

ANCESTRAL LANDS IN SEARCH OF A TITLE: REVISITING ETHNIC RELATIONS AND POLITICAL ALLIANCES IN THE CORDILLERA

Andrea G. Soluta

Abstract

This article reexamines how the Philippine government's "developmental ideology" and economic opportunism has systematically dispossessed various indigenous peoples in the Cordillera, Northern Philippines of their lands. This paper also traces how these ancestral land issues and the subsequent push for regional autonomy—so the IPs can defend their rights to their ancestral domain through self-determination—has created a new ethnicity, called the "Cordilleran identity," as well as the modern phenomenon of indigenous peoples' becoming interest or intensely politicized groups.

Introduction

History is replete with accounts of Cordillerans, then more popularly called Igorots,¹ putting up fierce resistance against Spanish—and later on, American—attempts to invade their territories. What is not often made clear in these historical accounts is the fact that such resistance had never been a concerted effort of all the Cordillera indigenous peoples but were actually "highly localized"; that is, opposition was done "village by village and valley by valley" ("There is going to be...," 1987:5).

Indeed, although the different Cordillera groups interacted with each other, they were still highly independent of each other with one ethnolinguistic group having its own unique set of socio-political institutions, religious beliefs and cultural practices. These differences are acknowledged even now by the

continued reference to these groups as the Cordillera *peoples* and not just the Cordillera *people*. There are presently six provinces, with eight ethnolinguistic groups, comprising the Cordillera Administrative Region.²

Each Cordilleran community deeply values its independence that it is not uncommon to have inter-village wars in the area even in these modern times. For instance, in May 1994 a tribal war broke out between the villages of Sumadel and Lubo in Mountain Province. As a result, "hundreds of students and miners [from these villages] had to leave school and work to go home" because it would have been dangerous to remain outside their home territories (Perez, 1994:21). More than a decade after, various villages are still involved in "border wars, conflicts over water resources or unresolved crimes of several generations ago" with serious repercussions. Just last November, students from Kalinga were not allowed to register for the second semester at the Mt. Province Polytechnic State College—located in Bontoc—"to avoid hostilities because their tribe members had been blamed for the killing of several Bontoc residents" (Cabreza, 2005:A15). That members of the tribe still obey what seems to outsiders to be a primitive and outlawed tradition is a tribute to the enduring strength of each tribe's indigenous institutions.

Starting from the 1970s, however, a decidedly pan-Cordillera consciousness emerged among the different indigenous groups brought about by their struggle against government development projects and government-sanctioned massive exploitation of natural resources in the area. Having become more educated, more politicized, and more exposed to the outside world, the Cordillera indigenous peoples (IPs) learned to bond together to defend their ancestral land rights.

In the 1980s, these peoples once more bonded to clamor for a Cordillera autonomous region because they

perceived autonomy as the only way by which the Cordillera could attain self-determination in today's world. The clamor resulted in the inclusion of provisions for regional autonomy in the 1987 Constitution, and a second version of the autonomy bill was deliberated upon in Congress toward the end of 1997. With then Pres. Ramos also pushing for the creation of a Cordillera Autonomous Region (CAR) in consonance with his Social Reform Agenda (SRA)³, the redrafted Cordillera Autonomy Bill (HB 3719) was consolidated before December 1997 ready for the plebiscite scheduled before the [May] 1998 elections. But in March 1998, the Cordillerans rejected the second Autonomy Organic Act (RA 8438).

What made the autonomy issue immensely interesting were the various changes and breaks in alliances that occurred among persons/groups concerned in the formulation of the organic act due to conflicting viewpoints and power struggles. In 1986 prominent political groups such as the Cordillera Peoples' Alliance (CPA), the CPLA (Cordillera People's Liberation Army), and even the Cordillera People's Democratic Front (CPDF) united with government officials, various non-government organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) in the region to push for Cordillera Autonomy. Along the way, however, differences in objectives and thrusts created fissures in the thinly-cemented alliance. In consequence, all the involved interest groups except for the government officials campaigned against the Organic Act in the 1990 plebiscite. They accused the Aquino administration of having "watered down considerably" the draft submitted by the Cordillera Regional Consultative Committee (CRCC), which they helped to formulate. And because the second Organic Act creating an autonomous region was "bogus and [did] not reflect the true aspirations of Cordillerans" ("Groups call for rejection...", 1998: 16), many of these advocacy groups

were again instrumental in the rejection of RA 8438 in the plebiscite held on March 7, 1998. These groups claimed, however, that in principle they were still in favor of *genuine autonomy* in the Cordillera since they believed this to be the only means by which rights to self-determination and ancestral lands are realized.

Ancestral Land as Life and Identity

The Cordilleran clamor for regional autonomy stems from the belief that autonomy can provide Cordillerans with a political framework with which to exercise their right to *self-determination*, which means

a political, social, economic, and cultural right – means the right of an Indigenous People to define, develop, and defend their social, political, economic institutions and objectives, and to preserve and progressively enrich their material and non-material culture, independent from the dictate and control of a central authority in which they have little or no representation, but at the same time not necessarily being separate from the rest of national society, unless it is their best interest to be so (Prill-Brett, 1988: 1).

