

KATINDU : A MANOBO SAGA

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I was born in Katindu.
We the Manobos are the owners of Katindu.
I will continue my struggle to regain it.
I will die in Katindu.

- Datu Mambiling Ansabu

The words belong to Datu Mambiling Ansabu, son of Datu Amasing Ansabu. They are Manobo of Katindu in the Arakan Valley of North Cotabato Province.

The purpose of this paper is to document the saga of the Manobo people. By telling and retelling the story of their indomitable spirit and will to survive, we hope to provide an inspiration to others whose lives, like their's, are faced with seemingly insurmountable hardships that threaten one's very existence on this earth.

The Manobo of Katindu have at least three generations of forbears who have lived or died in Katindu. The present Datu Mambiling is the son of Ansabu who was the son of Tindus from whose name the word Katindu was derived.

In 1957, Datu Amasing entered into an agreement with a Christian settler, Augusto Gana, allowing him occupancy and

other uses of the land, otherwise occupied by the native Manobo at Katindu in exchange for a yearly rental which Gana did not pay. Instead, eleven years later, he secured a Pasture Lease Agreement from the government and at the same time expanded his ranch by forcibly expelling the Manobo, burning their houses and destroying their crops. His cows were driven into the Manobo fields and fed on them. To prevent the Manobo from returning to Katindu, Gana employed cowboys from Cavite and armed them against the natives. In this way, some thirty-five Manobos died at the hands of Gana's men. Moreover, Gana enlisted the support of the Philippine Constabulary and later the Integrated Civilian Home Defense Force (ICHDF), a para-military group. In such a precarious situation, more than 3,000 Manobo families led by Datu Mambiling fled to the mountains.

The harshness of the living conditions in the remote mountain tops soon began to take its toll of the Manobo refugees. Although traditionally hunters and agriculturists, the 3,247 families were close to starvation. The wild game had practically disappeared from the denuded forests and mountains. For the same reason, their indigenous knowledge of upland farming was of little use. Their undernourished children easily succumbed to diseases. In no time, the Manobo menfolk were forced to resort to forms of brigandage, such as cattle rustling. Every now and then, Datu Mambiling, together with his nephew, Ebon, would lead Manobo fighting men to steal a cow or two from Gana's well-stocked ranch. Sometimes, when caught or when resistance was encountered from Gana's men, some lives were subsequently lost. Datu Mambiling, however, adamantly denied that life as outlaw had become a way of life for him and the Manobo community he had sworn to protect and defend. Rather, he was determined that he and

his Manobo community would survive, even in the face of the worst adversity to befall a people of their kind.

Even so, in the eyes of lowlanders, Datu Mambiling and his people had become outlaws and even rebels. Sometime during the term of former President Ferdinand Marcos, Datu Mambiling and his group were persuaded to surrender to government authorities, with the promise of regaining Katindu and on the condition that they would aid the counter-insurgency program of the government. When the promise failed to materialize, the Manobo went back to the hills.

The big turning-point in this state of affairs was the people-power propelled EDSA Revolution in 1986, when the Catholic Church of Magpet took the cudgels for the Manobo and became their patron. Beginning April 1986, chapel leaders from Basak, Buay, Mahongkog, Datu Alo, Balite and Temporan, all of District IV North Cotabato-had begun discussing the plight of the Manobo of Katindu. These discussions were prompted by certain violent incidents, especially in Basak, attributed to Datu Mambiling and his followers.

Fr. Rey Roda had written the governor of Cotabato Province, Rosario Diaz, in behalf of the Manobo saying that, sending a military detachment to the area was not the solution because the problems of peace and order were only symptomatic of a more serious problem which had its roots in the despoliation of the Manobo by the Christian ranch owner in Katindu. Towards the end of April, Fathers Roda and Villanueva, together with Edmundo Armada, Barangay Captain of Basak, and the Barangay Captain of Temporan had an audience with Governor Diaz at Gamas, Kidapawan. It was decided to call Datu

Mambiling and Mayor Gana for a dialogue - conference at Temporán.

The dialogue was held on May 2, 1986. It was attended by Datu Mambiling and Datu Ebon, with their armed followers; the Provincial Commander, Major Renato Santos, and other members of the military; local government officials, led by Dionicio Alburo; and Fathers Peter Geremia, Roda and Romy Villanueva. Augusto Gana was conspicuous for his absence. Later on, the aftermath of the conference was broadcasted by radio DXND where it was made clear that Datu Mambiling wanted nothing except what was rightfully his and the Manobo's - *Katindu*.

