

Up the river – Ifugao extras and the making of Apocalypse Now

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Francis Ford Coppola's experiences on the Apocalypse Now shoot in the Philippines were famously a journey 'up the river' into the director's own hour of darkness. His wife, Eleanor Coppola, published her own account of life on the set and made a documentary [1]. She details how, ill and beset by cost overruns on his production budget, Coppola had also run out of creative juice—having no idea what to do for the final scene. On August 24, 1976, Eleanor Coppola wrote:

In the script, Kurtz's band of renegade soldiers has trained a tribe of local Montagnard Indians to be a fighting team. They live in huts by the temple. Rather than dress up Filipino extras everyday, Francis asked Eva, a production assistant, to go to a northern province where the rice terraces are and recruit a real tribe of primitive people to come live on the set and be in the scenes. I hear she is trying to make a contract with a group of 250 Ifugao Indians....

Two of Edgar's friends, in costume, with one of the props they built for Kurtz's temple. (Edgar Dupingay)

The production was successful in recruiting a larger group of Ifugao people to act as extras on the film. They joined the shooting first in Baler, Quezon – the site of the “Charlie don't surf” scene – and then in Pagsanjan, Laguna – at Kurtz's “temple.” Living in accommodation around the set, the Ifugao extras constructed props, made handicrafts to sell, and continued their cultural life.

As Coppola puzzled over how to stage the death of Kurtz, Eleanor called him to see some of the Ifugao extras who were conducting a ritual. Coppola watched the ritual slaughter of a carabao (water buffalo) and immediately decided to incorporate what he had seen into the film. If his genius as filmmaker lies in the images he incorporates into his movies, he actually took these images straight out of Ifugao ritual.

The famous final scenes of *Apocalypse Now* thus show the Ifugao extras hacking apart a carabao. All the Ifugao extras we interviewed in 2002 insisted that this scene wasn't in the script. “That came from us!” Many audiences flinch. Maybe they don't want to think about the origins of meat? Or is it the apparent savagery of the ritual? These are superficial readings and westernized audiences don't see that there is much more to this than meets the eye!

This scene is reminiscent of the old colonial relations reported in the *National Geographic* of the early 1900s. [2] In the early colonial era, U.S. appointed provincial governors held “cañaos”—large redistributive prestige feasts. In a traditional Ifugao cañao, a carabao or several were slaughtered and the meat was doled out by the feast's sponsor to relatives in order of their importance to the sponsor. The Americans sponsored these feasts to make peace between fractious Ifugao villages and establish colonial hegemony over the redistribution of wealth and justice. Since the Americans had no relatives, in their cañaos the order of precedence was ‘up for grabs’—particular Ifugao community leaders vied for the first chance to strike a blow on the carabao, in order to show their affinity with their hosts. Men armed with bolos rushed to the carabao in a running melee until all the meat was taken from the bones, attempting to outdo each other in symbolically claiming kinship with the Americans. Photos of cañaos suggested the carabao slaughter was a ‘free-for all,’ reinforcing American ideas that Filipinos were primitive and barbaric.

To the Ifugao, the carabao remained a symbol of colonial power and its slaughter by the Ifugao became the symbolic tax levied on the Spanish as colonial overlord. But the carabao holds a deeper significance in Ifugao ritual. The carabao entered the rice terraces of what is now Ifugao Province when Ifugao people living along the Magat River were displaced by Spanish incursions. The river ran through lowland Ifugao, separated the uplands of Ifugao Province from the neighboring lowland provinces of Isabela and Nueva Viscaya. The Spanish tried to Christianize the population and bring them into reducciones (or mission settlements). The Ifugao abandoned their hunting grounds along the Magat and moved up to the mountains.

The theft of the animals by raiders from the Ifugao uplands was understood as a form of payment exacted from the Spanish for the use of the land the latter had occupied. As one Ifugao elder described it: “First, we just killed the carabao and carried the meat. Then we saw that it could be done to lead the carabao back. That was our pride, to kill many carabaos for meat when there was a death. That's how we were rich, sharing the meat.” [3]

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became the symbolic tax levied on the Spanish as colonial overlord. Therefore, the prestige and the feast retain an ambivalent quality. Even as the Ifugao accept the gift of meat, they are symbolically assassinating the imperial donor.

In the actual filming of this scene, the natives (as Cambodians) are led in a dance and ritual by Guimbatan, a respected mumbaki (ritual specialist or 'native priest'). Guimbatan came from Banaue, and the performances retain definitive Banaue Ifugao elements of expression and gestures.

In discussion: Francis Ford Coppola, Lily Luglug and Guimbatan, the mumbaki (Lily and Gerry Luglug)

Coppola was "in love" with the Ifugao since he was so reluctant to let them leave. Some of the Ifugao even said that they shouldn't show Coppola any more rituals; otherwise they would never be allowed to go home.

