



Casiguran Agta / Casiguran Dumagat

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The Negrito group recognized in literature as Agta, otherwise locally known as Dumagat, can be found along the Pacific coast of the province of Aurora. They inhabit seven hundred square kilometers of dense forest on the eastern flank of the Sierra Madre mountains of northern Luzon, especially in the municipality of Casiguran. They spread over the ridge to the western flank then to the adjoining province of Nueva Vizcaya. They are one of the over thirty-three identified groups of Negrito distributed all over the country and one of the sixteen known Agta groups in northeastern Luzon.

Negrito Movements

The Negrito are one of the oldest people to populate the various islands of the Philippines. They are said to have arrived in the archipelago between 30,000 to 20,000 years ago at the end of the last glacial period when the sea level started to rise. They were thought to have moved overland and island-hopped, coming from the southwest of the Philippines from the direction of the Indian Ocean. Only two other groups may have come before them in these islands, the first being the Paleolithic Age men of Cagayan Valley in northern Luzon who are dated to have been present as early as 9 million years ago, and the Mamanwa of northeastern Mindanao estimated to have been present in the Lake Mainit area of Agusan del Norte at about 60,000 to 50,000 years ago. Thought earlier as another Negrito group, the Mamanwa were later to be identified as a distinct Proto-Malay population.

There were two Negrito population movements from the southwest. One movement went northwards at the western side of the country along the island of Palawan, Panay, through the Zambales mountains, and hence to Abra and the northern tip of the Cordilleras. The other movement followed the northern coast of Mindanao and hence to the eastern side of the country then turned northwards. This movement now represents the sixteen Negrito groups on the Pacific side of the Philippines, including those in the Bicol Peninsula, the eastern flanks of the Sierra Madre and the narrow coasts, then upward to the northern extensions of the Sierra Madre mountains. The Casiguran Agta were part of this movement.

An Intimacy With Nature

The people are long drawn from a traditionally highly mobile population, not only through the long years of prehistory, but also by the nature of their culture. In the past, their subsistence was based on food-gathering, hunting, and incipient cultivation. This lifestyle molded the way by which their society organized themselves, creating the least impact on their physical environment and, in fact enhancing its recuperative propensities. It is a lifestyle that fits in the many ways nature carries on with all forms of life, a symbiotic relationship with those that participate in a systemic cycle. They forage in the fringes of the forests where the diversity of plant and animal life is the most varied. Their knowledge of the inventory of flora is so intimate that they will know—as they go through a patch of woodland—what shoots, leaves, flowers, roots are edible. They are known to pluck leaves, stems, and shoots as they walk, crushing these between their fingers, smelling, tasting the pulp to determine whether these are any good. In a glance they can and will identify plants, trees, weeds by name together with the information about what they are for, what their characteristics and qualities are.

Their knowledge about animal life is just as intimate. It has been said that by smelling the recent tracks of a snake, they will be able to tell the species of the reptile. They know where animals and birds are to be found at specific times of the year, and on which species of plants and trees. The rivers and the many mountain streams are reliable sources of protein: shrimps and crayfish beneath rocks, shellfish in the sand of silt, all obtained easily with their bare hands or sometimes even by children at play. This knowledge is born of a long tradition of

intimacy with nature, perpetuated by practice through many generations. Through these hundreds of years of relating with nature, they have not created such an impact that could degrade the environment. They remain in perfect balance, and like every other living creature obtain only as much as they need in a day.

Negrito Hunting

Although food foraging constitutes their most efficient mode for their daily sustenance, high prestige hunting, although relatively low yielding, is associated with them. Of all the peoples of the Philippines, they are known to be the most proficient in the use of bow and arrows. There are countless varieties of prey, the largest of which are deer, wild pig, and monkey.

Among the Pinatubo Negrito there are at least sixty named varieties of arrowheads employed for specific hunting purposes. The bows are made from the trunk of the palma brava about two meters or so in length and strung with strips of bamboo or bark. When a flat string is used, the arrows are not notched, but when bark strings are used the arrows are notched. The meter-long arrows shafts are made of straight reeds, tri-fletched with feathers, and provided with bamboo or metal heads of many shapes. There are overly long three-pronged arrows for birds or fish. There are harpoon-like arrows with single pronged heads lashed onto the shaft with a short cord that detach and get entangled in the brush as the game tries to escape. Game is also obtained by running them down with dogs and spears. They also use more efficient traps like pitfalls across game trails or spear-spring traps. Catching game by driving them into nets is rarely resorted to since there are just not enough people to constitute a drive. Hunting is more often than not an activity undertaken only by men and youths. Quite rarely, some women also have gone on hunting forays by themselves.

