

## **Ghost-hunting in Sagada**

Every Monday morning at 3:00am in Baguio City's Slaughter Compound, passengers relied on the Lizardo Bus for the first trip into Mountain Province. I cannot count how many times I've gone around the dark maze of provincial buses there to line up for a ticket and negotiate with the seller to give me a window seat. I saw my fellow zombies, the hunched bodies on benches while waiting for the bus driver. When the engine growled, each of us lumbered into the metallic warmth and the betelnut stink of the interior of a Lizardo Bus.

Lizardo Bus No. 11 used to be the fastest bus from Baguio to Sagada, driven by Mr. Abeya along the Halsema Highway, the zigzagging trail following the girth of the mountains of Benguet and Mountain Province.

I don't know how Mr. Abeya did it, but on the highway obscured by thick fog, he could tell when the road went left or right. Through the windshield, the headlights were only able to illuminate the first few feet of road ahead, and the rest of the world melted under an opaque mist. He drove that Lizardo Bus at a speed that made a passage through the Halsema feel like a meditation on mortality.

The fright is genuine. One moment you discern in the few feet ahead that you're headed towards the cliff. Next moment you feel the bus make a sudden swerve to the left, and you realize you're still on the road amid collective sighs of relief and the old men beseeching the driver to please slow down, please be careful, we have no reason to be in a hurry.

I however had a reason to be in a hurry: the first period classes I used to teach in St. Mary's School began at around 8:00am. Usually it would take around six hours for a bus to travel from

Baguio to Sagada, but Lizardo No. 11 was so fast it could reach Sagada's poblacion almost an hour early. So, fresh off the bus and ready for work, my Monday mornings were spent in a daze, half-groggy and half-dreaming. Like my soul was still in transit. At the end of the week, when the school bell rang the Friday dismissal bell at 4:30pm, I would hurry again to pack my things and dash off to the bus bound to Baguio City.

When I graduated from college, I hurried to go work in Sagada. When I did start working there, I knew I could never occupy the place properly. So I was finding reasons to return and finding excuses to leave. I was engaged in a love affair with place without the burden of land, without the pesky entanglement of rootedness.

"Apay nga Sagada<sup>1</sup>?" asked friends and family. "You could have found work somewhere else. You could have stayed in Baguio."

How could I tell them that my personal mission was to pursue various ghosts? Who could understand me if I said that St. Mary's School was the shrine of my ancestor worship?

My severest reminder came within my first week of teaching. "If you come to Sagada to be our teacher, you better learn how to speak like us," said one of my students. It was a demand I've tried my best to fulfill. Still attempting to fulfill. A life of transit will not teach me that it's not enough to reach a place, one must learn to be in-place. Because while the bus to Sagada is fast, there is no fastest way to Sagada.

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<sup>1</sup> "Why Sagada?"

"Apay kanayon nga Sagada<sup>2</sup>?" a friend thought aloud, mystified by Frank Cimatú's choice of title for his new book of poetry *Birdcatching in Sagada*.

I knew what my friend meant. How many pilgrims followed the path in search of their own shrines in Sagada? How many ghost-hunters sought to be haunted here? A mingled mystifying continues to gather in this place, still dreaming, still drowning in a sea of clouds, drunk and sputtering praises in moonhouses. Missionaries arrived here to convert but were in turn converted. In 1953, a traveling doctor once wrote upon reaching Sagada:

*Through the foggy veil and to our right was a sight I shall never forget. Below was a green, peaceful, fertile valley bathed in the sunlight and warmth. My feelings were too mixed for words. I just stared and looked. Rimmed by tall, craggy hills, cut off from the outside world, reposed Sagada the Beautiful... I remembered John Hilton's novel Lost Horizon and Shangri-la. Such beauty as I saw ought not to be hidden from tourist eyes.*

I was fresh off the bus one day near Sagada's community court when a skinny Caucasian man came out of nowhere, wearing a bahag. He swooped into the court and danced. He had a startled look on his face. He circled the center of the court, spinning and spreading his arms like a bird of prey.

Some people gathered to watch in their curiosity. Some people passed by, gazing as they went. When I realized I was much too entranced with the spectacle, I feigned indifference and looked away.

