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Preserving the Vanishing Culture of the Ifugao

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Contours of Change
by Aurora Ammayao with Gene Hettel

A member of a celebrated Philippine mountain tribe contemplates the erosion of her native culture and the ancient rice terraces that have nurtured it.

My American husband certainly is not alone as a foreigner with a keen interest in the Ifugao and our rice terraces. My people have been the subject of articles that date back to the early days of National Geographic magazine. Dean C. Worcester, then the secretary of the interior of the Philippine Islands, featured the Ifugao in a special September 1912 issue of the publication devoted entirely to the headhunters of northern Luzon. In that issue, he considered the Ifugao to be barbarians who were nonetheless excellent hydraulic engineers, as demonstrated by their marvelous rice terraces.

Nine decades later, foreigners are still fascinated with headhunting. The practice was abandoned long ago by the Ifugao, but we still have not escaped that moniker. In the 2000 book *The Last Filipino Head Hunters* by David Howard, we are described, along with our sister tribes the Bontoc and Kalinga, as having among our elders the last living headhunters in the Philippines. I seriously doubt that anyone now alive has ever been a headhunter.

Throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, there has been continued interest in the direction and pending disappearance of our 2,000-year-old rice terraces and related rituals and culture. In 1995 there was a flurry of activities and meetings in Manila and Banaue — some of which I attended — to formally nominate our rice terraces for inclusion in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List as a protected cultural landscape.

Later that year, when officially adding the terraces to the list, UNESCO stated: "For 2,000 years, the high rice fields of the Ifugao have followed the contours of the mountain. The fruit of knowledge passed on from one generation to the next, of sacred traditions and a delicate social balance, they helped form a landscape of great beauty that expresses conquered and conserved harmony between humankind and the environment." During its annual summit in December 2001 in Helsinki, UNESCO noted its continued deep concern for the rice terraces by putting them on its List of World Heritage in Danger. It stated, in part: "Despite efforts to safeguard the site by the Banaue Rice Terraces Task Force and the Ifugao Terraces Commission, more resources, greater independence and an assurance of permanence are needed."

Teodoro Baguilat, governor of Ifugao Province, stated in the local press that he would prefer to have fewer tourists in the area to facilitate the terraces' preservation. He also said that once the terraces are commercialized, more hotels and establishments will sprout like mushrooms. During a conversation I had with him in May 2002 in his office in the town of Lagawe, he clarified that tourism could be part of a strategy to help develop the rice terraces and provide additional income for the people. "Although part of the country's cultural heritage, the terraces are still primarily agricultural land," he said.

He is afraid that the goals of tourism officials may not always support what is really needed to preserve our rice terraces and best serve the people. "Let's not preserve the terraces for the tourists, but for the Ifugao themselves," he told me emphatically. I agree with Mr. Baguilat that the government should focus on issues of concern to Ifugao rice farmers, including infestations of rats and golden snails as well as enhancing the irrigation systems for mountain farms. Perhaps most important of all is educating our youth to appreciate that their culture revolves around rice cultivation — and to consider staying in the region instead of moving to the lowlands to seek their fortunes.

As politicians continue to discuss what to do, some ordinary Ifugao citizens, for their part, express a wide range of feelings and are engaged in a variety of activities related to the preservation of the Ifugao rice terraces and the traditions and culture tied to them.

Since 1995, when my husband was stationed in the Philippines as a science writer and editor for the International Rice Research Institute — <http://irri.org> — we have made an effort to record on videotape the various rituals associated with the rice-growing calendar.

Story continues at <http://www.irri.org/publications/today/pdfs/3-1/RiceToday3-1.pdf>

Read more at http://irri.org/Hope_Bile_is_Good.pdf

Also see "Bird's eye views of an enduring rice culture" at http://beta.irri.org/news/images/stories/ricetoday/7-1/feature_birds%20eye-views.pdf

Duration : 0:6:58

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwV-mN9qyOg&feature=player_embedded

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