



# CORDILLERA PEOPLES ALLIANCE

*For the Defense of the Ancestral Domain and for Self Determination*

## **INDIGENOUS CULTURE AND THE CORDILLERA PEOPLES MOVEMENT FOR SELF DETERMINATION:**

### ***ROLE OF ELDERS AND YOUTH TO NURTURE INDIGENOUS CULTURE FOR PEOPLES INTEREST IN THE MIDST OF PRESENT STRUGGLES***

**Message on Tribal Filipino Week Elders and Youth Exchange  
October 9-10,2010 Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary, Baguio city  
By Benedict Solang, Cordillera Peoples Alliance**

Greetings to our host, the Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary, and to the co-sponsors of this year's Cordillera Tribal Filipino Week Activity—the Regional Ecumenical Council in the Cordillera, the Dap-ayan ti Kultura iti Kordilyera and the Cordillera Peoples Alliance!

Tribal Filipino Week in the mainstream Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Church calendars in the Philippines, is a time to celebrate and give recognition to Tribal or Indigenous Peoples. This year's Cordillera activity highlights the role of elders and youth, as well as the transfer and nurture of knowledge and skills on various aspects of indigenous culture.

It is a privilege to give this message for the Cordillera Peoples Alliance, that has steered the progressive Cordillera people's movement for indigenous peoples rights; and that has continuously observed with the Church, the period of Tribal Filipino Week culminating on Tribal Filipino Sunday.

#### **The Context of Indigenous Culture and Values, Within the Dominant Filipino Culture**

Filipino culture is dominantly feudal and bourgeois, which is the culture of the present semi feudal and semi colonial Philippine society. Regional/local or ethnic culture also dovetail into the dominant culture. A specific minority ethnic culture is that of indigenous socio political systems and cultural values exemplified by the ili/tribe among indigenous peoples in the Cordillera. This is also of course influenced by the dominant culture.

Being tribal or indigenous people in the Philippines is a product of having missed out in the Spanish colonization of the country. Prior to Spanish colonization, the archipelago were villages or clusters of villages, as the ili/tribe in the Cordillera, that were relatively independent and self sufficient; but characterized by subsistence economy. The exception were the Muslim areas mainly in Mindanao, established by earlier Arab missionaries, that had feudal economy with corresponding feudal culture.

Whereas the mainstream and majority colonized Philippines would have a feudal hacienda economy with corresponding feudal politics, culture and values; the relatively un colonized parts of the country, like the Cordillera would have subsistence economy with production for own consumption. There would be equal access to all free food and other materials from the forest and environment, as well as democratic ownership of swidden lots and irrigated rice fields, for which ownership or usufruct, is based on introduction of improvements or labor input. The culture of such subsistence based communal economy in the Cordillera are the indigenous socio political systems, like the *bodong* and *dap-ay*, as well

as strong values on reciprocity or sharing of material things, direct democracy and egalitarian practice, community cohesion and common good over individual interest. Such values describe a primitive communal society where non surplus subsistence economy determines that there is no idle section of the population. Carried to the present, these are the social values to be nurtured.

The subsistence economy-based ili/tribe in the Cordillera, with indigenous socio-political structures (ISPS) of *bodong/dap-ay*, remained relatively unchanged through the centuries of colonization when the rest of the country adapted to the feudal hacienda economy with corresponding feudal culture. The succeeding American period successfully colonized the Cordillera and brought great changes in the subsistence economy with corporate mining, logging, and cash crops; as well as in politics, education, health, religion, and multi media that influenced cultural values. The trend of market economy dominating and subsuming the once subsistence economy, continued into the post American colonial period. And the pace further hastened in the current era of globalization. Thus the subsistence economy has been rapidly disintegrating, although still with remnants in interior villages. But the superstructure, of ISPS, cultural values, forms and practices persist. They are in a continuous state of persistence and disintegration.

The progressive people's movement has been a significant factor in the persistence of ISPS and cultural values by its support and nurture of indigenous people's rights which include ISPS and indigenous culture. A profound impact of the progressive people's movement in Cordillera ili/tribe and on ISPS and culture is in widening the narrow indigenous people's world view of ili/tribe to inter tribe/inter village and cordi wide, then to national and even international world view. As a consequence, there is acceptance of changes in ISPS like irrelevance of tribal wars, and need to adjust rituals due to present socio-economic realities. There is also appreciation for national democratic politics, that Cordillera concerns cannot be decisively addressed in isolation from national concerns, and even international situation, like the issue of destructive large scale mining and mega dams, or of agricultural liberalization.

