Social Practices, Rituals and Festive Events

TAGBANWA, CENTRAL PALAWAN ISLAND PROVINCE, CENTRAL PHILIPPINES. This ritual is the most famous of the celebrations of the Tagbanwa. It is extolled by media and sought after by tourists, not due to its magnitude as a spectacle, but because of its indigenous religiousity. The pagdiwata is performed three times each year by a babalyan, a ritual practitioner, to thank Mangindusa for good harvest and general well-being.

An ensemble of zithers played by women and a kutyapi by a man during the celebration of the ritual.

With a kerchief draped head, a babalyan sits on a ritual swing during the rites of pagdiwata.

An ensemble of zithers played by women and a kutyapi by a man during the celebration of the ritual.

Praying softly, he takes a pinch of the red rice and throws it into the air. He lights both candles and fastens them to the center tarindak on the left and right sides of the stand. Still praying, he takes a pinch of the betel mix, two peppers and white rice and throws these into the air. Following is a longer period of prayer where he stands in front of the piyanggaw. He takes his head covering off to end the ceremony.

The mabuy’s carries the ginger, onions and the two bowls holding the betel mix and red peppers into the house. Later, someone gathers the other offerings. The two candles are left to burn down. The mabuy’s then prepares a “prophylactic” from the offerings, chopping these up with a little water in a bowl. He goes about the room rubbing the foreheads of everyone with it. The children are treated first. There is a sizable crowd.

Building of the bankaran or banglay

A three-and-a-half meter ceremonial raft is constructed from fourteen poles of a kind of bamboo (lawas). Its sail is made from the atap palm and a mat-like kadiyang is set for the food offerings;

The panawag, an invocation to the spirits of the dead and the nine deities who ride the kawa on the sea, follows.

Next, the burning of incense on the kadiyang is done and the prayers by the ritual leader. Then these follow: lighting of the candles and offering of ritual food to the deities; the second call to the nine deities, signaling the children to dive in and eat; and the cleaning up and repairing of the raft which may have been damaged by the mad scramble for food.

The third invocation to the nine deities is performed, followed by individual family offerings represented by a woman. This is followed by the tying of a small chicken on the platform, lighting of candles, launching of the raft toward the sea, relighting of blown-out candles and throwing a pinch of rice to the sea.

Finally, singing and dancing through the night caps the ritual.

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ALL PAGDIWATA rituals are fundamentally alike, but vary in length, elaborateness of ritual paraphernalia, names of specific deities invoked and mannerisms of the babalyan/bangkaran. The last is specifically called tindak. The divata (spirit) rituals are, in turn, preceded by three or five luma ceremonies. The last luma is called a tindak, held on the eve before a divata ritual. The most elaborate are those from Manayli (Maladgaw) which usually last about eight hours. This is usually held during the full moon (baling) on the last three days of the last phase of the moon—to make it easier for the deities to see that a ritual is taking place. Babalays hold three pagdiwata each year during the social and ceremonial season, usually when the moon is full.

During the tindak, the supernatural and the spirit-relatives are informed of the coming ritual. No wine is offered during the first two lumas because the wine is only made a day or two prior to the conduct of these two events. There is no social drink fest following the tindak, but only between the spirit relatives and the “mortal drinking partners”. The routine of the luma is the same but shorter and less elaborate than the pagdiwata. During the luma, it is customary for one or more persons to dance after every appearance of a supernatural. In addition, they hold a brief ritual—pagmama—an offering of betel quids at dawn in the morning of the pagdiwata.

The pagdiwata proper starts in the early afternoon of late December. The followers of the officiating babalays gather. Some begin to prepare the needed ritual paraphernalia. The ceremonial plants are gathered from the forest. One or more gongs are constantly beaten to inform the supernaturals about the ritual. No permanent objects are made since new things are made for every pagdiwata. The impermanent objects are made of bamboo (Bambusa spp.). Attractive design may be carved or incised on the epidermis of the fresh green bamboo.

