

# Community Participation in the Ifugao Archaeological Project

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**Abstract** The Ifugao Archaeological Project (IAP) is a collaborative research between the Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement (SITMo), the University of Guam, the University of the Philippines, the National Museum of the Philippines, and the Local Government Units of Ifugao. The IAP is community-led through SITMo, who has provided inputs toward the project goals. SITMo is a local grassroots NGO whose primary goal is to develop preservation programs for the Ifugao Rice Terraces, a UNESCO World Heritage Site inscribed in 1991. However, the listing failed to encourage research on the history of this human-made landscape. Both SITMo and the IAP are convinced that understanding the archaeology of the Ifugao Rice Terraces will result in a well-rounded preservation program as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The IAP 2012 and 2013 field seasons provided the first archaeological documentation of an early Ifugao village, as well as information on the antiquity of the Ifugao Rice Terraces and the paleoenvironmental conditions of the region. The success of the 2012 and 2013 field seasons is credited to the active participation of the community through SITMo. In this paper, we present the challenges of community involvement, and discuss how we addressed them before, during, and after the field season.

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**Keywords** Ifugao; community archaeology; grassroots NGO

For over a century, the Ifugao has mesmerized both the academic and layperson with their majestic rice terraces and their unique culture. Academics who have focused on this region produced scholarly contributions that are valuable to the understanding of Ifugao history and heritage. However, the participation of the Ifugao communities in these research programs had been minimal.

Ifugao Province, like most indigenous peoples' areas in the Cordillera Region of the Philippines, has been continuously subjected to assimilationist programs since the establishment of American colonial authority over a hundred years ago. The American colonial objective was to pacify an inveterate headhunting culture and put an end to a seemingly incurable defiance to centralized civil governments established in most parts of the country by the earlier Spanish colonizers. The Ifugao assimilation to the wider Philippine society and the road to pacification and governance correspondingly led to the slow but inevitable demise of the customary culture of the Ifugao.

The establishment of government schools and institutionalized proselytization forever changed the Ifugao cultural landscape. Public school textbooks replaced orally transmitted literature with religion-based stories. Christian hymns and verses took the place of epic chants and ancient rituals of the old religion, the latter two being oral repositories of Ifugao custom law and history. The assimilationist policies of the colonial government combined with church doctrines

proved detrimental to the continued practice of indigenous culture as the Ifugaos were remodelled into the image and likeness of their colonized Filipino brethren. These policies continued long after the colonial era and well into the present such that generations of Ifugaos passively absorbed the nationally standardized history and social studies curriculum in Philippine formal education as their own. Community memory of an indigenous past is all but forgotten as entire generations of younger Ifugaos started embracing the dominant culture, veering away from the ways of their forebearers. While nationalists continuously lament Filipino colonial psychology or, in Renato Constantino's (1982) words, Filipinos are still mired in colonial consciousness, modern Ifugaos equally carry the dead weight of adopted colonial consciousness borne of an earlier colonial consciousness of the dominant Filipino culture.

While the Ifugao is one of the most studied ethnic groups in the Philippines, it is quite ironic that only a few Ifugaos involve themselves in conducting research on various aspects of their own culture (e.g., L. Dulawan 2001; M. Dulawan 2005; Pagada 2006a, 2006b). Most publications on the Ifugao are authored by non-Ifugaos who lived with the people, or by those who rely solely or partly on earlier researches (e.g., Acabado 2009, 2010; Barton 1919, 1922, 1930, 1938, 1955; Beyer 1955; Conklin 1967, 1980; Lambrecht 1929, 1962, 1967; Maher 1973, 1978, 1984, 1985, 1989; McCay 2003; Stanyukovich 2003). These publications remain the sole

