Licoy in Focus: A Community of Resilience, Strength, and Unity

It was a bright and humid day when we reached the idyllic town of Paracelis, Mountain Province, Philippines at around six o’clock in the morning. The Strategic Communications and Knowledge Management Department (SCKMD) of Tebtebba joined the Philippine Program on their trip to share, to learn and to engage with the Licoy Indigenous community.

We were already expecting to find the place to be somewhat different from the usual bustling Baguio-Benguet area, a thriving metropolis in the northern part of the Philippines where almost all the comforts—and discomforts—of city living were at one’s ready disposal, where Tebtebba’s office is based. We haven’t, however, anticipated to arrive in a town that was totally unusual in so many ways that the week allotted for the activity would turn out to be a blessed adventure on its own.
The trip from the Slaughter Compound in Baguio City was scheduled to take off at around seven o’clock in the evening. This was a crucial point since only one bus travels to and from Paracelis each day, save for a commuter van that also does so daily. The expected travel time is about 10 to 12 hours, depending on the volume of traffic and the number of stops that the bus or van may take along the way.

We chose to take the bus so that we get to arrive in Paracelis on the morning of the next day just in time for a quick bite and then to look for an available ride to Sitio Licoy, our final destination. It is one of the most remote parts of Poblacion, the center of the municipality of Paracelis, and home to the Licoy Indigenous people.

The trip was, indeed, long. The bus made about three stopovers, allowing us to have dinner during the first stop and restroom breaks during those after. Most of us just tried to sleep since we knew that we wouldn’t really have much time
to rest once we arrived in Paracelis the next day for our scheduled project evaluation in Sitio Licoy. The said project, the Inapinan Farmers Organization Incorporated (IFOI) Muscovado Processing Center, is an initiative made possible with the support of the Barangay Poblacion local government unit, Farm First through National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA)/Caritas Foundation Philippines, and SwedBio through Tebtebba.

Energy First

Needing the energy to hurdle the mountainous terrain toward Licoy, our group focused on finding an open eatery where we can, at least, have some coffee and a bit of breakfast. Thankfully, the tricycles—we had to take a couple as a single tricycle could merely carry a maximum of three or four passengers—were able to bring us to an open establishment. Along the way, we got to notice that the town did not have any sky-high buildings, annoying traffic jams, or even chattering crowds of people heading off to start their day. Simple, square wooden stalls were found along the way and most vehicles were motorbikes and tricycles, although they were interspersed with bigger automobiles—like the usual trucks and cars—on the roads, and there were also huge, concrete residential houses here and there. What was really striking was the lack of urban chaos that normally polluted thriving metropolises like the one we came from.

We were first served with heaping mugs of fresh barako (brewed coffee)—a blessing to most of us who would generally start the day with this basic favorite. Next, we were served with plates filled with steamed rice, a staple food in most Filipino homes. We noticed, however, that their normal cupful of this staple in the area was twice bigger than those typically served in the city. These were followed by servings of fried tilapia and bunog (goby or mullet fish normally found in bodies of fresh water), a bowlful of piping hot bulalo (Filipino beef marrow stew), and a huge slice of lemon-flavored sponge cake.
Preparing to Climb

As soon as we finished our meal, one of our companion’s father and one of Licoy’s leaders who also works at the Paracelis Municipal Agricultural Office, Erwin Casiw, arrived. He graciously welcomed us, mentioning the updates on the ongoing preparations for the upcoming inauguration. Manong Roger Lambino of Tebtebba’s Philippine Program, and also the Institution’s point person for the IFOI project, busied himself with contacting and coordinating our ride halfway up the mountain. While waiting for Manong Roger to find a possible car ride, the rest of us decided to take the couple of waiting tricycles at least part of the way toward Licoy.

Part of the road going up to Licoy is paved. So, the tricycles we rode were able to (not without much difficulty, I might add) go up part of the way—around a kilometer or so, albeit the fact that the road was slippery due to the heavily accumulated dust and dried
clayish soil clumps that blanketed the area. One could hear the whirring (and sputtering) of the vehicles’ motors as our drivers navigated the unforgiving climb. In the end, we had to stop at the first upward bend as the tricycles were already sliding despite our drivers’ valiant attempts to head onwards. We, then, braced ourselves for the slow ascent up the mountain, still fervently hoping for some ride to arrive.

