

Hybrid Christianity in the Oral Literature and Ethno-botany of the Agtas of Mount Asog in the Bikol Region of the Philippines

Jesus Cyril M. Conde, *Department of Language and Literature*

Maria Aurora A. Conde and Ramona S. Renegado,

Department of Natural Sciences

Ateneo de Naga University

Abstract:

This paper¹ explores a hybrid form of Christianity manifested in the oral narrative literature and ethno-botany of the Agta indigenous people at Mount Asog in the Bikol region of the Philippines.

Based on field research (2002-2004), this paper studies a hybrid form of belief in a reality composed of visible and invisible beings existing at the same space and time. In this reality, the belief in the power of plants and animals is instrumental for different relations between human beings and various invisible entities. The Bikol region is predominantly Christian due to its history as a part of Spanish colony. Yet, the mountain people of Asog believe in a reality in which indigenous culture overpowers Christianity. It is a cultural hybrid that shows the power and identity of Filipino post-colonial culture.

Key terms: Bikol, Agta tribe, Mount Asog, hybrid Christianity, Filipino post-colonial culture

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The Bikol Region in the Philippines

Let us first glimpse at the Bikol region and its literature and culture. Also known as Region V in the Philippines, Bikol Region comprises of six provinces and eight cities on the southeastern end of Luzon. The provinces are Camarines Sur, Camarines Norte, Albay, Sorsogon, Masbate, and Catanduanes. The cities are Naga, Legaspi, Iriga, Ligao, Tabaco, Masbate, Virac, and Sorsogon. Naga City, a commercial, cultural, academic and religious center is located 377 kilometers south of Manila.

The Bikol region is frequently visited by typhoons, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes. But despite this, the Bikolanos are generally happy, easy-going, friendly, hospitable, and deeply religious. Christianity is the dominant belief in Bikol. These traits are established labels of Bikolanos. But our study points to the possibility that Bikol culture consists of many other unexplored elements that can lead to deeper studies of our identity.

Objectives

This paper attempts to deepen the study of Bikol oral literature through an interdisciplinary approach. Specifically, its aims are to explore details of hybrid Christianity in the oral narrative literature and ethno-botanical practices of the Agtas of Mount Asog in the Bikol Region of the Philippines and to open avenues for deeper interdisciplinary studies of the post-colonial culture of Bikol, other regions in the Philippines, and other Asian countries.

Definition of Terms

Oral literature refers to expressions of human life and culture through words of mouth. Examples are oral narratives, poems, riddles, folk drama, and songs (Jose, 1979; Eugenio, 1991).

Post-colonialism is a position which aims to valorize cultures degraded by colonization. Leading post-colonial critics (Spivak, 1990; Bhabha, 1991; Legasto, 1993; Ashcroft, 1990; Childs, 1997) use interdisciplinary methods (literature, history, anthropology, philosophy) to show multiple forms of subtle power of colonized people despite the domination of colonial masters.

Hybridity is an example of postcolonial theory. It aims to unveil multiple and dynamic fusions of the cultures of the colonizer and colonized. These cultural fusions manifest unique identities of colonized

people that can be sources of pride (Spivak 1990; Bhabha 1994; Sangari 1991).

Due to its variety, complexity, and dynamism, a hybrid culture cannot be described accurately. We can only see dynamic fragments.

Nevertheless, a continuous study of hybridity is significant for a deeper understanding of the cultural identity of post-colonial societies.

Most postcolonial critics focus on cultural hybridities of people in urban areas. But a postmodern research methodology can explore the areas outside established paradigms to expand knowledge (Foucault, 1972). Thus a study of cultural hybridity of small communities remote from urban centers can be sources of new knowledge.

Hence, this paper focuses on the hybrid Christianity of the *Agtas* of Mount Asog in the Bikol Region of the Philippines.

Methodology

This research utilized a descriptive research design, combining participant observation, interviews and questionnaires. Interviews were conducted to forty (40) key informants from eight (8) *Agta* settlements in five (5) barangays at Mt. Asog. Furthermore, the team immersed in the communities in the summer of 2002 to observe the interrelation between oral literature, culture, and ethno-botany.

Research on oral literature continued from 2002 to 2004 (several days in a month) using participant observation and interview with the help of key informants, and a native guide and translator. The researchers used the Bikol language of Naga City, the center of Bikol. The *Agtas* could also use this language.

Scope and Delimitation

The scope of the project is a qualitative study of the hybrid Christian culture of the *Agtas* of Mount Asog through oral literature and ethno-botany. It does not include economics, political science, theology, and statistics. It does not cover the study of the hybrid culture of other regions in the Philippines.

