

BALAY TURUN-AN: AN EXPERIENCE IN IMPLEMENTING INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN CENTRAL PANAY

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The idea of putting up a school dedicated to the Panay Bukidnon or Sulod of Central Panay was conceived in 1992 when, as a struggling anthropologist, the author began her study of the Panay Bukidnon community and their oral literature – *sugidanon* (epic), *ulawhay* (long, chanted narrative), *talda* (repartee) and *dilot* (love song). This exercise, in turn, encouraged the Sulod to revive their cultural heritage.

In 2001, the establishment of a Balay Turun-an or School for Living Tradition (SLT) was realized with the approval of a grant from the National Commission on Culture and the Arts (NCCA). The curriculum content of the school is based on the oral literature of the Sulod and framed within the *Giya sa Pagtu-on* (Guide for Learning) developed by the author. The school is now in its fourth year of existence and other barangays in the hinterlands of Iloilo and Capiz have put up their own Balay Turun-on. The factors that have contributed to their acceptance by the Panay Bukidnon community, the local government units and academic institutions like the University of the Philippines in the Visayas are discussed.

Introduction

I conceived the idea of putting up a school dedicated to the Panay Bukidnon culture almost 10 years ago. In 1992-1993, as a struggling anthropologist with no access to funding support, I roamed Central Panay mountains for 21 days (three treks) together with three volunteers (Judith Pabito, Rara Limoso and Ricardo Camarig Jr.). My purpose was to have a first-hand information and observation of the mountain dwellers. I had no money for the difficult task but I thought the initial venture could serve as groundwork for future research in the area. So with P5,000.00, the only money I had, I bought food good for 9 days' trek and shared some amount with my three companions. A non-employed Bukidnon college graduate (Ricardo Camarig) then joined us and served as the cultural broker of the group. The initial 9-day trek brought us to the rugged mountains and cliffs of Central Panay. We passed by trails, springs, and forests known only to wild boars. We had to walk for seven hours under the heat of the sun and got

caught in the rain. Then we would leave at dawn for another village. We finally completed our first trek.

That early I was already convinced that something had to be done to help the mountain dwellers known as “Bukidnon” (aka “Sulod,” literally, “interior”) by the media. They were living in stark poverty and were sickly, malnourished, and highly illiterate. Many barangays had no schools and some had only grades 1 and 2. I realized, too, that there was also a need to raise their self-respect and dignity as they did not have a sense of ethnic pride. They were ashamed to be identified as Bukidnon (literarily, “mountain dwellers”), a derogatory name to them, since it was associated by the lowlanders with “backwardness”. By then, however, I had noticed the richness of their oral culture due to the presence of *sugidanon* (epics), *ulawhay* (long, chanted narratives), *dilot* (love songs), and *talda* (repartee).

Mode of Transmission

Their traditional oral literature, the best of which are the epics, is transmitted through chanting. It is sung as lullaby to an infant or as bedtime story for children. During gatherings like harvest, where there are *pangayaw* (transient harvesters), or while waiting for the sun to go down after an *itib* (traditional wedding), a chanter also sings the epic to a group of young men and women as s/he lies down in a *duyan* (rattan hammock) with the crowd listening eagerly. When one belongs to a family with a chanter, the likelihood is s/he will learn how to chant. Some mothers, grandmothers, or even great grandmothers of Bukidnons were *binukot* (kept maidens) when they were young. They were not allowed to work and had to stay inside the house all the time so as not to be seen by men because parents were very jealous of their daughters. Most of the time, a child selected to be a *binukot* is entertained by her chanter grandmother or kin with an epic as lullaby or bedtime story. Thus, she grows up to be a good chanter because society has not assigned her with any other role. She devotes her time to listening and eventually learning the epic.

