Ifugao idols and other identities
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Bulul: The indigenous people’s rice god is considered sacred.

As the indigenous people’s rice god, the bulul is considered sacred, and moving it from one place to another is avoided. It is a sacrilege.

Ifugao idols and other identities have come down to the lowlands emaciated or obliterated of their original, indigenous meanings. Some idols date back eons ago and remain extant as a collective form of judicious pride.

Lowlanders doing research on Ifugao art and culture count among the “culprits” for the emaciated and obliterated meanings of the otherwise sacred idols, including visual designs that adorn the indigenous people’s bodies, farm and home implements, hunting paraphernalia, etc.

The paper of Maria Lourdes D. Cappleman, a Development Communication major in UP Los Baños, which she submitted to me last year, cleared many misconceptions and thereby enriched understanding of Ifugao art and culture in the large.

Bulul

The bulul remains as the seminal masterpiece in Ifugao sculpture. As the indigenous people’s rice god, it is considered sacred, and moving it from one place to another is avoided. It is a sacrilege.

The bulul is a man-figure with hands resting on bent knees. The position means that the bulul is really watching over the rice fields or the rice granaries. Any bulul is calm, serene, composed, and loaded with inner strength.

Most of the wooden bululs (some are stone bululs), are black either from the natural color of the wood, or from animal blood poured on them. The bululs are idols and the first depictions of the Ifugao’s beliefs.

During rituals, the Ifugaoos usually pour animal blood on the bulul as a form of respect and belief in the powers of the rice god. The rituals constitute praying, singing a capella, and dancing. Prayers for protection from natural calamities, bountiful harvest, and safeguard from rodents are intoned for as long as one wants.

Indigenous priests known as mumbaki, also perform rituals in the bulul’s position. Such position covers a number of concerns, like appropriate guidance related to planting or harvesting, or conversing with the souls of the ancestors or with the gods.

The bululs, unfortunately, had gone down the level of commerce. Many, if not all mini bululs are now used as cellphone holders. Such downtrend is a form of sacrilege.
There are also standing bululs that perform the role of the sitting bululs and more. When placed on the yard or under a house, they act as "security guards," according to Cappleman. And no self-respecting IP will dare intrude into the fenceless domain of an Igorot family.

The standing bulul is usually a young man atop a tree stump or a cluster of tree roots. Arms and legs are firm to depict machismo and bravery.

Mini reproductions of bululs have invaded the market in Ifugao, Baguio, Marcos Highway in La Union area, including air-conditioned malls or curio shops in the lowlands. The term bulul is all but a generic term now, with so much of its indigenous identity and meaning, including its sanctity, lost in the rush for cash.

Fortunately, the icon continues to assert its significance among the Ifugao. It is, after all, a major part of their identity. Unlike other cultures/societies whose symbols are birds and bees, fish and fowl, donkey which is the dumbest of all animals , and the rest of the lower animal kingdom, ad nauseam, the Ifugao have the man-figure bulul as their symbol to showcase their identity from eons ago to the present: humanists.

**Tattoos**

Body tattooing in the Cordilleras is as old as Cordillera civilization. No fixed calendar year is on record, but the tradition had been passed on from generation to generation, with mummified bodies as proofs.

Designs are human figures, monitor lizard, birds, dogs, adz, shield, spear, stylized mountain, simplified trees, and stars. These designs tell the lifestyle of the wearer, namely hunting. Other designs may include centipedes, leaves, and ladders. Anyone with a centipede design on his body is considered as a fierce warrior because the front pair of legs of this elongate myriadpod is modified into poison fangs.

Any Ifugao tattooed man wearing a human head design proclaims that he had fought tribal wars and had brought home human heads as trophies of triumph.

Women, at least some two or three decades ago, had their bodies tattooed with less intricate designs, and with a different reason: to prove to themselves, to the community, and to their ancestors, that they are now mature to face life.

An elderly weaver revealed that she had her body tattooed before she had her menarche. She shed profuse blood that made her lie down for two weeks. But when she got up, she felt mature, strong, and a respected member of adult society.

A needle disinfected in fire is used to prick the design continuously until the last design is done. Soot is applied thereafter. Sometimes charcoal.

Today, body tattooing among women has become optional. Maidens studying in universities need not submit themselves to this tradition anymore, but are still judiciously proud of their being Ifugao.

Lowlanders have a lot to learn from these uplanders who, everyday, kiss the clouds while their feet are firmly planted on the ground.