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A Voice from Mt. Apo: Oral and Written Essays on the Culture and World View of the Manobo

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Book Reviews

MANUEL ARAYAM AND OTHERS
MELCHOR BAYAWAN, ED.; ENA E. VANDER MOLEN, TRANS.

A Voice from Mt. Apo: Oral and Written Essays on the Culture and World View of the Manobo

Manila: Linguistics Society of the Philippines, 2005. xxiii + 275 pages.

Mount Apo is the highest peak in Mindanao, and the Manobo people live on its northwest slope. Since “Apo” also means “grandparent” in the Manobo language, Ena Molen, in her foreword, sees in it a fitting metaphor for the Manobo elder handing down their oral tradition to the children sitting at his feet.

The short essays, anecdotes, legends, myths, folktales, poems, and songs in this book were contributed by fourteen writers and raconteurs representing the subtribe called the Obo Manobo, also variously named Kidapawan Manobo and Bagobo. They are the collective “voice from Mount Apo” as they recount and explain their history, codes of conduct, and way of life. A wistful tone ends many accounts as the narrators note the changes wrought by acculturation, particularly Christianization, state intervention, and “the Visayan way of life” (73). As are most of the books published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) Philippines, this is a bilingual book, Manobo and English, with a wealth of content footnotes, a glossary, and two appendices demonstrating a linguistic analysis of a Manobo text and selected grammatical units.

The book draws its inspiration from *A Voice from the Hills* (1989) by Francisco Col-om Polenda and his translator Richard E. Elkins. It is dedicat-

ed to Tano Bayawan, an indefatigable pastor, translator, and cultural worker for his tribe, who died at the age of 41 from heart failure. As a descendant of the first Manobo settlers in Kidapawan and having been a regular visitor to the mountain villages under his care, he felt the urge to record and preserve his Manobo culture. Hence, many of the essays in this collection are his.

There are various ways by which the pieces in this anthology may be classified. Molen’s introduction groups them thematically: (1) the supernatural world, (2) getting along with one another, and (3) finding sustenance. The first theme shows how major events in an individual’s life, such as childbirth, planting, house building, illness, or burial, are marked by rituals “to appease the wrath of evil spirits” (xiii). The second theme stresses harmony in social relationships, especially within one’s family. In this light, the datu’s primary role in the resolution of conflicts demonstrates his importance in the tribe. The third theme, finding and preparing food, has always been the Manobo’s daily preoccupation, only the means and methods have altered with time.

Said themes are divided into more specific topics in the book’s table of contents: (1) lifecycle, (2) social values, (3) the home, (4) livelihood, (5) getting along with others, (6) getting along with spirits, (7) getting along with nature, (8) leisure and beauty, and (9) stories, songs, and poetry.

The chapter titled “Lifecycle” contains short expositions on stages of life as the Manobo live them: from childbirth, marriage, the taking of an additional wife, divorce, death, widowhood, to the afterlife.

Social values, which fill the second chapter, are orally transmitted in the form of *payas* (giving advice; 51). Unmarried youths are given “guidelines,” the Manobo term for which literally means “measures of volume from 3.5–5 kilos” and signifying “a system of sanctions, values and penalties for doing things that go against customary laws” (55). These are either explicitly taught to them, or implicit in conversation and traditional narratives. Advice to newlyweds by elders is more ritualized, done after the wedding ceremony in which the young couple seats between the elders.

Coexistence, or “getting along” as the titles of the next three chapters put it, is defined on three levels: with one’s fellows, with spirits, and with nature. Vestiges and memories of the Manobo people as a warrior society are evident in their explications of how to “get along”: “If the Manobo people in the past were not vigilant against possible attacks by neighboring people groups, they could end up either as a slave or dead” (123). In this context “getting along with others” meant using weapons like the *kompilan*, *singongkabaw*,

sundang (swords), and the *budyak* (spear), and the *kaasag* or *taming* (shield), not to speak of magic charms for good measure. A fighting technique was so-*ut* “in which they kept jumping from place to place, making them a difficult target” (123). (Significantly *saut* is the current Visayan word for “dance,” pointing to the interconnectedness of the arts, culture, and political and social practice in precolonial society.) *Kod-ahaw* (the taking of someone else’s wife) is so entrenched a practice that, apart from being done until today, it is also a complex system of rationales, conventions, ritualized practices of restitution, and—if the rules are not followed—interference from the otherworld and the requisite appeasement ritual (134).

Vestigial elements of this warrior culture may now have completely opposite functions than for which they were intended. To the urban reader a tree house may evoke the romantic image of a refuge. To the Manobo a *popo* (tree shelter) was once “a shelter up in the branches of a tall tree to get away from the prodding spear of an enemy” (135). Today, however, a tree shelter is vulnerable to bullets and chainsaws and is no longer any different from its urban counterpart, which “would not be for protection from murderers, but instead just a resting place because it is very pleasant to live in a tree shelter” (137).

Not everything is presented in purely expository discourse. Codes of conduct and beliefs in spirits are validated by historical anecdotes or the narrators’ experiences. An example is this account by Romeo Umpan:

Now if someone has broken an *anit* taboo but has not yet been punished by the curse of anit, the magic stone (*suku*) is put where rain will flow in its path on the eaves of the roof to avert the progress of the curse of anit. As for my brother who broke an anit taboo, that was what they used to treat him. The magic stone suddenly landed on their house the time he broke an anit taboo, so they got the magic stone. Then they tested it to see if it could cure the anit curse, and it surely was able to cure it. (157)

Explaining an eclipse as a giant bird called *Monukawa* swallowing the moon, narrator Mantaona Bangcas recalls an unforgettable childhood experience in his hometown of Ginatilan, when he was out playing “in the street of Apan” (165) on a bright moonlit night:

I was really amazed because I thought, ‘Why is it suddenly so dark?’ Looking at the moon, I saw there were wings of a large bird that cov-

ered it, so that was the reason it was already dark! . . . As for my recognizing the Monukawa bird and why I say that it is definitely true, it is because I surely saw his wings spread out and it really was in the shape of a bird. (163, 165)

The more impressive accounts are akin to parables, and not so much as authentic history or biography. Tano Bayawan’s experience of a landslide that he survived when he was 10 produced a ballad, teleological reinforcement, and a significant chapter in Manobo history. As Molen summarizes it:

the spirit Monunggud purposely triggered a landslide to take the lives of Indayodan and his son in exchange for countless deer and wild pig the spirit allowed him to snare over the years. When the community learned of what happened to Indayodan, it instilled great fear in all and was not quickly forgotten. Nunoy wrote a song commemorating the event. (169)

The last chapter, “Stories, Songs and Poetry,” is a treasury of myths and trickster tales for folk literature compilers. A myth explaining the origin of *anit*, or taboo, also traces the beginning of the Manobo people’s sufferings to the curse of *Inanit* (the god of anit) when their ancestor Molingling committed incest. Trickster tales involve popular characters like the monkey and turtle; Tilandok (a.k.a. Pilandok, Philippine mouse deer) and the giant; the hawk and the hen; and the lesser-known whistler bird and the cat, Pituy and Otatat. Then there are Sunni, the archetypal wise hero, and his opposite, Wou, the archetypal numskull.

As a source of Manobo traditional knowledge, *A Voice from Mt. Apo* possesses encyclopedic information, ranging from its pantheon of gods to its underworld spirits, extending over invisible and visible orders of reality. But the encyclopedic structure is objective and subjective, mythological and historical, all at once. Myth, legend, historical reminiscence, and actual history interweave to form an accurate picture of a community that only its members can fully understand and relay.

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