

**NOTES ON THE COSMOLOGY OF
CONTEMPORARY AGUSANON MANOBO
IN SAN ANDRES, BUNAWAN, AGUSAN DEL SUR**

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How do the Agusanon Manobo in Barangay San Andres, Bunawan, Agusan del Sur relate to their ancestral spirits vis-a-vis Christianity? This paper examines the current spiritual beliefs and cosmology of the Manobo in Brgy. San Andres, Bunawan, Agusan del Sur. The contemporary worldview of the Agusanon Manobo that is seen here pertains to their integrated as well as distinct knowledges of the Manobo spirits and of the Christian beliefs.

Keywords: Agusanon Manobo cosmology

Introduction

Since the introduction of Christianity by Rev. Fr. Saturnino Urios S. J. in the last quarter of the 1800s, Manobo rituals and practices have considerably changed. To whom do the Manobo of today address their rituals and spiritual practices? What will be presented in this paper is the current cosmology of the Manobo who have become Christians, the spirits they now revere, their practices of spirituality. The information will be compared with Garvan's earlier data. When Garvan conducted his research for *The Manobos of Mindanao* around 1905 to 1910 the *conquista* or Christianization of the Manobo was on its 3rd decade.

Our research was conducted over a one-month period [in the summer of 2012] in Barangay San Andres, Bunawan, Agusan del Sur. An estimated 60 to 70 percent of the population are Manobo. However many of them have adopted Christian values.

In this paper, the worldview of the Manobo that will be referred to pertains to the integrated and also the distinct knowledge of their Manobo spiritual beliefs as well as of Christian beliefs. The belief system is currently being affected by exposure to the *langyaw* (Bisaya immigrants), the entry of

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several priests and religion being taught in this area, and with the NCIP (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples) trying to encourage return to their old beliefs.

Contemporary Manobo worldview

How the spirits came into this world. Agusanon Manobo today in Brgy. San Andres, Bunawan call the world *kalibutan* (earth) and the sky *yangit* or *kawanangan*. *Kawanangan* is where a long time ago, all of the spirits lived with the *Labaw na Magbabaja*. Those spirits were all called *diwata* or *tumanod*, and evil spirits did not exist. The *Labaw na Magbabaja* appointed several *tumanod* on a mission to the world (*kalibutan*) to check on what people are doing. When these *tumanod* arrived on earth, they fell in love with mortals and soon married them. They stayed for several years in the world and had families of their own. Only later did they remember their mission, so they returned to take their places up in the heaven. As soon as they arrived, they were punished for violating the rule not to marry mortals and for disregarding their mission. They were thrown back to the world to be together with other *tumanod* who did not do anything at all but just got involved in mischief. When hurled back to *Kalibutan*, the *tumanod* fell to different places: on trees, rocks, mountains, farmlands, etc. Those *tumanod* who had violated and disregarded their mission turned into *busow* and *taegbusow*, and those who simply “got involved” became the protectors and guardians of the people. Meanwhile the spirits who fell from the trust of the *Labaw na Magbabaja* had their powers decreased; they are now called the *tagbanwa*.

Disparate cosmologies. Figure 1 depicts a cosmology of the Manobo as described by Garvan (1931). I mapped out the general locations where each category of spirits resides. According to Garvan, for the Manobo:

“His gods, like his warrior chiefs, are great chiefs, no one of whom recognizes the sovereignty of the other. We find no idea of a supreme being as such. The priests of one settlement have their own special deities to whom they and their relatives have recourse, while the priests of another settlement have another set of deities for their tutelaries, with whom they intercede... It is true that each priest has amongst his familiars a major divinity from whom he may have experienced more help, but in the spirit world there does not exist, according to Manóbo belief, one supreme universal being (Garvan 1931:196).”