So the struggle for indigenous peoples' rights for self determination is linked to the national struggle for national freedom from foreign domination and for genuine democracy.

### **Inspired Views on Culture and Youth of Great Teachers and Leaders**

The great teacher in China, Mao Tse Tung, mobilized youth to be involved in the historic Chinese national democratic revolution that successfully established the Peoples Democratic Republic of China in 1959. Liberation from feudalism and foreign domination, achieved social justice and unleashed development of positive forces in Chinese society that set the foundation for today's China which is now a rising global economic power with growing political influence.

Our national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, during Spanish colonial period, recognizing the role of youth in the propaganda movement; wrote that the youth are the hope of the father land. A historian and teacher in present semi feudal and semi colonial Philippine society, Prof. Jose Maria Sison; has inspired since the 1960's for, and continues to challenge youth activists to be involved in, the national democratic struggle. This is a national movement for national freedom, social justice and genuine democracy. It aims for structural change in the pyramid feature of Philippine society; where an elite few from the ruling class and their foreign masters control Philippine economy, politics, and the state. Elections are just a democratic façade, and a rigodon where factions of the ruling class take turns being in power; but

any ruling regime is always subservient to the elite ruling class and their foreign masters. Thus there is neither genuine sovereignty nor democracy.

And in the Cordillera, another historian and missionary teacher, William Henry Scott or Scotty, inspired Igorot youth to assert their indigenous identity and culture, and to be involved in local struggles like the Chico dams, as well as in the national democratic movement for social change. His works on Philippine and specially on Cordillera history, instilled pride and dignity for Igorot youth. As Igorot ancestors defended the Cordillera from repeated Spanish colonial expeditions to access the rich Igorot mines, Igorot youth were inspired by Scotty's writings, to "stand shoulder to shoulder" with other Filipino youth during the onset of the Marcos dictatorship. Scotty was an inspiration for Igorot youth to be part of the mainstream youth movement, in the cities and the countryside. Thus Scotty attracted the attention of the Martial Law regime which detained him and further penalized him with deportation. But as he taught others to fight for their rights and dignity, he fought the deportation proceedings, justly asserting that he did no wrong to be deported. Widespread opposition and petitions also deluged Martial law officials. He was eventually released and he continued to write on Philippine and Cordillera history and culture; and inspire pride and confidence in Igorot identity, and also Filipino consciousness.

### **THE CORDILLERA PEOPLES MOVEMENT AND THE ROLE OF ELDERS AND YOUTH**

Living up to indigenous socio political systems and cultural values, as well as to national democratic politics; activist elders and youth have been in the forefront of major programs and campaigns of the progressive and militant Cordillera people's movement. These uphold and nurture ISPS and cultural Values for indigenous peoples rights and welfare; as well as enrich the struggle for national freedom and genuine democracy with a just and more equitable society. The major programs and campaigns of the past and continuing to the present, with highlighted role of elders and youth are:

1. Historic anti Chico dams and Cellophil struggles, where determined people's opposition successfully stopped these World Bank (Chico dams) and Marcos Dictatorship flagship projects. There were many *bodong*/peace pact renewals and multi lateral peace pacts on these issues.
2. Widespread information – education on indigenous peoples rights, defense of ancestral land and affirmation of indigenous ancestral land boundaries, thus critic of CALC/CADC/CALT/CADT that undermine ancestral land system; uphold indigenous socio political systems like the *bodong* or *dap-ay*, and affirm their operations instead of corrupting and undermining them. Continuing education on indigenous peoples' rights articulates the particular problem of national oppression of indigenous peoples, thus the struggle for self determination. National oppression is manifest in oppressive land laws and policies, discrimination, government neglect, development aggression, and militarization.
3. Campaign for Regionalization and Beyond – This aimed to compose the Cordillera geographical region inhabited by indigenous peoples as one distinct region; but the RAB campaign also set the background for the higher aim of Regional Autonomy (RA) as the political expression of self determination. Regionalization of the Cordillera as one region, instead of just adjuncts of the Ilocos and Cagayan Valley regions, was achieved in 1987 with President Cory Aquino. But as government and traditional politicians (trapos) coopted and corrupted the idea of Regional Autonomy popularized by the progressive people's movement, the Cordillera People's Alliance later qualified its campaign on political self determination as Genuine Regional

Autonomy (GRA) – that truly upholds ancestral lands and ISPS, truly address peoples welfare, and build self determination from the grass roots – village level up to regional. GRA is not mere decentralization of government bureaucracy, positioning politicians in elective and appointive positions, or access to funds. GRA address issues of national oppression. The past two organic acts for Regional Autonomy presented by government were rejected because they did not embody the substance of genuine regional autonomy. They were just regional autonomy in form and rhetoric.

