

Father Morice Vanoverbergh, CICM, 1885-1982: Illustrious Missionary Pioneer

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Abstract: This article looks back at Father Morice Vanoverbergh, CICM, whose missionary work testifies to his commitment to Filipinos among whom he lived. It traces his fruitful missionary work from 1909-1982; his contribution to scholarship that made Filipino scholars more aware of the rich cultural heritage of the peoples of Northern Luzon, and; his invaluable contributions to the history and cultural heritage of the Philippines.

Keywords: Missionary • Morice Vanoverbergh • Philippine Missions • Igorots • Field Work

Introduction

This article will explore some aspects of the missionary work of Fr. Morice¹ Vanoverbergh, a great CICM missionary pioneer in the Philippines. The first section will present a brief overview of his missionary activities in Ilokandia and the Mountain Provinces. In a

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¹ His first name has been spelled in at least five different ways. But the most common is Morice, the way he usually spelled his first name. Due to the fact that practically all his publications mention Morice as his first name, I will use it throughout my article.

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second section I will describe his fieldwork among the Negritos² of Northern Luzon. A third section will focus on Fr. Morice as a person, anthropologist, linguist, and missionary.

Fr. Vanoverbergh was born in Ooigem, West Flanders, Belgium, on September 20, 1885. In 1903, he entered the CICM novitiate and professed his first religious vows on September 8 of the following year. He was ordained as a priest at Scheut, Brussels, on July 18, 1909. On September 22, 1909, fourteen days after his perpetual profession, he left for Manila where he arrived on October 24, 1909.³

² Throughout the article I will use the term Negrito(s) because Vanoverbergh used it in his publications. The Negritos, whose beliefs and prayer ceremony are described in this article, are now referred to as the Pudtol Atta. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aeta_people, (accessed 25 April 2021).

³ A note in the *CICM-RP Archives*, Box 90.30, mentions October 22, 1909 as his day of arrival in Manila. In the text of interviews conducted by Henry Geeroms in August 1971, Vanoverbergh mentions October 24, 1909 as his day of arrival. See Henry Geeroms, "Fr. Morice Vanoverbergh, CICM, Reminisces...: Interviews of Fr. Morice Vanoverbergh, CICM" (*CICM-RP Archives*, Box 90.30, unpublished text), p. 1. In the Quezon City CICM archives, there is a typewritten Dutch text of the interviews and also a typewritten English version. I assume that the interviews were conducted in Dutch and that Geeroms, or somebody else, translated the interviews into English. In the Congregation's *Elenchus Defunctorum* (Rome: 2015, 38), Henri is mentioned as the first name of Geeroms.

Missionary Work in Ilokandia and the Mountain Provinces

In December 1909, Fr. Vanoverbergh was assigned to the mission of Bauko, Mountain Province. Vanoverbergh had started collecting plants while still a student in high school. During his novitiate, he was advised to continue this hobby because this would be interesting in China.⁴ It was Fr. Piet Dierickx (1862-1946), CICM, who had recommended Vanoverbergh to the Bureau of Science in Manila. During his stay in Bauko, Vanoverbergh would regularly send flowers to Dr. Eduardo Quisumbing of the Bureau of Science.⁵ Fr. Geeroms writes:

They had at once a series of new flowers which I had found. There were certainly some one hundred new kinds, of which about thirty were given my name. One particular flower is named 'Vanoverberghia Sepulchrae'. This fellow had met Father Sepulchre in Manila. When he had learned that Fr. Sepulchre had died, he added his name to the existing name of the plant to honor his memory. After some time, this botanist requested me to send flowers also to several musea, among others to Chicago, New York, Leipzig, Helsinki, Geneva and still others.⁶

It was also in Bauko where Vanoverbergh started to study the Kankanay⁷ culture, language and religion of

⁴ In 1903-4, when he was a novice, the CICM was only present in China and Congo.

⁵ See G. E. Mamoyac, "Bontoc Priest Marks Golden Sacerdotal Jubilee among Flock," *Manila Times* (July 22, 1959). The newspaper clipping in the box does not have a page number.

⁶ Geeroms, 5-6.

⁷ Vanoverbergh always spells the word as Kankanay (as he heard it in Bauco, Mountain Province at present). This is in the northern part of the Kankanay region. As there was no standard spelling, it can well be that in some Kankanay speaking places the people pronounce

the people.

In 1915, Vanoverbergh left Bauko, and there were plans to abandon this mission due to lack of financial means to support the missionaries. World War I was going on and there were less donations coming from Europe. The Provincial Superior requested the bishop of Vigan to assign to the CICM some parishes where the missionaries could be self-supporting. After a short stint as parish priest in Tagudin, Vanoverbergh became the parish priest of Bangar in La Union. In 1921, he returned to Tagudin. Four years later, he had to move to the Apayao mission.

Vanoverbergh mentioned in the interview that he had nothing in Apayao. At that time, the mission of Apayao comprised a very wide area, about 2,000 square miles.⁸ The present province of Apayao and parts of Cagayan were the mission territory of Vanoverbergh and his confrere Fr. Jozef Poot (1898-1982). Twice a year, Vanoverbergh went to Allacapan and stayed there a couple of months. Regularly, he visited the other places. "I did not always go to Luna. This was newly started. Practically all the people were Aglipayans⁹ there. I visited Pudentol several times for the Holy Week celebrations. I went occasionally to Namatugan,¹⁰ Bayag¹¹ and other barrios."¹² His assistant served in

the word rather as Kankanaey. In this article, I am keeping the spelling of the word as the author spells it.

