

SABHAY: AN ETHNOCHOREOLOGICAL MOVEMENT STUDY OF A SUBANEN COURTSHIP DANCE

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to chronicle and examine the dance's physical motions, dress, musical accompaniment, and cultural significance. Sabhay's position within Subanen culture was understood via fieldwork, interviews with cultural practitioners, and participant observation.

The primary objectives were to (1) investigate Sabhay's cultural background and significance in the Subanen community, (2) identify and analyze key movements performed during the dance, (3) describe the traditional attire and accessories worn by the dancers, and (4) examine the music and instruments used to accompany the dance. The investigation thoroughly observed Sabhay's precise motions, highlighting their social and symbolic significance in the wooing ritual. The investigation went beyond technical aspects to investigate how these motions conveyed Subanen identity, relationships, and spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, the research examined traditional dress, emphasizing the importance of accessories and dance qualities in increasing the aesthetic and cultural value of the performance. The musical accompaniment was also carefully investigated, with an emphasis on traditional instruments and the mutually beneficial link between music and dance motions. This documentation helped to preserve and revitalize Sabhay, making it accessible to future generations. The results showed that Sabhay is an important form of cultural expression for the Subanen community, expressing its values and social dynamics. By preserving Sabhay's distinct characteristics and recording its music, motions, and dress, this study helped to preserve an important component of Subanen legacy. It also highlighted the dance's ongoing importance in modern Subanen culture, demonstrating its persistence and adaptation across generations. This research offers an invaluable resource for understanding and appreciating Sabhay, highlighting its continued importance in modern cultural forms.

Keywords: *Sabhay, Subanen, ethnochoreology, courtship dance, cultural preservation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dance... "An art performed by individuals or groups of human beings with a primary purpose of expressing inner feelings and emotions (although it is often performed for social, ritual, entertainment or other purposes), in which the human body is the instrument and movement is the medium." (Kraus and Chapman, 1981).

In the Philippines, traditional dances like the Sabhay hold profound cultural significance within indigenous communities such as the Subanen, serving as vital expressions of their identity, spirituality, and historical narratives (Estioko, 2017; Peralta, 2015). Dance is a profound form of human expression that transcends artistic performance, acting as a significant mode of communication within communities, particularly in Indigenous cultures. In many Indigenous societies, dance is not merely entertainment; it serves as a vital vehicle for expressing cultural beliefs, social values, historical narratives, and emotional states. Among the Subanen, an Indigenous group from the Zamboanga Peninsula in the southern

Philippines, dance plays a central role in the expression and preservation of their cultural identity.

One such dance, the *Sabhay*, is a traditional courtship dance that holds deep cultural significance for the Subanen. Performed in the context of romantic rituals, the *Sabhay* is more than just an artistic expression; it serves as a medium for social interaction, the negotiation of gender roles, and the transmission of traditional values. The *Sabhay* is a traditional courtship dance of the Subanen people, holding deep cultural significance. It is performed within the context of romantic rituals and serves multiple purposes beyond mere artistic expression. The *Sabhay* acts as a medium for social interaction, the negotiation of gender roles, and the transmission of traditional values.

Notably, the movements of the *Sabhay* have been influenced by the cultural exchange with other indigenous groups in the region. Specifically, the dance incorporates elements from the *Igal* of the Sama and the *Pangalay* of the Tausug. This suggests a dynamic interaction and borrowing of practices among different indigenous groups, highlighting the fluidity and evolution of cultural traditions through contact and adaptation.

Courtship dances such as the *Sabhay* are performed during social gatherings, where the primary function of the dance is to initiate and formalize romantic interests between individuals within the community. However, beyond the act of courtship, the *Sabhay* embodies broader social structures, gender dynamics, and spiritual beliefs central to Subanen society. Courtship dances like the *Sabhay* are performed by a male and a female dancer, whose movements are both complementary and symbolic. Through intricate footwork, hand gestures, and spatial positioning, the dance communicates the nuances of attraction, respect, and the social dynamics involved in the process of courtship.

By documenting the *Sabhay*, this study will not only contribute to the growing body of research on Indigenous Filipino dance but will also serve as a tool for cultural education and preservation in the face of rapid modernization. Ultimately, this research seeks to ensure that the *Sabhay* continues to be a living tradition, passed down through generations, and remains a vibrant reflection of Subanen cultural identity.

This research aimed to conduct an ethnochoreological movement analysis of the *Sabhay*, exploring its movements, attire, dance properties, and music, with the goal of creating a detailed dance literature. By documenting these elements and analyzing their cultural meanings, this study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the *Sabhay* and its role in Subanen courtship rituals. Additionally, this research aimed to contribute to the preservation and revitalization of the dance, ensuring that future generations are aware of its significance and cultural value.

