

Mindanao and the Magindanao: an Overview

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What is Mindanao?

The name “*Mindanao*” is a Meranaoⁱ and Magindanao term meaning, “inundated” or “flooded.” Its root word is “*danao*,” meaning to inundate, flood or submerge under water.

A large part of Mindanao Island was once populated and controlled by the *Magindanao* people, whose name means “people of *Mindanao* (*midsanao* or *maigdanao*)” or of the “inundated land.” According to Mastura,ⁱⁱ the name is a contraction of the words *mag* (akin to) *in* (country) and *danao* (lake) or kindred settled in the country about a lake or inundated land. This “inundated land” or *Mindanao* was the original name of a settlement now known as “Cotabato City” and its vicinities.ⁱⁱⁱ Mindanao Island is named after it. Its vicinities include those areas along the Pulangi (Magindanao term for big) River (or Rio Grande de Mindanao in Spanish), its sources in the Liguasan marshes and Buluan Lake, and its tributary rivers.

Pulangi River passes through the present Tumbao (formerly Kabuntalan) where it forks out into the north and south branches. The north branch passes

through Nuling and Kotawato (hispanized into Cotabato) before it empties into the sea at Bongo Island. The southern branch passes through Taviran and Tamontaka towards Linik Bay.

Pulangi River is where the life of the Magindanao revolves. It is their highway, fishing ground, and source of drinking and bathing. It is also a source of destruction of their plants and sometimes of their dwellings, since it overflows its banks annually and on rainy days. When it overflows, the land of the Magindanao looks like a lake, flooded or inundated, which, in Magindanao, is *Mindanao*, *midsanao* or *maigdanao*. Hence, the name Mindanao.

Geography of Mindanao

The Cotabato provinces are a rainy region, where dry and wet seasons are not pronounced. Neither is the maximum rainy period pronounced. However, it is generally dryer from December to March and wetter during the rest of the year.

The provinces are dotted alternately with mountain ranges, large tracts of marshlands and plains.^{iv} The mountain ranges are located mostly in its northern and southern borders. The most important of them are the Mt. Apo range which straddles the Cotabato-Davao boundary and the Piyagayongan Mountain Range in the Cotabato-Lanao boundary. The latter is where Mt. Dayang, an active volcano, is found.

The marshlands are found mostly in the Libungan and Liguasan areas in the provinces of south Cotabato and Maguindanao. Some 86,100 hectares around the Pulangi and Mindanao rivers are covered by these two marshes.

The plain areas are irregularly shaped, partly swampy lowland overlain by alluvial deposits of clay, silts, sand and gravel. When heavy rain comes, the Pulangi River overflows and floods the plain areas. The flood carries with it fertile silts from the mountains of Bukidnon and Lanao, which are deposited in the plain areas. The municipalities of Kabacan, Sultan Kudarat, Pikit, Pagalungan, Datu Piang, Tumbao and Cotabato City are mostly the recipients of the silts that make them the most fertile land in the Cotabato provinces. That is why the Cotabato areas are known for rice growing and are the largest rice-producing area on Mindanao. In fact it was once "the rice granary of the South."

Inland bodies of water also abound the area, with Lake Buluan in Sultan Kudarat and Maguindanao being the largest and the main sources of the Pulangi River.

Occupations

Because of the geographic location of their home-place, the Magindanao are fishermen or farmers. These are occupations exclusive for men, not the women in the Magindanao tradition. In farming, however, the women help in the planting and harvesting, but not in cutting grasses or plowing the fields. Women bring food to their husbands in the field. The main task of the women are household works, including cloth and mat weaving and other cottage industry.

Some of them engage in small businesses, mostly as sidewalk vendors. A Magindanao visitor in Marawi City was very much impressed with the answer to his question when he asked: "Who own the business establishments here in Marawi City?" This author told him "that 100% of the establishments in Marawi City and 99% of the public transportation seen on the road are owned by the Meranao and this is the only place in the Philippines where the Chinese are 100% displaced." In Magindanao, as in Cotabato City, the migrants own the places of establishment. Only few Magindanaos own commercial establishments and the means of public transportation as a form of business.

Considering that brass and gold adornments are status symbols of the Magindanao, there are a number of them who are engaged in metal casting and have become very good in this venture..

