

# Semiotics in Street Dances a Reflection on the Roles of Power, Gender, and Modernization

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## ABSTRACT

Street dances depict one's local cultural heritage that stems from both early religious and socio-cultural origins. In this paper, a local street dance in Camarines Sur, Philippines was subjected for semiotic analysis to understand the underlying phenomenon that influence the changes in concept, style, and executions of the street dance. Focus group discussion, key informant interviews, and participant observations were conducted with various informants that include religious, political, and academic leaders, community members, street dance participants, and dance choreographers. The data were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded. By pointing to the signifier (physical/material) and signified (concept) in the street dances, it provides the reader with the connotative and denotative meanings on the objects being analyzed. Presenting binary oppositions is a fundamental organizer of human philosophy, culture, and language. By presenting the power structures and dynamics present in a society, it tries to point themes and ideologies present in its socio-cultural context which provided opportunity to critically think the influences of certain phenomena portrayed in local street dances. In a nutshell, these street dances are characterized by convergence of semiotic elements influenced by religious, artistic, gender, modernization, and historical factors revealing different meanings that evolve over time requiring intervention from local leaders and academe for cultural heritage preservation.

**Keywords:** street dance, semiotics, power, gender, modernization

## INTRODUCTION

Street dances depict one's local cultural heritage that stems from both early religious and socio-cultural origins. It reflects the richness of the local culture in terms of its music, dances, costumes, props, and choreography. Drawing back from history, its origins can be recalled as part of the Spaniards' efforts to colonize more Filipinos by participating in colorful processions and religious dramas. It is a way of attracting Filipinos to celebrate annual fiestas and festivals in commemoration of their patron saints to convert to Christianity. Through the years, these festivals become cultural in nature. No matter what the original meaning of the festival, these days are usually marked with people garbed in elaborate costumes, overflowing food and drinks, fluvial parades, processions, competitions, and many more. Some of the most popular Philippine festivals have become tourist attraction that draws visitors from all over the world. These dance festivals have been an essential element in fiesta celebrations in the country that portray the cultural richness of one place. As cultural studies began to regain its popularity, more socio-culturalists have ventured on this topic (Adiova, 2014; Magpantay, 2014; Peterson, 2016; Shay, 1999; Mabingo, 2019; Celeste, 2017; Wanyama, 2012; Ersoz, 2015; Rani, 2018; Karabulut & Dogan, 2018; Awuah, 2015; Levickaite, 2011).

In Sagñay, street dances have been a common highlight as part of its municipal fiesta celebration. In line with this, an initial attempt was done to comprehend the underlying phenomenon in Sagñay where two (2) festivals are being celebrated – the Guipao Festival and the Baybayon Festival. Given the modern phenomena such as modernization, it was pointed out in previous case studies that the concepts of “culturalist” being portrayed in street dances have been greatly influenced and subjected to misinterpretations. This may be due to the presence of the existing power structures dominant in the society such as the religious (church) and the secular

(government) sectors. How does this phenomenon affect a traditional festival like Guipao? What is the important role of the education sector in preserving the culture of its community?

This was investigated in this study exploring on the semiotic elements present in the Guipao festival and the Baybayon festival street dances in Camarines Sur, Philippines through an in-dept analysis on the concept, style, and executions of the street dance with their signified meanings in relation to power, gender, and modernization.

## METHODOLOGY

The Realist Ethnographic Research Design (Van Maanen, 1988 as cited by Prill-Brett, n.d) was used which focused on the researcher's omniscient reporting of "facts" and quotes from participants. The informants of the study consist of the church leaders, local government officials, their residents – representing various sectors such as farmers, fisherfolks, and other stakeholders such as the educators, dance choreographers, and dancer-participants. Exemplary case technique was used in choosing the informants based on set criteria – which includes their occupation related to fishing and festival celebrations in Sagñay. Instruments used in gathering data were: audio interviews (semi-structured), questionnaires, checklist, field notes, camera, and audio/video recorder. Prior to data gathering, consultative meeting and MOA signing activities with municipal leaders were conducted. A focus group discussion (FGD) was also done among local officials asking semi-structured interview questions such as: the common themes present in the municipality during dance festivals, the time when the inhabitants in the municipality engaged in the street dances, groups of sectors present during the street dances, occupation or agricultural products or religious acts portrayed in the municipality, and the participants' opinions whether or not the street dance portray the cultural identity unique in the locality. During the FGD, exemplary cases of street dances, or those informants who possesses the set criteria, were identified to undergo face-to-face interview. To further saturate the initial data gathered during the Key informant interview (KII), snowballing was used to further identify more informants.

