

'The trails to get there': Experiences of attaining higher education for Igorot Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines

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The title of this paper alludes to the hours of walking on mountain paths, which one of the authors, growing up in an Igorot Indigenous community in post-colonial Philippines undertook to go to school. This is an apt symbol of the sheer effort it can take to overcome physical, social, cultural and psychological barriers to access, persevere with and complete, higher education. This article explores the hardships of attaining higher education and the effects of education on the Igorot community. The article shares the experiences of Igorot leaders and how they have used their higher education learning to work for the promotion of maintenance of their Igorot culture.

Keywords: *barriers to education, Indigenous learning, westernized higher education*

Introduction

Digna's Story:

I come from a remote village in the highlands of Benguet. At an early age, my siblings and I were trained by our parents to help in household duties, farm work and participate in family and community rituals, which according to the Igorot culture are good ways to learn about life and its wisdom. Shortly before I turned seven, government representatives came to our village and enlisted children, telling us we needed to go to school to learn. After I finished elementary school, I needed to leave home to study at a private high school in a mining town centre, about five to six hours walk from my village. My fees were paid for by a politician who promised to support the education of one young person from my village when he campaigned in the previous election.

During the first year of my study, I experienced discrimination in and outside the school. I was often scolded because I did not know how to speak and use respectful words in Ilocano and Tagalog. There were times when my classmates would resist accepting me as a member in group projects and assignments because they thought I could not contribute to the task. Many times, I had to ignore belittling stares and conversations of people about me. Knowing very little about urban ways and lifestyle, I developed the desire to attain education. In my mind, gaining a formal education and finishing a degree will give the confidence to survive in the mainstream society. So, the rest of my high school life through college, I had to move to the city, learned to speak and 'behave' like my classmates in order to be accepted and belong to a group and have friends. I finished my teaching degree by being a working student. The fact that working whilst studying meant I had to do a four-year degree over five years did not matter.

Like me, many Igorots who come from remote villages struggled to attain higher education. In the following discussion, we will start by giving a background to formal education in the Philippines and in the Igorot region. We will then give an overview of the methodology used in this study, since these methodological issues are an important part of our argument about the meaning of education for Igorot professionals. The hardships of attaining higher education and the effects of education on Igorots will follow. We conclude by sharing the experiences of Igorot

leaders on how they have used their higher education learning to work for the promotion of maintenance of their Igorot culture.

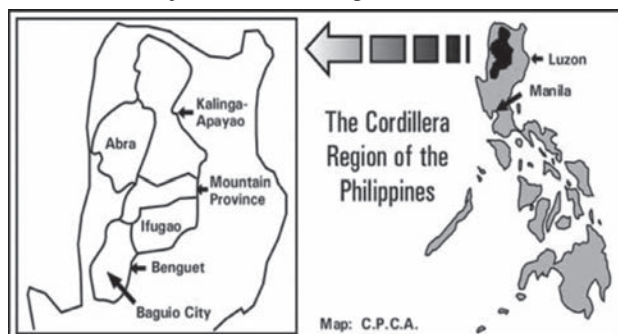
Research Setting

Benguet Province of the Philippines is located at the Northern Luzon of the Cordillera Mountain Range with an estimated population of 372,533 in 2007 (PPDO, 2008). As a result of government legislation originating from the Spanish exploration in the seventeenth century, Benguet is subdivided into thirteen municipalities namely: Atok, Bakun, Bokod, Buguias, Itogon, Kabayan, Kapangan, Kibungan, La Trinidad, Mankayan, Sablan, Tuba and Tublay. La Trinidad is the capital town and Baguio City, which used to be part of Benguet, now a chartered city of the Cordillera Region. Baguio used to be designated as an American military rest camp and the centre for the American government agri-business, transportation and mining industry development in the 1900s.

Benguet is primarily rural and characterised by rugged terrain and most interior communities can be accessed by public transport such as buses, jeepneys¹ and trucks (in areas with rugged roads). Most of the community's source of income is upland farming at a subsistence level. Most of business and trade take place in Baguio City and La Trinidad, making the villages integrated into the local market economy.

