

# Reconstructing Early Isinay Settlements and Migration Patterns through Linguistic Lineage and Historical Texts

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The Cordillera Review: Journal of Philippine Culture and Society 15 (1–2): 84–103.

<https://doi.org/10.64743/SLGS4548>

## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to reconstruct the linguistic and historical origins of the Isinay people, an indigenous group from Nueva Vizcaya in Northern Luzon, Philippines. Through document reviews, this study incorporates knowledge from linguistic analysis, historical texts, and oral accounts to suggest a more nuanced view of the Isinay's route to their current domicile. Drawing heavily from the works of Lawrence Reid and other Austronesian linguists, the research traces Isinay ancestry to voyagers from Taiwan who, by following the Meso-Cordilleran linguistic lineage, navigated the Cordillera region and down the river systems of Northern Luzon. Using comparative linguistic methodology, the paper highlights phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic relationships between Isinay and related Central Cordilleran languages, especially Ifugao, to propose a possible migration route. Historical records, including Spanish missionary accounts and local oral histories are examined to provide further context for linguistic patterns. This is done to make sense of contradictions in existing origin stories and to complement recent studies that challenge linear tree models in favor of a linkage model that better captures language evolution through contact and divergence. The study also discusses material culture, notably the role of ikat weaving in translocal trade, to illustrate broader cultural exchanges. The paper aims to serve as a foundation for further ethnolinguistic and historical inquiry by asserting the value of interdisciplinary reconstruction in documenting and revitalizing indigenous identities like that of the Isinay.

**Keywords:** Folklore, Folk History, Ethnohistory, Identity, Isinay

Lying at the heart of Northern Luzon, Nueva Vizcaya is a province nestled between the Cordillera, Sierra Madre, and Caraballo Mountain ranges. Known for its abundant forests and natural resources, the

province is also rich in culture, bolstering a population that now represents over 18 different ethnolinguistic groups (Galima and Hombrebueno 2017). One of the long-standing indigenous groups of this area is the Isinay community.

The Isinay belong to an ethnolinguistic group primarily found in the modern-day municipalities of Aritao, Dupax, and Bambang, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. These people have a rich heritage as makers of some of the most distinguished woven products in Northern Luzon. The Isinays' role as craftspeople in a larger network of trade with the peoples of Ilocos Sur, Pangasinan, Nueva Vizcaya, Benguet, Mountain Province, and Ifugao constitutes a significant part in the cultural and historical development of the region (Salvador-Amores 2018).

In recent years, the Isinay language has been classified as "threatened" and even "severely endangered" because of language shift to more dominant languages. The preference for these other influential languages diminished the use of Isinay outside the home and limited formal and informal efforts to pass the language to the next generation (Cruz 2010). Lawrence Reid and Analyn Salvador-Amores stipulated in their work on the Isinay Orthography that "there is only limited literature on the subject of the Isinay — its people and culture (Galang 1935, Constantino 1982), grammar and language (Conant 1915, Scheerer 1918, Reid 1974, 2006) — and efforts to revitalize Isinay as an endangered language are fairly recent (Cruz 2010)" (Reid and Salvador-Amores 2016, 11).

In the context of limited scholarship on the Isinay, this paper aims to contribute to the body of work surrounding the history of the Isinay and, thereby, support the documentation, revitalization, and critical discussion of indigenous histories and knowledge systems in Northern Luzon. This paper contributes to the rediscovery and reassessment of underrepresented narratives available through linguistic, historical, and oral sources. Resulting inferences are then made to invite further inquiry and collaboration towards piecing together the history of the Isinay in particular and Northern Luzon's indigenous past in general.

The case of the Isinay and their possible origins and migration over time is a great outset for the exploration of texts found in libraries and databases accessible within the Philippines and the United States of America. This is because most of what persists about the Isinay and their history remains in the form of stories passed orally between generations. Written records of such histories and stories are harder to come by. Of interest is a thesis written by Fe Yolanda V. Gatan that records one idea about the origin of the Isinay. In Gatan's interview with some elders in the Isinay Dupax community, namely: Lolita Sagario, Narciso Cia, and Salome Daran in 1991, the elders shared their ideas that the Isinay are the product of intermarriage between the Karao and Ilongot peoples (Gatan 1997). An account recorded in Ernesto Constantino's

1982 compilation of Isinay stories shares a different account from Diego Umamos in 1966. In this account, the origin of Bambang — where two tribes agree to not start a conflict after arguing over a deer that both had claim to and bury their weapons to show their resolve towards peace — is correlated with the origins of the Isinay saying that the Isinay were the product of the peace between these two groups, the I-uwak (referred to as Igorots) and Ilongot, as they intermarried and formed a new group (Constantino 1982, 163–170). The iterations of this story, as told by Rosendo G. Gonzales and Anastacio Acosta (1982, 154–161), are different in that the conflict is between the Ilongot/Ivilao (an Isinay word used to describe the Ilongot) and Buccalots (Bugkalot) — with Rosendo's story being the only one to reiterate the idea of intermarriage after the conflict, but nothing involving the Isinay.

The trouble with the idea that the Isinay formed as a group after the formation of Bambang is the presence of Luis Beltran Pigu. Pigu was a chief of Burubur<sup>1</sup>, an assistant to the Spanish leaders, and an Isinay historian who is mentioned to have been baptized in Burubur between 1702 and 1703 and was buried in Aritao in 1777 (Fernandez 1989, 137). Commentary on these events further states that “today's Bambang town came from the merging of the villages of Mayon, Diangan, Ilimanab and Seup in the site of the former Isinay settlement of Abiang” (Fernandez 1989, 153). Thus, this account, which follows events related to Pigu and the Isinay of his time in the 18th century, and the historical commentary on these events, substantiate the idea that there is a deeper history to the Isinay that extends far back before the arrival of the first Spanish expedition in 1591. This possibility not only expands knowledge currently available in local stories and oral histories but also invites further investigation.

