

THE BAMBOO FORTIFICATIONS OF EARLY ITNEG VILLAGES IN ABRA, NORTHERN PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

Hinged on the realist worldview that nations make rational decisions in their effort to secure their well-being, this paper explores the Itneg concept of security and peace by investigating the origins and purposes of the bamboo fortifications that surround some abandoned mountain-top settlements along western slopes of the Cordillera Mountain Range in the province of Abra in Northern Philippines. Data were gathered through the ethnographic methods of key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and actual visits to the abandoned bamboo-fortified Itneg settlements. The bamboo fortifications are seen as a unified Itneg response to external security threats, primarily arising from the early traditions of headhunting and village raids among the tribes of the Northern Cordillera Region. Investigations also revealed that the Itneg concept of security is closely tied to sound sleep at night and strong defense against the attacks of their traditional enemies. Moreover, the bamboo fortifications are a virtual boundary between the “secure village interior” and the harsh and perilous land outside the bamboo lines. Hence, the bamboo stockades that still proudly guard the deserted Itneg settlements are living monuments of Itneg political cunning and military thought; proof of their pacific spirit, love for a serene village life, and collective desire for security.

Keywords: Itneg, Bamboo fortifications, virtual boundary, security .

1. Introduction

The contemporary world order is defined by the multifarious elements of international free trade, cross-border human mobility, and global communications. Being tentacles of globalization, these have become grounds where conflicts of varying degrees have arisen through time.

One of the major issues of the 21st Century is national security. From Japan down to Indonesia, nations are gripped by economic growth and military defense concerns – two crucial elements of national security.

The universal framework of security, however, is often constrained by critical questions relating to transnational crimes, nuclear weapons capacity building, threats of war, and government spying on foreign nations. This means that where there is a desire for security, there is a corresponding burden to hurdle a specific security dilemma or conflict.

Tebtebba Foundation’s Victoria Tauli-Corpuz posited that “conflict is a reality in which many... communities find themselves today” (Fan, n. d.). As international and local newscasts do not pass without any story on conflict, violence, and war, it is apparent that peace is on the retreat.

This picture of reality today exemplifies the context in which peace and its implements operate. Hence, it is in this backdrop that this paper brings you to a journey into the eastern hinterlands of Abra Province, Northern Philippines, to explore some of the deserted early Itneg villages. With the aim of understanding the Itneg concepts of security, this paper will investigate the

origins and purposes of the bamboo fortifications that surround the abandoned settlements and how these have mediated the Itnegs' understanding of conflict and security.

2. Methodology

This paper is the result of fieldwork done in the Masadiit Itneg towns of Sallapadan and Bucloc in the Province of Abra. Two other sites in nearby towns that featured bamboo stockades were also visited – Sangsangadil in Manabo town and Abang in Bucay town – for ocular comparison.

Data were gathered through actual visits to the sites, and key informant interviews and focus group discussions with Masadiit tribal elders who were chosen by way of purposeful selection.

3. Results and Discussions

The Itnegs, also called as “Tinguians”, are a nation that inhabit the Malaya mountains along the Ilocos coast and the northwestern slopes of the Gran Cordillera Central in Northern Luzon, Philippines. The Itneg nation, Isabelo de los Reyes (1887) wrote, is richly favored with discernment and cunning, making them superior to all other northern mountain tribes; they are not supposed to be called savages for they observe certain social principles.

Consistently, Nid Anima (1982, p. 6) reveals that the Itnegs “are generally regarded as a peaceful tribe – in fact, the most peaceful of all Philippine tribes.” They are provoked to violence only when one of them is physically harmed and therefore has to be taken vengeance for.

Cole (1922), in his ethnographic study of the Itnegs, maintains that they are “pacific, hospitable, and industrious” notwithstanding their being also experienced and “inveterate head-hunters...”

