

Growing Old, Gracefully and Wisely... Cordillera Indigenous Women, After Fifty

By Zenaida 'Bridget' H. Pawid

Socio-economic indicators for 1998 and 1999 in the Cordillera Autonomous Region of the Philippines show an increasing number of persons aged 65 years and above. Of these, the women are outliving the men. Other demographic data pertaining to age brackets, school attendance beyond elementary level, the labour pool, civil status, etc., conform to the pattern of women being in parity with men, if not outnumbering them. The phenomenon is not confined to the Cordilleras. What makes the trend significant is that age is often equated with wisdom among the indigenous peoples and "homes for the aged" are unknown in their communities.

Older indigenous women occupy an enviable position within the family and the community. They are the bearers of tradition, keepers of the faith and social arbiters. In the fast-paced world of today, older tribal women act as anchors in a sea of change, graceful reminders of a more orderly, if simpler, lifestyle. They are the fulcrums of activity during rites of passage and change.

Yet these roles are not well understood and too often unappreciated. Here several tribeswomen of the Philippine Cordilleras, all over the age of 50, share their life stories.

Keeping the Faith

Fa-taan's family consists of her two daughters, two nieces and three adopted sons. She has never married, and supports them all by herself.

From the time she was old enough to work the fields, she has observed the annual rhythm of terraced wet-rice culture. Year in and year out she has meticulously observed the taboos, celebrated the appropriate rites and rituals, planted, cared for and harvested the rice in the same paddies, always mindful of the "old ways" of how everything is done. Her life mirrors the ebb and flow of rice paddy, the field *camotal* (field where sweet potato is grown), the pigs and chickens and the sharing-caring visits of kith and kin.

Hers is a well-defined existence, her role as clearly spelled out as those of the others in the *ili* (village). She can be counted upon to know and share the proper decorum for every occasion, prescribe the right solution to age-old problems of health, home, farm and interpersonal relations. The metes and bounds of the village are like lines in her criss-crossed palms, the genealogical lineage of each village person easily traceable over six generations, the trees, shrubs, plants and weeds intimately named, the events that mark the life-line of the *ilis* as fresh in her memory as if they happened the day before.

It is not as if she has never left home, for she did. The city lights beckoned and for a time she lived in relative ease and abundance, soaking in the whole experience with gusto. But she came home again and stayed. Recently, she took on the Department of Public Works and Highways and a millionaire in what became a precedent-setting definition

of *tayan* (clan woodlot where offerings are made to ancestors), and road-right-of-way.

What makes Fa-taan unique is that she, and others like her, “keep the faith” by living what they know has kept the village what it is and its residents who they are. She has seen two different worlds and chosen one. She is the living past.

A Pioneering Homesteader

Francisca, called “Iska,” is sixth in a family of seven children. Like most village girls, she finished high school in the capital town, married and settled down as a farmer, but her husband had larger dreams and brought his bride of two years to the government-sponsored “homestead farms” in a humid flat land to raise three crops of rice each year.

Those years were a nightmare of constant prickly heat, endless physical labour under the scorching sun, battles with insensitive bureaucrats, deprivation of basic social services, a spartan existence, malaria. She buried two children who died before the age of six, as well as her best friend, a faithful farmhand.

She never looked back to the old *ili*, knowing her children would have a better future in the homestead where they were born. But she fought, along with the other mothers, for a health centre, then a day-care centre, then an elementary school, then a high school. Generously she contributed time, labour and money to get deep wells, then a waterworks system, a chapel and parish priest, electricity, a co-operative, a reassembled jeepney, a village hall, farm training courses, market linkages for their produce, a rice mill, even the organisation of a women’s club. What was once a rough frontier community now boasts of a two-storey building,



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a general store that sells newspapers and has a direct-dial telephone service.

Francisca is mother to a doctor and a lawyer, and she has seven grandchildren, one of whom recently passed the nursing board exams and works in New York. She has blazed many new trails yet remains the young lady who left yesterday to begin tomorrow.

The Village Head Teacher

Dalen (baptised Magdalene in the Anglican Church) was born in a mining community, some three hundred kilometres from her parents’ original *ili*. As a child, she had a weak heart and lung problems. Her family decided she would be a teacher and avoid the more strenuous activities of an active social life.

At age 21, Dalen returned to her village to teach in the parochial elementary school. The old ways were a shock to her at first and she could not imagine staying on for years. But fate has a strange way of intervening and she married the town *kadangyan* (landed gentry, social arbiters), landed and hardworking but unschooled. A son was born. She clung tenaciously to the teachings of the church, finding solace in the predictability of the

schoolyear and the clarity of her Christian faith. At the same time, having married into the landed class she was expected to lead in the indigenous rites and rituals. (Later, her husband was baptised as a Christian.) Being both *kadangyan* and educated brought prestige and privilege and, without guile, she bridged the gap between the two men in her life—her husband, a traditional farmer, and her son, a mining engineer.

Year after year Dalen put her frail self through the test of teaching the children of her kith and kin, cajoled them to finish their studies, presided over countless medal-awarding ceremonies, served as unofficial village hostess, secretary to all village assemblies, informant and translator, guidance counsellor and village “auntie.” She earned her master’s degree in community affairs and finished her doctorate in applied psychology. In her sixty-eighth year, this year, Dalen died of tuberculosis, beloved of her menfolk and neighbours and adored by her pupils.

A Village Doctor

Ma-an (nickname for Marie Antoniette) was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, the only child of the *ill*’s first lawyer and municipal judge and its first pharmacist. Both her parents are *baknang* (*Ibaloi* term for landed gentry or social arbiters), landowners belonging to prominent political clans. She was born in the capital town, educated in the city, and graduated with honours from the national state university. All her life she was waited on, pampered, made conscious of her social status and expected to bring even more prestige to her family. She did.