⁸ Morice Vanoverbergh, "The Isneg," *Publications of the Catholic Anthropological Conference* 3, no. 1 (1932): 3.

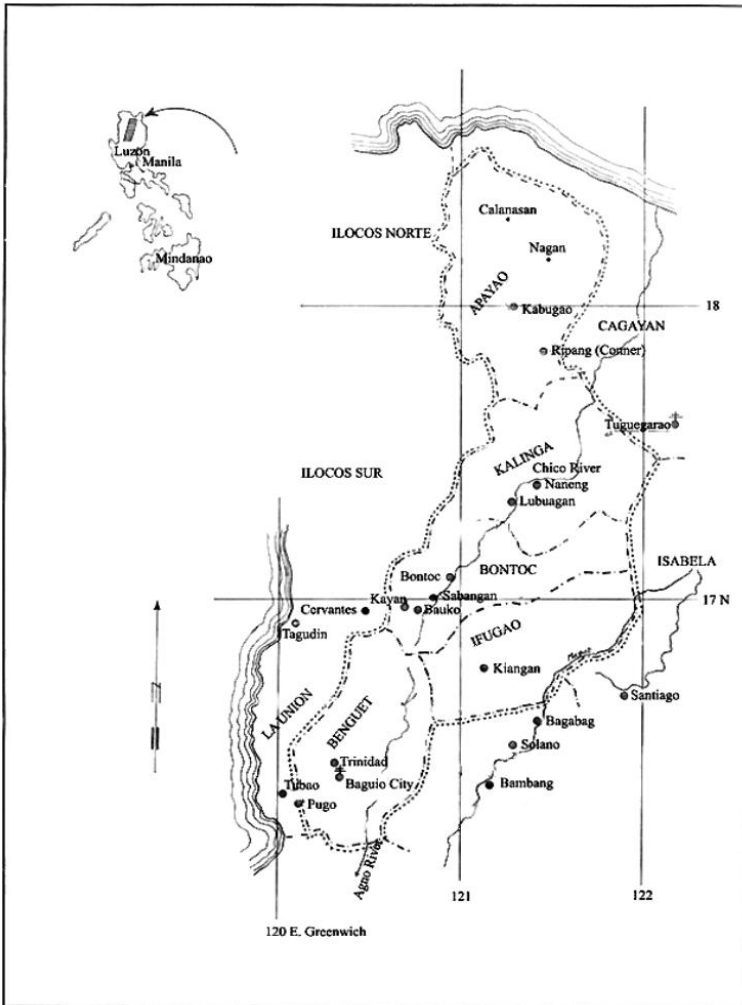
⁹ The Aglipayan Church is an independent church organized in 1902 after the Philippine revolution of 1896-98 in protest against the Spanish clergy's control of the Roman Catholic Church. The church continues to follow Roman Catholic forms of worship.

¹⁰ This is a typing error. The name of the place is Namaltugan and at present a barangay of Calanasan.

¹¹ This place is now called Calanasan.

¹² Geeroms, 33.

Ripang, Conner, where there was a church. In most places, the holy Eucharist was celebrated in a school building or any other suitable place.



C.I.C.M. Missions in the Philippines – The Apostolic Prefecture of the Mountain Province and outside mission stations administered by the C.I.C.M. Adopted from *Scheut, Congrégation Missionnaire du Coeur Immaculé de Marie*, s.l., 1937, p. 73.

Whenever Vanoverbergh travelled, he took along a catechist. At times, visiting the people was indeed dangerous:

Those trips were very perilous since we had continually to cross rivers. In order to reach Dagadan¹³ we had to cross the river fifty-nine times in one morning. The river was in fact the road, and every time the river touched a mountain, we had to try to reach the other bank. Sometimes, the river was deep and few people were living in that region. It was, therefore, necessary always to have a companion. We could have drowned, and nobody would have known it.¹⁴

In June 1932, Vanoverbergh left Apayao for Tagudin where he stayed only a few months, from July to November. After this short stint, he left for Belgium. It was his first furlough since his arrival in the Philippines. In the beginning of 1934, he returned to the Philippines. His new assignment was Tubao, La Union.

In November 1936, he was assigned to Sabangan. During the second world war, the town was completely destroyed by the American bombing raids. As a result, Vanoverbergh had lost everything. He could not celebrate the Holy Eucharist nor pray the breviary. Due to other causes, he had lost all but four of his teeth. After the liberation of the town, he was able to ride in an army truck, via Cervantes and Tagudin, to Manila. From the

¹³ Geeroms is mistaken here. The place referred to is without doubt Dagara. During my missionary work in Kabugao and Calanasan from 1975 to 1983, I visited the place at least once a year. An experienced hiker could make the trip from Kabugao to Dagara in about six hours. What made it a demanding journey was the fact that the Dagara River had to be crossed more than sixty times. The last settlement upstream of the Dagara River is Maragat, about one hour farther than Dagara.

