OMEHEN
Based in Metro Manila, Philippines

Omehen: The Garden as Chronicle and Strategy of Resistance
2019-ongoing
Audio testimonies and stories from the garden; original drawings and paintings from the Lumad Bakwit Schools; photos by Alfred Marasigan and Karl Castro
Organized in collaboration with the Lumad Bakwit Schools, Alfred Marsigan, Karl Castro, and Ateneo de Manila University

About Omehen:
“The project Omehen (which means “harvest” in Manobo Talaingod, the Indigenous language of the Mindanao region in the south of the Philippines) was conceived by Alfred Marasigan, Karl Castro, and Guelan Luarca in collaboration with the Lumad Indigenous community in exile in Manila. Following the bombing of Lumad schools during the ongoing armed conflict in Mindanao, the Lumad people found refuge in various academic institutions in Manila, including the Ateneo de Manila University, where the artists teach.

Harvesting is an integral part of the cosmological practice of the Lumad communities, and therefore fundamental to their systems of education and knowledge sharing. Thus, the artists worked together with members of the Lumad community and students of the University to create a space of harvest within the academic institution and to facilitate the continuation of this practice and the mutual sharing of knowledges. Over the course of a year, the artists, students, and Lumad communities engaged in artistic and agricultural practice together. In response to the ideas of Notes for Tomorrow, the project Omehen was invited to present this ongoing work (presented here as audio testimonies and archival materials), which operates at the intersection of Indigenous knowledges, food security, forms of precarity and labor, and addresses questions that are central to thinking about the worlds to come.”
– Abhijan Toto (based in Bangkok, Thailand)

Listen to the audio testimonies here:
https://anchor.fm/omehen-team

https://open.spotify.com/show/3szxytyNDmSIUYHjtus2TN

Omehen is one of the artistic projects included in Notes for Tomorrow, a traveling exhibition organized and produced by Independent Curators International. The exhibition was made possible with the generous support of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, VIA Art Fund, and ICI’s Board of Trustees and International Forum.

The following is a transcription of Omehen Update 2021 with Lumad Bakwit Schools Teachers and Students, which you can listen to on anchor.fm or Spotify:
Omehen Update 2021 with Lumad Bakwit Schools Teachers and Students

The conversation was held away from the Lumad Bakwit School’s garden but still within the University of the Philippines Campus. Security immediately became stricter compared to the earlier days of the project. In between parts of the recording, we are constantly distracted, curious, and wary by various entries within the premises. Fortunately, none of these were dangerous.

00:00

Omehen Team (Alfred): So for our listers, welcome to all! Maybe let's start with by introducing ourselves first to our listeners. I'll go first! I am Alfred Marasigan, and Omehen is a project that I started with Karl Castro and Guelan Luarca around late 2019, and today we continue with the evolving activities of the garden itself. Today we are with our collaborators, teachers, and students from the Lumad Bakwit Schools.

Teacher Andro: So there, I am Andro, a volunteer teacher for the Bakwit School, an agriculture teacher, and I also teach math, and art also got included recently. I also stay here in the Bakwit School, with the kids.

Teacher Ping: Hello I am Teacher Ping, also a volunteer teacher for the Lumad Bakwit School. I am teaching Grade 8, TLE (Technology and Livelihood Education) and Grade 9, P.E. and music. There, I am also an in-house teacher with the Bakwit School.

Michael: I am Michael, I'm already in first year college, I'm also studying in the Bakwit Schools, I also know some art so that I can help or contribute to the garden project.

Katkat: Hi, good day! I am Katkat! A student from the Lumad Schools. Also studying, and trying to learn art...I'm also from the Bakwit Schools, yes.

02:14
OTA: Yay, so there! Ok, so now we've met our conversation participants, I think, before, before we talk about...anything, may I ask how you all are actually? At the time of recording, and also this week. Maybe some people know...but not everyone knows. What happened this week and how did it affect your classes?

TA: So there...uhm, besides the modules and yeah, while other students meet for our agriculture class, visiting from time to time, of course, there's fear in current events that just suddenly happen. It's frustrating...because we're...just trying to live peacefully, and on top of COVID, and then a new variant, there are already a lot of threats against the Lumad communities and schools that shouldn't be happening, and that no one deserves...

