

OUR VANISHING CULTURAL PRACTICES AND LOSING OUR ETHNIC IDENTITIES

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I took this photo at the height of a government effort to rehabilitate the Batad Rice terraces after several of its paddies collapsed due to a landslide brought about by typhoon “Pedring” in August 2011.

The government effort was ultimately helped by a time-honored tradition among the Ifugao called “Vadchang.” This local version of “bayanihan” is one of the key reasons why the rice terraces came into being and have survived for so long.

During that time, we discovered that “Vadchang” was vanishing among the Ifugao. Where once the practice

would have been immediately mobilized among the people to freely helping each other, now money and payment have become a major issue. At that time some funds from the DA has to be allocated for the purpose.

There are several versions of the “Vadchang” all over the Cordillera like the “Ob-ob-bo” of Northern Sagada, “Ogfo” in Bontoc, and “Laffot” in Tonglayan, Natonin, all in Mountain Province.

The “ob-ob-fo” of Northern Sagada is employed in almost all kinds of work that require community work like the building of homes, re-thatching the roof of houses, building, and repair of irrigation canals, repair of eroded trails or rice fields. The practice is undertaken for the village or for individual members.

If “ob-ob-fo” is undertaken for the community, a contribution of rice and “etag” or bacon is made from the members. The contribution of food and labor is sustained until the elders declare it is done. If the practice is invoked by an individual, he feeds those who are gathered to work for him. In many instances, his clan comes to his aid to contribute labor and food.

The practice of “Laffot” in Tonglayan, Natonin is focused mainly in the building of houses and rice granaries. Here, the men contribute labor to gather cogon grass used to roof a house or rice granary. The activity starts with a “pukkaw” early in the morning. The “pukkaw” calls on the men to gather and proceed to the gathering of cogon or to signal the start of thatching the roof of the traditional house needing the work.

While the community members are gathering and bringing cogon grass or thatching the roof, the beneficiary-family prepares food. Traditionally, whatever food is available from the family sufficed and is served to the workers. Today, a pig must be butchered.

Despite the need of practicing “Vadchang,” “Ob-ob-fo,” “Laffot,” and similar practices in times of need or to live together as neighbors, friends or kin, these are vanishing because of new technologies and ways of living. For instance, the advent of cash and galvanized iron sheets does not require community work for the gathering of cogon. In some communities, people do not farm the terraces anymore as men have become road construction workers or are employed as paid laborers elsewhere. Some folks also look at, the daily hard labors of rice terraces farming as backward.

For whatever reasons that our cultural practices are affected and are vanishing, we may have the wrong notions and reasons for doing so. Our cultural practices, beliefs, and experiences make us unique with our own ethnic identities. When we give up on our cultural identities, we also lose our world, its memories, legacies, and its resources.