

RUNNING THIN

a report on the chico river dam project

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"... it has always been our earnest concern that human rights conditions in my country be fully known by the other peoples of the world. Respect for human dignity is after all the bedrock on which our present government is founded, and the record of our government is open to the scrutiny of all."

-- President Ferdinand Marcos  
3 June 1978

In the northern Philippines, a mountainous region populated by tribal people, the conflict between traditional values and the mandate of a developing state is threatening to erupt into wide scale violence. The dispute turns on the question of the government's desire to augment energy supplies with hydro-electric power and the native culture's claim that the dam, the Chico River Hydro-Electric Project, will destroy their way of life.

Historically, the people of the Chico River, known as Bontocs upstream and Kalingas further north, are the freest of the many groups which comprise the Philippine nation. According to William Henry Scott, a noted anthropologist and historian of the area, the mountain folk or Igorots, have successfully defended their culture against repeated waves of Spanish and American colonizers, Japanese invaders, and central governments. The result is a culture intimately linked to the land and fiercely independent in a manner which the often subjugated lowlanders find difficult to understand. The steady attempts of the government to construct power dams and thereby dislocate thousands of Kalingas and Bontocs is perhaps the most serious threat the Igorots have ever faced. "Already the social fabric of the Kalinga cultural community is being strained to the breaking point as townmate is set against townmate, brother against brother, and father against son."

On the government side, the dam makes complete sense. The project is designed to provide energy for rural Luzon, the most populous region in the country. The decision to construct a series of four dams along the Chico River goes back to surveys conducted by the National Power Corporation (NPC) in 1965. At that time, however, the social and economic costs of the project were deemed prohibitive and the idea was tabled. With the oil price rise of 1973 the project began to look more feasible. The Philippines imports 97% of its oil and it has been estimated that US\$ 39 million could be saved annually if the two largest dams in the project were completed. The go ahead was given to NPC engineers in 1973 and funding was secured through the World Bank.

Up to the present time no construction has begun and the resources of the government have been focused on subduing the vigorous opposition of the people located in the dam areas.

Leaders known as 'pangats,' stress their unalterable opposition to any government relocation attempt. The issue at stake for them is survival - spiritual and physical. Compounding the innate fear of losing the land of their ancestors are repeated claims of heavy-handed actions by government agencies in the affected villages. The opposition has thus far led to the postponement of efforts to build three of the four dams. The fourth, Chico IV, is being pursued in the province of Kalinga-Apayao.

A recent visit to the dam site and several affected barrios confirmed the growing hostility of the people toward the project.

A priest in the area noted the major sources of the opposition, the primary one being the almost religious devotion the people attach to their ancestral lands. The land is their life, for them, life is synonymous with the land." Another aspect is the rice terraces which cover the landscape of the mountains. These were built over several generations and are passed from

father to son. One pangat put it this way, "When the stone walls of our rice terraces were built there was a prayer that they would never be sold to outsiders... if they are sold we believe we will die." A third reason is found in the ancestral graves, which are regarded as sacred and never be disturbed. Finally, in the tropical lowlands the heat would be prohibitive, whereas the mountain climate is unusually temperate.

To date, numerous petitions and delegations for an audience with the president have failed to elicit much response. The two forces have continued on their own path. At every stage the government has been accused of bad faith in its dealing with the people and relations have deteriorated steadily.

The Chico IV area covers some five barrios and would immediately dislocate about 5,000 persons. At this time the government efforts at providing suitable relocation sites is limited to the construction of 30 western-style homes in a lowland area north of the dam site near Tabuk. The terms are good: a house and three hectares of rice land free to those who accept. The housing, although adequate by western standards, is inappropriate for Kalingas who are used to pine and bamboo not concrete. Also, the rice offer means a switch from varied agriculture to a money economy, a switch considered disastrous in terms of Kalinga - Igorot culture.