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authority in Ifugao history and culture that Ifugaos themselves consult these for research in such instances as those required within academic contexts. While many Ifugaos have already been educated in different universities within the country and abroad, very few turn out as scholars on Ifugao studies. It is also perceptible among younger Ifugaos that getting an education is equated to not knowing anything about the old Ifugao ways. In fact, knowledge of the old ways is usually seen as reserved for the unlettered terraces farmers, the superstitious *mumbaki* (religious specialist), and the elderly epic chanters, who typically disregard modern education. Indigenous culture in Ifugao has long been “demonized” by missionaries, labelled by lowland educators as backward if not barbaric. This indifference towards the conservation of their indigenous heritage, however, should not be judged as cultural apathy but should be taken within the context of a collective psychology long subjected to the indoctrinating effects of proselytization and Western education – perfect strategies of deliberate and enforced assimilationist policies of both church and state.

### Community Consent and Community Archaeology in Indigenous Peoples’ Lands

Ifugao Province is an indigenous peoples’ enclave inhabited by different Ifugao ethno-linguistic groups spread in different political subdivisions. The *Ayangans*, *Tuwali*, *Yattuka*, *Kalanguya* or *Keley-i* are separated by social or political boundaries, each trying to be distinct from the identity with which they are bound, that of the Ifugao – the people of Pugaw or the Earthworld, a realm in the cosmos inhabited by mortal beings (Conklin 1980). These different Ifugao groups may have slight differences in language and practices but such variations are more of exemptions rather than the general rule.

The first archaeological site for the Ifugao Archaeological Project (IAP) focuses on *Kiyyangan*, the legendary first settlement of the Ifugao and the precursor of what is now the municipality of Kiangan. *Kiyyangan* is located at Sitio Habbayan in Barangay Munggayang, west of the Ibulao River right across the provincial capital Lagawe. In the recitation of myths or chanting of epics in *Baki*, the Ifugao religion, the ritualists or *mumbaki* and lesser genealogists from all over Ifugao usually trace their ancestry and origin to this particular place. As far as the cultural memory of the Ifugaos is concerned, the stories of old *Kiyyangan* have passed on to the realm of myths and legends. For how can one describe a place where gods descend and mingle with humankind, where wars were fought between men and gods, and where rice from the Skyworld multiplies by itself to satisfy the feasts held by devout nobility? Mythical. Only a few Ifugaos even remember actual historical events that took place in the old village including its vital role as the center of successful resistance against Spanish colonizers during the entire three hundred years of their occupation of the country.

The IAP started with a series of consultations with civic and government organizations led by the Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement (SITMo), the community-based Non-Government Organization (NGO) partner of the project.

Dialogues were undertaken with elders from the descendant communities, political leaders and school heads in Kiangan, which resulted with affirmative nods and encouragement to conduct the project. However, none of these community consents could have been of use without the assent of the private owners of the site. The old village has since been passed on to private ownership when it was converted to rice fields at least three generations ago. The present-day owners are very much aware of the significance of their property, and often recall Maher’s earlier excavations in the area in the 1970s that aimed to examine the claims of its antiquity. The ultimate consent for the IAP was then given by the land owners, three siblings represented by one, whose right to either allow or disallow any excavation in their land is superior to any of the previous community decisions. Under Ifugao customary law, a property owner can do anything in his land for as long as it does not alter, destroy or affect in any way the adjoining properties. This customary law also gives more weight on private rights than communal rights, a fact many times disregarded by provisions of state laws on indigenous peoples where the presumption in land ownership always leans on the communal.

