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True Believers: Higaunon and Manobo Evangelical Protestant Conversion in Historical and Anthropological Perspective

Oona Thommes Paredes

This article discusses conversion to Evangelical Protestantism among the Higaunon and related Lumad groups, particularly the cultural and social reasons behind the surprising success of foreign Evangelical missionaries among the Higaunon, and its observable impacts. Special attention is given to the dominant themes of revitalization movements and the Ulaging epic that are shared by Lumad belonging to the Manobo language family. These dominant themes are strongly linked to those emphasized in Evangelicalism.

KEYWORDS: *Evangelicalism, revitalization, conversion, Lumad, Ulaging*

The Higaunon and other upland minority groups in the Philippines are traditionally distinguished from majority Filipino culture groups by the generic label of “non-Christian,” regardless of their historical ties with Christianity. Yet it is not unusual to find upland communities in which a large segment of the population calls itself Christian. Within some groups—the T’boli and Higaunon, for example—Christian converts may even play prominent political and social roles in preserving the larger group’s sovereignty and distinctive cultural identity, especially in the fight for claiming ancestral lands.

Except for brief periods of absence, there has been in fact a Christian missionary presence in northeast Mindanao, on both coastal and interior upriver areas, since the first mission was established in 1596 (Schreurs 1989, 1994, 1998a, 1998b). However, the success of Catholic

missionaries among Lumad groups has been singularly unremarkable when compared with their success among Filipinos in Luzon and the Visayas, where the identities of entire lowland groups have become inseparable from a Roman Catholic identity. These large lowland groups form the core of a Filipino national identity in which Catholicism remains an indispensable element, even when it is directly contradicted by long-standing indigenous or "folk" beliefs and practices (e.g., as described in Cannell 1999). In stark contrast, Catholicism has not made the same permanent inroads into present-day upland cultures in Mindanao, and, despite the fact that the "non-Christian" label is in most cases historically inaccurate, these groups remain distinct for this very reason.

However, various sects of Protestantism have made rather dramatic progress among upland groups in Mindanao like the Higaunon, despite a disadvantage of over three centuries. The recent work of foreign Evangelical Protestant missionaries among the Higaunon has produced a rapidly expanding cohort of "true believers" who, unlike their Catholic counterparts, do not syncretize old practices into their newfound faith. Moreover, this development appears to have reinforced, and perhaps even revived, the cultural distinctiveness of the Higaunon who have converted. This is in part due to the decision by such missionaries to bypass the use of majority languages (e.g., Cebuano, Ilonggo, Tagalog) and direct their efforts toward teaching literacy and converting Higaunon into a written language, which the Higanuon have enthusiastically welcomed. This approach also supports the missionaries' ultimate goal, which is to produce a Higaunon translation of the Bible for everyday use.

The literacy efforts and other charitable work of the missionaries have played a role in their acceptance as individuals into Higaunon communities. However, there may be other, underlying cultural reasons for the Higaunon attraction to fundamentalist Evangelical Protestant teachings. In analyzing the success of Evangelical Protestant missionaries among the Higaunon in Mindanao, this article explores the connections between the dominant themes of Evangelical Christianity, and those of Higaunon and Manobo millenarian movements, which in turn follow closely the themes and format of their *Ulagi* epic.

This article begins by explaining and contextualizing the cultural relatedness of all Higaunon and Manobos, and summarizing the key elements of Higaunon religious practice, including a brief discussion of Higaunon and Manobo millenarian movements. Special attention is given to connections between the dominant themes of both revitalization movements in Manobo language groups and the traditional sung epic shared by such groups, the *Ulagang*. In turn, these dominant themes are linked to those emphasized in teachings by the New Tribes Mission (NTM), which is active in Higaunon and Manobo areas.¹ The final section discusses the impact of this brand of Christian evangelization and conversion in northern Mindanao, and speculates on the possible cultural and social reasons behind the notable success of Evangelical Protestant missionaries among the Higaunon.

Research Areas

The perspective presented in this article is based on a brief period of field research, between May to August 1995, in four unrelated Higaunon Lumad communities in Misamis Oriental province (Region X, North Mindanao): two located at the western edge of the province, interior to the coastal town of Naawan, and bordering Lanao del Norte; the other two were located at the eastern edge, interior to the coastal city of Gingoog, and bordering Bukidnon and the Agusan provinces.

During this research period, I spent most of my time in two communities—one in western Misamis, the other in the east—with resident foreign missionaries of the NTM, and where many Higaunon had already converted to Evangelical Protestantism. Although they were both Higaunon communities, they differed in terms of livelihood, the particular dialect of the Higaunon language spoken, and the degree to which they deal with and resemble Cebuano-speaking lowlanders, generically referred to as the Dumagat² (literally a “coastal dweller”).

Higaunon in western Misamis live for the most part in areas of dry and deforested high plains less than an hour's drive from the coast, relying on intensive agriculture and other sources of livelihood, including gold-panning, which make them nearly impossible to distinguish

economically from the Dumagat. Eastern Misamis is considerably more mountainous and less accessible from the coast, and despite decades of intensive logging this area retains impressive tropical forest cover, allowing the Higaunon there to maintain a mostly forest-based lifestyle, characterized by limited shifting agriculture and the collection of forest goods for both personal consumption and resale. Due to infrequent contact with the Dumagat, it is possible to encounter many older Higaunon in the east who cannot communicate in Cebuano. Of the two types represented by these communities, most Higanunon would label those of eastern Misamis as being the more "traditional."

The NTM has been in the eastern Misamis area since at least the early 1980s, and one particular missionary family from Australia has been in their community for almost a quarter of a century. The NTM presence in western Misamis is relatively new, but is now over a decade old. In both cases, several NTM families have raised their children among the Higaunon, and in one case have even adopted a Higaunon child. It is beyond question that these missionaries, though foreigners, are fully incorporated into and accepted by their respective communities. These are the only Higaunon missions I know of, but there are NTM missionaries established in other Lumad communities.

The remaining two communities did not have resident missionaries, although they did have some contact with Filipino NGOs interested in livelihood development, environmental protection, and ancestral domain claims. In one case, the NGO in question was an agricultural outreach project of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP); religious conversion was not one of their priorities.

Although I conducted some formal, structured interviews, most interviews were informal in nature, conducted using the north Mindanao variant of Cebuano Visayan with the Higaunon, and conducted in English with the foreign missionaries. In a few instances when I faced language issues, translations and clarifications were relayed through either another Higaunon who knew Cebuano, or one of the missionaries. I also observed prayer meetings, religious services, and other events in each community, interaction between missionaries and Higaunon, and interaction between the Higaunon and other Filipinos. This research was followed up over the years by correspondence with a few key infor-

nants, both by electronic mail and regular post, and by a brief visit in 1997. The personal stories and viewpoints presented in this article come from people I have come to know as friends.

This brief field research was supplemented by extensive library research that used published and unpublished ethnographic accounts of Lumad peoples belonging to the greater Manobo language family. Since that time, I have conducted archival research overseas on social-organizational issues related to religious conversion, focusing on the same ethnographic and geographical area. This article is a second look at old observations, based on new perspectives gained from ongoing research and from personal correspondence that continued after my initial visits.

The Higaunon and Other Manobo Language Groups

The term Higaunon refers to a large and diverse group of people living today in the variably forested interior plains and mountains of northern Mindanao, covering the modern provinces of Misamis Oriental, Agusan del Norte, Agusan del Sur, and Bukidnon. Those dwelling in the latter province are more commonly referred to as the Bukidnon. As a modern population, they can be separated linguistically, culturally, historically, and genealogically from coastal and other residents of northern Mindanao who are relatively recent arrivals to the region. For this reason they, along with other upland groups, are called the indigenous peoples or the Lumad³ (in Cebuano, literally “born from the earth”) of Mindanao. They are also distinguished from the indigenous peoples of western Mindanao whose ancestors converted to Islam in precolonial times. For the Higaunon, the people who are neither Lumad nor Muslim are the Dumagat, settlers from northern islands, the bulk of whom began arriving only after the 1950s.