The foregoing assertions present a contrast to the practice of the tribes living on the eastern side of the Grand Cordillera Central - like the Kalingas and Ilongots (also known as “Bugkalots”) – who are more warlike in disposition. Anima (1982, p. 65) forwards this conclusion:

A scrutiny of the practices of the various tribes inclined toward headhunting brings forth certain conclusions. One, that the Ilongots take it through the force of tradition; two, that the Kalingas practice it as a matter of choice; and lastly, that the Tinguians veer toward it by compulsion.

The Itnegs embark on head-taking expeditions only in order to seek redress for a wrong done to them. If they do not get even by also taking enemy heads, they will end up as hunted game for their enemies – the “*alsachu*” peoples. *Alsachu* is the term used by Masadiit Itnegs to refer to the ferocious head-taking tribes on the eastern side of the Cordillera Central peaks. In this view, Anima (1982, p. 65) posited that the Itnegs [Tinguians]:

...are left with no alternative but to resort to it or face the dire consequences of their cowardice or indecision: the extinction of their race... They have already been driven from their lowland habitations by the Ilocano... In the mountains, they are faced against a veritable wall: they can go no farther... Farther means... jumping into the mouth of the crocodile, for farther into the wilds are other savage and barbaric tribes: the Kalingas and the Igorots who, like them, are in the head-severing business.

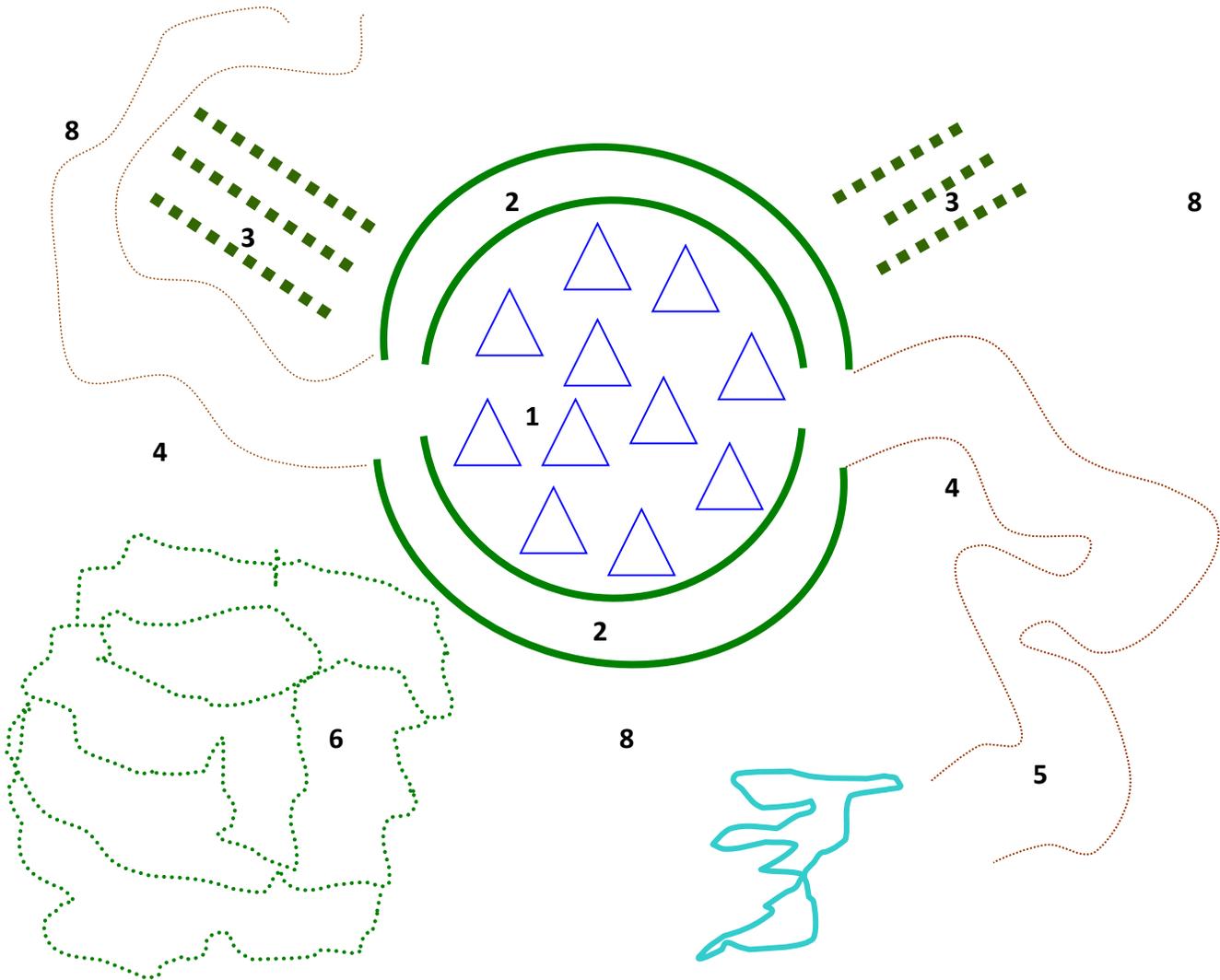
Hence, the settlements of the Itnegs are located in the valleys and foothills betwixt the western coastal regions populated by the Iloko-speaking lowlanders and the Eastern Cordillera Central inhabited by the Kalingas and the Igorots.

