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## The Hinabangan Tabu

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## **The Hinabangan Tabu**

**TERSITO AGUIRRE ALIPOSA**

A relatively small rural town, Hinabangan is an inland municipality in the southwestern portion of island of Samar. From Catbalogan, the original capital of the whole island of Samar, to Hinabangan is about thirty minutes bus ride and an hour by motorized banca.<sup>1</sup> The municipality of Hinabangan has a total land area of 44,728 hectares according to the Bureau of Census of 1980. The town has four sitios and fourteen barangays. As of 1974, Hinabangan had an estimated population of 15,000 but a recent survey shows that the figure is decreasing because people are migrating to urban centers like Metropolitan Manila for a number of reasons.<sup>2</sup>

In 1966, Hinabangan was rated a fifth class town and in 1970, it became a fourth class municipality. Today, it has made a leap to being categorized as a second class town with an annual income of ₱1 million. Essentially, two factors brought about the financial strength of the town: 1) Bagacay mines and 2) the logging companies. Rich in natural resources, Hinabangan has been identified by experts as having gold, silver, aluminum, ore, manganese and sulphur deposits among others. Some observers believe that this is perhaps one of the reasons why the Australian Government is directly involved in "the development" of the most depressed area of Eastern Visayas.

A longer version of this article was presented during the Sixth National Conference on Local-National History held on 11-14 December 1984 at the Philippine Social Science Center, Don Mariano Marcos Avenue, U.P., Quezon City.

1. Tersito Aguirre Aliposa, "The Tabu: Its Socio-Cultural Implications in the Development of the Municipality of Hinabangan, Western Samar, Philippines," (M.A. thesis, Graduate School, Silliman University, March 1975), p. 17.

2. Economic problems and the peace and order situation factors for the movement of people.

The majority of the Warays of Hinabangan are engaged in subsistence farming and fishing. The few professionals have not been tempted to reside in the place but, together with the young people, find their fortunes in metropolitan centers of the country. In this town the tabu has been in operation for almost a century.

#### THE GENESIS OF HINABANGAN TABU

Scholars like Hoebel believe that virtually all societies, large and small, engage in intertribal or international trade. Every society has its own goods or possesses natural resources from which to supply materials not available elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> He further states that:

As human society rests on reciprocity in social relations, the flow and exchange of goods among peoples is an important aspect of life. Exchange exists both within and between societies.<sup>4</sup>

Information shows that the issue of survival was the heart of the matter when fishermen and farmers opted to engage in the exchange of their respective resources. The transfer of products was the basis of the barter system and reciprocity. By virtue of geography, occupation and conditions of the bartering groups, the concerned people (farmers and fishermen) did not have all the necessary requirements for human existence. For example, the territory settled in by the fishermen was not suitable to farming, but the farmers' land was the exact opposite.

One of the key informants in our study commented on the origin and nature of the tabu. An aged Ex-Mayor of Hinabangan, Mr. Victor Abarquez, made the following comments:

Han pagpokrat han akon mga mata, akon nakita nga mayada na tabu denhi ha Hinabangan. An akon mga kag-anak nagsumat ha amon hin mga surumatanon mahitongud han tinikangan han tabu. Akon nahibaroan nga an mga para-uma ngan mga parapangisda nag-balyo-ay han ira mga abut ha tuna ngan han dagat.

(When I was a kid, I noticed that there was already a tabu in Hinabangan. My grandparents including my father and mother, related stories

3. E. Adamson Hoebel, *Man in the Primitive World: An Introduction to Anthropology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1958), p. 452.

4. Ibid.

pertinent to the beginning of the Hinabangan tabu. I learned from them that the farmers and fishermen exchanged their respective products from the sea and the land).<sup>5</sup>

As a former Mayor of Hinabangan, Abarquez, after World War II, was instrumental in a number of innovations in the structure of the *tabu*. A similar testimony was made by a person who was the first public school teacher of Hinabangan.<sup>6</sup> She related,

I had living memories of my father who was the first administrator of Hinabangan. In fact, my father, your Lolo, was the first appointed Mayor and Municipal Judge of the town. In spite of his busy hours, my father found time to relate to us children the industry, generosity, kindness and cooperation of his constituents. I had internalized the fact that the story of the tabu was the story of the poor people, the farmers and the fishermen who were instrumental in the beginning of the tabu. Many people come to our house for help but they also had gifts for my father.<sup>7</sup>

Almost eighty-three years old, the informant reveals something between the lines of the above testimony regarding the origin and nature of the tabu and the attitude of the "original actors" of the same.

