

## ***Subli: On the Use of Multidisciplinary Methods in Musicology***

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It has been over a quarter of a century since I saw my first *subli*. At that time, I was a young wife, a city girl born and raised in the liberal democratic tradition of the University of the Philippines campus in Diliman, Quezon City, the largest of Metro Manila's cities. Adjusting to marriage into a conservative kindred of sturdy, peasant stock, I struggled for answers to my many questions about the life that I had gotten myself into. One morning, as I watched the *subli* being performed in the middle of our little family compound in San Luis, a fifth-class municipality in the Southern Tagalog province of Batangas, a switch clicked inside of me and a faint light turned itself on. I recognized that a complex, powerful event was unfolding. My instincts told me that if I wanted to learn about the ways of my husband's people, this intense yet nuanced performance would be a good place to start. And so I began.

It took time to find the keys to *subli*'s secrets. After five years, I could delineate outlines and drive in stakes at key points. By the end of the decade, I had traveled through enough of its intricate paths to make some sense of the terrain. And now, at the end of more than two and a half decades, it seems a good time to stop and look back at what has been wrought by the enterprise of research and reflection.

Allow me to begin by introducing the practice that started it all. The *subli* is a special devotion performed in honor of the *Mahal na Poong Santa Krus*, the Holy Cross, the unofficial patron of the town of Bauan. The usual occasion for the holding of a *subli* is the feast of the Mahal na Poon, which falls on May 3 of every year, the date of Bauan's town fiesta. *Subli*, however, may also be held at any other time of the year except Lent to mark an auspicious occasion—a birthday, graduation, deliverance from an illness, or to simply thank the Poon for its patronage. It is usually performed in fulfillment of a *panata* (sacred negotiation). As a rule, therefore, the character of the celebration is festive and joyous.

The Poon is a large cross made of dark hard wood called *balayong*. The edges of the Poon have been encased in silver (today, stainless steel) to protect it from devotees eager to obtain a chip of the sacred wood that may be fashioned into an amulet to be worn around the neck. A golden sun's face with pointed rays is attached to the center of the icon.

The *subli* is linked to the Poon through a popular tale regarding its discovery in the early days of Spanish rule. According to this tale, a drunken gambler from the *barrio* of Alitagtag, then part of the town of Bauan, Batangas, arrived home late one evening to find neither food nor water in the house. Angered, he sent his wife out to a distant well to draw water. When the woman returned too quickly, bearing the water, he grew suspicious and sent her out again, following her in secret. He discovered her drawing water from a spring that issued from a dark, cross-shaped tree. A blinding light flooded

the area. Thus, the town was named Alitagtag (rays of light). The husband repented of his evil ways, and the first miracle of the Poon came to pass.

As news of the miraculous power of the tree spread throughout the region, three neighboring towns—Taal, Lipa and Bauan—vied for possession of the wood. Each town sent a delegation headed by their respective parish priests. A three-way competition was set, the aim being the retrieval of the exceptionally heavy wood. The priests of Taal and Lipa were unsuccessful. When the priest of Bauan came forward, however, the cross suddenly became light, a phenomenon that has happened frequently in the history of the icon. According to the *manunubli* (subli performers), the reason for the lightness of the cross was the performance of the subli by a troupe of dancers and musicians who had accompanied the priest of Bauan. Because the cross was delighted (*natuwa*) by the performance, it allowed itself to be carried off in triumph to the church of Bauan, where it still stands today, and where it still shows its pleasure or displeasure by becoming light or heavy at its will. Thus, the practice of the subli is inextricably linked to the devotion to this important icon.

It is possible to divide a subli performance into three main sections—the *kambulong*, the subli proper (*pinakasubli*), and the *pandangguhan*. Each section is separated from the other by a break in activity, and each is different in character from the next. The section that follows allows us to make a brief description of these sections.

