Remembering my roots, Interrogating the present, Envisioning my future:
A Personal Quest for Identity

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Opening Thoughts

In this essay, I explore my experiences, thoughts, inner longings, unexplained fears and sadness, and a deep-seated desire to unload a “monkey” riding hard on my back, or a “ghost” that seems to imprison my soul as I struggle to find my “self”…my identity…my very essence. At this stage in my life, it is as much an academic exercise as a quest for my cultural and linguistic roots. Hopefully, in the process, I will come to find myself more and more. I am realizing that I have lost a big part of “me” a long time ago…long before I was even born. Somehow, I am finding that I have lived, nay, existed, in a wide chasm of cultural and personal non-identity. Looking deep into my thoughts, feelings, personal experiences, and acknowledging their relevance, is valuable and meaningful to my academic direction and growth. I need this exploration to continue on with my life’s journey.

In remembering my roots as an indigenous person, it is unavoidable for me to occasionally refer to Philippine Igorots—I being just one of them—as if they are homogenous and undifferentiated. I realize this is not so. I will use the term loosely, like the oft-times use of terms such as Western or Eastern cultures, Europeans, North or Central or South Americans, Africans, Asians, or Albertans for that matter, in a general sense. While Igorots are non-homogenous and uniquely different as individuals, they have cultural similarities that somehow differentiate them from “others” without my necessarily defining them as the “norm” or “standard.”

Likewise, while I will refer to my thoughts, feelings and experiences as an indigenous Igorot, I would not want to mislead anyone to think that “I” am...
static. The truth is, I am, as are other Igorots and indigenous people everywhere, as anybody is, or as all life forms are, dynamic and ever changing. Continuing interaction with everything else in my environment ensures this gradual but steadily evolving new identity (Capra, 2002). I am required to make a periodic review of my past and keep interrogating my present if I am to keep focused on my vision for the future. I describe the stage I am currently at as a period of confusion and disturbance, and thus, I need to remember the past to better understand who I really am (Fanon, 1990 cited in Smith [1999]).

Like many of those who have experienced being “colonized,” somehow, this essay represents a clamor in me to decolonize myself—to deconstruct some very strong narratives that have characterized the past four decades of my life. As with Viktor Frankl, a famed Austrian logotherapist, survivor of the Auschwitz prison camp, and author of Man’s search for meaning, this project marks for me a phenomenon, a quantum new beginning in my personal quest for meaning and direction in my life…to re-member myself with a cultural and personal identity I feel I have been robbed of. In a way, it is to come home, to acknowledge to my thirsty spirit, the kabunyan (Igorot term for God) of my ancestors; to return to the songs, stories, rituals, values and beliefs of a people I closely identify with; to the oral traditions that serve as a rich reservoir of the knowledge and wisdom of a group of indigenous people in the northern highlands of the Philippine Cordilleras, the Igorots or “mountain people” to whom I proudly belong.

**Remembering my Roots: My “Igorot” Beginnings (3000 BC–1521)**

*Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.*


*...the fact that the present is always in a process of transformation means that the past must be continually re-evaluated; to write a history of the past is to see it anew, just as the analysand sees anew events of his or her individual biography in light of the experience of psychoanalysis. The past, in short, takes on new meanings in light of new events....no past era can be understood purely in its own terms, given that history is, in a sense, always a history of the present.*

—Martin, 1988:111

My ancestors built the world famous Banaue Rice Terraces, deemed by many as the eighth wonder of the world and declared a UNESCO World Heritage site (E-Z Map Philippine Road Atlas 2000). Fondly called the
“stairway to heaven,” these terraces are actually rice paddies carved by hand into the steep mountainsides that seem to go as far as one can see and still farther beyond, twisting, hugging, caressing, nurturing. Awe-inspiring, they are truly an engineering feat by a people with no schooling but with significant nature-based education.

Attuned to nature, they built these rice terraces, not to extract from and abuse the land, but to conserve and use the land in a long term loving, nurturing relationship. It was their way to harness and direct torrential monsoon rains slowly and productively down the mountainsides. It was an ingenious water resource management technique to transform an otherwise tremendous flood and soil erosion hazard, and, in the process, they produced staple food, rice, for themselves and for all generations that followed, to the present. Some of the oldest of these terraces have been dated as old as 4,000–5,000 years, which allows me to trace my roots 200 to 250 generations back.

