

Where Peasants Are Kings: Food Sovereignty in the Tagbanua Traditional Subsistence System

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Food sovereignty is predicated upon the rights of communities to determine culturally meaningful methods of agricultural cultivation in order to ensure the security of their diets and their lifeworld. The article provides an ethnographic study of two Tagbanua indigenous communities in the province of Palawan, Philippines, and analyzes the relation between swidden agriculture and food sovereignty. Traditional swidden farming is an integrative system that defines social relationships, structures a spiritual belief system, and builds a fundament of the Tagbanua identity. As a cultural praxis, it is also central to the manifestation of food sovereignty within the market system, constantly being challenged by internal exigencies – as opportunities for cultural reproduction are limited by changing lifestyles – and external interventions from both private and public sectors. The article discusses how the Tagbanua subsistence cultivation system serves as the main mechanism through which indigenous cultural communities assert their independence from the market system, thus establishing local control over food and food production systems.

Keywords: Indigenous Peoples; Philippines; Poverty; Seed Sovereignty; Subsistence Farming; Swidden Agriculture

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Ernährungssouveränität basiert auf den Rechten von Gemeinschaften, kulturell bedeutende landwirtschaftliche Methoden zu bestimmen, um ihre Ernährungsgewohnheiten und Lebenswelten zu sichern. Der Artikel bietet eine ethnografische Studie von zwei indigenen Gemeinschaften der Tagbanua in der philippinischen Provinz Palawan und analysiert die Beziehung zwischen Brandrodungsackerbau und Ernährungssouveränität. Der traditionelle Brandrodungsackerbau ist ein integratives System, das soziale Beziehungen definiert, spirituelle Glaubenssysteme strukturiert und ein Fundament für die Identität als Tagbanua aufbaut. Als kulturelle Praxis ist er außerdem zentral für die Manifestation von Ernährungssouveränität im Rahmen des Marktsystems, der sowohl durch interne Notwendigkeiten – aufgrund der begrenzten Möglichkeiten für kulturelle Reproduktion durch sich verändernde Lebensstile – als auch durch externe Interventionen des privaten und öffentlichen Sektors herausgefordert wird. Der Artikel diskutiert, wie das Subsistenzsystem der Tagbanua als zentraler Mechanismus dient, durch den indigene kulturelle Gemeinschaften ihre Unabhängigkeit vom Marktsystem geltend machen und dadurch lokale Kontrolle über Nahrungsmittel und Nahrungsmittelproduktion ermöglicht.

Schlagworte: Armut; Brandrodungsackerbau; Indigene Gruppen; Philippinen; Saatgutsouveränität; Subsistenzlandwirtschaft

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, rice policy and public investment on agriculture had been mostly dedicated to lowland, irrigated areas, whereas upland rice ecosystems have largely been left untouched. Consequently, upland farmers relied solely on traditional cultivation methods and varieties to maintain rice production (Dayanghirang, 2011). As rice production pressures increase with population growth, rice exports, the loss of agrarian land to real estate development, and the invariable poverty of farmers, policymakers have been turning their attention to the uplands. This article is an outcome of a research and development project that took place in the frame of the *Upland Rice Development Program* (URDP), which was launched in 2011 and draws on the *Palayamanan Systems Approach*¹ and the integration of traditional agricultural systems. In particular, it aimed at sustaining the seed sources for traditional upland rice varieties through the establishment of community seed banks and the promotion of sustainable farming practices. The program has focused its efforts on the eradication of swidden or slash-and-burn agriculture (Philippine Rice Research Institute, 2011) because it is perceived as unsustainable given the rapidly growing population (Rambo, 2009; Suarez & Sajise, 2010). National policy promulgated by programs like the URDP envisions a future for upland farmers driven by growth in production, preferably through modernization and mechanization (Corong & Cororaton, 2005). The intention of the program is to increase the income of upland farmers in order to improve their conditions and cross the poverty threshold.

The intensification of rice production in the uplands was purportedly an effort to achieve rice self-sufficiency, but the consequent implementation of URDP is evidence of the “dissonance between governmental desires for rice self-sufficiency and pursuit of a more export-oriented agricultural economy” (Ehrhart, 2013, p. iv).

In early 2008, a food crisis hit the Philippines and put the issue of food shortage at the forefront of national debate. Until now, the Philippine government – while certainly not blind to the looming food crisis – finds itself unable to attain its goals of rice self-sufficiency (dela Cruz, 2014). Even though domestic rice production has failed to satisfy the demands of the domestic market, the Department of Agriculture recently reported the milestone of exporting 400,000 metric tons of premium rice to Hong Kong and Singapore (“For first time,” 2014). The Philippine agricultural policy, including URDP, is based on the paradigm of food security which, however, was unable to serve the interests of the majority of food producers and has resulted in devastating effects on the livelihoods of peasants worldwide (McMichael, 2014). In contrast, the paradigm of food sovereignty, initiated by La Via Campesina, calls for “local production for local consumption” whereby food is valued based on its “nutritional and cultural benefits” in order to bring back control over food systems to nations and people rather than corporations who dominate the market (Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010, pp. 8, 10).

