**Twilight of the Sea People**

By Jose Torres Jr.

MALUSO, BASILAN— In one of the houses on stilts along the shore of Teheman, beyond the mangrove trees in this coastal town in Mindanao, a mother is singing to her six-month-old daughter. But as the child is lulled to sleep, another listener is moved to tears.

Beautiful Hanang cries as she curls up on her colorful bridal mat. Her neighbor Furaydah’s songs of lost love have brought on memories of Misdal, her husband, who left months ago to join the pirates and never returned. Just this afternoon, Hanang, all of 14, had an abortion. Although her eyes are filled with tears, she says it is all for the best, since she would have been unable to feed her fatherless baby.

Hanang, however, is unlikely to be the last in her community to make such a decision. For she is one of the Bajau, and for many years now, these once proud people have been taking steps that have broken their own hearts, and have led them farther away from what they used to be—self-reliant people of the sea.

Today, after centuries of living and roaming the southern Philippine seas, only a few Bajau still live on their boats, most of them in parts of Tawi-Tawi, Sulu and Zamboanga. Here in Basilan and elsewhere, Bajau boat communities have coalesced into larger pole house villages, where their ways are slowly being taken over by those of the surrounding shore population, and where they now live in abject poverty.

It is not by choice that the Bajau have gone onshore. For decades now, they have been losing their traditional fishing grounds to both legal and illegal fishing vessels intruding into their territory. In more recent years, they have become the favorite prey of pirates roaming the seas.

But on land, the Bajau have no real means of livelihood. This is why the first—and often, only—meal of the day comes as late as two in the afternoon, when the few men who have boats return with their catch. Desperate to feed their families, many of the tribe’s members, male and female, have left for faraway cities to beg. A growing number of the women left behind are also opting to abort their unborn children rather than see their offspring die later of hunger or disease. In fact, many Badjau children now suffer from malnutrition, dysentery, malaria, tuberculosis and ulcer.

Indeed, even burying their dead has become a problem for these gentle people. Their traditional burial ground, a small island off the shore of Maluso, has been taken over by a Tausug community who fled from the poverty and the sporadic fighting between Moro rebels and government soldiers in the nearby province of Sulu. Says Dalpek, a 35-year old Bajau community leader: “We have to dig up our ancestors to bury our dead. Sometimes we have to travel far to bring our beloved to some desolate island in the middle of the ocean for burial.”

The Bajau, who number from 70,000 to 100,000, believe any kind of misery that befalls them is brought about by saitan, evil spirits who live in the sea and mangrove forests. The tribe also believes in other spirits that travel from place to place, often in the form of animals or fish. The Bajau say hordes of these wandering spirits invade villages, causing an epidemic or illness.

The TRUTH is that even before these saitan began tormenting them, the Bajau never really had it easy, despite the romantic portrayals of the tribe by filmmakers. But when they were still living at sea, the Bajau were at least free from the everyday disdain of people like the Tausug and the Samal.

It is unclear why the Tausug and the Samal think of the Bajau as social inferiors. In a study, however, Professor Aurora Roxas-Lim of the University of the Philippines’ Asian Center, says that the prejudices against the Bajau often stem from the preconception that all nomadic people are by nature shiftless, rootless, irresponsible and unreliable.

Whatever the reason, it is obvious that the insults flung at the tribe hurt, and hurt deeply. Jainal, an 11-year-old Bajau who is lucky enough to attend school, says, “My Muslim classmates despise the Bajau because, they say, we are ugly and we smell bad.”

Estrellita Vicente, who in 2001 headed a conference in...
Alcober, who had to learn to speak the Sama language used by the Bajau. Fortunately, because of radio programs from nearby Jolo and Zamboanga, most children studying under the Claretian missionaries' literacy program now speak Filipino.

At first, while the children were at school, the Bajau parents were taught as well to read and write. But Alcober says he realized that this might not be the kind of education suited to the Bajau. He says, “The Bajau just want to survive. The need to learn how to read and write sometimes escapes their understanding.”

He has since changed the approach of the adult literacy program, and the Bajau grown-ups are now being taught operational literacy.

Not surprisingly, traditional weddings, where the bride and groom would have their faces decorated with white powder and dotted with fine charcoal, have become uncommon. These days, the Bajau would rather hire beauticians who like to follow the latest looks in movieland. Today, though, the Bajau on land would rather hire bands or rent karaoke sets.

