

In the Shadow of Datu Dino's Tangkulu': A Semiotic Analysis of Faith and Ritual in the Bukidnon Tribe

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of faith and ritual in the Bukidnon tribe as depicted in *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* by Jhon Joseph D. Pandong II. The researcher employed a semiotic reading based on Roland Barthes' theory to identify symbols and scenes in the narrative that reflect spirituality. This was further contextualized through the lens of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) to situate the rituals within native epistemologies. Three prominent themes emerged from the analysis: the collective faith in *Magbabaya*, spiritual rituals such as the *bangkasu'*, dreams, and the naming of the *datu*, and dance as a ritual of celebration, struggle, and thanksgiving. The study reveals that Bukidnon literature is a vessel of culture and a living connection among spirit, people, and nature. The data also affirms ritual is an active form of social organization and spiritual communication within the tribe. Through this reading, *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* is not only a literary creation but a conduit of indigenous knowledge and the collective belief of the Lumad.

Keywords: Bukidnon, faith, ritual, semiotics, *Tangkulu' ni Dino*

INTRODUCTION

The culture of the indigenous Bukidnon people of Mindanao is a living testament to the deep connection among humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. They are widely recognized for their rich rituals, dances, oral literature, belief in spirits, and a supreme deity called *Magbabaya*. These cultural expressions reflect a worldview where social life is shaped not merely by material needs but by spiritual faith—manifested in rituals marking childbirth, marriage, harvest, and warfare. Central to their belief system is the *tumanud*, spirit guardians of natural elements such as wind, water, fire, animals, and plants. Bukidnon literature mirrors this holistic cosmology. It embodies values of loyalty, warrior traditions, and their deep faith in the divine. Every action is believed to be under spiritual guidance, making literature an extension of daily life. Within this framework, *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* stands out as a literary work and a cultural narrative of faith, struggle, and communal devotion.

While prior studies—like Unabia's (1985) work on *sunngod* and *buklog*, and Macdonald's (1978) on Lumad cosmology have explored aspects of Bukidnon culture, most center on historical or linguistic dimensions. Navarro (2016) highlighted dance as a form of devotion among Mindanao's indigenous groups, but there remains a lack of research that situates these ritualistic expressions within literary analysis. This gap underscores the importance of exploring how literature conveys the intangible cultural heritage of the Bukidnon.

This study uses *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* as the primary text to analyze how faith is expressed through devotion to Magbabaya and belief in the tumanud. The story presents rituals led by babaylan (spiritual leaders), performed at the sacred bangkasu', and reinforced by communal dance and prayer. These are not isolated acts but collective practices that strengthen social cohesion and spiritual resilience. Guided by the Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IPRA, 1997) framework, this study examines how ritual functions as a core element of the tribe's identity—socially, spiritually, and ecologically. It applies semiotic reading to decode the symbols in the narrative, contributing to the broader discourse on indigenous literature and reaffirming the cultural and spiritual legacy of the Filipino people.

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

This research focuses solely on analyzing the faith and rituals of the Bukidnon tribe as depicted in the story *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino*. The study covers portions of the narrative that illustrate the tribe's devotion to *Magbabaya*, their belief in *tumanud* (nature guardians), and the rituals performed before, during, and after warfare. However, the study does not cover the broader historical or contemporary context of the Bukidnon tribe outside the literary text. It also excludes direct interviews with current members of the tribe. The analysis is limited to interpreting the story's symbols, themes, and perspectives as representations of the Bukidnon's belief system and spirituality.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the faith and rituals of the Bukidnon tribe as represented in literature, specifically in the story *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino*. In pursuit of this objective, the researcher seeks to answer the following question:

1. How are the faith and rituals of the Bukidnon tribe depicted in the story *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* as forms of intangible cultural heritage?

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two theories that illuminate the relationship among literature, symbols, and indigenous knowledge: Roland Barthes' Cultural Semiotics (1957) and the Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP), formally recognized and institutionalized in the Philippine context through the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) under the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA Law) of 1997.

Cultural Semiotics, advanced by Roland Barthes in his seminal work *Mythologies* (1957), refers to interpreting symbols within a text in terms of their literal (denotative) meanings and cultural and ideological connotations. Through this lens, rituals, prayers, and spiritual imagery in *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* are analyzed as bearing deeper cultural meanings rooted in the collective consciousness of the Bukidnon tribe.