Fortunately, Manong Roger came to the rescue. Honking its horn, a dark blue four-wheel-drive SUV came hurtling up the mountain, bidding us to stop. Looking out the window was Manong Roger in the passenger seat—he was able to request a ride from one of his friends, allowing us to breathe a sigh of relief—there won’t be any forced climbing that day. The good driver careened up the mountain with practiced calculation, expertly navigating the numerous sharp curves and slippery, rocky, and unpaved terrain. Finally, after 30 minutes or so, we were able to reach our destination—the beautiful Licoy ancestral domain, our home for the next five days.

Arrival at the Licoy Community

We were greeted with the infectious smell of fresh, green grass—and carabao manure—as we embarked from the vehicle, all of us excited to get a glimpse of the community cradled by a thick canopy of trees. Our first stop was a house not far from the actual muscovado processing center site. Kreja Casiw of Tebtebba’s Philippine Program and, incidentally, a member of the Licoy community, asked the house’s kind owner if we could freshen up there. The owner benevolently consented to us using his outhouse-cum-bathroom. Clean, fresh water was abundant since it came from the springs and creeks up in the mountains with several pipes diverting some of it toward the communal watering stations installed throughout the community.

After washing up—some of us chose to simply wipe ourselves a bit and change into fresh shirts as we did not have much time before the project evaluation activity was to start in a few minutes, we headed down the hill
Outhouses are found all throughout the Licoy community, with generally one outhouse per household.

I-Licoy women slicing gabi (taro) in preparation for lunch at the IFOI Muscovado Processing Center premises.
One needs to pass through a river, hopping from stone to stone, to reach the community church. Towards IFOI’s newly built muscovado processing center. Many of the Indigenous organization’s members were already there, busily preparing morning snacks and lunch for the event. Some of us, especially from the Communications Team, saw the building for the first time as the Philippine’s strict COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 to 2021 prevented us from visiting the community sooner. We were introduced to the community elders and leaders. We spoke with the women and youngsters who were helping prepare the meals.

**Project Evaluation**

We were told that the actual evaluation was to happen at the community’s nearby church—a simple single-storey structure not far from the processing center. One merely had to go down another slippery slope filled with loose, clayish soil and cross part of the flowing, shallow stream to get there. Without any serious trouble, we were all able to reach the other side of the stream and enthusiastically headed on to the church grounds. There, we found the other members of the organization, young mothers with their children—some of the children were still babies and toddlers busily suckling their mothers’ milk or sleeping peacefully in their mothers’ arms. The women were gracious and courteous and we all assisted in the activity preparation, specifically in readying the materials—plastic folders, pens, face masks, and notebooks—that would be needed during the span of the evaluation proper.

“What Indigenous group do you belong to? What province are you from?” they asked. So, we each introduced ourselves to them gamely. “I’m a Kadaclan, also a daughter of Poblacion, Paracelis,” said Helen Biangalen-Magata, Tebtebba’s Communication Officer and also part of the Organization’s Indigenous Peoples and Resilience Program. “I’m
from Sagada,” added Florence Daguitan, Tebtebba’s Coordinator for the Philippine Program. “We’re both Ibaloi from Benguet,” Jimrex Calatan (Tebtebba communications assistant) and I shared, all of us stating the particulars of our Indigenous roots.

After the prayer and opening remarks provided by two of the community leaders, Helen and Manong Roger provided a backgrounder on the project and Tebtebba’s eventual involvement in the said initiative. Helen narrated how they came into contact with IFOI back in 2018. Then, Manong Roger continued on to share updates on the project’s progress report, the details of the project phase completion, and so forth. Next, IFOI leaders began sharing their experiences obtained while conducting the project, underscoring also the lessons they learned as well as the recommendations they gleaned from it.

