THE T’BOLI: SONGS, STORIES AND SOCIETY

A descriptive study on the T'boli language, lifestyle, marriage, political system and religion

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Professor Chester Cabalza

Section X6

Jezia Talavera
Faith Manalo
Amy Baybay
Dayra Saludario
Rosario Dizon
Bea Mauro
Ana Porquerino
Ardo Novela
France Yakit
Aubrey Banares
Marie Francisco
Rizzabel Inocencio
Conrad Rongavilla
Tina Cruz
1. INTRODUCTION. This paper is a brief descriptive study on the culture of the T’boli tribe. Culture is defined as a set of shared beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, which are learned and passed on from one generation to the next (Ember & Ember 1995, p. 173). The Philippines is a rich melting pot of different cultures, from the Ivatan society in Batanes to the Tausug tribes in Sulu. With the archipelagic landscape of and historical migration in the Philippines, it is inevitable that diverse cultures with equally diverse languages have emerged. On the other hand, these societies also belong to a larger family called Austronesian, which is manifested by their shared similarities in certain aspects of culture.

2. METHODOLOGY. First-hand data and interviews from a T’boli boi (princess), Foyfoy Kaong Baay and reference to the Santa Cruz Mission articles on T’boli culture were employed in the study. This paper was only a brief overview of the T’boli culture, particularly in the aspects of its language, lifestyle, marriage, political system and religion.

3. GEOGRAPHY. The T’boli people belong to one of the ethnolinguistic indigenous groups in the Philippines. Also known as the Tiboli or Tagabili, the T’boli tribe mainly settle in south western Mindanao, particularly in South Cotabato. The T’boli tribe is also known for its three prominent lakes that are culturally significant to its people. These include Lake Sebu, the largest lake; Siluton, the deepest; and Lahit, the smallest.

Fig. 1. Geographical landscape of South Cotabato
4. LANGUAGE. T’boli belongs to the Western Malayo Polynesian Austronesian language family, which includes other Philippine languages like Tagalog and Cebuano (Zorc, 1986). The Austronesian group is the largest language family with some 1000 different languages (Stevens 1999, p. 1). These languages include Bahasa in Indonesia, Maori in New Zealand and Formosa in Taiwan (Boeree 2003, p. 9-10). T’boli is also internally classified as a Bilic language, which constitutes one of the Philippine microgroups (Blust 1991, p. 81), and is spoken by 93,500 speakers as of 2000 (Lewis, 2009). Other Bilic languages include Tiruray and B’laan and are known to have distinct linguistic features like their seven-vowel system (Porter 1977, p. 11) and initial consonant clusters (Forsberg 1992, p. 6).

4.1 Phonology. T’boli has 16 consonants and 7 vowels (Porter 1977, p. 11). The consonants include the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consonant</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/b/</td>
<td>beng</td>
<td>‘door’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/t/</td>
<td>tulud</td>
<td>‘to pull’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/d/</td>
<td>d’wata</td>
<td>‘god’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/k/</td>
<td>k’ silica</td>
<td>‘corn’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/g/</td>
<td>gawi</td>
<td>‘ladle’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/m/</td>
<td>megel</td>
<td>‘heavy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/n/</td>
<td>nelem</td>
<td>‘deep’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/f/</td>
<td>fet</td>
<td>‘rope’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/s/</td>
<td>sumong</td>
<td>‘lip’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/h/</td>
<td>helek</td>
<td>‘sand’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/w/</td>
<td>wong</td>
<td>‘spider’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/y/</td>
<td>yaku</td>
<td>‘worm’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/l/</td>
<td>logi</td>
<td>‘man’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. 7 Falls, Lake Sebu
One of the notable and controversial phonological features in T’boli is the absence of the voiceless bilabial stop /p/. On the other hand, the presence of the voiceless labiodental fricative /f/ is distinctive in Bilic languages and can also be found in some Cordilleran languages.