Another respondent shared an equally important fact pertinent to the early tabu practice. Also an Ex-Mayor of Hinabangan, Ricardo Babon is a retired captain of the Philippine Army. Instrumental in some of the changes in the operation and structure of the tabu, Captain Babon recalled that,

In so far as my memory could lead me according to what I had gotten from the older folks like my own parents and kinsmen, the tabu of Hinabangan was started by simple people of the sea and of the mountain who bartered their goods for cooperation and co-existence.<sup>8</sup>

The investigator questioned the veracity of the above testimony and the informant replied with certainty saying,

5. Ex-Mayor Victor Abarquez is still living. He is about a hundred years old. He had been instrumental in changes in the organization and structure of the tabu after the World War II.

6. The mother of the writer, Juanita Aguirre is the eldest daughter of the first appointed municipal Judge and Mayor of Hinabangan. Her parents come from San Sebastian, the sister town of Hinabangan.

7. Her testimony is shared by the old folk of the town who consider the former an ideal child of the town of Hinabangan.

8. Ex-Mayor Ricardo Babon is the first cousin of the mother of the proponent and like Abarquez, he claims to have introduced innovations in the operation of the tabu.

Maaram ako nga an akon mga ka-uropdan diri gud magbubuwa ni bisan an akon mga kag-anak han mga estoria nga ira inginsumat ha amon. (I am pretty sure that my kinsmen, yes my own parents will never tell a lie of anything they had related to us about the tabu).<sup>9</sup>

When a question was asked regarding the origin and nature of the tabu, the respondents (one hundred of them, sellers and buyers, plus ten key informants) were almost unanimous on the origin, nature and characteristics of the early tabu which could be summarized as follows: 1) the tabu essentially was conceived for survival purposes and was carried out on the principles of reciprocity implied in the exchange of the respective products, 2) the farmers and the fishermen were the people who initiated and started the exchange processes, and 3) implicitly, perhaps the decision to engage in the barter system was a move made by the key leaders of the respective bartering groups.

Other information was gathered from people residing in the neighboring towns of Hinabangan like Calbiga, Paranas, Motiong, Jiabong, San Sebastian, Basey and Catbalogan, narrating variations of data collected but all pointing to the fact that the local tabu began with the barter system as a medium for the transfer of goods. Similar facts were revealed by the transfer of goods. Similar facts were revealed by the provincial administrators of Catbalogan, the center of development in the whole island Samar.

#### TABU AND TABUAN TRANSFORMED

The preceding discussion shows the genesis of the tabu as related by the people themselves. It was conjectured that the bartering groups were faced with the problem of survival and thereby exchanged their products through the principle of reciprocity. People came to cooperate in times of crisis which is a natural principle of human society. But data shows that in the original practice of the barter system, no mention of the word tabu was made. Only during the later development when the practice became a habitual pattern of the people was it called tabu.

9. Ex-Mayor Babon felt insulted when there was a question regarding the validity of his testimony. In Hinabangan, like the rest of the country, local leaders are often relatives and kin perpetuated in power.

Literally, the term "tabu" means an act of drawing liquid, especially water from a container, spring or a well with the use of a dipper. Additionally, tabu means to fetch, to get something out of or from a source. Hence, tabu is descriptive of the life, act, behavior and even lifestyle of the people as they related with each other for survival. The *tabuan* is the place where the tabu is conducted. It is the meeting place of the barter practitioners, the venue where the tabu and the exchange of goods take place. The *tabuan* therefore may be considered as the marketplace in the daily market phenomenon.