The *Agtas* of Mount Asog

The tribal Filipino known as *Agtas* live at the foot of Mt. Asog in Iriga City. Iriga City is 38 kilometers from Naga City and 60 kilometers from Legaspi City. It is part of Rinconada area (4th district of Camarines

Sur) bounded on the North by Ocampo and Sangay, on the East by Buhi, on the South by Polangui and on the West by Bato, Nabua and Baao.

These generally nomadic mountain people live in clusters of houses called kaabays. With an estimate average size of three by three meters, many houses in kaabays are made of light materials like bamboo and nipa and only have three walls. An open side serves as door and window. But the kaabay, generally inhabited by blood relatives, is the basic social unit functioning as source of support and security.

The Agtas at Mount Asog we have met were generally small people- around five feet in height, with thick lips, flat nose, and dark complexion. They are normally shy and aloof to strangers. They are generally nomadic.

The Philippine government has tasked the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP) to oversee the integration of these people into the mainstream of society. Section 22 of Article II, Section 5, Article XII and section 6 of Article XIII of the 1996 Constitution provide for the due recognition and protection of the rights of the indigenous Cultural Communities to their ancestral lands and ensure their economic, social and cultural well-being.

The Number of Agta Ethnic Groups in Mount Asog

In his dissertation, "The Agtas of Mt. Asog" (University of Saint Anthony 1978), Miguel V. Pili states that there are 14 barangays in Iriga City where communities of Agtas thrive. All of these barangays are located at Mt Asog. Ten are at the sides of the Mountain, while four are near the top.

In the text of the dissertation, however, Pili enumerated only ten barangays, namely: Antipolo, Niño Jesus, Perpetual Help, Sagrada, San Pedro, Sta Isabel, Sta Maria, Sta Teresita, and San Vicente Norte.(11) Pili's map, in contrast, shows fourteen barangays: eleven at the sides, and three near the top of Mount Asog. Those at the sides are: San Juan, San Nicolas, San Isidro, San Agustin, Perpetual Help, Sta Teresita, San Andres, Sta Cruz, San Rafael, San Vicente, and Antipolo. Those near the top are: Tubigan, Sta Maria, and Manogo.

Interestingly, five barangays mentioned on page 11 of the dissertation do not appear in the map on page 12. These five are: Sagrada, San Pedro, Sta Isabel, Niño Jesus, and San Vicente Norte.

An analysis, therefore, of the two sets of data in Pili's dissertation reveals that this work presents nineteen barangays on Mount Asog as sites of Agta communities, and not fourteen. The inconsistency, however, in the two sets of data, means that other secondary sources must be studied, and more importantly, an actual survey of the sites must be made.

The 1994 Directory of the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP) identifies only four barangays in Mount Asog as sites of Agta settlement (Table 1).

Table 1. Agta Population in Mount Asog (NCIP 1994)

| Barangay/Sitio | No. of Households | Total Population |
|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Santiago | 76 | 401 |
| Katabog(San Nicolas) | 34 | 147 |
| Rombang (San Nicolas) | 25 | 117 |
| Natabunan (San Nicolas) | 12 | 50 |
| Ilian (San Nicolas) | 114 | 575 |
| Oyango (Sta. Teresita) | 25 | 103 |
| Parina (Perpetual Help) | 104 | 305 |
| Sta. Maria | No Data | No Data |

The data in this 1994 publication is quite different from the data in Pili's 1978 dissertation. While Pili's work mentions 19 barangays, this later publication mentions only four. All of the four barangays mentioned in the NCIP directory, nevertheless, are present in Pili's work.

The inconsistencies in the sets of available data prompted us to visit the barangays mentioned in the secondary sources from the summer of 2002 until the summer of 2004. With the help of Agta native guides and some barangay officials, we have reached the particular sites where the Agtas live.

Our findings are as follows:

1. Agta communities can be found in 8 barangays in Mount Asog, namely: San Nicolas, Perpetual Help, Sta Teresita, Sta Maria, Sagrada, San Ramon, Santiago, Niño Jesus.

2. There are 12 ethnic groups in the 8 barangays, as shown in table II: 4 in San Nicolas, 2 in Sagrada, and 1 in the remaining barangays.

Table 2. List of Agta Tribes

| Barangay | Ethnic Group |
|----------------|------------------------------------|
| San Nicolas | Katabog, Rombang, Natabunan, Ilian |
| Perpetual Help | Parina |
| Sta Teresita | Oyango |
| Sta Maria | Sta Maria |
| Sagrada | Sagrada 1 Sagrada 2 |
| San Ramon | San Ramon |
| Santiago | Santiago |
| Nino Jesus | Niño Jesus |

The Entry of Foreign Words in the Culture of the Agtas

According to the Agta leaders on Mt Asog, the word “tribe” existed only in their communities when the National Commission on Indigenous People was created by the government to manage the activities of the Agtas.

