

# Ant in Asia

## Philippines Chapter 8 – Becoming an Igorot

Off to the province of Bontoc! It's a six hour bus ride through the tropical mountains of the Philippines. These were some of the craziest and deadliest roads I have ever traversed. Sometimes the only thing separating me and a 4,000 foot plunge was a curb no higher than my ankle. At the highest point the mountain dropped 7,400 feet. When I glanced out the window of the bus all I saw were clouds, then the tops of trees, aaaaaand that's it. I couldn't see the bottom, where I assume endless busloads of corpses were piled up. Though it was raining; and the fog was so thick you could barely see the cliff's edge waiting to consume you, the bus driver surely maintained a safe speed and control over his vehicle? Oh wait....he was constantly mashing the gas pedal, passing numerous trucks full of local vegetables and fruits. Most of the time he stayed right in the middle of both lanes. This was all on some of the steepest blind turns I have ever encountered. More than once the breaks were slammed to avoid demolishing the other puny vehicles. Not to mention at least a quarter of the highway is under construction. Potholes and one-way roads didn't slow us down, not a bit. As always, I made it somehow. Max and I were dropped off by a path overlooking a river fed by numerous waterfalls. It's the Alab Oriente (village name). There was a suspension bridge over the river heading to the mountainside where homes were scattered about. This was the village, the only way in or out was across the bridge. The actual village looks like a cross between Middle Earth and Olympus.





A mist was settling over the rice terraces that avalanched downwards towards the village. The bananas leaves along the path were the size of me.

The noise created by the local insects was at full volume, it was almost too loud to talk over. The sky was flashing as we headed toward the village. It would soon be pouring and we were umbrella-less. Luckily we were intercepted at the first home we passed. We were quickly hurried undercover by an Uncle Barnabas. He is the Captain of the village (Cap-ee-tan). The mayor if you will. I barely finished saying hello before we were rushed to the next home. A fire was roaring inside while the rain was thundering down outside. I was introduced to Max's Aunt and other Uncle as well as five different cousins. After the bout of usual questioning, her Aunt was telling me about her nine kids in the village, most of which have kids themselves. I was starting to understand what she was getting at, most of this entire village were relatives of Max. I thought I had large family, but a fully independent village in the mountains with a population of a few hundred... we got some work to do. After coffee and conversation we

eventually made it to Max's cousin Sarah's place where we would be staying. We got the top floor. Our bedroom (or what most back home would call a closet) consisted of a few blankets and pillows on the ground. There weren't any lights so we used cell phones to get around. Luckily I have no qualms with sleeping anywhere and after battling off the numerous insects trying to take over, I got some sleep.

### Day 1:

Hiked back out of the village to catch a bus to the closest town.

One of Max's Aunts needed to buy some farm supplies and I was told to visit the little museum to brush up on my Igorot knowledge. First we stopped by Sarah's work and added her and her work-friend, Palmer, to our entourage. We grabbed a bite to eat and some fresh fruit smoothies at the local café before we headed to the Museum.





Palmer played tour guide and I got a full blown lesson on the culture. We messed around with the costumes and explored all the buildings as each piece of equipment, each home, and each article of clothing was explained to me.



For instance, when someone rich and powerful died their corpse was tied to a chair in a sitting position. The chair was then hoisted up and a fire was lit. Everyday for 24 days the person was smoked, a sort of mummification. The village people would come in with offerings of food and money. They would also chat with the corpse as if the person was still alive. Plus Igorots have nose flutes... Nose Flutes! After the tour and a stroll through the local park and market, we headed back to Sarah's work. Auntie went home and we decided since it would be the only time in town, we should hit a local comedy club and get some drinks. That idea fell through, though. Sarah ended up working

overtime until 7pm. The village we are staying at has a curfew (yes a curfew) of 10pm. If one of the elders catches you passed curfew you are sent to the town to clean the canals and roads for a day. No thank you. We ended up picking a bottle of Emperador Brandy for a whopping 70 pesos (about \$1.50, I

can't stress enough how cheap everything here is). There were now five of us trying to get home (we picked up another cousin somewhere in town). The road was dangerous, the village wasn't too close, and people don't like driving at night because it's pitch black on the mountain. So what did we do? Well all five of us packed onto a motor cycle with a side-cart of course! Six of us on possibly a 250CC motor cycle. The driver, three in the side-cart, and two clinging on the outside. Man I love it here, home is going to feel so bland. We drank, dined on pancit, and chatted until we all agreed it was time for some sleep.

