Weaving Dreams for heirloom rice

Anne Marie Jennifer E. Eligio

It is said that if you stretch the terraces and put together all those majestic stairs in one long loop, they would be able to cover half the globe. This is just one of several incredible and marvelous things said of the Ifugao rice terraces. We sure are lucky to have our country as prime beholder of their beauty. The first-time spectator is usually consumed by curiosity and puzzlement – particularly on how (and how long) the ancestors built these "sacred" stairways depending primarily on a basic yet indispensable tool: their hands.

CHRP ARRIVES

Vicky Garcia would probably say, it's the heart that has made the terraces stand proud. The heart of the rice farmer, that is. It could be the farmer from Kalinga who hand-pounds his *unoy* or the one from the Balangao tribe of Natonin, Mt. Province who's learned to perfect the wine from the rice produce. When the heart of the rice farmer throbs, it does so with a keen connection with the spirits of the ancestors and the gods who bequeathed the rice to them.

Vicky knew what she was into: five years ago, before starting the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project (CHRP), she knew that this was no ordinary challenge. A community organizer who's had her share of mobilizing rural communities in other parts of Southeast Asia, Vicky had gathered vast experience in development having worked for UN projects related to refugees. She had also partnered with local NGOs. More important, she was never condescending of the difficulty of organizing indigenous peoples in the Cordilleras. She was, for all intents and purposes, an outsider looking in. But five years hence, Vicky, who hails from Lumban, Laguna, has become an adopted Cordillera daughter and honorary tribeswoman.

The motivation to put up the CHRP did not pop out of the blue. In 2001, while the world trembled at the devastation and moral disarray brought about by the so-called 9-11 terrorist attacks in the US, Vicky doggedly went to America to pursue a Master of Arts degree at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. There she met Mary Hensley, an American who had lived in the Philippines as a young Peace Corps volunteer for two years in the late 70s. She told Vicky what she couldn't ever forget about her stay: the aroma of cooked rice in the hinterlands of the Cordilleras, which to that day, constantly beckoned her to go back.

But Vicky, the Filipina, did not know enough about the experience Mary was talking about; it was Mary who could describe the wonder and beauty of living

among Filipino farmers, breathing the same clean air, and sharing the same staple food with them. The two women were thousands of miles away from the Kalanguyas (Ifugao), the Balangaos, and the Taguibongs (Kalinga). But they were weaving optimistic dreams for them. The dream is living today - as the friendship and partnership in Vermont have leaped a thousand-fold, taking the two women recently to a large gathering in Italy where the tribes' rice varieties *imbuucan, ominio,* and *chong-ak* received international recognition with designation from the Slow Food Foundation's "Ark of Taste". The criteria: the food must be "of outstanding quality in terms of taste"; "must be linked with the memory and identity of a group"; and, "linked environmentally and historically to a specific area." As it seems, the rice of the farmer who once fed Mary eons ago in a little hut in Kalinga has now transcended boundaries, its scent wafting in the air of the European Alps.

FROM CURIOSITY TO LEARNING TO COMMITMENT

But Vicky did not breeze easily through the whole journey. She wholeheartedly believed that the Cordillerans' rice was *different*: the taste, the aroma, the nutritional elements (it has very high iron content), the enjoyable satisfaction one gets from it. More than anything, it was heirloom – a gift from the ancient gods passed on from one generation to another. Part of the challenge was for the indigenous peoples to acknowledge the extraordinariness of the rice they produce, and for Vicky, everything else would follow. The heart of the organizer must blend with the heart of the rice farmer.

Vicky started off the CHRP with Mary in two towns, Lubuagan in Kalinga and Banaue in Ifugao, in 2005. By 2010, eighteen municipalities were actively participating in the project. Two thousand farmers were tilling the land with the specific intent of not merely producing for one's consumption, but also for an export-driven market. The heirloom rice (which normally matures in 281-290 days) has

Vicky Garcia

> "The heirloom rice has clearly gone beyond its expectations: from 2005 to the present, the erstwhile 800 kilos of rice produced could now average 20 metric tons"

clearly gone beyond its expectations: from 2005 to the present, the erstwhile 800 kilos of rice produced could now average 20 metric tons. RICE, Inc. (Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs, Inc.), the non-government outfit that Vicky heads, sees to it that production, harvesting, and post-harvest activities follow strict quality control and that economic returns are guaranteed among farmers.

CLIMB ON

The work and achievements have yet to peak though. Vicky admits that while one corner in the US has created a market niche for the heirloom rice,[1] local distribution is still untapped. Vicky's recent efforts comprise networking with local distributors that would help put the heirloom rice in the domestic market, such as in malls and other strategic outlets.

Anyhow, the earned viability of the CHRP as a model project for sustainable small-scale agricultural livelihood is a considerable achievement in development work. Vicky shares that with farmers lending strong cooperation to the endeavor, a total of 61.7 tons had been produced from 2005-2010 earning a net income of P3,548,110. Vicky's sense of fulfillment lies in the validation that there is still much hope that can be derived from tilling the terraces and that indigenous peoples need not out-migrate and seek employment away from home. Moreover, the strict quality control standards consistently set by Vicky's group have led to able partnerships with the Rice Engineering and Mechanization Division of PhilRice and PHilMech (Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization) for the invention of new machines specific to the brown heirloom varieties. The brown rice milling system is again another hallmark of showcasing the distinguishing quality of heirloom rice.

MIRACLE OF RICE

Looking back to the years of wading through the ascending rice fields, communing with farmers, and braving arduous walks that have exacted a toll on her fragile condition (she was afflicted with polio when she was young), Vicky, at 50, could finally say that she has found her calling as dreamweaver for Mary, who initially conceived this dream project and inspired her to catapult the dream to reality. Indeed, the miracle of rice exists. Through the heirloom project, indigenous Filipinos have once again shown their innate gift at transcending boundaries and creating adaptive environments. Encircling half the globe to spread the Filipino identity isn't a difficult feat after all.

Check out its official online marketing site on http://www.heirloomrice.com