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<sup>2</sup> "Why is it always Sagada?"

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“Santamarya” was my answer to the friend who asked apay kanayon nga Sagada.

From across the stone church, St. Mary’s School, or Santamarya, is obscured by pine trees. It’s a five-minute walk from the hospital. Five-minute walk from the cemetery. Not too far from the footpaths that lead to the Echo Valley and the famous Hanging Coffins. It’s an entire compound riddled with various ghosts and “thin places,” spaces where one can easily slip between the realms of the sacred and the profane. Portals between the living and the dead. Past and nostalgia and heady history.

“Lighting the tagowan” is what the alumni call the act of homecoming to Santamarya. Every December 8th — the founding anniversary of church and school and also the Feast of the Immaculate Conception — the students in their wanes and gateng carry torches of pine kindling, forming a procession from town to the Mission Compound. The procession starts at five in the evening, and by the time it gets dark, a line of fiery dots would be moving like bobbing fireflies, kimkimbitan, across the panorama of Sagada’s poblacion.

When the parade reaches the school, the students feed the fire of their little torches into a bigger bonfire, signaling the magic of remembrance, lighting the tagowan, the commemoration of beginnings, immaculate conceptions, when the Mission changed the Igorot and the Sagada landscape forever.

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Migratory birds arrive in the -ber months, flying from colder countries and finding Shangri-la in the low clouds and high peaks of Sagada. But birds also depend on the guidance of light. They too grope in the darkness. They are also disoriented by thick fog.

One day, according to legend, a woman worked her fields until late in the evening. Because it was too dark to see her passage back home, she lit a piece of pine kindling to light her way. As she walked in the darkness with the little torch to guide her, all of a sudden, she was enveloped in the loud flapping of wings. Birds have come to gather around her light, like moths to a flame. When she arrived home she retold the encounter to her people, and the people deduced the birds' ways, their attraction to light, their need for direction in the foggy darkness.

Since then, the practice of mangkik, or birdcatching in Sagada, became a science of lighting and timing. In the dark at high elevation, birdcatchers would flash a light source—a small fire, a Petromax, the headlight of a motorcycle. When the birds draw closer to the light, a net is cast to trap them.

It used to be an act of survival, because the birds were caught for their meat. Then it became a pastime as recreational in Sagada as little-league baseball. In the poem “Birdcatching in Sagada,” Frank Cimatú articulates the devotion of a bird trapper:

*The old trapper on my left told me that timing is everything;*

*Bring out that gas lamp too early and you scare the flock,*

*Dispersing as they frantically seek other lights nearby,*

*Too late and the birds ram the lamp or fly beyond reach.*

*As you get older, he continues, you pray for the mistiming,*

*For all you need of grace is the chaos of wings passing;*

*The rush of love moving forward, taking nothing and everything.*

When the bird flu outbreak happened, mangkik was banned by local ordinance. Epidemics have a lot to do with our relationships with the non-human.

“Ze world iz fucked,” Aklay would say, sitting cross-legged in front of a computer where he updates his *Koyat, Kimkimbitan & Kaiw id Ganduyan* Facebook page. He could stretch hours talking about migratory birds and endemic birds, his canyoning excursions to Sagada’s margins, poor waste management everywhere, education as a box, the failure of the anthropocene, overall decadence.

Aklay a.k.a Philippe Heyer is probably a ghost-hunter too. He bicycled his way from his French-German town of Alsace and into Sagada, Mountain Province. He often hikes towards the fringes of Sagada from Buasaw to Tap-ew, on the lookout for birds and orchids and mushrooms. He keeps a handwritten record of Sagada’s weather since the year he first arrived. He documents a hairy moth caterpillar eating away at the leaves of his balangkas tree. He talks fast but he preaches the art of slowing down, paying attention, and reorienting the self with nature’s own timing.

During the pandemic he created a new Facebook group named *This human Species became a bunch of morons*. In it he writes observations like “Humans are not serious about their future as a Species...” or “Humans specialize in being the worst possible, like in a hurry to go somewhere...”

