

Are You Lost in the City, Too?

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Have you ever looked at the horizon and wondered if there was more waiting for you beyond it - or if you were meant to stay where you are?

I used to sit at the edge of our seaport's dock, watching the ethereal glow of the sunset. As a child, I would wonder what lay beyond that endless line where the sea met the sky, what life was like outside my island. But I would always wave the thought away. The island met my needs, and I was content with the life I lived. Perhaps, I thought, I was never meant to know what lay beyond that horizon.

Then one day, everything changed.

My alarm rings, and I jolt awake. I am now a senior at the Ateneo de Manila University School of Law. That memory I held onto so vividly was from twenty years ago.

I could have never imagined that life would take me where I am now.

I was born and raised in Basco, Batanes, thousands of miles away from where I now stand, reachable only by an expensive plane ride. Before it became a tourist destination, life in our province was difficult. There was a time when we had no electricity, when rice was available only on weekends. On most days, we survived on root crops, especially when typhoons battered our island. We had to depend on root crops for survival during days when the island was battered by typhoons. And yet our ancestors survived, and so did we. Despite the hardship, there was beauty in the simplicity of life, and strength in a close-knit community. For many, that was enough. But for those who dared to dream beyond the island, the question remained - is it worth trading comfort for uncertainty, proximity to family for distance, and belonging for the possibility of discrimination in the city?

And yet, a few still choose to look beyond the horizon, believing that we can be more.

I. The Philosophy of Liberty and Prosperity under the Rule of Law in the Eyes of an IP

In the belief that we could be more, I was one of those who dared to explore what lies beyond that horizon.

I am part of the Indigenous Peoples (IP) Group called the *Ivatans*, natives of the Batanes province. The main source of livelihood for our people was farming and fishing. My grandfather was a farmer too. I see nothing wrong with these professions, as I also grew up farming and fishing. There was nothing wrong with these professions, but as I grew, I read books and newspapers about several professions and nation-builders, and I wanted to become something that this island could not give. I wanted to be the first lawyer in our family.

And because I wanted to be a lawyer, I had no choice but to leave the island I called home in this pursuit. There was no other way.

That is how I found myself lost in the city.

The reality is that there are only two colleges in our province, one public and one private. Most of the courses they offer focus on education, agriculture, and technical skills. This creates an illusion of choice. Many were forced to enroll in courses they did not like because they had no choice. And this reminds me of former Chief Justice Artemio Panganiban's twin beacons of Philosophy of Liberty and Prosperity, that they "must always go together; one is useless without the other." In our case, there was little prosperity due to the difficult life in the province and the expense of sending a child to study in Metro Manila; therefore, for most, the reality was that they had no liberty of choice.

To find myself in Ateneo Law, I had to create doors because opportunities were not available. I had to create my own liberty by graduating at the top of my class at Batanes National Science High School. I had to take out scholarships again for my Juris Doctor degree just to secure that liberty and catch a glimpse of prosperity. It was not normal for an IP like me to be in Ateneo Law, much less for an *Ivatan* to be in spaces where several legal luminaries walked and learned the language of law. And this furthered my drive to excel at this stage. I wanted to prove that IPs can compete with the rest of the Philippines despite the disadvantages we face.

I am reminded of how Chief Justice Panganiban, in his speech entitled "**Unleashing Entrepreneurial Ingenuity**" regarding Confucius' lesson on teaching a fisherman how to fish instead of giving a fisherman a fish, is that:

“xxx the goal of governance and of law is to provide guarantees and incentives to help the fisherman prosper, to create institutions to support him, and to promulgate minimal regulations to prevent him from appropriating all the fishing grounds, from keeping all the earnings to himself and from forgetting his obligation to pay reasonable taxes to the government.”¹

I, too, subscribe to the idea that Liberty and Prosperity under the Rule of Law mean that the law and institutions would not only allow IPs to dream but also help them fulfill that dream. Yes, I am not blind to the fact that there are those IPs, or even Ivatans, who become professionals - lawyers, doctors. I would not even claim to be the first Ivatan lawyer if I pass the Bar, but the problem I seek to address is simply this: ***why are they always the exception to the general rule?***

The general rule is that we often do not have a choice; we do not have the liberty, because, more than the comfort of home, what prevents us from leaving the island in pursuit of opportunities is the economic aspect. It takes a fortune to send a child to Luzon to study, and most do not have that luxury. And yet the institutions fail to see this problem. The college offerings in our province continue to expand, but they offer mostly the same courses. I believe it is the responsibility of institutions and the law to provide for these courses, or, if not, to increase the scholarships available not only to Batanes but also to other IPs who are similarly situated to us.

