

The export of heirloom rice in our time

By Robert L. Domoguen

Mountain Light

Monday, September 16, 2013

IT WAS the first serious effort to upscale our heritage rice from the rice terraces. Now on its eighth year, the effort continues. It is unequalled in its vision, mission and activities that now put to task current and previous efforts to duplicate what it sought to do including those that were done to undermine this novel endeavour, its operations and activities.

The vision of this pioneering enterprise goes back to those days when Mary Hensley, a US Peace Corps Volunteer, was alerted by the headlines in the papers and on TV about the abandonment of the rice terraces by the local farmers. The farmers could not simply live off the land anymore. It is not only the economy but a host of environmental factors that were contributing to the decision of the local folks to leave their villages and their old ways to find a better life elsewhere. A Filipino heritage and distinctive identities including the grandeur of the rice terraces are at stake – of being lost. We fast become modern Filipinos assimilating a mix of all kinds of foreign cultures but without roots.

Several initiatives were introduced to keep the villagers stay in their homes, and hopefully continue to farm the rice terraces. Tourism livelihood activities were introduced. Ideas to convert the terraces into vegetable and flower gardens and other drastic proposals that would generate cash for the locals were proposed. As regional rice program coordinator in CY 2000, I advocated the development of high yielding rice varieties for the rice terraces. Nobody had the right vision for the rice terraces. Without that, all other visions, missions and activities surfaced and were undertaken for any reason but neither clear and right. Today we continue to face the same problem. The rice terraces are deteriorating, abandoned, turned into housing or other uses. The relationship of the terraces to the watershed and forests were forgotten. Its meaning to the individual or groups who want to own or encroached on these natural and common resources does not affect their conscience.

As envisioned by Mary, the rice terraces as a world heritage can be sustained by putting modern value to its heirloom rice product and the precious culture and traditions that goes with it. That vision, its mission and accompanying activities were translated into a feasibility study and initially tested by a group of economics students from the USA. The recommendations of that study formed the backbone for which the export of heirloom rice moves and operates now.

There are two development NGOs that currently orchestrate the export of heirloom rice to the USA – the Eight Wonder, Inc. (based in the USA) and its Filipino counterpart, RICE, Inc. They work with a region-wide farmers' cooperative, the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Growers Cooperative with its provincial chapters. The stakeholders implement the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project that undertakes development activities and recommendations to promote quality and value to the rice terraces products. It is an ideal set-up that must step-up to make its members own the project.

RICE, Inc. and Eighth Wonder Inc. are still doing much of the work right now. From the start, during and after the organization of the Cooperative and its chapters, both NGOs, spent time and resources to identify farmer partners in places where the rice terraces are and where this kind of farming are still done as part of the village culture and tradition. Except in Banaue. Ifugao, the places where the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project operates are still considered poor, hardly accessible with good roads and farmers had an average education below high school.

It was not as if, the export operation was done following precise steps and one that waits for the perfecting of conditions before it moves to the next steps. It was done with much faith and prayers of understanding. While it focuses and put emphasis on quality products estimating the needs of the foreign market and its modern palate at the village level with its farmers it also realizes the impossibility of jumping the evolutionary process of production and marketing to high-end world standards large scale. That reality or expectation is a dream way ahead in the future.

The dream of becoming big, probably now was actually considered in the beginning. It was shared to several government agencies and institutions, including the Regional Development Council (RDC), local government units and others during meetings and consultations. Nothing much happened but to let RICE, Inc. and Eighth Wonder, Inc. do it themselves. The DA and its attached agencies gave some support especially NIA-CAR. Some authorities argued they are not in the business of supporting private initiatives. The truth is government agencies have been supporting countless business initiatives and a lot failed to improve the lives of farmers or enhance the quality of life in our communities. The others thought they can also do the export business on their own. Some enterprising individuals simply worked on the packaging of the rice to justify a higher price for the product. Some simply sold the product and even higher than the prevailing export price. These initiatives ultimately bring the wrong message. The value and quality of a product is not simply about packaging as if dresses or clothes are all that mattered to the character of a person.

The quality and value of a product is about its inherent characteristics, the discipline and care that people put into it to uphold it. Ultimately, that demonstrated discipline and care considers the stakeholders desire and love for the consumers of their product which includes family members and anyone here and abroad who appreciate what is good about community, human civilization and shared lives and legacies in general.

I will report next week about how the farmers are working to ensure the quality of heirloom rice at the field level and what some of these farmers feel even if their product are not bought for failing to meet the set standards. If this is sustained and gets the right support at various levels for the right reasons, the rice terraces can really be sustained for the right reasons too for the next generations to come.

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