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## The Mormons of Malaybalay

*Lucita G. Tilanduca*



Man's culture is unique to man, but cultures in various societies differ. At birth the child is heir to this vast social heritage of organized ideas and values, knowledge, and expected ways of behavior. This culture presents him with a way of making sense of the myriad of people and phenomena in the world about him, and what he does with great consistency and in the course of his existence has to contend with the forces, values, and ideas from outside. One likely consequence would be acculturation which is usually a two-way process wherein one society borrows from the culture of the other without losing its identity.

In the contact between Filipinos and other nationalities like the Chinese, Spanish, Japanese, Americans, Hindus, and others, there has been a reciprocal borrowing of culture patterns and values. Social scientists who engage in field research observing and recording customs and cultures and discovering their meanings, perform valuable work for missionaries. By laying open the beliefs, fears, values, and customs of people, they suggest new approaches in missionary and pastoral work. Their findings speed up religious acculturation and accommodation, and processes important for effective Christianization. Arens (1958) cited some examples from the Philippines where missionary work among the pagans and pastoral work among the Christian Filipinos are often combined. He makes particular mention of the widely practiced agricultural and social rituals which have an animistic origin. The result is a kind of folk-liturgy developing from these priestly contacts.

Social interaction is a vital principle of society and no social life is possible without it. Both society and culture are products of social interaction in which various social processes arise. The establishments of so many religions in the Philippines are precisely results

of social interaction. The rapidity at which some religion gains foothold in a certain place also depends upon fast interaction taking place.

Malaybalay, which is the capital town of Bukidnon and just like any place in the Philippines shows a lot of this social interaction through the many religions established in this place. Of the many religions found, there is one religion which differed significantly in terms of its approach and the behavior it exhibits to convert members. This all started in the early 1980s when gentlemen in pairs (usually an American and a Filipino), in their best clothes (black pants and white long-sleeved shirt with a tie) walked the long narrow streets bringing with them an attache case each, and knocking at doors to preach their new religion—the Mormon. These very young missionaries mostly in their early twenties sacrificed, walking long kilometers to convince people of the new religion. The people took notice of them. Some marveled at the patience and hard work they had shown for the sake of establishing their religion.

In a matter of three years a new group of people emerged in Malaybalay as a result of the Missionary work. For a start, this group started to occupy a rented place in the poblacion as their worship house until, after three more years, they were able to buy a lot wherein a two-story edifice was built and was known as the Mormon church. This new group of people became known in the community as the Mormons of Malaybalay. Mormon became a new religion in Malaybalay.

This article will present some information about the Mormons of Malaybalay based on the data gathered from a questionnaire and interviews conducted with some of the converts. More information is derived from a participant-observation made by the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher decided to conduct an interview with the two Mormon missionaries at that time.

This study delves into an inquiry to get some information about the Mormons of Malaybalay. It specifically tackles the following questions:

1. Who are the Mormons of Malaybalay?
2. What are the reasons for their conversion?
3. How long was the time for their conversion to the Mormon religion?
4. What are the restrictions, commitments, and privileges the Mormons get from their religion?

5. Is there a possibility for the Mormons to slide back to their former religion?
6. Would converts stay as Mormons forever?
7. What changes have taken place in being a Mormon?
8. Is there a possibility that the Mormon religion will gain a strong following?

This study is a humble contribution to the study about religious groups. This venture might prove helpful to other researchers in the social sciences who are interested in the study of religions and their manner of conversion as a form of developing more attachment to God. This study can also provide information to students, professionals, and non-professionals about the Mormons of Malaybalay.

This study is a preliminary inquiry into a new religious group which was established in Malaybalay in the early 1980s. This group became known as the Mormons of Malaybalay. It tackles basic questions about the Mormons of Malaybalay, their composition, their feelings about their new-found religion and their so-called transformation. It also presents some observations about their activities in church and their future as a religion in Malaybalay. It is limited to the items in the questionnaire and facts gathered from interviews as well as the participant-observation conducted by the researcher during the time she was gathering data. It is further limited to the twenty respondents purposely chosen by the researcher to furnish information about their personal feelings toward the Mormon religion. Since this is a preliminary inquiry, the researcher thought of not considering any variable that might be used in the presentation and analysis of data.