Then Ma-an fell in love with a fellow doctor who drew her into student activism. Together they made for the hills under the

threat of imminent arrest and served their cause for the next ten years. She lost a baby daughter to the primitive conditions of the rural setting they chose, and her loved one in an armed encounter just before the dictator Marcos was finally ousted in 1986.

The new “space” created in 1986 provided her the opportunity to visit her parents who had gone through the emotions of rejection, recrimination, bereavement and resignation. The reunion was indescribable. Then her old friends gathered to welcome her back and asked her to stay. With her substantial inheritance, her parents’ blessings in death, and her friends’ extended families, she has opened a modest clinic to serve her people, introducing acupuncture, herbal medicine, community health and a new-found respect for what is truly *baknang*.

Ma-an’s fondest dream is to bring home and bury the bones of her husband and child. She has no regrets and exudes an enviable, contagious zest for life.



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The Barangay Councilor

Bugan has no other name. She is sixty-five, married with two children, eight grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. The village will refer anything and everything to her. She is the barangay councilor but is called *Kapitana* (captain), an indefatigable busybody, sanitary inspector, truant officer, conflict arbiter, change agent, generous host, fearsome bully, communications expert, a benevolent despot. Nothing escapes her notice, or participation.

And it all began with the simple realisation that her mother died only because there was no help, from anyone. That made Bugan angry—at the insensitivity of government authorities, the hypocrisy of the local elite, the remoteness of basic social services, the helplessness of the people of the *ili*. And she made certain that everyone would know how she felt. She badgered the local council, organised the young, the old, the not-so-young/not-so-old in all kinds of associations. She asked questions and was never satisfied with uncommitted answers. She joined all kind of meetings, training courses and study tours. It did not matter that she could neither speak English nor Filipino. She threw herself into the affairs of the traditional *ili*, learning and re-learning its ways.

In the course of events, she married the village *mumbaki* (priest or religious leader), raised their children, sent them to school and helped them find jobs.

Bugan's disillusionment with the local leadership led her, after much confusion, to seek and win public office in 1995. Her inimitable accent, her unabashed curiosity, her desire to learn and unconditional service to her barangay have made her the quintessential *Kapitana* who simply talks but effectively delivers. In 1998, her outstanding service was

honoured by the Department of Interior and Local Government in the Cordillera Administrative Region. She showed up in full native regalia and delivered a short and thoughtful appreciation for the support of her constituents.

The "Expat"

Mary of Kowloon Road in Hong Kong bears a commonplace name, but she definitely is not a commonplace individual. A public school teacher, she married young. Her husband, who worked in the Department of Agriculture, died in 1984 leaving her to support four children of whom three were in college.

There were expenses and obligations to be met, and she was bitter at being by-passed for a well-deserved promotion due to political patronage. Mary was driven to seek employment abroad as a domestic worker. The first year in Hong Kong was bleak and painful. Her employer was unfair and demanding, the pay barely enough to pay pre-employment debts and family expenses, the loneliness poignant. But pride and necessity bound her to the job. After three years a British lady offered her better work conditions, also in Hong Kong, as nanny to her two sons. Mary made a brief visit back home to witness the graduation from college of two children, and attend the wedding of another one. She found her father bed-ridden. The weight of family problems nearly kept her from leaving again. Hong Kong became a prison cell from which she would honour her commitments, both to employer and family. Tediumously she accounted income and expenses, scraping together and hoarding every Hong Kong dollar for the folks back home. She missed two graduations, watched her children turn into strangers, saw her bank account depleted as soon as it was replenished, smiled through lonely Christmases, All Souls Days, birthdays and anniversaries. But she stayed

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on, doggedly giving the best to her wards, living the life of a virtual nun, coming home only to bury her father. Ten years after leaving home, she visited for two months with an ailing mother, unsympathetic siblings and rebellious children. Her only consolation was a ten-year-old granddaughter.

Mary felt defeated and unappreciated, totally alien to her own *ili*. She was tired and longed for rest but could not find it in the village she left. Boldly, she initiated proceedings to adopt her granddaughter (whose mother had married another man) and take her to Hong Kong. Two years after, she won custody of the child and moved on to become housekeeper to an older British couple, who invited her to come live in London. She did, and since then has never looked back. She's earning enough to be comfortable and still be able to send some money home. This year, her youngest daughter, a registered nurse, has joined her in Great Britain.

Appreciation for and attention to the older women in indigenous cultures are perhaps long overdue. Most of them have remained in their villages and country, while a

good number have sought their fortune elsewhere. Not all of them may merit certificates of recognition for their life stories, these being considered too common.

Yet one discerns a pattern in which these older women consciously try to hold on to the past even while they grapple with an uncertain present and face a more indistinct future.

In other times and places, older women become productive members of society, given to bittersweet remembering and incessant recrimination. These indigenous "golden girls" have neither the luxury of modern amenities nor the security of paid-up insurance premiums. They return to the "old home" or remain emotionally attached to it. There is no chance to sit back and watch the rest of the world go by. The fields have to be tended, the family traditions upheld. Family members have to undergo the rites of passage and the *ili* has to continue to be home. The menfolk, more often than not, have long died and those still around are addicted to the bottle or too busy making a living to pay attention to the needs of traditional community life.

Taking a well-deserved rest and counting their blessings should really be their lot. Yet, the question can be asked, "What happens after a woman 'retires,' or does she at all?"

Zenaida 'Bridget' Hamada-Pawid, 58 years old, is both Ibaloi and Bontok, two ethnic groups in the Cordillera region in Northern Philippines. An NGO worker in the Cordillera, she is fondly referred to in the NGO circles as "our ancient ancestor." In her two daughters' estimation however, she will never grow old.