“Manobo” is the hispanicized form of “Manuvi,” which, of course, means “people.” The Manobo appear to be a remnant of the very first Austronesian invasion from Taiwan, predating peoples like the Ifugao of Luzon. The Manobo are several people groups who inhabit the island of Mindanao in the Philippines. They speak one of the languages belonging to the Manobo language family. Their populations range from 749,042 (1994). The groups are often connected by name with either political divisions or landforms. The Manobo groups are all very similar, differing only in dialect and in some aspects of culture. There are about 25 tribal groups, linguistically grouped under the “Manobo” family with 24 main dialects. The Ata or Langilan Manobo, Talaingod, Matig-Salug, Tigwa, Dibabawon and Umayamnon are more closely related since their dialects are similar.

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The Manobo people live a semi-nomadic life and settlements are generally kin-oriented nuclear groups near the swidden fields located on the ridges. Some communities have long houses. The communities are widely dispersed and placed on high ridges above mountain drainage systems. In some areas, there are long houses that accommodate a number of families, usually of an extended kind. Settlements are either dispersed or relatively compact, depending on the terrain, the agricultural system practiced, and the degree of acculturation.

Settlement Patterns

The island of Mindanao is the second largest of the Philippines archipelago with a land area of 36,505 square miles and the most recent of the major islands to be developed. It is often referred to as the "Land of Promise." The majority of the Manobo are located in the Central Mountains of the island and are seldom found in lowland towns except for going there to trade. Recently, however, many young people have made their way to the urban centers in search of work.

Location

The Manobo, also known as the Manobo or Manobos, are a native people of the Philippines. They are one of the largest of the Philippine ethnic groups, with an estimated population of over 250,000. The Manobo are distributed across several islands in the Visayas and Mindanao regions. They are characterized by their traditional lifestyle and their close-knit communities. They are known for their intricate basketry and woodcarving, as well as their rich oral traditions and music. The language of the Manobo is classified as Austronesian, Malayo-Polynesian, Western Malayo-Polynesian, Southern Philippine, Manobo.

Subgroups

Centro Sur, Ata-Tigwa
- Manobo, Ata (Atao Manobo, Ata of Davao, Langilan)
- Manobo, Matigsalug (Kulamanen, Tigwa, Talia Ingod, Matig-Salud)

Centro Sur, Bago
- Manobo, Bago (Bago Manobo, Kidapawan Manobo)

Sur
- Manobo, Cotabato (Tasaday, But)
- Manobo, Sarangani (Governor Generoso Manobo)
- Manobo, Tagabawa (Tagabawa Bagobo)

North
- Higaonon (Misamis Higaonon Manobo)
- Kagayanen (Cagayan Cillo, Cagayan-Cillo)
- Manobo, Cinamiguin (Cinamiguin, Kinamigon, Kamigon)

Central East
- Manobo, Dibabawon (Mandaya, Dibabaon, Debabaon)
- Manobo, Rajah Kabunsuan

Central West
- Manobo, Ilinan (Livunganen, Pulenyan)
- Manobo, Western Bukidnon (Ilemtungen, Kiriwenteken, Pulangiwen)
Economy and Livelihood

The Manobo people usually engage in farming and agriculture for they live in the rural areas of Mindanao. The upland Manobo practice swidden or slash-burn farming whereas those inhabiting the valleys practice wet-rice farming. Rice culture is so central to the Manobo way of life that there are more than 60 different names for rice varieties, and all agricultural rituals center around it.

In the late 190s, however, many Manobo groups shifted to corn culture because of the gradual disappearance of swidden sites. Besides corn grit, other supplementary foods are sweet potatoes and cassava. In times of famine, emergency foods are unripe bananas and wild yam.

ECONOMY AND LIVELIHOOD

Other major means of subsistence are fishing, hunting, bee hunting, and trapping. Because of these occupations, the Manobo live a seminomadic life. However, some Manobo villages that have established permanent settlements have shifted to the cultivation of coconut for copra export.

An occupation that figures as entertainment for the Manobo is bee hunting, the procedure for which is symbolized through the comic bee-hunting dance. Bees appear during the season when the trees start to bloom. The hunter waits for them along the creek banks and trails them to their hive. If he catches a bee, he ties a fluff of cotton to it and then releases it. When the bee reaches the hive, the other bees raise such a buzzing noise that a hunter is led to the location of their hive. He builds a fire to smoke out the bees and then climbs the tree to get the empty bee hive. However, the hunter faces hazards such as the tree catching fire or the bees attacking him.