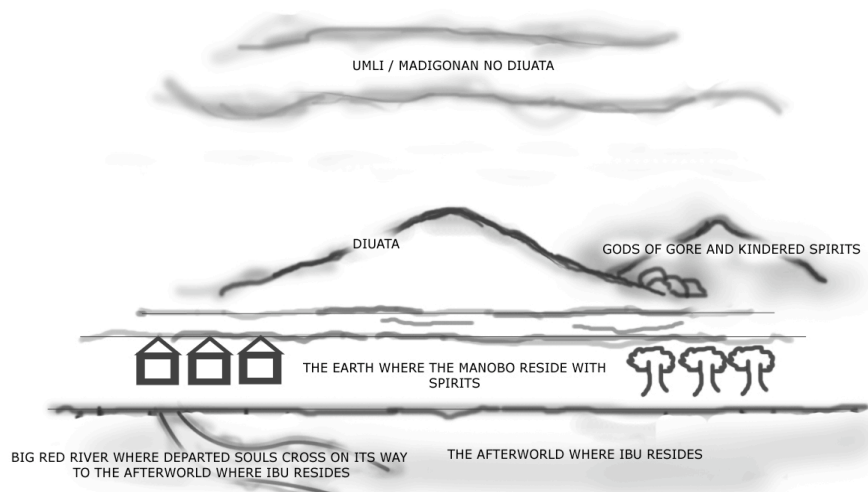


Figure 1. Manobo cosmology based on Garvan (1931).

Figure 2 shows the cosmology that a *baylan* [spirit medium] from Barangay Poblacion presented to me. She grew up in the Poblacion area where the foremost Jesuit missionary Fr. Saturnino Urios S.J. had established a headquarters in the Agusan-Simulao riverbank. She is now 72 years old, therefore she was born about thirty-five years after Fr. Urios died. Hawudun Cabanbanan [the Manobo tribal leader] was said to have appointed her as his “*diwatera*”, which is another term commonly and currently used for *baylan*. In the diagram I have constructed based on what she said, a hierarchy of spirits was not present. Only the *Labaw no Magbabaja* or “*Ginoo*” (‘God’ in Bisaya), is seen as the highest amongst all spirits. According to her, there is no underworld or land of the dead. When a person dies, the soul only roams around.

Figure 3 is a diagram from an informant who is around 20 years old. In the Manobo area (Loreto) where he grew up they still practice rituals for spirits though they have also been touched by Christianity. His exact age is undetermined because in his birthplace, according to him, they still follow the old ways. He compared the Manobo beliefs with Christianity, and concluded that they are “almost the same”. According to him, the *Labaw na Magbabaja* is the same as the ‘Supreme God of Christians’. This God lives in the highest part of the sky and on the second layer of the sky is where the *tumanod/diwata* live. Underneath is the World, *Kalibutan* (earth, land), where people live together with the *tagbanwa*. His concept of the underworld was adopted from the Christian concept of hell where all the evil

spirits reside. However his knowledge of the traditional Manobo beliefs is vast and he is aware of hierarchy between Manobo spirits.



Figure 2. Contemporary Agusanon-Manobo cosmology according to a *baylan*, age 72.



Figure 3. Agusanon-Manobo cosmology according to B, age ~20

Hierarchy of spirits. Based on the current understanding of my informants above, there is a hierarchy of spirits whose order is based upon the power each of these spirits are perceived to possess. The *Labaw na Magbabaja* is viewed as the highest amongst all spirits, and the one who created everything. His power is “all-around” and he can do anything. He lives in Heaven, *Kawanangan*, at its highest layer. Contemporary Manobo also equate him with *Ginoo*, the Visayan Christian’s term for God;

The second layer is where *tumanod/diwata* live. Informants compared them with Christian cosmology, citing that their equivalents are the angels and the saints. Beneath *Kawanangan* is *Kalibutan*, the world where humans and lower spirits (‘Not like us’/“*Dili ingon-nato*”) co-exist.

The spirits living in this world are called *Tagbanwa*, which means ‘owner of an area’. They live in trees, rivers, rocks, caves, cliffs etc. or merely exist by roaming around the land. *Tagbanwa* are classified into three categories: *bantey* who are guardians and helpers of the people, *busow* or *taegbusow* whose nature is to drink blood and cause harm towards people, and *tagabalete* who live in trees like the *balete*. There are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ *tagabalete*.

