

NOTES ON THE BEHAVIOR AND DEGREE OF ETHNICITY AMONG THE TIGKALASAN (TALA-ANDIG): A PRELIMINARY CULTURE-CONSTRUCT

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One of the Philippines' most miserable habitats for an almost naked "primitive" people is the steep range linking the Pantaron-Undandan-Kabutbutungan-Sumapay mountains within the rainforest of Bukidnon and Agusan del Sur Provinces.

The elevation of these ranges speak for themselves: moss-covered trees, moss-covered trails and the presence of pitcher plants that are believed growing abundantly only at a certain mountain altitude. It took my team 3½ to 4 days of hiking from our base camp at Barrio Saint Peter in the Municipality of Malaybalay, Bukidnon, to be able to finally make initial contact with the Tigkalasan (Tala-andig). Part of the rigors we encountered was playing hosts to leeches and fleas along dense trails. Landslides and loose rocks were everywhere. The most perilous, however, was the tricky Minala trail which connected the sides of two mountains. In between these two mountains was a chasm and to get to the other side one negotiated a trail naturally made out of interlocking tree roots carpeted with moss that rendered it slippery. The narrow trail would sag under one's weight and one had to be cautious not to trip. This "death bridge" was about 30 feet long and below it was nothing but the chasm.

My team utilized the services of a tribal chieftain, in the person of Datu Pahagno (*Amai Boksing* in his teknonymic address) who served as protector, spokesman and utilityman for the team. In the past, he had made several contacts with the Tigkalasan since a part of his tribal function was to serve as arbiter over conflicts among mountain tribes

within his traditional jurisdiction.

Our stay in the area was brief, but we were able to adequately cover a wide range of observations noted down in our eight field notebooks and nine pad papers. We had to cut short our stay in the area, first, because of the fear of the Tigkalasan over the presence of armed dissidents, fugitives and fanatics known to be hiding near their locale. Secondly, we were running out of food supply. Under the circumstances, the Tigkalasan willingly shared their simple root staples with us. Third, the high mountain moisture encourage the growth of mosses in our cameras, notes and cloths. Of course we were not prepared to stay in the area for a long time, since our visit was only planned as an ocular survey.

At this point, I would like to acknowledge the help of another tribal leader, Amai Amho, who helped us find the Tigkalasan. He could have volunteered himself as the guide, but he was weak and ill, apparently with consumption. Still, he sparked our enthusiasm to penetrate an area that had never been visited by other researchers. The Tigkalasan, better known as Tala-andig, was reported to have been studied long before we came, but those who claimed to have made such studies never came up with a simple culture-construct of the people. No wonder these people have not been given a legend in any of the ethnic maps of the Philippines. The researchers did not even know where exactly these people are found. What few data there are about the Tala-andig may have been gathered along national highways. These inadequacies of data, make the present preliminary ethnography the first determined effort to make personal contact with the group. We do not claim that we have made a "discovery" of the Tigkalasan. I would like to emphasize that it was no "discovery," but a location of the group. On the part of the natives themselves, they considered us the first outsiders to have set foot on their hallowed grounds.

I am also grateful to the National Research Council of the Philippines, of which I am an Associate Researcher, which issued an authorization permit for me to conduct survey in any cultural areas I may decide to carry out projects. The funds for this trip came from a modest grant by the University Research Center at Mindanao State University. To the Bukidnon Datu Association (Eastern Bukidnon Chapter), I also

would like to extend my gratitude for adopting me as a "Son of Bukidnon Province" and christening me with a tribal name, "Datu Pinalaw-an" (meaning "a datu with a wide jurisdiction" in the Eastern Bukidnon mountains). My coronation ceremony will remain as one of the most cherished events of my life and I shall endeavor to live up to the title conferred on me. My adoption into the Association became my passport in establishing rapport with the people. It was in the *piagdapokan* ceremony where I took the solemn oath to uphold the title I carry, such a title having been represented by the placing of a beaded and tasseled red head dress, a symbol of my authority. It was also in this ceremony where I made a promise to help this association, in whatever problems it may encounter.

This paper therefore is the first official and preliminary presentation of the Tigkalasan way of life.