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2013 to 2014, this article explores how a culturally shaped farming system that capitalizes on local knowledge

¹ *Palayamanan* is a contraction of two *Tagalog* words: *Palay* means rice and *kayamanan* means wealth. The *Palayamanan Systems Approach* emphasizes crop diversity as a sustainable practice for upland agriculture, encouraging the simultaneous cultivation of various crops and seasonal crop rotation.

continues to provide for the needs of families and upholds a meaningful form of subsistence while generating income for household expenditures. The research documents agricultural production and the planting calendar of Tagbanua upland rice farmers in two communities in Palawan, Philippines. Open-ended ethnographic interviews and focus group discussions with Tagbanua farmers as well as migrant, non-Tagbanua residents were conducted in order to explore the role of swidden cultivation in ensuring food sovereignty in the Tagbanua villages.

The article discusses local swidden agriculture and its relation to Tagbanua livelihood and identity. As we will argue, the traditional farming system found in this study provides a preliminary framework for understanding how upland farmers in the Philippines assert food sovereignty by embedding labor cooperation, food distribution, and the means of production into social systems founded in Tagbanua culture and tradition.

In order to reach a more in-depth understanding of the current role of swidden agriculture among Tagbanua farmers, the research explores the complex meanings and functions related to the cultivation of the swidden. Following an introduction to the research sites, we present our research findings in two subsections. Firstly, we explain the system of swidden agriculture, illustrating how it is embedded within, and at the same time structures, the farmers' lifeworld and livelihood by weaving together elements of the spiritual belief system, environmental consciousness, social organization, kinship system, and subsistence. Secondly, while the swidden tradition continues to flourish, the system is being challenged by forces from within and without. On the one hand, the interests and aspirations of the younger generations are being diverted as their formative years are under the tutelage of the public education curriculum rather than learning on the field with their parents. On the other hand, farmers are lured by private companies into contract farming of cash crops like rubber and government agencies support upland rice production for export rather than local consumption. While these pressures hamper the continuation of swidden agriculture, the swidden is integral to Tagbanua agriculture, identity, and well-being. Thus, lastly, we conclude that the Tagbanua are likely to continue developing means to maintain their traditions while providing for the needs of their families, regardless of the intentions of both government and agribusiness efforts to replace the swidden.

THE RESEARCH SITES: SITIO DAAN AND SITIO STO. NIÑO IN BARANGAY APORAWAN

The ethnographic study took place in the villages of Sto. Niño and Daan in the province of Palawan. Palawan has been historically dubbed as "one of the least populated islands in the Philippine archipelago" (Lacuna-Richman, 2006, p. 37), it continues to be home to different indigenous cultural groups, including the Tagbanua who practice traditional swidden farming for subsistence in the uplands. Aborlan was one of the major Tagbanua *rancherias*² established under the American regime (Ocampo, 1996) and Aporawan remains part of this geographic subdivision (see Fig-

2 Rancheria refers to the reservation areas where ethnic communities were relocated during American colonialism.

ure 1). Today, the *barangay*³ Aporawan comprises a total population of 3,008 persons in 509 households (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2012). A Tagbanua community of approximately 200 individuals continues to reside in Aporawan, living off their swidden fields and gathering non-wood forest products (NWFP) from their ancestral domain that they claim⁴ located in Sitio Daan. This village of Tagbanua families is situated in the uplands of Aborlan that lack access to basic utilities like electricity and public transportation. The distance of 87 km to Puerto Princesa City, the provincial capital and public transport terminal, is best understood in terms of cost (Sitio Daan via Aporawan to Puerto Princesa: PHP 220)⁵ compared to daily wages in Aporawan (about PHP 200). The houses are few and far apart, and residence in the area requires one to be Tagbanua or married to a Tagbanua.

In contrast, Sitio Sto. Niño is located approximately 12 kilometers from Sitio Daan, has become increasingly accessible through public transportation, and its population is more dense. Located beside the sea, it is a lowland agricultural community where wet rice paddy cultivation and commercial fishing are the main sources of livelihood. Some households also live from income generated from selling general merchandise in sundry stores. Tagbanua and *diwan*⁶ live as neighbors in this more heterogeneous community. Among the different villages in Aporawan, Sto. Niño is the closest to Sitio Daan and many Tagbanua families moved to this area in order to be relatively close to their farms but have access to public transportation, a larger market, and the local high school.

In the course of the ethnographic study, 40 interviews were conducted in Filipino with farmers from the villages of Sto. Niño and Daan. The majority of the interviewees were in the age group of 40 to 50 years,⁷ comprising 15 women and 25 men who all acted as heads of their households. The average household in Aporawan had five members, but among the Tagbanua, the size of the household varied widely from two persons in a household (an elderly couple whose children were fully grown with their own families) to twelve (where grandparents take care of their younger children and their grandchildren whose parents work outside of Aporawan). All interviewees are referred to by their nicknames and agreed to have their names published.