From oral traditions handed down from generation to generation, enduringly preserved to the present through legends, songs, rituals and ceremonies; values, beliefs and practices; in ancient artifacts; and significantly later, recorded in texts; I glean a people who lived holistically with nature, lovingly and respectful of mother earth, the trees and other plant and animal life, the air, the lakes and rivers, and everything that lives within them. Like many oral cultures, they practiced ancestral worship (remembering, respecting), and honoured trees, plants and animals for giving them clean air to breathe, water to drink, food, shelter and clothing to perpetuate life. They took from nature what they needed and put back in more than enough to sustain a long term relationship with other life and non-life forms.

Through their own ways of knowing, they designated certain trees, areas, even mountain sides as sacred, held various rituals, made offerings, and celebrated their gratitude for the “gifts” nature gave them. Love, respect, responsibility, and nurturing for one another characterized their existence. They realized that they were just part of their environment, and not the rulers with dominion over nature and everything else, as they were later told by their colonizers during the Christianization period.

A common characteristic with which I would describe and remember my ancestors (my roots) is their caring attitude and concern for living and non-living entities in their environment (values). They believed that “we” are all in this world in a long-term interdependent relationship. As Abram (1996) describes, we are a re-incarnation of an entity or entities, that previously lived or existed in this world. When we expire as physical entities, we in turn provide food and nutrition for other living entities and thus in a way, reincarnate through them, or return as elements to the environment (air, land, water), for later “recycling” and procreation of a
Remembering my roots, Interrogating the present, Envisioning my future hopefully better world. This way we are indeed one, parts of a whole, responsible for and accountable to each other in a long-term harmonious ecological relationship (Battiste, 1993; Fiar-od, 1999; Gonzales, 1992; Maggay, 1990; Strobel, 2001).

**Interrogating the Present (1521–Present)**

Life has never been a “bed of roses” for most people, especially in ancient times, but income, social and gender gaps were much narrower then than they are today. A phenomenon or quantum change occurred approximately 480 years back (Spanish colonization–1521) and again a century ago (American colonization–1898) (Botengan, 2000; Bulosan, 1943, 1973, 2002; Constantino, 1974, 1982, 1987, 1999; Reed, 1976, 1999; Scott, 1975; Strobel, 2001). Christianity was introduced, the yoke of imperialism was imposed, an era of colonization began. Indigenous worship was considered paganistic by the new conquerors; values and beliefs as barbaric; foreign laws and practices were imposed. Extensive land domains and “all the people in it” were given as rewards to those loyal to the “King” (Spanish era, 1521–1898), forever transforming the understanding of land “ownership” and use from community-based to the newly introduced concept of individual land ownership. Foreign landowner/tenant relationships were established, and a new identity was imposed: the “colonized” and later, the “oppressed” (Freire, 1970). This is the backdrop of “my” present that I want to interrogate.

**Locating myself**

Memory plays an important role in locating oneself. According to Le Doux (2002), memory transports us to earlier time—a moment or most of a life—it’s not perfect and is certainly not literal. “It reconstructs facts, as they were stored, not as they actually occurred by a brain…different from the one that formed the memory…but the gist is there” (p.97). Memory, in relation to life, is “…what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all…our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feelings, even our action. Without it we are nothing” (Le Doux, 2002:97).

I am an *Igorot*, part of a tribe of the “mountain people” of the Northern Philippine Cordilleras. I spent my growing up years nurtured by the cloud-capped mountaintops of Bauko, Mountain Province, and later in Kalinga Province—a “greener pasture” to my parents, where they were able to purchase six hectares (15 acres) of farmland, which they planned to later pass on to us, their children. Like many children of poor farming families, I experienced the backbreaking but spirit-strengthening barehanded planting of rice seedlings since the age of eight. Each rice-planting day was a struggle and a celebration of survival. I managed to survive my early growing up years this way.
Growing up, I was an unwary member of a society being “recreated” into something determined by a foreign power. I grew up with friends named Mary, Faith, Hope, Charity and Liberty. My two brothers were named George and Geoffrey—all foreign. I used to think that traditional Igorot names such as Gipaan (my Igorot name), Paligpig, Lamagan, Damayan, Botengan, were a shame, too old-fashioned, and left behind by progress. In school, I learned about Washington, Lincoln, Elizabeth Browning, Shakespeare, Poe, and read books about Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Huckleberry Finn, and The Hardy Boys series. I also endeavored to learn Spanish, and later English, the languages of the masters. I also “learned” that to be counted among your peers, one must have imported “this,” imported “that,” such as original “Levi Strauss” jeans, “Adidas” shoes, “Esprit” t-shirt, and … the more of these imported things, the better. I envied friends who had them, I did. Without being conscious of it, more and more people around me abandoned the traditional colorful, hand-woven dress wear of “my people.”

