

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## **Batanes, 1686-1898: History of an Attempt to Change a Culture**

Florentino H. Hornedo

*Philippine Studies* vol. 31, no. 4 (1983) 491–496

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## Review Article

### **Batanes, 1686-1898: History of an Attempt to Change a Culture**

FLORENTINO H. HORNEDO

A BLENDING OF CULTURES: THE BATANES, 1686-1898. By Ana Maria Madrigal Llorente. Manila: Historical Conservation Society, 1983. 238 pages + plates. (Casalinda Bookshop exclusive distributor.)

"Batanes to 1898" was the original title of the doctoral dissertation presented by Miss Madrigal at the University of the Philippines. That title invited one of the examiners to ask when, in geologic time, the Batanes group of islands may have risen out of the sea. The published version of that dissertation is the work under review. The author "got the message," and has accordingly limited the time scope of her present work to the years between 1686 and 1898.

#### THE PIONEER MISSIONARY CONTACTS

The year 1686 was when the first Dominican missionaries, Mateo Gonzalez and Diego Piñero, set foot on Batanes soil. And 1898 marks the death of the last Spanish governor of Batanes, killed during the Katipunan Revolution, ending the Spanish rule in those islands.

Between those dates, the Spaniards, especially the Dominicans, ventured repeatedly to establish Christianity among the Ivatans (the name the natives of Batanes call themselves in general).

On or about the year 1686, Fray Mateo Gonzalez, O.P., was the chief missionary at the mission of Sta. Ursula in Calayan, one of the islands in the Babuyanans which lie north of the Province of Cagayan at the northern end of Luzon. At the time, Fr. Gonzalez learned that there were populous pagan lands to the north. With the zeal many a missionary was fired with in those days, he took with him Fray Diego Piñero, and visited the islands. Indeed

there were souls to convert there, but unfortunately, the missionaries died not long after.

More than three decades later, about 1720, Juan Bel and Alonso Amado, also Dominicans, were trying to establish a mission there again. Faced with the same problems that the pioneers had failed to surmount, they decided to transport willing Ivatans to Calayan. The few they managed to resettle soon fell victims of famine and disease. There was also a resettlement near Camalaniugan in Cagayan on the Luzon mainland. That, too, failed. For the Ivatans sailed back home.

In mid-eighteenth century, another set of missionaries tried once more. They also soon died on the islands.

#### ANNEXATION TO THE PHILIPPINES

In 1771, a Dominican chapter decided to propose to the King of Spain that he take under his personal patronage the conquest of Batanes. He agreed. So under the governorship in the Philippines of Don Jose Basco y Vargas, two Dominicans and an assortment of government officials and functionaries headed by a governor were sent to Batanes. On 26 June 1783 the islands were officially made part of the Philippines.

It did not take long before the true economic potential of the islands became evident. Official complaints and criticism of the economic liability that Batanes had become led to a decision to downgrade its political status from that of a province to that of a municipality headed by an *alcalde*. By 1799 when governor Juan Casamara ended his term, a Cagayano, Don Valerio Bermudez, became *alcalde* and was to hold that position for the decades ending in 1830. In that year, the military engineer Jose Maria Peñaranda visited Batanes, made a bitterly anti-Dominican report on the status of the islands putting much of the blame on the simplicity and ineptness of Bermudez and the manipulation of the Friars. He recommended a change in policy. Bermudez was out, and a new series of *alcaldes* took over. This new era, characterized by efforts to improve and develop agricultural production seems not to have made any dramatic changes in Ivatan life and livelihood.

By 1855, the era of the *alcaldes* ended and Batanes was once more under governors, the first this time being Don Fernando de la Cueva. This period appears also to have seen better political organization of the towns with a much wider participation in local government by the native leaders. Public education was also greatly improved. Meanwhile, there was an increased opportunity for Ivatans to migrate to other parts of the Philippines, especially Manila. Among those in Manila in the 1890s were men who came in touch with the Katipunan and when they went back to Batanes, they brought along the ideals of the Revolution. It was under this revolutionary inspiration that the Ivatan members of the armed forces of the last Spanish Governor, Julian

Fortea, turned against their Spanish master. He was dead even before the *kati-puneros* under the general command of Daniel Tirona in Cagayan, through his lieutenant Rafael Perea, actually set foot at the Batanes Capital of Basco.