Chief Justice Panganiban says it best:

“the best way to conquer poverty, to create wealth and to share prosperity is to unleash the entrepreneurial genius of people by granting them the freedom and the tools to help themselves and society.”²

I do believe in the genius and the talents of our people, of the IP community. Those exceptions to the general rule - the few Ivatans who became lawyers, doctors, and renowned professionals prove that we can stand alongside the rest of the country and be equally, if not more, competitive in those fields. This does not show that only

¹ Artemio V. Panganiban, Unleashing Entrepreneurial Ingenuity, Address delivered at the Opening Luncheon of the 12th General Assembly of the ASEAN Law Association, Makati Shangri-La Hotel, Makati City (Feb. 26, 2015), available at <https://cjpanganiban.com/2015/02/26/unleashing-entrepreneurial-ingenuity/> (last accessed Mar. 28, 2026).

² *Id.*

a few of our people are talented, but rather to prove a point that, given the opportunities, we can show our talents. And so I advocate for more opportunities. I dare dream of a world where children in our province would not be mocked for wanting to be a lawyer or other professionals in the same way I did, just because we are IPs whose ancestors thrived on fishing and farming. I dare dream of the time when, instead of children being forced to stay on our island and study courses they did not want, they are empowered without guilt to pursue their dreams beyond the horizons of Batanes.

By providing tools, such as scholarships and opportunities, for our people and other IP communities in distant provinces, we would see that Chief Justice Panganiban's vision is not only an ideal but also the truth. If the law gives IP communities opportunities and grants to be on the same playing field as the rest of the country, we can showcase the genius of our people and conquer the poverty and lack of opportunities that has so far plagued most of our communities.

For so long, we have been underserved.

I always demanded more, and my being in Ateneo Law School is my way of defying the system that has prevented us from walking these halls that housed the greats of the legal profession. This defiance in the system motivated me to work ten times as hard as others. I was told I was ridiculous for completing 480 hours of internship when the prescribed hours were only 240. I was told I was preposterous for attempting to balance the rigors of law school with being the Vice President of the Ateneo Law School Student Council, the Associate Editor of the Palladium, the ALS Official Student Publication, and a mooter. I was told I should instead dedicate my time to rest and take breaks, or to fly and wander the world. *I could not, in good conscience.* It was, of course, normal to dream about spending time for leisure, but for us IPs, I had to work even when others spent their time playing or enjoying life. This has propelled me to reach heights I could never have imagined before.

To state that I had to give my blood, sweat, and tears for these opportunities that were not ordinarily given to IPs like me is an understatement.

In so dreaming, I am inspired by the story of Chief Justice Panganiban in his keynote address entitled “**Icons of Entrepreneurship and Nation Building,**” where he recounts that he also experienced extreme poverty and recalls selling

newspapers and cigarettes, even shining shoes.³ Like me, he had to maintain his scholarship just to be able to pursue his dreams of being a lawyer. Indeed, his story reminds us that it is possible to overcome the challenges from poverty and want, but it would take grit, above all.⁴

And as I stand here, a member of the Top 20 of the graduating class of Ateneo de Manila University School of Law, I see this not merely as a distinction but proof. Proof that the vision of Chief Justice Artemio Panganiban, of liberty and prosperity anchored on the rule of law, is not a distant ideal, but a lived reality. It can happen. It does happen.

II. Promoting the Philosophy of Liberty and Prosperity as a Law Student and as a Lawyer

As a law student, I have promoted the Philosophy of Liberty and Prosperity. I used my stature as a student of the Ateneo Law School to inspire the younger generations in Batanes, mentor them, and be present at speeches and events where I share my insights on the lessons and difficulties I have experienced and the opportunities that await them. I am, and have always been, open to presenting myself as a mentor to the next generation in ways I would have wanted when I was a young student from the province as well.

As a student leader, I have also conducted dialogues with local officials and representatives from educational institutions on changes and improvements to programs. Beyond this, at Ateneo Law, as the External Vice President of the Ateneo Law School Student Council, I have launched the largest partnerships program with over twenty (20) business partners of the council that provides discounts and promos to the students, seeing that many of those who study in the institution are also scholars and the cost of living in the Rockwell campus is expensive. I am, however, proudest of our term for creating more scholarships under the Justice Relova Scholarship funds, where we increased the 100% scholars to eight and 25% scholars to twenty students because of savings generated as I spearheaded thriftiness in spending for student events, which allowed for savings to be used for scholarships.

