

Aliguyon: Playing at War

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Of all the societies that gave rise to the epics taken up in class, the Ifugaos' is the most advanced. They constitute the only society with relatively sophisticated agricultural methods, practicing wet-rice agriculture on irrigated rice terraces while at the same time planting root crops on cleared slopes. As such, theirs is the only society with three rungs: the *kadangyan* or rich landowners, the *nawotwot* or servants and tenants, and the *natumok*, or small landowners who cannot produce enough for their years' needs. The *nawotwot* are supposed to have been captives in the Ifugaos' headhunting expeditions. (CCP 1: 289)

Except for the Palawans, then, the Ifugaos are the only tribe among the epic-makers that extracted a surplus from the land both historically and up to the present times. The others may have done so historically, but their present circumstances do not permit such luxuries as slaves anymore. The Subanons, for example, may have seen times when a slave would be killed to accompany his dead master to the other world; but today, the state of their forests is not the same as before, and could not support such excesses, practicing as they still do slash-and-burn agriculture. Nonetheless, even with the Ifugaos the amount of surplus produced is not so much as to allow slaves in the Western sense of humans being bought and sold, expendable at the master's will; for even with the Ifugaos, the term used is servant, or *aliping namamahay/sagigilid*, not slave.

More than anything, it is this political economy that determines the *Aliguyon*. William Henry Scott puts it beautifully when he says: "The Ifugaos have become justly famous for their ability to wring a livelihood out of the sheerest heights of the Cordillera Central." (Scott 2) In fact, they understand their ecology best among all the tribes of the Philippines, and are reported to have inspired neighbors such as the Bontocs, Gaddangs and others to build their own terraces.

That war in the *Aliguyon* is just so much play among striplings growing up to be young men is therefore understandable. According to Scott, work and play are barely distinguishable among the peoples of the Cordilleras. Children are taken from their parents at a young age to sleep in separate dorms in the same community, under the discipline of old people of the same respective genders. They go home to their parents only to eat, the rest of the day (and night, while they're young) working at various chores increasing in difficulty as they grow up. (Scott 44-60)

Moreover, Scott adds, discipline by parents is unheard of, perhaps because the children are taken away so early from them. Parents are indulgent with their children to a degree of irritability for those who do not understand their culture, permitting them all the discourtesies and disobedience they want, knowing perhaps that these would find the rod anyway among the old men and women in charge of the dormitories. (Ibid)

Against this background, *Aliguyon* begins to make sense. This is really the story of two children playing war all their pre-puberty and adolescent lives, until they are old enough to marry each other's sisters. Their two tribes are friendly tribes, their fathers having played at war themselves one time in the past, as children and adolescents. They were betrothed to each other's sisters as children, and so their laying claim to such rights as young men is just part of their rites of passage as inheritors of their respective *kadangyans*. And like all Ifugao children, they treat their parents, especially their mothers, like shit, because their parents never disciplined them,

because they received their discipline from other elders in the community, as well as from their own peers, at play.

Why is war their play? It is a way of keeping on their toes. While they live on the highest peaks of the Cordilleras, they were not historically invulnerable to the depredations of the Spaniards, nor of the Americans. Nor were they invulnerable to the strikes of other tribes around them, even before the coming of the Spaniards. Leaving their young males to play at war, therefore, they are able to steel themselves to the inevitability of the small battles that have dotted their history as a people.

While the “wars” played by the Ifugaos are smaller and less serious than those waged by the Livunganen-Arumanens and other Manobos, male domination is nevertheless much more developed in their society than in those of the latter. Why so? Because the Ifugao surplus enables them to keep servants not only individually but as a whole class, and with surplus and a class of servants come private property that results in the domination of the female, her relegation to definite household-bound tasks such as weaving and spinning (aside from farming), and the passing on of the property from the man to the children. In such societies as the Ibaloi, I suspect, engineering skills have made surpluses so great that their women have become perhaps the most downgraded of the peoples of the Cordilleras, to the extent of becoming virtual servants, if not slaves, to the men, in the seventies following their upright, twig-wielding men with backs bent over by heavy agricultural loads.

Indeed, Scott relates that among the Kalingas of Madukayan, “the only other female occupation, the practice of the priestesshood [aside from weaving and spinning], falls only to a few.” (Scott 105) This was 1966. It would be reasonable to suspect that by now, they may have lost the practice altogether, not only because of the inroads of civilization, but because of advances in their own economy.

Whatever little female power of the mother remains in *Aliguyon*, therefore, may become a function of historical memory rather than reality – that is, if Ifugao society progresses even more economically without getting integrated into the Philippine mainstream, where women are constrained to work outside of the home, and therefore inevitably, and rather easily, earn the right to equality, their historical memory retaining as it does strong strains of past matricentric tunes.

References

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- 2 **CCP Encyclopedia of the Arts.** Vols. 1 and 2. Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1994.
- 3 Engels, Frederick. **The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State.** Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1978.
- 4 Scott, William Henry. **On the Cordillera: A Look at the Peoples and Cultures of the Mountain Province.** Manila: MCS Enterprises, Inc., 1966.