Higaúnon Resistance and Ethnic Politics in Northern Mindanao

Oona Thommes Paredes
Anthropology and Archaeology
Arizona State University

The root causes of armed aggression among Higaúnon people in northern Mindanao, Philippines, have changed over the centuries. Prior to the 20th century, its primary aim was raiding for slaves and for redress of personal grievances. At the turn of the 20th century, armed aggression became tied to the loss of ancestral lands, an issue which grew more acute as Mindanao became the target of government resettlement policies and economic ventures. In the 1970s, Higaúnon aggression culminated in the 'Higaúnon War' against commercial logging on their ancestral lands. Rhetoric employed in this 'war' changed over the years, from limited personal grievances to Marxist ideology to radical environmentalism, all of which have engendered violent responses from the government. Recently, Higaúnons have conflated environmentalist rhetoric with expressions of their ethnic identity, and emphasised their economic as well as cultural dependence on the land. This peaceful strategy has produced some positive results but, because of continuing land insecurity, it has not completely eliminated the prospect of armed aggression in the future.

We can discuss 'resistance' in many different ways, but we often do so in vague terms. We may perceive any unconventional behaviour as manifesting 'resistance' even when it is unclear what people are supposed to be resisting. For example, some might interpret ancestral religious practices as an act of resistance or rebellion, even when it may not

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Fifth International Conference on Philippines Studies, Honolulu, Hawai‘i, 14-16 April 1997. I would like to thank Gerhard van den Top, Lela G. Noble, Stephen M. Perkins, Reed Wadley, and the anonymous TAJA reviewers for providing helpful comments to improve the clarity of the text.

2. In one example, Saway (1984:4) reports, under a section entitled 'On the Fanatic Issue', that PANAMIN agents threatened to bring in the military because they interpreted the

THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY, 1997, 8:3, 270-290
necessarily be the case. Participation in millenarian cults, and expressions of dissatisfaction through particular gossip, folktales, songs, metaphors, euphemistic language and ‘grumbling’ are some of the acts that Scott (1990) discusses under the problematic rubric of ‘resistance’. We can find many such acts in the political history of the Higañon, a minority ethnic group in northern Mindanao, Philippines (Cole 1956:6; Paredes 1997:157-70).

In this paper I review expressions of resistance specific to Higañon people which are clearly the outcome of protest against the loss of ancestral lands in particular. This provides a brief glimpse into the recent political history of a population that has been the subject of surprisingly little anthropological research—surprising because estimates of their population size make the Higañon one of the largest non-Muslim ethnic minorities in the Philippines. First, I discuss in a general manner how the roots of armed aggression among Higañons have changed over the centuries. Second, I recount what is known of Higañon aggression during the Spanish and American colonial periods. Third, I review aggression vis-à-vis settlers and economic development projects in the post-colonial period, focusing in part on what has been called the ‘Higañon War’ against commercial logging, and how the rhetoric of environmentalism has come to be incorporated into this situation. Finally, I show another facet of the Higañon fight to protect their land, by actively fusing expressions of their ethnic identity with the currently powerful rhetoric of environmentalism.

I focus here on the clearest indicator of resistance—armed aggression and explicit threats of violence known to be directed against those who the Higañon perceive as being culpable for the loss of their lands. Land issues are privileged here over other causes of explicit resistance because I found in the field that, even when I inquired into such seemingly unrelated topics as religious conversion and genealogy, they were always somehow tied to the matter of ancestral lands. Although Higañons, as a diverse people, have their individual problems, the tremendous uncertainty over the use and retention of ancestral lands is a problem that all of them share in some way. In a very real sense, this situation is an underlying cause for many of their most serious problems, e.g., poverty, internal political and social conflict, physical well-being, and exploitation by other Filipinos (Paredes 1997:65-94). Therefore, just as land is one of the general issues that tie all Higañon people together, it is also the common denominator that draws together the different acts of Higañon resistance.

The discussion on environmentalism and ethnicity is included to show that the issue of land is important on another level for Higañons. In the past few decades the land struggle has also become an important marker of ethnic identity. Much of who they are today as a people, and their present place in the larger world, is often explained in terms of this struggle. In other words, just as the struggle over land brings together various Higañon

production and use of medicinal concoctions and religious rituals by the Talaandig in Bukidnon to be ‘instruments for rebellion’.

3. Based on NCCP-PACT (1988) figures, Higañon sub-groups (see fn. 4 below) exceed in population size even more famous Igorot tribes such as the Ifugao, Bontoc, Ilonggot, and Kalinga.
acts of aggression into a meaningful framework, it also brings together the different threads of Higañon political and social history.

Unless otherwise indicated, the data presented in this paper are based on field research conducted in Higañon communities in Misamis Oriental province between May and August 1995. While I refer to all Higañons in a general way, most of my data pertains primarily to Higañons living in what is now Misamis Oriental province.

The Higañon

The term ‘Higañon’ refers to a large and diverse population living today in the variably forested interior plains and mountains of northern Mindanao, covering the modern provinces of Misamis Oriental, Agusan del Norte, Agusan del Sur, and Bukidnon. ‘Higañon’ is the name they call themselves, but they are also known to outsiders by other names which refer primarily to their geographical location—the hinterland, the mountains. In Bukidnon province they are generally referred to as the ‘Bukidnon’, a Cebuano term meaning, literally, ‘mountain people’. As a modern population, they can be distinguished linguistically, culturally, historically, and genealogically from other Filipinos in northern Mindanao who are relatively recent arrivals, the majority of whom started living in the region only after World War II. For this reason they, along with other non-Muslim groups, are called the indigenous peoples or Lumád (Cebuano, lit. ‘born from the earth’) of Mindanao. Ethnic groups indigenous to Mindanao that adopted Islam are generally referred to by the Spanish term Moro (lit. ‘Moor’). The settlers who dominate the region, in contrast, are referred to by Higañons as Dumágat (lit. ‘coastal dweller’).

Linguistically, the Higañon speak a language that belongs to the Northern sub-group of the Manobo family of Philippine languages (Elkins 1974), a large family that includes the largest number of speech communities indigenous to Mindanao (Lebar 1975:39). The actual size of the Higañon population is highly debatable, due to the remoteness and the mobility of many settlements, and the fact that some Higañon try to ‘pass’ for Dumágats or settlers in order to avoid discrimination (Paredes 1997:226-28). However, in 1988 the total population of Higañon groups4 was estimated at over 250,000 men, women, and children, making them the third largest Lumád group, after the Subanen and the Manobo (NCCP-PACT 1988). Of this estimate, perhaps 25% live in Bukidnon.