In Aporawan, employment opportunities are few and the Tagbanua generally seek daily wages of around PHP 200 doing various jobs ranging from house cleaning, doing laundry, or providing farm labor for the entire day. At the time of the field research, the highest paid position was working on the road construction projects of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), which paid PHP 400.

3 In the Philippines, the *barangay* is the smallest political government unit, headed by the *barangay* captain and its council. A *barangay* usually comprises different *sitios* or villages depending on the total land area and the resident population.

4 As of writing, the Ancestral Domains Office under the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples is still validating this claim, therefore the Tagbanua in Aporawan have not been awarded their certificate of ancestral domain title. Such a title formally recognizes the rights of possession and ownership of indigenous peoples over their ancestral domains identified and delineated in accordance with the law RA No. 8371 Chapter II, Section 3 (<http://www.gov.ph/1997/10/29/republic-act-no-8371/>).

5 PHP 220 PHP currently equivalent to EUR 4.2.

6 *Diwan* is a Tagbanua term that refers to non-Tagbanua residents.

7 The youngest interviewee was 25 years old. The elder interviewees, many of them without birth certificates, did not know their age.

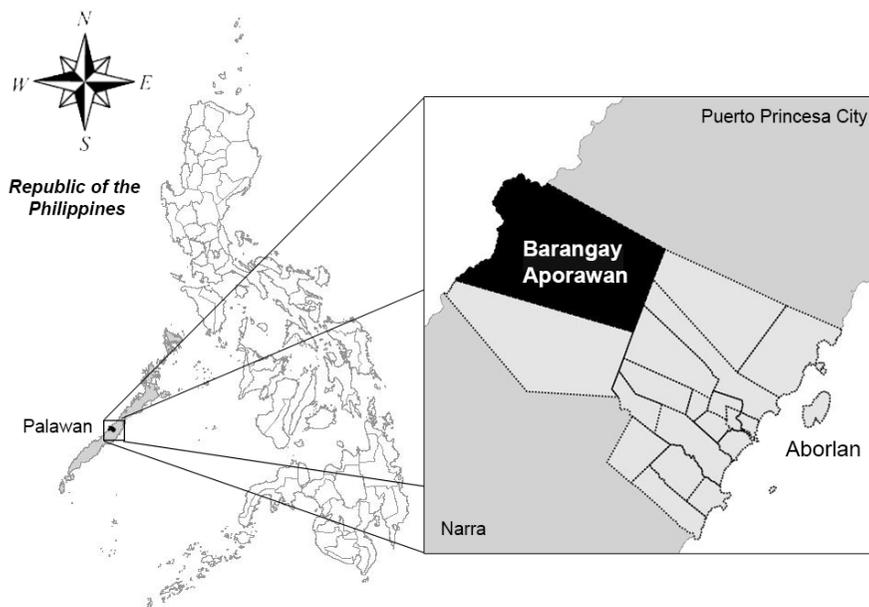


Figure 1: Location of research area Aporawan in Aborlan, Palawan province, Philippines (PhilGIS, 2013a; 2013b).

But the number of these positions is limited, and a contract of service is usually only issued for a short period of time – usually depending on whom one knows.⁸ In a focus group discussion, farmers conceded that long-term employment (*pag empleyado*) that earns monthly salaries would be a comfortable life to aspire to – a life without risks and with little hardship involved. However, gaining such forms of employment would require having extensive education and few of the farmers interviewed (both Tagbanua and non-Tagbanua) graduated from elementary school.

For the interviewed heads of the household, managing family resources invariably revolves around managing their food resources – particularly rice. For the Tagbanua, their harvest is not quantified in cash, but measured by how long their food supplies last. In number of cavans of rice (approximately 50 kilogram), some of the farmers claim that their family can survive on 15 cavans while other families require 50, depending on the size of the household. A special portion of the harvest is set aside for the seeds while the surplus can be sold. Generally, the rice yield harvested by the Tagbanua is modest, as harvests from the uplands are lower than the harvests in irrigated fields (Pandey et al., 2006). One of the farmers boasted that his greatest harvest was in 2007 when he got 20 cavans, approximately 1.2 tons, from one sack of *Tipak* seeds. Usually, a family can secure their rice supply for the entire year in one harvest season.

⁸ One of the Tagbanua farmers interviewed said that he had been fortunate enough to have worked with DPWH for four months before he was forced to give up his contract to somebody else. He knew a local official who endorsed him towards the agency and facilitated the renewal of the contract.