Profiling of the informants was done using a researcher-made questionnaire to get their basic information such as name, gender, occupation, role played in the street dance/festival, among others. Participant observation was done among the selected municipalities during the street dance performances. The process was documented using a video recorder and observers' field notes. These audio data were transcribed, coded, and grouped thematically to serve as support in the discussions. Ethical considerations were also observed in the conduct of the study such as seeking for free, prior, and informed consent from participants, and identity protection of subject-informants in the final manuscript. In analyzing the data gathered, semiotic analysis (de Saussure) was used having the physical/material (signifier) and the concept/idea (signified). It provides the reader with the connotative and denotative meanings on the objects being analyzed. Binary opposition is seen as a fundamental organizer of human philosophy, culture, and language. By presenting the power structures present in a society through themes and ideologies present in its socio-cultural context, it provides the reader with an opportunity to critically think certain phenomena as portrayed by the street dances in Sagñay, Camarines Sur.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Historical Context of Guipao

The word Guipao is a local word which means 'a school of fish'. Sagñay is well-known in Camarines Sur for its long coast lines and fishing as a means of primary livelihood of its people.

According to a local Catholic priest who was also the founder of the Guipao festival in 1999, the primary purpose of the creation of the Guipao festival was to commemorate its patron saint of fishermen – St. Andrew the Apostle and portray the fishermen's culture through traditional street dance presentation. Its secondary purpose is to uplift the socio-economic condition of Sagñay through tourism activities.

**TABLE 1. INFORMANTS' PROFILE**

SECTORS	AGE	GENDER	ROLE IN GUIPAO CELEBRATION	
			THEN	NOW
Dancers	9 – 12	Combination of Male and Female	Street dancers were students (elementary or secondary) from various municipalities in Partido	Street dancers were elementary pupils from various schools in Sagñay
Church Leader 1	45 – 75 yrs. old	100% male	Founder of Guipao festival	No participation
			Music composer	
Church Leader 2	50 – 60 yrs. old	100% male	No participation	No participation
Local leaders	45 – 65 yrs. old	80% male	Sangguniang bayan (Co-founder /Implementers)	Mayor (Planner/Implementer)
		20% female	Mayor (co-founder/implementer)	Sangguniang bayan (Planner/co-implementers) Tourism Officer (planner & co-implementer)
Education Representatives/Cultural Coordinators	40 – 55 yrs. old	Females	Teachers from various schools in Partido (Supervisory/coordination role)	Teachers from various elementary schools in Sagñay (Supervisory/coordination role)
Choreographers	20 – 50 yrs. old	Bisexuals	Teachers who were taught the initial steps by the founder	Dance trainers/choreographers hired by the school to train the dancers.
Judges	25 – 65 yrs. old	All genders	Religious VIPs in the community	Cultural personalities
Community members	All age range	Both male or female	Spectators	Spectators

Sagñay is one of the ten (10) municipalities in Partido district, Camarines Sur, Philippines. Most of its residents use the Bikol Partido language, a variety of the Bikol language distinct for its colloquial expressions, intonation, and word use. It has a rich culture manifested in its festivals, edifices such as old churches, music, food, and many others. It is geographically located along the west coast of the Lagonoy Gulf. As such, many residents rely on fishing as their means of livelihood.

**Semiotic elements found in the Guipao street dance**



Fig.1. Maria Clara dress used by the Guipao women street dancers

Semiotic elements of the street dances were compared to see the differences between the conventional and contemporary Guipao street dances. Conventional street dances use original music having original dance steps depicting ‘paglalawod’ (fish catching), ordinary and plain costumes for fishermen were used, and simple props such as ‘balde’ (basin), basket, ‘sagwan’ (rowing paddle), ‘lambat’ (fish net), ‘lampara’ (lamp), and ‘daso’ (gas lamp). On the other hand, notable changes in the contemporary street dance were observed such as the use of remixed modern and upbeat foreign music, mixture of original dance steps depicting paglalawod and modern dance executions such as back flipping, use of long, colorful dresses for girls (maria clara style) with headdress, use of colorful and elaborate shirts and pants for boys (with headdress), and use of additional props such as pyroplastic materials (smoke, fireworks), hula-hoops, flags, banners, and backdrafts.

