

“Pragmatic” Politics of Dispossession and Institutionalized Knowledge Among the Ayta Magbukun



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Background

The Philippines has endured a turbulent history since the decline of Spanish presence and the rise of American imperial power in the country. Following the traumatic Japanese occupation, the granting of Philippine independence appeared as a new horizon for the nascent nation. However, the rise of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s brought with it an era of unrivaled political and social repression, leaving proliferating violent anti-state struggle, land contention, and economic ruin in its wake. As much of the scholarship on these events has analyzed their effects on dominant ethnic groups within the Philippines, much less has focused on how these political processes have shaped the material realities of Indigenous cultural communities (ICCs).

One such collection of ICCs with an extensive history of marginalization from the rest of the Filipino population is the Aeta (often spelled as Ayta, Agta, or Dumagat depending on the tribe), an umbrella group of Indigenous peoples (IPs) who share physical attributes such as curly to kinky hair texture, dark skin, and shorter stature. Like other ICCs, the Aeta have faced troubles as outside entities have attempted to weaponize the state's bureaucratic processes governing Indigenous ancestral domains against them in order to dispossess them of their land.

In this project, I sought to investigate how these forms of dispossession, which I characterize as “pragmatic,” foster collaboration between IPs and non-IPs while promoting knowledge institutionalization. To do so, I conducted fieldwork with the Ayta Magbukun tribe of Kanawan, Morong, Bataan. In recent decades, the tribe has made significant inroads in achieving certification for ancestral domain titles while undergoing pivotal community restructuring. These developments coincide with their first successful collaborations with scholars, which have continued to this day.

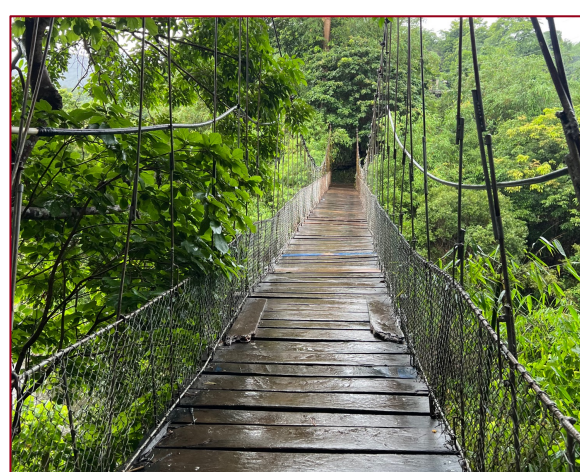


Figure 1 (left): The Kanawan Hanging Bridge, the only pathway into Sitio Kanawan and only accessible by foot or by motorcycle



Figure 2 (right): Kanawan Ayta elders and community members celebrating approval of Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (AMD/MPD-SBMA, 2018)

Methodology

I resided in Kanawan with an Ayta Magbukun family for two weeks this past summer, conducting ethnographic fieldwork as well as several semi-structured interviews with elders in Tagalog. My data analysis focused on my fieldnotes and interview recordings collected during this period.

Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT)

The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997 was the first official legislation that recognizes, promotes, and upholds the rights of IPs in the Philippines. Notably, IPRA established the system through which ICCs could formally have the right to their traditional lands recognized, through land title certifications known as CADT. This process requires communities to interface heavily with bureaucratic bodies of the state, particularly their region's respective National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) offices.

This process is generally extensive and costly, requiring the ICC seeking CADT to formally organize itself and often necessitating collaboration with or assistance from non-IP scholars, activists, and officials. In my discussions and interviews with Kanawan Ayta elders, it became apparent that the community's close relationship with my two mentors and colleagues, Dr. Borromeo Motin and Dr. Lourdes Cruz, was instrumental in having their CADT approved after 14 years back in 2018. Dr. Motin and Dr. Cruz worked together with the Kanawan Aytas in establishing a formal Tribal Council who could oversee CADT and other affairs. Elders, officers, and other community leaders also elected an IP Mandatory Representative to mediate between the state and the Council and Tribal Chieftain.

Currently, the Kanawan Aytas' CADT remains approved but not yet registered, which may prevent them from receiving the full extent of the rights and desired autonomy guaranteed under IPRA. This will require yet more time and an exorbitant fee, an expense that they would not be able to afford on their own. The community has thus shifted their focus to the potential for investment to bypass such an obstacle.

Community Development

Numerous community initiatives have emerged through collaboration. Dr. Motin piloted a program that eventually evolved into Kanawan's first K-12 school. He has also helped with beautification projects such as the Buod summit and its trail. Today, ongoing and prospective initiatives provide further support. My fieldwork also coincided with one such program, a community volleyball clinic hosted by Ikot Pinas, an organization that teaches volleyball to children in underserved areas.

