

**INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES**  
**A Case Study of the Sagu-Ilaw School of Indigenous Knowledge and Traditions**

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**Abstract**

Indigenous education in the Philippines has been a recent phenomenon, starting only in the past decade. Legislation supporting indigenous peoples rights as well as giving legitimacy to establishing indigenous schools were only authored in the past 8 years. The Asian Council for People's Culture assisted the different indigenous tribes in the country in setting up Schools for Indigenous Knowledge and Traditions (SIKAT). The SIKAT programme envisions a system at par with mainstream education, founded on the ways of life, traditions and culture of indigenous peoples. This paper takes a closer look at one of the SIKAT Schools – the Sagu-Ilaw SIKAT of the Bukidnon Tribe in Northern Mindanao. Sagu-Ilaw was set up in 2002 with the assistance of ACPC. Since then, despite the perennial problem of funding, it has been surviving on its own. It was designed as a tertiary type teacher-training school whose students teach the tribe's children in their respective communities. Recent linkages with the Department of Education has led to conflict over control of the school, leading the tribe to fear for the continued loss of their identity. Other linkages are currently being established for the survival and further development of the school.

**Key Words**

Indigenous Education; Indigenous Knowledge; Indigenous Traditions; Philippines; Tribal School

## **Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2003), 'Local and indigenous knowledge' refers to the cumulative and complex bodies of knowledge, know-how, practices and representations that are maintained and developed by peoples with extended histories of interactions with the natural environment.

These cognitive systems are part of a complex that also includes language, attachment to place, spirituality and worldview.

Many different terms are used to refer to this knowledge, these include:

- traditional ecological knowledge (TEK)
- indigenous knowledge (IK)
- local knowledge
- rural peoples' / farmers' knowledge
- ethnobiology / ethnobotany / ethnozoology
- ethnoscience
- folk science
- indigenous science

UNESCO says that these many terms coexist because the wide range of social, political and scientific contexts have made it all but impossible to for a single term to be suitable in all circumstances.

UNESCO has recognized the importance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, that it launched the Local Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) Project in 2002. As a cross-cutting intersectoral project, LINKS brings together all five programme sectors of UNESCO in a collaborative effort on local and indigenous knowledge.

The LINKS Project focuses on this interface between local & indigenous knowledge and the Millennium Development Goals of poverty eradication and environmental sustainability. It addresses the different ways that indigenous knowledge, practices and worldviews are drawn into development and resource management processes. It also considers the implications this may have for building equity in governance, enhancing cultural pluralism and sustaining biodiversity (UNESCO 2003).

Local and indigenous knowledge includes the sophisticated understandings, interpretations and meanings that are accumulated and developed by peoples having extended histories of interaction with the natural environment (UNESCO 2003: 1).

For the vast majority of rural and indigenous peoples these knowledge systems provide the basis for local-level decision-making about fundamental aspects of day-to-day life (economic, social, cultural, ecological).

Indigenous knowledge is also one of the key action themes identified by UNESCO in the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014).

Indigenous and local knowledge spans several important areas. However, for this paper, it shall be limited to indigenous education in the Philippines.

### **Situation of Indigenous Education in the Philippines**

The Philippine archipelago is made up of 7,107 islands with a total area of 300,000 sq km. It has a current population of nearly 88 million people, 75% of which belong to 8 major ethnic groups and the remaining 25% are divided among different minor ethnic groups and indigenous tribes.

The country has more than 110 ethnic tribes and cultural communities whose cultures and traditions are in varying states of extinction. These vanishing ancestral traditions and customary laws used to define social relationships and values and promoted efficiency of economic activities.

Unfortunately, environmentally devastating socio-economic ventures, large-scale indiscriminate mining and industrial logging have brought incalculable damage to their primary source of livelihood and cultural sanctuary. The consequent destruction of their environment resulted in the further degradation of ancestral cultures which are largely shaped by the indigenous people's interaction with the natural elements.

This resulting loss of their cultural identities, coupled with the devastation of their environment, have resulted in the serious economic displacement and cultural disempowerment of these communities. Tribal communities in various geographical areas are thus among the most impoverished and marginalized sectors of Philippine society (ACPC 2005).