That the “Manobo” and “Bukidnon” or “Higaunon” are distinctly different ethnic groups has been duly noted for over a century now. This has not always been the case. In fact, there is no indication that they were so distinct from each other, or even identifiable as ethnic groups, until a little over a century ago. In earlier historical accounts the “hinterland tribes” or “non-Christian peoples” of northern and eastern Mindanao were simply referred to by the Spaniards as *monteses* (“back-

woods” people) or as “manobo” (e.g., Madigan 1963, 116). Similarly, Garvan (1941, 1) described the term “manobo” at the beginning of the twentieth century as “used very frequently by Christian and by Christianized peoples, and sometimes by pagans themselves, to denote that the individual in question is still *unbaptized*, whether he be tribally a Mandáya, a Mañgguáñgan, or of some other group.” Note that Garvan uses “Christian” in reference to Roman Catholics, not Protestants.

Today’s Higaunon and the different Manobo peoples, including the Tala-andig and Banuwa-on (Briones 1988; CCP 1994), remain related in many important ways. According to Bukidnon narratives, it is indicated in the *giling*, a symbol of Higaunon customary law, that they are “like fingers on a hand”—therefore closely related” (Biernatzki 1978, 96). The Manobo closely resemble the Higaunon in terms of agricultural practices, religious traditions, artistic traditions, housing, political organization, and legal tradition. This is hardly surprising because many Lumad groups resemble each other in general. However, the Higaunon and Manobo resemble each other in more specific and unique ways.

Linguistically, the Higaunon, Bukidnon, and Manobo languages are members of the northern subgroup of the Manobo family of Philippine languages (Elkins 1974, 1995), which contains the largest number of speech communities indigenous to Mindanao (Lebar 1975, 39; Llamzon 1978). Languages of the Manobo family contain “certain features or combinations of features which [they] share exclusively with other members of the subfamily” beginning with unique pronouns and a vocabulary that distinguish them from Visayan languages (Elkins 1974, 602). Linguistically, therefore, the Higaunon and Bukidnon are but two of several Manobo groups.

According to their folklore, the Higaunon and other Manobo peoples are also related genealogically. Various stories in Higaunon mythology relate that the Manobo came from the same female ancestor Gahomon (Biernatzki 1978, 96; Yumo 1988, 6–7), even though the Manobo are considered “wild” and “without law” (Biernatzki 1978, 96). Gahomon, a pregnant woman, was the lone survivor of a great flood that occurred when something blocked the *pusud hu dagat*, literally the “navel of the sea.” Her children later became the ancestors of today’s Higaunon and Manobo peoples.

All Manobo peoples likewise share the sung epic called *Ulagi*, also known as the *Ulabing*, *Ulagingan*, or *Ulabingan*, which tells of the dramatic exodus of their ancestors, led by the family of Agyu, from famine and oppression to immortal life in a place called Nalandangan (Maquiso 1977, 1990; Opeña 1979; Polenda 1994; Saway 2003, 28; Sitoy 1937). In some sources (e.g., Manuel 1963, 1969; Wrigglesworth 1981), this epic is referred to as the *Banlakon*, the *Agyu*, the *Lena*, the *Baybayan*, or by other names that refer to particular characters in the *Ulagi* (see also Pajo 1956 for a Boholano version with an almost identical plot but different characters).

In this article I use the terms Higaunon, Manobo, and Lumad interchangeably at times, although my research is rooted in the Higaunon communities of Misamis Oriental. I point out the key cultural similarities between the Higaunon and other Lumad peoples from the Manobo language group so as not to preclude the wider applicability of some of the issues under discussion.

Acknowledging the Spirits

In discussing Higaunon and Manobo religious practice, we have to acknowledge their spirit world as well. While for our purposes the matter is purely academic, to the Higaunon these spirits exist in the most literal and tangible way. They have the capacity to affect life on a daily basis, even among those who have become devout Christians. During my time in one of the villages in eastern Misamis, for example, one devout Christian couple related an incident wherein the woman's father, without provocation or warning, attacked them with a machete. The father was reportedly possessed by a *busaw* or evil spirit, and they barely saved their own lives by killing him.⁴ In another event that I witnessed, a Higaunon woman in her thirties drew gasps, cries, and tears at a well-attended Evangelical prayer meeting when she described an encounter with the *busaw* who had been tormenting her family in the guise of her dead father; she said he would have dragged her to hell had Jesus not helped her get rid of him permanently.

Social scientists interested in comparative psychology or mental health issues may consider studying such phenomena with respect to the cul-

tural contexts in which they occur. There is much to learn in this area, especially with regard to a possible association between violent encounters with spirits and coping with personal conflicts or social trauma. However, it is enough to say that the widespread belief in such spirits is not at all unusual or remarkable in the Philippines (e.g., as described in Cannell 1999). Richard Elkins of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), an academically oriented Evangelical Protestant missionary group, has further noted that their corporeal relationship with spirits has been a major impediment to Christian conversion among the Manobo groups he has worked with, even in cases where someone openly expresses the desire to convert (Elkins 1994). However, this vigorous and sometimes dangerous spirit world is a critical motivating factor for Higaunon conversion to the fundamentalist brand of Evangelical Protestant Christianity, as proselytized by New Tribes missionaries.

Various sources already describe the Higaunon spirit world in adequate detail (Cullen 1973; Cole 1929; Cole 1956; Lynch 1967). Munger (1988), whose data come from Misamis Oriental, provides a particularly sophisticated description of Higaunon religious tradition that goes beyond a simple list of the different spirits. In this article only a brief summary of the Higaunon spirit world is recounted.

The Jesuit Vincent Cullen (1973, 2), writing in the early 1970s, describes Higaunon religion as being animist, involving a "hierarchy of ruling spirits, under the vague overlordship of *Magbabaya*," who is understood to be a single all-powerful god. Under *Magbabaya* there are many kinds of spirits: the *gimokod*, which is an individual's "soul"; the *tumanud*, or one's guardian spirit; the *busaw* and *balbal* (from Cebuano), malevolent spirits who possess people and cause some to "run amuck" (Cole 1929, 195); and the *mighbaya*, an assortment of spirits who represent the four cardinal points, waterways, fertility, and assorted nature spirits who dwell in trees, rocks, and other places. Some spirits are considered ancestral, but it is not always clear which ones are ancestors. All of these spirits can be influenced, through offerings of food and various animals such as pigs and chickens, to aid mortals in hunting, curing illness, agriculture, and the general fulfillment of needs. After death, life is spent "in a terrestrial happy hunting ground within Mount Balatukan, an extinct volcano" (Cullen 1973, 2).

Cullen and other more recent observers agree that Magbabaya is the "supreme god" who rules over all creation, implying a similarity to the Judeo-Christian "God the father/creator" concept. Older sources, however, describe not only a very different Magbabaya but also a different hierarchy of spirits. Fay-Cooper Cole (1956, 93) writes that there are "six powerful Magbabaya," and "so powerful are these beings and so great is the awe of them that even the *baylans* (shamans) fear to mention their names." Among the six Magbabaya he describes is one who is the "most powerful of all; destroyer of all competitors" who is addressed as "the creator of the earth" (ibid.); however, the six Magbabaya are all part of the highest rank of supernatural beings. The Magbabaya are those who support the earth and hold up the sky at the four cardinal points (ibid.),⁵ and are categorized under the general name Alabyanon. Under Alabyanon fall "nature spirits," fairies, "spirit owners of animals," and other spirits such as those of the afterbirth (Molinolin) and those of ancestors (Gomogonal) (ibid., 92–96). After the Alabyanon comes a second class of spirits called Kaligaon, who are said to dwell in hills, mountains, and volcanoes (ibid., 96–97). Additional spirits are "unfriendly" ones, known as balbal or busaw (ibid., 9), that are found throughout Mindanao, even among unrelated language groups.