OTA: Yeah, it so many things keep happening alongside how you're already adjusting because it's not easy for you to be here [in Manila] and you used to have different ways of learning. There's the pandemic, and there's...I think the UP DND Accord was terminated that I only read a bit on. Then, that's how I saw this week...last Monday I was actually just messaging Teacher Ping and then within the day, the news changed. Is it normal for you that your classes get derailed like this, especially this week?

TP: Uhm...so, there, we were more alert, and yes, there's fear. Uh, our classes were quite...we were hoping to keep our classes going, but because we lack gadgets and connections, and we weren't able to access much, to go out randomly, and now we aren't allowed to use other facilities. So it became a struggle for the students when this happened. And then we can't always go to our plot, so we postponed our agriculture classes for the security of the children and everyone in the Bakwit Schools. It's a big adjustment, but we always adjust anyway. We just keep going, really. We just keep going.

OTA: At this point, Sir Andro, like for January, what should be the seasonal offerings of the garden?

TA: Ampalaya (bitter gourd)…

TP: There are some radishes…

OTA: Radishes…

TA: I mean summer isn’t here yet, we’re just planting what’s fit for the current climate…

OTA: And then [the harvest]’s better in summer?

TA: For summer, yeah, we usually plant corn.

OTA: So you change what you plant or harvest for this time? I see.

TA: Yes.

OTA: So I gather at the moment that you’re not able to visit [the garden] much…?
TA: No. At the moment, we’re just starting [with the garden], and then there are a lot of other modules. The first steps for January usually is just weeding and preparing the plots, and then we get ready making whatever could be used as fertilizer.

At this point we see Ms. Rose, who we also spoke and worked with for Omehen. She will be occasionally pass by us because of her urgent meeting with school officials within the premises regarding the UP DND Accord threats. She was supposed to join us but she became understandably occupied at the time.

OTA: When you cleaned [your garden], did you also conduct the ritual [similar to the one done in Omehen at Ateneo]?

TA: Hmm…well because of the things that happened, our movement is a little restricted. What we usually do were put on hold.

OTA: I see. So it wasn’t easy to do?

TA: Yes. Like during afternoons, only around three people can go out. We can’t really move around in groups. Actually, now [you see that] we keep looking around because of recent developments.

OTA: I did notice! I mean it’s nice that [this building in campus and its people] look after you well. Although of course if you’re at home it also doesn’t feel calming to be guarded this way.

TA: Yeah, you’re always worried that something will happen.
OTA: Yeah! I did remember one time you told me about a *taho* vendor around…

TP: Now, no one can really go in. Because there are guards here.

TA: So yes. Because of this environment, we can’t always do the ritual, and our struggles compound. We feel forced, of course, to prioritize our security at the moment. There. So it’s very difficult.

9:01

OTA: So for the day-to-day, because of these disruptions, how is the cycle- or how do you source your food? Where do you buy your vegetables?

TA: Most of them come from vegetables. But when we get to harvest from our garden, we get to maximize its use!

OTA: This was in October [here], right?

TP: Yeah, we had a lot of harvest.

OTA: [laughs] I’m actually a bit embarrassed because [the Omehen plot in Ateneo] became ready for harvest during [the early days of] lockdown The person who actually got the most of the string beans was one maintenance personnel because we compensated him to take care of the garden. I think he was in-house. So, he was watering the garden and I just look at our Facebook messenger conversations and his photos of the vegetables. I learned from him that the okra should be too mature [to harvest]?

TA: Yes! [to Teacher Pingkay, Michael, and KatKat]. What is “young” [vegetable/fruit] in your [language], “lumpod”…?

TP: “Lumhod”.
M: “Lumbo”.

TP: Yeah, when it’s not yet too firm…

OTA: Yes! When it got more mature, you use it for-

TP: For new seedlings. Then, those really get too hard to eat. It’s really better to take the young [okra].


TA: For their [language], lumbo, meaning young.

TP: In Bisaya, it’s “linghod”.

OTA: Ah, ok!

TA: For us it’s “lumpod” in Bicol.

OTA: For us, there’s none. [Laughs.] Just Tagalog! I’m from Batangas, but I don’t get to sound like it much. But when I’m mad…[Laughs.] I was going to ask something but I forgot…

TA: We actually already started with yam…[to TP] peanuts?

