

## (RE)SEARCHING IDENTITY IN THE HIGHLANDS OF CENTRAL PANAY

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This article speaks of the struggle of a novice anthropologist who 'got lost in the field' when she realized that her theoretical framework could not be validated in the field site. As she found her way in the research, the various roles 'outsiders' (academicians, state agencies and other lowlanders including herself) play in the process of identity formation were foregrounded. The author argues that the mountain people are negotiating identity in a landscape of labels that are continuously re-defined.

Like many students of anthropology, preference for a particular subject for research is ingrained with a range of personal agenda, many of which are to conduct a study on people with whom one shares common rootedness. I count myself among these people. I grew up in the province of Antique along the western coast of Panay Island in western Visayas and had wished to conduct ethnographic study of one indigenous group found in the area. The provincial office of the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP) has record of only two IP groups in Antique (classified according to 'color'): the *Ati*, dark-skinned population found in some coastal towns south of the province and the fair-skinned *Sulod-Bukidnon* found in the highlands of Valderamma, the province's most interior municipality. Between the two, the *Sulod-Bukidnon*, appeared more interesting and relevant to me compared to the *Ati* groups who were a familiar sight in lowland Panay. While I capitalize on our commonality as inhabitants of the island, I was also lured (as with the colonial forerunners of my discipline) by the general penchant for the 'exotic other.'

I set out to research on the ethnicity of my 'exotic other' armed with a theory that ethnicity is a result of the interplay of people's a) primordial

givens,<sup>1</sup> b) internal constructs, and c) how they perceived external perceptions about themselves. I had believed that in the end I would be able to define their ethnicity by looking into how the ‘othering of the other’ took place, that is, how ‘otherness’ (from the mainstream society) was constructed by the locals. However, anthropological inquiries are naturally serendipitous; how we find meaning cannot be at all times dictated by our frameworks. Sometimes, as in this study<sup>2</sup>, meaning-construction is simply governed by the day-to-day interactions between the researcher and the researched and to be able to realize this requires one complicated journey to self-discovery.

### **The mountain people of Busog**

To start with, let me refer to my ‘exotic other’ as “*Sulodnon*”. The earliest academic encounter I had with studies on the *Sulodnon* was through a paper presented during a conference on western Visayan culture. It discussed how the *Sulodnon* lived their life in the mountains of Panay and described some aspects of their material cultures.<sup>3</sup> I was an undergraduate student then and the mental images I was able to gather about these people in the highlands of Central Panay continued to interest me. As a naïve student, I used to speculate that these people were descendants of the ‘white Spaniards’ who for some reasons were forced to migrate to the mountains and became so isolated to practically evolve a culture distinct from the lowland. I was told that they wore colorful, beaded and hand-woven textiles; that they have rich collections of brass ornaments and accessories; that they possess a rich oral tradition as manifested in their epic stories (e.g. *Hinilawod* and *Humadapnon*) chanted for hours by their women. It was believed that despite modernity, the *Sulud* continued to possess Japanese vintage coins

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<sup>1</sup> Socolovski and Tiscov (1996:190-193) espoused that there are some tangible and invisible foundations to ethnic identification in the form of “cultural inventories” (i.e. ethnic names, common language, common religion, common territory etc.) where people tend to naturally group themselves based on deep primordial attachment. These primordial given generate affective sentiments among individuals holding them together as a group.

<sup>2</sup> This research was conducted for my MA thesis which was eventually entitled *Kinarya-a, ‘Bandits,’ Sulod-Bukidnon, ‘Catholics,’ ‘Upright Farmers:’ Social Identity Formation among a Mountain People of Central Panay* (German 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The conference is a regular event organized by the Center for West Visayan Studies (CWVS) at UP Visayas in Iloilo City. Unfortunately, I could no longer locate the said document or its writer Jose Bolanio, a researcher from the now defunct Office of Southern Cultural Community (OSCC).

called *jinwin* (*Kinaray-a* pronunciation for 'genuine') which they used to purchase commodities in the lowland markets. This particular story-turned-anecdote reflected the lowlanders' perception of the *Sulodnon* as a 'backward' and 'primitive' group time-warped in the past.