¹⁴ Geeroms, 33.

end of July to the end of 1945, he stayed most of the time in the Procuration House.¹⁵

In 1946 he was assigned to the seminary in Baguio City. In the interview he said: “I was there only for one year. The seminary was housed in the Assumption Convent (Mount Mary) in Baguio, the present location of the University (Saint Louis). I had to teach physiology and also religion to the newcomers.”¹⁶

In December 1946, Vanoverbergh went back to Bauko. Fr. Henri Geeroms (1912-1983) was his assistant. In 1964, he left Bauko and went on home leave in Belgium.

He returned to the Philippines in 1966 with the intention to rest in Home Sweet Home, Baguio City. “I am going to help those who are doing nothing,”¹⁷ he said. Fathers Jan Zwaenepoel (1926-2008) and Henri Geeroms persuaded him to resume the composition of his Isneg dictionary which was published in 1972. He continued his study of the Kankanay culture and published several articles about it. During the last two years of his life, he was practically blind. However, he seldom mentioned his blindness and never complained about it. He finalized the *English-Kankanay Thesaurus* in 1981, although he could no longer read the final text himself. Somebody read the text to him and he would correct the errors. He had a phenomenal memory.

On November 2, 1982, Vanoverbergh passed away in Home Sweet Home, Baguio City. The following day, a group of Bauko people, led by the mayor, arrived.

They... would no more leave him, until they took him “home” on November 5, 1982 after the solemn funeral Mass at the Baguio Cathedral. Night and day they

¹⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

stayed at Home Sweet Home, the residence of Fr. Morice since 1966. They informed us about the wish of Fr. Morice to be buried in Bauko. “As soon as you hear that I am dead, come to Baguio to take me to Bauko,” he had told them in 1969.... On November 8, 1982, Fr. Morice Vanoverbergh was buried in Bauko in a monument that had been built years ago.¹⁸

Fieldwork Among the Negritos of Northern Luzon

In this section, I will first discuss how Vanoverbergh came into contact with Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt, SVD, who prodded him to undertake fieldwork among the Negritos of Luzon. Then, I will take a closer look at Vanoverbergh’s fieldwork among the Negritos of Northern Luzon.¹⁹

Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954)

Wilhelm Schmidt was a German anthropologist and member of the Society of the Divine Word or SVD. He published extensively, addressing many of his writings on family and social ethics to a general audience. His major work is *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee (The Origin of the Idea of God)*, 12 vols. (1912–55). In this and in his *Ursprung und Werden der Religion (The Origin and Growth of Religion)* (1930), Schmidt maintained that most primitive peoples believed in a supreme being and that their religion might correctly be regarded as monotheistic.

Schmidt, founder of the journal *Anthropos*, was of the opinion that the study of the Pygmy peoples “would be a valuable contribution to the elucidation of the earliest

¹⁸ Rafael Desmedt, “Father Morice Vanoverbergh, 1885-1982,” *Saint Louis University Research Journal* 13, no. 4 (December 1982): 633-4.

¹⁹ He also undertook fieldwork among the Negritos of Eastern Luzon.

history of mankind.”²⁰ In 1910, he made an appeal to anthropologists, ethnologists, scientific institutes, and governments to study these ethnic groups. Initially, his appeal found no echo whatsoever. After some time, a number of missionaries and anthropologists started doing fieldwork among these ethnic groups.

Schmidt’s main interest in the Pygmies went to the culture of these peoples. In particular, he was struck by their belief in the existence of a high god or Supreme Being. Rahmann observes “[w]hatever the shortcomings of Schmidt in certain respects may be, it cannot be denied that he has amassed an impressive amount of material about the existence of the belief in a high god or Supreme being among preliterate peoples. It is hard to see how those anthropologists who cannot find anything but ‘supernatural powers’ or ‘supernaturals’ among these peoples can do justice to the facts.”²¹ According to Rahmann, Paul Schebesta²² has stated that Schmidt, “in his attack against mechanical evolutionism, may have pushed the high-god belief too vehemently to the fore but that he (Schmidt) was perfectly right with his thesis of the existence of a high-god belief among the oldest peoples (Altvoelker).”²³

When Schmidt made his appeal in 1910 to study the Pygmy peoples, he did not know that field work was already being done on the Negritos of the Philippines. Looking for missionaries who could undertake field work

²⁰ Rudolf Rahmann, “The Philippine Negritos in the Context of Research on Food-Gatherers during this Century,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 3, no. 4 (December 1975): 206.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

²² In the 1930s, Fr. Paul Schebesta performed the first anthropological studies on the Pygmies of the Ituri Forest, a dense tropical rain forest in the northern part of the Congo River Basin in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). It covers a vast area of approximately 62,900 square km.

²³ *Ibid.*, 211-2.

among them, he thought that Vanoverbergh had some knowledge of anthropology. But Vanoverbergh states in his interview with Geeroms: “He did not know that I never had opened a book on anthropology.”²⁴ Vanoverbergh continues:

He wrote me a letter asking me whether I was willing to go to the Negritos. – At that time, I was the parish priest of Tagudin, a parish of more than 12,000 Catholics, and I was there all alone. – I replied that, as far as I was concerned, I was willing to go, but that my superiors would have to send me. Anyway, I was convinced that this would be out of the question!...

