

HIGAONONS AND BUKIDNON FORESTS INCORPORATED: “WILL THE TWAIN EVER MEET?”

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As resource competition for “development” expands in the Philippines, indigenous peoples’ movements flourish and converge into a strong political struggle to assert cultural identity and control of ancestral homelands.

In Mindanao, Higaonons of Bukidnon confront an industrial tree plantation project, the Bukidnon Forests Incorporated (BFI), by mobilizing themselves to articulate their indigenous rights and demands. They have successfully instituted an organization within the Project. This Higaonon group has thus established a collective mechanism for constructive association and conflict management with BFI.

Indigenous Peoples Movements: An Ethnographic Agenda

Historically marginalized and neglected indigenous peoples have come under renewed assaults as resource competition for “development” expands in the Philippines. Due to twisted legal intervention, their land and resources have been placed under the domination of the State. The dual forces of state-building and capitalism have encapsulated the indigenous peoples in Mindanao, resulting in a conflict which can be traced to the differing sociocultural systems and modes of production of indigenous peoples and the mainstream Philippine society.

Due largely to the misrepresentation of indigenous peoples, their cultures have sometimes been viewed as static, if not atavistic, amidst the political and economic forces impinging on them (Hirsch, 1990: 58). However, they are neither apathetic nor do they collapse suddenly and completely when their cultures and homelands are invaded. Many of

them rise beyond being “victims of progress” (Bodley, 1987). Different modes and forms of resistance and adaptation are evident, which, until fairly recently, have not been given their due ethnographic recognition. Their marginalization is a historical and geographic phenomenon but so are “demarginalizing processes” (Hirsch, 1990:59).

The Philippines is a society that is not only marked by class, regional, and urban-rural differentiation but also significantly, by a sociocultural plurality of indigenous peoples. To this day, culture remains the great unanswered issue in development (Obomsawin, 1992) in the Philippines and elsewhere across the globe. Its acknowledgment is essential in understanding why indigenous peoples’ movements are flourishing and converging into a strong political struggle to assert their cultural identity and control of their ancestral homelands. In Mindanao, the Higaonons of Bukidnon are increasingly mobilizing themselves to articulate their indigenous rights and demands.

Higaonons: The People and Their Homeland

Bukidnon, an inland province in central Mindanao, is also the term referring to the original people of the region. It literally means “people of the mountains” and they are of the 18 known non-Muslim indigenous peoples in Mindanao, generally called *Lumad* (Rodil, 1990:5). Their language is Binukid and some people today refer to themselves as Higaonon which is the Binukid term for “hinterland dweller”. Cole himself referred to them as Monteses, while Bukidnon is a name that came from the Visáyans. Biernatzki (1973:18) writes that the Higaonon and Bukidnon are the same but Higaonon “has been retained by those living in remote places”.

Their homeland, which is presently covering 803,840 hectares is a wide plateau of rolling grasslands between the mountains of central Mindanao and the northcoast of the island. Mt. Kitanglad, the second highest mountain peak next to Mt. Apo, divides the northern and southern regions while the lesser mountain ranges along the east serve as the natural boundary between Agusan del Sur and Davao del Norte. Because of these extensive mountains, the entire territory is dissected by numerous rivers and it is also the watershed of some of the major rivers of Mindanao.

Population data on indigenous peoples in the Philippines are usually variable, if not inaccurate. For the Higaonon, the 1975 census placed it

at 74,267 (Costello, 1992:35). Costello's (1992:35) computation of the growth rate of the Higaonon during the 1970-75 intercensal period is 19.3 percent, yet the People Action for Cultural Ties (PACT) (NCCP 1968) has only 72,000 for 1988. This apparent decline could be an indication that the Bukidnons are similarly facing the serious problem of ethnocide common among indigenous peoples.

Edgerton (1982) provides an extensive review of the social history of Bukidnon from 1870-1941. Early accounts indicate that in the 1870s, the Bukidnon plateau was not yet penetrated by lowland settlers and that they remained free from the Hispanic influence characteristic of that period. Nonetheless, many Bukidnons were influenced "when Jesuits began making regular settlements in the 1870s... and significantly affected the plateau's settlement pattern" (Edgerton, 1982:366). The Jesuits also introduced plough agriculture and permanent settlement in the grassland that became the precursor for the present barangays and towns along the roads and highways. Presently, it is common among the Higaonons to practice swidden agriculture in the hillside plots and plow in their plateau lands.