Research Objectives

1. What is the nature, cultural background and significance of *Sabhay* in the Subanen community?
2. What are the key movements of the *Sabhay*?
3. What is the attire worn for *Sabhay*, including the accessories and dance properties?
4. What kind of music and musical instruments are played to accompany *Sabhay*?

Dance as Spiritual and Cultural Expression: Dance is a profound means of spiritual and cultural expression among indigenous communities (UNESCO, 2003). The *Sabhay* courtship dance of the Subanen embodies narratives of courtship, gender roles, and social behavior, while also functioning as a spiritual practice that fosters connections with ancestral forces (Garcia, 2019; Delgado, 2020).

The *Sabhay* reflects the Subanen's cultural identity, with male dancers symbolizing pursuit and attentiveness, while female dancers express grace and modesty—qualities aligned with traditional courtship ideals. Despite its significance, scholarly attention to *Sabhay* has remained limited, highlighting the need for documentation and analysis, particularly as modernization continues to threaten indigenous traditions (Estioko, 2017; Fernandez, 2018).

This study employs an ethnochoreological approach to examine Sabhay within its cultural and social context. By analyzing its movement vocabulary, choreography, and symbolic meanings, the research aims to preserve this dance while offering insights into Subanen courtship rituals. Additionally, it addresses the broader challenge of safeguarding indigenous dance traditions against cultural erosion (Peralta, 2015).

Through systematic documentation, this study contributes to the preservation of Subanen heritage and enriches the discourse on indigenous dance in the Philippines. The findings will serve as a resource for further research and dance education, ensuring that Sabhay continues to be understood, practiced, and appreciated by future generations.

Preservation of Traditional Dances: The preservation of traditional dances is essential for safeguarding cultural identity and continuity (Royce, 2003). While these dances evolve over time, they retain core cultural elements that reflect a community's heritage (Desai, 2018). As repositories of historical narratives, social practices, and spiritual beliefs, they maintain cultural cohesion within indigenous societies (Garcia, 2019).

Innovative methods such as digital storytelling and ethnographic studies have played a crucial role in documenting and transmitting these cultural practices (Chakraborty & Anwar, 2017; Montes, 2019). Digital storytelling enables the multimedia capture and dissemination of dance performances, broadening public engagement with indigenous heritage (Montes, 2019). Ethnographic studies provide deeper insights into the social contexts and meanings embedded in dance traditions, highlighting their significance beyond mere performance (Chakraborty & Anwar, 2017).

For the Subanen, community engagement and intergenerational transmission have been vital in preserving indigenous dances (Caoili, 2015). This approach ensures that traditions like the Sabhay courtship dance are passed down with fidelity to their cultural roots, fostering a lasting sense of ownership within the community.

Heritage and Dance: Studies on Philippine indigenous cultures, including those from Mindanao, offer foundational insights into Subanen dance traditions (Almazan, 2018). Delgado (2020) highlighted the spiritual significance of Subanen dances and their continuity with ancestral practices. Garcia (2019) examined gender dynamics in Subanen dance, providing perspectives on roles and representations in performances. Avila's (2016) ethnographic study of the Subano Buklog documented ritual dances among the Subanen in Zamboanga del Sur, enriching the understanding of their cultural practices.

Challenges in Cultural Preservation: Subanen communities face challenges in preserving their dance traditions due to globalization, urbanization, and environmental changes (Acabado, 2018; Reyes, 2019). Globalization introduces external influences that disrupt traditional dance rituals, while urbanization alters community dynamics and reduces spaces for cultural transmission (Reyes, 2019). Environmental changes, such as climate variability and resource extraction, threaten indigenous practices by disrupting ecosystems and livelihoods (Reyes, 2019). These challenges emphasize the need for adaptive strategies to safeguard Subanen cultural heritage.

Dance Anthropology and Cultural Preservation: Dance anthropology provides theoretical frameworks for studying traditional dances within their cultural contexts, highlighting their role as repositories of cultural meanings and historical narratives (Royce, 2003; Johnson, 2016). Digital technologies enhance cultural preservation by documenting and disseminating dance traditions, while embodied knowledge ensures authenticity through kinesthetic awareness and experiential learning (Smith & Brown, 2019; Gonzalez, 2020). These approaches support the preservation of indigenous dances like the Sabhay courtship dance of the Subanen people.

Courtship Dances: Part of Human Behavior: Dance has long served as a medium for self-expression, physical release, and social interaction. Across cultures, it plays a crucial role in celebration, courtship, recreation, and entertainment. Courtship dances, in particular, allow

individuals to display vigor, attractiveness, and engage in socially accepted physical contact (Mackrell, 2025).

Historically, some courtship dances have contained fertility motifs, with symbolic or mimed representations of courtship and reproduction. The "fertility leap," where a male dancer lifts his partner high, is found in various traditions, such as the Tyrolean Schuhplattler. Scholars suggest that dance was originally integrated into daily life and religious rituals before evolving into a form of entertainment distinct from survival needs.