But the *binukot* tradition and epic chanting were already on the wane in the late 1960's up to the 1970's. When I visited the hinterlands in 1992, it was in its dying stage. The Panay Bukidnon people began to suffer cultural alienation after the Second World War (1940-1950). The Japanese soldiers, who were then experiencing defeat from the US army, began encroaching the hinterlands of Panay Island. Some *binukot* who were too weak to run and hide from the Japanese soldiers were raped and killed, discouraging parents from continuing the practice. After the World War II, many Filipinos were

disgruntled with the government. These people were called the “Huks” or *Hukbalahap* (*Hukbong Bansa Laban sa Hapon*). Many of them hid in the hinterlands of Central Panay up to the late 1950’s. In the late 1960’s to 1986 another group, the NPA (New People’s Army), the armed group of the Communist Party of the Philippines, also hid in the mountains of Central Panay, making the Bukidnon parents fearful of the entry of the outsiders. These all the more discouraged the Bukidnon parents from keeping *binukot* who were groomed to be chanters. These events, along with the exposure to modernization (e.g. roads, radio, building of schools, and education of some in the lowland), contributed to the demise of this important tradition.

Role of the School for Living Tradition

Before conceiving of and implementing the SLT (*Balay Turun-an*) way back in 1992 after my first trek in the hinterlands of Central Panay, I already made an initial move to do something for the Bukidnon people. My first attempt was to write the President of the Philippines, Fidel Ramos through Mayor Exmundo of Tapaz, Capiz to ask for the building of a schoolhouse and the extension of a road to the hinterlands. This way, mountain dwellers do not have to walk from 20 to 50 kilometers in going down to the nearest poblacion in Tapaz. But my letter, which was referred to the regional level (Region VI), was returned to me with comments regarding the requirements for a school to be established (e.g. required number of children, availability of willing teachers).

I then went to the Department of Health in Manila to the Office of Secretary Juan Flavio (now Senator), but I was told to wait for a number of days. I went to another government office where a doctor gave me big bottles of medicine for the Bukidnons for which I was thankful. I was so touched by their plight that I felt I could not go back without bringing some form of assistance. But then my problem was that these people were not recognized as an indigenous group. So I started another work—an initial informal advocacy by letting people know the importance of their epics and other forms of literature and of their cultural identity as a people. I thought that they would need a system of education that can revitalize their culture and make them proud of it. But then, this idea would not get support from authorities, for indigenous culture and art is associated with “backwardness”. Fortunately, with the institution of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) during the Aquino Government (1986-1992) things changed a little bit. Grassroots culture was starting to be given attention. There is hope, I said.

The School for Living Tradition (SLT) or *Balay Turun-an* was an idea long mentioned by now UNESCO Commissioner Felipe de Leon in one of our executive committee meetings at the NCCA, where I served in the Kapatagan/Balud Committee. In 1999, funding assistance came under Chairman Jaime Laya who supported the SLT. I was then encouraged to write a proposal for funding the project first, as a special committee project, and later as a project of the UP Visayas where I have been teaching. With the help then of the NCCA, an agency under the Office of the President, my dream came true!

Thus, the SLT or *Balay Turun-an* was born. The big challenge however of reviving the epic tradition and other forms of oral literature was that the social conditions which nurtured the practice were almost gone like the *binukot* practice and the *itib* or traditional wedding. The submitted proposal was revised to include other aspects of culture like crafts, gong playing and dances, making the approach more holistic. Epic singing then was to become the focal point because it embodies all the other components of culture like the wedding ceremony, *binanog* dance, socio-political structure, and religious beliefs. I later made a *Giya sa Pagtuon* (Guide for Learning) with the assistance of my staff at the Center for West Visayan Studies of UP (CWVS) which outlined the objective of the course, the content, teaching strategies and the timetable.

Federico Caballero, a Living Master, is given the role in the project of overseeing and liaising between the community, the Barangay Captain and the Coordinator based in UP Visayas at Iloilo City. I assigned Mr. Caballero's younger brother as the Assistant Living Master but in the actual teaching, he serves as the teacher since we observe that he has a penchant and skill for teaching as well as other skills, like in *binanog* dancing, gong playing, and crafts.