It was fortunate that during the first field season of IAP excavations, pending the revision of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) rules, the Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) process was suspended; the project proceeded without having to undergo the lengthy process of the NCIP-sanctioned community consultations. In essence however, even without the NCIP certificate, the obligatory formal consent from the members of the

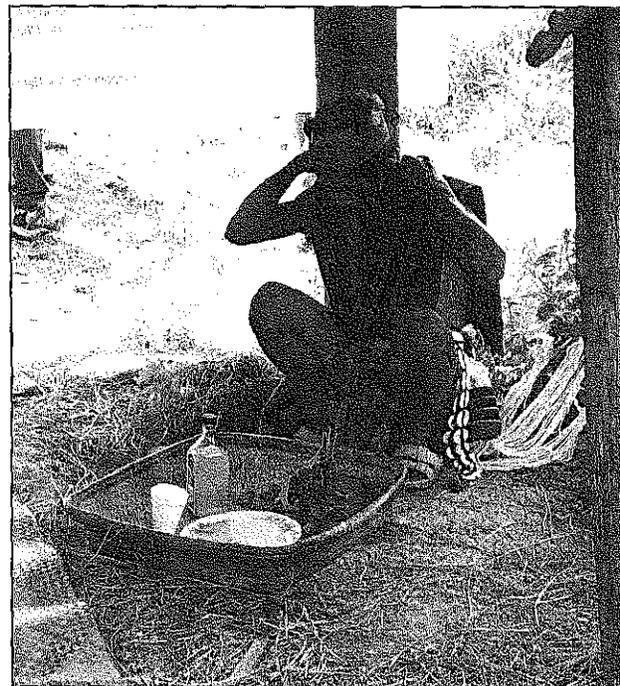


Figure 1. Launching of the Ifugao Archaeological Project 2012 Field Season with a *baki* ritual (M. M. Martin, June 2012).

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community including land owners and community elders were obtained. Before the first trowel hit the ground for excavations, a ritual was performed by a *mumbaki* to invoke appropriate deities and ancestors, asking their permission and protection for the crew to conduct the excavations (Figure 1). The ritual entailed reading the omens from the bile, blood and entrails of a sacrificed pig; the omens were good, indicating the consent of the spirit world for the excavations. For the Ifugaos, there is no higher approval than that of the divine.

The question on the FPIC process would still have to be resolved in future excavations. If the project is within the context of community archaeology where the community is directly involved in the entire process, where would the community get the community consent?

**Provoking Community Interest in Heritage Conservation through Participatory Archaeology**

The concept of heritage conservation among most government agencies in Ifugao rarely goes beyond lip service as the growing clamor for cultural conservation, particularly from outside, exerts its pressure on the mandated agencies. The superficial understanding of conservation by most government organizations is actually putting heritage in danger of getting damaged if not totally destroyed. One example would be the teaching of the *hudhud*. *Hudhud* is the Ifugao romantic epic that was declared as a UNESCO Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Pupils in public elementary schools are taught to memorize snippets of the epic chants more for inter-municipality competitions than for passing on the substantial socio-cultural significance of *hudhud* to the young generation of Ifugaos. In these schools, teaching of "culture" usually translates to token lessons on indigenous dances and the so-called ethnic ensemble, consisting of a mix of traditional practices using musical implements accompanied by Ifugao songs and dances.

A more alarming situation is the approach implemented for the so-called conservation of the Ifugao Rice Terraces, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The importance of indigenous knowledge in terraces construction and maintenance, and rice varietal selection has been disregarded. The terraces are kept in use, with the flooded pond fields planted with just about any type of rice, despite the fact that the stone walls are now only superficially intact and in need of maintenance work. The focus of these purported conservation initiatives is very tourism-oriented and lack foresight regarding cultural integrity and sustainable development for terraces' communities. While consideration should be given to physical aesthetics and tourism appeal, the more important aspect of understanding the terraces as part of a bigger system involving a depth of socio-environmental and cultural elements should be given priority to help contextualize its conservation within a wider scenario of heritage management. Understanding the interplay of people, villages, forests and water bodies in

