

# Fishing Methods and Beliefs of the Balangigan-on Fisherfolks of Eastern Samar

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## Abstract

This research was conducted in the town of San Miguel, Balangiga, which is surrounded by the ocean and has one of the highest numbers of fishermen in the entire Balangiga area. Most residents rely on the sea for their livelihood. Balangiga is not only rich in fishing resources but also in fishing methods rooted in their culture, shaped by time and extensive experience. The purposive sampling method was used to select the respondents. A total of five respondents were carefully chosen based on the study's criteria. According to the respondents' answers, Balangigan-on fishermen use various fishing methods, such as *handline fishing*, *net fishing*, and *sinaw fishing*. The study also revealed some beliefs related to bringing good luck and avoiding misfortune in their fishing practices.

**Keywords:** *Beliefs, Fishing; methods; good luck; misfortune;*

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## I. Introduction

### 1.1 Rationale of the Study

The town of Balangiga is one of the most historically significant places in the Philippines, known for the tragic massacre that occurred when American forces attacked the Balangigan-on. Aside from its historical and sacred importance, the province's topography is surrounded by the Pacific Ocean, making fishing one of the primary livelihoods of the locals—a practice deeply ingrained in their daily lives. This livelihood and fishing culture have become an enduring heritage passed down through generations. Since cultural practices can vary from one place to another, the Balangigan-on fisherfolks adhere to certain beliefs in their fishing practices that remain alive and effective to this day.

Similar to other provinces in the Philippines, fishermen perform traditional rituals due to the belief that these bring an abundant catch or good fortune in their fishing activities (Torreon, 2005). Torreon's study mentions that fishing rituals are conducted to help increase the number of fish caught. He further emphasizes that these rituals are significant as a way of communicating with nature. In fact, according to Mangahas (2012), fishermen in the province of Batanes, also known as Mataw Fishers, have seasonal rites called "Vanua," a designated area in the sea where fishermen perform rituals to bring good luck and ward off misfortune during their fishing expeditions. Meanwhile, Cabili's (2009) study demonstrated that the fishing beliefs and practices of the people of Capul contribute to the conservation of their island's fishing grounds.

Filipino fishermen are not different from the Malay people. According to Ahmad's (1941) study, they believe that their fate and personal safety lie primarily in the hands of the sea's guardians or deities. As such, they

perform rituals, including offerings of food and drinks—not just any drink but even alcohol—performed by the "Pawan" or the leader of the fishermen. Furthermore, Nurhayati's (2019) study highlighted that fishermen on the North Coast of Central Java believe in a natural power that controls the sea. Every accident or misfortune in the fishing community is believed to be under the control of supernatural beings. However, they also recognize their religion and understand that both positive and negative events in people's lives are under God's authority.

The Balangigan-on people have a rich culture in fishing methods and rituals due to their proximity to bodies of water, making fishing an integral part of their daily lives. In this regard, preserving these traditions is essential as they reflect the creativity of the Balangigan-on community. The researchers aim to gather information on the fishing rituals and methods of the Balangigan-on fishermen because their beliefs and practices are distinct and not observed in other cultures across the country or even in nearby towns such as Tacloban.

Given the limited studies on fishing traditions, this research aims to highlight the uniqueness and creativity of the Balangigan-on fishermen in the context of their fishing culture. The findings of this study will help emphasize the value of the rituals and methods used by the Balangigan-on community in fishing. It may also serve as a guide for other cultures and draw attention to the rich heritage of the town of Balangiga in Eastern Samar.

## 1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the beliefs and fishing methods of the Balangian fishermen in Eastern Samar. The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the fishing methods employed by Balangigan-on fishermen?
2. What are the beliefs of Balangigan-on fishermen regarding fishing, specifically:
  - 2.1. Practices that bring good luck
  - 2.2. Practices that bring bad luck
3. What is the relationship and impact of the Balangigan-on fishing methods and beliefs on their fish catch?

## 1.3 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the concept of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino Psychology) by Virgilio G. Enriquez, particularly the indigenization approach. This approach emphasizes understanding the Filipino way of thinking and consciousness. To establish rapport and minimize hesitation among informants, key research methods included *pakikiugaling*, *pakikisalamuha* (adapting to social norms) and *pakikipagpalagayang-loob* (building mutual trust and understanding). Interviews were conducted as a primary method to collect data through direct conversations and storytelling with informants.