Central to the issue of self-determination is the concept of ancestral domain:

the territory occupied and recognized by an indigenous cultural group since time immemorial, long before the existence of a Phil. Republic. The concept of ancestral domain includes (a) the indigenous people's right to avail of the direct benefits derived from the exploitation of resources within their territories and (b) the right to directly decide how land, water, and other resources will be allocated, used, or managed. These ideas are included in indigenous tenurial laws (Prill-Brett, 1988: 1).

But these tenurial laws have been supplanted by “legal laws” by the Philippine governments hence the Cordilleran push for regional autonomy to uphold their rights to self-determination and their ancestral domain.

The Cordilleran regard for their ancestral lands is well-encapsulated in the Kankana-ey sentence, *Dakami ya nan dagami*⁴ [literally, “We are our lands”; idiomatically, “Land is our life”] because the lands they have occupied since “as far back as memory can remember,” indeed mean their life inasmuch as their continued survival as indigenous peoples is hinged on them. Removed from their ancestral lands, they can no longer observe their customs and traditions; therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that their identities as indigenous peoples are also rooted in their ancestral lands (Claver, 1984: 147).

Shifts in Ethnic Relations brought about by Ancestral Land Problems

The Cordilleran indigenous peoples started being confronted with displacement from their ancestral lands when Spanish conquistadores declared the entire archipelago as belonging to the King of Spain in the sixteenth century. This is the infamous Regalian Doctrine, the basic premise of which—that all lands in the Philippines belong to the state—had been upheld by all the succeeding governments. The doctrine classifies state lands into three categories: private, public, and reservations. Prill-Brett explains the categorization:

Private rights to land are acquired from the State through grants, purchase, and/or other forms of transfer which are recognized and covered by the state laws. The symbol of ownership is a piece of paper called a ‘paper title’. The rest of the lands not covered by paper title are classified as either ‘public land’ or ‘reservation’ (1988: 11).

The IPs did not heed the doctrine and other land laws inasmuch as these were "alien and contradictory to [their] ways and beliefs" (Balao, 1985: n.p.). But without "paper titles," their lands got classified as either public land or reservations which were legally non-alienable and non-disposable. Consequently, many Cordillerans are now considered squatters on lands which they and their ancestors have owned "since time immemorial."

Aside from enacted laws, economic opportunism by outsiders also caused the indigenous peoples to be either displaced from or dispossessed of their lands. In the case of the Cordillera, it was its fabled mineral resources that attracted foreign opportunists. As early as the 17th century, the Spaniards began prospecting expeditions for gold into the area. It was however only in the latter half of the 1800s when they were able to establish copper and gold mining companies in Benguet since they experienced extreme difficulties in reaching the area as well as met with earlier opposition from the inhabitants of the place. The Spaniards also failed to mine extensively because of problems in transportation and production costs ("The life, death and ...," 1994: 7).

It was the Americans who benefited much from these mining operations for they were able to formulate colonial laws in their favor beginning with the Mining Act of 1905, which declared that all public lands in the Phil. are free and open to exploitation, occupation, and purchase by the citizens of the US and the Philippines (Tauli, 1983). Since capital and technology were available to the Americans, they easily got most of the mining claims; leaving the natives dispossessed of the lands they have owned for centuries. The Mining Act of 1935 further deprived the Igorots of the "fatta da land" by declaring that gold panning and native mining are punishable.

To the Igorots, their ancestral land rights include rights to resources contained under and above these lands. There is no dichotomy between surface rights and sub-surface rights and so the mineral resources contained within their territories rightfully belong to them (Tauli-Corpuz, 1997). Unfortunately, violation of these indigenous rights continue to this day because the colonial policy of regarding the Cordillera as a resource base area has been adopted and relentlessly imposed by post-war governments.

The horrors of the old Mining laws were resurrected in the Mining Act of 1995 (RA 7942) for this law proposed to open the last frontiers of the Cordillera. The Ramos administration insisted that this latest Mining Law was part of the Medium Term Development Plan (MTDP) that aimed for the Philippines to achieve NIC status by the year 2000; it however failed to consider the long-term effects of previous Mining laws – not only are the forests denuded today, but the mountains are also destroyed beyond repair in this century (“Gatt follows the vein...,” 1995, p. 9).

Aside from massive environmental degradation, the 1995 Mining Act also threatened to displace miners with its implementation of the so-called “bulk mining” method, which uses load-haul-dump (LHD) machines and other earthmoving machinery in extracting mineral deposits from the earth. The miners – most of whom were Cordillerans, Ilocanos and Pangasinenses – who in happier times revolved mostly around their own ethnic groups resorted to various united protest actions to draw attention to their plight (“Gatt follows the vein...,” 1995, pp. 10-11). Regrettably, such protest actions were completely ignored by the DENR – the government agency authorized to implement the Mining Law – when it published Departmental Administrative Order No. 96-40, which contains the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of the

Mining Act of 1995. The official newspaper of the CPA comments on the signing of the IRR:

The signing of the new IRR of RA 7942 has signaled the end of the various consultations initiated by the government in order to facilitate the operation of multinational mining companies in the country or to liberalize the mining industry. The government has enacted RA 7942 despite protests from various concerned citizens against said law—a law that sells the country's wealth and freedom.

