

Defending Cotta: Thoughts of a comisario in the morning of Salakayan

The Salakayan Festival of Miagao (Province of Iloilo) is celebrated every first week of February to commemorate the battle in which the people of Miagao successfully repulsed Muslim raiders (referred to as Moros by the Spanish) [1]. The Festival is a colorful depiction of this event that occurred in 1754. Often, as festivals continue on over the years, the significance of the



momentous event is often lost to fast movement choreography, heart pounding sounds and artistic passions of our modern times.

A real battle, like that of Salakayan (from the root words *salakay* meaning to attack), is neither joyous nor artistically choreographed. It is a bloody, painful and terrifying event for the men and women of the opposing sides. During this period of Philippine colonial history, the Muslim raiders depopulated Visayan towns by as much as 50% through enslavement and battles. It was a period when the very survival of many Christian towns hanged in the balance. But, it was a two sided invasion too. The following year, the Spanish and Christianized native allies would also stage an invasion of their own against the Muslim coastal towns along the far south of Sulu Sea. It was a tit-for-tat exchange that lasted for 333 years of our colonial past [2].

There is a dearth of information on that actual battle in Miagao. There was no record available even now how the battle was won and how long it took; how many have died; or even how many were engaged. It is even a mystery where in Miagao the actual battle took place. Neither do we know which Moro tribes we fought that day (there are 13 major Muslim tribes in Mindanao). What is known for now came through the writings of Elias N. Failagao and other historical records of the Moro Wars cited below [2,3]. Today, it is hard to imagine that period of our history. Most consider historical events as nothing more than just another day.

I wish to share with you this excerpt from an anthology of short stories entitled "Sulu Sea." I wrote this fictionalized historical tale with the hope that all of us may have a better appreciation of the significance of the Salakayan Festival. It is a story of the thoughts of a simple common clerk

in Miagao who is about to face insurmountable odds in the very front of the battle lines on that fateful day of May 7, 1754. The time lines are real and so are the names of major Spanish and minor officials of the period. With some understanding of how battles were fought in the 18th century and considering Miagao's terrain, how this battle took shape is calculated guesswork. Many native and Spanish terms are not familiar to most and definitions are provided at the bottom. This, I am sure, is inconvenient, but I think it keeps the 'conversation' within the realities of that day 261 years ago.

----- The Story -----

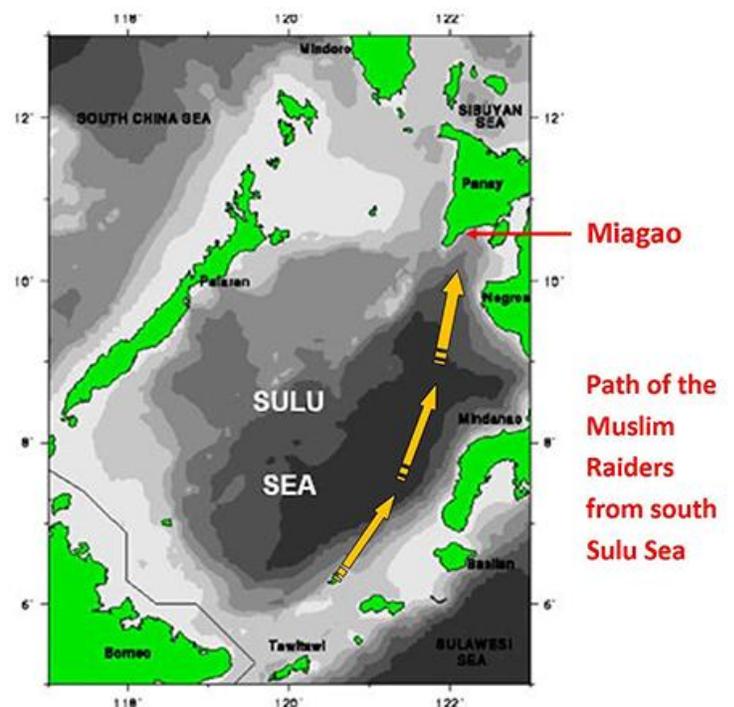
Prelude to May 7, 1754

People call me Boni, short for Bonifacio. Spanish names seemed unnatural for us whom the Spaniards simply call derogatively as *Indios*. Harder to pronounce Spanish words. Or, just simply too long for our Kinaray-a tongue.