Aklay draws and paints by hand the various koyat he has seen in his hikes: a spotted brown piyaw with a red throat, a white egret called a pukaw, a brown and blue kingfisher called the a-ak, a glossy black bird with a white belly called the ang-angyaw, and the mountain shrike called the tala, scourge of the rice field and for whom centuries of ancestors have developed bird traps.

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Someone developed an art of pinning dead insects in glass envelopes because the beauty of beings like the Golden Emperor Moth lasts for only 23 days. Some moths flutter to the floor dead, but this Golden Emperor stiffly clung to our door one early morning.

The moths of Gosline Cottage threw themselves against the ceilings and the walls, the thudding of their soft bodies punctuated dinner conversations and lulled us to sleep every night.

Sometimes I would work well into midnight, so the moths threw themselves around the light bulb or onto my laptop screen, mistaking my light sources for the moonlight that has always guided them in their quest for nectar. During my hours of productivity, I was causing confusion among the moths that probably thought they had food sources in my lit bedroom.

In the morning they would lay lifeless on the floor. How briefly our nocturnal lives intersect. They would leave the imprint of their wings on the floor, on my sock. I didn't mean to step on them. That's how teeming they were. Moth by the bedside. Moth between the floorboards. Moth in the small gap between the floor and the table leg. Moth pressed against the jamb. Moth between the hinges. Moth under the rug.

The Yellow Tiger moth had a body like a bee, striped yellow and black; brown dots were symmetrically placed on its frayed yellow wings. It was dead on the floor. The Jackfruit Borer had to be dead too in order for me to appreciate the beauty of its wings sashed with bright pools of gold, brown, and yellow. Cleora Moths had wings like the texture of bark, and so an ability to camouflage against any wood surface. Magpie Moths had rounded wingtips of black and white, and they were also the common casualty.

Like the Golden Emperor, other kinds of moths clung to the walls and doors: Monkey Moths, Isabella Tiger Moths, Red-fringed Emeralds and Gold-fringed Emeralds, Footman Moths. I could go on and on with the strange moths we had unwittingly disoriented in Gosline Cottage with our laptop screens and night lights.

One encyclopedia called moths "the nocturnal cousins" of the butterfly. Nocturnal cousins: kinships lasting the evening, well into nighttime, for by dawn they crumple like discarded chrysalis, fossils of last night's glory. They emerge after their fourteen-day metamorphoses, and instead of doing the Lord's work of pollinating orchids (orchids that their daytime cousins the butterflies cannot pollinate), the moths of Gosline Cottage are drawn to our artificial fluorescence, simply because we do not sleep on time.

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There is a black-and-white photograph of the St. Mary's School Class of 1957 all decked out in costume meant to evoke a 12th Century England. It was the cast of senior students in a Shakespearean play *King John* with costumes made by Ms. Hazel Gosline.

Between the 1950s and 1960s, Hazel Gosline used to occupy this clapboard house called the Gosline Cottage situated close to the schoolbuilding. Until now, this cottage has always served as quarters for St. Mary's School teachers. I wonder what sorts of moths were drawn into Ms. Gosline's evenings of candle light and Petromax lamps.

Ms. Gosline taught English as well as American and Oriental History in Santamarya, and for more than a decade she was partly responsible for the metamorphosis of a generation of Sagada Igorots. Her portrait hangs somewhere in the school halls: a beaming woman with a full face, graying curls, and horn-rimmed glasses.

Today, Gosline's Cottage is a ramshackle affair with a leaning terrace and an overall sagging look. Moss creeps into the once whitewashed planks. The bottom half of the window has no glass at all, kept intact with all sorts of things that decades of teachers managed to use for covering: cardboard, plastic cover, piece of plywood. Once when the plastic cover was torn, we lodged in the plastic lid of a bucket of Marie biscuits.

On the wall on which the terrace was attached was a window as high as the ceiling. This big window was the one architectural feature of the house that we liked. Dawns spilled all kinds of

reds and indigos into the dining room. It gave the floorboards a liquid sheen, floorboards made shiny by years of being stepped on.

It's the shiny floorboards that make me conscious of history. We belong to a long line of Santamarya teachers who have done the late night grind in Gosline Cottage, disorienting moths while we draw up lessons for the next day.