Though the Philippine republic has been in existence for more than 100 years, it has only been since the late 1980s and the 1990s that the government sought to address the plight of the indigenous peoples.

The present constitution, which was written in 1987, in Article XIV Sec 1 states:

“The State shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels, and shall take appropriate steps to make such education accessible to all.”

Furthermore, Sec 17 also reads:

“The State shall recognize, respect, and protect the rights of indigenous cultural communities to preserve and develop their cultures, traditions, and institutions. It shall consider these rights in the formulation of national plans and policies.”

These mandates were unfortunately not supported by specific legislation or policies. It was not until the 1990s that further legislation was authored to protect the rights of the indigenous peoples.

In October 1997, then President Fidel V. Ramos signed into law Republic Act 8371 - the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA). This legislation lays down the legal framework for addressing indigenous peoples' poverty. It seeks to alleviate the plight of the country's "poorest of the poor" by correcting, through legislation, the historical errors that led to the systematic dispossession of and discrimination against the indigenous peoples. The IPRA law enforces the 1987 Constitution's mandate that the

State should craft a policy “to recognize and promote the rights of indigenous peoples within the framework of national unity and development” and “to protect the rights of indigenous cultural communities to their ancestral lands to ensure their economic, social and cultural well-being” (Asian Development Bank 2002: 13).

The IPRA law also serves as the basis for the establishment of indigenous schools. Section 28 of the IPRA law states:

“The State shall, through the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP), provide a complete, adequate and integrated system of education, relevant to the needs of the children and young people of ICCs/IPs.”

Section 30 further states:

“The State shall provide equal access to various cultural opportunities to the ICCs/IPs through the educational system, public or cultural entities, scholarships, grants and other incentives without prejudice to their right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions by providing education in their own language, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous children/youth shall have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State.”

However, even with these recent legislation on indigenous peoples and indigenous rights, there remains very few indigenous schools in the country. In the Philippines, education is divided into formal and non-formal education. The formal sector is further divided into three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. Each can be private or public. Ever since the Americans established the public school system in the country, no efforts were done on establishing schools that utilized indigenous knowledge. In fact, it was required in all schools that the American system be used – language and all. All Filipinos were required to learn *only* in English. It was only in the past 20 years that Filipino has been reintroduced as a language of instruction in schools, though English still has preference. Native regional languages have never been encouraged, much less those of the indigenous peoples. Only a handful of indigenous schools are in existence, all of them due solely on the efforts of the tribal elders, often with very minimal support from the government – if any.

### **Schools for Indigenous Knowledge and Traditions**

Among the organizations in the country that promoted indigenous learning is the Asian Council for People’s Culture (ACPC). It was ACPC that came up with the SIKAT Programme. SIKAT is the Filipino word for ‘rising’ and at the same time the acronym for ‘Schools for Indigenous Knowledge and Traditions’. The combination of both meanings expresses well what the SIKAT programme is all about. It envisions a system at par with mainstream education, founded on the ways of life, traditions and culture of indigenous peoples, as a stepping stone to promote sincere development of the communities (Meneses 2004:1).

The idea for the development of a culturally-responsive education was first expressed in 1999 by several of the indigenous leaders present in one of ACPC’s trainings.

ACPC decided to facilitate the building of a national network of indigenous community educators who would develop and promote a dynamic and culturally responsive curriculum for indigenous communities. This inter-tribal council of elders launched the movement for the promotion of indigenous education. They then put forth a document – the Kalinga Declaration – which envisions:

"Indigenous education founded on the lifeways, traditions, worldview, culture and spirituality of the native community is a basic right of all indigenous people. It is a pathway of education that recognizes wisdom embedded in indigenous knowledge."  
(ACPC 2004)

Since the Kalinga Declaration, ACPC facilitated teacher trainings, curriculum development workshops, tribal leaders' forum and other activities to prepare the communities and their indigenous teachers for the establishment of their Schools for Indigenous Knowledge and Traditions.

According to Meneses (2004:2), the basic principles of SIKAT are:

**1. Ownership** - SIKAT is an idea that originated from the indigenous people themselves, the concept and the results of its implementation are therefore also owned by them. Important decisions are made by the SIKAT Council of Elders, consisting of 15 elected members of different tribes nationwide.