### **The *Kambulong***

This section is characterized by pure, unaccompanied unison singing by the women of songs narrating the retrieval of the cross by the *manunubli* (subli performers) of Bauan in dense metaphorical language called *talinghaga*. The first words of the opening song, “*O manga kambulong...*” (Oh, companions), give the section its name.

#### Example 1

O manga kambulong  
Ba tayo sa maykawong  
May nabalita doon  
Kurus na bagong bangon  
Bagong tagang balayong  
Sa iyo’y nuhos nalon  
Dugo ng Panginoon.

Oh, companions  
Let us go to maykawong  
There is news of  
A newly raised cross  
A newly felled balayong  
From this pours and flows  
The blood of the Lord.

O manga kapipino  
Halina aba tayo  
Sa Alitagtag mambo  
Doon daw nagmimilagro  
Itong krus na ito  
Ang Poong milagroso  
Si Hesus Nazarieno.

Oh, fellow refined ones  
Let us go  
To bathe in Alitagtag  
Miracles have been wrought there  
By this cross  
The miraculous Lord  
Jesus of Nazareth.

O katampok ng singsing  
Sunod kayo sa akin  
Ating paghahanapin  
Ang nagmimilagrong garing  
Kurus na Ama naming

Oh, fellow gemstones  
Follow me  
Let us search  
For the miracle working ivory  
Our Father Cross

O manga damoro  
Itong ating likmo  
Huwag aariing biro  
Estacion kung tanto  
Nobenas kung may pangako

Oh, fellow spices  
This our enthronement  
Do not treat it as a joke  
There must be, as you know  
A novena if that has been promised.

O manga kabulaklak  
Itong ating paglakad  
Inaari mong hamak  
Estase yung kung dapat  
Lubenas kung may palad

Oh, fellow flowers  
This our journey  
Let us accept sincerely  
There must be  
A novena if that is fated.

The singers identify themselves as *kambulong* (whisperers of spells and incantations), *kapipino* (refined ones), *katampok ng singsing* (gemstones), *damoro* (spices), and *kabulaklak* (flowers), all part of the common paraphernalia of ritual specialists. They call on each other to undertake a difficult spiritual journey to Alitagtag to find the miracle-working cross.

### Example 2

Sa una'y ang timbo  
Ang dahon ay lagolo  
Ngayon, kaibang anyo  
Krus ang tumubo

In the beginning, the *timbo*  
It's leaves were *lagolo*  
Today, it has a different form  
A cross has sprouted.

Sa una'y ang tikas  
Ang dahon ay bayabas  
Ngayon ay kaibang hinap  
Ang tumubo perlas

In the beginning, the *tikas*  
Its leaves were of the guava  
Now it is of a different stain  
It has sprouted pearls.

Sa una'y ang pisig  
Ang damo ay talahib  
Ngayo'y kaibang dikit  
Krus ang tumirik

In the beginning, the small bamboo  
Its grass was *talahib*  
Today it shines differently  
The cross has been planted.

Sa una'y ang paite  
Ang dahon ay lagundi  
Ngayon kaiba ngani  
Krus ang nabunyi.

In the beginning the *paite*  
Its leaves were *lagundi*  
Today it is truly different  
The cross is celebrated

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Sa una'y ang kasaysayan	In the beginning, the tale
Bundok at kaparangan	Was of the mountains and the fields
Ngayo'y naging simbahan	Today it is of the church
Napagnonobenahan	Where prayers are said
Taong makasalanan	By sinful men.

In this set of verses, the *kambulong* sing of the metamorphosis of various plants and leaves. All the plants noted, according to the text, once had medicinal and healing properties but have been transformed and brought into a new cosmos where the cross is enthroned in the place of power. The last verse celebrates this transfer of power where *kasaysayan* (the root “saysay” refers to meaning, narrative, and history) is transferred from the “*bundok at kaparangan*” (mountains and fields as sacred places) to the “*simbahan*” (places of worship) where novenas are performed (*napagnonobenahan*).