The linguistic research conducted by Lawrence Reid (2009) will be used as a hypothetical foundation for an alternative view, establishing the starting point for the Isinay peoples — before they arrived in the district of “Tuy” — in the Cordilleras. By incorporating folk stories and histories from Nueva Vizcaya, another story will appear, one where the people who would become the Isinay made their way south along the Magat River to the Marang River due to interactions with other neighboring groups. Ultimately, these people would be met by the Spanish as they crossed the Caraballo mountains in an expedition to establish control in this region connecting Cagayan and Manila— giving way to the establishment of the Ituy/Tuy mission, the predecessor of Nueva Vizcaya. I will engage in suggesting possible routes of migration and manners of social formation of the Isinay in the following sections.

## The Austronesian and Northern Luzon

In Lawrence Reid's (2009) article, "Who are the Indigenous? Origins and Transformations", key statements are given about the languages of Northern Luzon and their origins.

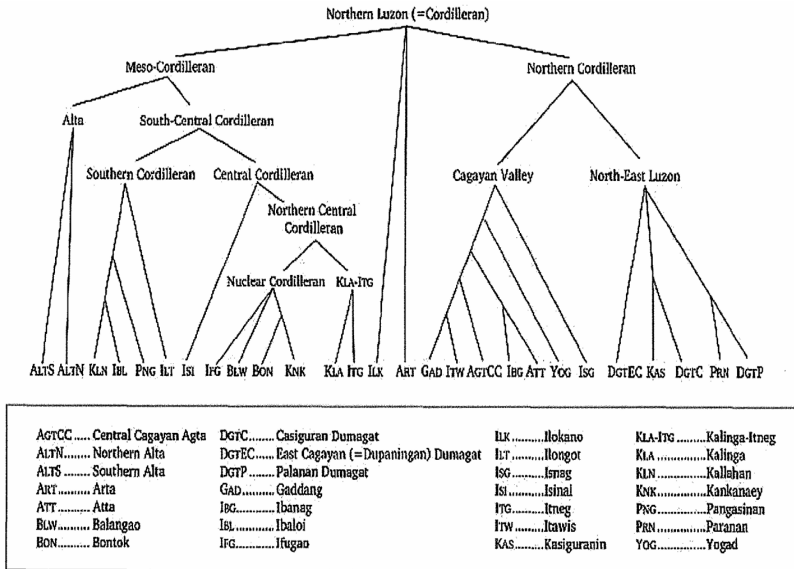


Figure 1. Subgrouping of Northern Luzon Languages (Reid 2009)

According to Reid, archaeological sources point to the origin of "the Cordilleran languages" as "a distinct branch of the... Malayo-Polynesian family of Austronesian languages... from an in-migration of people from what is now Taiwan, around 4500 years ago" (2009, 10). This linguistic origin in Taiwan is supported by archaeological comparisons between material culture found in Batanes and Cagayan, which are not found among the Negrito people who came "perhaps 50,000 years or more" before (2009, 8). Further details, Reid asserts, can be extrapolated from the study of language as people separate, blend, and interact over time. Given two principles of linguistics – one, where languages change slightly with each new generation of children that learns the language, and two, that the changes that occur over time occur in detectable patterns — researchers can compare languages close to one another and map out their general relations to one another. Reid walks through this systemic pattern of change, noting how slight changes in words and pronunciation can seem small between one generation or place — generally understandable between speakers as dialects — to becoming more pronounced, producing distinct languages. Hence, comparing shared words, sounds, or other aspects can "determine the kind and

degree of relationship languages have with each other,” (2009, 15) like parents to children and among siblings or cousins, and can be mapped in branches like a family tree.

In the case of Cordilleran languages, Reid argues that the group would be better termed “Northern Luzon” as “it includes... Ilokano, Pangasinan, all the languages of the Cagayan Valley, and the languages spoken in the Sierra Madre and down the East Coast of northern Luzon” (2009, 17). He continues by stating that “communicative isolation, as people gradually moved into previously unoccupied mountains and valleys,” along with local conflicts that also reduce “the possibility of meeting and interacting with peoples who originally had the same language” (2009, 17) are what caused these groups to develop their distinct languages and respective dialects .

Seeing that distinctions form as a result of isolation, blending occurs when there is increased exposure to other languages. Exposure occurs when people from other language groups interact with others, when migrants arrive for work or intermarry or when local people leave the group and come back after spending time in another locale. In these situations, the tendency is for the local language to decline in usage (Reid 2009).

Provided with what we know, that the origins of the Northern Luzon languages is Taiwan, we can begin our hypothetical journey there around when peoples from the island migrated south to Batanes and then to Northern Luzon by around 2500BC.

### **Northern Luzon Divided, the Meso-Cordilleran Journey Down the Chico River**

With the intention of further mapping out the ancestry of the Isinay, we start in Taiwan, travelling past Batanes and arriving in Northern Luzon. This group of Northern Luzon speaking people arrived around 2500 BC and spread out from there. The result produced four main language groups — Meso-Cordilleran, Northern Cordilleran, Iloko, and Arta — which have expanded with additional study into other language groups found in Northern Luzon, especially among Negrito populations, as reported by Reid (2009, 18).

Geographically, we can come to some conclusions on how this occurred. Northern Luzon is largely divided into four vertical sections because of the Cordillera and Sierra Madre Mountain ranges. Given the principles discussed in the previous section, we can assume that some of the people who spoke this Northern Luzon predecessor language made their way to the western coast — now commonly referred to as the Ilocos region. The language of these people, who were then distant from others of their former group(s), gradually shifted and became Iloko. Those of this Northern Luzon group that eventually settled in the

Central Cordilleras also saw a gradual change in their language which was later called Meso-Cordilleran. The people who stayed largely in the Cagayan Valley formed a different subgroup named after their area. Contemporaneously we see the Negrito people scattered throughout, some of who intermingled with other language groups and adopted aspects of their language, others forming a group of Negrito languages focused on the Northeastern part of Luzon where their communities in the Sierra Madre are.

