

# WOMEN'S LIVES IN AN ETHNIC COMMUNITY: A PROFILE OF THE SAMOKI

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## **Introduction**

Samoki in the Mountain Province is traditionally noted for its pottery and its weaving. I have had many occasions to stay in the area for the past two years, gathering data on these indigenous activities. Since potters and weavers in Samoki are women, my relations with them have progressed beyond mere rapport and a number of the informants have become my good friends. I have observed their way of life closely, participated in many of their activities, listened to their problems and sympathized, shared their good harvest and was glad for them. A baby I used to hold in my arms is now running happily about, as naked and as grimy as the rest of the neighborhood kids.

Many of the ways of the Bontoc in Samoki were new and strange to me. I have asked questions about these strange ways to help me understand. One of these is the way the women worked so hard while their men sat around and chatted with each other most of the day. I kept my opinions to myself and was careful not to show my resentment of the shabby way they treated women. What really puzzled me was that the women did not seem to mind their subservient role. I've always wanted to find out whether this apparent acceptance was genuine.

This study therefore was a welcome opportunity for me not only to satisfy my curiosity but more importantly, to help me and my readers to understand the ways in which the Samoki woman is similar to or different from other women.

The capital of Mountain Province is Bontoc, which was also the capital of the old Mountain Province. Bontoc proper lies approximately 164 kilometers from Baguio City and is accessible from that point by bus through the Halsema Highway referred to by the mountain people as "Mountain Trail". Travelling time from Baguio to Bontoc is eight hours over a bumpy, narrow road which follows the precipitous mountain terrain. There are two other routes to Bontoc

through the Kalinga-Apayao, and through the Ifugao-Bontoc road which starts off from the southeast in Banaue, Ifugao through the Mount Polis ranges. Bontoc has long been the crossroad in the heart of the Cordilleras.

Samoki is about four kilometers east of Bontoc across the Chico River which serves as a natural boundary between the two sister villages which are called *ili*. Samoki and Bontoc lie side by side on a valley floor, protected by tall, forested mountains from strong winds, storms, and until recently, enemy tribes. One is provided with a panoramic view of the Bontoc poblacion as viewed from all points in Samoki. Twelve kilometers to the south is Talubin which lies along a narrow river; eight kilometers northwest of Samoki is Tucocan while Can-ao lies 18 kilometers over steep mountains along the Tanudan River.

Samoki lies on the slopes of a mountain range and is slightly elevated from the flat valley floor. One enters Samoki through elevated walkways which are really the top of dikes cutting through ricefields, making them passable only by foot. Tricycles will take you along the road up to where the cemented walkway ends and you go by foot the rest of the way.

### **The Samoki Woman Today**

The Samoki woman has warm brown skin and dark brown-black eyes to go with her almost jet-black hair. She walks ramrod straight, a posture habit developed over the years since childhood, balancing all types of load on her head. She wears a skirt called the *lufid*, wrapped around her lower body from the waist to the knee and tucked under a belt called *wakes*. The skirt has many variations in design, all colorful and intricate and she takes pride in the fact that she is able to weave any and all of the design variations on her back-strap loom. Her mother taught her how to weave when she was a very young girl because it was, and still is, the mark of a "good" woman to be able to weave her own *lufid* and her husband's *wanes* which is the traditional loin cloth of the Bontoc men. Today, weaving has become a steady source of income, more reliable than her husband's occasional earnings from intermittent carpentry work. She keeps her cash to pay for her children's schooling and her family's clothing needs. Traditional handwoven dress is now worn only on "special" occasions such as weddings and festivals and also for attending Sunday services. There was a time when the Samoki woman wore nothing else besides her *lufid* and *wakes*. She was bare breasted and unshod. With the introduction of Christianity also come the concept of modesty and propriety so that today, the Samoki woman wears a blouse to go with her *lufid* and *wakes*,

underwear and shoes. For daily wear, she goes around in a cotton dress and wears rubber slippers when stepping out of her house.

