The Search for the White Mandaya

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I first heard of the white Mandaya while growing up in Tagum in the late 1950s. Tagum then was still a frontier, and we kids walked or ran around barefoot, even in school until Grade II, when the nuns advised our parents to make us wear *bakya* (wooden slippers), at least. I think it was part of the campaign against schistosomiasis. This was the era of ceaseless rains, Petromax lamps, hand water pumps, *kalesas*, abaca plantations, logging trucks, and, in the late afternoons, huge flocks of *kabog* (fruit bats) winging their way up north.

We lived at the Crossing, the business center of the town where the Chinese house-stores lined both sides of the wide road. We heard the word *picul* frequently from the *kargador* who carried the large bales of white abaca fiber in or out of some warehouse. Picul was what they called the bale of abaca fiber, which I would learn later referred to its weight of around 50-60 kilograms so it could be carried by a man on his head.

As this was the main road, the logging trucks rumbled through day and night, shaking the road and spewing dust. Invariably, the trucks would stop over to disgorge the drivers and helpers to eat or rest, and enterprising people would clamber over the huge logs and hack at or pry the thick barks that were sold for firewood. We know now the logging roads allowed Christian settlers to penetrate the forests and turn logged-over areas into their kaingins or farms, and later claiming them as their own land.

The same logging roads also allowed the *nitibo* (that's what we called the Lumads then) to venture into town. They must have hitched rides on some logging trucks from the interior, bringing with them some forest products—honey, the exotic *kalape* rattan fruit, kamote, rice, coffee, chickens, and

birds—parrots or wild doves. Mostly, it was Sundays they came to town, and I would see them in a huddle at the Crossing, immediately conspicuous because of their colorful costumes. The women, that is. The men were invisible. But the women bloomed in their attire vibrant with ethnic designs, their necks choked with colorful bead necklaces, and their chests covered with round metal breastplates, which on closer inspection, proved to be melted Liberty silver coins. On their arms they wore shell bracelets. Their hair hung in bangs. The Mandaya.

One day I heard a neighbor remark as she was regarding them: "*Daghan bayang guwapang Mandaya sa bukid. Mga puti. Blue og mata, bulagaw og buhok*. (There are many beautiful Mandaya women in the mountains. White. Blue eyes, blond hair.)" I never forgot that remark. We did not see white people in Tagum, except for the three or four Maryknoll priests in the Christ the King *convento* who gave us yellow corn during the *flores de mayo*. I was hoping I would see one of these white Mandayas but I graduated from high school and left for Davao without seeing a single white Mandaya. Through the years, all the assimilated Mandayas I met looked like any ordinary Filipino.

In the 1980s, I would hear about the white Mandaya again while working with the Development Education Media Services (DEMS) that produced conscienticizing products—principally soundslides—to show the real situation in the Philippines. One of its projects was to produce socially-relevant music[1] that included recording tribal songs and music as its contribution to preserve indigenous culture. In 1989, we were able to connect with a progressive group of Mandaya professionals led by Norma Gonos who assembled a group of chanters and musicians from the mountains of Caraga in Davao Oriental. Our star performer was Padung Mapansa, a full-blooded *balyan* (priestess) who wore tribal attire for daily wear. After the tape album[2] was finished, a Mandaya leader came to the office and we had a chitchat about their tribe. Just as he was leaving, he mentioned that they were also interested in doing more research about their tribe, in particular the lost tribe called Manurigaw, who were white.

The white Mandaya! They have a name: Manurigaw. But a lost tribe? No wonder I never saw one.

Years later, when I began to get interested in Davao history, I thought I should write about the local tribes more extensively as they merited only a paragraph or two in most Davao history books. I read up on the tribes. The Spanish Jesuit missionaries left voluminous records filled with ethnographic data. They took note that Davao had the most number of tribes anywhere in the country. When I was writing about the Mandayas, I wanted to include the Manurigaw but could find nothing about them. In the Davao volume of the *Jesuit missionary letters from Mindanao* (1989) edited by Fr. Jose S. Arcilla, SJ we find Manurigao mentioned several times as a village.[3] A Spanish defector named Manuel Sanchez who displeased rebel leader Prudencio Garcia was executed at the Manurigao plaza in 1898. Historians Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson (1903) mention Manurigao also as a village, from the Jesuit missionary Fr. Pedro Rosell who wrote about a famine in the area in 1885.[4]

Scanning various materials on Davao, I would finally encounter the Manurigaws referred to as a group of people from the book by Damian Mercader Lomocso (1961).[5] Lomocso describes the Manurigaws as having Caucasian blood and white skin! The Manurigaws appeared in the 1948 census of Compostela town, numbering sixty. In the 1960 census, their number had increased to more than a hundred. Writes Lomocso: "The Manurigaws were fierce, wild, and hostile, and killed anybody who went to their territory." It was only in the 1950s that they allowed outsiders to contact them.