Although it is becoming increasingly diverse in population, the original settlers are the *Kankanaeys*, *Ibaloys* and *Kalanguyas*. Maps one and two show the location of the Province of Benguet, the study site:

Map 1: Location map of the Province of Benguet, the study site (DA CHARMP Project, PPDO Benguet 2008)



Map 2: The Map of the Province of Benguet (PPDO File, Benguet Province website 2011)



Education and the Igorot Indigenous Peoples

Similar to the experience of many Indigenous peoples, the Igorots' encounter with the colonisers disrupted ways of knowing, learning and teaching. It also resulted in loss of lands, the erosion of cultures and ideas, and most importantly, the colonisation of minds (Wane

2008:183). The effects of the colonial education system were compounded by the different theories and strategies of development where the 'western ways of knowing' were viewed and adopted as the model for developing the poorer nations of the world (Sillitoe, 2000). International development was designed and implemented in the framework of western societies (Campbell, Pratt Gutrel & Lee, 2008; Escobar, 1995; Said, 1989). From the colonial paradigm, literacy, numeracy, school, trades, socialisation and Christian morals were requisites of better living conditions.

The 'civilising mission' (Lewis & Murphy, 2006) during the American occupation of the Philippines was implemented through the introduction of Christianity, 'democratic' government and formal education (Bagamaspad & Manada-Pawid, 1985; Rigney, 1989). From the Spanish-run schools for priests and for Catechism purposes (Karnow, as cited in Litton 1999: 86-87), the American occupation brought colonial education to the people of the Philippines (Litton, 1999: 86-87). Several authors argue that education was used as a tool to train Filipinos to adhere to the creation of an ideal American image (Pastores-Palfy, 1999; Litton, 1999; Mendoza, 2001); Mendoza–Strobel, 2001. English was used as the medium of instruction in the schools; American soldiers were the first teachers called 'Thomasites', their educational materials were from the United States (Galang, as cited in Litton, 1999: 87). This led to an entrenched colonialism among the Filipinos (Mendoza, 2001). This is seen in the Filipinos' general view that their culture is second rate to the culture of the colonisers; their delight being able to speak English and their pride in wearing American fashion (Constantino & Constantino, 1999; Ponce, 1980: 160). Consequently, Revilla observes that young Filipinos today have an identity crisis that revolves around their lack of self-respect and self-love as Filipinos (Revilla, 1997:101).

From 1907-1933, the missionaries claim to have Christianised 370,000 Igorots, which led to changes in the traditional structures of the culture (Medina, 2004:98). The traditional dwellings where young people gather and listen to the stories of the elders called "*olog*" (for young girls) and "*ato*" (for young boys) were turned into schools and dormitories. It was here that the missionaries provided medical, food and clothing relief, trades and service training for young people

(Medina, 2004:63). The impact of the missionaries' education system was so great that the Igorots started to become professional workers (Medina, 2004:63). Over the years, the missionaries consolidated the Philippines' education system into both formal and informal education. Most of the mission schools left by the missionaries have now become private diocesan high schools, colleges and universities serving as the foundation of higher education in the region, north of Manila. In this light, it is considered that a formal system of education is one of the greatest legacies of America to the Philippines.

Igorot scholars argue however, that colonisation made them 'misinformed, miseducated, misrepresented, marginalised, left confused and forlorn' (Fiar-od, 2002; Dacog, 2003:6). Annavic Bagamaspad and Zenaida Hamada-Pawid (1985) in *The Benguet History Project* trace that the Spanish and American colonisation created the term 'Igorots', which signify the distinction between lowland and highland Filipinos (Afafe, 1998; Scott, 2006). The Spaniards who encountered resistance from the upland peoples created an image of the Igorots as 'pagans', 'barbaric', 'savage', primitive and backward. This stigma of savagery led to the discrimination against Igorots in mainstream Filipino society (Scott, 2006: 7). Scott (2006) further argues that lowland religious conversion and affiliation with the colonial administrators made the Christianised Filipinos see themselves as superior to the Igorots and other ethnic groups in the country (Finin, 2005: 29). Discrimination is therefore perpetuated throughout the education system and structure primarily because everyone is required to adapt to the mainstream colonial education system (Mendoza, 2001). Additionally, research done on the Igorots in the last one hundred years, has been conducted primarily by foreigners (Brainard & Litton, 1999), particularly colonial officials, foreign anthropologists, Catholic and Anglican missionaries (Medina, 2004). From their perspective, they had brought 'civilisation' to this mountain's first people (Finin, 2005:19-20; Scott, 2006).