"Tala-andig"

The people call themselves Tigkalasan, meaning "people who know the forest," from the Visayan term *lasang* (forest). They have other nicknames such as *Dibaloyon*, "people on the other side" [of the mountain]; *Kalasanon*, "wild people" or "forest experts." All these terms denote the toponym of the group. Most of their neighbors call them *Tala-andig* or simply *Andig*, dropping the prefix *Tala*, to mean "people who lean on trees" (probably from the local term *sandig* "to lean in idleness"). The term also means "people who inhabit the steep cliffs" called *lagi-it*. The Muslim Maranao use a similar term, *talandig*, as a derogatory term for anybody who is lazy and idle. They also use such term to describe a person who is naked or unclad. The Muslim Maguindanao similarly use the term *tala-andigan* to mean being "bare and lazy." The Agusan Manobo use the term *tiyandig* also to mean the "state of nakedness of a people."

Thus, the term would refer to the behavioral characteristics prominent among these people and describes their distinct and marked "primitive" cultural identity. Since it concerns how man infinitely behaves, it would be easily remembered than referring to them by their toponymic or placement names. For this purpose I would prefer to use the term "Tigkalasan" because it was the first word that they used in

referring to themselves.

Behavioral traits and degree of "primitiveness"

In understanding the degree of backwardness of the Tigkalasan (Tala-andig) one has to zero in on the traits that were readily noted by the members of my ethnographic research team. The Tigkalasan level of subsistence is simple forest agriculture and the group members practice "transhumance." Their staple food is the camote (*Ipomoea batatas*). For supplement, they comb the forest for other edible tubers and herbs found abundantly in their habitat. They do a little trapping by setting up pointed stakes on pathways of wild animals. They also do a little fishing in rivers. Fishing is done by hand as they do not know of any other technique in catching fish. They also relish the rattan and palm piths and the red-colored mushrooms that grown abundantly in their surroundings. Occasionally, they gather honey, squash and gabi (yam). Food is mainly cooked by roasting and broiling since there are no cooking utensils available. Fish and other soft food are wrapped in leaves and placed on top of the embers. They eat from a trough fashioned manually from the fronds of the areca palm.

An inventory of their tools includes few prized items. The bladed bolo is the only metal implement known to the group and is always carried by men, women and children. In one house we visited, we noted one kettle, in another, a patched frying pan. The kettle and pan were used for boiling purposes as alternates to roasting and broiling of food. They have bows and arrows but the arrowheads were not of metal but of pointed wood. These about complete their implements.

We also marked how intently they stared at the food we ate, apparently because it was the first time they had seen rice eaten. They had even thought us to be "dirty" because they associated our cooked rice with worms. Rice is an unknown staple to them. After a while, however, they got so used to seeing us eat rice that they began to taste it themselves. Before putting a lump into the mouth, however, they would first pick a puffed grain and tweedle it between their thumb and forefinger. Usually, too, we would take our coffee and the more they might have pictured us as really weird. They thought we were putting "bottled dirt" into our glasses of hot water. More so, when cream

was added, the mixture would look like the murky water from flooded rivers. It took some time for the Tigkalasan to accept and later taste our kind of food. The coffee later became so much in demand that our supply ran out fast.

Another interesting aspect of their ignorance of things not within easy reach is that water buffaloes are called "crabs"; the animal's horns are taken for pinchers of the crustacean. One may think this is an over-exaggeration but who are we to question the limit of their knowledge? Still another intriguing episode recalled to us by one native is how one of them went with a friend and came across a *barrio*.² From the *barrio* they saw children licking yellow colored candies with holders and noticed how these children enjoyed the taste. Thinking perhaps that every yellow-colored object is something edible and palatable, it did not come as a surprise when they reached the town and saw a yellow painted house. Since they had to rest after a long journey on foot they sat close to the house and started licking its walls. This recollection sometimes becomes a laughing matter among them.

