

My Volcano Adventure

The Tboli People

The Tboli, with their embroidered costumes and beaded ornaments, bangles, bracelets, and brass link belts, are one of the most colorful of all Filipino groups. They are renowned for their tiedyed abaca cloth and metal industry, including intricate lost-wax brass casting.

The Tboli, also known as T'boli, Tiboli, and Tagabili, are an old indigenous people living in South Cotabato, where the southwest coast range and the Cotabato Cordillera merge to form the Tiruray highlands, in an area circumscribed by a triangle formed by the town of Suralla, Polomolok, and Kiamba. Located within these boundaries are three major lakes which are important to the Tboli: Sebu, the largest and the most culturally significant; Siluton, the deepest; and Lahit, the smallest.



The land of the Tboli

The 1980 census gives a figure of 7,783 Tboli-speaking households, comprising an estimated total of 38,915 Tboli. The National Museum census, as of November 1991 in South Cotabato, records 68,282 Tboli.



Tboli Transportation

Fifty years ago, the most common way to reach Tboli was either by walking or by horseback. Most Tboli lived in the mountains, and everybody walked. Every family had a horse or two for riding and for carrying loads. Today hardly anyone has horses, and there are hundreds of motorcycles used for carrying passengers everywhere. No one walks anywhere if they can help it. They love riding motorcycles, even old women! As many as six people can ride on one motorcycle! There are also jeeps that carry passengers like a taxi. A long body is built on a jeep so 14 to 16 or more people can ride in it from town to town. When there are too many passengers to fit inside, the men ride on the top. They also have many buses to go to other towns.

Teachers and government officials like riding in 'limos' (air-conditioned limousines) which can take 8-10 passengers. The price is nearly the same, but it is a mark of status to ride in them.



Tboli Houses

Fifty years ago, everyone lived in the mountains. Three or four houses would be in one place and everyone living in them would be related to each other. When their children married, new houses were added, as many as 10 to 20 in one place.

The "mountains" are really big hills. Fields are planted right

up to the top of them. Their homes were all built on hillsides. The posts on the uphill side were short ones and the posts on the downhill side at the front of the house were much taller. Houses were mostly made of bamboo. The bamboo is split open and laid flat for walls and floors. The roof was usually made of a long tough grass called *cogon* which cools the house.

Tboli Food

The Tboli eat several kinds of tubers almost every day, especially sweet potatoes. They also eat lots of greens that look like weeds, but are very tasty. Everybody has banana plants, many varieties. Some are eaten like potatoes. Others are eaten as fruit. Tboli eat a late afternoon snack of roasted corn, sweet potatoes, and bananas. And almost every family plants sugar cane for the kids. Often when they are weeding rice or corn out in the fields, they eat cucumbers for their snack. Today, now that they live on the plains and not the hillsides, everyone has to eat rice every day. They will even go into debt at the stores so they can eat rice! The Tboli use video tape from worn-out videos to string over their rice fields. The tape hums when the wind blows it and frightens away the birds that eat the rice.

Tboli men used to hunt wild pigs with big bamboo traps or with a gun. They also hunted deer. Today there are only a few animals left way up in the forests. Tboli eat grasshoppers (locusts), and two other kinds of insects. They also eat the crunchy little bugs that cling to the stony wall of a waterfall. The Tboli say they taste exactly like cheese snacks.



Tboli Clothing

Women love to wear necklaces, earrings, and fancy combs in their long hair and bracelets on their arms and leg, all made by themselves. Their favorite earrings were like “daisy chains” made from the hair of a horse tail; their traditional necklaces are made of beads they bought from Chinese traders. Nowadays they make the same type of beads from plastic rulers or kids’ little plastic guns or the black and white cassette tape boxes.

The most expensive jewelry are beautiful belts with hundreds of bells on them made from brass. The sound of the bells is part

of the pleasure of watching them dance, and even when they walk down the road! Their arm and leg bracelets are also made of brass. When their brass *agongs* (drums) get a crack in them, they melt them down to make women’s jewelry. They also make rings for their fingers and toes out of brass. Nowadays they also buy little plastic beads of all colors and make long necklaces with little bells at the bottom. Tboli are professionals at embroidering traditional designs on their black blouses. They make many different designs, all done without a pattern. The blouse will be covered with designs front and back and even on the long sleeves.

Tboli Children

Fifty years ago, Tboli children had no dolls or other toys. They didn’t need dolls because each family seemed to always have a baby. The little girls had “live dolls” to play with. The little girls often carried a baby in a tubular woman’s skirt on their back which was strapped over their foreheads. If one family didn’t have a baby, the little girls borrowed a baby from their relatives. Little girls took care of the babies when their mothers were in the field planting, weeding, harvesting, or doing other tasks. When the baby started to cry, the little girl would call her mother by beating a certain rhythm on the big drum always hanging in the house. Its sound carried a long way! When the mother heard it, she would come running home to nurse the baby. The baby always slept in the tubular skirts that could hang on a bamboo like a sling with the baby lying in it. The little girls would bounce it up and down because the bamboo was springy until the baby went to sleep.

