

Precolonial Traditions and Practices of the Agta in San Mariano, Isabela

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to record the precolonial traditions and practices on the life cycle of the Agta in Sitio Diwagdan, San Jose, San Mariano, Isabela relative to conception, child birth, child rearing, courtship, marriage, and death and burial; also to document how the Agta observe their precolonial traditions and practices along the following dimensions of life: social organization, religious practice, economic, politics, and education.

Based from the discussions made and findings of the study, it can be concluded that the Agta have rich precolonial traditions and practices on life cycle relative to conception, childbirth, child rearing, courtship, marriage, and death and burial. They have limited social environment; they are animistic and open to other religious sects; they depend on hand to mouth subsistence as they rely much on rattan resources in the forest as the major source of their livelihood; the Agta political system is limited to their tribe in which they do not involve themselves in politics at the barangay level; and education for the Agta children is the least priority of the Agta parents.

Keywords: *Agta, precolonial traditions and practices, life cycle, dimensions of life, Sitio Diwagdan, San Jose, San Mariano, Isabela*

INTRODUCTION

One of the earliest people who inhabited the Philippines were the *Negritos*, also called *Aeta*, *Agta*, *Ita*, *Dumagat*, *Baluga*, *Mangyans*. They were black, short, and barbaric in nature. They often have kinky hair and flat nose. They fed on fruits and roots from the forest and upon the wild animals as well as birds which they hunted. They wandered naked except in their privacies which were draped with barks of trees and beach nut for the women (Agoncillo,1974).

These natives resemble the people who live in Africa and South Sahara. Their nomadic characteristic dictated them to spread and populate the six regions in Southeast Asia, Northeast India, Northwest of Sumatra, and even Eastern Malaysia. They reached as far as New Guinea, Congo, and other parts of Africa (Gonzales, et al., 1983). Such claim made by other anthropologists was strengthened by an anthropologist in Harvard University by the name William Howell, who pointed out that the *Negritos* lived in Congo, Africa from 1800 B.C. and spread to Guinea and Assam (Burma), North Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra, and Borneo (as cited by Bennagen, 1985).

It is believed that a small group reached the Philippines through Melanesia, new Guinea and Fiji through the "land bridges" when the Philippines was still connected with the continent of Asia (Gonzales et al., 1983). Such information was confirmed by Turnbull, Wilfred (1979) illustrating that these short, black people migrated from Papua New Guinea by "crossing the oceans and seas." According to an Italian contemporary traveler named Gemelli Careri, they simply called themselves dwellers and "lords of the land" which is an indication of the antiquity of their settlement (Dela Costa, 1992).

Accordingly, these Agtas were the first modern humans that settled in what is known today as the Philippines, who had arrived there between 60,000 and 35,000 years ago (Magaña, 2000). These people were part of a major population dispersal that reached all the way to Australia and the Bismarck Islands. They entered the Thin, a south-north direction, settling along coasts and in broad river valleys. Living in small, mobile groups, they subsisted on hunting, fishing, gathering, and possibly extensive forms of agriculture (Minter, T. et al., 2004). This situation remained, for a long time, but about 4,000 years ago farming peoples entered the northern part of the archipelago from Taiwan. Contacts between the hunter-gatherer and farming peoples differed. In some locations, the former were assimilated by the latter. In such situation, they may have been exterminated by them, hence, they developed symbiotic relationships. Such was the case in the Northern Luzon; in the rough, coastal strip, which was unattractive for agriculture, hunting, fishing, gathering forest food products. This system still survives among their descendants, called, the Agta (Magaña, 2000).

The vast forest and forestlands of San Mariano, Isabela provide for environmental services and benefits as well as social, economic, cultural benefits not just in the municipality of San Mariano but also in the region as well. The forestland of San Mariano is home to the indigenous Agta

who are solely dependent on its natural resources for their living. It is covered by the Sierra Madre Biodiversity Corridor, one of the three declared Biodiversity Corridors in the Philippines (FLUP, 2009).

Objectives of the Study

The research aimed to answer the following objectives:

1. To record the precolonial traditions and practices on the life cycle of the Agta in Sitio Diwagdan, San Jose, San Mariano, Isabela relative to conception, child birth, child rearing, courtship, marriage, and death and burial; and
2. To document how the Agta observe their precolonial traditions and practices along the following dimensions of life: social organization, religious practice, economic, politics, and education.

