The Tamontaca Experiment in Southern Mindanao 1861-1899*

When on the 13th of June 1859 a group of ten Spanish Jesuits arrived in Manila, they were returning to a country from which the Jesuits had been expelled ninety-one years previously. The original group of Jesuit missionaries had arrived in the Philippines for the first time in 1581. With subsequent additions and replacements the Society of Jesus had worked in the Philippines for nearly two centuries (to be exact, 187 years). Besides their colleges and churches in Manila and its environs, their main field of evangelization were the Visayan Islands and two areas of Luzon. But in addition, there had also been Jesuit missions in Mindanao, for that great island (larger than several countries in Europe) was divided (for ecclesiastical purposes) between two missionary orders. The eastern half of the island was assigned to the Augustinian Recollects, the western to the Jesuits.¹

Expelled from all territories under the dominion of the Bourbon rulers, the Jesuits were eventually expelled from the Philippines. The order for their expulsion, issued in Spain in 1767, arrived in the Islands in 1768 and was implemented with rigor. There were at the time 154 member’s of the Jesuit Philippine Province: they were arrested in their various houses or missions. Those in the provinces were brought to

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¹Lecture delivered 11 February 1989, the first of the five Pearl Jubilee Lectures by Father Bernad to commemorate the 30th year of the granting of a university charter to Xavier University. Published in *Kinaadman*, Vol. XIII (1991), pp. 1-30.

¹Until their expulsion in 1768 the Jesuits had exclusive charge of the evangelization of the following island groups in the Visayas: Samar, Leyte, Bohol, Marinduque, and parts of Panay, Negros and Cebu. In Luzon their territory was the province of Cavite and the area cast of Manila (Antipolo, Cainta, Taytay, Marikina, Bosoboso). In Mindanao they had missions in Zamboanga, Dapitan, Dipolog, Lubungan, Misamis, Iligan (or roughly, the present provinces of Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga del Norte, Misamis Occidental and Lanao del Norte). Initao (in Misamis Oriental) was the easternmost outpost of the Iligan mission.
Manila under guard, and all were kept prisoners until they could be loaded on ships and sent to Europe. A total of 143 Jesuits were thus sent into exile.  

It is interesting to note that there was one who could not be arrested or sent into exile, for the Muslim raiders had killed him just at the time when the Spanish soldiers were rounding up the rest of the Jesuit missionaries to bring them to Manila. This was Father Juan Esandi, a missionary in Samar, who was killed on Capul Island off the coast of Samar. The natives whom he had tried to defend were carried off into slavery.  

After an absence of ninety-one years, the Jesuits returned to the Islands in 1859, not to resume what they had been doing previous to their expulsion, but to undertake new assignments. The Madrid government of Queen Isabel II had asked them to take exclusive charge of the evangelization of Mindanao and the adjacent islands, with special emphasis to be given to the evangelization of the non-Christian tribes. Accordingly, the first group of Jesuits sailed from Cadiz in February 1859 and arrived in Manila on 13 June of that year. They comprised five priests and five lay-brothers, headed by Father Jose Fernandez Cuevas.  

By order of the governor general (in response to a petition by leading citizens of Manila and with the approval of the Madrid government) four of the priests and two lay-brothers were detained in Manila to open a school, the Ateneo Municipal de Manila. The remaining two priests and two brothers were sent to open a new mission in southern Mindanao. In subsequent years, as more and more Jesuits arrived from Spain, some would be retained in Manila for the Ateneo or the Escuela Normal de Maestros or the Observatory; the majority were assigned to Mindanao. By the end of the Spanish colonial period in 1899, there

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2On this expulsion see Bibliographical Note (BN) pp. 26 ff below.
3If it is not presumptuous to use the term. Father Esandi may have been the last martyr of the Old (pie-Suppression) Society of Jesus to die for the Faith or a Christian virtue. See Conrado Perez, "Juan Esandi SJ, 1730-1768", KINAADMAN (K) 3 (1981) 100-104.
4The other four priests were Jose Ignacio Guerrico, Juan Bautista Vidal, Pascual Barrado, Ramon Barua: the lay-brothers were Pedro Inunciaga, Joaquin Coma, Venancio Belzunce, Jose Ignacio Larrañaaga, Jose Ma. Zumeta. Cf. Pastells, Mision, 1, 9.
were 48 residences and mission stations in Mindanao and Jolo, served by a total of 60 Jesuit priests and 40 lay-brothers.

This background is necessary in order to put the Tamontaca mission in perspective, for it was only a small portion of the Jesuit missionary work in Mindanao.\(^5\)

**The Rio Grande**

That they began their work in Mindanao in the south, at a place where there were no Christians, was not a deliberate choice on the part of the Jesuits. In 1860 Father Jose Fernandez Cuevas had made a voyage of reconnaissance in southern Mindanao and on his return to Manila be recommended that they should begin not in the south but in the north where there were Christians, and from there gradually penetrate into the non-Christian interior. That was actually what was later done by the Jesuits in the Christianization of Bukidnon: from the Christian coastal towns of Tagoloan and Jasaan they penetrated into the highlands. The Jesuits did something similar in what are now the provinces of Agusan del Norte and Agusan del Sur. From the Christian base in Butuan they moved southward along the Agusan River Valley, creating settlements that are today Christian municipalities.

That was what they wanted to do in 1861: start with the Christian towns in the northern part of Mindanao. But the Spanish government overruled them. The government armed forces were about to occupy the delta of the Rio Grande de Mindanao; why not establish a mission near the soldiers and near the Muslim settlements and near the hunting grounds of non-Christian tribes, at or near the delta of the Rio Grande?

The Rio Grande de Mindanao is a great river system, second only in extent to the Rio Grande de Cagayan in northeastern Luzon. Rising in the Kimankil and other mountains in northern Mindanao, the river (which in Bukidnon is called the Pulangi) flows southward, cutting a deep trench across the vast Bukidnon plateau, receiving the waters of several tributaries along the way. At the Liguasan marsh it makes a sharp turn and flows in a westerly direction. Before it reaches the sea, river divides at Tumbao into two arms, thus forming a large triangle or delta.