At the relocation site another problem was discovered. Mr. Banuya, the PANAMIN representative at the site, admitted that the National Power Company had not yet paid for the completed houses and occupancy was delayed indefinitely. Compounding these uncertainties in the eyes of area residents is the experience of other Igorots who have been displaced by earlier dam projects in the province of Benguet and are still awaiting suitable relocation facilities.

Tomiangan is one of the affected barrios. The sitio I visited is located in the middle of a hill across from the Chico River and almost directly on the dam site. It is an area rich in fruit, tree, coffee, and rice. The people are worried. At a meeting, one of the men stated, "if the soldiers see us with you they will come and take us to the barracks. They will accuse us of getting outside help for our problems." It was said that the Philippine Constabulary (PC) detachment has orders to deny access to any foreigners along the Chico. The people claim that their every move is watched because Tomiangan has a reputation for opposition to the project. My host asserted he would not move but clearly his companion are frightened by the presence of the soldiers.

The air is laden with the anticipation of an inevitable clash unless one of the sides retreats from its position. The battalion in question, the 60th, is a veteran of the protracted civil war in the south between the government and Muslim rebels. They were stationed in the area in late 1977 succeeding a previous battalion which first entered the province in November 1976. It was observed that the province does indeed have the appearance of a military zone - complete with check points and wandering patrols of heavily armed soldiers.

The militarization of the province followed earlier governments attempts to convince residents to accept the decision on the dam. At every step there was significant opposition. In Cagaloan, Pasil, for example, the government agency charged with dealing with minorities, PANAMIN (Presidential Assistant for National Minorities), began a campaign to gather support by offering large sums of money to local pangats. Anastacio Dalowog, the barrio captain, reported that Secretary Manuel Elizalde of PANAMIN, "forced every barrio captain of Pasil to accept P500." Dalowog's reply to Elizalde was unequivocal, "No sir, we would rather die in our place than be moved." In another area PANAMIN is accused of supplying arms to one village which was feuding with an opposition barrio. The two, Basao and But-but, have since patched up hostilities through the traditional peace-pact system of the region but not without loss of life.

Significantly, the only time the leaders of the area have had the opportunity to speak directly with the President was during a conference in Manila organized by PANAMIN. The conference, held in December 1975, resulted in a controversial document signed by the leaders approving the dam project. President Marcos praised their "great personal sacrifice" and the project appeared to be on its way. Upon returning from Manila, however, the delegates accused PANAMIN of coercion and rescinded their agreement.

While visiting in Cagaloan, further downstream than Tomiangan but also slated for destruction, the tension was almost palpable. A man had recently been forced out of his house at gunpoint by soldiers. His body was found riddled with bullets the next day. A de-facto curfew has been imposed in the village, according to a resident, "Every night the soldiers come here, the people are afraid to go out alone." The people in this village are not new to the problem of harrassment, many of them were part of a group nearly 100 Kalingas who were detained by the PC from November 1976 to June 1977 following their refusal to allow NPC surveyors into the barrio.

There is a new dimension to the strategy of the army in affected barrios. "Now, whenever we are known as oppositionists, the soldiers accuse us of being in the NPA." The NPA or New People's Army is the military wing of the outlawed Communist Party of the Philippines. Another farmer from Cagaloan, after describing an incident in which the granaries of his sition were destroyed in a futile search for supposed NPA arms, said, "The soldiers told me, 'if there are any soldiers killed here, we will destroy all the houses.'"

It is sad to observe the attack on the culture of the Kalingas. The Kalinga life is a simple one based on community, independence and self-reliance. "We grow everything we need in our place," explained a barrio leader, "except salt and soap." Another man in Tomiangan related, "In this culture everything is shared, even our shoes." He quickly added, "If we are moved, all that will change."

Nowhere was the spirit of resistance felt more strongly than in the village of Bugnay, in the municipality of Tinglayan, Kalinga

Apayao. There the leaders had called for a 'bodong' a peace pact, to be renewed among several of the affected villages. Seven barrios sent their representatives at the urging of the pangat Macli-ing, a president of Bugnay. Macli-ing, a wise and forceful man in his vigorous middle-age, is respected throughout the mountain provinces as a unifier. He is the one leader, sources indicate, who has sufficient respect to unite the opposition.