These changes can be attributed to the people’s accommodation of contemporary influences to the local culture such as the phenomena of power, gender, and modernization. Just as in the study of Celeste (2017) which focused on the purpose and meanings of indigenous tourism defined by attempts to preserve the “authenticity” of their cultural practices as well as efforts to adapt to the changing times. Similarly, another study that explores on the meaning in contemporary dances was that of Rani (2018) which explored two examples of African contemporary dance, including the 2014 Uhambo production in Athlone Cape town and Four Seasons. It also presented forms of oppression for the creation of meaning (value) through interdisciplinary choreography and post-performance discussions with audience members which will allow Black South Africans to begin to reclaim their ability to reflect on the meaning of contemporary African dance forms, and in turn, reflect and act upon confidently, through their own identity. Baybayon Festival in Sagñay “Baybayon” is a Bikol word which means “pangpang” or coastline. Baybay is the root word of the term Baybayon, which means buhangin or sand. The “baybay” cuts in between two worlds: 1) beauty of nature, and 2) reality of life. Baybayon Festival is a casual festival held during summer at the coastline of the Sagñay overlooking Ragay Gulf and nearby Aguirangan island. The purpose is to showcase Sagñaynon’s talents through music and the arts. In the past, Baybayon festival is celebrated through sing and dance contests featuring original Bicolano songs. However, at present, rock band contests/concerts, bikini/beach body beauty contest and dance showdown contests are among the modern fads being promoted among the youth.



**Fig. 2. Pyroplastic materials (artificial ash) was used as props in the Guipao presentation.**

### **Power Relations on Gender Issue**

Gender shapes power, from the ‘private’ relationships of the household to the highest levels of political decision-making (Koester, 2015). The power relations on gender in the Guipao street dance shows a dominant-subjugated relationship between the female and male gender. The female’s role as depicted in the Guipao street dance has been dependent to men for their livelihood waiting for their husbands to bring their catch. However, the wearing of Maria Clara costume in the Guipao street dance symbolizes weakness as depicted by the character of Maria Clara in the novel *El Filibusterism*. On the other hand, the romantization of power can be found in the female gender for being the “queen” of the household being served by the husband for subsistence. This depiction was not only evident in the street dance but also in the informants’ ways of life as revealed during their interview. Husbands are commonly the “breadwinner” and earning as fisherman, while the wife wait at the shore for his coming, a typical scenario in coastal areas. This was evident when asked of the source of income of the family, most of the informants who are plain housewives said, “A kabuhayan mi talagang gikan sa pagsira.. si agom an naglalawod (fishing)... duman kami nagkukua kan samong pagkakan saka panggurogastos sa uro-aldaw, pag eskwela kan mga aki.” (Our livelihood is mainly coming from fishing, my husband who is a fisherman earns from fishing and from there we get our everyday sustenance, school expenses, etc.)



This can be an ideal setup, however, in the real setting, the female gender increases its vulnerability to dominating powers of the patriarchy. It was observed that mostly of the females living in the coastal areas in Sagñay are left as housewives and takes care of the entire household. She was left with less option but sacrifice her own aspirations over her family's sake. As a consequence, poverty is prevalent that even seeking for healthcare is being deprived from the wife. When asked whether this setup is acceptable for the mother, she said, "Wara man kaya akong tinapos kaya mayo man ako maginibo. Dai man pati ako tataong magnegosyo, iyo na sana an maitabang ko sa agom ko, an atamanon ko an pamilya mi." (I did not finish my studies so I was left with no choice. I do not know how to engage in small business so the least thing I can do is to take care of my family).

This phenomenon according to Koester (2015), is one of the most persistent patterns in the inequalities of power distribution between men and women. According to her, the set of roles, behaviors and attitudes that societies define as appropriate for binary "gender" can be the cause, consequence, and mechanism of power relations, from the intimate sphere of the household to the highest levels of political decision-making.

Similarly, the gender roles in the contemporary Baybayon festival shifted from conservative to a more liberated one. The female gender who was once covered with decent Maria Clara dress has taken the modern "westernized" mode of dressing through swimsuit bikinis and swimming trunks for men. This was due to the fact that Baybayon festival is being held during summer of each year. Although this is a normal phenomenon for progressivists, it is not the case for conservatives.

### **Power Structures in the Guipao Street Dance**

Similarly, religion and government have both subjugated and dominant power roles in the Guipao street dance. Religion as represented by the Church is subjugated by culture and arts show elements (mixture of modern music and use of elaborate costumes and props). On the other hand, religion manifests dominance as represented by the image of Saint Andrew the Apostle as a symbol used in the street dance to commemorate his feast day.