Courtship dance: a traditional dance form: Courtship dances serve as a universal form of cultural expression, transcending geographic and social boundaries. Across cultures, these dances have symbolized attraction, social status, and relationship negotiation, often incorporating symbolic movements that reflect cultural values (Mackrell, 2025).

Courtship Dances in the Philippines: Traditional courtship dances in the Philippines remain integral to indigenous and rural communities. Tinikling, often considered the national dance, functions as both an exhibition of agility and a means for young couples to express compatibility (Garcia, 2013). Similarly, the Sabhay, a Subanen courtship dance, features symbolic movements where the male dancer demonstrates skill and commitment to his partner (Amador, 2017).

Courtship Dances in Africa: African courtship dances vary widely across ethnic groups but commonly involve ritualistic performances that facilitate social interaction. In Ghana, Kpanlogo allows young couples to communicate interest through synchronized body movements (Nkrumah, 2015). Among the Maasai in Kenya, the Adumu or "Jumping Dance" serves as a test of physical prowess, reflecting a man's readiness for marriage (Lydia, 2018).

Courtship Dances in Europe: Courtship dances in Europe evolved significantly during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, serving as formal avenues for courtship. The Minuet was a popular dance among the aristocracy, combining physical poise with subtle flirtation (Kowalski, 2001). Similarly, the Waltz, which originated in Austria, became a symbol of romantic courtship, allowing for closer physical interaction while still adhering to societal decorum (Greene, 2010).

Courtship Dances in the Americas: In the Americas, courtship dances integrate indigenous, African, and European influences. The Salsa and Merengue, common in the Caribbean and Latin America, feature rhythmic and expressive movements that symbolize attraction and connection (Lozano, 2016). The Bachata, from the Dominican Republic, emphasizes intimate partner connection, where movement and body language play a central role in courtship (Soto, 2012).

Courtship Dances in Indigenous Cultures: Indigenous communities worldwide maintain unique courtship dances that reflect their cosmology and social structures. Among Native American cultures, the Hopi Snake Dance symbolizes fertility and the spiritual connection between humans and nature (Sullivan, 2019). In Polynesia, the Pahulu dance serves as a courtship ritual, where individuals demonstrate their strength and suitability as partners (Clark, 2014).

The Role of Courtship Dances in Modern Society: Courtship dances continue to hold cultural and social significance, though their functions have evolved over time. Some have been formalized into competitive events, as seen in ballroom dancing, where performances still showcase chemistry and attraction between partners (Johnson, 2020). While the context has changed, the use of dance as a form of non-verbal communication in courtship remains relevant.

Courtship Dances around the World: A UNESCO Framework Perspective: Courtship dances serve as both artistic performances and ceremonial expressions of cultural identity. Recognized as part of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) under the UNESCO 2003 Convention, these dances require safeguarding and transmission to future generations. The convention emphasizes that cultural practices are dynamic and should be preserved while

adapting to contemporary influences (UNESCO, 2003). Courtship dances exemplify ICH by integrating social interaction, tradition, and performance, reinforcing their significance in cultural preservation efforts.

The UNESCO 2003 Convention and Intangible Cultural Heritage: The UNESCO 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage aims to protect cultural practices passed down through generations, including traditions, rituals, performing arts, and oral expressions. It emphasizes that cultural heritage is dynamic, evolving as communities adapt to changing environments while maintaining core values. According to UNESCO (2003), intangible cultural heritage (ICH) encompasses dance, rituals, and traditional performing arts, which are vital to cultural identity, social cohesion, and community interaction. Courtship dances, in particular, represent a unique form of ICH that combines artistic performance, social interaction, and romantic expression, making them crucial for cultural preservation.

Courtship Dances in the Philippines: In the Philippines, courtship dances have played a significant role in indigenous communities, serving as social interaction and expressions of romantic intent. The Tinikling, though widely recognized as a folk dance, has also been used in courtship. Garcia (2013) notes that Tinikling symbolizes the courting process, where the male dancer demonstrates agility and respect for his partner. Traditional Filipino dances like Tinikling reflect cultural values such as respect, family, and community, making them vital expressions of ICH (UNESCO, 2003).

The Sabay dance of the Subanen people is another example of a traditional courtship dance. Amador (2017) describes it as a highly ritualized performance where the male dancer demonstrates his suitability as a suitor through specific movements synchronized with the female dancer. The Sabay dance emphasizes patience, respect, and careful partner selection, aligning with the Subanen people's cultural values. It remains a recognized part of the Subanen ICH under the UNESCO framework (UNESCO, 2003).