T’boli also has a seven-vowel system, which includes the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vowel</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/a/</td>
<td>abu</td>
<td>‘fat’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/i/</td>
<td>imak</td>
<td>‘armpit’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/u/</td>
<td>utek</td>
<td>‘brain’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ə/</td>
<td>el</td>
<td>‘yes’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɛ/</td>
<td>el</td>
<td>‘water’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɔ/</td>
<td>owong</td>
<td>‘boat’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɒ/</td>
<td>olung</td>
<td>‘shadow’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2. Basic Greetings. There are basic greetings in T’boli that are used in everyday life. These may also be used when the T’boli people welcome tourists and guests.

Hyu h’lafus.       Good morning.
Hyu kimel.         Good afternoon.
Hyu kifu.          Good evening.
Bong s’lamat.      Thank you very much.
Beleem sekom.      You’re welcome.

Table 1: Figurative Uses of *nawa* that indicates emotion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T’boli Term</th>
<th>Literal Meaning</th>
<th>Figurative Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bong nawa</td>
<td>‘big breath’</td>
<td>‘love’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maan nawa</td>
<td>‘light breath’</td>
<td>‘joy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blat nawa</td>
<td>‘heavy breath’</td>
<td>‘sadness’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lungun nawa</td>
<td>‘coffin breath’</td>
<td>‘worry, anxiety’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figurative use of *nawa* in T’boli may express emotions (Porter 1977, p. 148) such as sadness and happiness, which are semantically correlated to their literal translations, as shown in Table 1.

Table 2: Figurative Uses of *nawa* that indicate characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T’boli Term</th>
<th>Literal Meaning</th>
<th>Figurative Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sidek nawa</td>
<td>bad breath</td>
<td>bad character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kesut nawa</td>
<td>tight breath</td>
<td>short-tempered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sotu nawa</td>
<td>one breath</td>
<td>unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tikaw nawa</td>
<td>clear breath</td>
<td>honesty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that the figurative uses of *nawa* may also express characteristics (Porter 1977, p. 149). The literal meaning is also semantically correlated with its figurative use.

5. LIFESTYLE. T’boli teems with rich culture that has been successfully preserved and passed on to the younger generation. The Datu, who serves as the tribal leader, teach his oldest child (*boi* for princess; *nga datu* for prince) the T’boli culture, dances, epic songs and instruments.

5.1. Food. Rice or *meso* is the staple food of the T’boli people. They also eat root crops such as *ubi* (camote), *ubi koyu* (cassava) and *k’sila* (corn). They occasionally eat meat and chicken; they
usually prepare meat dishes during feasts, celebrations and religious rituals. They also prepare wine or *lewag*, which is made of sugarcane, during certain celebrations.

![T'boli food](image)

*Fig. 2. T'boli food: meso (rice), uton (fish) and lamnaw (vegetables)*

5.2. **Tribal Fashion.** The T'boli, especially women have a sophisticated fashion style, with attires intricately woven in colorful fibers of red, white and black. Even young women already know how to put make-up and to wear their refined and distinct T'boli attire, which includes the *k’gal* (T'boli dress), *nomong* (earrings), *lieg* (necklace), *hilet* (girdles/belts), *blusu* (bracelets), *singkil* (anklets), *tising* (rings) and *sweat* (combs).

5.2.1. *K’gal* (T’boli dress). T’boli women wear different dresses depending on the occasion or on their everyday labor. They wear the *k’gal taha soung* when they are working in the fields and the *k’gal bengkas* on ordinary days. The *k’gal nesif* is a T’boli dress with sophisticated geometric patterns and animal and human designs, while the *k’gal t’nalak* is made of the *t’nalak* fiber woven in red and black colors. *Ulew* is a head turban mainly worn by men.
5.2.2. Nomong, Lieg, Blusu (Earrings, Necklaces and Bracelets). T’boli women have various colorful accessories that are made of brass, glass beads and shells. The lieg is the most priceless heirloom of a T’boli woman.

