

ANIMISTIC FISHING RITUAL IN LEYTE AND SAMAR

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To this day Leyte and Samar have preserved an animistic fishing ceremonial similar to the agricultural ritual.¹ From times immemorial the Filipino has been surrounded by seashores, and it can be assumed that he was engaged in both fishing and agriculture at a very early date. The gifts offered in the rituals are mostly of agricultural kind, fish is seldom offered, even in the fishing ritual.² This fact suggests that the agricultural ritual is the earlier form and has been adopted for the fishing ritual. More comparative studies have to be undertaken to prove or disprove this point.

The need of the ancient Filipino to have a fishing ritual originated from his animistic world concept. The fields and forests were alive for him with spirits who had to be treated friendly lest they did harm.³ The sea was the home of the "dagatnon" (spirits in the sea, far and near), the *lawodnon* (spirit far away in the deep sea), the *katao*⁴ (mermaid) and the *lawason*.⁵ Until today many fishermen believe that the spirits of the sea "govern the movement of the fish. If the spirits are hostile to a fisherman he will have a poor catch. If the spirits are his friends he will do well, is called "lucky" by his fellow fishermen, and plenty of laborers will apply to work for him.

To secure the friendship of the spirits of the sea the ritual or *buhat* is performed which consists mainly in a spirit meal.⁷ Leyte and Samar have long been under Christian influence and are to the remotest barrio christianized; nevertheless, animistic thinking has not disappeared. Animistic practices in their purest form are observed on Biliran Island, Leyte, which is spiritually and economically the most neglected part of the province, but is rich in natural resources.

Ritual in the fishcorral.—A model animistic ceremonial is the *buhat* in the fishcorral. This ceremony is performed on different occasions: it may be the opening of a new fish-corral, it may be an exceptionally good

¹ For a description of the agricultural ritual see Arens, "Animism in the Rice Ritual of Leyte and Samar," *The Philippine Sociological Review*, January 1956. Also, "Corn Ritual in Leyte and Samar," by the same author, *Philippine Sociological Review*, April-July, 1956.

² Fish is sometimes offered, but seems to play a minor role. No informants mentioned the offering of fish, only after direct asking they admitted that fish was sometimes included in the gifts.

³ See, "Animism in the Rice Ritual..." *ibid.*

⁴ The *katao* (half maiden, half fish) are referred to as "pets" of the "lawodnon" and "dagatnon".

⁵ The *lawason* touches persons who are swimming in the nude. This touch brings sickness.

⁶ These "spirits of the sea" are in the conception of the Leyteño and Samariño similar to human beings and therefore are referred to as "people of the sea".

⁷ *Buhat* means in the Waray-Waray Dialect "Work," but it has here the special meaning of a ritualistic performance. The officiant or performer of the ritual is called "parabuhat." There are many kinds of *buhat*: for hunting, for fishing, for the quick recovery of a sick person, for planting and harvesting rice.

catch or the opposite, namely a period of bad luck. The fishermen are convinced that neither the perfect construction of the fishcorral nor the know-how of their fishing methods will bring a good haul. It is the friendship with the "people of the sea," the owners of the fish, that brings luck in fishing. To win the friendship the fishermen have to make an offering to the "people of the sea." The help of a "quack-doctor" (*tambalan*) or of an officiant (*parabuhat*) who knows how to perform the ritual is secured. The ceremony is usually performed during full-moon night. A small bamboo raft is constructed and decorated. Delicious food is prepared for the "people of the sea": it consists of a medium-sized roasted pig, the cooked internal organs of the pig, boiled rice, eggs, some wine, bread, and tuba. After the food is ready, it is placed on the raft⁸ and brought by the officiant, who is riding in a boat to the fishcorral. At the fishcorral he waits until the moon rises, then he utters the *oracion* (prayers) and thereafter lets the raft with the food float freely into the sea.⁹ After the raft floats away, the officiant calls the "people of the sea" to eat and to accept this token of friendship. As reward the officiant asks the "people of the sea" to let the fish go to the corral of his client that he might have a good catch. The officiant promises that after a good haul more food and a bigger roasted pig would be given to the "people of the sea" at the time of next full moon.¹⁰