The i-Licoy community church is a few meters away from the IFOI Muscovado Processing Center.
Project Highlights

Highlighted during the project evaluation were the outstanding contributions of the organization’s member families, putting aside much of their time to take part in the processing center’s construction. Most of them were farmers, having their own umas (swidden farms) to look after, but many of them would go home early so they could contribute their own labor to the eventual completion of the said building. When asked why they were so dedicated to the initiative, they pointed out that the said structure was heaven-sent and would tremendously help improve their muscovado production.

Nevertheless, one notable challenge that came up during the evaluation was the need to scale up production even more. While a reduction of an hour from the regular six-cans-for-six-hours ratio was of tremendous help, the necessity of decreasing even more time from the said improved cooking time would make production even more efficient. Such efficiency would, then, allow the group to further achieve a more sustainable muscovado social enterprise for the whole community. This social enterprise would, in turn, permit them to effectively supplement their income obtained from other farm products including corn and saba (sweet plantain or saba banana), among others.

Vicky Omanhan, IFOI’s Auditor, shared that muscovado production skills upgrade wasn’t their focus during the project’s previous phase since their main priority, during that period, was to pinpoint an area for the processing center.

Ernesto Dawagan, a community elder and brother to the group’s Chairman, however, said that he was grateful for the opportunity to take part in the building construction as he noted how he was able to improve his craftsmanship skills—from carpentry to iron and electrical work—specifically because there weren’t enough skilled workers among the group at that time.
Anthony “Aytuna” Dawagan, Chairman of IFOI, also a community elder, and owner of the land donated for the initiative, shared more on the progression of the project and the challenges that they encountered, mentioning that the original plan to completely finish the building did not push through due to the constant fluctuation and increase in prices for the needed construction materials. He, however, reiterated the collective work that made the initiative possible as men, women, and the youth in the community volunteered their time, effort, and finances to the construction of the processing center.

A Food-for-Work support was requested by the organization during the construction, which Tebtebba granted. The arrangement was that members were paid half of the salary normally allotted for construction workers in the...
area. This enabled the continuation of the building project while allowing the workers to still provide monetary support to their families. However, Fidel Salipan, a member of IFOI, admitted that the said compensation was a bit low, thereby forcing many of them to find other jobs that could provide higher wages which, then, decreased the number of members who could spend more time in building the processing center. The context of this assessment point was the people’s experience of a direct impact of economic dislocation due to the pandemic which significantly lessened opportunities to earn income.

Additionally, construction of the building took two years—a longer time than was expected. This was due to the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic which put on hold worldwide face-to-face interactions to halt the spread of the virus. Transportation of building materials was a challenge as well, the members shared, due to the difficult terrain going to-and-from the processing center’s site.

While all these challenges may have seemed to slow down the completion of IFOI’s muscovado processing center construction, the aim to develop a sustainable indigenous livelihood and, subsequently, a more permanent area for it has been the sole driving force for the peoples’ organization, encouraging them to finish what they have started with support from various entities, aside from themselves, who were equally determined to make the dream a reality.

“Ibag a kon a ti agpayso ta anya ngay, awan met nga talaga iti maiparwaren ti tao (I need to be straightforward with you because we really do not have any more resources to cover the additional expenses needed),” Chairman Dawagan said, admitting that the completion of the building would still require more financial support from willing parties. He called for an evaluation of their organization, as well, as part of a better project evaluation activity.

Our team, however, only had high admiration for the group, its leaders,
and its members. While it is true that the organization has encountered numerous setbacks that could have immensely—and easily—derailed the project’s completion, what was truly admirable was the fact that they did not let these problems completely stop them from achieving what they wanted. For us, a striking realization has been highlighted—the little help that we bestow on others can certainly provide impactful and positive change, specifically when given to those who are more than willing to make it work.

Community Immersion

It was already early evening when we got to wrap up the project evaluation activity. While some of the members had to go down the mountain—some of them were currently residing in the Poblacion ili (town center) to be nearer their workplaces or schools. Because Licoy was around five to six kilometers away from the ili, our team requested to stay in the community. Our host family was that of husband and wife Pedrito and Monica Sabayle. Auntie Monica (as we addressed her) is the sister of IFOI’s chairman and Uncle Pedrito is a migrant-settler who traces his roots back to the Visayas region.