The former extras told us that, after Coppola first witnessed the carabao ritual slaughter, he tried to shoot every ritual that the Ifugao performed. Once he asked Roben Bahatan if the Ifugao elders could chant in one of the scenes. Roben said that they would be willing but that the utterance of those chants must always be accompanied by a sacrifice of chickens. So Coppola went overboard and ordered a whole truckload of chickens, which were then distributed to the entire Ifugao group. Just before the Ifugao left for home, they performed one more ritual. Gerry Luglug saw Coppola throw down his cap and swear, "Shit, why didn't they show us this before? I want that for the film." Lily Luglug, who led the Ifugao extras along with her husband Gerry, Roben, and Benjamin Cappelman remembered forming a similarly impression. It seemed to her that Coppola was "in love" with the Ifugao extras since he was so reluctant to let them leave. Some of the Ifugao people even said that they shouldn't show Coppola any more rituals; otherwise they would never be allowed to go home.

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Edgar on set in his warrior costume. (Edgar Dupingay)

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In December 1976, the Ifugao extras completed their contract with the production company and returned home. In contrast to their trip down to the set, Lily Luglug made sure they traveled comfortably. They rode in air-conditioned coasters and were escorted by the local police in every province that they drove to. When they reached Dalton Pass – the beginning of the mountains - Gerry Luglug told the police to go home, "Baka kami pa ang mag-escort sa inyo dito" (maybe we had better escort you from here on).

In our interviews, the former Ifugao extras recalled their participation in the film with a mixture of fondness and smugness. Their having been part of the filming is more important to the Ifugao than the film itself. Benjamin Cappelman said, "You feel proud that you're part of the film but first it was just about the money." He recalled that he was paid about \$500 a week for managing the Ifugao extras, and the exchange rate then was P7 per \$. Prior to the filming, he was earning P350 a month as a teacher.

For Edgar Dupingay, one of the on-screen extra actors, "seeing the movie filmed, it lessened my belief.... In the movie, you are attracted with them, you are believing what is being performed there. But, when I saw it for myself, it lessened my interest. Now, I only take in the history of the movie. Now, I don't believe already—once I have seen it, I know it is not true... In my experience there, at least by myself, I have done what they call filming. I stand in front of a camera and it's even an American film. It's a good experience for myself, when it comes to film. I'm a common person here, but I have experience. I was trained, for a short time, in martial arts for the film and even firing guns. Only we didn't operate the cannon... We learned how to load, to really attack and capture the object. It's like being a soldier without entering the military."

Edgar remembered that he even went to Bayombong, Nueva Viscaya (the nearest cinema) to see the film and was dismayed by how many scenes were missing. "I didn't even see my face there. I was very eager to see Brando with us. That was the scene where Brando investigated Sheen. We were dragging Martin Sheen to him."

Lily Luglug, who led the recruiting of the Ifugao group explained, "It was fun because it helped a lot of people here. They experienced traveling to a far place, there was good food. It was like a vacation for most of them. No hard work! We were pampered. There were truckloads of ducks and chickens. Drinks all over the place, lanzones (a delicious lowland fruit), toilet paper. For me, when I saw the making of the film I lost interest in watching other films. I don't get so excited so much because I know they fake it. It must have been a nice experience for the other women too. They traveled, they were a community together, they liked doing what they were asked to do, and some met future husbands."

All in all, our interviewees suggested that being in a Hollywood film and contributing to its ending was no big deal to the worldly Ifugao, really. It was fun while it lasted, and then life went on as usual and films thereafter lost their luster. No one could have said this better than Benjamin Cappelman. When we first asked him to tell us about his experiences on the set, he replied: "Apocalypse Now? That's Apocalypse Yesterday already!"

[1] Coppola, E. 1979 *Notes on the Making of Apocalypse Now* (London: Faber & Faber) and her documentary on the shoot, *Hearts of Darkness*.

[2] See Worcester, D. "Field sports among the wild men of Northern Luzon" *National Geographic* 22(3), 1911: 215-267; Worcester, D. "Head-hunters of Northern Luzon" *National Geographic* 23(9), 1912: 833-930; Worcester, D. "The non-Christian peoples of the Philippines-with an account of what has been done for them under American Rule" *National Geographic* 24(11), 1913:

1157-1256.

[3] The sacrifice of a carabao is part of rituals to cure sickness and misfortune as well as to honor the dead.

The images are courtesy of Lily and Gerry Luglug and Edgar Dupingay. The text is excerpted from a larger collaborative research study by Deirdre McKay (Keele University) and Padmapani Perez (University of the Philippines Baguio City and PhD candidate, Leiden University).

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<http://www.ourownvoice.com/essays/essay2004a-3.shtml>.