Traditionally—that is, based on observations made at the turn of the century—the Higañon lifestyle revolved around shifting cultivation, supplemented by fishing, the hunting of wild game, and foraging for forest roots, grubs, and edible plants. Many households harvested rattan and other forest products, and some grew such crops as corn and hemp, to sell for cash. Settlements were, with some exceptions in Bukidnon, generally isolated and limited to a few households that shifted locations after one or two planting seasons to new fields within a designated area of the forest (Lynch 1967). Because of this

4. Higañon—173,937; Bukidnon—72,000; Banwaon—33,000; Talaandig—9,000. All these peoples are very closely related linguistically and culturally, and in my view should be seen as Higañon sub-groups (Paredes 1997:46-9).
annual shifting of residences, dwellings were not constructed for durability, and Higañon were (and still are), in general, a highly mobile people. Political organisation revolved around one or more dátu (community political leaders) who served judicial, military, ceremonial, and other functions (Biernatzki 1973). This is also how elderly Higañons today describe and idealise their 'traditional culture' (BALC 1994).

In the last half-century, massive deforestation and immigration of people from the Visayas and Luzon have caused great changes in this traditional lifestyle, and many Higañon can no longer depend on the forest for livelihood or even basic nutrition. Although these days many Higañon still choose to live 'traditionally' from the forest and off the land, they are very much part of the modern world where tóper (tupperware), tiyp (tape recorder), iðru (hydro), dipláno (aeroplane) and kapipánis ('copy furnished', used in formal letter-writing) are common words and where it is not unusual to hear commentaries on national and international culture and politics. Today, no Higañon area is unaffected by the cash-based economy, and most Higañon try to produce cash crops and engage in whatever wage labour jobs they can find in order to pay for commercial goods and such services as health care and education.

Aggression from pre-colonial to present times

The existence of raiding and warfare in Mindanao, particularly on the part of Moro groups, has been well documented by European voyagers since the 1500s. But the prevalence or regularity of this type of aggression by Lumáds prior to the 19th century is largely unknown. From a reading of the raiding history in nearby Sulu (Warren 1985), it seems that Lumád raids were quite irregular and were few and far between. Raiding was done primarily for the purpose of acquiring slaves for personal use or for trade, and exacting revenge for past raids or killings (Biernatzki 1978:27, 1973:29-30; Cole1956:86; W. Scott 1994:151-53). The latter was generally called pangáyaw, a word that has cognates throughout the central and the southern Philippines as well as Borneo. In a study of Yanomami political history, Ferguson (1995) shows that their patterns of warfare, particularly its increase, were related to the presence of foreigners and foreign goods in the Amazon. It is possible that Higañon warfare has also been influenced by the presence of foreign missionaries, although this subject requires much research before we can make a definitive statement. However, during the last quarter of the 19th century, as Catholic missionising in northern Mindanao intensified, so did the pangáyaw situation. It appeared to grow to such intensity in the Agusan area that a passing French anthropologist, Joseph Montano, described a 'land of terror ... at the point of depopulating itself' (Schreurs 1983, 1989:301). While pangáyaw activity has dramatically declined since those times, it has not completely disappeared as a practice among Higañons.

In pre-colonial Mindanao, slave raiding was widespread partly because, unlike today, manpower was a more valuable commodity than land. Low population densities meant that for economic and political reasons, 'competition was fundamentally over control of people' (Reid 1988:122) and not over the control of land. Reid's description of the standard response to raiding tells us much about the raiding and warfare pattern of pre-colonial Southeast Asia:
The typical defensive response of the weaker party was therefore to escape capture by fading away into the forest and waiting for the invading force to tire of plunder and to depart. The lightness and impermanence of most urban structures and the portability of wealth . . . did not encourage a strategy of defending cities with stone walls, moats, and desperate last stands. (1988:122)

Elderly Higañons say that their ‘traditional’ response to most threats was also to abandon settlements and wait until the trespassers left. The expectation was that the raiders would eventually leave once they had taken all they wanted or leave because there was nothing to take, and that the residents would be able to return and rebuild. This ‘typical defensive response’ from pre-colonial times has great implications for understanding the ease with which other Filipinos were later able to seize control of Higañon and other Lumád territory throughout Mindanao. It is also important to note that from the 16th century to the present, Lumád peoples (with the possible exception of historical Mandaya) can easily be identified militarily, politically, and demographically as the weaker party whether their adversaries were any of the Moro groups (e.g. Magindanao, Maranaw), Spaniards, or 20th-century Filipinos. Consequently, when Lumáds raided anyone, their targets were, more often than not, other Lumáds.

By the mid- to late-20th century, slave raiding activity had practically ceased (but not completely, e.g. Biernatzki 1973:30), and Higañons were losing control of large sections of their ancestral territory in the interior to settlers and development projects, as well as to military activity. In the mid-1970s, the Luzon-based New People’s Army (NPA), a rebel force committed to communist ideology, also began operating in the area, which further intensified military activity. According to my informants, it was apparently during this period that Higañons began to realise not only that the land was in limited supply and was now the main object of competition, but also that loss of land resulted in a host of other problems for them as well. Because of their total economic dependence on the land, specifically forested lands, starvation and destitution became an overwhelming prospect. With the influx of migrants into Mindanao after World War II, a sheer lack of available land also reduced drastically the feasibility of the common tactic of fleeing any confrontation. One expression I heard often during field research summarises the Higañon perspective quite bluntly: ‘We have nowhere to run but up our asses’.

