



GRACE IN THE HIGAUNON TRADITIONAL RELIGION

ABSTRACT

Grace, the unconditional favor given by God to all of humanity and whole of creation, sustains every reality. The understanding of this can be seen and explained only from the point of view of religion. The Higaunon tribe of Rogongon, Iligan City, having kept their tribal religious beliefs in their rituals through oral means, recognize such favor. They continue to adhere to their tradition expressed in their yearly and periodic ritual practices. It is in these occasions that they encounter the divine as a community.

Keywords: Grace, Higaunon, Limbagan, indigenous, Pasabay ritual, mission

INTRODUCTION

“Every person, every reality has the potential to be touched by God’s love.”¹ Indeed, everything has the possibility to be graced by God. This was affirmed in Vatican II when it pronounced that “the Holy Spirit was at work in the world before Christ was glorified.”² Thus there is no further argument when we talk about

¹Christopher Dumadag, “Elizabeth Dreyer’s Manifestations of Grace,” Lecture Notes (Cagayan de Oro City: Grace, 2006).

²Paul VI, “Ad Gentes,” in Vatican Council II: *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, gen. ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2001), no. 4.



grace in the context of indigenous religions and belief systems such as that of the Higaunons. God has been with them since the beginning of their existence.

This paper will try to present grace according to the understanding and experience of the Higaunons. I have had a considerable time of exposure in the area of the Higaunons of Rogongon, Iligan City as I have been in the locality conducting preliminary research for a projected major paper. Most of the outputs in this paper are based on my direct experience with the way of living of this indigenous community and their religious practices, customs, and rituals. Two specific areas are to be dealt with in this paper. The first is grace in the context of the Higaunon myth of creation; and second, grace as a spiritual gift to man expressed in the ritual *Pasabay*.

THE HIGAUNONS OF ROGONGON

The Higaunons are one of the first settlers in the Philippines who belong to the proto-Austronesian family. They arrived from South China thousands of years ago and settled in the Northern and Central sections of Mindanao. One of these areas is Rogongon, a remote barangay of Iligan City, which comprises a total land area of 35, 000 hectares. It is located approximately 30 kilometers from the center of Iligan City. The 1999 census recorded a 6,822 population of the area.³ The non-Higaunons numbered around twenty percent only.

³See Ma. Cecilia B. Tangjan, "Traditional Beliefs Among the Higaonon Tribal Communities At Rogongon, Iligan City: Its Continuity and Change" (Master's Thesis, Xavier University, Cagayan de Oro City, 2001), 1 & 27; and Fidela K. Tundag et al. "Kultural na Katawagang Higa-unon Ng Rogongon Iligan City: Isang Panimulang Pagtutumbas" (Research Project: Department of Filipino and Other Languages, Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology, Iligan City, 2004), 5.

GRACE IN THE HIGAUNON MYTH OF CREATION

LIMBAGAN⁴: *The Higaunon Myth of Creation*⁵

as retold by Datu Eladio Sangcoan

- 1 In the beginning, this is why it was called *Limbagan*.⁶ When the *Nangadon*⁷ the Supreme God, made the universe it all began in a place called *baya*. The *baya* is not so much a spacious place.
- 2 When the universe was created everything was already there. All the trees and animals were already existing. But man was created later. Now the *Nangadon* said to himself, “The universe is not good. I have made many things but nobody uses them. These are without use.”
- 3 Immediately the *siwara*⁸ appeared. The *siwara* said, “The earth is so beautiful. But why is it that nobody lives there?” So he resolved, “I will make something in the earth. I am the king of the earth now.” The *siwara* formed something out of the earth, a figure of a human being.
- 4 Then the *Nangadon* told the *siwara*, “Now that you make that figure, be sure to let it rise so that it will be benefited and it will please you.”
- 5 “Yes,” the *siwara* replied. “I will take charge of this.” So the *siwara* commanded the figure to stand. But it did not. It remained as earth, a molded dust.

⁴This is a free translation with few revisions. The original is narrated in Cebuano.

⁵The paragraphs are numbered for referencing purposes elsewhere in the paper.

⁶*Limbagan* is a Higaunon word which is equivalent to the Cebuano “*himoanan*” or “*mugnaanan*” or a place of genesis.

