

# The Central Subanen People

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There are more than 175,000 Subanen people, inhabiting the three provinces of Zamboanga and Misamis Occidental. They were apparently the original inhabitants of the Zamboanga peninsula; then as successive waves of migration have come from the Central Philippines; they have retreated into the interior regions, where they live along the rivers.

According to a survey done by **Bob Brichoux** of the **Summer Institute of Linguistics** in 1981, adult illiteracy rate of the Central Subanen is 50%. Seventy seven percent of the illiterates are age 30 and up; 23% are age 15-30. This high illiteracy rate could be attributed to the fact that Subanens lived in areas where schools if not available were too far for children to go. Moreover, lack of self-esteem caused children to drop out of school even before they learned the basic skills of reading and writing.

Through joint effort with the Department of Education particularly with Alternative Learning System Division, other government agencies and non-government organizations existing in the area, the literacy rate in the area has remarkably raised from 50% in 1981 to 85% in 2005 (as per DepEd record).

The neo-literates who have been participants to our fluency classes expressed that they wanted a higher level of learning that focuses on the individual's capacity to contribute to development in their own respective villages. They further said that they want some learning experiences that that would assist them to clarify value positions, discern cause and effect relationships, make considered judgments and take responsibility for action. They want to embark upon a continuous process of improvement and greater mastery of their environment. They envision that this life-long learning would enable them not only to acquire information and ideas but also empower them to make decisions and accept responsibilities that have a direct impact on the future of their community. Along this line, the following needs have been identified: the need to strengthen the problem-solving capacity of the learners; the need to equip them with coping skills and the need to develop their inner potential and to strengthen the positive awareness of self as basis for practical action.

Since the TAP literacy program was initiated in 1992, different people organizations were formed for various purposes. The emergence of these organizations entails the need to hold some organizational development trainings. They expressed that for them to be able to function well, it is essential that the leaders are provided a variety of leadership trainings including financial management and credibility.

### **Education:**

Poor quality of education is still the prevalent problem in the area. This problem can be attributed to the following reasons: poor quality of teaching; the learning experiences do not match with the life experiences of learners since the languages used in school are unfamiliar to them as well as the methods and materials used are foreign to them; the school is too far for the children to hike; children are not motivated to learn; or the education is still not valued by some community members that it always come last in the list of priorities. Because of these reasons, it is observed that there is a high rate of dropouts. Moreover, most of the public school teachers are always absent and are not very much committed to teach. If no early preventive measures taken, illiteracy rate in the area will still remain a perennial problem.

### **Poverty incidence:**

Majority of the Subanen people belong to the marginalized level of the society with an average annual income of P 6,000 per household. They are basically farmers who plant corn, rice, banana, coffee, root crops and coconut for their daily subsistence and as source of their income. Even though they are landowners, they are unable to cultivate all their lands due to financial constraints.

### **Health:**

The midwife comes to the villages at least once a month to give vaccination to children and to treat some minor physical problems. Most of their problems are diarrhea, dengue fever, TB, pneumonia, scabies, parasites, and some cases of malaria. Moreover, it is observed that the people there including children are malnourished.

Since the literacy program was initiated in the area, the people have given attention to their hygiene and health. They become cooperative whenever health seminars or vaccination is done in the area. Several women were trained as barangay health workers who take turns in reporting to the village clinic. In some villages, "Botica Binhi" [Village pharmacy] is already operational.

### **Culture:**

It is noted that the Subanens would like to preserve their culture and language. Furthermore, they would like their own law be observed and implemented so that the Datu together with their "Saliling" [assistants] would be able to exercise their roles.

The Subanen attire is used only during especial occasions such as wedding, festivals or programs. Had it not been with the declaration of September as Subanen month, the Subanen music and dance would have been lost forever. During this month, young and

old dance in the streets, singing contest is held and many other cultural activities are carried out.

In some villages, the people still practice that if death comes in the village, taking another life from another village will halt death to come. A "man-killer" known as "Mangiyao" is hired to do the killing.

### **Environment:**

The slash and burn or "Kaingin" has adversely affected the environment. Light rainfalls cause soil erosion or landslide since there are no more trees that could hold.

In some places, the village leaders have allowed the operation of small-scale mining. Thus, the natural resources such as the river; fresh air; etc. are damaged. There was once a report received that some people were poisoned from eating fish they got in the river.

### **Religion:**

The Subanens are predominantly animists and pagans. Some of them have already been exposed to Christian teachings and have embraced the Word of God as the foundation of truth. These are the religions existing in the area: Roman Catholic, Indigenous Christian Church, Baptist, Alliance, Pentecostal group, United Church of Christ and some cult groups. Years ago, a Church of Satan came in one of the villages of the Subanen people. But the local government had it closed when there was a report that several people inside the cave were about to do a mass suicide.