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Domoguen: Remembering the old Suyoc village and its generation of rice growers

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Mountain Light

Wednesday, March 9, 2011

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IN 1965 my parents and three siblings moved to Suyoc, Mankayan, Benguet, from the Baguio Gold Mines in Itogon. I was so nauseous from the long a dusty trip but as we entered the whole stretch of another dirt road from Guinao-ang to Guiday, where we were to nest for the next six years, my spirits were suddenly upbeat. Just below the road, I saw this endless sea of gold exploding in my sight. In those days, the villages in Guinao-ang and Suyoc grow traditional rice beside the river that meanders from its source at the Mount Data Plateau all the way to Taneg. That is about 30 kilometres, more or less.

It is not just the view that impressed my drooping spirit. The earthy smell of the fields and the song of the clear water flowing down a snake winding river in between mountain ridges, alerted me to a new world. The sights and smell, and the song of the river has become for me, an endeared life and recurring dream.

Besides a near tragic encounter with a drunken man in the rice fields, life in Guiday was perfect for young growing boys and even girls. The rice fields and the clean river affected my consciousness as their moods and ornaments changed with the seasons. The fields and the river brought fun and an array of activities and colours in the environment any which way the seasons changed from the bright days of summer towards the rainy months of June.

In summer, after harvest, the fields yielded mudfish and shells of all kinds. Most days, we find ourselves there having the fun of our lives splashing in the mud and gathering what we can for food on the table. Besides the fish that the fields and river below our house yielded, we also enjoyed feasting on fresh water crest that thrived on their shores.

Whether you indulge your time in the fields or in the river, swimming and fishing, you can almost find time besides these to roam the mountainsides, gather blueberries which we collect in our shirts, tied at both ends to make a temporary sack. Our stained shirts bore us great fun and scolding from our moms. No mean and understanding mom can deny us the fun and adventures meant for a boyish life. We always compensated for such a minor offense though by bringing home firewood, besides the berries and on occasions mushrooms.

The natives in Suyoc were friendly and very accommodating to migrant mine workers and their families at the Suyoc Mines. Aside from rice farming, some of the natives engaged in private mining and businesses that served the mining corporation's army of migrant workers. Many of the natives are well-off and generous. For instance, after harvesting the rice fields, they allowed these to be cultivated with sweet potatoes, beans and vegetable by the migrants. That generation of rice-growing natives were really good. Aside from allowing migrants from the four winds of this land, who spoke all kinds of dialects and languages, without much complaint, they also shared what meager resources they had to them.

The changing times and its lifestyles transform the land and the hearts of men. Change for me and to some extent that community in Suyoc came fast in 1970 when the mining corporation started terminating its employees. Soon, the mines altogether stopped operations. To sustain our migrant lives, we moved to Lepanto Mines in 1971.

After four years, I visited Suyoc and marveled how this childhood nest has completely changed to a community of vegetable farmers. I did not see any of my local childhood friends. I was told some of them migrated themselves to Baguio City and elsewhere. The smell of the rice fields and the boyish vision of gold-yellow are gone. The song of the river with its clear water that allowed fishes and crustaceans to inhabit its bellies and crevices will never again be heard. Three decades later, the abundant and crystal clear water has dwindled to a trickle. During the rainy season, the river angrily rampages with silted water downstream. In all seasons, no child or buffalo will dare to drink from that river ever. The waterfall at Mount Data which is the river's source cannot also be seen during the summer months. This present reality completely marked for me, the end of an era. A new lifestyle with its life changing values has infected the present generation of Homo sapiens in this land. So for Suyoc and its benevolent ancient masters, all that is left for me to do is hold these good childhood memories about you, your sweet singing river and the gold-yellow rice fields of long ago.

I feel heartened to note that the Municipality of Natonin, Mountain Province and its officials care for the preservation and sustainability of their rice terraces and heirloom rice varieties. Through Mayor Mateo Chiyawan, a municipal resolution for the expansion of a 100 hectare rice terraces was endorsed by DA-RFU-CAR Executive Director Lucrecio R. Alviar Jr. to DA Secretary Proceso Alcala. The resolution was returned validation and Director Alviar forwarded it to the Regional Agricultural Organic Program Coordinator, Mrs. Arlene Sagayo, for her appropriate action. That means she has to work with the LGU of Natonin in preparing the required project proposal and needed documents indicating the problems and interventions that needs to be done. In my view, a component activity of the project to be developed must include the protection and preservation of the watersheds for the municipality's rice terraces. Both watersheds and expansion areas should be enshrined in the town's Comprehensive Land Use Plan (CLUP) for the guidance of the future Natonians.

Published in the Sun.Star Baguio newspaper on March 09, 2011.

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