Meanwhile, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) is a concept that emerged from discourses in education, anthropology, and indigenous human rights. It has been given institutional grounding in the Philippines under the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 (RA 8371). IKSP refers to systematic indigenous knowledge, including beliefs, spirituality, social practices, and rituals inherited and practiced within an indigenous community. This study uses IKSP to critically examine how faith and ritual in the narrative function as expressions of the Bukidnon tribe's local epistemology.

By synthesizing these two theoretical lenses, literature is valued as a creative text and a vessel of cultural knowledge—reflecting a community's beliefs, spirituality, and collective experiences.

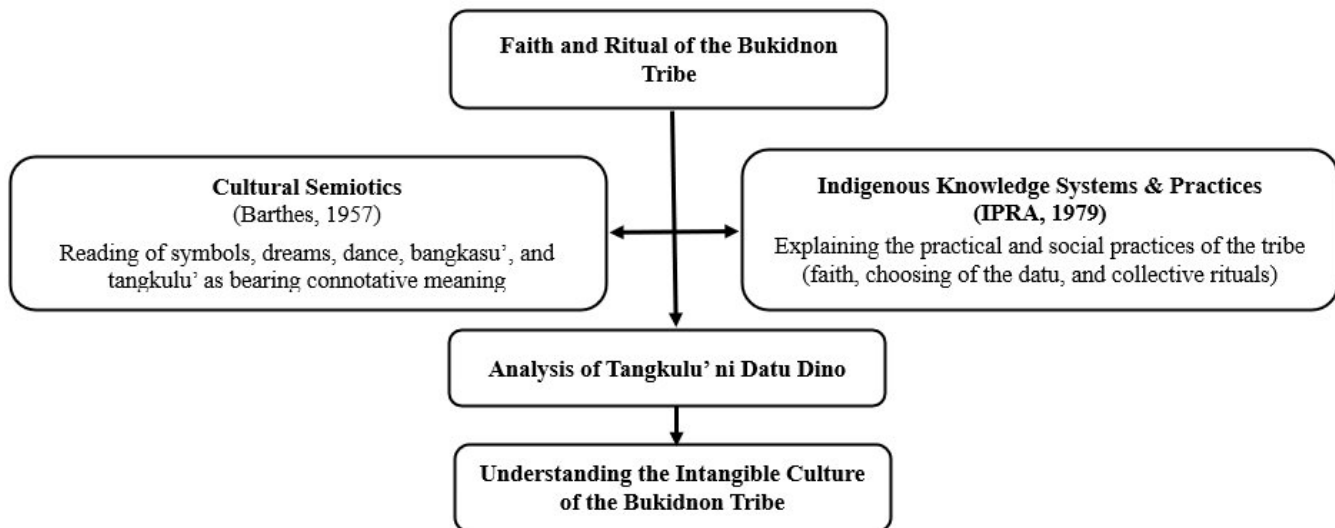


Figure 1. A Framework Linking Cultural Semiotics and Indigenous Knowledge Systems to Analyze Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino and Illuminate the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Bukidnon Tribe.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design with a focus on textual analysis. It aimed to examine the story *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* to uncover symbols, motifs, and themes related to the faith and rituals of the Bukidnon tribe. The research utilized semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes' (1957) theory and the framework of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKS, 1979) to reveal deeper meanings behind the ritualistic and religious acts depicted within the narrative.

Source of Data

The primary data source for this study is the story *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino*, written by Jhon Joseph D. Pandong and published by DepEd-Malaybalay under Project TWINKLER. The entire narrative was closely analyzed as the primary source of information, containing scenes of ritual, prayer, and worship directed toward *Magbabaya*, the Supreme Creator recognized by the Bukidnon tribe. The analysis also considered symbolic references to the *tumanud* (spiritual guardians of nature) and collective cultural performances such as dancing, offering, tribal gatherings, and sacred acts performed around the *bangkasu'*. This analysis aims to highlight the value of the text not only as a piece of literature but as a reflection of the rich spirituality and ritual practices deeply rooted in the indigenous knowledge of the Bukidnon people.

