

Sangyauw

The Land and the People
of Samar and Leyte



Sangyaw

The Land and the People
of Samar and Leyte

National Media Production Center
1980

Copyright@ 1980 by the National Media
Production Center, Manila, Philippines.
All rights reserved.

First Printing, June 1980

This book was prepared by the Committee for the Samar-Leyte Sangyaw Festival organized by the First Lady, Mrs. Imelda Romualdez Marcos. Among the Samar-Leyte writers who contributed to its preparation were the following: Joaquin Chung, Francisco Javines, Eduardo T. Makabenta, Greg Makabenta, Yen Makabenta, Danilo Mariano, Romualdo Medina, Leah Palma, Benjamin Peñaranda, and Victor Jose Peñaranda.

Sangyaw

For the people of Samar and Leyte,
that they may look at the past with pride,
the present with resolution,
and the future with hope.

Contents

1	Introduction by Imelda Romualdez Marcos
5	Prologue
9	The School of Nature
17	The Indigenous Society
31	The Sword and the Cross
43	Ordeal and Resistance
57	The Tapestry of Culture
73	The Enjoyment of Life
85	The End of "Peace Time"
101	The Political Inheritance
109	The Genesis of Change
117	Epilogue
123	Notes and Bibliography

Introduction

We are always being drawn back to our beginnings.

In Samar and Leyte, we have a saying that once the child learns that his father had a father, and that he was born in this part of the country and not in another, there is no end to the questions he will ask about his roots.

All of us yearn to understand and to know what our land and our people are really like, and what we bring to the present and the future as our inheritance. This is quite apart from that other attachment and affection we have for our common heritage as a nation.

For ours is a country of diverse regional personalities subsumed into a whole. It substracts nothing from the identity and unity of the whole that each of our regions and cultural groups has its own unique story to tell, and that we all take pride in the difference we make. Indeed, it may well be that our vitality as a nation derives from the vitality and life of its many regions.

In the case of East Visayas, that story and that difference have evolved from its unique geographic position in the archipelago and the interaction across the centuries of many historical, political, economic and cultural forces. In one respect, its evolution has paralleled and informed the history of the whole country; in another, it is quintessentially unique and different.

Samar and Leyte have been the seat of many historical moments in our country, of which the Christianization of the islands in 1521 and the liberation of the Philippines in 1944 are only the more popularly known. They have also been the seat of a vibrant regional culture that has survived many centuries of incursions and invasions and has continued to thrive in the thought and folkways of the people of the region.

This book differs from previous works on Samar and Leyte in its attempt to probe the panorama of history and life in East Visayas and to find a key to why the region is what it is today. "Sangyaw" seems to me especially appropriate as a title, because in the native tongue it means "proclamation" or "popular." And this book is in the truest sense of the word a region and a people's testament of their self-identity and their vitality. They are conscious that the intangible factors that make up their regional character - - their pride in their homeland, their intense spirituality, their zest for life, their sense of pride and dignity, their love of freedom, their scale of values, and their awareness of the past - - are their single most important resource in the journey towards the future.