In 2001, a television documentary featured the *binukot* of Lambunao, Iloilo also in Central Panay.<sup>4</sup> The *binukot*, translated by Magos (1995) as "well-kept maiden", were women isolated from public eyes since birth. Their sheltered life privileged them to learn the *sugidanon* ('epics') orally transmitted by generations of women *Sulodnon* making them the living repository of the tradition. Given all these images, what I imagined to be the *Sulod* culture were at best quaint and colorful. However, all these images collapsed before my eyes when I discovered during my first fieldwork period in 2002 that the people in the highlands of Valderrama, Antique who were introduced to me as "*Sulodnon*" were not so distinct at all. Instead of an exotic community, what I saw was merely a small community that, other than their mountain landscape, appeared just like the typical rural communities found in the lowland areas.

The village is called Busog after a nearby stream with the same name (the community's main source of water supply and which used to be a rich fishing ground). It is 26 kilometers away from the town proper and cut from the center by the Cagarangan River and the rugged mountain terrain; it is reached only by foot. Travel time usually takes eight hours, which by the local standard is already 'fast enough.' We would leave town proper as early as 4:00 a.m., negotiating slippery rice paddies, dangerous cliffs and rugged riverbanks. We crossed rivers (shallow enough as we always traveled in summer when the water is low) and made the final trek uphill to the village by noontime. The village is comprised of 28-30 households with around 300 residents; many of them are children 12 years old and below. They subsist on upland farming and other alternative forms of livelihood available in the area (i.e fishing, rattan gathering, hunting, livestock and poultry raising etc.) Education was not accessible in the barangay. Parents have to send their school age children to the town proper to work as household help in exchange for opportunity to get formal elementary education. The people of Busog claimed to be Catholics by virtue of baptism. Like the people in the

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<sup>4</sup> Kara David, a broadcast journalist of GMA channel 7 featured the life of Elena Gardose, believed to be the last living Binukot in Panay in a documentary program I-witness. The episode was entitled "Ang Huling Prinsesa" and perhaps it was the first exposure of the mountain people in central Panay over national television (David 2006).

lowland, they too speak *Kinaray-a*, dress in the lowland fashion and in general appearance look like any other lowlander.

### **The research process: Dealing with uncomfortable and untidy findings**

While the observations above were far from what was originally expected, I held on to my earlier assumptions and convinced myself that they were once a pristine and exotic community only that they were able to catch up with the times fast enough that one could hardly notice the traces of what I imagined as the former 'primordial community'. I then decided to investigate on what I believed was the 'transformation' process. I busied myself with the dynamics of ethnic identity formation and got excited with the whole idea of ethnogenesis. I had framed my proposed ethnography on how the *Sulud* crafted their ethnicity. Using Fredrik Barths' (1969) formulation, I searched for the group's common 'cultural inventories' and identified common language, common territory, common religion and kinship as their 'primordial givens.' Then I started to explore differences along insiders-outsiders, upland-lowland, center-periphery dichotomies with the hope of 'marking boundaries'. But in this, I failed. Data on "otherness" were difficult to extract. While the locals claim that they were different from the lowlanders, it was difficult for them to articulate these differences in relation to the outsiders they interact with. I was not prepared for these realities and it demoralized me.

In addition, I became confused over ethnic names like *Sulodnon*, *Bukidnon* etc. which have been used in the literature to refer to the IP groups in the highlands of Panay. Looking back, I had encountered the term *Panay-Bukidnon* even prior to my first fieldwork but totally disregarded it. For uncertain reason, I subscribed to the category *Suludnon* perhaps because a book was published bearing the said category in its title (Jocano 1968)<sup>5</sup> and I went on with fieldwork repeatedly referring to the locals as *Suludnon*. I had assumed that I was accurate with my label as an 'educated lowlander,' since none of the locals ever corrected me nor clarified the matter with me. In fact,

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<sup>5</sup> The term "*Suludnon*" was derived from the root word *sulud* meaning 'room' or 'inside' thereby implying a state of being enclosed as by tall mountains. Jocano himself admitted that the term *Suludnon* is itself "a compromised description" because all his informants "came from one area but no two individuals agreed on one term to describe themselves as a group." He merely adapted the category *Suludnon* "on the basis of what *Sulud* neighbors call their neighbors rather than what individuals call themselves" (1986:7).

