

Women evolve empowering and liberating culture

by Victoria Tauli-Corpuz

Cordillera women are faced with the task of bringing about an alternative culture, a culture of resistance and struggle, a culture which would liberate and empower them.

Igorot women face a triple burden of national, class and gender oppression. But they also have a history of fierce resistance against their colonizers and of a continuing struggle for self-determination. Unlike the rest of the Filipinos, the Igorots and the Moros were successful in resisting Spanish colonization. Because of this they were able to maintain their indigenous sociopolitical structures, traditions, and culture.

This indigenous culture which is a reflection of precolonial Filipino culture has some elements of egalitarianism and gender-sensitivity. Some examples of these are customary laws which heavily penalize men who slap or batter their wives, the continuing existence of indigenous priestesses, like the "manchahawak" of Kalinga, the important economic role of the women in subsistence food production, community participation in child-rearing, etc.

With the influence of American colonialism and Christianity,



many aspects of the culture were destroyed and overrun by a consumerist, market-oriented, individualistic, Christian chauvinist culture. However, some remnants of this indigenous culture remain today.

The culture of resistance and struggle lives among the Igorot women today. They want to adopt a culture which is liberating and empowering for women and to alter those aspects in indigenous culture which are oppressive to women. One negative aspect is the minimal participation of women in formal indigenous decision-making structures such as the "bodong" (peace pact) and the council of elders (male elders). Another is the practice of arranged marriages, dowry and bride price.

The homegrown patriarchy of tribal communities has been reinforced several times over by the colonizer's culture. The marginalization of the indigenous

women intensified with the erosion of subsistence economies by the colonizer's market economy. Waged work is considered productive in government accounting systems and women's subsistence work and domestic work are nonproductive. Thus even if Igorot women work from dusk to dawn in the fields they are not considered agriculturally productive.

Effects of colonization were evident not only in the economy but also in religion. The Christian religion attacked and discredited the native or animist religion of indigenous people. Indigenous rituals, beliefs and priestesses were considered pagan or barbaric. The practice of trial marriages in which a couple can have premarital sex to ensure that they will have children, is considered immoral. Performing rituals before and after the planting seasons to ask for blessings from the gods, goddesses, and the 'anitos' is looked upon as superstition. Indigenous rituals performed during births, deaths, and marriages are considered pagan practices.

Ways of Empowering Women

Several ways of creating an alternative culture to empower women are:

1. Go back to one's roots. Learn about the grandmother's roles before the American colonization in the early 1900s. Compare and ex-

amine which aspects of traditional culture and of the culture brought in by missionaries and Western education and values are worth keeping.

2. Compile all the stories and experiences of women as education and reference material for coming up with strategies which will address specific women's issues.

3. Use traditional cultural practices such as composing songs and theater presentations during conferences and consultations. Instead of reporting the results of a workshop, women can compose songs and chants like "salidumays, dong-dong-ays" to explain workshop discussions.

4. Hold training leadership sessions exclusively for women. Most in-

igenous sociopolitical organizations are male-dominated. Training women gives them confidence in participating in decision making structures. Women invoke that traditional decision making processes are consensual. In order to be true to this tradition, women should play an active part in decision making processes.

5. Allow flexibility and changes in traditional cultural practices. Dances like the "pattong tadek, tuppaya, salibi, etc," usually assign men to beat the gongs and women to dance. Interchange roles. Women can beat the gongs and men can dance.

6. Expand organizing work among the women and set up organizations oriented towards being feminist and nationalist.

7. Lead campaigns. Women's active participation empower and develop their leadership qualities. Campaigns bring out the potential of women as leaders, educators, and organizers.

8. Consciously practice nonsexist or gender fair child rearing. In traditional Igorot society, childrearing is seen as a community responsibility. Since women are in charge of subsistence farming, the men are usually left in the house to take care of the small kids. Set up childcare support systems which integrate indigenous childcare practice.

Conclusion

Small victories are building blocks to women's liberation. Women should continuously share their stories, victories, and pains. Their stories are a source of strength in the Cordillera women's search for an empowering culture.

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