

ABRA: LAND, PEOPLE, AND HISTORY

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Abra province is one of the six provinces in the Cordillera Administrative region (CAR). It is hemmed in the towering mountain ranges of the Ilocos on the west and the Cordillera in the east. It is bounded on the north by Ilocos Norte, on the south by Ilocos Sur and Mountain Province, on the east by Kalinga and on the west Apayao. This landlocked province is a melting pot of the lowland people of dominant Spanish ancestry and the Tingguian tribe. According to various writers, these people are descended from Chinese, Japanese, or Arabs; are typical Malay.

Insulated by the Mountainous Gazebo, Abra's nature has remained pristine and a way of life away from the humdrum of urban cosmopolitan living. With a land area of 3,180.8 square kilometers, Abra accounts for one-fifth of the regions land area, the largest province in the region with the most number of municipalities (27) and barangays (303). The seat of the provincial government is at Bangued, its capital town which is four hours from Baguio City and 10 hours from Manila.

LAND

The total land area of Abra is 397,555 hectares. Of these, 98,420 hectares is considered alienable and disposable land. The total forested area is 299,135 hectares. From this forested area, 8,106 is unclassified forest land and 291,030 hectares is classified forest land. The established forest reserve is 258,743 hectares. The established timberland is 32,230 hectares. The national parks comprise 57 hectares.

Abra's natural resources are: forest, gold, clay guano, rock phosphate, magnetite, alluvial gold and silica sand. The forest, mineral and rich agricultural land in Abra, most of which are located in ancestral lands is a magnet for local and foreign corporations to own and exploit.

A Historic Story of the Defense of Ancestral Land: The Struggle against Cellophil Resource Corporation (CRC)

In late 1972, just after the declaration of Martial Law on September 21, a barely-known logging company began to make its presence felt in the Abra Province, conducting spot tree surveys in the forested eastern uplands. The company was owned by Herminio Disini, a crony of then- President Marcos.

Cellophil Resources Corporation was officially formed in May 1973 and was quickly awarded by the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources (DANR) just four months later with a Timber and Pulpwood License Agreement (TPLA) which covered some 99,565 hectares of pine forests in Abra and Kalinga-Apayao.

Next, the Cellulose Processing Corporation (CPC), was formed in January 1974, and also quickly awarded two months later with a TPLA for 99,230 hectares of forest land in areas adjacent to the CRC concessions. *(Source: Pio Verzola Jr., News Article, Northern Dispatch.)*

Three years later, Cellophil, with a government guarantee, obtained a multimillion-dollar loan from international banks for the construction and erecting a pulp mill in the province.

Moreover, Cellophil's acquisition of vast tracts of forestlands in the Cordillera to serve as its raw material base encroached on the ancestral domain of the indigenous people, especially those of the Tinggians of Abra. (Source: Benjamin Bagadion, Jr., AIM, *The Rise and Fall of a Crony Corporation*.)

CRC and CPC companies had taken almost 200,000 hectares of mostly pine forests in Abra, Kalinga-Apayao, Mountain Province, Ilocos Norte, and Ilocos Sur, covering some of the most extensive watersheds of Northern Luzon affecting about 145,000 persons, most of them indigenous peoples.

During the 2011 Cordillera Day, a statement from the Cordillera Peoples Alliance titled: *The struggle versus Cellophil: A Shining Example of Indigenous People's Resistance*. In the said statement, anticipating their own eviction, Tinggian leaders in the Abra highlands demanded respect for ancestral land and traditional resource use. With the active participation of parish priests and missionaries belonging to the Roman Catholic Society of the Divine Word, Tinggian communities geared up for mass struggle. High school, college, and seminary students, peasant youth and elders, community women and men organized themselves and launched a protest campaign that was also the assertion of their rights and their identity as Tinggians.

Moreover, the statement further stated, that as the campaign intensified, Marcos placed the local government in the hands of military officers who were also local warlords. They provided security to Cellophil and attempted to quell the snowballing protest. But when Cellophil, escorted by the military, attempted to start logging in the Banilo district, its entry was blocked by the local people, who demanded that the company respects their ancestral land rights and customary laws.