**2. Emancipation** – The SIKAT-program is about indigenous people defining, developing and implementing their own education; content, inputs in curricula, lesson plans, and manuals come from the indigenous people involved in the SIKAT-program.

**3. Cultural Diversity** – While globalisation brings along many positive consequences and possibilities, it also brings the danger of cultural homogenisation. The SIKAT-program offers indigenous people a chance to revitalize their culture giving indigenous people the chance to contribute to society and suggest innovations based upon their perspectives. The cultural variety among indigenous communities offers indigenous people, from remote areas, to meet for an enriching inter-tribal interaction.

**4. Environmental Sustainability** – indigenous worldviews are in many ways holistic. For one thing, indigenous people have expressed their survival to be inherently connected to their natural environment not only on a material level, but also on a spiritual level. Indigenous communities' environment carries the soul of their ancestors, of their identity. The concept of ancestral domain and environmental sustainability urgently needed to safeguard this ancestral domain has a central place in the SIKAT curriculum.

**5. Community-Centred** – Local representatives who are immersed in trainings like developing curriculum are the ones expected to eventually teach and sustain their respective community SIKAT school.

**6. Rooted in Day to Day Reality** – one reason for indigenous people to want to establish culturally responsive education is the experience that what children learn in

mainstream schools is often not relevant in their day-to-day lives. Handbooks, curricula in mainstream education are highly westernised. Many indigenous children even become indifferent of their cultural background. The high drop out rate among indigenous students can be attributed to a school calendar that does not take into account the planting and harvesting season vital to many indigenous communities. SIKAT wants to develop a relevant curriculum to equip them with skills, knowledge and values to help contribute to society, and take pride in their indigenous identity, instead of being uncomfortable about it.

**7. Recognition** – SIKAT-participants often express aversion to be called *para-teachers*, or their education to be categorized as *non-formal education*. Through this they want to express that indigenous education should be recognized as quality basic education for their children, and not a form of additional education, just because it is different from mainstream education. Therefore advocacy and lobbying with the government, especially the Department of Education is an important point of attention.

As can be observed, the SIKAT schools are implementing what UNESCO has only recently recognized: that the recognition of local and indigenous knowledge transforms the relationship of biodiversity managers to local communities. Rather than mere resource users whose practices must be managed, local people are recognized as knowledge holders in their own right with their own ecological understandings, conservation practices and visions of how resource management goals should be defined and attained (UNESCO 2003: 5). This is among the central tenets of indigenous education in the SIKAT schools.

### **Sagu-ilaw SIKAT**

The school was established by Datu Mandimati (Conrado Binayao) on February 28, 2002 in cooperation with ACPC via its SIKAT programme. The school was established for the Bukidnon Tribe of Manolo Fortich and was given the name *Sagu-ilaw*. *Sagu-ilaw* means “wisdom of the true, good and living story of *Magbabaya* - creator of the world, heaven and everything in it and the maker of man with his soul and spirit in man.”

The tribe decided to establish the school “top-down” – meaning that they designed Sagu-ilaw SIKAT as a tertiary type school. The school’s aim is to train para-teachers. The school’s students attend class one day a week – only during Fridays. For the other days of the week, they are teaching kindergarten in their respective *barangays* (communities). The school currently has 25 students who teach in the following communities: Tankulan Kihari; Sankan; Kibulawan, Kalumanan; Lingi-on; Katablaran, Guilang-guilang. The school uses 4 languages as mediums of instruction: English, Tagalog, Cebuano and Binukid.

During the first year, Sagu-ilaw oriented its students not only on Bukidnon-Higaonon cultural and language studies but also on the Philippine constitution and the IPRA Law. Students were also taught the principles and methods of teaching. Literacy and numeracy skills development went hand in hand with the teaching of traditional songs, dances and arts. Students were also introduced to community development. All of these were designed to equip the student to be effective teachers in their respective communities.