## The Study

The inquiry was done in Malaybalay, the capital town of Bukidnon, a province located in the central part of Mindanao, and which also belongs to Region 10. Malaybalay is inhabited by a majority of people who come from the Visayas and the nearby provinces of Mindanao, while a sprinkling come from Luzon. The natives of the place who are called Bukidnons comprise a part of it mostly in the peripheral areas. The passing of time also accounts for the proliferation of quite a number of Muslim people, specifically the Maranaos from Iligan and Marawi cities plying their trades in the

market place and in small rolling stores lined up along the sidewalk. The medium of communication is Cebuano-Visayan.

Malaybalay has undergone a very naïve transformation from a very rural atmosphere to a quite suburban air until it became a city just recently. The series of fires that destroyed quite a lot of establishments paved the way for the rise of modern concrete buildings through commercial loans from public and private banks. Today, a lot more people are investing in buildings and in buying and selling ventures.

The dominant religion of the place is Roman Catholic and it has converted its old church to a new cathedral. Chapels and worship houses of the Iglesia ni Kristo, Seventh Day Adventist and several sects of the Protestant religion can also be found in different areas of the community. The Muslims have also established their worship house, and the city of Malaybalay hears the chants and prayers of Islam at certain hours of the day. The latest addition to these worship houses is the Mormon church established in the mid 1980s.

Twenty converts to the New Mormon religion were chosen as respondents. Most of these converts are government employees while only a few are engaged in private business. The elders of Mormon missionaries were also included. The Filipino elder comes from Dumaguete City and the American elder hails from Utah U.S.A.

The researcher framed questions on salient points about being a convert to the Mormon religion. These are questions that would readily pour out personal feelings toward the Mormon religion. The respondents were requested to state their answers on the blanks provided after each question. Two elders or missionaries were also included as respondents. An informal interview was done with some of the respondents to verify some of their answers. The respondents showed positive reactions when informed of the study being conducted about them and their new-found religion. It took three to four days for each of the respondents to finish their answers. The informal interview took place when the researcher collected the questionnaires.

The study was conceived and started in September 1988. It was continued in April 1990 which prompted the researcher to attend Sunday services in the Mormon church as an investigator attending Sunday services, weekend activities, Christmas and New Year celebrations. After collecting the questionnaires and interviewing the converts, the study laid to rest for some time and last June 1992, the researcher thought of organizing the data and finally came up with

an almost complete work in July 1992. An update was done through observation and interviews of some converts since 1992 and in 1998.

The researcher employed purposive sampling. The respondents were chosen on the basis that they were the known converts to the Mormon religion. The researcher's knowledge of the identity of the other converts was very limited. Thus, the twenty known converts were chosen as respondents. Besides, most of these twenty converts are friends and acquaintances of the researcher. There might be a lot more converts but during the conduct of the study the researcher could only identify these twenty converts.

The answers to the questions were listed down for purposes of presentation. Additional information from interviews with the elders or missionaries was also presented. The facts gathered through participation-observation were also accurately laid down for presentation. The manner in which the data is presented starts from the answers to the questions specified in the questionnaire and interviews by the respondents. Other information is coming from the observations and experiences of the researcher as a participant observer of the Mormon religion.

### **The Results of the Study**

Of the twenty known converts to the Mormon religion it is quite alarming to know that eighteen of the converts were previously members of the Roman Catholic church. The remaining two of the converts are Baptist. This batch of the original converts to the Mormon religion are mostly government employees while only about five of them are engaged in private undertakings for their livelihood.

Giving access to the teachings of the Elders or Mormon missionaries was like opening oneself to its doctrine. All the respondents agreed that in the process of learning the doctrine of the Mormon religion, its beliefs and teaching opened their minds to great spiritual truths ably supported by the Bible and Mormon Scriptures which they had never known in their lives before, in their former religions as Catholics and Protestants. The church made them understand the great purpose of life here on earth and they were able to find the answers to questions like: Where did we come from? Why are we here? And where are we going? It also gives them the true meaning of salvation. They also discovered that the teaching of Jesus Christ was plain and simple and not mixed by philosophies of

men. They believed that the Holy Ghost enlightened their minds and led them to join the Mormon religion.

Generally, the respondents' decision to join the new religion came out as a culmination of less than a month or eight meetings with the missionaries in their respective households. The missionaries talked to the whole family on a staggered schedule. The acceptance and conversion was made by the whole family. Not one member excluded herself or himself from the membership.