Interestingly, a number of the early villages built by the Itnegs in eastern Abra are surrounded by double bamboo stockades called *sichil*. Among all the mountain tribes in Luzon island, only the Itnegs are known to protect their villages with *sichil*.

Key informants have identified six early Masadiit settlements with *sichil*. These are the villages of *Bakaw*, *Lantagan*, *Parapar*, ***Sadag***, ***Porak*** and ***Bangtitan***. The last three settlements were chosen as research sites.

There are also other *sichil*-fortified early Itneg villages near the Masadiit area. The most commonly named are *Sangsangadil* village in the town of Manabo (south of the Masadiit territory) and *Abang* village, which is still populated today, in the town of Bucay (west of the Masadiit territory).

Sketch of an Early Itneg Tribal Settlement
(aerial view; based on actual visits)



- Legend:*
- 1 – *Foforóy* (literally: “houses”; it refers to the village)
 - 2 – *Síchil* (Double bamboo stockade)
 - 3 – *Úma* (Swidden farms located on higher elevations)
 - 4 – *Su-úngan* (Entrance area, within a hundred meters extent from the entrance)
 - 5 – *Cháran* (Foot trail, usually uphill, leading to the village)
 - 6 – *Pallikung* (Ricefields, mostly terraced according to the slope of the mountain)
 - 7 – *Sakchuwan* (A spring that serves as source of water for household use)
 - 8 – *Gin-ginufat* (literally: “the wild”; it refers to the thickly forested mountains)

* Terms used are of the Masadiit dialect of eastern Abra.

4. Headhunting and the Síchil

The Itneg territories were often enveloped with fear and worry because of the prevalence of headhunting expeditions conducted by the *alsachus*. The bamboo fortifications surrounding the Masadiits' early *foforoy* on top of the mountains are testaments to the tensed security situation they faced.

Key informants revealed that constant fear led the Masadiit forebears to construct their *foforoy* on top of mountains to augment their ability to secure themselves. They also conveyed that the *síchil* was placed in order to keep the *umili* (villagers) safe from the raids by *alsachus*. The *síchil* therefore serves as a green wall that separates the village interior from the threats lurking outside.

In its ultimate sense, the *síchil* was a protective enclosure for the *foforoy* when *alsachus* declare *fusur* (war) and begin *kayaw* (war expeditions purposely aimed at head taking). Since both *fusur* and *kayaw* are founded on the intent to kill, the Itnegs see the *síchil* as a strategic establishment of security that does not just ensure sound sleep at night but also a monument of their desire to live in peace. This *síchil*, consistent with the Itnegs' pacific nature, speaks of their aim of stopping their enemies from harming them; being able to do so means that the Itneg will have no need to retaliate and commence a cycle of blood-stained head taking.