The grievances and opposition of the Cordillera and Mindanao people against RA 7942 were supported by different interest groups from Manila. Meanwhile, the affected inhabitants within the mining areas are bravely defending their territorial rights. Some have even chased away representatives of mining corporations who were sent to their areas to conduct preliminary surveys with their *bolos* ("Baro a damag ...," 1997, p. 21). (translation provided)

The same news item dramatizes the effect of promulgated laws on indigenous peoples, who are ever willing to take up arms to defend their ancestral domain. Paradoxically, it also highlights their hapless situation: How long can the *bolos* stand up to the multinational corporations' giant machines? It is noteworthy though that the Cordillerans, aside from becoming united, have also realized the importance of cooperating with outside groups in their protest actions against the government.

A decade after then Pres. Ramos signed the Mining Law on March 3, 1995, there are still vigorous protests against this law. In a November 2004 call for its

rejection, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) mentioned various groups from all over the country struggling against continued mining operations in their respective areas such as the people in Mankayan, Benguet who were protesting against Lepanto Consolidated Mining Company's continued operation and expansion in their place ("A statement...", www.minesandcommunities.org/Action/press493.htm).⁵

Aside from the Mining laws, which heavily favored multinational corporations over small-scale native operators, the post war governments further institutionalized the displacement of the IPs from their ancestral lands through various Forestry Laws. Among the most notorious of these is PD 705 or the Revised Forestry Code which states:

No land of the public domain eighteen per cent (18%) in slope or over shall be classified as alienable and disposable, nor any forest land fifty per cent (50%) in slope or over, as grazing land. Lands 18% or over in slope which have already been declared as alienable and disposable shall be reverted to the classification of forest lands ... to form part of the forest reserves.... That when public interest so requires, steps shall be taken to expropriate, cancel effective titles, reject public land applications or eject occupants thereof (Section 15).

The 18% classification means that the land rises at 18 meters for every 100 meter-horizontal distance or is at an angle of 10.2 degrees (Balao, 1985: n.p.) Such a law is obviously unjust to most people in the mountainous Cordillera since it declares most of the region inalienable and indisposable. The plateaus and river banks where the native villages are usually

located, including their rice terraces, are also covered by PD 705 because these are areas which could be expropriated by the government "if public interest so requires." This law then ensures the continuing hold of the government on the indigenous peoples' lands.

The 1987 Constitution, which contains provisions for the rights of the IPs in the country, assures the recognition of these peoples' rights to their "cultural particularities" including their special regard for their ancestral lands. However, laws promulgated based on these provisions prove no guarantee that the indigenous peoples will get what is due them. One such law is DAO No. 02, series of 1993 again from the DENR. This order mandates the department to identify, delineate, and recognize land claims put forward by the indigenous peoples. After accomplishing these tasks, the DENR will award Certificates of Ancestral Domain Claims (CADC) and Certificates of Ancestral Lands Claim (CALC) to claimants who have satisfied the official requirements. This order also requires the department to form a group composed of GO-NGO members to assist the IPs in the preparation and afterwards implementation of a comprehensive ancestral domains management plan.

DAO No. 02 represents a "positive development toward the eventual recognition of their claims," stated then DENR Sec. Fulgencio Factoran ("Ancestral domain," 1994: 9-10) amidst criticism that the Certificates given out were merely an acknowledgment by the government of the indigenous communities' claim to their long-occupied areas. The order is also potentially divisive inasmuch as it has no clear proviso for outsiders who, by virtue of certain government laws such as the Squatter's Rights provided for under the Cadastral Law, have already been accorded legal rights to the place they are occupying within indigenous cultural communities.

The above problem is compounded by the fact that the number of hectares awarded to a community is always much smaller than what is traditionally considered as the ancestral domain. Since land is equated to indigenous peoples' survival, it is understandable why at the beginning of DAO 02 implementation, there was suspicion, apprehension, and wariness between and among members of the community. What the government failed to decipher was perfectly clear to some IPs in Abra who, realizing the danger posed by the CADC/CALC, returned the certificates awarded them.

The decision of the Tingguians to return their certificates also emphasizes the deep respect of the indigenous peoples for their lands and the regard they hold for their community. Rather than cause enmity and division among themselves by creating new territorial boundaries—the DENR designated a much smaller area to represent the entire community's ancestral domain—they willingly stopped the process of bringing about "official ownership" of their ancestral lands. Such decision follows logically their concept of ancestral domain as communally and not individually owned. The DENR reacted by commenting that "their desire for a broader concept of the *bogis* [ancestral domain area] as the basis of the delineation is not allowed under existing rules, regulations and legislations" ("Ancestral domain," 1994:13). This typical reaction is usually the crux of conflicts arising between the government and the indigenous peoples. The former insists on using a transplanted legal system in dealing with problems pertaining to indigenous cultures without regard for indigenous laws which are already in place so the IPs are left with no recourse but to put up an opposition to the imposition.

