

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## The Jesuit Letters and Mindanao

Jose S. Arcilla, S.J.

*Philippine Studies* vol. 37, no. 3 (1989) 357–366

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## The Jesuit Letters and Mindanao

JOSE S. ARCILLA, S.J.

§

Thirty years ago, Fr. Frank Lynch, S.J. published a brief guide to the Jesuit missionary letters from Mindanao known as the *Cartas de los Padres de la Compañía de Jesus de la Misión de Filipinas*.<sup>1</sup> He wanted to share the wealth of information they contain with anthropologists. Historians, too, would profit from their use.

These letters were written by the Jesuit missionaries in Mindanao between 1861, the year they opened their first modern mission in Tamontaka, and 1899, the year they left Mindanao because of the fall of the Spanish government in the Philippines. Published in ten *cuadernos* or volumes by various publishers and with slightly different titles, they total about 850 letters in 3,540 pages. There are still several unpublished letters in the Jesuit archives in the Philippines and abroad, but this note discusses only the published *Cartas*.

The first volume was multithumbed in 1872, and the tenth volume was ready for the press when the Bonifacio uprising occurred in 1896. It was never published, and what we have today as the tenth *cuaderno*, published later in Barcelona in 1903, contains the postrevolution experience of the Jesuits when, against their will, they left their Mindanao missions. Its title is *Cartas Edificantes de los Misionero de la Compañía de Jesús en Filipinas, 1898-1902*. It is divided into four parts: (1) the forced abandonment of the missions because of the uncertain political situation of the country; (2) petitions from various towns for the return of the Jesuits; (3) the reports from the missions after the Jesuits returned in 1902; and (4) events in Manila. Of the ten *cuadernos*, then, this is the most explicitly historical.

This is a modified version of a paper read at the Eighth National Conference on Local History, 19-20 September 1987, General Santos City.

1. Frank Lynch, S.J., "The Jesuit Letters of Mindanao As a Source of Anthropological Data," *Philippine Studies* 4 (1956): 247-72.

After the change of governments, the Spanish Jesuits continued to publish selected missionary letters, not as independent volumes, but in regular mission magazines in Spain not easily available to the Filipino researcher. The destruction of Philippine libraries during the second world war made the printed *Cartas* hard to find. That is why Philippine historians generally have not been aware of them.

Written by Spanish Jesuits active in the Mindanao missions during the second half of the nineteenth century, the *Cartas* are a varied lot: reports to superiors on work done; appeals for help, especially more personnel; complaints of obstruction by Spanish government officials, or Chinese retail merchants on occasion; analyses of the setbacks suffered by newly opened missions or the dispersal of Christian settlements; the Muslim problem in south central Mindanao, Basilan and Sulu; etc. The letters, therefore, are not historical essays, except occasionally when they include brief chronologies of the growth of a particular mission written to inform the Jesuit superiors. But used properly, they are indispensable and, in cases, the only sources available for local Mindanao history. This is, of course, to the better, since explicitly historical accounts would have given us only a partial view of events according to the writer's prejudices.

Before the Jesuits returned in 1861, Mindanao was closed to Filipino and Spanish Christians alike. There was a military garrison in Zamboanga, a naval base at Basilan, and Christian towns and missions dotted the northern littoral. But the unbaptized mountain tribes in the interior had remained untouched. The Jesuit missionaries who had arrived in the upper Agusan valley in 1875 found an area as backward as when Legazpi first arrived in 1565. Missionary work in Mindanao had always been carried on by the Recollects, but they were too few to be able to penetrate inland. How terribly short of men they were is best seen in the death in eastern Mindanao of a Recollect friar in 1860. Until Fr. Jose Fernandez Cuevas, the Jesuit Superior who had gone there looking for the best place to open a Jesuit mission, the Recollect Provincial Superior in Manila had no knowledge of what had happened to the friar who had already been dead some weeks previously.

