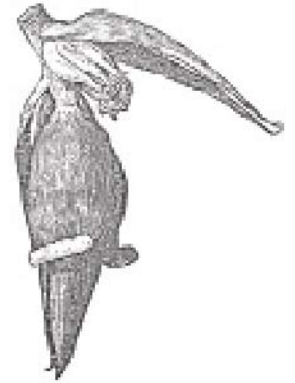




JASON MENALING
ROLDAN SAGULA
EMILY NAPONGAHAN
MARGIE LURANZA
JOSEPH CABALE
MARILOU GARCIA
Children of Bendum



Jason, Roldan, Emily, Margie, Joseph and Marilou are Elementary students at the Apu Palamguwan Cultural Education Center (APC)¹ that runs a school in Sitio Bendum in the uplands of Bukidnon, Mindanao. The APC is recognized by the Philippine Department of Education as the first formal Indigenous Peoples' school allowed to operate an elementary program using a mother tongue-based curriculum. The community derives its identity from the Pulangi River, and so along with their neighboring communities is known as Pulangiyeñ. The children are part of the school's 150 students who, with their parents, place great value on education and the opportunities to improve their lives beyond what the parents experienced. While this is no different from other Filipino parents' aspirations for their children, Bendum's children are mostly *lumad*² and live in the forest fringes, in an area of great insecurity for food, basic services, peace, and marginalized from the socio-economic and political centers.

The forests around Bendum provide food, water and some medicine, while also being the location for some livelihood activities and central to their rituals and ancestral identity; the forests hold a central place as well in the children's education.

Seeking a way forward



Jason

“When I wake up in the morning before going to school, I help tend our horse, then help feed our pigs and chickens. Sometimes, because it’s still early, I find myself sitting by our door, looking at the forest. They say mining wants to come in and I wonder what will happen to the forest if that is the case? Because I know that everything I do everyday, it has a relationship to the forest.” Jason is a son of the *datu* or tribal leader and recognizes that as the youth of the community, they need to and can do something, and not just let the elders take care of their situation. It might be difficult, but they need to act.

Jason remembers when mining explorers went up to Bendum last year without asking permission and without telling people what they wanted to do. He didn’t wait for the tribal council to organize and decide the next course of action. Jason, with other kids, grabbed a pen and paper, went up to the visitors and asked “Who are you? What do you need? What will you do here? Do you have a permit?” Jason admits he doesn’t know much about mining but he knows that Bendum is his tribe’s place and not for outsiders to simply go to and do whatever they want.

Jason is inspired by a teacher in the APC, Maura, who returned to Bendum after finishing her BS degree in education. Maura is also Pulangiyën in Bendum and a relative of Jason. She is the first graduate of the APC and teaches subjects on the Pulangiyën culture and is now the assistant school principal.

Roldan

Roldan’s day isn’t like that of the other children who go to school in the city. Roldan helps his parents to make sure that they’ll have food on the table the following day. “I go to class everyday, then when I get home I have to help in the farm, and tend, harvest, and prepare the corn to make sure that the day after we will have something to eat. Sometimes when I don’t have many chores, I get to think what I

will do that can serve as a good example to others. I really hope that everything will be fine in the school and my schooling too. I think about life in general.”

Roldan, who is seen as one of the youth leaders, reflects, “When I was still a child, my father took part in logging activities and we had more than enough money. But when logging stopped, father lost his job as well and we ended up losing so many of the trees as well. I realized that we really have to protect the trees because it has great importance to the forest and the water we drink daily. Now that they say mining is to enter, I say we have to reflect as well and do something about it because it will again affect the forest and the continuity of our lives. But we have to do it together or else our efforts will be in vain.”

Often, he seeks the advice of the APC’s teachers who respond to many of his questions. They also remind Roldan to study well, be a model to the younger kids, and eventually help the community.

Emily and Margie

The two girls are APC scholars and they stay at the school dormitory, as their homes are far from the school. They go back to their families during the school breaks in August, October, and December, which are also the harvest months when they can help out in the family.

Emily puts great importance on her education and makes sure that during exams, her focus is on her studies. She puts aside her other problems, so that she can study well. Her mother supports her as well by not giving her too many house chores so she has more time to study during the holidays. “The night before the exam, even if I have another problem, I don’t think about that other problem first. I don’t let it affect me, I study and that’s my priority. During recess, I don’t play. I go to the library to read books. I read even when I am alone.”

