

# The Bisayas of Borneo and the Philippines: A New Look at the Maragtas

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In Borneo and in the Philippines today there are people who are known as Bisayas (Bisayans). Did the Bisayas of the Philippines originate from the Bisayas of Borneo? This question has been the subject of inquiry among historians and anthropologists for many years. So far, no definite answer has been arrived at.

In Borneo the Bisayas live in Sabah, Brunei, and Sarawak. They inhabit the areas along the Klias, Padas, Lawas, and Limbang rivers in the periphery of Brunei Bay. In 1951, there were 7,866 Bisayans in Sabah, 35 in Brunei, and 1,125 in Sarawak or a total of 9,826.<sup>1</sup> This figure seems small, but according to Brunei traditions, these Bisayans are only a pagan relic of a once much

larger population which covered Brunei and which became Malay in the familiar process of cultural assimilation.<sup>2</sup>

In the Philippines on the other hand, it is estimated that there are more than 10,000,000 Bisayans as of 1970. Moreover, the term Bisaya (Visaya) as applied in the Philippines, does not only refer to people but also to geography and language. Geographically, the Bisayas cover the islands of Tablas, Romblon, Siquijor, Panay, Guimaras, Negros, Cebu, Bohol, Bantayan, Camotes, Masbate, Leyte, Biliran, Samar, and numerous smaller islands in the central Philippines. Linguistically, the word Bisaya refers to the language of the people in the region. It should be noted, however,

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<sup>1</sup> John Carroll, "The Word Bisaya in the Philippines and Borneo," *Sarawak Museum Journal*, IX (July-December 1960), p. 532.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Harrison, "Bisaya: Borneo-Philippine Impacts of Islam," *Sarawak Museum Journal*, VII (June 1956), p. 43.

that Bisaya comprises several closely related dialects, principally Aklanon, Kiniray-a, Hiligaynon (Ilongo), Sugbuhanon (Cebuano), and Waray-Waray.

What is the origin of the word *Bisaya*? Many theories have been advanced in this regard. In 1926 Dr. H. Otley Beyer suggested that the name came from the empire of Sri Vijaya.<sup>3</sup> In 1954 Dr. E. D. Hester of the University of Chicago Philippine Studies Program commented that etymologically the name may be related to Sri Vijaya,<sup>4</sup> and in 1956 Tom Harrison of the Sarawak Museum wrote, "I might suggest a link to the Buddhistic empire of Sri Vijaya which certainly reached West Borneo in the 12th century."<sup>5</sup>

In 1960, however, Eugene Verstraelen, professor of linguistics at the University of San Carlos, Cebu City, raised a doubt because, according to him, linguistically the deriva-

tion of Vijaya would not be Bisaya but Bidaya or Biraya.<sup>6</sup> Besides, the "rhyming game" of matching sounds is not reliable.

Juan Francisco, in an extensively researched paper, points out that the Sanskrit "J" in its development in the Western branch of the Malayo-Polonesian languages never shows an "s" or "sh" form.<sup>7</sup> He, however, suggests that Visaya may have derived from Sanskrit Visaya meaning "sphere, country, territory, dominion, kingdom." Yet he dismisses the earlier theory of the Philippine Bisayas having been a territory of the Sri Vijayan Empire for it is not in the list of dependencies — Sanskrit or Chinese — of the empire.<sup>8</sup>

John Carroll, also in 1960, suggested that perhaps the origin of the name Bisaya is not an empire of Sri Vijaya, which perhaps never existed, but a culture hero named Sri Vijaya.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Cited by Elizabeth Hassel, "The Sri Vijayan and Majapahit Empires and the Theory of Their Political Association with the Philippine Islands," *Philippine Social Sciences and Humanities Review*, XVIII (March 1953), p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>E.D. Hester, *The Robertson Text and Translation of the Povedano Manuscript of 1572* (Chicago: Chicago University, 1954), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 46 fn.

<sup>6</sup>Eugene Verstraelen, "An Essay Towards a Historical Description of Tagalog and Cebuano Bisaya," *Philippine Studies*, VIII, No. 3 (July 1960), p. 514 fn.

