



THE UPHILL BATTLE TO RECLAIM THE ANCESTRAL LAND OF THE MANOBO AND TALAANDIG OF MT. KALATUNGAN

Since time immemorial, the Manobo and Talaandig tribes of Bukidnon in the Philippines' southern island of Mindanao have called the Mt. Kalatungan and Mt. Kitanglad mountain ranges their home.

Even if they are different tribes, they lived in peace alongside each other. The boundaries of their ancestral lands properly and firmly established through kinship and agreements cemented through rituals and the firm belief that every human being has his or her own place under the sun.

This would all change with the coming of a successive wave of colonizers, who established government ownership over the entire country and appropriated large swathes of land for missionary, commercial, agricultural, and residential activities.

Driven away by logging

Around Mt. Kalatungan in Bukidnon province, large patches of IP lands became logging concessions and the Manobo and Talaandig indigenous peoples were driven away from their communities on the slopes to hamlets in and around the town centers established by the colonizers. There, they were forced to live alongside migrants from the Luzon and Visayas island groups, people who have been assimilated to the culture of the colonizers.

Thus, began the start of not only dispossession of their lands and properties, but also the erosion of their indigenous traditions and practices.

Datu Herminio “Minio” Guinto, 56, from the village of Bacusanon, Pangantucan municipality, narrated that what used to be their ancestral land has been converted to a logging concession almost overnight.

“As far as I remember, our area was a logging concession. Large logs were hauled daily from the mountain to the sawmill in town. This area, sitio San Guinto (the area including the land where his house presently stands) used to be where the logs were sorted and stacked,” Datu Minio shares.

The Manobo of Bacusanon were also forcibly relocated from their homes on the slopes of Mt. Kalatungan to the village center, where they lived alongside the settlers, as their land was given as a logging concession to the Timber Industries of the Philippines, Inc. (TIPI).

The Manobo return to Bacusanon

By the 1970s, logging operations slowed down due to lack of trees. In 1975, the Manobo of Bacusanon returned to their homes in and around sitio San Guinto and proceeded to rebuild their community.

The barangay (village) leadership at that time created sitio San Guinto so that the Manobo will not be accused of being illegal settlers.

According to Datu Minio, the area's traditional name is *Tabunan*, from the practice of a bird called *Mangawang* of burying its eggs, covering these with dried leaves and other debris, over which another bird will lay its eggs on top of it and cover it again with debris, and so on until the hole is level with the ground.

The *sitio* (hamlet) is also significant in terms of the area's ecosystem because it is an aquifer, containing the headwaters of the stream that flows down to the rest of the barangay. But the stream has all but dried up due to logging.

Although the Manobo cut trees for lumber used in building their houses and other structures, they implemented a self-imposed moratorium on the activity upon their return to the sitio to allow the trees to regenerate. Instead, they planted crops on the land. While still poor, the Manobo were content. They were back on their ancestral land.

Loggers return, conflict ensues

But all that would change with the return of the logging concessionaires in 1987, or after 12 years. While the company established its new headquarters in another sitio (*Migbadiang*), it hired members of the Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU), a paramilitary group created during the time of former President Ferdinand Marcos to combat the Communist New People's Army, as security guards.

In 1987, residents of the area, Manobo and lowlanders alike, were invited by the TIPI to a village consultation. During the meeting,

representatives of the company told the assembled residents that their purpose was to rehabilitate the forest in the area.

However, the company's "rehabilitation" efforts were just a smokescreen for its real intentions. For upon resuming operations, TIPI built roads for log-hauling trucks to be able to pass through.

"Every week, about 20 truckloads of logs passed through our area. Every day we heard the sound of chainsaws. That did not look or sound like rehabilitation to us," Datu Minio shared.

Alarmed, the tribal leaders with the help of the parish priest, decided to bring the issue to the village council. Responsive to their plight, a dialogue between the residents and the company resulted upon the initiative of the village council. This time, the vice governor of Bukidnon, the mayor of Pangantucan, the village captain, and the bishop of the province attended the dialogue. The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), which oversees logging operations, was represented by its Regional Director.

During the exchange, it was determined that the area was no longer fit for logging. Thus, a decision was handed down for TIPI to stop its operations within one week from the dialogue, otherwise its equipment will be impounded. After three months of operations, the logging stopped.

But then harassment began. After the order was handed down, company guards started harassing the residents. Some men in the village were beaten, bullets were found scattered near the houses, and combat-boot prints were seen around the houses of identified community leaders.

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Datu Minio, who was an organizer of the Indigenous Peoples Apostolate of the Diocese of Malaybalay, was particularly targeted. When threats did not work, the logging firm resorted to bribery.

“My pro-logging relatives visited me bearing gifts – rice, instant noodles, wine. They thought that as an organizer, I could persuade anti-logging residents to stop. But I told them I am just a facilitator of the community’s will,” Datu Minio said.

One day, the tribal elders got a letter from TIPI. Written in English, the letter essentially said that if the group did not withdraw its complaint about logging activities, violence would likely escalate. It was a threat, pure and simple.

After meeting with the tribe’s members, the elders, accompanied by the parish priest, went to Malaybalay, the province’s capital, for an audience with the bishop. The bishop then accompanied the group to Cagayan de Oro City, the regional center, where they handed over the letter to the regional director of the DENR.

The next day, the elders informed TIPI of what they had done.

As a result, the DENR enforced its order for TIPI to cease logging operations in the area. In its order, the DENR said that the company conducted illegal logging operations because it failed to submit an annual logging operations plan, a prerequisite for approval of logging permits.