NCIP officers organized the Agta communities. A group of clusters of houses was called “tribe”. A chieftain elected by the members of the tribe acted as leader in implementing NCIP projects. Before NCIP, Agta communities were called kaabays. Some community members (usually the elders) acted as leaders. But the title “chieftain” did not exist prior to the coming of NCIP.

The Nomadic Culture of the Agtas

In the observation of Agta informants, Agta communities are generally nomadic, even in the time of NCIP. The reasons are typhoons, misunderstanding or lack of good relationship with another group of people in the community, and the *Kaingin* system of planting.

During strong typhoons many of the Agta houses are destroyed. The Agtas would hide in a cave until the typhoon is over. They build new houses in new sites, since they believe that a new site will give them better luck.

Another reason for the nomadic lives of the Agtas is the *Kaingin* system of planting. In the *kaingin* system, the Agtas would clear a particular piece of land by cutting down trees in order to use the land for planting different sorts of vegetables and root crops. The *kaingin* systems destroy the forest and other forms of wildlife. But it is one of the main forms of livelihood of the Agtas. A *kaingin*, however, does not last very long. After a year or two, many *kaingin* fields become cogon lands. The Agtas usually cannot keep it free from growing grass. The reasons, in my observation, were either lack of hard work or extreme poverty. Many Agtas work less than eight hours a day. Some of them work in their *kaingin* after breakfast; go home at noon and no longer return to work. Likewise, in times of financial distress, some of them sell their *kaingin* to non-Agta planters at a low price.

When they lose their *kaingins* for any of the two reasons, they usually decide to have a new *kaingin* at a different site. And since they had to be near their source of income, they also reconstructed their houses at the new site.

The nomadic life of the Agtas is an important reason why different studies present different data about the number of Agta tribes or communities on Mt. Asog. As a matter of fact, we believe that it would be very difficult to establish a fixed number of tribes on this mountain. Due to the reasons mentioned, Agta tribes may merge with other tribes. Some tribes may split into different groups, each group forming a separate community at a particular part of the mountain. In a year, there can be several relocations of Agta communities.

The *Kaabay* Culture

The cluster of houses that we discussed is called *kaabay* (see pictures below). In my observation, the *kaabay* is the basic social unit of an Agta community. The term *kaabay* in the Bikol language of Naga City, which is the regional language of Bikol, means “something that is physically close”. But in the Agta communities of Mt. Asog, *kaabay* has a deeper and wider meaning. It does not only refer to the cluster of houses that are physically close to each other. More importantly, it also refers to the people

in these houses who are close to each other, not only due to blood relations, but also due to reciprocal caring relationships.

The households in a *kaabay* are generally related to each other by blood. Generally, the household heads are siblings. Very often, these siblings would build their houses near the home of their parents. The father of the siblings is usually the head of the *kaabay* in different ways, particularly in decision making. The household heads in a *kaabay*, though, were not limited to siblings. Sometimes cousins and friends join a *kaabay*.

The roles of the members of the *kaabay* in caring for each other could be classified as material and non-material. Material care varied from sharing food, lending money, helping in construction or repair of a house, caring for grandchildren and sick relatives. Non-material care vary from giving a piece of advice in times of decision making, providing emotional comfort in times of distress like illness or death of an immediate family member, and extending spiritual support when some members suffer from physical ailments believed to have been caused by supernatural beings.

The Hybrid Belief of the Agtas of Mount Asog

We argue that the culture of Mt. Asog Agtas articulates a hybrid form of Bikol belief constituted by the following:

1. An indigenous, non-Christian reality composed of visible and invisible beings existing at the same space and time. In this reality, the belief in the power of animals and plants is instrumental for different relations between human beings and various invisible entities.
2. Christian elements which are always in motion-in some instances functioning within this reality and in other instances totally outside it.

The Bikol region is predominantly Christian due to its history as a part of Spanish colony (Gerona 1983). Yet, the Mountain people of Asog believe in a reality in which indigenous culture overpowers Christianity. It is a cultural hybrid that shows the power and identity of Filipino postcolonial culture.

The belief in the power of plants and animals is deeply etched in the culture of the people of Mount Asog. Plants and animals empower both supernatural beings and people. They function as mediators through which different kinds of supernatural entities show their powers to humans. They

also provide people the ability to transcend their human limitations and oppose the domination of supernatural powers.