To explain the presence of white people in the mountains of Davao, a legend relates that a European ship was stranded on the east coast near Baganga. When the men and women disembarked, they were met by hostile natives and the survivors fled to the mountains and never went to the coast again.

In the 1890s, Compostela was a remote mission area of the Jesuits in upper Agusan River. The river empties north in Butuan, but its headwaters stretch south deep into the mountains of today's Davao de Oro near the Davao Oriental border. At that time, the shortest route from Davao to Compostela was through the Iyo River in today's Maco town to Mawab. From Mawab, it was another arduous route only the missioned priests dared, crossing rivers and hacking their way through valley jungles to reach Compostela.

The Spanish priests did not mention anything about the white Mandaya. In 1917, the Americans created the Compostela municipal district with a vast unexplored territory. In 1939, the Davao-Agusan road was constructed with one terminus at Monkayo, a town along the Agusan River. A section of the road, at Km 106, ran along the Agusan River in what is now Montevista town; it became the embarkation point of motorboats for Compostela some 15-20 kilometer in the interior.

Lomocso's census of the Manurigaws of 1948 was provided by a Mansaka tribesman, a neighboring tribe of the Manurigaws. Compostela then was still very difficult to reach. In fact, it was too far away that the town's government offices were moved to Barrio Nabunturan along the highway at Km 90. In the early 1950s, a road was constructed from Km 102 (Montevista) to Compostela, during which time the Manurigaws started to allow outsiders to contact them. But except for Lomocso's book, I have not gotten hold of any document that tracks the Manurigaws.

In 2000-2001, when I began my research about the Manurigaws and asked around in the Tagum area, nobody could give any information about the white tribe. Even some Mandaya friends who were from Baganga and Caraga were vague about the Manurigaws, except to affirm that there were many *pution* (fair-skinned) Mandayas in the east coast. So I began to think that the white Mandaya was just a legend. Or perhaps, they were just *mestizos*. After all, Spanish soldiers as well as priests visited Compostela. I was ready to give up and just mention the white Mandaya as a side note, when lady luck smiled on me. I was talking about my frustration in looking for a white Mandaya with a friend, Dr. Nato Locsin, when he said: "There are white-skinned and blond-haired natives in New Bataan." I was incredulous. But he insisted that it was true. As he had been a long-time resident of New Bataan, I took his word for it. With friend Betty de Vera who was looking for an adventure, off we went to New Bataan to check it out. This was May 2002.

New Bataan was carved out of Compostela in 1968, one of the latest to be detached from the mother town. It is 16 kilometers east of Compostela, towards the mountainous, heavily forested border with Davao Oriental. Much earlier, the highway barrios became a town: Nabunturan in 1957,

Mawab in 1959, and Montevista in 1966 as more and more settlers from Luzon, but particularly, from the Visayas, arrived after the Second World War (WWII). In 1998, these towns were incorporated into the Compostela Valley Province when it was detached from Davao del Note.

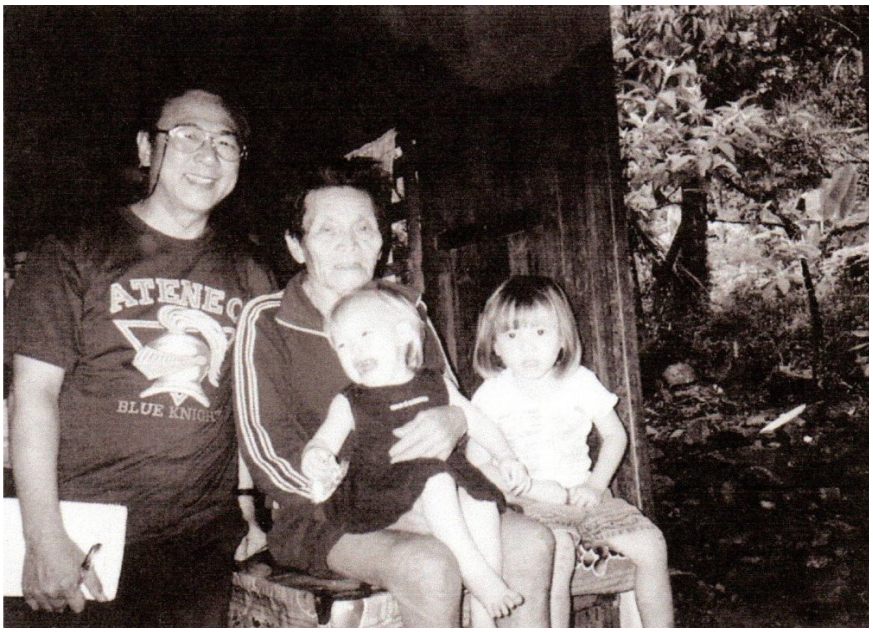
One early morning in May, Betty and I took the bus that traversed the Davao-Agusan highway, passing Panabo, Carmen, Tagum, Mawab, Nabunturan, and Montevista where we turned right, passing Compostela town and finally New Bataan, a trip of some four or five hours. The roadside scene was very rustic with endless coconut trees and occasional forest stands. Around Compostela town were banana plantations.