In 1997, the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA)⁶—a "landmark law" that aimed to distribute Certificates of Ancestral Domain Title (CADTs) and

Certificates of Ancestral Land Title (CALTs) to qualified IPs—was finally enacted but at the outset it was beset with problems such as the challenge to its constitutionality, insufficient budgetary allocation, and the existence of two sets of commissions tasked to carry out the law (Tecson, 2004, www.ppi.org.ph/publications/fnv/current_issues/fnv_5.htm). Not surprisingly, the first issuance of CADT by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP)—IPRA's implementing government agency—happened only in July 2002, practically five years after IPRA implementation. The NCIP issuance of CADTs and CALTs had been very slow; only 21 CADTs covering 535,302 hectares and 44 CALTs covering 425 hectares were distributed as of February 2004 (Tecson, 2004) out of the 181 CADT and 347 CALT applications submitted by the IPs in the country (Sidchogan-Batani, 2003, www.unochr.ch/indigenous/Sidchogan.BP4.doc).

To date, the issuance of CADTs and CALTs remains problematic—such as what many indigenous communities and farmers in Benguet are confronted with—due to “unresolved political boundary disputes and the absence of an official local government land policy on the delineation of ancestral domains and agricultural farm lots” (Cariño, 2005: A15).

The institutionalized dispossession of IPs lands has been exacerbated by the various Philippine governments' “ideology of developmentalism” (Maranan, 1987: 7). In the case of the Cordillera, “development projects” took shape in the various dam constructions in the area, the most prominent of which was the Chico River Basin Development Project. Vigorous protests by concerned IPs—that the dams will inundate hundreds of hectares of productive ancestral lands—were ignored “for the sake of the nation.” Then Pres. Marcos was supposed to have admonished the IPs not to be “sentimental” when a group of them went

to Malacañang to register their resistance against the Chico dams

And when the indigenous peoples proved recalcitrant, the Marcos government resorted to militarization. The military apparatus was used in the guise of counter-insurgency measures in areas targeted as either prospective sites of development projects or potential places of mining and logging concessions ("Development aggression...", 1991). From the late 1970s to the present, the Cordillera has been the site of massive militarization because more and more Cordillerans have been putting up fierce and united opposition against the endless government development projects imposed on them.

Indeed, the once fiercely independent Cordillera indigenous cultural communities have found a common cause in struggling against development projects in the area. This joining of forces was started by the Bontok and Kalinga tribes who fought together to stop the Marcos Regime, with funding from the IMF-WF, from building six dams along the Chico River Basin because the "damming" of the Chico River would have meant the destruction of much of their ancestral lands including their sacred burial grounds. The much-publicized opposition brought together these two tribes who were – and still are – generally regarded as traditional enemies, often engaging in tribal wars against each other. This time, resistance "was not localized but was broadened to include everybody [bringing about] a modern phenomenon, unifying those who were not unified" ("There is going ...," 1987: 5). This phenomenon according to Scott could not solely be ascribed to communal tradition but also to a more politicized people especially the youth who have become more educated than their elders. Scott proves this claim by saying that "the first time five or six language groups of the Cordillera ever did something were street demonstrations in Manila" ("There is going

..., 1987: 5). Therefore, the changed relations among the ethnolinguistic groups in the Cordillera today could be attributed to the issues these groups are faced with in the region. Their unity then is not forged by cultural or ethnic pride but rather by political exigency. In other words, these ethnic groups have now become interest groups (Glazer & Moynihan, 1975).

Another legacy of the Chico dam resistance is the birth of a Cordilleran hero: Macliing Dulag, the leader of the Butbut tribe in Kalinga who had powerfully articulated the indigenous people's relationship with their ancestral lands. Among the most recounted of his statements was his comment after then PANAMIN Chair M. Elizalde tried to bribe him: "An envelope can contain only two things, a letter or money. Since I can hardly read, it cannot be a letter. Then it must be money. The more it is not for me for I have nothing to sell" (Maranan, 1987: 16).

On April 24, 1980, at the height of the Chico Dam Project opposition, Macliing Dulag was gunned down by the military. His death was not in vain however because Marcos was forced to order the discontinuation of the project in the wake of the controversy generated by his murder. Today, any discourse on ancestral domain in the Cordillera always includes his name or any of his profound statements regarding the IPs' reverence for their ancestral lands. Since 1984, his death anniversary has also been celebrated as "Cordillera Day" in commemoration of his martyrdom, together with those of the other Cordillerans who lost their lives in defense of their land and culture. This could very well be another modern phenomenon in that the present day Cordillerans have started regarding these martyrs as their common ancestors. Moreover, Cordillera Day is now a "bonding day" for the indigenous peoples in the Cordillera.

Aside from the dams, developmentalism has also found expression in the government's tapping of hot

springs in the country to put up geothermal plants. The main objective of the Ramos administration in putting up geothermal plants was to increase the national power supply in line with its vision to make the Philippines an industrialized country by the year 2000. There were 5 identified potential geothermal sites in the Cordillera: Batong-buhay in Kalinga, Mainit in Bontoc, Mt. Province, Buguias in Benguet, Acupan in Itogon, Benguet, and Daclan in Bokod, Benguet.