Little girls also carried water in large bamboo containers that were made from one section of bamboo. They were always the ones who looked for green vegetables in the fields and woods. Little girls also washed clothes. There were always clothes to wash down at the spring. If you didn’t have soap, they used ashes or sand to get out the dirt. Little girls were kept very busy.

While the little girls were taking care of the babies, the little boys were making rat traps from bamboo. They learned how to do this very early in their lives, and were always so proud when they brought home rats for the family to eat. These were field rats that had been eating their crops. They tasted really good when roasted. Every boy had a bow and arrow for shooting birds for the family to eat. Most of the birds were little, and the little boys would make a fire right out in the woods and eat the birds themselves!

Tboli Religious Beliefs

The Tboli's supreme deities are a married couple, *Kadaw La Sambad*, the sun god, and *Bulon La Mogoaw*, the moon goddess. They reside in the seventh heaven. They beget seven sons and daughters who end up marrying each other.

One of the most influential figures in the Tboli pantheon is the *muhen*, a bird considered the god of fate, whose song when heard is thought to presage misfortune. Any undertaking is immediately abandoned or postponed when one hears the *muhen* sing.

The Tboli also believe in *busao* (malevolent spirits) which wreak havoc on the lives of human beings, thus causing misfortune and illness. *Desu* or propitiatory offering of *onuk bukay* (white chicken) or *sedu* (pig) are made to placate or gain favors from these evil spirits. Tboli rites are normally presided over by a morally upright elder who is proficient in Tboli tradition. Often enough, the *datu* themselves preside.

To the Tboli, all objects house a spirit. They continually strive to gain the good graces of these spirits by offering them little gifts. Before crossing a river, for example, they may throw a ring. If spirits or gods need to be appeased, the Tboli make *desu* (offerings) which may consist of cooked food, the *agong*, and the *kafilan* (sword).

The Tboli afterlife has several destinations. Murder victims and warriors slain in battle go to a place called *kayong*, where everything is red. Entry into *kayong* is announced by the sound of *agong*, *klintang*, *hagalong* (guitar), and *dwegey* (violin). Thunder and lightning during a burial signify a spirit's entry into *kayong*. Suicides go to *kumawing*, where everything sways and swings. Victims of drowning become citizens of the sea. Those who die of an illness go to *mogol*, where day is night and night is day.

The Tboli welcome rain after a death, the belief being that the deceased has crossed the bridge to the afterlife with no intention of returning.

Tboli Arts and Crafts

Among the many ethnic groups in the Philippines, the Tboli stand out for their marked and characteristics penchant for personal adornment. This is evident in their costumes, body ornaments, hairstyle, and cosmetic practices. According to Tboli belief, the gods created man and woman to look attractive so that they would be drawn to each other and procreate.

Tboli women learn the skills of looking beautiful from an early age. It is not uncommon to see five or six-year-old girls fully made-up, like their elder sisters and mothers. Tboli women are

not satisfied with one earring in each ear. The more earrings, the better. Thus their ears are pierced not only on the lobes but also along the outer rim. Tboli men and women regard white teeth as ugly, fit only for animals. Thus the Tboli practice *tamblang*, in which they file their teeth into *nihik* or regular shapes and blacken them with the sap of a wild tree bark such as *silob* or *olit*. To indicate their wealth, prominent Tboli, such as a *datu* or his wife, adorn their teeth with gold, a practice adopted from the Muslims.

Tboli have themselves tattooed from not just for vanity but because they believe tattoos glow after death and light the way into the next world. Another form of body decor is scarification achieved by applying live coals onto the skin. The more scars a man has, the braver he is considered to be.

The Tboli use of body ornaments definitely follows the idea that "more is better." A characteristic ornament that stands out is the *kowol* or *beklaw*, a combination of earring and necklace. It consists of several strands of tiny, multicolored glass beads, suspended gracefully under the chin, from the left earlobe to the right. From the bottom strand of beads dangle about 7.5-cm lengths of black horsehair links with 2.5-cm of brass links at each midsection and clusters of tiny, multicolored glass beads at the ends. These individual lengths of chain are suspended vertically, beside one another so that the jaws and chin of the woman appear to be framed by some delicate and exotic veil.

While the women retain much of their traditional costumes, Tboli men don their costumes only on special occasions. They ordinarily go about in shirts and trousers like any rural Filipino. Part of the accoutrements of the Tboli male is the *hilot* from which his *kafilan* (sword) is suspended. It is in their bladed weapons that the Tboli focus their decorative skills.

The Tboli metalcraft tradition distinguishes Tboli culture and is linked to *Ginton*, the god of metalwork, who occupies a stellar place in the Tboli pantheon. The Tboli, however, give no indication of having ever possessed any knowledge of mining their own metals. Whatever metal there is to work on comes from scraps that the Tboli manage to get. Thus, in the case of brass or bronze, there are no standard alloy proportions. Copper was once obtained from one centavo coins, while steel came from the springs of trucks abandoned along some highway in the lowlands.

