

Melding Indigenous and Tourist Lived Topographies in Sagada, Northern Philippines as a Sustainable Development Mechanism: The Case of the *Begnas* Ritual System
(Preliminary Findings of an Ongoing Research)

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Introduction: The Municipality of Sagada, Northern Philippines

The municipality of Sagada, Mountain Province, Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), Philippines is a fifth class municipality, having an average annual income of at least 15 million pesos and not more than 25 million pesos. Sagada is situated in a Type 1 climate of the four climate types in the country identified by the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA), having two pronounced seasons: dry season occurs from November to April and the wet season from May to October.

Sagada is landlocked and geographically located at 17°05' North and 120°54' East, bordered with the municipality of Tubo, Abra in the north; the municipality of Bontoc, Mt. Province in the east; the municipality of Sabangan, Mt. Province in the south; and the municipalities of Bauko and Besao, Mt. Province in the west (Fig. 1). It has a total land area of 9,969 hectares, wherein around 99.3% is classified by national law as forest and public land, with an elevation range of 1,313 meters above sea level (masl) to 2,318 masl. The recognition of an ancestral domain allowed the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to award the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim (CADC) No. 38, totaling 8,698 hectares (87.25%) of the total municipal land area in March 1996.

Sagada landscape consist of limestone rocks, caves, and underground rivers; situated in a mountainous terrain with gentle to very steep slopes; and gradually sloping valleys in the west-central and northeastern areas. Soil types include Sagada clay loam, Sabangan clay loam, Natonin loam, and other still unidentified soil types. Two major river systems cut through the terrain; one starting from the northern area, running through the Bomod-ok Falls in Pidlisan, and then barangay Tanowong, all the way to the villages of Tetep-an and joining the Chico River in Bontoc; while the other river system also starting in the northern areas (barangay Bangngaan), traversing the western-central barangays down south and connecting again to the Chico River at Malitep (SMDC 2007). Pine forests composed of *Pinus kesiya* Royle ex Gordon dominate Sagada's landcover.

The Municipal Development Council of Sagada currently subdivides different *ili*¹ into a number of zones, composed of primary and secondary *ili* (Table 1). Comprising of an original six *ili*, population growth eventually formed 19 barangays, each having its unique oral history, with differing but related ritual practices, and distinct geographical features.

¹An *ili* is a human settlement or village, but not necessarily equated to a *barangay*, the smallest administrative division in the Philippines.

Table 1. Barangay Zone Groups of Sagada (Municipal Development Council)

| Zones | Original Ili | Barangay Names | Expanded Barangays |
|-------|--------------------|-------------------------|--|
| North | Pidlisan, Tanowong | Pidlisan, Tanowong | Aguid, Pide/Piche, Bangngaan/Banga-an, Madongo |
| East | Antadao, Tetep-an | Antadao, Tetep-an | Tetep-an Sur, Tetep-an Norte, Kilong |
| South | Ankileng | Taccong, Ankileng, Suyo | Nacagang |
| West | Balugan | Demang, Balugan | Dagdag, Patay, Ambasing |

A national highway traverses Sagada from Baguio to Besao. As of 2005, provincial roads have a total length of 37.8 kilometers, with 7.86 kilometers or 21% paved and 29.94 or 79% were unpaved. The total length of barangay roads is 16.7 kilometers which consist the (1) Sagada-Ambasing, (2) Sagada-Suyo, (3) Sagada-Balugan, (4) Sagada-Tanulong, (5) Sagada-Banga-an-Aguid, and (6) Sagada-Payag-eo. Various road concreting works are ongoing however as of April 2016, and road networks have increased. Additionally, road widening projects have also been ongoing, which greatly eased access to the different barangays of Sagada.