5.3. Tattooing. T’boli people usually mark their bodies and forearms with tattoos, which reveal hakang (human), bekong (animal) and ligo bed (zigzag) geometric patterns. They believe that these tattoos glow after death, and serve as their light to guide their T’boli journey to the afterlife.

5.4. Instruments. The T’boli tribe also has a wide variety of percussion and stringed instruments that they use during wedding feasts, celebrations, healing and religious rituals. These include the
agong, a percussion instrument that is played to ward off the busao (evil spirits), and the famous k’lintang, which is played during feasts. T’boli stringed instruments include the d’wegey, hegelung and kumbing. The kumbing is a bamboo jaw’s harp and is played during an eclipse to call the moonlight back.

Fig. 5. Agong and K’lintang

Fig. 6. Kumbing and Hegelung

5.5. Dances. The T’boli tribe also performs dances during their marriage celebrations and rituals to appease their god D’wata and other spirits. They dance the madal tahu (true dance) during religious rituals to imitate their mythical hero Tudbulul. During the planting and harvest seasons, they perform the madal tahaw (bird dance) for good produce. They also perform the madal soyow (warrior dance) to depict their battles during tribal wars. They dance the madal be tonok (healing dance) when one of their relatives gets sick.

5.6. Arts and Literature. Aside from its rich and abundant instrumental and cultural dances and lifestyle, the T’boli tribe is also known for its unmatched and complex art system and elegant
styles of literature, which includes folktales and epic songs narrating the origin and history of its people.

5.6.1 Arts. The T’boli people use simple basic colors, especially red, white and black when they weave their T’boli dresses. However they use sophisticated patterns which are never repeated in any T’boli dress. These patterns include geometric styles, animal and human designs and repetitive lines and curves. These colors and patterns are manifested in the dream weavers’ work that is famously known as the t’nalak.

![T’boli Dream Weavers](image1.jpg)

**Fig. 7. T’nalak dream weavers**

5.6.2. Literature. Most of the T’boli literature is orally passed on from one generation to the next. These include Ana ne Tau Bawik (Ana and the Spirit of the Dead), Oko ne Ye’en (Oko and His Mother), Walo Nga Libun (Eight Maidens) and Bulol Hulon (Mount Hulon). Their epic songs include the famous Tudbulul that depicts the T’boli origin, Lemlunay (Paradise) and O D’wata Holi Kemudung.

6. FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS. The T’boli people have a wide array of traditional celebrations and occasions to mark significant cultural beliefs and seasonal rituals and traditions.

6.1. **Mo ninum.** Mo ninum is a feast of marriage renewal, healing and offering to appease the spirits. The celebration starts with a process of measuring by the hands called d’mangaw. This is the same process performed by the tao d’mangaw (shaman) when he finds a lifetime partner for a T’boli child. The bride’s and groom’s families prepare for the feast separately; the bride's kin
weave the *t’nalak* and prepare T’boli delicacies like the *tofoy* (made of sticky rice) and *lewag* (rice wine). The groom’s kin, on the other hand, cook *meligey* (wrapped rice) and hang antique T’boli plates.

After the feast, there is singing, dancing and playing of the *hegelung* instrument (two-stringed lute), followed by the *seket kuda* (horse fighting). The celebration lasts for two days and two nights.

### 6.2. Lemlunay Festival

Lemlunay, which means ‘paradise’ is an annual tribal festival, which is celebrated every third week of September at Lake Sebu (Yolk, 2012). The occasion features the unity and convergence of the six major tribes in South Cotabato, namely T’boli, Manobo, Kalagan, Ubo, Magunidanao and Tasaday. Tribal rituals which include singing of native music with traditional instrument accompaniment, cultural dancing and the famous *seket kuda* (horse fighting).