A burst of drumbeats signals the arrival of the icon at the subli site. Then the *kambulong* is sung. As practiced in Bauan today, it is a very austere section, although there is some evidence to suggest that the dramatization of the journey to Alitagtag and the retrieval of the Poon were more prominent features in the past. Today, the men of the group simply lift up the Poon and carry it to the *tuklong* (temporary bamboo structure housing the altar) and install it there as the women sing quietly. Although this section is lacking in the drama and color that characterize the later sections, the sacred quality of the devotion would be lost without it. Thus, its performance is a must in any subli.

***Ang Pinakasubli*** (the subli proper)

This portion of the celebration is the center of the devotion. Its most important characteristics are dancing by large and small groups of dancers, the singing of subli songs led by the *matremayo* (leaders, usually women) and the playing of percussion instruments as drone to hold together all the songs and dances.

This is the only section where all the dancers and instrumentalists perform as a group. The dancing involves two types of formations. The first are large group formations with elaborate floor patterns performed by a complete set of sixteen dancers. These are directed by two *matremayo*, who are the authorities on procedures, dance formations, and song texts. They lead in the singing and dancing. The *manunubli* look to them to decide on matters of performance pattern and sequencing. There are also certain songs and dance formations that they alone know and perform.

The double-pair variations are performed in between the large formations. A double pair consists of four dancers, two men and two women. Four sets of double pairs perform variations on a set pattern, one after another, until the next large formation begins. The types of movement men and women perform contrast sharply. The men are free to weave in and out of the formation, performing large, characteristic male gestures. Arms are flung up and down, hands beat the ground, heads are flung back in stances of pride and defiance. Feet stomp and pound the earth, leap and bound in strong masculine

movements resembling these of the *arnis de mano* (traditional martial arts). *Kalaste* (bamboo clappers) used by the men serve as extensions of the hands and create a rhythmic complement to the drum music.

On the other hand, the female dancers perform as a tight pair, mirroring each other's movements in a precise, orderly formation. The *kiya* (curtsey) and the *pagtatalik* (dance gesture involving the flicking of the fingers and wrists) are the characteristic female dance movements. The latter involve small, refined gestures of the fingers, wrists and forearms. The ladies' heads and torsos are kept upright with no bending or unseemly hip movements. Footwork involves simple walking as well as small bourree-like steps on half-toe (*nakatiyad*). The women define the shape of a dance in a strict, orderly fashion, while the men elaborate in a free-wheeling and flamboyant fashion on the essential rule. The contrasting roles males and females play in the subli as well as the very different dance gestures that are characteristic to each sex serve to throw light on basic concepts about what it means to be a man or woman in traditional Tagalog society.

We may note that although the large group formations provide an important structural framework for the subli, the double-pair variations are equally important. They take up most of the action. Individual dancers are allowed to shine. Each dancer has his or her own way of performing the characteristic steps and an individual dancer's grace and aplomb are very much on display in a small group, rather than in a large one.

A second important characteristic of the subli proper is the playing of a distinctive rhythm on the drum called *tugtugan*. The *tugtugan* rhythm dominates this section, providing a drone that may be heard from a great distance, alerting the community that a subli is in progress. The *tugtugan* is a goblet-shaped wooden drum with a single head made from the skin of a monitor lizard (*bayawak*). It is played with two thin bamboo sticks (*patpat*) that create a loud rhythmic drone against which the dance unfolds. In the absence of the drum, a long bamboo node, also called *tugtugan* (thing to play), may also be used.

Over the sound of the *tugtugan*, eight devotional songs, similar in both literary and musical style to the *kambulong* songs, are sung by the female dancers. Because of the loud sound of the drum, the songs are largely drowned out. Though these songs can hardly be heard, their performance in the proper sequence is necessary for they are the music counterparts of the large group formations and they provide the structural frame for the celebration as a whole.

These three elements—the group dance formations, the percussion drone, and the almost inaudibly sung prayers—are the most striking features of the subli proper.