In 1917, Fr. Schmitt²⁵ had gone several times to the Headquarters of CICM to ask the permission for me to go. I have learned that Fr. Rutten, who was then the Superior General,²⁶ once had an audience with the Pope²⁷ and that the Pope asked him why he did not allow that Father, whom Fr. Schmitt wanted to send to the Pygmies, to go. With this, Fr. Rutten was, of course, practically forced to grant the permission.

The provincial²⁸ came to inform me in Tagudin that I had to go to the Negritos to do some research work. He had received a letter from Fr. Rutten in which was stated that this was the will of the Holy Father. He commented, “Why must the Pope meddle in this?! I grant you one month leave of absence. After that, you can go to America to sell lace for the financial support

²⁴ Geeroms, 12.

²⁵ In several places of the text of the interview, the name Schmidt is misspelled.

²⁶ Fr. Joseph Rutten (1874-1950) was Superior General from 1920 to 1930.

²⁷ Pope Pius XI (1922-1939).

²⁸ The provincial superior was Fr. Albert Van Zuyt (1920-1925). See Albert Depré, *From a Tiny Shoot: The History of the RP CICM Province 1907-1982* (N.p.: n.p., n.d.), 233. Obviously, Van Zuyt did not realize the importance of studying the culture of the people among whom the missionaries were working.

of the school. The Pope will not find you there any more.”²⁹

Initial Contact with the ‘Negritos’ of Northern Luzon: April 5 To June 3, 1924

Before departing for the unknown, Vanoverbergh received a questionnaire from Fr. Karel Desmet (1885-1968). Vanoverbergh comments: “I never had opened a book on Anthropology, and I did not know what kind of report I had to make. Fr. Carlos³⁰ had in his possession a copy of the questionnaire of the ‘Séminaire d’Ethnologie³¹ de Louvain’. This helped me to find out what I had to observe and also in the selection of data to make my report.”³²

Rudolf Rahmann mentions how Wilhelm Schmidt evaluated Vanoverbergh’s fieldwork among the Negritos of Northern Luzon:

For Father Wilhelm Schmidt the most important achievement of Father Vanoverbergh was the fieldwork among the Negritos of northeastern Luzon. His findings and statements about the religious beliefs and practices of these Negrito groups may not in every instance be the last words about these aspects of their culture; however, the assumption that their high-god belief is simply due to Christian influence is certainly not the last word either.³³

On April 5, 1924, Vanoverbergh started his journey in Baguio City. In Bacnotan, La Union, he met a certain Mr. Maximo Padua, a professional photographer, who wanted

²⁹ Geeroms, 12-3.

³⁰ Fr. Carlos is Fr. Karel Desmet.

³¹ Should read: Séminaire d’Ethnologie de Louvain.

³² Geeroms, 36.

³³ Rudolf Rahmann, “Obituary: Morice Vanoverbergh, CICM (1885-1982),” *Anthropos* 78, nos. 5-6 (1983): 873.

to accompany him during the expedition. His wish was granted. This man took a number of interesting pictures which were published together with the report of Vanoverbergh in *Anthropos*. Together they traveled via Tagudin, Claveria, Tuguegarao, Tuao and Ripang to Kabugao, where they arrived on April 16. They stayed at the house of Captain Lizardo. The following day was Holy Thursday and Vanoverbergh heard some confessions. On April 20, Easter Sunday, he baptized some children, and officiated at two marriages.³⁴

The following day, Vanoverbergh and his companion left by boat for “negrito land,” where they met a number of Negritos who were always very friendly, even sad when he left. Vanoverbergh writes that “on the day I left Nagan, over twenty of those living in the neighborhood came to say good bye, and when I came to the shore of the river and entered the boat, many of them wept.”³⁵

On May 3, Vanoverbergh met with Fr. Cornelis de Brouwer (1881-1960), a CICM missionary residing in Bontoc.³⁶ At that time, the whole of Apayao and Kalinga was part of the mission of Bontoc.³⁷ Fr. de Brouwer was passing by to visit Isneg settlements. Vanoverbergh decided then to travel with him to Bontoc.

On May 6, Vanoverbergh and de Brouwer left for Kabugao. Reflecting on his short stay with the Negritos, Vanoverbergh muses: “Adieu, kind people, may God bless you and soon send a missionary to lead you on the right road, which, with God’s grace, will be an easy thing to do, much easier, humanly speaking, than to convert most of

³⁴ Morice Vanoverbergh, “Negritos of Northern Luzon,” *Anthropos* 20, no. 1 (1925): 151-9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁷ Depré, 246: The missions of Lubuagan and Kabugao were only founded in 1925.

the other pagan tribes, that are living in these mountains.”³⁸

The two missionaries arrived in Kabugao on May 7. From there, they continued their journey via Lubuagan to Bontoc, where they arrived on May 24. Four days later, Vanoverbergh left alone for Bauko. On May 30, he arrived in Tagudin, and four days later, on June 3, he reached Baguio City, the place of departure.³⁹

Later, Vanoverbergh will be able to penetrate more deeply into the culture and life of the Negritos. In his interview with Geeroms, he says: “Later, I was assigned in Apayao and, consequently, I had the opportunity to observe and to deal with the Negritos for about seven years. As a result, I wrote more extensively about them.”⁴⁰

Vanoverbergh’s Fieldwork among the Negritos of Northern Luzon 1925-1932

In this section, I will concentrate on what Vanoverbergh wrote about the Negritos’ concept of a Supreme Being and their prayer ceremonies.