<sup>7</sup>Juan R. Francisco, "Sri Vijaya and the Philippines: A Review," *Philippine Social Sciences and Humanities Review*, XXVI (March 1961), p. 101.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 101-102.

<sup>9</sup>Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 503.

Fray Alberto Santamaria suggested in 1960 that the word *visaya* is not Filipino or Malayan but is derived from Sanskrit Vijaya meaning "victory" or "victorious."<sup>10</sup>

From the Borneo Bisayans has come another theory. There is a Borneo Bisayan legend, recorded in 1950 by Derek Headly, which says that the Sultan of Brunei, upon seeing the beautiful land of the Bisaya, exclaimed, "Bisai-yah!" meaning "How beautiful!"<sup>11</sup>

The foregoing are all theories and speculations. Perhaps we will never know the origin of the name Bisaya. Be that as it may, it would be too much if we take it as a mere coincidence that two peoples, separated by a thousand miles of water, would be carrying the same name. There must be a connection between them.

This is what we would like to find out in this paper.

The oldest reference to Bornean origin of the Bisayan people of the Philippines is found in the *Maragtas*, a traditional account of the

An English translation of the Santaren texts of the *Maragtas* was published in limited edition by the University of Chicago in 1954. These texts, however, show that Fr. Santaren himself composed the two versions, basing them on several manuscripts in his possessions.<sup>13</sup>

Another version of the *Maragtas* is that of Pedro Monteclaro, first published in 1907,<sup>14</sup> which, like the Santaren texts, is not also a transcription nor a translation, but a composition based on old writings. The many Spanish words found in both the Santaren and Monteclaro versions show that the two authors have made interpolations on the account and hence, coming of the Bornean migrants to the Philippines. The first texts of this account are said to have been written by Fr. Tomas Santaren in Janiuay, Iloilo, in 1858 who said that he copied them from old manuscripts written in romanized Ilongo. These texts were first published in 1902.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Alberto Santamaria, "Visaya, 'El Victorioso,'" *Unitas*, Año 33, p. 345. Cited by Francisco, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Headly, "Some Bisaya Folk-Lore," *Sarawak Museum Journal*, V (September 1950), quoted by Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 504.

<sup>12</sup> As an appendix to Angel Perez, *Igorrotes: Estudio Geografico y Itnografico sobre Algunos Distritos del Norte de Luzon* (Manila, 1902).

<sup>13</sup> Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 505.

<sup>14</sup> In the Hiligaynon newspaper, *Kadampig sang Banwa*, Iloilo, 1907.

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their texts are probably of 19th century vintage.<sup>15</sup>

It is regrettable that no copies of the earlier accounts could be found. This being so, the *Maragtas* does not carry the weight of early historical documents like the Povedano Manuscripts<sup>16</sup> and the Pavon Manuscripts.<sup>17</sup> The *Maragtas* remains a legend, a tradition, at best a folk-history.

We have to resort to other historically accepted sources, if there are any, to prove that the Bisayas of the Philippines are related to the Bisayas of Borneo.

When the Spaniards came to the Philippines in 1521, they did not hear of the Bisayas although they reached the region and recorded many names like Zugbu, Mactan, Bohol, Cagayan, and even Borney which they passed on their way to the Mollucas. The expeditions that followed Magellan also failed to note the name Bisaya as applied to

the islands of the Central Philippines, although they learned of a port of Bisaya somewhere in Eastern Mindanao. And after Legaspi had established the first permanent Spanish settlement in Cebu in 1565, he gave the name "Pintados" to the people of the Bisayan islands because the natives had tattoos on their bodies.<sup>18</sup>

It was not until Legaspi had transferred his headquarters to Panay in 1569 that he learned of the existence of the Bisayas.

These facts tend to show that at the time of the Spanish arrival the term Bisaya was only applied to the people and language of Panay and Negros. Povedano, in 1572, titled his writings as "La Isla de Negros y las Costumbres de Visayos y Negritos."

Yet it is intriguing to note that in the same work and in his manuscript of 1578, Povedano states that the people of Negros were the

<sup>15</sup>Besides the Monteclaro and Santaren texts, there are still other unpublished texts of the *Maragtas*. Two of these are the municipal histories of Miagao and Cabatuan, Iloilo that were submitted to the National Library in compliance with an executive order of the Governor-General in 1911.