Furthermore, the CPA also stated that in September 1978, the Tinggian protest was further solidified with the forging of an inter-tribal bodong (peace pact) among the peoples of the municipalities of Malibcong, Bucloc and Tubo. The same year, Tubo peace pact holders hosted an interprovincial bodong conference, which resulted in the signing of seven-point pagta ti kalon or terms of alliance that bound the various tribes in Abra, Mountain Province and Kalinga against Cellophil. Thus, the anti-Cellophil struggle developed a broad front that was clearly framed in the indigenous people's rights and democratic institutions.

This ignited a rebellion led by Catholic priests who eventually joined the guerilla bands of the New People's Army. Cellophil's rapid growth in the 70s was outstripped only by the ire of the people negatively affected by its operations. Its collapsed has been attributed to the operational disruption caused by the attacks staged by the New People's Army.

In the course of the CRC logging operations, even the mayors of Abra and leaders of government-initiated peace pact association protested against the negative environmental impact of deforestation. In a joint resolution, they decried the massive soil erosion, destruction of irrigation systems, pollution of the rivers, death of fish, loss of drinking water and the marked decrease of produce from the rice fields.

The anti-CRC struggle unified the people, raised their political consciousness and inspired them to look into their history and adopt ways to tell their stories through their cultural practices (dances, songs, chants). Socio-political institutions were revived and strengthened to face a larger challenge. Like the victorious struggle against the World Bank-financed Chico Dam, the CRC struggle earned the respect and support of democratic and progressive forces nationally and internationally. It was a source of inspiration for other indigenous peoples. These victorious struggles contributed to the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship.

PEOPLE

The word, Tingguian means mountain dweller. It also refers to the people who retreated to the Abra valley and its highlands. **The Tingguians are also called Itneg.** Itneg comes from the word “iti uneg” meaning inside. There is a tendency though to refer to the Itnegs as those who live in the Abra’s far-flung areas and the Tingguians as the people who have been assimilated into the populace, which are the Ilocanos.

Presently, there are two Tingguian groups: valley Tingguian and mountain Tingguian, who live in the highlands of northern and eastern Abra. Abra was first inhabited by the ancestors of the Bontoks, Ifugaos and the Tingguians or Itnegs. There are 11 sub-groups with different dialects and their settlements are:

1. **Adasen** [Lagayan, San Juan, Tineg]
2. **Banaw** [Daguioman & Malibcong, and Balbalan (in Kalinga)]
3. **Binungan** [Baay-Licuan, Lacub]
4. **Balatok** [Villages of Amti, Kilong-olaw, & **Danak** (all in Boliney)]
5. **Belwang** [Dao-angan village (in Boliney)]
6. **Gubang** [Malibcong]
7. **Inlaud** [Lagangilang & Peñarrubia, Lumaba village (in Villaviciosa), Villages of Abang & Patoc (in Bucay), Langidan, San Isidro, San Quintin, Danglas, parts of Nueva Era (in Ilocos Norte)]
8. **Mabaka** [Lacub, Malibcong]
9. **Maeng** [Luba, Tubo, & Villaviciosa, and San Emilio, Banayoyo, & other Ilocos Sur towns]
10. **Masadiit** [Sallapadan & Bucloc, Sitio Sapdaan (in Manabo), Western Boliney (barangays poblasyon, bawiyán, and dumagas)]
11. **Ammutan**, a.k.a. Muyadan Tribe [Manabo]

According to the 2015 Census of Population of the Philippine Statistic Authority, Abra has a population of 241,000. Its population growth rate from 2010-2015 is 0.52. Abra has the 10 least populous city/municipality namely: Daguioman, Bucloc, Langidan, Lacub, Malibcong, Boliney, Danglas, Lagayan, San Isidro and Licuan-Baay (Licuan).

Abra's inhabitants are mostly descendants of Ilocano settlers and members of the Tingguian tribe. Based on the 2000 census survey, Ilocanos comprised 71.94% (150,457) of the total provincial population of 209,146. Tingguians came in second at 18.7% (39,115), while other ethnic groups in the province were the Ibanag at 4.46% (9,334), Itneg at 3.17% (6,624), and Tagalog at 0.42% (869). The predominant languages are Ilocano and Itneg.

FESTIVALS

To celebrate life, the Abrenians have many festivals.

- ❖ **Kawayan Festival** (Bamboo Festival)- This is the provincial fiesta and the largest among local festivities. This festival is tagged by Abrenian due to abundance of bamboos in their province.
- ❖ **Dapil Festival.** This is a festival on sugarcane, which is one of the province's main agricultural products and the main ingredients in manufacturing local wine, the Basi, vinegar, molasses (muscovado) and candies. Dapil is derived from the word "Dadapila," an equipment used to extract sugar cane juice.
- ❖ **Arya Abra Festival.** This is a week-long celebration, coinciding with the founding anniversary of the province. It is a celebration of the proclamation of Abra as independent province.

TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

There are many tourist spots in Abra. They can be classified into historical, cultural and man-made. You can start your search of places to see and things to do while in Abra by visiting the province's official website, www.abra.gov.ph.

TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

ABRA PROVINCE

Below is just a glimpse of the many beautiful sceneries and wonders that you can find when you go to Abra, one of the six provinces in the Philippine Cordillera region.

1 ABRA RIVER

Known to be the 6th largest river system in the Philippines, and the biggest, longest and most popular body of water in the province.



2 CASA REAL, BUCAY

An important historical structure, now a monumental arch, in memory of the creation of Abra as a province in 1846 (separated from the Ilocos). Bucay was Abra's former capital.



3 TAGPEW (TAGPAO) FALLS

A 120-meter falls found in a thick pine forest in Tubo, Abra. A 3-5 hour hike from sitio Batayan of barangay Alangtin. The word tagpao is actually the local people's term for the female genital.



4 LUBO FOOTBRIDGE

A 560-meter hanging bridge that links barangay Poblacion with barangay Sabnangan in Luba, Abra. Built from 1988 to 2002, this touristic structure is also known to be the longest footbridge in the Philippines and Southeast Asia.



5 KIMKIMAY LAKE

Located in Taquib, Villaviciosa in Abra, this wonder of nature is a favorite spot for picnic, swimming and fishing for both locals and tourists alike.



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 PHOTO SOURCE: Official website of Abra Province (abra.gov.ph)

ECONOMY

Even before the Spanish colonized the Philippine, the people of Abra were engaged in agriculture, production and trade. They used the Abra River as their means of transportation. There were traders from Vigan and other provinces who used to trade with them.

With its vast forests, Abra's economy is based on agriculture. Its major crops are rice, corn, sweet potato, and tubers. They also plant sugar cane, with its juice used in the production of local wine, called "basi." Their commercial products include coffee, tobacco, and coconut. The extensive grass- and pasture-land are used for livestock production. Aside from agriculture, they made iron tools like bolo, kitchen knives, and head axes.

As of 1990, there were 743 cottage industries in Abra, of which 208 are registered with the Department of Trade and Industry. 59% are engaged in bamboo and rattan craft making, both leading industries in the area.

The Tingguians make cloth from the bark of certain trees. The women weave materials that they make into blankets. They also make mats and engage in pottery. The men produce ropes, baskets and nets.

TRADITIONAL & CURRENT POLITICS AND INSTITUTIONS

The local villages have an elderly patriarchal figure, is assisted by other male elders of the village. They form a council of elders and discuss issues in the community. Traditional political institutions were devised to settle conflicts within and among the tribes, defend and promote the socio-economic interests of the tribe.

Spanish and US colonial rule-imposed laws, socio-political institutions and culture to solidify their colonial rule. Church missions were set up to save the "pagans" and to establish the moral and institutional power of the friars and missionaries. Schools were established to justify colonial rule and to develop educated colonial subjects to speed up the process of integration. Since the village council of elders' system has been integrated into the national political system, the village council has little influence unlike before. However, the people still stick to their customs and traditions and this is where the village council comes in. On the whole, the process of integration into the national politics and culture is steadily eroding traditional socio-political-cultural practices and institutions. This created the condition for the rise of political warlordism and family political dynasty in Abra. In the whole of CAR, Abra is known for its violent conflict among political warlords.

WARLORDISM IN ABRA

Warlordism is defined as the practices of a warlord. What is a warlord? A warlord is a person who has both military and civil control over a subnational area due to armed forces loyal to the warlords and not to a central authority.

If we hear the word Abra, the first thing that comes to mind are private armies, goons, and politicians, a place where Warlordism is prevalent because of the insatiable thirst of power and money.

Abra is known as the killing fields of the North. Since 2001, there have been at least 30 political figures, major and minor, killed in the province. This during the term of Abra Governor Vicente Isidro Valera.