By virtue of urgency and of necessity, the tabu was sustained as a habitual operation. However, there were times when both farmers and fishermen had to wait, not only for hours but even for days, in the *tabuan* and were often forced to pass the night there under the elements. When one group did not appear, it would mean that the waiting persons would have to cook their food, make shelter for resting and most serious of all, worry about how to find means of preserving their products from spoilage. With such experiences repeated many times by either party, a need was felt to put up temporary shelters and waiting sheds. As time passed, those concerned decided to live conveniently near the *tabuan*, and more families of kindred folk followed that pattern. With such a gradual movement of more people to the meeting place, a marked transformation of the *tabuan* was taking place. The continued migration of rural folk towards the *tabuan*, coupled with the habitual operation in the exchange of goods and local products caused the meeting place to metamorphose from an insignificant contact area into an emerging sitio and later on into a growing barangay, which finally evolved into an inland municipality in the early 1920s. A local government official, writing a brief history of the town of Hinabangan for purposes of the General Auditing Office Yearbook, said,

Formerly a mere barrio founded about fifty to sixty years ago, Hinabangan, was made a municipality during the early 1920's, because of its distance from the bigger towns of Samar.<sup>10</sup>

The transformation of the *tabuan* and naming of the emerging town as "Hinabangan" is significant insofar as the lifestyle of the

10. Anacleto L. Bohol wrote a brief history of Hinabangan which was published in the *GAO, 1965-1970*. He was the former secretary to the Mayor of Hinabangan.

people was concerned. The term "hinabangan" comes from the root word "hinabang" which literally means any aid, help or support extended to a needy, helpless individual or group whose very existence is solely dependent upon the grace and mercy of another. Therefore, the christening of the new municipality as "Hinabangan" was appropriate and descriptive of the interdependency of the farmers and the fishermen for reasons of survival, goodwill, cooperation, concern and camaraderie. It should be noted at this point that while the local "agriculturists" moved out to settle in the tabuan, their counterpart, the "fishers" opted to settle permanently on marsh land, in an area which is within the territory of Maqueda Bay, the fishing ground of Samar Island. Like the transformation of Hinabangan from a mere tabuan, the settlement of the fishermen in a new area also gained political status as a municipality called "San Sebastian," about six kilometers away from its kindred town.

#### THE MONETIZED TABU

The continued migration of people towards the tabuan was deliberate but reenforced by the colonial policy of Spain in concentrating the natives for purposes of more effective and efficient Christian indoctrination amidst a limited number of clergymen and for improved management.<sup>11</sup>

The transformation of the tabuan into a populated area dramatically affected the structure and operation of the tabu. Due to the newly constituted political status of the municipality of Hinabangan, the local leaders instituted ordinances and innovations which revolutionized practically almost all faces of the tabu system. Among others, the following measures were effected: 1) the transfer of the location of the tabuan from a creek-bank to the *poblacion*, 2) the change from a barter system of the tabu to a largely monetized market economy, 3) a move from an indefinite time of the tabu operation to more specific days, and 4) the change from a free tabu practice to a more controlled market process.

The local government began collecting cash tickets as a form of

11. John Leddy Phelan, *Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses, 1565-1800* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1959).

market revenue from both buyers and sellers involved in the enterprise. The local leadership introduced scheduled tabu days, Wednesdays and Sundays, for improved market activities in order that more people might be served. All of the aforementioned innovations were made during the incumbency of the first Hinabangan appointed Judge and Mayor, Leoncio Cerdeña Aguirre.<sup>12</sup>

In the case of the taxes hopefully to be derived from the tabu operators, the "local influentials" and the "government lords" were reported to have collected either cash or in kind. The physical and visible changes of the tabu and the tabuan have been carried forward into the contemporary operation and structure of the tabu system.

### THE TABU UNDER THE AMERICAN PERIOD

The evolution of the tabu is connected with the growth and development of the town. The data show that the tabu preceded the town itself. But what is stressed here is that both the transformation of the tabuan and the tabu affected each other. It should be noted that the changing faces of the tabu and the tabuan were brought about because of the intervention of the local government leaders.