#### THE MINDANAO MISSIONS

The opening of the Jesuit missions in the second half of the nineteenth century breached the thick wall of mountains and forests protecting the interior, and paved the way for the modernization of Mindanao. Scientific expeditions were undertaken, like the one by Joseph Montano in 1879-80. Grammars and dictionaries were written, Mindanao fauna and flora were studied, and initial ethnological works

were published, like the one by Joaquin Rajal y Larre, a district governor of Davao, and Blumentritt in the 1890s.<sup>2</sup> Many of the towns and the roads in Mindanao today were originally respectively the missions and the inchoate trails opened by the missionaries to connect them in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Jesuit missions were established in geographically strategic stations called *residences*. From these as the base of operations, mission trips to the surrounding areas were undertaken. These residences were Tamontaka (opened in 1861), Zamboanga (1862), Davao (1868), Dapitan (1870), Surigao (1871), Butuan (1875), Sulu (1875), and Tagoloan (1877). Penetration of the interior was especially successful through the Agusan river valley and up the Bukidnon plateau through the Tagoloan river. Late in nineteenth century efforts were made to link the northern missions in Bukidnon with Tamontaka in the south but the war of 1896 aborted the project.

The first impression one gets from the letters is the Jesuits' Mindanao was not a *tabula rasa*, but an island gripped with tension. Tribal fighting in the mountains was chronic, slavery and kidnapping were endemic, and, where the Muslims were in command, both anti-Spanish feeling and Muslim-tribal hostility could flare up any moment in bloodshed.

In the face of renewed interest by the other European powers in Mindanao and Sulu in the nineteenth century, Spain decided to make sure of her hold over the southern Philippine islands. To consolidate her military gains, the Jesuits were sent to Mindanao. Royal instructions ordered them to "resettle and evangelize the unbaptized mountain tribes" of Mindanao and the adjacent islands. If they also succeeded in Christianizing the Muslims, so much the better. But their primary concern was the modernization of the mountain tribes. They were therefore, apostles, patriots, and explorers rolled into one. Subsidized by government funds, the Jesuits spread the Christian gospel while also acting as agents of social change through some kind of a government resettlement program.

Historians always begin with some chronological point of departure. It is more important, I believe, to look at the qualitative starting point from which the Jesuits had to start. In the Jesuit letters we find

2. Joseph Montano "Rapport à M. le Ministre de l'Instruction publique sur une mission aux Philippines (1879-81)," *Archives des Missions Scientifiques et Littéraires*, 3 Serie XI (1885): 271-279; *Voyage aux Philippines et en Malaisie* (Paris, 1886); Joaquin Rajal y Larre, *Obras varias publicadas e inéditas*. 2 tomos (Madrid, 1879-81); Ferdinand Blumentritt, "Die Eingeborenen der Insel Mindanao," *Mitteilungen der Königlich Geographischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 28 (1886): 215-24; *Die Philippinen. Eine Übersichtliche Darstellung der ethnographischen und historicopolitischen Verhältnisse des Archipels* (Hamburg, 1900).

at least five identifiable groups in Mindanao: the mountain tribes all over the island; the Muslims, mainly in the southwest; the Christians in the seacoast towns; the Chinese merchants; and the Spanish government and military officials.

Surprisingly, the last two groups proved more than once to be a thorn in the side of the missionaries. With notable examples, the Spanish officials were a scandalous group. Not a few from the top rank were masons and flaunted their anticlericalism and haughty neglect of their Christian duties, effectively neutralizing what the missionaries tried to build in the eyes of their catechumens. In the southwest, where Muslim control was undisputed, they openly opposed the mission approach of peaceful assimilation and mutual toleration, arguing that only by sword and rifle would the Muslims be brought to their knees. But where the Spanish officials worked harmoniously with the missionary, as Spanish law envisioned, resettlement progressed in rapid strides. This was the case in Surigao and Agusan and in Davao later. In 1885, just ten years after the Jesuits had entered the Agusan river valley, the Jesuit Mission Superior in Manila reported the region had already been "fully" Christianized.<sup>3</sup>

Next we have the ubiquitous Chinese retailer, whose role in Mindanao has not yet been fully studied. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when Mindanao was the source of beeswax and other forest products, the Chinese trader could either hinder or help the missions. For a piece of iron which the tribes needed for an *agung* or bolo, the Chinese more often exacted in exchange products far in excess of the goods they sold. For obvious reasons, he encouraged his customers to avoid the settlements where they would be subject to the tribute and forced labor. One can see why the missionary, who exposed the trader's tricks, was loved by the mountain tribes and easily won them over to Christianity, but was at the same time feared and secretly opposed by him. Secretly — because either the government officials generally sided with the priest, or the tribal leaders themselves for some personal gain covered up for the Chinese.