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\(^5\)For the primary and secondary sources of what follows, see BN pp. 26 ff below.
Within the delta, along the northern aim of the river, the sultan of Maguindanao lived in a village called Cotabato, for at one time he had nearby a stone fort (cotta bato). At various points upriver (for the river is navigable for a hundred miles), the other “sultanates” were located, which were really no more than villages, some of them fairly populous, and some of them protected by formidable fortifications surrounded with thick walls and armed with brass canon.

For three centuries (prior to 1860) the Rio Grande was (as more than one writer has called it) “a nest of pirates” for it was from these villages, as well as from those in Sulu and Lanao in northern Mindanao, that the yearly piratical raids were carried out. Every year with the southwest monsoon the large sailboats would sweep the sea northwards and raid the coastal towns of Mindanao, the Visayan Islands, and southern Luzon, burning houses and crops and carrying away men, women and children to be sold into slavery. Entire villages were thus depopulated. Unable to obtain help from the central Insular Government, the towns had to devise their own means of defending themselves against this constant threat. In many places stone or brick churches were constructed so as to serve a double purpose: for worship during ordinary times and for refuge during raids. Some churches have had to stand a long siege, in some cases successfully.6

Two things combined to put an end, finally, to this terrible and recurrent scourge. One was the coming of the steam gunboats that could sail faster than the sailboats and whose guns could blast an entire flotilla of pirates from the sea. The other was the permanent occupation of, and the establishment of fortified garrisons in Lanao, Jolo and the Rio Grande.

In the past, there had been sporadic attempts by the Insular Government to destroy the power of the Muslim Maguindanao of the Rio Grande. One major attempt was made in 1596 by a large expedition beaded by Esteban Rodriguez de Pigueroa. The attempt collapsed after the death of its leader. A more successful (but equally

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6Outstanding examples of stubborn and successful resistance to the Muslim raids were those of the Christians in Palompon (Leyte) and Lubungan (now renamed Katipunan, Zamboanga del Norte). A tragic example of eventual defeat was the four-month siege of the fort of Tandag (Surigao del Sur). See M. A. Bemad, History Against the Landscape (Manila, Solidaridad Book Shop, 1968) 121-176.
An ephemeral attempt was that of 1637 by Governor Sebastian Hurtado de Corcuera, but after his victories, which the Governor celebrated in Manila with a triumphal parade as grand as those of the ancient Roman generals, life had returned to normal in the supposedly defeated Rio Grande.

It was in the middle of the nineteenth century that the Insular Government decided, once and for all, to put an end to piracy by the permanent occupation of Jolo, of Lanao, and of the region along the Rio Grande. A naval station was established at Pollok. The Sultan of Maguindanao submitted to the Insular Government in 1860, and his village of Cotabato was occupied by government troops. In 1861 the fortress of Pagalungan on the delta was stormed and destroyed in a fierce battle in which several hundred were killed. Government garrisons were established at Tumbao at the apex of the delta and at Tamontaca on the southern aim of the river. This gave the government complete control of the delta, and the town of Cotabato (instead of Zamboanga) became the headquarters of the military governor of Mindanao.

In subsequent years, other government garrisons were established along the river, culminating in the occupation and fortification in the 1880s of Bakat (renamed Reina Regente) which had been the stronghold of one of the stronger Muslim chieftains.7 It was in that context that the order came from the government in 1860 for the Jesuits to establish their first mission not in northern Mindanao where there were many Christians but at the Rio Grande, where there were none.

A Four-Month Wait

And so on 7 September 1861 the first group of four Jesuits sailed from Cavite for Mindanao. Two of them (Fathers Juan Bautista Vidal and Jose Ignacio Guerrero) were priests; the other two (Venancio Belzunce and Jose Maria Zumeta) were lay-brothers. They sailed aboard a frigate that was lowed by a steamer that developed engine trouble in the high seas. But eventually, after nine days, they reached their destination, which was the harbor of Pollok in what was then called

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7On the Moro raids and the struggle for the Rio Grande see BN pp. 26 ff below
"el tercer distrito o Distrito Central de Mindanao", later renamed the Province of Cotabato.

Pollok was a military and naval base of the Spanish Insular Government, chosen for its excellent harbor. Its population at that time consisted of some 200 sailors of the Spanish navy and an equal number of soldiers and a number of Filipino civilians exiled from other provinces for criminal offenses or for political reasons. There were also a “multitude” of Chinese who lived “in the most degraded form of polygamy” and whose children grew up with no education at all. Those were the residents of Pollok, but constant visitors from the surrounding country were the Maguindanao Muslims to buy or sell in the marketplace.

There was only a make-shift church of bamboo and nipa, but there was a resident priest, a Recoletos, who gave the four Jesuits a warm welcome and generous hospitality. He told them that in the six months that he had been at Pollok he had not baptized a single baby born of legitimate wedlock. This was in September of 1861. Four years later, the Jesuits were to take over the mission station of Pollok and were faced with the enormous problem of how to Christianize so abnormal a settlement.

But Pollok was merely a halting station for those four Jesuits. Their objective was to go farther south and establish a mission station where no Christians as yet existed. That mission was to be along the banks of the Rio Grande de Mindanao.  

*On the Left Bank*

On the left bank of the southern arm of the river outside the delta were rolling hills, vast stretches of cogon grass almost entirely uninhabited. This was Tamontaca. There, a company of soldiers had pitched their tents. And there also, not far from the camp, the Jesuits decided to pitch theirs.

They arrived at that spot by launch on 10 January 1862, the ship’s bell ringing repeatedly to announce the glad news of their arrival.

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*The long wait of almost four months at Pollok was made neccessary because of military operations at the delta. The Jesuits arrived in Pollok in September 1861: the battle of Pagalungan took place in November; they established the mission in Tamontaca in January 1862.*
Disembarking from boat and jumping ashore, Father Guerrico amazed (and probably amused) the soldiers by dropping to his knees and kissing the ground. That ancient gesture has been rendered familiar today by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, but in 1862 it was probably an unusual thing to do.

