

Compare and Contrast the Site of the First Catholic Mass in the Philippines

(Group 14)

GE 2 - Readings in Philippine History

MWF - (10:00-11:00 am)

Section: FB

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Introduction

In this topic, we are about to discuss one of the historical events that happened in the Philippines which is the First Catholic Mass. And to prove a point stand where the first mass was taking place. Is it in Masao, Butuan City or in Limasawa, Southern Leyte?

As we go through, we all know that Limasawa, an island municipality in Southern Leyte, is a small yet flourishing town being the site of the First Christian Mass in the country and Asia. The First Cross and the First Mass Shrine are some of the frequently visited spots that give tourists a rare experience of retracing the historic footsteps of the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan in 1521 who paved the way for the beginning of Christianity in the country.

However, there are controversies and conflicting views in Philippine history. Other Filipino historians have long contested the idea that Limasawa was the site of the first Catholic mass in the country. Historian Sonia Zaide identified Masao (also Mazaua) in [Butuan](#) as the location of the first Christian mass. The basis of Zaide's claim is the diary of [Antonio Pigafetta](#), chronicler of Magellan's voyage. In 1995 then Congresswoman Ching Plaza of Agusan del Norte-Butuan City filed a bill in Congress contesting the Limasawa hypothesis and asserting the "site of the first mass" was Butuan. The Philippine Congress referred the matter to the National Historical Institute for it to study the issue and recommend a historical finding. Then NHI chair Dr. Samuel K. Tan reaffirmed Limasawa as the site of the first mass.

The Controversy

According to the book of Guillermo A.R. (2005), Limasawa Island is a small island known then as Mazaua to the Spaniards - off the southern coast of Leyte is historically significant as the site where Ferdinand Magellan celebrated the First Catholic Mass in the Philippines on 31 March 1521. The chieftain of Limasawa, Kolambu and his men attended the mass officiated by Father Pedro Valderrama. The stop at Limasawa provided, Magellan and his crew of 236 men a much - needed respite and afforded them to replenish provisions. Before leaving the island, Magellan arranged to have a Christian cross erected on the site. Then Magellan's flotilla of three ships proceeded to Cebu, where he met King Humabon and again religious milestone occurred, with the Christian baptism of the king and his wife Queen Juana. This signaled the spread of Christianity all over the island of Cebu.

On Easter Sunday, March 31, 1521, a mass was held on Masao's shore with Reverend Father Pedro de Valderrama officiating. At sundown, Magellan, in the presence of Spaniards and Filipinos, planted a large wooden cross on the summit of a hill overlooking the sea. He named the country the Isla de San Lazaro.

Note historian Dr. Sonia M. Zaide Presented the evidence for Masao rather than Limasawa as the site of the first recorded mass in the Philippines. First, in all primary sources including the diary of Antonio Pigafetta, the chronicler of Magellan's voyage, the name of the place was Mazaua. Limasawa has four syllables and begins with another letter. Second, according to primary records, the expedition traveled 20 to 25 leagues from Homonhon, the first landing points. If they had been to Limasawa Island, the distance is only 14.6

leagues or one - half of the length. Third, the Distance to Cebu from Mazaua according to Pigafetta was 35 leagues (140 miles). The distance from Limasawa to Cebu is only 80 miles. Fourth, it was mentioned that the king came to their ship in a balanghai. Butuan is now the site of at least nine excavated balanghai relics; by contrast, Limasawa has no significant archaeological relics or balanghai tradition. Fifth, the Western explorer got excited at the abundance of gold in Mazaua, for that was the main currency at that time. Both archaeological relics and the gold mines today attested to the abundance of gold in the Agusan Valley.

On the other hand, Guillermo A.R. (2005) said, that Limasawa Island is a small island known then as Mazaua to the Spaniards - off the southern coast of Leyte is historically significant as the site where Ferdinand Magellan celebrated the First Catholic Mass in the Philippines on 31 March 1521. The chieftain of Limasawa, Kolambu and his men attended the mass officiated by Father Pedro Valderrama. The stop at Limasawa provided, Magellan and his crew of 236 men a much - needed respite and afforded them to replenish provisions. Before leaving the island, Magellan arranged to have a Christian cross erected on the site. Then Magellan's flotilla of three ships proceeded to Cebu, where he met King Humabon and again religious milestone occurred, with the Christian baptism of the king and his wife Queen Juana. This signaled the spread of Christianity all over the island of Cebu.

