

BAPTISM AND "BISAYANIZATION" AMONG THE MANDAYA OF EASTERN MINDANAO, PHILIPPINES

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EASTERN MINDANAO IS OCCUPIED BY A NUMBER OF "Tribal" groups which are markedly different from the Islamic populations of southern and central Mindanao, although close similarities are present with other non-Islamic groups in central and western Mindanao, such as the Bukidnon and the Subanun. One of the major groups of eastern Mindanao is the Mandaya who occupy the foothills and mountain areas of eastern Davao province and Surigao del Sur. Although earlier accounts¹ indicate that the Mandaya were one of the most powerful warring groups in eastern Mindanao, with the decline and disappearance of the *bagani*² complex during the 1920's, the Mandaya today are scattered throughout their ancestral areas subsisting on rice, corn, and tuber cultivation and occasionally, the commercial production of abaca.

The aim of this short paper is to discuss the conceptualization and process of religious conversion to Christian faiths as viewed by the Mandaya. The initial step, and usually the only step, in conversion to Christianity is baptism—the spiritual re-birth of one's soul for ultimate destiny to other supernatural spheres. To practically all Christian missionaries working in eastern Mindanao, baptism ideally represents only the first step toward a Christian life. In reality, most missionaries (especially those whose churches are short in numbers) recognize that the odds of following up on all natives who are baptized are limited. Thus, people are baptized with little or no religious instruction and with the minimum hope that, at least, a few Mandaya families will reach advanced levels of religious instruction. The dilemma to many a missionary on the remote east coast of Mindanao is: "Shall I or shall I not baptize segments of the aboriginal population although they may never acquire further religious instruction, or will ever be seen again?"

Religious conversion to Christianity and Islam is not a recent phenomenon. Contact with the Spanish on the eastern Mindanao coast dates back to the 1840's and 1850's during which time the Spaniards aimed at establishing military posts to counteract the spread of the Moro into Davao Gulf, Mati, and towns along the Eastern Coast. Catholic missionaries moved southward on the east coast establishing churches and missions at important military and population centers, such as Caraga. Spanish southward expansion also occurred on the lower Agusan River drainage towards Compostela and what is now Monkayo. Garvan³ summarizes the steps of Christianization in the

¹ See F. Cole, "The Wild Tribes of Davao District," *Field Museum of Natural History*, XII, No. 2 (1913). See also J. M. Garvan, "The Manobos of Mindanao," *Memoirs of the National Academy of Science*, XXIII (1913), 1-251.

² A warrior chief and charismatic leader who distinguishes himself by killing a given number of people in warfare and raids.

³ Garvam, *op. cit.*, 241-250.

lower and upper Agusan areas among the Manobo and the Agusan valley branch of the Mandaya. During the period 1877-1898, some 50,000 natives of different tribal origins were converted to Christianity.⁴ The Christian populations of the Agusan Valley are referred to as *conquista*. Jesuits constituted majority of missionaries during the late Spanish phase and only recently have other Catholic orders and Protestant churches been relatively active.

The spread and conversion to Islam was more important in the Davao Gulf region and areas in southern Davao and Cotabato. However, Islamized Mandaya are found on the north shores and interior areas of Mayo Bay in what is presently known as Lucatan. Evidently, these east coast Islamized Mandaya are not new converts since Garvan⁵ notes that "In Mati and its vicinity, I believe there are a comparatively large number of Moros or Mohammedanized Mandaya" during the period, 1905-1910, when Garvan was in eastern Mindanao.

With the gradual diminishing of warfare and the raiding-vengeance pattern as instituted around the *bagani* complex, Mandaya social structure, at least in upper Caraga and Manay, was integrated at the family-household organizational level. With economic activities based on the shifting cultivation of dry rice and tubers, the focal unit of activity must be a small, highly mobile social group. Family-household units are not only adaptive to ecological and economic requirements of upland dry rice cultivation where new swidens are cleaned and planted yearly, but are also units of interaction with a market economy.⁶ Current relationships between abaca-cultivating Mandaya and coastal markets also stress family-household independence at least in most distributive aspects of marketing.⁷ Since most family groupings in the abaca cultivating areas are productive units and are dependent on coastal markets for consumption goods and commercial items the marketing of abaca by small independent units is accomplished.⁸

As the "peasantization" process continues among the abaca-cultivating Mandaya, certain cultural changes occur. The influx of new elements such as transistor radios, "state-side" clothing, galvanized sheet metal roofs commonly known as the "G. I. Sheet," sewing machines, and so forth create further demands of the local population on the outside market and what it implies. Children are sent to high schools in Manay, Mati, and occasionally Davao City. The role and importance of a formal education is recognized not only in learning the basics of reading and writing, but in an understanding of what the dominant Bisayan ways of life are, how they operate, what they mean, and how they are acquired.