Tboli weaving is another skill that has been raised to the level of art. Their traditional cloth, the *tnalak* is made of *krungon*

(abaca fiber) extracted from the mature, fruit-bearing, wild abaca. Each fiber is carefully dried in the sun and stretched on the gono smoi, a comblike wooden frame with teeth pointing up, to preserve the length and silkiness of each fiber.



Tboli Literature

Tboli folk literature reflects the typical beliefs, customs, and traditions of their society. Practically every aspect of Tboli life is governed by folk beliefs and sayings. These proverbs are often based on non-sequiturs, and the non-Tboli who tries to decipher them might be perplexed. While cooking and eating, this is spoken:

*Don't throw rice away,
Otherwise there will be a famine.*

while hunting:

*If you catch a wild boar, eat its heart,
Or you will never catch another.*

and while planting:

*Plant during low-tide,
Otherwise you will not have a harvest.*

Lessons are taught through countless folktales. The epic *Todbulol* is the core of Tboli folk literature and the foundation on which Tboli identity rests. This epic, sung in its entirety only at important occasions, such as weddings, may last up to 16 hours, depending on the number of versions sung. *Todbulol* is normally sung through the night. The rapt Tboli listen to the singing of the epic in silence, with the children rapt in wonderment. Young girls shed tears of empathy as the epic unfolds and the singer continues into the night. There are spontaneous shouts of joy and admiration from the people.

Tboli Performing Arts

The Tboli have a wide repertoire of songs for all occasions; joyous, sad, or momentous, like weddings; or ordinary, like fishing in the lakes. Aside from these songs, which have fixed lyrics and melodies, the Tboli also improvise their own songs by using traditional melodic patterns at the end of a phrase or a sentence.

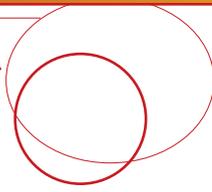
At wedding feasts, the dance called *tao soyow* is traditionally performed by two males engaging in mock combat, one dressed as a warrior, representing the party of the bride, and another dressed as a woman, representing the party of the groom. The warrior struts around and rattles his shield, while the “woman” sashays back and forth. The dancers go about provoking and taunting each other, getting near, but never really touching, then retreating. With hilarious steps, the dancers wriggle in the ground provocatively, yelping and screeching at each other. Another war dance performed in a man's life cycle is the *kadal temulong lobo*. The dance is narrative as the performer's movements tell how he has killed his adversary, who may have been his rival for a girl's affection.

Tboli History

Anthropologists say that the Tboli could be of Austronesian stock. It is believed that they were already, to some degree, agricultural and used to range the coasts up to the mountains. With the arrival of later groups, however, these people were gradually pushed to the uplands. There is reasonable speculation, however, that the Tboli, along with the other upland groups, used to inhabit parts of the Cotabato Valley until the advent of Islam in the region, starting in the 14th century. The Tboli and their Ubu (Manobo) and Bilaan neighbors resisted the aggressive proselytizing of a succession of Muslim warrior-priests, the greatest of whom was Sharif Muhammad Kabungsuwan from Johore in present-day Malaysia, who subsequently established the sultanate of Maguindanao during the late 15th and early 19th centuries.

Muslim oral accounts called tarsila claim that those who accepted the new faith remained in the Cotabato Valley, while the others retreated to the relative safety and isolation of the mountains (Saleeby 1974:184-193).

Conflict between the Muslims and the non-Islamized tribes continued with constant slaving raids by the former upon the later. It is no wonder then that in Tboli folk literature, the Muslims figure as perennial villains. Nevertheless, a regular volume of trade emerged despite the strained relations.



The fierce resistance of the Muslims against Spanish incursions served to insulate the Tboli from contact with Christianity and Spanish colonization. Only when the Americans were able to bring the Muslims under their sway, through a combination of military prowess and civil and religious accommodation, did Christian elements penetrate Cotabato and subsequently the hinterlands.

In 1913, 13,000 hectare of the Cotabato Valley were opened up for settlement and the first waves of Christians arrived. The Philippine government, in an effort to alleviate land pressures and arrest the concomitant rise of revolutionary movements in Luzon and the Visayas, opened up 50,000 hectare in Koronadal Valley for homesteading in 1938. The trickle of immigrants gradually increased into major streams of Christians, especially from the Ilocano, Tagalog, and Visayan regions. From February 1939 to October 1950, 8,300 families were resettled by the National Land Settlement Agency.

These migrations adversely affected the Tboli. In the wake of homesteaders came commercial ranching, mining, and logging interests. Armed with land grants and timber licenses, these entities increasingly encroached upon the Tboli homelands and disenfranchised those who had resided on the land since time immemorial, but who, not having access to the instruments of ownership recognized by the Philippine government, did not obtain legal protection from the latter.