In the 1990s, Higañons no longer have isolated areas to which they can run for protection. They have used this situation to justify both inaction and armed aggression as responses to the threats from outside. In discussing armed aggression as a form of Higañon resistance, I do not mean to say that all Higañons respond in such a manner or that they possess a belligerence exceeding that of other people in the world. Although all Lumád peoples at one time or another responded to foreign and Filipino domination with violence (e.g. Rodil 1990), only some populations (such as the historical Mandaya and Caraga) gained a reputation for belligerence (e.g. Cole 1913; Garvan 1941). All Higañons I spoke with expressed resignation and hopelessness with regard to their situation, and stated the desire to avoid any confrontation and simply survive the military and rebel activities in their area. Avoiding violent confrontation, in fact, was declared by some to be a defining cultural characteristic of Higañons.
At the same time, when agitated by the prospect of losing their lands to development or settlers, many men threatened to take up arms, adding that they were being left with no choice. However, in four communities totaling perhaps 2,000 residents, I could find only two men who had actually participated in a killing. In addition, only one elderly man had participated in pangdyaw activity in his youth (for which he was eventually imprisoned). In contrast, almost everyone I met had been victims of violence by outsiders, in one form or another. Many lost family and friends due to the violence of certain military and rebel activities, while others claim to have been harassed or assaulted by rebels, soldiers, or Dumágats.5 Almost all had evacuated to other settlements at least once in the past decade in order to avoid the threat of counter-insurgency violence. My main research site was even bombed from the air during the so-called ‘Higaonon War’ (see below). Some communities, in turn, had experienced both military relocation (known colloquially as ‘hamletting’) and rebel occupation. In light of this, Higaonons are more appropriately characterised as victims of violence rather than aggressors.

**Resistance during the colonial period**

In the 16th and 17th centuries Spanish missionaries and their activities in northern Mindanao were not necessarily perceived as threatening by the locals. In places like Himologà (now the city of Cagayan de Oro) and Butuan it appeared that they were simply incorporated into existing the settlements. That many Lumás (with the notable exception of the Caragas) welcomed the missionaries and even chose to become Christians demonstrates that, contrary to common perception, the Spaniards were not necessarily hated nor was Christianity necessarily perceived as a serious threat in the northern Mindanao area. Schreurs even writes that the Manobos in northeastern Mindanao ‘behaved peacefully with the Spaniards but that was definitely not the case with regard to the neighboring . . . tribesmen’ (1989:301). For the Spanish colonial period I focus on local reaction to missionaries because during this time, they were the primary contact that Higaonons and other people in northern Mindanao had with Spanish colonialism.

That the Spanish missionaries were supported by military detachments to protect converts from Moro domination and raiding must have also made Christian conversion appealing to people who felt vulnerable to raids. The presence of the Recollect missionaries, for example, appears critical in breaking the hold of the Magindanao sultanate on its tributaries in Himologan, Butuan, and the east coast of Mindanao. This process included several military forays into Maranaw and Magindanao areas led by a young military-trained Recollect priest named Agustin de San Pedro (Madigan 1963). In addition to the conversion to Christianity of Visayans in the islands to the north, these activities resulted in a realignment of political power in Mindanao, principally through the

---

5. It is curious that for all the reports I have read concerning military violence against indigenous peoples in the Philippines (e.g. IWGIA 1992), my Higaonon informants made it clear to me that while their encounters with the military were certainly uncomfortable, the rebels caused a much larger disturbance in their communities through murder, assault, and harassment.
alteration of earlier raiding patterns. One effect of this was the intensification of Moro (specifically Ibanun) raiding on northeastern Mindanao in the late 18th century (Warren 1985:169,171).

Except for some incidents in which people burned and abandoned their homes in order to avoid contact with missionaries (Lao 1985:36), no Higañon violence is noted in the sources I consulted until the late 19th century. Despite initial reports from the 1590s that some inhabitants were ‘by no means tractable on account of their fierce and violent nature’ (Blair and Robertson 1906, 34:202, quoted in Garvan 1941:241), it is soon noted that the local inhabitants were protecting the missionaries from Moro and Caraga attacks (Garvan 1941:242-244). Later, some ‘rebellions’ by unconverted ‘Manobos’ were noted in the interior areas of Agusan and Surigao, where ‘armed expeditions were actually sent out to overcome opposition to the adoption of Christianity’ (Garvan 1941:242-51). At the time the term ‘Manobo’ referred to unconverted natives in general (Garvan 1941:1), and therefore could easily indicate activity by the ancestors of today’s Higañon. Pagbáyan millenarian movements were also noted during the Spanish colonial period, but while they might be loosely considered under the rubric of ‘resistance’, it is debatable whether these movements were actually forms of protest against Christianity (Paredes 1997:157-70). In Mindanao, for example, missionaries were known to have protected Higañons from exploitation by Dumágats and others. In any case, there is no indication that any of these disturbances were related to the control of land.

In many ways, the Spanish colonial period made a significant impact on the interior populations of northern Mindanao (Paredes 1997). However, that impact is not readily obvious when we observe Lumád populations in the present day. Most Higañons I interviewed had either never heard about the Spaniards or insisted that they did not make inroads beyond the coastal cities. Some Higañon dátu in western Misamis even told me that Spaniards never set foot in Mindanao. When I expressed disbelief they conceded that some Spaniards might have come to Mindanao, but that if so they only made súray or ‘checked out the scenery’. This is not necessarily an unusual view. Maquiao (1977) reports that the Spaniards are similarly absent in some Arumanen Manobo histories. However, this is very possibly due to the nature of oral traditions rather than a clear reflection of the impact of Spanish colonialism in the area.

The Spanish period closed in northern Mindanao almost as peacefully as it began. The outbreak of the Philippine Revolution was apparently met with indifference by the local residents, some of whom (in southern Mindanao) even ‘offer[ed] to take up arms on Spain’s behalf’ (Arcilla 1990:46-7). At this time the Jesuit missionaries were apparently more concerned about an outbreak of smallpox that was driving people away from the missions (Arcilla 1990:48). Violence during this period consisted of scattered uprisings by small bands, the largest of which appeared to be ‘between 300 and 400’ escaped Tagalog prisoners deported from the north to be imprisoned in Mindanao (Arcilla 1990:47). In late 1896, this particular group escaped and was routed by Filipino soldiers to the hinterlands of Misamis where within a few months it was apparently joined by a number of Higañons, led by a dátu named Suba, and with this assistance they pillaged several coastal towns. Soon came other escapees and ‘renegade neo-Christians’, all of whom appear to have targeted Chinese merchants more than Spaniards in their attacks. After a
year Dátu Suba and his followers approached the Jesuit missionary Father Juan Heras and requested baptism (Arcilla 1990:48-50). In fact, most of the violence at the close of the Spanish period was due not so much to revolutionary fervour but rather to ‘the appearance of marauding bands of fugitives’ after plunder (Arcilla 1990:48).