they too were using 'my label' *Suludnon* (to represent themselves) during our conversations. In 2004, when I was already done documenting the more overt features of the community i.e. demographic profile, economic activities, material culture, physical landscape etc., it was time for the ideational and symbolic aspect of culture, time to explore identity constructions. I started asking respondents what for them constitute *Suludnon* identity. I got so many unexpected reactions: blank stares, shrugs, confused looks and other awkward expressions. Many admitted that they do not know the concept, and worse, some never heard of such a category. Since the field site provided no clear explanations, I went back to the literature hoping to trace some historical clarifications. What I found however, were additional labels all referring to the mountain people of Panay: "*Panay-Bukidnon*" (Magos 1999), "*Tumandok*" (Burgos 2005), Talledo (2004), "*Traynon*" (Magos 1999), "*Halawodnon*". As a result, ethnic names and labels became the new focus of inquiry.

### **Labels and social identity**

Colonial labels. Way back in the Spanish colonial period, the experiences of the mountain people in Valderrama, Antique, revealed that labels are an important aspect of social identity and that identity-construction is a continuing process. While the lowlands gradually developed into a nascent colonial society, the mountains of Valderrama (like some of the other mountain areas in the Philippines) became refuge to those who wanted to escape from Spanish dominion. To live in the mountains and away from the Spanish authorities was to turn away from the 'cultural advancement' that the colonial church and state were introducing. For this reason throughout the colonial and postcolonial years the mountain dwellers of the Philippines had been regarded derogatorily and labeled as 'primitive,' 'backward,' '*montes*', '*mundos*', '*remontados*', 'pagans,' '*infieles*', 'rebels', 'fugitives', 'bandits', '*buyong*', '*ladron*', '*tulisanes*', and generally 'bad citizens.' These labels were coined as part of a political strategy (by the colonial government administrators) to amplify the 'deviant acts' in order to dishonor or stigmatize the deviants. To some extent these were reproduced within the academe. Eventually, the labels came to be used by the larger society, and, also by the mountain groups to whom the labels were attached. While the people of Busog do not necessarily agree with the labels as appropriate representation of their identity, they have come to accept them as part of their identification. They have endured the sad reality that other people perceive them in negative ways.

Post World War II labels. By virtue of their relative distance from the mainstream lowland communities, clear links to local administrative governance in Busog came late. The barangay was formally established in 1951, five years after the birth the Philippine Republic in 1946. This move in a way institutionalized the mountain people's place-based identity as "*taga-Busog*" ('people from Busog').

However, despite the attempt of the Philippine Republic to organize its administrative structures, it failed to respond to the people's clamor for substantive social and economic reform since the departure of the Japanese. The *Hukbalahap* or "*Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon*" (Anti-Japanese Army) a peasant movement formed in 1942 to fight the Japanese, rearmed themselves and again took to the mountains not so much to overthrow the government as to defend themselves from abusive landlords. In 1948, they adapted the name *Hukbong Magpapalaya ng Bayan* (HMB) or People's Liberation Army (Greenberg 1987:61).

Instead of heeding the people, the government launched a massive anti-*huk* campaign and declared indiscriminate '*huk* hunts' wherever they thought *huks* or their sympathizers were located. '*Huk*' eventually became a national byword. In fact, the people of Busog retained a very strong recall of this period calling it "*tiempo huk*" (*huk* period), such that while the surrender of Luis Taruc in 1954 led to the mass surrender of his people (that in the mid 1950s the *Huks* no longer presented serious threat to the country), *tiempo huk* in the mountains of Valderrama extended decades further. The area remained susceptible to roving groups of hungry and jobless men who stalked the countryside to scavenge and steal.

In the 1970's, against the nationwide backdrop of the martial rule characterized by widespread poverty and peasant unrest, the mountain people of Valderrama encountered a new breed of *huks* - the NPA's or New People's Army.<sup>6</sup> The population of Busog were oblivious of the ideological underpinnings of these armed groups who roamed the mountains in the 70's and continued to refer to them as "*huks*" and "*buyong*" ('bandits') as in the 1950's. As the martial rule took its toll, the "*huk*" and "*buyong*" labels were given new meanings; labels such as "*aramun nga NPA*" ('sensible NPA's')

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<sup>6</sup> The New People's Army was the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CCP). They were formed before the Martial Law by Jose Maria Sison (a.k.a Amado Guerrero) who broke-off from the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas associated with the HMB.

or “*NPA nga may causa*” (‘NPA’s with [nationalist] cause’) emerged indicating that some outlaws were able to achieve a degree of social appeal by virtue of their ‘nationalist cause.’