Ritual in Net-fishing.—The open Pacific Ocean batters the shores of Eastern Samar making corral fishing difficult but allowing net-fishing. To secure a good catch a ceremony (*buhat*) is performed. Ando Island near Borongan has a very elaborate ritual for net-fishing. Between the months of April and June a kind of mackerel, locally called *marapati*, visits the island of Ando. On account of this regular appearance of the mackerel the elders of the barrio gather at a sacred place either in the cemetery or the chapel and recite together some prayers. This is done on the first Friday of April immediately preceding the full-moon. At the time the men are praying the women prepare luxurious food for a banquet. Some of the men build a richly decorated raft out of bamboo. After the raft is ready and the meal prepared, the whole barrio goes to the seashore to witness the elaborate affair.

The women arrange the meal on the raft in form of a banquet; everything is prepared to the last item, even dessert, cigars, and tooth picks are not missing. Tuba is richly served to the "people of the sea." The tuba in bamboo tubes is placed on the raft. From the mast of the raft waves a sheet of white cloth representing a flag. As soon as the raft is ready, the oldest among the group goes to the edge of the water while the others stand aside. He holds the rope which is tied to the raft; after chanting a few prayers he pushes the raft seaward saying aloud: "People of the sea, if this offering is worthy, please let us know." The raft does not go far from the shore in spite of the outgoing current. After several hours the

⁸ In some places no raft is used. The officiant and a helper bring the food in a boat to the fishcorral. So done in Oson, a fishing barrio in Biliran Island.

⁹ In Oson where the raft is not used the officiant consumes a part of the meal in the fishcorral.

¹⁰ Practiced in Culaba, Biliran Island. In Calubian (northern part of Leyte, opposite Biliran Island) the same ceremony is performed. Instead of the roasted pig, a white rooster is bound on the raft and around the rooster other food is placed.

raft comes back to the shore. The barrio people take this as a sign that their prayers were heard. The elders then feast on the sumptuous meal.

Hardly a week after this ceremony a school of *marapat* will be seen so close to the shore that they are almost thrown by the waves on the sand. Then the men of the barrio cast a net over them and one boat (*banca*) full of fish is the minimum catch. The first catch is equally divided among the people of the barrio. Even those members of the barrio living furthest away have their share. Any outsider who happens to witness the casting of the net has an equal share, too.

After the first catch, one of the elders takes a pair of fish and lets them bleed on the water. The meaning of this ceremony is that all the fish who smell the blood of their kind should die. Thus a mass-fishing of the mackerel is initiated. The over-supply of fish is shipped to town.¹¹

Common elements in the ritual.—The *buhat* is the main feature of the fishing ritual in Leyte and Samar. In its major aspects it is the same in these two islands. The officiant is the *parabuhat* (performer) or the *tambalan* (quackdoctor). The instruments used are a raft—well decorated—, or a boat. The food is arranged in banquet style. The time of performance is a night with a fullmoon.¹² The place is the sea or seashore. The ceremonies consist in the offering of food and the *oracion* (prayers). The objective is to gain the friendship of the “people of the sea” for better success in fishing. Minor varieties in the ceremony give new color to this performance.

Localized animistic beliefs and practices.—It can be expected that a society which depends so much on fishing has many additional beliefs and practices with regard to success in fishing. Some of these practices are quite localized throughout Leyte and Samar. A few shall be mentioned.

Before a fisherman goes out fishing he looks up to the sky to see if there are many wave and scale like clouds; these are an indication for a good catch.¹³

It is more advantageous for a fisherman to catch at low tide, because at high tide the fish are hiding at the bottom of the sea.¹⁴ If the fisherman does not live close to the sea he watches the eyes of the cat to find out whether it is low or high tide. It is said that at high tide the eyeballs of the cat enlarge and at low tide contract.¹⁵

Should the fisherman see his pet-cat cleaning her mouth with her paws, it means good luck and a big catch may be expected the next time the fisherman goes out to the sea.¹⁶

Fishermen of Talalora and Sta. Rita in Western Samar never place the coconut shell with which they fetch water out of the fishing boat upside-down in the *banca*. It is folk-belief that they would meet disaster

¹¹ Solitario Discar, Borongan.