In the hierarchy presented in Figure 4, *Apo Ma-Ibuyan (Maybuyan)*, a *taegbusow*, has a higher rank than *busow*. Though *taegbusow* are categorized as also *busow*, they are viewed as stronger than any regular *busow*. They are bloodthirsty spirits and can enable a single person to possess tremendous strength enough to decimate an army.

Spirits known to contemporary Manobo. The Manobo distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ spirits. Generally speaking, a spirit that is called *tumanod*, *diwata*¹ or *bantey*, is a good or benevolent spirit; and once a spirit is classified as *busow* then it is viewed as fierce or ‘bad’ spirit. Spirit familiars are called *abyan*; the purpose of these spirits is for healing sickness caused by “*dili ingun ato*” (‘non humans’, other spirits) or by people (e.g. witchcraft). Among contemporary Manobo, the term *diwata* (and *diwatahan*) is a much more familiar word than *busow* and pertains to all spirits, whether they are good or bad.

The *Tumanod* or *Bantey* can also cause sickness or harm towards a person, however, as explained to me by a *baylan*, the affected individual will deem the sickness or misfortune as a punishment for neglect or displeasure.

¹Cf *Diuáta*, “a minor order of benignant deities, with whom the priests hold communion on all occasions of impending danger, before all important undertakings, and whenever it is considered necessary to feast or to propitiate them” (Garvan 1931: 196).

As long as the spirits do not drink human blood or eat people, then they are *tumanod* or *bantey*. The qualification is highly dependent on the deeds done or usually done by a particular spirit. Those who are classified as *bantey* or *diwata* were categorized as ‘good’ because it is already in their nature to help people and so they can never be called a ‘bad’ spirit even if they sometimes ask for offerings and even cause harm to people if they feel neglected or insulted. The Manobo view them as kind and helpful spirits; they are called upon through the mediation of the *baylan* to help people—e.g. by giving advice—not only in healing but also when they go *mangayam* (hunting), planting and harvesting rice. *Bantey* are also known as guardians of nature. Contemporary Agusanon Manobo compare their purpose to that of Christian saints.

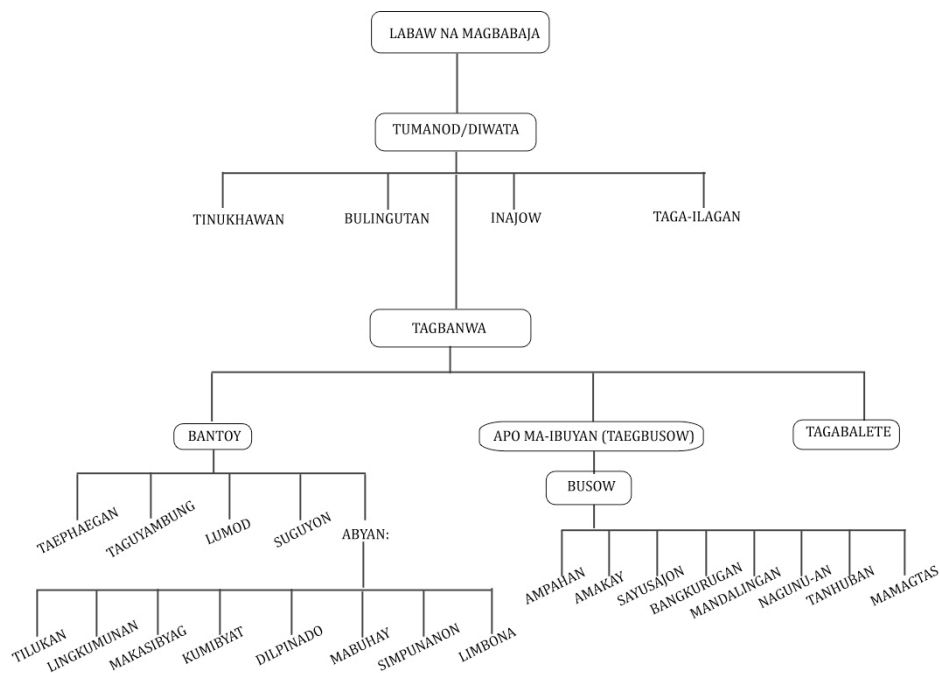


Figure 4. Hierarchy of the Manobo spirits (contemporary).