## Day 2:

Gorgeous day. The kind of tropical heat where you just want to cool off. After the now ritualistic coffee and spam/toast breakfast, Max and I headed to the river for some swimming. It's quite a little way along the river bank to the sandy patch.

Luckily I am no stranger to hopping from rock to rock, and I felt at home for the first time in a while. At this point in time it's just Max and I. Relaxing and swimming around some giant rocks. Three kids show up and start following me around. We head up river to some rapids and all float back down to the sandy section. Me and my new kid followers find some tall rocks to leap off. I surface from my awesome cannonball to find roughly seven more faces following me. This continues and within 45 minutes I have, and I counted, 17 boys (half of them nude) and one girl behind me. I am the damned Pied Piper of children. Oh and one yak (water buffalo? Hell if I know).

Yes, a yak came down to the riverside and swam with all of us. The kids were all mimicking me almost flawlessly. If I jumped from a rock, they all jumped. If I climbed up a cliff side and dove off, sure enough my newly acquired gang followed suit. These kids were naked, fearless, and completely awesome. But it was time to show them up, I mean I can't be outdone by kids no matter how badass they may be. I walked upriver quite a ways until I found a good long stretch of rapids that poured over boulders and consisted almost entirely of whitewater. Perfect.



I hop in and go limp. I am no stranger to floating rapids without a flotation device. Summers back in Washington were full of this. I do a quick head turn back, the kids are all standing on the bank

staring at me. Not one dared follow. I win. Of course I came out with quite a few bruises, some cuts on my elbows and knees, but most importantly those kids respected this white-boy. We spent the rest of the afternoon playing in the sand and skipping rocks. Most of the kids had never skipped a rock before and I'm sure it was quite the spectacle with all of us lined up and a constant stream of stones raining down into the river. I say goodbye to the children and head back home with Max. We shower up (bucket of water style) and just as I am about to take a nap and rest my sore body we are asked if we would like to hike out to the pond and feed the fish. Of course we do. Along the way we fill a bag with ripe limes and grab handfuls of edible leafs



We feed the fish but Max's Aunt decides we



should catch some for dinner. She grabs two sticks with a net woven in between and gets to work. She is at for ten or so minutes and after numerous fish have leapt out of the net she finally lands one. Next up is me. Don't ask me how, but within two minutes I had a net of fish. We transfer the fish to a bucket and head back to fry those suckers up. I ached from the numerous bruises, but slept like the mummified dead.



### Day 3:

Some of the elderly ladies and kids are at the house. It's around noon and the much looked forward to boxing match was today. The Filipino Pacquiao VS American Bradley. Not having followed sports or even watched TV in over a year, I opted to go hike along the rice terraces with Max. It's quite the hike, we decided to only go half-way up the mountain and explore the terraces there.

The view, landscape, and atmosphere were unreal. The mountains practically touching the clouds were cultivated and used ingeniously. I can't even begin to comprehend the amount of work that went into shaping and maintaining an entire mountain of rice. We kept hearing a whistling behind us from the path we came from. One of Max's cousins came rushing out of the jungle and along the rice terraces towards us. A quick conversation passes between him and Max. In the same mountains we were hiking a battle was going on between the NPA (New People's Army) and the Filipino army. One of the soldiers was shot and injured in the firefight. Good enough reason for me. Time to get the hell off the mountain.