OTA: Here?

TP: Yes, a lot.

TA: Radishes…

TP: Uhm…alugbati (Malabar spinach).

OTA: Aha!

TP: Yes! Because they grow very fast.

TA: Definitely. It’s easier for us. If we choose to plant something more delicate…

OTA: Hard to maintain?

TA: Yes. We’ll need to constantly check the garden outside.

OTA: Right! Yeah, so it was the maintenance personnel got the most vegetables from our garden. But I bought vegetables anyway to send to you because the harvest happens in small amounts? Yeah, so his family received most of it – sitaw (string beans), okra, ampalaya (bitter gourd) – there.
At least here- When I saw the pictures- [a bee or wasp whizzed by] Wow someone wanted to join in. [All chuckle.]

When I saw the harvest on October, there was so much [vegetables]! I only saw in photos.

**TP:** Yes! At the time there was really a lot.

**12:28**

**Ms. Rose:** [from afar] Hi!

**OTA:** [waves] Are you busy?

**Ms. Rose:** [Explains.]

**OTA:** It’s alright!

**TP:** Yeah, they’re busy and they have a meeting. It’s an emergency.

**OTA:** [nods] So there, there was a lot of harvest, but our plot in Ateneo is a bit small. So I’m happy that at least here you have a larger plot of land, because there’s also a lot of you. I mean three pieces of ampalaya…[chuckles] how much can that [feed]?

**TP:** We had so much harvest. We gave some to the security guards.

**OTA:** But how do you store it?

**TA:** Ah, it should be one week, it’s only good for a week.

**OTA:** So you have to cook it immediately.

**TA:** Yeah because it would go to waste. We don’t have refrigerators anyway! [Laughs.]

**OTA:** Right! It’s also pretty difficult to bring around even if you have them. Yeah, even if you’re here for a year, how would it be transported? Alright…so the harvest only happens once [last year]?

**TA:** Yes. Only once, because if you prolong it…yeah. We have to let the soil to rest. [Trails off.]

Someone passed by from afar after receiving a bag or package.

**TP:** I think it’s a delivery.

**OTA:** Ah!

**OTA:** So how were the art materials we bought for our project’s remote art workshop? Did you get to use it? How were the art classes themselves?
**TA:** With the sched, there’s a little difficulty. But the students were interested! With the art class. It also takes away some stress, especially with everything that’s happening.

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**15:12**

**OTA:** Actually that’s why I was happy with the drawings [you sent me from the remote art workshop], because it must be exhausting for all of you to always be asked [about your struggle]. At least in the portraits the students simply get to draw what they want. How was it for you as a teacher?

**TA:** It went well, mostly Junior Highs were able to take [the remote art class]. If they don’t understand something, we pause it and I explain it to them further. That’s how it went.

**OTA:** What questions came up?

**TA:** They were asking if the Rizal [petroglyphs] were still there…

**OTA:** It’s still there! Despite the typhoons, or after three typhoons [this year], and even if [Rizal] can get flooded, it’s still there.

**TA:** Yeah, things like those. What really stayed with them were the ancient drawings!

**OTA:** Sure! The PDFs I sent you included a study where scientists 3D-scanned the cave to differentiate the ages of each drawing from one another. A lot of people collectively drew them throughout its life. Some guerrillas, pre-war? They also drew on them, and anonymous people also vandalized it so it’s already difficult to distinguish [which are ancient or otherwise]. Still, there are rumors that it may be fabricated because- I’m not sure if it’s Botong Francisco. He’s an artist. And he discovered [the petroglyphs]. But scientists actually carbon dated it.
What else from the lesson can we assess? That’s why I also asked you if the students already had art classes before. I just didn’t want to come in teaching without context, so I asked you too what the students wanted to learn.

**TA:** The junior high students are a little…the senior high was supposed to undertake it, but yes, it was affected by the scheduling. That’s why the seniors didn’t get to do it. They were trying to keep up [with their other modules]. But I think it’s good.

**TP:** They also actually have art classes online.

**OTA:** Oh, how does it go?

**TP:** Yeah, they get to draw, they do photography…like in MAPEH (Music, Art, Physical Education, and Health). But we had it done online because no one will teach in-house [exclusively]. [Teacher Andro] just took it because of Omehen, but it’ll be difficult for him alongside his other classes. Yeah, their art class is fine.