Part of her traditional outfit is a crown of colorful beads collectively called *ap-pong* which she inherited from her mother and which someday she will pass on to her own daughter. These beads are made of polished agate, glass and porcelain and are very valuable. Many times she has been tempted to sell her *ap-pong* but her fear of the consequences has always been stronger than her need for cash. It is taboo to sell one's heirloom which was handed to her by her mother when she was married, as is the custom in Samoki. Custom dictates, even today, that man and wife bring into their union their individual properties, personal and real, which they inherit from their respective parents of the same sex. Husband inherits from father, wife inherits from mother. Although these remain their own individual properties for life, both share all obligations and benefits from such properties. The Samoki woman feels a deep sense of self-worth from the practice which tends to level the material status of man and wife.

The *ap-pong* is not only an adornment but serves the purpose of holding the Samoki woman's long hair neatly piled up in place at the crown of her head. The older woman wears her *ap-pong* all day long, removing them only for her daily bath and when she retires at night. The colorful beads stand out as she works in the fields, bobbing up and down amidst a landscape of green or golden sheaves of palay, depending on the time of the year. The older woman prefers to wear her *lufid* rather than the cotton dresses worn by the younger woman. She has no qualms about removing her blouse when she works in the fields not only for her comfort but also so that her blouse will not be dirtied. Her upper chest and her arms down to her wrists are adorned with intricate tattoo marks which curiously echo the elevated patches of kamote she tends on the mountainsides. She is proud of her tattoo marks which is in full display when she dances during festivals. Igorot dancing is articulated by arm and hand movements from start to finish. Her *ap-pong* distinguishes her from the women of the other tribes in the Cordilleras and her tattoo marks announce her warrior lineage.

The Samoki woman today does not don her *ap-pong* daily because it does not go with her cotton dress and her arms are unmarked because she would rather not go through the pain of tattooing. The young Samoki woman on the other hand sports "fashionable" shorter hair which is not suited for the *ap-pong*. She is of the belief that the *ap-pong* is only for "older" women. She refuses to be tattooed because it is "old-fashioned" and would mark her for life. She cannot imagine herself strolling down Session Road

on occasional visits to Baguio, with tattoo marks on her arms which others do not have. She prefers to look like "everyone" else.

## Childhood

The life of the Samoki female used to begin auspiciously enough after her entry into the world when she was given her birthright in a ceremony, part of which was the offering of prayers along with a *sangkhap*, the all-important trowel each and every Samoki woman must have as part of her personal equipment. The counterpart for baby boys was the *khaman* or head axe. With Christianization, such a practice was discontinued along with the practice of head hunting. Still, the Samoki woman's constant companion today is the *sangkhap* which she uses for digging the soil, planting rice seedlings, cleaning her kamote patch and weeding the ricefields.

Samoki children are brought up in a general atmosphere of permissiveness. By the time they reach the age of six, they are taught to behave properly and to do their share in household chores. Girls are usually assigned more chores than the boys because it is accepted that girls are more responsible than boys because "boys will be boys." This soft attitude towards boys is shared by Samoki women of all ages, starting with the young girls to the old women. Misbehavior on the part of boys is considered a part of growing up and therefore girls are expected to be tolerant of them. Household chores are learned by the girls from their mothers. They help their mothers feed the pigs and the chickens, fetch water for cooking from the common faucet and drinking water from the nearby spring, and tend babies while their mothers are out in the ricefields or up on the mountains gathering kamote vines for pig food. Samoki mothers are away for the most part of the day working in the fields so that the village is often left in the care of old women too weak to work in the fields or climb up the mountains and of little girls too young to do the same. It is a common sight to see little girls carrying their wards almost as big as they in blankets slung and tied across their seemingly frail bodies while feeding the chickens and the pigs. They are also expected to feed their siblings when mother cannot return at mid-day.

Farming activities are taught to little girls by their mothers, for it is the Samoki woman who is largely responsible for rice production and vegetable gardening. Older girls are encouraged to assist the younger ones while they are still learning. This practice strengthens the strong sense of cooperation and camaraderie among the women of Samoki.

A graphic example of the Samoki mindset regarding gender is the way the parts of cooked ritual chicken are distributed. The head and wings are served to the boys because they must be fast think-

ers and speedy of foot. The back of the chicken goes to the girls because they need strength to work hard and to carry heavy loads.

