

**PEDRO BUKANEG**  
(ca. 1592– ca.1622 to 1626)

Iloko Man of Letter

Pedro Bukaneg was the legendary “first Ilokano man-of-letters,” who, according to stories, translated to Iloko many church doctrines, including the *Doctrina Cristiana* from Latin and Spanish. Bukaneg’s translation works of religious teachings were said to have facilitated the Ilokanos’ conversion to Christianity.

Nothing was known about the exact birth and parents of Pedro Bukaneg but biographers assumed that his birth took place sometime in 1592. It was during this year when an old woman found him inside a *tampipi* (a woven basket or box) floating along the banks of the Banaoang River between Bantay and Vigan and turned him over to the Augustinian parish priest of Bantay who baptized him Pedro Bukaneg. His family name was derived from Iloko phrase “nabukaan nga itneg” (Christianized Itneg). Itneg refers to people from Abra and some parts of Ilokos who speak the dialect and were labeled by Spaniards as pagans during those days.

It was surmised that his parents threw out Bukaneg who was born blind and ugly in order to avoid the curse of evil spirits. He was born defective but he turned out to be brilliant and musically talented; such qualities that were honed in the convent of Bantay where the kind Augustinian priests nurtured and educated him. He learned from them Latin and the Spanish language in addition to his native vernaculars – Iloko and Itneg. Because of this, he was a great help to the priests in converting the natives to Christianity. Many priests turned to him for translation of their sermons and prayers into Iloko. He was even asked to preach Christianity in Iloko in the different towns of the province.

His being blind did not hinder him from writing down his thoughts. The popular Ilokano epic *Biag ni Lam-ang* attributed to him was written down by an amanuensis as he dictated the lines of the story. It was presumed that Bukaneg wrote his poems, songs, and translation in the same manner. He could also see behind his blind eyes. When one of the servants of Don Nicolas de Figueroa, the *encomendero* in Narvacan was killed, Bukaneg was called for help. After feeling the breasts of the suspected killers presented before him, he identified the criminal, who later admitted to the crime.

The numerous stories about Bukaneg’s capabilities and the dismal documents about him make one wanders what was historical and myth about him. Some records though, aside from his epic *Biag ni Lam-ang*, like the prologue in Father Lopez’ book *Arte de la Lengua Iloca* (UST, 1927) recognized his invaluable contribution. Father Lopez wrote: “...neither forgetting Mr. Pedro Bukaneg who may now be in Glory; since (I honestly confess) the greater and the best in this work as well as that of the *Doctrina* of Bellarmine is due him.” It was Bukaneg who translated the *Doctrina Cristiana* of Cardinal Bellarmine into Iloko. His translation was printed in the Augustinian Convent in Manila in 1621 by Antonio Damba and Miguel Seixo under the title: *Libro a naisuratan amin ti batas ti Doctrina Cristiana nga naisurat iti libro ti Cardenal a agnagan Belarmine* (Book Containing the Substance of the Christian Doctrine written by Cardinal Bellarmine).

Bukaneg, whose intellectual qualities and eloquence in speech that often mesmerized his audience superseded his being blind and ugly, died sometime between 1622 and 1626. Aside from his works that perpetuate his memory was the Bukanegan, a literary joust similar to the Tagalog balagtasan.

Reference:

Zaide, Gregorio F. Great Filipinos in History. Manila: Verde Bookstore, 1970.