Their Belief in One God

Although Vanoverbergh did not ask direct questions about their belief in one God, he was able to get a clear answer when he was inquiring about the rites they were performing after having shot down a wild boar. One day,

³⁸ Vanoverbergh, “Negritos of Northern Luzon,” *Anthropos* 20, no. 1 (1925): 175. Maybe the CICM missionaries could have given more attention to this friendly and well-disposed people. In 1976, during my visit to Palanan, Isabela, I too was struck by the kind and friendly disposition of the Negritos there. Anthropologists call them the Palanan Dumagats (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aeta_people).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 176-85.

⁴⁰ Geeroms, 13.

he had a conversation with Masigun, a Negrito, who said that they take home the animal, except for a small piece of meat that they stick on a sharpened piece of bamboo and roast it over the fire. Then they place it in a tree and recite a prayer in Negrito-Ibanag. Vanoverbergh quotes the text of the prayer and adds his literal translation: “*Yawatmi níkaw, apó, ta ariákkami karulatán nga itdán ta lamán*; which translated literally means: we-offer [this] to-thee, lord, so-that you-not-with-us be-disgusted to give [ta] wild-boars.”⁴¹

Later, Vanoverbergh asked Masigun what they did when they had killed a deer, “and he repeated the same prayer all over, changing *lamán* into *uttá*, deer. Remember that *nikáw* is the singular.”⁴² Then Vanoverbergh asked in Ilokano: “You say: lord; who is this fellow? (I used purposely the term: “*daydiay*”, which is rather disparaging or even slightly contemptuous.)”⁴³. Masigun answered in Ilokano: “Who he is?” (and here the expression on his face indicated intense astonishment at my ignorance); ‘well, the one who placed the earth, of course’ (and at this juncture he made a wide gesture, stretching out his whole arm and moving it from left to right).”⁴⁴

Vanoverbergh points out that Masigun did not use the word *namarsua* (created) which Christian Ilokanos use for the Christian concept of creation. Instead, he used *nangikabil* which means he placed or put down. Christian Ilokanos never use this term to indicate

⁴¹ Vanoverbergh, “Negritos of Northern Luzon,” *Anthropos* 20, no. 2 (1925): 436. Vanoverbergh places accents on the vowels to indicate the stress. Normally, these accents are not found in written texts. He indicates in a footnote that [ta] before the *laman* is a copulative, and that in this construction it is more or less equivalent to the English ‘some’.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

creation. Vanoverbergh reports that “Masigun talks Ilokano very well and must certainly have heard the term *namarsuá*. Nevertheless he used *nangikábil*.”⁴⁵ Vanoverbergh, who spoke the Ilokano language flawlessly, concludes: “*Namarsuá* is a derivative from the stem *ressuá*, to happen without obvious cause. *Namarsuá* is used only in the technical sense of creator or creation, never in reference to human activities, and means literally: to cause to happen.”⁴⁶

After hearing the Negrito belief in one God, creator of the universe, so clearly expressed, Vanoverbergh was struck with wonder.⁴⁷ His findings support Wilhelm Schmidt’s conviction that most primitive peoples believe in a supreme being and that their religion should be correctly regarded as monotheistic. The question, however, is whether this is the case for “most primitive peoples.”

Their Prayer Ceremony

Vanoverbergh describes the Negrito prayer ceremony in great detail.⁴⁸ I will limit myself to some salient points. He came across several versions of the text of the prayer which are quite different from one another. Regarding the first version he copied at Nagan,⁴⁹ he writes: “The Negritos, who recited this prayer, stated that it was used by all Negritos of that particular country, whenever they met at prayer, and that none other was known. I gave it to several Kagayan and Ilokano to read, but nobody could

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 435.

⁴⁸ Vanoverbergh, “Negritos of Northern Luzon,” *Anthropos* 20, no. 2 (1925): 420-1, 436-43; “Negritos of Northern Luzon again,” *Anthropos* 24, no. 3 (1929): 902-5; “Negritos of Northern Luzon again,” *Anthropos* 25, no. 2 (1930): 555-8.

⁴⁹ Nagan is situated in Pudtol, Apayao.

make head or tail of it; perhaps some European or American scientist will be more fortunate.”⁵⁰ The Negritos too had no idea of what the prayer was all about.

Vanoverbergh is of the opinion that the prayer is an example of the original Negrito language, although he is certain that a few of the terms are certainly Ibanag or Ilokano.⁵¹ In connection with the original Negrito language, he observes the following: “As to their spoken language, I think I shall have to agree, at least partially, with the statement made by most scientists and travellers, who have written about the Negritos, that is, that they lost their original language and took over the dialect of the people in whose immediate neighborhood they were living.”⁵²

On May 3, 1925, Vanoverbergh attended for the first time in the nocturnal Negrito prayer ceremony at Nagan.⁵³ He was overcome with awe:

⁵⁰ Idem, “Negritos of Northern Luzon” no. 2 (1925): 421.