⁷*Nangadon* comes from *nag* and *adon*, hence, *nag’adon*. It can be rendered in Cebuano as *nagabuhat* or *nagamugna* or “is creating.” Thus, *Nangadon* is a name given to God as Creator. But commonly God is called *Magbabaya* or Ruler of the *baya*. The *baya* as can be seen in the narrative is equivalent to paradise in Genesis.

⁸The *Siwara* is the Higaunon personification of the devil or the tempter.

- 6 The *Nangadon* said, “Then it is beyond your power to make it alive. But now that you have molded it, I would help you. But we have to come to an agreement that if I succeed in making it stand, it will not be yours totally. I have also my share of that being.”
- 7 To this the *siwara* agreed. The *Nangadon* held the figure and breathed into it. It rose up as a human being breathing from the breath of the *Nangadon*. It became the first human being on earth. He was called *Natanyag*.⁹ He had no companion yet.
- 8 The *siwara* felt like a loser. But he asked, “What can I possibly do in order to own the whole earth so that I would reign over it and nothing will go to the *Nangadon*?” While thinking of a way to bring his intention to the concrete, he remained silent yet he continued to observe the movement of the *Natanyag*. His mind was looking for a way into which he could deceive the *Natanyag*.
- 9 Then the *siwara* said, “*Nangadon*, what is the use of this being in this place when he has no one to talk to?”
- 10 “You,” the *Nangadon* replied, “what can you contribute to this deficiency?”
- 11 “Ah! Nothing. There is nothing that I can do about it. But look at it, is there something to boast out of that being here in the *baya*? He cannot even open his lips. No one to converse with. He just winks his eyes. He cannot even rise from where he sits. Certainly, no happiness!”

⁹*Natanyag* means one who comes out of nowhere.

- 12 The *Nangadon* observed. He then resolved, “It is true. There are things here in the *baya*. There is that first white animal¹⁰ and that tree there. What is the use of these?”
- 13 Then the *Nangadon* said: “I will make another being so that he will have somebody to talk to. The *siwara* is correct. So he said, “This being will fall into a deep slumber.” The *Natanyag* fell deeply asleep. The *Nangadon* then took a rib from him and put it beside him and this became another human being.
- 14 When the *Natanyag* awoke, he saw that he had a companion. The *Nangadon* said, “now he has somebody to talk to.”
- 15 The *siwara* said, “Now I can make my way into these beings. I will deceive them.” So the *siwara* further observed the two who could communicate now. The *Nangadon* told again the two *Natanyags*, “The *baya* is a place of honor. You are the lords (*magbabaya*)¹¹ of this place. You are the rulers of this place. I give this place to you. Every year some fruits of that tree fall. These are what you are going to eat. Do not abuse that tree by picking some of its fruits because it will make you sinful.”
- 16 While the *Nangadon* was saying this the *siwara* was listening.” Ah!” he roared,” This is it. I will get into them by the prohibition given to them. I am going to test if they would really keep what was told to them.”

¹⁰This animal which is described by Datu Eladio Sangcoan as first and white has a proper name in the archaic Higaunon language. But this datu (who is also a *baylan*) kept the name from the knowledge of an ordinary researcher-observer, the reason being that this name is so sacred to him who is a *baylan*. Yet he said that white is connected with their rituals so that they use white chicken during their *pamuhat* or ritual. Here the connection between the orally transmitted myth and the concrete life of the Higaunons of Rogongon is established.

¹¹The term *magbabaya* is applied to man. This hints that man was given a prominent place in the Higaunon paradise.

- 17 The *siwara* said to the first *Natanyag*, “Are you happy now that you have a companion?”
- 18 “Yes,” the first being replied, “because I have someone to talk to now?”
- 19 “But that is not enough. What do you get from that? There are only two of you. You are nothing! So that you will be more than the one who made you and you will become real rulers (*magbabaya*), I will pick the fruits of that tree and give it to you. You will eat them. Once you eat them fresh from the tree you will have more knowledge than the *Nangadon*, your maker. You will become true rulers of the *baya* then.”
- 20 The two asked each other. “What better can we do? Did the *siwara* say the truth?”
- 21 The *siwara* further said, “What I told you is true.” Then he climbed the tree and picked some of the fruits. “Here human beings, taste these so that you will become powerful and wiser than the *Nangadon*.”
- 22 The two took the fruits and ate them. The *siwara* laughed and then said, “They have tried eating the fruits. Now I get them; this kingdom is mine.”
- 23 Had the two human beings obeyed the order of the *Nangadon*, they would never experience death because before they ate of the fruits they had had horny skin all throughout their body, like that of the nails.¹² They did not feel the cold before the fall.
- 24 They ran to find the *Nangadon*. But they could not see him anymore. Before they sinned they could see the *Nangadon* in person.¹³ Now after their transgression, they never see him. Only his voice can be heard from the heavens. The voice followed them.