SWIDDEN AGRICULTURE AS A MAINSTAY OF THE TAGBANUA LIFEWORLD

The annual agricultural cycle of rice cultivation monopolizes the time of the Tagbanua whose main occupation is rice farming. When a new agricultural year begins, the farmers clear an area for the year's swidden field by cutting the natural vegetation and burning the debris prior to planting crops. These swidden areas are usually claimed usufruct lands that have been left fallow for several years.⁹

Rice is the first crop to be sown on the newly opened lands in order to take advantage of the high levels of soil nutrients. Supplementary crops like tubers and corn may be planted between these rows of rice. Such alternative crops can augment the household food supply throughout the year, in case the rice is depleted. Moreover, as the rice plants are growing, root crops are also planted "under the rice" (*sa ilalim ng palay*).¹⁰

*Tagkaingin*¹¹ begins with the thorough clearing of trees and other vegetation (see Figure 2). This is usually accomplished by January so that the dry heat of February and March can prepare the field for burning. Folk wisdom maintains that the burning has to be perfectly timed before the first rains of the monsoon; upland research claims that these rains bring in higher levels of nitrogen, an important macronutrient for the rice plant (de Datta & Ross, 1975). When the soil is enriched by the ashes and softened by the first rains, this is the optimal time to start sowing the seeds before weeds take over the swidden.

In recent years, many respondents faced difficulties in anticipating the first rains of the year as the climate has been less predictable by the traditional calendar. It was unable to predict the El Niño¹² phenomenon and the delay it caused to the harvest. The families felt the strain of El Niño as rice stores were depleted and families had to eat sweet potatoes, cassava, or wild tubers as alternative staples. Despite these difficulties, the long dry spell was conducive to swidden farming, as it brought forest fires burning the fields so thoroughly that many were able to reap a large harvest from September to November that year.

As the year ends, the farmers move onto another field for clearing so that they can sow rice on another highly fertile swidden. This is the current practice and generally typical of tropical forest upland cultivation practices in the Philippines (Olofson, 1981), as also revealed by studies on other areas including the neighboring barangay Napsan (Conelly, 1992) and upland farms of the Bicol Region (Castoverde, 2000).

9 Farmers avoid clearing primary or "virgin" forests since this is illegal and monitored by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

10 Farmers say that root crops are planted "under the rice", because the cuttings of sweet potato and cassava are literally planted under the canopy of the rice plant. One of the reasons why farmers prefer rice plants with thick canopies is because the shade reduces the growth of weeds, reducing the work needed for maintaining the fields, while also allowing enough space for the root crops.

11 *Tagkaingin* is a local term formed by the prefix tag and the root word kaingin used to denote the season or time for clearing the lands.

12 In 1998, El Niño prolonged the dry spell caused by a warming of the ocean and delayed the planting season by two months.

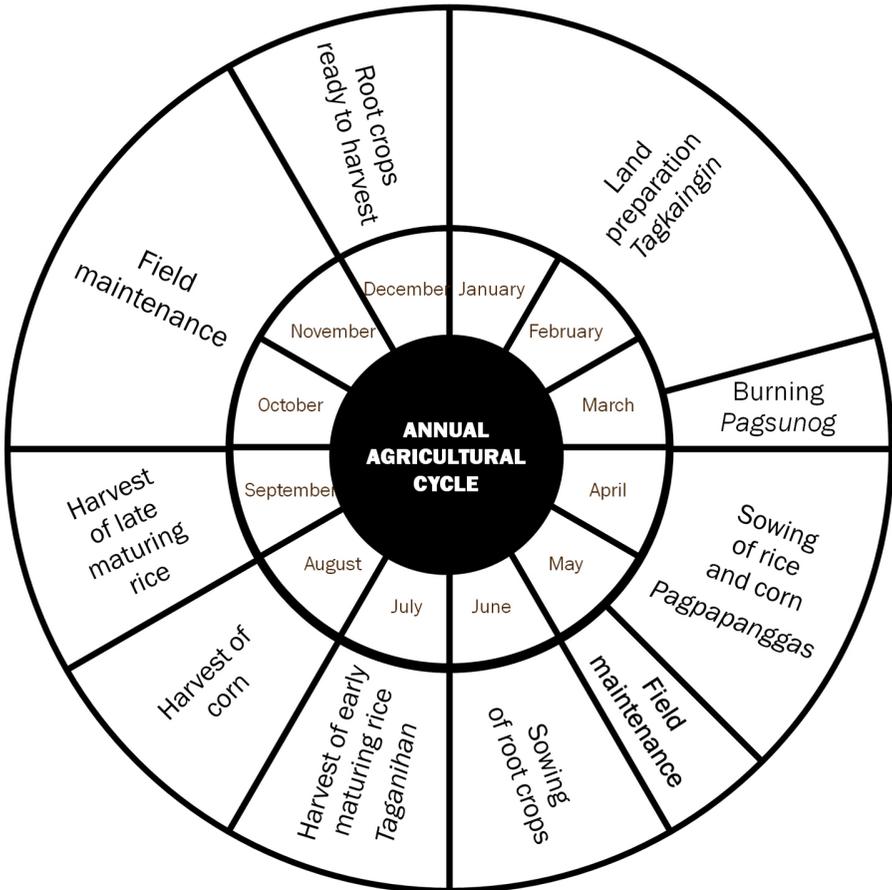


Figure 2: First year of the Tagbanua swidden calendar (own compilation from fieldwork).