The Higaonons share a common history with other *Lumad* peoples of Mindanao, of being pushed back from the lowlands and agriculturally favorable areas into the mountains and forests. In the 1900s, they are said to have inhabited "northern Mindanao from Sulauan Point to Diwata Point, including the Tagaloan valley: the shores of the Pulangi river in Bukidnon; Nasipit in Agusan de Norte and inland to the Odiungan river behind Mt. Bolatocan" (Cole as quoted in Rodil, 1992:247). Presently, they are the majority in only three municipalities: Impasugong, Sumiulao, and Talakag (Rodil, 1992:241). As of 1975, they comprise only 13.9 percent of the entire population of the Province.

Presently, there are Higaonons who finished schooling and some have become local government officials but these are confined among those who are close to Malaybalay and the highway. Majority reside in the mountains like other *Lumad* peoples who retreated to seek refuge from the forces of internal colonialism.

Ancestral Domain, Internal Colonialism, and Capitalist Expansion

To the *Lumad*, land is not something to be expropriated. Rather, it is their homeland for both the present and succeeding generations. The

land and its owners are not subject to any higher authority (i.e., the state). Nor is the land vested in anyone's proper name or quantified over a given period of area. Land tenure for appropriation of territory follows ancestral rights. Each settlement has defined property rights over territorial lands around which members of the community usually take up land for cultivation. When cultivation is abandoned, its ownership reverts to the community. Ownership is circumscribed by extensive and intimate knowledge of the place. It is "user right" through membership in clan groups identified with the names of their landscape (Duhaylungsod, 1993:20; Duhaylungsod and Hyndman, 1993:147-148; cf. Agbayani, 1993).

The State, however, wrongly identified these ancestral lands as uninhabited. The institutionalization of land laws from the time the United States acquired sovereignty over the Philippines did not carry any recognition of the communal ancestral domain laws. State laws and policies have since then been discriminating against the *Lumads*. Ancestral lands have become public lands rendering the *Lumads* virtual squatters in their homelands. Hence, Mindanao was touted as "wilderness", untamed, unknown, and unclaimed in the 1950s, totally disregarding the fact that most of the island is a humanized, cultural landscape of the *Lumads*. This image inspired the government-induced massive migration of Ilocanos and Visayans to the island and lured agribusiness corporations to invest technology in capitalist ventures. The State, having taken the ancestral lands as public domain, exercised the right to expropriate them as it pleases.

The invasion of the Higaonon homeland dates as far back as the early 1900s since some communities then were already into the trading orbit of the Visayan and Chinese merchants, notably the ones that are presently the side of the major roads and highways (Edgerton, 1982:365-367). However, significant alteration of the Bukidnon landscape and traditional land use, particularly the prime lands in the plateau region, occurred with the Americans' introduction of cattle ranching and the establishment of Del Monte pineapple plantation in the 1920s.

The immediate postwar period of the 1950s saw the dramatic demographic expansion of Bukidnon, following the postcolonial government's transmigration program in Mindanao. The province ranked highest among the Mindanao frontier areas during the 1948-60 and 1960-70 censal periods (Costello, 1992:35). This is primarily due to the influx of settlers in Pangantucan, a border municipality in Bukidnon, which is one of the sites of the organized resettlement program of then President

Magsaysay. As the heyday of migration to the frontier closed, the remaining ancestral domain of the Higaonons has been either lost as public domain or as titled lands of the settler migrants. Some Higaonons were also able to secure their lands but the majority, however, were displaced and had to flee to the more interior mountains for refuge and survival.

Local and foreign corporate intrusions in Bukidnon have continued and vastly expanded in succeeding decades, propped by favorable government policies. Nestlé acquired lands for its coffee and soybean production. Bukidnon Sugar Company (BUSCO), an ultra modern sugar mill in Quezon, Bukidnon funded by the Japan Import-Export Bank, is the largest sugar milling industry in Mindanao (Tadem, 1992:19). Construction Development Corporation of the Philippines (CDCP) was able to acquire farmlands in San Carlos to establish an agricultural estate. Bukidnon farms were established because of Marcos' government policy of encouraging corporations to engage in rice and corn production.

