THE IKALAHAN:
TRADITIONS BEARING FRUIT

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Name of forest: Kalahan Reserve
Location: Between Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya and San Nicolas, Pangasinan Province
Area (hectares): 14 730
Managing entity: Kalahan Educational Foundation and Ikalahan Community
Mgt. objectives: Rehabilitation, protection, sustainable use of natural resources, sustainable livelihoods
Country: Philippines

In the Philippines, to be jokingly branded as *taong gubat* — literally “man of the forest” — connotes backwardness or being out of pace with the rest of society. But this is not so with the Ikalahan, who consider themselves “people of the forest.” Their very name, as an ethnolinguistic community carries this description: *kalahan* literally means “forest” while the prefix *I* means “from” or “living in.”

As one native Ikalahan proudly declared, “Why should I be ashamed of the forest when it is our home and it sustains us?” And they have extra reason to be proud: they are recognized as pioneers in community-based forest management in the Philippines, and indeed the world.

The Ikalahan are otherwise referred to as the Kalanguya, which is a subgroup of the Ifugao tribe in the northern part of the Philippines. They live in villages nestled in the Caraballo Mountains located 250 kilometres north of Manila and 7 kilometres off the Santa Fe Highway. As a result of years of struggle in defending their land from greedy speculators since the early 1960s, they have learned to love and value these areas and nurture their productivity.
A pioneering solution for indigenous rights

The signing on 13 May, 1974 of Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) No. 1 (the very first of its kind) between the Kalahan Educational Foundation (KEF) and the Bureau of Forest Development — the main government forestry agency at the time — was a significant step towards the protection of indigenous rights in the Philippines. This agreement, which established the 14,730-hectare Kalahan Forest Reserve, was a pioneering development for both the government and the Ikalahan in resolving threats to ancestral lands and the culture of indigenous people. It was a long struggle, but the desire of the Ikalahan tribe to secure tenure over their ancestral lands was a strong motivation.

The Reverend Delbert Rice, an American missionary for the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, who has been working in the Kalahan Reserve since the mid-1960s, and Mang Sario, an Ikalahan elder, are witnesses to these struggles. Both still recall the legal battles that the Ikalahan had to undergo every time there was an attempt by rich and influential outsiders, sometimes including government officials, to grab portions of their ancestral lands.

In 1968, two large blocks of land between San Nicolas, Pangasinan and Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya, covering about 200 hectares were titled to lowlanders. The area was part of the ancestral lands of the Ikalahan. The titles were issued with the help of a geodetic engineer who made it appear that the area was part of the “alienable and disposable lands” (a term used in the Philippines to describe lands that can be titled to individuals for agriculture or other development), and allegedly unoccupied. The Ikalahan, who were residing in the area, reacted vehemently and filed a case in court. The case dragged on for several years with the Ikalahan initially losing the legal battle in the lower court. However, with the help of the Commission on National Integration, an agency previously under the Office of the President and established to protect the welfare of indigenous cultural communities, the Ikalahan finally won the case on 24 August, 1972. The Court of First Instance of Dagupan City set aside the decision of the lower court and decreed that the land registration titles issued were null and void.

The biggest threat to their land, however, came in 1970. The government planned to convert about 6,300 hectares of the ancestral lands into a vacation centre, to be known as “Marcos City.” Fake titles were used by relatives of high government officials in efforts to grab the land from the Ikalahan.

Alarmed, the tribal leaders in all adjacent communities held a major meeting to discuss possible solutions to the challenge they faced. They decided to file a case in court to force the government to recognize their ancestral land claims. The government attempted to have the case dismissed, but eventually, with the help of the late attorney Julian de Vera, a retired lawyer of the Commission on National Integration, the Ikalahan achieved legal victory in 1972. The court revoked the lowlanders’ titles, and eventually forced the government to abandon plans to develop the area as a vacation centre.
With the establishment of the Kalahan Forest Reserve, such land-grabbing attempts are now issues of the past. MOA No. 1 legitimized the prior and vested rights of the Ikalahan tribe over their ancestral lands. It recognized their claims and assured that they would not be driven away from their lands. It further gave them complete control and authority to manage the natural resources within the reserve.

“We can now enforce indigenous policies and rules geared towards the protection and conservation of the natural resources within the Kalahan Forest Reserve,” said Taynan Omallio, chairperson of the KEF’s board.

Omallio cited the case of one tribal member who leased his farm to an outsider to be used for raising fighting cocks. When the lessee started to develop the land, he cut down the trees in the farm which caught the attention of the board. The board immediately summoned the member and asked him to explain the lessee’s actions. There were no rules at that time governing this kind of problem but the board, which is composed mostly of tribal elders, fined the member US$60 and required him to plant an equivalent number of trees to those that had been cut. They also wrote to the lessee and informed him that the lease was terminated. As such, he could no longer develop the land leased to him.