Courtship Dances in Africa: In Africa, courtship dances serve as significant rituals that express attraction, social status, and cultural belonging. In West Africa, the Kpanlogo dance of Ghana plays a key role in courtship. Nkrumah (2015) explains that Kpanlogo acts as a non-verbal communication tool, where young people use synchronized movements to display romantic interest. It remains a crucial element of Ghana's ICH, facilitating social interaction and courtship.

In East Africa, the Maasai Adumu or "Jumping Dance" is performed as a courtship ritual where young men leap to showcase strength and vitality. Lydia (2018) notes that the dance symbolizes physical prowess, a valued trait in selecting a partner. The Adumu functions not only as a performance but also as a vital social practice within Maasai courtship traditions, reinforcing cultural values and identity (UNESCO, 2003).

Courtship Dances in Europe: European courtship dances have evolved, reflecting societal norms and hierarchical structures. During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, dances like the Minuet were performed by the aristocracy as formalized courtship rituals. Kowalski (2001) describes the Minuet as a dance that allowed for subtle displays of attraction while maintaining strict decorum.

The Waltz, emerging in 19th-century Austria, marked a shift towards greater physical intimacy in courtship. Greene (2010) highlights how the Waltz challenged earlier conventions by permitting closer physical contact between partners. Today, the Waltz remains an iconic courtship dance and is recognized as part of Austria's cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

Courtship Dances in the Americas: Courtship dances in the Americas reflect a fusion of indigenous, African, and European influences. The Salsa and Merengue, originating in the Caribbean and Latin America, are examples of courtship dances shaped by cultural hybridity. Lozano (2016) explains that Salsa, with its African rhythmic roots, serves as a form of romantic expression through partner connection and movement.

Bachata, from the Dominican Republic, is widely recognized as a courtship dance with themes of love and longing. Soto (2012) notes that Bachata emphasizes close partner interaction, using movement to convey emotion and attraction. As a living form of ICH, Bachata continues to evolve globally while maintaining its cultural significance (UNESCO, 2003).

Courtship Dances in Indigenous Cultures: Indigenous cultures worldwide maintain unique courtship dances that blend spirituality, physical expression, and community involvement. The Hopi Snake Dance in the United States, while primarily a fertility ritual, incorporates courtship elements. Sullivan (2019) explains that the dance demonstrates spiritual devotion and physical ability, traits valued in marriage.

In Polynesian cultures, the Pahulu dance functions as a courtship ritual, where potential partners perform synchronized and athletic movements. Clark (2014) highlights that the dance symbolizes communal values and readiness for marriage. The continued practice of Pahulu reinforces the role of courtship dances in preserving Polynesian cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

Subanen Traditional dances: The Subanen people have preserved a variety of traditional dances, including the "Pangalitawo," a courtship dance performed during harvest celebrations and social occasions (Luman-ag et al., 2017). Bautista (2017) describes Pangalitawo as a dance where performers use symbolic movements, such as "patay," where the female dancer bows her head and avoids bodily contact. According to interviews with Subanen women, the acceptance or rejection of a suitor is signaled through the use of a handkerchief—placing it on the shoulder indicates acceptance; while dropping it signifies rejection (Tulio, 2008).

Other traditional Subanen dances include "Tagdel," an all-male dance accompanied by poetic chants in the Subanen dialect, and "Sohten," a war dance performed with shields and dried palm leaves (Martinez, 2014). Despite modifications in traditional costumes due to modernization, Subanen dances continue to serve as cultural expressions, preserving their heritage and identity (Villanueva & Jomoad, 2013).

Theoretical Background: This study is anchored on four theoretical perspectives: Authenticity Theory, Performance Theory, Ethnography, and Dance Theory. These frameworks provide a multidimensional approach to understanding the preservation and adaptation of Subanen traditional dances, particularly in the context of tourism.

Authenticity Theory examines how Subanen dances maintain their cultural integrity amid external influences. Rooted in sociological and cultural studies, this theory assesses alterations in choreography, commercialization, and cultural presentation for tourism. It enables an evaluation of whether these dances retain their core essence or undergo modifications that shift their cultural meaning.

Performance Theory, drawing from theater studies and anthropology, explores the performative elements of Subanen dances, including choreography, music, and costume. It highlights how these aspects construct cultural identity and representation, particularly when performed in tourism settings. This perspective emphasizes the role of performance in preserving cultural narratives while adapting to contemporary audiences.

Ethnography serves as the methodological foundation of this study, offering an immersive, qualitative approach to documenting the lived experiences of the Subanen people. Through observation and participation, ethnography captures the nuances of dance transmission across generations, revealing how meanings are embedded in movements, attire, and musical accompaniment. This approach ensures an in-depth understanding of Subanen dance practices within their cultural and social contexts.