### **Adolescence, Courtship and Marriage**

The onset of menstruation called *lig-la* or *kachawyan* marks the Samoki girls' entrance into adolescence. There are no special rituals to accompany the event. On the contrary, a girl is instructed by her mother not to tell anyone else that she is menstruating for the first time. She washes her underwear and soiled cotton napkins when nobody is looking.

The Samoki woman still remembers how afraid she was when she first menstruated for no one had warned her about it. When she finally gathered the courage to tell her mother, she was told that there was nothing to be afraid of as long as she faithfully observed the taboos associated with menstruation. It was explained to her that menstruation was a sign that she is now *magmaokit*, a marriageable woman capable of childbearing. She was admonished not to plant rice or kamote while menstruating because the rice would rot and the kamote would not bear healthy fruit. She was also warned not to take a bath during menstrual periods lest she suffer chills which could be fatal. The importance of being clean at all times even without benefit of a bath was impressed upon her.

The older woman of Samoki had gone through the same experience and admonitions herself. In her case the onset of menstruation had another dimension no longer practised today. Her change of status from child to *magmaokit* marked her acceptance into the *olog*, a dormitory for girls of marriageable age. She goes to the *olog* at dusk after completing her household and farming chores, sleeps the night and returns to her parents' home at dawn. In the *olog*, she learned the facts of life that prepared her for marriage and motherhood. She learned about how to behave before the men in the village and she learned about sexual intercourse and the biological process of reproduction. The *olog* functioned as an institution where each Samoki girl blossomed into womanhood amid the strong camaraderie provided by peers and older girls under the watchful eye of either a spinster or a widow.

Young men, who had their own clubhouse called the *ator* which exists until today, courted the young ladies in the *olog*. The old women still remember what thrill it was when the boys came to call at night and they would sing their *salidom-ay*. Once a couple decided to be married soon, the young man was allowed to sleep beside his betrothed and to have intimate relations with her. The parents of the betrothed were advised of such relations by the older

girls of the *olog* and pressure was brought upon the couple to get married especially if the girl should become pregnant, for to have an illegitimate child resulted in ostracism within the community.

The *olog* no longer exists today and the old women of Samoki are the last to belong to the *olog* generation. The old women attribute Christianization as the factor for the abandonment of the *olog* although up to now they do not agree that the *olog* system was "immoral". Sexual relations with a betrothed was considered the first step in the marriage ritual and a young girl slept only with the man she had previously consented to marry. After they had slept together for the first time, it was the custom for the couple to live together as man and wife for seven days in either of their parents' house. Each day a ritual was performed and the wedding feast called *cañao* would take place on the seventh day.

The young woman of Samoki today learns about menstruation, sexual intercourse and human reproduction within the clinical walls of the schoolroom. While the older generation of women can talk about the same things with candor, the younger woman tends to be reticent and apologetic. In spite of the fact that young women learn about the facts of life in school, their mothers insist that custom and tradition be followed so long as they are not contrary to Christian practice. Taboos attendant to menstruation are still imposed on the younger women who in spite of themselves, grudgingly obey. They fear the consequence even if they look upon the taboos as "superstition".

Courtship practices among the young in Samoki today involve regular visits to the girl's house. Pre-marital sex is now frowned upon and the betrothed may only live together after the wedding feast. Traditional rituals prior to the wedding are still followed as well as the unwritten laws governing inheritance that take effect upon marriage. Christian wedding ceremonies have taken the place of the traditional ritual that used to mark the union of a man and a woman.

Custom has always dictated that the young woman may freely select whom she wishes to marry although parents and relatives exert their influence on her.

### **Conception, Pregnancy, Childbirth**

Non-occurrence of menstruation and a craving for unusual, especially sour foods are understood as sure signs of *i-naw* or conception. Strangely enough even the "schooled" younger woman depends on the older women to judge whether or not she is pregnant based on these traditional signs, even if the nearby provincial hospital offers free pregnancy tests.