Among the permanent wooden objects used are the pa’wan, a wooden bench carved from a log and incised with curvilinear designs. This is used as a stand for the jars; the takayan, a wooden boat for the lumalayag; the wooden stand (butukan); small wooden turtles, shields, spears, birds and others. The ritual paraphernalia are piled on a raised sleeping platform next to jars of rice wine. At dusk, the people crowd into the room and the first phase of the pagdiwata begins. The ritual instruments include: a guinhal (drum), at least one agong (gong), many smaller gongs and the babandil. The drummer sets the heart-pounding beat.

With the rhythmic gongs as background music, a man centers a ceremonial staff (tarindak) with parina rushes from the house and climbs to the south peak of the roof where the tarindak is placed. This is considered an additional center of ceremonial activities. The divata dihurutawain (messenger of the highest ranking deity) cannot stand on flooring and participates in the pagdiwata from the ceremonial staff on the roof. After the tarindak is placed, the man shouts loudly, notifying the supernaturals that the ritual has started.

While the people finish their evening meal, the paraphernalia are removed from around the jars. The rattan holding the jars to the floor are taken off. A swing (basically a short plant suspended from both ends and secured from the main ridge pole of the house) with wavy designs called kaling-kaling carved on the side and geometric motifs on the surface, is set in the center of the room, two feet from the floor. When the people finish their meal, the gongs sound again.

A young man puts on a red sash over his shoulder and leaves the house. Two men carry the large jars (a butukan and a smaller patting) to the center of the room and place these in front of the swing, lashed to the floor with rattan strips. They place a third jar, a small, green glazed container called main’tan on the butukan—a wooden stand aligned with the large jars. The young man returns carrying the ‘urby or infructescence of the areca palm (Areca catechu L.), shouting as he comes up the house ladder. The ‘urby is suspended in front of the swing. When suspended, it is now called mandarrinyu.

The three jars are then prepared for drinking; the leaves of the areca palm (or coconut) are used to stuff the jars in the divata rituals. While the leaves are being stuffed and the straws installed, another tarindak is incensed, held by a young man. It is carried outside the house and placed in a bamboo tube permanently buried in the ground beside the biyanyaw or ceremonial platform used formerly in a pagbuy’i ritual. Meanwhile, the two decorated straws for the supernaturals are smeared with coconut oil (two hours are spent in the preparation of the paraphernalia).
The gongs resound again and helpers erect the siyarangsang (ritual stand) and another tarindak. A piece of brightly colored cloth is placed on the platform of the siyarangsang and a heap of white rice is placed in the center. A newly woven mat is laid in front of the wine jars on which are placed: a stack of small porcelain bowls, two piles of new white rice, some ginger, onions, a bowl of betel quids, a kris (weapon with a wavy blade), a bowl of red peppers and a “pop gun”. The gongs stop playing.

The first of the formal phases of the pagdiwata begins. This phase is celebrated for the highest ranking deity, Mangindusa, and is called the lambay. The babalyan sits on the swing smudging all she could reach. She holds the incense on her right hand and a small bowl with the kris over her head. The babalyan is only in a ceremonial hood over her head and holds the sambut around her skirt, waist sash and nothing from waist down except for another red sash thrown over her shoulder. Coming forward, she sits on the swing with another “helper”. She covers her head with the hood, while the other babalyan ceases the lower margins of the hood. The second helper takes two bowls from the mat, one containing the betel quids and the other the peppers, and sits quietly beside the babalyan.

Mangindusa does not actually attend the ceremonies, minor deities carry the offerings to the middle regions where these are relayed by the dibuwatanin or messengers to Mangindusa.