¹² In Abuyog it is also done in the early morning hours.

¹³ Eastcoast of Leyte

¹⁴ Tanauan, Leyte

¹⁵ Tanauan, and other parts of Eastern Leyte and Northern Leyte, also Catabogan, Samar.

¹⁶ Sta. Rita, Samar

in form of a heavy sea. Good weather will suddenly turn into a storm (*madios*) and the boat might capsize.

Another belief is that fishermen in San Jose (Tacloban) never place their fish-corrals on a Friday or Sunday in the sea. That would bring misfortune to the fishcorral owner.

The fishermen can also secure help for a good catch through charms and prayer. A common charm used in Tolosa is the *kalipayan*¹⁷ plant. The story goes that during the last decade of the Spanish Occupation of the Philippines fishing was not successful in Tolosa. The bad spirits of Mt. Ambao had cursed the people of Tolosa on account of their noisiness. The curse affected the fishing industry and the catch was at an all time low. They could hardly bring home fish for consumption, much less for sale. Everytime they cast their net, the net got entangled in the thorns of the corral rocks, turning the net to shreds. A strong gale from the East would tear the fish corrals to pieces as soon as planted off the beach. The curse continued for years until the people of Tolosa called a council of wisemen. They agreed to see the “witch doctor” who was living in a cave at Mt. Danglay. After a two-day journey, the village wisemen found the “witch doctor”. He performed a short ceremony and advised them to return to their place and to see a hermit who was living just across the Ambao mountains. He would counteract the curse of the evil spirits. In another two-day journey they were able to contact the hermit who requested them to bring along a pair of white chickens and another chicken of different colour besides a ganta of black rice (*tapol*). After all these requirements were complied with, they were told that behind the hermit's cave were bushes of the “kalipayan” plant. They were to dry the leaves and to use them as incense for every fishing gear employed at sea. Through the “kalipayan” incense the curse cast by the evil spirits became powerless and the people of Tolosa again were successful in fishing. Until now “kalipayan” incense is used to secure luck and happiness in the fishing industry.¹⁸

Another method of procuring plenty of fish is practiced in Zummaraga (Samar) by the so called egg-ceremony. Early in the morning, when it is still dark, the fishermen go out with lights and a half dozen eggs to a place in the sea surrounded by mountains; here at a deep place they let the eggs down to the bottom of the sea and mark the place. Two days later the fishermen will come back with all kinds of fishing gears and will find plenty of fish.¹⁹

In Basey (Samar) the first fishes caught in a new fish corral are left free. It is folk belief that the fishes will tell their kin about the corral and will lead big schools of fish in to the corral, so securing a big haul for the fishcorral owner.

In Abuyog (Leyte) and Guiuan (Samar) the first take is given to the poor and all those present at the fishcorral. It is a form of thanksgiving and a greater yield of the fishcorral is expected.

¹⁷ *Kalipayan* is also used in the Rice Ritual, see Arens, “Animism in the Rice Ritual...”, *ibid*.

¹⁸ Esther Calleja, Tolosa (Leyte)

¹⁹ Fishermen from Zummaraga

Through prayer the fishermen of Leyte and Samar also procure God's help in fishing. This is the Christian addition to the fish ritual. Since St. Peter was a fisherman his help is especially called for. Before a fisherman in Caibiran goes to the sea he prays to St. Peter in the following way: "St. Peter have mercy on me that I may be able to have a good catch today."

On All Souls Day fishermen expect a big haul, because on this day all their deceased relatives and friends will be helping them. The souls of the deceased in return expect a good meal at the cemetery or at home, a custom very common in Leyte and Samar. Here Christian and animistic elements are interwoven.

Conclusion.—The animistic elements in the fishing ritual of Leyte and Samar show that ancient Filipino culture is heavily influenced by the South-east Asian culture. The pagan and Mohammedan fishermen in Malaya and Indonesia have similar practices in their fishing ritual.

The old animistic fishing ritual in the Philippines is on the way out. In towns and barrios closely related to the Church and well instructed in Catholic doctrine this fishing ritual is about forgotten, but it lives on as a reminder of the past in the religiously more neglected districts of Leyte and Samar.

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