

## **PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES AND PALAWAN NATIVES: DIALOGUE, CONFLICT OR MISUNDERSTANDING?**

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HAVING spent a number of years with the Palawan natives of southern Palawan Island in the Philippines, pursuing a study of their cultural and social organization, I have had several occasions to observe contacts, or rather the results of contact, between the Protestant New Tribes Mission and the native population. In this essay, I bring together a few of these observations, with a view to assessing the cultural impact of missionary work on the local culture and the meaning of the biblical message from the native's point of view. There are, however, many gaps in my data, since I tended to work in areas where the presence of missionaries was least felt.

The indigenous population of southern Palawan Island comprises an ethnolinguistic group of about 50,000 people who call themselves 'Palawan'.<sup>1</sup> They speak an Austronesian language and are predominantly shifting agriculturalists.

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1. A number of fancy ethnonyms are used in the literature: Palawanun, Palawanin, Palawani, Palawano etc. Their self-ethnonym is Palawan, sometimes including a glottal stop or a lengthened middle vowel: Pala'wan, or Pala:wan.

This indigenous group is made up of a number of local subcultures, often with their own dialect, while one of the main areas of difference between these groups pertains to the kind of religious beliefs and ceremonial life characteristic of each. To assess the nature of the impact of missionary work, one has to take these differences into account. To this day, the majority follows an indigenous polytheistic belief system that includes various ritual events, ranging from the shamanistic seance (Macdonald 1973) to elaborate ceremonies involving the spirits in a kind of ritual play (Macdonald 1990).<sup>2</sup>

Living in relative isolation, in a frontier area with no communication infrastructure until the middle of this century, the Palawan were only superficially exposed, and only in some parts of their territory at that, to Catholicism. There was, however, no systematic attempt at Christianization, nor did religious orders establish missions in this part of the island. There are, however, parish churches in Brooke's Point, Quezon and other such towns. Islam has been an influence for at least five centuries in the Sulu Archipelago, and a fringe element of the Palawan population became, nominally at least, Muslim, forming an as yet unstudied indigenous cultural group called 'Islam' or 'Pänimusan'.

### *A Protestant Mission*

Since the 1960s, the New Tribes Mission (henceforth NTM), a Protestant fundamentalist mission, has established itself in southern Palawan, with its headquarters in Brooke's Point and Puerto Princesa, the provincial capital, and in field stations in the hills. Missionary work has been carried out mainly by Australians and Americans.

Missionary work in southern Palawan actually started before the Second World War but was restricted in the main to the towns. A family of Scottish missionaries arrived in Brooke's Point, together with a group of Chinese Protestant families, and made contact with a few groups of natives, especially those whose children had been sent to the Christian school at Brooke's Point. During the war, these missionaries went into hiding among the Palawan people of Punang—one of the staunchest animist communities in Palawan—before being rescued by submarine.

The NTM involves several denominations. It is a mission based on faith, with an emphasis on sanctification developed by Protestant churches in Europe during the nineteenth century. Its theological basis is renewal through baptism and it stresses the notion of election with reference to the apocalypse. It is an agency

2. I have analysed the Palawan belief system and ritual life in several papers and books (Macdonald 1973, 1977, 1981, 1988, 1990).

that aims at conversion and specializes in a specific kind of intervention: linguistic work and the translation of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

Members of various denominations, sometimes with a professional training in such fields as linguistics or anthropology, work for NTM on limited contracts. Financial support is provided by various Protestant churches and private and academic foundations, as well as out of the NTM's own funds and profits. In 1990, the NTM's 2300 members were working in various countries around the world, mainly in Central and South America.