Through participant observation, the researchers noticed that oral narratives, the main form of recreation of the *agtas*, articulate and perpetuate the belief that various powerful beings enter the reality of people through plants and plants.

An example of a narrative from Mount Asog is the *Usipun kan luuk* (A Story about Luuk) narrated by Marcelino Monge, a 54 years old spiritual healer. The story narrates how a woman is possessed by a *luuk* and how Monge saved the woman through a ritual of exorcism. In this narrative, the *luuk* is a supernatural entity which possesses people and causes a tremendous rise of sexual desire.

In the story, there is no direct proof that the *luuk* actually exists. What convinced the narrator that the creature was indeed a *luuk* was that the woman, who saw it, displayed the symptoms of a person possessed by a *luuk*. These symptoms were signs that gave insights into the existence of the *luuk*.

“ . . . *nagkakarigos an diyana sa maation na tubig. Ay naghuhuba na ini. Pinagkakawatan na su sadiri niya, siring kaiyan.*”

(. . . She was taking a bath in very dirty water. She would remove her clothes and play with her sex organ.)

An interesting point is that the *luuk* takes the shape of plants to enter human reality and control people.

“ . . . *Kun minsan ngani, garu na ubak nin niyog. Maski ano an magibo niya. Basta palaen laen an itsura kan luuk.*”

(. . . sometimes, it even appears like the bark of a coconut tree. It does many things. A *luuk* has various appearances.)

Another oral narrative from Mount Asog is Our Lady of Angustia, a story about a miraculous image of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In the story, some people from Nabua, a town located at the foot of Mount Asog found the statue of Mary somewhere on the mountain. A church was constructed in Nabua as a shrine of the statue. Some people carried the statue into the church. They were about to put it near the altar; but when they reached the center of the church, they could no longer move

the statue. When they attempted to move it, big snakes suddenly appeared.

“Kan magkonstrak nin simbahan duman sa Nabua, dae pighiro su imahen ta pag pighihiro, igwa nagluluwas na mga halas.”

(When a church was constructed in Nabua, the image was not moved, since whenever it was moved, snakes would appear.)

This story shows that some elements of lowland Christian culture are being assimilated into the indigenous system of beliefs of the Agtas. This is not surprising for most of the Agtas we interviewed go down occasionally to the lowland city of Iriga and neighboring towns to sell fruits and vegetables and buy some items for their basic needs. There is also a Christian missionary church just at the foot of Mount Asog which has been able to recruit some of the Agtas as members.

But despite the presence of Christian elements in this story, the Agta culture remains strong through the sign of the snake. In Agta Asog culture, snakes are signs of supernatural power. This snake sign manifests in the usipuns from Mount Asog--- *Usipun ni Juan* (Story of Juan), *Mistryosong Halas* (Mysterious Snake), *Ang Parabantay nin Opon* (The Hunter of Boar), and *Enkantadang Sawa* (Enchanted Python).

The narrative Our Lady of Angustia manifests the belief that the Virgin Mary showed her power through fearsome snakes. It also articulates the belief of the Agtas that supernatural beings show their power through animals and plants. The power of the Virgin Mary is a particular invisible entity which can only materially manifest through the power of the sign of the snakes. Similarly the luuk in the other narrative is another invisible being which can only materially appear either as plant like barks of trees or animals like the half-fish and half-snake creature in the narrative.

There is no evidence in any of the narratives to support an interpretation that sees the snakes or other animals as coming from the entity in Christian belief called the Devil. Thus, the snakes appearing near the Virgin Mary are not within the lowland Christian frame of meanings which generally sees the snake as a symbol of the Devil. The snakes in the narrative are within an Agta frame of meanings. It appears that the Agta culture has absorbed some Christian elements from the lowland. But in this cultural fusion, the Agta elements appear to be stronger than the Christian parts.

The narrator stressed the power of this Agta culture. He functioned as an Agta native critic when he commented that “*bago nag abot an mga kastila, uda pa man mga santo*” (Before the arrival of the Spaniards, there were no saints). This commentary from an indigenous critic implies the power of his own culture to remain strong despite the presence of strands of Spanish Christian culture coming from lowland Bikol. Oral narratives articulate this indigenous power in a hybrid which we can call Agta Christianity.

Other stories further show the power of plants to mediate between people and mysterious entities. Eighty four years old Miguel Azores narrated that long time ago, a tree was the abode of an enigmatic white monkey which sometimes would appear to people. The monkey would never jump nor transfer to other trees. It would just disappear. The leaves of the mysterious tree never fell, even if there were typhoons.

