QUEZON CITY, Philippines—For some time American soldiers, who were then based at their military bases in Clark and Subic Bay in central Luzon had tapped some indigenous Aeta to teach them about how to survive in a jungle. Former nomadic hunters and gatherers, the Aeta taught American soldiers how to trap wild game and identify edible plants and medicinal herbs and how to apply these for injuries.
After the American soldiers and other non-indigenous Filipinos mastered the art and science of jungle survival, they parted ways with the Aeta. From what they learned, they developed a training course about jungle survival and have been teaching this to other soldiers. Other Filipinos who learned from the Aeta also have been teaching the course to interested enrollees on jungle survival.

The sad part, according to Aeta elder Salvador “Ka Badong” Dimain, is that this training course has been patented or copyrighted. He said the course is now taught by so-called “jungle survival experts,” thus depriving the Aeta of a livelihood as trainers or teachers in jungle survival.

The travails of the Aeta elder from Maporac, Zambales were just among the issues and concerns raised during an October 2013 workshop in Quezon City about the protection and promotion of traditional or indigenous knowledge.

Dimain’s concern about the patenting of their jungle survival can be legally contested. But this requires a tedious and expensive process, said Jing Corpuz, Tebtebba’s legal officer. To protect them from another appropriation attempt of their traditional knowledge, indigenous communities can come out with what is called “community protocol” or community laws and rules on intellectual property, she advised.

Indigenous Resource Management

Other indigenous leaders shared their traditional protection, conservation and management systems. Sibuyan Mangyan Tagabukid representatives asserted that their type of kaingin (shifting cultivation) is “sustainable.” One method the indigenous community from Mindoro
has practiced for generations is leaving a former kaingin farm fallow for at least five years.

“We stress on this (fallow period) to allow the soil to regain its fertility,” said youth leader Maramie Diego. In doing so, the indigenous communities there have maintained their forest cover and watersheds, thus ensuring a sufficient supply of water for their farms and homes, he added.

The Aeta of central Luzon also have established a way of protecting and managing their forested environs to support and sustain not only people but animals and other wildlife species as well. In hunting, for example, they have established a hunting and gathering season, according to young Aeta elder Joseph Salonga. Hunting deer and wild pigs is from May to September. During the rest of the year, hunting is forbidden as female animals are pregnant.

Harvesting honey is from December to May as bees stock their honey for their own consumption during the rainy season. Salonga proposed to inform the local government about these traditional practices and thus forge a memorandum of agreement so local government and communities can work hand in hand.

Traditional versus Hybrid

Other indigenous leaders highlighted that their traditional farming involves diverse crops as against the monoculture of “modern” agriculture. Since crops are diverse in a traditional farm, indigenous communities are assured of a variety of foods for their health and nutrition, thus assuring them “food security,” said Matthew Tauli of the non-government Montañosa Research and Development Center (MRDC) based in Sagada, Mountain Province.

Unfortunately, indigenous communities’ traditional crops have been threatened by hybrid varieties and more recently by genetically modified seeds, said Tauli. One disadvantage of these hybrid and genetically modified seeds is that they cannot be replanted and they can only promise good production if applied with chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The result: farmers have to solely rely on agri-chemical companies for their seeds and other inputs. This is in contrast to traditional farming in which farmers have full control over their seeds as long as they continue to propagate these.

Transmitting Indigenous Knowledge

Other indigenous participants tackled other threats and challenges and how to respond to these. One is how to transmit
to the youth indigenous knowledge and
good cultural practices and values, which
indigenous communities need to survive.
The good news is that there are current
initiatives and programs on these.

The Cordilleras in northern Philip-
pines has organizations, which have been
promoting local indigenous cultures
and practices. Youth leaders Mattyline
Camfili and Renalyn Tubao, for example,
have become ambassadors of Cordillera
indigenous culture through the Dap-ayan
ti Kultura iti Kordillera or DKK. Among
other things, the DKK focuses on indig-
enous performing arts such as dances and
songs and its members have performed in
various parts in the country and abroad.

Another is the Lin-awa Center, a
Baguio City-based center that aims to
transmit Kalinga culture and values in
an urban setting. Since Baguio is where
many Kalinga youth study and where
others seek employment, some Kalinga
professionals and leaders thought of es-
tablishing a center where young people
learn about how to play their traditional
musical instruments, perform their danc-
es, socialize and share and celebrate “a
state of well-being.” The center, said its
head Lucy Ruiz, seeks to help Kalinga
youth to become “proud of our roots”
and “not let discrimination put us down
but rather delight in our differences.”