The NTM strategy of proselytization relies not only on linguistic and translation work, but also on individual conversions. A member of the indigenous community is selected and trained as a linguist/translator. This training is accompanied by an attempt at individual in-depth conversion, which becomes more feasible as the trainee lives for an extended period of time with the missionary and his family. After the translation work is completed, the new translator/convert goes back to his community and becomes a missionary himself, a representative of the same church or denomination as his mentor/trainer. In order to support the new native missionary, and keep his faith alive, he is offered the financial means to start a small business, which it is hoped will promote him socially. Later contact is maintained by means of letters, parcels, and recorded messages, designed to heighten the convert's awareness of himself as a representative of the Church. In short then, the NTM strategy relies on short-term but intensive action aimed at the creation of a nucleus of converts equipped with the means to continue the missionary work by spreading the biblical message in the vernacular language or dialect.<sup>4</sup>

My own observations confirm the points made so far concerning the NTM's conversion strategy. The apparently well-funded mission displayed impressive logistics in the field, with airstrips, radio communications, a small plane and suburban-style dwellings for the missionary and his family, complete with water-tank, plumbing, electrical power plant, and so on. Two main mission stations were located on the west coast near Quezon and in the Kulbi area in the southernmost part of the island. During their residence, missionaries actively proselytized, built chapels, conducted Bible classes and taught parts of the Gospel and the Old Testament. In the meantime, linguistic work was conducted with a view to translating the Gospel into the native language. To my knowledge, two translations have been completed, in the dialects spoken in Quezon and Kulbi.

In 1989, the sites of Măgkälip in Kulbi and Iljăn near Quezon, were deserted and the mission infrastructure dismantled. Grass was growing tall on the airstrips and the buildings had all but disintegrated. During the course of their missionary

3. The better-known Summer Institute of Linguistics does similar work. With its larger membership, of some 6000 in 1990, it concentrates on major groups, while the NTM, with a membership in 1990 of only 2300, focuses on smaller and more isolated groups.

4. I am indebted to Dr J. Garcia-Ruis of the Groupe de Sociologie des Religions, CNRS, Paris, for most of the above information concerning the NTM. See also Stoll 1990: 17, 85.

work, however, the NTM had trained a few trusted converts to become, in their turn, religious educators. When I did fieldwork in 1989 in Kulbi, and before that in the Quezon area in 1983, Sunday schools were held among small groups of a dozen or fewer converts, who read the Bible in Palawan, sang hymns and prayed. Whether this actually amounted to real conversion is discussed now.

While missionary work is in progress, and when missionaries are present, the effects on the local social life are very striking. Having, by aerial reconnaissance, selected sites for their greater population density, missionaries locate themselves within easy reach of a cluster or clusters of settlements.<sup>5</sup> The NTM provide social and health services to the community, supplying them with free or cheap medicine and sometimes with emergency evacuation by air to the town hospital in Brooke's Point. The sheer presence of the missionary and his family, with its enormous (to local eyes) equipment and supply of consumables exerts a strong appeal. The creation of an educational programme, along with a sense of being looked after by a member of a social group with powerful connections, also contributes to the mission's attraction.

After a while, a trade system emerges, with goods, health services and drugs flowing one way and attendance at Bible classes and sermons flowing the other. It is unquestionably because of the goods and services offered that native people tend to cluster around the mission station. As a result of this process, nominal conversions take place and a core of 'Protestant' Palawans start to attend church and to abide by the rules set by the mission: i.e. non-participation in traditional 'pagan' ceremonies and rituals, abstinence from alcohol and tobacco, avoidance of divorce and polygamy, the saying of prayers at mealtimes, etc. This conversion process has a collective aspect to it, inasmuch as a whole local group or a set of closely related families usually 'enter' the new faith and embrace its way of life together. This induces a division in the community, but the social consequences are unclear, since Palawan society does not lend itself to the emergence of clear-cut political factions or competing groups. The social disruption caused by the mission has, in my view, limited effects, due to the fact that the traditional social structure is characterized by extreme segmentation, as well as because religious leadership is divorced from jural and political leadership.<sup>6</sup>

With the departure of the missionary, things change again and a number of those who had chosen the new faith revert to the old customs and ritual practices.

5. The Palawan settlement is generally made up of small scattered hamlets of two to ten households at walking distance from each other. In the Kulbi area, the settlement pattern is somewhat denser and large local groups of twenty households and more may be found. The presence of the mission may temporarily modify the local settlement pattern by inducing a concentration around the mission station.