### ***Awitan***

Lighter in tone, less formal and more freewheeling than the other sections, the *awitan* consists of performances of *pandanggo*—dance-songs that involve an instrumentalist (on the guitar, violin or drum) and a singer-dancer. The instrument plays

a steady rhythmic ostinato while the other performer alternately sings and dances to an improvised text.

As the singing and dancing become more and more lively, impromptu narratives and debates in song may spring up between singers. Initially, the topics for the texts are religious and solemn in tone, such as the *Awit sa Krus*. But late in the evening, the texts often veer towards the secular, romantic, or even ribald. An example of this is the *sinilangan* (dance song in the eastern style) exchange between a male and female performer:

Female:	Huwag ka nang pumaling sapagka't ang pangaral ko'y pangaral sa yo di ko pinagbibigyan	Do not try to avoid my gaze because my advice to you is that I will not give in to your wishes.
	Ulukan mo kami ito ay lumulooy kung talulon pa't lulusakin ko na raw	Should you make us an offer it will wither while still a bud. I will trample on it.
Male:	Nagkataon naman ako ay nasubo ng kanin ay sa lalamunan ko huminto't tumigil	It so happened that I have swallowed rice that has stuck in my throat and will not go down
	Kaya ko nasabi ang naitangkakang ihayag isang pag-ibig ay nasa sa iyo rin	I say this because I have tried to express a love and yet it is all up to you to accept it.

The audience reacts with laughter, shouts, rhythmic stamping of the feet, and clapping of the hands. The listeners may join in the animated and lively jousting in song and dance. In the awitan, the subli becomes a subtle blend of religious and secular practice, and one may notice a gradual progression from the austere opening kambulong to the lively, almost rowdy pandanguhan at the end.

While the preceding description of a subli celebration is necessarily brief, we are given a glimpse of the interlocking relationships that exist between music, dance, literature, prayer, gender relationships and religious belief in a single practice. In studying the aspects of a tradition, we become aware of how the behavior of dancer-musicians reveals patterns and attitudes that extend into other areas of socio-cultural interaction.

When I stumbled upon the form as performed in out-of-the-way *sitios* and hill communities of Batangas in 1980, I thought that it would breathe its last within the decade. Happily, events have shown that I was mistaken. Today, subli has become an

emblem of the dynamics of cultural change in a traditional society. Twenty years ago, the Cultural Committee of the City of Batangas, the prosperous port city in the southwestern part of the province initiated a Subli Competition as part of its annual Foundation Day celebration. Schools and community groups were encouraged to join the competition and learn the subli from traditional practitioners. Through the persistence of the local organizers and the enthusiasm of the communities concerned, hundreds of children and young people have since learned the basics of the form from their elders. Every year, judges strive to achieve a set of criteria for evaluation that ensures that the subli thrives in an environment that protects its integrity and allows its practitioners to express themselves as a traditional community coming to terms with swift cultural change.

In 1999, during the celebration of the Year of the Jubilee Cross, the powerful archbishop of Lipa, Gaudencio Rosales (now Cardinal Rosales, Archbishop of Manila), acknowledged the symbolic value of the practice when he instructed all parishes to prepare for the arrival of the replica of the Jubilee Cross in their locality by teaching their children to perform the subli to greet the cross as it worked its way through each and every community in the diocese. Subli has thus become a bridge to the past, a site for transmission of cherished values and ideas, a source of community pride.

As I travel through the dense subli terrain, I begin to understand that the landscape that surrounds me is identical to my experience of Batangueño life. It is neither reflection, replica, nor metaphor of this life, for these things suggest empty shells without the force or power of the original. Rather, it is more of an icon in the ancient orthodox sense of the term, for an icon is a physical manifestation of a powerful thing that is not less than that thing. Imbedded in its core is the same power found in the original. The iconic object, relic, or representation is imbued and invested with whatever spiritual force inhabits the object represented. The subli is a form that reminds us of the past. But it does not stop there. For it continues to weave its way through Batangas society, memorializing the past, challenging the present, and projecting the future.