Numerical counting to them is base ten. There are no terms for numbers over ten. Thus, if they count and go beyond ten they take note of the first ten with a knot on a *kuraw* (rattan vine). This art of tying knots also serves as a calendar to the natives. This could be depicted when they are anticipating a very important event like the observance of the Kalin'tala-andig ritual, marriage, the making of a *taligba* (clearing) or the building of a house. This could be shown by the succeeding example. If, for instance, an event is to be set in seven days, they tie seven knots on the vine and place such in a spot where it is easily noticeable. Every end of the day they would untie the knot until all the knots are unwound. This also could mean that as the anticipated date draws close they also start making the necessary preparation of all the needed paraphernalia for the occasion. The example here of seven days does not mean that they know these to be the number of days in a week. In matters of money, they admit not knowing the value of a paper bill or a coin. In one instance, when a group of boys ventured into the nearest *barrio* to work as hired hands for some advanced group, they received tattered clothing for payment and sometimes were given cash amount if they wished. Upon the suggestion of the employer, one

of these boys decided to prefer cash. Having been told what to do he went to the storeowner, placed the money on the counter and started pointing out the goods he wanted in exchange for his money, without really knowing if the cash had buying power. One could therefore imagine the result of such transaction if the money were not enough for all the goods he wanted to get. It was up to the storeowner to tell him when that amount could not purchase all the desired items. The storeowner could possibly make a fool of him by giving him less than what his money could buy.

Chewing betel quid is a favorite activity and, like the bolo, the quid is brought everywhere. It is placed in a locally handwoven backpack of wild fibers. They usually spend most of the day preparing, mixing, pounding and chewing the mixture. Among other groups, the usual composition is four ingredients, but among the Tigkalasan it could be seven or more kinds, which include aromatic roots, barks and rattan fruits, in addition to the areca nut, lime, tobacco and the pungent piper betel leaf. One can picture a mouthful of all seven ingredients placed inside the mouth and how the cheeks swell with the buyo quid. One could also see the walls and floors full of reddish spit.

Fire-making is by the use of a flintstone struck against a piece of metal with the *bahak* (a cotton-like combustible material) to absorb the sparks. This combustible material, once ignited, is blown into a braided hairlike element. This substance gets easily lighted and is therefore placed on the hearth, covered with wooden shavings and then finally fed with the large firewood. Usually, the hearth is kept burning throughout the day, but when not in use, the wood fuel is covered with ashes, which are blown off when fire is to be lighted. Also, when the Tigkalasan move to another place for some time, they make sure the hearth is ember-free.

Their light at night is derived from the *saleng* (dried sap) of a pine tree variety. Most often they go through the evenings with only the fireplace as the source of illumination. Normally, there are more than one hearth found in a hut, where they get their source of heat when sleeping at night in the cold temperature of the high mountains. They do not have blankets to cover their almost naked bodies as they only wear loin clothes. Many of the women are still half-naked from the waist up,

except for a wrap-around woven from the scarce wild abaca supply. When traveling at night they use the ignited firewood with only its embers glowing. They swing the wood left to right rapidly in front of themselves in order to see the trace of the trail.

The most interesting feature of their behavior which we considered a rare trait is the semi-conscious reflex of tapping their heads. It expresses appreciation or joy and also disgust or boredom. It could be associated with the clapping of our hands in concert or of saying "Wow!" Conversely, if we are bored, we sometimes find ourselves scratching our heads. This tapping of the head has not been recorded among any ethnic group so far and we found it to be a specialty among the Tigkalan (Tala-andig). At first we thought they were tapping their heads because of the lice. After seeing the action being repeated very often, however, we noted that it was one way of expressing contentment and satisfaction or its reverse, disgust or ennui. When one relates a funny narrative and brings about laughter, they all show appreciation by tapping their heads with their hands simultaneously. In the same manner, if a person shows bad taste and rude behavior they also tap their heads. One can therefore imagine how loud the tapping sound can be if all of them do it at the same time. This action is practiced by all including the children who are old enough to understand what is laughter and sadness. In addition to this act, they utter words "eee-ai" or "aki-ak" which, according to my interpreter, has no definite meaning.

Their dialect is composed of 75% *Binukid*³ cognates. The remaining 25% would be of interest to linguistics, since the Tigkalan, situated more in the interior of Agusan del Sur Province, have their point of external contact on the side of Bukidnon Province. I have reported this to the Summer Institute of Linguistics operating in Nasuli, Bukidnon but they were too loaded with other projects then.

These are some of the many notable features among the Tigkalan (Tala-andig). Since this is a preliminary ethnography, we hope to present more of the cultural distinctions after all the field notes have been transcribed.