Information shows that the introduction of the new political system in the town of Hinabangan paved the way for corresponding developments like the school system, telephone communication network, mail service and roads connecting towns to the provincial capital. With all these physical changes and new developments, the municipality of Hinabangan experienced an urban phenomenon, similar to what an American anthropologist called, "the Plaza Complex."<sup>13</sup>

The ordinance emanating from the local government for housing the tabu in the newly constructed market building generated disturbing problems in the total drama of the tabu syndrome. The holding of the tabu in the public market aggravated the problems for people who were not prepared to meet and participate in the governmental changes. For example, the farmers who

12. Leoncio C. Aguirre was the first Mayor when Hinabangan was called "Rancheria", chartered town.

13. Donn V. Hart, *The Philippine Plaza Complex: A Focal Point in Cultural Change* (New Haven: Connecticut, Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1955), pp. 40-60.



sold their own products could not be accommodated in the tabuan due to the sudden influx of a multitude of people. Fishermen who also sold their own catch had to postpone commuting to the poblacion. These changes resulted in the spoilage of the crops and the fish. Informants report that the tabu at that time went to its lowest ebb because those involved were discouraged. Additionally, the value of the local products went down, thus affecting the local government's revenue and the vitality of the tabu.

In order therefore to solve the growing problems like congestion, the local government leaders allowed the tabu operators to conduct market enterprise outside the public market. Sellers and buyers were permitted to display goods and transact business on the streets of the town. Although this was considered a sort of an extension of the tabuan, it was obviously a definite reversion to an earlier traditional tabu practice. Even if there were marked innovations instituted by the Americans, especially in the physical structure of the place which naturally affected the tabu operation and the flow and movement of the local products, the manner in which the tabu was conducted and managed remained untouched.

In order to solve the mounting problem of congestion and other related discomforts and controversies in the newly instituted government changes in the management of the tabu, the local government allowed the insistent people to conduct the tabu in a place called "paradahan," about a kilometer away and north of the poblacion. *Paradahan* is a place where people stop to rest and eat their meals because of the spring of refreshing potable water.

Extending the tabu in the newly identified tabuan was an act of the government leaders to give comfort to the tabu practitioners. Also, by local ordinance, another arrangement was effected to conduct the tabu once a week in the poblacion and during Sundays and Wednesdays in the paradahan. After quite a time, the people became adjusted to holding the tabu in those specified places on designated days.

#### THE TABU DURING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

The date show not only the nature and origin of the tabu but also its age. By the local folk historians, it has been estimated that the Hinabangan tabu has been in existence for almost one hundred years. As reported by the key informants, the indigenous tabu

system had survived time, the forces of human influence and the stresses of natural calamities. With all these forces, the tabu adjusted either favorably or adversely. As a matter of fact, the war period did not arrest the tabu system. It survived with some observable variations.

While the preceding American period brought considerable dynamism to the tabu complex in terms of commodities sold, structures of operation of the market and other innovations, the tabu during the Japanese occupation almost fell back to the traditional practices of the barter system. For example, factory goods gave place to local products, monetized tabu to a purely barter trade system, and regular tabu operation to off and on market days.

Being used to have money as a medium of transaction in the transfer of goods and services, the tabu operators during this period missed the American currency called the "genuine money" during the war period. The local folk historians reported that national and political conditions of the country had affected the tabu system. The disappearance of the genuine money in the total tabu operation forced the system to revert to its traditional manner of exchange processes and the reciprocity principle. However, the need of currency as a medium for the transfer of commodities was met when the Pre-Samar money in circulation reached Hinabangan, but it did not fully solve the ebbing quality of the indigenous market system.

Another factor related to the lessening dynamism of the tabu even "to the point of death" was the paralyzing effect of fear on the local people, the fear of the enemy, and the Guerilla and other lawless elements.<sup>14</sup>

## THE TABU AFTER WORLD WAR II

As mentioned above, the Hinabangan tabu experience was considerably altered during the war period, but it was not discontinued. Instead, it had its ramifications in the face of the political climate of the times by demonstrating its ability to adjust to the indigenous conditions. The end of the war brought about

14. See Kiyoshi Osawa, *A Japanese in the Philippines*, published in Japan in 1981 and distributed through the Philippine Japanese Embassy.

almost an instant revival of the dying spirits of the Hinabanganons which eventually affected the tabu complex. Many American goods like cigarettes, chocolate, canned peanuts, corned beef and other articles found their way to the tabu via ambulant traders and vendors coming in from Leyte, particularly Tacloban. Data shows that trading activities during this period were markedly profitable as "victory money" flooded the tabuan. The situation that pervaded the countryside and the urban centers during the war period was constant threat and continued insecurity. After the war, the liberation period and onward, the tabu recovered strength and regained new dynamism which was sustained up to the sixties and even during the beginning of the seventies.

