

“Rombloanon” comes from the Visayan, “Domblon” or “Lamyon” which means “sitting,” and refers to the people and language of Romblon, an island group off the mainland of southern Luzon. The province of Romblon is composed of the major islands of Tablas, Sibuyan, Romblon, and smaller islands such as Alad, Banton, Simara, Carabao, Logbon, and Cobrador. The province is bounded by Marinduque in the North, Panay in the south, Mindoro in the west, and Masbate in the east. Romblon’s population in 1980 totalled 193,174, with 69.74 percent speaking Rombloanon (*Census* 1980: xxi).

Tablas is the largest island, and the leading producer of staple crops. Sibuyan, the second longest, is thickly forested and mountainous but has wide grazing lands, mercury ore deposits, and vast timber resources. Romblon is the smallest of the major islands but has become the center of commercial and economic activities in the province. Romblon town, located in this island, is the provincial capital. The Rombloanon language spoken throughout the province originated from this place.

## **History**

The Spanish historian Miguel de Loarca visited the place in 1582 and referred to it as “Lomlon” or “Domblon.” In 1635 the Recollects established Christian churches in Banton, Romblon, and Cajidiocan. Like many Visayan provinces, Romblon experienced frequent attacks, initially from the Muslims, and in 1646, from the Dutch. Loarca noted that the Muslim pirates would swoop down on Romblon villages, burn the churches and houses, kill the men, and bring the women and children with them. In order to protect the people from the devastating effects wrought by these invasions, the Recollects built a fort in Romblon and another in Banton Island in 1650.

In the 19th century, under the Spanish colonial government, the province underwent various political and jurisdictional reorganizations. In 1818 it was incorporated into the province of Capiz, and later in 1853, the islands were reorganized into a politico-military *comandancia* with its center in Capiz.

In 1898, Romblon was administered by an army captain with Romblon town as its capital. Other municipalities were named Azagra, Badajoz (now San Agustin), Banton, Cajidiocan, Corcuera, Looc, Magallanes (now Magdiwang), Odiongan, Despujol (now San Andres), and Santa Fe. During the latter part of the Philippine Revolution, Romblon, as part of Capiz, was administered by General Mariano Riego de Dios who headed the Filipino revolutionary forces in the Visayas during the Philippine-American War.

On 16 March 1901, a civil government was established by the Americans. Romblon was created as a regular province. But due to insufficient funds, it again became a subprovince of Capiz in 1907 until 7 December 1917, when it was reestablished as a province.

During World War II, the Japanese Imperial Forces established a garrison in Romblon in 1942, which lasted until the Naval Battle of Sibuyan on 25 October 1945.

In 1947, Romblon regained its provincial status which had been abolished in October 1946 by a Commonwealth Act. The municipalities of the province constituted in 1940 were also restored.

## **Political System**

Romblon is governed by the Department of Interior and Local Government, acting in behalf of the president, through its local government units. The barangay is the basic unit of government. It consists of not less than 1,000 inhabitants and is administered by a set of elective officials headed by a *punong barangay* (barangay chief). The barangay functions as a basic arm for delivering goods and services at the community level. The municipality is a conglomeration of a number of barangays and is administered by elective and appointive officials. The city has large centers of population and has a relatively high degree of economic development (*Philippine Yearbook* 1989:70-73).

## **Social Organization and Customs**

There are a number of beliefs which guide the Rombloanon in the different stages of their life cycle.

Ease in the delivery of a baby is associated with loosening objects in the house. Thus, an expectant mother's husband refrains from tying knots as this may cause problems in the delivery of the child. At the time of delivery, when an expectant mother is undergoing labor, some closed objects used inside the house are opened, or some knotted or tied objects are loosened to "make way" for the baby. Expectant mothers are not allowed to wear any kind of scarf as this may cause the death of the child before or after delivery (Demetrio 1991:403-462).

The way the *inonlan* or placenta is disposed of will determine the child's degree of attachment to the home in its adulthood. If the *inonlan* is buried in the ground near the midpost of the house, the child is likely to stay home most of the time. If the *inonlan* is buried at the post of the stairs, the child, even if it travels far, will always return home. And if the *inonlan* is thrown into the sea, the child will travel most of the time.

Pregnancy is also a sign of good luck, so pregnant women are believed to make good planters of rice as they ensure abundant harvests (Demetrio 1991:403-462).

The Rombloanon take notice of natural phenomena to guide them through marriage. For example, a star close to the moon foretells elopement as women, during this period, are easily won. Another belief is that if on the day of the betrothal either the groom or

the bride gets sick, they will have a short married life (Demetrio 1991:243-342).

