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MAY 05 Not Everything in Life Must Change: Some Things Must Remain the Same

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There are treasures that we must keep preferably as they are. The Heirloom Rice Project (HRP) aims “to enhance productivity and livelihoods, protect against misappropriation and preserve in-situ or on-farm the farmer-preferred heirloom/traditional climate-resilient varieties and upland food crops by increasing productivity of these varieties through technologies, processes, and management options for smallholder groups and enterprises as models.”

The HRP offers a training program that will improve skills in “variety characterization, purification, and value-adding into their long-nurtured rice genetic resources.” By maintaining the purity of desired varieties, their value increases because the general rice qualities are maintained as demanded by the market. These characteristics may also serve as geographic indicators to depict the highly valued heirloom varieties associated with a certain location. The registry of these varieties and of the characteristics of each can be submitted to the Plant Variety Protection Office “as a form of a defensive protection against misappropriation.”

Seed keepers

A revisit of the book *All in a Grain of Rice* (1975) and of the monograph by J.C. de Leon entitled *Rice that Filipinos Grow and Eat* (2012) had no mention of Cordillera rice, let alone heirloom rice. However, the de Leon monograph had written in one sentence that “the initial construction of the famous rice terraces in the Cordillera region is also believed to have taken place some 2,000 to 3,000 years ago.” A further light search led to a 2010 edition of *Rice Today* that carried an article entitled *The Seed Keepers' Treasure* by Alaric Francis Santiaquiel who wrote about Marv Henslev a Peace Corps volunteer at the Cordillera in the 1970s who ironically, the export potential of these rare varieties has now become key to the Cordillera's brighter future.

What is heirloom rice?

According to Webster's New Dictionary (College Edition), an heirloom is “any invaluable or interesting possession handed down from generation to generation.” The Rice Terraces, a UNESCO Cultural Heritage Site, have, unlike other sites, structures and functions that had already been built, and what is needed is some level of maintenance to keep them visibly viable for the nation and for tourists. The rice terraces have to be continuously planted with rice in order to earn the distinction of being the Rice Terraces. Terraces without rice are not rice terraces, and without rice, the *heirloom function* of rice terraces disappears. The Cordilleras, therefore, for their own cultural heritage's sake, must keep, nurture, and grow the rice that makes the rice terraces, the Rice Terraces. To do this in the face of urbanization, modernization, population growth, exploding aspirations for a better life with less “hard” physical labor, and joining the globalization forces that drive people away from homelands to “other” lands in search of those hitherto unknown economic opportunities, we might consider Heirloom Rice: to Eat, to Earn, and to Survive .

Heirloom Rice varieties are in the process of being identified and classified as (1) near-extinction, (2) have market potential, and (3) are being marketed. Not mentioned and certainly taken for granted are those varieties that are planted for home consumption—planted to eat, in other words—and preferred by the people of the Cordilleras in their various localities.

Rice varieties, even heirloom ones, must differ not only in appearance but in aroma, stickiness, color, peculiar taste, and cooking qualities. But these must also differ in yield potential. Since the small-scale rice farmers in the terraces can produce only so much, especially with the low-yielding capacity of the varieties they plant, is it possible to hit two birds with the Heirloom Rice Project—that is, to plant farmer-preferred higher-yielding heirloom rice varieties for consumption alongside lower-yielding heirloom varieties that have high market potential and command higher prices in the market? Planting preferred higher-yielding heirloom rice to eat could reduce the pressure on farmers to ‘uncomfortably buy’ lowland rice varieties when their own heirloom produce runs out because they have sold the precious rice to the market, even if for a higher price.

Planting heirloom rice “to eat” and “to earn” guarantees that heirloom rice will survive through active use, and that the privilege of keeping heirloom rice available may extend beyond the enjoyment of just rich Filipinos based abroad or foreign nationals. Even the Cordilleras can continue to be proud to keep eating and savoring their own heirloom rice and, most of all, about helping their own cultural heritage survive.

Can science help?

Science must contribute to this challenging task. This is human purpose at its best—to use the best modern means to ensure the life of heirlooms.

I'm more than delighted about the HRP because all my professional life has been devoted to documenting and writing about changes in rice varieties in the field from traditional to high-yielding varieties in order to meet the needs of our ever-growing population, particularly in the Philippines. Now, with the value placed on heirloom rice, science must contribute to its continuing cultural life. Ruairaidh Sackville Hamilton, who manages the International Rice Genebank at IRRI, observed, “When farmers started to keep seeds for planting instead of just eating, evolution was suddenly no longer driven by natural selection. It started getting

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driven by human selection—a completely different driver altering the course of evolution. In addition, early farmers changed the environment of selection by introducing cultivation and weeding. That is not all. Farmers shared and moved seeds from place to place much more than what occurs naturally.”

“In the Cordilleras, it is not easy to move varieties from place to place because the natural landscape prevents performance in one part of the landscape to be exactly repeated in another part,” Ruairaidh explains.

Also, how did different provinces develop their own specific heirloom variety? Are the differently named varieties different in tested characteristics or do they differ in name only? Perhaps the HRP can find answers to these questions through, for instance, the hands-on training on observing specific traits or characteristics of heirloom rice.

Finally, not everything in life must change; some things must be kept as they are for the sake of humanity. As Ruairaidh advises, “We must securely conserve the full range of rice diversity so that our children’s children will be able to develop their own solutions to their own problems.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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In 1999, Gelia T. Castillo was conferred the Rank and Title of NATIONAL SCIENTIST by the President of the Philippines and is PROFESSOR EMERITUS at the U.P. at Los Baños. All her professional life, she has been guided by the precept that SCIENCE MUST SERVE A HUMAN PURPOSE. She served in several national and international Boards and Committees in agriculture and health and continues to be involved in five of them.

Among her publications are four books: All in a Grain of Rice; Beyond Manila; How Participatory is Participatory Development; and Rice in Our Life.

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May 5, 2014

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