⁵¹ Ibid., 420.

⁵² Ibid., 417. Rudolf Rahmann refers to William A. Reed who made a similar observation: “Reed states... that the Negritos of Zambales ‘seem to have lost entirely their own language and to have adopted that of the Christianized Zambal.’” And Rahmann adds that Reed “seems rather inclined to assume that research into an eventual original language of these Negritos would not lead very far.” See Rahmann, “The Philippine Negritos,” 214-5.

⁵³ Later at Kabaritan, Vanoverbergh witnessed the Negrito prayer ceremony for a second time. I was unable to locate the place named Kabaritan. However, I guess it is a place in the municipality of Allacapan, Cagayan. The text of the prayer has 36 strophes. Regarding the prayer he witnessed there, Vanoverbergh writes:

The Negritos at Kabaritan said that the language of this prayer was the original Negrito dialect, that they had remembered its text since time immemorial and that they would never forget it. It was further told me by the Negritos both at Arnani and at *Kabaritan* that this prayer should not be recited out of its proper setting, that is, prayer ceremonies; which may help to explain the actual ignorance of the Negritos about its meaning.

The tone, the emotional coloring of the chant and the gestures so impressed me at first that I myself was struck with awe and respect. No doubt could possibly exist but that they felt deeply the sense of communication with the supernatural world. No one could be present at such a ceremony, in the dead of night, hear these solemn chants and see the strikingly reverent bearing of the participants, without being forced to the conclusion that here he treads on sacred ground.⁵⁴

The text of the prayer, 21 strophes long, is chanted by men (M) and women (W). Now, follow its first four strophes chanted during the prayer ceremony.

1. M.: lilimamataralón, tálliaginasosón
W.: gerináy, tabalátanináy

2. M.: maganitokanéroy, tálliaginasosón
W.: kaniaggúray, kaginamaganitoy

3. M.: baróngonawáriton, ritónnakaráriton
W.: nónaw, nogónabanabalóy

4. M.: abakánanabubuáyoy, émmapagugatán
W.: akakénunuwwáng, émmapanganupán⁵⁵

Vanoverbergh describes in detail how the prayer is being sung:

I was not able to situate the place called Arnani. Maybe it is a place in Allacapan, Cagayan.

Morice Vanoverbergh, “Negritos of Northern Luzon Again,” *Anthropos* 24, no. 3 (1929): 902.

Like at Nagan, nobody could explain it to him nor give any translation of the same. However, thanks to his knowledge of Ibanag, Vanoverbergh was able to understand some of the words of the prayer.

⁵⁴ Vanoverbergh, “Negritos of Northern Luzon,” *Anthropos* 20, no. 2 (1925): 439.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 421.

One of the men intoned the first three or four syllables of the first verse (1. M.) with a good many modulations, and then all the men or a good number of them joined them in chorus; after that, one of the women intoned in like manner (1. W.), and very soon all or most of the other women joined her in chorus. The first two verses (one for the men, and another for the women) were repeated eight or ten times or even more often. Sometimes, as happened at the start, the men sang alone, and then were followed by the women; sometimes during the later repetitions the men and women sang together, each sex, however, singing its own verse; very often while the men were in the middle of their verse, the women would begin their own. After the first several strophes (if the two verses, the man's verse and the woman's taken together, could be called a strophe) the solo intonations were very far between. Except for this slight difference, the following fifteen or twenty strophes were sung in about the same manner as the first.

The melody was solemn and very musical; at first I almost thought they were starting the Kyrie of the Misa de Angelis! Even when the men and women sang together, or when the women broke in on the men's singing, the general effect was harmonious and in no ways discordant. About the first half of each verse, including both the three or four syllables intoned by the soloist and the several sung by the chorus, was chanted slowly and solemnly with many modulations; then the rest of the verse was sung very rapidly, in a somewhat lower pitch, much less loudly and without modulations. [...] During the singing they usually crossed their arms over their breast and gazed upwards with an expression of deep awe and reverence.⁵⁶

The chant and gestures made a deep impression on him. Without doubt they felt in communication with the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 439.

supernatural world. The singing was accompanied by certain gestures and movements:

Directly after intoning the chant, the soloist rose from the sitting posture, stood upright, crossed his arms on his breast and remained in this attitude for a while singing with his eyes lifted upwards. Very soon three or four other men did the same; then a woman, followed by some others. All took the same position, with crossed arms and upraised eyes, and during the repetitions of the first strophe they dressed themselves up, men and women, putting on whatever extra clothing they possessed. Such gala dressing during religious ceremonies is a common feature among the Non-Negrito pagan tribes of northern Luzon. As the singing went on, they usually began to walk in a circle, turning and going back in the reverse direction as soon as they arrived at the point from which they had started. Usually there was no hopping, only a very slow and solemn march; and the walking in a circle was not absolutely continuous; they very often paused.

Once or twice, during the recitation of the early strophes, an old woman jumped into the centre, hopping; but after the second or third strophe, this was done no more.