The American colonial period opened with nominal Higaûnon participation in the ‘Cagayan phase’ (1900-1901) of the Philippine-American war which, like the Revolution against Spain in the north, drew little interest or support among the locals in northern Mindanao (Lao 1985:43-6). Lao describes four encounters with American troops involving Higaûnons and local Dumâgats under a Cagayan lawyer named Capistrano. One of these encounters was a victory against the Americans in the Battle of Macahambus. Another was an assault by Bukid nons on the 28th United States Volunteers in which the former dropped upon the latter ‘huge logs about 4 feet in diameter and about 20 feet long [off] a steep canyon . . . followed by . . . stones the size of one’s head’ (Lao 1985:45). Despite the presence of armed aggression, there is as yet no sign of Higaûnon resistance due to loss of land.

While most people complied with American efforts at integration, Lao notes that in Bukidnon the ‘outbreak of sporadic native unrest . . . was prevalent in the early years of the American regime’ (Lao 1985:140). This aggression was noted by some as a response to relocation efforts and the presence of Dumâgat settlers, but were dismissed as mere banditry by the colonial government. The American colonial government encouraged Dumâgats (with little success) to resettle in the interior of Bukidnon as part of an effort to jump-start the province’s economic development (Lao 1985:89). Despite the very low settler turnout (Lao 1985:89), the presence of a few homesteaders on their land was enough to incite aggression among the local Higaûnons. The largest of these uprisings, headed by a man named Dátu Inda, was triggered specifically by the displacement of Higaûnons by settlers and lasted from 1918 to 1924 (Lao 1985:140-4). This time, the protection of territory was clearly at the centre of Higaûnon resistance.

In terms of relocation, it appears that during the Spanish period, Christian converts and other already cooperative Higaûnons were the target of relocation efforts. In fact, relocation to larger settlements may have been desirable at that time in the face of regular and widespread Moro raiding (Paredes 1997:88-9). In contrast, American relocation appeared aimed at all Higaûnons as part of an effort to attain the total political and cultural integration of non-Christian tribes (Lao 1985:55). In contrast to Spanish relocation, Americans had the resources and power to forcibly remove people from their original forest settlements. The provincial government reportedly ‘threatened with the use of arms those natives who stubbornly resisted resettlement, a program which (it was believed) served their best interest and welfare’ (Lao 1985:58). By 1914, more than 30,000 ‘Bukidnon’ had been moved into compact ‘model’ villages organised by the Americans. However, others fought to maintain control of their land. It is clear that Higaûnons resisted because even as late as 1919, almost twenty years into the American occupation, the government deemed it necessary to pass laws authorising officials to imprison non-Christians who refused to be relocated (Lao 1985:60).

However, we cannot necessarily equate the above resistance with anti-American sentiment. By the time of the Japanese occupation in 1942, Higaûnons in Bukidnon joined
former USAFFE soldiers in an anti-Japanese guerilla movement that drew massive grassroots support throughout northern Mindanao. Due to Japanese atrocities, other Bukid non-s, such as Captain Ramon Onahon, formed their own guerilla groups that operated in tandem with the USAFFE guerillas for the duration of World War II and were eventually absorbed into the unified command of the Mindanao Guerilla Force (Lao 1985:168-182). Although Japanese forces occupied the Bukidnon plateau and attempted to reorganise the residents, other Higañon areas were largely unaffected during this period. One elderly dātu in southeastern Misamis, a young child during the war, recalled that the only ‘happening’ at that time was when one dying Japanese soldier wandered into their area.

**Armed resistance in the Philippine Republic**

After World War II, when droves of people from the northern Philippine islands arrived to settle the ‘promised land’ in the interior of Mindanao, Higañons for the first time were faced with the massive loss of their ancestral lands. Unlike raiders of the past, these were in effect trespassers who would not leave. Of course Higañons did not necessarily endure the arrival of settlers without a fight. After President Ramon Magsaysay’s resettlement program was implemented in 1954, Higañons occasionally attacked settlers in order to drive them away. Some other settlers experienced political domination and ‘taxation’ under a local dātu. However, the most intense in-migration and Lumád violence took place in southern Mindanao, and it took another two decades before violence between settlers and Higañons became widespread in northern Mindanao. By the 1970s, settlers accounted for over 60% of Mindanao’s population (May 1992:128), making Lumád and Moro peoples demographic and political minorities in their own homelands.

By the declaration of Martial Law in 1972, tensions over access to land had escalated throughout the island as armed groups of Moros, Lumáds, poor settlers, and wealthy landowners all grew increasingly militant in protecting their interests. This tense situation was apparently cited as one reason for the declaration of Martial Law (May 1992:130). To deal with the problems of the new minorities, the government commissioned PANAMIN, the Presidential Assistant for National Minorities,6 which subsequently became notorious for exploiting Lumáds economically and politically (ICL 1979). Ironically, Martial Law also created an atmosphere of political repression in which religious workers and others were harassed, arrested, or murdered, allegedly for being ‘leftists’ or ‘communist insurgents’ due to their attempts to empower or aid Lumáds and poor settlers.7 While the government had a serious problem on its hands due to the rise of the communist NPA, many individuals and organisations were unfairly targeted as sympathisers, much like a political witch-hunt.

---

6. In Mindanao, PANAMIN was eventually replaced by the Office of Southern Cultural Communities under the Aquino regime.
At this time the government, as part of its counterinsurgency efforts, not only reinforced its military presence but also armed thousands of 'Christian fanatics' who were 'predispos[ed] to violent behavior' (May 1992:131). While some Higañons and other Lumáðs might have joined these 'fanatic' groups, they were comprised primarily of Visayan settlers who were engaged in syncretic revitalisation movements or cults. Among those operating in northern Mindanao were extremely violent groups with such names as: Rock Christ; the 4-Ks, whose name was a Cebuano abbreviation for 'Sin, Salvation, Life, and Poverty'; Sagrado Corazon Señor, also known as Tadtád or 'chop' from their practice of killing their victims by chopping them into small pieces; and two Rizalian groups called Caballeros de Rizal Agricultural Endeavor and the Philippine Benevolent Missionary Association or PBMA (ICL 1979:10; May 1992:131). The violence of these military auxiliaries resulted in numerous murders and other human rights abuses throughout Mindanao directed against anyone suspected of being 'rebel sympathisers' or having sentiments against the Marcos regime (see Coronel 1993:102-7, 134-9).