**KatKat (K):** [smiles] Hmm…sometimes, it’s hard. Because in our [other regular] art class, we focus on photography. We practice how to take pictures [or portraits], and sometimes our teachers would assign some of us as models to each other. There’s one class, where we have two models and then we take photos of them. I find it a bit difficult…because it is? [laughs] We’re not familiar using the camera [that way].

**OTA:** What camera is being used? [Gestures SLR.] Or can you use your phones?

**TP:** Sometimes they…[to Katkat] what do you use, DSLR, or phone?

**K:** Cellphone.

**TP:** They use cellphones. But for other grade levels-

**TA:** Grade 9, yes, Renren’s [group]…and Toy!

**TP:** And also grade 8, they really paint and draw. Sometimes, they were asked to draw or paint what they think, or about their communities. There are teachers who also want to exhibit their works. There are a number of students who are very good at it. Who join contests.

**OTA:** I’m actually not informed who manages Save Our Schools Network, but you can upload those images online in Instagram! It’s also a common platform for exhibition.

**TP:** That was one of their plans, to upload it to social media. Yeah, them [points to Michael]. They’re great at drawing.

**OTA:** [All smile.] Yes! [To Michael.] So tell us more! Do you excel more in photography? Or in drawing or painting?
Michael: I like arts and design. When I was studying in public school, I join poster-making contests…

OTA: Oh, is it like Mama Mary…? What are themes? Sorry, go on.

M: In school, especially during Nutrition month or Buwan ng Wika (Language Week), I’ve gone on to join division meets. But my competitors were so good, I wasn’t able to relax. I got very nervous, especially because when I went, I was very cold and I eventually had a fever. [Laughs.]

TP: He’s really good. He can really capture likeness well.

OTA: Don’t be scared! [All laugh.]

M: I kind of second guessed myself, because sketching, I just learned it here, to draw faces. For TLE, I am able to do table-skirting, flower arrangement, carving, those things…

OTA: What do you carve? Like, wood?

M: Fruits or soap! Then my sibling, they know how to draw, my other relatives they sew a lot. At the moment, the Lumad Bakwit Schools helped me improve in the arts. For painting, I just got to paint here.

OTA: Yes! That’s why I was thinking Omehen should contribute a lot of materials. Because it does take a lot of practice. It eats up a lot of time, but it’s fun when you see all that you’ve made and you’re able to realize that you like what you drew.

TA: For me actually, it was my first time painting [laughs]. We sort of painted…I was just encouraged by [the art workshop]. I just use graphite or pencil, it’s always just black and white in my mind.

OTA: Black and white is fine! I feel that many people are nervous about art…it’s like singing and you’re suddenly made to sing.

M: Impromptu.

OTA: [Agrees.] I mean it’s music. I just know how to sing the karaoke but I’m not good with music. I mean that’s why I also showed in the modules that there isn’t just one way of drawing. Actually the artists that we think are good, they just believed in the images they made. I guess sometimes it makes people feel bad to compare…but you should ask yourself first if you like what you make based on what you have done in the past, or your potential. For contests, it’s difficult when you’re nervous, really. People who join contests have gall!

M: Yeah, because it’s a competition!

TA: And then judges also have their own standards.
OTA: It often really depends on your luck. Sometimes you don’t know who the judges would be, sometimes they might not like red or green, just because. So they won’t choose those. So just keep joining.

M: Try and try until I die! [Laughs].

OTA: Yeah [laughs]! Sometimes it’s fun to win a cash prize, if it’s part of the contest. I haven’t actually won anything in that regard! But for me it was fun to join because I wanted to know what they would accept or like. Right now actually there is a lot of demand for commissions online. Things like fan art, or KPOP, or anime. It varies.

TA: So there.

OTA: What do you look forward to in 2021? Haha!

TA: It’s pretty difficult to think of it. You’ll just…

OTA: Get nervous [laughs]!

TA: Yeah…it’s better to just wait for what’s to come. And then focus on what to improve. Like for [Michael], it went well because he tried [painting]. The students really want to try it, and just to keep at it. Maybe for our agri [classes], we just hope to continue it despite what’s happening. I think some students have already begun decomposing material with the molasses.