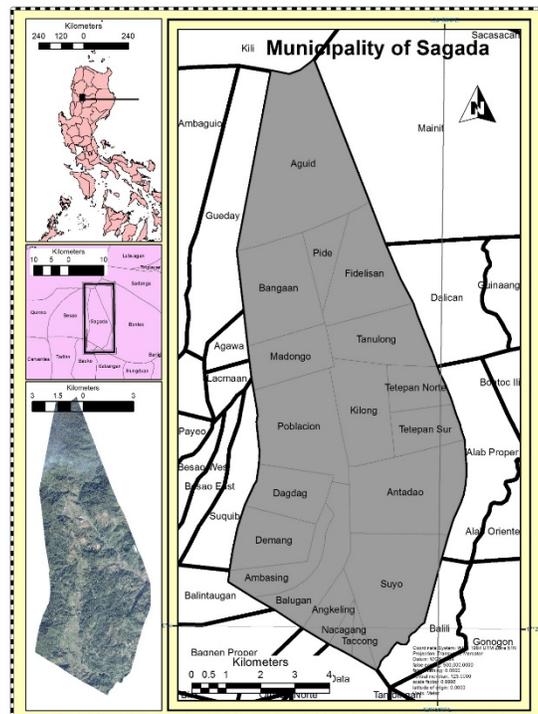


Figure 1. The Administrative Boundaries of the Municipality of Sagada Relative to Barangays of Adjacent Municipalities

In 2010, Sagada had a total population of 11,244 comprising 2,677 households and a population density of 114 individuals per square kilometer growing at an annual rate of 0.43% (National Statistics Office, NSO 2013). Nacagang is the least populated barangay while Patay is the most populated. In terms of population density, Aguid has the least population density and Dagdag the most densely populated barangay with around six people per hectare (Table 2). In the latest 2015 census however, total population was lessened by 117, although the least and most populated barangays remained the same.

Table 2. Land area and population in barangays of Sagada.

| Barangay Name | Area (ha) | Percentage to total land area (%) | Population (2010 Census) | Population (2015 Census) | Population Density (people per hectare) | |
|--------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| | | | | | 2010 | 2015 |
| Aguid | 2,717.68 | 27.261 | 596 | 681 | 0.22 | 0.25 |
| Antadao | 1,405.53 | 14.099 | 360 | 357 | 0.26 | 0.25 |
| Tanowong/Tano-ong | 625.98 | 6.279 | 402 | 402 | 0.64 | 2.18 |
| Balugan | 618.60 | 6.205 | 813 | 780 | 1.31 | 3.49 |
| Pidlisan | 587.65 | 5.895 | 462 | 428 | 0.79 | 4.87 |
| Ankileng | 555.03 | 5.568 | 994 | 907 | 1.79 | 3.85 |
| Madongo | 539.83 | 5.415 | 485 | 561 | 0.90 | 2.58 |
| Banga-an/Bangngaan | 443.00 | 4.444 | 703 | 924 | 1.59 | 2.60 |
| Tetep-an Norte | 354.87 | 3.560 | 397 | 363 | 1.12 | 0.58 |
| Ambasing | 333.73 | 3.348 | 796 | 774 | 2.39 | 3.21 |
| Patay (Poblacion) | 306.95 | 3.079 | 1,537 | 1,347 | 5.01 | 2.29 |
| Tetep-an Sur | 240.90 | 2.416 | 408 | 380 | 1.69 | 0.70 |
| Kilong | 235.36 | 2.361 | 393 | 409 | 1.67 | 0.92 |
| Taccong | 223.38 | 2.241 | 315 | 314 | 1.41 | 2.08 |
| Suyo | 217.54 | 2.182 | 395 | 439 | 1.82 | 1.32 |
| Nacagang | 184.32 | 1.849 | 254 | 174 | 1.38 | 0.28 |
| Demang | 150.81 | 1.513 | 758 | 768 | 5.03 | 5.49 |
| Dagdag | 139.91 | 1.403 | 814 | 731 | 5.82 | 1.32 |
| Pide/Piche | 87.93 | 0.882 | 362 | 375 | 4.12 | 1.22 |
| OVERALL | 9969.00 hectares | 100 % | 11,244 individuals | 11,127 individuals | 1.13 people per hectare | 1.11 people per hectare |