The Kalin'tala-andig observance

A word of caution: because of the limited stay of my team in the

area and more so because the focus of our inquiry was concerned with the general features of the group, a cross-section of the Kalin'tala-andig belief is made available.⁴ The Kalin'tala-andig is considered a "secret belief" of the real people of the forest and it is a ritual performed in respect to the god who watches over the habitational ground. This ritual is not to be open to just anybody, least of all to outsiders, since the presence of strangers in the area would affect the meaning of the ritual. It is performed by the elder male members of the group.

In the creation story version of the people, *Migtanghaya*, the Supreme Creator created three persons: *Minuna*, *Palagsulat* and *Palamgoan*. Not much is known of *Minuna*, being the first creation. *Palagsulat* (or "The one who writes") was believed to be the ascendant of the *Banwa-on* ("people of the town"), while *Palamgoan* was believed to be the ascendant of the present people of the forest and all the natural resources found therein (e.g. fish, wild animals, berries, wild rattan and palm pith and other fruits). *Palamgoan* is considered as the overseer of the mountains and therefore had to stay, watch and take care of his realm. The Tigkalasan believe that they are the direct descendants of *Palamgoan* and therefore are the rightful heirs and owners of the forest and its bounty.

Hand in hand with this belief in *Palamgoan* as guardian and ancestor of the forest people, is also the reverence given to the deity *Tagbaya ho aso* ("the god who takes care of the hunting dog"). Among the isolated hill tribes of Davao, Cotabato, and Agusan Provinces, the Tala-andig are believed to be the descendants of a man with two sexual organs and whose union resulted in the Tala-andig. Also among the Bukidnon group of the central part of the Province, especially in their folklore (contained in the folk epic, *Agio*) and mythology, the Tala-andig is an accursed race from a disrespectful son who was banished and destined to live off the forest for his own livelihood. It is therefore a known feature among the Tigkalasan that they are semi-sedentary and are also known to be leaners on trees. Thus, when it rains hard or when he is overtaken by nightfall he simply leans against the trees, hence the transitory traits of the people. With these correlations, one can comprehend the beliefs in relation to how the Kalin'tala-andig ritual is based.

The Kalin'tala-andig has been a powerful element in the overall

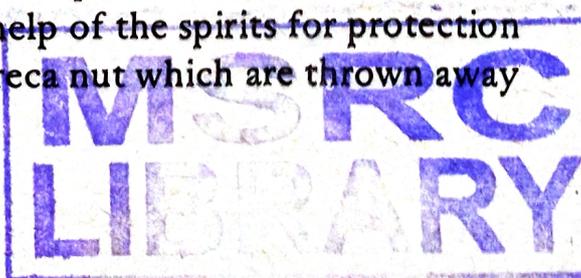
construct of the culture of the people, so much so that when they transfer to a new site they always perform the Kalin'tala-andig. Since the people are mainly gatherers and collectors they practice their own version of transhumance as stated earlier.

Nobody else is allowed entry into the site until the Tala-andig are through with the ritual, which is considered sacred. Palamgoan's descendants resent the return of the learned descendants of Palagsulat, because when the latter comes back, the resources in the forest are depleted and will not be enough any more for the Tigkalasan and because they shall have learned new lifeways so that they themselves will consume all the bounty found in the rainforest. This is probably the reason why the Tigkalasan have always regarded outsiders and other strangers as hostile people who are only interested in their territory. The Tigkalasan refuse to learn the new lifestyle of the townfolk because they believe and think it is destructive and that it runs counter to their own forestal attitudes.

Some manifestations of the belief have been noted through our hazy observation of the following taboos that have to be respected. Somewhere in this paper I mentioned that it is forbidden for any outsider or non-member of the group to set foot in their territory. To do so would be a violation of the Kalin'tala-andig and in order to atone for such transgression, the transgressor has to pay a stiff fine in kind, if he does not wish misfortune to befall him or his family members.

How were we therefore entertained in the area, since we were outsiders and much more so because the Kalin'tala-andig prohibits anybody wearing shoes, bringing cameras, hats or any signs of modernization to enter the territory? We succeeded because, prior to our departure for the area, we were told to bring gifts such as salt, clothing, needles and thread, which we later found out to be the most wanted luxuries of the people. With these on hand, changing hostility to congenial friendship was easily achieved. They might have violated the Kalin'tala-andig in this instance, but at least it was also a chance for the Tala-andig to enjoy something "foreign" and free of charge.