On the second year, students were taught the intricacies of the Bukidnon language – lexicon, grammar and usage. Bukidnon culture as well as migrant culture was likewise taught to promote understanding between the indigenous people and the lowlanders now in the province. The students were also introduced to the history, institutions and heroes of the tribe – things they would not have learned of in government schools. Ethnic songs, stories, dances as well as arts and crafts were also taught. The vocational, social and economic aspects of community development was tackled as well.

By the third year, the students progressed in learning the different chants, stories, legends and customary laws of the tribe. Ethnic cultural practices, beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, as well as knowledge systems was then taught, incorporating community development and environmental conservation and protection. In order to protect the tribal members from exploitation from migrants and lowlanders, traditional political leadership and the Philippine justice system was taught. Students were also trained to teach Pilipino and English as a second language.

Now in its fourth year, aside from teaching the students about Philippine and World history, vocational arts and crafts, Sagu-Ilaw is focusing on teaching its students about ancestral domain. The school is also encouraging its students to conduct cultural research.

All throughout the four years of their schooling, concern and care of the environment played a central role. This is not surprising since the tribe's stories, chants and songs highlight the interrelatedness of man and the environment. This philosophy, known to westerners as human ecology, is also a central tenet in the teachers' lessons in their communities.

### **Problems Encountered**

The school is located in Manolo Fortich town proper, in the campus of Community Colleges. A modest building was set up using P200,000.00 (around \$4,000.00) from ACPC. The school now runs solely out of the support of the tribe. Other than the initial support in establishing the building, there has been no funding support from any agency. Thus, the teachers work receiving no salaries, not even allowances. The ACPC continues to provide support in the means of continuous teacher training. Around two to three teachers of the tribe are trained; the trained teachers then train others in their school.

Support from the local government has been minimal so far. Though the mayor has been supportive of the school, the current fiscal crisis in the Philippines has the government on a "belt-tightening" mode – thus, financial assistance has been hard to come by. The local government, fully supporting the idea that Sagu-Ilaw SIKAT should have its own premises, is currently trying to secure disposable government land for donation to the school. Occasional provision of funds for training (usually for snacks of the participants and honorarium of the trainor) is also provided by the local government.

The establishment of the school, as stated in the IPRA Law, should have been through the NCIP. It is ironic, however, that the NCIP has provided very little support for the school. According to Datu Mandimati, the previous Provincial Officer of the NCIP

was supportive of the idea of the school. But since his death, the NCIP has not responded to any of the proposals forwarded by the school. Most support the school now gets is through the private efforts of the tribe and the through the occasional trainings offered by the ACPC.

The school has attempted linkages with established tertiary institutions to enhance its training capacities. Two schools in Davao City – the Ateneo de Davao and the University of the Philippines Mindanao - wanted to help. The tribe turned down the offer of the Ateneo for two main reasons: distance and control. The Ateneo, a Jesuit university, wanted control of the school, wishing to pattern it on its Jesuit foundations. The tribe refused, fearing the loss of the tribe's identity. The Ateneo then passed it to UP Mindanao, a state university. Unfortunately, politics reared its ugly head and nothing was concretised. Xavier University, in Cagayan de Oro City, also signified its interest in absorbing Sagu-Ilaw. The distance was closer compared to Davao City. But again, the tribe did not agree to the arrangements proposed by Xavier. Being a sister school of Ateneo, its Jesuit foundations would again lead to the loss of the tribe's identity.

Last October 13, 2005 the University of Southeastern Philippines (USEP) launched the Pamulaan Center for Indigenous Peoples Education. This center offers degree programs such as BA Applied Anthropology and Participatory Development, BS Indigenous Peoples Education, BA Peace Building and Multi-Cultural Studies and BS Indigenous Agriculture (Calamba 2005). Although Pamulaan - which means "seedbed" - is a college education program designed for the IPs in the Philippines, these programs are under the USEP and those who will study under the Center are considered regular students of USEP and will follow the same rules and regulations of other degree programs of USEP. This model is one that Sagu-Ilaw fears would still lead to a loss of identity.

According to UNESCO (2003: 7), while universal education programmes provide important tools for human development, they may also compromise indigenous language and knowledge transmission. Inadvertently, they may contribute to an erosion of cultural diversity, a loss of social cohesion and the alienation and disorientation of indigenous youth. This apprehension is mirrored by the tribal leaders who fear that with the Philippine school system patterned after western models, there is little hope of retaining tribal ways.

