

## Lost in the Retelling: Washed-out *Balitok* (Gold) in Ibaloi Generational Memory Ibaloi Diaspora into Benguet (Part 2)<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*Most Southeast Asian ethnic group histories are oral in form rather than written. The ethnolinguistic groups in the mountainous Cordillera region of Luzon, Philippines are likewise rich in epics, folklores and various other oral traditions. The Ifugao ethnolinguistic group; for instance, have the Hud Hud ni Dinulawan at Gonhadan which is an elaborate epic riddled with clues about the remote Ifugao past. The Ibaloi ethnolinguistic group meanwhile of Benguet province has also woven a vivid collection of oral traditions which adequately includes their first migrations into the southern slopes of Cordillera.*

*Although oral traditions are invaluable for the historical archaeologist, a level of caution must be exercised in dealing with oral tradition data, especially regarding its accuracy. Oral traditions are versions of events in the past that may have continually transformed as it was transmitted through several generations of an ethnolinguistic group. This paper will illustrate how oral traditions of the locations of the first settlements of the Ibaloi have downplayed the role of gold mining as an impetus, and instead have focused on wet agriculture potential as a criterion. This can be attributed to the fact that such oral traditions may function to (wittingly or unwittingly) validate present-day elite class interests and claims to*

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<sup>1</sup> See Part 1 entitled *Fording Upstream in Search for Balitok-Ibaloi Diaspora into Benguet* in *Hukay* Volume 14: 91-110.

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*status, lands, offices and other locations of prestige and power.*

*The first Ibaloi settlements in Benguet were in-fact gold mining camps located near the mountain peaks and the roughest of them. A visit to some of the oral tradition-identified early settlement localities today will show that they are not mining locations but rather leveled "fertile valley lands" ideal for wet rice agriculture. The role of Benguet gold in the early peopling of Benguet (during the 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century) together with its socio-economic and cultural practices took a back seat in the current retelling of the oral tradition.*

### **Ibaloi Baknang (Elite) Oral Tradition of Migration**

The historians Anavic Bagamaspad and Bridget Hamada-Pawid published a book on the history of Benguet and the Ibaloi people entitled *A People's History of Benguet* (1985). The book was the final synthesis of a five-year local government funded project dubbed the "Benguet History Project." The book is a compilation of the ethnohistories based on family histories of the Ibaloi in the different municipalities of Benguet. The data of the Benguet history project was primarily developed through the collection of Ibaloi oral traditions especially because no written sources on the Ibaloi prior to 1845 were available.

Data gathering was facilitated by research assistants who conducted interviews of Ibaloi Lead (*baknang* or elite) families in the different municipalities of Benguet. The Lead families are those with the following qualifications: 1) originality to the place, 2) most widely related and populous in the community, 3) bearers of traditional properties, performers of time-honoured rites and rituals, and 4) acknowledged socio-cultural-economic-political leaders of the town. They derived data on the early movements and settlements into Benguet province.

The oral tradition accounts recorded by Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid maybe skewed in favour of the Ibaloi elite since all informants interviewed were Ibaloi baknang families. The authors may have unwittingly created an "elitist history" in attempting to write a history book for the Ibaloi ethnolinguistic group collectively. It follows then that these recorded oral traditions, as recounted by the Ibaloi elite, may not be free from issues pertaining to baknang interests, claims to status, lands, offices and other locations of prestige and power.

According to the interviewed informants, early settlements were located in "fertile valleys, watered tablelands, and areas close to mining