The IPRA and the codification of the IPs. The implementation of the Indigenous People's Rights Act (IPRA) in 1989 afforded more sustained attention to names of identification and classification. It is through this legislation that Brgy. Busog was declared as a “one hundred percent tribal barangay.” They were given the official label “*Sulod-Bukidnon*”, a merged category derived from the works of local anthropologists F. Landa Jocano and Alice Magos. This tells us of the critical influence anthropologists may have on state policies for distinct ethnic groups. The National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP), as far as western Visayan region is concerned, has been acquiescent to these anthropologists' assertions on matters pertaining to the identity of the mountain people in Panay. Jocano and Magos' merged labels were assigned to the mountain people of Valderamma who without demur accepted the label as ‘appropriate’ for the reason that they come from no less than the state and the academe.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, I was not able to explore why and how the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the NCIP were able to come up with a combination of Jocano and Magos' labels and not just choose one of them - be it Jocano's *Sulodnon* or Magos' *Bukidnon*. Was this an indication of the state's inability to figure which label was ‘more appropriate’ or ‘more relevant?’ Was this a gesture of paying obeisance to two scholars who were at the forefront of studies on the mountain people of Panay? Were they just playing safe so as not to privilege one over another in order to avoid academic conflict and contestations?

While the conversion of Busog to tribal barangay formalized the status of the community as an “IP” group, this state categorization and ethnization was and is actually remote from the prevailing self-understandings of majority of the Busog population. The fact remains that “*Sulud-Bukidnon*”, as a label, is not collectively recognized in the community nor are the majority of the locals aware of their classification as “IPs”. Representation of them as such is actively carried out only by the tribal leaders who together with the state

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<sup>7</sup> Based on an interview with Elpidion Canja, the son of the tribal leader and elected chairman of the IPs in the province of Antique. Even prior to the establishment of the NCIP, a meeting took place between the people of the Department of Natural Resources (DENR) and the tribal leaders of Valderamma. They agreed to use the label “*Sulud-bukidnon*” to represent the IPs of Valderamma.

agencies (DENR and the NCIP) were the ones who 'agreed' to adopt "*Sulud-Bukidnon*" as their official ethnic name. This action by the 'tribal leaders' is understandable in the light of the fact that "*Sulud-Bukidnon*" is a politically useful identity, especially when they are linked through statutory policy to tangible benefits (e.g. ancestral domain claim, access to free education or scholarships, employment and livelihood opportunities, etc.)

It has been tempting for me to argue against the people's 'IP status' or to simply regard them as 'non-IP' and classify them as a regular upland-peasant community. On the other hand however, one cannot deny that 'primordial' and pre-Catholic beliefs and practices are still observable (i.e. planting rituals, marriage rituals, high regard for elders, etc.). Why these primordial and pre-Catholic features are not highlighted in their present engagements and why affective sentiments towards these cultural features are downplayed is something that would need further investigation. It was not the objective of my study to investigate if the people in Busog were IPs or not, nor make a commentary on what IP, as a category, should represent.

Local constructs. The various labels mentioned above were outsider's ascriptions and most of them carried negative connotations. (I consider IP categories –i.e. "*Suludnon*", "*Bukidnon*", "*Sulod-Bukidnon*" – as negative labels. While as a category IP may sound better than 'tribe,' 'race,' or 'cultural minorities', if one is to analyze these 'IP labels' within the framework of the nation-state it would still assume negative connotations because it identifies the community with those who are at the margins of the Philippine society. Subscription to 'IPhood' attests to the people's willingness to orient themselves within the nation-state.) The state and the academe which are at the forefront of these labeling processes premised their categories on intellectual, political and administrative agenda of their period. Since they are institutions of power, the various ascriptions that they were able to derive about, and to some extent imposed on, people and groups became powerful labels with long-term consequences—i.e. stereotyping and stigmatization—on people and group's identity.

While there has been no strong contestation from the locals against the use of the above labels, there is considerable effort on their part towards self-categorization and identity construction in another mode. These local constructs speak of an identification that they would rather appropriate for themselves in order to redefine their identity and at the same time manage the stigma of past labeling. I have repeatedly encountered strong assertions of self-ascription among the Taga-Busog as 'upright farmers' ("*mangunguma nga wara ga himo sayud*"), and 'Catholics' ("*Katoliko*").



