

Pivonungan

- Community Gathering

ITBAYAT, BATANES ISLAND GROUP PROVINCE, NORTHERN PHILIPPINES. *The intimacy of communal life is never more evident than in situations where there is geographic constriction. This island group is the most isolated and typhoon devastated in the country, which in turn circumscribes the small population into tightly knit communities, where the aging, even if only an individual, becomes a significant social event.*



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ONE OF THE coral islands found in the northernmost tip of the Philippines is the town of Itbayat of Batanes province. If traveling by boat to and from the capital town of Basco in Batan Island, even in good weather conditions, one has to endure the treacherous converging currents of the West Philippine Sea and the Pacific Ocean for at least three hours. Some locals admit to shun leaving the island unless necessary.

A welcome contrast is the people who are content traversing the island's gentle slopes and rolling hills on foot or men going to or from their farms leisurely riding their carabaos. Life in Itbayat, it seems, is as idyllic as the place itself.

The Itbayat people are known for being industrious and genial; treating both neighbors and strangers with kindness. Their sense of community is strong; everyone gathers to celebrate important personal and common milestones like *ponsyon* (wedding), *selebra mi anyo* (first birthday), *pamaskwon* (after nine days of novena) and the barrio and town fiestas, which are collectively called *pivonungan* or community gatherings.

One special occasion not to be missed and which a family looks forward to, prepares for, and even entices relatives living abroad to come home to, is the *servado*, a celebration honoring someone who is turning 60.



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(spread photos) The intimacy of communal life is depicted in the commensality of the people.

A few days before the appointed date, two *manhekat* or persons authorized to invite relatives and neighbors on behalf of the celebrant, goes around the different barangays to announce the forthcoming celebration. The *manhekat*, typically a woman, begins the invitation or *miniwara warab* with salutations to the invited family and then explains the purpose of the invitation. The message conveyed usually goes like this: “*Mapakapya sa su dios di miyo sa wily asa sa yayay ab may kamo du nawi a araw* (date).” [“The family of ___ extend their greetings to your family and would like to invite you to come and see what has been prepared just to mark the day and be able to strengthen your relationship with each other.”].

On the morning of the *servado*, guests are greeted by rousing *pitugtugan* (entertainment) from a local band (*mitugtug*) playing music that can be heard up to the adjacent barangay alerting the people of the start of the merrymaking. Accompanied by the *mitugtug*, a *manayay*, the person assigned to start the dance, leads the guests in dancing the *pandanggo*, their version influenced by the island’s close contact with Spain where the courtship dance called *fandango* originated. When a man extends his hand to a woman, it is an invitation to dance.

Right after dancing, the partners are offered a glass of *parek* (sugarcane wine) to drink and *rinavor*, a cocktail of minced beef skin mixed with blood and intestine, to eat. By nightfall, guests shift to dancing the waltz.

At lunchtime, people patiently line up to get *vonong* or food wrapped in *abaya* or breadfruit leaves of the atipovo tree [*Artocarpus treculianus* Elm. Family Moraceae]. A set of *vonong* consists of three individually wrapped foods arranged in order. At the topmost is a tasty viand, which includes grated *uwud* (banana pith), *sinaga* (finely chopped *vunus* or dried *gabi* [taro] stalks mixed with pork blood and intestine), *pritada* (sliced pork or beef) and *kaldereeta* (beef or pork ribs). This is followed by the *balencyana* or rice mixed with yellow ginger. The last of the assemblage is the wrapped *inapuy* or *paray* (rice). These delectable dishes come with not too steaming *lamoya* or vegetable soup also served on the *abaya* shaped like a cone.

During the *servado*, as in any *pivonungan*, community members gladly volunteer to help and are divided into well-organized groups. The men are mostly in charge of butchering the animals to be cooked. Usually, a group of women is tasked to clean hundreds of pieces of *abaya* gathered two days before the event. Another group does the cooking while a mixed group takes charge of preparing and wrapping the food and neatly arranging them in a *kanastro* (big basket) or sometimes in a *batulang* (basket usually hanging at the back of a carabao). A different group is assigned to distribute the *vonong* to the guests forming long lines along the street.

In all their celebrations, *pisidongga*, the Itbayat’s cooperative spirit is ever present.

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