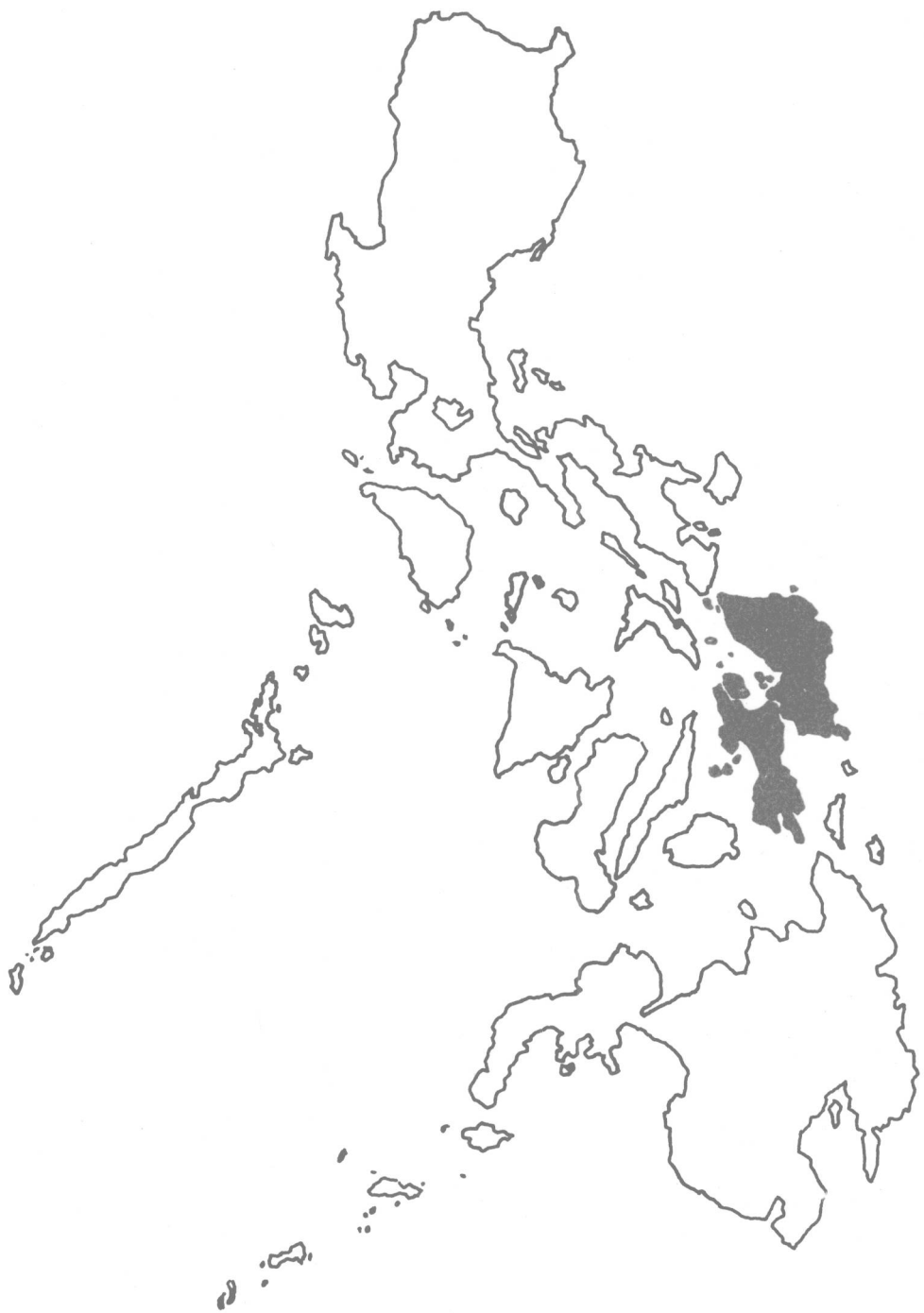
I am sure that in trying to probe the regional character of the land and people of East Visayas, this book does not in any way intend to create a mood of regionalism which would favor regional aspirations at the expense of national unity and solidarity. It suggests rather that we East Visayans can only contribute much to the vitality of our national life in proportion to the meaning and strength we draw from our past, our present and our future.

Finally it is to be noted that the book has relied mainly on the contributions of writers from Samar and Leyte. This has its advantages and its limitations: advantages in the closeness and understanding of materials that this provides, and limitations in the possible lack of detachment that this can result. But on the whole, this is perhaps for the best, considering how for so long we Filipinos have lived with the judgements and impressions of strangers. The reader must judge how well the advantages have been availed of and the limitations contained.

As one who has long hoped to find a book on Samar and Leyte that will look at them as parts of an entity and a single heritage, I welcome the publication of this work and commend it to my fellow East Visayans and to my countrymen. I hope, however, that this is only the beginning of a more sustained effort by our writers, historians, and artists to recreate and enrich the proud heritage of our region and our people.



IMELDA ROMUALDEZ MARCOS



Prologue

What kind of people are they? ”

The question has been asked over and over again when through some event or circumstance, the people and the land of Samar and Leyte caught the attention and imagination of others.

Ferdinand Magellan and his men wondered in anticipation, as they watched a boatload of men rowing towards their newly found refuge on the beach of Homonhon Island. In what must have seemed an eternity of waiting, all the trials and travails of their voyage passed once again through their minds, and they knew not in that instant whether they were to meet with yet another trial or at last had come upon the destination of their journey.

Three hundred and eighty years later, the Americans had wondered too, when in the heyday of their first experience of empire, they were shocked by defeat in Balangiga, Samar, and thence by the atrocities their soldiery committed in bitter retaliation. And they continued to be puzzled by the East Visayans, when in the climacteric of the Philippine-American War, with almost the whole of the archipelago securely under control, Samar and Leyte continued to carry on the war, delaying a prepared report of the Philippine Commission that the war was over and American colonial plans could proceed.