For dinner, we were served a kaldero (pot) of steamed rice mixed with corn—something that one doesn’t really encounter in the city—and a pan of inanger nga baboy (pork stew boiled for several hours until its meat becomes tender). These delicacies were served with plates on the floor—they did not have any table. Hence, we gathered around the food with our legs crossed and commenced passing the washing basin around (to wash our hands). It should be noted that while using the usual fork-and-spoon eating utensils is permitted, the kammet (using your hand) style of eating is a widespread Filipino custom, specifically in the countryside where traditions are
still widely followed and sustained.

The food was simply delicious! Nagi-mas, uray no inlambong laeng (It is delicious even when it is merely boiled). While food in the Licoy community is generally prepared with ingredients easily found within the ancestral domain, the refreshing lack of commercial preservatives and additives is noticeable. Indeed, monosodium glutamate (MSG), a typical food additive in many Filipino homes, is not necessary when your ingredients are organic or free-range and are freshly harvested or slaughtered.

After dinner came a brief—and continued—discussion with some of the elders we ate with, specifically Chairman Aytuna and his extended family. Plans regarding the IFOI Muscovado Processing Center and the sustained planting of sugar cane were the topics. We were served with both barako, sweetened Ginaataang mais (coconut milk and rice pudding with corn) and barako served as merienda (snack) during the IFOI Muscovado Processing Center project evaluation.
with muscovado, and basi (fermented sugar cane juice or sugar cane wine).

Then, we were presented with the room where we were to sleep in. A quilt-like blanket was spread on the wooden floor to serve as our bed with several pillows laid on it for us. The women were to sleep together while Manong Roger was to sleep in a room in Chairman Aytuna’s house.

Since all of us just came from a lengthy trip, we wanted to bathe before sleeping. While several outhouses were available for us to use—there was one for every house in the community and another near the main water pipe, we thought it better to bathe in a secluded corner near the main water hose, near the pigs who were tethered there for the night.

Bathing, knowing that the community has so much clean water to spare, was such a refreshing activity. Nag-imas agdigos! Naglammin diay danum! (It’s so nice to bathe! The water is cool, refreshing, and free!) We were even able to wash our soiled garments after—a blessing, specifically because each of us only packed a limited number of clothes for the duration of the community visit.

Finally, we were able to sleep blissfully. The only sounds we could hear were the cicadas, crickets, and birds frolicking through the night—a relaxing lullaby concerto especially after being used to the night-time noise of roaring cars and chattering neighbors in the city.

Touring the Ancestral Domain

The next day was again filled with activity. We woke up at around five in the morning—people in the countryside, compared to those in the city, generally wake up before sunrise as most of them have to go to their umas early. While the whole community still had to continue their preparations for the nearing inauguration, our group planned to start our ocular tour of the Licoy ancestral domain. After a hearty breakfast of pork-and-legumes stew and mugs of barako, all lovingly prepared by Auntie Monica,
we set out for our hike.

The Dawagan’s compound was situated in the entrance of the community, so we walked up the sloping pathway, passing by the homes of the other community members—the early morning sun caressing our cheeks. Youngsters were playing basketball at a makeshift court constructed in a flattened area of the community. Another group of young men were fixing a motorbike while children and dogs roamed about. We passed by a young woman washing kitchen utensils beside one of the water pipes installed all throughout the community while others greeted us from their doors or their windows. One could feel the spirit of communal warmth and camaraderie brought about by shared experiences, struggles, victories, and blood—that endearing notion of kinship and familiarity already fast-fading in present highly-urbanized societies.
As we ambled further up the mountain towards the Licoy umas planted with corn, bananas, rice, and sugar cane, we noticed that various varieties of flora blanketed the grounds. Largely left alone to thrive, a mix of both edible and non-edible plants peppered the area—one could find a creeping vine of *gawed* (betel leaf pepper) in one corner, a thicket of dracaena in another, and even copses of edible *pako* (fiddlehead fern) here and there, among others. “Your place is really rich in biodiversity and most plants here are edible,” I told Kreja, still busily taking pictures of the surroundings. “Yes, the community can be entirely self-supporting without having to take outside jobs—if only we could forego the need to eat rice,” Kreja laughingly replied.