The last category is that of the soul or gimokod, and there are seven who merge into one at a person's death and, after a ceremony, "goes to live on Mt. Balatocan" (ibid., 92). These seven gimokod are guarded with "great vigilance," for if any one of them leaves the body, "illness and emaciation set in" (Cole 1929, 181–82). Sickness, therefore, can be caused by "soul-loss," a condition common to many peoples throughout Southeast Asia (e.g., Manuel 196, 36). The Jesuit José Clotet, writing in 1889, did not name or discuss the gimokod at length, except to note that "fright separates the soul from the body" (Lynch 1967, 480). Regarding Magbabaya, however, Clotet reports that he is the "all-powerful one," but also that Ibabasug and Ipamahandi are Magbabaya's "equals in rank" (ibid., 470). In his short description of "Bukidnon religion," Clotet also notes that Magbabaya is one of the gods of the four cardinal points (ibid., 469). Other supernatural beings are various nature spirits, one of whom is called Magtitima (literally "the Dweller")

who lives in the forest, especially in *balete* trees. He writes about two carved idols named Tigbas and Talian, and mentions that “*Busao*, the evil spirit,” is kept supplicated with food, drink, dance, song, and the recitation of prayers (ibid., 471).

It is more probable that the confusion with regard to supernatural beings is due to Higaunon informants with differing degrees of knowledge of the spirit world, and not due to radical changes in Higaunon cosmology over a few decades (Paredes 1998). Yet, considering a Christian presence of over three centuries (e.g., Schreurs 1989), we can speculate that Christian doctrine, symbolism, or ideology may have had an influence on the conception of the Magbabaya as a single, all-powerful deity.⁶ This is not so farfetched, as Yumo’s (1988) account of the ancestral Gahomon story includes references to the Biblical Noah. The pantheon of supernatural beings named by the Higaunon is complex to be sure, and additionally confusing due to the fact that these powerful deities are feared: to mention them by name is taboo among adherents, including shamans (Cole 1929, 181).

The Baylan as Shaman and Millenarian Prophet

Religious specialists among the Higaunon are generally baylan. However, the Jesuit brother William Biernatzki (1973), who worked in Kalabugaw, Bukidnon, distinguishes two types: one with supernatural powers and the other without, called baylan and *mamumuhat*, respectively. Any religious ceremony seeking assistance or bringing appeasement to spirits, whether performed by a baylan or mamumuhat, is called a *pamuhat*. The work of both includes divination, healing sickness, removing curses, fixing agricultural problems such as drought or pests, and otherwise maintaining harmony in human-spirit relations (ibid., 28). Following Biernatzki, the baylan is a trained specialist—sometimes a woman, but most often a man—with a special ability to communicate directly with supernatural beings, and is therefore able to act as a conduit between the human and spirit worlds. Such a description defines the baylan anthropologically as a shaman (Steadman 1995, 101–10), whereas the mamumuhat is more of a “priest” who is limited to conducting rituals.

The baylan sometimes becomes a highly charismatic prophet who leads followers in millenarian activities. In contrast, Cullen (1973, 8) states that only such millenarian prophets are known as baylan among his informants, and even writes that "in the upper Pulangi River valley . . . a baylan may function as a shaman [but] not all shamans are baylan." Considering the fact that Cullen's and Biernatzki's informants were from the same general area of Bukidnon, we might try to understand the previous statement to simply mean, despite the conflict in terminology, that not all religious specialists become millenarian prophets, although a prophet may certainly function as a religious specialist. However, this exclusive definition of the baylan as a millenarian prophet might also be an indication that millenarian activity was more sustained or widespread in Cullen's research area.

Many Higaunon continue shaman-centered religious activity into the twenty-first century. In general, this involves making offerings to appease or influence various supernatural beings with regard to illness, agriculture, business, and personal relationships. The baylan or mamumuhat is brought in to perform complicated tasks such as: consulting and influencing supernaturals directly regarding the nature of illness or other threats; divination; and the performance of rituals for swidden clearing, harvesting, house building, and for various stages of the life cycle, especially death.

The true extent of present-day shamanism is difficult to gauge because the Higaunon who continue this activity may refer to it by different names in front of visitors. Some, conscious of Dumagat prejudice toward their "primitive" culture, may belittle it publicly as mere superstition. Others avoid divulging details by simply stating that this is what all Lumad believe. A common remark, however, is that conversion to Christianity poses a major threat to the transmission and practice of traditional religion. Sometimes the threat is considered to extend to the survival of Higaunon culture in general. One datu, who in the past had converted to several denominations of Christianity himself, even claimed that once others convert they are no longer *pyor* (from English, "pure") or authentic Higaunon.

With regard to the baylan as millenarian prophet, this kind of "baylanism" is a type of revitalization movement that is found not only

among the Higaunon but among Manobo language groups in general. Revitalization movements are classically defined as “deliberate, organized, conscious effort[s] . . . to construct a more satisfying culture” (Wallace 1979, 422), with the dissatisfaction generally occurring during periods of great stress, such as famine, colonization, political domination or oppression, rapid change, constant raiding, and other hardships. The occurrence of such movements has been noted repeatedly among Manobo language groups for over a century now, and may have begun as early as the seventeenth century.⁷

The pattern of baylan movements tends to be as follows: During a time of great crisis or stress, a baylan receives a message from supernatural beings that soon the world will be turned upside down and the chosen people will be delivered from their hardship. Instructions are given to abandon settlements and crops, kill all domestic animals, and proceed to a distant location to await further instruction. The reason for these instructions is that, when the world ends as we know it, the order of things will be reversed, e.g., domestic animals will devour their owners, and those experiencing sickness and hardship will become perpetually healthy and prosperous. With this prophecy, the baylan leads his followers to paradise where, if they follow his instructions, they would become *libung*—which translates as either “raptured” (Munger 1988), or “instant happy immortality” (Cullen 1973, 8)—after which they become immortal, and are no longer dependent on food or drink. This transformation will take place when followers enter paradise either by being lifted through a hole in the sky or walking into a secret opening in a mountain.

Invariably, the movement fails, and the baylan blames the followers for not following his directions accurately or for their lack of resolve, i.e., for not being “true believers” (ibid.). According to Higaunon working with New Tribes missionaries, baylan movements still occur in the present, adding that “(i)t wouldn’t matter which direction you traveled . . . you would find a ‘baylan’ with his subjects following the spiritual obligations put on them by the [spirits]” (Ostman and Ostman 1995).

We can classify baylan movements as revitalization movements that are millenarian, i.e., they concern “an apocalyptic world transformation engineered by the supernatural” (Wallace 1979, 423). In other words,

they involve a desire to bring radical change. Except for a few cases, it is not very clear what prompted baylan movements when they occurred. Most likely it was a host of reasons that created highly stressful living conditions. As mentioned above, some of these reasons could easily include raids, famine, and disease. Early in the twentieth century, the political instability caused by the introduction of a new colonial power, along with new policies, is another strong possibility. Toward the middle of the twentieth century, the stress caused by the increased presence of settlers could easily have brought about baylan movements as well.

It is debatable whether such religious movements can be considered acts of resistance against Christianity *per se* or, as suggested by Garvan, against change in general. For example, one baylan active in the martial law period apparently foretold the coming of New Tribes missionaries to his village. When I asked an elderly datu in Misamis Oriental how the Higaunon in his area found out that they were now part of a larger state called the Philippines, he said that the baylan Dalas-agan—who is mentioned in Biernatzki's notes—had told them so in the 1940s. Indeed, the motivation behind baylan movements may not necessarily be resistance to political or cultural change. In fact, it may be driven by an impulse to embrace such change.

Terence Ranger (1993, 69) explains that similar African religious movements—which sometimes overpowered the efforts of Christian missionaries during that continent's colonial period—were often equally “subversive of ‘traditional society’ as of colonial order.” Following Ranger, baylan movements might be more properly understood as movements that seek neither to preserve tradition nor resist a new colonial or national order being imposed from the outside. Rather, they may be an attempt to create an entirely new order when the existing alternatives do not seem likely to fulfill the vital spiritual, cultural, social, and/or political needs of those concerned.

However, Biernatzki's (1978, 113–15) and my own Higaunon informants observed that the baylan they had known seemed motivated primarily by a personal hunger for power. This is certainly possible, and accords with twentieth-century Western archetypes of “primitive” religious practices and their leaders. As discussed in Max Weber's classic

The Sociology of Religion (1956), the archetypal religious specialist for “primitive” religions was the “magician,” whose role consisted mainly of manipulating the supernatural realm as well as his followers, bending both to his own selfish will and distracting them with mundane, everyday concerns. We must bear in mind, however, that this was the stereotype of non-Western religions at the time, i.e., that they were institutions that protected tradition in order to keep people in depraved ignorance.