Dance Theory provides a framework for analyzing the formal and expressive elements of Subanen dances, such as movement patterns, rhythmic structures, and spatial organization. This perspective uncovers how these dances function as cultural expressions, reflecting social

values and historical influences. Additionally, it examines how the dances evolve in response to internal and external factors, including the pressures of tourism.

By integrating these theories, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of Subanen dances, addressing their authenticity, performative nature, cultural transmission, and technical composition. This theoretical framework is essential for understanding how traditional dances can be preserved while adapting to changing social and economic landscapes.

Conceptual Framework



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study is guided by a **multi-dimensional conceptual framework** that examines the Sabhay courtship dance through four interrelated themes: **Cultural Context, Dance Steps, Attire & Props, and Music & Instruments**. These elements function as both distinct components and an integrated system, shaping the meaning, expression, and transmission of Sabhay within the Subanen community.

1. Background/ Cultural Context and Significance

From a cultural anthropology perspective, the Sabhay is not merely a performance but a living tradition embedded in Subanen rituals and social structures. This study examines how the dance reflects courtship traditions, gender roles, and communal identity, highlighting its role in maintaining cultural continuity despite external influences such as tourism.

2. Dance Steps/ Movement Analysis (Ethnochoreology)

Using ethnochoreological approaches, the study classifies and analyzes the Sabhay's movement vocabulary—gesture, posture, and spatial formations—to interpret their symbolic meanings. The choreography is examined in relation to kinesthetic expression, ritual function, and embodied storytelling, revealing how movement encodes social values and emotions.

3. Attire, Accessories, and Dance Properties

Attire in Sabhay extends beyond aesthetics; it is a key marker of identity and semiotic expression. Through the semiotics of dress, this study explores how traditional garments and accessories enhance the visual impact of the performance, signify status and gender roles, and contribute to the ritualistic nature of the dance.

4. Music, Instruments, and Soundscape

The musical dimension of Sabhay is examined through ethnomusicology, focusing on rhythmic patterns, instrumentation, and their synchronization with movement. This analysis explores how soundscapes guide dancers' tempo, transitions, and expressive nuances, reinforcing the emotional and communicative aspects of the performance.

This conceptual framework underscores Sabhay as a holistic cultural expression, where movement, attire, music, and context interact dynamically to shape meaning. By synthesizing insights from ethnochoreology, cultural anthropology, ethnomusicology, and the

semiotics of dress, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis that contributes to the documentation, preservation, and contemporary relevance of Subanen heritage.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This qualitative study employed ethnographic methods to explore the cultural significance of the Sabhay within the Subanen community. It captured the lived experiences of Subanen elders, focusing on the dance's historical, social, and symbolic dimensions. The study sought to document traditional knowledge, emphasizing the ways in which the Sabhay continues to serve as a meaningful cultural expression.

2.2 Research Locale

The study was conducted in Lakewood, Zamboanga del Sur, a municipality with a significant Subanen population. This location was selected due to its rich preservation of Subanen traditions, ensuring data collection occurred within an authentic cultural setting where the Sabhay remains an integral part of local heritage. By situating the research within a community deeply connected to the dance, the study ensured a more accurate and contextually grounded understanding.

2.3 Research Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select two Subanen elders recognized as cultural masters of the Sabhay. Participants met the following criteria: (1) extensive knowledge of the dance's history, choreography, attire, and music and (2) firsthand experience in performing, teaching, or preserving the Sabhay.

2.4 Data Sources

Multiple data sources ensured a comprehensive understanding of the Sabhay. Primary data included semi-structured interviews with Subanen elders, participant observation of live performances, and video/audio recordings, all obtained with consent. Secondary data consisted of historical records, cultural texts, and archival materials such as ethnographic reports and prior studies on indigenous dance traditions. Integrating these sources allowed for data triangulation, enhancing the study's reliability and depth.

2.5 Data Collection

Data collection captured both tangible and symbolic aspects of the Sabhay. Semi-structured interviews with Subanen elders elicited detailed narratives, documented through audio recordings and field notes. The researcher conducted a one-week immersion in Lakewood, observing live performances and interacting with cultural practitioners. This participant observation examined dance movements, attire, music, and community participation, providing deeper insight into the dance's cultural dimensions. Video and audio documentation supplemented field notes, aiding in later analysis. Document and archival analysis further contextualized the Sabhay's historical evolution. This multi-method approach ensured a well-rounded examination from both contemporary and historical perspectives.