The people, who squatted around, joined in the singing as well as did those that were standing. Towards the end of each strophe, they all sat down again one after another, until the man who had started the singing was standing alone.⁵⁷

Vanoverbergh mentions that the prayer ceremony always took place inside the house, never outside. They

sometimes prayed one night only, sometimes two nights consecutively, but only during the night. If more than two consecutive nights were devoted to prayer, on

⁵⁷ Ibid., 440.

the third night, they usually passed to another house. [...] the Negritos had the prayer ceremonies after a marriage, after a burial, when somebody was dangerously ill, and at other times, whenever they thought fit to hold it.⁵⁸

Vanoverbergh had the impression that all present at the prayer ceremony were full of awe and reverence. He raises the question whether the chant is a real prayer or not. He answers in the affirmative: “That it was a genuine prayer seems to be clear beyond any reasonable doubt.”⁵⁹ And that for the following reasons. First, the statements of the Negritos themselves who, like the other ‘pagans’ in Northern Luzon use the Ilokano word *agboda* which denotes pagan sacrifice. A Negrito in Cagayan told Vanoverbergh “that the prayer ceremony is the way the Negritos have of asking God to help them and to cure them.”⁶⁰ Second, the statements of Christians and Isneg⁶¹ who “very clearly intimated that they considered both Negrito prayer ceremonies and pagan sacrifices as identical so far as religious purpose is concerned.”⁶² Third, the emotional atmosphere that pervaded the whole Negrito prayer. “An intense expression of awe and reverence was clearly to be seen on the faces and in the gestures of all participants.”⁶³

Thus far nobody has been able to understand the text of the prayer ceremony. I guess Vanoverbergh has spent many days in trying to unlock the mysterious text. One

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 441.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ The Isneg people is an ethnic group living in Apayao. When I was a missionary in the mission of Kabugao-Calanasan (1975-1983), and I began to understand their language, I asked several of them the question: Are you an Isneg or Isnag? Isnag was the answer.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 442.

thing is sure. The Negritos he has met were monotheistic and tried to communicate with God whose existence they did not doubt.

Illustrious Missionary, Anthropologist & Linguist

Illustrious Missionary

Vanoverbergh joined the CICM Congregation in order to be a missionary. For about fifty years, he ministered to the inhabitants of the Mountain Provinces. On horseback or hiking, he visited his flock and lived in the most isolated settlements. Throughout his stay among the Ilokanos, Isnags, and Kankanays, he paid special attention to religious instruction. Fr. Rafael Desmedt (1905-1990) wrote: “While a missionary at Bangar and Tagudin, [Vanoverbergh] prepared an outline of doctrine, that served as the basis of his sermons and instructions for many years. He called it ‘Christian Doctrine Outline;’ it was written in Ilocano.”⁶⁴ He taught at two seminaries for about fifteen months. He never taught in institutions of higher learning, although he was a monument of scholarship.

Wherever he went, Vanoverbergh was close to the people; for “[i]n spite of his superior talents, he lived a simple and sober missionary life, close to the Ilocanos of Tagudin and Bangar, to the Kankanays of Bauko and Sabangan, to the Isnags of Apayao, to the Negritos of Pudtol and Casiguran.”⁶⁵ With enthusiasm, he would talk about his missionary work.

In order to better understand and communicate with his flock, Vanoverbergh made it a point to learn their language well. Mastering the language of the people was a priority for him because he wanted to share with them

⁶⁴ Desmedt, “Father Morice Vanoverbergh,” 632.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 631.

a very important message, the Good News of Jesus Christ. Being a good listener, he was able to grasp the intricacies of the languages he was learning.

Vanoverbergh was also a grateful missionary because he always thanked his benefactors. In his interview with Geeroms, he said: “I have sent a letter of thanks to all those kind people. I never had to ask anything. The only thing I had to do was to thank. They understood that a missionary always needs something...”⁶⁶ On several occasions, he expressed his gratitude for the assistance he received from religious and diocesan priests, bishops, and officials. For instance, upon leaving Kabugao for Bontoc, Vanoverbergh thanked the household of Captain Lizardo – “our kind hosts for their inexhaustible generosity and hospitality.”⁶⁷

Vanoverbergh also realized that providing basic education and literacy is an important missionary activity. Hence, he gave plenty of attention to the management of the schools entrusted to his care. For sure, his commitment to the Gospel fueled his missionary activities. The people among whom he was working were touched by his kindness and interest in their daily life. It is no surprise then that the people of Bauko, where he had ministered for more than twenty years, insisted that their beloved Father Moricio be buried in their place.

Illustrious Anthropologist

Although he had no formal training in anthropology, Vanoverbergh became one of the “most outstanding pioneers in the ethnographic and linguistic fields of Northern Luzon.”⁶⁸ In between his missionary duties, he found the time to learn firsthand the ways of life of the

⁶⁶ Geeroms, 41.

⁶⁷ Vanoverbergh, “Negritos of Northern Luzon,” no. 1 (1925): 176.

⁶⁸ G. E. Mamoyac, “Bontoc Priest,” no page number.

people. He meticulously jotted down their religious ideas, riddles, songs and tales. He did this wherever he was assigned.

