

The Cordillera: The People of the Mountains

By Ernest Gonzaga

The Cordillera is a massive mountain range situated in the northern central part of the island of Luzon, in the Philippines. The mountain range encompasses several provinces, namely: Abra, Apayao, Benguet, Cagayan, Ifugao, Ilocos Norte, Kalinga and Mountain Province. The range also includes Baguio, a chartered city located within Benguet situated at over 5,000 feet (1,500 m) in elevation. Because of its elevation, it was established by the Americans in the early 20th century as a hill station to escape the heat of summer in the lowlands.

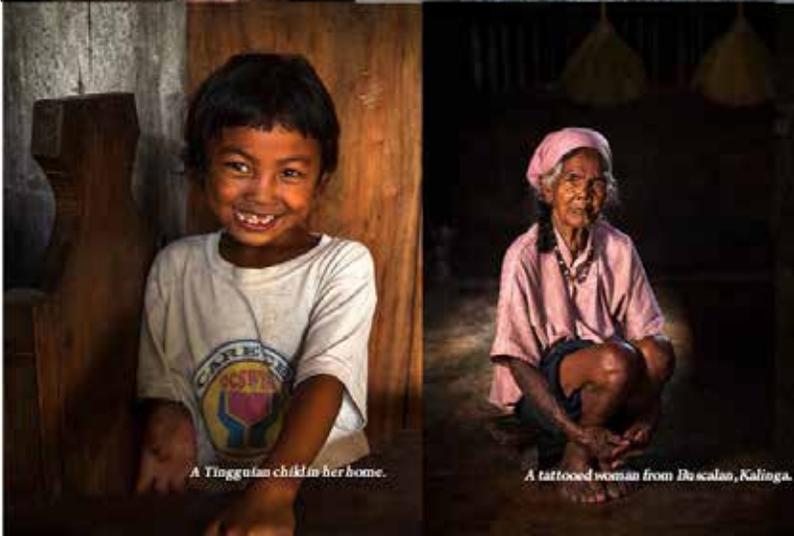
To the north, the mountain range terminates at the northern shores of Luzon along the Babuyan Channel in Ilocos Norte and Cagayan provinces. At its southeastern part, the Central Cordillera is linked to the Sierra Madre Mountains, the longest mountain range in the country, through the Caraballo Mountains in Nueva Vizcaya province. During Spanish colonial period, the whole range was called Nueva Provincia, (New Province).

Its inhabitants are a loosely connected federation of highland tribes. Most tertiary educated Cordillerans speak English, which is the most common medium of instruction at the college level in the Philippines. English is also taught in high school, as is Filipino (Tagalog); neither are commonly spoken at home or work, while Ilocano is used as a lingua franca.



Ghan-nao, who is Fung-od's younger sister, has one of the more elaborate tattoos that can be seen in the village.

A blind Kalina woman in front of her home.



A Tinggulán child in her home.

A tattooed woman from Du scalan, Kalinga.

Photos: Jacob Maentz
Images Asia



A Babut Kalinga Woman looking out of her window one afternoon after inviting us into her home. The tattoos on her arms are used as a form of beautification and identity which is specific to certain Kalinga tribes.



Fung-od giving a tattoo to a local tourist from Manila

Culture and language

Most of the Cordillera Central is the ancestral domain of the 'people of the mountains.' These ethnolinguistic groups include Abra (Tinggian), Apayao (Isneg), Benguet (Kankanaey and Ibaloi), Ifugao (Ifugao), Kalinga (Kalinga, Isneg), Mountain Province (Kankanaey). Each of these major ethnolinguistic groups has its own family of languages and cultures. An alternative listing for the Northern Philippine tribes is Apayao/Isnag, Abra/Tinguian, Kalinga, Gaddang, Applai, Mountain Province/Bontoc, Bontok, Bago, I-lagod, Kankanaey, Kankanai, Balangao, Ibaloi, Ifugao, Ikalahan, Kalanguya, Karao, and Ilongot.