Sagada is inhabited by an indigenous ethno-linguistic group, the northern Kankana-ey, which also occupy a great portion of Mt. Province, although most inhabitants commonly identify themselves as *i*-Sagada (*/i:/*-Sagada) to denote their belongingness to the place or at other times as Igot (Igorot), a collective term ascribed to peoples of the Luzon Cordillera, or highland peoples in general. *I*-Sagada (as well as applied by other Cordilleran dialects) also use the prefix *i*- (*/i:/*) for specifying one's ancestral *ili*, for example, *i*-Pidlisan, *i*-Bugang, *i*-Aguid, etc. Natives would also use geographical terms in order to refer to their own barangays or that of their neighbors. "Northern" barangays would refer to Aguid, Pide, Pidlisan, Banga-an, Tanowong and Madongo. "Central" barangays refer to Poblacion (Patay), Demang, Dagdag, Ambasing, and Bugang (Balugan). "Eastern" barangays are Tetep-an Sur and Norte, Antadao and Kilong. Finally, "southern" barangays are Angkileng, Suyo, Taccong, and Nacagang (Fig. 2).

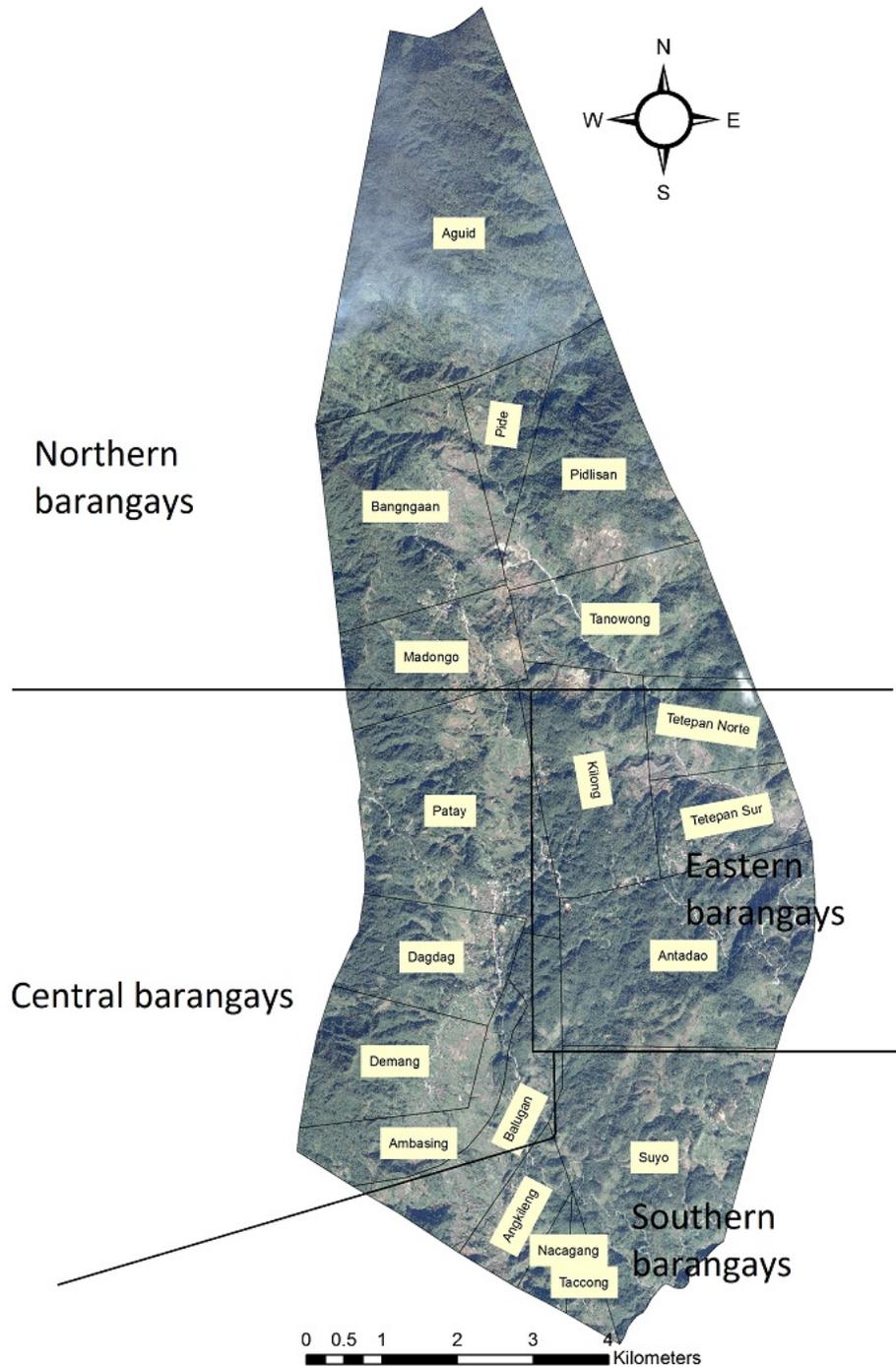


Figure 2. Informal geographical references for Sagada barangays.

The *Begnas* Ritual System

The *begnas* (bəgnas) is a northern Kankana-ey practice for invoking community welfare and personal well-being. Its elements are composed of a complexity of participants, meanings, processes, ritualistic activities, and other necessary conditions which when one is absent, a *begnas* cannot be fulfilled. In general, the purpose for any *begnas* is

commonly associated with communal thanksgiving, invoking good luck while seeking protection from unfortunate events. Specifically, a *begnas* can be categorized into three broad classifications: (1) for marking agricultural activities, (2) as a means of thanksgiving for particular events (other than agricultural-related activities), and (3) for cleansing misfortunes within the community.

The *begnas* and its role for communal cleansing is manifested when a very unfortunate event occurred, such as when a particular house gets burned down. In the case of Taccong and Ankileng, this *begnas* type allows village cleansing (which deters a repetition) for a loss of life among community members, especially when someone dies of apparent murder allegedly perpetrated by an individual from another village (within or outside Sagada). Such *begnas* celebrations can be termed as a “sad” occasion, which focuses on ancestors to dispel further disasters from happening again in the village.