Ethical Considerations

This research focused on analyzing a literary text and did not require the direct participation of members from the Bukidnon community. However, given that the subject matter deals with rituals, beliefs, and sacred aspects of their culture, the analysis was conducted with a high level of cultural sensitivity and respect for their literature and spirituality. To preserve the integrity and validity of the study, the researcher consulted with the author of *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino*, Jhon Joseph D. Pandong, who is himself a member of the Bukidnon tribe. This consultation clarified key concepts, terms, and meanings of the rituals and symbols to ensure accurate and ethical representation of the culture. All information used in the study was solely for academic purposes and aimed to promote awareness, appreciation, and a deeper understanding of the rich intangible heritage of the Bukidnon people.

Data Analysis Procedure

In analyzing the story *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino*, a close reading of the entire text was conducted to identify and extract passages that pertain to the faith and rituals of the Bukidnon tribe. Selected elements were then

classified according to their symbolic meanings. For example, the *bangkasu* ' was interpreted as a symbol of the altar or sacred space for offerings and prayer, while the *tangkulu* ' was understood as a representation of spiritual leadership and authority.

Using Roland Barthes' (1957) semiotic framework, the identified scenes were analyzed in terms of denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (deeper cultural or spiritual implication). The analysis continued by connecting the findings to Indigenous Knowledge Systems, examining how indigenous beliefs—such as communication with the *tumanud* (spiritual guardians) and the performance of nature-based rituals—are represented in literature. Finally, the results were synthesized to identify recurring themes: the role of ritual in shaping collective faith, the spiritual responsibilities of the *datu* and *babaylan*, and the meaning of victory as not merely material success but a form of spiritual blessing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In analyzing the story *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino*, three central themes emerged, in line with the study's objective to examine the faith and rituals of the Bukidnon tribe. These themes were drawn from a close textual analysis and the interpretation of symbols, scenes, and perspectives that convey spirituality within the Indigenous literary text. Collectively, these themes reveal the profound connection of the Bukidnon people to nature, to the spiritual realm, and their Supreme Creator, *Magbabaya*.

Faith in Magbabaya

In the narrative, faith in the Supreme Creator, *Magbabaya*, is the foundation of the characters' inner strength. Inay Balignau emphasizes trust in the guidance of the Divine despite looming danger:

"Hindi na dapat tayo mabahala dahil nakatitiyak akong di naman tayo pababayaang ni Magbabaya," bahagi ni Inay Balignau. (Pandong, 2023, p. 16)

The same unwavering faith is evident in Datu Dino, whose conviction strengthens the resolve of his companions:

"Huwag kayong mabahala hindi tayo pababayaang ni Magbabaya, manalig tayong diringgin ang ating mga panalangin," sagot naman ng matandang bagani. (Pandong, 2022, p. 23)

Furthermore, Datu Amay Sep also shared his dream:

"Kitang-kita ko na may darating na tulong." (Pandong, 2022, p. 25)

These excerpts suggest that faith in *Magbabaya* is not merely a matter of belief but a collective ethical compass for the tribe. In a semiotic reading, *Magbabaya* is a divine figure and a symbol of moral and spiritual leadership. From the perspective of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, he represents the central force of all life. In the story, calling upon *Magbabaya* is not a passive act of prayer but an active community engagement with their perceived savior.

Moreover, the narrative implies that the tribe's victory is not solely due to Datu Dino's bravery, but more importantly, to their collective faith and spiritual connection with *Magbabaya*. The eagle's arrival as a form of aid symbolizes divine intervention—believed to be a response to their prayers. In this sense, faith becomes a force of collective hope and social cohesion within the Bukidnon tribe.

These findings align with the study of Camino-Singcolan (2025), which asserts that faith in the Creator links spiritual and social order. Similarly, the belief in *Magbabaya* in the narrative unites the tribe under a shared purpose: the salvation of their *banuwa* (community). In Unabia's (1985) documentation, the prayers of elders

are shown to be an essential part of oral tradition, serving as guidance for the younger generation. Macdonald (1978) also explains that Lumad religion is inseparable from politics and society, all grounded in the concept of spiritual balance. The narrative reinforces these views and presents a living spirituality manifested through literature.

Spiritual Rituals and Practices

Table 1 presents four major aspects of spirituality and belief in *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* that prominently surfaced in the narrative: the *bangkasu'*, the naming of the *datu*, dreams as spiritual guidance, and the *tangkulu'*. The *bangkasu'* serves as a sacred altar where prayers, offerings, and petitions for blessings from *Magbabaya* take place. Meanwhile, the naming of the *datu* is not arbitrarily decided by the people but is revealed through dreams or declarations from the *bangkasu'* itself. Thus, dreams are also considered essential to belief, where visions received by the elders are honored as direct messages from *Magbabaya*. Lastly, the *tangkulu'*, a sacred cloth or headdress, symbolizes true and divinely chosen leadership. It is incorporated into every ritual to affirm the spiritual connection of the *datu* to a higher power.