Despite opposition by residents in the early '80s, drilling in Daclan was undertaken by the PNOC. The residents of the other identified sites also expressed vehement opposition to the planned geothermal plants having been informed of the numerous negative environmental impacts of these said plants. Nonetheless, overtures made by the government on community leaders seemed to have worked in the case of those of Pasil and Tinglayan, both towns of Kalinga. The two leaders were treated to a field trip to the Mak-Ban geothermal fields in Laguna in July 1996 and this had reportedly resulted to a Memorandum of Understanding between the NAPOCOR and the Kalinga governor and the two mayors of the affected towns allowing geothermal exploration on Mt. Binulawon. This mountain which runs through the two mentioned-towns serves as watershed to the mighty Chico River ("Power and..." 1996: 9-11, 24-25).

The above report is quite surprising considering the historical identification of Kalingas as brave warriors who have never hesitated to fiercely defend any type of encroachment on their territorial boundaries. Equally surprising is the determined opposition put up by the Ibalois, traditionally thought of as the most peace-loving ICC in the Cordillera. Itogon Vice Mayor Aloysius Kato speaks of this Ibaloi capacity to also stand up for their rights when driven up the wall:

The government cannot dismiss this threat on the basis of cultural differences; i.e., the Ibaloy are not like the Kalingas (of the infamous Chico dam). It must be recalled that the Ibaloy, (a peace-loving people) have their own history of war, too ("Power and ...," 1996: 5).

Interestingly, Kato juxtaposes the Kalingas with the Ibaloy affirming the traditional belief that the Kalingas are fighters while the Ibaloy are not. This change in the Ibaloy attitude is further illustrated by the increasingly active participation of the community's womenfolk in protest actions either against transgressions to their rights to their ancestral domain or against destructive "development projects" in their area. Television footages of Tuba townsfolk demanding the Philippine Tourism Authority's just compensation of lands expropriated for the Marcos Park in the '80s showed the women in the forefront of the protest activities. The image of Ibaloy women as shy, retiring and reticent had been replaced by a more assertive and politicized one in defense of their indigenous rights.

The revival of the Agno River Basin Development Project in December 1997 – renamed San Roque Multi-Purpose Project (SRMP) – which was discontinued along with the Chico River Basin Development Project at the height of the opposition to the dams in the early 80s is the latest instance of developmentalism in the Cordillera. The then Ramos administration insisted that the continuation of the project was necessary to enable the government to provide adequate and reliable supply of electrical power to the Central Plains as well as irrigation for accelerated agroindustrialization. To environmental experts, however, the SRMP is expected to have long-reaching and disastrous effects on communities in the municipalities of San Manuel and San Nicolas in Pangasinan, and Itogon and Tuba in Benguet. Its most immediate effect will be the

inundation of homes and agricultural lands located within the planned reservoir area (The San Roque Dam, 1996).

The organized opposition put up by the affected villagers – the Shalupirip Santahnay Indigenous Movement in Itogon and Tignayan ti Mannalon a Mangwayawaya ti Agno (TIMMAWA) or Peasant Movement to Free the Agno in Pangasinan – with help from both local and international advocacy groups, caused various delays in the project but construction was continued by the succeeding Estrada and Macapagal-Arroyo governments. While the dam was yet under construction, San Manuel already experienced “the worst flooding that hit the municipality in years” (“San Manuel residents blame...,” 2001, www.inq7.net); nonetheless, construction of the \$1.2 billion San Roque dam went on until it was finally inaugurated by Macapagal-Arroyo on 29 May 2003.

Today, antidam advocates led by the Cordillera People’s Alliance (CPA), are still calling for the end to the operation of the dam because it is proving too costly for both the government and electric consumers inasmuch as “the national government, through the National Power Corp., is mandated to pay the SRPC [San Roque Power Corporation] the amount of P500 million monthly as fixed energy fee even if the private firm failed to supply NPC the needed energy” (Palangchao, 2004, www.themanilatimes.net). Moreover, operation began even if some non-power components of the dam such as flood control, irrigation, and water quality were not yet in place (Makilan, 2005, www.bulatlat.com/news) constantly compromising the lives of residents within the dam’s pathway.

As illustrated in the above discussion, about the only welcome development ensuing from the pressing problems in the Cordillera had been the increasingly concerted efforts of the various ethnic groups in the area

to get together to search for solutions. During the celebration of Cordillera Day in April 1997, practically all the ethnolinguistic groups in the Cordillera gave commitments to help fight against the putting up of the San Roque Dam; commitments that are still being honored today. The impressive outpouring of support of non-members from within as well as without and from just about all walks of life shows too that this time, the Cordillera indigenous peoples are no longer waging isolated and lonely fights.

Shifts in Political Alliances due to the Push for Regional Autonomy

Autonomy is believed to be the best means of putting a stop to the government's "development projects" generally viewed as detrimental to the indigenous peoples' lands and cultures. Being autonomous, the Cordillerans hope to end the continued violations of their rights through government laws and move on to chart their own region's course toward development.

