

BUTUAN BEFORE THE SPANISH OCCUPATION: AN INTRODUCTION

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Philippine historiography has evolved and entered a significant phase of development. This development is clearly shown in the awareness of the present scholars in history of the need of understanding the local past as a crucial basis in enriching and reconstituting the current trend in Philippine history writing. To emphasize the importance of local history, the first of the series of conferences on local and regional history was conducted sometime in September, 1978 at Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro City. The conference has greatly kindled my interest in local history and it is this ignited interest that the writing of this article is given serious thought and consideration.

History tells us that the year 1565, when Miguel Lopez de Legazpi established the first Spanish settlement in Cebu, signalled the beginning of the formal Spanish colonization in the Philippines. But it must be noted that the different areas of the Philippine Archipelago were actually occupied by the Spaniards at various periods. In the case of Butuan, it was occupied in 1596 when the early Jesuit missionaries came and started converting the natives to Christianity. Therefore, "Butuan Before the Spanish Occupation" means the period before 1596 when Butuan was inhabited by people having trade contact with the Asiatics which in the process led to the development of the place as one of the most flourishing commercial centers in the Philippines before the Spaniards came. For the period before 1596, the following objectives will be considered:

1. To determine some of the practices of the pre-colonial inhabitants of Butuan.
2. To discuss the contact between Butuan and some places in Asia.

Butuan, now a city and the capital of Agusan del Norte became a city on August 3, 1950, by virtue of Republic Act No. 523, otherwise known as the City Charter of Butuan City.¹ It used to be the provincial capital of the Province of Agusan before its division into the present

provinces of Agusan del Norte and Agusan del Sur in the early 1970s. It is situated in the northern part of Mindanao along the present Agusan River with a total land area of about 706 square kilometers.

The population of Butuan City is increasing every year. For instance, in 1948 its population was only 30,032. This figure rose to 79,990 in 1960 and in 1970 the population registered 131,094; or an increase of 51,104 persons in ten year's time.²

Popularly known as the "Timber City of the South," Butuan City once enjoyed a boom upon the exploitation of the forest resources of the two Agusans. Through the swift-running waters of Agusan River are towed thousands of logs a year where a great number are exported to foreign markets. As of 1968 alone logs exported from Butuan amounted to ₱209 million pesos.³

The national highways linking Butuan to Misamis Oriental, Surigao del Norte, and Davao City, have served for many years as important means of transportation and communication. The outpost at Magallanes and the airport at Bancasi also greatly contribute to Butuan's economic progress.

The Name Butuan and Its Early Location

To trace the origin of the name Butuan is indeed fraught with difficulty because of the dearth of recorded materials that survive to the present. To do this, accounts of the Spanish chroniclers will be depended upon to draw ideas needed to trace the origin of the name Butuan.

It is certain that the place later called Butuan was already existing before Magellan arrived in the Philippines. How did this place get its name Butuan? To answer this question, the following views will be considered.

According to Prof. Henry Otley Beyer, the term Butuan was derived from the word *butu* signifying phallus,⁴ which indeed is the present meaning of the word in Agusan today. A linguist from the University of San Carlos, however, opines that Beyer's view is uncertain. The said linguist instead says that the word Butuan must have originated from another word, the derivation of which is not easy to trace due to linguistic transformation over time.

A more popular and widely accepted account about the origin of the word Butuan is found in the pamphlet *Kasaysayan sa Ciudad sa Butuan* (The History of the City of Butuan). It is here claimed that a

soldier of Magellan went to Butuan and observed that the natives ate a native fruit called *batuan*. Accordingly, it was from the word *batuan* that the word Butuan evolved which was finally applied to a village-called Butuan.

The village of Butuan was visited by Pigafetta, the official chronicler of the Magellan Expedition, in 1521. Pigafetta mentioned in his chronicle that he had personally gone to "Butuan where pieces of gold were found by sifting the earth."⁵ In the 17th century, when the bishopric of Cebu was administered by the Recollect Order,⁶ the province of Butuan was established. The name of this province, according to Fray Luis de Jesus, was derived from Butuan,⁷ the name of the river (obviously the present Agusan River). This means that the province of Butuan was established later than the village of Butuan that Pigafetta had visited. Based on this analysis, it may be said that the word Butuan was first used to name a river before it was applied to name a village and until later, a province.