Kinship System and Marriage

The Manobos have a bilateral kinship system. They recognize lineage to both their mother or father’s family. Polygamy, although rarely practiced, was allowed.

Marriage among the people is traditionally done by parental arrangement. It begins when two families choose a spokesperson, usually a datu who is known for eloquence and knowledge of custom law. Ginsa, which means “asking”, begins with the girl’s representative offering betel chew, which the boy’s representative politely refuses until negotiations for the kagun (bridewealth) begin. The wedding date is determined by the length of the groom’s family will need to raise the kagun while the bride’s family are preparing the apa (wedding feast), consisting of rice, meat, fish, and rice wine.

Many rituals are performed and practiced by the married couple and their families such as:

- The groom’s parents stay for three more days, during which a purification ritual of chickens and rice is performed for the couple’s gimukod (soul-spirit), whose approval of the marriage is sought.
- The groom goes home with his parents to call his gimukod in case it stayed there while he was away. He does not stay away too long from his bride’s home because, for every day that he is gone, he must gift his in-laws with an article of clothing.
- At first, the young couple lives with the bride’s family until the groom is able to build a house of their own which is located near either parent’s house.

Many taboos are followed by the groom when building the house such as:

- If he sneezes while looking for a site, he should stop look for a site another day

The groom wears a white handkerchief and is accompanied by his “party” and walk to the bride’s home bride is kept hidden behind a curtain in another room with someone guarding her.

- Two or more of the bride’s relatives who may ask the groom’s party for a gift, such as clothing or money before he is able to see his bride.
- After the feast, the elders sit on a large mat for the edeltagan he rirey, to display the symbols for the bride’s value
- Ten piles of corn kernels each are laid out in rows, each symbolizing remuneration for the pains taken by the bride’s family in raising her
- The groom’s family presents the items of the kagun which may consist of a house, a piece of land, clothing, money, articles made of iron, brass, and animals
- The groom’s family then presents the tenges (head cloth), which symbolizes that the arrangements must be wrapped up tightly to ensure a happy life for the young couple
- The serial ritual follows: the bride and groom sit before a dish of rice. Each of the spokespersons takes a fistful of rice, molds it into a ball, and gives it to the couple, who feed each other. Then the guests join in the eating.
- The bride’s mother then prepares betel chew and hands it to her daughter, who offers it to the groom. This gesture symbolizes her tasks and duties as a wife.
- The couple is then given advice by the elders while the guests leave for home.

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If the cry of the limokon (omen bird/dove) is heard while he is clearing the site, he must look for another site.

When he digs holes for the posts, he must avoid unearthing earthworms, termites, or beetles, for these will cause many deaths in the house.

The posts must have no disfigurements because these will cause deaths in the family and no vines wrapped around them because this means that the owner will die by hanging.

No broken parts because this means that the wife will die.

The roof’s gable should face east so that the occupants’ life “will be like the shining of the sun.”

The traditional social structure consists of four classes namely, Bagani, who defends the community and goes to battle, Baylan, a male or female priest and healer, the Commoner or the farmers, and Slaves who have been seized in raids. Slaves usually belong to the ruler and were usually given away as part of the bridewealth.

Village members could become enslaved if they could not pay the penalty for a crime they had committed. Slaves could win their freedom through diligence in the fulfillment of their duties, faithfulness to their master, or payment of their debt through servitude.

Intervillage relationship is based on upakat or reciprocity. Village members, usually belonging to kinship group or groups allied by marriage, expect assistance from each other in matters of subsistent labor, defense, and support in crises.

 Ear ornaments are usually worn by the Manobos. These are wooden disks, 3 cm in diameter and laminated with silver, gold, or beaten brass wire, four strings of beads 30 cm long, hanging from each ear. Women wear armlets. Highly prized armlets are those made of sagai-sagai (black coral), since these are believed to contract around the wearer’s arm to warn of impending danger.