This opinion is still shared by many, if not most, Western missionaries, including those of the NTM. “Primitive” religions are inevitably contrasted against the so-called world religions (i.e., Christianity, Islam, Buddhism), alleging that the latter are more valid in a moral sense because they emphasize self-improvement and personal redemption. In this way world religions can be considered as active mediums of social change, and by encouraging their followers to break away from the traditional religious order they have the potential to influence society in an almost revolutionary way. However, as reflected in the analysis by Ranger above, baylan movements and others of their type may be equally revolutionary, representing a “third way” vis-à-vis both traditional and modern culture.

Millenarian Elements in Manobo Epic Tradition

The baylan movement may not have been an entirely novel response to the threat created by new political arrangements and the loss of territory and autonomy, because its main millenarian elements also resonate throughout the *Ulagiing*. The same themes, symbols, and series of events found in baylan movements are also found in all versions of the *Ulagiing* that have been translated and analyzed to date (Maquiso 1977; Opeña 1979; Polenda 1994).⁸ Beyond the obscure motifs and magical exploits contained in its different “cycles” or episodes, this epic is essentially a story of survival and deliverance told through characters from the mythical clan of Agyu.⁹ More than simply suggesting a cultural basis for “resistance” (Acosta 1994, 203), the story of the *Ulagiing* practically provides a working blueprint for baylan movements.

The unadorned and simplified plot is as follows: In a time of extreme hardship, Agyu, Lena, Banlak, and the other characters of the

Ulagi are shown the path to immortality (as an escape from the hardship) through the revelations of the female shaman Mungan, who is also the first to become libung or immortal. Initially, Mungan has a disfiguring disease and is abandoned by the others. Soon she reappears as an immortal, which means her body has become perfect and golden, emanating light.¹⁰ Meanwhile, those who demonstrate their faith by following Mungan's instructions to abandon all worldly goods, destroy all crops, and kill all animals, are lifted by a deity to a hole in the sky on a *salimbal*, which has been vaguely described as a large boat. In some cases, it is more or less a saucer-like vehicle made of metal. A closely related Boholano version is curiously suggestive of alien abduction: the chosen people "set out for the mountain top where the ship that would carry them to heaven was expected to alight" and the ship itself, descending from a hole in the sky, "was so brilliant that it lighted the surrounding mountains and valleys in all directions" (Pajo 1956, 323).

In Higaunon cosmology, there are several different "heavens," including one found inside a mountain, where the souls of the dead live a struggle-free version of their mortal lives. The actual mountain most often cited by name is Mount Balatukan in the Pantaron range between Bukidnon and Misamis Oriental. Therefore, in some versions, the *Ulagi* people enter such a mountain instead of ascend to the sky. However or wherever conceived, the immortal paradise is always called Nalandangan. Reaching this place is the fulfillment of the libung event, the climax of the *Ulagi* story. It is also the promise of baylanism and the ultimate objective of those who join baylan-led millenarian movements.

The final element of the plot is that, due to a disagreement with the deity, the hole in the sky or the mountain is sealed up with the oath that it will not be opened again until certain conditions are met, and a powerful new shaman comes along to show the remaining mortals the correct path. Meanwhile, mortals are advised to continue following the instructions of Mungan in order to be prepared when the new baylan comes. The significance of this advisory is not lost on those already familiar with Evangelical doctrines, which I discuss in a separate section below.

It is important to note that, in almost all studied versions of the *Ulagi*, the basic plot remains virtually identical. Any variation in the different versions is found instead in the extenuating circumstances that move the plot of the epic.¹¹ Sometimes the initial hardship is caused by a Muslim sultan who demands excessive tribute (Manuel 1969, 80), and in one version it is the American policy of compulsory education for all children (Maquiso 1977). In another version, the *Ulagi* people seek famine relief by traveling to Cagayan on the coast because they know that the Chinese shopkeepers have many canned goods in stock (Polenda 1994). However, because of the high demand, the Chinese resort to price-gouging and the *Ulagi* people return to the mountains, bringing other people—Dumagat, Muslims, Spaniards, and even some Chinese—along with them (*ibid.*).

In terms of published studies, the only major exception I am aware of regarding the plotline of the *Ulagi* is that which appears in a special issue of *Kinaadman* (Rével 2003). This study translates and analyzes a version from Talakag, Bukidnon, sung by Victorina Pariente, with input from well-known local cultural expert and *datu* (chief) Victorino Saway. Although similar elements are present, this version focuses almost entirely on the Talaandig political organization, and is discussed by Saway mainly within the context of preserving cultural traditions. In his general statement on the *Ulagi*, however, Saway underlines the importance of Nalandangan as an idealized paradise of immortals, and that its residents have bodies that are “invulnerable to all kinds of weapons” (*ibid.*, 29): “Immortalization was achieved because *Agyu*’s people were able to follow faithfully the commandments of creation. . . . Members of the tribe who are faithful to their customs and traditions aspire for *ulagingen* as a means of liberation from human sufferings” (*ibid.*, 28). Despite the variation, therefore, the same themes are emphasized in this particular rendition of the epic.

We cannot speculate on the circumstances contained in the “original” version or when the *Ulagi* was first sung. It is presumably an ancient piece of oral tradition among Manobo language groups, and I hope that future research will tell us more about its evolution as a cultural expression. In any case, the *Ulagi* places millenarian activity squarely within ancestral tradition, and not as a novel adaptation to colonial

interference. Based on the variations that have been noted in published sources, it is obviously an active element of a living, intelligent culture. In order to maintain its significance vis-à-vis its audience it undergoes some adjustment in the course of daily cultural practice, and is recontextualized with each retelling. If we had a recording of an *Ulag* from two hundred years ago, it might comment on the Spanish expeditions to eastern Mindanao, or on pirate raids by the Iranun and Maguindanao.

Finally, it is also important to note that the *Ulag* people are considered to be the true ancestors by the Higaunon and Manobo, much like the Biblical Israelites are considered by today's Jews to be their true ancestors. I should emphasize, therefore, that the events recounted in the *Ulag* are sung as having taken place literally throughout northern and central Mindanao, in rivers and valleys that still exist today (Maquiso 1977). We tend to neglect this literality in the social sciences, in particular because such epics are easily relegated to the categories of traditional lore, epic, folktale, or mythology.

At the same time, knowledge of the finer points of the *Ulag* is not necessarily widespread among average people. Although its basic elements are familiar, the epic itself is sung in a poetic form of the language in which only specialists in esoteric knowledge, such as baylan and datu, are fluent. In a similar way, all Christians today may know the more popular basic elements of the Bible, but only specialists (e.g., biblical scholars) have a deep understanding of its more complex textual and doctrinal elements.

Conversion to Christianity

Among the Lumad, the most recent development with regard to conversion to Christianity is the entry of American Protestant missionaries, particularly Evangelicals, into Mindanao and the rest of the Philippines in the twentieth century (see Kwantes 1989). The Protestant variety of Christianity has not yet gained as many converts as Catholicism, and to this day it may appear that most Christianized Higaunon and Manobo are nominally Catholic. No reliable statistics are available, but in reflecting on the work of Spanish Jesuits in Mindanao, Arcilla (1990, 56) is able

to state proudly that “the people clung tenaciously to their Roman Catholic faith and refused to accept the ‘new teaching’ brought by the American Protestant missionaries.” However, there remains the fact that most Filipinos seem to adhere to a highly localized adaptation of Roman Catholicism, which some refer to as “folk Catholicism.” The Higaunon in Misamis and Bukidnon who became Catholic also have their own “folk” version of Catholicism, which reveals a fundamental gap between their understanding of church doctrine and their actual religious beliefs and practices. Cullen (1973, 4) points out:

the Christian notion of moral evil as a defect in the person differs from the Bukidnon notion of sin, or *salá*, which is more of a temporary . . . disruption of the harmonious relations . . . between man and the spirits. . . . [which] can be remedied by an appropriate sacrifice. . . . In short, the Bukidnon has a hard time seeing the basic point of Christianity.