I was just 10 years old when the raiders came from the sea. I was terrified. Everyone was. The mere utterance of the word Moro evoked a sense of foreboding, fear and despair. Raiders are aplenty in these islands. Not always Moros. Often, they are marauding bandits of all kinds—Christians and non-Christians, such as the *Pintados*, Chinese and Japanese pirates.

As soon as the bell rang everyone in our village ran for our lives. We knew what each rhythm of the church bell meant. That particular one was the distinct warning that the raiders were coming. Not many of us made it to the safety of the mountains. The raiders came too fast, using the Tumagbok River as their gateway. The elders, the wounded and the very young were butchered like pigs, mercilessly cut to pieces with the *kampilan* or the *kris*, the long wavy swords of the Moro raiders. They were simply useless for the slave trade and the long voyage back to their homeland.

My father and mother were among the unlucky ones. When others found me deep in the jungle I was told that the other young men and women were taken to be sold in the slave markets of Sandakan and even as far away as Batavia in the island of Java. Even now I do not know where Sandakan or Java is. I have not gone beyond the boundaries of Miagao.



My uncle, Nicolas Pangkug, the first *capitan* of Miagao, finished the construction of our church in 1731 so that the Spanish priests from Oton would finally come to serve the religious needs of this town. In the year of our Lord 1741, the raiders came. They raped, killed, looted and burned our church!



Photo from: philippineamericanwar.webs.com

Six years later, in the year of our Lord, 1747, the raiders came back again and burned the second church built by Fray Fernando Camporeondo. I sweated for 40 days each year carrying stones and timber for that church. Everyone 16 years of age to 60 must serve this forced labor called *polo y servicio*, except the town *principalia*, the Spanish *insulares* and Spanish *peninsulares*. The rich *Indios*, not many of them in town, pay the *falla* of seven pesos to be exempted. Me, I barely have ten

centavos at any one time in my life. So, it is always the poor bastards like me who must do the backbreaking work for no pay and meager rations for 40 days each year. That is why I am forever poor, I guess.

Waiting for the Moros

But, I have always considered myself lucky until now.

Today, I am 23 years of age. Unfortunately, I am celebrating my birth date of May 7th, 1754 by standing guard on top of Cotta, the watch tower in sitio Baybay. I am just a *comisario*, a minor clerk in the office of the *capitan*, but now carrying a spear and a *bolo* strapped to my waist. A month of half-hearted training with a spear is not much of a defense when the raiders finally start scaling the walls of this half-finished watchtower. If only the Spanish officer taught us how to use a flintlock musket instead. But, not many muskets in Miagao. Or, maybe they just don't trust us *Indios* to have guns.

We were rushed to Cotta two nights ago. The *governadorcillo* expected raiders to come from Sulu Sea any time soon. How he knew, no one explained. Maybe from a spy. There are 30 of us inside Cotta. The walls of coral stones are 5 meters high, with wooden planks as palisades to protect us from flying arrows and spears. I wonder how many raiders we are going to fight. I hope they are less than our numbers. But, that is only wishful thinking.

I have never fought anyone, never hurt anyone. The same goes for most of the men inside Cotta, except the *cabeza de barangay* of Baybay, Nong Fermin. He is much older than us. I dare say 'ancient' by the way he looks. He wears a long sleeved shirt even in the hot summer days,

perhaps trying to hide the tattoos all over his body. Nong Fermin was and still is a *Pintado*. And, he seemed to have some experience in this sort of thing. He came from beyond the sea one day about 30 years ago, married a local woman, says very little and keeps to himself most of time unless he needs to bark an order. Today, he is carrying a mysterious wooden case, about a meter long. All of us are afraid of him as much as we are afraid of the Moros.