It is notable that each ritual involves a spiritual intermediary—from the *bangkasu'* to dreams—making *Magbabaya* a central figure in the life of the tribe. He is not merely believed in as a god but seen as an active participant in decision-making, leadership, and the direction of the community. The narrative shows that the *bangkasu'* is not just an altar, but a sacred space capable of communicating the divine will. Dreams are not regarded as illusions but as credible forms of communication with the divine. In this way, rituals embody the inner life of the community, as spiritual practices that are cultivated, revered, and passed down.

Furthermore, these rituals reflect the tribe's profound belief in divine intervention in their collective life. Rather than being secular or political, leadership is granted through spiritual legitimacy. The text recounts that the naming of the *datu* was "declared by the *bangkasu'*," demonstrating the belief that true authority comes from the divine, not from humans. Wearing the *tangkulu'* is not merely ceremonial; it is an acceptance of a sacred calling. This perspective highlights ritual as a form of collective faith and a tool for tribal unity.

Such recognition of ritual and symbol aligns with studies on Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices. According to MacDonald (2004), in indigenous communities across Southeast Asia, rituals are not solely religious acts but systems of knowledge rooted in ecology, history, and spirituality. Acabado's (2015) research on the Ifugao demonstrated that rituals of leadership and agriculture derive authority from dreams and spiritual communication. Similarly, in the study by Dela Peña-Bandalaria and Mojica (2021) on the Subanen, the selection of leaders always involves dreams and spirit whisperings—paralleling what is seen in *Tangkulu'*. Moreover, Geertz (1973) asserts that ritual among indigenous peoples is not merely external performance but a symbol of collective belief and social structure. Thus, *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* affirms that folk literature is a vessel of living spirituality, and that symbols such as the *bangkasu'* and *tangkulu'* are conduits of collective connection to the sacred.

Table 1. Spiritual Rituals and Customs Depicted in *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino*

Ritual Term/ Symbol	Belief/ Meaning	Customs/ Practice
Bangkasu'	A sacred altar that mediates between the tribe and <i>Magbabaya</i> ; a source of wisdom and blessing	Used for prayer, receiving visions, and bestowing blessings upon the <i>datu</i>
Pagpapangalan ng Datu	<i>Magbabaya</i> grants the name through a dream or a declaration from the <i>bangkasu'</i>	Celebrated by the tribe through offerings, ritual, and dance
Panaginip bilang gabay	Dreams are believed to be messages from <i>Magbabaya</i> about the tribe's future.	Respected and heeded by the <i>datu</i> and elders in decision-making
Tangkulu'	A sacred cloth or headdress symbolizing the <i>datu's</i> spiritual authority	Worn during leadership rituals and when appearing before the <i>bangkasu</i> .

Dances as Part of Ritual Practice

Table 2 highlights the integral role of dance in the spiritual and social life of the tribe. These dances are not performed solely for entertainment or artistic display but serve as rituals imbued with symbolic meaning. The identified dances are *Binakbak*, *Binanog*, *Inagaw*, *Inagong*, *Inamu*, *Pangalingut*, *Panikup*, and *Tinambul*. For example, *Binakbak*, which imitates the movements of a frog, symbolizes the tribe's connection to nature and is used by warriors as a pre-battle ritual. *Binanog*, one of the most refined dances, imitates the eagle's flight, representing a spiritual merging with the bird that, in the narrative, served as the tribe's savior. *Inagaw* depicts courtship rituals or the choosing of a spouse, while *Inagong* is closely associated with the sound of the gong, marking the beginning of a ritual that emphasizes unity.

Each dance is performed not merely as a form of celebration, but as a ritual act with spiritual or social purpose. For instance, *Tinambul* is danced by men guarding Mount Dulang-dulang, symbolizing the tribe's protection. On the other hand, *Inamu* conveys joy during times of victory. Each dance's movements, gestures, and symbols are carefully chosen to reflect animals, nature, and communal responsibilities. Thus, dance becomes a literary and spiritual language in the Bukidnon context. As a ritual, dance reinforces identity, collective faith, and the tribe's connection to its environment.