Like lowland Filipino Catholics, Bukidnon Catholics tend to focus on baptism, through which political and economic alliances may be reinforced through social ties. There is also an emphasis on the use of images, medallions, and other items as “magical” objects believed to be imbued with spiritual power, as well as the performance of novenas (*ibid.*, 5). Spanish priests noted a similar situation early in the colonial period. Catholic baptism, for example, was popular as a “miracle” cure for illness (Phelan 1959, 55). Some even admitted that “after sixty years of missionary activity . . . very few of the converts had acquired a clear comprehension of the basic mysteries of the Catholic creed” (*ibid.*, 60). Another Jesuit, Fr. Ignacio Alcina, noted in the seventeenth century that people in the Visayas region did not accept the concept of heaven: “The brighter ones, he wrote, were willing to grant the plausibility of a heaven for the Spaniards, but they refused to believe that the Bisayans would be allowed to share it with the Spaniards” (*ibid.*, 59–60).

The same issues lead Cullen (1973, 4) to state that the majority of Roman Catholics among the Bukidnon were not truly Christian but remained “animist by religion,” meaning that their conversion involved a cultural reinterpretation or—to use the terminology of O. W. Wolters

(1999)—the “localization” of Catholic practices and doctrines in terms of their traditional religion (see also Lao 1985, 41). Cullen (1973, 6) concludes that “Catholicism does not seem to have made a profound (cultural) impact on the Bukidnon.” From my own observations, the same statement can also be made with regard the more inclusive mainline, or nonfundamentalist, denominations of Protestantism, such as the UCCP.

Of course, this broad generalization does not speak to the validity of any deeply held beliefs that such practitioners of mainline churches may have; it speaks only to a technical comparison of Christian doctrine and observable religious practices. However, on this score the more conservative and fundamentalist Evangelical Protestants appear to have succeeded where Catholics and mainline Protestants appear to have failed, in spite of the relatively generous cultural accommodations they allow. The same phenomenon is observable among Christian denominations in the United States and elsewhere, and even among Muslim denominations worldwide (i.e., Wahhabism, as described in Schwartz 2002): that the churches, sects, or denominations with the most stringent, fundamentalist, and exclusive doctrines seem to attract the most dedicated adherents.

In his otherwise highly critical description of the work of the American Baptist Mission based in Malaybalay, Cullen (1973, 7) concedes that Evangelical Protestant missionaries have managed to “communicat[e] at least some of the essentials of Christianity to a good number of [converts] and [avoid] syncretism.” This success is notable because Evangelical Protestantism makes no allowances for animistic survivals, including the use of magical objects, in both practice and doctrine. Cullen (ibid.) notes that Bukidnon Baptists also appear to have a strong sense of religious solidarity, setting themselves apart socially from others as *tumutuo* or “true believers,” a phenomenon unknown among Catholics. He even voices serious concerns that “the strict code of behavior (i.e., prohibitions against drinking, smoking, and dancing) tends to cut the Church members off from the [traditional] culture,” and worries that the religion may develop into an “oppressive theocracy” among the Bukidnon (ibid.). However, Cullen grudgingly admits that, from the standpoint of the principal Christian doctrine of

salvation through Christ, the conversion of the Bukidnon to Evangelical Protestantism has been more thorough when compared with Bukidnon conversions to Roman Catholicism.

I was able to observe a similar phenomenon firsthand in the two Higaunon communities in Misamis Oriental where foreign NTM missionaries have been in residence for many years. The missionaries as well as the Higaunon converts are nondenominational and are loathe to belittle their faith by calling it a mere "religion." Among members of the local Christian congregation, I observed the same absence of syncretism in religious practice and expression of faith. Clearing and harvest sacrifices are no longer practiced, nor were diseases and accidents blamed on the spirits. Unlike among other groups such as the Karen of Burma, where Christian doctrine made inroads as a reinterpretation of indigenous concepts (Dettmer 1987, 54),¹² salvation through Jesus Christ appears to have been successfully imported—wholesale—as an entirely foreign concept (for a comparable example from the Americas, see Shapiro 1987).

As with the Baptists in Bukidnon, these Higaunon set themselves apart as "true believers." Indeed, they set themselves apart even from the Bukidnon Baptists. However, unlike the latter, the NTM does not set any limits on Higaunon cultural activities such as the use of betel chew, or dancing and singing in traditional forms. The missionaries are also adamant that there is no dress code or other behavioral requirement imposed on believers. Only a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, i.e., accepting Jesus as one's savior, is necessary. In one community of believers, services often begin with either a *paalati* or a *limbay*, which are Higaunon song forms, and the congregation chews betel quid during the sermon. Some missionaries have even explicitly promoted the preservation and development of Higaunon language and nonreligious cultural traditions. By translating pertinent documents to and from English, the missionaries were themselves instrumental in the successful completion of one Higaunon community's ancestral domain claim. This was done freely as a community service, and part of their effort to preserve Higaunon traditions.¹³

Even without the imposition of a strict code of behavior, these believers do not drink, smoke, or gamble—a natural consequence, they

say, of submitting to the power of Christ. This development has drawn Higaunon from outlying areas because convert communities have acquired a reputation as safe havens of nonviolence, where people neither drink nor gamble. In addition, some tumutuo have reportedly been invited into other Lumad communities to proselytize. In both Misamis communities I observed, prayer meetings were well-attended, and eagerly so. People asked questions and hashed out doctrinal clarifications with the deacons, and were generally actively engaged during these events. In addition, households with their own Bibles conducted independent study sessions on a regular basis. Judging from discussions and correspondence that I have received from my informants—and friends—in these communities, I can say with confidence that their understanding of the Bible and of the fundamentals of Christian doctrine is thorough and their conversion to Evangelical Protestantism is fundamental rather than syncretistic.¹⁴

In contrast, the “Christianized” Higaunon I met in other communities, including lowland towns like Gingoog, indicated that Christianity had little or no central importance to their lives. I call them “Christianized” because, although they made no claims to being believers, nor do they claim to attend any services on a regular basis, most identified themselves as belonging to a Christian denomination of some sort, e.g., Roman Catholic Church, Philippine Independent Church, UCCP, Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventist, and so on. A few even added that they had always “converted” to whatever religion was most convenient at any given time, i.e., who was more interesting or persuasive. I have known members of one family to belong to different denominations of Christianity, or to different religious traditions altogether (see also Biernatzki 1978, 10).¹⁵

Indeed, although many Higaunon I met in other communities were “Christianized,” they seemed to regard “church” or “religion” as something that everyone was expected to do in this day and age, like going to school, or finding a job. Some dismissed the relevance of religion altogether, voicing the opinion that, if faced with a situation in which beliefs truly mattered, the Higaunon would always return to the religion of their ancestors. When asked his opinion about the work of the NTM in a neighboring community in western Misamis, one datu asked

rhetorically what real significance the foreign religion of the *taga-Luma* (Romans) could possibly have for the Higaunon. He punctuated this with what I perceived to be a deliberate political statement, reminding the other Higaunon present during the interview that, no matter what that Roman Bible may say, "The migbaya (spirits) will always be in the trees and rocks." Everyone present, including one church worker, nodded in agreement. Ironically, when I asked the same datu about his own religious practices, he identified himself as *Katoliko*.

It is, therefore, the ultimate irony that the most fundamentalist Evangelical denominations—which allow for no compromise with the world or syncretism with other religions—have managed to overcome the Higaunon spirit world as an obstacle to doctrinal conversion.

Characteristics of Evangelicalism

First let us address the matter of fundamentalist Evangelical Protestantism. In *Broken Mirror: Protestant Fundamentalism in the Philippines* (2002), the historian Shelton Woods, who grew up in northern Luzon as the child of fundamentalist Evangelical Protestant missionaries, undertakes an incisive critique of fundamentalism based on his experiences as an MK ("missionary kid"). In this book, Woods is making a social statement not only about fundamentalism and fundamentalists but also about issues related to his own personal history, responding in particular to the danger of the intense militancy he perceives as inherent in American Protestant Fundamentalism (APF) or "Evangelicalism" (*ibid.*, 7). There are certainly extremists within Evangelicalism, as there are in almost every religious or political tradition, but I would hesitate to attribute to every Evangelical missionary, or to the NTM in general, the militant conservatism Woods describes. All the same, his general description of Evangelicalism is, in my view, an accurate portrayal of its doctrine in that it rings true in terms of my own experience with fundamentalist Evangelical Christians, including those associated with the NTM. As long as Woods's personal history is duly noted, we can read his description and critique within its proper context. Below, in condensed form, are several relevant facets of fundamentalism described by Woods.

