

**CARNEGIE INSTITUTION OF  
WASHINGTON, PUBLICATION NO.  
184. THE SUBANU; STUDIES OF A  
SUB-VISAYAN MOUNTAIN FOLK  
OF MINDANAO. IN THREE PARTS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649076789

Carnegie Institution of Washington, publication No. 184. The Subanu; studies of a sub-Visayan mountain folk of Mindanao. In three parts by J. P. Finley & William Churchill

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**J. P. FINLEY & WILLIAM CHURCHILL**

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# THE SUBANU

## STUDIES OF A SUB-VISAYAN MOUNTAIN FOLK OF MINDANAO

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PART I. ETHNOGRAPHICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL  
SKETCH OF LAND AND PEOPLE

BY LIEUT.-COL. JOHN PARK FINLEY, U. S. A.

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PART II. DISCUSSION OF THE LINGUISTIC MATERIAL

BY WILLIAM CHURCHILL

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PART III. VOCABULARIES



WASHINGTON, D. C.

PUBLISHED BY THE CARNEGIE INSTITUTION OF WASHINGTON

1913

2237

CARNEGIE INSTITUTION OF WASHINGTON  
PUBLICATION No. 184

PRESS OF GIBSON BROTHERS, INC.  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

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PART I.

ETHNOGRAPHICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF  
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By JOHN PARK FINLEY

*Lieutenant-Colonel of Infantry, U. S. A., Governor of Zamboanga*





# THE SUBANU.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SUBANU.

### TRIBAL DESIGNATION.

The term Subanun (Subanon) is of Moro (Sulu) origin and signifies a man or people of the river or, more exactly, a man or people from up the river. The Sulu equivalent of the word river is *soba*; of the phrase up the river, the equivalent is *sumud ha soba*. The suffix *mun* denotes locality or place of habitation. The suffix *non* has a similar signification in Visayan. The suffixes *num* and *nom* possess similar meanings in the dialects of Ilocano, Lepanto, and Bontoc, and in some of the Formosan dialects. According to the Spanish nomenclature this term is written *Subano*. When these people are interrogated, those living near the coast call themselves Subanu or Subano; those living near the headwaters of the rivers and in the mountains call themselves *tan bukid* or *tan buid*, meaning, respectively, man of the hills or hill-man, or man of the fields. The word *bukid* in Visayan means hill or mountain, in Tagalog it means field or country.

Christie says:

The name *Subanun* means *river dweller*, from the word *suba* river, common to Philippine dialects, including Sulu and Visaya. This term was applied to the tribe because its members are met with in going up the river from the coast, in contradistinction to the Moros and Christians of the Zamboanga Peninsula, who are coast dwellers. Probably the term was first applied by these people to themselves.\*

The habitat of these people is confined to the interior and mountainous portions of the Zamboanga district of the great island of Mindanao. In his history of Mindanao and Sulu, published in 1667, Father Francisco Combes calls the Subanu the "fourth nation of Mindanao" and refers to them as the inhabitants of the rivers, to which they owe their name, as the radical *suba* is the "word used by the nations (tribes) of Mindanao for river."

The names of tribes, of persons, of titles, of places, and of natural features in the Philippines have been subject to much irregularity and confusion in their orthographical presentation. This is due to the absence of an established orthographic system, the neglect of such a system when properly authorized, ignorance of or indifference to the

\*Emerson Brewer Christie: *The Subanuns of Sindangan Bay*. Manila, 1909; Bureau of Science, Division of Ethnology; Publications, vol. VI, part 1, pp. 121, chart, 29 illustrations.

application of any system, and attempts at individual phonetics. Thus great diversity appears in official reports, both civil and military, and in the construction of maps of the islands. An example is given in the spelling of the Sulu term *datu* (chief), a Moro designation of rank, variously written as: *datoh*, *datto*, *dattu*, *dato*, *datoo*, *dattoh*, and *datu*, the last being the best form, according to Saleeby's system of transliteration, described briefly as follows in his *Studies in Moro History, Law and Religion* (Ethnological Survey of the Philippine Islands):

In translating the *tarsila* (original manuscripts) such a large number of words have to be transliterated that it is deemed necessary to adopt a system of transliteration which can be easily understood by every English reader and which is more adequate to express Magindanao sounds than either Spanish or English. With the exception of *ng* and *sh* the characters used in this system represent simple sounds only. Every radical modification of a certain simple sound is regarded as a different simple sound and is represented by a separate and distinct character. Every compound sound is represented by those characters that express its simple constituent sounds. It is an unvarying rule in this system that every character represents an invariable sound and every sound has only one invariable character.