The following day the first Mass was celebrated under an awning. For the few days they lived in tents: one tent serving as a chapel, two as their living quarters, and an awning under a tree for their kitchen.

Previous to going to Tamontaca they had paid their respects to the Spanish military and civilian authorities at Cotabato, Tumbao and other points along the delta. Now, a day or so after their arrival, they established friendly relations with the nearest Muslim settlement. This was a village farther down the river ruled by a datu ("wily, astute and valiant") named Vansil. Summoned by the Spanish camp commander, Vansil came for a conference. And then the camp commander and the Fathers went to his village to return the visit. With protocol thus observed, their new life was started by gestures of good will on both sides.

One immediate result of these good relations was the fact that the Fathers were able to hire some of the Muslims to help the lay-brothers in the construction of their house to replace the tents. This new house was a barn-like structure of wood and nipa divided into three compartments: chapel, living room, and kitchen. Later, a separate building would be erected for the chapel.

They then settled to a quiet life, saying Mass, giving catechism lessons to the soldiers (who doubtless needed them), and waiting for the fish to bite. The "fish" in this case were the pagan Tiruray whose dwellings were up in the hills.

The First Baptism

They did not have to wait long. The first nibble came a little less than three weeks after their arrival. During those intervening days many Tiruray and not a few Muslims had come out of curiosity to look at what was going on. But on the 28th of January — eighteen days after the coming of the Fathers — the first Tiruray family came down to settle at a place a short distance from where the Fathers lived. This was a family of six: father, mother and four children. They were
instructed and prepared for baptism. And on the feast of the Purification, the 2nd of February 1862, they were baptized.⁹

The baptism of that first Tiruray family was a solemn and festive occasion. The army band came from Cotabato, and their playing attracted many people. The soldiers attended the baptismal ceremony as did a large number of Tiruray who had come down from the hills to watch. The army captain and several officers acted as godfathers to the new Christians.

Nine days later, on the 11th of February, fifty Tiruray (adults and children) also came down from the hills and set up their, dwelling a few miles ("two leagues") from the mission. They started to cultivate the fields. The army gave them bolos and enough palay to tide them over until the harvest.

The Jesuit missionaries on their grassy knoll at Tamontaca followed a schedule not hectic but regular. Several times a week in the mornings after Mass they would go to the Tiruray village to give instruction in Christian doctrine. In the afternoon they would do the same to the soldiers in the camp, most of whom were native Filipinos from various parts of the Islands and speaking different native tongues. That must have been how the chavacano language of Zamboanga developed: the soldiers had to have some least common denominator with which to communicate with their officers and with each other and with the natives of the locality; they found that least common denominator by mixing Spanish words with their native idioms.

There was something else that the Fathers and Brothers did at this time. They took five boys led by one of the sons of that first Christian Tiruray family, and had them live with the Fathers. They helped with the domestic chores but they were not domestic servants. They were given instruction in reading, writing, and Christian doctrine, in the hope that they would develop into catechists to instruct their fellow Tiruray.

⁹To our modern ideas on the need for a long and leisurely catechumenate, this baptism of a Tiruray family after only a few days’ instruction may seem precipitate. How much instruction did they actually get, and in what language? And yet, this first Tiruray Christian family proved to be staunch and reliable Christians. One member became the first matron of the orphanage for girls. Another, named Sigayan (but baptized Jose Tenorio) became the chief informant to Father Bennasar for his book on Tiruray customs. (For that book, see BN.)
Father Guerrico was a fine musician with a good singing voice. He taught these boys to sing hymns and thus provide a choir for church services. When the Jesuit superior came down from Manila to visit the mission in 1864, he was regaled with a vocal concert in which Father Guerrico’s adult voice blended with the high *típles* of the boys.

Towards the end of the first year, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception 8 December 1862, the new chapel was inaugurated. It was only a barn with a nipa roof but the band came again from Cotabato and there was a good deal of festivity during the day and a display of fireworks at night. By that time there were 150 inhabitants in the new Tiruray village, of whom 95 were baptized Christians.

*On the Right Bank*

In 1866 the army camp moved away from the grassy knolls on the left bank of the river and settled elsewhere. The missionaries also decided to move across the river to the right bank and settle within the delta where the ground was better suited for farming. It was also closer to Cotabato and a rough road was constructed connecting the mission in the south with the town of Cotabato in the northern part of the delta.

Some of the Tiruray followed the missionaries and started farming within the delta. As a result two communities developed: the original one on the left bank and the newer one on the right. By the end of 1866 (the fourth year of the mission) there were 667 Tiruray in the two settlements, of whom 340 (a little over one-half) were Christians.

That was the first part of what we might call the Tamontaca experiment. Its aim was to evangelize the pagans by establishing a Christian community starting from scratch, and to do so not by forcing the pagans to live in the village — compelling them to live “debajo de las campañas” (within sound of the church bells) as had been done in other places in the past — but by attracting them to come of their own accord. Not by force but by attraction.

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10 The following distances between the government installations along the Cotabato delta are given: on the northern arm, from the river mouth to Cotabato town, 5 kilometers; from Cotabato to Libing, 9 kms.; from there to Tumbo, 9 kms.; total 29 kilometers. Along the southern arm, from Tumbo to Taviran, 8 kms.; from Taviran to Tamontaca, 9 kms.; total 17. Cf. Julian Gonzalez Parado, *Memoria acerca de Mindanao* (Manila 1893) p. 79.
That strategy of attraction was of course not new. It was only a smaller and humbler variation of a great movement in the early Middle Ages. Was it not that way that Ireland and Scotland and England and France and Germany and much of Western Europe became Christian? The monks built their great monasteries in the wilderness in the middle of nowhere; following the great Benedictine rule of prayer and work — *ora et labora* — they sang their hymns and cut the timber and cultivated the fields and raised the cattle and copied the manuscripts and wrote their books: and gradually a Christian community built up around each monastery until all Europe became Christian.