The Kalahan Academy

With their lands safely secured, the tribal elders’ next concern was to maintain Ikalahan cultural identity and prevent cultural erosion. They wanted young members of the tribe to be educated but were concerned about the possible emotional trauma on the youths who pursued higher education outside the community. Thus, the KEF established a high school, which is now called the Kalahan Academy. In June 1974, seven months after the KEF was registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission, the academy was established through the concerted efforts of the Ikalahan people who provided free labour and wood from the forests, supplemented by donations from private individuals and organizations.

Today, the income-generating projects of the KEF, such as the food-processing centre, support the academy, although some private organizations also contribute to its operation. Since the academy was established to instill cultural pride among the Ikalahan while providing the necessary educational preparations for higher education or vocational courses, the KEF’s board sought Ikalahan teachers to inculcate Ikalahan history, mores and traditional practices effectively to the students. The high school curriculum of the academy includes subjects on forest ecology so that students are better prepared to manage the forest resources within the reserve.

Since its creation, 683 students have graduated from the academy. Some of them are now professionals who have returned to the community to serve the
KEF. In fact, most of the KEF staff and teachers are graduates from the academy. Others are serving as barangay (local government) officials in the Kalahan area or are working in the municipal office of Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya.

The Kalahan experience has become a model for Philippine Government programmes involving community participation in forest management. The succeeding community-based forest management programmes of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) were largely patterned after MOA No. 1 of the KEF. For instance, the DENR’s programme recognizing the ancestral domain of indigenous peoples and the subsequent Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA) were patterned on the Kalahan experience. The Ikalahan’s tenure over their land has further been strengthened with the signing in 1996 of the Kalahan Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claims that placed nearly 58,000 hectares of forest lands under the management and administration of three groups of Ikalahan tribes, including the KEF. They are now looking forward to receiving their Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title, as provided under the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act Law, which will give them complete ownership of the land.

**Clear individual rights within ancestral domains**

After taking community control over their ancestral lands, the KEF allocated farm lots of up to 10 hectares to every family. This was necessary because for at least two centuries the Ikalahan had been producing their food on swidden farms (kaingin). In the past, each family was allowed to make kaingin anywhere in the forest. Usually, they selected areas which were heavily forested as these were very fertile. The result was frequent widespread burning, converting most of the forested areas into farmlands. Although the Ikalahan were observing fallow periods to regain soil fertility, the time needed for successful rotation was 15 to 18 years or even longer. As the Ikalahan tribe grew, the traditional farming system required more land for cultivation, which continually reduced the area of forests.

This practice ended when their ancestral land was finally recognized by the government and the Kalahan Reserve was established. The tribal elders developed simple but clear rules for recognizing individual rights within the ancestral domain. These rules and policies were formulated after a series of consultations with local community members in the reserve. They were initially drafted by the KEF’s board, with representatives of the tribal elders from each of the barangays or villages. Afterwards, the draft rules were circulated to all barangay officials and discussed with the local residents. Comments were gathered and harmonized prior to finalization and approval of the policies and rules by the board. The implementation of these policies is carried out by the agroforestry office of the KEF, which comprises three foresters and forest guards.
Accordingly, any member of the tribe who wants to clear forest for a farm must select the site and request a permit from the KEF. The foundation’s forester then inspects the area to determine its suitability. If the area is acceptable, the forester and the applicant delineate the site and the corresponding permit is issued within two to five days. No approval is given for areas reserved for parks, watersheds or sanctuaries; areas exceeding 10 hectares in size; primary forests; areas prone to landslides; or areas that are not claimed by others. The applicant signs an agreement along with a sketch map that shows the areas approved for use and protection.

The recognition of individual rights within the ancestral domain has encouraged about 550 resident families to develop their farms following land-use plans which they and their leaders have formulated. The tribal leaders work in the KEF voluntarily. They are provided US$3 for each meeting to cover transportation expenses.

Since each family has an average of six hectares of landholding, a significant portion of the reserve is now under the responsibility of farmer-members. This has resulted in the protection of thickly forested areas and the rehabilitation of degraded areas. “In 1974, most of the areas in the forest reserve were bare, open and dominated with grasses,” noted Baliag Bugtung, a 67-year-old Ikalahan. “Today, you can see these areas teeming with trees, thanks to farmers who plant trees like alnos (Alnus japonica) before leaving the farm to fallow.”

**Strong enterprise development**

The Ikalahan’s strong sense of entrepreneurship makes them distinct from any other ethnic group in the Philippines. They see immense opportunities in their own resources and creatively pursue these with ingenuity. A case in point is the fruit-processing venture, which started in 1974.