People say Nong Fermin was also a warrior decades ago. He fought in an army composed of Cebuanos and Ilonggos called *Armada de los Pintados*, the Army of the Painted Ones. This army, they say, crossed Sulu Sea on war boats called *caracoa* to raid the coastal Muslim villages of Zamboanga, Jolo and Basilan. The raiders coming today are Muslims from the far end of Sulu Sea, perhaps from the same villages previously raided by the *Armada*.

Now they are back to do the same.

I was also told that my great grandfather was also of the Muslim faith until Augustinian friars and Spanish soldiers with armor and firearms, the *Conquistadores*, came to our island of Panay to make him a Christian and take his land. It was convert or die—only two options.

Is it right to call the Moros pirates when our Spanish 'masters' did the same to us? If we are not Christians, would the raiders still come? Had the Spanish not raided their villages, might they be civil and leave us alone? Or is it simply that they prefer the life of piracy as a tradition? Does the Moro I will face in battle today think about these things as well? I ask myself these questions as I look out to the horizon. Maybe one day I will have a chance to speak to a Moro and ask him, if he doesn't kill me first.

The raiders seem to come every 6 years during *amihan*, when the trade winds are favorable. This is the seventh year and *amihan* is almost over. They are a year late. Maybe they are not coming? Maybe they changed their minds and will visit us next year instead? I can only hope.

The war boats sighted

Of all days, why does this fight have to happen on my birth day? I could have been sitting with Badoy and Mario by the river side, drinking tuba, eating grilled chicken and talking about the maidens in Baybay we take fancy of marrying one day. The image of my head being carried off as a Moro war trophy is not a pleasant thought at all.

My daydreaming was cut short by someone shouting, "Look, the watchmen on the hilltop of Sitio Barangit-itip are signaling with mirrors. They have sighted twenty one sails over the horizon!"

Twenty one boatloads of angry Moros heading straight at ME.

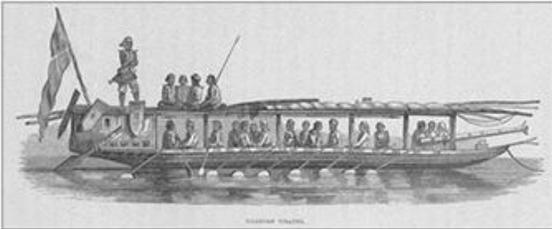


Bells are ringing, sounds of drums made from hollowed-out tree trunks warning the people beyond the hills about the impending attack. I see throngs of women from the sitios of Baybay, Ubos and Kirayan, running with children in tow, carrying whatever they can of their meager, yet precious belongings, scurrying towards the sitio of Mat-y and the hills beyond.

All the able bodied men are being gathered, more like herded, reluctantly up to Tacas by *quadrilleros*. The men in the watch towers of Kadamisolán and Kirayan are being withdrawn back to town to join the improvised 'army' of more *comisarios*, *quadrilleros* and a motley group of mostly simple farmers, laborers and traders armed with whatever they can find.



Caracoa war boats on a raiding expedition. Rowers are on the outriggers. Estimated speed 16 knots, with rowers being exchanged periodically by those on the boat. Original watercolor from collection of Jonathan R. Matias (New York).



Prau of Illanoan pirates of Borneo and Sulu Archipelago. No outriggers, oars manned typically by slaves. Lantaka canon on the bow of the boat and an upper deck for more warriors; capacity 80 warriors. Image from <http://www.gutenberg.org/>

The two typical war canoes - the outrigger type caracoa and the prau - likely seen from the beaches of Miagao during Salakayan.

The skirmish line is being formed in Tacas. I can see from afar three figures that stand out from among the crowd. There is the Spanish officer, Jose Echevaria, taller than most *Indios* and resplendent in his white uniform. He is busy ordering the company of men he brought along with him in a firing line with flintlock muskets while at the same time keeping the

rest of the people's army of reluctant *Indios* from running away in fear. There is *capitan* Agustin Gayo translating for the Spanish, running here and there; I presume trying to inspire the terrified folks to stand and fight.