There are also Magindanaos who have earned degrees in westernized education, and many of them work in the government. Magindanaos also prefer to work abroad if they have the chance to go, because it uplifts their economic status. Thus a number of them have been or are abroad. Many of them serve as domestic workers there. It must be mentioned that the Magindanao do not work as domestic workers or helpers in the Philippines. It is a shame for them to do so.

The Magindanaos are poor people. They live below the poverty line. According to Alfanta:

Their (Magindanao) economic life shows a people still struggling for the better necessities of life. Their crude agricultural and fishing practices could not possibly elevate them to a status of self-sufficiency.^v

He further said that the miserable condition of the Magindanao implies that government aid, if any has been very slow.

Magindanao Population

The Magindanao is one of the three largest Moro-Muslim groups in the Philippines. They claim their descent line from Sharif Kabungsuan, an Arab missionary who came in the 16th century and who was credited for the

islamization of Mindanao. Their number cannot be ascertained since they also do not register their birth and death with the civil government of the Philippines. Their population is either overestimated or underestimated, because numbers have meaning in the political countdown. Some writers place the Magindanao population at 2% of the Philippine population,^{vi} which means that the Magindanao today is 1.2 million. In 1980 and 1982, the Magindanao population was placed at 644,549 by the Philippine National Economic Development Authority.^{vii} This figure is doubtful. The 1990 Philippine Census of Population and Housing report shows that in the Magindanao province there is a population of 756,878 and 568,878 of them were Magindanao. Somehow, the Muslim in the Philippines is always placed at ten percent (10%) of the Philippine population or 7,000,000 of the 70 million Philippine populations. Considering this 10%, and assuming that the three major Muslim groups is about 80% of the Moro-Muslim population, the Magindanao can be fairly placed at 26% of the Muslims or more than a million.

Nonetheless, the Magindanao, as will be shown, was once a dominant people of Mindanao. They belong to the 13 Moro-Muslim groups who constituted 73% of Mindanao population in 1903 and whose number has been gradually decreasing until they become 22% in 1980 (see Table below).^{viii}

Table 1. *Mindanao population of 1903-1980*

Year	Population	Moro Population		Non-Moro Population	
		Number	%	Number	%
1903	327,741	25,000	76	77,741	24
1913	518,698	324,816	63	193,882	37
1918	723,655	358,968	50	364,687	50
1939	2,244,421	755,186	34	1,489,232	66
1948	2,943,324	933,101	32	2,010,223	68
1960	5,686,027	1,321,060	23	4,364,967	77
1970	7,963,932	1,669,708	21	6,294,224	79
1975	9,146,995	1,798,911	20	7,348,084	80
1980	10,905,243	2,504,332	23	8,400,911	77

The Sultanate pf Mindanao

In the early days, the Magindanaos had developed three major populations centers which produced three powerful sultanates, namely: the sultanate with seat in the old town of Nuling and Kotawato, which Mastura calls the Magindanao Sultanate,^{ix} but referred in this work as the Kotawato sultanate; (2) the Buayan Sultanate, with its capital in Dulawan, Datu Piang, and (3) the Kabuntalan (modern day Tumbao) Sultanate. These three sultanates are referred to in this work as the Mindanao Sultanate, since they are developed in Mindanao or in the inundated land. Furthermore, Mastura, as just stated, uses the term Magindanao Sultanate to mean the Kotawato-based sultanate, excluding the other sultanates. His reader can be confused, if he is looking for sultanates developed in the old Mindanao.

These three settlements are found along the Pulangi River. The Buayan settlement is in the upper valley, Kotawato is in the lower and Kabuntalan is at the center. Although they are all Magindanao, these three geographically situated people have different political, cultural and economic developments.^x The lower valley people call the upper valley ones *tao sa raya* and themselves as *tao sa ilod*. Unlike that of the *tao sa ilod*, the Magindanao of the *tao sa raya* is difficult for a Meranao to understand because it is more "classical" than the Magindanao of the *tao sa ilod*. Furthermore, they have a "strange" intonation. Those at the center of Kabuntalan area speak an admixture of the Kotawato and Buayan tongue.