OTA: I wasn’t actually sure if I sent the right molasses!

TA: [nods] So there, they started. We just want to continue with the struggle. Of course, we still have to adjust and that makes it difficult.

OTA: Definitely. Actually with the five colors I sent, you can mix shades from it. I also told Teacher Andro that the color blue is what you can change up. Yellow is pretty irreplaceable, and so is red. This blue [points] is different from this blue [points.] This blue has a lot more yellow. This blue has a lot more red. For instance, if you mix yellow and blue, what would it make? [We think for a bit, and then laugh.] Okay, that became a pop quiz! If you mix yellow and blue…?

TP: Red?

TA: I think it’s green.

OTA: [nods] If we mix yellow and blue it makes green. If you mix yellow with this blue, it would make…[points].

TA: Right it might be a bit dark [green].
OTA: Yeah, see, a bit dark. If you use a blue with some red, but here it would be a brighter green. Whenever we look at plants, they’re not the exact same green, right?

TP: Right.

OTA: So if you add a bit of red, it will get a bit darker. If you add yellow, it’ll be brighter. So the Mountain Dew bottle…that has a lot of yellow. If you look at the sun here, it makes this a bit yellow. Especially afternoon light, it changes shades. This green in the…[stands up]. Haha! A spontaneous lesson! [Points to leaf.] They’re both green, but when the sun hits it, it changes. During noontime, it’d be different. Because the light changed. Just try it! Mix it up and experiment. Almost like cooking? Sometimes it doesn’t taste good, sometimes it’s burnt. [All chuckle.] You’ll never know unless you try. Unless you watch someone make a mistake and learn from that, maybe. TLE…Did you also get threads?

TA: Yes!

OTA: I actually thought in Shopee, [the spool] is bigger. It’s almost like [the meme] “When you get it online”…

TP: “Expectation vs Reality.”

OTA: [agrees] Right. What are your last…words….not really, haha! What would you look forward to in the coming year? I know it’s just January, but you’re already being tested.

TA: Yeah for me, just continue.

TP: This year, yeah, just to keep at it. We really don’t know what’s going to happen, like last week until now. We just continue…the classes. That’s mostly it.

OTA: Indeed. So for you, what lessons would you want to learn more?

M and K: [thinking and smiling] Haha!

OTA: None? Haha!

K: I mean for me…I’m not quite interested. I’m a little more interested in what’s happening with us. It’s a challenge for me. Because sometimes if you take something seriously, you could get lost in what’s happening. But I still practice sometimes…I’m not…even coloring…I find it difficult. But I think it’s easier if we can focus.

OTA: Right! I mean that’s why you have different teachers, so that you can choose while growing up what you want to do, what you’re good at, what you’re interested in. That’s why there are many subjects. Your teachers won’t always know if you love sewing…

TP: That is correct.
OTA: Or maybe cooking. Many things. That’s why they teach it!

K: Whoa.

OTA: How about you, Michael?

M: Making art doesn’t have to be rushed. You should also use your time well, or rest. You don’t always have to come up with something great in just one minute. You also have to gather inspiration or ideas on what to do, so that you can put together the perfect form of what you plan to create. So, it’s patience, too, in creating. If you don’t know color or drawing, you will learn it if you try. Because it’s not…you will learn things from the people around you. Knowledge doesn’t just come from you as an individual, but from the people who help you earn it. Then it’s also something that takes away stress or becomes a leisurely hobby. It’s good for students to learn it, so they’ll know if they can do it well, and so that we can continue what we need to do.

OTA: Yes! Just keep everything. I’m not sure about storage, but document them all. The difficulty is when it gets wet. It’s easy to compile and exhibit. And exhibits now are not just physical, especially because we can’t go out much anyway. So online spaces are now good spaces to show those kinds of works…

Okay! Thank you all so much for sharing your stories about your situation here in UP of the Bakwit Schools, about gardens, about art, about education, so I hope for those listening, they can think about it and can take some wisdom away from our experiences. That’s why we’re also talking about it because not everyone understands what the Bakwit Schools go through during these times as students, as teachers, as Lumad people, as Filipinos. It’s not always clear to people, but because we’ve shared it, they can learn from it. So thank you so much.

TP: Welcome!

38:00

End of recording.