Recently, the Department of Education (DepEd) released DepEd Order 42 series of 2004: "Permit to Operate Primary Schools for Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Communities". On the basis of this order, Sagu-Ilaw SIKAT established two primary level classes in their communities this year - in Sitio Consolacion, Guilang-guilang and Sitio Kibulawan, Kalugmanan (both in the Municipality of Manolo Fortich).

According to this department order, indigenous schools are "encouraged to register with DepEd for mainstreaming in the educational system". The main problem faced by Sagu-Ilaw with the running of the indigenous school is that DepEd wanted control over the school – the tribe does not want this because, again, they fear that their identity would be lost.



To allay the fears of the indigenous people, the order encourages flexibility for three areas (DepEd 2004:1):

**“1. Curriculum** – it should be flexible without undermining the balance between the attainment of the core learning competencies which every Filipino learner should master in the community and the indigenous culture.

**2. Teachers** – as much as possible, qualified teachers should teach the core subjects of the curriculum. However, in handling the concerns of the community, e.g. culture, traditions, songs, practices, para-teachers from the place or those who know the culture may be employed. They may not be holders of degrees in education but may be experienced or trained parents.

**3. School Calendar** – while cultural/tribal idiosyncrasies are to be observed, the required calendar days of the school year should be adhered to as much as possible.”

Several problems are highlighted by the issuance of this order. As can be seen from the excerpt above, while indigenous schools are allowed to operate, it has to register with the department to make it a “valid school”. By registering the indigenous school with the department, it will be obliged to modify its structure to fit in the government school structure, which is based on western models. Curriculum would be based on the Basic Education Curriculum (BEC), which would give emphasis on Math, Science, English, Filipino, and Social Studies. This would deviate from the purpose of the SIKAT schools where curriculum would be centred around the tribes’ cultural traditions. Should indigenous schools register with the DepEd for “mainstreaming of the educational system”, tribal ways would be relegated to supplementary subjects instead of it being the main focus of the school.

If the schools are also registered, they would be obliged to have “qualified teachers to teach the core curriculum”. This would refer to duly certified teachers who are often recipients of western-styled education. It has already been observed among SIKAT teachers the big challenge they are facing to outgrow their education in westernised schools and to rediscover their indigenous heritage. One example is the micro-curricula, which tends to become duplications of existing western ones. Though these concepts have been valuable for western society and western education, indigenous educators should challenge the concept and see if there’s a more suitable one for their situation (Meneses 2004: 9). The labelling of indigenous teachers as “para-teachers” is again reflective of the lack of recognition by the government of the importance of indigenous teachers. Even if these “para-teachers” do not meet the westernised criteria of teachers, they are teachers in their own right.

The order to adhere to the Philippine school year is again a lack of recognizing the unique needs of the tribes vis a vis availability of children for harvests and other important cultural activities.

Another section in the DepEd order also highlights some problems. Section 6 of the order states:

“Children who finish studies in unrecognised schools but want to continue their studies in the regular schools may submit themselves to a Validating Test (Philippine Validity Test) to be administered by the National Education, Testing and Research Center (NETRC) to determine their competencies for proper grade placement.” (DepEd O42 s.2004: 2)

With this section, it states that for indigenous children to be admitted to government schools, they must pass the validating test. For the students to pass the test, they must have competency in the Basic Educational Curriculum (BEC) of the state. This section can be interpreted thus: 1) indigenous schools must register with the DepEd in order to allow their children to gain the necessary BEC knowledge and skills; or 2) indigenous schools who choose not to register should include BEC in their curriculum. The bottom line is that this section again does not allow for indigenous schools to develop a curriculum suited for their tribal traditions as identified by SIKAT.

These problems have been foreseen by Sagu-Ilaw SIKAT and the tribe is working hard to meet these requirements of DepEd without sacrificing its identity and vision. This “tug-of-war”, coupled by the financial difficulties of running a school, has led to some of the school’s non-tribal partners to disappear. Datu Mandimati has observed that there is a “very weak commitment of individuals, government agencies and other institutions in sustaining the project started”. It is solely due to the determination of the tribe to have this school that has kept it going.