These Magindanao Sultanates were very powerful and influential. Their influence extended as far as west of modern Zamboanga peninsula,^{xi} to the south of Sangir Island, to Lanao, Bukidnon, and Davao. But these sultanates have been continuously threatened from within and without and therefore have weakened. For instance there was always internal bloody rivalry for power (for the rightful heir of the sultanate leadership) within a sultanate and between or among sultanates, off-and-on, their relation (i.e., the *sa-raya* and *sa-ilod* datus) had been characterized by animosities and reconciliations.^{xii} Added to this is the superimposition of the Philippine government that eventually created the lose of essence of the sultanate.

Internal Enmities

The animosities just mentioned were exploited if not maneuvered by the foreign invaders to divide and rule the Magindanao. For instance, the Spaniards interfered in the succession of leadership in a sultanate by supporting or appointing a Sultan in a contested throne. Their appointee was given all the possible support and used in subjugating resisting Magindanaos.^{xiii} This resulted

in factionalism and hostilities between or among Magindanao. However, this interference was also an of and on affair in itself.

These enmities, ironically, perhaps, contributed to the survival of the Magindanao sultanate and society. As shown in the history works, the unsupported group was always hostile to the Spanish, which was one of the reasons for the Spaniards failure to have peace of mind on Mindanao. There were always Magindanao groups fighting Spanish forces and, at times, internal hostilities were suspended because the hostile parties have to face a perceived common external enemy. Thus for more that two centuries the Magindanao were able to maintain their political survival.^{xiv}

After the foreign invaders, the neo-colonial Manila government came equipped with different kinds of neo-colonial programs. This government was regarded as the “government of other people” or a hostile government. In the course of time, however, and as in the past, there were those Magindanao who allied themselves with the neo-colonial government. Many of them have reaped the benefits and have demonstrated the “sweetness” of the neo-colonial government. There were also those who were dissatisfied, those whose memories of the past history still linger in their mind, and those who longed for a change. These and more became the seeds of the present Moro struggle for self-determination, which started in the 70’s under a new and different system of leadership, and which have caused thousands of their lives and property.^{xv}

The Magindanao Image

Like the rest of the Moros, the Magindanaos are often blamed for the peace and order problems in their territories and in their neighboring places. Whenever there is a crime committed, the usual suspect is the Magindanao.

In the past, the Magindanao were labeled bandits, savages, barbarians, etc. Today, they are terrorists, kidnappers, carnappers, and other negative labels one can think of, even if only an insignificant number of this population undertakes these ventures. They have been frequently described by respondents in surveys as treacherous, fierce, murderous and troublesome.^{xvi} These descriptions are captioned by Peter Gowing as the “Moro Image,” a legacy of the three centuries of Moro-Spanish warfare in the Philippines.^{xvii}

If ever the Magindanao (or the Moro-Muslims in general) seems to be violent it is because they are used and reared to be violent for several centuries in defense of their society and culture from external invasion, which started from the Spaniards down to the other colonizers. Furthermore, any group that becomes a minority in its own homeland will have the tendency to become violent as a

form of self-defense. They will perceive any act by the dominant group as a threat to their existence.

Aside from the above matters, Magindanaos have also been described by their counterparts as dirty, illiterate, polygamous, indolent, lazy, good only in eating, and many more. These descriptions can be found among any culture group, but to preserve them as general traits and characteristics of an entire group, like the Magindanao, is an absurd act born out of prejudice and discrimination.

The Conquest of Mindanao

Originally the Moro-Muslims were the dominant groups on Mindanao and outlying islands, but as time went on they became the minority. This started when the neo-colonial Manila government came. This government is equipped with different kinds of neo-colonial programs like education, politics, economics and others. It was regarded at first as the government of "other people," but in the course of time, as like in the past, there were Magindanaos who allied with the neo-colonial government and many of them have reaped benefits. These benefits attracted the Magindanao that gradually led to their acceptance to the neo-colonial government.