In another narrative by Mateo Vargas, a 73 year old Agta forest guard, a poor man named Juan discovered a magical tree that made him attract the king and married the princess. The tree was so powerful that it was the cause of both the disease and the cure in the life of the hero.

“Kadto daang panahon, igwang lalaki na ang pangaran si Juan. Ang hanapbuhay niya mag gibo nin bakol para itinda. Sarong (1) beses kan siya magsakat sa bukid para mangua nin kahoy, siya nakaagi nin kahoy na may tulo (3) sanang sanga. Sa sarong sanga ang bunga puti, sa sarong sanga ang bunga pula, duman naman sa sarong sanga, itom. Ngonyan, pigrisa niya si kahoy. Ano daw ngayang kahoy iniyo? Nahiling niyang may mga kinakanan nin gamgam si bunga. Maisip niya, kung ini gaya nakakahilo, dai man kakakanon kang mga gamgam.

Namitan ko daw gaya. Enot na kinakan niya si bungang puti. Ay talagang mahamis! Pagkatapos niya pagkakan kang bungang puti, ini man daw ngayang pula. Kuminua siya kan hinog, inubakan, saka kinakan. Mahamis man. Isinunod niya si bungang itom.

Pagkakakan ni Juan naisipan niyang magbaba na para mangua nin gigibohon bakol. Kan siya nagbaba, napangalas siya ta may sungay na siya! Namroblema si Juan kung pano na mahahali ang sungay niya. Napag isisp isip ni Juan, na sabi daa kang mga gurang “kung ano ang ginikanan kang helang iyo man lang makakabulong”. Ang

ginibo niya nagkua siyang mga dahon kang kahoy na may tulo (3) iba't ibang klaseng bunga asin iginusgos niya sa puro kang sungay. Pagkatapos man naggad nawara si sungay na nagtubo sa payo niya."

(Long time ago, there was a man named Juan. His job was making baskets for sale. One time, when he went to the mountain to get some wood, he passed by a tree with three branches. One branch had white fruits. Another branch had red fruits and another had black ones. Now, he examined the tree. What tree is this? He saw that there were birds eating the fruits. He thought that if the fruits were poisonous, they would not be eaten by birds. He thought of tasting them. First he ate a white fruit. Oh how sweet! Then, he thought of the red ones. He got some ripe ones. He peeled and ate them. They were also sweet.

Next, he tasted a black fruit. After eating, Juan decided to go down to get some materials for the baskets. When he went down, he was surprised, for he already had horns! Juan was burdened of how to remove his horns. He remembered the saying of the old. "The cause of the disease is also the remedy." What he did was to get leaves of the tree and rubbed these leaves on the tips of the horns. After this, the horns disappeared.)

The oral narratives mentioned manifest the indigenous belief in the power of plants. The stories do not show any element of Christianity, the dominant religion of lowland Bikol.

Interestingly, however, other narratives contain a fusion of Christianity and the Agta belief in the power of plants.

The narrative entitled *Doseng Higante* (Twelve Giants) narrated by Luis Endaya, a 44 year old laborer, shows a form of hybrid Agta Christianity. The story tells about the adventures of the hero named Rodrigo who fought monsters since childhood, provided great fortune to his poor parents and married a princess.

The traces of Spanish colonial culture are visible. Like most Filipinos, Rodrigo and his wife Maria have Spanish names. The setting also shows the presence of a king and princess, titles of nobility with possible

European origin. More interestingly, the hero Rodrigo, like Jesus Christ of Spanish religion, was captured, tortured, and put on a cross by his tormentors in a land called Calvary.

Christ was tortured and nailed on the cross by Roman soldiers; Rodrigo was tortured and tied on a cross by flying monsters called *mampaks*.

“Pagkahiling no mampak, pagpara suntokon Don Rodrigo. Yamaan de amo komo maluya da naginibo.

Yamaan gaposon iya sa kalbaryo, ipako do krus.”

(When the mampak saw them, it punched Rodrigo. Since Rodrigo was still weak, he could not do anything.

He was brought to Calvary and tied to a Cross.)

Moreover, in the Christian belief, Christ died on the cross but has risen after the third day to ascend to heaven. Rodrigo, on the other hand did not die on the cross. He was saved by his cat and the power of his necklace made of parts of *kawela* plant. The material existence of the otherwise invisible twelve giants, the protectors of the hero, depends upon the necklace.