Furthermore, the study of Pe-Pua and Marcelino (2008) highlights the importance of the skill of *pakiramdam* (sensitivity) to avoid offending the informants' feelings, which was also considered during the data gathering process. The Balangigan-on fishermen were asked about their fishing methods and beliefs as part of an observational approach employed in this research.

The study also employs *cultural relativism* as a guiding theory. Cultural relativism asserts that beliefs, practices, and norms are relative to the cultural context in which individuals or societies exist. What is considered "right" or "wrong" within a particular culture may differ in another, as there are no universal moral standards.

Lastly, the study applies the *emic approach*, which focuses on examining a particular group, culture, or community from their internal perspective. This approach prioritizes how the members of a culture perceive and understand their own experiences, meanings, and belief systems.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Design**

This study utilized a qualitative research method with an ethnographic design to gather data on the beliefs and fishing methods of the Balangigan-on fishermen and to explore the relationship between these variables and their fishing practices. The research involved interviews conducted with a high level of pakikipagpalagayang-loob (mutual trust and understanding) to ensure more reliable data from respondents.

The five respondents were composed of Balangigan-on fishermen with: a). 30 or more years of fishing experience, b). A resident of San Miguel, Balangiga c). Willing to participate in the study. The responses from the interviews were compared and synthesized to form a comprehensive analysis of the rituals, methods, and their impact on Balangigan-on fishing. The respondents' experiences and answers served as the foundation for validating the study's findings.

### **2.2 Research Instrument**

The researchers utilized semi-structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation to allow respondents to freely narrate their beliefs and fishing practices. The guide questions were designed based on the research objectives and covered contexts such as the fishermen's beliefs before and after their fishing activities, the methods they use, and the impact on their livelihood.

Respondents were encouraged to share their experiences and beliefs openly. Tools such as audio recorders and cameras for photo elicitation were also employed to capture authentic and accurate information with the participants consent.

### **2.3 Data Analysis**

To address and analyze the collected statements and data, the researchers employed thematic analysis to understand the prevailing themes and identify patterns from the information gathered. Transcriptions from interview recordings underwent a coding process, where the researchers repeatedly reviewed the respondents' answers to identify potential themes or patterns.

Similar themes were then analyzed and categorized to form the overarching elements of the data. Additionally, tables were used to effectively present and summarize the findings.

### **2.5 Ethical Considerations**

The researchers adhere to ethical considerations to ensure the rights and welfare of the participants. The following measures were implemented: First, the identities of the participants were kept private through the use of pseudonyms. Participants were given the freedom and right to withdraw from the study at any time without the need to provide any reason. Data and statements collected through interviews and audio recordings were obtained with the participants' consent. Second, the collected information was kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. As a sign of respect for the participants, the information obtained was given due acknowledgment. Lastly, the researchers treated the gathered information without bias and subjected it to thorough analysis to ensure accurate and appropriate results.

### 3. Results and Conclusion

#### Fishing Methods

Fishing is one of the primary livelihoods of the Balangigan-on residents in San Miguel, given the abundance of catch due to the vast body of water surrounding the area. The participants shared various fishing methods they use and identified the most effective techniques depending on the time of day and fishing season. Their traditional knowledge and adaptive strategies demonstrate how local practices are shaped by environmental factors and extensive experience passed down through generations. These methods reflect their resourcefulness and intimate understanding of the marine ecosystem, making fishing a sustainable source of livelihood in the community.

**Table 1: Fishing Methods of the Balangigan-ons and Their Usage Periods and Techniques**

| Fishing Method   | Period and Method of Use   |
|--|--|
| <b>Pangangawil</b><br>1. Kitang<br>2. Paglalawag<br>3. Pag-aanod | This is used by fishermen when they go fishing from 2:00 AM until 8:00 AM.  Paglalawag is only used during the period when the <i>Solosogue</i> occur, from May to July. This is conducted when the sun begins to shine.<br>Pag-aanod is a method used to carry out during specific seasons when certain fish are abundant.<br>Balangigan-on fishermen cast their nets starting at 4:00 AM at certain locations. |
| <b>Pamumukot</b><br><b>Pansinaw</b>                              | Conducted during the new moon phase (darkness of the moon).  |

**Pangangawil (Fishing with Hook and Line).** Based on one of the lead fishermen with over 40 years of experience, pangangawil (hook and line fishing) remains one of the most effective methods for catching fish. There are three traditional types of pangangawil used by Balangigan-on fishermen that remain prevalent in the area:

**Kitang** – This is a fishing method where the kawil (fish hooks) are baited with raw fish cut into small pieces (fishing lure) and attached to a nylon line approximately 1,000 meters long. This is set at night and retrieved in the morning to collect the fish caught on the hooks. No lights are used during this method. Various types of fish can be caught through kitang. **Paglalawag** – This is also a type of hook-and-line fishing, but instead of using raw fish as bait, crystalline (a shimmering fabric that reflects light from the boat's flashlight) is attached to the hook as bait. The line must move continuously underwater to attract fish that mistake the shimmering material for small prey. This method often catches botlog (big-eyed scad). The nylon line used for paglalawag is shorter, ranging from 50 to 100 meters. Fishermen prefer this method when they cannot afford long nets because it is more cost-effective. Respondents believe that blue or pink-colored crystalline is more effective as these colors resemble small fish in the open sea. **Paanod** (Drift Fishing) – This method involves allowing the hooks to drift underwater while the fishermen wait nearby for Solosogue (blue marlin) to bite. Typically, botlog (big-eyed scad) is used as bait because it remains alive longer, even when hooked. This method is only practiced during the spawning season of Solosogue from May to July. Larger hooks, measuring 3 to 5 inches, are used, and the bait is set about 10 meters below the surface. Fishermen believe that this technique is most effective when the sun starts to rise because Solosogue hunt for small fish during this time.

**Pamumukot (Net Fishing).** Pamumukot is a fishing method that uses pukot (fish nets). Balangigan-on fishermen follow standard mesh sizes, avoiding single-mesh nets to prevent catching juvenile fish. They typically go out to sea at 2:00 a.m. and set their nets around 4:00 a.m. By sunrise, they retrieve the nets. Balangigan-on fishermen do not have permanent fishing spots but instead observe factors such as the dulom (dark phase of the moon) or follow a fellow fisherman who recently made a good catch.

**Pansinaw (Spear Fishing).** Pansinaw involves using sinaw (spear), suga (flashlight), and silip (goggles). This method can catch various types of fish but requires the fisherman to invest significant time and hold their breath

while diving to search for fish hiding among rocks or seaweeds. Respondents mentioned that pansinaw is only effective during the dulom (dark phase of the moon) when fish are less wary and easier to catch.

The fishing practices of the Balangigan-on community avoid the use of modern fishing equipment and destructive methods. According to respondents, they rely solely on traditional fishing techniques that do not harm the sea or their livelihood. However, their biggest challenge is the presence of illegal large fishing boats from neighboring provinces like Leyte. These boats deploy extensive nets that cover vast areas of the sea, posing significant competition to small-scale Balangigan-on fishermen.

**Table 2. Lucky Charms (Pampaswerte) – Beliefs of Balangigan-on Fishermen in Catching Fish**

| Luck at Sea   | Effect on Fishing   |
|---|---|
| Bringing a <b>saut</b>  | A type of lucky charm believed by fishermen to increase their catch.  |
| When the boat gets splashed by holy water during the feast of Sto. Niño in a fluvial procession | It is believed that a bountiful catch is ensured if the boat receives a ‘blessing’ or splash from the sea during this event because it is thought to have the saint’s divine favor. |
| Asking for blessings while hauling the boat to the sea  | The phrase "tae gad ako hin grasya" (Bless me with a bountiful catch) is considered a lucky chant that often results in numerous catches.   |
| If a person dies while fishing or is found ‘ <i>lawud</i> ’ (drowned) in the sea                | It is believed that the sea has claimed a life, and the next fishing trips may suffer from poor catches as a form of exchange or bad omen.  |

Traditional fishermen, including the Balangigan-on, believe in luck that brings good results in fishing. The respondents shared positive testimonies about their belief in the ‘**saut**,’ a type of lucky charm unique to the San Miguel area, believed to increase fish catch. The ‘**saut**’ can take various forms, such as twin fruits with unusual shapes like pineapples, **tatsanga** (a specific fruit shape), or even a pair of small white stones that move. Fishermen carry these charms to the sea and reportedly catch a variety of fish in abundance. The ‘**saut**’ is said to possess mystical power; when buried or hidden near a banana tree, it allegedly prevents the tree from bearing fruit or even causes it to die.