As mentioned earlier, rice is the main nutrient source among Filipinos. While it is true that the Philippines produces a large quantity of rice, with production reaching 12.4 million tons in 2021, the country’s importation of rice remains high, with 2.98 metric tons of imported rice in 2021 alone. As of writ-
ing, the current price of commercially available milled rice is between 1.62 USD (84.82 PhP) and 2.03 USD (106.29 PhP) per kilogram, a steep price that is ill-afforded by the average Filipino earner who merely has a daily wage of 537 PhP—a salary that is even far less for workers in the countryside. Hence, while most i-Licoy (people of Licoy) are farmers who till their own umas within their collective ancestral land, their raw products are bought at really low prices—for instance, corn is presently priced at 0.17 USD (9 PhP) per kilogram while a kilogram of dippig (another term for saba banana) is currently at 0.13 to 0.34 USD (7 to 18 PhP) per kilogram. Hence, there is a pressing need to supplement their farming income with other incomes mostly obtained by finding other labor-intensive jobs outside the community.

We finally made it to a plateau overlooking part of the ancestral domain. We found a carabao (water buffalo) placidly
resting near a sort of watering hole. An elderly man appeared after a few minutes to lead the animal towards his uma. Vast gardens filled with sugar cane, corn, and rice could be viewed from the said vantage point. A bamboo forest, located in the higher parts of nearby mountains, could even be seen. Various fruit-bearing trees could also be spotted, despite the fact that we were already pretty far from the community’s residential compound. Guava, mango, and even kakao (cocoa) trees were teeming the place. Several fishponds were filled with tilapia fingerlings. “Licoy tilapia has a distinct grayish color,” shared Kreja. “This may be partly because the water here is potable. You can even find other small aquatic (and edible) creatures in the waters of Licoy, which the community members freely harvest now and then,” she added.

Our eyes feasted on the different shades of green and brown that surrounded us, the invigorating smell of unadulterated nature seeping into our bones. We couldn’t explore the whole
ancestral domain since the whole area was more than 5,000 hectares of mountainous terrain and this was just the specific Licoy community we were visiting, not including those located in other adjacent barangays or those given to other Indigenous groups.

Sweaty and tired, our feet and legs sore from the unrelenting up-and-down landscape, we headed back to the residential compound. Auntie Monica already prepared a scrumptious lunch of *bangus* (milkfish) *sinigang*, a Filipino stew made with tomatoes, kangkong (water spinach) leaves, ginger, tamarind, and other lowland vegetables. Lunch was followed by a round of freshly brewed coffee sweetened with muscovado.

A quick check of our individual laptops and mobile phones (There was no stable internet connection or mobile phone signal in sitio Licoy. Although we brought with us the office’s pocket WIFI—a device that allows on-the-move
WiFi connection via mobile sim card use, it needed to be placed in a tree that was a few meters away from the house) to see if there were pressing office-related communications that required immediate attention, then we decided to doze off for an hour or so.

After our invigorating nap, we decided to continue touring the place. Since we were already sweaty from the earlier hike, we agreed to visit the small, hidden creek located about a half a kilometer (or so it seemed) away. To reach the place, we had to trudge through the lower part of the dense forest that we passed through this morning. Then, we had to walk through the rice fields to arrive at the creek where we planned to bathe—and explore, as well.

**Bathing in the River**

River stones and boulders glistened beneath the gently flowing waters. With each of us carrying a canvas bag of fresh clothing and toiletries, we removed our slippers and carefully treaded barefoot (the rocks in the river were slippery) toward the heart of the enchanting rivulet—a basin-like indentation in the stream’s upper corner shaded by wild-growing trees and bushes.

Kreja quickly climbed one of the trees, harvesting several pieces of ripe, yellow kakao pods and throwing them down to us in the gushing water not far below her. “When we were little, we would come here to bathe and simply get some of the fruits that we would find. There are even guavas growing over there,” she shared while sucking on a kakao bean. “Try it, it’s sweet,” she
remarked, offering half of the kakao pod in her hand.