Along the path back we were greeted with big smiles and told we were bad for hiking so fast up the mountain when they were trying to find us and send us back. When we got home I was handed a cup of Sabeng. To make sabeng you soak fish in vinegar along with a local fruit. Not just overnight, it's been soaking for a year. It's served hot and I was warned that if it's my first time drinking it my stomach may reject it. I got it down without a problem, it wasn't even that foul tasting. Not my favorite, but by far not the worst thing I have tried. After my mug of warm, fermented fish juice I was invited to one of the other homes to watch the boxing match with the guys. Uncle Barnabas lead me down the path to a room with about 15 guys drinking gin and sabeng. I was promptly given a large shot of gin and a seat on the bench. It was round six of the fight, and in between matches I was questioned thoroughly by everyone. In everyone's eyes I was already married to Max. I was a cousin, nephew, and uncle to these people. I was family already. They asked many questions about working, living, and drinking back in America. Where my family is from and what they think of me being 7000 miles from home in the middle of nowhere. Everyone was satisfied with my answers, especially when I promised not to divorce Max (we aren't even married yet, sheesh). The fight went to the 12th round; Bradley barely pulled ahead towards the end and was declared the victor. After so much talk about the different alcohols, Uncle Barnabas invited me to his place to try his home-made rice wine. On the way down I was jumped on by numerous kids wanting to be carried. They were



shouting Tito (Uncle) American. Never a dull moment. We eventually made it to Uncle Barney's house where he presented to me a bowl of pinkish liquid.

It was a tad bitter, but honestly not too bad. His wife poked her head around the corner and started yelling at poor Uncle Barney for giving me what she referred to as "vinegar wine". Especially after all the gin we had just consumed. She told me that in the first four days the rice wine is actually very sweet tasting. I asked how many days old the wine we were drinking was.

"Five years." She told me. Of course it was....of course. A few more elderly folks joined us and we chatted about things that the elderly tend to chat about. I was caught off guard when they all pressed their hands together and started thanking me profusely and sincerely.

"For what?" I asked a tad taken aback. Barnabas explained that across the river another American had taken a wife. When he and his wife returned from America to visit the village she was changed. They both flat out refused to eat any of the food, drink the water, or use the bathrooms. They would go to town (not a close drive by any means) when they needed any of those things. They deemed the ways of the village too "simple" for them. I was being thanked for eating, sleeping, and living as one of them and not above them. I explained that there was no reason to thank me. If you can't adapt and become part of a culture you have no right to live there. I was given the nickname "Cowboy" for my ability to eat and drink anything and my motivation to try everything firsthand. Max showed up to walk me home. Apparently back at home the old women were pleading with Max to come save me from Barnabas. They told her when the wine is out trouble seems to follow. I made it home in one piece, but not before promising Barnabas that I would meet him tomorrow morning around 6am to hike into the jungle for firewood. I didn't realize what I was setting myself up for.

#### Day 4:

The big village festival is today! The women spent all yesterday preparing a feast and games for everyone to play. We planned our trip just for this day. But first things first. I had some work to do.

Barnabas met me outside at 6am. We hiked straight up the mountain. Up, up, and then some more up for good measure. From the pictures you can see what appears to be the top of the terraces, not even close. The mountain goes on. For those that have hiked the hot springs back in WA, its like that. Times ten. My legs and lungs were burning, I was a tad blinded from the sweat. Way above everything was a little shack, I was told this is where people slept during the harvest season. Uncle Barney lit a piece of wood and it took off as if soaked in gasoline. He told me this specific wood was oily by nature and great for fires. He promptly put on a pot of coffee.



After some coffee and conversation (I use this term often as it seems to be a favorite activity around here) we finally stopped traveling up and hiked into the jungle. A decent ways in was a clearing with already felled trees. Luckily for me everything was already cleaned and chopped. It just needed to be carried. Barney put together a pile for me, using his machete he cuts some vines and wedges. He tied up and secured my load with the precision and quickness of one who has done this their entire life.