The respondents said that the Mormon doctrines, beliefs, and teachings are unique and significantly different from their former religions on the following grounds:

- a. The Heavenly Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are three separate personages and not one God. They are all one in purpose and that is the salvation of men. All three are divine.
- b. Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man, no one else, not even the Virgin Mary, although she is respected as the mother of Jesus Christ in flesh.
- c. No worshipping of images, idols, and the crucifix. These are all made by the hands of men.
- d. No recitation of the rosary or other repeated or memorized prayers. Praying is individual but it can also be done in a group or collectively and direct from the hearts as conscience and mind dictate. The prayer to the heavenly Father is always through Christ the son.
- e. No baptism of children below eight years old. It is a mockery to baptize small children at their age of innocence for they cannot comprehend the essence of the ceremony. The child should reach the age of reason. Baptism is the total immersion in water just like when Jesus Christ was baptized by John the Baptist—for baptism means to emerge or to wash—a rebirth from our sins.
- f. Beliefs in the same organization originally founded by Jesus Christ composed by the apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, deacons and others. They have a living prophet who is the President of the church and who receives revelation direct from God.
- g. There is no paid clergy or priest. Services are done by the members themselves, free and voluntary, including church maintenance, baptisms, weddings, and death. Every member is a missionary to his or her neighbors, friends and relatives.
- h. Believe not only in the Bible and Book of Mormon but also in other books like the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great

Price. These are four standard books which all come from God as guidance in life.

- i. The church is family oriented. The first priority is the stability of the family. The head of the family or father directs the affairs of the family. Families with strong spiritual beliefs and faith build a strong nation.

What commitments, privileges and restrictions are in the Mormon religion? Commitments are promises to the Lord after baptism like:

- a. Always remember the Lord Jesus at all times in our lives.
- b. Do good things always and take upon us His name in all our activities.
- c. Start the day by family morning prayer and end it by family evening prayer.
- d. Love and serve our fellowmen in need.
- e. Obey all the commandments of the Lord.
- f. Attend the Sabbath Day on Sundays.
- g. Obey the law of tithing.

The restrictions in Mormon religion are the following:

- a. Refrain from taking alcoholic beverages which are the major cause of family breakdown, crimes, accidents, diseases, death, and addiction.
- b. Avoid drinking coffee and tea which science proves to have bad effects on the nervous system.
- c. Refrain from smoking, being the cause of cancer, ulcer, heart attacks, and other major human ailments. This could also lead to addiction.
- d. Avoid acidic drinks like Pepsi, Coke etc. These are not needed by the body to be healthy.

The respondents vehemently denied any possibility of sliding back to their old religions because that would mean being misled again. They assured us that they prefer to be Mormons all their lives. The respondents were one in saying that many great changes have happened since the time they conducted their lives as Mormons. They completely stopped all vices like womanizing, smoking, drinking alcoholic beverages, coffee, tea, and acidic drinks. The results are healthier physical and mental conditions, improved memory, keen perception, increased knowledge in spiritual truths and wisdom in



decision-making. There is peace of mind, peace in the family and happiness in the house precisely due to a balance in physical and spiritual acts. They become good parents, good children, good husbands, good wives, good sisters, good brothers and good relatives. One astray and unfaithful husband confessed that the Mormon religion restored him back to his proper senses and responsibilities. Now there is unity, orderliness in the family and his relations with his wife have been restored and strengthened everyday. Children learned correct principles and positive outlook in life. They stay close to the church and engage wholeheartedly in church activities. The teachings of the church shield them from the influence of "barkada," drugs, pornography, and bad movies.

Sacred day for the family is the Sabbath Day which is every Sunday. Nagging, lazy wives become understanding, industrious, respectful and cooperative partners to their spouses. Husbands or fathers direct the affairs of the family just as Jesus Christ directs the church on earth. This is the role of the husband and not of the wife although the wife is a co-worker, a support. The result is orderliness of daily family activities. Family Home Evening and Family Council Meetings are practiced. The former is a social as well as a spiritual weekly activity at home with neighbors. It is a program which includes songs, music, dances and other show of talents from family members. This activity strengthened family unity, socialized children, and developed their talents and unfolded their potential capabilities.

The respondents believe that with the continuous missionary efforts in Malaybalay and with the rate the baptism of converts is taking place almost every week, there is no reason why the Mormon religion will not gain a strong foothold in Malaybalay in spite of the persecution done by other religions like distributing anti Mormon materials to destroy its name and discourage future converts. In fact it has already acquired a 2000 sq. meters lot along Claro M. Recto St. and the construction of its estimated three million chapel or Meeting House in Malaybalay became a reality in 1985. Now, the Meeting House serves its people, visitors, and friends.