On the whole, the data show that almost always the local administrators interfered either directly or indirectly in the affairs of the tabu. This intervention by the local government power welders is evidenced in the form of market notices, announcements, ordinances, policies and planned changes. The local politicians took opportunities to utilize and even manipulate people and the tabu practitioners. Some local politicians used the tabu as an instrument for personal interests and ambitions. The tabu was one of the major political issues and in the 1969 local elections, during the incumbency of Ex-Mayor Ricardo Babon whose leadership was challenged by a younger, dynamic political aspirant, Domingo Lobres.<sup>15</sup> Lobres courted the people by promising that if elected to the highest local position, he would give special treatment to all tabu participants regardless of origin, education, status, and religion. Reports show that it was during the administration of Mayor Babon that the tabu operation went down to its lowest level. An informant reported, "Laxity in the tabu management, undisciplined behavior of many agents of the law and similar abuses were the natural order of the day."<sup>16</sup> It was observed that some top local leaders were involved in irregularities related to the affairs of the tabu. Against this background, the opposition candidate<sup>17</sup> garnered the majority support

15. A critic of Ex-Mayor Babon who wanted to become the next local administrator of Hinabangan.

16. Today, the incumbent Mayor is believed to have a weakening leadership as observed by his noninvolvement and indifference to the multifaceted problems of the town.

17. Mayor Lobres, "the administrator who is always out of town," according to one critic.

of the people and made and repeated promises on his inauguration day. The newly elected administrator instituted the following actions to demonstrate and fulfill his political promises: 1) all tabu operators were exempted from cash tickets (collection), 2) the tabu was restored to twice a week operations, 3) all tabu participants were allowed to transact business, and 4) more attention was given to the mountain folk.

#### THE TABU DURING MARTIAL LAW

The week following the imposition of Presidential Decree 1081 by President Ferdinand Marcos marked a significant decrease in the commission of crimes all over the country. The entire archipelago experienced a historical shock which was dramatically evidenced in almost all phases of national life.<sup>18</sup> The observations of a local observer regarding the response to the new political climate was obviously demonstrated in the behavior of the local residents in the tabuan. For example, the Hinabangan municipal treasurer claimed that it was during this period when the tabu collection went up as never before. Another observable phenomenon was the subdued behavior of the rural folks in the area, manifested by no infractions of the law.

Aside from the several casual conversations with Mayor Domingo Lobres, the investigator interviewed him in his office in recent years. Asked how he felt about the present set up and operation of the tabu, Lobres expressed high hopes for the continuing improvement of the indigenous tabu and its increasing contribution to the town, the neighboring population and traders and to the total rural economy. In addition, the same executive expressed his opinion that unlike the past administration, his government would continue to take care of the tabu, to render fair and just treatment to all people engaged in tabu vending. He believes that with the changes instituted in the town and to the tabu system, the people will experience more liberty, contentment and economic progress.

18. Ferdinand Edralin Marcos, *Notes on the New Society of the Philippines* (Marcos Foundation, Inc., 1973).

## CONCLUSION

The contemporary tabu has entered another phase of historical development which would give a different dimension to the changing face of the economic system. Recent developments show that the worsening peace and order situation in the island of Samar is adversely affecting the local market day. For example, people, especially the young and the educated, continue to move out of Hinabangan. The mountain folk are migrating to the poblacion by sitios and even barangays, abandoning their properties, settlements and farms. Worst than in the Japanese occupation, continued fear, uncertainty, hunger and congestion are plaguing the rural folk. Local leaders are sandwiched by two or more contending political forces, mountain and lowland. And finally, unsolved crimes, massacres, and killings continue to terrify the people. All of the above forces affect the tabu operation in many ways. When asked what will happen to the tabu in the midst of these man-made problems, the rural folk are afraid to answer and make comments for fear of reprisal. Yet the history of the Hinabangan tabu shows remarkable resilience to adapt to changing conditions.