



STICK-IT-TO-THE-MAN RICE

Madhavi M Peters

January 23, 2017

Here in Banaue, deep in the heart of the Cordilleras mountain range in the Philippines, civilization seems very far away, and it is intentionally so. Even today, with all the advances in technology, it is an arduous ten-hour drive from Manila (although as the crow flies, it is a mere 376 kms apart).

In previous eras, the region was even more inaccessible. Although the Philippines had been a Spanish colony for more than three hundred years, the first Europeans set foot here only towards the end of the Spanish regime, in 1868.

For thousands of years, this part of the Cordilleras was a refuge for those who did not want to be forced into *corvée* labor or into paying taxes to a series of repressive states.

The region is so remote that despite being within the geographical boundaries of the state, for most of its inhabitants, i.e. the Ifugaos among others, the state was a fiction with little to no impact on their daily lives.

Free from the pressure of having to constantly evade the reaches of the state, the Ifugaos had the breathing room to engage in permaculture, unlike similar refugees elsewhere in the region, who typically fed themselves through an escape agriculture¹ of the slash-and-burn variety.

Most significantly, the Ifugaos were able to grow rice, a land- and labour-intensive crop that was historically a key factor in the rise of the centralized state in lowland Southeast Asia.

To be clear, this upland terrace rice, known as *tinawon* or once-a-year rice, was quite different from the rice grown in the lowlands. For one, it was a low-yield rice, which meant that it was not used for trading purposes, unlike the high-yield lowland varieties.

In fact, yields were barely enough to feed a single family, who had to rely on other sources of carbohydrates (and crops more typical of escape agriculture) such as the sweet potato.

Given its suspect economic value, why grow *tinawon* at all? Yet, the rice was an important part of the Ifugao cultural identity and played a key role in various rituals.

Tinawon could thus be seen as a rice of resistance, not only to the state, but also to the capitalist ideologies increasingly associated with it: an anti-commodity in the age of commodification, as the academics Dominic Glover and Glenn Davis Stone argue.

The distance between the Cordilleras and the rest of the country gradually began to collapse in the post-independence era, with better roads and communications infrastructure facilitating its absorption into the state. Traditional livelihoods crumbled and the pace of migration to the cities picked up.

Well-meaning scientists and modernists, armed with degrees from the best American universities, began to trickle into the region.

Using the sort of language fairly typical in early post-colonial parlance, the goal was to bring “backward tribals” into the modern era, by dazzling them with all the benefits that technology could confer.

At the forefront was the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in Los Baños, near Manila, a temple to modernism’s promise to the developing world.

At the end of the last century, Francis Fukuyama grandly proclaimed the end of history. Subsequent events have proved him grossly mistaken. The battle between universalism and particularism continues to be played out on battlefields as big as entire nations, but also as small as a single grain of rice.

This year (2016) marks the fiftieth anniversary of IR-8, a high-yielding rice strain developed by IRRI that significantly increased rice production and kicked off the Green Revolution.

As Professors Stone and Glover point out, IR-8, and its other high profile successor Golden Rice, are key examples of the disembeddedness characteristic of agro-business.

Modern industrial agriculture takes place in hermetically sealed lab environments at a great remove from the fields where the seeds will eventually be planted. Here, supported by funding from all over the world, scientists from all over the world combine genetic material from all over the world. The result is that place is rendered irrelevant.

In this cosmopolitanism, IR-8 and Golden Rice couldn’t be more different from a geographically embedded rice like tinawon, so distinctly tied to a specific land and its history.

The story takes a surprising twist here.

In 2014, IRRI, along with a few other organizations, launched the high-profile Heirloom Rice Project (HRP) in the Cordilleras, through which it tries to bridge the gap between scientific and traditional knowledge to raise overall rice yields and reduce poverty in the region.

Why would IRRI, whose philosophical position is so fundamentally at odds with the pre-Green Revolution tinawon, get involved in such a project?

Officially, the **rhetoric is one of scarcity** and meeting the needs of a rapidly increasing population in an era of climate change. Heirloom rice and wild rice are important sources of genetic material that may be critical in developing new rice varieties. (Disembeddedness rears its head again.)

Unofficially, given the bad press around the environmental disasters and the high rates of cancer in areas that cultivated IR-8, such as the Punjab in India, IRRI was in need of a warm and fuzzy public relations hit.