*The Crisis of 1872*

In 1872, when the Tamontaca mission had been ten years in existence, something happened to give it a new dimension. A severe epidemic of smallpox had attacked the Muslim settlements along the Rio Grande and many had succumbed to the disease. Those who did not die were incapacitated long enough to prevent them from working in the fields. This meant no harvest or a meagre one. There was threat of famine. Not able to feed so many mouths, or to obtain money to buy rice and other foodstuffs, some of the Muslim offered the children of their slaves for sale at a low price.

In a slave-economy, social status is often directly proportional to the number of slaves. Children born in captivity ordinarily add to the assets of the slave-owner. But not when there is threat of famine. The more children there are, the more mouths to feed. Hence the willingness to sell them at a low price.

The idea of ransoming slave-children was not new. Twelve years earlier, in 1860, when the Jesuit superior, Father Jose Fernandez Cueva, had made his voyage of reconnaissance in southern Mindanao, he had included in his report the suggestion that a possible opening-wedge for the evangelization of southern Mindanao would be to ransom slave-children from the Muslim and to raise them up to become free Christian adults.

What gave Father Fernandez the idea was his visit to Pollok, where, in the marketplace, be found among the foodstuffs and other goods for sale a different kind of “merchandise”: children and even their
mothers for sale as slaves. The Spanish authorities soon put a stop to this human traffic, but Father Fernandez wondered whether it might not be a better act of charity to ransom the slaves and instruct them in the faith and set them free. In his report of his trip (afterwards published) he said:

There is another kind of merchandise that the Moros bring to Pollok, merchandise that unfortunately is highly prized in the Rio Grande region and by the sultans of Baras. I refer to captive children whom they have the temerity to offer for sale even to Christians and Chinese, and they even dare to offer for sale mothers with their children. The government has prohibited this kind of traffic, and rightly so; but it would be conformable to the spirit of piety and charity to ransom, for a modest price, from the hands of the Moros these innocent victims of their tyranny so that they can live as freemen in Spanish territory and be taught the truths of our Faith. This ransom could be a possible way of using the funds of the Holy Infancy, a religious association that exists in Spain under the patronage of our Queen, that spends large sums for the ransom of children in China whom their parents have abandoned so as not to be burdened with having to feed them.11

Those words, written in 1860, were now recalled in 1872. The military commander of Mindanao, Don Luis Fernandez Golfin, suggested to the Fathers at Cotabato that perhaps female slave-children could be ransomed and educated to become good Christian mothers? “Why not also male children?” the Fathers asked,” for the boys could grow up to become good Christian fathers.” In fact, long before the crisis of 1872, when the Jesuits left Manila for Mindanao in 1861, they had already discussed the possibility of ransoming and educating slave-children from the Muslims.12

In 1872, it was Fernandez Golfin in his official capacity as military governor of Mindanao who wrote to both the governor general and the archbishop in Manila, suggesting that funds be raised for

11"Relacion de un viaje de exploracion a Mindanao por el R.P. Jose Fernandez Cuevas", Cartas 8 (1889) 35 f.
12Father Guerrico’s pamphlet of 1881 begins as follows: “Al salir de Manila para la Mision de Mindanao en 1861 ... llevábamos la idea y el deseo de aprovechar la ocasión que se presentase de reunir algunos niños y criados como convenia, para con ellos
ransoming as many slave-children as possible. The suggestion was well received and a commission was created to supervise the fund-raising, with the archbishop as chairman and the major “superiors of the religious orders of friars as members, with a Dominican friar as treasurer. The sum of over 13,000 pesos was collected, of which 4,500 pesos were remitted to Mindanao. With that amount the Jesuit Fathers were able to ransom, over a period of several years, more than a hundred children.

The first to be ransomed were four children on the 9th of September 1872 — a significant date, being the feast of St. Peter Claver, the Spanish Jesuit who had devoted his life to the African slaves brought by slave-traders to Latin America. By the end of that year, 30 children had been ransomed between the ages of 3 and 13.  

The baptism of these children on 2 February 1873 was a gala affair. By coincidence it was the eleventh anniversary of that first baptism of a Tiruray family in 1862 and, as on that previous occasion, there was a big celebration. The church was decorated, the band came again from Cotabato as did several prominent citizens to serve as godfathers. (No godmothers could come because of the bad road, and so they were all represented by proxy.)

By the middle of 1875 a total of 90 children had been ransomed. By 1879 (seven years since the start of the project) the total had risen to 160. Of that number 40 had “graduated” (so to speak) while 120 were still in training, the boys and girls living in separate dormitories.

**The Training**

And what did their training consist in? It was a very simple kind of elementary education, but at the risk of making it seem complex we might distinguish in it four distinct dimensions. There was first of all a religious dimension which consisted of instruction in Christian

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formar una nueva generacion, habiendolo antes tratado con nuestro R. P. Superior Jose Fernandez Cuevas y con el Excmo. Sr. Capitan General; pero no lo pudimos conseguir, y nos dedicamos a los salvajes o monteses que se llaman tirurayes que venian a visitarnos casi diariamente ...” On Guerrico’s pamphlet, see BN.

13It seems that many of the children were sold by slave-owners to Chinese traders who in turn sold them to the Mission. Cushner, “The Abandonment of Tamontaka Reduction, 1895-1899”, PS 12 (1984) 288-296. (On this article, see BN.)
doctrine, daily Mass and prayers, and the reception of the sacraments — baptism, penance, the Eucharist, and when the time came, the sacrament of matrimony and the anointing of the sick. (There was one sacrament they could not receive: confirmation. There was no bishop in Mindanao in those days.)

A second dimension of the children’s training was literacy: they were taught to read and write.

A third dimension was vocational: they learned skills by working in the fields or in the old-fashioned sugar mill or in the carpentry shop, or working with the blacksmith or the stone-mason or the brick-layer. The girls were taught tailoring, cooking and other household crafts.