During this turbulent period, the government also increased its armed support of and allotment of land to corporate development interests in Mindanao. This resulted in the displacement and extensive relocation of both settlers and Lumáðs to agribusiness, mining, and logging, in addition to new government projects such as hydroelectric dams. Different groups of Lumáðs responded to these new developments with armed aggression, sometimes working alongside settler cult groups, beginning in the late 1960s. In northern Mindanao, this initial period of aggression against the intrusion of large-scale development was termed by one dátu as the panahón ni Mabaláw, or the 'time of Mabaláw'. Mabaláw is also known as Richard de la Camara, a Higañon mestizo described in one Filipino newspaper as a 'Spanish-Manobo mestizo' who bore 'a faint resemblance to Errol Flynn' (Tupas 1968:11). In the late 1960s, Mabaláw was suspected of coordinating people from the Manobo, Higañon, Mamanwa, and Magahat tribes in several raids against logging workers (Tupas 1968). In 1973, he formed the 'Higaunon Supreme Council of Datus', of which he was the 'Overall Chieftain' or Gipolón. May reports that this organisation was 'initially promoted by the Philippine Constabulary (PC) to counter the growing influence of the NPA in the area' (May 1992:132) and promote 'peace and order'. However, during this politically oppressive period (1992:130-5), Mabaláw succeeded in achieving the opposite result:

Instead, its violent rhetoric against the PC and their unfulfilled promises stir[red] up the members against the PC and increase[d] unrest and militarisation in the area. (ICL 1979:10)

From the very beginning, all such violence during the Mabaláw period was acknowledged by both the government and the various Lumáðs involved as retaliation for

7. One of the religious workers imprisoned was Jesuit priest Vincent Cullen, who worked with Higañons in northeast Bukidnon (see Cullen 1973).
8. Rizalians worship the Philippine national hero Dr. José Rizal as a supernatural, Christ-like figure (Ilie 1989:50).
9. Magahat actually means 'outlaw', and it is sometimes used mistakenly by outsiders, implying that certain types of Higañons are members of a separate ethnic group (Paredes 1997:46).
‘landgrabbing’, particularly on the part of logging companies (Olano 1977; Tupas 1968:10). Harassment by the military and logging workers also fuelled the anger and violence of Higañons.

Biernatzki reported a serious incident in 1968 wherein ‘more than a dozen’ people were killed during an ambush of logging workers in Esperanza, Agusan del Sur. This, in turn, incited ‘a small-scale guerilla war’ between Higañons and the logging company (1973:32). This was possibly the pangáyaw led by the dátu Manpatilan, who was reportedly avenging his brother’s murder at the hands of logging concession guards. Manpatilan was later photographed for National Geographic as part of a feature article on ‘Philippine tribes in trouble’ (MacLeish and Conger 1971:227). Although the article focused on the allegedly altruistic work done by Manuel Elizalde as director of PANAMIN, it lent legitimacy to Manpatilan’s pangáyaw because he was represented as the leader of a helpless minority group that had been grievously wronged by society. A similar pangáyaw was to erupt a few years later, brought on by the death of another dátu named Mankalási, a situation reported in the press as the ‘Higañon War’ (Gatuslao 1988). As discussed below, the ‘Higañon War’ lasted for over two decades, until the death of its leader ‘Kumander Jabbar’ in 1992. Although such incidents of pangáyaw appear to be personal vendettas, or even personality cults, they were always reducible to a deep sense of injustice due to the loss of ancestral lands. This is discussed further in the next section.

It is also important to understand that this type of violence does not necessarily represent the intentions of all Higañons. As mentioned previously, many Higañons prefer to avoid serious conflict altogether—and in fact many did. The fact that some Higañons were employed by the logging companies meant that kin and friends were sometimes forced to take opposing sides in these conflicts. The difficult choice between rare employment opportunities and protecting ancestral lands remains a dilemma today. Either choice can improve or destroy a household’s chances of survival. For example, a logging job brings prospects of a small paycheck, violent death, or being in conflict with your own community, and fighting for the land brings prospects of poverty, violent death, or continuing insecurity of tenure. Although many Higañons supported such violence in defence of their lands, most were also terrorised by the cross-fire between the military and the logging companies on one side and armed Higañons on the other. Manpatilan, for example, was described in National Geographic as ‘Hero among the Higañons’ but was greatly feared by Higañons in eastern Misamis as a violent outlaw. Mankalási’s grandson ‘Jabbar’ also was feared as an extremely violent person and was known to have killed Higañons who interfered, however unwittingly, with his plans. It was made clear to me that, in the absence of realistic legal options, armed aggression was the last resort of the majority of Higañons.

Narratives of the ‘Higañon War’

In this section, I explore a recent chapter in Higañon aggression. The different narratives regarding the ‘Higañon War’ introduce us to the changing rhetoric of
Higañon resistance and show the different ways in which Higañons have come to understand this important chapter in their political history. Despite the different narratives regarding its proximate cause, the ultimate cause of this conflict remains the control of land.

According to the print media and the local government, the ‘war’ began as a pangáyaw launched in 1972 when a logging company assassinated several Higañon dátu, particularly Mankalási of the Mandahñog family, for refusing access to timber-rich ancestral land bordering on Misamis Oriental and Agusan del Sur provinces (Gatuslao 1988). The government authorities neglected these murders and other Higañon complaints against the company, further aggravating the situation. This resulted in the declaration of a pangáyaw by Mankalási’s son, Kalási, who pledged to conduct raids until the murderers were brought to justice. By the time the NPA entered Higañon areas in 1976, they ‘found a tribal rebellion in full swing’ and were easily able to recruit Kalási and his band of warriors into one of the first NPA units in Mindanao (Gatuslao 1988:5).