- Institutional Support

Because the project was envisioned to be sustainable, NCCA's idea was to involve the UPV institution where I am affiliated. As such, my University, through the Chancellor, became the proponent through my request. Aside from support from NCCA and UP Visayas, support was also sought from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) in Region VI, which would involve three of their members in the monitoring team.

The idea of consulting and involving the cooperation of other agencies of the government such as the LGU (Local Government Unit), the NCIP, and even the People's Organizations (PO), and Non-Government Organizations

(NGO) in the locality is part of the strategy to get the cooperation of all sectors of the community. This way, they can feel being a part, if not co-owner, of the project. This approach was also encouraged by the NCCA to make the project more sustainable and empowering for the Bukidnon folk who are still building their capability to run organizations and projects.

Sustainability

The project has shown good signs of sustainability after almost three years even with minimum support from the government or outside source. A small honorarium of one thousand per month is given to the Assistant Living Master who does the actual teaching while the Master Teacher, Federico Caballero, does the supervision. The monitoring staff especially NCIP spends more time in the field, but the UPV group also visits the area when able since they are assigned to prepare reports. There is a need to continue government support to sustain the project and for that our advocacy with the local government has had positive results. We will continue more advocacy and extend the SLT to other barangays, since two more SLT proposals have been approved in two poblaciones, in Tapaz, Capiz and in Calinog, Iloilo. One very encouraging result is the SLT started in January 2004 in Tacayan, Tapaz even without government support. Another one in Taganhin, Capiz started later that year and I was told that in the adjacent of barangay of Niyawan, Tapaz they were planning to establish one.

What made the project sustainable for the past months? First, many Panay Bukidnon folk became highly motivated due to the example set by Federico Caballero who won a GAMABA Award (*Gawad sa Manlilikha ng Bayan* or National Living Treasure) for his role in promoting culture through epic chanting and his involvement in epic research and translation. His trips to Manila in connection with the Award and his monthly pension inspired the others who also dreamed that one day, they would be able to follow his footsteps. Second, in assemblies and gatherings of Bukidnon folk, I had made the people feel the importance of oral culture for survival especially because my first research with them established their indigeneity and ethnic identity which they needed in their struggle to claim their ancestral domain. Third, there are institutions with whom I am working with and whose help I value like the NCIP and lately, the LGU. Lastly, the mass media also helped advertise the vision of *Balay Turun-an* and drew more interest from other LGU's who also want a similar project in their place.

The Bukidnon people are located in the innermost part of Panay Island, in the interior towns of Iloilo, Capiz, Antique and Aklan. At least twelve

towns of Panay Island have indigenous mountain dwellers known by various names (Halawodnon, Pan-ayanon, Iraynon, Akeanon; also referred to as Sulod, by Filipino anthropologist F. Landa Jocano. In one article I wrote I theorized that they came from the coast and are a sea people because their epics deal mostly about the sea. They must have come from other island groups in Southeast Asia as the people in Southeast are insular and were in constant movement from the 7th to the 15th century mainly due to trade. There were, of course, other reasons which are political in nature.

Piratical raids from Mindanao and political suppression during the Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines (1567-1898) had pushed some of these mountain people who came from the sea coast to move to the hinterlands of Central Panay. But there were already people in the hinterlands before the Spanish rule in the Philippines as my ethnographic notes can bear me out. So, I surmise these mountain people came to Panay Island by boat long before the 13th century and were the ancestors of the present-day Panay Bukidnon. They must have followed the course of the big river systems of Panay Island like the Pan-ay and Halawod rivers where the Bukidnons are concentrated today.