SEEDS, KINSHIP, AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

All agricultural endeavors begin with the seed (Harlan, 1995) and among the Tagbanua, rice seeds for the swidden can be obtained in several ways. One way is to receive rice seeds from parents when they hand over responsibility to their children (heirloom rice). According to custom, parents give their children rice seeds either when they start tilling their own lands or when they start their own family. Seeds can also be obtained when a farmer helps another through cooperative labor (*bayanihan*) during harvesting. Depending on the amount harvested, an individual can be entitled to one-fifth of the bulk that he or she helped bring in from the field. Departing from this tradition, farmers may ask for money nowadays (around PHP 200 as the going rate for a day's labor), depending on the situation. On some occasions, a Tagbanua farmer may be forced to purchase seeds from the nearby villages, but this does not occur frequently as farmers often find it difficult to exchange hard-earned seeds for

money: Carefully cultivated seeds that farmers set aside for the next season are given spiritual attributes and cannot be sold for profit. Also, considering the amount of labor, skill, and time required to grow the seeds, Tagbanua farmers believe that money would not be an adequate compensation. Therefore, the majority of the farmers get their seeds from their previous harvest, selecting them carefully from robust rice plants (*matinggas*).¹³

It is common among the Tagbanua farmers to cultivate several different rice varieties in one cropping season. Usually, this depends on how many seed types a farmer has available to sow for the season. However, the process of selecting which varieties to plant is not a random decision (Warner, 1981) and the farmer usually selects a favored (*malandi*) variety. One of the key informants to the research, Amay Bergin¹⁴ from Sitio Daan, said that depending on the farmer's skill, his *malandi* variety can gain popularity. As the farmer's popularity grows, the number of people willing to provide cooperative labor in return for seeds will not be difficult to amass when the time comes. Other farmers shared that their *malandi* were the seeds they had obtained from their parents. Despite using other varieties, the farmers' experience proved that the old varieties still produced the more robust plants in the field.

Thus, among the Tagbanua, a farmer's skills build on his or her network of social relations that, in turn, will be helpful in cultivating and harvesting the swidden. In order to prevent exploitation and monopoly, distributing one-fifth of the harvested grains among community members is a form of reciprocity that is inherent to a system of swidden agriculture and dissimilar from the global market of agro-industrial corporations that control the supply of inputs in the corporate food regime (Fairbairn, 2010; Schanbacher, 2010).

RITUALS AND BAYANIHAN

Prior to land preparation, selecting which field to prepare requires a ritual where the farmer asks the *diwata Mangindusa*¹⁵ for intervention to speak with the other spirits and request for permission to work the land. The farmer ends the ritual with the words "I know nothing. You can see." and is not allowed to revisit the swidden for three days in order to allow the spirits to 'talk' to each other. Rituals allow communication with the *diwata* letting the farmer know if the spirits will be benevolent, blessing the harvest, or malevolent. Misfortunes and tragedies borne of displeasing

13 *Matinggas* is a local term that can be translated as 'robust'. According to the farmers, a plant's robustness is a combination of various characteristics including resistance to pests and diseases, endurance against drought or dry spells, a wide canopy, and an aromatic and delicious taste. Though the latter may be considered subjective characteristics, they are the traits that lead to traditional varieties being regarded as 'specialty rice' as opposed to modern rice varieties that have neutral aroma and different eating qualities compared to local varieties. Other characteristics reflect practical concerns: As farmers do not use pesticides or chemicals in their fields, wide canopies can help reduce the encroachment of weeds in the rice fields.

14 *Amay* is a honorific term referring to a male elder – *Amay Bergin* is a member of the council of elders of Aporawan who is considered to be the foremost expert in agricultural rituals and folk herbal remedies.

15 *Diwata* is a local term for unseen spirits that live in the natural environment. Rituals like these are reminiscent of the animistic religion of the pre-colonial Tagbanua. For agricultural rituals, Amay Bergin invokes the spirit of *Mangindusa*.

a malevolent *diwata* are not always limited to a disastrous cropping season, but may also go beyond the swidden, for example, by bringing illness to the family.

Another ritual conducted on the cleared swidden opens the rice planting activity (*pagpapanggas*) right before the sowing activity (*sungrod*) starts. Before dawn, the farmer heads onto his or her swidden in order to build an altar (*papag*)¹⁶ and say some prayers asking for blessings (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: A *papag* for the *diwata*, an offering for the intercession of benevolent spirits (Photo by Sophia M. M. Cuevas & Imelda DG. Olvida).