HISTORY

As early as 1963 Abrenian believed that the importation and training of goons started when Barbero ran against Jose Valera. But in 1965, goons were first documented in the province in connection with the murder of Bucay Vice Mayor Silvestre Perlas. According to Filemon Tutay who wrote the "Goons for Victory" in the October 30, 1965 issue of the Philippine Free Press, Perlas's paid assassins were imported from Manila, Pampanga, Nueva Ecija, Cagayan, Laguna and Quezon City. (source May An Ballesta, Philippine Investigative Journalism)

According to May An Ballesta, and a descendant of one of the wealthy political family of Abra describes her first hand experience as she shared it in her article "The Blood Politics of Abra". She narrated her trip to Lagayan, a northwestern town across the Calaba River in Bangued that she stumbled upon a village that was populated by people whose fathers were employed as goons in the 1960s. The imported hired guns had apparently married and settled in the province. One resident even confided that it was his grandfather who burned down the Abra Capital during the same decade. She said that she is used to seeing ordinary citizens with firearms which are not licensed.

Ballesta further describes that goons start out as street sweepers and gardeners in Abra. Then become breeders of their master's fighting cocks and then cleaning firearms and then they start learning to hold and fire guns and when they reach the full rank, they evoke fear and vicious, goon commanders are worse, especially those who know no other means of livelihood

other than planning the deaths of whoever are rivals of their bosses at the moment. Their loyalty is a commodity. Abra politicians have created monsters who can turn against them. In many ways, goons have the politicians on a leash or in a very apt description, goons have the power to rearrange the politician's testicles. That is why they cannot say no to their requests for projects.

January 11, 2009, PNP Cordillera recorded 47 murders, 28 frustrated murders, two attempted murders, 22 frustrated homicides, six attempted homicides and 11 homicide cases in 2006. (May An Ballesta, The Blood Politics, Philippine Investigative Journalism)

In an article by Dexter See in the Manila Standard.net stated that in the past 30 years, warlords turned Abra into a political war zone. Private armies offer their higher services to the highest bidders and ordering a killing became a business transaction. During the past, the private armies recruited and trained minors to become hitman and expand their groups.

AT PRESENT

Governor Valera, who was called the supremo because he ruled Abra like a warlord, was behind the killings and they showed their sentiments in the May elections of 2007 elections by voting him out of office and electing governor Eustaquio Bersamin, brother of the late Luis Bersamin. Later on, Valera was thrown in jail on charges of double murder.

Police Regional Chief Superintendent Benjamin Magalong said, 12 of 14 private groups has been disbanded and have confiscated 3,300 firearms and charges have been filed against 300 people.

A Farmer was asked if he is happy that peace has returned to Abra, he responds: Valera is in jail, his family left Abra but his men are still here and unless they seal the Tangtangadan Tunnel, he will comeback someday. (Dexter See .The Dark tunnel of the Past .Manila Standard. net)

The Tangtangadan Tunnel, known as "Usokan" is a 20-foot tunnel firm structure drilled against a hill rock on the Abra-Ilocos Sur border. It is more than just a welcome tunnel; it is a symbol of the Abrenios sturdy defiance against the odds. (Exotic and Mystical Abra. Precious Ann Parel).

CONCLUSIONS

1. History - The peopling of Abra pre-dates the Spanish colonization. **The people developed a self-reliant economy based on agriculture and trading with the lowlands and the Chinese.** They developed their social-political, cultural practices and institutions to protect and sustain their community and identity. They participated and took leadership in the anti-colonial struggle- Spanish, US and Japanese, in the Abra-Ilocos region.

2. **There is a continuing process of the dissolution** of traditional institutions, assimilation and integration into the post-colonial politics, socio-economic system and culture, a process which they do not have full control. A highly conflictive manifestation of this process is political warlordism and family dynasty which continues to plague Abra. There are national laws/policies that negates ancestral land concept, and which designate Abra and/or the Cordillera as resource base area for corporations to exploit. Like the indigenous peoples in the Cordillera region, IPs in Abra are neglected, discriminated and misrepresented.

3. **The long, bitter but victorious struggle against the Cellophil Resource Corporation (CRC) is a historic milestone** in the political consciousness of the people against the Manila-imposed "development aggression" and more importantly, for the right to self-determination taking the form of genuine autonomy. The anti-CRC struggle continues to have a transformative impact on the communities to a point where the people are supportive to and taking part in the national democratic movement for national sovereignty, social emancipation and a just, progressive Philippines.

There is growth in strength of an awareness that the people united are changemakers for a just, prosperous Abra, Cordillera and Philippines. This is a sign of hope. 📖

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