

# philippine studies

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 11, no. 3 (1963): 390—400

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

# A Note on the Golden Image of Agusan\*

JUAN R. FRANCISCO

PERHAPS one of the most spectacular discoveries in Philippine archeological history is the golden image known as the "Agusan Gold Image."<sup>1</sup> For a clearer view of the subsequent discussions, the image may be described briefly. It is a figure of a female deity(?) seated cross-legged, made of 21-carat gold and weighing nearly four pounds (see the accompanying plate). It has a richly ornamented head-dress and many ornaments on the arms and other parts of the body. It was found in 1917 on the left bank of the Wawa River near Esperanza, Agusan, eastern Mindanao, following a storm and flood and is now on display in the Gold Room of the Chicago Museum of Natural History.<sup>2</sup> The question of its identification is still undecided.

Professor H. Otley Beyer writes that the image "appears to date from the 14th century or earlier." He writes further:

\* Paper read at the Lectures in Honor of Dr. Cecilio Lopez, Professor of Linguistics, University of the Philippines, on the occasion of his retirement from the University, February 1, 1963. Because the proper type is not available for transliterated *devanagari* script, Sanskrit words are printed without the necessary symbols.

<sup>1</sup> H. Otley Beyer, "Outline Review of Philippine Archaeology by Islands and Provinces," *Philippine Journal of Science*, Vol. 77, Nos. 3-4 (July-August 1947), pp. 205-374; p. 301.

<sup>2</sup> Beyer gives us (*ibid.*) an interesting account of how the image found its way to the Chicago Museum of Natural History.



THE GOLDEN IMAGE OF AGUSAN  
(NATURAL SIZE)

Plate courtesy of the Chicago Museum of Natural History,  
through A. E. Evangelista, National Museum, Manila

A study of this image was made by Dr. F. D. K. Bosch, of Batavia, in 1920, who came to the conclusion that it was made by local workmen in Mindanao, copying a Ngandjuk image of the early Madjapahit period—except that the local artist overlooked the distinguishing attributes held in the hand. It probably had some connection with the Javanese miners who are known to have been mining gold in the Agusan-Surigao area in the middle or late 14th century. The image is apparently that of a Sivaite goddess, and fits in well with the name "Butuan" (signifying "phallus"). Pigafetta's account of the court of the "king of Butuan," whom he visited at Magellan's behest in 1521, bears this out—as the non-Mohammedan king of Butuan was apparently a survival from the old Madjapahit colony of a century earlier.

John M. Garvan further states that the Manobo chiefs knew of this image long ago; that one of their number kept it secretly hidden as a priceless *pusaka* (sacred heirloom) for an unknown number of generations; that it had been lost during a great flood which destroyed several villages during the late 19th century, and the guardians moved away to another district with the view to escaping the vengeance that they feared their ancestral spirits might wreak on them; and that after its rediscovery in 1917 they were afraid to claim it again. (The probable truth of this story is strongly supported by the number of bronze Sivaite and Buddhist images found by the early Jesuit fathers among the Mandayas; the Siva image from Cebu; and other similar finds.)<sup>3</sup>

In view of the fact that these statements appear in his summary *Outline Review of Philippine Archaeology*, it is perhaps not surprising that Beyer does not give us many details in support of the identification he offers. Nonetheless, certain questions must be raised; namely, (1) What is the basis for Dr. Bosch's identification? and (2) What strength have Beyer's added comments?

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301-02. On the Cebu image, John Carroll writes ("The Word Bisaya in the Philippines and Borneo," *Sarawak Museum Journal*, Vol. 9, Nos. 15-16 [July-December 1960], pp. 499-541; n. 14): "A picture of the 'Siva' image in the [Reyes, Grau-Santamaria, Beyer, de Veyra, et. al.] *Pictorial History of the Philippines* [Manila: Capitol Publishing House, Inc., 1952], pp. 36-37. However, I think it is an Avalokesvara, not a Siva."