The National Development Authority shows that the Muslims on Mindanao constituted 76 percent of the Mindanao population in 1903, while the non-Moro was only 24 percent. As time went on, this percentage was gradually reduced until in 1980 their percentage was only 23 percent and the non-Moro became 77 percent (see Table 1). There are factors that can explain this phenomenon. History tells us that the settlement program of the national government was a major cause. That is, people from Luzon and the Visayas (mostly notorious people) were settled in the Moro homeland, especially in the Magindanao territories with supports from the government, that led subsequently to the displacement of the Magindanao. Damaso writes:

...The creation of the National Land Settlement Administration opened up Muslim land to Christian settlers from the so-called congested provinces. It eventually displaced [the] Muslims population from choice lands with the influx of natural migration waves

The first Christian settlers arrived in 1913 and opened up 9 agricultural colonies. Between 1913 and 1932 there were 20,590 homeseekers. Thereafter, Christian settlers arrived month after month with no exact record of their number.^{xviii}

The settlers were favored by the government. For instance, the Philippine government Land Act of 1919 reserved the right to issue titles to public land, possession of which became proof of ownership. Under this act, a Christian settler was allowed to own and title land up to 24 hectares. Furthermore, this Act placed Muslims in the disadvantageous position, since they did not title their lands, and even if they wanted to secure title they did not know how to secure one, as it was not their practice to do so.^{xix} Because of this problem some Magindanao leaders feared that the Magindanao would be displaced from their homeland. In 1927 Senator Datu Piang voiced out the sentiment:

The Moro witnessed many of the choicer parts of his country parceled out to the Filipino. . . Has seen the shrines where once his ancestors gathered in solemn worship now converted into pig-wallows or drinking shops- - two abominations to the Moslem.^{xx}

The same sentiment was conveyed by Senator Salipada Pendatun to the Philippine Vice governor General in 1935. But he added that in the acquisition of land the Christian were assisted by the Bureau of Labor and by the Bureau of Lands in Cotabato. Pendatun further warned that:

If this situation is allowed to continue the most probable effect will be that Christian homesteaders will eventually occupy most of the public unserved land of Cotabato, making the non-Christians minority in their own community.^{xxi}

This fear has come true. The territories the Magindanao once controlled or influenced have shrunk and been distributed to Region ((Western Mindanao) Region 12 (Central Mindanao) Region 11 (Eastern Mindanao), and in the Muslim Autonomous Region. The eastern part became part of the Eastern Mindanao region. The western side became part of the present Zamboanga and Pagadian Provinces, which partly composed the western Mindanao region. The rest are in central Mindanao and in Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao. The ancient Cotabato Empire has been divided into Cotabato City, the Magindanao Province, Sultan Kudarat, South Cotabato and North Cotabato. Among these provinces, it is not only in the Magindanao province where the Magindanao can be considered dominant. (In the capital city, they are a minority). This Magindanao province has been even uprooted and is isolated from its old geographic-administrative cluster to become part of the present Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao.

Aside from divisioning^{xxii} and parceling out the lands of the Magindanao, the neo-colonial Philippine government has been superimposed over the Magindanao Sultanate that has subsequently lost its essence. Other policies and programs have been introduced also, noted among them being the introduction of

the western type of education, which caught the interest of the Magindanao at the disadvantage of the Arabic education. As already mentioned, all this and more have been very significant in the minoritization of the Magindanao in their own homeland. It is the process of their being assimilated into the Philippine body politics^{xxiii} and of the fading away of many of their traditions in favor of the western life.

The Literature on the Magindanao

The preceding pages show very briefly the colorful and meaningful history, life and influences of the Magindanao. The literature about this group, however, is minimal. Most have been products of personal impressions without sufficient empirical support, since fieldwork in Muslimland entails a lot of burden and personal risk. This may be the reason why copying, rephrasing or integrating earlier works or ideas appeared to have been the common procedure in writing about the Muslims, since it is the easiest way. As a result, error committed in the past is perpetuated in the present and is seldom corrected.