To be *Katoliko* is an important self-categorization. It is interesting to note that while the Catholic institution was historically instrumental in the discrimination and the labeling of the mountain people during the colonial period, the current generation of *taga-Busog* seemingly embraced the religion without issues. This may be attributed to the fact that Catholicism reached the barangay only in the 1960s at the time when the faith has already established a great degree of popularity and prominence in the area. People acquired the new religion and eventually the new identity by means of the sacrament of baptism.<sup>8</sup> The acquisition of this new faith bestowed the people with a degree of commonality and connectedness with the mainstream Catholic community. The appropriation of *Katoliko* as a social identity generated a favorable impression against the previous generations of Non-Catholic mountain people 'who did not know how to make the sign of the cross.' Catholicism was reason why bad behavior is 'seasonal in the community'; practice of Catholicism made them 'better people,' they claimed.

Despite very limited knowledge of the Catholic religion, the people of Busog today are now self-categorized as *Katoliko* and therefore 'upright farmers' and 'better people'. Since these categories are self-ascriptions, they cannot be analyzed using the context of Labeling Theory. Rather, they are better explained as a social identity (Tajfel 1974)—a positive evaluation of the members of the in-group in order to enhance members' self-esteem and self-image—constructed by the locals in order to manage the stigma of past labeling. 'We are upright farmers' and 'Catholicism made us better people' were very empowering statements in response to the stigma of past labels.

The various twists and turns in the research process, particularly my failure to mark boundaries (because this is one of the major expectations if one is to follow Barth's ethnicity formulations), became the major research dilemma. The absence of ethnicity-forming features (i.e. interrelationships with others that validates difference and draws boundaries, local elites' competition for political power and economic advantage, inter-group disputes over resources, etc.) was a very uncomfortable finding. I had to accept that while it is true that many identities emerged out of the oppositional identities involved in the 'dialogue' of inter-group conflict and

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<sup>8</sup> A baptismal ceremony takes place once a year during the barangay fiesta. It was only during this occasion when the priest visits the village to celebrate mass in honor of village the Patron Saint (San Isidro Labrador, Patron Saint of Farmers). Baptism is considered as the most important Catholic ceremony in the village. A child's name is not considered final unless he/she underwent the sacrament of baptism.

some have arise in opposition to state action,<sup>9</sup> the mountain people of Busog were not yet in a situation where ethnicity assertion is necessary, at least for the time being. Their present identity was a construction of social context (spontaneous engagement with various social historical forces) more than of politics. What 'ethnic identity' the people of Busog have is something that I cannot conclusively answer right now. I can only assert that they are a mountain people trying to build a social identity as 'upright farmers' and 'Catholics' (and therefore 'better people') as they negotiate their way out of the landscape of labels.

### **The mountain people and me**

When I explored what I thought of as the unfamiliar world of the mountain dwellers, I had expected to encounter strong assertions of 'otherness,' but I was wrong. There were occasions when I doubted if I had really looked deep enough. My failure to find what I was looking for made me feel very uncomfortable, even as I could not bring myself to discount the validity of my theoretical tool for I strongly believed that the central ideas are valid. My choice to downplay Barth's framework (my study's original framework) was dictated by the circumstances encountered during data gathering. There are some cultures fit for a Barthian study and some researchers would not have difficulty finding them given the highly politicized situation in other ethnic communities; some, like the people of Busog, are simply not ready for it. Hence, I decided to let go, and follow the flow of the narratives to wherever they may lead me. To borrow Margaret Mead's (1997) description, I was a "helpless dependent" in the reality of what takes place in the field both as I see it and as my informants see it.