"Avalokitesvara, a Boddhisattva in the Buddhistic concept or mythos, is the 'being who is capable (Isvara) of enlightening insight (avalokita),' but who, out of infinite mercy, postponed his own attainment of nirvana" (Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* [Bollingen Series; New York: Pantheon Books, 1953], p. 182).

Dr. Bosch was led by certain characteristics of the image to identify it as a copy of a particular Ngandjuk image of the early Madjapahit period. What these characteristics were, and what distinguishing attributes of the analogous Ngandjuk image "the local artist overlooked" we are not told, nor does Beyer mention where Dr. Bosch's identification can be found.<sup>4</sup> Since we have neither the details of Dr. Bosch's study nor the Ngandjuk image to which he refers, we cannot verify his opinion.

Dr. Beyer states that the Agusan image is "apparently that of a Sivaite goddess." He supports this by three auxiliary bits of evidence; namely, that "Butuan" signifies phallus, that the "king of Butuan" visited by Pigafetta in 1521 was not a Muslim, and that other Saiva images had been found in the same general area.

His first argument assumes that if the name of a settlement includes reference to the symbol of a group that *might* have been its settlers or founders, then this group must in fact have been there. This assumption, with its leap from possibility to actuality, is intrinsically weak. Furthermore, it is not certain that Butuan means "phallus," or meant it at the time of the settlement's founding.<sup>5</sup>

As regards the second point, it does not follow logically that because the "king of Butuan" was not a Muslim he must therefore have been a Hindu. It follows even less that he should be a Hindu of the Saiva persuasion. Beyer's third argument for the Agusan image being that of a Saiva goddess is

<sup>4</sup> In 1958, while the present writer was still in India pursuing his research for the doctoral degree, he wrote Professor Beyer (through Mr. Moises C. Bello, of the University of the Philippines Discipline of Anthropology) inquiring about the paper written by Dr. Bosch on the identification of the image. The reply to this inquiry was never received.

<sup>5</sup> I am told that in Cebuano Bisayan (spoken in and near Butuan City) the word root *butù* signifies "testicles"; "phallus," or "penis" is signified by *lagáy*. Second, since the name of the settlement is pronounced /butuqán/ or /butwán/ (*q* is here used for the glottal stop), the word-root is most likely *butù*, or /butúq/ and not /bútuq/. I do not know the meaning of *butù*. Third, a still unanswered question is what *butuan* meant at the time the settlement was so named, prior to 1521.

the existence of other such images found among the Mandayas (south of where the Agusan image was discovered) and in Cebu. The problem here is that the images referred to were destroyed in the fire that consumed the Ateneo de Manila Museum in the early 1930's.<sup>6</sup> Their identity is at least questionable, since John Carroll, who examined a photograph of the Cebu image, believes that it is "an Avalokesvara, not a Siva" (footnote 3, above).

Several Indian scholars saw published photographs of the Agusan image. Since these photographs lacked clarity and sharpness, they were understandably reluctant to make an identification. For one thing, it was impossible to discern the *mudrās*, or hand gestures, which are of fundamental importance in the classification of Indian (Hindu and Buddhist) iconography. Furthermore, the attributes they expected to see were not clearly shown. With these limitations, R. C. Majumdar presumes that is an image of a goddess, but in the absence of any attributes he finds it difficult to identify.<sup>7</sup> K. A. Nilakantha Sastri writes that if it should be proved decisively that the image is a goddess, it would still be difficult to say whether it belonged to a Hindu or Buddhist pantheon.<sup>8</sup>

Because we have just obtained on loan a remarkably clear photograph of the Agusan image, we are able to see quite easily many of the ornaments which did not show in the photograph examined by the Indian scholars mentioned above.<sup>9</sup> For this reason we feel in a position to offer several suggestions as to the pantheon to which the image belongs.