We, *Indios*, are descendants of the warlike *Pintados*! We have the blood of raiders in our veins too. I ask myself often, "Did turning into Christians also turn us into scared lambs? What happened to our forefathers that allowed us to become *Indios* only fit for polo y servicio for the Spanish and meat for the slave market of the Moros?"

Then, there is the Spanish priest, Reverend Father Pedro Alvares, wearing his cassock giving God's blessings to those about to die. How he manages to survive the summer heat wearing that is even a mystery! What does he wear under the cassock? It is a funny thought, but keeps my mind occupied for now.

How about us here in Cotta? No officer, no muskets and no priest on this miserable pile of coral rock. Today, many will certainly meet God because for the first time we are not running away in fear of the Moros. Well, at least not yet.

The Messenger from Tacas

Tacas is more defensible. It is uphill from the beach; a plateau. And the defenders of Tacas have moved farther into the reverse slope of the plateau, away from my sight and from that of the raiders. Either they are all running away at the sight of the Moro fleet, leaving us to buy time for their escape or Echeveria has a plan.

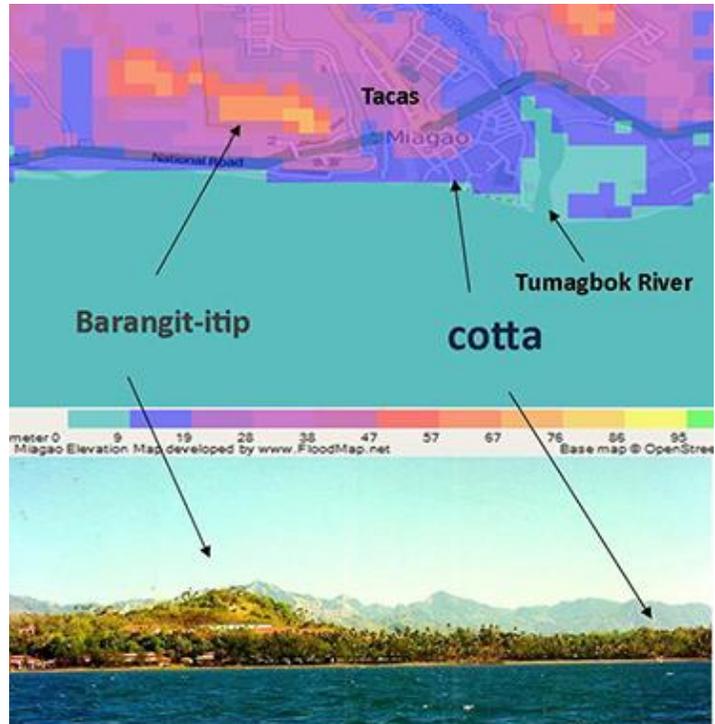
I think Tacas will be a perfect place to build our third church one day or a stone fortress, assuming Miagao still exists after this battle.

The messenger from Echeveria, almost breathless from the fast run downhill, arrived with a message from Tacas. He said, “Nong Fermin, the Moros will likely go up the hill on the main road from the beach of Baybay.”

We are the only force blocking their way. The raiders will try to destroy Cotta first to clear the road uphill. The Moros will not bypass us to go around. They do not have a high regard for us as warriors at all, just war booty for the slave markets.

And, worst news of all —The messenger said, “You are ordered to defend Cotta for at least one hour to give Echeveria enough time to position the men for the counterattack.”

That only means to me that Cotta is the bait for a trap. And, baits are always bitten or eaten by the beast we intend to trap. We at Cotta are the expendable bait!



Top: Image from Miagao, Philippines Elevation Map
Bottom: Photo of Miagao coastline from Panay Gulf (Sulu Sea) by JR Matias (ca 1995).

Bright red banners are strung up high on bamboo poles around Cotta. I asked, “What is that for?” The messenger said, “Remember the angry bull? Just making sure the Moros only see Cotta and head straight for you!” That answer certainly did not make me feel so good.

The invasion

One hour. A very long time to stay alive in Cotta.