Only the barangays of the twelve interior towns of the four mentioned provinces have Bukidnon population. In physical appearance, they are not markedly different from the coastal Filipinos (except if the latter have Spanish or Chinese blood). Culturally, however, they can be distinguished because of their possession of *ihibalo* (body of knowledge), material culture (e.g. gongs, jewelry made of old coins), oral literature (e.g. epics, long narratives, long songs), types of houses, and unique practices like tattooing and teeth filing. Their barangays are spread so far apart from each other that it takes three to seven hours for a lowlander to reach the next barangay depending on the weather. The Bukidnon people all over Panay Island, however, have not been fully accounted for as not all barangays have been surveyed due to their far interior location. Many of them have also intermarried with non-Bukidnon and have settled in the coast.

Some people have asked me why the enrollment in SLTs is small considering the big Bukidnon population of over 160,000 (Census 2000). The *Balay Turun-an* was conceived as a pilot project with only fifteen selected students or even less. I figured out there might be difficulty in convincing parents and their children to enroll. The sessions are held on a Saturday because during weekdays the children help their parents in the farm and in domestic chores. To my surprise however, the enrolment has continued to increase until it is almost 60. But budgetary constraints compelled us to have a limited enrolment. With the amount of P200,000. 00 from NCCA, we cannot afford to have several classes. As it is, the budget

cannot even afford a modest honorarium for the services of the monitoring team (who have to walk several kilometers during the weekends).

The criteria we have set-up for selecting children enrollees are: interest of both children and parents, health, age and commitment. A contract is signed after a child is interviewed by the parent/guardian. At the outset, they are informed of the expectations that go with the enrollment.

Satellite Classes

Sometime after the approval of the project and response to our advocacy, there was clamor for a similar project to be implemented in the adjacent town of Tapaz, Capiz, since Bukidnon children there could not go to Calinog which is rather far. Also, the barangay captains and tribal heads in the town of Lambunao, Iloilo asked formally for the implementation of a similar project which could enhance the indigenous culture of six Bukidnon barangays. A daycare center was offered as a venue for their *Balay Turun-an* in the poblacion of Lambunao. But the SLT there had to wait at least a year for the securing of funds and assistance from the LGU. There were also doubts from people who had worked with them as to whether they had the capability to run the projects. So as of the end of 2004, we awaited the decision on how the project is to be implemented.

Today the Panay Bukidnon are now officially organized as a cluster group separate from the lowlands. After the conduct of an NCCA capability building seminar workshop in Iloilo City, they have now elected their own cluster head and enjoy direct representation in the monthly NCCA meetings in the person of Recardo Camarig Jr., a Panay Bukidnon whose commitment to the mountain dwellers is unquestionable.

People's Response

The *Balay Turun-an* has gained positive response from the Bukidnon people themselves, the LGUs, the NGOs, the artists, the mass media and even foreign visitors. For as long as the Bukidnon people are made to feel that their oral literature, especially their epics, and other forms of art are highly appreciated by lowlanders and guests, they will continue nurturing them. They have now developed a sense of pride and confidence in themselves. Where before there was great hesitancy in showing off their dances, now, many volunteer go to the city for a cultural performance even if only a selected group has been invited. In open forums, after the presentation,

one can easily observe how proud and confident they are in explaining the how's and why's of their culture. An illustration of this positive reaction was shown during the Hublag Festival sponsored by Iloilo Cultural Foundation a few years ago in Iloilo City. There, many Bukidnons eagerly and proudly answered the questions raised by the students and guests at the open forum.

More advocacy, however, is needed for councilors and the so-called middle classes in the town where there are indigenous peoples to fully cooperate in the SLTs. But this attitude is now slowly changing as shown by the full support of the town mayors of Calinog, Iloilo and Tapaz, Capiz. The academe has entirely changed because students' response to Bukidnon dances, chants, and songs is one of wonder, amazement, appreciation and interest to learn. Even the Catholic Church, as in Calinog, has shown support for the culture of these people and the alleviation of their economic plight. About five satellite SLT's have been initiated by the mountain folks in far more interior areas even without government funding. Indeed, the *Balay Turun-an* would live long in Central Panay.