“*Mga dili maayo nga spirito*” (the ‘not good spirits’) is what the contemporary Manobo call *busow*. *Busow* are known to be fierce and bloodthirsty spirits and cause trouble for people. They like to drink the blood

of humans, but the blood of domestic animals, usually a chicken or a pig, can be considered a worthy offering to appease them. Human beings can be easily harmed by the *busow* because our 'distance' or 'boundary' from them is small or thin and they can be seen by the naked eye. Before Christianization, *busow* were called upon by the *bagani* (warriors) and by the tribal chieftains to help them win the fight and to boost their courage during raids.² *Busow* are also known to cause trouble for people. In a forest, when they smell the sweat of a person, they create confusion in smell and make a traveler lose his way. They are the invisible visitors who sometimes bang on doors at night.

Among contemporary Agusanon Manobo, the term *busow* is used to refer to any spirit that causes trouble or sickness. Sometimes the word *busow* is used to refer to someone who eats another person. The Europeans and the lowland Christians educated by them brought the idea of people who could magically transform themselves into monsters. These beings called by the Visayan terms of *wakwak*, *kikik*, and *aswang* integrated themselves into the Manobo belief: they are also categorized by the Manobo as *busow*.

Taegbusow are more powerful than the regular *busow*. Their desire is to take possession of a body of a human being, whether a *baylan* or not, turning that possessed person into a superhuman, with such strength that even bullets could not pierce them. A *taegbusow* entering into a human will kill everything in sight, and then eat them; especially their hearts and liver.

Tagbanwa, the *tumanod* who were thrown out of heaven by the *Labaw na Magbabadja* and had fallen down to the world, have become the owners of and live in mountains, seas, rocks, trees, etc. The *tagbanwa* are classified into *bantey* and *busow*. Generally, the term *tagbanwa* pertains to nature spirits who live here on earth.

The *tumanod* who did not fall from *Kawanangan* maintained their original level of powers. They are benevolent spirits, and they also help the people but they rarely appear to them.

The table on the next page shows the classification of the spirits into the 'good' and 'bad'.

Becoming a baylan. To become a *baylan*, one must give up something dear, voluntarily or not. One of my informants, Nanay V, became an 'official *baylan*' when her eldest daughter experienced being very sick for two days

²Cf *Tagbúsau*, "a category of sanguinary gods who delight in blood and who incite their chosen favorites, the *bagáni* or warrior chiefs, to bloodshed and revenge, and ordinary laymen to acts of violence and madness" (Garvan 1931:196).

after which she died. When Nanay V refused to believe in the *abyan* (spirit familiar or helper), she became sick for six months. She tried to get rid of the suggestion to become a *baylan* by going to confession to four priests. In the end she accepted the command of her *abyan* even if it was against the teachings of the Catholic Church.³

Table 1. Classification of the Manobo spirits.

BENEVOLENT SPIRITS (<i>diwata/tumanod</i>)	MALEVOLENT AND FIERCE SPIRITS (<i>busow</i>)
<i>Tinukhawan</i> is angered whenever there is a female wearing white clothes. He can see everything. He also heals the sick. One of his abilities is spatial manipulation like turning a mountain into a plain.	<i>Apo Ma-ibuyan/Bitud</i> is the first <i>busow</i> and the highest amongst all the <i>busow</i> . Categorized as <i>taegbusow</i> . His followers cause trouble for the people.
<i>Bulingutan</i> , together with <i>Tinukhawan</i> , also heals people and is one of the highest amongst the <i>diwata</i> .	<i>Ampahan</i> has the face of a human but the nose is pierced by a <i>dagum</i> (metal needle). He is a warrior and drinks human blood but he can help people when offerings are made. He does not have a specific place to live.
<i>Inadjow</i> ⁴ controls lightning and thunder. Every time he laughs, lightning appears in the sky. He has a short tongue and cannot speak which is why every time he goes into the body of a <i>baylan</i> , the <i>baylan</i> also could not speak. He is the one who sends out punishment to those who have incestuous relationships or who laugh at animals. He would strike that person with lightning (<i>anitan</i>). ⁵	<i>Inampo</i> is a warrior who always carries a <i>bangkaw</i> (spear). Though he does not do bad things all the time, he is still considered a <i>busow</i> because he drinks blood.
	<i>Sayusadjon</i> sleeps upside down and takes care of the <i>Mantiyanak</i> .

