



## KEEPING THE FLAME ALIVE:

Talaandig and Manobo Youth Groups of Mt. Kalatungan take the lead in keeping their indigenous practices and traditions alive

**S**melly. Dirty. Poor. These are among the many derogatory words that children from indigenous peoples (IP) communities hear at school from their “assimilated” classmates. Hurtful words that sting, leave lasting scars, and shame IP children enough for them, and even their parents, to deny their ancestry and shun their culture and traditions.



## They no longer speak their language

Thus, stories abound of parents not even teaching their children the *Manobo* or *Talaandig* language and rituals. They are taught to speak Visayan instead. As a result, there is already a generation of *Manobo* and *Talaandig* who are no longer in touch with their heritage.

Datu Johnny “Bagusayana” Guina, leader of the Portulin Talaandig Tribal Association, Inc. (PTTA, Inc.) in the municipality of Pangantucan, Bukidnon, recounts that they held a contest to see how many entire families in their association could still speak *Talaandig*. They were shocked to learn that only two families won in the said contest.

In *Barangay* (village) Bacusanon, also in Pangantucan, youth lament that they no longer know their rituals. Now they want to reconnect.

“Some of us have strayed from the path, they no longer follow indigenous knowledge, systems, and practices. We only get together to showcase our culture during fiestas,” Melvin Pongautan, an IP and barangay youth leader, lamented.

“This is not entirely the fault of our parents, we have just been out of touch,” he added.

Julieta Dawatan of Portulin, also a member of the PTTA, Inc., bewails that her daughter was not accepted to the Pamulaan Center for Indigenous Education, a prestigious IP institution of higher learning under the University of Southeastern Philippines located in Davao City, because she could not speak *Talaandig*.

“It was mainly our fault, mine and her father’s. We feared that our children will be ridiculed in school for being *Talaandig*, so we never taught them our language,” she revealed.

## Revival of interest

But things are changing. There has been a revival of interest recently, mostly through the efforts of performing arts groups like the Kulahi Performing Arts Group (KPAG) of Barangay Portulin.

KPAG had its beginnings as the Kulahi Band, a brainchild of Christine Joy Guina (now Agudo), eldest of Datu Johnny’s children. At a young age, Christine Joy already was already organizing cultural entertainment events for her father’s visitors.

In 2009, she became a scholar at Pamulaan Center for Indigenous Peoples Education and immersed herself in thoroughly getting to know *Talaandig* songs, dances, and musical instruments, with the help of other *Talaandig* scholars from *Barangay* Mirayon, municipality of Talakag, province of Bukidnon.

Rodelio Linsahay “Waway” Saway – founder and leader of the *Talaandig* Band – a *Talaandig* datu and world-renowned musician, was a big influence in Christine Joy’s music. She collected his albums and played them whenever she returns to her community.

In 2010, the tourism office of the municipal government of Pangantucan hatched a plan to organize a tribal band. Christine Joy, together with her father Datu Johnny, volunteered the Portulin *Talaandig* youth for the role.

However, the tourism office said that they wanted to see the Portulin *Talaandig* youth group’s performance before they decide.

After the meeting, Christine Joy and Datu Johnny commissioned the Talahari band, a *Manobo* performing arts group from *Barangay Panadtalan* in the nearby municipality of Maramag, to train the Portulin Talaandig youth. After a rigorous two-and-a-half-day training, the group was ready to render their recital with the tourism office.

## Kulahi's coming out party

On 10 April 2010, the Kulahi Band “auditioned” for the Pangantucan tourism office and passed with flying colors. The date marked the “official” birth of the band as they performed for the first time using the Kulahi name.

Three months later, on 1 July 2010, the Kulahi Band held its first public performance during the Pangantucan Day celebrations held at the municipal plaza.

Nine years later, the group has had countless performances under its belt, not only within Bukidnon but in neighboring cities and provinces. It has already established itself as a brand that embodies the Portulin Talaandig youth. It has also inspired other IP youth groups nearby to follow in its footsteps.

The group has also expanded from just performing music to theater, and thus renamed itself the Kulahi Performing Arts Group (KPAG).

The group's founder, Christine Joy, is now a schoolteacher in Pangantucan proper, but she still mentors and creates songs for the group.

From the five youth of Portulin (plus Datu Johnny) who first performed for the Pangantucan tourism office in 2010, the group has now grown to around 15 regular members and is now on its third generation of members. Christine Joy's son, six-year old Rhengade, is Kulahi's youngest member.

Kulahi, which means “shout” or “scream” in the *Talaandig* language, embodies the sentiment of the Portulin youth. They want to shout out to the whole world that they are *Talaandig*. They want the world to know their hopes, fears, ambitions, and apprehensions.

Most of Kulahi's songs revolve around *Talaandig* culture and traditions, their way of life, and their relationship with the environment. Their most popular song is "Kulahi," which literally means shout of the forest.

Kulahi members practice regularly and play up to 10 indigenous instruments, which include the *kubing*, bird flute, *kokak*, rain stick, and traditional drums.