In the beginning there had been a problem with regard to the training of the girls. At first they were put under the supervision of a Christian Tiruray matron. But a more systematic training was needed. So the Jesuits appealed for volunteers in Manila from among the members of what was then called the Beaterio de la Compañia de Jesus in Intramuros. Three of them volunteered who sailed from Manila on 7 May 1875. Until the mission was dissolved, those brave women and their successors gave dedicated service to the Tamontaca mission. The Beaterio, incidentally, has since been approved by the Holy See as a religious congregation under the title “Religious of the Virgin Mary.”

There was a fourth dimension to the education at Tamontaca: a social dimension, for they were being prepared to live in a community as independent farmers. As the boys and girls grew up, they looked for partners and got married. Each married couple was given a piece of land, a carabao, farm implements, and enough rice and foodstuffs

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14In the 1870s Tamontaca, along with all of Western Mindanao, was under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Jaro (in Panay). Previous to the creation of the Jaro diocese (1865) all of Mindanao was under the bishop of Cebu. It was not until 1910 that a diocese was established in Mindanao, that of Zamboanga. In 1933 Mindanao was divided into two dioceses: Zamboanga and Cagayan. Today (1990) there are 20 bishoprics in Mindanao and one in Sulu, comprising five ecclesiastical provinces with the archdiocesan seats at Cagayan, Cotabato, Davao, Misamis (Ozamiz City) and Zamboanga.

to tide them over until their harvest. Thus, a cluster of Christian communities grew up in and near the Cotabato delta that were self-supporting, composed partly of the Tiruray converts and partly of the former slave children who were now married couples.\(^\dagger\)

A Community Approach

The Tamontaca mission has been compared to the Jesuit reductions in Paraguay, and both have been characterized as a “community approach” to evangelization.\(^\ddagger\) That is an accurate description, and the comparison with Paraguay is apt. However, one essential difference should be pointed out: In the Paraguay reductions all land was held in common. The community was the landowner. In Tamontaca each farm was individually owned.

Tamontaca was not an “hacienda” like the sugar or rice plantations elsewhere in the Philippines, owned by one family, with peasant families living within them either as paid workers or as share-tenants. Nor was Tamontaca like the banana or pineapple plantations owned and managed by a corporation, with thousands of hired workers who (be it said in fairness) are in many cases among the best paid, the best housed, and with the best hospital and education facilities available among Filipino workers.

Tamontaca was something else. It was a farming community composed of independent farmers. The Mission as such owned a large tract of land planted to various crops: rice, sugar, corn, coffee, cacao, coconut, fruit trees, and a carabao herd. The produce of that farm supported the children in the orphanage and the other works of the mission. Around the mission farm were the smaller landholdings tilled by their owners and producing crops of which their owners had the disposition. Tamontaca, in short, was a community of farmers, not a commune.

\(^\dagger\)An 1891 report gives the total number of Christians in the Tamontaca area as 1,699. Of these, 532 were in the Tamontaca pueblo itself and 109 were Christian Tiruray living in dispersion in the hills. The remaining 1,058 were living in eight hamlets, three of them with chapels (visitas). “Estado de la poblacion cristina de las misiones de la Campania de Jesus en Mindanao e islas adyacentes.” Cartas 9 (1891) 667-679.

\(^\ddagger\)Two articles by Cushner and two by Cushner and Madigan emphasize this point. See BN.
Problems: Local

Those who are romantically inclined may tend to think of Tamontaca as an earthly paradise whose residents lived an idyllic existence. But there is no such thing as a paradise on earth. Even the Garden of Eden had a serpent. It should therefore not surprise us to learn that not all of the 160 children who had been ransomed and educated at Tamontaca were content to live there. The majority were; but a few, having grown up in a Muslim environment and having gotten used to other ways, chafed at the regimented life of the Tamontaca dormitories and disliked the work in field or shop. During the 27 years since the orphanage was organized in 1872, some fourteen boys escaped. It was easy enough to escape. There were no high walls, no armed guards, and no attempt was made to track down those who escaped. Some were never heard from again. Some eventually returned and begged to be readmitted.\textsuperscript{18}

There were other troubles on the local scene. One was a jurisdictional conflict over the government of Tamontaca. An informal arrangement had been made with the Cotabato authorities whereby the Tamontaca community was considered an autonomous unit with its own elected officials. But a new governor came to Cotabato who insisted on legalities. He treated Tamontaca as a barrio dependent upon Cotabato. Tamontaca resisted. The matter was referred to higher authorities who decided in favor of Tamontaca as an autonomous municipality.

Much more serious were the harassments from hostile Muslim elements. Some of these were occasioned by the very success of the mission. Besides the T Classifier from the hills and the children ransomed from slavery, some Muslim adults from the valley began to ask for baptism. For instance, in December 1893 Father Juanmarti baptized 24 Muslim adult converts. In February 1894 fifteen couples were married in a wedding ceremony celebrated with much fanfare. Eight of those couples were former slave-children, “graduates” of the Tamontaca orphanage, and three were T Classifier couples; but four couples were recent converts from Islam.

\textsuperscript{18}Cushner, “The Abandonment of Tamontaca”.

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These were small numbers, but even these minute inroads into Islam were resented. There were murders, in which some of the headless corpses were said to be of Muslim who had left their villages in order to become Christians.

The establishment of a military fort in Bakat, deep in the Rio Grande valley in the heart of the territory of one of the fiercest of the Muslim dams, brought about repercussions. There were harassments on the civilian population of Cotabato and on the mission of Tamontaca. Even before the establishment of the Bakat fort there had been several attempts to bum down the Tamontaca mission. These attempts were now intensified, culminating in two major conflagrations. In one case the boys' dormitory was burned down, rendering sixty boys roofless until a new building could be constructed. In another case, the priests' and brothers' residence was burned down.

It was easy enough to cause a fire, for the Tamontaca buildings were roofed with cogon grass. A flaming torch hurled like a javelin at the roof would start a fire that almost instantly would be uncontrollable.

One source of trouble was the disunion among the Muslims themselves, one datu with a considerable following feuding with another equally strong. One party would be friendly to the Spanish authorities, the other party hostile, and therefore also unfriendly to the Tamontaca mission.