Barney grabbed a 12ft piece of timber and we headed down the mountain. I was to lead the way back to the village. If you notice, Barnabas is wearing knee-high rubber boots. I am wearing my flip-flops from Hawaii. The way up is etched in stone by people far, far older than Uncle Barnabas. Before chisels and the luxury of simple hand tools (I also got a history lesson on the hike up). Heading down with a pile of wood perched on my shoulder and mud-caked sandals I eventually biffed it. Twice. Not my worst fall, but my already sore body got a little more sore. We laughed as I showed him my now demolished sandals. We arrived at the

village hungry and tired. I got a few surprised looks as we entered. People have never seen a white person working for the village before. They'll get used to it, I'll be back.





I showered and prepared for the festival. The festival was taking place at the church across the river. All the local mountain villages were joining in the contests and games. Sarah happened to be running the show. The outside of the church was packed.

The women of the villages had spent the last 24 hours cooking over 1,000 pounds of food for the hungry masses. Each village sang a song or performed a skit before lunch was served. During all of this the old men of the villages would do the “gong dance”. They would get in a circle and one man would lead in a dance. The others would mimic the dancing while playing their gongs.

Uncle Barnabas, the elder of our village, found me in the crowd. He made his way toward with a big smile. He asked if I would like to join in and then lead the gong dance. Now, as far as anyone remembers I am the first white/American to even be present at the festival. I was already being asked numerous questions and had no fewer than 50 people staring at me at all times. I was causing quite the stir among the villagers. I didn’t exactly want to go center stage in front of hundreds and hundreds of Igorots and attempt their ceremonial dance. I politely declined.



Ha! Nah, I walked my white ass down and played the hell out of that gong! I amused an entire mountain community that day. The highlights of the afternoon were the village vs. village games. Basketball for the men, volleyball for the women, and tug-o-war for the elderly.

During the basketball intermissions some arm wrestling and relay races were thrown in for good measure. The man doing the arm wrestling was wearing a tank top, and playing the crowd up. Belting out challenges that nobody dare took. Side story: My



neighbors name is O'King. He has down syndrome. He comes over to eat and drink brandy with us every once in a while. He also partakes in everything, just like everyone else. In fact he is treated exactly the same as everyone else. As a result, he is just like everyone else. There may be a lesson here somewhere, can you spot it? Back to the arm wrestling. By now you can guess who accepted the challenge for our village. Not only accepted, but won. O'King was The King for a brief while. Every person then formed a line. Children fist, then the elderly, then everyone else. They were all handed a plastic bag full of food. Lunch was a healthy serving of rice, pancit, and a bit of pork. I received my bag, but was called down to try a more unique cuisine. Pork innards sautéed in pig's blood. One of my preferred dishes here actually.

As the festival ended and the evening rain set in, I hurried home. Of course we were stopped along the pathway home. A few villagers were drinking and waved me over. After one of the guys scurried up a tree to pick some mangos for a snack, we got down to drinking. I was only passing through, so I managed to put a few shots of brandy back. In that short time I was enthralled with the stories they were telling. The way they hunt wild boar here had me in stitches. They make a home-made type of grenade which they then hide inside an egg. They bury said egg and when a wandering boar unburies its newfound snack and takes a bite...well the boar get's more than a migraine. Inhumane? Maybe. But I can't help but love this method. After a hastily cooked dinner, I pass out into another blissful sleep.

### Day 5:

Today I get to finally embark on the hike I've been hearing so much about. Far



up into the mountains to the Ganga caves. It's another gorgeous day, the view I'm told is amazing. I have four women guiding me on this adventure.

We load up with snacks and water and head out. Even the hike was breathtaking. The fields, mountain ranges, and waterfalls always blow me away. No matter how many times I see them. After numerous wrong turns, laughs, and beads of sweat we make it to the caves. This was NOT the look but don't touch type of burial grounds. As with everything else here, it's a hands on type of place.



We even spent a good chunk of time moving and shifting numerous coffins to get at the fabled 100 year old mummy. No one in my group had actually seen it, just heard tales about it. I'll be damned if that bottom coffin didn't hold a freaking mummy complete with clothes and hair.