Notable groups within the Cagayan Valley family of languages, as listed in the *Ethnologue* (Eberhard et al. 2025), are Ibanag, Gaddang, and Isnag. Meso-Cordilleran as a language family comprises noteworthy groups like the Kalinga, Itneg, Balangao, Bontok, Ifugaw, Kankanaey, and Isinay in the Central Cordilleran subgroup with the Ilongot, Pangasinan, Ibaloy, I-wak, Kalanguya/Kallahan, and Karao, in the Southern Cordilleran subgroup.

Following the Meso-Cordilleran (MC) group, taking the Chico River would lead them deeper into Central Cordillera, isolating them further from their former language group and leading to interactions with Negrito peoples as Himes (1998) theorized in his article “The Meso-Cordilleran Group of Philippine Languages.” His purpose in studying the MC group was to further elaborate how the Negrito populations — those speaking Northern Alta and Southern Alta — shared aspects of the Cordilleran language. His conclusion led him to believe that “speakers of MC eventually encountered groups of Negritos, possibly on the eastern and southern slopes of the Cordillera Central, who adopted the speech of their new neighbors. The interaction between the two groups must have been intense and intimate enough for the Negritos to have substituted MC for whatever language they previously spoke” (Himes 1998, 89).

Taking this as a checkpoint in the journey, we can estimate the southern migration of Austronesian peoples from Taiwan some of who arrived in Batanes before the coasts of Northern Luzon or directly thereon. Some of these groups separated from others, settling in different areas along the northern coasts, developing language differences over time that would form a Northern Luzon language group. As these people grew and spread, the rivers and mountains of Northern Luzon would provide the catalyst for the development of further branches in the language family. Some in the west would later develop into the Ilocano language group. Others around the Cagayan Valley stay in the north and follow the river southeast with a group that would push southwest at the fork of the Cagayan River into the Chico River becoming the Meso-Cordilleran group. All these settlers interacted in various degrees with the Negrito inhabitants of this land they were settling, causing pieces of the languages of these Austronesian settlers to become a part of the Negrito inhabitants’ preexisting languages.

## The Formation and Flow of Meso-Cordillera

The passage of time and the intermingling of the Meso-Cordilleran group and the Negrito populations would see the formation of three major groups in what we can assume is somewhere around the modern provinces of Apayao and Kalinga. These are the South-Central Cordilleran — the migrants into the forested mountain area — and the groups that would later become the Northern and Southern Alta. It is interesting to note that, according to sources indicated in the online reference, Glottolog, the Northern Alta people are currently located in Aurora province, with the Southern Alta occupying parts of Nueva Ecija, the coasts of Quezon province, and a few portions of Bulacan. Given Himes' (1998) conjecture on Meso-Cordilleran and its ties to the Negritos, we assume that they had to be in the same mountain regions of Apayao and Kalinga at one point. These Negrito peoples, interacting with those of migrants into their territories, would assimilate their languages and coexist until such time that they were urged to leave. In the case they navigated the Chico River, going south and southwest until they reached the region around Mount Data (in modern-day Mountain Province), a connection to the Agno River would lead them further south and then east in Benguet or Pangasinan provinces, where they could then traverse Nueva Vizcaya. That matches with references to tribes that were apparently the product of other groups intermingling with Negritos and formed new tribes such as the Ibilao and Abacas who once resided near Isinay territory as described in the commentary on Pigu's account (Fernandez 1989, 150–51). Given Negrito presence in Aurora, Nueva Ecija, and more, the encroachment of the Spanish and other factors influencing the social dynamics at the time may have pushed these people further to where we find them today.

South-Central Cordilleran, as the progression from Meso-Cordilleran language, could follow simply as a course of time and isolation, given separation from the Negrito population. Current information dictates the separation of this group into two — Central Cordilleran and Southern Cordilleran. The Central Cordilleran language group includes the Kalinga and Itneg, as well as the Balangao, Bontok, Kankanaey, Ifugao, and Isinay; the Southern Cordilleran is comprised of the Ilongot, Ibaloy, I-wak, Kalanguya, Karao, and Pangasinan. Say that this separation of the South-Central Cordilleran took place along the Chico River and its tributaries within the modern province of Kalinga, we can reasonably see how the people of this group could diverge further into the Kalinga and Itneg peoples while, in time, others would continue south as the Alta did with the flow of the Chico River into modern-day Mountain Province.

For the Southern Cordilleran language groups specifically, a more extensive study can take place on the prospective migration patterns.



Given the focus on the Isinay and their place in the Central Cordillera language group, the conjecture being made in this study is that those of the Southern group may have ventured south to Mount Data as the Alta before, down the Agno River to Benguet and either east or south as successive groups went to Pangasinan, Nueva Vizcaya, Nueva Ecija, Aurora, and so on.

The Central Cordillerans, on the other hand, may have lingered in the areas between Kalinga and Mountain Province. Longer time of interaction among members of this group could be attributed to the shared features of their languages as shown in the table that follows.