Margie views learning beyond what she obtains from school, but also in her everyday activities and her chores at the dormitory. Margie

sees the importance of helping out so that everyone else can study and do their homework. At the weekend they often gather the fuelwood on lands that have been again cleared for cultivation. But most of the land in the area is coming under permanent crop cultivation and there is less of the traditional shifting cultivation. Still, with all the fencing and fruit trees there will be enough wood for cooking without cutting anything in the forest.

Joseph

Joseph puts importance on his learnings in and outside the classroom. What he appreciates most is the openness of the teachers in listening not only to their problems about lessons in class, but also about life in general. “Our teachers are a big help not only with our lessons but also with other things. They remind us that we are the youth, and although we are not yet part of the elder community, we are to serve as examples to the younger kids. It is important that we don’t think about marriage yet as marriage is a big responsibility. We can have girlfriends but we must know our limits. They remind us to study first and find a good job, as we can do so much more.”

They are children with simple lives and simple dreams. But as Lumad children, the forests and the environment they relate with in their daily lives bear a greater significance in their education and in maintaining their cultural integrity, much more than other Filipino children.

Marilou

Marilou is a Dumagat or migrant who also studies at the APC and lives in Sitio Bendum. When she has school assignments, she asks the help of her parents and her brother, who also teaches at the school. “Most of my friends are already in high school down the valley. During weekends, they also help me with my assignments and my school projects. I am happy in the school and look forward to being in high school.”

The whole group went off to climb Mt Agkumabay for the day, a hill just to the north where the clouds first gather when the summer rains start. They laugh as they cook food and roll it up in banana leaves before sunrise, “there is plenty of water and we know where to get it, not like when we go on trips in the lowlands where we are always hot and dry.” The children walk through the tall *kagulangan* (regenerated) mature forest and are dwarfed by its size and gloomy light. As they climb uphill through what they call *lagiit*, where moss hangs on the trees, the forest vegetation thins and the “roof” comes lower. Near the top the children joke at how tall they have grown as the stunted forest with a thick cover of ground moss called *saldab* and is only just above their height. They have a great view of the valley which they can see at a point above the short canopy.

These brief interviews with the children of Bendum, while focused on their daily activities in school, illustrate the great importance they place on the educational opportunities while remaining in their culture. They are children with simple lives and simple dreams. But as Lumad children, the forests and the environment they relate with in their daily lives bear a greater significance in their education and in maintaining their cultural integrity, much more than other Filipino children.

¹For more information about APC, please visit <http://apc.essc.org.ph>.

²Lumad is a generic term for Mindanao’s indigenous peoples and comprising about 28 cultures and languages and 41 subgroups.





GREGORIO HONTIVEROS

Historian

In 2004, Greg Hontiveros finished writing a book “Butuan of a Thousand Years,” where he documented Butuan’s history from pre-colonial times as an ancient trading port until the Commonwealth era and the outbreak of the Second World War:

“Butuan is an ancient trading port with historic trading links to many Asian kingdoms, and its role as a homeland of many ruling groups in Mindanao and Sulu archipelago, serves as a historic backdrop prior to the entry of Spanish colonial rule in the islands. Butuan was in full decline when the Spanish explorers came to our shores, its former glory at its zenith some 500 years back...Other Philippine trading centers like Sulu, Maguindanao, Cebu, and Manila gradually eclipsed Butuan towards the dawn of the Spanish colonial era...(Butuan reached its) apex as an ancient trading port around the 11th century, and the decline in the 13th century.”

While writing the book, Greg had the opportunity to understand the landscape transitions and transformations that took place. Greg is also an active participant in forest discussions in Butuan City, especially when he became a member of the Multistakeholder Forest Protection Committee, a DENR effort in the mid-1990s to broaden forest protection activities and the involvement of other stakeholders beyond the DENR.

During the heavy logging years, Butuan City thrived from the different businesses that grew out of logging: the ports and shipping, sawmills, traders and dealers, tree farmers, wood processing. With a Timber License Agreement from the government, the Nasipit Lumber Company,





or NALCO, became one of the more well-known wood companies that provided lumber to the construction industry in the entire country. “Lawanit” was a popular and inexpensive wood construction material and NALCO developed this from the *lauan* that was endemic in the Agusan area.

According to Greg, this history of logging in Butuan, and the reputation this engendered when the anti-logging sentiment became more pervasive by the 1990s up until present, is not lost on the people of Butuan. “Logging is a thing of the past and would not benefit the place very much, that’s the usual attitude. Nobody in Butuan talks about logging as something they can be proud of.”