The Negritos or Agtas in San Mariano

The Philippines is one society with so many ethnic groups. One of these ethnic groups is the “*Aetas*”, “*Aeta*”, and “*Ati*” believed by some to derive from the Malay word “*hitam*” meaning “black”. They are dark-skinned people, short, small of frame, kinky-haired, snub-nosed, and with black eyes. *Aetas* have different names which may refer to their history, their geographical situation, or their relationships with their neighbor. The *Aetas* are among the earliest known inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago, believed to have travelled by land bridges in historic times. They are sensitive, courageous and hardworking people who experienced displacement in their way of life. For example in the Northern part of Luzon, most of them settled in the provinces around Mt. Pinatubo and live a nomadic way of life surviving by foraging and hunting, depending on nature to provide for everything they need. Despite such crises, they continue to fight for the preservation of their culture, the provision of educational opportunities for their youth, and their economical livelihood in a dignified and productive manner.

The *Negritos* are dispersed all over the archipelago from Northeastern Luzon to the Visayan islands and the Northeastern interior of Mindanao. The Negrito is likewise found near pockets of arable valleys farmed by the Malays with whom they would conduct limited barter and trading transactions. *Negritos* are likewise seen along the western slopes of

Sierra Madre which runs through the provinces of Cagayan, Isabela, and Nueva Vizcaya (De Capia, 2004).

In Cagayan, and it is believed that in the coastal towns of Isabela such as Palanan, Maconacon, and Divilacan, *Negritos* were already found to occupy the place as early as 1903. Relative to this information, Miano, T. A. (2011) unraveling the fact that 25,999 years ago, the first settlers in Isabela, in northeastern Luzon, were the *Aetas*, who were dark-skinned and kinky-haired pygmies. The descendants of the nomadic *Aetas* (or *Negritos*) were the *Dumagats* now settling and roaming in the forested Sierra Madre mountain range in eastern Isabela and Aurora province. Palananon today in Divilacan, Maconacon, Palanan, and Dinapigue are relatives of the *Aetas*.

Despite globalization and fast changing development in Science and Technology, there are still some groups of people particularly the *Negritos* who remained ethnocentric and unmoved by these technological advancements (De Capia, 2001). The Agta in San Mariano, Isabela represent a minority of backward and untainted civilization while the rest of humanity is in constant search for ways to improve the quality of life. The Agta of San Mariano have remained undisturbed to such changes. As per observation in their way of living, the primitive men are slowly incorporated into the present through the tremendous effort of the government to make them live in equal footing with the present generation. Efforts had been done to uplift their lives, educate and teach them livelihood projects. But much to the desire of the government these aborigines continue to isolate themselves from the people of the modernized world. The government continues to recognize them as integral constituents of the nation for we cannot hope to understand the history of our nation, its rich culture, traditions, and religion without taking into account the cultural and social life of its inhabitants, more particularly its earliest settlers, the *Negritos* or the Agta.

The Agta really preserve their culture as they peacefully live in the forestlands and mountainous barangays of San Mariano, particularly the Agta in the Sitio of Diwagdan in San Jose. Hence, the study calls for the documentation of the precolonial traditions and practices of the Agtas.

Precolonial Traditions and Practices on the Life Cycle of the Agtas

The precolonial traditions and practices on life cycle were still observed by the cultural people like the Agta. Jocano (1976) found out in his study of childbirth that delivery among the Tagalogs can be hastened by feeding the expectant mother with eggs and cacao and making the pregnant mother lie down with her head toward the east. Reyes (1986) in

his study on the social life of six upland barangays found out significant findings on some of their practices, customs, and beliefs. A certain ceremony is performed when a baby is born. Money is placed in the bath of the baby who will afterwards be wrapped in a diaper. When he gets sick, he is baptized by an old man in the barrio and later be baptized in the church. When this baby is baptized, the godparents pay their registration fees. After baptism, the child is brought near the stove then the baby is given to the godparent who will hand it to the mother.