Problems in Manila

To these local troubles were added those in Manila: an external storm of open attack and secret whisperings against the Jesuits. The difficulty arose from a conflict of motives, and (probably more basic) from a radical difference in the concept of missionary work.

When it was suggested from Cotabato that a fund-raising campaign be held in Manila for the ransom of slave-children, there was enthusiastic response. The fact that the archbishop himself acted as chairman of the fund-raising Commission, with the major superiors of the friar-orders as members, gave great prestige to the fund-raising campaign. The amount raised — more than 13,000 pesos — may seem trivial today but was a very large amount in those pre-inflation days. Unfortunately, it soon became obvious that the Commission in Manila
and the missionaries and officials in Mindanao had totally different ideas as to what to do with the children who were ransomed.

The Jesuits and the Mindanao officials took it for granted that the purpose of ransoming the children was to grant them full liberty. Since they were children, some of them extremely young, they would first be housed and educated at Tamontaca, and when old enough to marry or live on their own, they would be given land so that they could become self-supporting farmers.

In Manila they had a different idea. They thought that the ransomed children should be sent to Manila to be distributed among “respectable families” (“familias honradas”) where they would be “educated”; translation: where they would be used as servant-boys and servant-girls in the household.

When it was learned in Manila that the children were being kept in the orphanage at Tamontaca, there was an outcry against the Jesuits. The amount of 4,500 pesos that had already been remitted to Mindanao could not be recalled; but the Commission refused to allow the remainder of the funds to be given to the Jesuits. The money was deposited in a savings account. It is not clear what was eventually done with it.

A later attempt by Father Guerrico to raise additional funds did not succeed. Hence the necessity of supporting the ransomed children from the income of the farm which they helped to cultivate.

Three Outstanding Missionaries

The Tamontaca “reduction” (if that is the proper term for it) was only part of the Jesuit missionary work in the Rio Grande. Not long after the Tamontaca mission was started, the Jesuits also took over the spiritual care of Pollok and of Cotabato town. In this latter place there was no church, and for a while Mass was being said in the basement of the priest’s rectory which they constructed.

But Pollok, Cotabato and Tamontaca were merely a base of operations for a mission whose territory comprised the entire valley of the Rio Grande. To borrow a useful term used frequently by Protestant missionaries, there was need for “outreach” to the Muslims of the valley and to the pagans in the hills. Only a beginning could be made in this task, but of those who tried it, some were outstanding.
Jose Ignacio Guerrico. Among them was one of the four founders of the Tamontaca mission: Father Jose Ignacio Guerrico. He was a Basque from Guipuzcoa, born in 1806, who had studied in Spain and France (having been one of those exiled from Spain during a revolution) and had taught philosophy to Jesuit scholastics at Freiburg in Switzerland. He was 55 years old when he went to Tamontaca, but he had the energy of a much younger man. Besides the work at Tamontaca (where at one time he was the only priest left), he made excursions to Muslim villages along the river, and was of signal service to the government in its efforts to avoid war with Datu Utto at Buayan. In his letters (some of which we have published recently) Father Guerrico pleaded for a greater sympathy for and a better understanding of the Muslims.19

After eight years at Tamontaca and with health impaired, Guerrico was recalled to Manila to serve as "socius" (assistant) to the Superior of the Jesuits and to act at the same time as spiritual father to the Jesuits and to the students at the Ateneo. He remained in that capacity from 1869 to 1874. In 1875 he was back at Tamontaca and stayed there until finally forced to retire five years later. He died at the Ateneo de Manila in 1883 at the age of 77.20

It was during Guerrico’s first stay at the Ateneo, during the two school years from 1872 to 1874, that the young Rizal got to know him. The elderly missionary must have made a deep impression on the young boy, for, two decades later when Guerrico was long dead and Rizal was a physician and a famous man living in exile in Dapitan, Rizal made a statue of Guerrico probably from a photograph. The bust showed an old man, emaciated, with head slightly inclined. That piece of sculpture has had an interesting history. Seven years after Rizal’s death it was brought to the United States to be exhibited at the St. Louis Exposition among the specimens of Philippine sculpture. It was also one of the works of Rizal that were saved from the fire that

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19On these letters see BN. The kind of men these Spanish Jesuits were may be seen from how they spent their time during their 4-month voyage from Cadiz to Manila in 1859: Father Fernandez Cuevas translated his philosophy textbook from Latin to Spanish, and Father Guerrico translated into Spanish a Flemish Jesuit’s work on the Spiritual Exercises.

20A “noticia biografica” on Guerrico is given as an appendix to Cartas 6 (1987) 309-338.
destroyed the Ateneo in Intramuros in 1932. And it seems also to have survived the destruction of Manila in 1945, for that bust (or a copy of it) is now in Fort Santiago.  

**Guillermo Benasnar.** Another outstanding missionary was Father Guillermo Benasnar whose outreach was towards the pagan Tiruray in the hills. He became proficient in their language, and he compiled a dictionary which was printed in two volumes in Manila: Spanish-Tiruray and Tiruray-Spanish. Father Benasnar went to Tamontaca in the second decade of that mission's existence, in 1883, and he remained there until the end when the mission was disbanded. He was repatriated to Spain but died at sea.  

**Jacinto Juanmarti.** One of those who remained longest in the Rio Grande mission was Father Jacinto Juanmarti, who was 42 years old when he was sent to Mindanao to become superior of Tamontaca and pastor of Cotabato. His outreach, like that of Father Guerrico, was towards the Maguindanao Muslims. He learned their language well and wrote a grammar and compiled a dictionary. The grammar was later translated into English by the American army of occupation. The dictionary was used as the basis for a new one recently published in Cotabato. Father Juanmarti also wrote a catechism for the Maguindanao Muslims and a Bible history printed in both Roman and Arabic characters. As no printing press in the Philippines could handle the job, he went to Singapore and had it printed there.

Father Jacinto Juanmarti died at Tamontaca in April of 1897 and was buried under the floor of the church.