Once pregnancy has been established, customary taboos are imposed and followed strictly for fear of abortion or other misfortunes. A pregnant woman is not allowed to

- go out alone in the fields between the hours of ten in the morning until noontime (the bad *anitu* are believed to be roaming about during these hours);
- take a bath downstream (somebody may be bathing upstream and difficult delivery might result);
- take a bath at sunrise (the baby will be an albino);
- go near hot or cold springs (these are believed to be the residence of spirits who might cause difficult delivery and/or physical deformities);
- sleep near windows (an invisible bird spirit is believed to feed on the hearts of the unborn and the newly born);
- look up at fruitbearing trees (fruit trees will either stop bearing fruits or wither completely); and
- travel outside the territorial boundaries of the village (strange spirits might follow her home and bring disaster upon the village).

Pregnancy, in spite of the concomitant taboos imposed, is generally a pleasant period for the Samoki woman. Her husband, family and friends treat her with more care and kindness, assisting her in her daily chores and heavy loads. It is also the time when everyone goes out of his way not to displease her in any way and her caprices are tolerated in good humor because of her condition.

Even today, it is not clear to the Samoki woman how due date for delivery is determined. In the past, it was next to impossible to do so because a month meant one lunar month. Today, it is generally accepted that the fetus takes nine calendar months to mature. Since the occurrence of pregnancy cannot be pinpointed with accuracy, Samoki women base their estimation on the way the swollen stomach appears. When the bulge descends from its usual position, they assume that delivery will occur at any moment. The pregnant woman at this time does not stray far from her house.

When labor pains begin, she walks around and keeps busy. The women in her family start to cook black-eyed beans called *itab* with lots of water and a small slab of salted pork called *inasin* as broth which the new mother will take after delivery. *Itab* is believed to possess medicinal value in hastening recovery of strength and good lactation. Until recently the *fachifat*, a pair of long cane grass sticks, were placed on both sides of the doorway at this time as a sign that no one outside the kin group may enter the house. This

was done to prevent bad luck. This practice is no longer observed today although no one can seem to remember when or why this happened.

The *inchawat* or *partera*, the traditional childbirth specialist, is called in to assist in the delivery. If the *inchawat* feels that the labor is not progressing well, she asks for an *in-ina* to be called in. The *in-ina* is an old woman who is believed to possess *sup-ok*, the power to heal. She performs the *wal-lit*, a ritual offering to call the good *anitu* to help ease the delivery of the baby. The old women of Samoki claim that the *wal-lit* of the *in-ina* has always worked.

The word *inchawat* literally means "to catch", which is exactly what the *inchawat* does with the baby when it finally comes out. The *inchawat* cuts the umbilical cord with a *langkit*, a thin sliver of bamboo. The use of any bladed instrument is discouraged because of the possibility of infection. The old women however claim that the custom is practised so that the baby will not grow up to be naughty and quarrelsome.

After childbirth is the period of *inkemen* for the new mother when she is forbidden to leave the house and to engage in activities usually done by a wife and mother such as cooking, feeding the pigs, going out to the fields. The period of *inkemen* lasts for five days within which she is also not allowed to sleep near her husband nor to entertain any strangers. During the first day of the *inkemen* she must go to the river to take a bath, taking care not to talk to any strangers along the way. If her delivery occurs during the rice planting period, she must wash her hair down one side only, so that she will not bring bad luck to her people's crop. The end of the *inkemen* is marked on the fifth day by a *mangmang*, the ritual offering and butchering of a chicken.

The *mangmang* is performed by men only, usually the husband. In the absence of a male, a widow may perform the ritual. No one can explain the reason for this. This has always been the custom; custom as far as the *mangmang* is concerned, is not questioned.

After the five days of *inkemen*, the new mother resumes her routine and everything in the household returns to normal. Her husband expects normal sexual relations as soon as her post-delivery bleeding has stopped. She breastfeeds her baby, but on days when she is away in the ricefields, the baby is given ahm water in a feeding bottle by a sibling. When her baby is still very small, the Samoki woman rushes home at mid-day to give her breast to her baby then rushes back to the fields again.

Birth control is not practised in Samoki and they leave everything in God's hands. It is a common joke among Samoki women

that the only form of birth control they use is liquor which Samoki men seem to have a strong liking for. Nights find many of the men imbibing while they sit around the *ator*. The women say that by the time they get home, their men are too drunk to be interested in sex.