Methodology

The participants in this study are 36 Igorots from Benguet province from different ages, economic and work backgrounds. The data used in this paper are specifically those from stories, conversation and sharing about attaining higher education on their own or with limited support from

their family. The participants are from two groups; the first comprised young people ages 18-26 and the second, parents between the ages of 40-60, representing three ethnic groups – the Ibaloy, Kankanaeys and the Kalanguyas. The participants share the view that education is an important tool to have a better life in the future.

Inspired by the growing number of scholars advocating Indigenous frameworks for research, we chose to employ Indigenous research methodology for this study. This is a methodology aimed at 'mainstreaming' Indigenous Peoples' voices and knowledge systems (Batiste, 2000; Rigney, 1989; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). The utilisation of Indigenous frameworks, paradigms and methods is a result of adaption and creative additions to existing qualitative research methodologies from postmodern, postcolonial and critical theories that work on theorising the nature of the colonised and privileging the voice of the 'other' (Riley, 2009:228).

We specifically drew our methodology from Indigenous research frameworks that resemble the Igorot experiences and understanding, specifically Martin's (2003) 'Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing' based on research in Indigenous Australia. Martin argues that there are three main constructs of Quandamooka ontology. The first is establishing through law what is known about entities, which she calls 'ways of knowing' (Martin, 2003:9). Second is the 'ways of being', which refers to establishing relationship with the entities. The third is the 'ways of doing', which is enacting the knowledge system and maintaining the relationship with the entities and with all other beings as seen in the way of life, arts, songs, rituals and ceremonies performed in Indigenous communities (Martin, 2003:11). The processes of knowledge acquisition and reproduction involves, listening, viewing, reviewing, reading, watching, waiting, observing and application of learning (Martin, 2003:7). The co-existence of the Aboriginal people with the entities is where they learn, relearn and pass on their knowledge system and wisdom. Parallel with Martin's framework, DA gathered the data for this study employing the Igorot ways of learning called *pansuka-el*, an Ibaloy word, which means 'deep search for wisdom'. *Pansuka-el* entails the process of seeking wisdom to attain full development as a person, as a family and as a community. The search for wisdom in the process of *pansuka-el* takes different forms in the experiential and oral tradition

and culture of the Igorots.

Sharing and discussion circles in pan-iistorya and pantatabtaval

From the stages of data gathering up to the analysis of data, sharing circles (Lavallée, 2009) called *pan-iistorya* and *pantatabtaval* (Afable, 1998) were the methods used in an attempt to strengthen the Igorots' participation in this research. Traditionally, these are the methods where elders share wisdom from the metaphors of life and experiences. *Pan-iistorya* is story sharing based on life experiences which traditionally happens during community gatherings and rituals, done by sitting (on the ground or inside the house) facing each other in a circular-like formation. Here the participants' perspectives on 'what is community' and 'what could bring development to the community' were asked. Central to this was their idea of education as a very important element in bringing them development. *Pantatabtaval* on the other hand, is the discussion and sharing of analysis, perspectives, ideas and feelings on given topics; in this case, pertaining to attaining higher education.

The analysis of results and discussion of findings were also done in the sharing circles of *pan-iistorya* and *pantatabtaval*. This stage required that Digna as the researcher, participate both as a facilitator (*peki-man/peki-da*) for the discussions and as a passive participant by observing (*panbisna*) and listening (*pantetneng*). As a facilitator, she presented the topics related to ways of attaining higher education for the sharing circle but as a listener, she listened, observed and came to know more details and background of the participants' opinions, perspectives and other important community dynamics during the fieldwork. Field notes were written using the village language and then later in English after consultation with identified elders and community leaders, consistent with Bouma and Ling's (2004) stress on the importance of consulting an authority as a way of knowing in research.

Use of real names and local terminologies

Indigenous theorising affirms the importance of involving Indigenous communities as research participants (Anderson, 2009; Sillitoe, 2001). Its frameworks emphasise not only in recognising and understanding but also, using the Indigenous community's knowledge systems,

ways of life and cultural values to increase their participation in the research process (Enriquez, 1992; McCubin, 2009). The participants for this study opted to use their real names, stories and situation. They also requested for the inclusion of the terms they commonly use and understand in their local Ibaloy, Kankanaey and Kalanguya languages. They viewed their participation in this research part of their 'participation in real life', thus there was no need to use pseudonyms or aliases in sharing of their Igorot knowledge systems. Overall, despite debates surrounding its rigour and credibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), we argue that Indigenous research methodology is the methodology that allows Igorots as active participants in this research.