### THE MUSLIMS

Mindanao also includes the Muslims. What did the Jesuits write about them? One afternoon just before sunset, two Jesuits went out on

3. Juan Ricart, S.J. "Relación sobre las Reducciones de infieles en el distrito de Surigao, presentada al Gobierno General en 27 de enero de 1885, por el Superior de la Misión de la Compañía de Jesús P. Juan Ricart" in Pablo Pastells, *Missions de la Compañía de Jesús Filipinas en el Siglo XXX III* (Barcelona, 1917), p. 467-76.

a stroll along the Jolo waterfront. A group of Muslim fishermen were washing and arranging their nets after the day's work and the priests stopped to chat with them. Out of nowhere, two young men in white pounced upon them, their shining kris finding their mark as the two missionaries wounded and bloody fell on the sand. *Juramentados!* The sultan condemned the act, and the government did its best—successfully—to save the lives of the victims. The latter, after the initial trauma, prayed not only for their assailants, but for the total conversion of the Muslims, hoping that their Christianization would put an end to this painful tradition.

When the Jesuits arrived in 1861, they had no clear policy regarding the Muslims. Some, with only book knowledge, suggested staying away from them. They insisted they had been sent to Mindanao to resettle and evangelize the mountain tribes. But one of the pioneer Jesuits in Tamontaka, Fr. Jose Ignacio Guerrico, urged an open policy of charity and justice, since Christ died equally to save the Christian, the pagan, and the Muslim. Unlimited charity, he wrote, was the Christian way. And if they avoided the Muslims, that would only confirm the latter in their anti-Christian ways. On the other hand, the Muslim's conversion would promote that of the unbaptized mountain tribes. Then, slave raids and outright appropriation of others' harvests would stop, since both groups, united in the one religious faith, would regard themselves as brothers.

In 1872, a severe drought dried up the fertile Pulangi valley, forcing the Muslims to barter slave children for rice. The Jesuits pounced on the chance and, with money donated from Manila, Cebu, and Spain, established an asylum where they raised as Christians the children ransomed (or, appropriately, *libertos*) from their Muslim masters. When the children grew up, the liberto married the liberta and settled in the new Christian town of Tamontaka (now part of modern Cotabato City) the Jesuits had set up for them. They received a house and lot, a farm with tools and a carabao, plus clothes and food until they took in their first harvest. It was the dream of the Jesuits in Cotabato to form towns everywhere with the *libertos* as the nucleus. But lack of funds—and time, since the revolution of 1896 interrupted the Jesuit work in Mindanao—limited the project only to Tamontaka. But even then, the sight of the growing, healthy and well-fed *libertos*, the lush sugar, rice, and corn plantations they raised under the guidance of the Jesuit Brothers and RVM Sisters attracted the Muslims. Many of them escaped from their masters and sought refuge with the missionaries. Others who could not bring themselves to such risky step, and many Muslim leaders themselves, admitted there was a difference between their way of life and that of the Christians. As one of the Jesuits wrote, Tamon-

taka may not have led to numerous conversions, but it broke down prejudice and softened Moro attitudes towards Christianity. Indeed, in time of need, the Muslims (simple folk, *panditas*, datus, and sultans) did not hesitate to approach the Jesuits.

#### THE MOUNTAIN TRIBES

A common observation in the Jesuit letters is the docility and the ease with which the mountain tribes accepted the Christian faith. The reason is not hard to find. When the Jesuits came, the latter were not without their own religious beliefs and practices. The Mandayas, for example, had their Mansilata and Badla, the good and the bad god respectively, while the Bagobos believed in Busao, the god who had to be appeased by human sacrifice. It was, therefore, a matter of purifying their concepts rather than of introducing them to teachings they would have rejected as totally new and beyond their grasp.

Second, and this is true in northeastern Mindanao, people were still in the preurban socioeconomic stage in which primary needs of food, clothing, and shelter were satisfied by the most primitive methods of swidden agriculture. Their only tools were the bolo and the spear. They had not even seen a carabao or a horse such that when the Jesuits showed them one, they could hardly believe the power of the carabao pulling slowly but steadily a loaded canoe upstream! And because of the lack of the proper tools their usual recourse when the harvest was poor, or when bad weather blighted their crops, was to move to a new site which they cleared and burned before planting again. They might return to their former farm, but the second time around, cogon had already grown, against which the bolo was useless. They needed the plow, which they did not have.

This explains why tribal life was nomadic. And, as a first step, the missionaries tried to resettle the people in permanent communities and permanent farms to provide food for the present and the future. But this meant a radical change of values. They had to accept the new political system and a new society, which immediately brought up the problem of social authority. Tribal society hinged on ties of kinship, and authority was exercised by one's blood relations. And although the missionaries tried to preserve traditional lines of power and authority, public officials could not always be one's relatives. It took some time before the new Christians not only accepted but lived according to new social and human values.