I grew up a Christian, a devout Catholic. Like many in my generation, I frowned on the “paganistic” traditional and nature-oriented Igorot “way of worship,” while to this day, some of my people still cling to the “old ways” of doing things. (What a relief) I felt then that they were not Christian. I have adopted an “identity” that looking back now, makes me sad—truly sad and betrayed. The process in reaching that identity was subtle, but so effective, so unkind, so cruel.

As a university student in Baguio City, I used to watch the native kanyao, a traditional festival of Igorot people, to celebrate “something” —akin to the Pow-wow of North-American Indians. Fortunately, like an invisible “cord” linking me to my ancestors of distant times, I occasionally participated in the dances (then and until now) accompanied by wooden drums and brazen gongs. Somehow, I enjoyed them too. Looking back now, I am so grateful that my break with my “past” was not complete.

I was a teacher in two private Catholic High Schools in the Philippines for three good years prior to living and working in Hong Kong for five and a half years, and coming to Canada in 1992. For thirteen long years, I kept spic and span the masters’ homes; I washed their Mercedes, Rolls Royce and BMWs. I took care of children and the elderly, cooked for them and washed their clothes. Later, I wiped tables and waited on diners. My work experiences, my never-ending introspections and reflections, my conscious and burning desire to obtain higher levels of education, and my unconscious longings to contribute to the betterment of indigenous peoples (IPs) of the world in general, led me serendipitously back to school (to begin anew) in 1998, at an age usually considered by many as the age when one is already most financially productive.

Moving through my graduate studies, I began to see that all my life’s trials
prior to my going back to school and my studies were parts of a long journey to better know myself, and that education and knowledge are complementary ways for rediscovering my “lost” cultural and personal identity. The courses I took in my graduate program helped me to become more critical in my thinking. This ability was not as developed when I was teaching high school students. I felt sad but likewise grateful with this realization. Some of the courses I took inspired me to use my “native eye” to look deeper into these interrelationships and to interrogate my present identity. I came to realize that “Western education has colonized Indigenous peoples” (Cajete, 2000: 188), their minds, including mine. The “foreigners” colonized our minds so much so that my identity took on, almost completely in a blind fashion, this outside influenced identity.

Negative interpretations and reactions to the appellation Igorot still exist today, although to a much lesser degree compared to as late as one or two decades ago. As in times past, they consist mostly of misrepresentations and misinformed impressions by supposedly “civilized” colonized non-Igorot Filipinos, who really have very limited or non-existent knowledge about Igorots. This misinformation can also be traced to early literatures written by “Outsiders” (e.g. Spanish and American colonizers), in their anger and humiliation against the Igorots for resisting subjugation.

Those of us, who were colonized mimicked the ways of the colonizers (Spanish and Americans) and took on their identity (e.g. names, language, mannerisms, ways of dressing) in what Bhabha (1990) termed as “hybridization.” It was an intellectual captivity, where people develop a warped sense of values and a distorted picture of their own reality (Constantino, 1974, 1982). Early Igorot historians transmitted their histories in the oral tradition from the spirits of the ap-apo/amam-a (elder) and/or pangat (leader), to the youth through songs and stories, customs, rituals and traditions and languages, all of which risked extinction due to the intensive pressure of extensive hybridization (Bhabha, 1990; Fiar-od, 1999).

Accounts of Filipino colonization (Botengan, 2000; Bulosan, 1943, 1973, 2002; Constantino, 1974, 1982, 1987, 1999; Reed, 1976, 1999; Scott, 1975; Strobel, 2001) have greatly influenced the ways I and many other Igorots/Filipinos have perceived our “selves.” I feel betrayed, misinformed, miseducated, misrepresented, marginalized, and am now left confused and forlorn. Seeking and re-membering my misplaced, lost, even confounded cultural and personal identity is a long and arduous struggle. Realizing now that I can unmask my falsely conjured and imposed identity is a great relief. Now, I can polish slowly and definitely welcome that long lost part of me …my cultural, and thus, a beautiful, part of my personal identity.