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21See the chapters on Rizal in Dapitan in M. A. Bernad, *Rizal and Spain, an Essay in Biographical Context* (Manila, National Book Store, 1986).

22Father Guillermo Benasnar was born in Mallorca in 1845 and came to the Philippines in 1883. Except for brief interruptions when he was in Zamboanga, all of his priestly work was at Tamontaca till it was disbanded in 1899. On his publications see BN.

23On Father Jacinto Juanmarti, Father PedroTorra (in the bibliography mentioned in BN No. 5) notes that he was born in Solsona (Lerida), Spain, 3 February 1832, entered the Jesuit order 13 September 1857, arrived in the Philippines 1864 and taught for a brief period at the Escuela Normal de Maestros, Manila. He worked in Tamontaca and Cotabato from 1874 till his death 7 April 1897. On his published works see BN.

24Father Juanmarti was the principal organizer at the Cotabato end and Father Eusebio Barado was the chief participant from the Bukidnon end of the daring and
Abrupt Ending

But like many good things, the Tamontaca experiment came to an end rather abruptly, the victim of a war. The Philippine Revolution that had started in Luzon in 1896 had no visible repercussions in Mindanao, but the American occupation had fatal consequences for the mission. It took eighteen days for the news to filter in to Cotabato and Tamontaca that on May 1st, 1898, a “battle” had been fought in Manila Bay in which Spanish warships had been sunk by the American navy. The news was disturbing not only to the Jesuits (who, being Spaniards, naturally had Spanish sympathies) but disturbing also to the Muslims but for different reasons. One datu after another came to find out what was going on. On some days many Muslims would come. The most bitter news reached the mission on 4 January 1899, when they learned that in the Treaty of Paris the previous month, Spain had yielded to the United States the sovereignty over the Philippine Archipelago. News came that the Spanish soldiers and authorities had left Iloilo, Cebu and Iligan and were soon to leave Zamboanga and Cotabato. The Jesuit Fathers hoped however that they could remain and continue their mission.25

But the mission was threatened by the Muslims. One datu offered to “protect” the mission’s farm and herd of carabaos. His offer was declined. The herd began to dwindle. One night twenty head of carabaos were stolen. The Fathers began to sell off the herd: as many as thirty head would be sold in one day.26

Besides cattle rustling, the Muslims also began to molest the farm: a sugar cane field was burned; a coconut grove was robbed of its coconuts. Most ominous of all, they began demanding to have the children, doubtless to make them slaves once more.


25Mariano Suarez to provincial, from Tetuan, 28 Jan. 1899, in Cartas edificantes, 125-131. (On see book see BN.)

26An indication of the scale of production of the farm and ranch of the Tamontaca mission was the number of cattle and the amount of rice left unsold after the entire carabao herd had been disposed of: “Todos los carabaos fueron vendidos a muy buen precio, quedando sin vender algunos centenares de vacas y tres mil cabanes de palay.” Pastells. Mision, III: 411.
It was their defenselessness from this kind of molestation that made the Fathers decide to evacuate Tamontaca. The first to be evacuated were the girls. On 16 January 1899, after Mass, the seven Beaterio sisters and the thirty-seven young girls started on the road to Cotabato escorted by the superior of the Tamontaca mission, Father Salvador Viñas. He accompanied them as far as Cotabato and then returned to Tamontaca. The nuns and the girls, with two Jesuit priests (Fathers Bitrian and Ferrer) and a lay-brother (Brother Jaume) boarded the steamer “Churrucu” bound for Zamboanga.

That same day word was received at Tamontaca that another ship (the “Santo Rosario”) had arrived at Cotabato; so, that very night at eight o’clock, the thirty-two boys, with Father Pablo Mayoral and Brother Jose Serrano, started on the long walk to Cotabato. It should have taken them only an hour, but because it had been raining all day and the road was muddy, they got to Cotabato at ten o’clock at night.

When the people in Tamontaca saw that the boys were being evacuated, many of them also packed up their belongings and walked to Cotabato to board the ship.

The following day — 17 January — more evacuees were taken on board another ship. And that same day the remaining Jesuits left Tamontaca for Cotabato and thence for Zamboanga. In this rear guard were Father Guillermo Bennasar and the remaining lay-brothers: Pedro Llull, Juan Perez, Sebastian Puigpelat, Sebastian Sanroma; and of course, last to leave the sinking ship, the superior, Father Viñas.

The diarist who recorded these events ended his entry for that day — 17 January 1899 — with the following words: “On the following day after having loaded aboard the Churrucu almost all our belongings and many people from Tamontaca, Brother Perez and Father Mayoral departed, leaving for the time being those missions where God had poured so much good and heavenly favor upon the Moro and the Tiruray peoples, working by means of Ours for the thirty-seven years of our stay here. May God be praised.” 27

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27 The entries for the pertinent dates in the diary are translated by Cushner, “The Abandonment. Of Tamontaca”.

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Some Reflections

With the hindsight of almost a hundred years we can look back on the Tamontaca experiment and ask ourselves a question: Was the experiment a success?

That it lasted for 37 years — almost four decades, 13 years short of half a century — is proof that it was to that extent successful. That it ended abruptly does not derogate from the success of those 37 years. After all, it ended due to a war of other people’s making, decided in Washington and Madrid, with which the people of Tamontaca had nothing to do except suffer its consequences.

The fact, however, is that the Tamontaca experiment did end abruptly. Could that sudden ending have been averted?

It is possible that there was a difference in perception. For the missionaries and for those who directly benefited from the mission — namely the Tiruray and the ransomed children — the mission was a noble experiment, entirely unselfish, a labor of love undertaken for God and for the people. But did the Muslims of the Rio Grande look upon the Tamontaca mission in the same light?

It is possible that their perception was different; that they looked upon Tamontaca as merely apart of the Spanish establishment whose armed forces had defeated them at Tumbao and other battlefields. And therefore, as soon as they learned that the Spanish forces were to be withdrawn, they took advantage of the situation to harass and destroy the mission.