*First Suggestion.* One of the outstanding attributes of the image is the flame-like projection from the rather ornamental head-dress. If this flame-like projection is actually the repre-

<sup>6</sup> Beyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 291, 307-08.

<sup>7</sup> *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*; Vol. II, *Suvarnadvipa* (Calcutta: Modern Publishing Syndicate, 1938), Part 2, p. 345.

<sup>8</sup> *South Indian Influences in the Far East* (Bombay: Asia Book Co., 1948), pp. 8, 144-45.

<sup>9</sup> Mr. Alfredo E. Evangelista, Archeologist of the Philippine National Museum, lent the present writer the photograph. He obtained it from the Chicago Museum of Natural History while he was in graduate studies at the University of Chicago in 1956.

sentation of a flame such as characterizes a great number of Buddha images in the Southeast Asian locus, then the Agusan image undoubtedly belongs to the Buddhist pantheon.<sup>10</sup> A question may, however, arise: How can its appearance in the image of a *female* "deity" be explained? In practically all Buddhist images where the flame appears, the representation is of a *male*. This question must be set aside for the present because we do not yet have the materials with which to answer it.

If on the basis of the flame-attribute it is a Buddhist image, with a Ngandjuk relation, it may belong to the Indo-Javanese art of the Madjapahit period. It may then be related to the cult of Queen Dedes, who on her death (or even before) was celebrated as a *Prajñāparamitā*. Queen Dedes was the consort of Ken Angrok (1220-1227), and they were Buddhists by persuasion.<sup>11</sup> The Agusan image may then be that of a lesser goddess related to the *Prajñāparamitā* as an attendant.

<sup>10</sup> See and compare Henri Parmentier, *L'Art du Laos* (Hanoi: Publications de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, 1954); Vol. I, pp. 269, 271, 275; Vol. II, Fig. 140-a, -c, -g; Fig. 142, Fig. 144-a, -b; and Fig. 145-a, -b.

See also Henrich Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia* (Bollingen Series, No. 39; New York: Pantheon Books, 1955); Vol. II, Plates 591-b, 593-b, and 595.

The same flame-motif is also represented in the Buddhist images of Dvaravati, Siam. (See Pierre Dupont, *L'Archéologie Mone de Dvaravati*; Vol. XLI (Hanoi: Publications de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, 1959); Text vol., p. 165; Plate vol., Figs. 336-37.

Compare these images possessing the flame-motif on their crown (usnisa) with bronzes discovered in Nagapatam and preserved in the Madras Government Museum. They represent the standing Buddha (without the usnisa, however, but) whose head is surmounted with a flame of the Singhalese tradition (*ibid.*, Text vol., p. 184). Compare also Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, pp. 152-54: "That the flame is a symbol of Siva . . ."

<sup>11</sup> In Mahayana Buddhism, there are many female powers, one of which "is a counterpart of the great goddess of Hinduism, the Universal Mother. She is known as *Prajñāparamita* (Plate 499), 'The perfection of the virtue (paramita) of the enlightening transcendental wisdom (pranñā)', . . . 'the enlightening wisdom (prajña) that has gone (ita) to the far shore (param)' — the shore of the transcendental void where that wisdom eternally abides" (Zimmer, *op. cit.*, p. 140).

Moreover, if the image is identified as that of a goddess of the Buddhist pantheon, it may yet turn out to be a portrait of a queen, which expresses "the idea that the members of the reigning families, when dead, were assumed into the essence of the supra-celestial divine being, or that while alive they functioned as avatars of the forces that support the world."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this concept is expressed in the funerary representation of Queen Dedes conceived of as Prajñāparamitā, the Sakti of the Adi Buddha. The Agusan image may be an unknown statue of an Indo-Javanese (Madjapahit) queen represented as Sakti of one of the Buddhas or Boddhisattvas.