What is your work with the Bajau?

At the moment we focus on community organizing and education because the Bajau are unorganized, their traditional community structure, if there was, is already gone. They are more organized now as clans, but there is no inter-clan structure. As an outsider, how did you enter into their lives?

By spending more time with them. When I started, I stayed with them on an average of three days a week. I spent time with them. I talked to them about everything under the sun.

I first tried to learn the language. I observed that only few people know their language. When I learned their language, they were amused. They feel that I am not so different from them and they become closer to me. They feel that I am not alien to them.

How did you adapt?

I stayed with them. I honestly attempted to understand the context of their situation until I realized that they don’t have the choice like I have. I can choose to have clean clothes everyday. They don’t have that choice. Although they know...
It is no secret, though, that what most Bajau want is to return to the sea. If they can no longer live there like before, then at least they want to be able to continue to live from its resources. To do that, many Bajau believe they will have to have motorized bancas that will enable them to fish farther into the ocean.

Sabiya, Dalpak’s sister, recalls that at one point, she summoned enough courage to borrow P50,000 from a Tausug businessman, just so she could buy a motorized banca. “For three years,” she says, “we were not able to pay him a single centavo.”

Dalpak himself chose not to take out a loan from the businessman when things began to get really desperate for his family. Instead, he went to Manila, where he spent six months trying to sell pearls and corals. He boasts that he even went as far as Baguio and Ilocos. He says, “We usually get P10. On good days, when there are many commuters, we get P40 pesos.”

Academic Roxas-Lim urges that policy implications on how to deal with marginalized social sectors should include the Bajau. “The plight of the Bajau can serve as the litmus test of how well our so-called democratic system and our national patrimony and the environment are faring,” she argues in her study, Marine Adaptations and Ecological Transformation: The Case of the Bajau and Samal Communities.

She observes that the Bajau’s political participation is almost nil. And when they do participate in elections, they are either relegated to voting for predetermined candidates or caught in the crossfire of feuding political factions and political dynasties.

The Bajau are under no delusion that the polls will bring any change to their lives. Says Dalpak: “It is better that we don’t vote because we don’t get anything from government anyway.”

But Purayda’s singing is interrupted by the distinct crack of a rifle. A child starts crying. Marzial says to the visitors, “Don’t worry. Go to sleep now. We will know tomorrow who it is this time. It’s normal here. People get killed.”

Because of the feudal relationship, the Bajau looked up to the Tausugs who treat them unjustly.

The Bajau live in an environment surrounded by a dominant Muslim culture. That’s why they always associate or blame threats and abuses on the Muslim community, although it’s mostly only the Tausug or pirates who abused them in the past.

What have the Claretians done in the community?

In Tahanan (in Maluso, Basilan), we had a housing project, livelihood assistance for them to have boats and we built a footbridge. Then we started a literacy project for children; we have kindergarten classes.

Today, we focus on organizing the community and supporting the education of children. We are also trying to improve their health condition by teaching them proper hygiene and introducing basic health care.

Are you not intervening in their culture with your work?

Definitely. What we are doing are interventions. But whether it is politically correct or incorrect, that’s an open-ended question.

What we are doing is help them adapt to the changing society so that they will not always be in the periphery and be marginalized. That’s our basic thrust.

Are they not hesitant to change?

In the beginning, of course they were. Because what we are doing is outside intervention, there was some form of resistance. It’s part of their culture. But lately, we have observed a lot of indicators...
NEWSBRIEFS

Recently elected leaders of the Claretians worldwide

Superior General: Fr. Josep M. Abella Battle (East Asian)
Vicar General: Fr. Rosendo Urrabazo (USA West)
Prefect for Spirituality: Fr. Gonzalo Fernandez Sans (Spain)
Prefect for Apostolate: Fr. Vicente Sanz Tobes (Castilla)
Prefect for Formation: Fr. Mathew Vattamattan (Bangalore)
General Econome: Fr. Domingo Grillia Biestro (Argentina-Uruguay)
Consultor: Fr. Marcelo Benezra Nsang (Rugieratius Guinea)
Secretary-General: Fr. Jose Felix Valderrabano Ordeig (Aragon)

Current Philippine Claretian Leaders

Provincial Superior: Fr. Renato Manubag
Vicar-Counselor: Fr. Carlos de Rivas
Consultors: Fr. Leo Dalmeo (Prefect for Formation)
Econome: Fr. Juan Manuel Suhiaz
Prefect for Apostolate: Fr. Angel Calvo
Prefect for JPCI: Fr. Eduardo Apungan

Priestly Ordinations 2003

Arnold M. Abelardo was ordained priest on February 23, 2003, at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Quezon City, Philippines. Arnold is from San Antonio, Nueva Ecija, Philippines. He is now working in the “La Placita” parish church in Los Angeles, USA.

