

REVERSING THE VANISHING OF OUR CULTURE: INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION PROJECTS

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The Ifugao rice terrace is a product of the ingenuity of our ancestors. From the heavily forested slopes, they carved out multi-leveled terraces for rice cultivation and created a network of irrigation from forest water resources. From the terraces sprung the culture and tradition of the people.

The terraces were included in the inscribed heritage sites of UNESCO in 1995 as a living cultural landscape but due to its gradual deterioration brought about by human and natural factors it was added in the World Heritage List in Danger in December 2001. The fading away of the rich indigenous knowledge of the Ifugaos came along with the physical destruction of the terraces.

Indigenous knowledge is the sum of all traditional skills, laws, philosophy, rituals, livelihood, sciences and technologies that a tribe possesses. For Ifugaos, indigenous knowledge transcends all facets of life and is handed down from generation to generation.

Examples are our organic farming and forest management techniques, the native songs, dances and other performing arts, the rites of the mumbaki and rituals associated with the agricultural cycle, the weaving skills of our women and the woodcraft mastery of the men and the world-renowned expertise of rice-paddy farming and terracing.

However, in the past half-century, Ifugaos have gradually adopted modern ways. While the indigenous culture remains a strong influence in the community, modernization is already dominating many aspects of Ifugao life. This is more prevalent among the young generations who have adopted lowland and foreign culture.

Ironically, the trends of development — the influx of tourism, better access to mass media, Christianization, education and government programs - have contributed to the changing cultural norms of Ifugaos.

With more Ifugaos getting educated and influences of MTV, Hollywood and materialistic lifestyle of tourists, the lure of leaving the mountains and settling in the city or overseas consumes many young Ifugaos.

Traditionalists in the church preach that age-old religious rituals of the forefathers were pagan. Older Ifugao generations continue to practice the rituals but the young shun them to avoid embarrassment.

Government programs introduced modern agricultural methods that replaced the traditional rice varieties and organic farm systems with high-yielding crops and chemical agriculture.

While we struggle to restore the terrace walls and repair the irrigation systems, the growing alienation of the young to their traditional culture presents a far more sinister threat to the World-famous rice terraces. The question is who will stay behind to continue maintaining the rice terraces?

RESPONSE OF THE IFUGAOS TO THE CHALLENGES

Establishment of a cultural heritage office

In 2002, when the National Government abolished the Banaue Rice terraces Task Force as part of its rationalization scheme, the Provincial Government of Ifugao took over prime responsibility in running the conservation and management program for the Terraces and established the Ifugao Rice Terraces Task Office (IRTCHO).

Later renamed Ifugao Cultural Heritage Office (ICHO), ICHO spearheads the coordination and management of the restoration and preservation of the tangible and intangible heritage of the Ifugao as contained in the Ifugao Rice Terraces Master plan crafted in 2003-2004. Among its major programs are the restoration of the collapsed terrace walls, community watershed enrichment, land use and zoning, research on indigenous culture, policy recommendation, eco-tourism promotions, integration of culture subjects in the school curriculum and advocacy.

In the Adopt-A-Terrace program, ICHO was able to come up with a list of identified priority sites, rice terraces owners or beneficiaries, estimates of damages in volume, area and restoration cost. To further strengthen the involvement of the community in the terraces preservation program a Rice Terraces Owners Peoples Organization was organized in Bangaan, Banaue.