The ‘official’ story above matches that relayed by my Higañon informants who have worked with NGOs and the local government. One young man referred to his stint with the NPA as a legitimate military experience under a legitimate government—in the form of the National Democratic Front, the political wing of the NPA—that had usurped the authority of one that was unjust and corrupt. Today, he is affiliated with several local NGOs and is seeking to secure his community’s ancestral domain claim, through which he hopes to protect the remaining forest from logging and develop livelihood projects for Higañons. According to this young man, the Higañon war began when Dátu Mankalási Mandahñog was killed by the government for the benefit of the logging company. His fate was sealed after a meeting with the loggers and the government during which Mankalási stated that he would surrender ancestral land to the loggers only if the company could guarantee a means to feed, clothe, and support his entire family for seven future generations. This demand was supposedly the equivalent of what his family would lose if the company took the forest and the government took the land. Mankalási’s poetic speech apparently drew the ire of the company and the government because they felt it would encourage other dátu to respond similarly, so they had him killed. Mankalási’s son Kalási then formed the Palang Bagani (Red Warriors) to exact revenge and to protect the ancestral land from being taken by the company. It was Kalási’s son Hucád Mandahñog, later known as Kumander Jabbar, who incorporated Marxist ideology into their pangáyaw. This narrative, therefore, appears to take an environmentalist tack.

However, other informants presented different twists. According to some, the hostilities began when Higañons started destroying and stealing a logging company’s equipment. Higañons were apparently angered by the fact that the company would not hire Higañon applicants or even let them hitch rides on logging trucks. Employment and transportation were privileges they expected in exchange for letting the company use their land. Soon it became apparent that they could not legally take their land back from the logging company, and they felt swindled. Therefore, one man explained, the people in his parents’ and grandparents’ generation began using homemade rifles to ambush company employees. One of them, Mankalási, would ‘ambush’ once a year by using logging trucks for target practice, and this is how the pangáyaw developed. That these ‘ambushes’ were
conducted by Mankalási as well as Manpatilan were also noted by others (Biernatzki 1978:98-100).

In another version, two dátu in Agusan explained that Mankalási was actually killed by an angry Dumágat whom he had swindled in a land deal. Apparently, Mankalási and others started selling land to Dumágats in order to get cash for ‘things to get drunk on’. Often the land not only belonged to others but was also sold very cheaply and to more than one person at a time. Although this version suggests that Mankalási got what he deserved, the two dátu also implied that Dumágats had done much worse to Higaúnons in terms of the unfair acquisition of land. Therefore, despite the fact that Mankalási was a known troublemaker, there remained an inescapable injustice that had to be corrected. After Mankalási’s death, his son Kalási started a war against Dumágats, including those in the government. When the military came to arrest Kalási, he fled with his son Jabbar into the forest.

Another man who is cousin to Kalási says that Dátu Mankalási was instead killed by soldiers during a drinking binge. The soldiers were in civilian clothes but armed with concealed weapons. After all of them (including Mankalási) were completely drunk, one of the soldiers started shooting. A young grandson of Mankalási, probably Jabbar, watched as the soldiers pumped seven bullets into the dátu’s body. Despite the differing versions, all agreed that because of his father’s and grandfather’s activities, Jabbar (age 13 at the time) was arrested by the military and made to drink the soldiers’ urine. This cruel treatment is apparently what turned the young Jabbar forever against the government and into the arms of the NPA. Jabbar himself is an enigma. To some, he came across as harmless and uncharismatic, yet he was so greatly feared that no Higaúnon dared challenge his ideas or his actions openly. He also grew into a powerful folk figure who cultivated links to supernatural phenomena, and he was often rumoured to have died, only to resurface alive elsewhere.

These different narratives give a novel perspective to the Higaúnons’ conflicts with the logging company, and in the last two versions, the pangáyaw is not even connected in any way to logging. It becomes apparent that Higaúnons are not necessarily against the commercial exploitation of the forest—as long as they receive acceptable compensation and retain ultimate control of their land. In fact, logging is not the issue at all. This point is significant later on, when the conflict becomes infused with environmentalist rhetoric.

**Changing rhetoric**

This Higaúnon ‘war’ was in the beginning strictly non-ideological and easily labelled ‘banditry’ by the government and the military. When the Higaúnon joined the NPA, they gained access to arms, and the pangáyaw against the company became articulated with a nationally-recognised movement involving Marxist ideology. But becoming part of a wider class struggle against the bourgeoisie on the periphery of international geopolitics only served to further remove the Higaúnon from their claims, especially during the Cold War. Under Martial Law, any connection with Marxist rhetoric, no matter how remote, was enough to draw retaliation from the government. The national government, in keeping
with its NPA policy and other broad anti-subversion decrees of the time, treated this resistance as a communist insurgency that warranted food blockades and a military response. A local government official in nearby Gingoog City, Misamis Oriental, described these military assaults, involving air strikes and the use of helicopter gunships (Gatuslao 1988), as being 'like Apocalypse Now', referring to the Francis Ford Coppola movie on the American war in Vietnam.

By 1988, with the end of Martial Law and the famous rise of 'People Power', the language of Higañon resistance began to gravitate towards complaints of deforestation and unchecked human rights abuses by the military (Gatuslao 1988; MMNS 1993). This coincided with the rise of democracy and popular environmentalism in the Philippines. In Misamis Oriental province, the pangáyaw was brought into a new phase by a public statement declaring 10,000 hectares of the company's logging concession as a forest reserve. This began a potentially explosive standoff involving heavily armed barricades and the demolition of the company's bridges and logging trucks. Around the same time, Higañons in neighbouring Agusan del Sur province reportedly declared logging bans in their respective areas as well. Though the Higañon involved were NPA troops and sympathisers, they chose the rhetoric of environmentalism over that of class struggle to represent their actions. Despite the growing public concern over deforestation and the idea of a total logging ban gaining popularity in the Philippines (PCIJ 1993:9-13), this tactic still received a violent reaction from the government. However, the local government apparently saw in this new rhetoric a possibility for negotiation, and began requesting that the military and its auxiliaries be withdrawn so that the Higañon areas could be more appropriately managed by the local police (Lugod 1992:1).

Ultimately, this standoff by 'environmentalist' Higañon rebels caused a cessation of most of the company's operations, which brought about a de facto logging ban (ALCO 1994). However, the government has never rescinded their Timber License Agreement and in 1993, a year after Jabbar's demise (which was verified in Lugod 1992), they formally resumed operations in Higañon areas, mainly through surveying and the filing of operation plans to the appropriate government agencies. Despite the changes of rhetoric and ideology summarised above—from a mere pangáyaw to Marxism to environmentalism—the issue remains control over ancestral land.