The Mormon missionaries are called Elders followed by their family names. They are usually a pair, one Filipino and one American. Being missionaries of their religion, they are partly financed by the congregation and by their families. They spend two years for missionary work and most of them go back to school, find a job, get married, if not devote their time to the church. When interviewed,

the Elders were happy to share their feelings for the Mormon religion. They testified that peace and contentment which money cannot buy have been the best that they get from being Mormons. They will never trade it with other things in the world. They are at peace with the Lord in the Mormon religion. As further gathered from the interviews, the Missionaries can be male or female. For male missionaries, the required age is nineteen above and for female, the required age is at least twenty-two. The male missionary spends two years while the female missionary only one year and a half.

There are supposed to be two full-time missionaries in one district. They always come in pairs. They can be both Filipino or both American or a mixture. What is important is for them to work closely for the propagation of the Mormon religion. There are also member missionaries and their task is to give referrals to the full-time missionaries of the families they would visit. District missionaries are also member missionaries who also give referral and help the congregation grow by explaining, engaging in fellowship with friends about the Mormon religion.

### **Participant Observation**

At first there were negative and destructive speculations about the chapel of the Mormons—that there are secret rooms where secret ceremonies are held and that this Mormon religion is a cult. The researcher attended Sunday services in the Mormon's chapel in April 1991 until November of the same year to get objective information. The chapel located at Claro M. Recto St. in the poblacion is a two-storey edifice. It is a permanent structure with a very comfortable space for a lawn and driveway. The upper part of the building is divided into two parts, the first half is a mini auditorium or Social Hall. This is where a lecture is presented during the first activity on Sundays. The second half is the Sacrament Hall where the sacred or Holy activity on Sundays is held. The lower part of the building has many small rooms where lectures for children are done in the Primary Room. The adolescents and young adults have their lectures at the Young Women's and Men's Room while for the married men and adult single males the discussions are conducted in the Elder's Quorum. For the married women and adult single females, they have their lectures at the Relief Room. The lectures for these specific groups are done separately. Every Sunday, lecturers or teachers are assigned

for each group. They are ready to impart the teachings from the Book of Mormon which are also augmented by the Bible and other Holy Materials. The baptismal font is also another room in lower portion of the edifice. The person is dressed in white and fully submerged in water as the holy ceremony is celebrated.

The Mormons of Malaybalay compose one district with three branches. The first branch is the area from Sumpong to Magsaysay Street. This is handled and headed by a branch president, Mr. Rizal Ramos. The second branch is within the heart of Malaybalay and this is headed by the branch president, Mr. Cuenco. The third branch is the area in Impalambong and this is headed by Mr. Celso Daclag. The over-all leader of the district is the district president—President Leandro Miale.

Two years ago Malaybalay Mormons composed only a little group, but now it has increased in membership almost three-fold. A modest estimate would be around 900 members. The different branches have individual or specific schedules during their Sunday Services in the chapel, because they cannot all be accommodated if they all attend at the same time. The district President also attends to other Mormon branches outside Malaybalay. At present there are already branches in Valencia, Maramag, and Quezon in Bukidnon. Each of these branches meet together in their specific meeting house. A meeting house is a smaller structure and not as permanent as the chapel.

The Sunday Service is divided into three major parts. Part one is a lecture and sharing of ideas of a specific teaching from the book of Mormon in the Social Hall. The second part is the individual lectures of several groups at different designated rooms in the lower part of the building. The third part which is the holy service is the ceremony or the sacrament where some testimonies are heard on the first Sunday of every month. On the other Sundays, passages from the Book of Mormon or Bible and a main talk from a titular head is heard, then the blessed sacrament follows—the blessing of the bread (bits of ordinary bread) and water. Everyone partakes of the body and blood of Christ. Some announcements are made after the sacrament. After which everyone goes home with a happy heart.

The Relief Society is composed of married women and adult female single, widowed, or separated, who engage in homemaking as well as welfare activities. They all believe that a woman should learn more about homemaking so she can serve her family and fellowmen. Welfare for the families as well as for the other members and non-members are also their concern.