After this, logging was permanently stopped in the area.

Still, the Manobo of Bacusanon faced threats to their land.

Ancestral land parceled by settlers

During the time they were driven from their ancestral land by logging activities, settlers were able to move in and claim large portions of it.

This was exacerbated by the resettlement efforts of succeeding government administrations, which encouraged people from Luzon and the Visayas to move to Mindanao, starting in the 1950s.

To encourage settlers to move to Mindanao and help in its development, the National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Administration (NARRA) gave each settler family eight hectares of farmland, farm animals and implements, and monthly food rations.

Although the Manobo reclaimed some portions – by purchase, the owners voluntarily giving back the land, or the land was simply abandoned – a large part of their ancestral domain was forever lost to private individuals and agribusiness companies.

At present, huge swaths of the Manobo's land is planted with sugarcane and bananas, leased by their owners to large agribusiness firms.

IPRA gives hope, then takes it away

When the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) was implemented in 1997, the group formally organized and started the process for a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT), with support from the Philippine Association For Intercultural Development (PAFID). A CADT is a title formally recognizing the rights of possession and ownership of IPs over their ancestral domains that have been identified and delineated in accordance with IPRA.

From 1998 to 2001, NAMAMAYUK conducted organizing efforts, preliminary mapping activities, and worked on the tribe's genealogy.

On 10 October 2001, they formally submitted their papers to the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) – Bukidnon provincial office. Their documents were received by NCIP but had not been issued a petition number. That was where the problem began.

Without a petition number, the claim could not be processed since the NCIP could deny that they received NAMAMAYUK's documents.

With the help of church organizations and NGOs, NAMAMAYUK has brought its case to the attention of the NCIP regional and national offices. Up to now, the CADT application is still in limbo.



The same thing happened when NAMAMAYUK attempted to submit their ancestral domain sustainable development and protection plan (ADSDPP), which they were able to complete with the help of the Xavier Science Foundation, Inc. (XSF), in 2017. ADSDPPs are the consolidated community plans developed by indigenous communities within an ancestral domain, which details how resources will be managed based on their indigenous knowledge systems and practices. When they brought the document to the NCIP provincial office, they were told that there was nobody there to receive it since the staff were attending the seminar.

They tried to submit a week later but were told that the seminar was for two weeks. They were told to just leave the document, but they did not for fear that it will suffer the same fate as their CADT application, which the NCIP provincial office claims was not filed because there was no petition number.

In October 2018, Datu Minio and Datu Johnny of PTTA, Inc. personally submitted a follow-up letter to NCIP Commissioner Norberto “Jong” Navarro.

At present, even after a number of follow-up activities by the IP organizations and their CSO partners, notably XSF, PAFID, and the

Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC), there is still no word from the NCIP regarding the status of their claim.

In fact, when representatives of the NCIP provincial office visited the areas as part of the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) activity for the project *“Improving Tenure Security of Smallholder Farmers in Select Areas in the Philippines.”* the government staff were surprised to even know that these communities exist; and that they have submitted CADT applications.

Portulin Talaandig in the same boat

The ancestral domain claim status of the Portulin Talaandig Tribal Association, Inc. (PTTA, Inc.) is no less different. However, the means by which they reclaimed their land is a different story.

Unlike the Manobo, the Talaandig of Portulin and surrounding barangays had the advantage of having firearms, as they were conscripted during the Marcos administration as CAFGUs charged to combat the Communist New People’s Army guerillas operating in Mt. Kalatungan.

One of their notable commanders was Datu Johnny Guina. Thus, when Johnny was appointed as *datu*, he used this advantage to drive away outsiders from their land.

Johnny was not actually next in line for *datu* as his father and uncles were still alive. But his grandfather saw in the young man leadership qualities and gave him the mantle of leadership.

And the young datu proved him right as he successfully led his people in reclaiming their land.

Datu Johnny is strict but benevolent. He even allowed settlers to retain five hectares of land as long as they gave up their other claims. However, he is not as accommodating to abuses, such as the time when the son of the mayor built a climbers’ lodge using timber gathered from the forest, without asking for the tribe’s permission.



“I told the mayor’s son that what he did was wrong. Not only did he not ask permission for cutting down trees, he did not ask permission for the land that he built his resthouse on,” Datu Johnny shared.

Since the resthouse was already there, the PTTA, Inc. appropriated it for the use of the climbers since, technically, it is on their land and is theirs.

The PTTA, Inc. was organized in 1998, also in preparation for their ancestral domain claim under the IPRA.

But even if they do not “officially” own their land, PTTA, Inc. can take consolation in the fact that they have control over it.

“Even the DENR, which oversees all public lands, cannot come into our area without our permission,” Datu Johnny proudly declared.

While this may be true to some extent, not having “official” ownership status means that threats are more imminent.

The Mt. Kalatungan range has already been declared a national park. But the IPs inhabiting its slopes are still allowed on their ancestral lands, albeit with oversight from the DENR.

ENIPAS a new threat

The recently passed Expanded National Integrated Protected Area System (ENIPAS) law has made the IPs apprehensive and more restive since its implementing rules and regulations specify that only indigenous groups belonging to ancestral domains with instrumentalities of ownership, i.e. CADT or CALT (Certificate of Ancestral Land Title), will be recognized in the governance of resources when protected areas that overlap with ancestral domains.

If this law is implemented, then IPs who have yet to secure a CADT will not be able to fully exercise their rights over the use and governance of their ancestral domains.

And only God, or in their case *Magbabaya*, knows what the Manobo and Talaandig of the Kalatungan range will resort to if this injustice comes to pass. ■