PCCo	Gloss	Distribution
*ʔátuŋ	hot	Isi, Kla, Itg, Bon, Knk, Blw, Ifg
*ʔíla	see	Isi, Kla, Bon, Knk, Blw
*dalít	eel	Isi, Kla, Bon, Knk, Blw, Ifg
*dugí	husk of rice	Isi, Kla, Itg, Bon, Knk, Blw, Ifg
*kəlán	worm	Isi, Kla, Itg, Knk, Blw, Ifg
*kiyát	swim	Isi, Kla, Bon
*waŋwaŋ	river	Isi, Kla, Itg, Bon, Knk, Blw, Ifg

**Figure 2.** Examples of Shared Lexical Items among CCo languages mentioned in Reid 2019

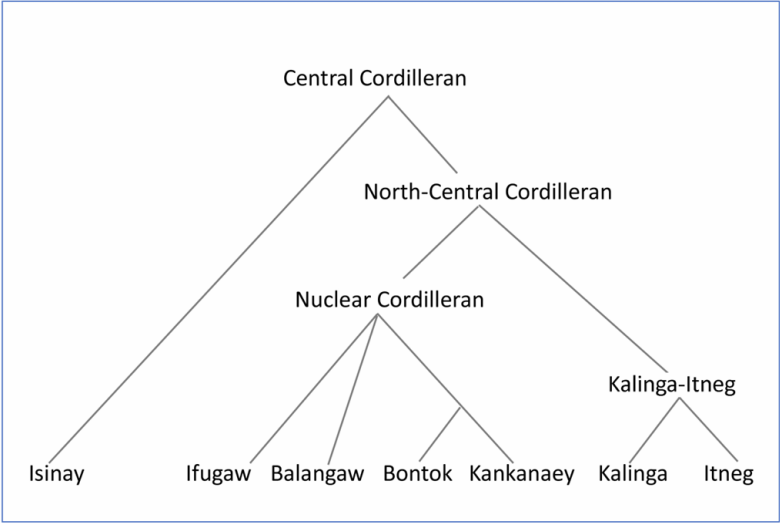
Phonologically and in reference to morphosyntax, there are also some changes from Proto Central Cordilleran that are shared between these languages. The use of definite and indefinite specifiers and basic demonstratives, as reminiscent of Proto-Central Cordilleran (aka PCCo), is also present in these descendent languages. In another case, Isinay “reflects [Proto-Central Cordilleran] \*k as /ʔ/” (Reid 2019, 19), which is a change that is also noted in Balangao, Southern Bontok, Batad Ifugao, Guinaang Kalinga, “some dialects of Isneg... and in some languages of negrito groups of the north-east coast of Luzon, such as Northern Alta,” (2019, 19) with only slight variation. The demonstratives among Ifugao, Kalinga-Itneg, and pre-Balangao languages are also shared with Isinay with slight variance. This gave sound reasoning for the linearity of the relationship between these languages and their predecessors at the time.

### A Separated Central Cordilleran Group

As we place the proto-Central Cordilleran language somewhere within Mountain Province after their separation from the Southern Cordilleran group, we start to observe nuance in the relations between their languages that prompt us to consider multiple hypotheses related to the origins of the languages in the Central Cordilleran group. Before



Reid’s 2019 article, the consensus at the time seemed to be that Isinay and other languages in the Central Cordilleran group formed close ties that could be connected in a tree model, like a family where descendants can be clearly marked from one another under a common ancestor—Proto-Central Cordilleran in this instance.



**Figure 3.** Central Cordilleran, formerly as a Tree Model (Reid 2009, 18)

The theory that Isinay is a first branch from Proto-Central Cordilleran then asserts that the speakers split from the others in their group earlier and became a distinct language sooner. This is how researchers explained its unique traits that separate it from the others. Some of these differences include changes in phonology, words in their lexicon that do not appear in other sister languages, and changes in morphosyntax with the use of certain specifiers and a definite enclitic. One specific instance is the personal dative/locative specifier *i* that is only seen in Isinay. Slight changes presented by Isinay include the development of PCCo \*l to /l/; /e/ or /ey/; /w/ or /y/ in ways that contrast or share development, possibly even borrowing from Ifugao, Kalinga, and others and the topic marking form *sa* that is also found in Ifugao and others in their language group, but only being used in Isinay on fronted demonstratives. Reid also stated that these changes “of Isinay from PCCo are primarily the result of the lenition of voiced stops, a very common change in languages and which could have happened after Isinay diverged from other languages in the family” (Reid 2019, 5).

PCCo Consonants	PCCo Vowels
*p *t *k *ʔ	*i *i̯ *u
*b *d *g	*a
*m *n *ŋ	
*l	
*s	
*w *y	
	Stress
	*V́

Figure 4. Proto-Central Cordilleran phonemes (Reid 2019, 4)

Isinay Consonants	Isinay Vowels
p t k ʔ	i u
b d g	e o
m n ŋ	a
v s h	
l	
r	
w y	
	Stress <sup>4</sup>
	*V́

Figure 5. Isinay phonemes (Reid 2019, 4)

Given these points, the tree model would support the idea that those left behind by the Isinay would form a new language in time called the North-Central Cordilleran. Later, either due to conflict or expansion, this group would also eventually split into two: Nuclear Cordilleran and Kalinga-Itneg. The one group would stay in the general area or migrate close by to establish the settlements that would become the Kalinga and Itneg communities. Those of the Nuclear Cordilleran group would make their way south, also like the Alta and Southern Cordilleran, into Mountain Province. Like the breakage in Kalinga, groups would stay in the vicinity of Mountain Province — forming into Bontok and Kankanaey, and even Balangao. In contrast, another group ventured not southwest towards Mount Data as the Alta and Southern Cordillerans may have, but south to Mount Polis. These people would later become the Ifugao, with the proposition being that the Isinay also took this route through Mountain Province and Ifugao much earlier than the others.

In the presence of more evidence, though, Lawrence Reid’s 2019 article, “Reassessing the Position of Isinay in the Central Cordilleran Family” changes the tree model for Central Cordilleran as a language group. In reference to research conducted by Ronald Himes in 1996, Reid

recognized that the Isinay shared more with the Nuclear Cordilleran (Ifugao, Balangao, Bontok, and Kankanaey),“ especially the Ifugao languages, rather than with Kalinga-Itneg” (Reid 2019, 2). Reviewing lexical data, it was observed how Isinay did share more with those of this group as shown in the table below.