In New Bataan, Betty and I rode the *habalhabal*[6] on a rocky, up-and-down road escorted by Nato on his motorcycle to Taytayan, Andap, a few kilometers from the *poblacion*. We crossed the Batunun river on the steel frame of a fallen bridge jutting out of the water. In the past, the bridge would have been simply a log put across the river or perhaps made of flimsier materials like bamboo that you would *taytay* over. Across the river was mountainous terrain, along the banks were a few huts, and in one hut I met Mansac Lino, Sr., who identified himself as a Manurigaw. I was excited. Finally, I would see a real Manurigaw face to face.

However, I was a bit disappointed. Mansac was ninetyish, and was indeed fair-skinned but he would not pass being called "white." He also had dark hair. He was simply a mestizo, someone who would, in his case, have some Caucasian blood, which was rather common in the country. In Cebuano, he would be *pution* (whitish), but not *puti* (white). At any rate, I let him talk. He shared some legends, including a flood myth which unfortunately I was not able to record because that was not my intention in going to New Bataan. What I recall about the flood myth was that the survivors were a woman and her son, and they had a union to repopulate the earth.

After a while, I asked him if there were white men in the area. And he said, "I am white." I teased him, saying he just looked mestizo. He replied that he was much whiter when he was younger, but the sun had darkened his skin over the years. Were there other whites in Taytayan, I asked. "My grandchildren," he said. And he called for them.

I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Mansac's granddaughters: Alona Jane Pero (one year old) and Archiely Pero (four years old). They had white skin, grey eyes, and blond hair. According to Mansac, his parents were mixed; his mother was white; his father brown. His mother's parents were all white, but his mother's grandparents on both sides were mixed pairs. Adds Mansac: "There are more whites in the interior." There were reportedly some villages in the mountains inhabited by clusters of white people. I recalled Lomocso's report that in 1960, the Manurigaws numbered 100 people. It would have been good to go see them *in situ*. But the villages were far away, and there were no roads, just jungle trails, not an inviting prospect for an armchair researcher. When I asked Mansac how come there are white Mandayas in Manurigaw, he couldn't offer an explanation.



Author with Mansac Lino, Sr. (ninety-two years old) and granddaughters Alona Jane Pero (one year old) and Archiely Pero (four years old). The girls are white, grey-eyed, and blond. Andap, New Bataan, Compostela Valley, 6 May 2002. PHOTO BY *Beatriz de Vera*

Betty took pictures of Mansac with his white-skinned grandchildren. At last I had seen a white Mandaya. They were a real people, and they were called the Manurigaw of legend because up there in the interior, I would learn later, is a river called the Manurigaw. They were Mandayas who live along the Manurigaw river.

I was greatly satisfied to have solved the mystery of the white Mandaya that had intrigued me since I was a child. But new questions arose in my mind: Why would there be white people deep in the forests of Davao? Where did they come from? Is there truth to the legend of a stranded European ship in the east coast, and that the survivors both males and females fled to the jungle when attacked by hostile natives?

These were questions that lingered in my mind as I was going home with Betty. Along the highway stood houses of settlers, some made of *nipa*, some of cement and corrugated iron. Gone are the thick forests, gone the abaca plantations, gone the Petromax lamps. The highway now had lights guiding the bus on our way to Davao. For the moment, I gloried in the discovery of the white Mandayas.

Notes

[1] The first DEMS tape album produced with primitive equipment was Joey Ayala's *Panganay ng umaga* in 1982 under the management of Maria Yap Morales and the technical assistance of Virgilio Montecastro. A totally new recording was made through the Kinaiyahan Foundation and the Bagong Lumad Artists Foundation in 1989.

[2] *Mga awit at tugtuging Mandaya* (DEMS, Davao City. 1989.)

[3] Jose S. Arcilla, SJ. ed. trans. *Jesuit missionary letters from Mindanao, Volume three: The Davao mission*. (University of the Philippines-Center for Integrative and Development Studies, National Historical Institute, the UP Press, and the Archives of the Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus. 1998, 554.)

[4] Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson. *The Philippine Islands 1493-1898*. Reprinted by Cachos Hermanos, Inc. Mandaluyong. 1973, Vol. 43, 213-215.

[5] Damian Mercader Lomocso. *East Asian countries culture and progress*. (East Asian Countries Culture and Progress Publications, Davao City. 1961, 63-64.)

[6] A *habalhabal* is a stretched motorbike for hire that could seat up to three or four passengers.

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