<sup>16</sup>Written by Diego Lope Povedano in Negros, 1572 and 1578. English translation by James Robertson, published by the University of Chicago, 1957.

<sup>17</sup>Written by Jose Ma. Pavon in Negros, 1838-1839. English translation by James Robertson, published by the University of Chicago, 1954.

<sup>18</sup>Miguel de Loarca in his *Relacion de las Filipinas, 1580*, in Emma Blair and James Robertson, *The Philippine Islands: 1543-1898* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Publishing Co., 1903-1909), Vol. V, pp. 115-117, says, "The men tatto their bodies with very beautiful figures, using therefore small pienes of iron dipped in ink."

Haguecina, who lived along the coast; the Haraya who lived on the lowlands; and the Igneine who lived in the uplands.<sup>19</sup> The same observation was made by Loarca in Panay in 1580, but added that the Haguecinas were also called Yliguenes.<sup>20</sup> Which I think are the present-day Hiligaynon.<sup>21</sup> Loarca also noted that the Yliguenes believed that the soul of the dead went with the god Siburenen to a very high mountain in Borney.<sup>22</sup>

In 1570, when Legaspi invaded Manila from Panay, an anonymous chronicler wrote the first reference to Visayas by the Spaniards:<sup>23</sup>

Having prepared the things necessary for the said voyage, the field marshal (Martin de Goiti) with the said captain (Juan de Salcedo) in two of our small ships, with three pieces of heavy artillery with fourteen or fifteen ships of the Pintado Indians, our friends, who in their language are called *Veseys*, left the Panay River in the year (15) 70 above-mentioned, on the day of the Holy Cross, the third of May.

It is my opinion, therefore, that the name Bisaya first applied only

to the people of Panay and Negros. Perhaps it was only the Hiligaynon (Yliguenes) who carried the name or maybe the Hiligaynon, Haraya, and Igneine collectively referred to themselves as Bisayas. The name must have been applied to the rest of the islands in Central Philippines only later by the Spaniards.

That the Bisaya of Panay and Negros would give their name to the people of the other islands may be deduced from the fact that Oton and later Arevalo and Iloilo became the center of Spanish activities in the south for many years.

Another theory may also be presented in this respect and it is that people from Panay migrated to the neighboring islands just as the *Maragtas* says. Official census figures during the Spanish period show that Panay, particularly Iloilo, was the most densely populated place in the Philippines. As late as 1857, the census figures showed Iloilo as the biggest province in population, having more people than the then

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca P. Ignacio (tr.), *The Povedano Manuscript of 1578* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1954), p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Loarca, *op. cit.*, p. 121. Loarca also applied the term Yliguenes to coast-dwelling Cebuanos and Boholanos.

<sup>21</sup> In Iloilo today, if a man speaks Hiligaynon the non-Hiligaynon-speaking Ilongos refer to him as Haguecina.

<sup>22</sup> Loarca, *loc. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> In Blair and Robertson, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 141.

province of Manila.<sup>24</sup> The population of Iloilo compared with the other Bisayan provinces as follows:

Iloilo	— 527,570
Cebu	— 267,540
Negros(whole island)	— 113,379
Bohol	— 175,686
Samar	— 117,686
Leyte	— 134,493
Antique	— 77,639
Capiz	— 143,713
Romblon	— 17,068
Masbate	— 10,992

The island of Panay (Iloilo, Capiz, Antique) had almost half of the inhabitants of the whole region.