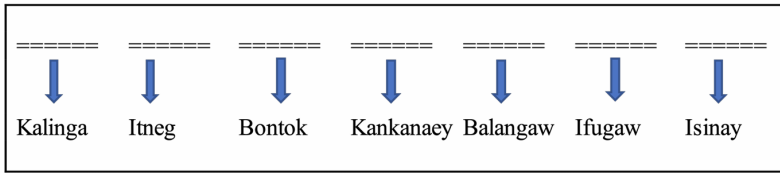
PCCo	Gloss	Distribution
*ʔaʔəw	shadow	Isi, Bon, Blw, Ifg
*ʔapis	to fight	Isi, KnkN, Ifg
*ʔiba	sibling	Isi, Bon, KnkN, Ifg
*dipag	to lie on the back	Isi, Bon, KnkN, Ifg
*dika	dirty	Isi, Bon, Ifg
*kəpət	wet	Isi, Bon, Blw, Ifg
*kugut	to sew	Isi, Bon, Blw, Ifg
*kupkup	skin	Isi, Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Ifg
*ləgab	to burn	Isi, KnkN, KnkS, Ifg
*laman	deer	Isi, KnkS, Blw
*(l)ind[əu]m <sup>b</sup>	G-string	Isi, Bon, Ifg
*mu	if	Isi, Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Ifg
*puknas	to wipe	Isi, KnkN, Blw, Ifg
*putu	belly	Isi, Bon, KnkN, Blw, Ifg
*s[əʔ]ʔəd	to wait	Isi, Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Blw, Ifg
*təkən	different	Isi, Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Blw, Ifg
*tuyu	regret	Isi, Bon, KnkN, Ifg

Figure 6. Changes shared between Isinay and Nuclear Cordilleran languages ( Reid 2019, 18)

An example of this affinity is in how “Isinay reflects PMP [Proto-Malayo-Polynesian] \*ə with a mid-back vowel /o/, but it is also reflected as /o/ in Ifugao languages (Lambrecht 1978, Newell & Poligon 1993) and in Eastern Bontok (Fukuda 1997). The same reflex occurs in Kalinga languages (Brainard 1985, Gieser 1987, Limos Kalinga 1981), forming a contrast between /o/ and /u/ in each of these languages (Liao 2004: 128). While Southern Bontok (Talubin) typically reflects PMP \*ə as /ə/, a few forms show an /o/ reflex (Kikusawa & Reid 2003). Isinay does not share the development of PCCo \*-aw as /-əw/ that occurs in Bontok and Kankanaey languages. It is retained in Ifugao (and Kalinga) as the sequence /-aw/,” (Reid 2019, 18-19). A feature of Ifugao and Isinay that is shared in their morphosyntax is the use of *an* as a ligature. These points indicate a closer relation between Isinay and Ifugao compared to their closest neighbors within their language group relative to where they were at the Spanish encounter.

This prompted Reid (2019, 16–23) to conclude that the Central Cordilleran languages would be best described using a linkage model, which makes the relations between the languages in this group more open instead of linear. Using a linkage model, it is suggested that the

“proto-language [broke] up into a network of dialects that eventually developed as separate languages” (2019, 16).



**Figure 7.** Central Cordilleran as is now recognized as a Linkage Model (Reid 2019, 3)

So, while maintaining the current proposition for the migration path of Central Cordilleran as a descendant of South-Central Cordilleran, Meso-Cordilleran, and so on, another assertion can be formed about how the Isinay and its sister languages groups may have developed. Those of the Central Cordilleran language group quickly spread out and interacted sometime after arriving in Mountain Province, forming different settlements with slight differences as dialects but still mutually intelligible. In time, the groups with different dialects then formed into distinct languages.

That then brings up the question of how the Isinay arrived at their current location from Mountain Province. Reid contemplates various alternative routes proposed by previous researchers:

- A path west out of Mountain Province and south through Benguet, Pangasinan, then through Nueva Ecija to arrive at Nueva Vizcaya by way of the Balet Pass;
- A path east out of Mountain Province, their next direction being south along the Cagayan River — possibly in Isabela — and then into Nueva Vizcaya once the Cagayan River meets the Magat River;
- A path south through Mountain Province and Ifugao towards modern-day Bayombong where the Magat River could then lead them southward.

Considering the first alternative which assumes that the group that would become the Isinay split and travelled through Benguet, Pangasinan, and so on to head back into their current area of Nueva Vizcaya, the linguistic data makes it clear that this is unlikely. Had the proto-Isinay people gone down this path we would expect to see more changes or similarities shared with South Cordilleran groups - Ilongot, Pangasinan, Ibaloy, I-wak, Kalanguya/Kallahan, and Karao. While Reid notes the influence of Ilongot and other Cagayan valley languages on Isinay — particularly on Isinay Bambang and its phonological

differences from Isinay Aritao and Dupax — this he comments are “relatively recent” (Reid 2019, 5). Thus, we rule out this option.

A similar argument is held for the second alternative — a route through Isabela. Reid’s notes (2019, 6, 7, 11, 18–27) indicate a larger share of influence by Ifugao and other languages of Central Cordillera, which means that they interacted far more and even longer with these people than others. This route will not be fully discounted, though, due to an interesting record held in Bayombong about the origins of its name. The account will be elaborated later, but one noteworthy segment of the recorded history of Bayombong is that the Malaates, an alternative name attributed to the Isinay, were “of Isabela” and settled in the area following Ifugaos that came from Mountain Province (Nueva Vizcaya State Institute of Technology Bayombong n.d, 1). While this account is singular in referring to the Isinay as descending to Nueva Vizcaya from Isabela, it is — until such time that further evidence contradicts it — a valuable option for deducing the origins of the Isinay before Nueva Vizcaya.