The *begnas* as a means for thanksgiving particular events other than agriculture-related ones can be seen as the “opposite” of a “sad” *begnas*. Such cases of *begnas* happen for commemorating the inauguration of a new *dap-ay*², or a completed rehabilitation of one. It is also performed for celebrating a new year, or any momentous or important event for the community, as such, a *begnas* is the thanksgiving activity of the whole community. These types of *begnas* however are more commonly associated with Christianized villages (Anglican or otherwise) and extended villages (villagers who originated from a particular “parent” village and eventually increased population through biological growth or in-migration), and could be seen as an innovation of the original intents and purposes of *begnas* as experienced by villagers from their parent village(s).

Finally, the *begnas* as a marker for specific agricultural events entails both communal cleansing and thanksgiving, and is more complex in form (processes involved in its performance) and its required elements. It is more complex in the sense that there are additional rituals and requirements, as compared with the other *begnas* types. Moreover, this type of *begnas* is most commonly practiced in Sagada agricultural and daily life.

Performing the *begnas* begins at the *dap-ay*, as male participants prepare for an omen-seeking and welfare-invoking trip. This initial omen-seeking trip may also involve the butchering of a chicken or the roasting of *etag*³ once they reach their destination, depending on the practices of each particular village. The destinations are usually grasslands, shrub lands or forested areas; and omens to look out for are the presence of a particular bird song, the presence of crows, snakes and other animals crossing the path of participants during such trips, soaring hawks or other birds of prey, and an assortment of other fauna-related behaviour. Various interpretations are assigned for each particular manifestation, and depending whether it is a good or bad one, omen-seeking trips may be repeated until good signs are observed, or in some villages, require bathing at a water body to cleanse misfortunes.

²Distinct physical structure essential for various socio-religious-political affairs, composed of a low-roofed dwelling and stone paved walls, flooring and ground premises, as well as back rests.

³Slice of pork meat preserved through salt, sun-drying, and or smoking.

