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Cordillera losing its heirloom rice varieties

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Monday, February 28, 2011

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THE latest listing of heirloom rice varieties grown in the rice terraces of the Cordillera was prepared by the Rice Program of the Department of Agriculture (DA) in Cordillera Administrative Region in 2009. By no means was the list complete but on its own, it reveals that many heirloom rice varieties are no longer grown by the farmers.

The master listing of heirloom rice varieties was undertaken in the provinces of Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga and Mountain Province. A total of 8, 180 farmers in 15 municipalities, and 118 barangays who are cultivating around 3,367 hectares were included in the list.

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Almost a decade ago, the Central Cordillera Agricultural Programme (Cecap) of the Department of Agriculture listed about 300 heirloom rice varieties grown by farmers in Abra, Kalinga, Ifugao and Mountain Province. Cecap listed some 8-15 varieties grown in each if not most of the region's rice terraces clusters. In the DA listing it is worth noting that many of the barangays surveyed listed from one to four varieties now being grown by the farmers. Only about 29 barangays grow from 11-18 varieties while the rest grow 5-10 varieties only.

Benguet province, the nation's vegetable bowl, is not well known as a rice producing area. Surprisingly, the municipalities of Atok and Kibungan are where farmers grow 6-18 traditional varieties in each of the 12 listed barangays where these are grown. In Atok, 5 barangays to include Abiang, Naguay, Paoay, Pasdong, and Poblacion grow their own native rice varieties. Seven barangays in Kibungan town particularly Badeo, Lubo, Madaymen, Palina, Poblacion, Sagpat, and Tacadang still grow rice. The traditional red and white coloured rice varieties grown in these places are: Makonting, Balatinao, Kadiling, Paskaren, Mayoc, Potaw, Calias, Knchot, Bongkitan, Dayong, Gal-ong, Lamadya, Kabal, Sing-itan, Lasbakan, Saba, Saboli, Makanining, Talangkay, Kumbisyon, Salili, Kwalt-an, Balasyaw, Ipugao, Palgay, Lalay, Babantina and others.

The DA list suggests that native rice biodiversity losses in the provinces of Kalinga, Ifugao and Mountain Province. The municipalities and barangays growing only one rice variety are found in Poitan (California); Ducligan (Pinidwa); Ubay (Pinidwa); Batad (Linawag); Banao (Linawag); and Banga-an (Linawag) all in Banaue, Ifugao. In Kalinga province, all heirloom rice growers in Pasil and Pinukpok towns are growing Unoy rice only. In Mountain Province, only two varieties are grown in Bun-ayan, Natonin; and Lunas, Barlig. Most barangays in Mountain Province now grow from 3-6 varieties. Only 12 barangays in the province now grow from 7-11 native varieties and all are found in Bauko town.

Some of the rice now grown in the rice terraces like California, Intan, Waray, and Taiwan are not native to the rice terraces but have been well adapted to the highlands by the farmers. These rice varieties are considered for their high yield and shorter growing period compared to native and genuine heirloom rice.

The old folks in the Cordillera have understood their rice varieties as energy crops with good nutrients. They used to eat these without viand most days of the year but diabetes and its related diseases were unknown to them. These days, not a few of these surviving old folks observed that many of their young used to eating white rice suffer from the disease even before they reach 35 years old.

Closely associated to the people's culture and traditions, the cultivation of heirloom rice in the rice terraces led to the development of indigenous and sustainable natural resource management, particularly the preservation of watersheds, in situ food biodiversity, village social capital, festivals and others. A serious look into the implementation of the Agrikulturang P-Noy Program for food self-sufficiency and security should lead to a revival of the growing of heirloom rice and rice terraces farming in the region. For this reason, the DA is now asking the heirloom rice growing municipalities and provinces of the region to prepare their own rice self-sufficiency roadmaps to be consolidated in the regional rice self-sufficiency road map. The regional road map will be the basis for the preparation of specific development project and activity proposals for interventions that need funding from government to address specific problems and concerns.

Published in the Sun.Star Baguio newspaper on March 01, 2011.

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