An ordinary day for the Samoki woman starts at dawn. Before daybreak, she cooks a simple breakfast of rice and *safeng*, a sour fermented vegetable mix which is believed to be nutritious. The little ones are fed and she prepares what she needs for the day's work in the ricefields. The rising sun finds her well on her way with a daughter and her female neighbors, hiking to a ricefield about eight kilometers away from Samoki. They reach their destination where they will stay all day working until the sun is on its way down. The rice stalks are heavy with grains still green as they pull out the weeds that have grown thick along the terraced walls and along the sides of the paddies ankle deep in water. From planting seeds in the seedbed, cultivating the soil, transplanting seedlings to the ricefields, weeding, scaring away birds that prey on the precious grain, up until harvest, the Samoki women are responsible for every stage of rice production. The men repair the terrace walls, take care of irrigation and help in the harvest.

The Samoki women stop long enough to eat their packed lunch, usually kamote shoots boiled with some *inasin*. Dusk is a sight to behold in Samoki. Women of all ages are hurrying home from all directions bearing all sorts of things on their head, their favorite manner of carrying their load. The women coming from the ricefields carry round baskets with their trowels, knives and empty lunch baskets. Others coming from the mountains are loaded down with huge clumps of kamote vines for the pigs. And still some carry firewood gathered from high up on the mountaintop. They bathe quickly as soon as they reach home and shortly afterwards, prepare dinner for their families. Dinner is vegetable with *inasin* or sometimes chicken.

On rainy days or rest days called *tengao*, the Samoki woman weaves or makes the pots her village is noted for. She sells these items at the public market or to some traders who come from as far away as Bangued in Abra. On such days, she gets to socialize with the other women in the neighborhood. They call out to each other for the latest gossip as they weave. The houses are clustered closely so that it is possible to hold conversations without leaving their houses. Their workshop is the ground floor under their houses.

### **Old Age, Death**

The old woman of Samoki today can only guess at her age since there was no calendar reckoning when she was born. Cessa-

tion of menstruation called *tep-ped*, is a signal that a woman can no longer bear children and can do certain things that she was not allowed to do before *tep-ped*. For one, she can now weave the *ka-in*, the special *lufid* worn in death by Samoki women and the *chinangtar*, the loin cloth worn in death by Samoki men. She can now also perform the rituals that are always done before planting and harvesting rice. If she is a widow, she can also perform the *mangmang*.

As long as she is still strong enough, the old woman still works in the ricefields along with the younger women. Since many young people of Samoki have found occupations in places far away from their village, more old women are now forced to fend for themselves even when they are no longer strong enough. The old woman who is no longer capable of working, takes care of the little children who are left behind in the village when their mothers are away in the ricefields or in the mountains. At this point in time, the daughter of the old woman commissions another old woman to weave a death *lufid* for the mother because it is now only a matter of time before she dies.

When the old woman draws her last breath, it is believed that she will become an *anitu*, a good one. Younger people would like to believe that she will go to heaven, but they are ambivalent about this, because the older folks, in spite of their new religion, believe that the dead go to a spirit world to guard and protect the loved ones they leave behind as well as the material things entrusted to them.

## Perceptions

From the moment a Samoki female is born, her destiny is already ordained — to be a giver of life. "*Mang-biag*" — an Ilocano term which means "to give life" — is the simple but all-encompassing word the old woman of Samoki uses to answer the question — what is a woman? She realizes and takes pride in her responsibilities to the community and to her ancestry as the transmitter of tradition, the provider of rice, and as the progenitor. Her husband's role is to protect her and the children, for his stature as a man goes hand in hand with his prowess as warrior. She does not talk about love. The word she uses is *inlayad* — to like. Her husband chose her to be his wife because she is a "good" woman — strong, capable of bearing children and comes from a good family. She married because not to do so would have brought shame to her family. It is her duty as wife to bear children as expected of her by her husband and the community. Her husband is expected to participate in all *ator* activities — hunting, protecting territorial rights, making war, keeping peace, participating in discussions and deci-

sions affecting community life. Menstruation, copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause are all biological processes with attendant rites and taboos which are followed without question. Old age is a time of waning and waiting. Her strength begins to ebb and she misses her *payew* — her ricefield — now being worked by her daughters for she has become too weak to do the same. She also misses her vegetable gardens and her favorite spot in the forested mountains where she and her friends used to gather firewood. She is disturbed at how the young women of the village seem not to care much for custom and tradition. She blames their schooling as the culprit for this unfortunate attitude. In her eyes, the young maidens of Samoki are not worthy of womanhood. And so she waits for death to come — gladly, says she. She has no wish to see the day when the Samoki she knows will be no more.