2.6 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to systematically examine and interpret qualitative data. First, interviews, field notes, and observations were transcribed to ensure accurate documentation. Thematic coding was conducted through open coding to identify recurring patterns, particularly in dance movements, attire, and music. Axial coding followed, establishing relationships between emerging themes, such as the symbolic meanings behind specific gestures or the influence of cultural shifts on performance styles. Constant comparison was applied throughout the process, refining themes and ensuring internal consistency. Triangulation was used to validate findings by comparing insights from interviews, participant observation, and archival data. Additionally, expert review and participant verification were conducted to ensure the accuracy of cultural interpretations. Through this structured and rigorous approach, the study provided a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the Sabhay's cultural and performative significance within the Subanen community.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first question this study sought to answer is **“What is the nature, cultural background and significance of Sabhay in the Subanen community?”**

Findings reveal that *Sabhay* is a courtship dance derived from *mengalay*, an earlier dance form with a more general social function. Over time, *Sabhay* evolved into a ritualized expression of courtship, reflecting cultural traditions and social norms.

Informants describe *Sabhay* as mimicking the courtship behavior of chickens. The male dancer moves energetically to gain the female's attention, while she responds with reserved gestures. A defining feature is the use of a *munsala* (handkerchief), which the male places on the female's shoulder as a symbolic offering. If she discards it, she rejects him; if she keeps it, she acknowledges his gesture—though not necessarily as an acceptance of a romantic relationship.

The dance is performed barefoot as a sign of humility and respect for the earth. Women's movements remain controlled to maintain the dance's symbolic meaning. *Sabhay* is traditionally performed at weddings, community gatherings, and festivals, reinforcing its cultural role as an artistic expression of courtship and social interaction.

The second question this study sought to answer is **“What are the key movements of the Sabhay?”**

To document the dance movements, a demonstration was conducted with male and female dancers. Video recordings captured their performance, followed by an identification of fundamental dance steps. Analysis revealed seven (7) core movements, which are repeated with variations in execution and character. According to Cultural Master Nilda Mangilay, the female dancer's movements should be refined, demure, and slightly off-tempo, reflecting a reserved demeanor. Meanwhile, Gauden Sireg emphasized that the male's movements must be strong, sharp, yet graceful, mimicking a rooster's courtship display.

The third question this study sought to answer is **“What is the attire worn for Sabhay, including the accessories and dance properties?”**

The traditional attire for Sabhay reflects the cultural identity and social structure of the Subanen. Women wear either the ginulung or pinarayon, long-sleeved blouses made of cotton or silk, adorned with embroidered motifs symbolizing nature, leadership, and beauty. The lower garment, gampik, is a woven tubular skirt, historically made of ikat abaca (phulaw), though this has become rare due to the decline in weaving traditions. A therung (female) or thulapok (male) serves as a headdress, folded differently depending on the occasion.

Accessories for women include ghaletis (woven bead earrings), phalengek (black cloth choker with buttons), and bhetihel (precious bead or pearl necklaces). Men's attire consists of the kinujalat, a blouse featuring the palahab (chest covering), symbolizing protection. They wear khawes, tight-fitting trousers fastened with an abaca belt for daily use or a ganghol cloth for special occasions.

Colors in Subanen attire hold symbolic meaning: black represents protection and nighttime worship, white denotes peace and tribal authority, red signifies ancestral defense and festivity, green reflects nature and ritual offerings, and yellow symbolizes supernatural beliefs. Traditional dyeing methods used natural sources such as Galig (yellow), Bulante (black), Marugo (red), and Antebayotek (green).

The Subanen once wore hanagdong bark for clothing before adopting abaca weaving, incorporating motifs of the sun, waves, mountains, butterflies, and eagles. The distinct embroidery and colors of their garments not only serve as decorative elements but also embody the tribe's history, beliefs, and connection to the natural world.

The fourth question this study sought to answer is “**What kind of music and musical instruments are played to accompany the Sabhay?**”

The music for *Sabhay* is known as *Demdem*, which can be either vocal or instrumental. The *Dlatan-dlatan* is a chant traditionally sung while dancing, narrating a boy's attempt to court a girl who initially refuses his advances. *Sabhay* can also be performed with gong accompaniment, requiring dancers to synchronize their movements with the rhythm.

Subanen instrumental music for *Sabhay* follows two rhythmic patterns: *Dlabu* (a steady, monotonous beat) and *Dlayun* (an intricate, dynamic rhythm). Traditionally, *Dlabu* was considered "male" and played by men, while *Dlayun* was "female" and performed by women. Over time, gender restrictions faded, allowing both men and women to play either rhythm. The *Gagung Pon* (main gong) plays *Dlabu* by striking its boss (*sambulan*) with a padded mallet (*basal/ghapong*), while *Dlayun* is played on the gong's rim (*bhaba gagung*) using wooden sticks (*guletik*). Smaller gongs such as the *gandingan*, *babandil*, *tiyanggi/shalabon*, *galang*, and *lumbaga/burnay* accompany the *Gagung Pon* in ensemble performances.

To ensure the preservation and teaching of *Sabhay*, the study's findings were synthesized into instructional dance literature. This documentation, developed with the assistance of dance annotator Earl Francis C. Pasilan, includes details on the dance's background, attire, music, and movements.