The sun is now rising from the east. Blinding, but feels good on my sweat-drenched skin. I have to squint like a *Sangley* to see the *vintas* and the large raider boats they call *caracoa*. I can hear the faint beating of their drums and mesmerized by synchronized splash of oars on the sides of the long boats. The taunts from the boats are getting louder and louder each second. I can see the glint of the swords and the tip of their spears. Each *caracoacan* hold more than 80 warriors

and there are at least ten of them heading directly to Baybay. The *vintas* are smaller and lighter, with the *amihan* winds pushing their sails faster, onwards towards me. Each *vinta* can carry 5 men. We are facing about 1,000 warriors against 30 of us on top of Cotta. And, another group of 20 trembling men that came with the messenger, placed in hiding at the back palisades protecting our rear.

Fifty men. I hope Echevaria knows what the hell he is doing. I hope he has a cannon and the Spanish cavalry hidden up there in Tacas.

The boats reached the beach almost simultaneously. The Moros have landed. Without even a pause, they scampered out of the boats, running like mad men towards me, some brandishing their swords above their heads, shouting insults, I presume, in a language unintelligible to me. Most have wooden, intricately carved, colorful shields. I see no one carrying muskets. No *lantaka* swivel cannon on any of the *caracoas*. That's one consolation.

They have about 150 meters of beach to cover before they reach Cotta and **ME**.

Nong Fermin, standing tall at the center of Cotta, took his *camisa de chino* off, showing a muscular tattooed body no one has ever seen before. Inside the wooden case is the *kampilan* he took from the Moro *datu* he killed in a distant war of the *Armada de los Pintados*. He raised the *kampilan* over his head to let us see the rays of the sun reflecting off the sword.

He shouted, "No Moro will ever get beyond these palisades. This sword has killed more than a dozen of these raiders before and will do so again today. This *kampilan* will also chop the head off any one of you that run or refuse to fight."

Now, I have the Moros in front of me and Nong Fermin behind me. Not a particularly happy situation on my birthday.

100 meters. The shouts are deafening. I am holding this spear so firmly as if it is now part of my body and my soul. I am sweating so much. Fear of the Moros can be so overpowering, so

pervasive. I looked at my fellow *comisarios* to my left and to my right. The same fear in their eyes. Young Ernesto of Mat-y is visibly trembling. His pants are wet, but he is not running away. Too late to run anyway.



Nong Fermin stands behind all of us and looking as bloodthirsty as the Moros coming toward us. Others are silently

praying to *Nuestra Senora de la Paz*, the patroness of peace of Baybay. This community is unique in having two patronesses. The other is Santa Cecilia, patroness of music. Music is not helpful right now. Peace, not likely. I think both saints have a hearing problem anyway.

Nong Fermin shouted final instructions how we will fight as a group today. Then, he placed his hand on my right shoulder, squeezed gently. He whispered, "You will be alright." I wanted to say I am ready, but just nodded instead. My mouth is so dry and it is not because of the heat of the morning sun. Reflexively, I looked down below my waist. At least I have not wet my pants, yet!

30 meters. I can see their faces now—faces full of hate, rage and joy of finally being in personal combat soon. These are the faces of real, hardened, merciless warriors. Most are brandishing the sword called *barung*, not *kampilan*. The *barung* is the preferred sword of the Tausugs. I heard they lost 2,000 warriors in a single battle against the Spanish fleet last year. I am sure they are here for vengeance.

They are thirsty for blood— my blood.

Spears are thrown at us, most embedding themselves on the palisades with a loud thud. Over our heads, arrows are flying. Our bodies, pressed against the inside wall of Cotta, are hidden from view by the thick wooden palisades. I can hear my heart pounding! Screams of pain from the left and the right of me. An arrow embedding on one's chest is a sound I have never imagined to be so bloodless but so palpable, so frightening.

The bamboo ladders are now against the Cotta's wall and the first of the Moros are on their way up shouting '*Allah Akbar.*' Others are prying loose the mortars of the coral stones and inserting spears in between to create a makeshift ladder. I have thrown the first spear down towards them. I did not bother to look if it connected with someone's flesh and bone. I just turned around to grab the next spear from the panicking spear bearer behind me.