During and after the wedding, the objects used in the ceremony are cared for as these may influence the marriage. The candles lighted in front of the couple during the ceremony determines their life span. If the candle near the girl is brighter and lasts longer for the duration of the ceremony than that of the boy, it means that she will live longer. A ring falling during the wedding ceremony is a sign that something bad will happen to the couple. If the wedding veil falls from the groom's head during the ceremony, it signals that the party concerned will not live long. In contrast, if a pot, a glass, or a plate is broken during the wedding reception, the couple will prosper (Demetrio 1991:243-342).

Several other practices are observed after the wedding ceremony. In the bride's house, the groom and the bride each lights a candle. This is then followed by the *saboangan* or *galahan*, the practice of throwing coins or paper money at the newlyweds while they dance. The money thrown at the couple becomes part of the couple's first income. While they have not yet changed their wedding attire, both the groom and the bride refrain from looking at the mirror as this may cause bad luck (Demetrio 1991:243-342).

The Rombloanon take notice of signs which foretell the death of relatives like a moon resembling a cradle, the combing of the hair at night, dreaming of losing a tooth, riding on a boat, or the chirping of the *salagunting*, a kind of beetle. Even a dying person can have a premonition about his death when he is heard to utter meaningful words about it. To forestall death, the person who hears it should interrupt the ominous speech and change the subject of the conversation (Demetrio 1991:463-540).

When a person dies, his relatives go into mourning. The girls wear black clothes while the boys wear ribbons. Within three days, no member of the bereaved family is allowed to clean any portion of the house including the kitchen and the yard for fear of death. Death in the family may also come when a dead person's toes point toward each other, or are inclined inwards. During the *belasyon* (wake), food is served to neighbors and visitors to ensure the passage of the dead man's soul to heaven (Demetrio 1991:463-540).

After the burial, the widow or the widower is not allowed to peep out of the window until after the third day. Relatives and other people who stay in the house where the death occurred are prohibited from combing or cutting their hair during those three days.

On the third day after the burial, relatives partake of the *guigul* (washing) to help the soul of the departed cross the river Jordan (Demetrio 1991:463-540).

### **Religious Beliefs and Practices**

The Rombloanon believe in *anito* or *engkanto* (spirits) that inhabit the mortal world. These spirits live in balete trees which they call *lonok*, and the Rombloanon see to it that the trees are not destroyed, harmed or despised as unseen inhabitants have the power to do harm or offer good luck. They also believe in the *kapre*, a big creature

whose height reaches 5 meters, similar to a coconut tree. It appears at night and does not harm innocent persons (Demetrio 1991:587-638).

Together with the good spirits that bring luck, there are wizards and witches that harm people. An example is the *asuwang* who loves to eat babies and assumes different forms at night in search of victims. The Rombloanon believe in the *barang* (amulet) that protects a person from all physical encounters. One way of acquiring a *barang* is by swallowing a small stone yielded by a certain type of banana at midnight on Good Friday (Demetrio 1991:587-638).

The Christian Rombloanon celebrate their nine-day town fiesta every January, in honor of the Santo Niño, Patron Saint of Romblon town. With Loarca's expedition came the image of the Santo Niño, a replica of the one in Cebu. Legend has it that when the expedition was ready to depart, strong typhoons prevented it from getting out of Romblon Bay. The Spaniards attempted seven times to leave and each time they had to turn back. It was believed that the Santo Niño wanted to stay in Romblon. When the Spaniards decided to leave it on shore, it stuck to its present place and the expedition sailed safely out to sea. This even resulted in the conversion of many natives to the Catholic faith.

During the town fiesta in January, people decorate themselves with flowers and vines, paint their faces, and dance in the streets. A fluvial procession honoring the image of the Holy Child circles the bay seven times to reenact the Spaniards' futile attempt to leave the bay (Carballo 1964:22-23).

Carved out of black wood with gold boots, the 30-centimeter tall image is associated with many tales. Sometimes it is seen playing with little children but it immediately disappears when approached by an adult. Many times, its clothes and feet would be stained with mud although these had been unsoiled the previous night (Carballo 1964:23).

### **Architecture and Community Planning**

Traditional beliefs which guided the early Rombloanon in the construction of their houses are still prevalent among many Rombloanon families. The time for building a new house is determined not only by the availability of material or the suitability of the weather but also by the beliefs associated with each month of the year. Houses built during the months of March, June, September, and November will bring luck and prosperity to their owners. Owners of houses built in July will also prosper if they raise animals such as pigs and cattle. Houses built during the months of May and October will easily catch fire and all household belongings including the owners will perish with the fire (Demetrio 1991:123-162).