The Maguindanaoan, according to Glang and Convocar (1998), practiced various rules governing conception and pregnancy of a woman. The pregnant woman is prohibited from fasting or when she is nourishing a child. When a baby is born, his umbilical cord is cut with a bamboo sharpened with a knife and before throwing the placenta, the *walian* or midwife fills the placenta with water, empties it three times to temper the child's actions when he grows up. He is circumcised at age five and is protected from evil spirits. Palogan (1996) found out in her study that Christianized members have become acculturated with modern courtship and wedding practices. A woman observes a variety of do's and dont's during the conception period. Birth is witnessed by a native midwife and native instruments are used in the delivery technique to ensure safety. The husband is an active participant in the birth of a child.

Like the lowlanders, there is a profuse giving of gifts by relatives for the new born member of the family. As soon as the child is big enough, he is placed at the back of his mother with the use of a warm blanket. She is not at all impeded in her household chores and farm work.

In the readings of Pestante (1977), he cited the following findings about the rituals of love of the *Negritos* in Mt. Pinatubo. He said that *Negritos* still practice polygamy. If a man wants to marry, he should accumulate sufficient *bandi* or a bride price which includes bows, arrows, bolos, clothes, shoot guns, and money. A child is betrothed while he is still in the womb so more *bandi* would be accumulated. He noted as saying: "the principal causes of trouble between Negrito families stemmed from failure to meet the "bride price." The aforementioned researcher also conducted a study on the *Tasadays*. He described them as exogamous band or paralegal band because the wife always joins the band of the husband.

Furthermore, Pestante (1977) , an anthropologist, narrated that the Philippine pagan Christian and Muslim groups came to Bontoc, Ifugao an adjacent tribe in the mountain province. The study of Kroeber about the

Sagada Igorot was analyzed and found out that the young Igorot leaves his household to sleep with his age mate in an *ato* with an *alog* or *olog*.

In like manner, Manuel (1976) in his article about the prehistoric burials among the Manuvu in Cotabato and Davao reported the three prehistoric burials and other ancient customs. The first burial practice was rather simple - the dead was wrapped in a mat or matting of bamboo slats, then bundled and fastened up in a tree. The second was observed when there was a big tree with forks around it that could conveniently receive the wrapped. The bamboo basket served as coffin and fastened to prevent it from dropping to the ground. The third burial practice was called aerial burial. The tree branches were cut and planted crisscross and were constructed into a makeshift platform where the bundled remains were laid ensuring that this was beyond the reach of wild animals. The tree burial was practiced up to the close of the 19th century and even the early decades of the present century.

Alongside with the cultural practice of the Manuvu in Cotabato and Davao are their observance of the War party, slaves taking, wife stealing, and the practice of human sacrifice which led them to build their houses in groups on top of trees safe enough from the spears below. More importantly, the natives believed that when a member of the family died, the house would be inhabited by evil spirits, hence, this drove them to leave the house. The same author also noted that the Sulod platform type of burial, but unlike that of the Manuvu which is in the open air, theirs was confined within the house. They also sealed the coffin of their dead with resin or *almaciga*, while the Andaman who is an islander who lived west of the Malay Peninsula, placed their platform on a tree in which case more honorable burial is afforded only to those who were in their prime of life.

Precolonial Traditions and Practices on Dimensions of Life of the Agta

According to Tessa Minter et al., (1991), the Agta of the Sierra Madre has a population numbering about 10,000 individuals. They live along the coasts, in the forested uplands, and in the denuded foothills of the Northern Sierra Madre. Their settlement patterns range from sedentary to highly mobile, especially in the lower lying areas which were logged-over by timber companies in the second half of the twentieth century. The Agta have often adopted a sedentary life in or near non-Agta villages. They combine paid land labor with tilling their own small plots of land, in alternation with occasional hunting and fishing activities. This is in the case

in the San Ildefonso Peninsula in Aurora province, and in parts of Cagayan and Isabela province.

In addition, a large share of the Agta population, retains an economy, social organization, and settlement pattern that is typical of hunter-gatherers. This is especially so in and around the Sierra Madre Natural Park. The Agta must marry outside their own extended family, and preferably outside the *mapisan*. Each household usually consists of a nuclear family, but widowed parents often offer siblings, or orphaned cousins to take up temporary residence with the family, too. Households have their own dwelling and health. Dwellings usually are open wooden and bamboo structures with palm leaf roofs, although the Agta occasionally build closed sawn-timber huts. In the hot, dry season, the Agta live under *lean-to's*, which are constructed of a few wooden poles and a woven palm leaf shield. These shields are called *pinanahang*, literally, a place to be abandoned.