## Analysis of the Study

As was disclosed by the members, the number of individual members of the Mormon religion in Malaybalay is increasing after more than ten years of establishment. This would be quite a satisfying accomplishment as the missionaries would attest. The converts and the missionaries are hopeful that more converts will join the congregation. The realization of a meeting house which was constructed in the early part of 1985 can be a factor in the conversion of more members in the future as it would provide more security and assurance for the members since it will serve as a holy house protecting its members. Again, it will also mean authority, strength and durability since it is a sign that it has gained a foothold and established itself in the place.

A lot of the converts are former Catholics and a minority are Protestants which might mean that Catholicism has weakened its hold on its members. From the responses, the converts clearly echoed their overwhelming delight to the spiritual truths they learn from the Mormon's teachings and doctrines supported by holy books of Christ. Does this mean that these converts never discovered spiritual truths in their existence as Catholics or Protestants before?

The converts are also willing to sacrifice their former habits and vices to conform to the restrictions of the Mormon religion. Even with the economic crisis, they are willing to follow the Law of Tithing or giving one-tenth of their salaries to the church. The Mormon teachings might have been so powerful, so convincing, and more gratifying, considering that in the Catholic religion the members are free in their choice of things, drinks, and style of life plus the fact that no money obligation is required of every member every month. Does this mean to say that people particularly these converts who are former Catholics also get tired of being loose and free, that they want proper direction in the conduct of their lives, much more in their children's lives? Maybe the loose morality, crimes, drugs, pornography, oppression, are threats to their children's future. They want a religion that could guide them to a clean and orderly life.

The assurance and pledge of the converts that no way would they go back to their former religion or be converted to another one is an interesting piece of information since it is in contrast to the study conducted by Dr. F. L. Jocano in one of the groups of people in Panay where Catholics who were converted to the Protestant religion slide back to their former religion because they found the restrictions not

conforming to their daily practices and activities. They found these restrictions bothersome in their lifestyles. It might be that the converts of the Mormon religion found the restrictions worth following since they are made aware of the consequence of a vice in their spiritual meetings with sound scientific basis. It is not just simply forbidding but forbidding with enlightenment. The restrictions also jibe with the hard, economic times, so, one would find it reasonable to follow.

From the interviews, a lot of the converts, particularly the women expressed their happiness and contentment that their spouses are leading clean and moral lives which could mean that troubled family life particularly husband-wife rift and loosening or weakening family relationship could also be a factor in the conversion. Frustrations in life like losing business ventures, and personal troubles, led some to question their faith and the Mormon religion came very convincing, very real, although most of the converts point to the Mormon doctrines as the main cause of their embracing the Mormon faith. However I would say that if a person is not having trouble with his faith then he will not allow himself to listen to the missionaries who came in pairs and ask for the permission of the family to schedule a specific date for the Mormon teaching which will be followed by several meetings with the whole family. It will really take so much of the family time. This would not be possible for one who has great faith in his former religion.

## Conclusion

The coming of the Mormons in Malaybalay in 1981 and up to the present time (with a total of almost 900 individual converts) is an activity worth watching. The preliminary inquiry has so many limitations. It failed to include other salient questions which could shed more information about the status of the Mormon religion. However, many interesting things have been provided by the inquiry. On the findings in the study the following conclusions may be derived:

1. People are still awed by spiritual truths explained simply and plainly.
2. Ample time is needed for the whole family to accept the Mormon doctrine. Patience of missionaries is commendable.

3. Mormon religion differs from other religions but more positively and with sufficient support from several books or doctrines. Its teachings are family oriented,
4. Commitments are purely spiritual virtues in the conduct of human life in relation to family and humanitarian causes. It is really very noble.
5. People who are wholeheartedly convinced would follow all the restrictions of a given religion.
6. The Mormon converts have found wonderful changes in their family lives which made them all the more faithful to their new-found religion.
7. It might be premature to say that the Mormon religion will gain a strong foothold in Malaybalay. However, the increase from 1985 up 1992 is something to consider. The next three or five years might prove its strength as an enduring religion.

Today the Mormon religion has tremendously increased its membership. Within the city limits of Malaybalay, it has started to build another church, much bigger and more modern than the previous one erected in 1985. As gathered from a recent interview with a Mormon member who can be considered a pillar of this Mormon religion, the Mormons of Malaybalay are tenaciously adhering to their faith with more fervor and dedication. Except for a few members who underwent some admonitions and punishments, all is well in the Mormon religion. The members take pride in declaring themselves as the Mormons of Malaybalay. They are strong believers of their Mormon faith as strong as the strength and aura their churches will attest.

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