At nightfall, all villagers are expected to be in their respective homes already. The two entrances to the village are firmly sealed with bamboo or wooden gates. When a *fusur* is declared, the gates are further protected by dry thorny bamboo twigs scattered in order to deter the quick advance of the enemy. The entrances are well-guarded throughout the night and any signs of enemy raid would cause the village warriors to take arms.

Since most of the village raids are done during the night, enemies usually try to clear a passage between the bamboo ramparts so they can enter the village unnoticed. However, night guards can easily detect enemy movements in the silence of the night. That is why the spears of village warriors usually have very long handles so that they can be protruded into the double bamboo stockade and hit the enemy outside.

Being able to inflict injury or death on enemies outside the *síchil* while being able to protect the *umili* from *alsachu* attacks is the leverage that is provided by the bamboo walls. This impregnable green fortress is an ingenious containment strategy that bespeaks of the Itnegs' military cunning and their ability to understand and use the strength of nature in their favor.

When the killings resulting from the attacks are avenged and become intermittent, the exchange of attacks bring about the situation called *kinnayaw* (deliberate killing between enemy tribes, done intermittently). As the tribes engage in *finnaros* (exchange of vengeful attacks), they also have to engage in “*finnusur*” (alternating declaration of war). Ergo, the terms *kinnayaw* and *finnusur* mean the one thing – the exchange of attacks by two enemy tribes.

As danger looms, even the women who draw water from the nearby village well (*sakchuwan*) do not go out singly (Cole, 1915). Enemies might be hiding behind the darkness of the *ginufat* (forest) or just beyond the bushes that line the trail. So, they go in batches in order to make it easier to spread the alarm and ask for help in case an attack is made by *alsachus*.

The key informants named some of the *alsachu* groups, the easterly nemesis of the Itnegs, as follows:

1. The *i-Djanác* (the Balatok tribe of Danac village in Boliney town, Abra)
2. The *i-Barwang* (the Belwang tribe of Dao-angan village in Boliney town, Abra)
3. *Kurayu* (a tribe in Kalinga Province)
4. *Futfut* (a tribe in Kalinga Province)
5. *Timpu* (the Maeng village of Tiempo village in Tubo town, Abra)
6. *Labwagan* (a tribe in Kalinga)
7. Villages like *Sachanga*, *Mainit* and *Ginaang*, all located near Bontoc, Mountain Province

Anima (1982, p. 61) wrote that “headhunting used to be prevalent among the Tinguians” and it was “motivated by pure vendetta.” Consistent with the findings, this means that the Itnegs of yesteryears were not devout practitioners of headhunting. As it is human nature to defend oneself and one’s people from peril, so they also took arms against their adversaries. When the killings became successive because of the headhunting craze of their neighbors, they also had to make their enemies feel that they have the capability to retaliate. Hence, the Itnegs also engaged their enemies head-to-head in *kinnayaw* expeditions.

Conclusion

The environment of fear caused by the twin evils of *kinnayaw* and *finnusur* in the early days became the foundation of the Masadiit Itnegs’ culture of peace and security. The preservation of their serene village life was made possible by the building of their *foforoy* on mountaintops and surrounding the same with *sichil*.

The *sichil* as still seen today in the deserted villages are monuments of security; they were green fortresses that bespoke of the Itnegs’ unified containment response to external threat and collective desire for peace. These double bamboo stockades are expressions of the Itneg concept of security, one that spans the distance between deterrence and sound sleep during the night. Finally, the *sichil* that still proudly guard the deserted Itneg settlements are living monuments of Itneg political cunning and military thought; proof of their pacific spirit, love for a serene village life, and collective desire for security.

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