The most recent assault to the Higaonon homeland is the inclusion of 310,581 hectares under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) (Ledesma, 1992). What virtually remains out of these processes of state expropriation, settler capitalism, local and transitional intrusions are the abandoned and over-grazed ranch lands, cogon hills, residual and receding forest reserves in the interior. These lands are now in the site of the government's Bukidnon Forests, Inc. (BFI), an industrial tree plantation project.

Bukidnon Forests, Inc.: Background ¹

Barely a month after the ascendancy of then President Aquino in 1986, she requested the New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange for assistance in afforestation during the latter's call in Manila. A series of meetings between New Zealand and Philippine officials and a walkover survey ensued after which a suitable land area for a large-scale industrial plantation was identified in Bukidnon. Through an exchange of notes between the Philippines and New Zealand Governments on 2nd February 1989, the RP-New Zealand Industrial Plantation Project (BIPP) was later

¹ I wish to acknowledge the New Zealand Embassy for the opportunity to be part of the midyear evaluation team in March 1992. Many of the observations are based on the said activity but the opinions and views are, nonetheless, all mine.

established. The Project covers four municipalities in Districts 1 and 2 of the province of Bukidnon.

The agreement has a five year term, with the Philippine government committing P35M in cash and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) providing 14,000 hectares of denuded cogon hill country, free of grazing or other leases. The counterpart of the New Zealand government includes the provision of residents with short term advisers, technical back-up from New Zealand, as well as P40M in cash over the five-year term. Since that time, there have been a number of events and institutional developments that have helped to shape BIPP until it eventually became the Bukidnon Forests, Inc. in 1991, under the National Resources and Development Corporation (NRDC), the corporate arm of the DENR. Subsequently in 1992, the New Zealand Government committed another five-year term of assistance as support.

BFI's Primer (n.d.) stipulates that its "prime objective is to operate as a commercially viable enterprise in the business of plantation forestry, i.e., to grow timber producing trees profitably." More specifically, BFI hopes to achieve:

1. production of logs suitable for sawing into construction grades and high quality grades of timber to meet local demands;
2. production of industrial grade logs of sufficient quality and quantity to support a minimum economic sized Medium Density Fiberboard plant (300,000 m³/annum log input);
3. production of fuelwood to meet local demand;
4. creation of both permanent and seasonal employment in the tree farming and forest industries in the province of Bukidnon;
5. protection of the government and downstream agricultural lands by covering denuded cogon grasslands with forest; and
6. creation of financial and economic benefits for the country as a whole.

Many of the Project benefits to the community arise from the employment of local people for the labor requirement of the Project. Currently, this is concentrated on the seasonal hiring of laborers in the establishment of the plantation. The relatively more regular employment is confined to the project management workforce which, as of 1992, consists of 54 employees. Of these only five (including the New Zealand

consultants) are non-Bukidnon residents and 50 percent of the Bukidnon resident employees are Higaonons.

Livelihood and community development projects solely funded by the New Zealand Special Projects Funds have been set up but these are secondary in nature and BFI views these as mechanisms to get community support for the protection of the plantation and the forest (Primer n.d.: 18). These ventures were also a response to the urgency of fulfilling, if not assuaging, the raised hopes of economic benefits that the people perceived are going to be provided by the Project.

Besides employment envisioned to be generated for the local people, the Project also offers the community a share in the net revenue from the harvest of the trees "... to be used for community infrastructure, livelihood or development projects" (Primer n.d.: 20). BFI also explicitly states that it is "not to displace existing occupants from fertile agricultural land" (Primer n.d.: 6).

BFI and Community Relations

The BFI project has been both politically and socially controversial. It met intense opposition from socially significant groups in the region — the Roman Catholic Bishop, local leaders, and communities directly affected by the Project. Since its inception in 1966, successive community and professional consultation activities were conducted resulting in preliminary surveys and information campaigns. From 1987 until 1989, a Filipino sociologist was regularly consulted on community participation. The 1987 community survey conducted by the Research Institute on Mindanao Culture (RIMC 1987) indicated a general attitudinal openness of six barangays surveyed. However, this was not at all reflected in the community climate, partly due to advance information campaigns and partly to inadequate information campaigns of BFI.