Such an identification would fit well with John Carroll's view that the Cebu copper statue is an Avalokeshvara (Avalokitesvara), and not a Siva image as Professor Beyer believes.<sup>13</sup>

*Second Suggestion.* A closer study of the image suggests, however, that Professor Beyer may have been correct in his identification of the image as "Sivaite" (although not for the reasons he advances). The image may be a Sakti of the Siva-Buddha (Bhairava) and may rightfully be named Bhairavi. The Siva-Buddha is a religious development in Java, in which the destructive or ferocious aspect of Siva (that is, the Bhairava aspect) is synthesized with the debased Tantric forms of Buddhism (both in Java and Sumatra). It was introduced from Bengal sometime around the 13th century A.D.<sup>14</sup>

The Indo-Javanese Prjñāparamita (Plate 5091) is described as "the most spiritual manifestation possible of maternal principle . . . For this transcendent image seems to have been what is known as the 'consecration figure' of an actual Javanese princess—Queen Dedes of the Dynasty of Singhasari" (*ibid.*, pp. 143-144).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>13</sup> See footnote 3, above.

<sup>14</sup> In India, "Ramanuja describes the Kalamukhas as using a skull as a drinking vessel, smearing themselves with ashes of a dead body, eating human flesh, holding a club, setting up a wine-jar as a site for offerings to the deity" (who is Siva, as Bhairava) and . . . Sankara was said to have had "controversies with Kapalikas—at Ujjayini . . . where Siva, as Bhairava, was worshipped with human sacrifices and wine libations" (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. XI [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958], p. 93-a). Also S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. V (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 2ff.



The image's connection with the Siva-Buddha aspect is suggested by the prominent representation of what seem to be skulls as ornaments around the arms just above the elbows, around the wrists, and upon the head-dress (if indeed the ornaments do not represent lotus buds).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, if it is a Tantric image, it may be related to the Ganesa statue of Singhasari, which is ornamented with human skulls, and sits upon a slab of stone supported by human skulls.<sup>16</sup> In fact, if it were conceived of as the Sakti of the Siva-Buddha, it may show that she possesses some of the fundamental characteristics possessed by Prajñāparamitā, who is the Sakti of the Adi Bud-

The Kalamukhas and the Kapalikas are believed to be worshipers of the Destructive (Bhairava or Bhairavi) aspect of Siva and his consort, Paramesvari.

See P. V. Bapat (ed.), *2500 Years of Buddhism* (New Delhi: Government of India Publications Division, 1959), p. 95. "There are interesting accounts of kings in the later period of Sri Vijaya history who were followers of this cult. Two important Mahayana texts in Java are known: The *Sang hyang kamahayanan mantranaya* and the *Sang hyang kamahayanikan* . . . ."

The first work consists of Sanskrit verses with a Javanese translation, while the second consists of a somewhat free Javanese version of a Sanskrit original mixed with a number of original Sanskrit verses. The second text gives a detailed exposition of the sacred principles of Mahayana, but the first gives the picture of a more popular but degraded form of Mahayana. Its title *Mantranaya* is probably another form of *Mantrayana*. In any case, it is really an exposition of the *Trantrayana*, or *Vajrayana*, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, and explicitly refers to the five kinds of sensual enjoyments (*kamapan-cakam*) which no doubt refer to *panca-makara*. There exists a fairly detailed account of King Krtanagara of Java (1254-1292 A.D.) who was passionately devoted to this degraded form of Buddhism. (*Ibid.*, footnote 1, p. 95.)

The *panca-makara* are the five essentials of the left-hand Tantra ritual. These five essentials are *madya*, "wine"; *mamsa*, "meat"; *mat-sya*, "fish"; *mudra*, "interwinning of fingers"; and *maithuṇa*, "sexual union."

<sup>15</sup> If they are lotus buds, the image could also be Hinduistic, for the flower (lotus) is as prominent a symbol in Hinduism as in Buddhism.