“Tadtina yo opos panik do santa krus kuwintas. Ngaya among mata na ta tade na yo kuwintas mo. Mapagmata ya Don Rodrigo pangala bumaoy. Ngaya kuwintas ko kawela, paluwason mo an dose higante. Pagkimat ya antimano ta yaonyo dose higante. Dios ko ngaya ano an nangyari kimo. Mala mo na niwang nakagapos ka pa daton. Kagibohan ngaya eh nan kalaban ko. Yamaan ngaya an gusto ko sabihon entero banwaan nan mampak tonowon. Yamaan gaboton yo sta krus. Habaran iya daton ka sana ngaya among. Kami na ngaya bahala. Ipansabad. Yo mga mampak ipinagsabad do kadagatan. Sa madaling sabi, nabawi yayo asawa ya pagkakoko no kuwintas yo nasulit yo balay ya palasyo do kadagatan. Nasulit yo tinampo paiyan do panogan ya pati yo a ipinagibo do magudang ya nasulit asta.”

(The cat climbed the cross and put the necklace around Rodrigo's neck. “Wake up, master. Here is your necklace.” Then, Rodrigo woke up. He spoke.

“My kawela necklace let the twelve giants come out.”

When he winked his eyes, the twelve giants were there.

“My God, master, what happened to you? You are very thin”, said the giants. “This is the work of my enemy”, said Rodrigo. “Now, what I want to happen is to annihilate this community of mampaks!”

A giant pulled the cross, untying Rodrigo.

“Just stay here, master and we will be in charge.”)

We can see the fusion of Christianity and Agta culture. But in this fusion, the Agta belief in the power of plants and animals appears to be more powerful than the Christian elements. In *Doseng Higante*, despite the presence of some Christian elements, the power of the hero depends on kawela plant.

A possible reason for this hybridity is the belief of Agta people on Mount Asog that reality is a co-existence of things that we can see and things that we cannot see. These two parts of reality are related to each other in a play of power. The things that we can see consist of natural things like people, animals and plants. The things that we cannot see consist of various supernatural beings that exist with people in the same space and time. Positive invisible beings give special power to people. Negative ones cause most of the physical and mental illnesses of human beings. They cannot be fully perceived by the human senses. But human beings can use the power of plants and animals. We can detect the presence of these beings through the behavior and sounds made by animals and through the presence of mysterious, magical plants. We can also survive the illnesses that they cause through the curative power of plants.

A very interesting point is this cultural hybridity is present not only in oral narratives but also in material practices of the Agtas. Stories narrated by healers show the power of literature not only to express but also to perpetuate the cultural fusion of Christianity and the Agta belief in the power of plants. The untitled story by 48 years old healer Eugenia Aguilar reveals the interactive form of literature which is very effective in transmitting beliefs. It is an example of the Agta stories telling session in which narratives which have become parts of community knowledge strengthen and perpetuate beliefs in the minds of listeners. In the session, other Agtas listen, ask questions, and add some comments.

Story of a Healer

Narrator: Eugenia Aguilar, 48

Participating Listeners: Nena Casyao, 40; Yolina Casyao, 61

Yolina:

“Kin ano nangyari do pinagabolong mo ta an katubean baga nan mga pinagabolong mo mga naenkanto, mga naibanan.”

(What happened to the one you are healing? The majority of those you heal were possessed by spirits and by invisible people.)

Eugenia:

“Manay, an akos yaan ni Susan. Ngaya manay santigwaron mo daw ngaya ya Boboy. Yamaan di amo. Amo ko na Santigwaron. Inagapan iya no pagkahulog. Yamaan yo akos naga para sabi ni bo, abo ako. Anro an. Pero yo bugaybo ko entero nagatindog. Nagisog na no mata. Pinagatonglon na ko. An sabi, pautay ka seton ata nagisog na no akos. Sabi ko, maray nganako nai Rico ya akos. Ihapag yamaan. Di amo. Magipos ni ihahapag no nagkuwa na ko kamangyan. Ibogta ko na do abab. Nahiling ko yo aso. Entero nagaluyap. Itong aki, nagpaparasabi nin maray pa ngaya ko magraan na. Bagana kaya pinaga para palimanlimanan no magudang a lalaki. Di tolos ipinabolong.”

(That one was the child of Susan. *Manay*, she said, please exorcise Boboy. So it was. What I saw was that the boy kept on saying no. But the hair on my body stood up. The eyes of the boy were threatening. He was saying invectives. “You are a whore”, he said. I thought I better put some medicine on his body. I burnt some *kamangyan*. I put it in a coconut shell. The smoke filled all the house. The kid kept on saying that it was better for him to die. It seemed that the boy’s father was not determined to get a healer for his son.)

Nena:

“Ya ko pinagbobolong mo napaono na?”

(Then, what happened to him?)