Aside from the ‘**saut**,’ due to their strong faith, the Balangigan-on also believe that the ‘**bindita**’ (blessing from a priest) brings luck to their fishing endeavors. This blessing is given during the fluvial procession of the Sto. Niño during the town’s feast or when new boats are blessed before being used for fishing. According to the respondents, boats that receive the blessing are safer at sea, even during bad weather, and typically have better fish catches compared to those without blessings.

When hauling their boats to the sea, the fishermen recite the phrase ‘**tagi gad ako hin grasya**’ (grant me a bountiful catch), believing that God listens to their prayers and blesses them with fish, even if in small quantities.

All respondents immediately mentioned that a death at sea, either of a fisherman or someone found ‘**lawud**’ (drowned), brings a significant blessing to the fishermen. They believe that a bountiful catch is exchanged for the life of a person. According to their narratives, this belief is supported by consistent testimonies from fishermen who have returned with kilos of different kinds of large fish following such events.

**Table 3: Misfortunes in Fishing – Beliefs of Balangigan-on Fishermen in Catching Fish**

| Misfortunes at Sea                                | Effect on Fishing   |
|---|---|
| <b>Saut</b>                                       | The luck brought by the saut is believed to have a corresponding consequence of misfortune and danger. It may result in a failure to catch fish or even require a life offering in exchange for blessings at sea. |
| If there is <i>tabug</i> (a type of grass) inside | Fishermen will not be able to catch any fish.   |

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| the boat |  |
|----------|--|

Despite the luck brought by the *saut*, it is believed to carry misfortune for fishermen who rely on its supposed blessings. Fishermen believe that the use of the *saut* must be kept secret from others. There are two reasons for this belief. First, when the *saut's* luck fades, the fishermen will no longer be able to catch fish for an extended period. Second, it is believed that a life may be taken as a consequence. Fishermen who naturally perish at sea are thought to have used the *saut* and paid the ultimate price with their lives.

The Balangigan-on fishermen also believe that *banwa nga maghamdas* (leaves that cause skin irritation), such as the leaves of the *Tabug* (Fig Tree), when found inside their boats, bring bad luck to their fishing endeavors. Thus, before going out to sea, they ensure that their boats are clean and free of such leaves. To remove bad luck, they perform a ritual called *paghuhuwas*, where the boat is submerged in the sea and then smoked to dispel the misfortune and restore their usual fish catch.

Overall, the Balangigan-on fishermen hold strong beliefs in both good and bad luck in fishing, which they continue to observe to this day. Their livelihood and fate are intertwined with these beliefs, which have become deeply rooted in their cultural practices and traditional fishing methods.

The Balangigan-on's methods and beliefs significantly influence their fishing practices, allowing them to preserve their culture and traditional ways of catching fish. These practices have become an integral part of their lives. Moreover, these methods have helped them meet their daily needs, such as purchasing essential fishing equipment like boat motors, and even enabling them to support their children's education.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study revealed the methods and beliefs of the Balangigan-on fishermen, which have become an integral part of their culture and serve as their primary source of livelihood. The Balangigan-on fishermen do not rely on modern fishing equipment; instead, they continue to use traditional fishing methods such as angling (*pangangawil*), including the use of *kitang*, *paglalawag*, *pag-aanod*, and fishing nets (*pukot*) and *pansinaw*.

They also hold various beliefs about good luck, such as the use of *saut*, the blessing of boats during the feast of Sto. Niño, and the death of a person or fisherman at sea (*lawud*). Conversely, they associate misfortune in fishing with the public revelation of *saut* usage and the presence of *tabug* (a type of grass) inside the boat, which is believed to result in poor catch yields.

These practices and beliefs have a significant impact, as they help preserve the fishing culture and enable the fishermen to provide for their daily needs.

#### 5. Recommendations

The researchers warmly recommend the following:

1. **For the Community:** Value and preserve the culture, traditions, and traditional fishing methods that reflect the heritage passed down by their ancestors.
2. **For the Fishermen:** Strive to continue the traditional fishing practices so that the rich culture reflecting these methods and beliefs can be passed on to future generations.
3. **For Researchers:** Conduct further studies on the culture and beliefs of Region 8 to contribute to the body of knowledge on cultural preservation.
4. **For the Local Government:** Provide support and resources to help fishermen modernize their equipment while still preserving traditional practices and beliefs that are culturally significant.

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