6. As we shall see below, the situations obtaining in Kulbi and Quezon are somewhat different. The Kulbi subculture features a rather exceptional degree of political and religious (i.e. ceremonial) unity.

Communities clustered around the mission station scatter, the makeshift chapel is not attended to anymore, and whatever is left of the Christian gatherings and practices takes place in the private homes of the remaining converts. From this, it may be concluded that the NTM missionary work has had no large-scale impact, and that most of the interest generated by the presence of the missionaries and their teachings actually stems from a desire to take advantage of the support and services they provide. This may, of course, be in line with the NTM strategy of aiming at the conversion of a chosen few rather than mass proselytization.

As has been said, however, a few do keep the new faith alive by conducting Sunday schools, praying before meals, and trying (though not terribly successfully) to observe Protestant prohibitions, like abstaining from alcoholic beverages. Even if the phenomenon of conversion remains marginal, its reality begs the anthropological question of what the Palawan perception of Protestant teachings might be, both as a belief system, and as a set of values or principles of moral and practical conduct. In order to address this problem I shall examine briefly two individual cases of conversion, together with their specific cultural and religious contexts.

#### *Ajup, the Two-Minded Believer*

The first case is that of Ajup, from the Quezon area. Ajup (Felipe, by his Christian name) is an extremely intelligent middle-aged man, well versed in the ancient lore and a man of keen intellectual curiosity. Rather poor, even by local standards, and in no position to exert leadership, he is, however, an average well-adjusted member of his community. He is married with children, and engages in the usual farm work and economic activities practised in the region (shifting agriculture, gathering of forest products, fishing). He is also a specialist in certain healing rituals but is in no way a widely known ritual specialist. His conversion to the Protestant faith expresses itself in statements to the effect that 'Prutis' (the Protestant way) is good, or better (than animistic beliefs). He prays and attends Sunday school with a small following of other converts. In spite of his avowed dedication to these religious positions, he drinks alcohol and attends non-Christian rituals conducted by his elder brother.

I acquired some degree of intimacy with Ajup, who was my main informant during several months of fieldwork in Känängkaqan, in the Quezon area, in 1983. It became very clear that Ajup was a devoted and faithful follower of the ancient ways, and particularly of the beliefs entailed by ceremonies conducted by his brother and other relatives. At the same time, he was almost desperately clinging to the faith he had acquired through the Protestant missionaries. This might seem odd, but it can be understood, at least partly, through a brief examination of the local belief system.

In a Durkheimian fashion, the religious morphology of cult organization is the mirror image of the social morphology (scattered autonomous local groups with no overall leadership) of the Quezon subculture. Each local group seems to have its own 'parochial' ceremonial life, together with its own spirits or divinities. These are called upon to attend and speak in seances, during which the ritual specialists are possessed by them in a state of trance (i.e. a temporary loss of sensory contact with the immediate environment, as it is defined locally). In addition to these kinds of rituals, including trances, spirit possession and dancing to the beating of gongs, people seek to contact spirits that they come to know through dreams or revelations. In this manner, each local group (itself a kinship-based unit) has its own religion, so to speak, with its own deities and spirits, as well as ritual rules, ceremonial schedule and ritual specialists.

In interviews with Ajup and other informants it became clear that religion here has to be understood as a continuing process of acquiring new knowledge about the supernatural world, and of sharing such knowledge in a wider social circle. This knowledge is based both on a personal individual experience and on beliefs and practices inherited from elders and through descent. The result is a mosaic of cults and beliefs, none of them gaining full acceptance by the entire regional community. A certain degree of scepticism towards any kind of belief pertaining to the supernatural world, and a continuing attempt, at the same time, to gain new knowledge about it, are characteristic traits of the local people's attitude in these matters.