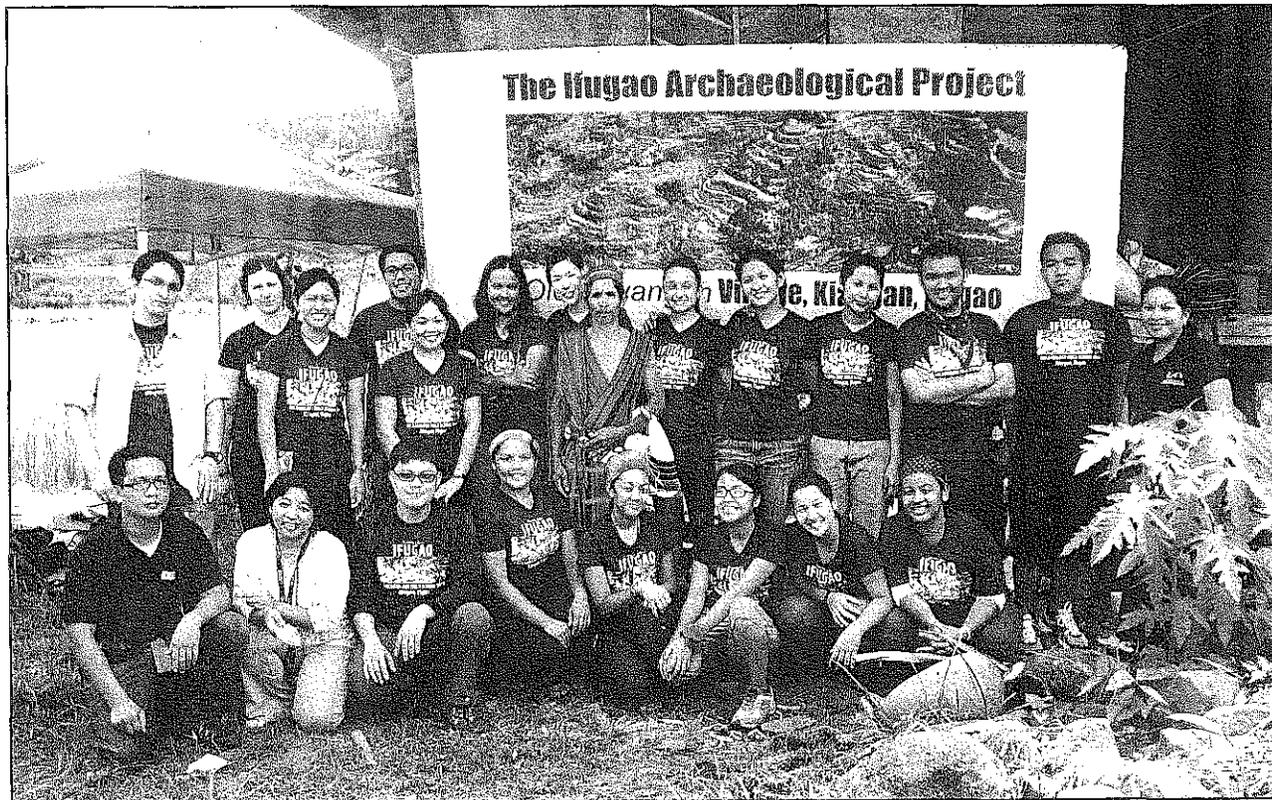


Figure 2. The IAP 2012 Field Season participants with the *mumbaki*, the religious specialist (center) (photo courtesy of IAP, June 2012).

