

Getting to Know the Philippines Through the Igorots By *Claus (Agpad) Nabert*

On the Island of Luzon is a huge mountain range (the Cordillera) that is currently home to over a million Igorots (mountain People), so named by the Spanish. They resisted the Spanish for over four hundred years and only joined the rest of the country when the Americans came and made friends with them. The Americans brought education, health care and roads to the mountains and the people are forever grateful for this. This transition started a bit over a century ago so many elders are still pagan while the kids are Christian and everyone else is a mixture.



A Danav

The Igorots were ruled by the elders. Each community had a dap-ay (dap-eye) a stone circle with a fire pit in the middle where the elder males would gather to deal with the issues of the community. There was a little hut off to one side in case it rained. The dap-ay was the centre of the community, it was the municipal council, it was the courts, it was the body that handed out justice, it was the place to bring disputes. This governance structure existed for at least a thousand years as more and more of the mountain ranges became settled.

The staple foods were and are pork (initially wild pigs), chicken (initially wild birds), kammote, a root vegetable where both the bulb that looks like a potato is eaten as well as the leaves, sayote and of course rice. The people would often trade with the lowlands for dried fish. Papaya and bananas are also common. Beverages are mountain tea and coffee. Eating was a social occasion in that families ate together as did visitors and entire villages, but it was not an art as in Europe. So the foods were mostly just boiled and simple.



Rice Fields

The people lived initially in grass huts which were later replaced by structures made from galvanized iron sheets from the



American missionaries. Today there are few grass huts but many homes made of steel sheets and a growing number made of cement.

Amenities like electricity were unheard of. Moving from the south part of the cordillera towards the northern end, the Americans did gradually bring electricity but so far it's used mostly for lighting. In relation to the population few homes have electricity but this is changing quickly. Water is a different problem. Each home if it wants water, has to find a source and then run a pipe to the house. So as you explore Igorot communities you often see many pipes following the road. There is no garbage pickup, roads are only now starting to be paved, most are not yet. There are police in the mountains but very few. Homes that have water only have cold water.



The mountains are a major tourist draw that brings tourists from the lowlands, from Japan and from Germany with occasional visitors from the USA. It always fascinates me to be walking those communities and seeing those cultures on the streets.

Many Igorot communities have amazing colorful traditions and rituals (shared in a later story). Major attractions are the amazing rice fields which are complex feats of engineering (the subject of a later story). In the Sagada

area you have burial caves, hanging coffins on the cliffs, fascinating rock formations (the mountains were uplifts there) and incredibly colorful traditional customs and traditions (also the subject of a later story).



These are a people who deserve respect and admiration for the amazing capabilities they had and the amazing things they accomplished.

Unfortunately at the moment they are mistreated like all aboriginal people the world over. The lowlanders have forgotten that their own history was exactly the same. Thankfully today they are becoming increasingly more influential politically and will eventually take their rightful place in Philippine society. Thankfully too they are trying their best to preserve their unique customs and traditions for the enrichment of the entire nation and the world.

