The Bikol Agtas

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Agta is the generic term used in Bikol to refer to its 40,000 natives with dark-colored skins, short stature and kinky hair. There are three other terms for them in Camarines Norte where they have managed to preserve their indigenous culture. “Kabihug” is what they call themselves; “Manide” is the term for their language; and Abian, meaning “friend” is how they are referred to by non-Agtas.

Shelter

While many of the Bikol Agtas now live in permanent “settlements”, there are still some in Camarines Norte who are semi-nomadic and who build temporary elevated shelters called butukan made from tree branches and leaves. The other parts of the Agta shelter are: an upper compartment called tinabaw where hunting weapons and fishing materials are stored; a tug-onan or hearth for cooking purposes; and a wooden seat called pasingolan located outside the shelter for receiving visitors. An area is believed to be ideal for building a butukan if six tagbac tubers planted there will grow or where decayed organic matter is present or where the shelter can be reached by reflected light from a river. The light purportedly prevents evil spirits from having access to the shelter and bringing death to its occupants. A tree with vines is not advisable as housing material, because the vines allegedly signify snakes which might frequently visit the shelter.

Clothing

The traditional attire of the Agtas is the tapis (skirt) or bahag (breech cloth) made from the bark of the gumihan tree, although nowadays they have shed these off for the wear of their lowland brothers. They still adorn their heads, however, with a multi-purpose container called takupis made from the kalagimay plant where they keep their lime from burnt seashells, nganga (betel nut) and pepper leaves called ikmo or lukmoy. In lieu of ornaments, the natives scar their bodies (asde) with designs bequeathed to them by their ancestors. Asde is supposed to rid the body of “dirty” blood and protect it from different illnesses. To carry her baby, a breastfeeding native wears the uban, a piece of cloth slung from the shoulders.

Subsistence and Livelihood

The Agtas grow rootcrops, rice and vegetables in their farms. Rice is often hard hard to come by and is readily substituted with a boiled root crop called dugma. They also have a favorite drink concocted from the lakad bulan or sambong plant. The Agtas still observe certain practices and beliefs for ensuring a good yield. For example, the presence of cumulus clouds at the moment of planting is believed to enhance the size of the camote, while planting during high tide or the full moon is said to result in a bountiful harvest. The camote should be planted in big earth mounds by a man and not by a woman or else, the camote will form cracks. The ideal time of the day for planting is during late afternoon. The man first takes a bath so that the camote crops will remain unspoiled and delicious.
Camote vines are then planted together with betel nuts and camias so that camote roots will multiply in each mound. The man must be naked so that the camote skin would not thicken. He must also be in a sitting position with his feet astride the mound and his penis pointed to it. It is also said that sugar placed near the mounds will produce sweet camotes. During really hard times, some families dig for nami, a root crop with a milky poisonous sap but which becomes edible after being soaked in running water for two days.

Hunting is another means of subsistence for the Agtas. They catch running game by spearing them with pointed sticks called galud or by means of pit-traps. Birds are caught by using slingshots locally known as labtik and bird traps made from a glue-like sap called dikit. A successful hunt for animals or honey is assured by performing a ritual at the grave of a skilful hunter. This consist of scattering banana stalks signifying dried meat around the grave as offering, and also by erecting arched bamboos symbolizing traps for big game.

Fishing and catching crabs are also other means of livelihood for the Agtas. Their gadgets include the: baslay, a bow and arrow used for fishing; banwit consisting of a boro, a slender bamboo with a few meters of nylon at one end that has a sima or hook where the paon or bait is placed; soo, a small torch used to attract the fishes and crabs during the panghahapoy or night-time fishing; agahid, a net used for catching fishes and crabs; kawit, a hooked wire used to dislodge crabs from their hiding places; sagad, a rattan basket where the catch is placed; bobo, a trap made from split bamboo fastened together with rattan or nito; and alawa , a fishnet for shallow waters during low tide. Mollusks are also caught to augment the Agtas’ diet. Some of these are the bivalves or toway, finger-like mollusks called sihi, and the slender-bodied mollusks called bagisara.

 Besides farming and fishing, many Agtas have also engaged into more lucrative ventures, such as copra making, charcoal-making and gold panning.