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<sup>9</sup> As in the case of the *Tumandok* in the neighboring mountains of Capiz and Iloilo, the *Lumads* of Sumilao, Bukidnon and the various IP groups in the Cordilleras who had strongly asserted their ethnic identity as they fought for their rights to ancestral lands. The *Tumandok* has ceaselessly fought against the State's militarization policy in the highlands of Panay. (Burgos 2005). The *Lumad* farmers of Sumilao defended long legal battles and walked for two months from Bukidnon, Cagayan de Oro to Metro Manila before San Miquel Corporation conceded and gave them back 144 hectares of agricultural land which they claim was part of their ancestral domain (Postrado 2008). In the 1970s up to the 1980's various ethnic groups in the Cordillera forged alliances based on traditional peace pact to fight against the Chico River Basin Development Project and the Cellophil Resources Corporation that threatened to displace thousands of Bontocs, Kalingas and Tinggian from their ancestral territories (Labrador 1997)

Looking back, negotiating entry to the village was very neat and totally unproblematic. I had been prepared to encounter problems of all sorts e.g. uncooperative informants, skeptical locals and even resistance to my entry. I recognized the need for me to 'blend with the community' and at the same time was conscious of my position as an 'outsider.' I was careful not to offend or to impose my mainstream values on the locals. I think I blended well; I made a lot of female friends; the children seem to be fond to me; the barangay officials were kind; people that I encountered were generally accommodating and cooperative. My arrivals to the community have always been a happy occasion, but, ironically, so were my departures. As a whole, I had the impression that the locals considered my stay in the village as a welcome intrusion.

I had clearly introduced myself as a student and researcher. I felt the need to highlight this identity for two reasons: first, as a way to get the message straight that I have no money, influence and power to improve their lives; and second, to make them understand that what I was doing was a school project and had no financial value for them, as well as cannot be used against them. I also revealed to them information which I thought they ought to know - my course of study, my profession, my family and where I came from. However, at the end of the day, the people had defined my identity the way they wanted. As far as the people of Busog were concerned, I was (according to order of importance): a "*maestra*" ('teacher'), "*padara kang NCIP*" ('someone sent by the NCIP'), and "*taga-banwa*" ('lowlander'). In trying to understand these 'outsider's descriptions' of my self, I took a second look at the three categories:

"Maestra" / member of the academe. My identity as a student was almost forgotten as soon as people learned that I am a teacher—as if it was hard for them to comprehend that I could be both. This identity was accentuated further when they learned that both of my parents are educators. Unlike the other outsiders who went to Busog, I had brought with me 'teacher's stuff' or research paraphernalia, i.e. a variety of pens, notebooks, adhesives, manila papers etc. and they would often see me writing on and reading (my field notes) 'as what most teachers do.' Even at these seeming solitary moments, children would crowd at close distance to observe me. In a childlike fascination, I had smiled over the thought that I was observing them observing me.

I had continuously sensed the local's indirect plea for me to champion their cause so the local government would send them a teacher.<sup>10</sup> They had shared with me how important was it for them to get their children educated so that they would not be 'like them', but to be more 'like me' - "*may aram kag may obra*" ('educated, and have a paid job'). I suspect that this desire for 'congruence with the outsiders' was the reason why 'difference' was not highlighted in their engagements with me.

In a different light, while categories like 'Catholics' (*Katoliko*) and 'upright farmers' (*mangunguma nga wara gahimu sayud*) were unquestionably local constructs, it is important for me to admit that they came from the narratives of Mary and Budak, two of the local ladies who I considered as my village friends. They became the 'dominant voices' in the field and their stories eventually became the 'dominant narratives' in my study.

The emergence of these dominant narratives does not deny the existence of an alternate interpretation of the local's identity, but it demonstrates how an interpretation can dominate within a particular time and specific condition. These placed the researcher and the academe in a sensitive position. The 'dominant narratives' which we have chosen in which to base our decision of how to represent the people's identity and culture is more often a biased position informed by our own subjectivities and the locals' attitude towards us. In other words, the identities that we are studying and describing are also our own creation. As members of the academe, we hold an influential position to shape people's understanding of their own identity and culture. This is very evident in the case of central Panay where anthropologists like Jocano and Magos played a dominant role in categorizing the mountain groups such that even the agencies of the state (the DENR and NCIP) have adhered to their categorizations.

"Padara kang NCIP" / representative of State Agencies. Since my entry to the village was facilitated by the NCIP, the people who were aware of this government agency (the tribal leader and his family) also assumed that I was sent by the Commission to hear their problems. They had repeatedly insinuated their dire need for livelihood projects, and other forms of financial support. I had clarified that I am not connected with the government<sup>11</sup> and

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<sup>10</sup> There used to be one teacher serving their barangay elementary school. She was drowned in the river (in 2000) with her father while on their way to spend the weekend in their own village.