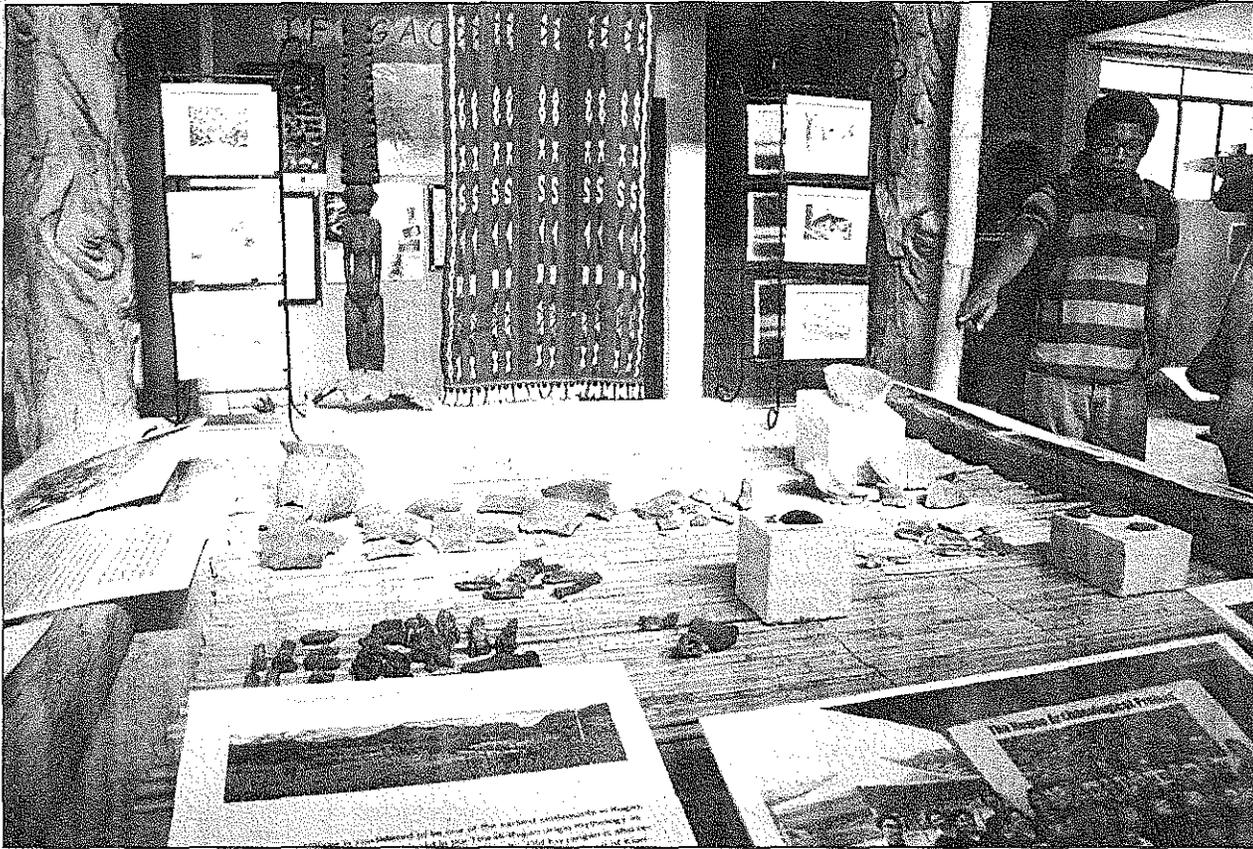


Figure 3. Sharing the results of the IAP 2012 Field Season to the community via an exhibition at the National Museum Kiangan (M. M. Martin, June 2012).



Figure 4. Sharing

terraces communities is crucial to long-term conservation of this World Heritage Site.

The participation of the local community in heritage management is as crucial as their participation in any form of cultural research. This is true in archaeological undertakings especially in conducting exhaustive research that seeks not to leave any stone unturned. Genuine community participation works both ways for the archaeologists and the community. On one end, the community has as much interest in the outcome of the project as the archaeologists themselves especially if the former, like the Ifugao, is on the threshold of losing the realities of its ancient past. On the other hand, the archaeologists need community interpretations and memories to support and complete their research. Thus, community participation in archaeology projects should not be seen as mere compliance with the legal requirements at the national and local levels (e.g., community members providing FPIC to researchers) pertaining to conducting research on indigenous people's areas.

The objective of the IAP initially started with the dating of the different terrace clusters in the province to address the question of antiquity of the Ifugao Rice Terraces. This matters more to the archaeologists as an academic issue, however it is not an issue generally considered important by

the terraces farmers or the Ifugao communities at large. The objective expanded after the IAP's first field season as more members of the community became interested in providing insights that aided the analysis of collected data.