It was not enough to establish Christian settlements. They had to be consolidated and the people accustomed to stable community life. Dissolution of the smallest community was setback, and the Jesuits tried to keep their neophytes from slipping back to the mountains.

In 1879, Lingcuban was *gobernadorcillo* of Remedios, Agusan. But he had second thoughts and regretted becoming a Christian and having submitted to the government. He forbade his people from attending the catechetical lessons or accepting Christian baptism. Twice he went berserk, killing innocent families in nearby Las Nieves. Fr. Saturnino Urios, the Jesuit missionary, warned him, but he did not listen and was demoted from office. Humiliated and wrathful, he sent his minions around threatening with fire and sword those who would dare oppose him. Four frightened communities disappeared overnight. In an interview with Urios, Lingcuban demanded ₱100 for the loss of his slaves whom he had released when they were baptized. The local militia surprised him, however, as, brandishing a spear and wearing a crown, he was harranguing his men during a ritual banquet before setting out on a raid. Lingcuban escaped by jumping down a window, as did his two brothers, *bagani* like him, and Macahinlay, another disgruntled *bagani*. But his wife and children were taken into custody. Soon, the pitiful voice of Lingcuban hidden somewhere could be heard pleading for mercy, promising he would surrender in three days, but asking for amnesty.

Three days came and went. Lingcuban did not appear. The poor man, hungry and scared, wandering aimlessly, had been killed by Sugod, a relative and henchman. Disgusted by his leader's cowardly escape from the troops, he ended the latter's boasts of invincibility as, with a single sharp blow he chopped off Lingcuban's head.

By mid-December 1880, the Lingcuban affair was closed. But on the last day of the year, Urios learned the new settlement of Amparo near Butuan had also disappeared. The French ethnologist, Joseph Montano, had gone there measuring heads, arms, legs, etc., and scaring the people away.

Urios remained unperturbed. Before Montano, some Christian traders had left them merchandise on credit. After consuming the goods, the Manobos—perhaps they were loathe to part with their wax; perhaps the price was too high; perhaps they had never intended to pay in the first place—chose the only option left, namely, gather in the harvest and disappear into the pathless forests where no creditors could locate them. This was the reason why Amparo was deserted and Urios felt, after a month, maybe less, hunger and sickness would drive the escapees (or *remontados*) back to the Christian settlement. He was right.

More serious was the continued threat of a *bagani* raid. Paradoxically, it was easier in the new Christian settlements to obey than to command, for the *kampilan* was faster and surer for settling disputes. But in jungle tradition, one death had to be avenged by another death.



This was one of the more common complaints one finds in the letters, namely, the bagani honor system. To the missionaries, this was professional murder. They saw only the native lack of an appreciation of the value of each individual human being or the Christian dignity of each human person. But for the unbaptized tribes, it was a duty of honor. To aspire to the lowest bagani rank of leadership, and the privilege of using a red kerchief or turban around the head, one had to prove he had killed between five and ten victims. The next rank, distinguished by a red kerchief and a red shirt, was granted after killing between ten and twenty victims. And the highest rank, with the privilege of using a red kerchief, red shirt, red pants, and red decorations on one's weapons, was won by killing more than twenty. In the words of a missionary, they "cut off a lock of the victim's hair to adorn the rim of their shield. They count the number of victims by the number of locks of hair."<sup>4</sup> One did not have to kill by one's own hands. It was enough to instigate the act. There was also the case of a bagani, respected and feared by all and a braggart about his looks despite his pock-marked face. He claimed he had victimized about two hundred hapless men, women, and children. But he had not even killed a fly. How did he carry out the deed of honor? Stricken with small pox, he had contaminated an entire village!

This perplexed the missionaries. To them the bagani code had neither rhyme nor reason. The important thing was to kill a human being and the satisfaction of avenging it with death. When no human victim was found—as when settlements fled in time—the code demanded avenging it with the death of the first thing one met, a cat or a dog.

Tribal marriage also occasioned bagani raids. The bride's parents usually demanded slaves in exchange for their daughter to compensate for the mother's milk when she was a baby. Without resources to barter or purchase slaves, it was accepted practice to kidnap them, which meant killing the families who resisted.