Furthermore, both the local government has both subjugated and dominant roles in the street dance. The government is subjugated since it is accountable to the church and its people for the religious relevance of the festival. However, the government's power is dominant in positioning itself in the promotion of the Guipao street dance as a show and policy formulation in conducting the celebration. By juxtaposing the local church and local government, both have provided each other a role to play in the Guipao festival celebration. This phenomenon was also noted in the three (3) case studies examined in the dissertation of Adiova (2014), which explored festivals in Bicol, Philippines and Michigan, USA – 1) the Tinagba Festival in Iriga City, 2) the Peñafrancia fiesta in Naga City, and 3) the staging of Peñafrancia fiesta in Michigan. These festivals were influenced by complex and ever-changing phenomena that are shaped in many ways by the dynamics between religious and secular communities. The study argued that festivals are not merely occasions of celebration that provide breaks from the everyday and the mundane; they also bring to the fore the continuous negotiation of tensions between the most powerful institutions of the region religion and government and the manner in which individuals and communities' express identity for local, national, and international audiences.

In like manner, the Guipao and Baybayon street dances possess these qualities of local identity expression. However, this expression of identity can be both respective and violative of the secular sanctities originally embedded in this street dances. Just as the founding priest of Guipao festival quipped, "nawara na an tunay na esensya kan Guipao festival" (Guipao festival has lost its true essence). This, according to him was due to the changes being done in the concept (costumes, music, and props) used by the participants. As explained in the study of Adiova (2014), music and dance in festivals illustrate how local notions of power and prestige in social hierarchies shape the reception of aesthetic ideas in performance. Should there be any changes in how Guipao and Baybayon festival is being celebrated may be attributed to the locals' notion of power and prestige present in the social hierarchies, which, in the case of Sagñay, according to the teachers and priest interviewed were due to the present phenomena of which its locals have been exposed recently to modernization and globalization. "Nangyayari an mga pagbabagong ini [sa street dance] dahil [garo] sa impluwensiya kan modern Ong panahon...Saro pa, an mga partisipante saka mga paradalan dai man mamuya magdalan [kan streetdance]

na mayong buhay na presentation.” (Changes happened to the street dance maybe because of the influences of modernization in the modern world. One more thing is... the participants and the viewers of the streetdance would not want to watch a boring and stereotyped presentation).

### **Effects of Modernization and Globalization in Guipao and Baybayon Street Dance**

The effects of modernization and globalization in Guipao and Baybayon street dance can be seen through binary positions. While the reserivists of culture view modernization and globalization as detrimental to culture preservation, progressivists, on the other hand, view it as essential for the development of mankind. This was supported by the Theory of Cultural Transition as emphasized in the study of Ortiz, et al. (2017) on the transition of Sinulog Dance Festival in the face of modernization. Their study found that the contemporary Sinulog dance transcended to a new culture after the Sinug was obliterated to a more progressivist view of change to increase tourist attraction catapulted to a more commercialized endeavor for tourism and business development opportunities.

Similarly, this phenomenon is present in the Guipao and Baybayon street dances. Local leaders prefer making the Guipao festival more festive to attract tourists and increase commerce. For them, culture is not static rather dynamic and fluid. And to some extent, culture should not be preserved; since culture continue to evolve as civilization emerge and develop. This is also the case with dance choreographers who prefer modern and lively music over traditional and old-fashioned one. They find Maria Clara costume as “cultural” and appropriate to the Guipao dance festival concept. However, being too cultural or traditional will bore the audience making them incorporate lively music and grandiose props.

Globalization in culture is prevalent in this era due to unprecedented acceleration and intensification in the global flows of capital, labor, and information which results to a homogenizing influence on local culture. “While this phenomenon promotes the integration of societies and has provided millions of people with new opportunities, it may also bring with it a loss of uniqueness of local culture, which in turn can lead to loss of identity, exclusion and even conflict” (UNESCO, 2017). This explains what is happening to the many ethnic communities exposed to rapid modernization.

What is happening to the Guipao festival and Baybayon festival in Sagñay is one concrete example of this phenomenon. The opening of the nations around the world to globalized information and communication systems commenced the effect it brings to local cultures. With the advent of modern technology and the internet, people worldwide learn to interact and collaborate which impacts the way people think, perceive, and appreciate their own and other people’s cultures. This phenomenon is further explained by the Theory on Cultural Convergence which states that “two cultures will be more and more like each other as their interactions increase” (Ritzer, 2011). It further explains that the more cultures interact, the more that their values, ideologies, behaviors, arts, and customs will start to reflect each other.

