

Some Notes on Hanunoo-Mangyan Culture (Abstract)

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The term 'Mangyan' is a generic name for all the minor ethnic groups found in Mindoro. Numbering about 30 to 40 thousand at present, they roam the mountains of the island, living off the bounty of nature. Some Mangyans, especially those in southern Mindoro, still remember that their forefathers had fled Tablas Island at the time of the Spanish invasion. After coming to Mindoro, the Mangyans originally had settled along the coastlines, but raids of Mohammedan pirates and the invasion of Christian immigrants subsequently had pushed them into the hinterlands. Still today pirates, Spaniards, and Christians in general are called *damuong*, that is "those who landed on our shores."

Harold Conklin has distinguished at least ten subtribes of Mangyans, each of which possesses a different language, different customs, manners, traditions, and practices. One of them, mistakenly named *Hanunoo* by Conklin, occupies some 800 square kilometers of forest and grass land in the southeastern part of Mindoro facing Tablas and Panay. About 7,000 to 8,000

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in number, the *Hanunoo* constitute the most populous group among the Mangyan subtribes.

The *Hanunoo* possess a culture much superior to what one has always been led to believe. The same can be said regarding their moral values. Until today they have succeeded in keeping their culture generally free from outside influences. This paper is an attempt to explore a few aspects of *Hanunoo* culture.

Religion plays a central role in the life of the Hanunoo. It is so intimately interwoven with their social structure, economic life, political organization, and everyday happenings, that their organizational structure could be described as 'theocratic'.

"We believe in a supreme being," they say, "*Mahal na Makaayo*" (which literally means 'the Holy one who can'). "He is our *Panginoon*, the supreme ruler of world and men, who gives and sustains our lives by merely looking at us. Once he withdraws his gaze, we all will have to die. But he loves us Mangyans and therefore allows us to live."

Panginoon wants the *Hanunoo* to live as faithful Mangyans, i.e. to adhere to their ancient customs and traditions. In order to assist them, he has assigned

Pangulo, his son, as president of the world, who sees to it that *Panginoon's* commands are executed.

For all practical purposes, God (*Panginoon*) is considered the leader of the *Hanunoo*. This may explain the fact that they have no recognized visible leaders among them.

The world is crowded with invisible spirits, both good and bad, whose favorite abodes are rivers, streams, and other places. For this reason water has a special meaning to the *Hanunoo*. To these spirits they offer animals, fruits, and parts of their harvest.

Good spirits are more or less identified with ancestors, whose task it is to protect the *Hanunoo*, their fields, and their crops. A powerful evil spirit named *Labang* is believed to be the cause of all crimes and unhappiness in the world. He is held accountable for mistakes people commit, for their sufferings, and for every misfortune that comes over them. To protect themselves against the evil influences of malignant spirits, the *Hanunoo* carry charms and amulets, to which they ascribe superhuman protective powers. For example, a stone called *pamara*, queer, unripe betelnuts, or tree roots are used as weapons against sickness.

A number of taboos, though rooted in their protective religion, have gradually become social taboos and permeated their daily lives. It is bad, they contend for example, to kill cats and dogs, and to throw away crumbs of food. The *Hanunoo* are warned not to follow the lowlanders, *damuong*, with regard to the mode of dress and the use of a spoon while eating. *Panginoon* wants them to live as true Mangyans. If the *Hanunoo* do not heed these warnings, the mountains will be levelled, *patag*, and a great deluge, *gunaw*, will destroy them all.

The relationships of the *Hanunoo* to their fellowmen, both *damuong* and other Mangyan, are regulated by high moral standards. Among other traits, honesty, respect for private property, hospitality, politeness, helpfulness, and cooperation are greatly valued. Marital bonds are considered sacred. In order to preserve peace, they shy away from any kind of trouble, even to the extent of giving up their rights rather than to fight for them. Unfortunately, Christian lowlanders in growing number are exploiting this good-naturedness, thereby depriving the *Hanunoo* of their right to property and life. As a result, many of the *Hanunoo* not only fear the Christians, but Christianity itself.

The high level of cultural development, which the *Hanunoo* have attained, is attested to by their system of writing and their literary products. According to research findings of Postma, the *Hanunoo*, besides their ordinarily spoken language, use at least two or three other languages for special occasions: a symbolic language, a secret, and a cryptic one. The degree of intelligence, which many *Hanunoo* possess, can be judged from the fact that they tend to learn Tagalog, Bisayan, and English in the Western style of writing faster than some Bisayan or Tagalog college students are able to absorb the *Hanunoo* language in the Mangyan script.

The Mangyan culture, as observed today, seems to represent a case of "cultural devolution." One is struck by the paradox that the present mode of life of the *Hanunoo* is so very primitive and backward, and yet, at the same time, they have preserved a literature astonishingly rich and extensive. How much of this cultural stagnation is due to outside disturbances can only be guessed.

It may be argued that the culture of the *Hanunoo-Mangyans* represents to some extent pre-Spanish Philippine culture, many aspects of which have been labeled "uncivilized," or "savage" by the conquistadores simply because they differed from Spanish or Christian values or practices. If this hypothesis is correct, it is unjustified to depict the pre-Spanish Filipino as generally savage, *salvaje*, and to characterize him as "el Indio," a term with the pejorative connotation of "dumb" and "incapable of learning," labels which many times have been used in Spanish writings.

Mangyan culture may have to offer a great deal of information which can help to explain some of the present Filipino's behavioral tendencies and customs. From a historical and ethnological point of view it may help to shed some light on still unclear aspects of the pre-

Spanish past of the Philippines. Mangyan culture, especially in the realms of religion, literature, and music, seems to point to a rather close relation between original Philippine culture and the cultures of the Pacific area and the Far East.

As far as the processes of national integration and the acculturation of minority groups are concerned, Mangyan culture should be taken into serious consideration. Efforts should be made to preserve its desirable aspects. If in the course of acculturation and integration Mangyan culture should be completely ignored—and consequently annihilated—and attempts be made to impose on the Mangyans a culture alien and unintelligible to them, the poor losers, besides the Mangyans themselves, would be the Philippines on the one hand, and Philippine Anthropology on the other.