Shouts, screams, smoke and utter bedlam. Swords, spears, bayonets and bodies pressed against each other in the bloody mess of close combat on top of Cotta. This is going to be the longest hour of my life.

SALAKAYAN has begun!

—excerpt from 'Sulu Sea,' an anthology of short stories about the islands and people surrounding the inland sea of Sulu.

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Sulu Garden-Miagao

January 1, 2015

www.sulugarden.com

Definitions

amihan	Northeasterly trade winds from October to June
barangay	village; also refers to an indigenous boat up to 25 meters in length for sea voyage
barung	short, thick bladed sword preferred by Tausug tribe of southern Philippines
cabeza de barangay	head of the village
camisa de chino	Chinese collarless shirt, usually white and long-sleeved
capitan	equivalent in rank to town mayor
caracoa	a version of the barangay boat designed for warfare
Cebuano	Indigenous people of the island of Cebu
cotta	a small fortified position, usually a watchtower made mostly of stone; also spelled kuta
datu	title for chiefs in Visayas and Mindanao; interchanged with rajah
falla	a fine paid to be exempted from forced labor
governadorcillo	municipal governor of a town
Illongo	Indigenous ethnic group found along the eastern portion of the island of Panay
Indios	Spanish colonial racist term for all indigenous people of the Philippine Islands
insulares	pure-blooded Spaniards born in the Philippines
Kinaray-a	Language usually spoken in the provinces of Iloilo and Antique in Panay Island
kampilan	single-edged long sword with tapered blade
kris	sword characterized by wavy blade found throughout SE Asia; also called kalis in southern Philippines
lantaka	swivel canon made of brass, typically mounted on raiding vessels in pre-colonial South East Asia
Moro	term used by Spanish colonials for indigenous Muslim people of Philippines
peninsulares	pure-blooded Spaniards born in Spain
Pintados	a term used by Spanish to describe the indigenous warlike people of the Visayan Islands whose bodies are painted (tattooed). The bravest are tattooed the most.
polo y servicio	mandatory forced labor of 40 days each year during the Spanish colonial period
pricipalia	ruling class or aristocrats descended from previous head of tribes
quadrilleros	policemen
Sangleys	pure-blooded Chinese immigrant
Sitio	a place, smaller than a village
Tausug	indigenous Muslim tribe in Sulu Archipelago of southern Philippines
Tumagbok	A major river coursing near poblacion or town center of Miagao
vinta	small boats with sail of assorted vertical colors indigenous to Sulu Archipelago

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. For references to Salakayan Festival here are some links:

http://vigattintourism.com/tourism/articles/SALAKAYAN_FESTIVAL_OF_MIAGAO

<http://salakayanfeast.blogspot.com/>

2. In 1753, the Spanish fleet destroyed 150 war boats, killing 2,000 Moro warriors and liberated 500 captives. Whether this is a reason for the retaliatory strike along the Iloilo coastline is a conjecture, but likely among many reasons for the raid in Miagao. Iloilo City was protected by a large fortress and too impregnable for the small Moro contingent to overcome.

See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish%E2%80%93Moro_Wars

3. Elias N. Failagao's 'History of Miagao,' published in 1979 (La Editorial, Inc., Iloilo, Philippines), serves as my major source for dates, names and events about Miagao. His work, based on translations of Spanish documents to Hiligaynon, was recognized by the National Historical Institute (forerunner of the current National Historical Commission) as an important piece of historical document. Without Failagao's work, there would have been so little history to use as reference not only for this article, but for others in the future.

4. The current Miagao Fortress Church did not yet exist during the battle of 1754. The construction began on a Saturday, market day, 1786, over thirty years later.