The Agta subsist in a mixed economy; the composition of which varies over time and between residential groups. They procure products through fishing, hunting, and gathering. They exchange part of these products with non-Agta residents and traders for rice, salt, coffee, sugar, and other commodities (Minter et al., 1995). Furthermore, the study reported that the Agta's socio-economic system has persisted despite great changes it has had to reckon with. It has survived the arrival of early farming peoples, the imposition of colonial and post colonial states, civil war deforestation, and immigration. The Agta owe their cultural survival to their great flexibility. They are always ready to shift to new opportunities as they arise, and thereby show an admirable ability to make the best of situations that are beyond their control.

METHODOLOGY

The study on the precolonial traditions and practices of the Agta of San Jose, San Mariano, Isabela used the qualitative ethnographic research method in documenting the precolonial traditions and practices of the Agta. During the researcher's immersion with the Agta of Sitio Diwagden in San Jose, San Mariano, wherein he conducted literacy classes for the Agta for eight consecutive Saturdays, observation technique and interview method were employed to record the Agta's precolonial traditions and practices with the help of an audio cell phone recorder. The following Agta and NCIP personnel were interviewed and have supplied information to

the research: Citing Alejo, Nestor Alejo, Marciano Beltran, Delfin Gagucas, Lourdes Gagucas, Barbara Garcia, Lenie Garcia, Samuel Gonzales, Mariesol Ramirez, Kanu Viloría, and Neblata Viloría. Data were gathered, interpreted and analyzed to determine the cycle of life and dimensions of life of the Agta.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Any indigenous ordinary Agta woman understands that conception is likely to occur in the life of an Agta married individual once *kadawyan* (menstruation) ceases after sexual contact. According to Mr. Marciano Beltran (2014), IKSP Coordinator of the National Commission for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) Service Center of San Mariano, Isabela that when he was conducting a census among the Agta in Sitio Diwagdan, he observed that on the average, a 13-14 year old Agta girl usually enters into marriage and gets pregnant immediately. In the mind of the ordinary Agta, a woman who does not have menstruation anymore for two to three months is understood to be pregnant already, thus, she goes and verifies her situation to a *manghihilot* or (midwife). If proven that she is conceiving, then she is advised of the measures that she should take relative to her pregnancy for the safety of the baby in her womb. Therefore, a pregnant woman is prohibited from fasting because she is nourishing a life in her womb. During pregnancy, the couple is extra careful and endure the pain which the pregnant woman feels for the safety of the child especially if it is going to be the first child.

An Agta woman by the name *Citing Alejo*, a mother of four children was not allowed to work and had to stay at home when she was pregnant with her first child. *Nestor Alejo*, her husband saw to it that Citing had to be provided with all the things she needed until the day she gave birth. She was nourished with fruits especially banana on the belief that the child would be resistant to sickness just like a banana which after having been cut grows on and on. But her second, third, and fourth pregnancies were not taken cared of in the way the first was because of their belief that once the first birth had been out of danger, most likely the succeeding conceptions and births would also be successful.

A pregnant Agta is also given more attention. When she craves for fruits or any food, the husband should satisfy her request or readily given her order. Once the fruits are ready, the Agta should carefully pick lest they fall which is a sign of bad omen. Most of the practices and beliefs during

conception are domestic in nature. Other practices had been disregarded due to change of time and acculturation.

Childbirth

Due to lack of knowledge as the Agta did not go to school, the ordinary Agta of Diwagdan do not really know when a pregnant woman gives birth because they are not familiar with its nature. However, they are very sure of one thing, that the child is going to be born out of the womb of a mother after nine months of pregnancy. Other Agtas especially those not literate give birth at any place, anytime especially the first timers.

Normally, according to Mrs. Leni Garcia (2014), an IKSP Coordinator of NCIP Service Center, the Agta mother gives birth in her home. She is attended by an Agta elder male or female. While delivering a child, hornbill feathers should be burned near the stairs of the house. They do this burning because they believe it will ease the mother's pain in giving birth. In the absence of a hornbill, the skull or a braided piece of cloth can be burned for the same reason. The Agta do this because they believe that the burned cloth emits smoke which during the first night is believed to protect the child from being taken by the black spirit.