Getting through the rugged trails of attaining higher education

Barriers and Trials

The participants identified at least five major difficulties that in one way or the other they have to overcome when entering a higher learning institution. These are the highlander-lowlander divide, adjusting to a mainstream values system, language, lifestyle, and poverty (strawberry farmers, *inpaki-istorya*). Igorots are considered 'uplanders [highlanders]' and this term would usually be associated with 'natives', 'primitive' and 'barbaric' imagery (Scott, 2006) while 'lowlanders' would usually be associated with 'civilisation', being familiar with the 'modern', being more 'advanced' (2006). Often, Igorot students are received negatively by classmates where they admit to being Indigenous, in some instances being called derogatory names like 'nefot' or 'Igoy' (Sabelo, *inpaki-istorya*). Many experience discrimination happen when they go to the country's lowland cities. Participants related stories where they were asked questions such as "if you are an Igorot, why are you wearing clothes?", "why are you not dark, with thick lips and kinky hair?", "Is it true that Igorots have tail?", "Do you ever get to see modern things where you live?" (Picpican, *inpaki-istorya*). Despite such state of 'otherness', Igorots are determined to thrive in the higher learning environment.

For the young people, they believe that even if they attend schools and churches in the town centres, there is still a large influence of the experiential way of learning within the culture with parents and elders as facilitators. Moving to the city to pursue higher education

however, the Igorot learner has to move from traditional learning to a higher education learning facilitated by teachers and professors who learned from the university, earned a degree and have usually taken on a worldview influenced by western societies. Colonization mindset is evident that the students' cultural background is put aside in place of mainstream approaches (Wane, 2008). The imputing of a Western psychological self was at the centre of academic colonisation (Wilson, 2004) creating a Filipino scholar and elite who was divorced from his/her indigenous roots and one that lacked a holistic self-identity. Tertiary education therefore functions as a political activity, which disconnects indigenous communities from their roots so that the communities routinely neglect their traditional practices and indigenous knowledge (Barua & Wilson, 2005). Therefore, local knowledge and ways of learning are hardly recognised and talked about in universities.

For centuries, the Igorot used informal settings, which included story-sharing, apprenticeship and interactions with the elder family members to educate the young on their indigenous knowledge and subsistence based professions. Indigenous knowledge was also transmitted and maintained through rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Community unity, collective work, mutual cooperation and assistance, selflessness and upholding the common good are the underlying values of villagers and tribes for peaceful co-existence (Asia Society 2001), and this can be said true in many respects of Igorot communities. Wisdom is gained from experience, observation, listening and participation in community activities and rituals (Benham, 2004; Martin 2003). Within the university system on the other hand, students have to learn about individual accomplishment, competition, material accumulation and self-promotion to be able to perform well and get better job opportunities after graduation. The contradicting value systems create tensions and crisis for the Igorot students – whether to assimilate to belong to the system or resist it and be marginalised (Benham, 2004).

Language is another aspect of adjustment to university life. Aside from their village languages, Igorot students must speak in Ilocano, the regional language and Filipino, the national language which is rarely spoken in the village to be able interact with people at the town centres and in the cities. They are also required to speak and write in either English or Tagalog at the university. Speaking different languages and

switching from one to another is not hard for Igorots, but it is for their accents that they are most criticised. Jokes and stories abound about how Ibaloyos and other Igorot groups poorly pronounce Filipino and English words which at times could be a source of further discrimination (Sabelo, *inpaki-istorya*).

Aside from overcoming the impacts of the construction and representation as 'the other' (Batiste, 2010; Martin, 2003), one other significant barrier to Igorots' finishing higher education is a lack of access to services and resources. The economy of Igorot villages is based on a subsistence economy. The farm and its biodiversity is the source of living for the people. The little cash they get from selling their farm products is what they use to buy the family's needs. With their children going to university and living in the city, the foremost concern of parents is where to get the money to pay for tuition fees and other needs. One of the remedies is to go into cash crop gardening which means going into a higher volume of upland vegetable production with the use of chemical farming (Willie, *inpaki-istorya*). Many of the parent participants claim that they had to get scholarships or serve as working students even in odd jobs just in order to support their schooling.