Furthermore, the improvement of the trades and industry, as well as communications technology, paves the way for a better means of interaction in both inter and intracultural ways (Jenkins, 2006). As nations aspire for economic development, various aspects of nationhood are affected such as the preservation of the ethnic cultural identity. Not only that this is observed in the Guipao and Baybayon street dances, but also in other local festivals around the world. Along this line, the question of how much of this foreign influence may be accommodated or rejected by a local culture in order not to lose one’s own cultural identity needs deep reflection. This was underscored in a paper written by Lorusso and Mantovani (2017), highlighting the importance of defining identity in cultural preservation since it is the driving force for any cultural group on what extent to allow cultural accommodation from external influences.

### **Classical vs. Contemporary Cultural Ideologies in Guipao and Baybayon Street Dances**

By looking into the contrasting classical and contemporary cultural semiotics present in the Guipao and Baybayon Street Dances, one can see the difference on how culture is being viewed and defined. Culture, according to Zimmermann (2017), is the characteristic and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and arts. Having this definition, some would

interpret culture as conventional, old, or traditional. This can include ethnic language, music, and arts that are long embedded in the consciousness of every member of a tribe or group. But some social and cultural scientists believe that culture is not just about how our traditional ancestors passed on to the younger generations their ways of life. As defined by UNESCO (2017), “Culture is a dynamic force for change rather than a rigid set of forms or parameters that must be strictly adhered to”. As it evolves, certain societal and cultural factors come to evolve as well. This contradicts the old orientation on culture as something traditional, old and unchanging. This is supported by the World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD) as cited by UNESCO (2017), stating that “the society’s culture is neither static nor unchanging but rather is in a constant state of flux, influencing and being influenced by other world-views and expressive forms”.

This dynamism of culture is a byproduct of certain phenomena prevalent in the society. In a less industrialized nation such as the Philippines, the progressivist pressure is indeed high in order to meet the demands of the changing world arena such as in the ASEAN and the United Nations. Being a member in these world organizations would mean cooperating in its visions and advocacies for its member-nations such as the establishment of globalized community and economy. UNESCO is convinced that no development can be sustainable without a strong cultural component. It further posits that cultural preservation and ethnic identity amidst globalization and modernization towards development can be applied with human-centered approach, mutual respect, and open dialogue between cultures to achieve lasting peace.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that as an artform, the Guipao and Baybayon festivals are indeed a good venue for enhancing the socio-cultural and environmental traits of the Sagñaynon, as it expresses concern for marine resources and ecological diversity. As such, it provides a strong impact in spinning the progressive cultural aspects of the municipality as manifested in the gracious and inspiring activity for the youth. As a tourism activity, the Guipao and Baybayon festivals usher us rich meaningful cultural tradition for Sagñay. It is one of the important activities of the lahing Sagñaynon as it showcases the intangible cultural heritage of the fisherfolks.

Furthermore, the Guipao and Baybayon festival street dances depict the drastic effects on culture brought primarily by globalization, modernization, and integration of information and communications technology such as the internet and mass media. The roles on the prevailing power structure such as the church and the state are also considered to be influential on how the Guipao and Baybayon festival evolved from past to present. These evolving effects are clearly observed in its music, dance, costumes, props, and choreography.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While there are tourism and economic benefits that can be gained from the progressivist’s end, the challenge still lingers on how to minimize the intrusive effects of globalization to the local cultures and traditions in order to preserve their cultural identity. The operating question lies on how to balance the benefits of globalized world integration on one hand, and protection of local culture uniqueness on the other hand. It is a pressing issue for most developmental authorities who place culture at the center of the developmental policies since the two are almost in the opposite cline. Both these two sectors need to recognize that confining culture in a conservative way is not equated to development; and exposing too much of the local culture to external influence is losing its uniqueness over sustainable progress. There needs to have rethinking of this concern on the level of the local authorities and the church to create a sound mutual understanding between conservatism and developmentalism. Having an open dialogue between the church and state will lead to the recognition of mutual respect that needs to be accorded to each other on the issues of cultural preservation and identity over promotion of local eco-tourism. This mutual understanding would lead to the formulation of sound local policies that promotes the common good of both secular and political sectors.

Furthermore, involvement of the education sector and other cultural workers will help the local government to realign local festival street dances as venues for ecological promotion and marine conservation among its constituents especially the youth.

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