Once this initial trip is finished, additional rituals will be conducted at another sacred area, usually marked by an upright stone or a large, branch-laden tree, to again invoke community welfare and well-being. This would also involve the butchering of a small pig, or a big one, depending on the customs of the village. Before people are permitted to work, a pig or a chicken is butchered at the last rest holiday. All of these various events are spread in a number of days, ranging from a minimum of three days or a maximum of six days, varying from one village to another.

Sagada's Tourism Industry

Incidentally, the increasing documentation and recognition of the *begnas* ritual system, most especially during the visually-exciting events of the first day of the ritual process, make it a popular affair among tourists. Several tourists even cite the *begnas* as one reason for visiting Sagada, seeing the cultural practice as a unique spectacle to experience. On the other hand, while Sagada natives welcome the presence of tourists and their interest in the ritual, the sheer number of visitors and the desire to document their experiences with and of the *begnas*, vis-à-vis the solemnity and sacredness of the event, have been causing a number of issues. The uncontrolled need to take videos and pictures of the *begnas* participants and processes is a particular annoyance, especially in cases where backyard spaces are intruded in an effort to have a better vantage point. A graver aggravation happens when tourists impede pathways, especially during the return of male participants from the *papatayan* (a sacred landscape), or when they cause rocks to fall from standing or sitting on or near rock-reinforced walls (*kabiti*). Such events are bad omen, and depending on the severity of what transpired, would require additional rituals.

As a result of the increasing presence of tourists and the inconveniences they cause to participants, measures have been put up by the community in an effort to inform tourists about proper decorum and ensure the peaceful celebration of the *begnas*. Unfortunately, the sustainability of such measures would be tested amidst Sagada's growing tourism industry.

Historically, the tourism industry in Sagada started during the 1970s, with the opening of various facilities to accommodate tourists. One of the very first guest houses to operate in Sagada was established by the American Episcopalian missionaries. St. Joseph's Guest House which opened in 1975 used to be an orphanage managed by Episcopal sisters. The sisters decided to turn part of the orphanage into a guesthouse to generate funds for the orphans under their care. In addition to guest houses for accommodating tourists, restaurants opened. This proved to be a venue for tourists in suggesting restaurant owners to cook varieties of European, American, and Middle East dishes; bake English muffins, cinnamon rolls, and bread; and make Israeli yogurt and pita, and wines from local fruits (Dulnuan 2003).

Tourism is thus a great culture changing factor for Sagada. Interestingly, an Asia-Pacific Workshop on Tourism, Indigenous Peoples and Land Rights was held in Sagada in 1995. Indigenous peoples from Hawaii, Papua New Guinea, Australia, Taiwan, Indonesia, India, Bangladesh and Nepal issued a declaration which denounced the tourism industry designed by transnational corporate interests, which is seen to turn "our ancestral homes and sacred grounds into playgrounds for the pleasure of the few" and

further announced that tourism should be free from foreign control and based from the community's choice and consensus (D'Sa 1999).

The municipal government in response to various tourism-related issues, formulated a number of ordinances to manage the influx of tourists (Brett 2012). The first ordinance was enacted in 1998 through Municipal Ordinance No. 03-98 concerns protection of various scenic spots within the municipality. The scenic spots pertain to the caves, underground rivers, limestone formations, *dap-ay*, *papatayan* and other sacred sites. Those caught committing prohibitive acts such as destruction of the spots, extraction of stalactites and stalagmites from caves and underground rivers, and taking coffins or human bones from burial caves and hanging coffins are subject to a corresponding penalty of six months imprisonment or a fine of five thousand pesos (₱5, 000.00) or both at the discretion of the court. (₱46 = \$1, August 2016)

In 2008, Municipal Ordinance No. 08-2008 stipulated the collection of a ₱20.00 environmental fee from all tourists, and was further increased to ₱35.00 in 2012. The utilization of the environmental fee is broken down into the following, although Simongo and Bagsangi (2015) noted that the utilization of the funds are not followed (as of 2015) as stipulated in the municipal ordinance: (a) Maintenance and preservation of scenic spots (55%), (b) Personal services (20%), (c) Waste management program (10%), (d) Calamity (5%), (e) Cultural preservation (2%), (f) Office development and supplies (3%), (g) Information dissemination and trainings (3%) and (h) Others (2%).