The bodong exists throughout the region as the means for maintaining order and security among the various villages. The Kalingas are not united in a nation but instead rely on the bodong to keep peace between them. Every village is, in a sense, mandated to engage in a peace pact with its neighbors. The bodong guarantees the safety of a co-pact holders in another's territory and provides the means for punishment and retribution when the pact is broken.

In the case of the Bugnay gathering, however, a crucial element was added - opposition to the dam. Because of the efforts of PANAMIN at bribing certain villages, the presence of the military, and the traditional independent and dispersed nature of Kalinga society it was felt that the barrios needed to solidify their opposition. Bugnay would not be directly affected by Chico IV, which is to be placed downstream at Tomiangan, but it is the common consensus that the successful completion of one dam would mean the eventual implementation of the entire project.

Bugnay has been working to keep the dams out since 1965. It is the dominant theme of life. In the dialect they have invented, or rather adopted, a new word: 'problema.' It has one meaning: the dam.

At the gate above Bugnay on the dirt road which serves as the National highway along the Cordillera mountain range the first sight is a stone marker which commemorates the 'victory' of the Kalingas and Bontocs over the dam planners in 1975. The initial strong opposition led the planners, under then Secretary to the President Alejandro Melchor, to suspend operations on the Chico in June 1975. Quotes from Melchor, tribal leaders, and these words from President Marcos decorate the plaque, "I am opposed to any move that would destroy the culture and heritage of the Igorots."

A long and narrow mountain trail leads into the village of Bugnay. Like other Igorot settlements, Bugnay is nestled into the side of a mountain. At the base of the village runs the Chico River and rising on either side are the famous rice terraces, which have existed since the beginning of time, in the Kalinga sense. The only access of the village is the path and that has obviously affected the development of the barrio. There are few signs of technological convenience - most of the houses are rough hewn, one or two room affairs constructed from pine trees gathered in the forest and rattan. The one bow to progress is the preponderance of tin roofs on the more prosperous homes. There is no electricity gas, or running water. The men, especially the elders, still dress in the native G-strings and many of the married women remain bare chested.

It should not be imagined, however, that these are people afraid of the Twentieth Century. They have made a kind of pact with the modern age. They wish to enjoy the benefits without having to sacrifice what they know is a superior way of life. Frequent comments are made without the government's historical neglect of the area - there are no schools in Bugnay, for example and Kalinga roads are primitive. Many Kalinga parents send their children to the city for education. One man said, "My only expense is for education. Our children must be educated to serve the community."

The bodong itself is a festival, a festival of unity and brotherhood. It is marked with dances, chants, ritual slaughtering of animals and sharing among the participants. But always, whether in the messages of the songs or the impassioned speeches of elders, the theme of resistance was clear. An opening speech put it this way, "Let us protect the code of the bodong so that our unity may not be broken." Deep distrust of the government was another theme. A representative from the village of Anabel said, "Now the government has finally reached us and they want to destroy us. The Igorot law is sufficient for our people... The government law is only there to divide, to destroy us."

The festival began, or had already begun, on Monday June 5 with dancing, greetings, and preliminary talks. The next day the more formal rituals of celebration began early with the butchering of a cow to be prepared for the noonday meal. The animal blood sacrifice is a very important part of the ritual. It symbolizes the sharing of the wealth of the land and the sharing of the people with one another.

As the delegations from the various villages arrived we sat down in the midst of the village and watched and listened to cultural presentations. Again, the culture was tailored to fit the theme as the traditional melodies and chants echoed the struggle. Gongs, worth more than ten carabao (water buffalo) and dating back to the 14th Century, accompanied epic poems composed to commemorate different phases of government intervention and response.

And dancing. Dancing punctuated every gathering. The dances originate in the warrior heritage of the tribes, many of them recalling the days of hunting heads and victory celebrations. Everyone danced usually in groups of eight to ten men who begin a rhythm with the different tones of the gongs as they form a winking, open ended circle. Inside the circle, after the dance begins, smaller groups of women join in symbolic praise and exhortation of their warrior companions.