<sup>11</sup> Partly downplaying the fact that I am employed by a local government university.

had no political influence that could be of value to them. This was a difficult position on my part; because in as much that I did not want them to expect something from me, I did not also want to appear unsympathetic and totally powerless before them. This unwittingly brought to mind the divide between academic and applied anthropology; I kept on reminding myself that my undertaking is a purely academic research and that I do not need or even want to do intervention work. If only I was trained for applied anthropology, but I was not, and there were limitations to what I could do. For the second time, I felt uncomfortable and frustrated. I debated with myself on whether I should intervene or not and I left the field without resolving this internal issue. All I know is that in this marginal environment, the State and its agencies are perceived as the most powerful instigator of economic transformation. People perceived them as benefactors or agents of change; hence in their dialogue with me they tended to highlight issues on poverty and lack of social services usually obtained from the state.

"Taga-banwa" / The common lowlander. This is my most predictable identity. All along, I have anticipated the emergence of this category in people's engagement with me and it did. However, it was not meaningful enough to elicit the idea of 'otherness' because the people, while aware that we were different from each other, had difficulty identifying our distinctiveness in terms of ethnic identity. They had pointed out the fact that I am educated and I am a *maestra*, a class category rather than an ethnic one.<sup>12</sup>

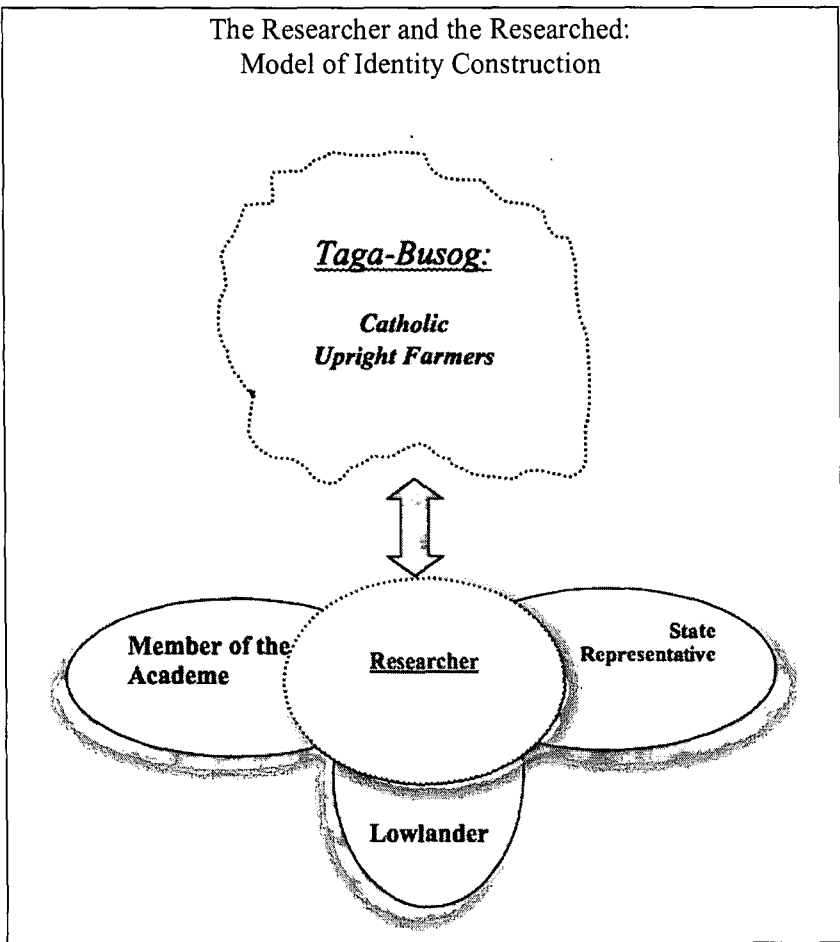
I had thought that my engagement with the community would involve a simple positioning as 'me' (the outsider) and 'them' (the insiders). I failed to notice that my being an 'outsider' was a nuanced category. Had I been a lowland-business man, or lowland-farmer, they would have treated me differently and we would have talked of other things besides their being 'Catholics' and their being 'upright farmers'. But I was a researcher and I bore a distinctly nuanced identity: "*maestra*", "*padara kang NCIP*", and "*taga-banwa*".