Beside their own tribal cultures, there is a Cordilleran culture which is largely molded by the geography of the Cordilleras, and their common heritage of resisting the invading imperial powers (Spain, US, Japan in the past - and after 1946 the central government in Manila is also regarded as such), including the continuing adverse encroachments by lowlanders.

Notwithstanding their resistance to invasion from the lowlands, the economic language used throughout the Cordilleras is Ilocano, adopted from the lowlander traders of Ilocos.

Cordillerans are a group of indigenous people, recognized as such by Republic law, with their own sets of customary laws. The Customary law takes precedence over Republic law. The Tribal criminal law takes precedence over the Criminal Code of the Philippines. Murder and manslaughter, for instance, is more usually dealt with under the tribal law which might include blood debt, only satisfied by the death of the perpetrator. Tribal land law applies in preference to lowland registration law. Spanish deeds were never issued for the land in the Cordilleras since the Spanish were continuously repelled for the whole of Spanish colonial period.

Cordillerans view land as the source of life, an integral part of their cultural identity, which traces its origins from the land. The land is considered sacred and tribal land can neither be owned nor sold, but is nurtured to produce life for the communal benefit. For Cordillerans, the loss of their land, or their alienation from it, can be equivalent to taking their lives. It is because of this belief that Cordillerans now and in the past have willingly shed blood to defend their domain from colonizers, and have fought for the right to remain on their land.