Tan says that the literature on the Muslims is of four kinds: (1) Hispanic, (2) American, (3) Filipino, and (4) Muslim literature.^{xxiv} The Hispanic, Tan says, is full of biases and prejudices as they were not based on empirical data, since the non-Moro were not received well in the Muslim societies during the Spanish era in the Philippines. The American literature was either sympathetic with the Muslims and employed some actual observations and interviews, or it continued the Hispanic anti-Muslim literature. With few exceptions, Tan continues, the Filipino literature did not depart from the Hispanic-American pattern and heritage and still looked at the Muslims as uncivilized and warlike. This is so because, according to a Christian scholar,

... our ignorance of and/or indifference to their (Moro) culture, art and literature is almost complete. Obviously, a situation like this cannot be attributed to mere ignorance and indifference; it would be more correct to say that the situation is deeply rooted in prejudice and misinformation.^{xxv}

Tan further says that the literature on the Muslims written by themselves is centered on demoroizing the "Moro image." But Muslim writers cannot cope up with this requirement.^{xxvi} So far they have relatively few works. Most of them are segmentalized and concentrated on history. In the case of the Magindanao, despite the fact that they accepted western English education with preference over the Arabic education, they have only few scholars. Among these few, the more popular are Michael Mastura who turned politician,^{xxvii} Alunan Glang who was not heard from for the past decade; and a few other individuals. As with the

Meranao of Lanao,^{xxviii} there is not yet a single comprehensive book on the Magindanao.

These “literatures,” which are products of scientific investigation or at least of structured research work, are mostly in the form of dissertations pursued in compliance of degrees. Some of them may be cited in this work, such as the works of Maceda on the Magindanao Music and of Iletto on Magindanao history. Iletto acknowledges the scarcity of literature on the Magindanao when he writes:

Unfortunately, the study of [the] Magindanao and society has not progressed much since Najeeb Saleeby published his studies in the Moro History, Law and Religion in 1905. Jose Maceda’s fullscale study of Maguindanao Music, a landmark in Philippine ethnomusicology, is probably the only-in-depth study of some aspect of Maguindanao society that has appeared in the recent years. Some scholars have preferred to delve into the sociological aspects of mission work and may sometimes have been influenced by their own “Christian” biases and therefore unable to view Philippine Muslim society in its own terms.^{xxix}

Iletto’s work is a Filipino literature based on accounts of foreigners, mostly Spanish accounts. Perhaps it belongs to the few exceptions of Tan’s Filipino literature mentioned above.

NOTES:

ⁱ Meranao (with pepet vowel e) is one of the largest Moro-Muslim peoples who are in the Northeast of the Magindanao areas. Meranao means “people of the lake” because they live around Ranao or Lake. Their language is sister to that of the Magindanao.

ⁱⁱ Michael Mastura. *A Short History of Cotabato City and its Historic Places, Cotabato Guide Book* (Cotabato City: 1971) p.5.

According to Alunan Glang, the Spaniards and the Americans as a result of their difficulty in pronouncing the term maigdanao corrupt the name Magindanao from the word maigdanao. *Maigdanao* is from the words *maig* (to turn into liquid) and *danao* (lake). See Alunan Glang, *Magindanao and Islam*, in *Muslim Filipinos*, ed. Nagasura Madale (Quezon City: Alemars-Phoenix Publishing House, Inc., 1981) pp. 334-345.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zoilo M. Galang. *Encyclopaedia of the Philippines*, Vol. XVI (Manila, Philippines: 1957) p. 185.

^{iv} National Economic and Development Authority. **Socio-economic Profile** (Central Mindanao. Cotabato City, 1990) pp. 9-10.

^v Filemon Alfanta, *The Maguindanao of Zamboanga del Sur*, **North-Western Research Journal**, (Vol. 5, 1979), 24.

^{vi} James C. Stewart, *Four Muslim Groups: An Ethnographic Survey*, **Dansalan Research Center Occasional Paper No. 11** (September 1978), 1.

^{vii} Philippine National and Economic Development Authority, **Philippine Population, Land Area, and Density: 1970, 1975, 1980** (Special Report No. 3, 1980).

^{viii} Philippine National and Economic Development Authority, *Estimated Moro and Non-Moro Population in Mindanao, 1903-1980*.

^{ix} When one reads the work of Michael Mastura on the Magindanao Lineage, one gets the impression that the Magindanao are those who belong to the Kutawato-based sultanate, which he calls the Magindanao Sultanate, and that they are different from the people of Buayan and Kabuntalan Sultanates. (Mastura, *Magindanao...* pp. 9-24)

^x Glang, p. 338.