In the historical framework just sketched the chief contribution of Miss Madrigal's book is in filling in details in the fifty-year period between the end of Bermudez's time in 1830 to about the 1880s. The rest has been covered substantially by previous literature on the subject.

#### A QUESTION OF POINT OF VIEW AND INTERPRETATION

In so far as the work describes the general events and impact on the lives of the Ivatans by Spanish action, whether religious or political, the book is helpful and substantially sound. The amount of primary documentary sources is also praiseworthy, for no single history of the Batanes has used all those materials before. The problem, with this work, however, lies in the *point of view* and the *interpretation* of the documentary materials. Teodoro Agoncillo has wisely warned against blind confidence in the accuracy of Spanish records written by Spaniards for official Spanish purposes. The colonial government enjoyed a monopoly on the production of source materials. Dr. William Henry Scott has modified the Agoncillo position by proposing what he has called "cracks in the parchment curtain." Through those "cracks" it is possible to see, says Scott, the authentic reactions of Filipinos to what was done to them by the foreigners. (See his *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain*, New Day, 1982.) Thus, anyone who wishes to write about a history of the *Filipinos* should see through the "cracks." The uncritical use of the documents involved in the present work is, to my mind, the source of its major problems and weaknesses.

The title *A Blending of Cultures: The Batanes* . . . is somewhat deceptive. "The supplanting of culture" or "the imposition of a culture" would have been more accurate. To say this does not constitute an objection to the results of the process. It is merely to describe what Miss Madrigal has presented in her book. If examples be needed, suffice it to present what Joaquin del Castillo did in the early 1790s. By decree, he abolished the old social structures of native power, even including the manner of dressing (pp. 92ff). The punishment for resistance was in some cases death, as in the case of Aman Dangat (repeatedly spelled Dagat in the book), and the wholesale resettlement/exile of the population of an entire island (pp. 94-98). Another example is that given under "Ivatan Literature" (pp. 162-64). One would expect something more than the following when describing a local literature: "Ivatan literature was oral and had to do with the everyday lives and customs of the people. However, [sic] they had an inclination towards poetry." The rest of the material under the heading is a listing of *arte de la lengua* and religious materials all prepared by the missionaries for their own pur-

poses. These materials had little to do with "blending of cultures" but much to do with supplanting, changing culture.

Regarding the point of view related to the critical use of the documents, something has to be said about the author's rendering of the Sabtang rebel chief Aman Dangat (pp. 94-96). He is presented as a "malevolent outlaw" (p. 93), in contrast to the noble Spanish officials. The sequence of socio-political acts that led to the events narrated by Miss Madrigal are essential to a proper understanding of the reactions of the native chieftains, especially the non-christian chieftains at that contact period. But the implications of these antecedent socio-political events are ignored in the book's criticism of even major native reactions to Spanish policy. The assumption seems to be that the Spanish policies were always right. By implication, then, the ethnocentric position is taken that what was anti-Spanish at the confrontation of cultures was diabolic. Therefore, Aman Dangat could only have been inspired by the devil.

From 1785 to 1789, Miguel del Amo was governor. He inaugurated the establishment of local government with the participation of native chieftains serving as *alcaldes* and judges. Non-Christians were "not considered for any of these positions" (pp. 91-92). Men like Aman Dangat, traditional power-holders as they were, saw themselves as gradually losing their hold on their people and, possibly, their property — to a power they hardly understood. (At his trial, later on, he confessed what the records render as his "*poco entendimiento*" but which the Spaniards regarded as a false excuse! ) In 1790, Joaquin del Castillo, an authoritarian by any standard, became governor. He decreed the abolition of the traditional power structure and ordered the natives to change their traditional costumes and ornaments for the ones already in use in the rest of Christian Philippines at the time. Even traditional festivals were abolished (p. 93). Disobedience meant severe punishment.