1. Fundamentalist doctrine, in practice, is highly dogmatic, involves a literal interpretation of the Bible, and does not allow for any cultural compromises, which Woods attributes to a “myopic world view” (ibid., 6). The reading of the Bible can be quite literal, as in the literal creation of the world in seven days; following the Biblical “begats” or genealogical histories, the doctrine puts the age of the Earth as only several thousand years old—in stark contrast to the age of the Earth according to the geological sciences.
2. Woods calls fundamentalist doctrine as “dispensational premillennialist,” which suggests that a key part of the teachings is that only in the next life will social and economic justice take place, and that to remain worthy of salvation true believers must remain separate from the rest of society (i.e., separate from its ills and temptations) while awaiting the return of Christ. At its core this is an exclusive, separatist doctrine. In this framework, they are the only real Christians today; everyone else is a dilettante with an incomplete understanding of the faith (ibid., 162–63). Other so-called Christians are not considered true believers, and Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants may as well be lumped together with all other nonbelievers, such as atheists and Muslims.
3. Regarding the return of Christ, all true believers will be transported—in their bodies, as living beings—to be with their savior Jesus Christ in heaven (ibid.). This is the Biblical “rapture”—which is also the English translation of the Higaunon word “libung.” The rapture is not an obscure theological premise to Evangelicals; rather, it is the promise and the core goal of fundamentalist, Evangelical movements. In other words, the rapture is the *why* of their religious practices. As to its tangibility I have personally witnessed Higaunon and foreign missionaries alike make statements in person and on paper that reflect this belief, i.e., “we won’t have to worry about x or y when the rapture comes, and I hope it comes soon.”

Overpowering the Spirits

How does one make the radical transition from the animist Higaunon spirit world to the world of fundamentalist Christianity? Curiously,

Higaunon and Evangelical Christian worldviews are entirely compatible. In line with standard Evangelical Christian teachings, NTM missionaries have dealt with the Higaunon spirit world and its constant need for appeasement by affirming rather than denying or belittling its existence. Spirits such as the busaw, migbaya, and others are recognized in Evangelical teachings as real, tangible creatures, and are translated into their cosmology as demons and fallen angels (e.g., as in Mark 5:9,15; Luke 8:30; 1 Timothy 4:1; Matthew 25:41). In other words, these spirits are as real to the foreign missionaries as they are to the Higaunon, and many foreign missionaries I met had their own stories of harrowing encounters with such demonic forces in Mindanao.

Instead of dismissing the Higaunon belief in their spirits as primitive superstition, the missionaries instead teach that the power of the "One True God" is greater than the power of all the spirits combined. The spirits, they say, have been engaging in self-promotion in competition with God, and presenting themselves fraudulently as gods to the Higaunon. They "are the angels that God created and who followed Lucifer in his rebellion¹⁶ against God and are now endeavoring to deceive as many people as they can from listening to the truth about God" (Ostman and Ostman 1995). Biblical teachings are thus presented as the powerful, life-altering, and liberating truth that the spirits have been trying to prevent the Higaunon from hearing. Consequently, the powerful spirit world has not been erased; it has instead been superseded by God. In turn, their new faith has given Higaunon converts a powerful spiritual weapon that renders the spirits virtually impotent.

Some Higaunon I interviewed stated in fact that, despite its being an important aspect of their ancestral traditions, their difficult personal experiences with these demanding spirits, specifically in terms of baylan movements, was a major motivation for converting to Christianity. The economic, physical, and emotional costs of baylanism were consistently identified as highly undesirable because their enslavement to the fickle whim of the spirits made the fulfillment of subsistence and other basic human needs difficult, if not impossible. It is not surprising then that the importance of this new capability to overpower the spirits was emphasized by the Higaunon in discussions about their conversions.

Converts told me that this radical change allowed them to look beyond spiritual matters in their daily lives and move forward with other concerns, such as improving their children's economic and social prospects, as well as their own material well-being. Because they hold absolutely no skepticism whatsoever regarding the existence and destructive power of these spirits, the NTM missionaries are able to echo these advantages in a profoundly convincing and sympathetic manner, in a way that other missionaries simply cannot.

Another area in which the spirits have been overpowered is in the realm of disease and healing. Modern medical knowledge may be tangential to religious conversion, but in this case it is contextually relevant. The NTM missionaries in eastern Misamis explained to me that most Higaunon in their area were once illiterate and completely unfamiliar with the prescription process. Thus, when given written prescriptions in the past by Dumagat doctors, the prescription itself was often consumed as if it were a magical charm. This practice had the potential to worsen an existing illness because, in accordance with indigenous shamanic cures, these paper charms were sometimes mixed with inedible or toxic substances, such as the feces of the sick person. Other practices based on indigenous models of healing, all rooted in the widespread Southeast Asian concept of a supernatural "life-force," were similarly dangerous. The same NTM missionaries related to me a situation they knew of in which a baylan infected several newborn infants with his tuberculosis in the course of repeatedly blowing into their mouths to increase their "life-force."

As a humanitarian service, the NTM missionaries in Misamis Oriental province have also helped train many Higaunon as community health workers, linking them up with the national Botika Binhi program. For the Higaunon, the new knowledge that germs and viruses—rather than spirits—actually cause infection and disease, and knowing that modern medicines—rather than offering sacrifices to spirits—are most effective against these problems, has directly undercut the power of the spirit world in their daily life. Among believers, of course, prayer is an essential part of healing, and they pray with the certainty that the power of the One True God is a greater healing force than anything the spirits

can deliver. However, in these villages' medical centers, medical care, advice, and prescription instructions are provided at a paraprofessional level without any regard for religious affiliation. These services are likewise delivered by trained Higaunon volunteers in a manner that is easily comprehensible to other Higaunon. Conversion to Evangelical Christianity, therefore, has been vital to the delivery of modern health care and medicine not only to the Higaunon converts in these villages but also to nonconverts from villages within walking distance.

Three Answers

So far I have shown why the Higaunon might want to find an alternative to their traditional religious practices, a system which for some has proven undesirable in the long term for a host of practical and emotional reasons. Indeed, it should not be surprising that groups experiencing cultural stress might see religious conversion as a valid and practical way to deal with the moral, political, and economic complexity of the modern world. But our core questions remain: Why have such people converted not to the ubiquitous Dumagat religion of the Roman Catholic Church, but instead to such a conservative and unaccommodating fundamentalist brand of Protestantism? Why have such converts, by all accounts, become "true believers"? Why does their practice of Christianity have no sign of the "syncretism" or "split-level Christianity" that is attributed to Philippine Catholicism in general? To these questions I propose three interdependent answers, which are informed by my personal observations and reflections.

The first and most obvious relates to the personal relationships that the Higaunon have formed with the foreign missionaries. The discrimination suffered by the Higaunon and other Lumad at the hands of lowland Filipinos or Dumagat is common knowledge. It happens not only at an abstract political level involving land laws, but also as part of daily social interaction with the Dumagat. I have observed firsthand a wide range of humiliations experienced by the Lumad (Paredes 1997a). I have also observed both Filipino NGO workers and Filipino missionaries from mainline Protestant denominations adopt an openly patronizing attitude in reference to Lumad persons, one that went above

and beyond what the novelist Philip Caputo (2005) calls "the imperialism of good intentions." I would argue that the discrimination experienced by Lumad and other minorities can be described as "racism" in that the Dumagat widely consider their cultural distinctiveness to have a genetic basis, which is only reinforced by "wave migration" types of theories that, as of the late 1990s, were still a staple of social studies textbooks for elementary schools in the Philippine educational system, despite having been debunked by social scientists (see Paredes 2000).