We have already observed a considerable variation in the orthography of the tribal name of the Subanuns, which in that form has the sanction of the Philippine Bureau of Science. If the word is spelled as generally pronounced by the members of the tribe, and applying the principles of the Saleeby system, it would be written Subanu.\*

Concerning this question of orthography and nomenclature, Blumentrit said in 1890:

Notwithstanding the rich literature concerning the peoples and languages of the Philippine Archipelago, there is no book or publication in which are catalogued the names of the tribes and the languages, and this appears the more inexcusable since both Spanish and Philippine writers, with few exceptions, handle these names very carelessly, so that great confusion must ensue.

The prevailing bad form in the Philippines of transferring the name of one people or family to another, who possess similarities of any kind with the first, either in manner or life, or even only in culture grade in the widest sense of the term, has its counterpart in a second bad fashion of making several peoples out of one by replacing the folk name with the tribal names. Only with the greatest pains and thought is it possible to extricate one's self from this labyrinth of nomenclature. After thorough search I am convinced that many names reported to me must be eliminated, since they owe their existence to mistakes in penmanship or printing, to ridicule, misunderstanding, or to error, as I have proved in single instances.

\*For the reasons stated in the preceding sentence it has seemed preferable to adopt for this work the designation Subanu and to employ it indeclinably. The derivation proposed by the several authorities cited in the preceding pages is in violation of the principles of composition employed in the language. Thus *saba* is river, *-nan* is locative; observe in the vocabulary *sinbaan*, a church as the place (locative *-an*) in which worship (*sinba*) is performed; accordingly, *subanun* would not mean people of rivers, but a place where rivers are. Furthermore, in the language, *-an* is the locative suffix, *-nan* is restricted to the value of forming nouns of quality from adjectives. The suffix *-n* is employed to form collective plurals, therefore Subanun means only all the Subanu. Following the best modern usage we shall employ *Subanu* for singular and plural, as noun and adjective.—W. C.

Dr. Barrows, in his paper on the non-Christian tribes of Mindanao, published in the Census of the Philippine Islands, 1903, states:

The word *Subanon* is derived from the very common Malayan word *suba*, meaning *river*, and the suffix *non*, meaning *people of*. It is a good tribal designation, is in general use, and has been recorded a long while. The Subanons are the only Pagan people of Mindanao among which I have spent sufficient time to judge somewhat of the type, the language, and culture. They appear to be a representative type of the primitive Malayan race widely distributed through the Malayan archipelago, who have been forced back from the sea in the interior by the arrival and persecutions of the sea-faring Malays, both previous and subsequent to the latter's conversion to Mohammedanism.

Mason, in his introduction to Blumentrit's work on the native tribes and languages of the Philippines, says:

To unravel the mysteries set forth by the foregoing is the opportunity of the ethnologist. It needs only to look back upon the bloody horrors enacted in our own history through lack of knowledge concerning the social organization and prejudices of the Indians, to awaken the liveliest sympathies and cooperation of the statesmen and philanthropists in the ethnology of the Philippines.

Since the above criticisms were published much has been accomplished to correct the evils complained of. Labors to this end have been unremitting by the Bureau of Insular Affairs of the War Department and by the Bureau of Science of the Philippine government at Manila. Much yet remains to be done, and the field for faithful and patient research is a large one, offering rich rewards to ethnologists of the highest ability; private munificence has an unusual opportunity in promoting this most important survey of primitive people, including Indonesians, Malayans, and European and Asiatic mestizos.

Blumentrit in "Native Tribes of the Philippines" mentions "the Subanos (Subanon, river people) as a heathen people of Malay extraction who occupy the entire peninsula of Sibuguey (west Mindanao) with the exception of a single strip on the south coast."

On a chart of the Philippine Islands and China Sea, engraved in Manila in 1734, from data obtained from Spanish and British navigators, the native inhabitants of the Zamboanga and Dapitan districts are referred to as "Subanirs" and "Solocos," and the territory as a part of the great island of "Majindanao," as it was then written.

Along the western shore of Illana Bay (then called Bongo Bay) the inhabitants are referred to as "Moors," a translation of the Spanish designation for the Mohammedan tribes, Moros.

In the record of his voyages (1774-1775) Captain Forrest uses the terms "Haraforas, Sunabos, Kanakan and Oran Manubo" as applied to the Subanu of Mindanao. He describes them as—

the vassals of the Sultan and of others who possess great estates. Those vassals are sometimes Mahometans, though mostly Haraforas (heathen). The latter only may be sold with the lands, but can not be sold off the lands.