We waded through the crystal-clear water as tiny river crickets jumped from glinting boulder to another. Small fishes swam in the still packets of water—water enclosed by pebbles, making basin-like mini sojourns for these equally minute animals. We, then, washed our soiled clothes and took final dips in the refreshing runlet all the while allowing the goodness of nature to seep through our skin.

Twilight was fast-approaching when we made our way back to the village, our newly-washed selves once again ready for another story-telling opportunity with the kind people of Licoy. The sounds and smells of cooking welcomed our return—villagers fetching water from the pipes scattered in the community; Auntie Monica cooking dinner in her dalikan (traditional stove that uses wood kindling for fuel); Uncle Pedrito preparing to operate the sugar cane presser-juicer (to press the harvested canes to be used in the upcoming inauguration); and Manong Roger conversing with Uncle Aytuna and other community elders, discussing the whats, hows, and wheres of the said exciting event—a bottle of basi in their midst.

**Preparation Day**

The next day was the *bisperas* of the IFOI Muscovado Processing Center inauguration. The community was busily preparing—several pigs got butchered; huge cooking pots and pans were scrubbed, ready for the auspicious event; the tarpaulin announcing the big day was put up in the would-be stage—and the feeling of excitement filled the air.

The new cooking pot was filled with sugar cane juice and IFOI members took turns, gently stirring the said sweet concoction—a crucial step in muscovado processing. We, the Tebtebba team, joined in the preparations. We had the opportunity to experience muscovado processing—cook, filter, and pulverize...
The newly installed cooking furnace of the IFOI Muscovado Processing Center being prepped for cooking a batch of muscovado.

Manong Roger testing the newly installed stove.

The finished products of the IFOI Muscovado Processing Center—muscovado, inakob, and sugar cane jelly—are already ready for packaging.
Slicing the camote for the ginataan.

An IFOI member carving some bamboo cups to be used during the inauguration.
the sugar cane juice. We, women, helped slice *camote* (sweet potato) and dippig for the *ginataan*\(^1\) that was to be served as our *merienda* (afternoon snack usually served at three in the afternoon) for the said preparation day. Manong Roger assisted in the butchering of the pig—a task that is generally delegated to the male members of the community.

The festivities—or should I say, the pre-festivities—continued until the early morning of the next day as cooking for the event meant no sleep for most of the members of the organization and the community. As is the norm for them, everyone volunteered their time, labor, and even money to fully realize the inauguration event of their Muscovado Processing Center. While SwedBio, through Tebtebba, contributed part of the finances necessary for the said activity, the bigger bulk of the entire budget came from the organization’s savings as well as shelled-out donations from the organization and community members themselves. A few external sponsors, including local politicians running in the May 2022 Philippine elections, extended a minimal percentage of the funds but, again, nothing would even come into fruition without the sustained unity, cooperation, and sheer determination of the community and the organization.

**Inauguration Day, at Last!**

Finally, the day of the IFOI Muscovado Processing Center inauguration arrived. The sweet twittering of birds greeted us as we woke up at around five in the morning. A palpable hum of expectancy could be felt in the air. Donning the best clothes that we were able to bring with us in the trip, we joined the community as they trooped towards the Processing Center. Some of the community members and guests were already there and we at the Communications Team began taking colorful snapshots of the unfolding scene.

The event started with the blessing—or consecration—of the building. Brother Rico Sumalag, a lay church leader, led
the said ceremony. This was followed by a kos-ag, a traditional inauguration ritual, that was officiated by Anthonio Cayyog, a Ga’dang ritualist who was invited to perform the said rite. Both important ceremonies conveyed the community’s prayers for the continued prosperity of the Licoy community, for the longevity and durability of the newly-built structure, and for the building’s protection against evil spirits. Brother Rico’s sprinkling of holy water on the different corners and posts of the building was fortified by Uncle Anthonio’s smudging of pig’s blood on the walls.

Such is the culture of most Indigenous peoples—the amalgamation of western and traditional beliefs bears proof to the fact that culture is dynamic and that open-mindedness brings forth a harmonious co-existence of two seemingly opposing customs.