**Politics and ethnicity**

From the viewpoint of Higañons, relations with the Philippine government and Dumágats in general have become acutely oppressive in recent decades. This has resulted in the increased politicisation of ethnicity, which can encompass and supersede other agendas. As noted by Acosta (1994:190) in his dissertation on the politics of Lumád ethnicity, 'being Higañon—is parlayed into political capital to substantiate a claim to ancestral land'. Although this was in reference to a particular court case in which a dátu was fighting the ejection of his community in Kinambong, Bukidnon by a reforestation project (Acosta 1994:188-190), 'ethnic' rhetoric is also consciously employed by Higañons in describing relations with outsiders in general. Considering that current Philippine land laws do not allow Higañons and other Lumáds legal ownership to their
lands, ethnicity has become a powerful tool to promote the legitimacy of their land struggles.

This is especially true of Higañon rhetoric in relation to problems with logging companies. In a recent statement to one logging company with an active Timber License Agreement (TLA), one community states,

\[ \text{. . . we don't want you to return here again to take the trees that are left here in our hinterland because we don't want our forest to be ruined again . . . You have destroyed our sacred mountains and other places that we consider precious . . .} \]

(Balighian 1995:1)

The first part of the above quote seems a straightforward pro-environment statement, but the second part is a clear reference to their lack of control over their own lands. In the same letter, they also accuse the company of destroying their ‘spiritual ways of livelihood’ and teaching Higañons to sell trees for money, which subsequently caused Higañons to turn against each other (ibid.). In other words, the presence of commercial logging is undesirable because it allows outsiders to profit from the land, and also causes social disruption. Such talk continues despite the fact that many Higañon men have stated openly that they would readily seek employment in logging, if jobs were available.

Unlike mainstream environmentalist rhetoric that attributes a sacred link between tribal people and their land, however, Higañon rhetoric emphasises their economic dependence on the forest. But in the process they contrast not only their livelihood but also their cultural values with that of Dumágats: Higañons have a ‘moral economy’ wherein they respect each other and protect the forest, whereas Dumágats are purely capitalistic and would kill people and destroy the forest for profit. This contrast is also used to explain such injustices as the theft of ancestral land that Higañons have been forced to suffer at the hands of the government, the military, and Dumágats in general.

In an affidavit requesting the cancellation of the controversial rattan-cutting permit of a Dumágat businessman, seven Higañon men testified that their inclusion in the permit request was ‘fraudulent and in bad faith and the primary purpose was only to take advantage of our being innocent Higañon members to be able to get (cutting) privileges from the government’ (from a joint affidavit, dated April 1993, filed in the City of Gingoog, emphasis added).

This is consistent with the rhetoric I found in other Higañon communities wherein people who seek to benefit themselves at the expense of others are derisively labelled ‘business-minded’ (i.e. non-Higañon). In a letter to the national government requesting the removal of the ‘business-minded’ logging companies, several dātu highlight their cultural distinctiveness by writing:

\[ \text{As for we Higañon people who live here in the forest, let us just be direct . . . in telling you that the forest is definitely our livelihood. It is not possible for us to live by way of business and other methods of livelihood that those who live on the coast have.}^{10} \]

---

10. Undated letter from community representatives of Kinamaybay, Agusan del Sur, and Dokdokaan, Misamis Oriental, to President Fidel V. Ramos.
This passage portrays Higañons as forest people who will be unable to cope if forced to deal with the outside world. By all accounts, however, there are many Higañon who today ‘live by way of business’ and engage in other enterprises on the coast. In fact, important aspects of Higañon livelihood, such as rattan-gathering, depend on dealing regularly with Dumágtat businessmen on the coast.

Although others may question this political use of ethnicity, it is critical to Higañons for two reasons. First, the ancestral lands are vital to their ethnic identity, and they form an important, material connection to their heritage. The lands contain a network of burial grounds, and sites of mythical and religious significance, and sites that constitute the hard evidence of their oral history (BANC 1994). Second, the focus on ethnicity has provided Higañons enough democratic space to argue for their cause coherently, persuasively, and legally. In the politicisation of ethnicity, they have found a meaningful and potentially effective alternative to armed aggression.

One important effect of the politicisation of ethnicity is shown in reports of a 1992 hostage incident involving Higañons in Gingoog City, which eventually resulted in the death of Kumander Jabbar (Gomez 1992; Lugod 1992). One news article quotes the late Mayor Arturo Lugod as clarifying that, although most of the perpetrators were rebels active in the NPA, the hostage-takers were nonetheless to be considered ‘Higañon tribesmen fighting for their tribal rights’ (Gallardo 1992). It is important to note that the Lugod administration did not necessarily support Higañon rights solely out of sympathy for helpless tribal people. Instead, they considered it a realistic strategy for achieving lasting peace in an otherwise violence-ridden area. This may have compelled the administration to explain that ‘although the Higañon tribesmen fight side by side with the NPA, the two groups have different principles’, i.e., whereas the NPA sought to achieve Marxist goals, the Higañons seek:

...the permanent withdrawal of all military troops in the area, for the government to respect their tribal sacred grounds and ancestral domain and to stop all logging operations. (Gallardo 1992)

During this time, the Gingoog City government had been attempting a ‘total development approach’ by socially, politically, and legally recognising the existence of Higañon communities, providing schools, electricity and other government services, and supporting the idea of ancestral land claims to contain the insurgency. Higañons are now also officially acknowledged as part of local society in a city government brochure declaring Higañon as one of the city’s languages. Higañon material culture has also been appropriated by Gingoog’s majority Dumágtats and is now used to celebrate the city’s ‘ethnic’ heritage, especially in the annual Kaliga parade where schoolchildren dress in ‘tribal’ costumes and perform their own rendition of ‘tribal’ dances. The original Higañon Kaliga, however, is an important religious ceremony involving blood sacrifice to spirits.