Moreover, as with research everywhere, the thrust of IRRI's activities is largely determined by directives from funding organizations. Funding for the HRP comes from the Philippines Department of Agriculture and the Kellogg's corporation, the latter surely aware of the growing market for heirloom foods in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Still, although "the money and public relations considerations are real," according to Professor Stone, "these people [at IRRI] are in the business of using science to contribute to agricultural production, and they actually want to do that."

Indeed, during a visit to Los Baños, the enthusiasm for IRRI's mission was infectious and unmistakable. Dr. Casiana Vera Cruz, a plant pathologist who has been involved in the HRP, took great pains to emphasize the involvement of indigenous farmers at every step of the way.

Nonetheless, one got the impression that having to consider the real-world implications of their scientific research was a novel experience, and that there was chafing at the endless rounds of consultations involved.

A third player in this story is the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project (CHRP), a social enterprise begun by Filipina Vicky Garcia and American Mary Hensley that brings heirloom rice from the terraces of the Cordilleras to the dining tables of North America and Europe via tony retailers like Whole Foods.

Ms. Hensley is a former Peace Corps Volunteer and a social activist in the sixties mould. I spoke to her on the night of Donald Trump's stunning upset in the U.S. election, when, ironically, the world witnessed an American revolt against the same sort of disembeddedness that Eighth Wonder and so many locavore groups oppose, albeit in a far more palatable form.

Compared to the HRP, the CHRP is more involved in the commodification, i.e. the bringing to market, of this essential anti-commodity.

Ms. Hensley spoke of how hard it was (and still is, to an extent) to gain the trust of the Ifugaos as an outsider.

Like Ms. Hensley, Noemi Madiwo, a local community organizer and quality inspector for Eighth Wonder, also emphasizes the difficulties inherent in the process of incorporating this most embedded of crops into a global supply chain.

Quality control is their biggest challenge, they both say. Convincing the Ifugaos to adopt practices to make their product more marketable and ensure a consistent supply is a struggle.

The result of the commodification is an inevitable transformation in the overall ecology and culture in which tinawon was traditionally grown (the very embeddedness that the CHRP set out to protect), a process that was already underway due to the pressures of modernization.

Comments:

Mark Stahly I read the article with interest, particularly since I've never run across the term embeddedness and even after reading an explanation I'm biologically unable (stupid) to grasp it's inversion (disembeddedness). I just found it a pity that they didn't bother to explain what benefits the commercialization of this rare and hard to grow type of rice would bring to the world or this part of the Philippines. As you know **Madhavi** I live with 3 rice harvests a year at my doorstep and can assure you that quantity does more than quality for the poor in the case of rice.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · Yesterday at 5:23am



Madhavi M Peters "Embeddedness" here refers to the idea that in traditional societies, agricultural practices and cultural systems co-evolve over many centuries. For another example that's recently been in the news, but in India, it turns out that indigenous bull fighting (which the govt tried to ban) is inextricably tied up with bull breeding practices: https://thewire.in/.../banning-jallikattu-will-decimate... "Disembeddedness" is introducing into this context a foreign element that doesn't take into account local practices, which is what happened with IR8 initially. It's hard to know in the long term what will happen with commercialising heirloom rice, and I didn't want to speculate (yep, I'm the author), but the immediate benefit is the preservation of crop diversity and a way of life. I know Indonesia benefited from the green revolution, as did India, but in India at least, a short term solution to a food crisis ended up creating serious long-term problems, both environmental and social. I am hoping to be able to do a story on the latter later this year, time permitting. [Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 23 hrs · Edited



Mark Stahly Unless the heirloom rice has some marked special qualities I wonder if it's worth commercially keeping it? Agreed it should be warehoused for it's genetic make up and any future needs.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 15 hrs



Madhavi M Peters **Mark Stahly** it tastes good and is more nutritious than many commercial varieties

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 8 hrs



Mark Stahly At the risk of seeming silly, rice, like potatoes, grits, barley and noodles tastes like what you put on it. No one eats it bare if there's any curry, gravy, bolognaise sauce, Parmesan or cream to put on it do they?
Like · Reply · 7 hrs

<http://thetropicalist.press/2016/12/stick-it-to-the-man-rice/>