“We have so many native guavas (Psidium guajava) ripening and just falling to the ground to rot,” Reverend Rice recalled one Ikalahan saying. “If only we could gather and process them for commercial consumption, then we could benefit more people and increase incomes.”

That was the beginning of their fruit-processing venture. Esther, Reverend Rice’s wife and a food technologist, supervised the fruit-processing venture. Their first products were guava jelly, guava jam and guava butter. Their commitment to quality and good taste attracted people from outside the reserve to buy their products. Leading supermarkets in Manila also took notice.

Their products were entirely natural with no chemical additives. “We prepare our own sweetening materials and pectin to ensure high quality,” Reverend Rice indicated. Quality control measures ensure proper cooking and sterilization. To prolong the shelf life of the preserved products marketed under the “Mountain Fresh” label, jars are sealed airtight.
Encouraged by the favourable acceptance of their first products, the KEF started processing other products from indigenous plants in 1980. These products include dagwey (*Saurauia subglabra*) preserves, dagwey jelly and spread; dikay (*Embelia philippinensis*) jelly; ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) jelly; passion fruit (*Passiflora edulis*) jelly; roselle (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) jelly; and santol (*Sandoricum koetjape*) jelly and spread. Today, their products are sold in 10 major shopping centres in Manila and are exported to the United States of America, Japan and Australia.

Currently, the KEF is also establishing new forest-based ventures including organic vegetable production, orchid growing and furniture manufacturing. Shortly, they will also be involved in a bottled water business — tapping water from a clean mountain spring inside their reserve.

**Transition of traditional system**

While many ethnic communities are known to live harmoniously with nature, being content with their traditional knowledge system, the Ikalahan have gone a step further by learning about and practising more ecologically friendly and sustainable agroforestry skills. For example, Romeo Pangomis, an Ikalahan elder, carried out a trial several years ago by planting alnos (a medium-sized tree that grows quickly and contributes significant quantities of nitrogen to the soil) in fallow areas. He discovered that the trees help to restore soil fertility after only seven years of fallow. Today, this practice is widely adopted by Ikalahan farmers on their upland farms because, aside from shortening the fallow period, the trees can also be harvested for fuelwood in four years or for quality timber in eight years.

Reverend Rice, who has been a missionary in the area since 1965, has been steadfast in supporting the formulation of effective policies, plans and programmes for the Kalahan Reserve. His efforts are being rewarded with heightened awareness and participation among the Ikalahan community in the protection, rehabilitation and management of forest resources.

Although the Ikalahan know that a degraded forest can slowly renew itself through ecological succession, every individual residing within the reserve works to accelerate the process through “assisted natural regeneration.” This practice consists of creating and expanding favourable environments for naturally growing tree saplings in the mountain gullies, and augmenting them with additional tree planting at the periphery of the expanding forests.

Every able resident living in the reserve is required to undertake at least one day of community service each year. This is mainly channelled towards reforestation activities. The agroforestry staff of the KEF work with barangay officials to organize tree planting activities every year, usually between June and September. Competing vines are removed so they do not choke the growing trees.
To date, the Ikalahan have reforested more than 2,000 hectares successfully. To support these efforts, two nurseries were established, which produce about 200,000 seedlings of forest and fruit trees annually. The nurseries are maintained by the agroforestry office and the labourers are paid by the KEF.

Recalling what they have done through the years as a community, Baliag Bugtong, a board member of the KEF, expressed satisfaction: “The planting of trees is something that we should be proud of. Today, we have fully grown trees standing around our villages in contrast to the vast barren wilderness that existed in the 1970s. This is a lasting gift we have for our children and our children’s children.”

The efforts of the Ikalahan have been rewarded by the emergence of expanded forest cover that contributes to the ecological, economic and food security of the community. The Ikalahan have planted tree species like tuai (*Bischofia javanica*) that bears fruits relished by birds, as well as economic species, like mulberry, coffee, citrus, apple, pears and indigenous dagwey and dikay fruit trees.

Keen on conducting research on their own, the Ikalahan have planted trials of 160 varieties of sweet potato to identify those that best suit their requirements. Recently, they discovered a valuable use for a weed, which in local parlance is called “panawel.” When composted and applied as a fertilizer to sweet potato, *panawel* eliminates the potato weevil, which previously destroyed as much as 40 percent of their crop.

**Governance aspects**

The KEF and its board manage the Kalahan Reserve. The seven barangays covering the ancestral domain are each represented by their tribal leaders on the board. Barangays Unib, Maliko and Imugan each have two representatives each because of their higher populations. Each of the other four barangays has one representative on the board. Representatives from the Kalahan Academy alumni, the local government and the youth sector bring the total membership to 13.