4. Indigenous Igorot youth launched the anti Grand Cañao campaign that successfully resulted in termination of this government tourism project which commercialized Igorot culture. Opposition to Grand Cañao generated widespread support from Igorot student – youth and professionals.

5. Decades of Defense of Land, Life and Resources Campaign – Defense of Land Life and Resources Campaigns were undertaken against destructive projects like mega dams, open pit mining, and Large scale mining.

6. Decades of campaign on human rights and against militarization with ethnocidal effects since the Marcos Dictatorship to the present. There is ethnocide when the normal day to day life of an indigenous village, of ISPS and cultural values as well as agriculture and livelihood, are violated – disrupted – undermined.

7. Regular education campaigns on clean and honest elections, new politics, and progressive party lists.

8. Anti tribal war campaign that required changes in the indigenous values of tribal cohesion, practice of tribal war, indigenous justice, and peace pacts. By raising consciousness through activist education, the narrow ili/tribal world view was raised to the Cordillera wide and national socio-economic and political context. It has then, been possible to unite on the irrelevance of tribal wars at this time, for negotiation and mediation in settling tribal conflicts instead of tribal war, and for multi lateral peace pact (*bodong*) on common concerns, instead of being limited to the usual bilateral peace pact. Elders and youth, also as mingor or warriors, are key actors on matters of peace pacts and tribal conflicts/wars.

9. Continuing programs and activities on cultural renewal in all aspects of music, dance, attire, rituals and other cultural symbols or aspects of material culture ; thus the need for continuous transfer of indigenous knowledge from elders to youth.

10. Youth participation in sector (student youth) campaigns on student rights and welfare, like on tuition fee increases, and other school based activities

### **Indigenous Cultural Values Complement the Discipline and Values of the People's Movement**

There is a complementary role of Indigenous Elders and Youth Activists in all out service to the people – the ili/tribe, sectors, Cordillera, and country. This is seen as follows:

#### 1. Serve the People

Service of Elders to the ili/tribe is an overriding value of subsistence economy based indigenous communal societies. The survival and solidarity of the ili/tribe, with the leadership of Elders, is

paramount over individual prerogative. People are easily mobilized for any concern affecting the ili/tribe. This complements with national democratic activists' motto of "Serve the People", relegating individual interest for higher goals of service to the people.

## 2. Defend and nurture the ili/tribe, uphold identity and self determination

Defense of the ili/tribe (people and culture, land and resources) is the way of life of indigenous communal societies. Fast forward to the present - the struggle of Activists for self determination of indigenous peoples of the Cordillera, is precisely rooted in the reality of such strong ISPS of the ili/tribe. Genuine democracy requires that this reality be upheld, thus the perseverance of the peoples movement in the pursuit of self determination.

## 3. Simple Living

Simple living is an apt description of life in indigenous communal societies. Life is literally simple. In accessing resources and any material needs, the discipline is to get only what you need. Leave the rest for others or for future generations. With the influence of the capitalist market economy and consumerism based western society, that is characterized as wasteful; there is even more need for instill the value of "Simple Living". Activist discipline cultivates "Simple Living", for responsible stewardship of resources, for good health, and to maximize use of limited resources for service to the people.

## 4. Direct democracy and egalitarian social values, now upgraded to class based genuine democracy

The ili/tribe, with the ISPS of dap-ay/ator and bodong, practice direct democracy and instill egalitarian values. Justice is a central issue and has to be satisfactorily addressed to maintain ili/tribal cohesion and solidarity. This has positively evolved, and is upgraded to deal with current class society and the struggle for genuine democracy.

## 5. High regard and care for women and children

Cordillera ili/tribe society has high regard for women and care for children, consistent with its concern for future generations. The progressive people's movement address and similarly espouse concern for women and children.

But there is male chauvinism against women in some ISPS where women are excluded in political leadership positions and decision making. This is addressed through education.