The sheen also evokes for me an old Bontoc proverb about the ato stone: "Sumileng nan fato isnan wanga, nu tuk-tukdoan is katawe-tawen." (A plain rough river stone becomes shiny and polished through years of sitting on.)

The plain rough river stone is brought into the ato, a traditional convening area consisting of big rocks for seating. Centuries of elders sit on the stones, discussing and imparting their knowledge for years, making community decisions, educating their youth, and in the process making the rough stones shiny with their buttocks.

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From the ato to the clapboard house: there are two sepia photographs of the same Bontoc man taken nine years apart. A sort of "Before" and "After." He was Pitapit a.k.a. Hilary Clapp, an Igorot boy adopted by Rev. Walter Clapp, an Episcopal missionary who came to Bontoc early in the American colonial era. Pitapit's pair of photos was an imperialist juxtapositioning, borne from a gaze obsessed with comparisons and differences.

In the “Before” photograph there’s Pitapit standing in his g-string, sporting his Bontoc mullet and a big smile on his face. In the “After” photograph there’s Pitapit now renamed Hilary Clapp, standing in a white suit and tie with hands folded, clutching a white hat, bearing the stoic mien of a turn-of-the-century gentleman. “The Metamorphosis of a Bontoc Igorot,” was how imperialist-extraordinaire Dean C. Worcester captioned the two photos.

Metamorphosis, enhancement from hairy infancy to clean-cut completeness, can be a funny metaphor. Colonialism is not as natural as a necessary cocoon. But Hilary was no less Igorot than Pitapit. After the grammar lessons, catechisms, and the Shakespearean plays, Hilary Clapp was still Igorot even when he gave up his bahag for trousers, or when he moved from the ato to a whitewashed house, or when his Bontoc tongue spoke English.

One day (and on many days) in Sagada’s Age of Tourism, a visitor would ask “Nasaan ang mga Igorot?<sup>3</sup>”

But the Igorot is right *here*. We are busy constructing hotels and concrete houses. Busy being capitalists. Busy preaching in the churches. Running for public office. Handling the cash registers. Driving buses in zero-visibility mist. Secretly catching birds on Mount Ampacao. Staying up late in front of laptop screens. Sporting Bontoc mullets. Spewing Shakespeare.

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Or singing about edible bed-bugs.

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<sup>3</sup> “Where are the Igorots?”

The bed-bug called the toma was memorialized by the schoolboys of Class of 1955, in what is now called the Toma Song.

Of all the post-war missionaries who arrived in Sagada, it was William Henry Scott, a.k.a. Scotty, who appeared the most converted. As a new teacher of Oriental History in St. Mary's School in 1954, he had no problem using the word "savage." One of his earlier pronouncements is still recalled by former students to this day: "I crossed the Pacific Ocean to teach and not just watch bums sitting on a log." Or a variation of that: "I did not cross the Pacific Ocean to teach wrong English."

Of course, after teaching and living among his Igorot students, Scotty would become less austere. This same man, years later, would find himself reflecting: "I had failed, and I had failed because I had lived in such a way that grammar seemed more important than love."

Years later as the preeminent historian, he would demonstrate his love by dispelling myths and exoticisms about the precolonial Filipino, narrating the Igorots' struggle for independence, and asserting the role of Igorots in the creation of a Philippine nation.

One day Scotty introduced a German drinking song to his students in St. Mary's School, asking them to Igorotize the lyrics. Hence the Kantan di Toma, or the Toma Song, now considered a Sagada folk song about an edible bed-bug that could be roasted, boiled, fried, or paired with rice – a native recipe no one follows anymore, but a ditty that lives on in community gatherings or whenever the tagowan is lit again.

No one thinks of the German origins. No one thinks of it as translation. It's as if Sagada has thoroughly converted it.