In contrast, non-Filipinos seem to have no such prejudices that single out ethnic minorities as culturally or intellectually deficient. Relationships between Lumad believers and foreign missionaries—that is to say, white men and women from the United States, Canada, Australia, and Europe—are essentially relationships between social equals. The foreign missionaries I met did not regard non-Westernized minorities as inherently inferior in terms of their humanity, character, or intelligence. This attitude is a reflection not only of liberal Western ideals of egalitarianism and racial equality among believers, but also of the same libertarian ideals that are core values within conservative Evangelical Christianity and most "low Protestant" denominations. However, this should not be surprising; after all, these denominations emerged as blue-collar movements "from below." In addition, one might say that this nonracist attitude is the embodiment of the most fundamental Christian value of loving your neighbor as yourself, or the Ignatian core moral value of seeing Christ in others (Modras 2004).

In my own field research experience, I heard comments from Dumagat, including my own relatives, who noted this distinction. In the group of Dumagat (including city and provincial officials) who accompanied me on one trip to a Higaunon community with the NTM missionaries, some were impressed and deeply moved by the fact that these foreigners treated the Higaunon as people of equal social worth, which caused them to reflect on their own prejudices. Still others considered the missionaries "weird" and eccentric for liking the Higaunon so much. In any case, the open attitude of missionaries toward the Lumad would have been the point of first contact, and I consider it to be a critical part of this whole conversion phenomenon. Perhaps the acceptance and emotional accommodation demonstrated in these

socially affirming friendships is more important than doctrinal accommodation, and also more important than what the same missionaries might possibly provide in terms of community development, technology transfer, and other practical assistance.¹⁷

The second part of my answer relates to a desire to maintain a separate identity as Higaunon people in the modern Philippine state, and its most obvious context is a political one. My understanding of the connection between religious conversion and ethnic identity is informed first and foremost by anthropological and historical studies of religious conversion that show very clearly the interlocking social and political agenda that structure a group's response to conversion efforts (e.g., Barker 1990; Hefner 1993a; Kipp 1995). These and other studies show that the act of conversion may signal either the renegotiation or the reinforcement of group identity (Duncan 2003). It can also be an explicitly political act that challenges the status quo, especially in situations of entrenched social inequality (Falla 2001; Hefner 1993b; see also Viswanathan 1998 regarding "conversion to equality"), particularly pertaining to ethnic minorities. The Higaunon, and in fact all the Lumad peoples, fall into this latter category. From what I have seen, they have not necessarily converted as a means of achieving this type of radical change, but the desire for change is certainly part of the equation.

Based on encounters with the Dumagat, as related to me by several Higaunon—and on other occasions by other Lumad peoples—I would say that, although for the most part they express a desire to embrace what they see as material "progress" or "modernity" and to participate in the Philippine nation, their negative experiences with lowland culture serve to reinforce their desire for distinctiveness. In this way, they see little point in embracing Catholicism, which to them symbolizes the lowland culture that disenfranchises them and does not view them as equals,¹⁸ and perhaps never will. Why, in fact, would they ever wish to associate themselves with something so negative?

I have discussed elsewhere (Paredes 1997a, b) how Higaunon political narratives have contrasted their traditional values against the deplorable values of the "business-minded" Dumagat, whom they stereotype as valuing material acquisition and profiteering over basic human morality. This perception applies not only to specific political, economic, or

social issues, but also to their view of their own essential differences from the Dumagat. In response to their very real political and social marginality, they highlight what they believe is their moral superiority. It is perhaps coincidental that this sense of marginalization and victimization is also an essential part of the Evangelical worldview. This sense of persecution is articulated even in the United States, where they are already a politically dominant group. It also reflects their perceived continuity with the persecution of the early Christians as a minority group in the Levant. Either way, it is certainly another critical point of cultural and emotional connection between Evangelical missionaries and Lumad peoples.

The last part of this answer relates to the specific peculiarities of the Higaunon (and Manobo) cultural context itself. To anyone who may still regard the idea of the Higaunon and other Manobo converting to a heavily fundamentalist Evangelical Protestant denomination as culturally anomalous or even unlikely, I return to the story of the *Ulagi*, which, if you recall, also contains and emphasizes the themes of heavenly salvation and the future arrival of a powerful shaman who will lead the way to immortality. The parallel between the future arrival of a powerful shaman and the "Second Coming of Jesus Christ" is plain to see.

But there is another, even more significant parallel in the theme of heavenly salvation, and here is where the millenarian tendencies of both Evangelicalism and traditional Higaunon and Manobo culture come to the fore. As mentioned earlier, the libung is the climax of the *Ulagi*, the promise of the baylan and the ultimate goal of those who join baylan movements. This goal significantly finds its direct Christian parallel in the rapture. The Bible refers to the rapture as a consequence of the final day of judgment, when Jesus will return and all living believers will be raised directly to heaven, and achieve eternal life without dying (see 1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thessalonians 4). Such themes are heavily emphasized in the *Ulagi*, in baylanism, and in Evangelical Protestantism. It is reasonable to say, therefore, that the rapture appeals to the Higaunon as a deeply ingrained indigenous concept rather than as a foreign one. However, I cannot say whether this connection is made consciously or subconsciously because I did not note these similarities until some months after I had already returned from the field.

The main difference between the Higaunon libung and the Biblical rapture is that, in the latter, there are no fickle spirits to appease, and no one is being asked to neglect their daily needs until the final moment. This distinction is not only doctrinal but also practical, because even as the fundamentalists theorize on the closeness of the “end times” they acknowledge that no one but God knows when the time of the rapture will come. It follows that, from the perspective of many Higaunon, becoming Evangelical Christians provides them with a more manageable path to eternal life.¹⁹

Conclusion

The Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen (2006) exhorts us to remember the complexity of human identity, and not to reduce it, in any given case, to one simplistic aspect, such as religion. Such reductionism, he says, feeds off divisive theories of civilizational clash that, even within contexts of enforced political correctness and multiculturalism, require a fundamental separatism that renders true resolution and harmony impossible. In the case of the Higaunon outlined here, I ask the reader to consider Sen’s exhortation and leave behind the classic opposition between traditional and modern, foreign and indigenous, and even between animism and Christianity and other world religions. We have seen that, even in the context of Evangelicalism, which prohibits cultural accommodation in religious doctrine, a negotiation of a different sort—one in which the ancestral spirits are not erased but simply superceded in power and practicality by the Christian God—is entirely possible.

As such, the “clash of spirits”²⁰ that took place between the Higaunon spirit world and Evangelical Christianity did not reflect a civilizational clash between the modern and the traditional. Its current resolution, to the extent that it is observable, seems to show that the two are not necessarily incompatible, and that neither state is mutually exclusive. In this particular case, they even appear intricately suited to each other, allowing the Higaunon to reaffirm and reinforce long-standing ancestral cultural traditions even in the seemingly radical transition from ancestral religion to Evangelical Christian fundamentalism. In other words, Higaunon conversion to Evangelical Christianity seems to show

that people can be deeply traditional and yet radically modern in the same moment. Once we factor in the relevance of baylan movements and the *Ulagin* epic in the Higaunon and general Manobo cultural matrix, what seems radical to outsiders is more a case of moving further along the same spiritual and paradigmatic continuum.

Of course, this is not always the case in terms of comparable religious conversions, and I would like to distinguish the Higaunon case from those in which syncretism with local deities was the key development, such as what occurred naturally in Afro-Caribbean traditions (Olmos and Gebert 2003), or the artificial grafting of "Yahweh" onto the Karen demon figure Y'wa by missionaries in Burma (Dettmer 1987). Such adaptations may indeed display recognizable elements of Christian or Catholic religious ritual and iconography that have been indigenized or incorporated into local practice, and they may also bring to their respective believers a sense of salvation and liberation. However, their interaction with Christian doctrine is doubtful or, at the very least, problematic in a way that Higaunon Evangelical conversion and practice is not.