Such an idea spurred a multi-sectoral group in the Cordillera to heed Cory Aquino's call for peace and reconciliation in the aftermath of the EDSA Revolution. The group that called itself Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA) tested the sincerity of Ms. Aquino by lobbying for autonomy in the region. In response, the Aquino government included provisions on the Autonomous Region in the newly drafted 1987 Constitution. Specifically, Art. X, Section 15 of the Constitution mandates the creation of two (2) Autonomous Regions:

There shall be created Autonomous Regions in Muslim Mindanao and in the Cordilleras consisting of provinces, cities, municipalities, and geographical areas sharing common and distinctive historical and cultural heritage, economic and social structures, and other relevant characteristics within the

framework of this Constitution and the national sovereignty as well as territorial integrity of the Republic of the Philippines.

Consequently, the creation of a Cordillera Autonomous Region was no longer "a question of privilege but instead a question of right" for the Cordillerans. The inclusion of this provision in the Constitution augured well for many concerned groups in the Cordillera making them set aside differences in ideologies and thrusts to come up with a draft of an organic act to be used as basis for the lawmakers. However, most of these groups like the CPA, CPLA, CBA, CPF and others who participated in the drafting of the organic act eventually campaigned for the rejection of the final version of RA 6766 because they found that the act had become a product of "manipulation" by the "unseen hands" of those who had "vested interests" (Dumagat, n.d.). As well, party ideologies and thrusts proved difficult to set aside too long and so the alignment formed by the groups had gone prematurely askew.

The honeymoon stage for the various interest groups who all pushed for autonomy was all too short. Despite this, all still avowed a common desire for autonomy; only this time, each had put forward its own definition of what Cordillera autonomy should be. And in the course of articulating their own visions of Cordillera autonomy, they forged alliances with other groups and, at the same time, caused breaks and factions within their respective groups; developments that are quite fascinating to follow. Because of numerous players in the field, this paper will present the positions of just the key groups by way of tracing the shifts in these groups' political alliances as a result of the issue on Cordillera autonomy.

One of the key groups concerned with the discourse on Cordillera autonomy is the Cordillera

Peoples' Alliance or CPA. The CPA traces its beginnings to a multi-sectoral congress held in June 1984. From the 27 grassroots groups that formally participated in its founding, it presently has around 120 member groups mostly composed of NGOs and POs. The CPA had always been consistent in its belief that the best way of advancing the interests and welfare of the indigenous peoples in the region is to work for a Cordillera regional autonomy. In fact, Rood, a former UP Baguio professor and political scientist, credits the group as having been instrumental in making possible the inclusion of the provision on autonomy in the 1986 Constitution through its intense lobbying. Like most groups, the CPA believed that autonomy is

the best vehicle through which the Cordillera peoples can exercise self-determination within the framework of a sovereign Filipino nation. Within the autonomous region, the indigenous peoples of the Cordillera can exercise legislative, executive and judicial functions that are in keeping with their needs and particularities (Florendo, 1994: 45).

The passage emphasizes the CPA position that the struggle for Cordillera autonomy should be part of the country's struggle for national freedom and democracy; thus, the group's advocacy for *regional* autonomy. And for it to be a *genuine regional autonomy*, it should have the following six components ("Genuine ...", 1994: 3):

1. Recognition of ancestral lands of various Cordillera indigenous peoples, and their ancestral proprietary rights to the disposition, utilization, management and development of these lands and resources.
2. Recognition of the domain or territory of the Cordillera autonomous region and the Cordillera

peoples' prior rights to these lands and resources; the rights of disposition, utilization, management and development to be provided for and exercised through a future Cordillera Regional Autonomous Government.

3. Recognition of the right to economic prosperity and genuine social development.
4. Respect for the indigenous culture and the right to pursue cultural development.
5. Recognition of indigenous sociopolitical systems and political integrity as indigenous people.
6. Protection of civil liberties and human rights against militarization and state repression.

In an interview, CPA spokesperson Minnie Degawan while discussing the said components reiterated that "[a]ll other issues are negotiable except the issue of ancestral land rights" (*Advancing... - A Source Book*, 1994: 101). And since the government did not make its position clear regarding this issue, the CPA rejected the proposed 2nd version of the Cordillera Autonomy Bill as well as campaigned hard for the rejection of the Organic Act in the 1998 plebiscite.

Meanwhile, the Cordillera People's Democratic Front or CPDF echoed the CPA position that the struggle for Cordillera Autonomy should be seen within the struggle of the national democratic movement. This position is not surprising considering that the CPDF was the underground national democratic organization of the indigenous peoples of the Cordillera. It was founded by the CPP-NPA in 1981 as the "organizational expression of the particularities of the Cordillera struggle within the national democratic revolution" (*Diliman Review*, 1987, p. 25). Hewing to its Marxist ideology, the long term objective of the CPDF is the establishment of the Cordillera People's Revolutionary Autonomous Government (CPRAG) as an assertion of the Cordillera Peoples' right to self-determination and

an affirmation of their capacity for self-governance (Florendo, 1994: 42).