CONTEMPORANEOUS to the time Legaspi discovered the existence of the Bisayas in Panay, the Europeans learned of the existence of the Bisayas in Borneo. A map in Florence, Italy, dated 1563, shows the name Bisaya for the territory immediately north of Brunei Bay.<sup>25</sup> A Dutch historian, Jan Huygen van Linschoten, included in his book published in 1595 a map of the

East Indies which also shows the name Bacaija in the same place in Borneo.<sup>26</sup>

In 1578 and 1579, only a few years after the Spanish conquest of Manila, the third governor-general of the Philippines, Francisco de Sande, organized two expeditions to conquer Brunei. During his first expedition, a Spaniard and two Filipinos were captured by Sultan Lijar (Saif-ul-Rejal)<sup>27</sup> of Brunei. In his letter to Sultan Lijar demanding release of the captives, Sande referred to them as "a Christian Spaniard named Diego Felipe and two Visayans, natives of Cubu (Cebu), Christians. . ." <sup>28</sup> By 1572, therefore, the Spaniards had already started calling Cebuanos as Visayans.

The invasion of Sande of Brunei is very relevant to our study because one of the reports, dated March 22, 1579, states that Sultan Lijar summoned "all his Bisayan and Moro allies to build a fort. . ." <sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Gula de Forerteros*, 1858, cited in John Bowring, *A Visit to the Philippine Islands*, new ed. (Manila: Filipiniana Book Build, 1963) p. 67.

<sup>25</sup> Noted by Robert Nicholl, *The Sarawak Gazette*, April 30, 1960.

<sup>26</sup> Reproduced in C.A. Gibson-Hill, "Singapore Old Strait and New Harbor, *Memoirs of the Raffles Museum*, No. 3 (December 1956), p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Sultan Saif-ul-Rejal, the seventh sultan of Brunei. Cf. F. Delor Angeles, "Brunei and the Moro Wars," *Brunei Museum Journal*, I (1969), p. 123.

<sup>28</sup> Blair and Robertson, *op. cit.*, Vol. 4, p. 152.

<sup>29</sup> Affidavit of Si Magat, recorded by Juan Arce, Blair and Robertson, *op. cit.*, Vol. 4, p. 198.

and Sande received an intelligence report that Sultan Lijar was hiding in "the river of Bisayans in the province of Melano, near to Saragua."<sup>30</sup>

These statements reveal that at the time of Spanish conquest of the Philippines, the Bisayans of Borneo were living in the province of Melano. This indicates possible affinity between the Bisayans and present-day Melanaos who live along the coast of Sarawak from the mouth of the Rejang River to the mouth of the Baram River. If the Bisayans mentioned in the *Maragtas* accounts were Bisayans, they must have come from the River of Bisayas in the province of Melano near to Saragua.

A statement by R.A. Bewsher who had worked among the Bisayans in the Limbang area in Borneo, may be relevant in this connection. It shows that the Bisayans had migrated from one place to another within Borneo. Bewsher says:<sup>31</sup>

Limbang Bisayans suggest that their own migrations are very recent subsequent to the beginning of the Murut decline in that river, and contemporaneous with the flight of others to Labuan

and the Padas River (North Borneo) under pressure from Baram headhunters upon their homes in the upper Belait and Tutong Rivers.

Here is where I would like to point out some suggested connections between the Philippine Bisayas and the Borneo Bisayas. First, I would like to call attention to the river named Saragua mentioned in the report to Sande and the Sirawagan (Siwaragan) River in Panay where the Borneans of the *Maragtas* were supposed to have landed. It is possible that the Borneans of *Maragtas* named the river in Panay after the river in Borneo. The difference in spelling may just have been due to the Spaniards' known difficulty in spelling words ending in "n" and "ng." For example, they shortened Ilong-Ilong to Iloilo, dropped the "g" from "Ilong" and spelled Hiligaynon as Yliguene.

Second, the *Maragtas* says that Datu Puti and his companions fled Borneo because of the oppressive rule of Sultan Makatunao. Among the Melanaos there is a tradition that says:<sup>32</sup>

Over five hundred years ago, before the coming of Islam, the Melanaos were

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> B.A. Bewsher, "Bisayan Accounts of Early Bornean Settlements in the Philippines Recorded by Father Santaren," *Sarawak Museum Journal*, VII (June 1956), p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> See R. G. Aikman, "Melanaos" in Tom Harrison, *The Peoples of Sarawak* (Kuching: Government Printing Office, 1959).



all pagans and were ruled by their own chiefs, the most famous of whom was the legendary Tugau, who dwelt in the Retus, a tributary of the Igan. . . Tugau. . . though himself strong enough to challenge the might of Brunei. . . after two decisive victories by the Sultan's forces the Melanaus were beaten and their territory, from the Tutong to the Igan, became a part of the Brunei empire."