Whenever they start to travel to some place within the wide territory, the Tala-andig always invoke the help of the spirits for protection by offering some metal, porcelain and areca nut which are thrown away



for the unseen spirits to partake off. A simple sign of dark clouds hovering above is associated with somebody violating the Kalin'tala-andig and therefore had to be found out so that the storm or flood could be aborted.

Often superstition is also clearly included in the belief. For instance, when in the building of a *taligba* (clearing), one is injured, then it is considered a bad omen. The work should be discontinued. It is also believed that the trees cut have life and that before one starts cutting a tree down one has to ask permission from it with a promise of offering something in return. In most cases a hen's egg is placed on each of the stumps. They group the trees and assign a "mother tree" where the egg is placed. Again, after a tree-felling activity is undertaken they have to keep watch that the eggs do not disappear because the disappearance would mean that the spirits are mad and therefore the site has to be abandoned as early as possible.

Still another taboo is marrying someone outside the group. Marrying an outsider would mean that one has allowed a descendant of Palagsulat to intrude into the area — a violation of the rule of Palamgoan's descendants. This aspect of the Kalin'tala-andig appears to have encouraged inbreeding among the group. Besides, because of their very isolated location, marrying someone from the outside rarely happens.

Concluding Remarks

At present, the Tigkalasan (Tala-andig) number about 67 in population, according to the head count of Sida. The overall picture of the Tigkalasan (Tala-andig) personality is hanging on a thin thread. Technologically, they have nothing to speak of and so there is always a strong dependence on religion. Their low state must be understood as resulting in large part from the low development of their technology—Tigkalasan culture is among the most "primitive" known. These people lack agriculture and domestic animals (except the dog and chicken which may have been late acquisitions) and, of course, the host of appurtenances associated with a movable life.

It is difficult to explain at the stage why the Tigkalasan (Tala-andig) are so complacent and uninventive, but perhaps we may say that their pattern is not exceptional in the primitive world. Certainly the challenge

of a harsh environment does not always stimulate a creative response. Civilized man is always tempted to think of what he would do if faced with the necessity of survival in a forestal territory. But people like us are thinking differently—that is, our views are formed by an entirely different culture, and our response to this kind of question is typically ethnocentric.

In the words of a Filipino lady journalist who described the “discovery”: “ ... And so another tribe has come into our ken, and the Briones team is to be commended for this discovery. Meantime, those of us who take elevators and telephones and telemachines as indispensable extensions of our daily living hope and pray that the Tala-andigs can be allowed to flourish in their innocence and simplicity, untouched by the gross sophistication and mindless cruelty of the world outside.”⁵

NOTES

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Professor Briones teaches Anthropology and Sociology courses in the Socio-Anthro Department of the College of Arts and Sciences at the same time serves as Executive Secretary of the University Research Center, a detailed Anthropologist of the Aga Khan Museum at Mindanao State University, Marawi City, Philippines. He was assisted in the field by Mrs. Ludivina R. Opeña, Deputy Cultural Consultant of the Bukidnon Provincial Development Staff, as interpreter and Mr. Inocente N. Javier, Research Assistant at the URC of MSU.

¹This is a practice among slash-and-burn people who transfer from one place to another within the limits of their mountain habitat when food becomes scarce and depleted or when their existence is threatened by other external forces. It is also known as a seasonal movement, synonymous with following.

²A barrio is the smallest political unit in the Philippines. It is almost always situated in a rural area under the leadership of a Barrio Captain. Now it is called Barangay and is headed by a Barangay Captain.

³*Binukid* is the dialect spoken among the people in the Province of Bukidnon.

⁴The information regarding the ritual was through an interview with *Sida*, the eldest Tigkalasan who has been serving as the invoker of the many deities when performing the ritual. He considered himself within the circle of gerontocrats who was allowed entry to every ritual. Because he considers himself too old to perform it again, he just sits down and do the thinking for some solutions to the problems they encounter. My team never saw the actual ritual but some forms of it were observed all over the surroundings.

⁵Excerpt from the column "In the Limelight," *FOCUS Philippines*, III, 32 (June 28, 1975), 35.