In the selection of housing materials, the Rombloanon believe that a balete tree where balete vine has grown is not suitable for building a house, as this is the dwelling place of *engkanto*. Bamboo to be used for construction is cut in December to make it more

durable. Dead trees are not used as this may cause the family members to be sickly (Demetrio 1991:123-162).

During the construction of the house, burying a centavo beneath every post ensures prosperity for the inhabitants. Also, the posts are erected one after the other in clockwise fashion so the house will become windproof.

Building a house disturbs the unseen owners of the land; therefore, a peace offering is prepared for the spirits. For this purpose, the Romblonan kill a pig or pure white chicken and pour the animal's blood into the holes where the posts are supposed to stand. Permission of the spirits is also secured when repairs are made on the house; otherwise, the person who repairs it will get sick (Demetrio 1991:123-162).

Transferring to another house is best during full moon and never on a quarter moon. The first commodities brought into the new house are water, rice, and salt to ensure that the prime necessities of life will always be abundant. Once in the house, the jar is not emptied for one week and the stove is kept open for one day. Also, during the first seven days, the family avoids spending a centavo (Demetrio 1991:123-162).

Many bridges and houses of stone from the previous centuries dot the province of Romblon, particularly the capital. Romblon Cathedral and its accompanying bell tower date back to 1635 when the Recollects arrived in the islands. The church has a Byzantine-type altar and several distinctive paintings and icons.

There is also the famous Fort San Andres, built in 1640 by Fray Agustin de San Pedro, which together with Fort Santiago on the opposite side of the town, served to alert the people about the arrival of Moro invaders who would burn villages and carry off men, women, and children into slavery. After the construction of the towers, even the biggest Moro invasion in 1753, when Moro fleets practically covered the entire Visayan seas, was repulsed. Today, the fort still stands beside the building of the weather bureau on a hill overlooking the town, and is used for navigational purposes. To make it more accessible to visits, a 210-step stairway has been constructed leading up to it.

## **Visual Arts and Crafts**

Basketry is not only a major industry in Romblon but also a source of aesthetic pride. Romblon baskets are unique in material and weaving technique. An important basket material is *kokolongkoy* vine, used in about 3-millimeter osiers and utilized to form a small bowl in a twilled technique called roping. This formation highlights the natural luster and resilience of the vine and makes an unusual basket with great spring and expansiveness. This technique is used only in Romblon.

Another technique involves the splitting of the kokolongkoy vine to form a jar-shaped *butit* or locust jar for the collection of grasshoppers. This highly decorative craft allows

enough air inside to keep the captured insect alive. A fitted cap formed from a split kokolongkoy vine in knotted web is placed on top of the jar. When formed in a weblike structure surrounded by a frame made of whole vine in twined construction, the split vine may also serve as an open screen or drying tray.

Another popular basket material is the *nito* vine, used principally for covered market baskets and bowls of various sizes. The usual design would be dark nito woven against a ground of light-colored vine.

Other products use the combination of buri strips overlaid with split nito by means of plaiting. For the export baskets, many other kinds of vines are available, such as *malipali*, *ungali*, and *sagagap*. Other products of leaf and vine weaving in Romblon are coiled baskets, small coin purses, men's hats and salakot, nested sets of as many as six boxes, covered jars, open bowls, and covered trays (Lane 1986:64, 125, 132).

## Literary Arts

Most of the collected Rombloanon literature are in the form of proverbs which use metaphorical expression in referring to traditional lore and everyday experience. In content, these proverbs may have a wide variety of subject matter and may explain general views and laws of life, recommend certain virtues, condemn vices, and express a system of values. Rombloanon proverbs may either be proselike statements, while some are monorhyming couplets with 5 to 12 syllable lines. Others are longer, coming in three- to four-line stanza form. Examples of these proverbs are (Demetrio 1991: 59-122):

*Ka tawong marahan magpanaw  
matunok man ay mababaw.*

A person who walks slowly will have a shallow  
wound should he/she step on a thorn.

*Rali, rali marahil mahali.*

Haste makes waste.

*Ka nagpipili ay nakakapili it pasi.*

A selective person selects the worst.

*Con diin ka matumba didto ka mabangon.*

You stand up where you fall.

*Ang tawong may calisdanan, buot guid buligan.*

A person in need heeds help.