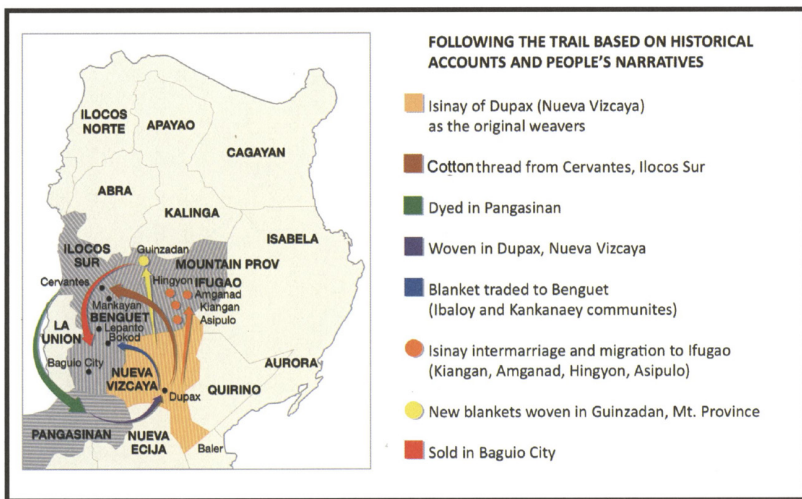
Reid cites the regional geography as the primary factor for why he believes in a third and convincing option: a route through Mountain Province and Ifugao into Nueva Vizcaya. He points out that

some members of the [Central Cordillera] group (after reaching the Bontok area) moved up the Wangwang River tributary heading south from Bontok and Samoki to Talubin (/tónɐŋ/) and Caneo (/kanʔəw/). They then moved following what is called on the map Apap Stream to Ambayoan or Bayyo (/vayyəw/) (a dialect of Southern Bontok that shows clear influence from Ifugao). They then passed over the Mt. Polis pass (1597m.) to Ifugao territory. They gradually settled all the water valleys in the area where the language became Ifugao. Finally, they moved down to settle the Ituy area in the upper Magat and became what are now called Isinay. This probably happened over at least 2000 years, since the ancestral CCo people first moved up the Chico River. At that time, they were probably dry rice swidden farmers and hunter-gatherers, and only later, with the introduction of wet rice did they develop the rice terraces that Bontok and Ifugao are currently known for (Reid 2019, 27).

With this account, we can proceed with the two most probable routes of the Isinay predecessors: one east out of Mountain Province into Isabela and then south to Nueva Vizcaya, and another south through Mountain Province into Ifugao before landing in Nueva Vizcaya. In either case, we can use the upper Magat River basin as the site of our next course in prospective Isinay history.

## The Malaates, Settlers Along the Magat River Valley

Numerous researchers have dedicated thought to the origins of languages and groups within Northern Luzon. Felix M. Keesing, a New Zealand anthropologist who spent time in the Philippines, is one such inquirer into the origins of those in Northern Luzon that Reid considers in his 2019 account. So, in his reference to Keesing's *The Ethnohistory of Northern Luzon* a theory therein on the origins of the Ifugao, states that they may have stayed in the "Paniquy-Ituy area of the Cagayan lowlands... around Bagabag," (Keesing 1962, 334–35 quoted in Reid 2019, 25) before settling their current areas. Keesing's reasoning at the time was a result of the contrasting cultural aspects of the Ifugao from those in Mountain Province, but Reid disagreed, saying contemporary cultural and linguistic data imply closer relationships — another contributing factor to their grouping as a linkage in the Central Cordilleran languages family.



**Figure 8.** Translocal movements of Ikat blankets to different regions of Northern Luzon based on research by AV Salvador-Amores and Denes Dasco (2018, 79)

Reid does entertain, though, the idea that the people who would become the Ifugao had pulled in large part from the genetic pool of the Magat population, a concept that — along with other oral histories — can hint at the possibility of the proto Isinay and Ifugao being together in their descent to the Magat or in an asynchronous descent south into the Magat. Analyn Salvador-Amores' article on "Resignifying Kinuttiyan (Ikat Blanket) In the Philippines Cordillera: Translocal Connections And Ritual Use" gives additional perspective on this interaction between the Ifugao and Isinay. Her study follows the material culture

of ikat blankets especially for the Isinay as they were said to be the chief producers of these products in the past among others in Ifugao, Bauko, Mountain Province, and the Ibaloy (Salvador-Amores 2018, 92). Based on her research, the skill of making such cotton products is recorded “as early as 1743” under Father Malumbres’ historical accounts, and its economy and trade connected the Isinay with peoples across Ilocos Sur, Pangasinan, Benguet, Nueva Vizcaya, and Ifugao.

Salvador-Amores also mentions in her study the different ways in which other people in this region learned how to produce ikat woven goods, stating the possibility of imitation, assimilation, and so on. This leads us back to the theoretical relationship between the Isinay and Ifugao.

It is possible that the Ifugao imitated Isinay products or that some Isinay were assimilated into the Ifugao population during the early years of Spanish resettlement efforts (Ellis 1981). On the other hand, “Beyer (1909) speculates that the opposite may have occurred, and that the Christian Isinay may be descendants of resettled Ifugao (cited in Ellis 1981, 262).

According to Manuel Dulawan, a culture bearer from Ifugao... there were also intermarriages that occurred between the Isinay and Ifugao in Asipulo and some areas in Kiangnan via the Amburayan River. He assumes that the Isinay blanket may have been introduced in Kiangnan. Furthermore, Palompon Bahay, a mumbaki (ritual specialist) mentioned that the early Isinay resettled in It’kak, Ifugao, when the Ilongot of Nueva Vizcaya and Ayangan of Ifugao in the past drove out the Isinay of Dupax by incessant headhunting raids (97).

