

# PBS GLOBALTRIBE SERIES: THE HUDHUD CHANT: SONGS OF A PEOPLE

## Kiangang, Ifugao Province, Philippines

Standing in her family's rice field just outside the town of Kiangang, Honorata Tapo says wistfully and earnestly, "Sometimes, I dream of days gone by."

Her nostalgia is understandable.

After decades of foreign occupation – by the Spanish, the British, the Americans and then the Japanese – the vast majority of Ifugao people have given up their traditional way of dress, their religion, and many of their rituals and customs.

Their renowned rice terraces – now 2000 years old – still remain, making them the oldest and more elaborate agricultural project in history. But they've started to deteriorate, as more and more people leave the province to seek better pay and a modern way of life.

Above all, Honorata laments the gradual disappearance of the region's oral traditions, which include epic tales and a manner of chant known as the *hudhud*. In the old days, when villagers would harvest their rice by hand, they sang the *hudhud* collectively to help pass the time. Now, much of the harvesting is done by machines, without musical accompaniment.

"Nowadays we hear the *hudhud* only during the wake of somebody dead," says Honorata.

## A PEOPLE'S HISTORY

The *hudhud* is no mere song. It's a musical record of Ifugao myths, traditions and beliefs passed down orally from as far back as the 15th century, although some scholars believe it to be older. Few know the *hudhud* chants, which can last as long as three days, by heart, and the ones who do today are as old as Honorata, who is 67.



Once they pass on, their knowledge will die with them.

The elders feel a sense of urgency now to try to teach Ifugao traditions to the younger generation. Honorata's sister, Lourdes, has contributed to that effort with extensive research, articles and a book, "Ifugao: Culture and History." So far, she has been able to document four versions of the *hudhud*. But there are many more, and she doubts she's up to the task.



“I’m already very tired,” says Lourdes, who’s already 86 years old. “I feel sorry, I feel sad sometimes.”

Luckily, the world is taking notice. In May 2001, UNESCO declared the *hudhud* one of 19 Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, focusing world attention on a chant few outside the Philippines had ever heard.

## SCHOOL FOR LIVING TRADITIONS



The proclamation gave Ifugao culture a much-needed boost, even within the Philippines.

In August of that year, Manuel Dulawan, another Kiangnan native (with no relation to Lourdes) received government funding and launched his dream project: the Ifugao School of Living Traditions.

The school opened with 32 students between the ages of 20 and 45 taking classes every weekend for six months. During that time, they learn not just the *hudhud* but also loom weaving, traditional rice wine making, dancing and other forms of myth narrating... a last-ditch effort to reverse decades of cultural decline.

“When we were children, we were prevented from speaking our language,” says Manuel. “We were punished by the school authorities when we spoke our own language.”

The missionary schools that shaped many of Manuel’s generation also discouraged local beliefs and rituals, and went so far as to call them evil. Generations thereafter grew up embarrassed by their customs and even their traditional garb, especially the “g-string” that men wear.

“We are now erasing whatever our missionaries have been teaching and telling us were wrong,” says Manuel. “They were educators but they forgot that education must start with a people’s own culture.”

Thanks to the work of elders like Manuel and Lourdes, schools today do incorporate Ifugao teachings in their curriculum. Young girls and boys are learning the *hudhud* and even take part in regional competitions.

## THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

But so much of Ifugao’s customs are tied to rice farming and today’s youth, while embracing the role of “keepers of the tradition,” aspire to working in Manila or overseas.

“The children do not build the rice fields anymore,” says Lourdes. “They go to study and afterwards to college. And when they get their degrees they work somewhere where they can apply their knowledge.”

Few return to the highlands, as beautiful as they are to outsiders. And so, the future of Ifugao remains in doubt. But Manuel Dulawan is more hopeful.

“We will, I think, continue to exist distinctly as an ethnographic group, especially now that we are using even the school system to help propagate our culture,” says Manuel.

That, of course, also depends on the rice terraces and on whether elders continue to dream of days gone by.