The rituals come from the wider Tagbanua belief that a good harvest is not the result of a farmer's skills or seeds, but rather of the blessing of the *diwata* and God: "Only God can give life to people, right? Same goes for plants!"¹⁷ Explaining plant growth in magico-religious terms, this supernatural belief system provides believers with peace of mind and helps cope with stressful events (Barber, 2012). In more practical terms, a subsistence economy can provide what is necessary for the family especially in a place like Aporawan where opportunities to earn income are low and the

16 *Papag* is an altar for the *diwata*. It is a bamboo platform ordinarily set in the middle of the swidden and is composed of several elements. The farmer assembles several local plants, water, and sand from the nearby river in order for the rice plant to emulate the characteristics of the different elements assembled in the *papag*. For example, a local river reed is included in the altar because the farmer wishes the rice to grow supple and resilient against the buffeting winds just like the river reed. The altar will only be cleared by the farmer after the harvest has been completed.

17 The Tagbanua believe that in between these rituals and the planting activities maintaining the field up until harvest, there is a miracle that allows the plants to emerge from the seeds, grow tall and fruitful after a few months. When that miracle takes place, humans can eat the rice that nourishes their bodies and gives them life.

prices of [consumer] goods – particularly rice – are high (Sobreviñas & Barrios, 2010). Swidden agriculture is a complex exercise requiring the successful orchestration of the climate, workforce, and timing to accomplish each activity. After the *Mangin-dusa* ritual has been conducted to obtain blessing for the selected swidden fields, the farmer taps into the cooperative labor exchange system within the community (*bayanihan*) to help clear the field of vegetation.

Since the planting is a crucial element that requires community cooperation, the Tagbanua have made pragmatic arrangements to schedule planting dates and announcing them to neighbors and relatives so they will know when to join the farmer in planting rice.

In order to finish sowing one hectare of land in a day, a minimum planting party of six women and one man, i.e. a total of seven people involved in the dibbling of rice, is required. Men handle the dibble stick and poke holes in the ground in a process called *pagtutugda*; women then follow to drop approximately seven to ten seeds per hole in a process called *pagbubudbud*. Compared to *pagtutugda*, *pagbubudbud* is more complicated and time-consuming and requires more workers, usually women. According to the farmers, older women perform these tasks best because they are used to evenly distributing seeds into holes made by the men across the swidden.

At the same time, however, *pagbubudbud* is a backbreaking task, as women have to crouch down to drop seeds accurately into the dibbled holes. Therefore, one of the respondents said that she preferred not to let her daughters help in the planting. Accordingly, she and her husband planted the rice alone, which took them several days to finish. While the respondent realized that practicing to sow would be the best way for her children to acquire the skill and avoid wasting rice seeds, it was more important for her to relieve the physical burden on her children than to pass on traditional swidden knowledge.

TAGBANUA IDENTITY IN THE SWIDDEN

“If you are a Tagbanua, you do swidden. Because that is the Tagbanua life. That is our life.” *ate* Bebet¹⁸ said in response to why they continue the traditional practice of swidden agriculture. Like other interviewees, she was unable to imagine a life away from the uplands, and in these areas, swidden is the way of life. *Ate* Bebet was raised by a mother who feared the *diwan* and their “foreign” ways. Living in the uplands, children like her learned the agricultural technology system for the swidden cultivation practices of Sitio Daan from their parents on the fields and in the forests. Rice cultivation shapes and affects every aspect of Tagbanua existence to the point that it is impossible for the respondents to imagine being without a swidden and still identify themselves as Tagbanua. This belief depicts that the indigenous (agri)culture continues to have strong roots among the interviewed farmers in Sitio Daan who were mostly 30 years or older.

When government policies constrain activities within the ancestral domain in the name of environmental conservation, this can entail displacement, especially when

18 *Ate* is a kinship term referring to an older female sibling within the same generation, but it can also be used to refer to older females without kinship relationship in order to express respect. It is used in this article in the diminutive form.

traditional means of extracting or producing resources are declared illegal (Dressler, 2005; Novellino, 1998). While cutting and burning primary forests is illegal, the Tagbanua have made adjustments by limiting their practice of swidden cultivation to usufruct lands. Yet, by continuing the traditional livelihood of swidden agriculture, indigenous identity and knowledge remain localized. This livelihood concurrently becomes their anchor to cultural heritage: By maintaining the swidden, they are still Tagbanua and have not lost their identity by adapting the ways of the *diwan*.

Rice production in the swidden does not simply satisfy the physiological need for food, it also fulfills a more complex role by ensuring the social and cultural well-being of the community. Beyond mere survival, the concepts of self and identity are shaped by maintaining a traditional lifeworld that continues to be relevant precisely because they continue to work.

The value of the swidden, it seems, cannot be divorced from people's struggle to survive. In an area like Aporawan, the market is mostly inaccessible and the prices for the small pockets of commerce that are made available are prohibitive.¹⁹ Subsistence farming is therefore a vital tool for the survival of the Tagbanua household. Swidden farming does not only help meet subsistence needs, but also provides an identity.