Bugnay is a village of nearly 800 people and for the bodong the population swelled by several hundred. There was no inconvenience felt as tasks were carried out with remarkable calm and orderliness. At meal times long boards were set upon the ground and filled with steaming bowls of rice, the mountain variety which is brown and a bit coarser than lowland rice, and servings of boiled pig, cow, or duck depending on which animals had been slaughtered that day. In between times there was camote (sweet potato) served with native coffee, black and sweet. And during dances and deliberations large quantities of basi, a sugar wine with the consist-

ency of syrup, was shared. Everything consumed was either a product of the barrio or a gift from the participants.

The main deliberations took place on Thursday, the final more or less official day of the gathering. The culture does not follow the dictates of agendas and schedules in the western sense, the bodong did not have an opening speaker, plenary sessions and a closing prayer. It was a coming together, an expression of unity and joy which did not acknowledge timetables. On this day, the elders gathered about mid-day in another section of the barrio, a kind of plaza. The rest of the community slowly coalesced in the area. The liver of a slaughtered pig was read by a group of pangats. The pig liver, according to tradition, is a sacred symbol read for omens and signs of hope. If the liver had been negative, I was told, the bodong would have been called off and the people dispersed. The news was good. "It means that the struggle will be long but the people eventually will succeed," was the consensus of the readers.

The speakers affirmed the themes which had dominated the week. The land of the people is sacred and we will not be moved. As Macli-ing observed, "With the blessing of God our people have been put here. The government now wants us to go away but that means death... We do not want to fight this evil unless we have to."

In further discussion it was learned that fighting has indeed broken out in some areas. A series of skirmishes took place in Ngibat, Tinglayan from May 1977 to March of this year. At the time Ngibat were feuding with a barrio armed by PANAMIN under the Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF), a program reminiscent of US pacification efforts in Vietnamese tribal villages. As matters escalated and Ngibat obtained guns for self-defense, the PC was called in. The area was declared an NPA stronghold and, rather than risking injury, the PC detachment placed mortars around the village and fired indiscriminately rounds into the center of the village destroying several houses.

An uneasy truce prevails in the area now. The two villages have reaffirmed their peace pact but the PC detachment remains. No official explanation of the shelling has been reported from military authorities.

The deliberations pointed to this growing seige atmosphere in the region. The military presence is resulting in a more militant posture among area residents.

In the evening the bodong was more or less brought to a close by a marathon dancing session. The visitors, including the lowlanders and foreigners, were asked to join in the courtship dance. This is a symbolic boy meets girl affair in which a random couple dances around the fire flirting with one another. The union is consummated when the pair join hands, the man's on top, to the applause of the crowd. Everyone was given the opportunity to dance, sing or otherwise offer a piece of themselves to the gathering. There is little of the western shyness about performing among the Kalingas. You are expected to perform when called upon and you do. It is, perhaps, another confirmation of the sharing noted in other aspects of the society. The 'evening' ended

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at 3:00 am with yet another meal after which the people dispersed for a few hours of rest before sunrise.

A nagging question for the Kalingas is the status of the dam project. While the government presence remains strong, on site inspection reveals that funds for the dams appear to be in short supply. There are a large number of NPC employees at the construction site in Tomiangan but their activity is limited to surveying and drilling for rock samples. Sources in Manila report that the World Bank has pulled out of the project due to the opposition of residents but I was unable to confirm these findings. It has also been suggested that the Marcos government is seeking alternative sources for funding.

Regardless of the current status of project money the collision course the government has set continues. The leaders are clearly impatient with bribes and coercion. The military presence far from softening the opposition, has stiffened the backs of the Kalingas as they feel themselves driven to the wall. In a 1975 letter to President Marcos, Bishop Francisco Claver, a Bontoc whose prelature is located in Mindanao, said, "...my people are giving serious thought to armed violence and they are asking whom they should approach for arms." In the intervening three year the crisis has deepened and options and patience are running thin along the Cordillera.

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