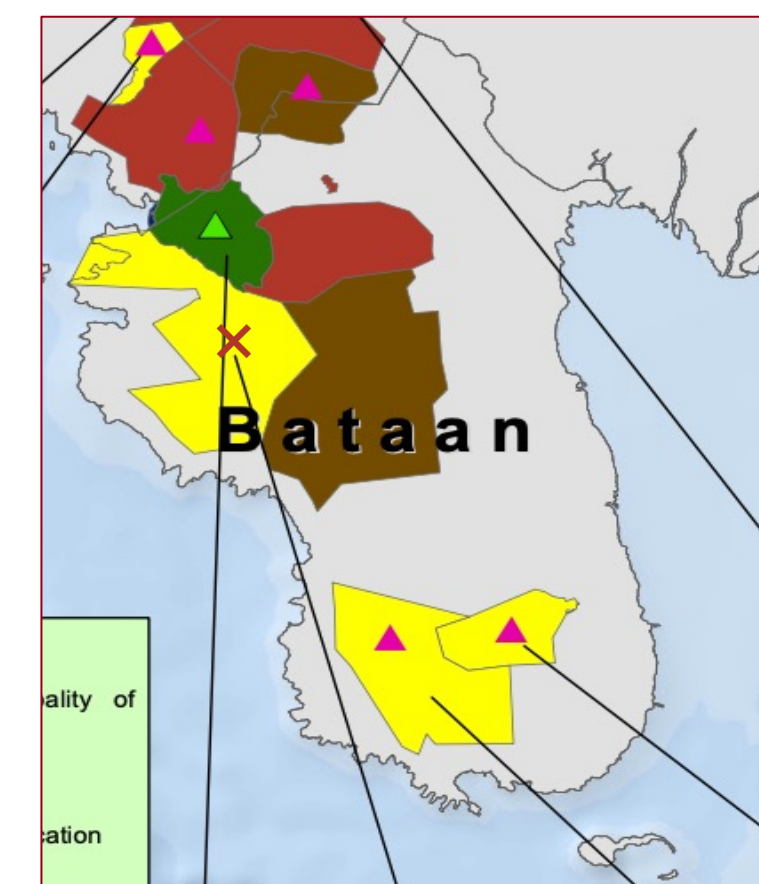


Figure 3: Screenshot from Region III CADT map. The CADT of the Kanawan Aytas is the region with a red 'X.' Its color means it is approved

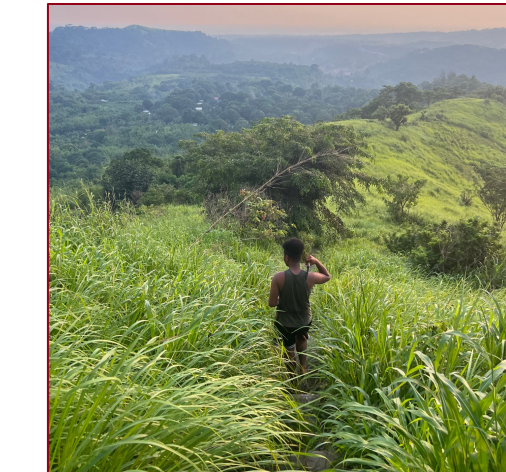


Figure 4 (left): View from near the top of Mt. Buod, which overlooks Sitio Kanawan and nearby Subic Bay. Dr. Motin and other community members created the trail, including installing concrete stairways, railings, and a bathroom at the top

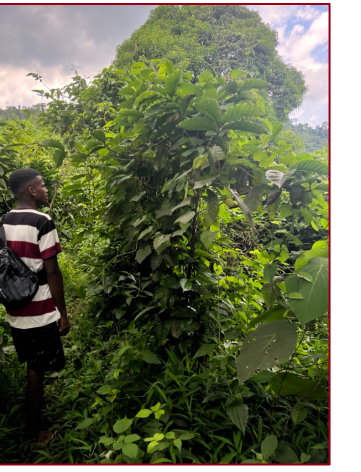


Figure 5 (right): My friend showing me a fruitless coffee plant in the plantation. As these coffee crops require as much as a decade before bearing fruit, the stakeholders have been waiting for over six years to attain commercial production levels

Plantation

Possibly the current most influential project operating in Kanawan is the coffee plantation—more akin to a farm than a stereotypical full-scale plantation. Dr. Cruz initiated the venture about 6 years ago, providing the seeds and some basic equipment, with the long-term goal of providing an avenue through which the Ayta could become economically self-sufficient. The plantation follows a joint venture model, thus subjecting the gains and losses of participation only to stakeholders. Others in the community do not benefit, limiting the plantation's effects.

One potential risk of the plantation becoming a commercial farm is the continued decline of traditional Ayta foods and medicines, a practice that has already been taking place. One elder informed me that many of the fruits that had once been plentiful were over-exploited once they became valuable commodities. This follows a broader trend of Ayta traditions being lost as they integrate into capitalist modes of production.

Future

The Ayta Magbukun of Kanawan know that they live more difficult lives than many other Filipinos. Still, it is remarkable how community members' material conditions have improved so considerably in the span of only a few decades, to a great extent because of successful collaboration between the Kanawan Aytas and outside figures such as Dr. Motin and Dr. Cruz. Looking toward the future, certain goals must be attended to.

As negotiations with a potential investor(s) in the plantation continue, it is crucial that the Ayta convene to discuss said investor and ensure that all proper precautions and vetting are carried out in order to avoid potential unintended consequences (e.g. land conversion, tourist over-presence) of such a deal. Likewise, it must not be understated the importance of balancing the community's self-sufficiency with sustainable use of land and treatment of the environment, especially if the plantation's activities are to be scaled up. It is also crucial that the decline of Ayta traditions and the Ayta Magbukun language be staved off, as there may be no other chance to do so. As these domains—culture, relationship to the environment, self-sufficiency—are all interrelated, none can be forgotten.