### **Plans for the Future**

In November 4, 2004 the tribe established the Sagu-Ilaw Technical and Vocational School with the assistance of the several government agencies and from a grant from the German government. Equipment for woodworking was donated by the Germans for the use of Sagu-Ilaw. The vocational school aims for imparting upon its members continuous skills and vocational training in coordination with different government agencies. Another target is capability building for entrepreneurship through the fabrication of furniture crafts and housing components and also traditional art.

The vocational school was designed in such a way that the products of the students would be sold and the funds earned would sustain the indigenous school. The problem they are currently facing is that the tribe cannot source wood because they cannot touch the trees in their ancestral domain along the slopes of Mt. Kitanglad. This is because Mt. Kitanglad is a nature reserve that is protected by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. Datu Mandimati sadly says, “We cannot even use the wood in our own land”.

The only hope the tribe sees for the school to survive is for the tribe to utilize its ancestral domain. They believe that once they get this, they will no longer have problems in funding their activities.

To address this situation, the tribe recently created the Non-Formal Education arm of Sagu-Ilaw which focuses on educating the adult members of the tribe on its rights on

ancestral domain and land. The focus now of Sagu-Illaw is on centering the education of the tribal members in the context of ancestral domain. As of the moment, the tribe is busy preparing their Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan.

### **What Now?**

Although the government has made strides in defending the rights of indigenous peoples and uplifting their state in society, it still has some ways to go in terms of indigenous education.

The SIKAT programme is on the right track. What is needed would be government recognition and support. As of the present, most (if not all) indigenous schools are operating only with the support of the local tribal communities or of NGOs. The best the government can do as a start is to recognize SIKAT schools as legitimate schools different from government schools but equal in standing.

The Department of Education could also provide more autonomy to its regional offices to collaborate with indigenous groups in curriculum formulation. As of the present, curriculum content and formulation is too centralized – it done in the capital of Manila and sent out to the regions. Autonomy could assist in the localization of content without veering away from the basic structure the central office wishes to achieve in the schools.

Teacher-training institutions can also offer indigenous education as a programme to allow for future teachers to acquire skills needed to teach in indigenous schools. This programme should be patterned after the SIKAT curricula and veer away from the western model so often used in schools today. This could serve as a good bridge between the SIKAT curricula and the DepEd memo – since this programme would produce teachers that are equipped with cultural sensitivity and skills plus the Basic Education Curriculum content used in all Philippine schools.

Exploratory talks are currently ongoing between Sagu-Illaw and Bukidnon State College on plans for a course or programme about indigenous education based on Bukidnon culture. A collaboration is being proposed wherein Sagu-Illaw SIKAT would serve as a preparatory course and Bukidnon State College, through its School of Community Education and Industrial Technology, would serve as the finishing programme, awarding its graduates with diplomas. The graduates would then have the “legitimacy” that DepEd is looking for.

Local and indigenous knowledge is a key action theme in the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development. It is an area that should not be limited to indigenous peoples alone, since we could all benefit from it. In the area of education, indigenous schools in the Philippines are still experiencing problems. The SIKAT project is a good template for empowering indigenous people through their own kind of education. If the government could assist in the SIKAT programme, and if teacher-training institutions would also offer these programmes, indigenous schools and local knowledge would finally gain the recognition it deserves.

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- Finished BS Development Communication at the University of the Philippines at Los Baños, Philippines (1998)
- Finished MS Human Ecology (cum laude) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium (2004)
- Worked at Mt. Kitanglad Agri-Ventures Inc, a highland banana plantation that won an award for being an ecologically friendly plantation
- Currently assigned at the School of Community Education and Industrial Technology, Bukidnon State College
- Teaches Development Communication courses
- Current interests are on environmental education, education for sustainable development and indigenous education
- Currently working on a joint collaborative project between Sagu-Ilaw School of Indigenous Knowledge and Traditions and Bukidnon State College
- Also currently assessing the current practices and policies of Bukidnon State College for sustainability and environmental friendliness
- Married with 2 children