

**The Sarawak Museum Journal****Vol. XL No. 61****December 1989****ISSN: 0375-3050****E-ISSN: 3036-0188**

Citation: Punchak, S. S. (1989). Bisaya Ethnography: A Brief Report. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XL (61): 37-48

BISAYA ETHNOGRAPHY: A BRIEF REPORT**Sylvester Sarnagi Punchak**

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by

Sylvester Sarnagi Punchak

INTRODUCTION

The Bisayas

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POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

Distribution

The Bisaya are a small, fragmented group inhabiting parts around Brunei Bay, the Padas and Klias River basins in the North Borneo (Sabah), the upper tidal reaches of the Limbang River and a few inhabit the Lawas and Trusan rivers in Sarawak (Bewsher, 1958; Sandin, 1971; Peranio, 1977). A possible connection with some groups in the Tutoh (Baram), in Labuan and the Bisayas of the Philippines was suggested by Bewsher (1958).

The Limbang Bisayas are found between Lubok Lasas (upper Limbang river) and Merasam (down river), a region between 20 to 40 miles from the mouth of the Limbang river. Altogether there are presently 31 Bisaya villages (kampongs) in the Limbang Valley (Galis, 1984).

Population

The number of Bisayas in Sarawak appeared to have been underestimated in the past. Peranio (1977) reported a figure of 2,394 in 1958 and 3,030 in 1970. Asmah (1983) gave an approximate figure of 4,000 for all Bisayas in Sarawak. The latest figure was that of Hussain and Newman

In 1970, there were more than ten million Bisayas estimated to live in the Philippines compared to about 14,000 in Sabah and 3,312 in Sarawak.

Note: The term '*Bisaya*' or Visaya in the Philippines not only refer to people but also to geography and language. Geographically Bisaya cover Tablas, Romblon, Sibuyan, Masbate, Panay, Guimaraas, Negros, Siquijor, Cebu, Bantayan, Bohol, Camotes, Biliran, Leyte, Samar, and numerous smaller islands in the Philippines. Linguistically, Bisaya refer to the language of the people in the region.

Several writers including Father F. Araneta and Father M. Bernad (1960), Sonza (1972) and Harrisson (1976) shared the view that the Bisaya origin was from Borneo before migrating to the Philippines. Harrisson (1976) suggested that migration of Borneo Bisayas to the Philippines occurred in the 12th or in the early 13th century. Carrol (1960) theorised that the migration stemmed from constant harassment of the people of the '*River of Bisaya*'—now known as Melanau Bintulu, by a Melanau chief called Makatunao. Makatunao was later killed during a second return of the Bisaya with the help of a Brunei ruler (presumably Alak Betatar). This led to Brunei domination over the Retus and Bintulu Rivers. In subsequent years, migration from the Borneo to Panay continued and brought the name Bisaya to Panay and nearby islands. Language studies by Araneta and Bernad (1960) showed significant similarities, both in vocabulary and usage, between the Borneo Bisaya and Philippine Bisaya (Ilongo, Cebuano) and Tagalogs.

c. Migration

According to Sonza (1972) at the time of the Spanish conquests of the Philippines (Magellan-Legaspi period), that is, from 1521 onwards, the Bisaya of Borneo were living in the province of Melano. He further suggested a possible affinity between the Bisayas and present day Melanau along the Sarawak coast from the mouth of the Rejang River to the north of the Baram.

Bewsher (1956) recorded that the Borneo Bisaya had moved from one place to another within Borneo. The Limbang Bisayas migrations were very recent subsequent to the Murut decline in that area. Both tribes were harried by the Bruneis from the coast and Kayans from the Baram. At the same time those Bisayas in the Upper Belait and Tutong Rivers fled to Labuan and Padas rivers under pressure from the Baram headhunters.

After the secession to Sarawak in 1890, migration of Bisayas from Brunei to Limbang followed.

d. History

In the decades preceeding the annexation of the Limbang District by Brooke in 1890, the Limbang Bisaya had no district or regional chief. Tribal groups were considered subjects of the Sultan of Brunei. and a number of titles were introduced to the Bisaya people as a means of establishing liaison. These titles in ascending order were *Janang*, *Panglima*, *Penghulu* and *Orang Kaya*. By the period 1870–1900 there were at least 30 living individuals with such assorted titles. These titled individuals were obligated to:

- serve as intermediaries between Sultan and the Bisaya people,
- pay homage at the court (with full regalia, i.e. gong music, etc.),