The Jesuit missionaries who went with Xavier to Japan, or those who went with Ricci to China, or those who worked with Alexandre de Rhodes in Viet Nam, had a great advantage: they were not part of a colonial establishment and could not be accused of having ulterior political motives in their preaching of Christianity. The persecution in Japan arose precisely because of the bragging of European traders that their home governments were thinking of conquering Japan.

The Jesuit missionaries on the Rio Grande did not enjoy that advantage. They went there under the shadow of the armed might of a colonizing nation; and although this does not detract from the intrinsic value of their missionary work, it may have colored the perception that the Mohammedans had of their motives.

On the other band, could the experiment have been attempted without the active support of the colonial government? For instance,
when the slave-children grew up and got married, they were given a piece of land: how could this have been done unless the government had made public land available?

In any case, the experiment was attempted: a double experiment, first with the Tiruray pagans, later with the slave-children ransomed from the Muslims. That it abruptly ended after 37 years was a disaster occasioned by foreign wars on the one hand, and local cupidity on the other.

Today Tamontaca and much of what used to be the vast province of Cotabato is largely Christian.\(^{28}\) Its Christianization has been hastened by two main factors: on the one hand, the massive migration into that territory by Christian families from other parts of the Philippines; on the other hand the dedicated missionary work of a considerable number of priests and nuns and brothers belonging to several missionary congregations. There is a Catholic university at Cotabato City and several Catholic colleges in other towns, and many parochial schools and several seminaries in that territory. In Tamontaca itself, there are three novitiates: one for priests, one for brothers, and one for nuns.\(^{29}\)

The church built by the Jesuits at Tamontaca in the past century still stands, looking like a tiny chapel in comparison with much larger edifices in the area. The first time I visited Tamontaca, in the 1950s,

\(^{28}\)What had been the Province of Cotabato has since been divided into six political divisions, four of them provinces and two chartered cities. The city of Cotabato and the city of General Santos and the two provinces of North and South Cotabato are predominantly Christian: on the other hand, the provinces of Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat are predominantly Muslim.

\(^{29}\)The Jesuits turned over the missions in Cotabato province in 1939 to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), who in turn invited the Passionist priests (CP) in 1958 to take charge of part of the territory. To help run the schools they invited the Marist Brothers (FMS) in 1948 and several congregations of Sisters to run schools and hospitals and other agencies, among them Dominicans (OP), St Paul de Chartres (SPC), Religious of the Virgin Mary (RVM), Maryknoll (MM), Augustinian Recollects (AR), Passionist Sisters (CP), and, above all, the locally founded Oblates of Notre Dame (OND). The territory of the former Cotabato Province now comprises a separate ecclesiastical province comprising one archbishopric (Cotabato) and the dioceses of Kidapawan and Marbel. According to figures in the Catholic Directory of 1986, there were in those three episcopal jurisdictions a total of 145 priests, of whom 61 belonged to the native diocesan clergy.
the church was still very much as it must have been when the missionaries left it, and I still saw in the pavement the memorial stone marking the grave of Father Jacinto Juanmarti. Twenty years later, when I returned to Tamontaca, the church had been renovated and the old tile flooring had been covered over with a thick layer of concrete. Nowhere was there an indication that anyone was buried under it. I asked the people in the vicinity what had happened to the bones of Father Juanmarti; had they been exhumed? No one knew.

Epilogue

What happened to the Tamontaca Mission after the evacuation of 1899?

The farmers who had fled from their farms when the priests and the children were evacuated must have returned not long afterwards. But for almost four years (1900-1903) they had no priests. All the Jesuits (except those who were imprisoned in northern Mindanao) were gathered in Manila in 1900, some living at the Ateneo, others at the Normal School.

Beginning 1901 they gradually returned to Mindanao. At first only small teams of "roving missionaries" (missiones excurrentium), each composed of two priests and one lay-brother, were sent to each region who were to try to cover as much territory as they could. There were such teams at Zamboanga and Davao in the south, Caraga and Hinatuan in the east, Butuan and Surigao in the northeast, Talisayan in the north, and Dapitan in the northwest.

In 1901 more missionaries went to Mindanao, including two priests and one brother assigned to the Rio Grande delta. It was again called the Tamontaca Mission (Residentia Tamontacensis) although they lived in Cotabato town. They however continued to serve the little church in Tamontaca, for the farmers were there, most of them Christians.

30The maturity of the Mindanao Christians was shown in their behavior during the prolonged absence of priests. For example, the way they handled marriages: "En Cotabato, como en todas las demas poblaciones, se habian celebrado matrimonios sin la bendicion del sacerdote por carecer de el: pero todos con la promesa e intencion de presentarse a los Padres cuando estos llegasen a fin de que santificaran sus uniones." - Pastells, Mision, III: 432.
That arrangement lasted twelve years, from 1904 to 1916. There were generally two priests in the delta, except one year (1910) when there was only one. Among the priests who served the delta at this time was Father Pio Pi, who had been Superior of the Philippine Jesuit Mission (1896-1905).

But during that time the title "Residentia Tamontacensis" was purely a legal fiction, a tribute to the past, for the priests no longer resided at Tamontaca but at Cotabato. There was no longer any orphanage or mission farm. The Tamontaca experiment was over.

In 1917 the realities of the situation were finally recognized and the mission of the Rio Grande was formally renamed the Cotabato Mission (Residentia Cotabatensis). The work was purely pastoral, saying Mass and administering the sacraments to the people in an increasing number of localities. In this way the Jesuits remained in charge of the Cotabato Mission until 1939 when it was taken over by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI).

Tamontaca is no longer an independent municipality. It is now a suburb of Cotabato City. As previously stated, there are three novitiates there: one for priests, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI); one for the Marist Brothers (FMS); and one for nuns, founded in Cotabato and called Oblates of Noire Dame (OND). These three novitiates are situated on high ground to, the east of the road from Cotabato. To the west of the road, on lower ground, is the old church, and around it a village of fanners, the descendants and successors of the once-flourishing community of Tamontaca.