The act of recognising these communities has provided for legal representation at the local government level and opened lines of communication with rebel factions, making way for the implementation of a national amnesty program. Recent government amnesty programs directed towards NPA and other rebels have also affected the discourse of the ancestral land struggle to some extent. These days, Higañon NPA rebels are apparently
offering to surrender on the condition that their ‘tribal rights’, including rights to ancestral land, first be officially recognised. It is even rumoured that some Higañons have taken advantage of this path, declaring themselves ‘surrenderees’ for a chance at getting their land titled, even though they were never in the NPA in the first place. The same has been reported in reference to government amnesty and gun buy-back programs directed towards the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Several Higañons in western Misamis Oriental, which borders the Moro areas of Lanao del Norte province, are rumoured to have ‘dressed up’ as Moros, ‘surrendered’ themselves, and turned in obsolete or stolen firearms in order to get the cash rewards and other benefits offered to authentic MNLF surrenderees. On the other hand, other Higañons still threaten to join the NPA or become rebels if their ancestral land rights are not recognised, assured from past experience that authorities are more likely to pay attention to rebeldees and that they can always surrender if need be (see ICL 1979: 20-21 for examples of this from Manobo groups). Although it can be argued that amnesty programs are ‘good press’ for the government, showing that it is making progress with regard to peace and order problems, Higañons have also been able to use such programs to their own advantage.

Summary

In this limited review of Higañon political history, we have seen that as circumstances changed, so have the root causes of armed aggression among Higañon people over the past centuries. During the Spanish colonial period, armed conflict in Mindanao was largely due to raiding for slaves and for redress of personal grievances. At this time, control over land was not as critical as control over people. This, along with the military protection against Moro raiding offered by Christian missions, may have even encouraged Higañons and other Lumáds to embrace religious conversion and/or resettlement. Causal connections between Higañon aggression and Christian missionising remain unclear.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the new American colonial government enforced a policy of massive resettlement in Higañon areas. As a result, armed aggression became tied to the loss of ancestral lands for the first time. This issue grew more acute after the Second World War as Mindanao became the target of government resettlement policies and economic ventures. By the 1970s, settlers from other parts of the Philippines accounted for over 60% of Mindanao’s population, making Higañons and other indigenous peoples powerless minorities in their own homelands. This, in turn, caused aggression over land to escalate.

In the late 20th century, Higañon aggression culminated in the ‘Higañon War’ against commercial logging on their ancestral lands. Despite differing narratives regarding the events that sparked this conflict, the control over ancestral land appears to be a recurring point in each version. Rhetoric employed in this ‘war’ changed over the years, from limited personal grievances to Marxist ideology to radical environmentalism, all of which have engendered violent responses from the government. Despite this changing rhetoric, the control over ancestral land is the concern that defines this ‘war’. Recently, Higañons have conflated environmentalist rhetoric with expressions of their ethnic
identity, and emphasised their economic and cultural dependence on the land. Owing to the popular acceptance of such rhetoric in the Philippines, this peaceful strategy has produced some positive results for particular Higañon communities. However, as shown in the final section below, continuing land insecurity has not eliminated the prospect of armed Higañon aggression in the future.

Postscript

‘Environmentalist’ rhetoric is still being used by Higañon communities whose ancestral lands continue to be threatened by the logging operations. However, it has not removed the possibility of yet another pangáyaw, for even the most peace-loving Higañon men have assured me that, if the government allows logging operations to resume in earnest, they will join the NPA in order to defend their lands. Despite this threat, most Higañons are entirely sober about their chances of prevailing against the government. One man explained that, unlike several generations ago, Higañons no longer possess any real power to fight, ultimately comparing their effectiveness to that of ants biting at the heels of the national government and the business interests it supports.

However, recent initiatives by the government’s Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to delineate and officially recognise ancestral land claims in anticipation of future legislation have given some communities hope. In late 1995, one Higañon settlement in eastern Misamis Oriental was awarded 4,000 hectares of their claimed ancestral territory as ‘ancestral land’, and several other communities were completing the claim process. By July 1997, a second Higañon ancestral land claim certificate was awarded in Agusan del Norte. However, because no enabling laws have been passed by the Congress, even such officially recognised ancestral lands are subject to all national policies and programs, which may include logging or other development enterprises, anti-insurgency operations, and resettlement.

Even as the Higañon slowly attempt to legally secure their land claims, many obstacles loom on the horizon that may interfere with this process. The most recent reports from along the border of Misamis and Agusan indicate that another war may erupt at any

11. The official document accounting for this development is known as Department Administrative Order No. 3, Series of 1993, which was drafted in response to new provisions in the 1987 Constitution necessitating the protection of the indigenous minority groups and their ancestral lands.

12. Because of the existing Land Code, the ancestral lands are ‘subject to national development policies and programs’ (MMNS 1993:72). In addition, certificates cannot legally override existing logging, mining, and other such contracts. Therefore, claims that are in such ‘disputed’ areas, like those of the Higañon, do not give them full use-rights until those contracts expire. The logging contracts that encroach on Higañon ancestral land do not expire for another decade (Vitug 1993:220-4). In addition, the Land Code must still be revised in order to grant titles to ancestral lands, which are all on government property. Because many lawmakers have strong ties to logging and mining interests (see Vitug 1993), it is unlikely that such legislation will pass any time in the near future, if at all.
moment. Rumours of hostilities perpetually circulate in the area, making it difficult to clarify what is actually going on. According to the media, however, the military has been bombing Higañnon and Manobo areas all over Agusan del Sur and Surigao provinces—apparently to ‘clear’ the land for large scale development projects—and they have once again begun to use the NPA presence to justify such assaults (Canuday 1996a). The media also report that Lumáds are arming themselves all over Mindanao in response to encroachments by renewed mining and forestry projects. Some ‘warriors’ in Agusan reportedly ambushed a group of mining surveyors in May 1996 (Canuday 1996b), possibly opening another chapter of Higañnon resistance. In addition, Australia’s controversial Western Mining Corporation has reportedly started a mining project in northeastern Bukidnon with a local company. They have applied for a permit to do mining exploration in the town of Impasögông, which lies in the Higañnon heartland. No violence was reported as of August 1997, but the project is facing stiff opposition from Higañnon and other local residents (Enerio 1997).

Perhaps it is necessary to reiterate that despite changes in the rhetoric or ideological attachments employed by Higañons to communicate their concerns over the last few decades, the object of the ‘war’ remains essentially the same thing: land rights. This issue is sure to grow more acute as the density of the Dumágt population in and around Higañnon areas increases and the land and remaining forests become more important to government and corporate interests over the coming years.

References