So also wondered the Japanese, who had hoped to be welcomed during the Second World War, in the light of the overthrow of the American colonial rulers and of their own promise of liberation for

their fellow Asians, but instead knew no day in their occupation of Samar and Leyte that was not marked by the dogged and fierce resistance of guerrilla forces.

But it is not only the foreigner who has wondered in puzzlement about the people of Samar and Leyte. Their fellow Filipinos have asked the question too, particularly their neighbors in the Bicol Peninsula and in Central Visayas, who had ventured in their own fashion to exert some form of dominance.

The answers that have been offered are as various as the experiences that had provoked the questioning. Fray Antonio Pigafetta, in his chronicles of Magellan's historic voyage, wrote of a hospitable race, courteous in their manners, and quite unwary of the guile of strangers. But this view would change once the *conquista* proceeded to evangelize and colonize the land.

The American experience was the reverse: it began in shock and utter hostility toward the region and the people, but developed into the glorious beachhead in Leyte on October 20, 1944 that started the liberation of the Philippine Islands. At the turn of the century, Samar and Leyte showed a less than benign face to the Americans, and indeed they would proclaim bitterly that this was a savage land. Faced with fierce resistance that perhaps might never have been quenched but for the premature collapse of revolutionary forces in the rest of the country, they even took to cursing the forests, the ravines and the rivers of the region which all seemed to conspire against their "manifest destiny."

And it is still another face or faces that emerge from the testimony of the peoples of the other regions of the country. To some, the people of Samar and Leyte are fun-loving, prone to laziness, improvident. Others think them trustworthy, affable and docile - - qualities that have endeared them as friends and household helpers. And still there are those who perceive a strong streak of fatalism and belligerence in the East Visayan that borders on the terrifying and bizarre.

This amalgam of contradictory impressions opens to question the facile reading of character that people are perennially doing on other people. But there is a sense in which each statement that has been made about the East Visayan is true, except that taken in isolation they do not give the whole picture of a quite complex personality. Certain cultures and groups are quite unitary and are therefore easy to compre-

hend; others are complex and layered with seeming contradictions and paradoxes, and are a little harder to probe.

In one of the earliest forms of their oral literature the East Visayans speak the language of riddles and puzzles. And the characteristic of these is that unless one has already heard the answers, one cannot guess them.

The point seems to be that for the East Visayan, there is never an easy answer to the big mysteries of life and nature. He offers the cautionary view that reality is not easily understood.

There are contrasts in the world and the ways of the people of Samar and Leyte that approximate the conventions of the riddle.

The land is, by all accounts starting from the early Westerners to more recent travellers, a beautiful land, lush in the variety of its topography and vegetation, and blessed in a way unknown to others. Yet it is also a violent land. For it lies squarely in the path of storms and moonsoon torrents, and every year without fail, almost half of the typhoons that visit the country light upon Samar and Leyte.

This contrast of extraordinary beauty and grim natural disasters is mirrored in the contradictions in the character of the East Visayan: the bewildering extremes of docility and stubbornness, of openness and secretiveness, of gaiety and fatalism, of friendliness and belligerence, of listlessness and great exertions of will.

And these are all reflected in the history, the politics, the economy, the customs, the traditions, the arts and the literature of the region.

What kind of people are they?

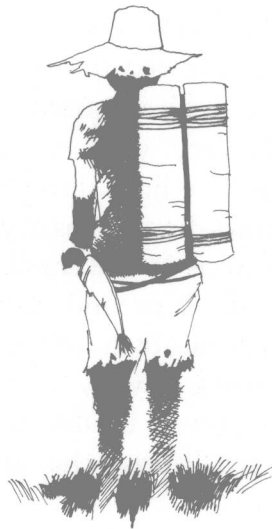
No simple answer will suffice.

Evidently, it is not for nothing that the word by which the people of Samar and Leyte are more popularly known -- "*waray*" -- itself seems to deny clues to their regional personality. In the native tongue, the word means "nothing." There seems to be poetic justice here in that this name, with which the Samareño and Leyteño have never been at peace and in which sometimes they detect the derision of their neighbors, should conceal rather than reveal who they are.

To answer the question is, in short, to ask other questions. What kind of land is East Visayas? Who are these people? What is the guiding spirit of their lives? What is their pattern of conduct? What are the principles of their thought? How are they different from other

Filipinos? How are they similar? What have they achieved in their own fashion?

No answers are disclosed to him who will not make the effort to examine and understand.



One



The School of Nature

From earliest times down to the present day, the configuration of the land and the sea has dominated the world of the East Visayan.