Eugenia:

“Abo ngayá ko keton. Ako ngani ikinaangot na. Di ka man nganako noy pigdotdoton. Para nganako pig paasuwan ta sanay ka. Ata ngayá abo ako. Ya ano di ako nagintindi. Paasuhan ko baga yo akos. Yaon nganako noy, tapos na. Krusan ko baga. Ata yo, pagluwas ko sana manay, entero ko pinanggirabo.”

(He said he did not want it. I even got mad. “I will not touch you”, I told him. “I will just let the smoke touch you.” “I really do not want it”, he said. I did not mind him. I just let the smoke touch him. I said, “Boy, it is over.” I put a cross on his pulse. When I got out, the hair on my body stood up. I thought that I had a different healing experience.)

In this narrative, the cross put by the healer on the pulse of the boy is an important Christian element in the healing ritual. However, the belief in the power of plants is stronger than Christianity in the healing rituals of the Agtas. In the continuation of the interactive narrative, Nena Casyao, another Agta healer who was a mere listener at the start of the story telling session assumed the role of the narrator and expressed details of the use of different plants in opposing an evil supernatural being called *aswang*.

“Si manay Pina naaswang sa may irrigation. Pinaaking sala sa oras. Agom iyan kan tugang ko na si Felix. Tinapalan lang iyan. An tapal kamyang iyan. Pangontra talaga iyan. Bilog an dahon kaiyan. Ipinagtatapal iyan sa bados para pangontra sa aswang. Igwa iyan iba ibang kolor. Igwa kaiyan berde. Pero an pinakapektibo iyo an pula. Pula talaga an pangontra.

Kun malala na an bados, bako na iyan an pinagagamit. Tanganing dae malaglag an aki, sagkud mapondo na an pagdugo asin an pagkulog kan tulak, pinaghahalan na iyan nin dahon nin kalpi saka kinudkod na niyog. Pinaghahalo yan tapos sinusugba sa kalayo. Alagad dae dapat matutong.”

(An *aswang* victimized Manay Pina near the irrigation. She gave birth at the wrong time. She is the wife of my brother Felix. We put *Kamyang* plant on her to oppose the *aswang*. Its leaves are round. It is put on pregnant women to oppose the *aswang*. It has different colors. There is green. But the most effective is the red one.

But if the case is severe, it is no longer used. So that the baby will not get aborted, and to stop the flow of blood and the stomachache, we mix with it leaves of *kalpi* and coconut. We make a concoction and throw it on fire. But it must not get burned.)

The existence of this belief in the power of plants to oppose evil spirits is one of the main findings of the research project entitled, *Ethnobotany of the Agtas in Mt. Asog, Iriga City* (2002). The study aimed to identify plant species used by the Agtas, to determine the uses of each plant, and to relate these plants to their unique culture.

In broad terms, ethno-botany is the study of the relationships between plants and people. The two fields labeled “ethno” and “botany” cover a spectrum of interests, ranging from archaeological investigation of ancient civilization to bioengineering of new crops. Most studies are concerned with the ways indigenous people use and view plants. Those use and views can provide deep insights into the human condition (Balick and Cox, 1996).

This research utilized the descriptive research design whereby interviews were conducted to forty (40) key informants from eight (8) Agta settlements in five (5) barangays of Iriga City at the foot of Mt. Asog. The questionnaire was the major tool for gathering data. The researchers also used direct observation and secondary data from the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP), the government agency overseeing the Agta settlements.

A specimen of each plant species was collected and preserved following the standard procedure. In the case of herbs, a whole plant was obtained for each species, while in the case of trees and big shrubs, samples of leaves, stems and roots were used. The species were identified from books, catalogue and international data-bases on plants. Those unidentified from above references were referred to the University of the Philippines Herbarium for proper identification and validation. Each species of plant was properly documented.

Results revealed 84 species of commonly used plants belonging to forty nine (49) families, with herbabuena (*Mentha arvensis*), oregano (*Coleus amboinicus*) and pamugtongon (*Mitrephora sp.*) topping the list. The three (3) main uses of plants identified were: food (with 12 species), herbal medicines (111 species) and repellent for evil spirit (10 species). Responses

likewise revealed plant-associated practices unique to their culture. Some of these practices were related to spiritual and supernatural phenomena.

Plants used to repel evil spirit are:

- For “naanginan”, Taratabako (*Elephantopus t.*), San Francisco (*Codiaeum v.*) and tamailan (*Curcuma s.*)
- For cases of “naibanan”, three species are also used, namely; kayo (*Ceiba pentandra*), tagulipod which belongs to family Rubiaceae and tagbac or banban (*Donax cannaeformis*).
- For “ratac” kamangkaw (*Ocimum sanctum*), saripungpong (*Teijsmauniodendran*), bungliw (*Polyscias nosoda*) and lumbayaw (cf. *Mallotus*) are usually utilized.