“This brings to mind the will of the abuos (weaver or canopy ants whose nests, which are made of leaves and are generally found on upper branches
of trees),” Uncle Erwin remarked, as he likened IFOI’s putting into fruition their Muscovado Processing Center despite the many challenges of the task—the insufficient financial capacity; the remote location of the community and the building; the mountainous landscape that made transporting building materials even harder; the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that limited face-to-face gatherings and easy on-site transactions; and the harsh and unstable weather conditions, among others—to that of the said red ants who could build their colonies high up in the trees despite similarly difficult circumstances.

The throng of speeches from various key members, elders, and guests ended with a lunch banquet. Heaping servings of pork adobo (vinegar-braised pork), inanger, dinakdakan (grilled and chopped pork parts seasoned with calamansi or Philippine lime, chili, ginger, onions, and pepper), and rice, among others, were handed all around. Bottles of basi were also served while a kettle of barako continuously boiled on a make-shift stove built for the occasion, open

Sautéed abuos, also available in the Licoy community, is a valued dish among various communities. It is a good source of protein and other nutrients.
to anyone who preferred this alternative _panulak_ (slang for beverage or drink, literally meant to “push food down one’s throat”).

**After-Event—Traditional Dancing and Singing All the Way!**

After lunch, traditional dancing commenced. _Pattong_ (Mountain Province indigenous dance) and several other Cordilleran or Igorot (collective terms used for the people of the Cordilleran Administrative Region located in the northern part of the country) including the _sissiwit_ were energetically danced by the community and guests alike. The menfolk took turns in beating the gangs (gongs) while both men and women, young and old, enthusiastically queued in for the different dances. It was inspiring to see how willingly each person was to join in the revelry. It was humbling to observe how involved the community members were in the dancing—and how proud they were of their indigenous heritage.

Community singing alternated with the community dancing. Igorot songs were played in the loudspeaker. Members took turns in the singing, holding the microphone proudly as they show-
cased their vocal prowess. Not wanting to be left behind, our team eagerly joined in both the dancing and the singing.

**Umay Ak Man…**

“Umay ak man idiay Baguio (Let me come with you to Baguio) said the little girl who tightly held my hand, her big, round eyes peering up at me. “Maki-umay ka kanyak idiay Baguio (You’ll come with me to Baguio)?” I asked her, smilingly. She nodded her head and held up her hands to me, asking to be carried. “Ag-motor ta (Shall we ride a motorcycle)?” she prodded. “Nagalis. Haan ta mabalin agmotor (The road is slippery. We might not be able to use a motorcycle),” I replied, describing to her how near impossible—and dangerous—it would be to traverse the ever-winding, slippery road heading back down to the ili where our team would then take the bus bound for Baguio. “Magmagna ta laengen (Shall we walk then)?” the little girl inquired, making me laugh. I looked to the young woman beside me who was worriedly watching her daughter as the little girl wrapped her tiny legs around me, demanding that she be allowed to come to the trip.

After a week filled with discovery and adventure, the day of departure has arrived. While most of us were already on the way either back to Baguio or off to another area of assignment, I was still in the community, preparing to also head back in a couple of hours. Because it rained early in the morning, the unpaved road that headed down the mountain was muddy and slippery. Kreja busied herself with coordinating motorcycle rides for each of us in the team as she was to remain in the area for additional work.

Since I was a bit big (fat, I mean), the community as well as my teammates were a tad doubtful that we could find a motorbike (and a motorbike driver) that could support my weight during the travel back to the ili. This was even more so because most of the motorcycle riders in the community were of slight, thin builds. “Weh, ket no kaya da met mangingato ken mangibaba iti saksako ti bagas, ‘di ba (But they are used to driving
sacks of rice up and down the mountain, aren’t they?” I argued. “Wen met ketdi angem 25 kilos lang met iti kada sako ti bagas (Yes, they certainly can but a sack of rice merely weighs 25 kilos),” they reminded me, laughingly. “Makabirok ni Kreja iti mangkaya kanyak. Imposible nga awan (Kreja will be able to find a rider who can carry my weight. It would be impossible for her not to),” I muttered back.