Although, the CPA agreed with the CPDF position that the Cordillerans are victims of national oppression because of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism, the former did not advocate an autonomous revolutionary government or *fetad* (people's war) to liberate the Cordillerans and the entire Philippine masses (Florendo, 1994). On the other hand, the CPDF, like the CPA, also emphasized the importance of recognizing the IPs rights to their ancestral lands and had thus included provisions on land rights in its program of government. Besides creating a Land Council tasked with evaluating land conflicts among the people, the CPRAG recognized customary forms of land ownership, both "individual and collective"

based on those that are currently operational among the people . . . Thus shall the CPRAG respect variations in custom regarding the use or ownership of land. Special land laws, distinct from national land laws, shall be formulated and enforced in accordance with the particularities of culture and conditions of the Cordillera (Advancing..., 1994: 111).

A third key group that figures prominently on the issue of Cordillera autonomy is the Cordillera People's Liberation Army or CPLA. The CPLA was a breakaway faction of the CPP-NPA founded by renegade-priest Conrado Balweg on April 7, 1986. The birth of the CPLA was a consequence of the disagreement within the CPDF of the meaning of "national oppression" in the process of arriving at the meaning of Cordillera autonomy. While the official political line is to regard the previously mentioned problems as the root causes of Filipino oppression, one faction sees a fourth cause which it considers as a distinct problem of the Cordillerans: "the state's disregard for indigenous

peoples' rights to ancestral domain, to the freedom to maintain and develop their indigenous systems, and to equal status with other citizens of the Philippines" (Agbayani, 1987: 21). This problem is part of the so-called "internal colonialism" and since the Cordillerans do not share a common history with the rest of the Filipino people, neither do they patronize the nation-state's dominant social institutions, the Cordillera might as well become a nation in itself.

Such an idea was frowned upon as "indigenist" by most cadres in the CPDF who were not members of an indigenous cultural community while the "indigenist" faction known as the Lumbaya Company, retaliated by accusing the CPP of "imposing lowland rules over the Cordillera" (Agbayani, 1987: 21). Thus, the issue started to take on the mantle of ethnicity eventually causing the Lumbaya Company to break away from the CPDF. This question on ethnicity became more pronounced when, in the meantime, Balweg and his followers, who were in disagreement with the Party leadership, raised the following grievances: non-minority members were given more support and resources as well as regional leadership than minority cadres; and the regional struggle not the national struggle should be the priority in the Cordillera. Moreover, Balweg, accused the CPDF of plotting to liquidate him instead of just placing him under disciplinary action (DA) "allegedly on account of having an extramarital affair with a female comrade." And since the vice-CO of the Lumbaya Company happened to be Balweg's cousin, the company and Balweg's group then linked up to form the CPLA (Agbayani, 1987).

What differentiated the CPLA from the CPA and CPDF visions of an autonomous Cordillera was its push for a federal system of autonomous government, more specifically, the creation of a Cordillera Autonomous Socialist State. This framework purports to make the recognition of Cordillera territorial, economic, cultural

and political integrity possible, as well as, the eradication of discrimination against Cordillerans as "morally inferior people." Under the federal system, Cordillerans would be able to define the pace of the region's development. In addition, the group asserted that the CPLA should be the peacekeeping force for this envisioned Cordillera state (Florendo, 1994).

When the Aquino government called for peacetalks in 1986, Balweg's group decided to face the government panel for negotiations in order to push for its vision of an autonomous government. At about this same time, some members of the CPA – mostly *pangats* or Kalinga leaders – decided to get out from the umbrella group and formed their own organization which they called the Cordillera Bodong Association or CBA. Eventually, many members of this organization, attracted to the idea of "indigenizing the Cordillera," joined Balweg's CPLA. At the start of the negotiations with the government, an administrative arm of the CPLA was formed to sit down with the government panel. Since most members came from the former CBA, the group took on the name Cordillera Bodong Administration or CBAAd which was also headed by Balweg (Castro, 1987).

The CPDF – then embroiled in a word-war with Balweg – snubbed the Aquino government's truce offering. On the other hand, the CPA found unacceptable the inclusion of traditional politicians in the peace panel and so it also refused to join the peace negotiations. Consequently, it was Balweg's group that was able to push for its political program; in addition, it was given a tremendous media mileage against its two opponents. (By this time, the CPA also started its own word war with the CPLA since it was accused by the latter of "*wanting to link the Cordillera people with the NDF.*") Throughout all these, the CPLA was able to get the sympathy of observers because Balweg carried his war against the CPA and the CPDF on political

grounds while the other two delved "into what they perceived to be the unsavory personal iniquities of Balweg" (Agbayani, 1987: 22). In other words, both the CPA and CPDF appeared petty in that they seemed unable to rise above the issue of personalities. In a previous interview with this researcher, Engr. Solang, the then Vice Chair of the CPA, claimed that there was no chance for his group and the CPLA reconciling because "*aguuyungen ni Balweg [Balweg has gone crazy]*" (Benedict Solang, personal interview, 1997).

But all was not also well in the Balweg camp for aside from antagonizing the military for its insistence on making the CPLA the peacekeeping unit in the entire Cordillera, it also had within its ranks members who did not agree with this particular demand. In early 1994, Atty. Joel Obar, who long served as Balweg's right hand man, brought his break-away faction out of the CPLA and formed his own Cordillera People's Unit (CPU) (*Advancing...- A Source Book*, 1994,).