5. Failango's book mentions that several cottas were constructed during the period of the Moro raids, but did not specifically mentioned Cotta in Baybay as functional by May 7, 1754. No one knows for sure when Cotta was built, although the plaque in Cotta now says 1760. That date is still yet to be historically confirmed. I have taken the artistic liberty of assuming Cotta was already a functioning defensive structure at the time of the raid. Failagao mentioned that the Cotta in Kadamisolán and Kirayan were also built during this period. For now no one really knows for sure. To see how Cotta stands today, please go to this site: <http://simbahan.net/2014/11/23/miag-aos-lone-watchtower-converted-barangay-hall/>

6. Antonio Pigafetta, Magellan's chronicler during his voyage, first described these large wooden sailing/rowing war boats as balanghai, a Europeanized term for barangay. The boat, measuring up to 25 meters, can carry the population of an entire village. The war boats are called caracoa and described more in detail here:

http://www.poseidonsciences.com/Poseidon_Blog_Balanghai_Borobudur_Phoenicia_and_the_Morgan_Reconstructing_and_celebrating_our_ancient_maritime_heritage.pdf

And also here: http://www.iloiloparawregatta.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=18:filipino-boats-and-seamanship&catid=6:the-paraw&Itemid=4

7. The *kampilan* and *kris* are swords common throughout South East Asia, especially in the Indonesian archipelago. The *kris* in particular is a ceremonial sword but also used in warfare by higher ranking Moros. The *barung* is more identified with the Tausug people. Their homeland was under the rule of the Sultanate of Sulu comprising Sulu Archipelago, Palawan, Mindanao and Borneo. The Tausugs are noted for their warrior society and colorful *vintas*. Tausug means 'people of the current.'
8. The *Pintados* represent indigenous people that inhabit the islands of Panay, Cebu, Leyte, Samar and many smaller islands of the Visayas. Their bodies are tattooed, the extent of the body painting based on position and accomplishments in battle. They are known to be warlike, riding *caracoas* to conduct piratical raids in Luzon and all the way to southern coast of China. Having converted to Christianity, the Spanish enlisted them to fight in the Moro Wars from the 17th to 18th centuries in the Spanish Fleet called 'Armada de *Pintados*.' Using galleons to fight a war in the small islands was impractical because of the Spanish ships were too large to navigate the shallow coastal waters. Spanish soldiers disembark from galleons and ride the *caracoas* with the *Pintados* to invade the Moro homelands. To learn more about the Visayan *pintados*, please read Isorena EB (2004), *The Visayan raiders of the China coast, 1174-1190*, *Philippine Quarterly of Culture & Society*, 32(2), 73-95. Also another reference: <http://www.fmapulse.com/content/fma-corner-symbolism-pre-colonial-filipino-warrior-culture>
9. *Polo y servicio*, forced labor for 40 days, was in effect during *Salakayan*. A *polista*, a person who has rendered *polo*, would have worked in the shipyards to build galleons, bridges, roads, churches, haciendas and served in military expeditions as conscripts. *Polo* is part of the new policy called *Repartimiento* which replaced the even more oppressive *encomienda* system of the *Conquistadores*. This was reduced to 15 days in 1884 due to growing unrest of the population. Besides *polo*, a poor peasant must also pay 1/10th of the farm's produce to the government as taxation. Read more about this here: <http://ezinearticles.com/?The-Forced-Labor-and-Tribute-of-the-Filipinos-During-Spanish-Period&id=5620267> and also here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Repartimiento> . There is an interesting entry in Failagao's book (p. 143) wherein he described the penalty for refusing to render *polo*. I describe it here verbatim to give the reader an understanding of life situation under Spanish rule in Miagao.

Failagao writes, "The Catholic Cemetery was built with forced labor under the direction of Capitan Sebastian Fausa, an exacting town executive who punished those who disobeyed him or were lazy to work. One 'martyr' in the construction of this cemetery was a certain Simon Godoy. Because he refused to work, he was mounted on horseback and paraded around the poblacion followed by a brass band and a group of *comisarios* armed with spears. At every street corner, he was whipped severely until his body bled. Because of this, many male residents of the town fled to other places to escape forced labor."

The last statement touched my memory of an interesting conversation with Vilmor Noblezada of Miagao. On my question of why there are many variations of the last names of Noble, Nobleza and Noblezada in Miagao, Vilmor said that during the Spanish colonial period, when a Noble flees to escape the *Guardia Civil*, he changes the name to Nobleza, then another Nobleza runs away and changes his name to Noblezada. That apparently confused the *Guardia Civil*.