³ Artemio V. Panganiban, Icons of Entrepreneurship and Nation Building, Keynote Address delivered at the General Membership Meeting of the Junior Chamber International Manila (JCI Manila), Tower Club, Philamlife Center, Paseo de Roxas, Makati City (Apr. 19, 2016), available at <https://cjpanganiban.com/2016/04/19/icons-of-entrepreneurship-and-nation-building/> (last accessed Mar. 28, 2026).

⁴ *Id.*

I am, however, most excited to bring these changes to a larger scale as a lawyer. The first program I would pursue is giving back; I will personally sponsor a scholarship fund for deserving *Ivatans* and invite others to do the same, not merely for our province but also for other IP groups. I would also help fund students' participation in various competitions in mainland Luzon, as a campus journalist myself. I used to represent the province in various Regional and even National Schools Press Conferences, with only a few from our delegation due to the airfare and accommodation costs. Not only that, but we were not trained by professionals the same way other schools were; hence, we only have a few winners in these academic competitions. I wish to change this because, while we were underfunded, we were winning regionals and even nationals. More funding would provide more skilled trainers and opportunities for our locals to showcase their talents with the rest of the region and the country.

I would also intensify dialogues with local leaders and the Office of the Batanes Representative to lobby for additional funding and improvements in the education sector, primarily in course offerings in Batanes and scholarships for those wishing to pursue their studies in Metro Manila. No longer would I want to know that a young Ivatan's dream of being a lawyer, a doctor, or a professional be laughed at; their dreams must be empowered, and we can only do this if the government participates and the law coordinates.

I would also take an interest in defending Indigenous Peoples (IPs) in pro bono cases, especially on concerns about land-grabbing. During my internship at the Office of the Solicitor General, I had first-hand experience of the detrimental effects of land-grabbing by powerful investors engaged in mining and similar business undertakings. Coming from a province where our lands are protected, I wish for other IP communities not to be displaced from their ancestral homes. As the tourism industry in our province booms, I will help ensure that the *Ivatans'* lands remain in their hands and that they are not displaced.

These experiences have shown me that promoting liberty and prosperity is a responsibility. As I step into the legal profession, I carry the conviction that the rule of law must open doors and create opportunities for those who have long been left behind.

III. Conclusion

Are you lost in the city, too?

For someone who hails from a province that has no malls like SM, not even a Jollibee, McDonald's, or Starbucks, the city felt like a jungle. The skyscrapers were daunting, and the environment tested one's character, and I was tested.

At one point, I felt lost in the city.

At barely 18, when I came here to pursue my pre-law, it felt like Atlas bearing the weight of the world. I had no choice but to do well - I had one chance to pursue my dream of becoming a lawyer. Not knowing anyone, and with no connections, I began my story lost, in challenge mode. This is a reality many Indigenous Peoples face.

In this city, more than often, I felt like I did not belong. I was ridiculed and told to go back to the province where I belong, but the doubts were always smaller than my dream for my community. *If these doubts, discrimination, and hardships are the price I pay for wanting a better future for my people and other IP communities, this is a price I would gladly pay.*

With Chief Justice Panganiban recounting his stories from extreme poverty and conquering it, he tells in his keynote address that because he experienced these difficulties personally, it gave him the ability to empathize with and assist the needy. I intend to do the same.

I am often asked why I want to become a lawyer. My answer has always been the same - growing up, I felt the weight of being part of an IP community when the law does not work in our favor. The law may be equal in theory, but in reality, it is not. In criminal cases, the poor often have no real choice of counsel. I saw this recently when we visited fisherfolk in Rizal during our Clinical Legal Education Program. Belonging to the minority has always meant carrying this story, but I intend to help change it, because I know it, I have felt it, and I have lived it. Add to this the discrimination faced by those from the provinces, and the burden becomes even heavier.

There were stares, there were doubts, even ridicule when I said I would go to the Ateneo Law. But this was precisely the problem I wanted to confront. That doubt did not stop me, *it fueled me.*

So, to answer the age-old question. I did not pursue law for prestige, nor for pecuniary gain, but for the chance to uplift communities that have long been unserved and underserved. We often say that our province is the most isolated in the

Philippines because of geography, but it has also felt that way in terms of access, services, and opportunity. That must change. And it will only change when the rule of law truly serves Indigenous Peoples toward liberty and prosperity. I believe that our communities will one day experience that liberty and prosperity, but we must work for that change. And I intend to be part of it.

This is for those who are lost in the city, too.

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