The village of Butuan, the area covered by this paper, was situated, as it is today, in northern Mindanao. Prior to the Spanish occupation, Butuan used to be a part of a larger region known as Caraga. San Antonio in his description of the geography of Mindanao said that:

Caraga was formerly the name of all that coast which extended north and south from the point of Surigao and through Iligan and as far as Dapitan until later times a division of districts was made.⁸

Cross-checking San Antonio's description with the map of Mindanao will buttress the earlier statement that Butuan was once a part of Caraga. Buzeta and Bravo supported San Antonio's view because they mentioned in their work that Butuan was a part of Caraga before the Spaniards divided the island of Mindanao into military districts.⁹

At about the second half of the 19th century, the Spaniards succeeded in pacifying the island of Mindanao from the troubles posed by the Muslims. This development paved the way for the division of Mindanao into six military districts on July 31, 1860.¹⁰ Under the new political division, Butuan became a part of the military district of Surigao.¹¹

The Early Inhabitants

An attempt will now be made to trace the origin of the early inha-

bitants of Butuan and to discuss some of their activities and practices before the Spaniards occupied the area.

Francisco Combes and Murillo Velarde said that the early inhabitants of Butuan were people who belonged to the Manobo tribe. It is believed that the word Manobo is derived from Manuba or Man-suba both signifying "river people."¹² The Manobos, according to San Antonio came from the "neighboring islands of Borneo [and] Macasar of the Moluccas [islands] . . ."¹³ On the other hand, Jose Algue in tracing the place of origin of the Manobos said that this people came to Asia from "Madagascar, Africa."¹⁴ San Antonio's and Algue's statements imply that originally, the Manobos came to Mindanao from Africa through Asia. Obviously, the coming of the Manobos to the island of Mindanao was not through the waves of migration as Beyer popularized, but through island hopping movement. This must have happened between 400 and 500 B.C.,¹⁵ because according to Prof. F. Landa Jocano the people of Asia during this period became highly mobile.

At about the time that Magellan arrived in the Philippines in 1521, Butuan was found to be the site of settlement of the early natives. No less than Pigafetta attested to the presence of this settlement. This settlement must have been situated at about the spot where the present Butuan City is found, because Legazpi in his account about the existing trade between the natives of Butuan and the Muslims from Sulu, said that the Muslim junk anchored "in the river which flow near the town [of Butuan]."¹⁶ Before Butuan was established as a permanent settlement, however, it is believed that there was an earlier settlement located in what is today Masaw. Later, this settlement was transferred to various places: first to Baug (the present Magallanes), then to Bansa and Agau and finally to the site of the present Butuan City.¹⁷ Although the settlement was transferred to different sites, it is suspected that the earlier ones were not completely depopulated. A number of families must have decided to stay behind as the bulk of the population transferred to a new settlement.

Recent archaeological diggings in Butuan reveal the existence of a settlement located in what at present known as Suatan, Ambago, about nine kilometers northwest of Butuan City.¹⁸ Considering the proximity of Suatan to Butuan, it may be inferred that before the settlement of Butuan was finally established there was another settlement found in Suatan. Among the artifacts found in the Suatan digging were the 14th century celadon plates believed to have been brought to the place from

China during the Ming Dynasty, fragments of a *balanghai* or *baranggay* (boat) and some traces of a long house; indicating that the early inhabitants of Butuan practiced the Malayan culture where several families of a clan live in a common house.¹⁹

According to the old folks in Suatan, they belong to the Lapaknon tribe, a swamp tribe which in the Butuan native dialect means mudflat dwellers.²⁰ Mrs. Burton, an archaeologist from Xavier University who headed the diggings in Butuan, suspects that the "Lapaknons are members and close relatives of the Manobo and Higa-onon tribes of Upper Agusan."²¹ This opinion is consistent with the statements of Combes and Velarde that the first inhabitants of Butuan belonged to the Manobo tribe.

Analysis of the sites of the early settlements in Butuan will reveal two distinct locations. First, the settlement was located along the coastal areas as indicated by the fact until the present both Masaw and Baug (Magallanes) are situated near the seacoast. Second from the coastal area, the settlement was transferred inland along the riverbank as proved by the location of Bansa and Butuan.