## 6. Integrity of Elders and Activists

Both indigenous elders of the ili/tribe and progressive activists have high integrity in their service to the ili/tribe and to society, without expectation of material reward. They are committed agents for social change, in rain or shine; towards achieving self determination, peoples welfare, and genuine national democracy.

The example and guide from Elders is in their performance and character- of being a leader, steadfast, determined, open to new ideas, just and fair, and with integrity. Like other great leaders concerned for future generations, Elders have consciously exhorted the youth, as the bridge for the future, to be involved and to take responsibility. Let us hear from two elders:

> Ama Mangatam: " You – our children, the youth – activists; have taught us a lot – about our ili/tribu, the Cordillera and the country, and the future of our society; continue to be equipped with our tradition of defending our lands , our rights, our values of unity; and carry on your good work until victory – for the benefit of all".

> Mother Petra : " That CPA (Cordillera Peoples Alliance) has successfully held this 9<sup>th</sup> Congress (November 2009) is a testament to the unbroken succession - transfer of leadership and responsibility from older, to new and young activists. Thus the continuity of CPA, our work - our programs is assured (kadidine)."

The role of youth, impressed with indigenous cultural values, in Cordillera peoples movement is personified by two youth activists who were victims of ejk (extra judicial killing) and desaparecido (forced disappearance) during the Gloria Macapagal Arroyo regime.

> Markus Bangit of Kalinga, started with the Chico struggle in '70s when he was in elementary school, and later as student activist throughout high school and college. Then he was a community based activist and leader among indigenous peasants working mainly with youth and elders, until his death by extrajudicial killing in 2006. He was instrumental in evolving and uniting on appropriate application and developments of the bodong ISPS for the anti tribal war campaign and for tribal conflict mediation and negotiation.

> James Balao of Baguio and Benguet, started as student activist in college. Upon graduation, he was staff of Cordillera Consultation and Research. At the founding of CPA in 1984, he continued as staff in various functions – like for research, education, information until his forced disappearance in September, 2008. He has written many of CPA's information and education materials like on indigenous peoples rights, regionalization and regional autonomy, defense of land life and resources (DLLR) information materials, and Cordillera situationers and visuals. He worked with youth, peasants, elders, and professionals. He was a staff of the 1987 Constitutional Convention on Indigenous peoples under Commissioner Pons Benagen.

### **Challenge for Sustained Knowledge Transfer and Continued Activist Role of Elders and Youth**

Indigenous socio political systems and cultural values in the Cordillera persist and continue to be relevant, because they serve the people's needs and interest. The progressive people's movement nurtured and appropriately evolved ISPS, like the bodong, to be responsive to indigenous peoples' aspirations and struggles. The rich indigenous cultural forms were effective channels for public information, and for processing new ideas. Sustained transfer, from Elders to Youth, of indigenous knowledge and skills on various cultural forms, ensure the unbroken life and practice of indigenous culture by younger generations.

Inspired by the example of activist elders and youth, as well as by gains of past struggles, that effectively combined indigenous culture with progressive politics for the people's interest; the challenge now is for Elders and Youth to continue their activism on indigenous peoples rights and human rights, and on general social – economic – political issues.

It maybe observed that the national situation is generally favorable at this time, as we have a popularly elected President, who just replaced a popularly rejected President . But we must be vigilant, as P'NOY

merely represents a faction of the ruling class. As such he will likely serve the interest of his class. It should also be recalled that during the term of his popularly elected mother, then President Cory Aquino, the progressive people's movement in the Cordillera led by the Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA), was harassed and activist members were killed by the para military CPLA (Cordillera Peoples Liberation Army). President Cory Aquino's regime coddled the CPLA. The armed CPLA attacked the un armed civil society CPA, because CPA exposed CPLA atrocities and dared criticize the CPLA's bankrupt political line of wanting to set up a "Cordillera nation" for indigenous peoples only, and to make Bodong the form of government in the Cordillera. This experience is instructive that in the struggle for particular indigenous people's rights, we should be vigilant against narrow indigenism, as that of the CPLA.

From this account of the progressive Cordillera peoples movement, the role of activist Elders and Youth is crucial in pursuing the indigenous people's struggle for self determination; in correcting backward anti people ideas and agenda, and in linking with the wider national struggle for freedom and democracy, as well as the international movement for equality and solidarity. #