In the project design, community members became involved in an otherwise purely academic exercise reserved only for the formally schooled (among the Ifugao at least). The IAP is not the first research of its kind to be conducted in the area but it is the first to involve more community members from public and private schools, civil society and government (Figure 2). Community participation is not limited to actual excavations, however. The conduct of the actual dig and the subsequent presentation of preliminary findings to the community brought into light curiosities, points of conversations, and arguments among members of the descendant communities (Figures 3 and 4). In many informal and small group discussions, folk stories were recalled and epics were analyzed vis-à-vis the archaeological findings. As questions were answered, more were asked. This heightened interest in cultural discourse among locals would not be possible without the data provided by empirical observations of trained archaeologists based on the excavated materials. Giving the community a chance to interpret their own heritage makes the discussion on culture more interesting as

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Figure 4. Sharing the results of the IAP 2012 Field Season to the community via public presentations (M. M. Martin, June 2012).

it gives them a sense of identity and pride in their homeland. These discussions are otherwise empty rhetoric sans their actual participation in these types of research.

The engagement of different Ifugao communities in the past and forthcoming IAP field seasons aims to promote social cohesion among the relatively divided Ifugao groups who have developed diversified versions of their cultural origins and its chronology. The archaeological discoveries of the IAP served as a catalyst for community debates and a stimulus to wider public participation in heritage conservation. As a matter of fact, the project inspired the establishment of a community heritage library in one of the Ifugao public schools, which aims to serve as a repository of all published literature on the Ifugao. The plan for the library is to involve Ifugaos and Ifugaos at heart, here and abroad, to contribute to the collection of published works on Ifugao culture, history and society and to facilitate access to research materials on Ifugao studies for students, scholars and enthusiasts. The involvement of local students also serves the purpose of spurring interest in the disciplines of history and socio-cultural studies, courses not normally of consequence to young Ifugaos (Figure 5).

The sustainability of the goals and achievements of the IAP relies more on the community which stands to directly benefit from the accomplishments of the archaeological

research. Inclusive and participatory community archaeology, however, is a shared responsibility of community members and archaeologists. Nonetheless, the Ifugao community is responsible for ensuring that the information gathered and analyzed from the IAP is disseminated and transmitted continuously from one generation to the next.

The concept of inter-generational responsibility of the transmission of culture, including knowledge about prehistory, is considered important among the Ifugaos as with other indigenous peoples. Passing down their traditional knowledge and everything that makes up their cultural heritage to the next generations is essentially the responsibility of the current generation. It is in this vein that wider community participation is encouraged in all aspects of cultural research so that the forgotten past may be re-learned, and community stories and memories may be passed on to younger generations. For every generation of Ifugaos charged with passing down indigenous knowledge and memory to the succeeding generation, their interest in participating in such endeavors immensely influence the transmission and continuity of the various aspects of the Ifugao culture. Sadly, this interest is constantly diminishing with each generation. Stories fade into legends, legends become myths, and myths are eventually forgotten as with most archaeological materials. For the Ifugao who straddle between the worlds



Figures 5. Local students from St. Joseph School in Kiangán visit the Old Kiyangan excavation site (M. M. Martin, June 2012).

of the old and the new, of tradition and modernity, there is hope for their heritage if such interest is rekindled through community participation in archaeological research such as the IAP. Broken pots and weathered bones, and artifacts from unrecalled times are all pieces in a jigsaw puzzle that can elucidate the confused memory of the Ifugao about their past lifeways. These things pique the interest of the modern Ifugao especially when hard science completes bits and pieces of the dreamy tales passed down by their ancestors. These methods may seem strange to the Ifugao yet appropriate-for-its-time as they provide a way of re-learning stories about their past based on material evidence. More importantly, these methods and materials provide confirmation of their being and an affirmation of their distinct identity.

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