

# Islas de los Pintados: The Visayan Islands

Nestled in the bosom of the Philippines central seas are islands which Spanish conquistadors called Islands of the Painted People, *Islas de los Pintados*, because of the ancient people's custom of tattooing. Tattoos expressed a person's role and achievement in society. Men tattooed themselves almost totally while women were tattooed only in select parts of their anatomy, like arms. Tattoos served like a piece of clothing, and complemented the simple cut of clothes and jewelry, which the people wore.

*Land.* This cluster of islands consist of

- six large ones—Panay, Negros, Cebu, Bohol, Samar, Leyte;
- seven medium—Guimaras, Siquijor, Bantayan, Mactan, Camotes, Biliran, Panglao
- and many small ones, some named Maripipi, Capul, Lauang, Batag, Cabilao, Olutayan, and countless unnamed island and isles

The Visayas is situated around 12.5 to 9 degrees latitude north; 121 to 126 longitude. Its climate is tropical and has marked seasons of rain, cool and dry enjoyed by the rest of the Philippines. Its northern islands are within the typhoon path with the island of Samar being buffeted the most, hence its depressed economic condition.

The islands are either of volcanic or marine origin. The islands of Panay and Negros are primarily volcanic, and the lofty volcanoes Mount Kanlaon in Negros Occidental and Mount Talinis near Siaton, Negros Oriental supply not only the energy needs of the island but neighboring islands as well. But Cebu and Bohol are mostly of limestone and fossilized coral giving away their marine origins.

*Name.* The islands, however, are known collectively and locally as the **Visayas**. The name's origins are nebulous, some hypotheses have been proposed one suggests that the name derives from the Shrivijaya Empire based in Palembang, Sumatra. A major maritime power it influenced much of Southeast Asia from the 7th to the 12th centuries, it had converted to Islam toward its later history after being Hindu-Buddhist. However, the almost total absence of adherents to Buddhism or Islam in Visayas at colonial contact (1521) suggest otherwise. One could hypothesize that a kingdom deeply attached to Islam would have brought the religion to the Philippines. Islam came to southern Philippines through Arab traders and through the Borneo route and had not advanced much beyond Mindanao in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Bisaya in archaic Tausog means slave; however, this is a case of later development when Visayan caught by slave raiders were being traded in Jolo to supply the manpower needs not just of the local datus but of Dutch merchants who run an active trade in Batavia (Jakarta). A Spanish missionary, Ignacio Alzina, writing about the history of the Visayas in 1668 claims that the term comes from **aya** or **caya**, meaning a happy person.

*Pre-history.* The nebulous origins "Visayas" coupled with a poor knowledge of the region's history prior to colonization seems to be the reason why the Maragtas story and the subsequent tale of wise lawgiver Datu Kalantiaw is accepted as historical truth in many places, notwithstanding the dubious origins of the stories. Briefly the Maragtas narrates that a group of Borneans, fleeing persecution and headed by Datu Puti arrived in the Visayas, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century where they encountered the dark complexioned Ati under Datu Marikudo. The Borneans negotiated with the Ati to allow them to settle along the coast in exchange for a golden salakot, basin and necklace. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Maragtas was retold as an epic

poem by the Ilongo poet, Ricaredo Demetillo, *The Barter of Panay*; staged as a multi-media drama, *Dularawan*, for the inauguration of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and has become the subject of a dance suite by the famous Bayanihan Dancers. The rest of the tale is taken as historical truth (complete with dates) as shown in the following quotations from government publication (DOT Website) about:

### Iloilo

Irong-Irong appears in the Maragtas legend of the coming of the ten Bornean datus to Panay who bartered gold for the plains and valleys of the island from a local Ati chieftain. One datu, Paiburong by name, was given the territory of Irong-Irong in what is now Iloilo. For 300 years before the coming of the Spaniards, the islanders lived in comparative prosperity and peace under an organized government and such laws as the Code of Kalantiaw.