*Ang kawayan nga tubo, sa langit nagtudlo;  
kung gumolang kang tumambo,  
sa duta nakaduko.*

A bamboo while young  
always points to heaven,  
but the moment it gets old  
it bows to the lowly earth.

The most important stylistic device used in proverbs is the metaphor. Images in these metaphorical proverbs are derived from the common everyday life and occupations of the people—plants and animals, common objects at home and in the working areas, customs and beliefs, foods and games. Examples are (Demetrio 1991:52-122):

*Ka bato ay inde magso-or sa sehi.*

The stone will not approach the snail.

*Ang ulang nga tulog gul-anod etsulog.*

A sleeping shrimp is carried away  
by the current.

*Ang bato na napolip-id indi iglomata.*

A rolling stone gathers no moss.

*Kung matutubi-an ka baka, ay talagang makaba.*

The frogs are very noisy when  
there is much water.

*Iwanon pa ang compay kon patay  
ron ang kalayo.*

Grass is useless to a dead horse.

## **Performing Arts**

The Rombloanon have songs for the different life stages intimating a close relationship between life and music. Thus, songs may be classified as cradle songs, love and courtship songs, work songs, and death and burial songs. Most of the collected songs are translations of the Visayan version based on the original Tagalog songs (Obrique 1983:11-16).

Cradle songs are sung to put the children to sleep to enable the mothers to attend to other domestic duties. Here is an example (Obrique 1983:15):

*Ili, ili, tulog anay  
Wala sili imo Nanay,*

*Nagkadto sa tindahan  
Magbakal it tinapay*

Sleep, my child  
Your mother is out  
She went to the store  
To buy some bread.

Love and courtship songs utilize images of nature as metaphors to express unrequited love. Most of these songs dramatize the hardships experienced by a man as he tries to win the love of a woman. An example is “Namunit” or Fishing (Obrique 1983:13-14):

*Ako ay namunit  
Sa pampang sang gugma  
Ako nga guin paon  
Madamo nga letra  
Anay sang guintukob  
San isang parangan  
Madamo ang kaila  
Sa akon higugma.*

I went fishing  
In the sea of love  
All that I used  
Were countless letters  
But when you were about to take  
These letters that I served  
Everyone was overjoyed  
With the love I offered.

Another example is “Ano ang Dahilan” (About What Happened) (Obrique 1983:13-14):

*Bigla haw nahangit  
Ano ang dahilan  
Kung pamtian mo lang  
Ang gugmang nahihidlaw  
Ang tangis ko adlaw-adlaw  
Ikaw ay para sa akon Inday.*

Don't feel jealous  
About what happened  
If you'll only listen  
To my lonely heart  
It is constantly yearning  
For you, my Inday.

The last example is called “Ang Higugma Cag Pispis” (The Love of a Bird) (Obrique 1983:13-14).

*Kung ako lang ay pispis  
Lupadon gid kita*



*Ogaling ikaw ay odyan sa langit  
Kag sa akon ay naka tan-aw*

If I were a bird  
I'll fly my way to you  
But you are in the sky  
Watching over me.

Work songs are sung by men and women as they perform their tasks in the house, in the fields, or at sea. Sung to relieve boredom, these songs try to lighten work with humor. Here is a rowing song:

*Hi-yap, hi-yap, hi-yap  
Mag-gaod na kita  
Hi-yap, hi-yap, hi-yap  
Male-non, magpagaod.*

Pull, push, pull  
Let us paddle the banca  
Pull, push, pull  
Let us paddle, paddle.

This song entitled “Si Pilimon” (Filemon) is one of the most famous in the Visayas:

*Si Pilimon, si Pilimon  
Nagpamunit sa karagatan  
Nakadawi, nakadawi  
Isda nga tambasakan  
Binaligya, binaligya  
Sa mercado nga sira  
Ang benta puros gisi  
Ang benta puros gisi  
Kulang pa nga itingi.*

Pilimon, Pilimon  
In the sea, he fished  
He caught, he caught  
A tiny fish  
He sold, he sold  
In a dilapidated market  
The earning was small  
The earning was small  
Not enough to buy food.

This song obviously belongs to the carpenter (Obrique 1983:11-12):

*Lagari cag lagari  
Pukpok ng pukpok  
Mahirap ron ang akong pangbuhi  
Owa it mangad sa kalibutan.*

Always cutting with a saw  
Always beating with a hammer  
My life is miserable  
There's no wealth in the world.