It is possible, and this theory was first advanced by Carroll, that before the advent of Islam, a chieftain named Makatunao (Tugau, Megat Tung-ao, Maha Tung-ao) gained power in the area of the Retus and Bintulu Rivers. This Melanau chieftain oppressed the people in "the river of Bisaya" (now known as the Bintulu Melanau) thereby causing a large group headed by Datu Puti, Datu Sumakwel, Datu Paiburong and others, to leave. On their *benidays* they sailed towards the northeast until they reached Panay where they settled. These *Maragtas* people became the Haraya or Kinaray-a speaking inhabitants of Panay.

Datu Puti later returned to Borneo, enlisted the aid of the sultan of Brunei and attacked Makatunao in his stronghold of Odtojan (Tutong?). Makatunao was able to repel this attack. Later, perhaps after ten years when Labaw Donggon and Paibare, the sons of Datu Paiburong of Iloilo, had grown up

to be strong warriors, they led the Brunei forces in a second assault against Makatunao, killed him, sacked his city, and brought the survivors to Panay as slaves.

The victory was resulted in Brunei domination over the Retus and Bintulu Rivers. In subsequent years immigrations from Borneo to Panay continued, the immigrants coming from different Borneo cultural-linguistic groups like the Kalimantanans, Kedayans, Bisayans, Muruts, Dusuns, Tutongs, etc. The later immigrants became the Hiligaynon-speaking Bisayans of the Philippines. The *Maragtas* account says that the Borneans who came to Panay were from different places in Borneo which explains the differences in language.

The later immigrants to Panay and other islands pushed the Kinaray-a-speaking inhabitants towards the interior just as the latter had earlier pushed the proto-Malay (Igneine) to the uplands. By the time the Spaniards came there might still have been migrations going on from Borneo to the Philippines, particularly the Bisayans.

While this is just a theory, it somehow gives support to the *Maragtas*. We should also recall, as mentioned earlier, that Loarca noticed among the Yliguenes (Hiligay-

nons) there was still a belief that when they died their soul would go to a high mountain in Borneo. This belief could have been a vestige of their religious beliefs in Borneo.

Bewsher's statement on the Limbang Bisaya migration from the upper Tutong and Belait Rivers is also significant. It shows that the Bisayan migration was from areas to the south and nearer to the Bintulu Melanau which has been suggested as "the river of Bisayas."

Another supporting evidence of the Borneo-Philippine Bisaya connection is language. In 1958, Father Francisco Araneta and Father Miguel Bernad of the Ateneo de Manila University, on invitation of the Sarawak Museum, stayed for a time with the Bisayans in Borneo and made a study of their language. Their study disclosed significant similarities, both in vocabulary and usage, between the Borneo Bisayan and the Philippine Bisayan (Ilongo and Cebuano) as well as Tagalog.<sup>33</sup>

It may also be of interest to point out, in this regard, that Tagalog is very similar to Ilongo although a sea divides the Tagalog region from Panay while it is very different from

Pampango although the Tagalogs and the Pampangos live on the same plain in Central Luzon.

The *Maraytas* says that from Panay, Datu Balensusa and Datu Dumangsil settled at the mouth of the River Taal and from them sprang the Tagalog people.<sup>34</sup>

To cite some examples of vocabulary similarities between the Bisaya (Ilongo) and the Borneo Bisaya, here are the following:

English	Ilongo Bisaya	Borneo Bisaya
Father	Amay	Hamat
Son	Anak	Anak
Husband	Bana	Lakih*
Head	Ulo	Ulu
Eyes	Mata	Mato
Neck	Liog	Liao
Bird	Pispis	Maanok**
Dog	Idu	Asu***
Sea	Lawod	Laut
Island	Pulo	Pulao
Stone	Bato	Battu
Mountain	Bukid	Bukid
I	Ako	Aku
You	Ikaw	Ikkao
That	Ina	Inah
What	Ano	Anh
Walk	Lakat/Panaw	Manao
Kill	Patay	Mamatay
Inom	Inom	Minom

<sup>33</sup> F. Araneta and M. A. Bernad, "Bisayans" of Borneo and the "Tagalogs" and "Visayans" of the Philippines," *Sarawak Museum Journal*, IX (July-December 1960), pp. 542-564.