### Capiz

Capiz is another province whose name possesses a rather interesting etymology. It was named based on the story that when the Spaniards came to Capiz in 1570, it was the time when Datu Bankaya's wife of the Aklan district gave birth to twin daughters. Twin is "Kapid" in the local dialect, so the Spaniards adopted the name Capiz (Kapid) as inadvertently miscommunicated to them by the natives.

Capiz, known as Aklan in pre-Spanish times, was one of the early settlements of the Malayas, centuries before the coming of the Spaniards to the Philippines. It was part of the Confederation of Madjaas, formed after the purchase of Panay by the Bornean datus from the Negrito king named Marikudo.

### And Aklan:

Aklan is the oldest province in the Philippines, organized in 1213 by settlers from Borneo as the Minuro it Akean to include what is now Capiz.

The capital of Aklan changed location several times. Towards the end of the 14th century, Datu Dinagandan moved the capital to the present site of Batan which was captured in 1399 by Chinese adventurers under Kalantiaw, who forthwith ruled Aklan. In 1433 the son of Kalantiaw, Kalantiaw III laid down a written code of laws now known as the Code of Kalantiaw. The short-lived Kalantiaw dynasty ended when Kalantiaw III was slain in a duel with Datu Manduyog, legitimate successor to Datu Dinagandan. When Manduyog became the new ruler, he moved the capital to Bakan (ancient name of Banga) in 1437. Several datus succeeded Manduyog when Miguel Lopez de Legaspi landed in Batan in 1565, Datu Kabayag was ruling Aklan from what is now the town of Libacac.

Unfortunately as the historian William Henry Scott has pointed out the Maragtas goes no further than 1907. "the Maragtas is an original work by Pedro A. Monteclaro published in mixed Hiligaynon and Kin-iraya in Iloilo in 1907 which claims to be nothing more than that. It is based on written and oral sources then available, and contain three sorts of subject matter—folk customs still being practiced or remembered by old folks, the description of an idealized confederation whose existence there is reasonable grounds to doubt and for which there is no evidence, and a legend recorded in 1858 of a migration of Bornean settlers, some of whom are still remembered as folk heroes, pagan deities, or progenitors of part of the present population of Panay. There is not reason to doubt that this legend preserves the memory of some actual event, but it is not possible to date the event itself or to decide which of its details are historic fact and which are the embellishments of generations of oral transmission (Scott 1984: 103).

Regarding the Code of Kalantiaw, Scott observes that its source is “the Marco-Pavón Antiguas Leyendas.” Jose E. Marco of Pontevedra, Negros Occidental was a stamp collector and antiquarian who brought to the director to the American director of the National Library, Alexander Blair, supposedly ancient manuscripts about the Visayas. The Pavon manuscript was allegedly written by Fr. José María Pavon y Araguro, a priest of the Diocese of Cebu and assigned parish priest of Himamaylan (1843-49 [50?]). In 1848-49, the Recollects took charge of Negros and Pavon presumably returned to Cebu. Other historians aside from Scott doubt the authenticity of manuscripts presented by Marco to the National Library. Regarding the Pavon manuscript, Scott concludes: “The Jose E. Marco contribution to Philippine historiography ...appear to be deliberate fabrications with no historic validity. There is therefore no present evidence that any Filipino ruler by the name of Kalantiaw ever existed or that the Kalantiaw penal code is any older than 1914” (Scott 1984: 134).

The postwar impetus to provide the Visayas a facile prehistory does not deny that the Visayas had a rich history. Although the archaeological of the islands is very much incomplete, tantalizing evidence of rich culture have been found. In the island of Banton, Romblon (politically part of Region 4, Southern Tagalog, though culturally Visayan) a warp ikat cloth was found in a burial site. Dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century it is probably the oldest example of ikat weave from Southeast Asia. The Museo de Iloilo display not just Neolithic pottery and implements but a gold death mask unearthed in Oton. Samar is yielding many gold ornaments from areas controlled by the NPA. These prehispanic jewelry finds its way to the antique market, though badly documented regarding provenance, and almost useless archaeologically. Cebu's University of San Carlos displays artifacts unearthed within Cebu City during an archaeological excavation conducted by the University. Bohol's Baclayon church stores some *haligi* or house posts (claimed to be pre-colonial) recovered from the Dauis Strait.