![Lemlunay dances](image)

### 6.3. Helobung Festival

The Helobung Festival, which means ‘never-ending joy’, is celebrated every November in memory of the T’boli tribe’s rich culture and their famous Lake Sebu (Damo, 2011). The people wear their traditional hand-woven t’nalak attires and perform dances such as the *madal tahu* and *madal tahaw*. They also use their priceless cultural instruments like the *hegelung*, *kumbing* and *k’lintang*. 
6.4. T’nalak Festival. The T’nalak festival showcases the renowned t’nalak cloth of the T’boli tribe intricately crafted by the dream weavers. This is celebrated every July at the city of Koronadal, where the people are dressed in their respective cultural attires and showcase their provincial trademarks through street dance competitions (Jong, 2011). The tribe’s rich cultural heritage is manifested in the elegant and colorful hand-woven dresses, breath-taking dance performances and dynamic music.

Fig. 10. T’nalak festival

7. MARRIAGE. Kesiyehen or arranged marriage is common among the T’boli. They also perform marriage rituals and courting traditions before the actual ceremony. Grooms prepare dowries and bride price for their bride as well.
7.1. Child Marriage. T’boli parents usually arrange their children’s marriages at an early age. The parents usually do this when their child falls severely ill. The tao d’mangaw (shaman) helps them find a partner for their child. The sick child is dubbed as a binahung, or someone who needs a lifetime partner. The partner may be from another tribe and is required to give the sick child a ring or bracelet to cure him/her. Once the child becomes well again, the family visit the partner’s parents and may plan on their children’s marriage in the future. However, this is not obligatory.

7.2. Feasts, Visits, Dowries. The groom is required to give sungod (bride price), which may consist of a number of carabaos, agongs and other properties. He is also required to give kimu (bride endowment). Mulu is the feast where the lifetime partners and their parents sleep in each others’ houses within a period of time. After the mulu, the groom does the gatoon or mutual house visits to the bride to prove his worth to the parents.

The marriage may be dissolved if no mutual love between the lifetime partners emerged. They perform the hulek sungod, where the woman returns the bride price and endowment.

7.3. Marriage Ceremonies. The marriage ceremony takes place at night. Dressed in their respective wedding attires, the lifetime partners prepare for the wedding in separate houses. Before the wedding they perform the traditional s’lingon, or poetry song debate, where the two parties hire a representative, who boasts of their beauty and power to haggle over the bride price. That is, the groom’s debater tells how brave and powerful he is to lower the demand of the bride.
price, while the bride’s representative brags about her beauty and prestige to demand a bigger sungod. After the s'lingon they all sing the Tudbulul, or the epic song of the night.

7.4. Polygamy. Polygamy is acceptable in the T’boli culture. Unlike the Muslim tradition where a man may only marry up to three wives, the T’boli man or datu may have as many wives as he can. This tradition reflects their god D’wata who also has many wives. There are, however, rules that men must follow. The man must first ask permission to his first wife if he can have another wife. He must also be capable to finance all of his wives and provide an adequate lifestyle for all of them.

7.5. S’ko or Divorce. Divorce is allowed in the T’boli culture. Partners must present themselves before a datu and bring up their grievances, which may be sterility, incompatibility or infidelity. When the case is settled, the woman must return the bride price fourfold.

8. POLITICAL STRUCTURE. The political organization of the T’boli people stems from the traditional barangay system, where a tribal leader takes over the community and a group of wise men preside over decisions and employment of customary laws.

8.1. The datu. The datu is the tribal leader of the community, who imposes the traditional laws, settle misunderstandings and conflicts and perform marriage rituals. He makes decisions along with a group of wise men and leaders. The circle of decision-makers may include the datu’s oldest child. The datu is also decided by the group of leaders, and must possess leadership and communication skills, wisdom and adequate knowledge of the T’boli tradition. He must also possess properties and status symbols like land, property and a number of wives. The transition is not necessarily hereditary; that is, the next datu may not come from the same family, as long as the person possesses the skills to be a datu. On the other hand the son of a datu may also take his fathers’ place as the new tribal leader.
8.2. **Sebila (Friendship pact).** T’boli families also have a concept of friendship agreements, where two families may perform a *sinum lito* (blood compact) to seal their friendship. Such a ceremony would mark the eternal unity of the two families. Their motives include financial and economic securities.

