

## Experiencing Lebek ... Strengthening the Community by Making Muscuvado

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### ABSTRACT

I witnessed the annual *lebek* (muscuvado making activity) of the *Igorots* (Mountain People) of Barangay Gueday, Besao, Mountain Province during the annual *org* immersion<sup>1</sup> of the Regionalization Students Organization of the University of the Philippines-College of Medicine last April 2010. People from Gueday narrated the story of *lebek* and how each one in the community participated in the gathering.

*Key Words: Gueday Besao, lebek, muscuvado, regionalization*

### Introduction

*Lebek* is an annual community gathering of the *Igorots* in Gueday, Besao, Mountain Province in which sugar cane is turned into muscuvado sugar. It is a day-long event participated by various families in the community. Families wake up early in the cold and foggy morning to eat their breakfast and get ready the whole family to join the occasion. Together, these families trail through the bright green rice paddies and hike up the slopes to reach *Lekban*, a place where *lebek* takes place.

### Community Immersion Report

#### 1. Making of Muscuvado Sugar

The *lebek* commenced upon the arrival of families in *Lekban* together with their harvested sugar cane (*unas* or *tubo*), and materials for making muscuvado sugar. The sugar cane was peeled partially using a sharp bolo (*ga-man*). After which, the peeled sugar canes were fed into the *dap-ilan*, a simple screw machine squeezing out the juice of the cane. Sugar canes were being fed through the *dap-ilan* thrice to squeeze out all its juice. The *dap-ilan* functioned with the help of a carabao moving the log attached to its back in circular motion. When the carabao got tired, the children replaced the beast of burden in order to operate the *dap-ilan*.

The young *Igorots* happily and excitingly clutched on either of the two ends of the log and ran as fast as they could while pushing the log in one direction for the machine to continue juicing out the sugar cane. Around four tin cans of 15 liters each were filled with sugar cane juice which amounted to 60 liters of juice.

Using firewood, the sugar cane juice was boiled for 2-3 hours. After hours of boiling, the juice eventually became a brown powder, the *muscuvado* sugar. What a wonder! Then, it was transferred to a *pay-ok* (a large pan) where it was further pounded to become more refined.

#### 2. Sharing the Fruits of Community Labor

Around one tin can of *muscuvado* sugar was produced from the 4 tin cans of sugar cane juice. Each family who helped in making the *muscuvado* sugar received a part of the product of a day-long labor. Contribution was in the form of sugar canes, food for the community members or the labor itself. *Muscuvado* sugar was divided among the participating community members tantamount to the contribution they made in the making of the sugar. The sugar was primarily consumed by the people, which could last for months or even for a year. Selling of the sugar was an option but not a priority for them. They would rather use the sugar they made for personal consumption or community sharing.

### Strengthening the Community

What made the *muscuvado* sugar special and even sweeter were the people behind its creation. *Igorots* coming from all ages, the young and old alike took part in turning the sugar canes into *muscuvado* sugar. Parents brought along all their children including their babies. Each one had a role to play in gracing the event.

The strong men – grandfathers, fathers and young men – took charge of carrying the bunch of sugar canes and

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<sup>1</sup> RSO (Regionalization Student Organization) *Org* Immersion is an annual joint immersion activity of all RSO members to show the new RSO members how an actual immersion is planned and carried out before they do their own summer immersions. Activities done during the *org* immersion are tailored to the needs of the chosen community. The senior members of RSO accompany the new members during the *org* immersion to guide them and impart their knowledge and skills in conducting an immersion. It also aims to cultivate appreciation and love for Philippine culture, people and nature.

peeling them, assembling and running the *dap-ilan*, boiling the sugar cane juice, and pounding the sugar. Mothers prepared and cooked the food for the community lunch and dinner, and helped in the peeling of the sugar cane, too. Grandmothers assumed the role of taking care of the babies and toddlers while parents were diligently working in fulfilling their responsibilities in the making of *muscuwado* sugar. Babies were carried on improvised slings which was a skill that mothers had mastered.

Children were seen running and playing around *Lekban* whole day long. They eagerly took the place of the carabao in moving the *dap-ilan*. Although very young, these children were efficient in removing squeezed sugar cane from the *dap-ilan*. They even tried to take hold of a bolo in their small hands to somehow help peel the sugar cane.

*Lebek* is more than just turning sugar cane into *muscuwado* sugar. It truly embodies the essence of a community. In this once a year community gathering, the people of Gueaday showed in its simple but purest form what a community is supposed to be - a community that is happy and harmonious. The presence of the families and the contribution of each member of the community made *lebek* more meaningful and colorful. Everything and anything that the *Igorots* shared of themselves that day sweetened and refined the *muscuwado* sugar, and more than that, it fostered and strengthened a community.

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