TAGBANUA IDENTITY AND CHANGE

Food sovereignty seeks to provide a viable grassroots alternative to the predominant neoliberal economic stance of free trade (McMichael, 2010) that turns social relationships into mere functions of economic relationships (Polanyi, 1957). The Tagbanua have generated their own model of food sovereignty based on their indigenous knowledge systems and practices combined with their social institutions and the natural environment. They continue to practice traditional methods of swidden agriculture and refuse to utilize chemicals to augment their production. They continue to cultivate local rice landraces – some of which are heirloom varieties – following planting calendars according to seasons, and drawing on their social and family relations in order to participate in and benefit from cooperative labor exchanges on field activities. However, they do agree that there are certain trade-offs: The swidden does not generate any cash income, is time and labor intensive, has low yield output (in comparison with intensive wet-rice production), and requires long fallow periods during which the fields are unproductive. However, these trade-offs are only relevant within the context of an income-productive farming operation: Traditional and subsistence farming systems are a different story entirely.

The dimensions of wealth among the Tagbanua are tied to their geographic location – that is, their ancestral domain. Displacement strips their indigenous knowledge of relevance, nullifies valuable social capital, and renders them exclusively dependent on money as the sole currency with which to exchange goods necessary for survival (Asian Development Bank, 2002). Indigenous identity and knowledge remains localized: As comments on the role of the swidden for Tagbanua identity cited earlier indicate, interviewed farmers believed that they cannot be themselves

19 The typical sundry stores sell their merchandise with a higher mark-up price, due to the cost of transporting the goods, but also to take advantage of the captive market in Aporawan.

after being displaced from their homes – and if they are, it is necessary to return or to maintain a connection to the land. Among the Tagbanua, poverty and hardship are measured or assessed based on the kinds of food that are served: Lean periods are when they are served with root crops or when corn is mixed in with the rice as an extender. While policymakers try to measure poverty and the quality of life through the quantitative computation of income and profits, the Tagbanua simply assess the quality and variety of the food they eat. During a group interview with six farmers on the swidden, the farmers talked about the sensation of taste and how the pleasure of eating is based on what tastes are sought by the tongue. The inability to indulge in that pleasure, that is, when people can only eat enough in order to have the energy to do the work necessary to produce food and live another day, defines deprivation and poverty for the Tagbanua.

Another aspect overlooked by policymakers is the bodily conditioning that traditional farmers undergo throughout a lifetime of farming in the traditional manner. Physical well-being was reportedly affected by adapting the more sedentary lifestyle and the steady diet of artificial substances of the non-Tagbanua – requiring medical attention beyond the herbal remedies of the local healers. Thus, culture and identity are not simply embedded in the cognition of swidden farming tradition but in the physical practices that this tradition demands.

Clearly, the lifestyles of Tagbanua farmers are changing. They are expected to change more drastically in the coming generations with young children no longer spending their childhood gaining “performative knowledge” (Roncoli et al., 2009) under the tutelage of their parents in the field, but increasingly attending school and learning skills appropriate for employment. Evidence of such changes can take on various trajectories: The youth growing up in Sitio Daan whose homes are closer to the swidden fields are able to mimic their elders by proximity, but the youth who grow up in the heterogenous community in Sitio Daan lack the opportunity to learn the skills necessary for the swidden, and instead redirect their efforts to learning skills appropriate for employment. Bert,²⁰ a young Tagbanua, grew up working with his father to gather wild honey and helps in the field during the summer months when classes are not in session. He dreams of attending college and getting a job elsewhere to earn money for his parents. Meanwhile, a young girl from Sitio Daan dreams of finishing at the top of her class, learning about the history of her people, and teaching others to respect people from other cultures. Another marked difference in behavior among the Tagbanua who live outside of Sitio Daan and those who grow up in Sitio Daan concerns the children’s games. In Sitio Daan, they mimic the planting activities of their parents while children in other villages preferred to run to their neighbors to watch television.

Changes in lifestyle of subsequent generations would also affect their survival strategies, belief systems, and, according to the interviewed Tagbanua, even their physical health, should swidden agriculture be replaced as a form of livelihood. One community elder talked about his daughter, a primary school teacher in the city, who felt uneasy and uncomfortable with urban life. He gave his daughter a few seeds and advised her to plant them, thinking that it would make her feel at ease. Surprisingly,

20 The author has used a fictive name to refer to an 11-year-old boy who lives in Sitio Daan.

his daughter established a rooftop garden where she has her rice plants and felt much more content. As a Tagbanua elder who is attributed high social authority on agricultural issues, it was his opinion that planting rice is a spiritual activity that provides the soul with a connection to nature and peace within oneself. Otherwise, the elder said, a Tagbanua who does not plant rice would feel unhealthy and weak, prone to becoming ill, and generally miserable.

Assuming that identity is predicated in social existence – not in the nature of practices themselves, but in the way that these practices are valuable to a community – suggests that not only swidden agriculture *qua* itself matters, but swidden agriculture within its larger cultural frame of reference: the Tagbanua lifeworld.