<sup>34</sup> Bewsher, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

\* In Ilongo Bisaya, "laki" means paramour or man.

\*\* In Ilongo Bisaya, "manok" is chicken.

\*\*\* It is also "aso" in Tagalog.

A look at the map of Borneo will easily reveal that many major place-names, especially in Melanau area, have counterparts among place-names in the Philippine Bisayas. Among these place-names are Sibiu, Linao, Bulu, Bulan, Baloi, Igan, and Dala. Moreover, Bewsher believes that the name "Panay" is Kalimantan.<sup>35</sup>

Aside from language, there are also many similarities in the tools, utensils, weapons, and other ethnographic materials between the two peoples. In the Sarawak and Brunei museums are displayed many objects of the Bisaya and Bisaya-related tribes of Borneo (Like the Tutongs and Dusuns) that are very much the same as those found in the Bisayas of the Philippines.<sup>36</sup> For example, *tadyaw* (jar) in the Philippine Bisayas is also *tajau* (jar) in the Borneo Bisayas. Another example is *dulang* (earthen plate) which is common to both cultures.

## COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

In recent years, there has been gathering an opinion among anthro-

pologists and historians (especially among Filipinos) to dismiss the *Maragtas* as pure myth. One of the arguments presented to support this opinion is the discovery in Panay archeological diggings of Chinese trade porcelain wares belonging to the Sung Dynasty which was in power in China from the 10th to the 13th century (960-1279 A.D.).

Critics of the *Maragtas* argue that the sale (or barter) of Panay between the Borneans and the Negritos could not be true because if it was true, how could one explain the presence of Sung porcelain in Panay? These critics contend that Negritos did not carry on trade with the Chinese.

This opinion is not necessarily true. It is largely based on the belief or assumption that the *Maragtas* events occurred in the 13th century as reckoned by Beyer, Zaide, and company. Zaide estimated the migration took place in 1250 A.D.<sup>37</sup> Beyer put it at the first half of the 13th century.<sup>38</sup>

But it is possible that the *Maragtas* events happened earlier than the

<sup>35</sup>Bewsher, *loc. cit.*

<sup>36</sup>In the summer of 1971, the writer had the opportunity to visit museums in Kuching, Brunei, and Kota Kinabalu when he went on the Travelling Symposium on Museum Development in Southeast Asia, sponsored by the Ford Foundation.

<sup>37</sup>Gregorio F. Zaide, *Philippine Political and Cultural History* (Manila: Philippine Education Co., 1950), p. 60.

<sup>38</sup>Quoted by Hassell, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

13th century! After all, the *Maragtas* texts do not carry any date. It is possible that the first Bisayans came to Panay from Borneo in the 11th century or even earlier and were the very people who conducted overseas trade with mainland China, Annam, and Siam.

Despite the paucity of conclusive historical evidence, there are very strong indications that the Bisayas of the Philippines came from the Bisayas of Borneo. This writer would also advance that the name Bisaya did not have its origin in the empire of Sri Vijaya as Beyer, Hester and Harrison suggest, nor in the culture hero named Sri Vijaya as Carroll intimates, nor even from the San-

skrit Vijaya (victory) as Santamaria claims. Rather, it has its origin in the river BISAYA in Borneo, the home of the original Bisayan people.

This writer would further suggest more comparative studies among the Borneo and the Philippine Bisayans, especially on linguistics, physical and social anthropology, ethnography, and also folklore. I say folklore because, as Bascom has pointed out, any study of a culture that does not include folklore is incomplete and that "folklore may suggest clues to past archaic customs."<sup>39</sup>

Who knows that beneath the veneer of fiction in the *Maragtas* legend lies a solid core of historical facts!

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<sup>39</sup>William R. Bascom, "The Four Functions of Folklore," in Allen Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 284.