

## **BRINGING CULTURE BACK IN: NURTURING THE FORESTS OF ASIA-PACIFIC FOR THE PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS**

### ***Nurturing Local Culture***

As a development worker in the NGO and lately, in the government, I find myself barraged with earfuls of questions regarding my activities and projects. A village elder in a far-flung barangay would, in my attempts of ferreting out facts regarding indigenous organic farming methods, ask why I'm interested on such "mundane matters". Why, says he, am I interested in learning about the old ways which "do not command a price?" In an elementary school, I have been quizzed by starry-eyed kids about my interest in dragonflies which, in my early childhood in the late 1980s flew about in our village of Maggok, Ifugao like miniature planes in the world's busiest airports.

When I worked full-time for the Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement, a local-based NGO, I found myself getting really close and aligned with my people in the villages of Ifugao, one of the remaining few watershed areas in Northern Philippines. I worked first as researcher and site manager then later, team leader of the Nurturing Indigenous Knowledge Experts Among the Young Generation (NIKE) Project, a Japanese NGO-funded endeavor which aims to correct discontinuities in the transmission of indigenous knowledge and skills (IK) from the few remaining IK Experts to the young generation. Here, I learned lots of things about the ways of our forefathers which before, I had deemed unnecessary for peoples' existence. I learned that our ancestors practiced land zoning, delineating areas for production, replenishment, and settlement. I became aware of the sustainable agro-forestry practices of my elders which put premium on future croppings and fauna replenishment, contradicting "green revolution" ventures of monocropping, intensive application of toxic pesticides and herbicides and heavy use of inorganic fertilizers, and massive deforestation. My eyes were opened to the fact that our forefathers valued the *muyong*- private woodlots- and forested mountains hence special care was allotted and customs tailored to safeguard them for future generations.

### ***The Forests of Asia-Pacific***

The lot of future generations in the Asia-Pacific and the whole world depends upon our actions and/or inactions at present. This specifically applies to forests, its value of which is beyond any question. As source of clean water, it is indispensable to the lives of people whether ethnic highlander or lowland city folks. It feeds rivers and streams which irrigate rice fields and crop areas; maintains underground aquifers for land stability; and provides water to an ever-increasing human population. As source of oxygen and converter of gases otherwise poisonous to animal, including human life, forests are irreplaceable. Moreover, forests supply human and non-human needs of timber, food, income and dwelling.

Indeed, the value of forests is beyond question. Yet, current developments have raised the stakes at the highest levels. That climate change is real and a clear and present danger makes us more

aware of the importance of our forests. Increased wealth in the Asia-Pacific area has led to the speeding up of development and modernization which meant increased deforestation.

### ***The Ifugao Muyong - A Microcosm of the Degenerating Forests of Asia-Pacific***

The Ifugao muyong or private woodlot has seen various transformations since the early pre-Columbian period when forests were in a pristine state. As a rule, the muyong is owned by a clan with responsibility transferring to every firstborn, the so-called primogeniture rule, regardless of sex. The other muyong principle on ownership is 'land-locked' meaning it may not be divided by the siblings nor parts of it sold. The one who inherits the muyong may have primacy over its use yet it means also shouldering the responsibility of taking care of less endowed siblings, giving them free access to it. Nowadays, the entry of Western concepts of titling and the money economy has eroded this practice to nil existence. Only a few families still adhere to the primogeniture and land-locked tenure principles of land ownership which means skills and knowledge on proper muyong maintenance are not being transmitted to the younger generation. Nowadays, the muyong is mainly seen as source of fuel and money, sustainability put aside.

Another indigenous knowledge practiced by the ancient Ifugaos is land zoning and delineation. From the top of Ifugao's peaks to the rivers and communities below, people have identified areas for production of primary needs, replenishment and recharge zones, and buffer zones. From the middle part of the mountains up to its peak are the recharge or watershed zones. Human activity is restricted here except for hunting and selective harvest of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). They call it *tudong di payo* (lit. rice field umbrella). Below it are the private woodlots or muyongs, production area for timber to be used in house construction and fuel. Below the muyong are the rice terraces, production area for rice, the main staple of the Ifugaos. Gathered in one area near the terraces are the settlements or villages where the people live.

Buffer zones exist to check on human encroachment to vital natural systems. The woodlots act as buffer to minimize human activity into the mountain watershed areas. Between the rice fields and the settlements is the *agidayan* or greenbelt encircling the village, a deterrent to stop the encroachment of housing into the former. The greenbelt has also its purpose as orchard area for the growing of citrus fruits, guava, avocado, and others.

The muyong is taken cared by the owner and his family and clan through several methods. First is selective harvesting. Trees are only felled when they are most needed- the construction of houses. For fuel, people gather up dead trees, fast-growing indigenous trees, and misshaped trees. Fruit trees are rarely cut owing to their importance as secondary food source. Secondly, after trees are felled for construction and/or firewood, the owner replants it with the like variety to ensure that the forest cover is constant. Thirdly, the owners practice the removal of unwanted vines, weeds, and shrubs which restrict the growth of trees. Fourthly, muyong thanksgiving rituals and superstitions controlling human activity underscore the importance of the forest as giver of water and healthy air.

Nowadays, the indigenous practice of land zoning and delineation is increasingly being forgotten by the Ifugao people due to problems in transmission of knowledge. Land erosions are frequent because of deforestation and the resultant drying up of underground reservoirs. Rivers are shrinking evidenced by the exposure of formerly submerged caves and tone boulders. Rice fields are being abandoned, partly to the drying up of brooks and streams which once flowed abundantly.

In the Asia-Pacific area, most of the remaining forest covers are in montane areas, populated by indigenous peoples who live differently from their lowland brethren and who are closer to Mother Earth. Hence, as in Ifugao, problems of deforestation are partly caused by ignorance among the young generation of indigenous peoples who have not learned about the values and skills of their forefathers on the maintenance of the forest. On the side of the lowlanders, the pre-eminence of modern living emphasized by rapidity in everything people do is fast draining what remains of their forests, and fast encroaching into the last remaining watersheds in the mountains of the indigenous peoples. This has dire consequences not only for the indigenous peoples but more so for the lowlanders who depend upon the former for their irrigation and electricity needs.

### ***Solutions- Bringing Back Culture In and Zoning***

If the current trend on forest and environmental (mis)management continues then the future is, indeed, bleak for everyone, whether living in the highlands, coastal areas or in the flatlands. Deforestation will lead to increased competition of natural resources increasing conflict and poverty. To address the problem, we must go back to the age-old wisdom of our forefathers.

To protect the montane forests from total deforestation, the ways of the old must be understood and re-learned by our environmental planners and decision-makers. Culture, as the highest expression of peoples' union with nature, should be promoted learned and the skills, values, and practices on the maintenance of the mountains, the forests, rivers, rice fields should be transferred to the young generation. The remaining IK Holders should be nurtured for the perfection of transfer modes and educational systems should be refined to be friendlier to IK.

Accompanying this should be a serious implementation of land zoning to halt the demise of remaining forests. Buffer zones should be established to serve as barometers of modernization. Reforestation should be a priority for the Asia-Pacific countries. However, care should be observed so that errors of the past like the use of fast-growing paper trees in watershed areas should be avoided. As much as possible, indigenous species should be used.

Bringing back culture and indigenous knowledge and zoning are big steps which need the involvement of everyone from the local communities, government, NGO, academe, and the international community. To be successful, it should be a multi-concerted effort. It should be doable as the few remaining forests of the Asia-Pacific are worth uniting for.