<sup>16</sup> Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia*; Vol. II, Plate 504.

dha (above). The rather prominently developed breasts suggest motherhood.<sup>17</sup>

*Third Suggestion.* These opinions more or less confirm the present writer's first suggestion, that the image belongs to the Buddhist pantheon. This confirmation comes from U Bo Kay (Conservator, Archaeological Directorate, Rangoon, Burma) and R. J. Thapa (Director of Archaeology, Kathmandu, Nepal). Both "agree that the image belongs to the Buddhist pantheon, as to the manner of sitting, calmness of facial expression, long ears and halo around the head. They, in fact, venture the opinion that the image represents a female deity of the Mahayana Buddhism."<sup>18</sup>

Corollary to this confirmation, P. R. Srinivasan (Assistant Superintendent of Epigraphy, Archaeological Survey of India, Ootacamund, S. India) "identifies it as that of a Tara, probably late Medieval. 'Some people call such images of female deities as female Boddhisattvas'."<sup>19</sup>

*Fourth Suggestion.* This suggestion does not directly involve iconographic attributes, but the image's date. According to R. C. Majumdar, the head-dress and other ornaments show the influence of Indo-Javanese art of the 10th century A.D.<sup>20</sup> If it is in fact a Buddhist image, it may belong to the second half of the Sailendra period of Sri Vijaya history (900-950 A.D.).<sup>21</sup> The Sailendras who ruled Sri Vijaya between

<sup>17</sup> Compare Zimmer, *ibid.*; Vol. I, Ch. 5, "Indian Ideals of Beauty," pp. 68-157. In this chapter, well-developed breasts are given extensive attention as one of the prominent attributes of Indian beauty.

For more information about the Sakti concept, see Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, pp. 137-148.

<sup>18</sup> The confirmation is found in the notes taken by Mr. Evangelista (footnote 9, above) after he had shown the photograph of the image to the above cited authorities whom he met at the International Archaeological Congress held in New Delhi, India, in December, 1961. These notes were transmitted to the present writer in a letter (Manila, dated January 24, 1962).

<sup>19</sup> See the same letter (footnote 18).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> See K. A. Nilakantha Sastri, *History of Sri Vijaya* (Madras: University of Madras Press, 1949), and G. Coedes, *Les Etats Hindouises d'Indo-Chine et d'Indonesie* (Paris: Ed. M. E. Cavaignac, 1948).

850 and 950 A.D. were Buddhists and the contemporary sculptural techniques would have been influenced by Indo(Buddhist)-Javanese art of this period.

If this image represents a Buddhist deity and was made under the influence of the Indo-Javanese art of the 10th century A.D., a possible inference is that the image is related to the Buddhist tradition of that period, which was responsible for the building of the famous Borobudur, the text-book in stone of Buddhism, and other Buddhist monuments at Kalasan and Mendut, Java.

*Conclusion.* No definite inference are to be drawn from the above discussion, for the suggestions are not conclusive. However, the present writer inclines to the first suggestion, which was *fortified* by the confirmation given in the third suggestion. Indeed, in view of these considerations, it seems likely that the image is a goddess of the Buddhist pantheon, in the Mahayana group. It is related to the concept of a female Boddhisattva, and at the same time the counterpart of the Hindu goddess (Sakti), as a Tara (or wife of a Buddhist god), which is a peculiar development of Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

While mention of the iconographic attributes of the image has been made, it was not the purpose of the present paper to explain and discuss their symbolism in relation to their religious significance. An excursus on these points will have to be reserved for a separate paper, for materials on this subject are not readily available in Philippine libraries.<sup>22</sup>

It is hoped, however, that the foregoing discussion will suffice to show that the earlier identification by Professor Beyer is somewhat questionable, and will stimulate further the study of the image and its implications for the history of the Philippines in pre-Hispanic times.

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<sup>22</sup> Letters have been sent to the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient, the Institut Francais d'Indologie, the Kern Institute, Leiden, requesting comparable iconographic materials. It is hoped that these materials will give us solid ground to identify the image with greater certainty.