



ACCEPTING TRADITIONS: MY EXPERIENCE WITH THE IFUGAO PEOPLE

by: DR. DINO A. REYES

I'm Dino Reyes, and I'm from Santiago in Isabela, which is a thriving city in the center of the Cagayan Valley Region. I was the University Artistic Director and College Instructor at Saint Mary's University in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, for fifteen years. I had the honor of collaborating directly with student artists there, many of whom were from indigenous communities like the Ifugao and Ga'dang. They were the catalyst for my intense interest in the customs and culture of the Ifugao people.

In my spare time, I would always be drawn to the province of Ifugao, particularly to Lagawe, the capital. What began as informal trips evolved into more in-depth investigations—not just of a stunning location, but also of a people and their identity. I enjoyed hearing their tales, seeing their traditions, and living their lifestyle. My adoration eventually turned into love. My decision to go to Lagawe and join the faculty of Ifugao State University (IFSU), where I currently teach physical education, was a life-altering one because of my intense love.

One of IFSU's guiding principles is cultural awareness, and my first day there was a real lesson in that regard. I went through what many would refer to as "culture shock" because I came from a different cultural background. I had never seen students chewing 'momma' (betel nut) during class breaks. I must admit that I was initially uncomfortable because I was not familiar with the procedure. Furthermore, I observed that pupils seldom ever used honorifics like "po" and "opo," which I had always thought were used to express respect. Their rhetoric occasionally even sounded hostile to me. I wondered if I really belonged.

But as I listened and learned, I eventually understood. I came to understand that mother chewing is a deeply ingrained custom with cultural, societal, and even spiritual significance

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rather than just being a habit. A blend of lime, areca nut, and betel leaf, the mother represents harmony and kinship. The lime symbolizes the link that unites them, the areca nut symbolizes masculinity, and the betel leaf symbolizes femininity in Ifugao culture. Similar to offering food or drink in other Filipino communities, offering "*momma*" is a sign of respect and friendliness.

Chewing "*momma*" has really become into a group activity among students, forging friendships and fostering ties. One afternoon, not out of duty but as a show of support and respect for their culture, I even joined my coworkers in chewing "*momma*". I no longer felt alienated in that instant. I was welcomed.

Language also acquired a new perspective. Although "*po*" and "*opo*" are considered courteous in Tagalog culture, the Ifugao have their own means of honoring elders, which include using certain respectful expressions in their own language, as well as tone and word choice. Despite their different speech patterns, they exhibit respect for a language that has been used for generations.

The *Hudhud* chant, an old oral tradition sung at harvests and significant ceremonies, is one of the most potent symbols of their culture. In addition to being poetry, these chants are living records that preserve the morals, values, and wisdom of the Ifugao people. They talk about family, community, bravery, and most importantly, respect.

I can now genuinely claim that I have found my second home at Ifugao State University, where I am in my sixth year of teaching. My affection for this province and its people has only deepened. I regard myself as a cultural bridge who uses my topic to conserve and promote the Ifugao history in addition to being an educator. I have incorporated hybrid leisure activities—which combine traditional Ifugao games with contemporary components—into my physical education programs. It's my meager attempt to preserve and commemorate their legacy for the coming generation.

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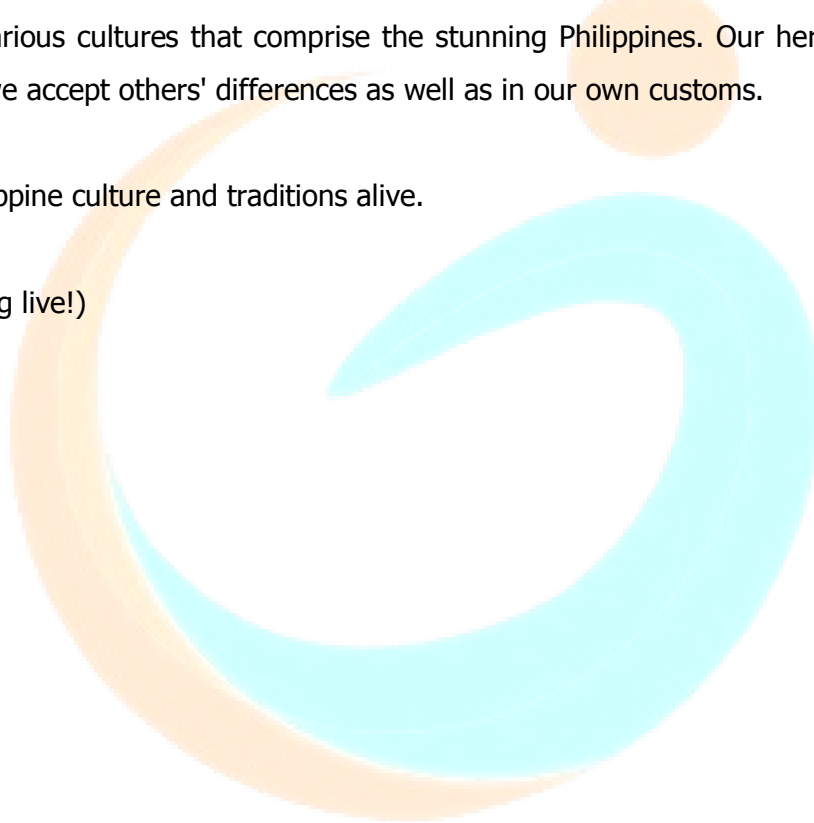


One of the most important truths I've learned from living and working in Ifugao is that you don't need to be born into a culture to understand, accept, and be accepted by it. My life has been irrevocably altered by the Ifugao people, who have welcomed me into their homes, hearts, and customs.

I hope that by sharing my tale, others will be encouraged to learn about, appreciate, and cherish the various cultures that comprise the stunning Philippines. Our heritage's depth is seen in how we accept others' differences as well as in our own customs.

Keep the Philippine culture and traditions alive.

Haggiyo! (Long live!)



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