Realizing the issue of ancestral domain in the Project and to further ensure community acceptability, the New Zealand government included a New Zealand anthropologist, Manuka Henare, in the 1988 Pre-Feasibility Mission. The anthropologist held dialogues with two non-government organizations (NGOs) operating in Bukidnon — the Community Organizing People Experience (COPE) and the *Kalibukan Alang sa Lumadnong Kalingkawasan* (KLLK) or Movement for Tribal Peoples' Emancipation (Cayon and Balisalisa, 1990:11). At this time, the

Bukidnon Non-Government Agencies (BUNGA) was formally organized and Henare was able to secure the commitment of both BUNGA and KLK. He recommended that these two organizations be tapped as the community liaison groups (Cayon and Balisalisa, 1990:12). However, KLK, the *Lumad* Alliance in the Region, later withdrew its support, arguing that the "Project is more harmful than beneficial to them" and that "it will endanger their claim and ownership to their ancestral lands" (Cayon and Balisalisa, 1990:23).

BUNGA, a Roman Catholic-based NGO that has a community organizing component, was commissioned by the New Zealand Government to undertake socioeconomic and demographic surveys, and community information campaigns-cum-community organizing. BUNGA's commitment is "premised on their recognition that although the Project is undeniably a commercial venture, it is nonetheless the lesser evil compared to letting it remain idle and barren" (Cayon and Balisalisa, 1990:23). The report submitted included, among others, aired 15-minute radio information campaigns, press releases and conferences with media, and intensive meetings with barangay people. The Project finally took off in 1989.

BUNGA's involvement with BFI terminated in 1991, because the management thought it overextended its role (i.e., at one point, it edged on raising false expectations among the people). However, its contribution in enhancing community acceptability is undeniably significant. BUNGA's position was that "their commitment speaks of their flexible position and that way they are open to withdraw their commitment once the Project shows indication of being anti-people... and what is important is that they are able to educate and prepare the people for any eventuality so that the people would be able to defend themselves and fight for their rights when there is a need to" (Cayon and Balisalisa, 1990: 23).

BFI therefore had to confront the need for community support to the Project and this was expressed in complementary industrial tree plantation with livelihood and community development programs. Partisan information campaigns, locally, nationally, and in New Zealand, further contributed to the Project's concern for the incorporation of social and community development components in the Project. In addition, the Feasibility Mission (Cayon and Balisalisa, 1990:10) was able to identify two major risks that the Project will have to face—the possible incursion of squatters and fire incidence. It was suggested that these can

be contained through a “people sensitive management approach,” which incorporates the following:

- an invitation food and cash cropping during the establishment phase;
- a baseline survey of existing inhabitants to determine those who may be eligible for the stewardship title;
- support of an agroforestry component for adjoining barrios or groups with perceived ancestral rights;
- stumpage or superannuation scheme, giving them the right to cut or harvest tree crops; and
- establishment of site committees comprising both management and worker representatives to establish communication lines between the Board of Directors and the Project workforce.

BUBPED: A Symbolic Inversion of the *Datu* System?

Since 1989, efforts have been continually exerted in soliciting local leaders and local structure to achieve full community acceptability of the Project. BUBPED, an acronym for Bukidnon Barangays People and Environmental Development, was organized in 1989 and involved the five barangays covered by the Project. Its formation can be attributed to the initial input of BUNGA and the leadership of Calsudio Casinabe, a prominent local *Lumad* leader.

Until mid-1991, BUBPED membership was confined to interested individuals and barangay leaders directly affected by the Project and was structurally distinct from the local barangay or the indigenous political system (*datu* system). Currently, its membership has extended to 10 barangays, including key leaders of the community who were originally resistant. It has also been restructured in response to increased size and improved linkage with the local government structure. Present membership consists of all barangay councils, each of which has seven members. With an expanded membership and increased organization programs and concerns, an executive committee which consists of all barangay captains covered by the Project has also evolved. This body meets monthly with the BFI Project Management Staff (PMS) and serves as a channel for ventilating grievances and complaints of the community

regarding the procedure of the Project. Out of the BUBPED membership, a President who sits in the BFI Project Management Committee (PMC) as community representative was also elected.