All these evidences point to a rich history needing reconstruction. Extensive excavations along the Tanay River have uncovered prehistoric evidence of settlements, of associated artifacts, including Chinese trade ware, suggesting a lively commerce along this waterway.

*Languages and dialects.* The Visayans speak a variety of related languages, not just dialects, although dialect varieties exist.

The principal languages are

- Hiligaynon, with variations especially marked among the Ilongo, Antiqueño and Capiznon, spoken in the provinces of Iloilo, Capiz, Antique and Negros Occidental
- Sugbuanon, Bisaya, Binisaya or Cebuano Visayan is spoken in Cebu, Negros Oriental, Siquijor, Western Leyte, Bantayan and Camotes; and a dialect, characterized by the hard pronunciation of “y”, Boholano or Bol-anon in Bohol, although constant interchange between Cebu is slowly eroding the distinctions;
- Popularly called Waray (because the prevalence of the rolling “R” sound) but Samar-Leyte Visayan by linguistic scholars is the language distinct to Samar and Eastern Leyte.

Other minor languages exist

- Akaenon or Aklanon spoken in Aklan,
- Kinaray-a or Kin-iraya, an older variety of Hiligaynon, is spoken in the interior towns of Panay Island.
- Abacnon, Capulon, a cognate of Tausog, spoken by about 1500 persons in Capul Island, off northern Samar

- Although Romblon and Cagayancillo now belong to Region IV, Southern Tagalog and Masbate to Region V, Bicol, inhabitants of these islands speak a language akin to Hiligaynon
  - Rombloanon in Romblon
  - Bantoanon in Banton
  - Masbateño in Masbate
  - Cagayancillo's lingua franca is Hiligaynon as most of the inhabitants are from Iloilo or Antique. These settlers continue maintaining economic ties with Panay for it is far more convenient to sail to Anini-y on Panay's southwestern tip than to go to Puerto Princesa under whose political jurisdiction Cagayancillo falls.
- and a variety of languages tribal languages spoken by minorities: the Sulod of Panay, Bukidnon, Mahagat and Karolon of Negros, and Ati or Ayta.

**Administration.** For purposes of administration the islands are divided into Western, Central and Eastern Visayas. Western Visayas is made up of the principal islands of Panay and Guimaras, the province of Negros Occidental and nearby islands and islets. Central Visayas is made up of the islands of Cebu, Bantayan, Camotes, Bohol, Panglao, Negros Oriental, Siquijor and nearby islands and islets; and Eastern Visayas, Samar, Leyte, Biliran, Lauang, and neighboring islands.

**Travel:** The Visayan islands, though related culturally, are distinct from each other, so that island hopping becomes a pleasant experience of variety. And most islands are physically not too far from each other, on the average 20 to 30 nautical miles distant. The distance is even made shorter by the ready availability of fast, hi-tech catamaran type ferries that sail from the principal harbors for adjacent islands, approximately every hour. It is possible to plan trips so that you can tour an island one day, and be on the next island the following.

It is also possible to travel by public transportation from one island to the next. A bus line connects Bacolod City, Negros Occidental with Cebu. The bus is loaded on a roro (roll in, roll out) ferry for the sea crossing. Within the islands aside from buses, FX vans are available. These are probably more convenient because of their frequent trips and few stops along the way, although sitting is tight because the vans are small and crowded.

Our island-hopping heritage tour of the Visayas takes advantage of this convenience. It begins with Cebu as a hub, moves south to Bohol, then north to Dumaguete, Bacolod, Iloilo, ending in Capiz for the culture buffs or the very popular white-sand beach of Boracay.

To get from Manila the Cebu the most convenient way is to travel by air, however, sea travel is also available. The government has recently rationalized the roro services between islands. It is now possible to travel to Boracay, Aklan from Cubao, Quezon City, Metro Manila. The trip takes 15 hours. From then onwards public buses are available. But be warned, the buses may lack in comfort. So the bus and roro option are for the adventurous.