Freaky, ain't it? We decided instead of heading back we would continue on to the top of one of the mountain peaks. Along the way we stopped and rested in WWII hideouts. Back in the day whilst the fighting commenced down below, the villagers hid way up in the mountains. The insides of the caves were still tar-black from the fires. After countless stops to goof around and take photos we arrived. Pictures don't do this view justice, nothing does. An enormous rock was perched at the very top. Crawling out toward the edge led to a deadly free fall.



It had been a good three hours hiking up, it was now time to head down. I was told we could actually hike to the town through a mountain pass. But we would of needed a very early start for that. The last portion of the way back to the village was called The 1,000 Steps. Sounds fun. I am wearing shorts as you notice. Everyone else is wearing pants. The reason is while hiking across the rice terraces a certain grass known as “Knife Grass” grows.



Don't worry, it's just as pleasant as it sounds. My legs and arms are by now an assortment of cuts and bruises. I also got banged up moving the hefty coffins around in such a small cave. We climbed to a clearing and saw the first signs of home, sweet home.



All of us were covered in sweat and feeling grimy. We quickly changed into swimwear headed to the river. This time we opted to stay near the suspension bridge and forgo the river hike. Some of the kids saw us and stripped down to join in. I taught the girls how to play chicken. We quickly had some heated matches going, along with the usual shouting and shrieking. I took a minute to look up, the bridge was lined with kids all watching us and cheering. The pathway toward the village was also full of spectators. Everyone wanted to see what all the commotion was about. We finished our swim with an epic game of tag in the rapids. It was getting dark, so we packed up and headed home. Ben-hor came over to butcher a chicken for dinner (the same cousin that rescued us from the rice fields during the battle). Tonight was the first night of the harvest festival. After dinner we would head out and join in. There are three *atos* in our village. An *ato* is where the councils of elders meet when making decisions for the village. The *atos* are what keep the people of the mountains so unified. Everyone belongs to one of the three. We head toward our family's *ato*, the mother *ato*. Oldest one in the village. All the elders were dancing, eating, and drinking around a fire pit. I took part in a few more gong dances, while sampling gin and rice wine.

The elders even convinced Max and I to dance the courtship dance (video evidence was made that I dance). To the sounds of the gong, beat of the drum, and infused with wine we danced the dance to the cheers and hoots of the village. Tonight was supposed to be our final night, Max was working tomorrow. The older folks pleaded with us to stay a few more days for the harvest festival. I tended to agree, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity.





Plus, could you say no to that face? It was settled, Max would call in tomorrow and tell her boss we were being held hostage in the province.

**Day 6 and 7:**



The gongs have been playing for two days and two nights. The *atos* all have a constant stream of people to replace the tired. Pigs were butchered and cooked to keep the dancers going strong.

I have by this point vastly improved my gong dancing skills. When the *atos* observed me I got many handshakes and compliments. I was talking to the local Christian preacher at one gathering. He was telling me that though he was Christian, he would never ask the people to remove the *atos* from the village. The spirits were strong. One man tried to remove one of the *atos* once and was struck ill. The hospital was unable to diagnose him. Only after an elder forgave him and a chicken sacrificed was the man able to recover. This is from the mouth of a Christian priest. The expression “when in Rome” was in full force these last two days. I ate, drank, and danced until I was no longer just a foreigner partaking in some ancient rituals. I became a part of the people. By the last day it was no longer the spectacle it once was to see a white person at the ceremonies. For lunch the final day I received the pig’s heart and liver, a very precious part of the animal. Everyone made me promise to return, and why wouldn’t I? I’ve found somewhere so far off the grid that I could potentially never be heard from again. There’s a sense of history and a freedom from “life” in these mountains. I am lucky to be able to not only partake in this culture, but become a part of it. A pig will be put on hold for my wedding ceremony, hopefully I can make it back late 2013. Back in Baguio I have been working for the family, building stairs and such. I am told that since I helped the family, I will in return be given help. If I pick out a plot of land they will build a house for me. Max wants a house here in the mountains and not in city. I agree, a home here would be amazing. As for now I return home with only pictures, memories, and a desire to come back to this village of the mountains.