³ *Abyan* approximate the ‘spirit familiars’ or ‘spirit helpers’ described in the literature on shamanism. Note however that there are non-*baylan* or people who have no healing abilities but nonetheless have spirit familiars (Gatmaytan 2004).

⁴ Cf *Inaiyau*, “an empyrean god, the wielder of the thunderbolt and the lightning, and the manipulator of the winds and storms” (Garvan 1931:197).

<p><i>Taga-Ilagan</i> is a seer and she has the ability to see through to the most hidden secrets of a person. She is also called upon by <i>baylan</i> to help a woman give birth. She would choose a long strand of hair to be wrapped upon by the waist of the patient to ease childbirth.</p>	<p><i>Bangkurugan</i> is a spirit who eats people and lives in <i>balete</i> trees.</p>
<p><i>Bantey</i> are generally benevolent spirits; they are called upon by the <i>baylan</i> for help.</p>	<p><i>Mandalingan</i> causes people to go crazy and laugh for no reason at all. It does not live in a specific place but only roams around.</p>
<p><i>Taguyambong</i> does not have any place because he himself is all-around; he is pure power. He shields the Manobo from those with bad intentions. One account of this instance was in B's birthplace. The area where he lives is much more rural. There were soldiers who passed by their house, but they did not know that it was a house because they were hidden by <i>Taguyambong</i>. He cast an illusion on the soldiers which made them think that the house was only trees.</p>	<p><i>Amakay</i> is a giant who randomly picks up people and places them inside his bag. He eats the people that he picks up.</p>
<p><i>Suguyon</i> is called upon whenever the Manobo conduct a <i>mangayam</i> (hunt) and whenever there is sickness. Before hunting, one must get any part of the chicken and then burn it together with the offerings in the plate.⁶</p>	<p><i>Nagu-nuan</i>, although he is not necessarily bad, is still considered <i>busow</i> as he desires human blood and drinks it.</p>
	<p><i>Mamagtas</i>, together with <i>Nagunuan</i> and <i>Ampahan</i>, is not considered totally 'bad' because he can help people. But he is still considered <i>busow</i> because he drinks blood.</p>
	<p><i>Tan-huban</i> is considered <i>busow</i> because he requires blood offerings.</p>
	<p><i>Kiging</i> is a female <i>busow</i> who lives in the rocks and eats the corpses of people.</p>

⁵ Cf *Anit* or *Anitan*, "the spirit of the thunderbolt, and one of the mightier class of spirits that dwell in the upper sky world" (Garvan 1931:196).

⁶ Cf *Sugúdon* or *Sugújun*, "the god of hunters and trappers, under whose auspices are conducted the operations of the chase and all that pertains thereto. He is also the protector of the hunting dogs" (Garvan 1931:197).

<i>Tilukan</i> is the name of the <i>abyan</i> or spirit familiar of the <i>diwatahan</i> I met. She described him as having fair skin and wearing a white dress and cap. He rides on a giant black dog and his primary purpose is healing.	<i>Yumod/Lumod</i> live in the sea, similar to a mermaid. They are malicious spirits that drown people. ⁷
<i>Lingkumunan</i> is the best friend of <i>Tilukan</i> . His specialty is giving advice and tracking down a person.	
<i>Makasibyag</i> .	
<i>Kumibyat</i> .	
<i>Dilpinado</i> .	
<i>Mabuhay</i> .	
<i>Limbona</i> .	
<i>Simpunanon</i> .	
<i>Tukas</i> is like a lawyer because he tracks down criminals and gives advice to people.	
<i>Matangkapon</i> is a friend of <i>Tukas</i> and his specialty is healing.	
<i>Limbuyuan (Taga-dagat)</i> . His specialty is healing.	