This transfer of settlement must have been caused by the inland push of the early natives due to the coming of new settlers from the neighboring Visayas islands. This inland push is shown in the following account of Francisco Combes:

The owners [of Butuan] are those who people the mountains. They enamored with their peaceful mode of living . . . lost their liking for the coast . . . they gradually become mountaineers . . . [and allowed] the foreign traders to seize the coasts, harbor-base and rivers. [The new settlers made] themselves masters of all things, [and] the aborigines, being less valiant yielded to the foreigners (new settlers) as [they] were more civilized.²²

Because of the arrival of the new settlers, the Recollect missionaries who went to Butuan in the early 17th century observed that "almost universally the [inhabitants of Butuan] talk Visayan which is common and peculiar in Zibu."²³ This observation further indicates that with the continuous influx of the new settlers some of the earlier inhabitants were pushed to the hinterlands which in the process resulted in the former dominating the area occupied by the latter.

The early inhabitants of Butuan were found to have established an organized government headed by a datu. Pigafetta who had visited Butuan reported that the *balanghais* (barangays) of Butuan was under a chief named Colambu.²⁴ Later developments, however, manifested that at the start of the Spanish occupation of Butuan in 1596, Colambu was already succeeded by another datu named Silonga.²⁵

The presence of a barangay headed by a datu in Butuan before the Spanish occupation, attests to the common and widely accepted belief among the present scholars that the unit of government existing in the Philippines during the precolonial period was the barangay. In the absence of available data, it can only be said at the moment that the organization, structure, and operation of the precolonial barangay government of Butuan followed, by and large, similar pattern with the barangays prevailing in the Philippines prior to the Spanish colonization.

Among the customary practices of the Butuan natives worth noting is their burial practice. This practice may be seen from the artifacts found in the Suatan diggings.

Some of the things uncovered in the Suatan digging were human skeletal remains placed inside a "coffin made of log-halves, hollowed out and fitted with top covers."²⁶ Inside the coffin were also found porcelain wares together with the skeletal remains. This shows that it became a practice of the Butuan natives to bury with their dead and the treasures he possessed while yet alive, a common practice among the other tribes of Mindanao, according to Combes.²⁷ This practice must have been caused by the natives' belief in life after death, where the dead person is presumed to be born again. Thus, it is necessary to bury with the dead his treasures and utensils for him to enjoy and use in the other world.

Cranial deformation must have also been practiced by the early Butuan natives because it was observed that "ninety percent of the skulls found were deformed — they were flat heads."²⁸ It is believed that this was also a common practice among some tribes in Borneo, particularly the subtribes of the Dayaks. This means that cranial deformation as practiced by the inhabitants of Butuan must have originated from Asia, especially from the places where the early natives of Butuan were said to have come from, namely: Borneo and the Moluccas Islands (supra.). Moreover, this similarity in the practice of cranial deformation, at least, supports the earlier statement that the

first inhabitants of Butuan came from Asia, among others, Borneo and Moluccas Islands.

The coastal and riverine locations of the early settlements of Butuan reveal that fishing was the most common source of living among the inhabitants. This occupations is again shown in the diggings of Butuan where the diggers found seashell bracelets, an abundance of capiz shells, bony fish skeletons and native wooden paddles.²⁹

Fishing was not the only source of living among the Butuan natives. Some of the people were engaged in commerce which was centered in Butuan.³⁰ Pigafetta reported that he saw the chief of Butuan using porcelain dishes, wore a *putong* (a piece of cloth wrapped around one's head) made out of silk. Moreover, archaeologists working in Butuan dug up, among other things, porcelain wares of Chinese origin. These are some marks that trade relation between Butuan and foreign lands had already existed before the Spanish occupation because the said items were certainly brought to Butuan through trade.

Gold seemed to be the most important item bartered by the Butuan natives with the Chinese porcelain wares. This is so because Butuan was found to be rich in gold deposit, as Pigafetta had witnessed.³¹ The increasing demand of porcelain wares for utilitarian value and funerary usages among the inhabitants of Butuan must have contributed to the growth of the gold panning industry. This industry was already practiced by the natives at the time Pigafetta arrived in Butuan. Another item traded by the Butuan natives to the nearby islands was a certain kind of perfume taken from the civet cats³² that reportedly abounded in Butuan.

Relation with Some Places in Asia

Butuan was not entirely isolated from the known places in Asia. The archaeologists working in Butuan uncovered artifacts of exotic origin, showing that the precolonial inhabitants of Butuan must have possessed enough knowledge about the places in Asia where the artifacts came from.