In this account, we can recognize that the Ifugao-Isinay relationship is complex, in more ways than one, and has a unique relevance to the origins of either group as independent language groups. The small municipal history of Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, provides a unique bridge that can clarify the reason why these two may have developed a gap over time. The “History and Brief Description” of the municipality of Bayombong describes:

The first inhabitants of Bayombong were intrepid If(u)gaos from the neighboring mountain province. The Gaddanes from Daruyat, Angadanan, Isabela and Amanga, Cagayan and the Malaates also of Isabela followed by Ifugaos in about 1718 and live(d) in Bayombong. The Malaates settled at Paitan while Gaddanes established their communities at the Calepquep Hill (what is now a part of Vista Alegre Hill). However, the Gaddanes were fierce, more concentrated and who frowned



on the influx of other ethnic groups. Thus, having been driven away, the If(u)gao Tribes retreated back to their original abode and are now settlers of today's Ifugao Province (Nueva Vizcaya State Institute of Technology Bayombong n.d., 1).

Reading this account can bring us back to our two interpretations of Isinay migration out of Mountain Province — east out of Mountain Province into Isabela before Nueva Vizcaya or down south out of Mountain Province into Ifugao before Nueva Vizcaya, while they were yet an understandable component of the Central Cordilleran language-speaking people.

According to Reid's theory, the Isinay — also known as Inmeas and Malaates — were one group with the Ifugao at some point, travelling down into the Ifugao province from Bontoc and expanding further down the Lamut River to reach the Magat (Reid 2019, 1). This idea of continuous expansion into the Magat river valley clashes somewhat with the opening statement of the Bayombong account in the sense that the Isinay are said to come from Isabela. The statement that the Gaddang "frowned on the influx of other ethnic groups" is also an intriguing detail. It suggests that the Gaddang were the original settlers of the area who fought to keep the land they had maintained. This version would assert then that the Isinay/Malaates and Ifugao settled on the southern side of the Magat (Paitan) and not on the north side (Calepquep) where the Gaddang were. The story of Bayombong continues as such:

Legends handed down through the years has (sic) another version of the origin of the town's name. The Gaddanes never welcomed the arrival of the Malaates. This resistance triggered the first tribal war resulting from the Malaates retreat to the nearby areas. In their retreat, they left their prized valuable possession, the " Bayongyong ", a bamboo about two (2) meter[s] long used by the Malaates to carry fresh water from wells built along the riverbanks (sic). The place were literally littered with so many abandoned Bayongyong and since then the place was named " Bayumbung " as fitting reminder to the Gaddanes of their first taste of victory of resisting invasions to their private domains (Nueva Vizcaya State Institute of Technology Bayombong n.d., 2).

Here we have an interesting dynamic where the story dictates that the Ifugao and Malaates are the outsiders while the Gaddang are the defenders. Be that as it may, "the term Malaates", states Reid, "is an exonym (a name given to a group by outsiders), and refers to people who live near the Magat river," (Reid 2019, 1). He goes on to say that

the use of *l* is representative of the Meso-Cordilleran languages' way of referring to the Malat River, while Magat is more likely the way the Ibanag, Itawis, or Gaddang would refer to the river (Reid 2019). So, if we are to believe that the Gaddang were the first settlers, why is it that they were not given the title of the "residents along the Magat"? "Malaates", in describing the Isinay is not the name they refer to themselves — but one that comes from Meso-Cordilleran language groups — that means that any of that group (likely candidates being the Ifugao, Balangao, Bontok, Kankanaey, Ilongot, Ibaloy, Kankanaey, and Karao given their proximity) were using that word to refer to the Isinay as the residents of the river, not the Gaddang. This inconsistency could supply evidence that the Gaddang were, in fact, the ones who arrived after the Isinay who, among the other tribes of the Cordillera, were seen as the initial inhabitants of that part of the river.

Another case for this argument is given in Pablo Fernandez' commentary on "Pigu's Account in the Context of the Evangelization of Nueva Vizcaya" mentioned earlier where the Isinay themselves report having been called Malaat by those in the northern parts of Nueva Vizcaya — referred to as Paniqui in the past. He pulls in a quote from Francisco Antolin, a priest who was historically assigned to the Tuy mission over the Isinay people and wrote notes on the people and history of their time. When interviewed by Father Antolin, the Isinay said, "their proper and legitimate name is 'Inmees'; although they acknowledge that their Paniqui neighbours used to call them 'Malaat' and among the Pampangos they are known by the name 'Isinay'" (Fernandez 1989, 123). With this account, we are given additional confirmation of the Isinay being referred to as the Malaat by "Paniqui neighbours" and the consensus among groups in the northern part of Nueva Vizcaya that they were indeed the occupants of the river before.

So, say that the Isinay and Ifugao, before they were considered distinct tribes with their own languages, occupied the same space for some time. The group that would become the Isinay scouted and sent down settlers to the tributaries of the Magat through the areas of Lagawe and Lamut to Bagabag for hunting or settlement. Another potential route, possibly explaining the venture out of Isabela, could be if the Isinay were a part of a group in Ifugao that took the river near Mayoyao, which meets with the main channel of the Magat near the Magat Reservoir north of Bagabag. Either way, those of their original group in Ifugao who stayed would differentiate themselves from those that left, calling the ones who left the Malaates — the ones they sent to live by the Malat River.

In time, more of those from the Ifugao would join the Malaates around the time when the Gaddang, maybe following the Cagayan River as it flows up into the Magat, had started to make their way to the settlements of the Malaates. Suppose the Gaddang had just started

settling in the area. In the beginning, they may not have seen the Malaates as a threat. Yet, with their reinforcement from other group members making their way down from the mountain, their perspective would shift to seeing the Malaates as competition. In that case, they may have felt pressured to act first to not be pushed out later in numbers. In response, those people who recently settled from the Ifugao area would flee back to their former settlements, while the Malaates could have either been separated or motivated to move south, most likely if they had used the river to escape or if they had settlements southward to escape to.

Under these circumstances, it would make sense why many linguistic researchers like Reid note the Isinay show “the longest period of independent development” (Reid 2019, 3), from the languages they are closest to. Having an inter-tribal conflict over land with the Gaddang could provide the support for why the Isinay were relatively isolated from their former counterparts. It also provides us with an additional clue as to why they were prompted to settle further south than others in their language group, arriving in what would later be known as the Tuy/Ituy valley, where the Spanish would encounter them years later.