8.3. **Jurisdiction.** The T’boli political system employs strict jurisdiction rules to settle misunderstandings and conflicts. The datu presides over the conflict and employs different trials for different types of criminal cases. He performs the *s’bot meso/halay* (submerging of rice) for adultery cases. The tribal council prepares a bowl of water and eight types of rice grains and drop them in the bowl. If the rice grains float, the accused person is not guilty; if they sink, then he is guilty of the crime. The person must then pay the penalty fee and return the bride price.

The *t’mogo hekodok nga onuk b’notu* (cooking or boiling of egg) is the trial for cases of stealing, and the *s’beles* (revenge) for murder cases. The *s’beles* is the worst punishment for the accused; he must be killed because the T’boli people believe that if the person who is murdered is not avenged, he cannot proceed to afterlife. Such heavy punishments justify the peaceful condition among the T’boli tribes; people do not dare to commit such crimes with the fear of being judged guilty and being punished.

9. **RELIGION.** The T’boli people believe in and worship spirits of nature like their god of creation, *D’wata*, and *Fun Koyu* or the spirit of the forest. They ask permission and pay their offerings called *densu* whenever they would cut a tree or get water from the lake to appease the spirits. They also pray to the gods of the moon, sun and stars for a healthy life or safe travel.
During the Spanish colonization, Dominican priests introduced Christianity to the T’boli tribe. The people still believe in their gods and also recognize God and Jesus. With the introduction to the Christian tradition of baptism, they name their children with a T’boli and Christian name.

9.1. Beliefs and Healing Rituals. The T’boli people believe their sicknesses are always caused by their angry gods, and they have to perform rituals and offer densu to appease the spirits. They believe that these are punishments because they violate the customary ways of intervening with nature. The m’wanga (tribal hilot) and m’tonbu (herbal healer) cure the sick person and lead the healing rituals. They cure illnesses such as b’latu (tumor or myoma), tenbalung (hemorrhage) or henayam. The illnesses range from sentengeb (minor) to nasal be tonok (most serious), where the healer perform and offer different offerings depending on the severity of the sickness.

9.2. Herbal Medicine. The T’boli tribe also has traditional herbal medicine for certain illnesses, as illustrated in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Herbal Medicine</th>
<th>Illness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seket gembon (herba buena)</td>
<td>for kini ne m’kow (fever and cough)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bulok bukay (white flower)</td>
<td>for hali (wounds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nook hulo-dolil (root of red sugarcane)</td>
<td>for lemwal lito (eye disorder)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9.2. Death and Burial. The T’boli people bury children and adults differently. When a child dies, they wrap him/her in a kumu (blanket) or igam (mat) and suspend the body in a branch of a tree. On the other hand, they place an adult in a lungun (coffin), which looks like an owong (boat). Relatives of the dead child or adult do not cry after several hours of his death, because they believe he might return. They also decorate the dead person’s coffin which reflects his past life. That is, they paint images of root crops and fields for a farmer, or stars and moons for a poet. They also have burial beliefs: earthquake after a burial means that the dead will turn into a busao (evil spirit). Also, when a person dies, his/her most beloved grandchild will follow him/her.
9.3. Concept of Afterlife. The T’boli people believe that when they die, their spirits will journey into the afterlife in a boat.

10. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS. The brief descriptive study of the T’boli culture shows that such a tribe possesses an intricate and significant way of life that reflects a part of the identity of a Filipino. Their traditions on marriage, lifestyle, political system, religion and language still root from the Filipino ethnicity and trace back their origins to the Austronesian family. The complex yet valuable traditions of the T’boli people must not be overlooked, and must be set an example with regards to how they successfully pass their culture from one generation to the next, so that the other equally important Philippine ethnolinguistic groups may continue to live.
REFERENCES


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