My tripartite self was the external force that has driven identity formation of the people of Busog. For as far as their engagement with me,

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<sup>12</sup> I do not discount the fact that there may be deeper reason for their inability to articulate our 'difference.' I have decided however, to temporarily set it aside for future inquiries.

the academic/state representative/lowlander, the people needed to project a social identity, that was informed by their perception of what I represent, as a strategy to effect change and development and hopefully achieve their community's aspirations i.e. access to education, livelihood projects, recognition of their respectable image. In the process, they confirmed the 'changing', 'permeable,' 'optional' and 'situational' nature of identity formation as it happens differently in different situations as reflected by the mountain people's engagement with certain kinds of personality that I, as an outsider, may represent.



### **Musings on the research process as self-discovery**

I am a lowlander. I grew up in a coastal town, in one fishing village. A great part of 'me' is connected with the coast, thus some part was urging that I explore the unfamiliar mountains environment. The mountain people, therefore, are my 'others.' Pondering on my decision to study an IP community, I now realize that such choice was not so much prompted by the fact that IP issues dominated the academic environment at that time (early implementation of the IPRA) so much as because I belong to the mainstream society and the 'otherness' of the IP's was an interesting area of study.

In my penchant for the 'exotic', I have discovered that I have unconsciously articulated my own intellectual evolution from the 'old school' to my acknowledgement of the present-day conventions and perspectives in anthropological inquiry. During the whole process of my graduate training I came across hegemonic discourse with specialists in the field – how to see and analyze things, where to search for inspiration, what to critique, what approach to privilege – all of which have been crucial in my intellectual and personal growth. As a researcher, I was shaped by this untidy yet enriching process.

In similar fashion, my earlier training in the discipline of history left a lasting imprint. Whenever I want to understand the present reflexively, I always think of it in terms of the past. It is for this practice that my study has evolved from ethnography to something more like an ethnohistory. The 'others' that historians traditionally study have been distanced by time and sometimes also by space from the investigator's culture. An historian from Panay like me studied the history of other Panaynons, however the 'other' that I studied was spatially distanced from my culture as well as from my self. And this has led to the reflexive examination of the self.

My tendency to romanticize the 'exotic' has been pointed out during the oral presentation of my study and I acknowledged them. Perhaps I belong among with the early anthropologists from the west who went to the orient to 'discover exotic races.' Our discipline went through paradigm shifts in theories and methods but like the culture we study, our discipline has 'primordial features' that endured the changes of times. Yet like our current perspectives in researching culture, we no longer give as much emphasis on the enduring aspects; some of us found them less important.<sup>13</sup> We went

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<sup>13</sup> Like for example Talledo's (2004) critique of Jocano and Magos' works for giving emphasis on kinship and epics rather than on concrete and emerging realities confronting the mountain cultures of Central Panay.

beyond 'objectivism', empiricisms' and 'homogenization.' Diversity became the new focus and even more attention was paid to studying difference. We have consciously divested from 'tradition;' and allowed greater appreciation for the dynamic changes that occurred in the field. Anthropology as a discipline is much the same with the culture we study – always in flux, permeable, and best appreciated within the contexts of political, economic, socio-cultural climate of its respective period. As we critique the nuances in the culture we study, we realize that it is always more meaningful if we also critique our internal culture as anthropologists. This way, we frame our critiques into proper and more insightful contexts (after all, we were trained to analyze things in its 'proper context'). In the process, as we critique our 'community' as anthropologists we are as well critiquing our individual selves. This makes the practice of anthropology a process of self-discovery.

At the risk of being self-indulgent, I take pride in this opportunity to share with other young anthropologists the learning experience that I have achieved in my engagement with the mountain people of central Panay. My representation of their identity was to a great extent determined by the role that I played as a researcher and outsider to the community. As in the general real-life scenario, there is wisdom and prudence in the value of honesty, especially in dealing with the enormously complex subjectivities of the people we study. Hence, for any young anthropologists about to engage in fieldwork, may I recommend that you always lay your cards on the table. If you can be honest as to how you came by the data and the reasons how you arrived at your interpretations, you give your readers a better understanding of the people you study. We need to settle within ourselves that we are not experts on 'culture'. We need to bear in mind that ethnographic writing is an interpretation amongst many possible interpretations. This admission is not a weakness of our discipline, because reflexivity does in fact require training and expertise.

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