Cultural values as 'tools to get there'

Most participants who are now working in professional occupations emphasised that they had to discipline themselves to obtain a higher education degree. Interviewees perceive that keeping Igorot cultural values such as being grounded on the land, hard work, listening and respecting elders' words of wisdom are broadly encapsulated in the words *inayan*, *yamyam* and *bilin*. The concept of doing good and avoiding the bad in the view of *mayat* and *Lawa* served as inspiration for them upon leaving the village (P. Abluyen, *inpaki-istorya*). Asuncion, who is now a nurse supervisor at a government hospital, shared that the greatest thing she can contribute to younger Igorots is by demonstrating determination and hard work and giving value to education as a way of improving her family's economic condition:

For me, education and finishing a degree is very important in being able to develop myself. My parents did their very best to help me finish my nursing degree because they said they have nothing else to give me as an inheritance other than education.

As a sign of respect for all their hardships, my life revolved around just two main things at university – work and study. I only had two sets of clothing and disciplined myself to have a simple life (A. Anod, inpaki-istorya).

The stories of the participants also revealed that the traditional values learned during their childhood in their *ili* (village) helped them thrive in the mainstream environment. Bonsian, who is now a manager of BABUDEMPCO cooperative said:

I keep in my heart the yamyam (counselling) and bilin (advice) of the elders when I started my work. The elders always advise me ‘Ay-aywanam nan pilak di Ipugaw; adi kan kankanen!’ (Take care of the money of the people, do not corrupt it). As a manager, I personally made a commitment to run the cooperative as taught by the elders. These values made me and the community strong and persevere in facing the problems of the organisation. For about thirty years now, our community cooperative continues to grow serving hundreds of members (B. Willie, Pannaki-istorya).

Another parent participant, Manong Pablo, the executive director of Upland Development Institute (UDI), a community-based NGO, considers traditional values of his *ili* as the source of his strength and perseverance for all that he has become:

For me, the values of inayan (taboo), mayat (good), Lawa (bad) and other cultural values served as tools in pursuing my dream, of gaining higher education and serving my community. Our organisation now is working to raise awareness and solidify people’s actions on alternative health and mining issues in Igorot communities in the Cordillera region...despite the discrimination that I have experienced from our lowland brothers while I was studying, I was not discouraged to learn the rituals and cultural activities in my community – I learned how to play gongs and other musical instruments and now that I am older, I have learned to preside over simple and basic cultural rituals. (P. Abluyen, inpaki-istorya).

Cultivating the soil and planting crops is a basic life skill that traditionally every child in an Igorot community would learn and perform as a source of living. There are no other sources of income other

than 'mankapayat si luta' meaning 'dirtying the hands' by working with the soil. Participants who are now working in professional areas had to work either as house hold help, or work as day labourers while studying.

The young people participants admit that many of them tend to subscribe to mainstream values when they live in the city. They shared the feeling that because of education and religious influences, the opportunities to learn about Igorot traditional values is diminishing. Their wish is that parents would make the deliberate effort to teach their children the important Igorot values to help them survive in the outside world, proud of who they are (inpaki-istoriya sin anak).

The 'gains' and further 'trials' of obtaining higher education

Today, tertiary education has become a panacea for the variety of conditions relating to individual and social advancement, such as getting better jobs or being respected by the society members. It has also been deemed important for the advancement of the nation's economic and development interests. There is significant evidence that education has partially met the expectations of individual, economic, and political development. It has brought obvious benefits, such as an improvement in literacy rates. While Igorots suggest that formal education—adopted from the West and based on generalisations of culture, thoughts, practices, and content has broadened their outlook, brought awareness about female education, provided opportunities to diversify professions, and improved their social status, nearly all the participants responded that they see education as not only that which occurs in the classroom but it also includes participation and taking active roles in community and university organisations. Learning about culture was also seen as a big part of non-formal education (J. Dangiwan, inpaki-istoriya).

With changing realities, most young participants have expressed fears about the loss of culture and cultural values amongst younger generations, especially those born in the city and town centres. Teddy, a Barangay Captain (government official), shared his observations on the 'changes of times':

With educated parents and modernisation, the traditional rearing of children has also changed a lot. Kids now are just in front of the television and they even don't help in the chores

at home... Now that we have rights of children, computers, television and media influences, it's hard to discipline and teach them. My fear is, "how will they learn to live on their own in the future?"(T. Quintos, inpaki-istorya).