Moreover, the dances serve as vessels of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) and expressions of collective belief. In the narrative, the close link between dance and ritual is evident—before battle, there is dance; during prayer, there is dance; in moments of triumph, there is dance. *Binanog*, for example, is not merely a dance of the eagle but a symbolic merging of the eagle's spirit with that of the tribe. This reflects the belief in spiritual guidance from nature, where animals are not separate from humans but accompany them on their spiritual journey. This belief is affirmed in the story where Kalumbata, the eagle of Datu Dino, becomes an agent of *Magbabaya*'s divine intervention. In this way, each dance carries the tribe's beliefs through the expressive art of movement.

The dances in *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* affirm Navarro's (2016) study, which asserts that among indigenous groups in Mindanao, "every movement in a dance is a prayer, a vow, and a recognition of nature's power." De Leon (2012) likewise emphasizes that Lumad dances serve as rituals of memory expressing history, spirituality, and the social roles of each community member. Meanwhile, Farnell's (1999) global study suggests that the body and movement are powerful medium of expression in indigenous cultures, where kinesthetic communication is as vital as spoken language. In this context, the dances in the narrative are not mere entertainment but spaces for reflection and remembrance of the tribe's connection to the spiritual world, nature, and the collective spirit.

Table 2. Ritual Dances Depicted in *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino*

Dances	Symbolic Belief	Description
Binakbak	Mimics the movement of frogs; symbolizes connection with nature	Warriors leap and hop in a ritual before entering battle
Binanog	Represents a spiritual connection with the eagle, the tribe's savior	Dancers move as if soaring like eagles in the air
Inagaw	Struggle over winning a maiden's hand symbolizes courtship or selection	Performed during rituals of marriage or tribal unity
Inagong	Gong sound signals the beginning of a ritual or gathering	Accompanied by a dance of unity
Inamu	Mimics monkey movements; symbolizes joy and abundance	Danced during festive occasions such as harvest or victory
Pangalingut	Mimics gathering of honey; symbolizes perseverance and livelihood	Dancers imitate being stung by bees

Panikup	Depicts fishing or catching frogs in the river; a ritual of abundance	Performed as if fishing along the riverbank
Tinambul	Warriors guarding the mountains symbolize protection	Included in rituals that involve guarding the tribe

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The analysis of *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* has shed light on the complex yet deeply rooted faith and ritual practices of the Bukidnon tribe. The study reveals that belief in *Magbabaya*, the use of the *bangkasu* as a sacred intermediary, and the wearing of the *tangkulu* are not merely religious rituals but reflections of the community's entire way of life, moral system, and leadership structure. Likewise, dances such as *Binanog*, *Tinambul*, and *Pangalingut* affirm that the art of the body serves as an aesthetic and spiritual medium of collective memory, faith, and identity. Indigenous literature, such as this story, must be nurtured and recognized as a vital document of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and cultural heritage.

The research presents significant implications for education, culture, and literature from this understanding. First, local epics and folktales should be integrated into the curriculum to deepen awareness and respect for indigenous belief systems. Second, spiritual practices must be acknowledged and promoted as forms of national art and Filipino consciousness. Third, teachers, researchers, and readers are called to be advocates of folktales as sources of critical cultural understanding. Through this, literature becomes not merely a text to be read, but a bridge for reflection, reverence, and the shaping of national identity.

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APPENDIX A

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF BUKIDNON RITUALS

Many rituals, beliefs, and symbolic practices explored in *Tangkulu' ni Datu Dino* continue to be expressed in contemporary Bukidnon communities. While some have evolved due to modernization, others remain actively practiced in rural and urban cultural settings. Rituals such as thanksgiving dances, healing ceremonies, and ancestral offerings are still performed during agricultural cycles, tribal weddings, school festivals, and local peace pacts. Traditional garments like the tangkulu are worn during these occasions to invoke ancestral protection and spiritual presence.

Moreover, local schools and cultural groups have incorporated these practices in education and public performances, ensuring that the transmission of indigenous knowledge continues among younger generations. The sacredness of spaces like the bangkasu and respect for nature spirits or tumanud are integrated into environmental advocacy and indigenous community organizing. In this light, the story reflects historical beliefs and connects to the lived realities of the Bukidnon people today—bridging ancestral wisdom with contemporary cultural identity.