ICHO also conducted workshops with school administrators and teachers. The workshop had the following outputs:

- Leveling off on the principles and objectives of the IK Transfer Program
- Process of integration in the school curriculum
- Identified subjects of IK integration
- Schedule for follow-up workshops for syllabi making with IK focal point teachers
- Commitment of strengthening the Hudhud IK transfer among elementary pupils

Promotion and transmission of the Hudhud chants

One of the major intangible cultural masterpieces of the Ifugaos is the epic chant hudhud, an oral masterpiece of the world as enshrined by the UNESCO. A UNESCO funded program that aimed to ensure the proper preservation and transmission of the Hudhud coursed through the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) in partnership with the Provincial Government and the Department of Education, Ifugao Division was able to establish 19 Hudhud Schools for Living Traditions (SLTs) in the municipalities of Asipulo, Kiangan, Hingyon, Hungduan, and Lagawe. These municipalities have been identified of practicing hudhud. An output of this program is the annual conduct of the Hudhud Festival showcasing different hudhud chants of the aforementioned municipalities with the hudhud pupils themselves as the performers. The 1st Hudhud Festival was participated by 500 hudhud pupils and documented by no less Kidlat Tahimik, an international film maker.

In addition to the 19 SLTs, a Hudhud Perpetual Award was launched in June 23, 2006 during the 40th Ifugao Founding Anniversary to further encourage and inspire the people to revive their interest in the age old hudhud tradition. Hudhud competitions are currently being promoted to entice the stakeholders to research on existing hudhud chants in their respective areas. A cash incentive is given to the winning municipality in the Hudhud Chanting Competition. The cash though may only be used to fund a short-term project for the safeguarding and promotion of other domains of the intangible cultural heritage that needs equal attention.

To sustain the promotion for hudhud and other intangible masterpieces such as the alim and the baltung, a Provincial Council on Cultural Heritage was recently created to work in close coordination with the Ifugao Cultural Heritage Office (ICHO). The council is tasked to analyze and formulate policies under the guidance of the NCCA and oversee the implementation of projects to safeguard and transmit the Hudhud chants of Ifugao. The council is also responsible in protecting the integrity and sanctity of the various intangible heritage following the Intellectual Property Rights and other pertinent laws.

Transmission of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) to the younger generations

Mainstreaming the vanishing indigenous knowledge in Ifugao, being an important tool in sustainable development, is the advocacy of the Nurturing Indigenous Knowledge Experts (NIKE) project of the Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement (SITMo) currently funded by the National Federation of UNESCO Association in Japan (NFUAJ). SITMo is one of the most steadfast advocates for indigenous knowledge preservation. It highlights its practicality and relevance in maintaining ecological balance.

The NIKE project is being implemented in partnership with the Provincial Government and other concerned private entities. A survey by the NIKE Team during the project's Phase 1 revealed that Mayoyao has a dwindling number of skilled workers on native house building, stone tiling and stone terrace construction. Hungduan, on the other hand, surfaced to have numerous maintained watersheds while Kiangan has sustained production of the traditional

Tinawon rice variety. These became the bases for the implementation of the project's Phase 2 at the establishment of an indigenous knowledge pilot school at the Ifugao State College of Agriculture and Forestry (ISCAF). At least three elders from each of the mentioned towns were hired to teach indigenous knowledge (IK) to 14 sponsored IK students. Modules, lesson plans, and indigenous knowledge teaching strategies were drawn from the researches, and experiences of the indigenous knowledge holders themselves. The outputs of the pilot school will be utilized in the implementation of the project's Phase 3, the integration of indigenous knowledge in the school curricula.

WHAT WE CAN STILL DO....

Ifugao still has a long way to go in its program to safeguard and promote its vanishing culture and majestic rice terraces but with concerted efforts from the government agencies, civil society organizations, and individuals the dream will be near to reality.

As members of the indigenous peoples we have a responsibility to safeguard and promote the rich heritage passed on by our ancestors. Our land is our life and our culture is our identity. The destruction of our land entails the fading away of our culture and traditions. The following thus are some steps we could take to protect and advance our rich heritage:

1. Active participation of the young generations here and abroad in the promotion and upkeep of our culture.
2. Strengthening of international solidarity not only among us but to other international bodies supportive to indigenous peoples programs.
3. Lobby for the legislation of laws protecting our indigenous knowledge.

References:

The Ifugao Rice Terraces Master Plan 2003-2012

ICHO Accomplishment Report 2007

NIKE powerpoint presentation