Angelito S. Ancla was ordained priest on June 7, 2003 at the San Antonio de Padua Parish in Davao City, southern Philippines. He has since returned to Vietnam where he is missionary.

Perpetual Profession 2003

On the Claretians’ Foundation Day, July 16, 2003, four young Claretians made their perpetual profession. Ian Shelley Alabanza and Eduardo Ricabonda professed at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Quezon City; Benedict Dilag at the new Claretian Mission Center in Ormoc City; Layan, and Restituto Ankl at the St. Anthony Mary Claret Parish, Zamboanga City.

VIII General Assembly of the Lay Claretian Movement

From July 12 to 27, twenty four (24) representatives from 9 countries gathered in Madrid, Spain for the VIII General Assembly of Cordimarian Filiation. Theme of the General Assembly was: “A New Pentecost with Mary so that the world may believe”. They chose a new set of leaders: Directress Elena Rodriguez; Council Members; Franciscana Prada, Maria del Mar Alvarez, Carolina Sanchez and Rosa Mallin.

VI General Assembly of the Lay Claretian Movement

From July 17 to 27, fifty (50) participants from 16 countries gathered around the mother house of the Claretians in Vic, Spain for the VI General Assembly of the Lay Claretian Movement. Theme of the General Assembly was: “Mission of the Lay Claretian in Today’s World”. They evaluated the situation of the Movement and prepared guidelines for the next 4 years. They chose new leaders: Secretary General Cristina Martinez (Seville, Spain); Reclamation, Milagros Vicente (Quipbo, Colombia); Treasurer, Nandy Burgos (San Juan, Puerto Rico). During the meeting, the Secretary General, Mrs. Martinez, asked about the situation of the four Filipino groups that have been “in discernment” for quite some time.

South East Asia Formation Center

In the middle of July, a group of 8 Vietnamese students willing to become Claretian gathered at the Claret Seminary, Sandille. Applicants of different nationalities are expected to arrive in the future to create an inter-cultural formation center. The Program of Collaboration in Formation is being done under the direct responsibility of the General Government with the collaboration of the major Organizers of the Asian Claretians (ASCLA).

Pen Xiang Program

Pen Xiang is the Chinese word for “sharing”. Two young Chinese priests are staying in our Theology House in Tandang Sora. Both have expressed interest in our Claretian missionary life. Another three young Diocesan seminarians from Vietnam and Cambodia are also staying with our College students. This is one concrete way of helping the Church to grow and, at the same time, of making our Claretian Spirituality and Mission known in other nations where we, Claretians, cannot be present yet.

An Evening with Shakespeare

Last September 26, the seminarians of the Southeast Asian Formation Center (SEFIC) took the stage in an evening activity featuring excerpts from Shakespeare’s plays. In between delivering their pieces, they also took turns singing and acting our songs from their home country (Vietnam). It was an enjoyable, entertaining and meaningful experience for all – actors and audience alike.

Ordination to the Diaconate

Dennis Tamayo will be ordained as deacon on December 6, 2003 by Bishop Carmelo Morelos, DD, in Zamboanga City.

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We are also very careful. For example, we avoid teaching the children Christian songs because it could create wrong impressions. We don’t teach them Christian prayers. We have spontaneous prayers. During meeting with Muslim leaders, we pray with them. What is still to be done?

Now that the community is slowly being organized and they already have a semblance of a community structure and the children are in school, the more immediate thing to be done is to provide alternative sources of livelihood.

The Bajau still fish in the traditional way even if it is no longer sustainable. If the situation continues, they will not survive only by fishing.

We tried to experiment with alternative livelihoods like mussels culture, but we did not pursue it because they are afraid to live near the mangroves.

We tried duck-raising but although they love to eat eggs, they don’t like the smell of the ducks.

There is also a need to consolidate the gains in the community through tangible structures or symbols of development like footbridges, houses and basic services like health and recreation centers.

There is much to be done.