Theoretical background
I sought explanation from theories to help me better understand how my past has intertwined with my present to form the “colonized” part of me, now endeavoring to become “de-colonized.” Tracing through philosophical traditions, I can see that the ancient times’ belief in soul and spirit was replaced by the “independent and separate” views of Galileo and Descartes of mind and matter (i.e. mind/brain), later called the Cartesian dualism of mind/body, knower/knowledge, mental/physical, a perspective long emphasized in our Western-influenced education. Consequently, knowledge understood as emerging from the workings of the mind was considered superior to anything resulting from the influences of the body.

The goal of Western education has been directed primarily towards objective (measurable/quantifiable) knowledge, as opposed to spiritual/mental communion and a subjective holistic view of the world as envisioned by indigenous peoples. Most of us have shunned the influences of our body as an important part in the construction of our knowledge and in making meanings. In the ancient oral culture of the Igorots and perhaps most other indigenous cultures, empirical attitudes were expressed in narrative, and the rational in anecdotal songs, stories and legends. Cultural assumptions of knowing and knowledge were largely not interrogated, mostly being subjective and inter-subjective, oriented to humans and their relationship to nature, both life and non-life forms (Abram, 1996; Fiar-od, 1999; Smith, 1999).

Over emphasis by early Western theorists on objectivity almost brought about total abandonment of concerns for the life world (and inter-subjectivity) in philosophical and “real world” considerations. This life world is a “reality” that exists before we begin to analyze and describe it through theories and (objective) science. Individual life worlds may differ among cultures depending on how components of that world (e.g. humans) live and engage that world (Varela, 1999; Capra, 2002; Abram, 1996). Thus the life world of the Igorots differs from those of the Yanomani Indians of Brazil, the Masais of Africa, or the Maoris of New Zealand even if they are all indigenous cultures. This is also true of the life worlds of colonizers and the colonized. It is clear that the imposition of one’s culture, norms, values and standards on others can wreck havoc, dislocation, chaos, and irreversible hybridization as it has happened with many of the colonized (Strobel, 2001; Smith, 1999; Cajete, 2000; Bhabha, 1990).

The notion of hierarchy and dualism in the valuations of cultures (e.g. high/low, civilized/primitive, colonizer/colonized, subject/object [Battiste, 1993]) pushes us away from the interrelatedness and interdependences of living systems. In his discussion of Maturana and Varela’s *Santiago Theory of Cognition*, Capra (2002) emphasizes the notion that the living system is free to decide its course, or life’s processes. It is linked to the process of the self-generation, self-maintaining and self-emerging of living systems.
networks. Thus, for human networks, our minds and bodies are interdependent in constructing knowledge, thought and insight. Capra nicely illustrates this theory of interrelatedness and interdependency aspects of mind and matter, or cognition—the process of life, in a perfect metaphor, *the breath of life* (2002:37-38).

For many cultures around the world, a fundamental insight is that everything that exists is connected and that the “whole” enmeshes the “being” in its inclusiveness. I feel that this perspective has long been ignored in many Western cultures, and, in particular, in Western influenced education systems. Many indigenous cultures, such as the *Igorots*, express a belief in the presence of an immanence that “gives meaning to existence and forms, or a mysterious force that connects the totality of existence” (Ermine, 1995: 103). For me, to acknowledge the interrelatedness and interdependences of human and nature, human and non-human to the more-than-human world creates opportunities towards developing knowledge of “ways of knowing and being” geared towards holism, and towards a beneficial transformation of learning.

**Weaving my canvass—Vision of the future**

I must come to better know my self, actualize it, and transcend it if I am to have a life with fuller meaning. Exploring my experiences, and spiritual ramblings in the past, helps me immensely in my preparation to deal with my present and future fears and trial; in unloading the “yoke” off my shoulders; in better understanding the “present,” and in weaving a most meaningful canvass for my future. What concepts of identity and self-essence have I derived from this exploration? I have now better acquainted myself with a long lost part of me. By becoming acquainted with my self as I have in writing this essay, I feel more whole, grateful and expectant of a more beautiful me, than I have ever felt in the past. I feel better prepared to pursue a path of growth in my personal and professional life. I feel more optimistic that I can more speedily evolve into an identity I never realized was possible for me in the past. Through deep reflections and meditations, I will continue to seek refuge, strength and resolve to develop a path that is based on the holistic nature-based, subjective orientation of my Igorot culture, and on love and service to self, to fellow indigenous peoples, and to humanity.

**References**


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