To while away long hours of vigil, the people play games and sing songs during the wake. A popular song for wakes is "Ahay Singsing" (Oh Ring), sung by both young and old who participate in the game. The game starts with participants forming a circle and assigning an "it" in the middle. The participants hold hands and swing them alternately. A ring is secretly passed from one person to another. The objective of the game is for the "it" to catch the person who holds the ring before it reaches its point of origin. When the "it" has successfully guessed the holder of the ring, the one caught will become the next "it." The "it" is spared from the penalty which is usually in the form of a pledge of a song. The game is accompanied by singing of lyrics which go this way (Obrique 1983:16):

*Ahay singsing*  
*Lakot sing madali*  
*Padakto sa hari*  
*At reyna ng madali*  
*Ang bantay mag-usay*  
*Singsing sa gihapon*

Ring, oh, ring  
You better move fast  
Go to his Highness,  
The king and the queen,  
Immediately the guard will  
Constantly search for you.

Three days after the burial, the Rombloanon go through a rite called *belasyon* in which the relatives and friends offer prayers for the departed. After the rite, the "Ahay Singsing" is played, accompanied by another song with traces of Spanish influence.

Early Rombloanon theater was in the form of rituals performed as peace offerings to the unseen spirits. These rituals were handed down from one generation to another and some are still performed in remote communities of Romblon province.

An example is a ritual called *mahikaw*. Usually held during January, June, or December, this ritual is performed by the head of the family to invoke the spirits' protection of the family from sickness and other misfortunes. Before the ritual proper, the head of the family prepares: seven bundles of *suman* (rice cake), each bundle consisting of seven pieces of rice cakes; seven sticks of tobacco; a young banana leaf; a glass of *tuba* (coconut wine); a glass of water; charcoal, and incense; two lighted candles; and a piece of clothing used by the head of the family. An important element in this ritual is the chicken which is delicately prepared by cutting off the head and making sure that the organs are intact. The chicken's head is set aside while the rest of the chicken is boiled for the offering (Obrique 1983:17-19).

At eight o'clock in the evening, these paraphernalia are meticulously arranged before the bedroom altar. A buri mat is set on the floor, at the center of which the banana leaf is placed. The chicken's head is fastened again to its body to make it appear whole again, after which it is placed on top of the folded piece of clothing. Four tobacco sticks, four bundles of suman, and three pieces of rice cakes are set on the right side of the chicken while on the left side are three tobacco sticks, three bundles of suman, and three pieces of rice cakes. The remaining piece of rice cake is placed on top of the chicken. The glass of tube and water are set on each side of the mat. Candles are then lighted before the religious image.

As the ritual begins, family members are gathered around the mat. The head of the family chants a prayer as he spreads the incense smoke from the coconut shell to the entire room. The chant is repeated seven times after which he sprinkles water, then the tuba, seven times each over the offering and throws this under the house. He sprinkles water over this seven times and ends his prayers.

What remains of the offering is divided in two. The first half is distributed among all those present in the room, who must consume everything before they leave the area. The other half is shared with the other relatives in the house. After eating, the head of the family buries the chicken's head which serves as protection against sicknesses and misfortune.

This practice is handed down by the head of the family to the eldest child. If the child, however, wishes to end this ritual, the head of the family must bury all the offerings to signify the end of the tradition. If the ritual is to be continued, the banana leaf is stored. An interesting element of this ritual is the gender of the chicken which determines the storing place of the banana leaf. If the chicken is male, the leaf is placed in the ceiling of the porch, but if female, the leaf is placed in the ceiling of the bedroom. The Rombloanon who practice this ritual are consistent in choosing the gender of the chicken.

Another Rombloanon ritual is called *paghahalin* which literally means "transferring." Usually performed on a Saturday, this ritual is done to cure the sick. In a remote area, a makeshift house is built under a tree. The head of the family prepares food offerings which he places in a basket tied with a *yantok* (rattan). He brings this basket to the makeshift house and scatters the food inside. During the ritual, he chants prayers for the spirits and *malignos* (evil spirits) (Obrique 1983:19).

A commencement ceremony performed just before planting or harvesting is called *tuna*. For this ritual, leaves of *tanglad* (lemon grass) or those of nipa palm are used. Prayers are offered to the spirits for a bountiful harvest (Demetrio 1991:507).

A harvest ritual is performed when farmers begin their first harvest. In this rite, a farmer takes seven stalks of rice and leaves them in the place of harvest. After this, the farmer harvests one basketful of rice and puts it away in the granary. It is believed that with this ritual, the spirits will help the farmer harvest the rice quickly

and will provide a bountiful harvest (Demetrio 1991:537) • G. Zafra

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