It is quite understandable, therefore, that people trained in both 'parochial' scepticism and religious eagerness should be drawn to a new kind of religious experience, while retaining some of their old caution about anything that is not grounded in the experience and authority of the ancestors, very close relatives and neighbours. The context thus provides the answer to the problem of the seemingly two-minded attitude of Ajup and others to the new faith.

### *Täjä, the Young Entrepreneur*

The second case is that of Täjä, from Kulbi, near the Mäggälip mission station. He also was one of my main informants while I was conducting fieldwork in 1989, and I had a close view of his ideological inclinations during long and intimate conversations in his home at Tägbituk. Like Ajup, he came from extremely traditional Palawan stock, was still a well-integrated member of his community and had retained a faith in the religious teachings of the, by then departed, Protestant

missionary.<sup>7</sup> Large posters showing Old Testament scenes decorated the walls of Tājā's home, and each Sunday I overheard hymns being sung by a group of neighbours and their host on the porch. Prayers were said before meals, with closed eyes.

There are, however, a number of social and personal differences between Tājā and Ajup. First, Tājā was more literate than Ajup. He had attended high school and, more importantly, had been a linguistic informant and collaborator with the NTM's Bible translation team in Puerto Princesa, where he lived for more than a year. This made him a very well trained informant, with the skills of a professional linguist, as well as a very knowledgeable Bible reader. Besides, he was much more enterprising than Ajup from a social and economic point of view. Acquiring land and cultivating it with a water-buffalo, he had established a successful farm with irrigated rice-fields. He was also a small trader and had a small itinerant retail goods (*sari-sari*) store. His two children attended the nearby government school and his family in general was better off than the average. Finally, he was playing an active social role, being a neighbourhood leader and acting as an arbiter, although not a very senior one, in litigations. He was generally regarded as a potential regional leader, with the makings of a *kunsyal*, or municipal councillor.

In spite of this area remaining very isolated and very conservative in lifestyle, its religious and social atmosphere is quite unlike that obtaining in the rest of the Palawan culture. As noted above, settlement patterns are denser and there is a sense of regional unity totally lacking in Quezon. Tukung, the most senior ritual and customary-law leader, became the centre of a converging, if informal, group of people throughout the entire region. Yearly harvest ceremonies are meant to cleanse and protect the land. Villagers flock to this annual event, and the collective religious life is then concentrated in one place under Tukung's ritual leadership.

From the political point of view, the social life of Kulbi is characterized by prolific litigation. But, unlike in Quezon, the process through which disputes are settled seems to be more rigorously implemented and the elders appear to carry more weight and authority in administering the litigation. Local groups are both larger in size and more cohesive. There are also many individual variants in the belief system, though this has not resulted in a proliferation of local cults. A mild form of possession prevails, but trances are not a very prominent feature of the religious life. In other words, it seems that people are more ready to leave religious and ceremonial expertise to a few selected specialists than seek themselves to contact supernatural powers.

7. The Māgkālīp mission had been occupied by two missionaries in succession, an Australian and an American. They both left a favourable impression on the local population. They had both learned enough Palawan to converse. However, I heard some people complain that they tended to barter medical help with attendance at Bible school and formal conversion.

All this makes for a quite different context from the one existing in Quezon. As far as Tājā is concerned, he is, or wants to be, a 'modern' progressive agent, fully aware of problems of local economic development. His belief that the new religion goes hand-in-hand with social and economic progress accounts, in my view, for his continuing allegiance to the Protestant faith. The fact that he keeps in touch with his overseas benefactors and friends, as well as the advantages derived from his partnership with the NTM in Brooke's Point and Puerto Princesa, cannot, however, be discounted as factors encouraging his allegiance to the Bible scheme. These facts fit very neatly into the NTM's conversion strategy. Let it be noted, however, that Tājā has in no way discarded all belief in traditional Palawan lore, as a general body of wisdom.

