

The Sri Vishayan Empire

By Jed Pensar

Who are the Visayans and where do they come from? Before 500 AD, there are no known archaeological findings of native Southeast Asian Malay inscriptions. Thus, we have to rely on Chinese documents about Southeast Asia. Their records tell of five Southeast Asian states sending trade missions to South China between 430 to 473 AD. After that, the one known by its Chinese toponym Kan-t'o-li prevailed over its neighbors. Historian O.W. Wolters believes that this state was established near Palembang, Sumatra in the second century. Trade stopped during the 500's due to civil strife in China, and Kantoli was never heard of again. Inscriptions in Old Malay appear after 500 AD, notably in Sumatra, Banka Island, Java and the Malay Peninsula. Eight states emerged to resume trade with South China starting 608 AD but by 670 only one remained, Shih-li-fo-shih. Artifacts dated 775 AD from the Ligor isthmus of the Malay Peninsula, as examined by Southeast Asian history pioneer George Coedus, determined that the state known to the Chinese as Shihlifoshih was the same as Sri Vishaya.

Sri is an Indian honorific placed before the name of people and places. One familiar example of this usage is on the island of Lanka. Thus, the common name of Sri Vishaya was probably just Vishaya.

Now, consider that most Philippine languages do not have the 'v' and 'sh' sounds. These are pronounced as 'b' and 's' respectively. To some, Vishaya might have been known as Bisaya.

Like the Kantoli, Sri Vishaya warred on neighboring states. It was also based in Palembang. It is possible then that this state, which was known to the Arabs as Zapage, was the same entity as the Kantoli.

Sri Vishaya ruled from the Malay Peninsula up to perhaps Western Java at its peak. It had diplomats, traders, sailors, an international seaport, and, according to its own inscriptions, an army of 20,000. As middlemen, they monopolized the highly lucrative Persian trade.

Javanese records tell of raids against Sri Vishaya in 992 AD while the Tamils claim to have sacked Palembang in 1025. The death blow probably came when the Chinese manned their trading ships themselves, doing away with Vishaya middlemen.

Chinese monk I Tsing noted during his travels from 671-695 AD that Sri Vishaya practiced Mahayana Buddhism. If there is a direct link between the Sri Vishaya and the Bisaya of the Philippines, why does the latter show no traces of the Buddhist faith? Only the Vishaya aristocracy adhered to Mahayana. In spite of Mahayana's headstart, it was Hinayana that had greater success in the Southeast Asian mainland. The rest of Vishaya, probably ninety percent, remained animists. This explains the unencumbered spread of Islam later on. The migration of Visayans from the Malay Archipelago to Visayas in the Philippines must have consisted of animists.

Another author, Kenneth Scott Latourette, notes that the Vishaya established trading outposts in Taiwan. It makes it easy to suppose then that some of them migrated to the Philippines and settled in what is now the Visayas. So where was their first settlement? Probably in Cebu. Possibly not Bohol because some native arts there resemble the Bukidnon's in Mindanao. Negros likewise had sizable remnants of the Bukidnons until recently. Panay has a large population of Karay-as and Aklanons who may antedate the Visayans. Among its neighbors, Cebu seems to have had a Visayan identity for the longest time.

Three major ethnic groups call themselves Bisaya and their language Binisaya. They are the Ilongo, Cebuano and Waray. No matter that they speak three separate languages and have three distinct identities, still they are collectively known as Bisaya. Cebuano may be the purest form of Binisaya. Ilongo root words are mostly Cebuano, with a significant admixture of Tagalog.

The Ilongos are also geographically close to the Tagalogs. Waray root words are also mostly Cebuano, with a significant admixture of Bicolano. The Warays are also geographically close to Bicol. In Mindanao, the native forms of Binisaya are dialects of the Cebuano language. Take note though that Cebuano language is a technical term that not all its native speakers are accustomed to.

One hypothesis is that Visayan consciousness and language spread from Cebu. Northwest it mixed with Tagalog, forming Ilongo, and northeast it mixed with Bicol, forming Waray. South to Mindanao, it retained its Cebuano form.

Alternatively, the northward spread gave birth successively to the Ilongo and Tagalog as well as the Waray and Bicolano languages. This hypothesis is correct only if it can be shown that Cebuano is relatively the oldest of the five languages while Bicolano and Tagalog are the youngest. Note also that Tagalog and Bicolano are intimately related to no other indigenous language in the Luzon mainland so it is not difficult to trace a Visayan root.

It does not follow that the Sri Vishaya spoke an archaic form of Cebuano. Ilongos, Cebuanos and Warays share the same root and may in fact have descended from the Sri Vishaya, an empire acknowledged today to be one of the greatest Malayo-Polynesian nations ever. They share equally of this sterling heritage.

Ages before Manila imposed its Tagalog language on the Philippines, Visayans already were predominant outside of Luzon. In Samar and the Leytes. In coastal Iloilo, Capiz (where an unusual form of Ilongo, Capisnon, is spoken) and the Negroses. In Southern Masbate, Cebu, Bohol, Siquijor, Camiguin, Misamis, Lanao del Norte, Zamboanga, Agusan, Surigao (where an unusual form of Cebuano, Surigaonon, is spoken), Bukidnon and Davao. Curiously, the Karay-as and Aklanons of Panay also consider themselves Bisaya. Binisaya is not how they call their languages though. They must be pre-Visayan peoples with their own proud history and traditions who have since coexisted with their Ilongo-Bisaya neighbors.

It is never too late to expand one's knowledge of the past. Embarrassing as it may be to the Manila government that the Bisaya it has tirelessly repressed is indeed descended from the great Sri Vishaya, the pursuit of historical truth justifies itself. If not, then for the sake of our young who can only take so much of self-serving and subjective official Philippine history.

Ref.: <http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=95478641686&topic=13101>