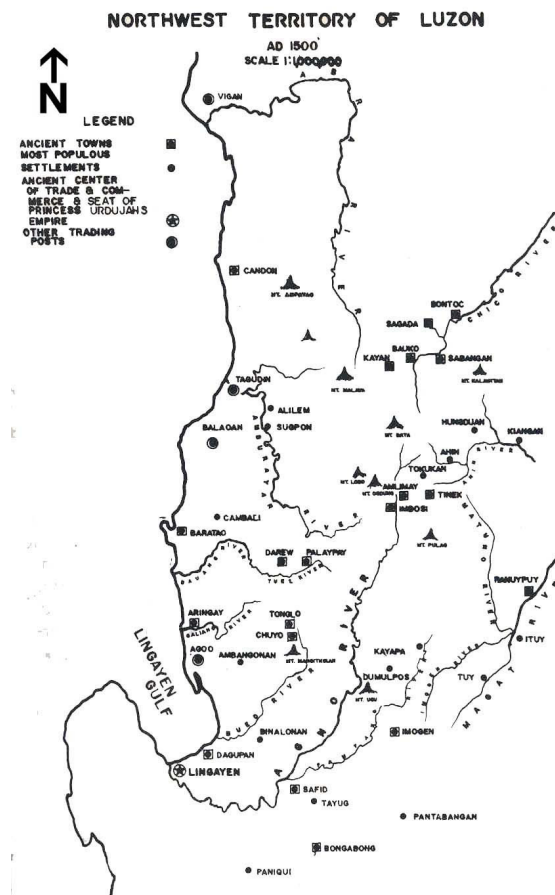


Figure 1. Map of Ibaloi early settlements (after Bagmaspad and Hamada-Pawid 1985)

sites” (Bagmaspad and Hamada-Pawid 1985). This statement leaves one perplexed as to why the Ibaloi would choose locations favourable for wet agriculture when in fact the early (13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century) settlements were in gold mining areas (rough peaks)? A review of written primary and secondary ethnohistorical sources about the Ibaloi from the Spanish and American Contact periods and even comparative upland migrations elsewhere in Southeast Asia has shown that *balitok* or gold catalysed the first migrations into Benguet. Wet agriculture only entered the Ibaloi socio-economic world in the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Bagmaspad and Hamada-Pawid found out that the Ibaloi generally believed that their ancestors originated from the Lingayen and Ilocos coastlines. Stories of the earliest movements into Benguet were most vividly recalled by Benguet history informants coming from the municipalities of Tublay, Tuba, and Kabayan. They described the

movement as a west to east movement. These early migrants moved upriver towards the Benguet area following three migration routes (see Figure 1).

The first route is through the tributaries of Aringay, and Galiano rivers ending up in Chuyo and Tonglo in Tuba municipality. The second route is through the tributaries of the Amburayan River to Darew and Palaypay in Kapangan municipality. Finally the third is through the Agno River to Imbose in the municipality of Kabayan and Amlimay in the municipality of Buguias (Bagamaspad and Pawid 1985:26-27, 42-49).

Here we see that the migration movements may have been generalised as being hydraulic (following the river). As we will see later, the accounts gathered by Prill-Brett and Salinas-Ramos (1998) from their non-elite Ibaloi informants have identified foot trails that may have been created by the first Ibaloi who migrated into Benguet.

Chuyo settlement is present-day Green Valley Country Club in Baguio-Tuba area. The location of Tonglo settlement is a mystery up to now, baffling Cordillera scholars. The search for the vestiges of this “gold bulking station” is my current research interest. Darew is present-day Gasweling in Kapangan municipality. Palaypay is present-day Pongayan also in Kapangan municipality. Imbose is in the municipality of Kabayan while Amlimay is in the adjacent municipality of Buguias.

The settlements of Darew, Chuyo and Imbose were purportedly settlements of the Ibaloi elite. Palaypay, Tonglo, and Amlimay; on the other hand, were mainly trade centres and were allegedly home to less affluent kin. Palaypay is known to be a centre for extensive trade. The settlement of Imbose is believed to have been occupied in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Imbose is the earliest remembered community in Kabayan. The Ibaloi lead families generally look to this area as their first settlement. Chuyo is the main settlement of the Tuba lead families of Milo-Kanadya.

A visit to Palaypay in Kapangan and Imbose in Kabayan has shown that these areas are primarily for wet agriculture—being located in “fertile valleys and watered tablelands” (Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid 1985). One becomes puzzled on why the accounts have identified locations that are for wet agriculture when in fact the early (13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century) settlements were in gold mining areas?

Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid (1985) say that the motivations for such initial movements were the exploitation of relatively gentle slopes with abundant water and game, and safety from intruders and in some cases epidemics. The authors then made a claim that such a reckoning of

early settlement was recounted among all the oral tradition sources across the thirteen Benguet municipalities.