**Panag-aawid (Time to Go Home)**

Thankfully, Kreja was able to convince one of the motorcycle owners and riders to take me back to the ili. I immediately packed by bag, now made heavier by two packs of muscovado, a couple of sapads (hands) of dippig, a bottle of basi, a chunk of inakob, and a plastic of indigenous legumes—gifts generously given by the community. An hour or so after lunch, Kreja informed me that my ride was already waiting for me. I said goodbye to Kreja and the kind people of the Licoy Indigenous community, hurrying to join the tall teenager who would bring me to the ili and to the bus that would bring me home.

“Manang, mabalim nga bumaba ka pay? Urayek sika idiy ngato (Manang, can you please hop off the motorcycle for now? I
will wait for you at the top),” requested Chris, the motorcycle rider who was to bring me to the ili as he gestured towards the top of the slippery inclination in front of us. I hopped off the motorbike and Chris vroomed his bike to the top. I followed him on foot and carefully made my way to where he was waiting.

Out of breath, I miraculously made it to the top of the incline. I hopped onto the back of the motorcycle again and we continued on our way (with me crossing my fingers that I wouldn’t have to get off the bike again—or, at least, until we reach our planned destination). The unpaved road was indeed as slippery as one could only expect it to be after a heavy downpour—the clayish soil turning into sticky mulch—but we were able to go down the mountain without a hitch, Chris navigating the muddy, puddle-filled road with the expertise of someone who traverses the said road every day.

At long last, I was in the bus bound for Baguio. After a couple of motorcycle rides (Chris brought me to another motorcycle and tricycle who were waiting to bring me to the bus—the motorcycle to take me, the tricycle to take my bags), I was on finally on my way back to Baguio.

Ayyew and Kasiyana

The trip was an eye-opener in numerous ways.

The all-encompassing concepts of inayan and ayyew—the Igorot virtues of doing good for the benefit of all and of being in harmony with nature, wasting no resources, respectively—are highly evident in the way of life of the Licoy Indigenous community. The fact that they have maintained such rich biodiversity within their ancestral territory, cultivating the land without the exploitative, hurtful, and wasteful nature commonly observed in most commercialized areas, is an inspiring custom that must serve as a shining example for other communities.

Kasiyana, another Igorot concept that means “Everything will be alright,” is
also a prevalent belief among the Licoy community, explaining their unwavering resilience that allows their sustained survival despite the many challenges of living in such a remote area, away from the convenience of having easy access to various social norms and services available in highly modernized areas.

Hence, while there are several things that may not be readily found in Licoy—access to commercialized, ready-to-eat food, for instance—the community makes do with what they have, accomplishing goals and overcoming challenges collectively and determinedly. Indeed, like the abuos, every initiative is made achievable when accomplished through the spirit of genuine community.

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Endnotes
1. Sitio (or purok) is a Filipino term that refers to a group of households within a barangay (See Footnote 2), used to designate specific geographic and/or territorial location especially for delivering services.
2. Barangay refers to a small administrative and territorial unit of government which can, then, be divided further into puroks or sitios.
3. A tricycle is a motorcycle with a side-car attached to it, giving it three wheels in total. Tricycles are among the main public utility vehicles in the Philippines.
4. Particularly in the Ilocano language, manong means elder brother but is, at the same time, colloquially used to show respect to an older male.
5. The Visayas region is a group of several islands situated in the center of the Philippines which is about 749 kilometers away from Mountain Province upon where the Licoy community, as mentioned, is located.
10. Bisperas is a Filipino term that refers to the day or night prior to a given date, especially of a celebration.
11. Ginataan is a sweetened Filipino delicacy usually made with camote, dippig, langka or jackfruit, gata or coconut milk, and bilo-bilo or glutinous rice balls, among other ingredients
12. A dance that was popularized by the song of the same title which was composed and sung by Hilair Wacagan of Tanudan, Kalinga in the Cordillera region, Philippines.
13. Similar to the term Manong which refers to ‘Elder brother’ and is also used as a sign of respect to an older male in the local vernacular, Manang is also an Ilocano term that means ‘Elder sister’ but is also used as a sign of respect to an older female.