It is believed that the earliest known Asiatic influence that filtered to as far as Butuan was from India. This influence was carried out indirectly through the island world of Indonesia,³³ because Butuan, and even the entire Philippines were geographically outside the direct line of the early commerce between India and the rest of Asia. It is

suspected that the Indian influence penetrated into Butuan not until the beginning of the 4th century when a powerful Hindu civilization rose up in Java and Sumatra.

The proof of India-Butuan relation is the report that sometime in 1975, pot hunters in Butuan found items like gold foil ornaments, ancient jewelry, and parts of a weapon made out of gold – all of these were said to “bear designs of either Shrivishayan or Madjapahit.”³⁴ Another evidence is the discovery of a 21-carat gold image along the Wawa River in Esperanza, Agusan. This image known as the Agusan Image is now found in the gold room of the Chicago Museum in the United States of America. Prof. Beyer identified the image as a Philippine copy of the Nganjuk of the Madjapahit Empire. However, Prof. Juan Francisco of the University of the Philippines disagrees with Beyer. Francisco suggest that the image is that of a Buddhist Tara. Whatever interpretation is correct, the Agusan Image still proves that Butuan was placed within the Indian sphere of influence, because undoubtedly, both scholars are agreed that the image is of an Indian origin.

The decline of the Madjapahit and Shrivishayan Empires also resulted in the decline of the frequency of the Indian cultural diffusion in Butuan. However, the Indian influence continued to penetrate the Philippines in general up to the 15th century.

The waning penetration of Indian influence in Butuan was compensated by that of the Chinese. The China-Butuan relation was carried out through trade, intensified by the Butuan natives' demand for Chinese wares and the Chinese desire for gold from Butuan.

The trade relation between Butuan and China is borne out by archaeology. Recent diggings in Butuan show signs of an extensive trade relation between China and Butuan because most of the artifacts found are of Chinese origin. One of the artifacts dug up in Butuan was a 14th century celadon plate. The archaeologists said that the China-Butuan trade relation continued from the 8th century to the 15th century.

Like that of India, the China-Butuan trade contact was indirect. This means that trade items from China to Butuan and vice versa were sent to these places through an intermediary. In this indirect trade contact, the Sulu Muslims played a remarkable role as the intermediary. The following report of Legazpi who dispatched a group of Spaniards to Butuan proves the role of the Sulu Muslims as middlemen in the trade between China and even India and Butuan:

On their [Legazpi's men] way they sighted a Moro junk and its crew fought against the Spaniards. . . The Moros told the Spaniards that they carried iron and tin from Borneo and from China porcelain, bell made of copper. . . and pointed tapestry; from India pans and tempered iron pots.³⁵

Due to the role of the Sulu Muslims as trade intermediary, a direct and regular contact between them and the inhabitants of Butuan had eventually existed. This relationship must have attracted the interest of some Sulu Muslims to come and establish political control over Butuan because Silongan, as mentioned earlier, claimed that he was related to the chief of Sulu. In addition, it must be emphasized that the trade contact is not only limited in the exchange of trade items, but significantly enough, in the interchange of culture. In the case of Butuan and Sulu this cultural interchange or influence is apparently shown in the language spoken by a native Butuanon and that of a Tausog of Sulu.

Today, if the native Butuanon and Tausog dialects will be thoroughly studied, it is certain that there are a number of similar words. How much Tausog terms are found in the Butuan native dialect and vice versa, is a good topic for research. This similarity must have evolved from the trade contact between the natives of Butuan and the traders from Sulu because, as expected, there is a natural desire on the part of the people involved in trade to learn each other's language to make business more effective and successful. The similarity further suggests that the contact between Butuan and Sulu must have gone on for a long time before the Spanish occupation of Butuan.

Conclusion/Summary

Based on archaeological findings and recorded accounts, it is revealed that Butuan is one of the most populated areas in Mindanao, before the start of the Spanish colonization. The customary practices of the Butuan natives show close similarities with the customary practices of the other tribes in Mindanao in particular, and in the Philippines in general. This implies that the Butuan natives were part of a larger ethnic community that inhabited the Philippines and it was only during the colonial period that this ethnic community was divided

into smaller tribal groups and given names by the Spaniards, consistent with Spain's divide-and-rule policy. To the Manobos, the name given to the earlier inhabitants of Butuan goes the honor for having successfully established the nucleus of what today is Butuan City, an accomplishment that the present Butuanons owe a debt of gratitude.