We have to be reminded at this point that the early migration accounts, according to the authors were “most vividly recalled by Benguet history informants coming from the municipalities of Tublay, Tuba, and Kabayan” (Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid 1985). What may be seen here then is the creation of a generalised (ethnolinguistic) group history for all thirteen municipalities based on accounts from only three municipalities.

### **Oral Traditions by Less Affluent Ibaloi**

June Prill-Brett and Tala Salinas-Ramos (1998) conducted work on Tuba municipality ethnohistory utilising non-elite oral accounts of family histories in their work. A total of four migration periods have been ascertained from the interviews. The initial migration was a pre-1500 peopling from the west and southwest plains of Pangasinan following the rivers Aringay-Galiano, Naguilian, Bued, Angalacan, and Agno (see Figure 2). This may bear semblance to the earlier one presented by Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid; Prill-Brett and Salinas-Ramos’ work however, further elaborates on the southwestern early peopling movement as follows:

Some recollections of early migrations are associated with river systems. From the coastal plains of northwestern Luzon, movements were into fertile river valleys or close to gold mining sites of the southern cordillera (Benguet) through three main drainage systems: The southwest Aringay and Galiano rivers into the Mangitkiran range to Chuyo and Tonglo, and surrounding settlements in Tuba and Sablan. The Agno River from Lingayen, Pangasinan, ascending initially into Baloy in Itogon, and further inland into Imbose in Kabayan, and to Amlimay in Buguias. (Prill-Brett and Salinas-Ramos 1998:17)

They also say that early mountain trails used as migration routes from the southwest into Benguet were the very same routes which the Spanish punitive expeditions into Benguet followed hundreds of years later. Prill-Brett and Salinas-Ramos also identified two pre-Hispanic trails that connected the south to the coastal plains of La Union:

Both pass through the municipality of Tuba, one originating from Tubao passing through Pitogan-Bukiagan-Lamtang, then Banget (La Trinidad). The other starts from Naguilian and goes through Galiano-Ampusa-Lamtang then to Banget. A third entry point is through the municipality of Sablan—originating from coastal Aringay, passing through Galiano-Ampusa-Betwang-Yagyagan-Pinalyog then into Pugis... (part of La Trinidad) (Prill-Brett and Salinas-Ramos 1998:17)

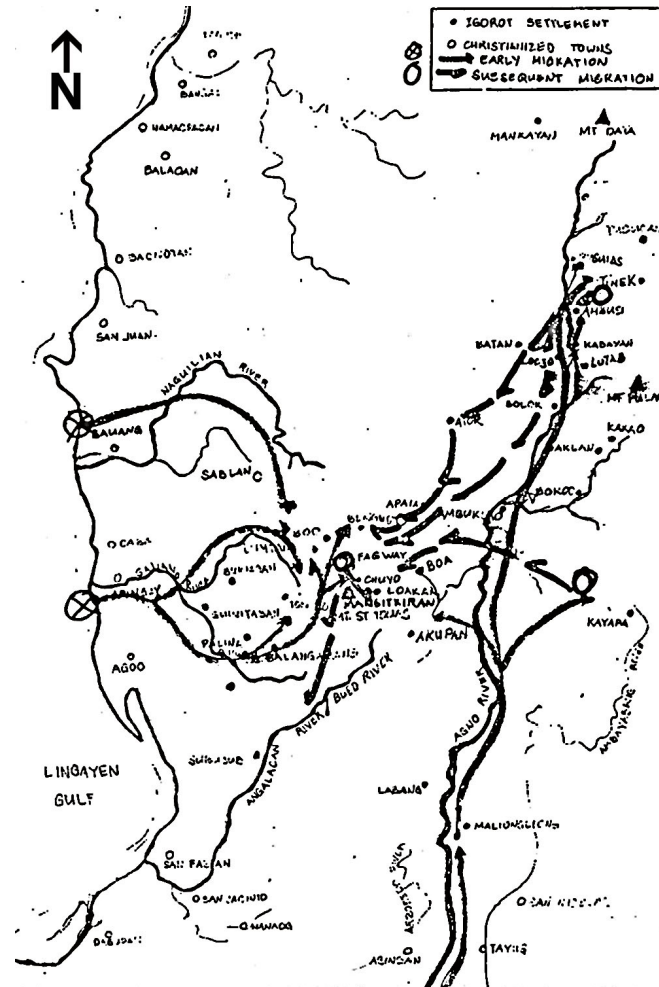


Figure 2. Map of Ibaloi early settlements. (after Prill-Brett and Salinas-Ramos 1998)