While Mandaya culture—in its organizational aspects—had adapted to the commercial production and marketing of abaca, marked changes have not

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ A. A. Yengoyan, "Aspects of Ecological Succession among Mandaya Populations in Eastern Davao Province, Philippines," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters*, L (1965), 437-443.

⁷ A. A. Yengoyan, "Environment, Shifting Cultivation and Social Organization among the Mandaya of Eastern Mindanao, Philippines" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1963).

⁸ E. R. Wolf, "Type of Latin American Peasantry: A Preliminary Discussion," *American Anthropologist*, LVII (1955), 452-471.

occurred on the structural level. However, contact with coastal "Bisayans" and other members of dominant Philippine religious groups, has brought about changes in self-identification in regards to groups and networks external to the Mandaya. As increasing contact with external populations continues, one gradually assumes and acquires certain behavioral patterns which are only manifest in dealing with non-Mandaya populations in the widening socio-economic framework. Involvement in social groupings such as community work operations, fiestas, ritual co-sponsorship, barrio political activity, and liaison men for the two major political parties, provide a number of channels by which a Mandaya may participate in the traditional lowland Bisayan sub-culture. Such flexibility in mobility is partially accountable to the absence of any formal social or kin groupings besides the family-household structure.

The major obstacle in interacting with, and being accepted by, the lowland Bisayan populations is the connotation which lowlanders possess about uplanders. In general, Christians and Muslims regard uplanders or pagan groups as backward, unsophisticated, and superstition-bound people. In most areas, the lowland peoples readily take advantage of upland groups by obtaining lands which are not titled or renegeing on agreements concerning commercial transactions.

In upper Manay and Caraga, those segments of the Mandaya which are involved in abaca production, recognize the necessity of being a "Bisayan," at least, when interacting with the coastal populations. Externally, this is easily accomplished by changes in apparel, the cutting of one's hair and the exclusive use of Bisayan, which is the *lingua franca*. However, external changes are only the first step in the uplanders transition into the coastal Bisayan population.

The Mandaya also recognize that all Bisayans are baptized and are Christians. This close association between baptism and being a Bisayan is most important in the interaction of the upland Mandaya with coastal populations. In cases where the Mandaya discussed the meaning and role of baptism, nearly eighty per cent felt that one became a Bisayan through baptism. The idea of spiritual rejuvenation, which is commonly connected with baptism, was seldom realized as being crucial, nor at times was it recognized. The high rate of Mandaya going to a coastal mission or church, being baptized, and returning as "Bisayans" attests to this fact.

Being a Bisayan to the Mandaya, at least in interaction with the coastal people, connotes that the Mandaya are on an equal status with the coastal Bisayans. Whereas the foothill Mandaya, who are involved in the production and marketing of abaca and are in close contact with the coastal groups, become baptized as means of acquiring and assuming the status of Bisayan, the interior upland rice-cultivating Mandaya are seldom involved in direct interaction with coastal populations.

The process of "Bisayanization" through baptisms is not new nor does it occur only among the abaca cultivators. Most coastal groups are actually Mandaya populations whose conversion dates back to the late Spanish period or the early American era. In such cases, when one is asked, "what are you?", the common reply is "A Bisayan." Upon further inquiry as to what Bisayan Island one is from or where his parents or grandparents were from, the usual

findings are that as far as one is able to trace descent, all lineal kin were born in a given locality in eastern Davao or Surigao del Sur. Ultimately, the basis on which one calls himself a Bisayan is baptism.

Not only does one become a Bisayan by changes in clothing, hair style and baptism, but also by active participation in a social framework which is part of the "mainstream of Philippine Culture." A Bisayan is one who is fully aware of the national life, one who knows the "ins and outs" of business, politics and society, and is able to take part in political, social, and religious organizations and activities characteristic of lowland Philippine culture. For a Mandaya who is gradually coming into the sphere of Philippine economic activity, it is necessary to acquire lowland cultural patterns and attitudes.

Thus, the Christian baptism to a Mandaya signifies a partial change in reference group structure. In dealing with non-Mandaya, a baptized Mandaya calls himself a Bisayan, uses Bisayan as the *lingua franca*, and selectively manifests activity in lowland Philippine culture. In the foothills, one is a Mandaya, speaks Mandaya, and partakes in all the social and religious aspects of Mandaya social structure.

In summary, Christian baptism is the key to participation in lowland Bisayan culture. Whereas many missionaries may assume that the number of baptisms is a measure of one's success, the crucial problem is to investigate what baptism signifies among those who undergo such an event. How widespread is this practice, is not known to the author though it may be hypothesized that in cases where contact between the dominant lowland culture and various non-Christian upland groups is characterized by sporadic interaction, an absence of continuous one-way contact between a dominant and subordinate culture, and where agents for cultural transmission are few, one may find cases, such as the Mandaya, where reference group structure and changes allow an individual to partially participate in two networks of social activity with minimum amount of conflict.