¹²Datu Sangcoan said that after the fall, only a portion of the skin of the first man remains – the portion that covers the fingers and the toes, the nails.

¹³This could mean that man in his original state of purity beholds God in beatific vision.

- 25 “Wherever you go, I can see you. Wherever you run I can still behold you. Your sin has blinded you from seeing me. You are now different from me. You do not deserve to be here in this noble place, the *baya*. You will be exiled to the place where there is the *daat*, the *tunok* and the *alingatong*.¹⁴ There you will experience burdens, labor, rain and heat of the sun. From now on that will be your place. I will not let you cross over that river. Only your souls will get back here. Take care of yourselves in that world where there is the sun, pain and labor. You will continue to sin there. You will eat by your labor. You will multiply there. Then death will be upon you even in early childhood or even at the time of conception. This is my punishment for you.”
- 26 They both cried.
- 27 “The tears,” the *Nangadon* continued, “that spring from your eyes are the recompense of your repentance so that you will realize that you are sinners. But you could no longer go back to the place where you come from, the *Limbagan*. Only your souls may return there. From now on you will be in that world.”
- 28 Then they were driven out. They tried to return to ask for forgiveness. But it was impossible now because they were ruled by the *siwara*.¹⁵
- 29 The *Nangadon* continued to say, “Now your *magbabaya* is the *siwara*. Therefore, you have fear now. You will be afraid of the *siwara* and you will to keep away from it.”

¹⁴*Daat* is a wild plant with abrasive leaves, which can harm the skin when touched; *alingatong* is a wild tree with fibrous leaves which produce prickly pain when touched by the skin. The *daat*, *tunok* (thorns), and *alingatong* can be symbols of human pains and sufferings.

¹⁵According to Datu Sangcoan the territory of the *siwara* is the world. This is the abode of the *siwara*. This is its kingdom.

- 30 Such things that were told to them by the *Nangadon* have happened in the world. There is envy because this is the art of the *siwara* on earth.
- 31 Then the *Nangadon* said, “Keep this in mind, these are my words for you: You have to bear in mind that I care for you; you were pure human beings when I created you that nothing evil would enter your body which was once solid; now you are weak; the hairs of your skin would be penetrated with evil in the territory of the *siwara*; your whole body is owned by the *siwara*; only your souls are mine; thus you need to be good. My commandment is this: Do not steal nor cheat nor abuse others, nor get the wife of others. You need to be watchful of these...
- 32 And Datu Sangcoan said, “So we Higaunons respect everybody.”

The Higaunon myth of creation¹⁶ as it is retold at present is definitely influenced by Genesis story of creation. This is the result of the long encounter between Christianity and the Higaunon people of Rogongon, a situation that is also generally observable in other indigenous tribes of the Philippines. Nevertheless, we can still trace some important elements in the creation myth *Limagan* that points out how the Higaunons recognize God as the gracious Lord to humankind and the universe.

God as Creator of the Universe

The first important element is the Higaunons recognition that God, the *Nangadon*, is the creator of the universe. Although it is not clearly outlined how God makes the world, it is understood by this people that God who is the sole giver of all human benefits creates the universe for good. When the *Nangadon* said, “[t]he universe is not good. I have made many things but nobody

¹⁶See *Limagan*.

uses them,”¹⁷ it is understood that creation is made to be used for goodness’ sake. God creates and it is aimed at a positive end. To make this end concrete he makes the human person. Every person serves as the user of God’s benefits. Here creation is concretized as a gift for humanity.¹⁸

God as the One who Blesses

The Higaunons see the human person as a special creation. His/her existence is narrated in a manner that is dramatically woven. God is the protagonist and there is the presence of a villain, the *siwara*, which is the Higaunon representation of the devil. The *siwara*, like the tempter in Genesis, can be considered the earthly part of the human person, the insatiable desire that wants to possess the whole of creation and humanity. This antagonist succeeds in tempting the human but that is what he can only do. The Higaunons still believe in the power of God. Without God, the molded human figure made by the *siwara* remains earth, lifeless and nothing.

