A symbol of unity in diversity – The Story of the Cordillera Unity Gong

Posted on September 20, 2018

The Cordillera Region is home to various groups with their own unique cultural practices, traditions, crafts, and dialects. In spite of this diversity, however, the Cordillerans are united as one people, with one goal and one aspiration: for the region to be autonomous.

The Cordillera’s unrelenting pursuit of regional autonomy is best symbolized by the gong. The gong, or gangsa in the local dialect, has always been an important part of the Cordillera people’s culture that has been passed on from one generation to another. The gangsa is a single hand-held smooth-surfaced gong with a narrow rim. It comes in various sizes and metal components and is beaten with a padded stick.

Art Tibaldo, a native Cordilleran, could not have underscored the importance of the gong to the Cordillerans better when he wrote in his SunStar article dated May 1, 2017, that “Gongs, which come in various sizes and metal components, are beaten by mostly men to provide the rhythm and music for the dances performed.” He added that every province in the upland region of Northern Philippines has a distinct tempo, beat or musical rendition. The beating also depends on the purpose why the gongs are brought out and played. The beating of gongs in a feast also signifies nobility and thanksgiving for important gatherings such as weddings, family reunions, healing of the sick or even during the final rites of a burial or recognition of an important person in the village.

In 2012, to celebrate the region’s 25th year anniversary as a region, the Cordillera Regional Development Council (RDC-CAR) began the Cordillera Gong Relay which became a major staple of future Cordillera Month celebrations. The RDC-CAR had the Cordillera Unity Gong specially made for the purpose. Larger than the average gangsa, the first Unity Gong was 12 inches in diameter and had its own wooden yoke and a large padded stick to beat it. It was supported by a stand.
As part of the Cordillera Month celebrations, representatives of the lead RDC sectoral committee coordinating the celebration, together with the rest of the RDC members, the media, and guests, would traverse the region in a week-long journey bringing along with them the Cordillera Unity Gong. The Gong would be turned over from one province to another, completing a roundtrip around the region. It would culminate in its return to the host province on the anniversary of the creation of the Cordillera Administrative Region, July 15.

For this year’s Cordillera Month celebration, DILG-CAR and the rest of the RDC members, along with NEDA-CAR as the RDC Secretariat, led the Unity Gong Relay as it began its journey to Banaue, Ifugao on July 9. There, Governor Pedro Mayam-o unveiled the newly redesigned Unity Gong, complete with a grander and bigger stand.
The new Unity Gong features seven spokes on its inner side to symbolize the six provinces and one chartered city that comprise the Cordillera. Highlighted in its two pillars are the logos of the region’s provinces and city with a base that showcases the Ifugao Rice Terraces. At the upper portion of the stand is a hagabi or bench that connotes wealth, and to its left and right are two Ifugao houses representing the renowned architectural design of the Province of Ifugao. The stand is collapsible and has cabinets where the logos can be stored. The gong with its stand are now with Kalinga, the host province for next year’s Cordillera Month.

Recognizing the important role of the Cordillera Unity Gong in the region’s pursuit of autonomy, many Cordillera leaders are pushing that the sound of the Unity Gong and its meaning be heard in and beyond the region. In response, the Cordillera Unity Gong was temporarily borrowed from Kalinga and was brought to the PICC on September 13, during the 32nd anniversary of the historic Mt. Data Sipat.

Together, the Cordillerans should ensure that the Unity Gong will continue to be heard as it beckons the people to dance to the rhythm of Cordillera autonomy.


LOOK ALSO:

https://aboutphilippines.org/folklore-music-songs-dances.html#gong-making_tradition_in_Cordillera