Educated Igorots have contributed in lifting the economic activity and improving the health and hygiene of the Igorot people. If measured in terms of indicators, such as per capita income, life expectancy, literacy, levels of employment, and the human development index, we can say that there has been socioeconomic development among the Igorots. From an optimistic view, modern education gave the Igorots a broad outlook of life and an undaunted zeal to upgrade their standard of living as well as a means of better livelihood. It helped them become participants in the ever-changing global race.

But, the escalation of the Igorots toward lucrative market opportunities has resulted in the dearth of those willing to work on the land. Adelina and Peter believe that somehow education has made many Igorots search for an easier life and they no longer want to work on the soil, thus cutting their connection with the land. Adelina recalls elders' claim that 'eskoyla untangla' which means 'getting education distorts thinking and values' (A. Pater inpaki-istorya). Peter, an Ibaloy university administrator, similarly views education as a factor that has alienated most Igorots from their culture and communities:

Today, educated people are removed from active participation in their own communities because of the nature of their jobs. Their education made them different in their values, aspirations and lifestyles from their own kin and neighbours. They have a seemingly easy lifestyle that is away from the traditional occupations attached to the land and its resources, which instilled an ever-widening desire for education among the townsfolk (P. Cosalan, tabtaval).

The dominance of the Western knowledge system aided by development intrusions has largely led to a situation where indigenous knowledge is almost neglected and ignored. Indigenous practices are fading away as they seem to become inappropriate or too slow to meet new challenges. This disappearing act of indigenous knowledge not only impacts the ones who carried it, but also causes permanent loss or disappearance of skills, technologies, artifacts, problem solving strategies, and expertise all at once.

With both the positive and negative effects of education on the Igorot culture and community, Igorot professionals are being challenged to reflect on their values. Dacog (2003), for example, shares her experience of decolonisation after many years of doing domestic work overseas, and about her desire to go back and learn more about her Igorot culture. She migrated to Canada, and she then decided to pursue postgraduate studies:

This project marks for me a beginning in my personal quest for meaning and direction in my life...to re-member myself with a cultural and personal identity I feel I have been robbed of... it is to come home, to acknowledge to my thirsty spirit, the Kabunyan of my ancestors; to return to the songs and stories, rituals, values and beliefs of a people... to the oral traditions that serve as a rich reservoir of the knowledge and wisdom of the Igorots, or 'mountain people' to whom I proudly belong (Dacog, 2003:2)

This calls for a mechanism to bind formal education and indigenous knowledge together through collective action, so that the Igorots do not find themselves inclined to only one aspect while being alien to another or confused about both. Positive changes are taking place in Igorot society to preserve their indigeneity but it is happening in small circles. A few Igorot NGOs have been teaching children and youth Indigenous values. Adel is one of the program coordinators of the Shontuog Foundation – an NGO that developed an alternative entry childcare program for villages in Benguet to teach children about their Igorot culture. Adel shared that her job made her realise that culture is the foundation of individual identity and life skills, especially for Igorot children (A. Timoteo, in pantabtaval).

However, until these programs are given proper recognition and respect by the society and the nation as a whole, its continuity is hazy. The modernised way of learning and living has to see the value in indigenous practices so that the younger generations continue to bind these to their present way of life.

Conclusion

By giving voice to the Igorot Indigenous Peoples 'life story' in attaining higher education through the Igorot ways of knowing, being and doing in *pansukael*, this study revealed that education, though originally

used as a colonial tool to subjugate them, has served to empower many Igorots to become active part of the mainstream society. The participants identified overcoming the of lowlander divide, pressures of mainstream values system, language, lifestyle, and poverty as the major barriers that they need to overcome in attaining higher education. In doing so, they recognize that their traditional cultural values and concepts are their source of strength and determination. The participants however admitted that with the changing times, the traditional structures for learning cultural values among Igorots are slowly diminishing. It is recommended by the participants that Igorot parents make a deliberate move to teach their children about Igorot culture, values and traditions. There is also a need for a more strengthened advocacy for the recognition and utilization of Indigenous knowledge in formal education. The continuing challenge for Igorot professionals is to use the advantage of western tertiary education to achieve Igorot goals (Danner, 2004) for their development and self-determination.

Endnotes

- 1 A Philippine made public transport vehicle, which could carry up to twenty-two passengers for one trip.

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