To Dwell Or Not To Dwell

The mode of life implies mobility since subsistence relies on the availability of food in the immediate place of habitation. They have been described as mobile; that is to say they continually wander around without permanent homes. Their basic early living structures are lean-tos erected near water sources like a bank, near mountain streams or beaches. These are no more than a ridgepole across two posts made of saplings, leaning against one side of which is makeshift roofing made of overlapping broad leaves, or grass that are available. The direction of open side is shifted depending on where the sun shines. The interior of the lean-to can be bare ground, or lined with plant material, or slats of bamboo. In front of the opening will be a fireplace, for cooking, warmth during cold nights, or protection against numerous forest insects and pests. Only the barest essentials of life are in the lean-to: the hunting tools, knife or two, bamboo tube containers, occasional bark cloth, cooking paraphernalia, some cooked food like tubers, and little else.

When the place becomes too littered and infested with flies and other insects, they shift dwellings to a more acceptable place within the general area. Major movements, however, are prompted by the availability of food resources. When they have depleted the plant and animal food in the area such that cost-benefit of food foraging is no longer viable, they move. They either leave the lean-to entirely, or bring with them the most essential poles, since it is easy enough to obtain building materials where they will next live. The movement is usually to a previously known area, which has lain fallow for a long time and which now they know would have regenerated food resources. They will select habitable areas influenced by certain beliefs. For instance, they will not select a place with pitcher plants since these are omens of death. Through an annual cycle, the movement is a roughly patterned circle, moving from one place to another previously occupied area. Only during occasion of drastic change do they enter an unknown area of the forest in order to live there.

Patterns Of Movement

While they are highly mobile, their movement is not aimless and without pattern. In fact, any time through an annual cycle their general location can be predictable. The key to finding them is to know also the cycles that nature undergoes. For instance, they will move to the vicinities of trees, like the balite, when they are known to be already bearing fruits since this is where birds they can hunt will congregate. Wild pigs and deer too will browse below these trees for the fallen fruits. Occasionally, they will converge on open tidal areas to gather shellfish

especially during the hot months, or go deeper into the protection of the trees when tropical typhoons are blowing. All through these, they maintain what can be called "frequentation stations" that are familiar even to outsiders.

The basic lean-to houses a nuclear family composed usually of a father, a mother and children of young age, and perhaps a grandparent. Fissioning takes place when older children form their own families. But it is rare that a family lives alone. Present in an area usually is a band composed of a few related families forming a small community of lean-tos. Called a bertan in some areas, this band operates and moves socially as a unit. The organizational links are sanguinal and affinal. Although it is an egalitarian society, there are recognized elders whose opinions and decision are respected. The decision to move to another area, for instance, depends on consensus-formed discussion and consideration of elderly opinions. No single family moves without the rest of the band as if the band itself is the basic social unit.

Traditional custom vests leadership on an elder of the group who acts as judge, kaksolan/kaksaan together with other elders. The position is often inherited. He promulgates decisions arrived at consensually by the group. He acts as judge, intervenes in social relationships, and decides on guilt and modes of punishment. The consensus process ensures the legitimacy of decisions. A decision, once promulgated, is to be respected by all the members of the group.

Ornamenting The Body

The dress is very basic: loin covering for men and short skirts for women, and traditionally made of bark. These are at times decorated with vegetable colored prints at the fringes.

There is ornamentation made of plant materials, often dyed in earth colors. Bracelets, girdles, necklaces of vines or of occasional copper or bronze are known, as well as wooden earplugs fronted with engraved mother of pearl.

Body scarification was often practiced for other than mere ornamentation. It is resorted to also in the belief that it protects the person from various forms of diseases. Patterned wounds are incised on the skin of arms, back, chest, abdomen, legs, and hands, even calves. These are then irritated by ash, lime, fire and others to produce keloids or raise fibrous tissues that produce designs on the skin. Teeth chipping or filing, as well as blackening are also done, since sharp and black teeth are considered human features. Young children go about naked.

Belief System

There are varied views regarding the belief system of the Casiguran Agta. They believe in the existence of deities, among them a virtual "owner" of all resources that they exploit to whom they make votive returns. They have lesser deities that govern nature and natural phenomena: the sun, the moon, thunder, lightning, the forest, the sea; and environmental spirits of the dead. Prayers are always part of economic life, before and after a hunt, an offering of a portion of meat before partaking of a game; a dance to apologize for the fish that they catch, or another after a bee hunt. Omens are important in almost every movement in their daily life-the particular call of a bird or the chirping of a lizard, the passage of a snake determine whether or not a journey is to be taken. They believe in an after life that is dependent on how life is lived in this world. It is an existence in which reality and the spiritual world intertwine.