With the power of the Spanish government apparently invincible, petty officers and government agents many of whom were imports from Cagayan crisscrossed the islands on errands for either the missionaries or for the government officials. (At Basco, some had been caught cutting trees belonging to the natives, without permission. When the natives saw them, they resisted them and when they were told they were doing so in the name of the governor, they called the governor "*ladron*." ) No one knows sufficiently from the documents what abuses may have been committed. But the "cracks in the parchment curtain" suggest there *were* abuses. Aman Dangat's rebellion must be seen in that light. He was a man who saw what was being done to his traditional authority and rights by a new power he did not yet understand. He tried to get an explanation at least twice: once from a priest in Ivana, and on another occasion from the governor himself. One wonders how well the Cagayano translators conveyed to him in his native language what the

Spanish officials were saying, let alone the political implications of what they were trying to tell him. His reaction — he rebelled and had the agents of the Spanish government killed, including the agents of the missionaries whom, understandably, he could not have seen as different from the government agents.

#### DOCUMENTS UNCRITICALLY USED

The uncritical use of certain documents leads to the claim that Aman Dangat's rebellion was unprovoked, and that the chieftains of Sabtang were not imprisoned prior to the retaliatory massacre of the government agents. There is a letter of Lamidau (Teodomiro, not Teodoro as on p. 95) dated 8 August 1791. He said the rest of the chiefs were "en cepo" except Aman Dangat. This information is an incidental note appearing as part of a letter notifying del Castillo of a log shipment from Sabtang. (It is not clear how these logs were obtained, or whether they were properly paid for in case they were taken from Sabtang owners.)

The uncritical use of documents appears in other places, too. For example, Fr. Jose Serres is identified as the commander of the expedition sent to intercept the Katipuneros on their way from Ivana (p. 177). The document written by Fr. Serres himself says the inspector Don Rafael Romero (not Castro) was made chief of the expedition by the governor. (The rest of the names mentioned, e.g. Pedro Zabala instead of Jabalgauregui, suggests that the account used was that by Fr. Florentino Fernandez, O.P., who was not an eyewitness, instead of that of Fr. Serres who was a participant in the events.) Strangely, however, even when there is a shift to the Serres document, the information drawn is erroneous. For example, in referring to the killing of the Governor, it is asserted that "he was then hit by a bullet fired from a nearby tree by one Vicente Barsana" (p. 177). The document cited is the very one I have on hand, and this is what it says:

By morning it was known that the Governor had died, a victim, according to some, of the mortal bullet of the soldiers, and according to others, by his countryman the Inspector when he (Romero) went to ask him (the Governor) to surrender himself. *This is what Don Vicente Barsana says.* (Italics supplied.)

Then the account of Serres proceeds to list other theories of how the Governor might have been killed. But it clearly does not say Barsana did the killing.

Errors are disappointingly numerous and widespread in the book. Ivatans themselves will find it hard to identify even their own villages when named by this book. There are too many misspellings, and places misnamed. On the

back cover, the picture of my own home barrio of Savidug, in Sabtang, is called San Jose de Ivana which is a sea and an island away! I see one of the pictures which I think belongs to me. It is unacknowledged (no matter), and misnamed. There is no mountain called Mt. Araya anywhere in the Batanes.

The treatment of demographic data, especially population figures, is disconcerting. The graph on p. 195, for example, shows the population as rising from 30,000 in 1778 to 100,000 in about two year's time. Then as quickly it goes down to 14,000 in about a year. After about another year, it is down to 11,000. True, those numbers are in documents. But a scholar should be critical of such data especially when, as in this case, the very questionable accuracy of these data had been brought to the attention of the author repeatedly. Yet these data are still there. The book reports for example, that in 1900, Batanes had a population of 20,000, citing Fathers Idigoras and Bruges as sources. The 1903 Census of the Philippines shows that Batanes had a population of 8,293 at that time. Indeed, Batanes had been victimized by pestilences that could decimate the population. There is no record, however, of a plague with such virulence that between 1900 and 1903 some 59% of the population disappeared. Within the next fifteen years, as shown by the Census of 1918, the population drops to 8,214, a decrease of less than one percent.

The editing and proofreading of this work has left much to be desired. The lack of an index is inconvenient. A map of present-day Batanes should have been included.

This work could have been a very welcome supplement to what has already been written about Ivatan local history. As it is, its chief value is in putting in one volume a listing of the documentation available, and a substantially correct outline of what the Spanish colonial government tried to do to change the culture of the Ivatans. But a more satisfactory history of the Ivatan people themselves still has to be written.