^{xi} A Sibugay Datu of North Zamboanga became a Kutawato Sultan in 1888. His seat of Sultanate was alternately held in Zamboanga and Cotabato. See Reynaldo Iletto, *The Magindanao: 1860-1888 (Career of Dato Uto of Buayan)*, **Data Paper No. 82** (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, 1971); reprint ed., (Marawi City: Mindanao State University Research Center, n.d.) p. 87.

^{xii} For some of the internal and external threats to the Magindanao society, readers are recommended to see the works of Michael Mastura, (1971) and Reynaldo Iletto, *The Magindanao: 1880-1888 (The Career of Dato Uto of Buayan)*, **Data Paper No. 82** (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, 1971); reprint ed., (Marawi City: Mindanao State University Research Center, n.d.) 143 pp.

^{xiii} See Iletto, 1971 and Mastura, pp. 9-24.

^{xiv} Iletto's work seems to portray that the Buayan people never surrendered to the Spaniards as compared to the Kutawato people. Their resistance was carried down to the Americans, and Datu Ali of Buayan was the last Moro Datu to have mounted a bloody resistance against the Americans. See **Iletto**, pp. 1-98. Furthermore, the resistance against the present Philippine government was declared first in Pagalongan, a Buayan

territory. Today the Buayan territories are still the center of the Magindanao civilization. .

^{xv} See W.K. Che Man, **Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and The Malays of Southern Thailand**, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1990) 240 pp. and S.J.T. George, **Revolt in Mindanao: The Rise of Islam in Philippine Politics** (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1980).

^{xvi} Filipinas Foundation, **Philippine Majority-Minority relations and Ethnic Attitudes** (Makati: Filipinas Foundation, 1975) Amihan Lamiin, *Muslim-Christian Perception Toward One Another* (Undergraduate Thesis, MSU, Marawi City, 1980); Luis Q. Lacar and Chester L. Hunt, *Attitude of Filipino Christian College Students Toward Filipino Muslims and Their Implications to National Integration*, **Solidarity** 7/3 (1972), pp. 3-9.

^{xvii} Gowing, Peter. **Mandate in Moroland: The American Government of Muslim Filipinos – 1899-1920** (Quezon City: New Day Publishing, 1983), p.13.

^{xviii} See Nicasio Garces in Mastura, p.20.

^{xix} See W. Man, pp. 24-25 and Rad Silva, **Two Hills of the Same Land: Truth Behind the Mindanao Problem** (n.p.: Mindanao Sulu Critical Studies Group, 1979).

^{xx} Mastura, p.20.

^{xxi} Mastura, pp. 19-20.

^{xxii} The Meranao homeland was also divided into Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte with capitals in Marawi City and Iligan City respectively. In Lanao del Norte, Meranao and Christians are almost equal in number and they have been competing for dominance for the past decades. In Iligan City, the Meranao are minority. Lanao Sur and its capital are dominated by the Meranao.

There has been a move to divide Lanao Sur into Lanao and Maranaw Provinces. This is perhaps following the history of the Magindanao.

^{xxiii} For an example of how the Sultanate is being affected by the new system of government, see Melvin Mednick, *Sultans and Mayors: The Relation of a National to an Indigenous Political System*, in **The Maranao**, Mamitua Saber and Abdullah Madale, editors, (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1975) pp. 82-88; Antonio Isidro, *From Sultanate to Democracy*, **Mindanao Journal**, 3/2 (October-December 1976), pp. 59-69, and Eric Casiño, **The Jama Mapun...**, 159 pp.

^{xxiv} Samuel K. Tan, **Selected Essays on the Filipino Muslims** (Marawi City, Philippines: Mindanao State University, University Research Center, 1982) p. 105-108.

^{xxv} Alfredo T. Tiamson, *Muslim-Filipino Literature*, **Mindanao Journal**, 2/3-4 (January-June 1976), p. 112.

^{xxvi} Esmail R. Disoma, **The Meranao...** pp. 4-6.

^{xxvii} Mastura could have written several dozens or volumes of authoritative works, had he not joined politics. On the other hand, his political role, perhaps cannot be undertaken by other Magindanao of his generation.

^{xxviii} Only recently that a solid book on the Meranao based on empirical work is published by the author. See Esmail R. Disoma, **The Meranao...** 200 pp.

^{xxix} Iletto, p. vi.