“People are more critical now than before and more dispassionate: first, because people know that only a few profited from logging and second, people know, especially the oldtimers, that historically there was not much investment done by those who did the logging.”

“People look back to the years before and realize there are many families who are not into logging anymore; they don’t talk much anymore, and most of these families are not here anymore, even their descendants. Agusan is no longer offering a lucrative business option for the younger

generations of these logging families, so many went to Manila and other places.”

“So there is a different attitude. There is also a growing group of people who fear so much what they see and hear on TV on the impact of logging and loss of forests and relate these situations with what happened to Agusan, the forests that were destroyed and that did not benefit many of its people and the areas around these forests.”

“At this stage, people know that the big operations are already gone, especially now that they see many of the clear areas. From the 1970s until in the 1990s, there were still factories. Now these are closed down. The big factories still operating actually import the timber. There are still a few people making a living out of logging, but these are small.”

“So in general, we don’t talk much about it anymore. We know the logging is still there. Sometimes there is a big haul, but even then the local newspaper and radio will report about confiscations, but these are not as much as before.”

“There is no destruction of the forestland anymore in the large market sense. Before, you could see truckloads of timber coming out of the forest.



Logging operators cross a river to go to Tungao where there are still a number of sawmill operations, mainly processing falcatta in the south of the city. One can distinguish the tree species by the color of sawdust that is washed up on the riverbanks.

Now, the extraction is on a smaller scale. They cover up the timber in jeepneys and small trucks to smuggle it into the market. There are so many operators as well. They cross a river to go to Tungao where there are still a number of sawmill operations, mainly processing falcatta in the south of the city. One can distinguish the tree species by the color of sawdust that's washed up on the riverbanks."

"The markets are in Cebu and Cagayan de Oro. The processing plant for matchwood is back again, and they use a native softwood called *bay-ang*, and the volumes are large. The hardwoods are still there, but these are smuggled out even if there are occasional confiscations."

Greg sees much value in what can still be done. "We have to do some pushing, because some political leaders, elected politicians will talk much about it, but don't do much about it. A lot of them are not in the business anymore and they do not say that they were into logging because they know it has no future anymore. Logging has no future, and they know that. A positive result out of this situation is that there is also a good sector in society that is more environmentally sensitive."

In one sense, Butuan has a unique history, a documented archeological history of the river and the wetlands around here. The question is, how is it alive in the people today and how does it relate to the landscape? There is now a growing movement but how will this connect with the past?

Greg cites an example as a response. "There is the Water Board that takes charge of the waterways and I tell them we need a paradigm shift in our minds in relation to the environment. For a long time, Butuan people have a negative view that Butuan is very low and always flooded, and there is a need to clean up and fill in. I ask them to look at it in another way. Compared with other countries that still have a number of waterways, ours is not an ordinary waterway, as this has to remain water all the time to process many areas in Butuan. It is the most expensive waterway in terms of different outlooks. In many of my lectures, I say that you cannot separate the history of Butuan from the

word Agusan, from the environment itself, particularly its geography. We are corporate now, we have expensive waterways."

"There are three parallel immediate waterways in Butuan. The first one is Agusan River, the second is Masao River, and there is the Banza River, which is to the east, six kilometers from where we are. The old boat¹ was found in the Masao River. So many of the archeological finds were right!"

Greg gave a brief tour along the shoreline of the Agusan River and what is left of the riverine forest in Butuan. The sago forest, some old mangrove areas are still there, and there are sawmills processing gmelina along the river.

"There are certain sections here along this stretch along the river where there is still the original vegetation. I suppose one problem we face here is that we have so many fishponds all the way here, more than 5,000 hectares. The problem was people were cutting discriminately. Here in Magallanes, we still have some of the rich original mangroves."

"There are some protection efforts such as the small project we are developing, 'Flora Caraga,' that identifies the mother trees and some other old trees, the acacia along the Agusan River, the baolo trees. We are promoting the preservation of these trees. The best way for people to understand is to recognize that we are living in a big internal delta. It's something school kids can look at as well and we can search our own original flora."

"I also do some pioneering in terms of this river (Masao River). Interest is growing and the ordinances already exist, and we provide guidance to the mayor to look at the potential of the river for boating and fishing, that you cannot find anywhere else in this country."

¹Refers to the *balanghai* boat that was first uncovered in 1976, part of the pre-colonial boat relics dating back 1,600 years ago and proclaimed in 1987 as national cultural treasures and symbolize the country's basic unit of governance and the Filipinos as a maritime people.