### *Protestant Fundamentalism and Palawan Paganism*

I want now to assess the ideological differences between the Palawan belief system and Protestantism, but before doing so, I should like to point to some factors that may or may not facilitate the conversion process. Protestantism emphasizes the observance of a code of ethical behaviour that has to be strictly followed. Missionaries are unequivocal in their rejection, not only of traditional rituals and ceremonies, but also of such social practices as polygamy, divorce, and the consumption of alcohol.<sup>8</sup> Inasmuch as the rates of divorce and alcohol consumption are lower in Kulbi than in Quezon, one might expect resistance to conversion to be relatively weak in the Kulbi area and relatively strong in the Quezon area.

Alcohol consumption and divorce rates, however, do not appear to be determining factors; other elements are at play. For instance, the Quezon people seem to be more at ease than the people of Kulbi with the notion of prophecy and more ready to accept Jesus Christ as a charismatic historical figure.<sup>9</sup> In both areas, as well as elsewhere among the Palawan, the ethical values of compassion, pity and kindness to others are expressed by the term *ingasiq*, which is readily translatable by the English term, and Christian concept of, 'charity'. Thus there are a variety of factors that point to a possible compatibility between both religious ideologies; and there are a variety of extraneous elements that might or might not facilitate the conversion process.

8. For a comparable account of a fundamentalist sect doing missionary work among the Navaho, see Rapoport 1991: 741.

9. This would be even more true of the belief system of the central highland area, not dealt with here, where the concept of a *tungkul*, a divine-like human figure who is also a shamanistic ancestor endowed with miraculous powers, leads to a ready acceptance of Jesus Christ as a figure of this type.



I should like to emphasize now seven aspects of the biblical message that are totally unrelated to the object and purpose of Palawan beliefs and ritual systems.

First, the Palawan belief system is basically polytheistic, even though the existence of a unique supreme being is postulated, and has no unified or written doctrine. In contrast, Christianity is monotheistic and has a well-integrated doctrine and theology based on a single book, the Bible.

Secondly, Protestant Christianity, especially that of the fundamentalists, strives for a position of dominance and universalism that is completely foreign to the Palawan religious mind. Local believers make no claim whatsoever to a message of universal truth. From the outset, the dialogue between the ideological interlocutors is undermined by the fact that Protestant missionaries think in terms of truth and error, whereas the Palawan people think in terms of a variation in religious experience. This is an extremely important point. It accounts for the fact that missionaries think they are competing against another religion, while the natives see the Gospel as another path towards the same truth they were already seeking. At the same time, it might also help to explain temporary conversions, inasmuch as Christianity appears to Palawan as just another kind of religious knowledge to be experienced for a while.

Thirdly, the foundation of all major Palawan rituals is the attempt to make contact with supernatural beings who have a material existence and who dwell within reach of human spiritual perception. Contact with God, as a supreme being, is not sought. There is no need, and it is not considered appropriate, to address God (Ämpu'), except in certain ceremonial circumstances, and a relationship with him is not the object of ritual practice. Central to this view is the Palawan theory of the person, who is considered to be made up of internal and external material principles, the cohesion of which has to be maintained by rituals. Human-like supernatural beings threaten or promote the cohesion of the individual person and that of the social body. In one way, most of Palawan ritual practices may be interpreted as dealing with external agents unrelated to Ämpu'. By stressing the need for contact with the supreme being, missionaries attempt to explore a field of spiritual activity that is not deemed relevant by the Palawan.

Fourthly, the Protestant believes in an internalized individual contact with God, whereas the Palawan ritualist is inclined to a kind of externally induced (through trances, dreams etc.) contact with the spirits and other human-like beings living in his environment. Although the Christian believer seeks a continual renewal of his contact with God, his quest is not directed towards the discovery of as yet unknown elements of the divine realm. By contrast, the Palawan is engaged in an unceasing quest for new revelations. Palawan ritual is thus an epiphany rather than a communion.