The breath of God makes the figure rise from its lifeless state. Here God shares Himself with the earthly figure and the human comes out, the living creature after the inspiration of the divine breath. The divine breath of the human person springs directly from God.¹⁹ Here the Higaunons hold on to the belief of a Supreme Deity who gives His imprint on humanity. This imprint, which is in the form of God’s breath, is a blessing. This is the second element that points us to the Higaunon realization, no matter how simplistic or primitive it is, that they cannot (or humanity cannot) continue to live on without this gracious Lord.

¹⁷See *Limbagan*, par. 2.

¹⁸See Christopher Dumadag, “Grace in the Old Testament: The OT Call to Social Witness,” *Lecture Notes* (Cagayan de Oro City, Grace, 2006), St. John Vianney Theological Seminary, 1.

¹⁹See comment on Gen. 2:7, Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 77.

GRACE: A GIFT TO MAN AS EXPRESSED IN THE RITUAL PASABAY²⁰

Having seen the graciousness of God as one who creates and blesses, we proceed then to the Higaunon belief of the extent of this graciousness in their life as a community. As this researcher observes, the ritual *pasabay* connects the Higaunon life to their mythological account so that it could be said further that “myths” are woven based on what they really practiced in rituals. This is difficult to understand for most of us Christianized Filipinos. Most of us are detached from our culture and native tradition so that myths for us are mere folklores, fiction that are distant from our experience. This is not so with the Higaunons. For them all the accounts they have received from their ancestors are parts of their *tanod*, their sacred memorial,²¹ that needs to be recounted and celebrated every year. Missing this important event seems to be detrimental to their life as a tribe.

The Pasabay

A Short Description of the Kaamulan

The *kaamulan* is an annual gathering among the Higaunons of Rogongon. This gathering, aside from its communitarian importance,²² is foremost a religious assembly. It is done a few months after harvest time, usually in the middle of December, as a thanksgiving for the harvest, whether bountiful or not, that is given to each family by the divine. Aside from this, it is also the time wherein the people gather to ask healing of their ailments from the Providence. This is expressed in the concluding ritual called *pasabay*.

The *kaamulan* lasts for six nights. In the morning after the last day, the *pasabay* would be performed by the *Baylan Solohano*.²³

²⁰The *pasabay* means *panambal sa mga diwata* (the cure of the deities).

²¹The *tanod* (a Higaunon word which means *tinamdan*) contains all the stories and myths, sacred history, the epic of Agyu which has been handed down from one generation of *baylans* and *datus* (elders) to the next.

²²*Kaamulan* comes from the Higaunon (*Binukid*) word which means “social gathering.” See Antonio Montalvan, *Bukidnon Heritage Kept Alive*; available from www.seasite.niu.edu/Tagalog/Cynthia/festivals/kaamulan_festival.htm accessed (July 27, 2006).

²³The *baylan* who is at the same time a faith healer.

Prelude to the Pasabay

The day before the morning of *pasabay*, there is a thorough preparation for the *paagbong* (or the coming out or visit of the benevolent *diwatas* or deities), which would take place in the afternoon. A makeshift altar called the *bangku sa lama* is prepared for the ritual smearing of blood wherein white chickens are killed in a manner that is described by C. S. Lewis as “their throats cut and their actual flesh and blood were used in ritual.”²⁴ The ritual of welcoming the *diwatas* follows until the evening. Throughout the whole night the ritual dancing called *lagudas* and the ritual chanting called *kaliga* would continue until sunrise.

Description of Pasabay

In the final morning before breakfast, after the nightlong dancing and chanting which is done by taking turns, the people assemble for the last time. There is a long ritual chanting (*kaliga*) that is performed by the *baylan solohano*. In this ritual chanting he is representing the benevolent *diwatas*, which are going to return to the spiritual world. But before their departure, as they are commissioned by the Supreme Deity, they would bestow on the *manusiya* (humankind) the blessings they need from the heavens. In a symbolic manner, the *solohano* sprinkles water through the use of fresh leaves of some herbal plants (*mayana*, *kilala*, and *anghilika*) to the people for several times, especially the sickly, who are gathering around him.