Butuan to pursue claim it was site of First Mass in RP 485 years ago

BUTUAN CITY — the event that marked the birth of Christianity in the Philippines 485 years ago is still under dispute, with this city renewing its claim that the historic first Mass celebrated by Spanish colonizers was held here and not in Limasawa, Leyte.

Local executives and Church officials as well as historians here said they have new scientific evidence to substantiate the re-filing of a petition before the National Historical Institute (NHI) asserting that Butuan City — particularly Mazzaua Island, now Barangay Pinamangculan — was the official site of the first Mass on Easter Sunday in 1521.

Among the pieces of evidence are 10 1,600-year-old Balahanghai boats believed to have been used for trade and to transport people for worship services.

"We waited for more scientific evidences to strongly substantiate the Mazzaua claim until geomorphologists and archeologists came up with official reports that indeed Mazzaua Island was the site of the first Mass," Fr. Joesilo Amalia, trustee of the Butuan City Cultural and Historical Foundation Inc. and curator of the Butuan Diocese Museum told **The STAR** yesterday.

A law was passed by Congress on June 19, 1960, or Republic Act No. 2733, declared the site of Magallanes on Limasawa Island as the national shrine to commemorate the first Mass ever held in the country that gave birth to Christianity in this now predominantly Catholic nation.

But the Butuan City Cultural and Historical Foundation Inc., (BCHFI) with the backing of the Butuan City government in the early 1980s up to the '90s, contested the declaration. This prompted the government in 1994 to form the Gancayco Commission headed by then Supreme Court Associate Justice Emilio Gancayco.

In 1996, the commission penned a resolution in favor of the Limasawa Island claim. However, the BCHFI said the NHI board failed to concur with the Gancayco findings. "This prompted BCHFI to continuously raise our protest," Amalia said.

Two weeks ago, NHI chairman Ambeth Ocampo, who visited the Butuan City Regional Museum here, told BCHFI officials that the NHI is keen on resurrecting the Mazzaua "First Mass" claim.

BCHFI officials are set to meet today with local officials, historians and Church leaders at the Butuan City Regional Museum to discuss the contents of the BCHFI position paper to be submitted to NHI, Amalia said.

New proof

According to BCHFI, it has gathered 28 new pieces of scientific evidence and comparisons between the two islands — Mazzaua and Limasawa — to substantiate Butuan's claim, including the recovery of 10 Balahanghai boats which were accidentally dug up near Masao River in 1976. A shrine was built for the ancient boats which were used by natives in Butuan for sea travel even before the Spaniards came.

The Philippine government has endorsed the Balanghai Shrine to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a "World Historical and Cultural Heritage Site" because of its contribution to ancient culture and history.

According to Amalia, once UNESCO recognizes the Balanghai Shrine, it will put Butuan City on the world map as a "historical and cultural heritage site." Amalia said they are hoping the NHI will listen this time, pointing out that the

claim for the site of the First Mass must be substantiated by scientific proof, not just by passing a law which, he insisted, had no scientific basis.

REPUBLIC ACT NO. 2733

Republic Act no. 2733 - an act to declare the site in Magallanes, Limasawa Island in the province of Leyte, where the first mass in the Philippines was held as a national shrine, to provide for the preservation of historical monuments and landmarks thereat, and for other purposes.

Enacted without Executive approval, June 19, 1960.

Subsequently, Magellan's men held a mock fight. The soldier in a suit of armor remained unhurt even after he was struck. Rajah Kolambu was fascinated and noted that one man in such attire was worth 100 fights. These newcomers could help them win their battles. Thus, the rajah decided to seal their new friendship. Afterwards, he performed the *kasi kasi* or blood compact ceremony with Magellan on March 29, Good Friday.

On Easter Sunday, March 31, 1521, a mass was held on Massao's shore with Reverend Father Pedro de Valderrama officiating. At sundown, Magellan, in the presence of Spaniards and Filipinos, planted a large wooden cross on the summit of a hill overlooking the sea. He named the country the *Isla de San Lazaro*.

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