It appeared that the Manobo enjoyed popular support; even the local government of Magpet supported them. There was a disclosure that Gana's pasture lease could be cancelled since he was not paying its taxes. In the meantime, Fr. Villanueva wrote Governor Diaz for material support for Mambiling and the Manobo. Datu Mambiling began exposing the depredations they underwent at the hands of Gana's men. In a letter he said that the ICHDFs of Basak, Mahongcog and Malibatunan were under orders from Gana to harass him and his community of Manobo.

On June 6, the government made its own move. A Fact-Finding Committee under John Bragas, who was then OIC of the Bureau of Forest Development (BFD), was created. A workplan was produced to start the perimeter survey of Gana's ranch from June 9 to June 20. However, there was a delay and the survey was actually begun and aborted on the second of July. On July 4, the Federated Associations Concerned for

Truth (FACT) of Magpet sent a petition to President Corazon C. Aquino asking for a presidential proclamation for the return of Katindu to the Manobo.

By July 21-26, the second part of the perimeter survey was conducted at the Mahongcog area. On August 10, a list of the Manobo families who were to occupy Katindu was submitted to the Magpet Parish. On August 31, the situation became increasingly tense so that Fr. Roda and the chapel workers of Basak, Buay-Buay, Balite, Temporán, and Mahongcog asked Datu Ebon not to harm innocent civilians or their properties. However, the following month, several violent incidents flared up.

On September 7, five cows, owned by Gana and his mother-in-law, were killed by the Manobo of Datu Mambiling and again, on September 17, two horses belonging to Inang Ocampo (Gana's mother-in-law) were lost and were believed to have been taken by Mambiling and his group. On the 23rd of September, six cows were shot to death by Datu Mambiling and his men and were distributed to the native Manobo, as well as to the Visayan settlers of Temporán.

In the meantime, the perimeter survey had already been completed and the results were aired by DXND. It was revealed that, as per records of the survey, Gana exceeded his pasture lease by more than 100 hectares. However, although the maps and recommendations were sent to the Regional Office of BFD, the District OIC who conducted the survey, Jose Tagorda, did not make any recommendations about Katindu.

The other significant event that took place during this period was the reconciliation of Mambiling and the barangay

captains of Kiandang, Mahongcog and Meocan. Mambiling was allowed to establish a temporary camp at sitio Anoling, in Meocan, to be near Katindu.

The following months, the case suffered some setbacks when John Bragas, chairman of the Fact-Finding Committee, declared that Gana did not violate any laws on his pasture lease contract and sent a recommendation on this matter to the BFD Regional Office. Consequently, Fr. Roda and Mayor Omandac of Magpet personally asked Governor Diaz to intervene on behalf of the oppressed Manobo. Governor Diaz promised to refer Mambiling's case to the Minister of Natural Resources in Manila.

In October, the ICHDFs of Barangay Kiandang were disarmed, either by the NPA rebels or Datu Mambiling's men. All thirty-five families in Kiandang evacuated to Magpet in fear of more violent incidents. When Fr. Roda went to Natayukan to inquire about the disarming of the ICHDFs in Kiandang and negotiate for the return of their firearms, he failed to find Mambiling. Datu Ebon, who was present, denied having the firearms seized from the ICHDF and said it was the New People's Army (NPAs) who had them. However, taped interviews of the Kiandang evacuees recorded the evacuees saying that the NPA under Commander Peter gave them to Datu Mambiling and his men.

Several attempts were made to contain the situation and prevent the outbreak of armed hostilities. Petition letters were sent to Governor Diaz, from barangays Temporán and Balite, asking for a just solution to the Gana - Manobo conflict and the preservation of peace. An open letter was likewise sent by

Fathers Roda and Villanueva to the NPAs and the rightist Tadtad group "to give peace a chance". The Peace and Order Council Meeting at Magpet declared the effective solution was not a military operation but the return of Katindu to the Manobo. The NPAs responded that they alone were responsible for disarming the ICHDF at Kiandang and that they did not physically hurt them.

On November 6, Magdaleno Sino, forty-seven years old, married and a resident of sitio Kimampong, barangay Balite, was killed by the men of Gana. As a result, ten families immediately fled from barangay Balite. The following week, components of the PC-INP, together with ICHDFs, went up to Natayukan for a military operation. The members of this military operation looted and destroyed the properties of Manobo families living there. Forty-five families fled Natayukan.