Notwithstanding this community representation to the Project management, socio-cultural conflicts continued to impede the technical progress of the Project so that in May 1991, BFI had to hire a full time professional community development officer (CDO). Until September 1991, BUBPED meetings with PMC were irregular and conducted unsystematically. It was the new CDO who instituted the monthly meeting of the BUBPED with PMS. Since the CDO's employment, attendance of the members in BUBPED meetings has been encouraging and fruitful insofar as enhancing community acceptability of the Project. A P500 honorarium is given to every member at every meeting to cover transport and other incidental costs.

Traditionally, the largest confederation of the Higaonon was confined to "settlement chiefs presiding over areas called *Tulugan* (Edgerton, 1982:365) or what Biernatzki (1973:16-17) discovered as *Dadatu-on* system. Jurisdiction of the *datus* follows an ecological territoriality and the *datus* "controlled the land and its use in their immediate environs, determining which families would till which swidden plots" (Edgerton, 1982:365; Biernatzki, 1973; cf., Duhaylungsod and Hyndman, 1993:68-70). The influence has remained considerable in contemporary times and influential *datus* have even become local officials. The authority of the *datu* over the land and dispute settlements is still strongly recognized. Most of the *datus* in the interior communities that the Project covers, are both barangay and BUBPED leaders. BUBPED which has a substantial number of both *datu* and/or barangay leaders, has become a useful provision for the Higaonons to interface with the more sophisticated socioeconomic systems that they face with the Project. However, for the Higaonon, it is still a big jump into a new socioeconomic order in the Bukidnon society.

The relationship between the larger Philippine society and that of the *Lumads* is hierarchical and tends to be paternalistic. This has a bearing on the behavior of people in any group or social situation. The establishment of BFI precipitated several layers of cross-cultural encounters (New Zealand, Philippine bureaucracy-Higaonon). There are great socio-cultural differences that are perceived by Project Management as impediment to the smooth operation and implementation of the Project. The PMC is microcosm of such cultural hierarchy. One of the difficulties in the current PMC structure is how to enhance the articulation of the

Lumad representative who, out-spoken as he is among his people, becomes timid during the PMC meetings.

Until February 1992, BFI adopted a direct-hiring scheme using daily-wage labor, especially those pertaining to plantation activities. Management shifted to contract hiring through bidding because it entails less administrative costs for the Project and thus allows Project staff to perform other Project activities. However, most of the contractors in the site preparation phase for the 1992 planting backed out. The contractual mode generated difficulties in the monitoring of whether the contractor employs local people. While it is true that the terms of the contract include provision that the contractors get their pool of laborers, this became a major issue raised by BUBPED. The Management gave two major reasons:

- There were no interested bidders from the local barangays, so they had to hire outsiders. Even if there were, they usually become disqualified because they are not able to put up front-end financing to start up the contractual work.
- The nature of contract hiring demands efficiency and that the quota and ratio allocations of the work requirements have been based on time-and-motion study using previous labor productivity profiles. Accordingly, they have no complaints from contractors that there are Higaonon laborers who would abandon the work in the course of the contract, placing the contractor in a fix.

The Project is caught in a paradox of using Project resources much more efficiently while, at the same time, accommodating a people unfamiliar with standard business practice because the Project stipulates community benefits through employment. There are certain cultural features of the local people that tend to impinge on efficient management, if not militate against the development of BFI as a local industry.

The Higaonons operate in a communal, subsistence-oriented economy with a strong etiquette of kinship like other *Lumad* peoples (Duhaylungsod, 1991, 1993:21-23; Duhaylungsod and Hyndman, 1993:62-74). They are not used to task-specific work assemblages of changing participants, much less to a purely business transaction. The perceived ineptitude of the Higaonons can be rooted to this kind of personalistic and culture-bound ethics that tend to override what Management regards

as work quality and productivity. In fact, BFI is perceived as renegeing on its commitment to provide priority employment when they were disqualified from the workforce. The shift from this type of work logic to a business, corporate system cannot be an overnight trip.