On their own, many indigenous com-
munities have established ways to trans-
mit traditional knowledge to the young.
The Magbukun Aeta tribe of Bataan
faces near extinction of its indigenous
language, which embodies the commu-
nity’s customs, traditions and values.
But the tribe has made it a point to train
educators to teach children about their
own language. Aeta educators are aware
that should they fail to teach the young
about their language, there will come
a time when a big library of traditional
knowledge will be lost altogether as key
elders pass away.

Defending Rights

Other indigenous leaders underscored
the challenges and threats to their human
rights and dignity and how they have re-
responded to defend these. The indigenous community of Sagada, Mountain Province, for example, was able to prevent a company from building a telecommunication tower in a place the community highly regards as one of its sacred sites, said Sagada-based researcher and writer Gina Dizon.

She also reported about how the community stopped a British filmmaker from filming how Sagada coffins were made for lack of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) from the residents. Seeking the residents’ FPIC is not enough as the permission of the spirits of the dead is required, according to tradition and this entails costly elaborate rituals. Dizon thus suggested the need for policies to protect indigenous communities from visitors or outsiders with certain vested interests.

Another issue highlighted was land grabbing. Ibaloi elder Vicky Macay narrated how wide swaths of Ibaloi lands were lost as a result of colonization and past and present government land laws and policies.

Political Governance

Indigenous representatives from Mindanao in southern Philippines underscored challenges related to political governance. They particularly cited the issues they face as they aspire to engage with local governments through indigenous peoples’ mandatory representatives or IPMR.

An IPMR is provided for by the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act or IPRA. Each local government unit—from the barangay (village), municipal to provincial level—is required to have an IPMR. Ideally, the IPMR is one way where indigenous communities can actively participate in local governance, especially focusing on indigenous peoples’ issues and concerns. Apparently, however, the role of the IPMR has to be better understood and appreciated by indigenous peoples and government officials.

The Department of Interior and Local Government and the National Commission of Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) must take the lead in orienting indigenous communities and local officials about the roles and responsibilities of IPMRs, said indigenous leaders. Indigenous peoples also must be vigilant against attempts by some politicians to strategically place their IPMRs for political gains, according to Allan Deli-deli of Sildap.

To the indigenous Arumanen Manuvu, an IPMR must be selected based on how indigenous communities choose their leaders, said Manuvu leader Datu Roldan Babelon.

Since the IPMR’s role is crucial, other leaders suggested the need to train potential indigenous leaders to engage with local governments. Tebtebba’s executive director Victoria Tauli-Corpuz proposed a training or conference center for IPMR where resource persons from such groups as the Ateneo School of Good Governance could be tapped. She also encouraged indigenous leaders to demand the NCIP to hold mandatory trainings for IPMRs.

“Once chosen, an IPMR must assert and strategize programs beneficial for indigenous communities,” she added.
Indigenous Education

Deli-deli likewise highlighted the importance of indigenous education, drawing from indigenous knowledge and local context the mass education of children in indigenous communities. In support of indigenous communities’ alternative education initiatives, Tauli-Corpuz suggested the need for a plan or strategy for a community enterprise maximizing local resources (e.g., traditional livelihoods and crafts, etc.) to help sustain indigenous peoples’ education. “We can also demand that government, as part of its duty, to allocate funds for indigenous peoples’ schools managed by non-government or peoples’ organizations,” she said.

An encouraging development is that more and more among the international community now acknowledge that traditional or indigenous knowledge is equal to science, according to Len Regpala of Tebtebba’s CBD Program.

After sharing their stories, the participants proposed ways to transmit indigenous knowledge to the young and how to further enhance this as one way to cope with the demands of the future. As one concrete proposal, “Why not a university on IKSP (indigenous knowledge, systems and practices)?” asked Datu Ed Banda of Davao.

Banda’s proposal was followed by a similar one—a center for all indigenous voices in Asia.

Traditional Knowledge Council

And to ensure that a lead group would sustain what has been tackled and agreed upon, the participants unanimously pushed for the formation of a national council on traditional knowledge. They agreed to call the council, Pambansang Ugnayan para sa Pagsasabuhay ng Katutubong Kaalaman (National Initiative for Applied Traditional Knowledge).

Members of the council come from the country’s major islands. Luzon has four representatives; Mindanao, four; and the Visayas, three. (Redith Morales, Indigenous Peoples and Biodiversity Program and Maurice Malanes, Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service) 📝