Concerted efforts to save Mambiling and others in his group were extended by the church and local officials. Fathers Roda and Villanueva wrote the Regional Unit Command (RUC) XII Commander, Brig. General Hermosa, to revoke an order for Mambiling's arrest or capture, dead or alive, even as the Sangguniang Bayan of Magpet unanimously passed a resolution asking the President of the Philippines to declare Katindu as the Ancestral Land of the Manobo.

In January of 1987 the priests, together with Mayor Omandac, held another dialogue with Datus Mambiling and Ebon. In this dialogue it was agreed that Mambiling and his men should hold on to their arms to protect themselves until the government decided to allow them to return to Katindu.

Then, on February 4, Datu Salimbag Paguyan of Meocan was able to persuade Datu Mambiling to attend a tribal dialogue in this barangay. As soon as Mambiling and his group arrived, they found themselves surrounded by government soldiers, led by Captain Barbatida. Mambiling and his family were brought to the military detachment at Doroluman for interrogation and then to RUC XII at Cotabato City.

The entrapment and capture of Mambiling and the Manobo generated great disappointment and tension among his supporters, but was alleviated by the efforts of Fr. Villanueva to gain custody of the Manobo. Consequently, Mambiling and his men became the wards of the Tribal Filipino Program of the Diocese of Kidapawan. They were placed under the care of Fr. Peter Geremia, PIME. This development led to the grant of amnesty to the Manobo, while Attorney Greg Andolana filed petition with the office of the President asking for the cancellation of Gana's pasture lease and the declaration of Katindu as the Ancestral Domain of Datu Mambiling and his community of Manobo.

More dialogues and conferences failed to convince the government to recognize the Manobo claims to Katindu. At the organizational meeting of the Provincial Rehabilitation and Development Council at Amas, Kidapawan on February 13, it was decided that the Manobo would be transferred to a temporary settlement at Ganatan while waiting for the developments of the case. On February 15, reconciliation between Mambiling and the people at Kiandang was finally made. The evacuees agreed to return to their barangay on the day that Mambiling and his group were finally settled back at Katindu.

On February 28, two relatives of Mambiling namely, Leote Ansabu and Jun Ansabu, were shot at by ICHDFs at Mahongcog. From a report, it was learned that a carabao belonging to Francisco Wobina of Mahongcog was stolen. The group of Manobo relocatees, under Datu Ebon, were suspected as culprits.

A prior incident, which may have been related, was the strafing of the father of Datu Ebon on February 2 in the same place. Datu Sablo, together with his family, was collecting some frogs along a creek to exchange them for some rice. While going about this activity, they already spotted some ICHDFs on top of a nearby hill who were watching them. By nightfall, Sablo and his family decided to spend the night by the creek's banks and proceeded to construct a small hut for shelter. While the family was eating their supper, a hail of bullets suddenly rained down on them. Fortunately, the strafing was not intended to kill anybody and no one in the family was hurt. However, the next day, Sablo reported the incident to the barangay captain, who promised to summon the ICHDFs for questioning. The incident in February, involving Leote and Jun Ansabu, happened at exactly the same spot. Two ICHDFs from Mahongcog, without any provocation, fired at the two Manobo who ran for their lives.

Towards the end of 1987, the problem of the Manobo had no end in sight. The task of materially sustaining the community fell to the hands of the Catholic Church. The Manobo would regularly come to the Guadalupe Center at Balindog to ask for food and other help. The local government in Magpet also contributed ten sacks of rice. How long such a situation could hold was anybody's guess. Then, on July 18, 1989, the

DENR formally cancelled the Pasture Lease Agreement of Gana and awarded Katindu back to the Manobo. On September 14, Governor Diaz proclaimed the government's decision both to Datu Mambiling and Gana and, on November 7, the Peace and Order Council was designated by Governor Diaz to organize Task Force Mambiling to assist in resettling the Manobo and handle other problems.

Conclusion

My story ends here but the saga of Katindu is a long story to tell, although it has a happy ending. After their return to Katindu, the biggest problem that Mambiling had to face was how to deal with the Christian settlers who were already living within the 720 hectares of Manobo land. Moreover, despite the Integrated Social Forestry (ISF) grant of 1989, for which they were made to apply, the DENR again told them to apply for a Community Forestry Stewardship Agreement (CFSA) and in 1993, owing to the promulgation of DAO No.2, the Manobo were once more made to apply for a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim (CADC). Fortunately, by this time, more and more people had been won to the Katindu case. These supporters saw them through all the legal battles and finally on May 26, 1995 a CADC, recognizing the rights of tenure, preparatory to ownership and other rights, was awarded to the Manobo of Katindu.