After Balweg's death in 1999, the CPLA was again split into two factions: one currently being led by Michael Suggiyao Jr. and the other, by Mayor Mailed Molina of Bucloc, Abra, and Balweg's widow, Corazon Cortel-Balweg (Solmerin, 2004: www.manilatimes.net). To date, the two factions are still locked in a leadership dispute.

Conclusion

The various shifts in political alliances have not yet stopped inasmuch as some of the key personalities in the largely left-leaning political groups have gone on to either join the government (an example is Atty. William Claver who used to be the Chairperson of the CPA but went on to become a Congressman under the government party) or simply got out of their parties because of disillusionment and went on to join the other parties (the CPA claims that some of those *pangats* who initially left the CPA to join up with Balweg have since

returned to the multi-sectoral group). And this account does not even include the government officials (members of the Cordillera Executive Board or CEB and the Cordillera Regional Assembly or CRA, who were at the helm of the Cordillera Autonomous Region or CAR) who have also experienced turmoil and intrigues within their ranks. Seemingly, this political rigodon will go on until the question on Cordillera autonomy will finally be resolved.

In the same vein, until the government passes an enabling Ancestral Domain/Ancestral Land Law that will be fully acceptable to all parties concerned (indigenous peoples and settlers who are non-members of the indigenous cultural communities, together with government lawmakers and various interest groups), the problem on ancestral land rights will persist, with the indigenous peoples putting up more determined and equally more concerted efforts to defend these rights. In the process, the different indigenous groups will become more and more dependent on each other to sustain these struggles.

Nonetheless, amidst discussions on ancestral land rights and autonomy is the two-sided reality of indigenous structures and processes in the Cordillera today: one of persistence and one of disintegration. And if the existing givens of the Cordillera society are used as gauge — more educated, more politicized people; out-migration of IPs, in-migration of non-members; and presence of outsiders' institutions like the school and the church — obviously, the process of disintegration is already in place. This disintegration only proves that the Cordillerans are not caught in the quagmire of immobilism but are flowing naturally with the evolving times.

But these facts are not necessarily contradictory to the Cordillerans' fight to hold on to their indigenous rights inasmuch as the process of disintegration is parallel with that of persistence. Although change is

immutable, a society can still determine to a certain extent its own pace of change. Change, after all, can also be a matter of political choice. With the swiftness of development in today's world, the IPs do not need the government to hasten the holding of a requiem for their cultures by imposing various developmental projects through its interventionist philosophy. After all, the process of persistence is part of the natural course of relentless change.

Notes

¹The historian, W. H. Scott, says that the term Igorot has journalistically given way to the word "Cordillera" signalling the emergence of a Cordilleran Identity ("There is going to be..." 1987: 5). Although history has commonly lumped the ethnic groups in the old Mountain Province—composed of Benguet, Bontoc, Ifugao, and Kalinga-Apayao—under the label "Igorot," it is only actually the people of the first 2 provinces who referred to themselves as such. A study in 1988 conducted by the Cordillera Studies Center of UP Baguio—the author was part of the research team—proved this when only 46% of Kalinga respondents and 44% of Ifugao respondents thought of themselves as Igorots while 100% of both the Ibaloy and Kankana-ey respondents in Benguet and 99% of the Bontoc respondents considered themselves so (Rood, 1994: 10).

²The CAR is composed of six provinces with 8 major ethnic groups: 1) Benguet - Ibaloy, Kankanaey, Ikalahan / Kalangoya; 2) Mountain Province - Igorot; 3) Ifugaos; 4) Kalinga - Ikalanga or Kalinga; 5) Apayao - Isneg; and 6) Abra - Tinggian

³The Social Reform Agenda by the Ramos administration was a set of interventions meant to alleviate poverty and improve the welfare of the marginalized sectors of Philippine society.

⁴Title of a book; *Dakami Ya Nan Dagami: Papers and Proceedings of the 1st Cordillera Multi-Sectoral Land Congress* 30 (1983) published by the Cordillera Consultative Commission.

⁵The NCCP accuses Pres. Macapagal-Arroyo of issuing Memorandum Circular No.67 or the Mineral Action Plan (MAP) to amend the IRR of the Mining Act in order “to simplify and fast-track the procedures of processing mining applications and issuance of permits to mining companies” despite persistent calls for the scrapping of the Mining Law.

⁶ IPRA or RA 8371, which took effect on November 22, 1997, is a comprehensive law recognizing the IPs’ right to their ancestral domain, self-governance and empowerment, social justice and human rights as well as cultural integrity.

⁷Balweg was indeed assassinated on 31 December 1999 while visiting his ancestral home. The NPA’s Agustin Begnalen Command—said to be led by Balweg’s brother, Jovencio, who was also the alleged gunman—owned up to the killing. The ex-priest was “meted revolutionary justice because of his blood debt against the people” (Vanzi, 2000, 2002; Palangchao, 2003; Cabreza & Caluza, 2003).

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