Although Prill-Brett and Salinas-Ramos utilised non-elite informants in their research, most of their data followed cadence with Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid's (1985) earlier work. This is interesting because here we see the adoption of an Ibaloi ethnolinguistic "group history" which is again based on the published Ibaloi Baknang (elite) accounts.

### The Limits of Oral Traditions of Migration/Origins

The oral traditions of an ethnolinguistic group are important as a point of entry into any historical research of the group. Oral traditions tell the modern scholar which questions to pursue; therefore, it must be explored at the onset of the research. Oral traditions are irreplaceable; not

only because the information would be lost otherwise, but also because they are inside information uttered by sources in the group. They are an intimate “history of the natives”—interpreted and spoken by the natives themselves.

However, oral traditions are historiologies of the past or accounts of how people have interpreted the past. It is a continuing reflection meant to establish what in the past, believed to be real, was relevant to the present. The Ibaloi regularly hold an *Ul-nong*, which is a meeting where they discuss their oral histories:

We discuss what we remember and we correct ourselves immediately when we have wrong data. More importantly, our stories help us discover new information which our respective families now keep for our new generations. (Pungayan quoted in Cabreza 2010:A9)

One is left to wonder, who gets to determine what information will be deleted, revised, or retained in the collective Ibaloi oral history during the *Ul-nong*? Such meetings may not be free from the phenomenon known as “group-think” which has been studied fully by sociologists specialising in group dynamics (Janis 1972).

Jan Vansina (1985) has shown that oral traditions must be treated as expressions of generalisations rather than statements of actual observations of events or situations. The researcher should mesh out the logical constructs and cosmological representations from oral tradition accounts because they may have been condensed beyond easy recognition. This is especially true for genesis and origin accounts.

Origin accounts/migration stories should be treated as cosmologies because they are infused with a people’s ontology (how do they view reality?), cultural values and modes of life. The use of logic (deductive or inferential reasoning) is very much evident in these stories including that of peopling. Oral traditions include information on early environments, settlements, migrations, marriages, and meanings of words and phenomena which are safeguarded beyond the generation it happened so that it can be recalled whenever a person, marriage, or village is in question. Such a need usually arises when matters concerning the descendants, later marriages, or heirlooms are discussed. It lays foundation to contemporary rights over land, resources, women, offices, herds, and others.

The Ibaloi early settlement accounts would favour a perspective from the landed Ibaloi (agricultural field owners). Oral traditions should be

understood in the practical context of the Ibaloi Baknang defending their stake or claim of ancestral lands. The need for this is highlighted even more upon passing into law of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997, which awards Certificates of Ancestral Domain Claims (CADCs) and Certificate of Ancestral Land Claims (CALCs) to indigenous peoples who may be able to use oral tradition in justifying occupation of lands since “time immemorial” (Republic of the Philippines and Congress of the Philippines 1997). Interestingly, Augusto Gatmaytan (2007:) warns us of a danger set into motion by the IPRA: “we need to look into how specific actors in specific settings exercise their agency in pursuit of their respective rights or interests.”

The Baknang oral traditions of the initial (13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century) settlement sites “project” the recent 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century agricultural milieu into the past in order to lay foundation for present-day ancestral land-claims. This resulted to the downplay of the role of gold mining as an impetus to the Ibaloi initial migrations.

Historical archaeology will now play an all important role in re-instating gold extraction as the main engine that drove the earliest Ibaloi migrations into Benguet. The Benguet Archaeological Surveys of 2008 will be discussed in the final part entitled “Refining *Balitok*: The Ibaloi Early Settlements Systematic Archaeological Surveys. Ibaloi Diaspora into Benguet (Part 3)” to be published in *Hukay 16*.

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