Becoming a KPAG member is indeed a privilege and is not easy. While it is open to any Portulin *Talaandig* youth who wants to join, only those who manifest his or her desire to learn more and promote *Talaandig* culture are recruited. Those selected undergo rigorous training on *Talaandig* culture, traditional instruments, and performing.

After the rigorous training is the screening process, sort of an audition, where the trainees are required to demonstrate their knowledge of *Talaandig* culture (not just the what and how, but more so the why) and showcase the skills they learned from the training.

The KPAG has performed in Bukidnon State University, Central Mindanao University, Barangay Miarayon in the nearby municipality of Talakag, Davao City, and in Cagayan de Oro City's *Kaamulan* Festival. The group is a regular fixture at Bukidnon's provincial festivals and IP events.

## KULAHİ

*Lyrics: Christine Joy G. Agudo*  
*Tune: Adopted from Kadangyan*  
*and revised by Kulahi*

Mig ulahu sa kalasan  
*(The forest cries)*  
Daw tuminulu sa luha  
*(And the tears fall)*  
Agpanayu atiyu ha bulig  
*(Asking for a little help)*  
Te menga atew. Hey!  
*(From people. Hey!)*

### Chorus

Kulahi hu kalasan  
*(Shout of the forest)*  
Kulahi hu kalasan  
*(Shout of the forest)*  
Kulahi hu Talaandig  
*(Shout of the Talaandig)*  
Kulahi hu tribu tew.  
*(Shout of our tribe)*

*(Repeat all)*  
*(Repeat Chorus)*

***“We go where we are invited because it is an opportunity for us not just to showcase our performing skills, but to spread Talaandig culture as well.”***

*“We go where we are invited because it is an opportunity for us not just to showcase our performing skills, but to spread Talaandig culture as well,”* Jeffrie Barton, 19, one of the group’s senior members, said.

They do not charge professional fees for their performances, but only ask for support for transportation and food.

*“We do not charge for our performances because we are just happy to perform and share Talaandig culture through song and dance,”* Christian Guina, one of the group’s lead singers and dancers, explained.

Even though they have performed all over Bukidnon and nearby cities, their most relished performance was their impromptu performance, or “jamming” with a visiting performing arts group from Myanmar.

*“The group from Myanmar went to our place and jamming with them was fun because we learned about the music and culture of IPs from another country, which we realized is very similar to ours,”* Janice Barton, the group’s female lead singer and dancer, shared.

As a total performing arts group, Kulahi does not only spread *Talaandig* culture through songs but also through dances. Among the most popular are the *Binanog*, in which the dancers mimic bird-like movements, in homage to the avian inhabitants of Mt. Kalatungan (which includes the Philippine Eagle), the warrior dance, and the courtship dance.

Aside from performing, KPAG members also undergo training on other aspects of *Talaandig* culture. A regular activity is beads making. Beads are an intrinsic part of *Talaandig* culture as these are embroidered in *Talaandig* traditional garments (clothes and headdresses) and used as accent pieces (wrist bands, necklaces, and the like).

Kulahi's most recent gig was during the *Araw ng Pigtauranan* (Pigtauranan<sup>1</sup> Day) held at the picturesque Lake Napalit.

Out of its 15 regular members, only around five to 10 are usually sent to the performances due to budgetary constraints and lack of instruments.

While the group is happy to perform for food and transportation, they would gladly welcome support for the purchase of more instruments, so that more members can be recruited, and more can join during performances.

### **Kulahi inspires other youth groups**

Kulahi's success has resonated to other youth groups in Pangantucan, who hope to follow in their footsteps.

In Bacusanon, Melvin and his group are planning to put up their own youth performing arts group. They are in the process of asking for sponsors for the purchase of instruments.

*"Kulahi has shown how music and dance can bring together the youth and give them a sense of pride in their heritage. Hopefully, with our own group, we can bring the same to Bacusanon,"* Melvin shares.

Like the *Talaandig* of Portulin, the *Manobo* of Bacusanon also have a rich culture to share. They have the *Olaging*, a traditional singing contest showcasing Manobo songs, the *Panulakan*, an elaborate ritual performed before the start of a major program, and the *Kaligaan*, a ritual that uses dance as a prayer.

Then there is also the *Ibabasuk*, a ritual undertaken before planting.

All these rituals involve elaborate songs and dances that the *Manobo* youth of Bacusanon also wish to showcase via their own performing arts group.

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<sup>1</sup> Pigtauranan is one of the barangays (villages) of the municipality of Pangantucan. It is where Lake Napalit is located.

These rituals are also based on the connection of IPs to their land and the spirits that abound there. Thus, the importance of preserving culture is also linked to tenurial security. Without land, their rituals will vanish.

With Kulahi and other performing arts groups, the flame of hope for future generations of IP youths around Mt. Kalatungan is still alive and burning. But it needs to be nurtured and supported. Otherwise, the flame will die down to a flicker and future generations of Filipinos, not just IPs, will never know what they have lost. ■