Not infrequently, too, death in the family from natural causes was also reason for bagani killings. To assuage the pain of his wife's death, the chief of Kalisayan killed one of his slaves. In revenge, the victim's brother killed a second slave. And to avenge this death, the chieftain killed a third slave. And so on, until escape saved the rest.

#### THE FINAL LETTERS

The last published letter before the Jesuits left Mindanao was dated at Sumilao, Bukidnon, 27 November 1894. By that time, the Jesuits had

4. Pablo Pastells, S.J. to the Mission Superior, Cateel, 8 June 1878: *Cartas de los PP. de la Compañía de Jesús de la Misión de Filipinas* 2: 144.

spread to nine residences: Zamboanga, Jolo, Tamontaka, Davao, Caraga, Surigao, Butuan, Dapitan, and Balingasag. These enjoyed jurisdiction over twenty-nine municipalities all over Mindanao. In 1861, there had been only 4 Jesuits (2 priests and 2 brothers) in Mindanao, and by 1899, their number had increased to 103 (58 priests and 45 brothers). But these are merely the statistical frame, a quantitative outline of the change and growth that had taken place. Or, in classroom terminology, the facts of history. The historian still needs to analyze these facts, this movement. What do the *Cartas* tell us of these changes in space and time?

On 1 October 1891, Urios wrote a letter to Fr. Pedro Torra, procurator of the Jesuit Normal School in Manila, his flock in the Agusan River valley was "well on the road to heaven." He had just returned from sick leave in Manila, and changes in his mission were more noticeable to him after a short absence. Bagani raids, he began, were hardly mentioned any more, pagan sacrifices were almost unheard of. Formerly, he added, an adulteress had no hesitation recounting her deed "in the hope that her partner would pay the few animals their pagan system of justice would impose" to satisfy her husband. But now, there was

... a greater appreciation of one's personal worth and dignity, more personal honor, more refinement. When they arrange marriages, the betrothed and their families mutually exchange views and opinions about the other's life and conduct. Now, when death occurs . . . they mourn as Christians . . . not with such dramatic and exaggerated demonstrations with howling, gestures, and lamentations for the material goods lost with someone's demise.<sup>5</sup>

Previously, Agusan forests were rich with unexploited woods left to rot on the ground or in the Agusan river and its tributaries. In the midst of so much natural wealth, the people were hungry and lived not much better than beasts. But now, there was a sudden commercial growth, and people worked, eating, living, and dressing just like their Christian peers in the rest of the Archipelago and Spain. Not only in the valley, but in the rest of Mindanao, merchants and trading companies were opening local branches. Abaca was commercially profitable, and the Chinese, the native-born Filipino, the Spaniard, and the mountain tribes now attuned to community life, rivalled one another in the exploitation of abaca, rice, corn and other forest products. With this economic growth, people no longer thought of going

5. Saturnino Urios S.J. to Pedro Torra, S.J. *Cartas* 9: 588.

back to their mountain huts. Instead, they began to save for the future. Those who had money began to send their sons to school in Manila, the foundation, in the words of the missionary, for the future "enlightenment of Mindanao." Unfortunately, educated and speaking and writing impeccable Spanish, they were gobbled up by the commercial houses which paid them much higher salaries than the schools or government employment could guarantee them.

But it was a bright picture. Signs were everywhere the missionary efforts were beginning to bear fruit. A good indication would be that the later letters coming from the original mission areas have by the 1890s become "boring," as they deal generally with administrative matters. "Adventure" reports are still plentiful, and these are about mission trips to new areas, like the southern littoral of Mindanao.

By 1892, there was a total of 191,493 Christians in Mindanao living in 59 pueblos, 44 *visitas*, and 139 *reducciones* or settlements, besides uncounted *rancherias* or mere clusters of huts. But then, the revolution occurred. The Jesuits wanted to stay on. But when the Spanish government fell, and there was no guarantee they would be unharmed, the mission superior in Manila recalled all the missionaries from Mindanao.

The last Jesuits to leave Mindanao finally sailed from Zamboanga in 1899. One can imagine that scene on the wharf, where the missionaries aboard the boat taking them to Manila tried to hold back their tears as they watched their Christians, especially the *liberto* who had fled with them from Tamontaka, waving goodbye as they wept disconsolately. Thus was closed another chapter in the history of Mindanao where in their limited way the Jesuits, serving God and their king, sought to make the unbaptized mountain tribes human beings first in order to make them Christian.

What we do find in the *Cartas*? The discerning reader will find in them the process of development of a society through a change in the values of a people.