CONCLUSION

One of the tenets of food sovereignty is “local production for local consumption” whereby food is valued based on its “nutritional and cultural benefits” (Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010, pp. 8, 10). Locally developed cultivation systems like the Tagbanua swidden agriculture require environmental knowledge, cultural practices, and social relations in order to provide subsistence for themselves. Although their main preoccupation is the swidden, the Tagbanua (like other marginalized groups) utilize various strategies in order to sustain their livelihoods: gathering forest products in order to gain an income, seeking employment as day laborers (e.g. road construction, household help), replanting old swidden fields with fruit-bearing orchards for cash-crop production, and funding the education of their children. The swidden or subsistence food production of the Tagbanua is only one aspect of the entire web of economic activities that the farmers engage in, though clearly an important one with regard to the maintenance of the local food culture as part of the Tagbanua lifeworld and identity.

In terms of ensuring their community’s food security, the Tagbanua’s greatest hurdle is their lack of monetary resources, while their greatest asset is the persistence and conscious maintenance of their traditional food production systems. It is between these two poles that the Tagbanua assert food sovereignty. Despite the prevalence of the corporate food regime and the increasing impacts of the market economy, they are afforded relative freedom, control, and intimacy over their food and food-related lifeworld.

This system is, however, also challenged from without and within their communities. Clearly, the Tagbanua continue to practice traditional swidden cultivation in order to provide their families with rice and root crops (Dressler, 2009) that would otherwise be unattainable given the scarcity of employment opportunities within the area and the low level of education or skills that would make them eligible for employment elsewhere. However, interviewed farmers also see a need to improve their quality of living and aim to achieve this through participating in government programs like the URDP, the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program,²¹ or the Participa-

21 This program is also known as 4Ps and comprises a conditional cash transfer program implemented by the Department of Social Welfare and Development in 2007.

tory Coconut Planting Program.²² Despite their participation, however, these farmers felt that they have yet to experience the improvement and development such as mechanization and growth in production as promised by these projects. Admittedly, for the majority of the farmers interviewed, continued participation in the programs is predicated on the material or monetary incentives they will receive for it. Constructive development can only be realized when policymakers recognize marginalized groups as “active agents, working hard to transform their economic and social standing” (Gardner & Lewis, 1996, p. 59).

Would perhaps a paradigm shift from food security to food sovereignty be more attuned to the needs of the populace as it has been documented in the province of Bukidnon in Mindanao (Ehrhart, 2013)? In this case, a rice-growing collective composed of small-holding farmers founded on the principles of agricultural sustainability, collective marketing, reciprocal labor, and self-determination organized themselves against the prevailing trend of export crop strategy (particularly pineapple and banana) which had resulted in input-dependent agroecological systems, tenant farming, and debt bondage.

At first glance, there appears an insurmountable antagonism between traditional lifeworlds and the demands of ‘modern’ existence, but the Tagbanua themselves are not averse to participating in the market; however, they hold that such a participation endangers their sovereignty over the food production systems, and consequently, over themselves. Therefore, in order to ensure their right to food sovereignty, their strategies and choices in this regard must be respected, not only because they are rooted in traditions and experience, but more importantly because their practices continue to *work* and meet their needs. By remaining primarily, but not solely, swiddeners, the Tagbanua ensure their well-being and lead lives that for them are culturally significant and contextualized. By participating in the market, they recognize that isolation from the world is impossible. The power that they exercise by continuing traditional agricultural practices allows them space to negotiate indigenous identity within the encroaching modern world.

Integrating traditional cultivation systems with a diversified farming system like the *Palayamanan* would seem to hold much promise from the perspective of the Tagbanua farmers. Given their experience, they are willing to include additional varieties to their swidden and compare them with the varieties that they have been cultivating before. As a result of this study, for example, the farmers of Sitio Daan received seedlings of cocoa, coffee, and cashew. These were given to the communal nursery managed by the local cooperatives in order to begin the development of agroforestry in the area. Amay Bergin also petitioned the Philippine Coconut Authority for the release of coconut seedlings. As the leader of the Tagbanua community, he believes that they would have to find alternatives to gathering non-wood forest products in order to generate income and agroforestry plantations could provide a viable solution. Agroforestry plantations are also a strategy to maintain the swidden as the Tagbanua expect to be able to continue planting rice for their subsistence while selling the fruit of the trees for income in the coming years. Thus, regardless of external

22 This program is implemented by the Philippine Coconut Authority and manages the plantation of open-pollinated varieties of coconut trees in suitable areas.

interventions, the farmers aim to continue swidden cultivation as it provides them a livelihood independent of market forces. More importantly, the value of the swidden is an integral part of their identity as Tagbanua. While it may be true that not all Tagbanua will stay in Sitio Daan and work on the swidden, there are those who will remain to continue the tradition.



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