

Getting to Know the Igorots – The Impact of Money

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It is often said that money is the root of all evil. It is also said that money makes the world go round. Whatever the truth, money is a fundamental part of our societies and we tend to accept it as a necessary evil at worst and as a necessity and a positive influence at best. But is it really good for us? Can it buy us happiness?

When the Igorots of the Philippines ruled the Cordillera there was no money. Goods were exchanged on a barter basis, perhaps a bag rice for a gold charm or two bags of rice for a pig and so forth. At that time the culture was interesting too. If you were poor or homeless you would be welcome in my home. My wealth was my fields and perhaps my pigs and chickens. Having you in my home was handy because you could help me in various ways and that help would of course increase my wealth particularly if you help me work the fields. So there is a net gain for me to look after you.



This kind of economy worked perfectly in the mountains. Since there was benefit to helping each other there was no one on the streets begging, there was no one without a roof over his or her head. In fact not helping someone in trouble would have been an insult to the people of the community, it was essential that everyone was cared for whether healthy and strong or weak and infirm.

Then came money when the Americans managed to get into the mountains. At first the people didn't really know what to do with it. Whatever they needed could be had by traditional barter. But over half a century there were more and more things that couldn't be had through barter. Slowly, gradually, money became a growing issue and need. As hearths were replaced money was needed to buy the propane for the stove. As candles and torches were replaced money was needed to buy electricity for the lights. Eventually taxation was introduced which also required money, the government couldn't build a road with bags of rice.



But, now came a cultural shift. Where my wealth was initially in my fields and in my granary, increasingly with each decade wealth was measured more and more in terms of how much money I had accumulated and stored away. Oh the fields still had value of course but only in relation to how much money I might get by

selling them, and my harvest had a similar value, it was dependent upon what I could earn selling it in the market.



Suddenly if you came to my house now to seek my help I would not be inclined to welcome you in. To feed you and house you would cost me money now, it would reduce my wealth and even if you did help me in the fields, the odds are that I would gain less from that help resulting in a net loss to my wealth. Suddenly, the indigent were no longer welcomed into the homes and were instead forced into the streets to beg and to try to find shelter from the rain.

Money also made it possible for me to acquire things that I had never acquired before. But now I had to lock my house to protect these new acquisitions and at the same time there were people on the streets that would covet them and try to take them from me. As money became more common I no longer needed to work. I could hire people to solve my problems for me. In the longer term this led to things like garbage cascading down the side of a mountain, like beggars in the streets of Baguio, like more and more people suffering because they could not afford health care. It led to a culture of coveting possessions instead of sharing lives. It led to increasingly more domestic challenges as spouses started to argue about not having enough money. And money created commerce. Instead of a weekly market in our local community larger and larger retailers and services came into being forcing us to have ever more money to be able to afford those things they sell and that we are convinced we have to have.



Gone was that nice life where I worked hard to plant, and later harvest, my fields and in between relaxed often for a month or two. These were replaced by my having now to work at least five days a week to be able to afford all the things I have started to covet. To recover some of my free time I buy a washer and other labour saving devices but it's a vicious circle for now I have to also work harder to be able to afford to get these devices repaired when they break.



These are all issues I never thought about until I personally witnessed the growing effects of money.

Today I look upon money as a necessary evil too, it's our form of barter but at the same time it's also an evil for it has destroyed our compassion for our fellow man and woman and it has ended our leisure time. It's an evil for many earn money without producing anything. I don't have a replacement for money so I have to accept it but at the same time I also mourn the loss of values, customs and leisure time that existed before it came into being. Something to think about.