At birth, the Agta baby is not given a name. They name the child when he starts to talk and is able to walk already. Their reason for this may have something to do with high mortality of the Agta new born babies. To name a child is a privilege of the mother. A name is only given when the child starts to open his or her eyes, that is, after two weeks or (*durwa lawas*). Usually, a name is only given without the family name. The Agta do not adhere to family name unless they are being baptized in which case they take the family name of their godfather or godmother. Such name may be based from dramas which they hear from the radio or names of their ancestors.

Child Rearing of the Agta

The Agta consider their children as a source of joy. The Agta parents really work hard to provide their children with the basic needs. The Agta father would do everything to ensure the security and brighter future of the child. Similarly, after the mother gives birth, the Agta mother nurtures her child with love and care.

In an interview with Mrs. Mariesol Ramirez (2014), principal of San Jose Integrated School narrated that the Agta mother breastfeeds her baby

up to the age the baby refuses to suck milk from his mother's breast or when another baby is delivered. This information was confirmed by the report paper made by Magaña (2000) regarding the child rearing of the Agta children that from the period of infancy to childhood, the mother breastfeeds and weans the baby up to two years old. The child is tied around her body with a blanket and is carried wherever she goes even when doing domestic chores or gathering activities up to two or three years of age.

At the age of four, the child starts to go with other children for their gatherings, both in the forest and in the river. At the age of six, the Agta child starts to learn fishing and hunting techniques, and foraging. This will be the child's activity with the father or the grandfather and other men in the band until he becomes a teenager. During these activities, the father or the grandfather orients the male-child about their settlement areas, lamp areas, fishing grounds, hunting grounds,, place of foraging activities, other land marks and burial grounds for their ancestors (Magaña, 2000).

Courtship for the Agta

The Agta regard courtship as a primordial event in the formation of a family and marriage. Among them, such practices are simple in as much as they display a simple way of living. Just like any other Filipino nowadays, a male Agta proposes directly to the girl unlike in the past when parents arrange wedding plans for their children. The boy then shows his love by giving some presents like fruits and a part of hunted animal.

Courtship and engagement for the Agta do not take so long and undergo a complicated process. In an interview with an Agta, Lourdes Gagucas who is married to Delfin Gagucas, she mentioned that she was courted when her pubic hair started to appear, an indication that she was already at the right age. Delfin tried to manifest his interest by bringing her some fruits and wild animals two times a day. After three weeks he came along with his parents asking Lourdes to marry him. Her parents seemed to like his idea so they approved such without conferring the matter with her. Since Delfin was then known for being industrious, Lourdes manifested likewise her acceptance.

For the Agta, courtship and engagement do not take a long time and complicated process. When a man and a woman are seen talking to each other and going together constantly, the community will conclude that love springs between the two of them. The young Agta man gives

personal accessories like *manic* and *biskal* made up of colored rosary-liked beads and colored string for their bracelets and necklaces. He courts the maiden and when the feeling is mutual they can start a relationship. The man talks to the parents of the maiden for the approval of the relationship. If they approve, he starts his *serbi* by helping the maiden's parents in their economic and domestic activities. But if the parents disapprove, then the relationship terminates.

The Agta Marriage

Marriage among the Agta is an arrangement by both parents. The parents generally dictate or approve whom the lady will marry. This tradition upholds that an Agta girl is not allowed to marry relatives up to the third degree. Thus, brothers, sisters, and cousins are forbidden from courting or marrying a kin as revealed in an interview with Mrs. Lenie Garcia (2014).

The Agta at Sitio Diwagdan, San Jose, San Mariano, Isabela are generally monogamous because of their belief that marriage is sacred; besides, polygamy for them would mean greater financial responsibilities. In the Agta culture, the marriage union has three forms (Magaña, D. S., 2000). The usual socially approved way is for two sets of parents to arrange a marriage between two children; after a period of bride service and trial marriage, a wedding feast takes place. The second way is through elopement; a boy and a girl arrange privately to run away together, and return to their terribly upset parents after several days, who then agree with the marriage most of the time. The third way is through consensual agreement of a couple where either one or both of them are widowed from a previous marriage, and have come to live together; in this case, there is no wedding feast. As expressed in an interview with Kanu Viloría (2014) and Nebleta Viloría (2014), the newly-wed Agta couple usually establish their own dwelling near their parents or depending on the availability of resources in the settlement.