 Teeth filing was usually performed upon puberty, though this is no longer practiced now; teeth were blackened with juice of the mau-mau plant. Both sexes have their earlobes pierced, although women enlarge the holes up to 2.5 cm wide. The face is kept hairless, thus both sexes shave their eyebrows, and the men prevent beards from growing by plucking. Tattooing is done for ornamental purposes on chest, upper arms, forearms, and fingers, and women wear theirs elaborately on their calves.

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**Manobo Literary Arts**

Narrative poems and lyric poems are generally also ritual songs addressed to gods. Western Bukidnon Manobo riddles show the use of metaphorical language in describing their natural environment, material culture, and human anatomy. Numerous Ilianon Manobo poems (folktales) have been collected and classified as tales about animals, culture heroes and heroines, kindness rewarded and evil punished, cleverness and stupidity, and fate. A Western Bukidnon myth explains the sacredness of the betel chew. It is the means by which people attain immortality, in recompense for their difficult of the betel chew. It is the means by which people attain immortality, in recompense for their difficult evil punished, cleverness and stupidity, and fate. A Western Bukidnon Manabo riddles show the use of metaphorical language in describing their natural environment, material culture, and human anatomy. Numerous Ilianon Manobo poems (folktales) have been collected and classified as tales about animals, culture heroes and heroines, kindness rewarded and evil punished, cleverness and stupidity, and fate. A Western Bukidnon myth explains the sacredness of the betel chew. It is the means by which people attain immortality, in recompense for their difficult evil punished, cleverness and stupidity, and fate.

**Riddles and Proverbs**

Examples of Western Bukidnon Manobo riddles:

- If you cut into it, it’s a bow; If you pierce it, it’s a pool. (Coconut)
- If you cut into it, it’s a bow; If you pierce it, it’s a pool.
- Emun edtibasan nune vasag ne edlambas ne linew.
- Ke etew ne kepa eddlingey te impuun din ne kena eb-kepekeuma diya te edtamanan din
- He who does not look back to his origins will not reach his destination.
- Ke mevandes ne ed-ipanenew ne melaaran ke egkeruhi.
- If a man walks fast and steps on a thorn, it will go in deep, but if he walks slowly, it will go in only a little.
- Pekeuma diya te edtamanan din
- Fotfot, sung at wakes and social gatherings, is rhythmic sounds from the singer’s armpit.
- The flute is played to express one’s feeling or to accompany such sounds. Drum was used to accompany religious and secular dances.
- Many Manobo songs are accompanied by rhythmic sounds from the singer’s armpit. Food, sung at wakes and social gatherings, is accompanied by such sounds. Drum was used to accompany religious and secular dances. Manobo vocal music consists of ritual songs that are narrative songs, lullabies, and songs of nature. An important song type is the epic song Owaging/Uwahingen.

**Religious Beliefs**

The religious beliefs of the Manobo are revolved around the concept that there are many unseen spirits who interfere in the lives of humans. They believe that these spirits can intrude on human activities to accomplish their desires. The spirits are also believed to have human characteristics. They are both good and evil in nature and can be evoked to both anger and pleasure.

Animism, the fear of evil spirits, is the mainspring of tribal religion. Every village will have at least one spirit priest, usually a man. Animal sacrifices are required to appease the offended spirit in times of illness. While the religious practices of the Manobo vary slightly, there seems to be at least one common thread linking them together. Each culture believes in one “great spirit.” This “great spirit” is usually viewed as the creator figure.

As the various Manobo groups have been separated, the religious beliefs of other peoples have influenced them somewhat. However, the Manobo have often incorporated these new practices into their belief system, rather than abandoning their practices and being converted to new religions. 

**Problems and Issues**

Like other indigenous groups, the Manobos had to deal with issues such as discrimination, marginalization, human rights violation as exemplified by cases of extra-judicial killings, and deprivation of their right to self-determination and territory brought about by the extensive militarization in Mindanao. The said military operations according to them were put into place, not for the purpose of giving them protection but to protect foreign investors who wish to exploit the natural resources of their land. The Manobo’s problem on formal education is even more augmented because of the threat inflicted on their children being labeled as rebels and insurgents while at school by military officials. Their homes were also being surveyed by military officials who camp near their houses even if it is supposed to be not allowed. All these pushed the Manobos and other affected indigenous peoples to evacuate to a safer place away from threat. And just as when they learn that they can safely return home, they find their houses and crops destroyed, giving them another burden of how to start all over again.

**References:**