This study provides a detailed examination of the Sabhay, the traditional courtship dance of the Subanen community in Lakewood, Zamboanga del Sur, highlighting its intricate movements, cultural significance, and role in heritage preservation. Through interviews with Subanen elders and cultural practitioners, the study identified distinct dance movements and their associated terminology, reflecting traditional courtship customs and social values. The analysis of dance attire revealed gender-specific variations, with women wearing the ginlung or pinarayon and men optionally donning the palahab, each garment carrying historical and symbolic meaning.

The study also explored the integral role of music, particularly the gagong (gong) and guletek, emphasizing their rhythmic function and their connection to the courtship dynamics embedded in the Sabhay. Additionally, a dance literature was developed, serving as a structured instructional resource for teaching and preserving the Sabhay in both academic and cultural settings. These findings contribute to the broader efforts of safeguarding Subanen heritage by providing a documented framework for accurate transmission, ensuring that the Sabhay remains an enduring expression of Subanen identity.

Table 1: Summary of Findings

SABHAY				
Description	Music	Attire		Fundamental Movements
		Male	Female	
<p>A courtship dance from the Subanen of Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga Peninsula (this dance research was conducted in Lakewood, Zamboanga del Sur).</p> <p>In this dance the man holds a <i>munsala</i> (handkerchief or scarf) while dancing with a female partner.</p> <p>The man tries to win the heart of the lady by putting the scarf on her shoulder a number of times (usually three), which the latter throws away, while they go through the motions of the Subanen Mengalay (similar to Pangalay or Igal).</p> <p>The female dancer agrees to the plead, only, by accepting the kerchief placed on her shoulder.</p>	<p>The music is called “<i>Demdem</i>” played on the gongs or the “<i>Dlatan-Dlatan</i>” chant</p> <p>Musical Instruments</p> <p><i>Gagong</i> – large gongs of different sizes</p> <p><i>Guletek</i> – beaters/ sticks</p> <p>Music: 4-4 Count: 1, 2, 3, 4 or 1 ah, 2 ah, 3 ah, 4 ah or 1 &, 2 &, 3 &, 4 &</p>	<p><i>Dlahu (Sub) Dla’e</i> (Male attire):</p> <p>Top: <i>KINUJALAT (pinarayon)</i>-straight cut)– this is a long-sleeved top for men made of cotton or silk materials embroidered with symbolic designs in front like rice stalks and large designs at the back such as eagle, shields and characterized by a “<i>palahab</i> (chest covering reaching to the hem of the blouse, typical to the Subanen of Kabasalan, Zamboanga Sibugay but not Lapuyan, which appeared only on the 1950’s introduced by Datu Imbing)”</p> <p>Pants: <i>KHAWES</i> – a tight-fitting trousers from knee-down similar and loosely hanging at the crotch area, which is similar to the Yakan or Tausug and lose at the crotch part.</p> <p>Belt: <i>GANGHOL</i> - A ten-meter cloth worn around the waist to hold the pants.</p> <p>Head cloth: <i>THULAPOK</i> - a striped/ plaited meter-square woven cloth with stripes of any preferred color red, green, yellow, blue and orange (similar to the woven therung of the females)</p> <p>Implement: <i>Munsala</i> - a woven handkerchief</p>	<p><i>Dlahu (Sub) Dlibon</i> (Female attire):</p> <p>Top: <i>GINULUNG</i> - a long sleeved top with sheering and pleats for women made of cotton or silk materials, the upper is a fitly tight blouse especially below the breast the tummy portion is embroidered with symbolic design in front like <i>BINITUN</i> (star or flower), <i>SINUBA</i> (river between the mountain) and <i>SINALUG</i> (a river in the valley) and at the back is a large design of <i>BALEMBANG</i> (butterfly).</p> <p>Skirt: <i>GAMPIK</i> - a tabular cloth or “<i>patadyong</i>” or malong borrowed from the neighboring Iranon or Magindanao.</p> <p><i>PHULAW</i> – an old tubular skirt entirely made of woven abaca (ikat)</p> <p>Head cloth: <i>THERUNG</i>, a square kerchief usually of handwoven materials/ plaited material similar to the gampik</p> <p>Accessories:</p> <p><i>Ghaletis</i> – Earrings, made of the same material use for weaving a cloth and filled with beads.</p>	<p>Basic Step 1. Panaw giytik 1 (Walking Step) 1M/ 2M With the R (L) ft take 4 or 8 walking steps going to any direction, swinging arms forward alternately</p> <p>Basic Step 2. Panaw giytik 2 (Close Step) (1M)</p> <p>a.) Step R (L) ft in place, swinging L (R) arm forward, palm facing back, fingers pointing downward, flicking hand upward at the end of the measure (ct 1)</p> <p>b.) Step L (R) ft at rear of R (L) ft, swinging R (L) arm forward, palm facing back, fingers pointing downward, flicking hand upward at the end of the measure..... (ct 2)</p> <p>c.) Repeat</p> <p>(a)..... (ct 3)</p> <p>d.) Step L (R) ft forward, swinging R (L) arm as in (b) (ct 4)</p> <p>Basic Step 3. Panaw giytik dapi palad (Close-Stomp Step with clap) (1M)</p> <p>a.) Step R (L) ft in place, swinging L (R) arm forward, palm facing back, fingers pointing downward, flicking hand upward at the end of the measure (ct 1)</p> <p>b.) Step L (R) ft forward, swinging R (L) arm forward, palm facing back, fingers pointing downward, flicking hand upward at the end of the measure..... (ct 2)</p> <p>c.) Stomp R (L) ft in place, clapping hands twice at waist level (ct 3, 4)</p> <p>Basic Step 4. Mag-bolibod dapi palad (Pivot Turn Steps while clapping) (2M) With the R (L) ft, take 8 pivot steps turning to the left (right), clapping hands at every count... 2M</p>