The collection of the environmental fee is being undertaken by the Office of the Municipal Treasurer through the Tourist Information Center. Tourists are required to pay the environmental fee, which also serves as registration data for calculating the number of tourist arrivals. It is however estimated that about 30-40% of visiting tourists do not register at the Tourist Information Center due to having family relatives, or knowing friends and acquaintances in Sagada. Participants to reunions and seminars, as well as traders and businessmen would also not register as they would initially attend to their intended businesses before touring around Sagada (Simongo & Bagsangi 2015).

Brett (2012) in her interview with former vice mayor Richard A. Yodong, disclosed that the lack and inefficiency of implementing tourism programs, policies and projects are attributed to the absence of a tourism office, which in part is also due to the insufficiency of funds. While Sagada currently has a Municipal Tourist Office (MTO), there is no regular and tenured employee assigned for manning the said office. These selected ordinances, and other related ones currently ratified in Sagada, as well as the current power of the MTO, prove ineffective in addressing the negative impacts caused by the tourism industry.

On the other hand, various campaigns are initiated in Sagada to invite more tourists. The Etag Festival celebrated in the last days of January until the initial days of February, and named after the indigenous practice of preserving pork meat with salt and smoke (*etag*) has been initiated in 2011 by the municipal government as part of its tourism campaign. Another is the Bonfire Fest in the late days of December, which is initiated by Travel Factor (a travel package provider based in Manila), the Sagada Genuine Guides Association (SaGGAs), and the municipal government in 2009.

These festivals however are not without issues. It is said that not enough *etag* is produced for the Etag Festival, as well as the conduct and rationale of the festival itself

having mixed reactions (Cabreza 2016). The Bonfire Festival on the other hand, has been receiving a lot of criticisms lately. In 2014, the event was scheduled to be conducted at the Tangeb grounds, adjacent to barangays Demang and Dagdag which still retain and practice traditional calendars and rituals. Due that the event showcases the playing of gongs during a prohibited time (all gong playing should have ended by that time, according to the traditional calendar), a petition of nearly 200 residents of barangays Dagdag and Demang, as well as a joint barangay assembly, demanded the cancellation of the event (Dizon 2014). The Bonfire Fest pushed on however, although again, this has been receiving mixed reviews in online blog posts.

Unfortunately, the increasing tourist arrivals have also brought with it a plethora of ever increasing external cultures impinging on the rich and unique indigenous culture-environment of Sagada. With this trend are related problems such as solid wastes, safety and security issues, landscape degradation, and an overall decline of Sagada's culture-environment carrying capacity.

Concluding Remarks: Melding Tourist and Native Appreciation for the *Begnas*

While tourism is not the only issue affecting the *begnas*, the main idea presented in this paper is to harness the potential of tourism for strengthening the appreciation of the *begnas* in the face of various culture-environment issues such as changing preferences for rice varieties planted, culture change, population growth and infrastructure development, and probably even climate change. By melding tourist and native lived topographies of the *begnas*; sacred landscapes required for the *begnas* are preserved, generated incomes are increased and equitably and appropriately utilized, and overall culture-environment integrity and health is achieved.

This paper specifically proposes that lived topographies (lived experience that occur in specific places or types of places) of Sagada, northern Philippines, among tourists and natives could be melded according to their topographical interpretations of the *begnas*. The idea is to harness the potential of tourism for strengthening the practice of *begnas* in Sagada, and therefore encourage the preservation and protection of sacred landscapes and other ecological capital required for the *begnas*.

The relevance of multilevel governance, in which national and regional practices are embedded in local governance practices (Fink, Lang, & Harms, 2013), is also suggested for achieving this endeavour. Policies should allow the participation of tourists in the *begnas* ceremonies without the ritual losing its significance and potency for fulfilling its intended functions. Natives on the other hand should harness economic capital from *begnas*-related tourism in raising native pigs and making *etag* out of such pigs, be incentivized in growing up sugarcane as a source of organic sugar, and promote the practice of the *begnas* in complete traditional attire and processes to strengthen cultural identity and knowledge.

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