Naaiginan, *naibanan*, and *ratac* are terms which generally mean “possessed.” Further research must be done to determine the more particular meanings of these terms.

Furthermore, because of the belief that pregnant women are preys of “aswang” (witch), the Agtas have a practice of outwitting witchcraft by placing a matchstick and garlic on any part of the house to drive away the “aswang”. Different practices are observed as antidote for evil spirit. In Ilian, *tagbac* leaves are dried and rolled into cigarettes. The smoke is also believed to repel evil spirit.

Ancestral Domain Project (1994) cited other practices of the Agtas associated with plants, namely: When a woman is pregnant, a lemon is always placed beside her to scare away witches. It is believed that spirits or “engkantos” exist in huge trunk of trees, and, should not be hurt or disturbed. Once disturbed, the person may suffer from a certain ailment. The Agtas use “Agol” trunk to make coffin for their dead. In making the coffin, they use a sticky fluid commonly called “salog”, extracted from Pili tree.

A very interesting practice observed in Oyango, Sta. Teresita community was the practice of using lanka root as fertility enhancer. The roots are boiled and taken as decoction. They believe that when longer roots are boiled, it means more children, otherwise the shorter the root, the less number of children. They also suggest that decoction be taken once a month, in four months after the menstrual period.

Kaangis-angis, a tree with fragrant leaves, is used by the Agta as “lumay” (love potion). The leaves are mixed with roots of amorseko (a kind of weed) and young leaves of pulango (also a tree) and wrapped in a handkerchief. When a woman smells its fragrance, she will chase the man bearing the handkerchief and stay wherever he is. Thus, man can not get away from the woman.

Conclusion

This paper shows the possibility that through studies of oral literature and ethno-botany, we can see several points regarding Bikol culture.

The exploration of the oral literature and the use of plants of the Agtas of Mount Asog is an entry point to the field of cognitive ethno botany, which involves the study of cultural symbolism and social structure to examine the ways in which different plants or vegetation types are perceived by a particular individual or community (Cotton, 1996).

In the Agta communities at Mount Asog, the entry of the Christian religion from the Spanish-influenced lowland Bikol produced a hybrid whose dominant element is still the Agta culture. In the narratives that we have discussed, the indigenous belief in the role of plants as mediators in the power relations between people and invisible beings appears to be more powerful than Christian elements. This is a way towards a deeper study of ethno botany and culture.

The belief in the power of animals and plants was already present in the Bikol region centuries ago. 16th century Franciscan missionary and scholar Marcos de Lisboa mentioned that female religious leaders called balyanas were using plants-specifically buyo leaves and rice grains in rituals of exorcism (Gerona 1988). Jose Castaño (1895), another Franciscan missionary stated that early Bikolanos believed that the sound made by the bird *saya saya* was a bad omen.

That these beliefs have fused with elements of the Christian religion brought by Spanish colonizers is an obvious and even superficial analysis of Bikol history and culture. But the interdisciplinary study of details of this fusion at the present time may reveal unexplored traits of our region.

Furthermore, we have to be critical of the common notion that Christianity is the dominant belief in Bikol. This could be a product of a framed way of thinking centering only on discourses of dominant cultural apparatuses. The Bikol Region is known for the deep veneration for the Blessed Virgin Mary articulated in the nine days celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of Penafrancia. In this feast, Bikolanos of different walks of life from the various provinces of the region, from Manila, and even abroad gather in Naga City, the regional religious center to participate in the

various rituals of the feast. Highlighted by the mass media, this feast has become a center of the perceived identity of Bikolanos.

But the exploration of other parts of a culture outside the perceived centers is essential in the expansion of knowledge. Studies of oral literatures and ethno-botany of the masses of Bikol can be instruments for the deconstruction and expansion of the common perceptions of our identity. Our study shows that the old belief in the power of plants and animals still exists, though in different forms. It remains relatively pure in some situations and has absorbed some Christian elements in other situations.

Interdisciplinary researches on Bikol oral narrative literature and ethno botany contribute to the deepening of this grand endeavor to study the oral literatures of our country and the unexplored details of Philippine culture that they articulate. Multidisciplinary exploration of more specific details of the oral literature and culture of different regions in the Philippines involving researchers from the fields of science and the humanities can produce wider and deeper knowledge of our identity as a people.

Recommendation

A possible expansion of our project is a comparative analysis of the post-colonial cultural hybridity of different communities in the Philippines and other former colonies in Asia. This can be done in the fields of oral literature, anthropology, history, and cognitive ethnobotany.



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