**Agta Society**

The Agta family has very close ties. The relatives on both the father’s and mother’s sides are called kaka. The following kinship terms are used by the Kabihugs for members of both the consanguineal and affinal families. Grandfather, dadong; grandmother, lala; father, tata; mother, nana; uncle, ama; aunt, mina; eldest brother, kaka or bihion; subsequent older brother or sister, kawedian na inyog; son, anak a bihion; daughter, anak a babaye; child, batet; grandchild, apo; nephew or niece, kumangkon; older cousin, pinsan a kaka; younger cousin, pinsan a wedi; and father or mother-in-law, lis-ikan.

The father and the elder sons usually hunt, while the mothers and daughters are left behind for the household chores. It is usually the mothers who take care of the babies. Infancy is termed as tayombon, weaning as pagbubutas, childhood as pagdako, adolescence as pagsisiel and pagbakis as marriage.

In social gatherings called katapusan which is usually a day for rest, youngsters get the opportunity to mingle with other youngsters. When a boy happens to fall in love with a girl, he can declare his intentions by hiding and waiting for her to bathe in the river. There he should throw to the girl a fruit with a drawn design symbolizing his love for her. If the girl picks up the fruit, it means that she too has similar feelings for the boy. It is only then that
the boy reveals himself and proposes to the girl. If their parents do not object of their love, the boy will do the manunungko and ask from the girl’s parents her hand in marriage. The girl’s father gives the boy a final task. If accomplished to his satisfaction, the wedding is then set. It is the tribe’s oldest member who officiates at the ceremony, where tobacco, local wine and nganga figure prominently. After receiving the final blessings and instructions from their eldest relatives, the couple make off for the hills or forest for their honeymoon. The next day, they wear a red piece of cloth around their foreheads to proclaim their newlywed status.

**Religion**

The Agtas believe in a Supreme Being called Gugurang, a heaven called kamurawayan, and a hell called gogombon. The evil spirits are led by the Aswong. They also believe that death is a journey to the afterlife and that the spirit of the dead may either go to the kamurawayan or gogombon, depending on how he or she lived his life. The relatives of a dying person must all be present when he gives his last wishes, so that he will guide and look after them. Otherwise, he will haunt them. The Agtas in Camarines Norte perform long rituals to help their dead get to their destination. A dead child will not find the journey difficult, for he has committed few wrongdoings. But a strenuous trip awaits those who have reached adulthood and have lived their lives unworthingly.

When a child dies, a bamboo-slat coffin called sala-sala is made for him. While this is being done, he is laid on his mother’s lap and continues to be breast-fed. When the sala-sala is finished, a white cloth is wrapped around him and the child is laid inside. Afterwards, it is placed on the mother’s lap and can only be removed in times of personal necessity. When the parents of the child decides to bury him, the burial spot is usually along a pathway near the house under the roof. It is the task of any close relative to dig the grave which is fumigated to drive away the evil spirits. After which, the mother sets the child aside in the meantime and goes to the burial ground where she performs three rituals: crying, touching the hole three times and dropping milk from her breasts into the hole. She now returns for her child and asks a relative to carry him/her to the grave. The mother again pours milk on its lips as baon for his after-life journey. Afterwards, she bids goodbye to her child and prays that he or she doesn’t begrudge his/ her family for they have done everything they could to prevent his or her death. Next, the mother walks away without turning her back. Meanwhile, the father mourns loudly. Afterwhich, the child is covered with soil and everybody leaves without turning their backs to avert another death. Upon reaching the house, the oldest member of the family and the mother crawl and cry, pretending to look for the child. The Agtas follow the same procedure when burying their adults. When an adult dies, his clothes are changed and a piece of cloth is wrapped around his head. The lips are filled with nganga to keep away the flies. The eyes are covered by a strip of cloth with two openings so that the spirit may be able to see where it is going. The hands and legs are tied in front. The body is then laid in a bamboo coffin. Like the dead child, it is also “fed” during mealtime. The food is wrapped with leaves and then tied to the thumb. Sobbing is then loudly done to prevent strong winds and heavy rains from occuring. There is no ceremony for the actual burial, whose usual site is between tall trees. The grave must
exactly match the size of the coffin, otherwise, another death might occur. The coffin is made from bamboo slats laid side by side and tied with rattan.

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