Birthday girl

Johnny Litton and Mhel Pechera's Birthday Revelries

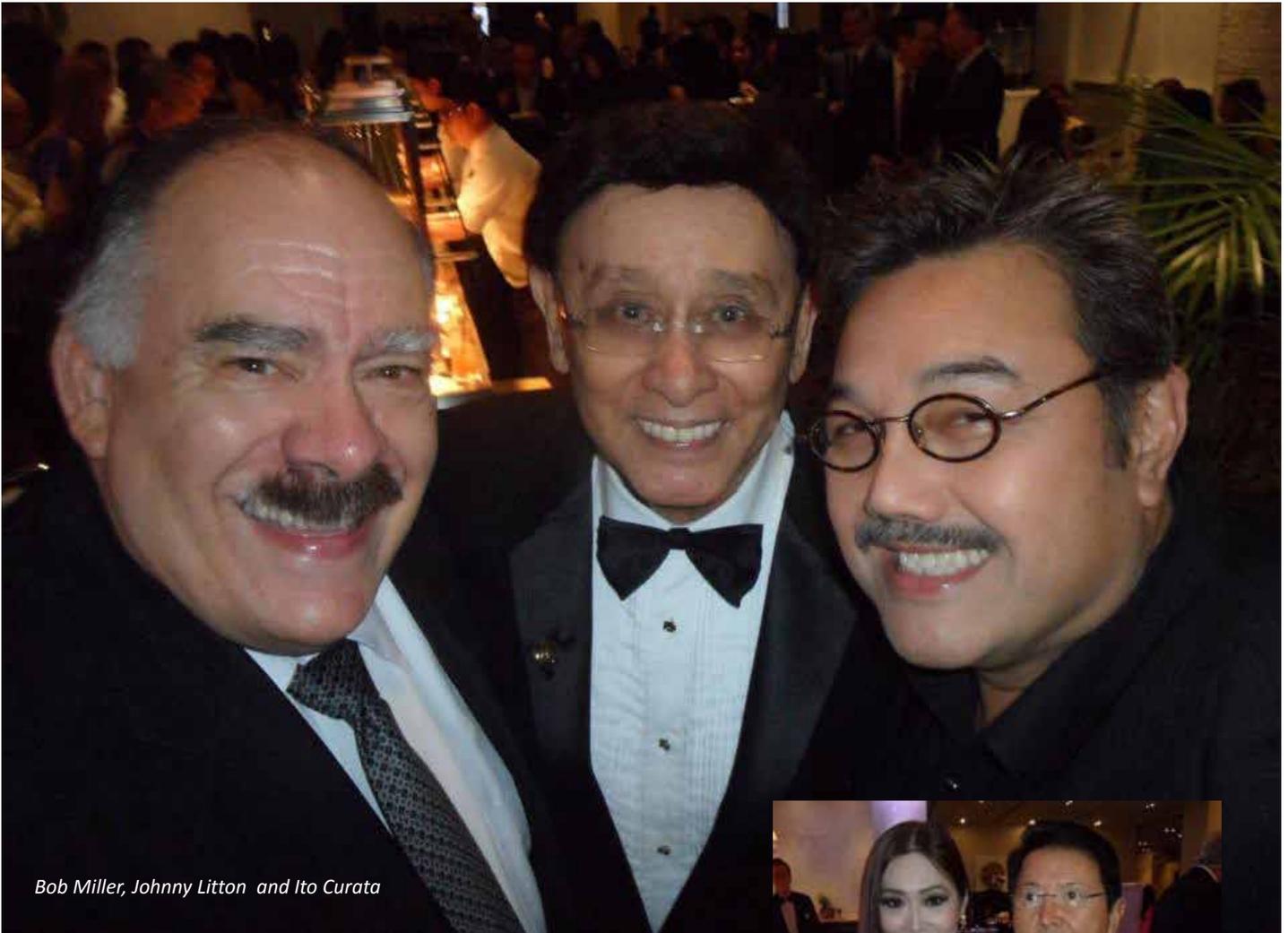


Ernest Snoops

by Ernest L. Gonzaga

The month of August is dominated by the zodiac sign, Leo, with the last few days falling under Virgo. People born between July 23 and August 21 are considered Leos, whereas, those whose birthdays fall between August 19 and 23 are said to be born on the Leo-Virgo cusp. People born under these two astrological categories differ from each other to a certain degree. A Leo possesses a positive outlook towards life and is very enthusiastic and is full of life. He/she is proud and determined and is also a great achiever who sets examples for others. Leos are genuine friends and are extremely loyal in their relationships. However, their self-centered nature and the tendency to dominate others are among their major negative traits. They are attention-seekers and can be very demanding at times. However, Leos are born leaders and whether consciously or unconsciously, they like to rule. They are brave and fearless when it comes to confrontation and are natural leaders. They take pride in themselves and possess an extreme sense of supremacy, just like the Lion itself.

A few friends, including myself celebrated their birthdays this month of August. I opted for a simple yet meaningful celebration. I treated the abandoned and family-less oldies of the Kanlungan ni Maria, a Home for the Aged in Antipolo City for dinner with my family and some friends. Several friends who reveled their milestones in different styles and venues included PAL's Fe Dixon, Miss World Philippines organizer Cory Quirino, former beauty queen actress Jean Saburit, socialite Marissa Fenton, lawyer Manette Agbayani, Katryn Manuntag, cosmetic surgeon Dr. Joni Dizon, Jazz Carreon among others.



Bob Miller, Johnny Litton and Ito Curata



Linda Ley and Chito Antonio

Two other August born friends partied their special day sumptuously and spectacularly. Society columnist of the Philippine Star and sought after event host Johnny Litton turned 80 years old. The grandiose ballroom of the Marriot Hotel in Newport City was the site of the merrymaking. Over 600 guests from the business, social and diplomatic communities attended the cocktail party. The highlight of the night was a special program, a fashion show as well as a concert by Martin Nievera.

Another celebrator's revelry, the well-loved and gorgeous socialite Mhel Pechera was held at the posh Monochrome Event Center in Sta. Rosa, Laguna. She requested her guests to come in either black or white motif. Mhel looked like every inch a radiant and gleaming debutante. She emerged from the top of the staircase three times in Oliver Tolentino gowns. In spite of the heavy rains, flooded streets and atrocious traffic, hundreds of her relatives and friends trooped in to rejoice with her. To Johnny Litton, Mhel Pechera and to all August born mob, a birthday wish of all the best. Happy birthday everyone.



Connie Haw and Elsie Pascua



Karl, Luigi and Meray with Elsie Pechera