He recorded in great detail what he observed. Eufronio Pungayan gave this description of him: “[N]atural talent for observing human behaviour and lifeways enabled him to produce many fine writings.... He was a first-hand culture analyst.”⁶⁹ Maybe, he felt obligated to write down what he observed. Did he realize that, sooner or later, the people with whom he was living would change their ways, and that he was a prime factor in the coming changes, and that he should record how they originally lived? I would not know.

Vanoverbergh also had contacts with Filipino scholars. Rudolf Rahmann mentions in his obituary for Vanoverbergh: “Quite early he had established friendly relations with Filipino scholars in Manila, and he told me that it was his concern to make them realize what great treasures and values the Philippines possesses in the multiple aspects of the culture of the archipelago’s populations.”⁷⁰

According to Wilhelm Schmidt, Vanoverbergh’s most important achievement was his fieldwork among the Negritos of Northern and Eastern Luzon. Indeed, he left us very important reports about their way of life, religious ideas and concepts. The list of his anthropological and ethnographic publications is very impressive. His writings give the reader an idea of how the Isnags, the Kankanays and Negritos were living and what were their beliefs during the first sixty years of the twentieth century. Rudolf Rahmann and Gertrudes R. Ang wrote this assessment:

⁶⁹ Eufronio L. Pungayan, “Reflections on the Life and Works of Fr. Morice Vanoverbergh in Northern Luzon,” *Saint Louis University Research Journal* 13, no. 4 (December 1982): 425.

⁷⁰ Rahmann, “Obituary: Morice Vanoverbergh,” 872-3.

Due to his scholarly efforts, much of the lore of these peoples has been saved from complete loss.... The wealth of information provided by the papers listed in the bibliography reflect the fruitfulness of the years Fr. Vanoverbergh devoted to these people. Many of his writings are considered excellent original contributions on hitherto undescribed aspects of their material culture.⁷¹

Illustrious Linguist

In the course of his missionary life, Vanoverbergh became “an outstanding authority on the Iloko language.... No scholar, Filipino or foreigner, has probably as assiduously and devotedly studied the language of the Ilokanos as this dedicated missionary.”⁷² In recognition of his contribution to the enrichment of the Ilokano language, the Ilocano Heritage Foundation, Inc. bestowed on him a special award on July 25, 1974.⁷³

But Vanoverbergh did not confine his linguistic interest to the Iloko language. When he was in Bauko, he began working on a grammar of Lepanto Igorot or Kankanay, the language of the place. His dictionary of Kankanay was published in 1930. During his stay in Apayao, he gathered the materials for his *Isneg-English Vocabulary* which was published when he was already 87 years old.

What puzzled him very much was the fact that the Negritos of Northern Luzon had no idea of what the text of their prayer ceremony meant. Did they lose their

⁷¹ Rudolf Rahmann and Gertrudes R. Ang, “Dedication,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 3, no. 4 (December 1975): 201.

⁷² Marcelino A. Foronda, Jr., “Portrait of a Missionary as Scholar,” *Chronicle Magazine* (July 20, 1968): 6.

⁷³ Rahmann and Ang, 201.

original language? “I think I shall have to agree, at least partially, with the statement made by most scientists and travellers, who have written about the Negritos, that is, that they had lost their original language and took over the dialects of the people in whose immediate neighborhood they were living.”⁷⁴

Concluding Remarks

Looking back at the missionary and scientific work of this great missionary, one can only admire his commitment to the people among whom he lived. He befriended them and they loved him in return. He also made Filipino scholars aware of the rich cultural heritage of the peoples of Northern Luzon. He made invaluable contributions to the history and cultural heritage of the Philippines.

Without exaggeration, it can be stated that he is a model for all CICM missionaries wherever they are active. He lived in contact with the people he sought to evangelize, and put the words of Anthony Bellagamba into practice long before they were written down: “The struggle of the people, their hopes and concerns, their vision of life, their experience of death, their cosmological theories, their methods of being community, their understanding of authority, their use of authority, their sexual drives, and their whole system of values are, or should be, of great interest to cross-cultural personnel.”⁷⁵

As a missionary, he was truly a person of the present and the beyond. According to Peter C. Phan, persons of

⁷⁴ Vanoverbergh, “Negritos of Northern Luzon,” *Anthropos* 20, no. 2 (1925): 417.

⁷⁵ Anthony Bellagamba, *Mission and Ministry in the Global Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 95; quoted in Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 146.

the beyond “must go beyond their own cultures, histories, values, mother tongues, native symbols, even their religions, not in the sense of rejecting them, but in the sense of ‘emptying’ themselves of them in order to be guests and strangers among the people they evangelize and to receive and adopt as far as possible their hosts’ cultures and ways of life.”⁷⁶

Vanoverbergh spent practically his whole active missionary life among marginal peoples like the Isnegs, Kankanays, and Negritos. He crossed the border of poverty and led a very simple life. What filled his heart and mind, the Good News of Jesus, became alive in his actions and words. He was a true missionary, a model for all missionaries.

⁷⁶ Phan, 146-7.

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(I did not consider it necessary to include all his articles and books in the following list. I only included those which have more or less a link to the topic of my article.)

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