



IMP	ION	IS	ISM	JAS	JFC	JGS
105,000 7.69%	210,000 0%	1,820,000 0.89%	665,000 -2.34%	69,000 -2.8%	952,800 0.48%	2,196,390
7	0.59	0.23	1.25	2.43	210	70.75



## Banaue rice terraces, the 'heirloom rice' project, and community development in the Cordilleras

CROSSROADS (Toward Philippine Economic and Social Progress) By Gerardo P. Sicat (The Philippine Star) | Updated May 6, 2015 - 12:00am

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How do we interrelate the safekeeping of the works of famed painter – Vicente Manansala the National Artist – with the continued survival of our unique rice terraces as living monuments of mountain rice growing?

**Philippine art, cultural history, rice farming and biology converge.** The answer to this question will be partly answered on May 14, 2015. A program jointly sponsored by the National Museum, the Department of Agriculture and the IRRI (International Rice Research Institute) will feature the formal recognition of two landmark murals, originally undertaken by Manansala for the IRRI, as “National Cultural Treasures” at the National Museum.

Along with this event, there will be a presentation of scientific efforts to conserve and further develop heirloom rice varieties from the Cordilleras. Called the Heirloom Rice Project, this project of the IRRI is also heavily supported by the Department of Agriculture and by the PhilRice (Philippines Rice Research Institute).

The dictionary defines “heirloom” as any valuable or interesting possession that is handed down from generation to generation. Heirloom rice varieties are those varieties of rice that have been grown indigenously by farmers over generations.

The Heirloom Rice Project is a program that is focused on the planting and conservation of these rice varieties to improve the livelihoods of upland farmers of the Cordilleras. Several of Metro Manila’s leading chefs will demonstrate their dishes using heirloom rice during the dinner part of the program.

The guests for this event include selected members of the Cabinet, the diplomatic corps, the friends of Manansala, as well as other partners and patrons of the arts. In attendance also will be some of the rice farmers of the Banaue rice terraces, key scientists of the IRRI, the PhilRice and trustees of these institutions and the National Museum.

My essay today is a tribute to this important occasion as well as a statement of great regret at missing it as it coincides with my long summer road trip to the provinces of Mindanao via Luzon and the Visayas.

I learned much about this project by reading a recent issue of *Rice Today* (published by IRRI, Oct.-Dec., 2014)), admiring a wall calendar picture of heirloom rice varieties (also produced by IRRI for 2015), and accessing the Internet site, [www.heirloomrice.com](http://www.heirloomrice.com).

**Our heirloom rice varieties are vanishing and it is time to arrest and conserve those that we still have.** The Department of Agriculture's (DA's) latest listing of heirloom rice varieties of the Cordilleras reveals that many of them are no longer being grown by farmers.

Almost a decade ago, there were around 300 heirloom rice varieties grown in the Cordillera region (that included Abra, Kalinga, Ifugao and Mountain Province). The latest survey undertaken – in 2009 – shows a noticeable and dangerous decline in the planting of these indigenous rice varieties.

Many farmers have shifted to foreign varieties that are known for higher productivity and shorter growing period that are adaptable to mountain conditions. Such foreign rice varieties have higher yields and have shorter growing period compared to the heirloom native varieties.

But there are some major “losses” incurred as a result of their displacement in farming. For one, there are many properties of heirloom rice that need fuller appreciation.

The heirloom varieties are exotic and aromatic and the grains contain richer nutrients for health. Thus, they have unique health qualities that need to be understood and preserved.

To the old folks of the Cordilleras who ate these rice varieties, it served as complete meals most days of the year. It helped keep them healthy. The different varieties were multiple energy foods in themselves. Today's younger people are more susceptible to diabetes and other food-related diseases.

These heirloom rice varieties are strongly connected to the mountain environment. Thus, they sustain a healthy ecological balance within that agricultural setting. Their disappearance could mean a loss of biodiversity that has been part of the cropping patterns of agriculture in the mountains.

An important development for the retention and continued planting of native rice varieties has to be found. One avenue for this is to anchor it toward a sustainable economic reason for their cultivation. Finding commercial possibilities and creating a permanent demand for them is critical for their survival as sources of food.

Such an approach also contributes toward strengthening natural resource management in the mountains, specifically the preservation of the watersheds via biodiversity. In doing so, it could protect farming in rice terraces and enhance tourism based on them.

**Brief history of the heirloom rice project.** The trick could be to develop programs and activities that heighten the demand for heirloom rice varieties as a niche market. This is a commercial approach that promise lasting contribution also to community development in the Cordilleras.

Pioneering developmental work to create a commercial market for Cordillera heirloom rice varieties in the US could be traced to Ms. Mary Hensley. She is a former US Peace Corps volunteer who was assigned in that region and who was much impressed by her personal experience. There is also a Filipina community worker, Ms. Victoria Garcia. Together, they forged a collaborative work that began in 2004.

This pioneering work attracted more attention and support among civic groups, local government executives, government institutions and also the IRRI. The market possibilities for heirloom rice also attracted attention from the Department of Agriculture.

Today, both women are still part of the Heirloom Rice Project. An IRRI scientist, Dr. Casiana Vera Cruz, another woman, is overall leader of the project. The project is multi-faceted. One of these is to “systematically characterize traditional varieties of the Cordilleras and conserve them” for posterity and future use.

Another facet is that the project could serve as an instrument to pool support for a common goal. Thus government agencies, local government units, state colleges and universities, farmers’ groups, and private entities all stand to learn from the experience in creating and strengthening the value chain work for the rice growing industry for heirloom varieties.

Success of this project will improve incomes of rice farmers in the Cordilleras. It will create incentives to preserve the rice terraces for continued farming so that they continue to serve as living monuments of rice growing culture, Philippine style.

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<http://www.philstar.com/business/2015/05/06/1451565/banaue-rice-terraces-heirloom-rice-project-and-community-development>