In the socially approved way of marriage, the Agta observed the usual way of wedding arrangement. Parents of both parties would do the planning and preparation. Preparation starts with the *danun* where the man's parents formally ask the consent of the future bride's parents for marriage. During the *danun*, a few important materials are to be prepared as presents. A betel nut, a piece of cloth, wine, usually gin *pambung* and money if budget warrants. Both parties give their proposals and acceptance during the *danun*. Various topics are discussed during the meeting such as the good qualities to be possessed by the *nobyó* and *nobyá* to make a lifetime

relationship, the date of the wedding, and the manner of its celebration. After this agreement, the woman is considered engaged to the man even without her consent. She is then prohibited to entertain other suitors and to go out from the house before the wedding. The case then is brought to the attention of the community's chieftain, *panglakayen*, or tribal leader who will have to approve such marriage. For the wedding, the girl is usually dressed in glaring color of flower prints and accents and the boy in his best dress, not necessarily native. The couple and some relatives gather with the *Panglakayen* or tribal leader officiating the ceremony.

Nowadays, there are other religious sects that penetrate the settlements of the Agta community and encourage the Agtas with their religious ceremonies like the wedding activity. The Agtas follow their marriage rites which is a celebration of the couple's vow with all the invited guests to partake the food prepared at the wedding reception which include rice, butchered pig or wild boar and fruits.

After the celebration, the bride and the groom stay in the groom's house for their first night. The groom's parents will spend the night at their neighbors giving privacy to the two for their honeymoon. The following day or two, the couple transfer to their new house with some important things which were previously prepared and offered during the *danun*. Before entering the house, rice is sprinkled while couples look up.

Such wedding practices have been in existence in the past and even today as narrated by Kanu Viloría (2014), Mayor of the Agta in Sitio Diwagdan tribe who has experienced such a wedding ceremony. Now he has eight grown up children. Nowadays, the church becomes inclusive and sensitive to the needs of the Indigenous Peoples groups. Hence, the church welcomes the Agta in church activities. Thus, church weddings have slowly come into existence among the Agta culture. The nuptial of the couple together with baptism is now the highlighting activity during fiestas. Agta couples now agree to be wedded in church most especially with some religious sects, private individuals just like the politicians would sponsor the wedding in which case the sponsor's family name will be carried by the couple.

Death and Burial of the Agta

Manang Neblata Viloría (2014), the wife of the Mayor of the Agta Diwagdan tribe narrated that the death for the Agta is full of sorrow and grief for the whole community. Noticeably, if the Agta is a sick member

who could not afford to be hospitalized and there is no hope of being cured, the family could not do remedies except to watch their dying love one to his last breath. Upon death, there is much wailing and lamentations and uttering of farewell words to the dead from the family members. The dead is wrapped with blankets and buried the following day. Miss Barbara Garcia (2014), the Provincial Officer of the NCIP Isabela also confirmed the same information.

Meanwhile, the relatives prepare a coffin or *landasan* made of bamboo for the cadaver. When the coffin is ready, the men dig a hole as fast as they can. Then they bury the dead to the grave and cover it with soil while the corpse of their beloved dead has not decayed yet. Then the Agta men construct a *lean-to* on top of the grave where they can put the personal belongings of the dead. The spear, hook line, bolo, and the cooking pot are usually hanged on the *lean-tos*. All who attended the burial carefully leave the graveyard. As soon as everything is in place, the last to leave the place is obliged to sweep away all the footprints in the grave. They do this because the Agta believe that footprints will make the spirit of the dead haunt them. After the burial, all the members of the band will transfer to another area and stay there for about a year, then return again to their former settlements (Magaña, D. S., 2000).

Pre-colonial Traditions and Practices of the Agta with Regard to Dimensions of Life

Social Organization of the Agta

As revealed during an interview with Mr. Samuel B. Gonzales (2014), Community Development Officer V, San Mariano Service Center, the Agta household is composed of the basic unit, the family or *mattema* which is characterized as nuclear, composing the father, the mother, and children. An Agta family has an average of two to three children. This is due to early child death. The Agta have bands or groupings which consist of two or more bands with extended families. All band heads act as Council of Elders in the barangay level. The head of the band is usually the Mayor of the tribe. At the settlement level, each of them has a specific responsibility over their own band. They call their head as Chairman.