With financial assistance from the New Zealand Special Project Funds, several livelihood projects were also put up but, except for one, majority did not successfully take off. The failure can be traced to a more fundamental oversight in encouraging local communities to engage in business-oriented type of livelihood projects. There is no background how these projects related to locally-defined needs. Again, like the case of the contract labor problem, it boils down to unpreparedness of the people to engage in such operations. Systematic cost-accounting, record keeping and reporting are culturally alien operations. In other words, these types of projects were prematurely ventured into. Livelihood projects for people virtually unfamiliar with the intricacies of business management require a locally-assisted community development process. This implies the necessity of time investment for social preparation and not simply financial capitalization. There are qualitative differences and conflicts between the system of resource management of non-capitalist indigenous peoples and the market-dominated, monetized system (Duhaylungsod, 1993; Duhaylungsod and Hyndman, 1993:62-73). Nonetheless, the small project grants were effective in many ways in cementing community relations for BFI to efficiently continue. However, if succeeding livelihood projects suffer the same fate, these can backfire on the credibility of the Project.

BUBPED, on the other hand, has been an effective collective mechanism for constructive association and conflict management within BFI. Nonetheless, the extent and endurance of its power for asserting the rights and demands of local people remains to be seen, especially when the Project assumes its more corporate stature as the plantation gets more established.

Prospects for the Future

BFI is perceived by the community to be both a threat and a provider of new opportunities in life, although the local people have become virtual wage earners in the forest. The reforestation and protection of the environment are a commendable agenda of BFI, a Project of

“commercialization with a cause” (Cayon and Balisalisa, 1990:20), but its progress and sustainability continue to be threatened by cultural lines of cleavages. There are protracted and unresolved conflict areas — ancestral domain issue, land and labor disputes, and ambiguity of the long-term benefits of the Project as it is perceived by the local community.

BFI has exercised judiciousness on the issue of ancestral domain claim. Where it had to take parcels that have established agricultural settlement, negotiations are carried out with occupants. Resettlement is offered and corresponding payment for land improvements both in cash and in kind are given. It has also produced a draft set of guidelines on the policy of ancestral domain which BFI hopes will facilitate clarification on claim issues within its Project areas.

Despite these efforts, the Project will increasingly confront ancestral domain considering the current political state of the issue. Presently, the bill to implement the ancestral domain clauses of the Philippine Constitution is pending in Congress. It may yet take a long time before it becomes a law given the general political behavior of the Philippine government on the matter. Meanwhile, support for ancestral domain will increase from indigenous organized groups and advocacy institutions and groups. Public debates and fora can be predicted to further escalate as the issue remains unresolved.

Apart from the legitimate occupants within BFI areas, the Project continues to resolve unsettled land disputes, mainly with former pasture leaseholders and land speculators. The entry of the latter has been instigated by the road infrastructure development of the Project and the perception that they can avail of the BFI assistance once they settle within the Project areas. Continuing court litigations are done but these are delayed and made complicated because most of these are intertwined in the local political, economic, and power struggle.

In contemporary times, traditional cultures are, in the main, economically deprived but they are not altogether underdeveloped. There are socio-cultural features that need to be upheld, if not enhanced. If the BFI continues to pursue the development concerns alongside industrial tree plantation, it has to address more seriously the issues of social preparation of a people shifting from subsistence-oriented to a more commercial economy and the socio-cultural impact associated with the class of these two forms of economy.

The Project may have stipulated local communities as major beneficiaries but it did not consider the kind of adjustment that the local

people are being required to make and the people were not given enough explanation of the intended benefit. The ambiguity of the terms of community share of stumpage attests to this, not to mention that as a business corporation, those who stand to benefit from the investment are logically, the corporate interest holders who consist of government bureaucrats and Manila-based industrialists.

This threat can be seen as fundamentally linked to the flawed conceptualization of the Project, rooted in the gross reduction of the BFI lands as public domain and lack of thorough socio-cultural understanding of the local communities. If the Project is to truly uphold the direct participation of the local people in its management, then it has to accommodate any new organizational structure flexible enough to allow genuine community participation.

Community support therefore will come only when the BFI can fully convince and clearly demonstrate to the people the long term advantages and benefits from the Project. The inclusion of how precisely they are to benefit could be expected. What is more important, the Project should show that the benefits of the forest integrate both *Lumad* homeland and heritage.

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