### **The Inmeas, now Isinay**

Returning to Pablo Fernandez’ account, the quote from Father Antolin states that “among the Pampangos they are known by the name ‘Isinay’” (Fernandez 1989, 123). What is interesting is that the Isinay in this account didn’t take to the name of “Tuy” or “Itui”, as if the title being used for their region was foreign to them. This begins to make sense when reviewing Manuel de la Vega’s compiled accounts on the region “Expedition to the Province of Tuy” (De la Vega 1609, 281–326). Here, we note that Gomez Perez Dasmariñas, in what would be the first successful expedition into the region for the Spanish, was accompanied by numerous chiefs from Pampanga who brought with them up to “one thousand four hundred Indian [soldiers]” (De la Vega 1609, 282). In the case that the Pampango had long-standing trade relations with the Isinay and familiarized themselves with their region, it makes sense how they were the proper companions to the Spanish in aiding their pursuit of subduing the northern tribes. The prevailing ideas of the Pampango about the Isinay and their neighbors would form the basis for how the Spanish would understand their area, leading them to use the title “Isinay” for the people of “Tuy” as the Pampango would have referred to them.

While this proposes a new set of questions — like why the Pampango referred to the Isinay and their region as such — another puzzle piece comes into view. By the time Francisco Antolin interviewed

the Isinay in the 18th century, they stated their official name as the “Inmees”. Reid explains that

the name Inmeas (/ʔinmeyas/) was probably an endonym (a name given to a group by insiders), since the name is a regular reflex in Isinay of PMP \*kálas ‘forest’ (Isinay /ʔeyas/ plus infix ‘perfective actor-voice infix’, the combination probably meaning ‘used to live in the forest’), cf. Keley-i Kallahan an ethnic group geographically close to Isinay, whose name originally meant ‘forest people’, also Batad Ifugao inalāhan ‘a public forest’ (Newell and Poligon 1993 cited in Reid 2018, 1).

This explanation can be taken as a hint for a greater sense of connection between the Isinay and their northern neighbors, and it also provides us with context for how they viewed themselves. Before they were the Isinay — a title given to them by the Pampango and perpetuated by colonial leaders — they were Inmeas, people of the forest. They may have been referred to as the Malaat or people of the Magat river, and for much of their known history, the Isinay are recognized for their settlements along that very river. However, they identified themselves “legitimately” as people of the forest (Fernandez 1989, 123). While we can assume that the forests of their namesake are those found in the Dupax watershed or any nearby forest in Aritao or Bambang, our exploration into the possible origins of the Isinay in the Cordilleras can give us a different point of view. This potential for new discoveries and insight into Isinay history through greater critical analysis is what I hope will lead the community and academe at large to discover the hidden stories behind Isinay stories, names, and culture.

## Conclusion

This study intends to stand as a modest contribution in the pursuit for documentation, compilation, revitalization, and advocacy for indigenous histories and knowledge systems, especially among groups like the Isinay whose language and culture are threatened by contemporary conditions. While it was presumed that there were limited records available about the Isinay, sources available from a variety of fields were able to provide a richer perspective on their history and potential origins.

Linguistic scholars from the past point to a linear path: the origins of the Isinay beginning from the northernmost shores of Luzon, going south with the Cagayan River to the Chico, then from the Chico River to the Agno, finally to the Magat River, which flowed into the Marang River. Contemporary evidence challenges the narrative of the predecessors to the Isinay as they venture into Mountain Province, producing diverse options for rediscovering histories about the Isinay

and those related to them as they journeyed from the Cordillera into the Cagayan Valley region. With complex networks of trade and stories of conflict between groups, it is understandable how the Isinay could have been pressured into their secluded region of Nueva Vizcaya, where the Spanish encountered them in the 1500s. Under those circumstances, and the ensuing events following Spanish colonization, the Isinay continued to grow into their own identity, language, and culture. In time, greater depth and richness can be brought to these narratives with even more archeological, linguistic, and historical research.

The few sources in the field of linguistics were crucial in forming the base for this paper, yet much was to be desired because of my limited access and expertise in this field. I hope that the suggestions made in this paper can stimulate discourse on the history of the Isinay and other indigenous groups, allowing for more information to be shared openly and used in further studies. I believe that the journey to uncover and compile information related to the Isinay is replete with a plethora of pieces waiting to be discovered in the puzzle of Northern Luzon history especially in the mental archives of culture bearers, on the shelves of obscure libraries, and elsewhere.

With the addition of historical and archeological research surrounding Northern Luzon language groups, the propositions made about these groups and their stories can also become clearer. The increased interest and support surrounding indigenous histories like with recent histories surrounding the Karao, I'wak, and more within Nueva Vizcaya are just the beginning. Each subsequent effort to document the stories and histories of various groups can refine the narratives of others. In this way, coordination can provide much support in the formation of informed histories and can foster unity in the hopes of preserving culture and language in Northern Luzon. This progress begins with the information we have and expands with the knowledge that can be added to it.

### **The Author**

Mark Maslar is a Filipino American writer, researcher, and cultural advocate with a strong focus on interdisciplinary studies involving anthropology, literature, history, indigenous heritage, and cultural preservation. His work explores innovative ways to adapt and recontextualize traditional practices, focusing on Filipino and Polynesian communities. He is a proud member of the Isinay tribe of Nueva Vizcaya and has contributed to 2 academic publications along with their participation in local cultural workshops and livelihood projects. Passionate about sustainability, collaboration, and respect for indigenous knowledge, they aim to bridge academic research and

community-driven initiatives to support cultural preservation and awareness.

## Notes

1. Burubur is a village attributed to Pigu and the Isinay people, one of the areas that were later incorporated into the modern town of Aritao. The location of the village was described as along the Marang river, somewhere between the población of modern-day Aritao and the Aritao barangay of Canabuan.

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