Busow and *taegbusow* can become *abyan* for as long as they help the people. They can also heal people because they are the ones who cause the sickness. Generally, those spirits who help people are classified as kind and those who eat and cause harm are automatically bad. However, there are situations when the distinction between the good and the evil as in real life becomes nebulous. In the case of *busow*, they are called “*maduot nu batasan to tagbanwa*” because of their nature to kill, to drink blood and cause harm to the people. Though, at some point they can be called “*madajow nu*

⁷ Cf *Yumud*, the water wraith, an apparently innocuous spirit, abiding in deep and rocky places, usually in pools, beneath the surface of the water Garvan (1931:197).

batasan to tagbanwa” in a situation when they would help people. However, they still require constant bloody sacrifices and the person they come in contact with who could no longer supply their wants, ends up being eaten.

Christianity as a symbol of modernization

While the Christianization of Bunawan was initiated in the last quarter of 1800s by Fr. Saturnino Urios S.J., in San Andres it only commenced during the 1980s with the start of mining and logging activities in the area. The Camarin Mining Corporation brought several Christian employees to the Agusan Marsh area. Other than that, there are the Manobo who came from other places and settled in the area, usually looking for work and livelihood. These IP migrants were Christianized earlier. The first ‘chief’ of the area, (Andres Lacaza, Sr.) was already a Manobo Christian when he and his clan settled in the San Andres area. Lately, the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP) has been trying to return old beliefs and practices. This has also influenced the folk Christianity in the belief system of the Manobo in the area.

With the entry of Christianity, Manobo spiritual beliefs have changed dramatically. Many of their rituals were eradicated or were transformed to agree or correspond with the tenets of Christianity. With *Labaw na Magbabaja* being ‘equated’ to the Christian God, the Manobo cosmology has become integrated into the Christian belief system where many of the old spirits have become inferior in the eyes of the Manobo. The Manobo in San Andres today have minimal knowledge about their ancestral spirits. According to the tribal leader Hawudun Tandawan II, he hires a *baylan* from other places to conduct rituals because the *baylan* in his area is not really an “expert”. To make up for the loss of a huge part of this knowledge, they have also integrated Christianity in their Manobo beliefs. Thus current Manobo practice of spirituality is quite eclectic. Some would include a *novena* when doing a certain ritual. The nine days Christian *Novena* precedes the Manobo harvest rite *Taephaeg* and other Manobo rituals in Barangay San Andres, Bunawan, Agusan del Sur.

There are Manobo who have completely adopted modern Christian beliefs, and there are also those who practice their belief in the ancient spirits ‘separately’ from Christianity. One example of this is having a ritual for the Manobo spirit and a simultaneous one for the Christian God. During planting and harvest time when they perform *Taephaeg* for the Manobo spirit for agriculture they perform another offering and sacrifice for (the Christian) God. The NCIP is trying to restore their old Manobo religious practices thus some of their rituals were practiced. But, according to one of my informants

they would pray first to the Christian God to forgive them for doing their indigenous ritual, only then would they proceed to the indigenous ritual.

In sum, there are three patterns of accommodation of these two beliefs systems: a) integration of their ancient spiritual beliefs and Christianity, b) the Manobo adopt Christian values or c) 'separately' practice their ancient spiritual beliefs and Christian beliefs, creating a distinction between the two.

Another example of integration is the *oracion*, a secret powerful prayer (in Latin) believed to be exclusive only for the *mananambal* or healer, and which can be 'equated' to the Manobo's *Panawagtawag*.

There have been drastic changes in the Manobo's relation towards their spirits as they adapt to modernization. The spirits in the old Manobo beliefs played major roles in their lives. According to Garvan, Manobo devotion to their religious belief is very deep. He observed that the Manobo "undertakes no action out of the ordinary routine without consulting the powers above..." (Garvan 1931:193). Contemporary changes in their knowledge and interactions with the ancient spirits are indicative of significant changes in every aspect of their culture in present engagement with the two belief systems in Bunawan, Agusan del Sur.

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