While the lambay is being performed, the babalyan dons her ceremonial dress: a wrap-around skirt (pantunuan), a dark long-sleeved jacket (bugoy) and a narrow cloth waist sash (sambut), for supporting the kris and dagger (a male babalyan may perform with a wrap-around skirt, waist sash and nothing from waist up except for another red sash thrown over his shoulder). Coming forward, she sits on the swing with another “helper”. She covers her head with the hood, while the other babalyan ceases the lower margins of the hood. The second helper takes two bowls from the mat, one containing the betel quids and the other the peppers, and sits quietly beside the babalyan.

At the end of the fifth circle, she seizes the infructescence, with the parahernalia five times. At the end of the lambay phase of the pagdiwata ritual. The principal helper (tugatak) of the babalyan comes forward and prepares the ceremonial hood over her head and holds the sambut around her head. She dances to the gong playing. The babalyan is only wakened when a helper plunges his hands into the wine jars and scoops water into each. Then, with a brief prayer for the highest ranking deity, Mangindusa does not actually attend the ceremonies, minor deities carry the offerings to the middle regions where these are relayed by the dibuwatanin or messengers to Mangindusa.

The major phase of the ritual begins when the babalyan is ebooked in trance (sangglam). The babalyan is in a state of pagglam (trance). The babalyan is only wakened when a helper plunges his hands into the wine jars and scoops water into each. Then, with a brief prayer for the highest ranking deity, Mangindusa does not actually attend the ceremonies, minor deities carry the offerings to the middle regions where these are relayed by the dibuwatanin or messengers to Mangindusa.

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This sample case illustrates how the supernatural appears:

Led by the gongs, the babalyan takes the bowl of betel quids and places it on top of the four straws of the bisingamin jar. She holds the bowl with her left hand and shakes the ugsang of the jar with her right – an inducement for the supernatural to appear. A helper rocks the swing on which the other babalyan and helper sit. The gong playing stops as the babalyan removes the bowl from the top of the straws. This routine is repeated twice. Then the gong playing begins and increases in intensity and tempo while the babalyan strikes the sides of the large jar with the ugsang many times. At this point, the first supernatural appears. Pulut, the sister of the babalyan’s mother, begins to drink from the jar. The gongs cease and the sister (through the babalyan) starts to sing the refrain of the tirais or the diwata. The women in the crowd follow suit with a brief chorus.

The singing stops and the gongs begin again. A second babalyan approaches the jar and scoops water into it five times using the small bowl (suwit) to replace the amount drank by the celebrant. The celebrant’s ten drinking jars and scoops water into each. Then, with a brief prayer for the highest ranking deity, Mangindusa does not actually attend the ceremonies, minor deities carry the offerings to the middle regions where these are relayed by the dibuwatanin or messengers to Mangindusa.

The spirit-relatives of the babalyan sings with the women chorus again but this lasts only for a few minutes. The singing stops. The helper lights a cigarette and hands it to the celebrant. Finally, the babalyan swishes the ugsang violently together, signaling that the spirit-relatives has “departed” – naglitid.

The routine is repeated for each appearance of a supernatural, with varying actions of each supernatural as interpreted by the babalyan:

1. A lumalayag (sailor) may pour oil on the hair (tangdan) of the helper and other women present;
2. The bamboo pop gun or tumbak-tumbak symbolizes the attack of the lumalayag on evil spirits and illness, and a new song, the karatung is sung;
3. Gongs, songs and beats are associated with each supernatural:
   a. tambul – for Mangindusa and the spirits of the dead;
   b. tugatak – for dibuwatanin;
   c. karatung and magpakalatutok for the various types of sailors.

Then an assistant babalyan takes over and performs a brief ‘alap (also called bibilang), during which he calls all the other deities and spirit relatives of his bilateral kindred to eat, chew betel and smoke, so that the supernaturals not specifically called will not feel slighted. He prays briefly over the two jars and scoops water into each. Then, with the exception of the wine jars, the ritual parahernalia in the room are removed. The room is then readied for the drink fest which ends the pagdiwata ritual.

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