From Foragers To Peasants

This idyllic world roughly described where they were just another part of nature, is now a thing of the past. Today, they are definitely a post-foraging society, having changed over the last few decades to what may be considered landless peasantry. The most visible activity of the menfolks is the hunting of wild pig, deer, and monkey, with their bows and arrows. The meat from the game, however, is not consumed domestically, but primarily traded over to lowlanders in exchange for starch and other foodstuff, and trade goods. A considerable amount of their time is spent in gathering forest products for trade like resin, gums, rattan, wild honey, orchids, and other exotic plants. They also work as seasonal laborers for lowlanders. In 1983, about one-fourth of the population maintained small patchworks of swidden field, checkerboard fashion in the forest for some rice, root crops like taro, yams, sweet potato, and some

occasional fruit tree or coconuts. The yields of these fields do not meet their barest subsistence needs. Much of their food depend on cultigens obtained through trade with neighboring lowlanders. In the recent years they have resorted to charcoal-making and even logging to sell to lumber yards, further depleting their environment.

The population has been declining steadily through the years. In 1936 there were about 1,000 people. This number diminished to about 800 in 1962, and 616 in 1983. By 2002 the population has been estimated to be about- 600 individuals. Many of them do not even know that they live in a country called the Philippines. Although the population has stopped declining, much of their traditional life continues to be eroded. Only approximately 3% of the forest that they inhabit remains intact. Much of the game they hunt and the fish they catch in the rivers and streams are depleted, straining their subsistence struggles. The trees and plants, especially the rattan that they gather t{) supplement their economic needs, are now subject to competitive exploitation by their lowland neighbors. By 1990, almost all Agta families no longer lived in the dense forests of the Cordilleras, far from the reaches of lowland communities. They now live near farming settlements of lowlanders, mostly Tagalogs and Ilocano, where they engage in casual labor for wages or in exchange for foodstuff, for handouts like second-hand clothing and other forms of charity. They are now multi-lingual, proficient in Tagalog, to the detriment of their own language. They are now aware of population centers that can be reached through the road that opened in 1977, from Casiguran to the outside world like Manila. Their culture, marked by their language, is no longer being learned by their children. Tagalog, which they use to communicate with their lowland patrons, is inexorably altering their mother language with the incorporation of new words.

Squatters In Their Own Ancestral Land

The traumatic changes have been brought about in the Agta ecosystem by the country's population explosion by forcing landless people or otherwise economically pressured segments into the Casiguran Valley. Whereas they occupied some 90% of the area during the end of the Second World War, they are now squatters in their own ancestral land, crowded in by a population density of 51.5 persons per square kilometer-a number that increases by 1.5% every year. Local companies and corporations that bulldozed roads through Agta settlements and foraging grounds, destroying forests and altering drainage systems, brought about tremendous ecological changes. These roads accelerated the entry of more settlers into the area. The influx of people had a horrific impact on the Agta with the introduction of new kinds of diseases, hard liquor, pesticides, electric fishing, radios, commercial land buyers, and firearms. There had been inter-marriages, too. Alarming is the fact that there is an inordinately high homicide rate now among the Agta.

Local leadership, too, has been undermined. This has been transformed into forms that marginalized traditional leaders, reducing their roles in their own communities. Absorbed into the civil structures of government, young people who have attained some form of education over and above traditional leaders, now assume posts in the government's civil structures. This situation creates conflicts between these young leaders and the elders, and some degree of confusion among the members. The trend is for the traditional structures to recede further back in their social organization until its inevitable disappearance as the ethnic form of social control.

What Now, Agta?

As far back as ethnic memory can reach, the Agta consider land as part of their ancestral domain, governed by usufruct. With the passage of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA 1997) to recognize, protect and promote the rights of indigenous peoples, an assertion has been made for their right to regulate the entry of immigrants. This brought about a confrontational situation with the non-indigenous migrant population because of access to resources within the ancestral domains. It is questionable whether the Agta with their moribund culture will be able to contend with a more dominant population that is swallowing them up inexorably. It will not be long before the memory of the Agta will only be that - a memory - for even the color of their skin and curliness of their hair will also be things that will merely linger for a little while more and only at the edges of the mind.

Ref.: <http://www.aurora.ph/baler-aurora-book/agta-dumagat.html>