

Nuestra Del Rosario. The narratives on the Balawarte that has been circulating about may be affected by the construction, it may continue to proliferate even after the construction or maybe at the edge of oblivion. Dwijendra & Mahardika (2018) reveals in their study that globalization has affected their local culture in Indonesia such as the decrease of the love of the people towards the culture of the nation, the erosion of cultural values, the occurrence of cultural acculturation which further develops into the mass culture and they further recommended that there should be an increase of sharing knowledge about the nation's culture in the Indonesia Education. They view the emergence of globalization as a negative implication to their existing local culture.

As people become disinterested in their folklores and local culture, the region or the nation may fear what the future might do to the existence of the Philippine local culture including folklore.

Cultural Implication

The Balawarte is seen by the people living in the municipality of Uson and this is located a bit far from the shore of Uson in which a lot of people may see it at daylight and shadows of it at night. The people in the Municipality of Uson have always been celebrating its construction every 9th day of October and they offer a flower to commemorate it and pay respect to the saint that it represents – Nuestra Del Rosario. Through time, there have been many stories about the Balawarte and it has created fear and faith to some people because of the stories being passed on.

Balawarte was believed to have a cave found below the rocks. Old stories stated that there have been snakes that guard the Balawarte and whoever tries to go near to it is punished and experience mysteries. Fear is also transferred to many people because of the circulating folklore about it and only a few are getting nearer to it because of what it brings. Nevertheless, it is also said that in every fear there are also blessings on the other side that is why people are commemorating it every year.

The narratives about the Balawarte collected by the researchers has shown a powerful narrative that has shaped the cultural belief of the people about the mysteries that is in this Balawarte. Some of the narratives are versions and adaptations from the respondents.

Miracle Harvest

Every October 9, the account from a respondent said that lightning struck the Balwarte and the shadow from the lightning they show Mary carrying a baby on her hands which is different from the sculpture that they know. Since this is a yearly thing that they usually see, they were no longer surprised seeing it. This brings joy to the residents of the municipality because as they commemorate Balawarte, a miraculous harvest in fishing is seen. They offer to the Balawarte, every fiesta, flowers, and anything that they are pleased to offer while many people are surrounding around the Balwarte to offer prayers to it. This is the reason why they have lots of harvest in fishing.

“...pag lagi ka nagdadasal tuig tuig, yung pangisdaan madami kami huli na isda pag naghihingi tulong sakanya...”

“...whenever prayers are offered yearly to her, harvest in fishing is plenty.

The impact of the continuous practice of the commemoration of the Balwarte and the continuous offering of prayers to it is said to be the primary reason why Balawarte gave them a good catch of fish. This is valuable for them since fishing is the number one source of income of every family near the shore or Uson.

This cultural practice and tradition of the residents in Uson may have also been reflected in some of the practices in the Philippines such as the offering of rituals to Bathala to have more harvest in the Rice Terraces (Dulawan, 1982), prayers to the parish saint as their devotion as an act of thanksgiving for healing the illness from a curse (Paderan, 2016), and etc.

Power and Curse

Balwarte is also believed to have wealth in it. Accounts would say that there are precious diamonds under it that can be recovered when dug up, however, only a few dared to try because of the mysterious lightning that would strike if there is a person who would try to get close to it which happened to one of the persons who tried to dig up a place in it. There were people who tried to get through it but they were either struck by a lightning or eaten by snakes that guard it.

Moreover, Balawarte is also known to have a source of power that people in Uson would like to possess. An account was also collected that depicts the folk healer, who is in the process of becoming a full-pledge folk healer, was instructed by a supernatural being to go to the Balwarte and perform the ritual there. Through the process of going to that place was indeed a challenge that he faced for he met three (3) big snakes that guard it. According to the narrative, the snakes would not harm anyone who goes there with good intention.

Mysterious Death

People had stirred the fear in their hearts to go closer to the sculpture because of the outgrowing folklore on the mystery in the Balawarte that people should not come closer to it nor have the desire to go to it, instead, the highest respect on distancing should be observed especially when there is a bad motive on it. But as the researchers continue to explore on the narratives, they were able to have an account of one resident who has been told about the death of a fisherman because of fishing near the Balawarte with the notion at the back of his mind to go closer to the sculpture and touch it and prove to people that it is just a hoax about Balawarte mystery. The account revealed that a big fish was seen that shows up in the vicinity of the place, a warning and signs that it looks up to get a life of a person. Suddenly, lightning struck the fisherman that caused his death. The same versions were also gathered from the relatives of the daughter who narrated the mystery behind the death of his father.

Themes

Religiosity

The Philippines is a catholic-dominated country and Bicol is one of the regions that contribute to the strong Catholic faith due to the influence of the Spanish colonization in the earlier days. Bicol celebrates one of the biggest religious devotion to Peñafrancia at Naga City participated by the people from the entire province and some Filipinos. Nevertheless,

The dedication of Catholic belief was even evident in this particular folklore in Uson, Masbate in which they commemorate the establishment of Balawarte now called Nuestra Del Rosario. The folk belief that has been passed on may reveal that beyond their narratives is a faith that brings people together. These narratives gathered speaks of high regard to the sculpture that represents whom they lay their faith on.

Values

Conformity of people on the circulated narratives on Balawarte shapes the character of an individual and marks their respect on something worthy of it such as seen and unseen. The death, fear, and curse may seem to uncover the mysteries

behind the Balawarte but this springs out a belief that respect must be given even to the things that do not do any harm to people.

Adherence to the folk belief springs up warning that signs to those people who would not learn the easy way. Bad intention leads to consequences and purity is rewarded. Believing on what the folklore have shared may not harm us but may shape values formation such as respect for the barrier established to human and things, seen and unseen.

Culture and History

One thing that makes one exist is because of its cultural preservation. Things unrecorded in the history books may be seen in the folklore shared in the community. As folklore continues to emerge and proliferate, people in the place shall establish a norm that is not imposed but naturally comes out of a person. Patterns in life such as not going to and fro without paying respect to the seen and unseen entity have to be made. Thus, blessings shall be seen to those who do good. Moreover, History is beyond books and one of the best sources is the people who have direct experience, their narratives, and the things that have to continue to be shared. These are something that has to be recorded and preserved because it is seen as the bridge to the gap between the past, present, and the future. The decision that may arise in the future may have a strong connection to what transpired in the past and the narratives have to be written down and become a basis for cultural preservation.

CONCLUSION

History is not dependent on the archives and written documents. They are also revealed by the people who live with it and have passed on from one generation to another. This study on folklore has opened an opportunity to explore beyond what is seen and understand the perspective and cultural belief on what has been told. Through the narratives collected, the understanding of the unexplainable mystery is slowly resurfacing to present to the contemporary people what has to be learned and what has to be understood to know the origin and to know its value.

Such unwritten history, cultural implication, themes that speak of religiosity values formation, and culture and history shall not be deemed important when a disseminated and unread. Much more it will be forgotten when not collected and written. The study on folklore should be given emphasis because the richness of it lies in the scholars who are passionate about digging up what is on the surface of every story that is yet to unfold.

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