

Getting to Know the Igorots - Western Influence
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Baguio Market

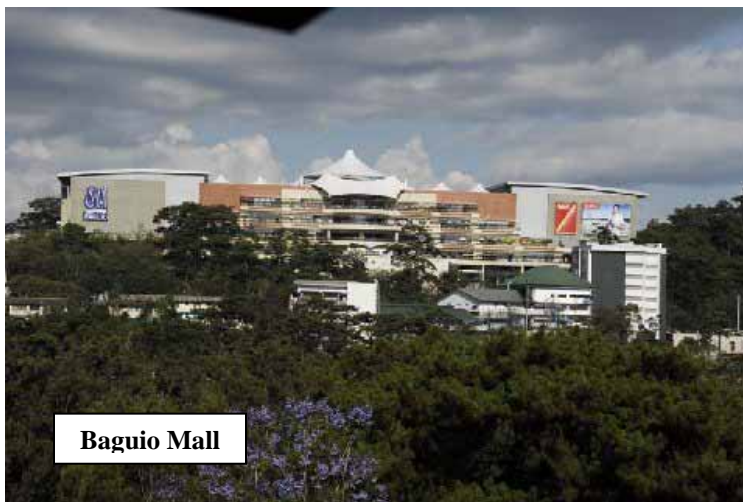
Having worked with the Indigenous people of the Philippines now for seventeen years going back to the Philippines every two or three years I've come to see many changes, most of them disturbing. When I first arrived in Sagada, Mountain Province, Philippines I found myself in a simple community where no one locked their doors. In part there was probably nothing worth stealing but more to the point it was still a community in which everyone respected each other.



Baguio Market

By 1997 this changed. I found more and more homes were being locked when no one was home and there was a slowly growing crime rate. By 2000 things had changed again. There was development, a new hotel was built and more and more vendors were coming to town. This placed a terrible strain on existing infrastructure particularly the water supply. Having to pass through Baguio, the summer capital of the Philippines, to get to Sagada I found a city that was starting to grow out of control.

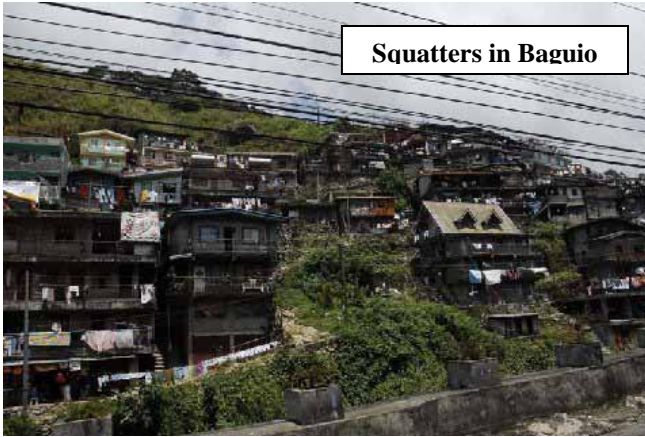
The year 2003 was pivotal for me. Baguio had become as commercialized as any Western city. The traffic was becoming terrible, the air was foul with diesel exhaust. More disturbing I saw beggars in the streets. The beggars were an insult to Igorot culture for in the past each community took care of its own. Now it seems this is no longer true. And Sagada was as bad, there were no beggars but development continued unabated making it ever worse in terms of the demands on the infrastructure.



Baguio Mall

In 2008, my last time there Baguio had a new mall, a huge megamall. And on the way to Sagada I was shocked to see garbage on the side of a mountain. Someone was just dumping trash over the side of the road.

Over these years there were social changes too. The children weren't as obedient as before. They started to question authority and their parents. They began to become rebellious. The



Squatters in Baguio

adults for their own part found these behaviours inexplicable and often insulting and hurtful. Helping others was getting harder too if it cost money, the new measure of success. When success what the land you owned it was more likely that people would be helped. And equally shocking, I began to see abandoned rice fields. This too is an insult to the culture for the rice fields were the most precious things a family could own and pass on to their kids.

Alas the kids these days were intent on seeking jobs in the city or overseas, they were no longer interested in growing rice. So as soon as they could they left leaving the aging parents at home unable to maintain the fields.

What was happening? It was simple. As communities were wired for electricity they slowly acquired radios and televisions and through these they were introduced to new ways of life and new cultural norms. The children particularly embraced these ideas. The coming of the cell phone, the first widely held communication vehicle ever, further spread the new ideas throughout the cordillera. The people were beginning to embrace Western Culture at the expense of their own and along with this they were also embracing all of our problems. It was not a moment that made me proud to be Western.



Sagada Development Impact

On the positive side we brought medicine though at the moment only for those who can afford it. We brought Education which now is starting to be available free at least for the primary grades and high schools. We, the Westerners, were the ones who built the roads that transformed the economy of the mountains. We brought peace, no longer were there tribal wars. We did a lot of good and in doing so we also tried to preserve the local cultures encouraging the people to embrace only that which works and merging

that into their own culture. But alas they continue to embrace everything we stand for and thus create more and more issues too.

When I think about these many years of change I wonder if it might not have been better for us to never go into the mountains but of course that's not possible. I wonder if perhaps it might have been better to not give them access to our ideas and culture but that too is impossible. All that is possible is to stay out of the way as they all struggle to assimilate new ideas and try to help when asked about what the ideas mean.

It's a turbulent time at the moment and it makes me wonder how it must have been in ages past when colonial powers penetrated stable cultures and tried to impose their own. Surely those people must have gone through similar struggles. Some of them emerged as strong powerful nations, some did not. I guess in time we will also see what happens to the Igorots and to the Philippines in general as they continue ever forward on this path to a new culture that will mix the many already there.