

Revisiting Bontoc's Bab-bey

by Kristine Kawi

In 2003, my then French fiancé, now my husband, and I were in the Philippines for visit. I thought it would be really interesting to show him my roots.

I guess I essentially wanted to give him an idea of what life in small town or village of the Mountain Province can be. But of course, I also wanted to go back to where my mother used to live and experience the “coming back after many years” feeling that you sometimes long for, when you live abroad, far away.

So, as part of our first travel to the Cordillera together, on our way to Banaue and Sagada, we stopped over in Bontoc for a day. And I decided to give him a short “guided tour” of *Bab-bey* (village in Bontoc as compared to the town).

We arrived at dusk, and the whole village was already quiet and almost plunged into darkness, since there were no street lights (or shall I say ‘pavement’ lights, because there is no street in Bab-bey). I remember thinking that we should have brought a *saleng*, which is a piece of resin wood we used back when I was a child, to light our path in the early morning, or at night. These days, residents generally use torch or flashlight.

As we entered the village, we started walking on the pathway, the same old narrow, roughly paved pathway I used to walk along as a little girl. It is so narrow that one cannot walk side by side with another person.

It seemed to me that little had changed at all. There was the absence of street lights, the narrow pathway, and next to houses were pigpens occupied by either wild pig coloured black, or ‘mestizo’ coloured white.

These pigpens are like pits dug up and have stones around them. There are two parts, one is the open part where you can see pig’s dirt, and the other is a covered section where the pig sleeps. In the corner is the feeding area. One can go down into the pig pen by stepping on stones that protrude through the wall.

Raising a pig is a usual custom for every family. A number of pigs is usually always butchered and cooked during occasions like wedding or during a wake for the dead.

Then, along the way, we passed by several tiny structures made of galvanized iron sheets connected together to form the roof. I explained that these were the *ulog*. They were constructed so close to the ground that one cannot stand upright when inside. The *ulog* was used as the women’s “dormitory.” In the olden days, this was where men and women courted.

In days past, young men and women slept separately from each other and from their parents---in the *ato* and *ulog*, respectively. And in here, they are allowed to court freely.

We saw the *ato* still standing where I’ve always known it to be. I explained to my fiancé that *ato* is where the males---young boys and men alike---convene to smoke pipes, to rest and socialize, or to discuss political matters. When I was little, this was still the case. I am not sure if it still is now.

The *ato* and *ulog* were part of the tradition. They had a social function.

Looking at these with my grown-up eyes, I understood why my grandfather got very angry at me once, when, as a child, I was trying to get into the *ato*. It was so wrong: *atos* only are for men, and this rule must be respected.

Then we went together to my late grandparents' house, which is now inhabited by renters. My late grandparents' house is still standing in the middle of the village. It is a two-storey little house, more modern than the traditional Bontoc houses, but less modern than the concrete two- or three-storey houses which now dominate Bontoc towns.

I lit candles on their traditional graveyards, as I always do whenever I go to visit. The front of the house was where my late grandmother was buried. And at the side was my late grandfather's resting place. There is no white tomb or any sign that they are graveyards. The land is now covered with *kamote* tops and one wouldn't know that they are burial grounds unless informed.

My grandmother died when I was very young, in the late 1970's. She was mourned and buried the traditional way - i.e., on a *sangadil*. My grandfather passed away much later and was laid in a more modern way - a coffin.

The *sangadil* was made up of two long poles tied together and rested on the wall of the house. At the bottom of these poles sat my grandmother, bound and tied to the poles, with her mouth gagged. Her corpse faced the entrance door so that when one enters, the first he'll see is the dead.

Having grown in the city, I was very shocked to see her body exposed this way. It was such a terrible contrast from the lively, sweet, loving and caring old woman that I knew.

I was frightened and never went inside where she was, a second time. I felt that the dead woman sitting there was not my grandmother.

There were many people around the house---paying their last respects, supporting the family. Food was distributed to people who came to mourn, as it was the custom. And at the same time, people who had come donated money to the family.

My foreign fiancé was charmed by the trip, but mostly by my culture. He is proud to have known me having a simple but colourful background.

Conclusion

A large number of my grandparents' generation cannot read nor write. They were still bound very closely to the Bontoc customs and traditions.

In comparison, my parent's generation moved away from Bab-bey, studied, and differed already from their parents. Many have degrees and hold professional status in the community. They do not have traditional tattoos covering their arms and they live either in the town centre, cities, or abroad.

My generation has moved even further away from this. Many of us are living abroad. Thus, I feel a huge gap between my grandparents' generation and mine when it comes to our cultural practices. Despite this, however, I feel so lucky that I got to see this part of our Igorot culture, even only for a short time. Its simplicity, honesty, and courage, make me feel proud that I am an Igorot.

I have a two-year old son whose first names in his birth certificate are Olivier Itait. I have named him after my late grandfather in honour of my roots. I want my son to know about where he comes from, his roots and culture, and also the language because language carries a big part of the culture.