What nature has provided as a homeland - - the ring of seas and ocean, the island clusters, the variety of topography and soil, the river systems, and the caprice of climate and weather - - has been the most enduring element in the evolution of the region.

Magellan's landfall in Homonhon Island, for all its historic import for the nation and the world, was more an accident of currents and weather, rather than a design of conquest.

The historic battles of the last war, which placed Leyte in global history, owed largely to the strategic importance of Leyte Gulf in the battle for control of the Pacific.

The fateful joining of the entire archipelago, with Samar and Leyte serving as the link through which the Philippines may be traversed by land from North to South, owed everything to physical considerations and to little else.

A Keen Sense of Geography

Among the East Visayans, the sense of geography is keen, but not in the common meaning of latitude and longitude, feet and miles, and other measuring sticks. It is a much more dynamic feeling for the land and the sea: a sense that they live by their geography as well as survive it. When they are heard to say sometimes that they are a region of

"firsts," or that Samar and Leyte are the eastern gateway to the archipelago, it is not to boast or to aspire at being a national center of culture or commerce, but only their way of recognizing the place of geography in their lives.

What C.M. Bowra has written about the place of geography in the flowering of a culture is pertinent to the experience of the East Visayan: "A people lives by its geography . . . Physical type may be altered beyond recognition by new strains and cross-breeding; languages may disintegrate before the political pressure or social attraction of new tongues; habits, which seem to be indestructible, may collapse before unprecedented menaces or intoxicating novelties. But nature remains in the end what it was in the beginning: a school which by its prizes and its penalties fashions its children to a special pattern."

The whole culture of the region seems to confirm what kind of school nature has indeed been for the East Visayan. The imagery of the literature and the songs is everywhere laced with allusions to natural wonders. Proverbs and riddles abound about the weather, the land and the sea. Folk rituals connected with the cultivation of the land are a way of propitiating nature. Even political campaigns take due consideration of the physical environment.

The lasting impression is of a people who move in rhythm with nature and the seasons.

It is not difficult to understand why.

Traditional Gateway from the East

The islands of Samar and Leyte and their cluster of offshore islands and islets form the eastern ramparts of the Philippine archipelago, closing off the Visayan sea area from the open reaches of the western Pacific Ocean. Altogether the region nurses a long coastline along the Pacific, which historically has been the traditional approaches to the islands from the east.

To the north, the region is separated from Southeastern Luzon by the narrow San Bernardino Strait; to the south it is separated from Northeastern Mindanao by the equally narrow Surigao Strait.

Samar and Leyte are among the larger islands of the Philippine archipelago: Samar being the third largest after Luzon and Mindanao, and Leyte ranking eighth in size. Among the larger and more important

offshore islands are Biliran, Maripipi and Santo Niño in the Samar Sea; Homonhon in Leyte Gulf; and Panaon in the Surigao Strait. In all, the total land area of the region covers 8,400 square miles, 93 percent of which lies on the large islands of Samar and Leyte.

The two main islands and the offshore islands exhibit a degree of regional homogeneity that distinguishes them from the rest of the Visayas, and from the extremities of Luzon and Mindanao. On the map, this is seen in the close proximity of the islands. Samar and Leyte almost touch each other, separated only by San Juanico Strait which at two points is no wider than 200 yards. The sense of regionality is even more vividly confirmed by the topography.

Variety of Landforms

The physical environment includes almost every kind of topography -- mountains, forests, jungles, river systems, lakes, plains, coasts, islands. To see the land is to find a microcosm of the whole archipelago, which is remarkable because everything is crammed into a land area that is no more than a twentieth part of the entire country.

The island of Leyte has a rugged mountainous interior. Three distinct mountain systems form the backbone of the island: the low Northwestern Highlands which slope to the edge of Ormoc Bay; the higher Central Cordillera which contains the highest points of the island on Mount Magsanga and Mount Matagob at elevations in excess of 4,400 feet; and the low Northeast Highlands which front San Juanico Strait. All three of these highland systems show past histories of considerable vulcanism.

The island of Samar has a much lower highland system. The central upland core is formed from a broad plateau with local relief ranging from 700 to 1,000 feet. Numerous streams in the island have cut sharp valleys on the surface of this plateau, and the overall landscape is hilly and rugged.

Both Samar and Leyte provide a picture of heavily settled coastal plains, and relatively deserted mountainous and hilly interiors. Generally, lowlands are not extensive in East Visayas. They tend to lie in the coastal peripheries or in the alluvial plains and deltas accompanying the large rivers. The largest contiguous lowland area is the Leyte Valley in