Later events showed favorable development in Butuan as trade contact was established with some parts of the Philippines and Asia. Trade broke off Butuan's isolation and contributed to the growth of, among other things, the gold panning industry. Most of all, trade made Butuan as one of the most progressive commercial centers in Northern Mindanao prior to the Spanish occupation of the place. This must have been one of the reasons that attracted the interest of the Spaniards during Magellan's time to come and visit Butuan.

The Sulu Muslim's cultural influence that largely diffused into the dialect of the native Butuanons was brought about by the role played by the latter as trade intermediaries. Hence, without the coming of the Spaniards, the direct trade contact between Butuan and Sulu could have been a means in the eventual Islamization of the Butuan inhabitants.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Dionisio Sy, *Butuan Through the Ages* (Cebu City: Our Press, 1970), p.5.

² *The 1971 Yearbook* (Manila: Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1973), p. 180.

³ Sy, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ Antonio Pigafetta, "First Voyage Around the World," *The Philippine Islands*, trans. by Emma Blair and James Robertson (55 Vol.; Cleveland, Ohio: The Arthur M. Clark Company, 1905), XXXIII, p. 121. Hereafter abbreviated as *BR*.

⁶ "The Ecclesiastical System in the Philippines," *BR*, Vol. XXVIII, p. 274.

⁷ Luis de Jesus, "General History of the Discalced Religious of St. Augustine," *BR*, Vol. XXI, p. 220.

⁸ Juan Francisco de San Antonio, "Cronicas," *BR*, Vol. XL, p. 311.

⁹ Manuel Buzeta and Felipe Bravo, *Diccionario Geografico, Estadistico, Historico de las Islas Filipinas* (Manila: Impr. de D. Jose C. de la Peña, 1851), p. 505.

¹⁰ Agustin de la Cavada, *Historia, Geografica, Geologica y Estadistica de Filipinas* (Manila: Impr. de Ramirez y Giraudier, 1876), II, p. 185.

- ¹¹ Jose Algue, *El Archipiélago Filipino* (Washington: Impr. de Gobierno, 1900), pp. 129-130.
- ¹² Murillo Velarde, "Jesuit Mission," *BR*, Vol. XL, p. 60.
- ¹³ San Antonio, *op cit.*, p. 311.
- ¹⁴ Algue, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
- ¹⁵ F. Landa Jocano, *Philippine Prehistory* (Quezon City: Philippine Center for Advanced Studies, 1975), p. 110.
- ¹⁶ "Coleccion Documentos Ineditos de Ultramar," *BR*, Vol. II, pp. 116-117.
- ¹⁷ Adolfo Sanchez, "Neither Limasawa nor Homonhon," *Philippine Free Press*, Vol. LXI, No. 1 (January 6, 1968), p. 21.
- ¹⁸ "15th Century Artifacts Found," *Times Journal*, Vol. V, No. 52 (December 12, 1976), p. 1.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ²¹ "Remains of Lost Tribe Dug Up," *Times Journal*, Vol. V, No. 54 (December 24, 1976), p. 11.
- ²² Francisco Combes, "Historia de las Islas Mindanao, Iolo y sus Adyacentes," *BR*, Vol. XL, p. 122.
- ²³ De Jesus, *op. cit.*, p. 201.
- ²⁴ Pigafetta, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
- ²⁵ *BR*, Vol. XXIII, pp. 11-12. Preface part.
- ²⁶ "15th Centure Artifacts Found," *op. cit.*, p. 1.
- ²⁷ Combes, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
- ²⁸ "15th Century Artifacts Found," *op. cit.*, p. 1.
- ²⁹ "Remains of Lost Tribe Dug Up," *op. cit.* p. 11.
- ³⁰ "Col. Doc. Ined. Ultramar," *op. cit.*, p. 118.
- ³¹ Pigafetta, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
- ³² Antonio Morga, "Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas," *BR*, XXVI, pp. 105-106.
- ³³ Henry Otley Beyer, "The Philippines Before Magellan," *Asia*, (October-November, 1921), p. 23.
- ³⁴ "Diggings Yield Ancient Artifacts," *Times Journal*, Vol. V, No. 5 (December 11, 1976), p. 1.
- ³⁵ "Col. Doc. Ined. Ultramar," *op. cit.*, p. 116.

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