The young woman of Samoki likes to see herself as "modern" and not "old-fashioned". If her parents can afford it, she prefers to go to college so she can have a job as a source of regular income. She seems not to have any violent objections at having to work in the ricefields but she questions why it is the woman who has to do so much work while the man hardly does anything but while away his time in the *ator* with the rest of the menfolk "just chatting" and drinking. She likes weaving because of the cash returns. Her concept of being a woman is being a wife and mother, at the same time holding a job which may be full time or part time. She talks about romantic love as her basis for selecting a future husband. More importantly, she wants a husband who will be willing to work in the fields and who will have regular, even if seasonal, job contracts. She believes that working in the fields and vegetable gardens is not a woman's job. She has no objection to planting the rice seedbeds and even transplanting for she too believes and values the traditional concept of the woman as "*mang-biag*". But she strongly believes that a man must share the rest of the chores. Samoki women age before their time, she claims, because of too many responsibilities.

The young woman of Samoki inspite of being born and bred a Christian and inspite of her "modern" attitude is intimidated by taboos. Inspite of herself, she dares not go against customary restrictions for fear of incurring the displeasure of both the *anitu* and the older folks of the village. She is not wont to talk about sex as candidly as her elders. She sees menstruation as a bothersome but necessary part of the reproductive cycle and menopause as the start of old age.

The Samoki woman is caught between the old woman and the young woman. She is basically of the same persuasion as the old

woman in everything, but at the same time, she sympathizes with the restless and impatient young woman, especially her resentment about the apparent inequality of the distribution of labor. Still she cautions the young woman about the virtues of obedience and patience. She is cognizant of the fact that change is inevitable especially when the generation older than they will have all gone.

## Conclusion

The concept of womanhood among the women of Samoki is on the brink of evolution. Already, the fundamentals of change have made their presence felt. Christianization, schooling, commercialism, even mass media have reached the village. The young are aware of how their counterparts elsewhere in the country live and what their values are. In many ways, they have begun to adopt many things outside of their own culture. In dress, speech, behavior and in dreams and aspirations, the young Samoki woman is beginning to be more and more like her lowland sister.

Still it will probably take at least three more generations to effect substantial change in the lives of the women of Samoki. In spite of the deluge of extraneous stimuli, the concept of womanhood among the women of Samoki is still firmly rooted in tradition. The persistence of tradition is anchored on two formidable determinants — the belief system and the rice culture.

The Samoki Bontoc believes in the potency of the *anitu*, the spirits of his dead ancestors. Even Christianity, for all its mighty force, has not made a dent on traditional belief. Christianity is tolerated but has not been integrated into the native consciousness precisely because of the belief in the *anitu*.

Rice production in Samoki is the very essence of life. Tradition is bound to the seasons of growth and dormancy. The milestones of a woman's life attain almost magical portent in their relation to rice production. Since ricefields are inherited in one continuous line of descent, they are directly linked to ancestors, and therefore to neglect the ricefields is a desecration of ancestry. It is no wonder then and justly so, that the woman of Samoki, who is the traditional keeper of the ricefields, should perceive herself as "giver of life".

The Samoki man, on the other hand, lives in a limbo and has become a nowhere man. There are no more tribal wars to fight, buying meat in the market is more practical than hunting game. Not too long ago, the hunter-warrior was away most of the time, the wife taking care of fields and the family while he gallantly fought to keep away the enemy. Today, his traditional role is no longer relevant but he has not yet found an alternative to fill the gap. In the meantime,

he whiles away the endless idle hours, sitting around in the *ator* shooting the breeze with the rest of the menfolk.

While her man sits out his life, pathetically watching the Samoki world go by, the Samoki woman continues to nurture her progeny — the earth and her children. She is the quitesence of survival in Samoki. And she knows it.