Fifthly, one of the most striking features of the biblical message is its stress on an ethical code of behaviour based on transcendental principles. Animism has no ethics. The Palawan religious system, in its various manifestations, has a very loose relationship with a code of conduct. As members of a social organization based on kinship, residence and a set of political rules, enforced by elders in a

codified system of arbitration, Palawan do, of course, possess an extremely well-developed and articulate ethical system, with values and rules applying to social and human relationships. The connection between the religious and the ethical systems rests on a somewhat unspecified reference to the supreme being and the ancestors as the ultimate source of this code of behaviour. Values vested in concepts like *ingasiq*, 'compassion', respect for human life (Palawan culture being non-violent to an extreme degree), incest avoidance and so forth are ultimately validated by the teaching of the 'ancestors' and 'divine wisdom', but are not precisely matched with ritual practices and beliefs concerning spirits, nor with major myths. In short, Palawan ethics are an immanent property of human relations and are not conceived of in teleological and transcendental terms.

Sixthly, a further twist in this complex of religions and ethical traits is the centrality of the notion of evil in the mind of Protestant missionaries. After twenty years of fieldwork and close association with animistic 'pagans', I have never come across a clearer case of literal belief in the physical existence of evil forces, and its development into an integrated ideological system, than that of American Protestant fundamentalists. Most Palawan are quite ready to believe in the physical existence of the devil, but none of them would be ready to make it the centre of their religious convictions. Good and evil agents seem rather to be partners in a balanced interaction, one that is expressed in ritual practice. For example, the retrieval of the soul of a sick person captured by a forest creature, or the complex ceremonial rituals of Quezon and Punang are meant to ensure an equilibrium between benevolent and malevolent forces.

Lastly, it should be stressed that Palawan beliefs and ritual practices present a picture of a system of material and immanent forces in the social realm and in the natural environment (itself inhabited by a host of human-like beings). In contrast, the missionaries base their views on transcendental values. Palawan listeners do not, in general, grasp such a discourse, and when they do, see no point in it, since they already have a well-developed ethical system of their own, which is similar in many ways to the Christian one.<sup>10</sup>

### *Conclusions*

By examining various aspects of the Palawan world-view, belief system and ritual practice, as well as other social and cultural elements, I have tried to assess the meaning of the biblical message, seen from the Palawan point of view, and its

10. The Palawan struck me as rather puritanical, albeit very tolerant, as highland people usually are in this part of the world. They show extreme consideration for human life and obsessive respect for other people's freedom of behaviour.

impact on the natives. There are a number of, so to speak, extraneous elements that might encourage Palawan people to be favourably inclined towards Protestant teachings—NTM's support services, for example, or recognized similarities with their own world-view in the importance of compassion, charity, restraint etc. Conversely, and in accordance with the tenets of their local beliefs and practices—the importance of rice-wine ceremonies and their high divorce rate, for example—they might be expected to prove highly resistant to conversion. More important are those internal elements that make the biblical message difficult or impossible to translate into Palawan cultural and ideological idiom. The NTM's Protestant ideology is not in conflict with the Palawan system of belief, despite what the missionaries firmly believe. It deals with such values and concepts as the notions of a one-to-one, internalized, relationship with God and a transcendental theory of ethics wholly unrelated to Palawan values and concepts. In other words, the Protestant 'religion' and the Palawan 'religion' are not contending for the same field of truth, any more than astrophysics and biochemistry are dealing with the same area, or the same aspects, of the objective world.

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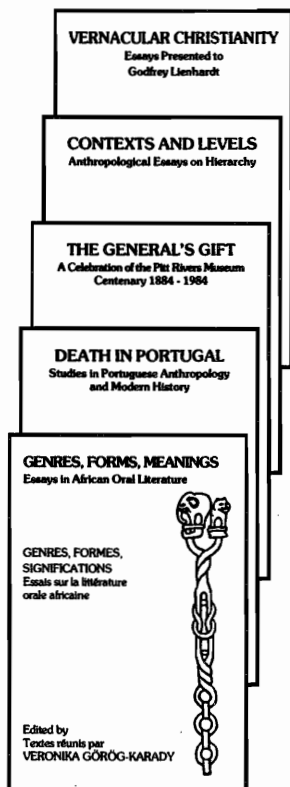
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