Despite all this, however, our image of the current success of Evangelical Protestantism should be put in its proper historical perspective. That is to say, we need to acknowledge how little we know—as social scientists and as lay people—about religious conversion per se among people like the Lumad. For example, while some of us may be aware of the extensive mission history of the Recoletos and Jesuits in northeast Mindanao during the Spanish colonial period, the matter of who and how many they converted remains an unknown quantity, as the archival records are incomplete. The Evangelicals suffer from the same lack of demographic records. As such, we cannot compare objectively the long-term "success" of Evangelicalism as opposed to Catholic conversion in early colonial times.²¹

In large part this is because, relative to the scale of missionization and conversion in the Visayas and Luzon over the centuries (as outlined by Phelan 1959), developments in Mindanao have admittedly been negligible. However, because Lumad peoples today remain culturally distinct from lowland Filipinos, we have also been blinded into treating as legitimate or worthy of recognition in Lumad cultures *only* those prac-

tices and rituals that appear to us “exotic” or unfamiliar. More than anything, this compels us to exclude many meaningful aspects of Lumad life, culture, and history from our research, including the impact of Christianity, colonization, and modernity on the Lumad. This exclusion removes in one fell swoop the opportunity and responsibility to consider the full human complexity—across time and space—of peoples like the Higaunon and Manobo, as any and all “change” becomes mourned automatically as “loss.” It reinforces the idea not only of clashing spirits but also the misleading image of a “clash of civilizations.”

The possibilities for research are much more exciting once we stop confining Lumad peoples to the precolonial past and begin to recognize them as actors who are deeply engaged with historical and modern realities. In discussing the Higaunon—and by extension other Lumad peoples—in this light, my hope is to encourage others to see the range of research possibilities that take into account the cultural and political dynamism of the so-called non-Christian peoples of the Philippines. In this way, perhaps they will no longer be defined negatively by the degree to which they do or do not resemble “normal” Filipinos.

Notes

1. More information about the New Tribes Mission can be found on its website at <http://www.ntm.org>. Peripherally, in the period I visited these communities in 1995, the NTM pilot with whom I flew a total of three times (when there were empty seats on regular supply runs) was Martin Burnham, the American missionary from Kansas who, along with his wife Gracia, was kidnapped by the Abu Sayyaf from Palawan in 2001. Martin was killed in a rescue attempt the following year.

2. Here I follow the general usage of this term (e.g., Rodil 1990). However, some use this term only for groups that belong to the Manobo language family, excluding such peoples as the Mandaya, Subanen, Tiruray, and Bagobo (e.g., Acosta 1994, 70–71).

3. This term is used here to refer only to the residents of Mindanao who are neither Lumad nor Muslim, and not to populations elsewhere that use the same name.

4. This account is similar to a massacre related by Mabel Cook Cole during her visit to Bukidnon in 1910 (Cole 1929, 195–96).

5. The earth, for the Higaunon, is “shaped like a saucer [which must be supported from below], and the sky is the same form, but its concavity is toward the earth” (Cole 1956, 93).

6. This has been known to happen, even to apparently isolated, still “traditional” cultural groups. For a good example of the Christianization of native cosmology, see Shapiro 1987.

7. Accounts of such movements can be found in Madigan 1963; Garvan 1941; Cullen 1973; Cole 1956; Cole 1929; Biernatzki 1973, 1978. A brief discussion is also available in Paredes 1997a.

8. The most comprehensive introduction to the *Ulagin* is the work of the late Elena Maquiso (1977), who studied several versions of the epic among the Arumanen Manobo in Cotabato.

9. Lao (1985, 23) says that Agyu’s story is about the migration of the Higaunon from the coast to the mountains. However, the versions I have reviewed and cited do not indicate this movement.

10. The emanation of light as a sign of great spiritual power is a common theme throughout Southeast Asia.

11. One exception is noted by Manuel (1969, 81) among the Ilianen Manobo, wherein Agyu’s people build a fort (*ilian*) in the mountains (hence the name Ilianen Manobo) to fend off a Muslim attack. Mungan then ascends to immortality without them.

12. In an example from the Karen of Burma, rather than introduce a foreign “One True God” to the animist Karen, foreign Baptist missionaries instead recycled a lower-echelon Karen deity named Y’wa, and taught that this was the same as the Bible’s Yahweh. Ironically, these missionaries also determined that the Karen must break all ties with their traditional culture, including their “immodest” dress, in order to be Christians (Dettmer 1987, 33–34). In Mindanao, one UCCP missionary explained to me that he is also engaged in a similar effort to emphasize any and all possible superficial similarities between Higaunon and “Christian” cultural artifacts (words, cultural peculiarities, stylistic coincidences, and so on) so that Higaunon people might be drawn in.

13. This concern for protecting indigenous cultures and rights was explained to me as proof of how far the Evangelical missionary enterprise has evolved over the years in terms of respecting cultural diversity and human rights. In part this was a response to vehement (and just, according to at least one NTM missionary) criticism of the strategies used by early Evangelical missionaries to gain entry into isolated Indian communities in the Americas.

For example, cultivating a dependency on commercial and manufactured goods in previously self-sufficient and nonmonetized communities (thereby necessitating the presence of Westerners) was seen by many as deleterious to the social, political, and economic well-being of such groups. In particular, the Summer Institute of Linguistics and its sister organization, Wycliffe Bible Translators, were roundly

denounced in the 1970s by anthropologists and others as “tools of imperialism,” and expelled from a number of Latin American countries for harming indigenous cultures and allegedly colluding with the CIA and oil companies to the detriment of indigenous communities (see Hvalkof and Aaby 1981; Stoll 1983).

The concern to protect indigenous culture also arose from a realization by Evangelical missionaries that cultures of dependency required the continuous presence and patronage of missionaries, interfering with their true mission, which is to deliver the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, and planting self-sufficient churches, until the “Good News” is spoken in every language, viz., “westernizing” people is not a part of spreading the Gospel, and therefore not a good use of their time and energy. Sharing practical knowledge about health care and technology, however, is to them clearly a matter of humanitarianism rather than cultural imperialism, and reflects their Christian concern for the well-being of the communities they work with.

14. In some cases, their knowledge exceeded my own, despite my advantage of ten years of Catholic schooling, and many more years spent as a practicing Catholic.

15. I have also found this peculiar situation in some lowland families in Mindanao. One man I met in South Cotabato was referred to by his neighbors as “the Muslim,” because his ancestors originally came from Maguindanao. He clarified, however, that he had chosen to become a Baptist, and that his parents were still together but had chosen to become members of two different Christian denominations, neither of which was Baptist.

16. The literal account of an angelic rebellion against God led by Lucifer comes to modern popular tradition not through Scriptures but through John Milton in *Paradise Lost*, which draws heavily from the religious ideas of the Middle Ages. Though Evangelical Christians point to numerous Biblical passages to support this belief (including Revelation 12:7–9; Isaiah 14:12–15; Ezekiel 28–1), the passages are at best vague, and theologians admit that “indeed it is difficult to approach the ‘proof texts’ used without reading them through a preconceived theological framework,” i.e., the framework provided by Milton (Bradshaw 1992).

17. I had a chance to observe the UCCP missionaries in one Higaunon community in Misamis Oriental, and their vain efforts at encouraging both livelihood projects and church attendance among the Lumad. After separate discussions and interviews with both the UCCP workers and the Lumad, I concluded that the failures of the former were due to their perceived inferiority of the latter—which caused the UCCP workers to disallow any community input in project design and decision making, and which caused the Lumad to distrust the motives of the UCCP workers and, in turn, affected the quality of their participation in both the livelihood projects and in religious services.

18. See Rosaldo 2003 for a discussion of this issue among Muslim groups in the Philippines and other minority groups in Southeast Asia.

19. In contrast, Elkins (1993, 321) reports that the Western Bukidnon Manobo are "reluctant to embrace biblical Christianity" apparently because the concept of blood sacrifice, i.e., that our sins are washed away with the blood of Christ, is associated intimately with the appeasement of evil rather than beneficent spirits.

20. With reference to Aguilar's (1998) study that portrays the collision of indigenous and foreign spirit worlds within the context of the Visayan sugar plantation economy.

21. For instance, I argue elsewhere (Paredes, in preparation) that Catholic missionization in the early colonial period created a significant Christian group identity in northeastern Mindanao, such that Lumad converts were successfully motivated by Spanish missionaries to join colonial forces in raids against their Muslim neighbors in support of Catholic mission-building in the region.

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