The Agta kinship is bilateral with the nuclear family acting as the social unit. Theirs is a closely-knit family composed of father called *Amang*, mother called *Inang*, sister and brother of both parents are called *dada* and

amay, the children called *ennak*. The couple call each other, *kabanga*, older brother and sister are called *kaka and wadi*. The grandmother is *akas*, and the grandfather is *akay*. The family groupings are called *mattema* and easily changed with the occurrence of birth, marriage, and death and sometimes the scarcity of resources. Agta kinship interfaces closely with economic patterns of production, exchange, and consumption of goods and services in their society.

Religious Practices of the Agta

Undeniably, there had been some influences from Spaniards, Roman Catholicism, and more recently, Protestant missionaries for the Agta religious practice. However, they were not very enthusiastic about these ideas of their lowland neighbors, nor did they take the Christian teachings seriously. The Agtas do not take their own religion very seriously either. There is a systematic belief in their lives and it takes only a secondary place in their ideology. However, according to Miss Barbara Garcia (2014), some Agta join in the church service of other sects who enter into their settlements for a missionary activity.

The Agta are animists. They hold a strong belief in the spiritual world which contains several classes of spirits residing in trees, underground, on rocky headlands, or in caves. They have no religious requirements or practices connected with swidden farming. No augury, magic, prayers, blood sacrifice, nor any ritual practice can be found among tribal swiddeners. If the crop should turnout bad, they will blame it on weather, on insect or lack of weeding and not on any kind of spiritual cause.

The Agta cosmos is divided into two worlds: that of the living Agta, animals and plants (the Agta world) and that of the dead, which inhabit the supernatural. The world is ever-growing since eternal spirits stay and spirits of the mortal join them. The two worlds are exclusive of each other and overlap in space. The inhabitants of both worlds live in the same physical environment. Agtas do not actually worship the spirits, but rather fear them. They believe that most sickness and death are caused by malevolent human spirits and can be avoided by taking sorcery.

The Agta believe that the spirits are child-like and they can be easily evaded, distracted and appeased. The Agta use strategies of avoidance and manipulation in their dealings with the human spirits. Measures are taken to ensure a smooth passage of the soul at the time of death. The soul is said to resist departing from the living. The Agta dispose their dead at

the earliest possible time in the nearest forest. The next thing to do is to burn the *lean-to* and more important belongings of the deceased. Then the bereaved family moves to a distant place where the camp of the relatives is located. In this way, they believe that they will not be bothered by the spirit of the dead especially when the cause of death is violent (Magaña, 2000).

Another characteristic of the Agta religious belief with the dead is that after death, the spirit leaves the body and stays invisibly with humanity. It may protect them, or cause them sickness especially when prohibitions on material things left by the dead is not observed and followed. It is practically animistic in nature (Magaña, 2000).

Economic Life of the Agta

The Agta households manifest an economic family. The father as hunter, the mother as gatherer and the adult kids as helper for the father or mother in hunting, fishing, or gathering of forest products. Indeed, the Agta social movement depends primarily on the available resources in the area. If wild pigs are scarce, they move to other areas for hunting. If the forest products and food resources are scarce, they transfer to other areas to gather food for the family. After three or more months, they return to the area they consider as their culture where the older members of the bands are left behind, as per interview with Mr. Samuel Gonzales (2014).

As mentioned previously, the Agta of Diwagdan, just like any other *Negritos* scattered all over Luzon are nomadic in nature. Where the foods are, the Agtas are there also. Hunting, fishing, foraging, and gardening are not the only subsistence activities of the *Negritos* or Agtas in a given man – environment relationship. Corollary to this are their person to person relationship in a complex and continuous process of cultural creation. In hunting, apart from the occasional individual hunting expeditions, it is necessary to get the men organized for efficiency; so it is in fishing. On occasions like these, the local group under the ad hoc leadership of a skilled hunter or fisher becomes an economic unit.

Resources do not belong to one particular individual, they belong to the whole group. Private property is limited to personal items of ornaments and clothing, bows and arrows, and traps while partaking of a personal character in the sense that a person produce them but are not necessarily private property. Anyone in the unit may use them with consent from the maker. A pig therefore is shared by all members of the local group with the head going to the hunter who had slain it. This sharing is extended to all

other items that can adequately go around. Thus, an abundant fish catch, honey, tubers, and fruits are food to be shared.