The board is responsible for formulating policies. It also serves as the final arbiter in resolving conflicts. The day-to-day operations of the KEF, however, are carried out by the management staff who are organized into teams according to their functions. These teams are coordinated by an administrative team composed of all the team leaders and some administrative personnel.

The KEF organizational structure follows the social structure of the Ikalahan community and is very effective, especially in policy enforcement and conflict resolution. To demonstrate this point, Reverend Rice recalled an incident involving a boundary dispute between two Ikalahan members. The two parties were claiming an area of land which overlapped the boundaries of their farm lots. The problem was brought to the attention of the board who visited the site to settle the conflict. The two parties were both hard-headed and would not agree to the board’s
suggestion to place their farm boundaries in between the disputed properties. Since neither party would yield, the board finally decided that the disputed area would be owned by the KEF. “Up to this time, this area still belongs to the Foundation,” Reverend Rice said.

To add legitimacy to the KEF’s decisions and to gain broader support, the foundation works very closely with barangay officials in formulating policies and implementing plans and programmes. The board drafts policies, sends them to the barangay council for review and approval and then the board adopts the approved policies. This process minimizes conflicts and builds stronger partnership between the barangay officials and the foundation.

The KEF also works with all barangay officials to develop uniform policies on resource management for all barangays covering the Kalahan ancestral domain. Through these initiatives, the KEF and the barangays are now implementing strict policies concerning the protection of wildlife inside the reserve. Two wildlife sanctuaries, covering approximately 3,500 hectares of forest, have been declared already. These areas are also protected by the communities for watershed purposes.

“The foundation has effectively managed the Kalahan reserve,” said Fernando Zamora, Barangay Captain of Imugan and President of the Association of Barangay Captains of Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya. “Under the leadership of the board and with the help of barangay officials and members of the community, sanctuaries which were established to protect wildlife and watersheds are properly protected. That is why — up to the present — barangay Imugan continues to have clean water for drinking and irrigation,” Zamora added.

Champion of the cause

The accomplishments of the Ikalahan people demonstrate what initiative and role modelling can do. Admittedly, the role of Reverend Rice — an electrical engineer and anthropologist by profession — has been instrumental in the development of the Ikalahan community and their metamorphosis into a model for community-based forest management.

Living together closely with the community, Reverend Rice has taught the Ikalahan to love and revere the forest and the rivers, and to be responsible stewards of these resources. For many years, he has served and worked with the KEF board and guided them with his advice. He has also been effective in securing funding support for community projects and in facilitating negotiations and fulfilling the bureaucratic requirements of the government.

Having worked in the Kalahan area for nearly 40 years, Reverend Rice has seen immense changes occurring in the community. “The kind of education offered by the Kalahan Academy and the livelihood opportunities provided by the food-processing centre have encouraged the Ikalahan to look at the forest in a new
The Ikalahan: traditions bearing fruit

way. They are now seeing other resources that they had never noticed before and are creatively looking for ways to properly use them. They are also looking more seriously at the sustainability of these resources. Most importantly, they have found that they can make changes without losing their culture and unity as a community,” he noted.

Together with Reverend Rice, the leadership of the KEF has crafted a vision for a self-reliant and self-sufficient Ikalahan community. Together they have motivated the community to work tirelessly toward this vision. “In the past, the forests were cleared for farming. But now, we want to protect them to provide livelihoods for our community. We have policies to make this happen and with the help of our barangay officials we are able to enforce these policies,” Taynan Omallio, chairperson of the KEF board, asserted with confidence.

The successes of the Ikalahan in productively and sustainably managing their forests attracted the attention of then DENR Secretary Fulgencio Factoran to the extent that many features of the KEF were adopted as a model for the DENR banner programme on community-based forest management. This programme grants community organizations the right to manage forest lands adjacent to their homes for periods of 25 years, renewable for subsequent 25-year periods upon satisfactory performance.

Being true pioneers in many respects, it is not surprising that the Ikalahan community, through the KEF, has received several awards. For their innovative work on the local processing of indigenous forest fruits, they have already garnered five awards from the Department of Agriculture and from scientific organizations. Their school, the Kalahan Academy, has been acknowledged as the most outstanding secondary school for environmental education in the country. More importantly, the academy has produced community- and ecology-oriented professionals, several of whom are now serving in various development projects in civil servant positions.

Wild guavas are used by the KEF as raw materials in producing guava jelly (courtesy KEF).
Conclusion

The Ikalahan proudly stand as a model of indigenous people’s self-determination. They exemplify the utmost yearning of an indigenous community — to freely pursue their dreams and aspirations while wisely managing their forest resources for the benefit of current and future generations.

Bibliography


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