Then the *diwatas* promise the people that they would come back the following year. As a sign of this promise they would leave a small portion of fresh sugar cane.

When everything is finished, a procession follows. It is a symbolic accompanying of the *diwatas* as they return to their heavenly abode.

²⁴C. S. Lewis, *The Seeing Eye and Other Selected Essays from Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 49.

Grace in the Ritual Pasabay

The blessing that is given to the people is not a separate element that is detached from the *tanod*. In the creation story, although the man and the woman are expelled from the *baya*, God remains overseeing them. “You do not deserve to be here any longer in this noble place...” Yet God said, “[w]herever you go, I can see you. Wherever you run I can still behold you.”²⁵ This is a primitive recognition of God’s involvement in the affairs of his people. Although the world other than the *baya* is full of suffering—the symbol of the *daat*, *tunok*, and *alingatong*—God is still gracious that humanity is not totally damned. The lifeless, earthly figure is still sustained and given the opportunity to rise once again from its fallen state. The expressions—“You will eat by your hard labor;” “Take care of yourselves...;” and “You will multiply there.”—suggest the Higaunon understanding that every person, no matter how poor he/she is, is not totally left by God. So the human person has his/her produce from his/her labor to sustain himself/herself. He/She has the *solohano* and the spiritual beings that would take care of him/her in times of sickness. Fr. Francisco Demetrio, SJ explains that the people of these islands had already a religion which consists of many religious phenomena. Thus he describes, “religion has always been meant to supply: the satisfaction of human *existential needs*, both *material and psychic*, e.g., the longing for a fuller life, for deeper and more satisfying communion with one another the desire to surpass the *human condition*, to break out of the bonds of space and time and to *contact the deity*.”²⁶ The human condition is an interplay of suffering and happiness, of hardship and victory, of abundance and want. And in all these intermingling events in the life of the Higaunons, they would continue to celebrate their indigenous religious rituals to thank the gracious Lord of Providence and to ask blessing and healing from him.

²⁵See *Limbagan*, par. 25.

²⁶Francisco Demetrio, “Notes and Comments: The Engkantú Belief. An Essay in Interpretation,” *Philippine Studies* 17 no. 3 (July 1969): 591. *Italics mine*.

An important part of the *pasabay* is the repetition of the command of the *Nangadon*: “Do not steal nor cheat nor abuse others, nor get the wife of others.”²⁷ The *diwatas* who are commissioned by the Supreme Deity repeat these words as a reminder to the *manusiya* that they have to live harmoniously with one another. This is a reflection of a people’s longing for communion with others and ultimately with the spiritual world.

Thus, three important elements can be traced from the *pasabay* ritual concerning the life of the Higaunons: grace is implicitly understood as material and spiritual blessing; the importance of communion with one another and with God; and God’s continual presence in the affairs of his people.

Conclusion: God, the Source of All Things

We have seen that God is gracious and his graciousness is without condition and limit. He shares this graciousness – which is he himself – with creation and especially with humankind through his expression of life. He is life and this life is grace. Joseph B. Ballong-Wen-Mewudu and Fr. Zeph Baxla, SDB say that “[h]e is the source of all things and transmitter of original vital force of life.... the great progenitor of the tribe and the source of all fecundity of the land and of living beings.”²⁸ This gracious God is recognized by the Higaunons of Rogongon through their myths and stories that are not simply told apart from their life experience. These myths and stories of how God involves himself in their lives embody their rituals and religious practices. In this way the Word of God, the Grace through whom all things were made²⁹ has come down to them since time immemorial and their rituals are their expression of recognizing and thanking God again through the same Word that “gives to all men life and breath and all things.”³⁰

²⁷See *Limbagan*, par. 31.

²⁸ Joseph B. Ballong-Wen-Mewudu and Zeph Baxla, *Following Christ in Mission: A Foundational Course in Missiology* (Boston, USA: Pauline Books and Media, 1996), 418.

²⁹ Cf. Col. 1:16.

³⁰ Joseph Neuner and James Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 4th ed. (Bangalore, India: Theological Publications in India, 1987), no. 1018.

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