Gathering of *bugbog* (rattan) is one major livelihood of the Agta. The jungle of the place used to be thick with rattan but because it is not being replaced, rattan is feared to face extinction, consequently, one has to go to remote areas just to gather rattan for a living.

Politics for the Agta

In the Agta community, as hunter-gatherer, political organization is weak. There are no chiefs or formal group leaders of any kind beyond the nuclear household. As far as social life as organized, the band is controlled by the nuclear family heads, namely father and mother. Within the structure, the man and the woman participate equally in decision making. Because of the fact that social organization is based on personal kindred, social control is weak as well.

The traditional Agta political system is very loosely a knitted group based primarily on family groupings or band politically independent from one another. The oldest father acts as the head and obliged to protect every band member. In any decision making process, the head will consult the band members.

The Agta are peace-loving people. Accordingly, they isolate themselves from others because of their fear of disputes and complications in life. Honesty and trustworthiness are their core values.

In the community, a *panglakayen*, considered to be an authority who is elected by the heads of the family, leads. He is supposed to be the cleverest, aged, and should have at least gone to grade one.

Within each settlement, there is a ruler, an older man who enjoys the respect of the others and who decides when a move is to be made to another hunting center, when a hunt is to be started, how the spoils are to be divided, when the dogs are to be fed. He is called *panglakayen*. He thinks. It is not always the oldest man, but as the rule, the elderly man must be a clever hunter. As head of a large family, he exercises great authority. He cannot be called a chief, there is no obligation to follow his counsel but they do so in most cases partly because they rely on his experience and partly because it pays to be on good terms with this man.

His idea is always sought whenever an altercation arises among the Agtas. He represents the group and shares the authority together with the barangay captain, the *panglakayen*. The barangay captain bears their plight and enjoys glory.

There has been no written law governing the Agta community. Punishments likewise are not so defined and distinct. Most often anyone who commits an anomaly is still within the jurisdiction of the barangay captain and therefore be sanctioned by him.

The *panglakayen* then serves as a go-between to settle disputes in the most simple and silent way possible. As their belief, it is only *Apo* who has the right to punish.

The Agta do not have the idea about national laws. Their orientation is limited to barangay laws. National election does not bother them at all except when a diligent politician accompanies them to precincts where they participate in voting through thumb marks.

The Agta Concept of Education

There is no better way to push the Agta into a higher class of civilization except through education. Cultural change and development can be brought about due to education, for education is a catalyst of change.

There is indeed a slow cultural adaptation among the Agta because they are resistant to it. Formal education or schooling is not a priority. The reason is obvious, it is economic in nature. While it is true that there is one multigrade school in Diwagden within the Agta community, some Agta children do not continue their education until higher grade level due poverty and social pressures.

According to Agta culture, male children are the priority to send to school than the female children because the male Agta is regarded as the bread earner of the family while the woman takes charge of the housekeeping activities. It is observed that instead of the parents directing the attention of their children to education, the parents train the children to become hunters, a forager or a skilled farmer, and fishermen. Parents' desire for the education of their children is fervent but could never be realized due to economic pressures. Informal education takes place anytime, anywhere. Skills are mastered through learning by doing. The old usually show how a certain skill is done, and the young are expected to imitate the skill until mastery is achieved.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Based from the discussions made and findings of the research, the researcher deduced the following conclusions:

1. The Agta have rich precolonial traditions and practices on the cycle of life relative to conception, childbirth, child rearing, courtship, marriage, and death and burial.
2. The Agta have limited social environment; they are animistic and open to other religious sects; they depend on hand to mouth subsistence as they rely much on rattan resources in the forest as the major source of their livelihood; the Agta political system is limited to their tribe in which they do not involve themselves in politics at the barangay level; and education for the Agta children is the least priority of the Agta parents.

Recommendations

In view of the conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are hereby formulated:

1. The Agta are considered rich in heritage of the past; they should not be allowed to become extinct. Hence, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples should strengthen their programs for the preservation, protection, and perpetuation of the traditions and cultures of the indigenous peoples.
2. More projects, livelihood, and education programs should be designed to alleviate the living conditions of the Agta.
3. The Local Government Unit of San Mariano should extend support in building the identity of the Agta by registering them as official residents of San Mariano, thereby enjoying their rights as Filipino citizens such as the right to suffrage, and other rights and privileges.

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