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Our after-hours sometimes happened in an Ambasing house, a drinking place also frequented by tour guides. We downed everything and slotted in coins for every Bon Jovi hit. One night someone brought along a foreign tourist. He had dreadlocks and wore a durag. A co-worker slotted a coin into the karaoke machine and gave me the microphone. Under the influence, I could sing anything, so I took the mic. She had pushed in Bob Marley's "No Woman No Cry." We were pandering to the stranger. I obliged with the government yard in Trenchtown, and while we were "oba-oba-serving the hypocrites," I got the room to sing with me. This should not come as a surprise: we were in the reggae capital of Mountain Province. Arms up in the air. The visitor in the durag singing along. "Everything's gonna be alright, everything's gonna be alright."

Later as the place got quieter, we heard the tour guide say to his dreadlocked friend, "You can't leave tomorrow yet."

"Why not?" the visitor asked.

"Because it's a full moon tonight," his tour guide replied, "and in our culture here, you cannot travel after the night of a full moon."

The visitor seemed to contemplate this seriously.

"Ay inayan ka pay<sup>4</sup>," blurted out one of my co-workers who had heard him, because the full-moon mumbo jumbo was not true at all. Sometimes new folklore is created whenever a tour guide tells a story.

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In 1904, Rev. John Staunton turned a goat shed into a schoolroom. The rest is...metonymy. How does one really narrate a place? Or: in all its plurality, how does one describe a landscape?

The semiotician Roland Barthes said that description is but an enumeration of different parts and fragments. A little like birdwatching: looking out for the wingtip, the color of the throat, the beak, the breast, the crown. From the parts we derive the identity, assign nomenclature either to establish dominion or to make visible the plurality of a thing and therefore our humbling dazzlement.

Ghost-hunting too is a sort of metonymic labor: looking out for traces and links and phantoms and the shadow of a connection. So the goat shed became a schoolroom. The Sagada elder's most elegant likeness is in Masferré's photograph of Lakay Kabayo with his pipe and buaya<sup>5</sup>. Scotty kept wearing a denim jacket he had worn in Martial Law prison. Nick Joaquin saw the grazing cows and declared they were the only New England thing about Sagada. Santi Bose took it far by mingling his media in a tapestry of metonyms, right on the facade of St. Mary's

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<sup>4</sup> To say "inayan" to someone in this context means "Shame on you." Inayan is an indigenous concept of mores and taboos, the do's and don'ts within the community.

<sup>5</sup> a necklace of boar's tusks, worn by prominent elders of the dap-ay

School: fires from kindling, limestone palisades, rice paddies and waterfalls, Dangwa buses, a rugged landscape dotted with cogon houses and the faces of old folk now dead and immortal. “The chips fall all the way from Sagada,” wrote Francisco Arcellana, “and they fall on everyone, everywhere, both highland and low.”

With a montage of scenes of a misty sunrise and a sea of clouds, *That Thing Called Tadhana* increased Sagada tourism more than a hundredfold.

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Angel Piluden a.k.a. Ababew was the son of Batang-i and Mabanay. He was Christianized in 1906 when he was seven years old, entered St. Mary’s School in 1912 where he mastered his English Grammar and Catechism, worked at age twenty-two in the Igorot Printing Shop right below the church, went back to Santamarya where he taught Mathematics and Geography.

In all his photographs he was always unsmiling, always cocked his head at a certain angle from the camera, made his jaw look squarish.

Ababew has a blown-up black-and-white portrait in my late grandfather’s home. Where does a portrait begin? Metonymy again: striped tie, horn-rimmed glasses, squarish jaw, squinting eyes. It wasn’t out of haughtiness that he cocked his head that way; I like to think it looked like he was skeptical of the camera.

He was a teacher in Santamarya. I continue to look for traces of the ghost of this great-grandfather, a stranger I love.

Apay kanayon nga Sagada? Because writing about Sagada is my ancestor-worship.

And I'm still ghost-hunting, tethered to this place by the shadow of a connection. I've been making a pursuit in the mist. I've been complicit in the mystifying.

On a gallery wall in St. Mary's School are old photographs of class pictures: students from various decades and a venerated line of Santamarya teachers from Gosline to Scotty to Ababew.

I scan the front row for the unsmiling man in horn-rimmed glasses and a striped tie. Many times Sagada appears to me in his squarish jaw and squinting eyes. Ababew's head is cocked not out of haughtiness, but a skepticism for the gaze that trapped and immortalized him.

Constructed him.