<p>The dancers imitate the movements of the rooster (male) and hen (female) in a love chase.</p> <p>This is usually performed during community gatherings like weddings, welcoming guests and festivals.</p>		<p>or scarf (similar to the head cloths)</p>	<p>Phalengek – choker, a black cloth filled with buttons.</p> <p>Bhetiher – necklace, made of precious beads, at times, adorned with pearls.</p>	<p>Basic Step 5. Mengalay Variations</p> <p>1 Stomp and Turn hands outward (2M) Stomp R (L) ft in place twice, once every measure. Arms at the sides, waist level. Turn R and L hands together in an inward-outward motion (ct 1 ah, 2 ah), then turn L (R) hand in an inward-outward motion (ct 1 ah, 2 ah) moving both arms at lateral right and then to left.</p> <p>2. Stomp and Forearm Turn (2M) Stomp R (L) ft in place 8 times while doing forearm turn (inward-outward) with the R and L arm alternately at every count.</p> <p>Basic Step 6. Dlae Dlibon Manok (rooster and hen) Chasing Steps with forearm turn (1M) With the R (L) ft leading, do 4 chase steps going to any direction while doing forearm turns, with the R and L hand alternately.</p>
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4. CONCLUSION

This study successfully documented and analyzed the Sabhay, a traditional courtship dance of the Subanen community in Lakewood, Zamboanga del Sur, thereby contributing to its preservation and transmission. By identifying key dance movements, the cultural significance of attire, and the essential role of music, the research provided a comprehensive understanding of the dance's structure and its place within Subanen heritage. The creation of dance literature based on these findings serves as a valuable resource for academic instruction and cultural preservation. Despite challenges such as youth engagement and the continuity of traditional knowledge, the study underscores the urgent need for sustained preservation efforts through both visual and written documentation. These findings reinforce the Sabhay's role in strengthening Subanen identity and highlight the broader significance of safeguarding indigenous performing arts. Furthermore, this study serves as a foundation for future research on traditional dance forms, particularly within indigenous communities facing cultural erosion.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integration into Education – Educational institutions, particularly those offering programs in cultural studies, ethnomusicology, and dance pedagogy, should incorporate the Sabhay into their curricula. Schools for Living Traditions (SLT) must be supported and expanded to ensure continuity in cultural transmission. Additionally, instructional videos should accompany written dance literature, providing a structured, step-by-step guide to facilitate learning and accessibility, particularly for younger generations.

2. Institutional and Policy Support – Strengthening partnerships with cultural organizations such as the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) is essential to securing formal recognition and protection of the Sabhay. National policies should actively incorporate Subanen cultural practices into heritage preservation programs to promote indigenous dances across the Philippines.
3. Community Engagement and Documentation – Local communities, cultural practitioners, and stakeholders should take an active role in safeguarding the Sabhay. Initiatives such as cultural workshops, performances, and festivals should be implemented to encourage youth participation and raise awareness. Comprehensive documentation and archiving of oral histories, performance techniques, and symbolic meanings should be prioritized to ensure the continuity of traditional knowledge.
4. Training and Authentic Representation – Choreographers, dancers, and cultural educators should undergo specialized training in Subanen ethnochoreology to ensure authenticity in the performance and teaching of the Sabhay. Collaborative workshops with Subanen cultural masters can help prevent misrepresentation and facilitate a deeper understanding of the dance’s historical and symbolic significance.

Future Research Directions – Further studies should explore the role of traditional dances in reinforcing cultural identity, particularly among indigenous groups facing cultural assimilation. Expanding research beyond dance to encompass Subanen music, language, and rituals would provide a more holistic understanding of Subanen heritage. Additionally, comparative studies on indigenous dances across the Philippines may offer insights into broader themes of cultural preservation and adaptation.

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