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Does Nature Determine the Gendered Spaces in Indigenous Society? A Look at the Ivatan Farming System and Food Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT. This study analyzes the paradoxical situation of Ivatan women whose spaces and places are used, valued, and struggled over not only to protect their independent sources of income and livelihood but also to preserve the diversity in local flora and fauna. The paper suggests that it is important to understand their role in household production and reproduction activities as part of their obligation to feed the family. While development policies and programs are geared toward greater participation of indigenous people, the same program fails to contextualize and locate indigenous women whose productive-reproductive roles and worldviews revolve around domestic needs and requirements of the family.

KEYWORDS. Ivatan · gendered spaces · food sovereignty · indigenous peoples · Batanes

Introduction

The province of Batanes, located at the northernmost tip of the Philippines, is a recipient of government-initiated and foreign-funded development programs aimed at improving the lives of the Ivatans by integrating them into the market. Batanes is a preselected agrarian reform community (ARC) that received intervention packages from "donors," including agriculture and enterprise development—more specifically, through the development and testing of innovative approaches in mainstreaming indigenous peoples into the agrarian reform development communities.

This paper illustrates Batanes' unique biophysical characteristics and its gendered farming systems' close adaptation to the environment. While acknowledging that the logic of market integration at the backdrop of globalization will bring in livelihood improvement, it focuses attention on the gendered spaces constructed by cultural ways

of life and worldview of the Ivatan agricultural system, which includes the circularity and reciprocity of food that they produce and consume. Agricultural practices and everyday living are constructed spaces established by a social environment reflecting cultural constructions of nature where common people express their needs. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 1996, 2000, and 2008, this paper explores the agricultural production at the midpoint of development and change in the context of integrating indigenous people in the mainstream of development.

In a study conducted by Christie (2006, 658) among the Central Mexicans, she demonstrated that human territoriality is "defined by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area." Human territoriality, as she further argued, "is in no sense biologically rooted, but rather a strategy 'entirely within the context of human motivations and goals.'" Thus, this paper attempts to bring up emerging issues of access to and control over resources amid a development project on agriculture and enterprise development, among other interventions, by development proponents (SDS Report 2009). This paper presents opposing viewpoints with regard to agriculture for subsistence versus enterprise development. While development policies and programs are geared toward greater participation of indigenous people, the same program fails to contextualize and locate indigenous women whose productive-reproductive roles and worldviews revolve around domestic needs and requirements of the family.

My discussion focuses on Ivatan indigenous farming systems as closely knitted to its natural setting.

The Natural Environment

The province is characterized by a series of rolling hills and mountains, with ridges in all directions. Only 7.10 percent of its total area or 1,631.50 hectares are level to undulating, and 78.20 percent or 17,994.40 hectares vary from rolling to steep and very steep. Forty two percent or 9,734.40 hectares are steep to very steep land.

Batanes has three major islands: (a) Batan (with a land area of 35 sq. km.), which is generally mountainous on the north and the southeast and has a basin in the interior; (b) Itbayat (with total area of 95 sq. km.), which slopes gradually to the west, being mountainous and hilly along its northern, eastern coast; and (c) Sabtang, which

covers the central part of its 41 sq. km. area, making the island slope outward to the coast.

The natural terrain of the province provided good drainage, explaining the nonexistence of prolonged flooding. The main island of Batan has the largest share of level and nearly level lands, followed by Itbayat and Sabtang, respectively. Itbayat has gently rolling hills and nearly level areas on semiplateaus surrounded by continuous massive cliffs rising from twenty meters to seven meters above sea level, with no shorelines. Sabtang, on the other hand, has its small flat areas spread sporadically on its coasts, while its interior is dominated by steep mountains and deep gorges. Batan Island and Sabtang have intermittent stretches of sandy beaches and rocky shorelines.

Weather and Climate

The climate is semitemperate most of the year; temperature ranges from a minimum of 14.5 °C to a maximum of 37.6 °C. Mean monthly temperature ranges from 23 °C to 29 °C, which is relatively cool compared to other parts of the country. Batanes exhibits two pronounced seasons: dry from March to July, and wet the rest of the year. It enjoys practically four seasons, the best ones being summer or *rayon* (March-June) and winter (December-February), when the temperature dips as low as 7 °C.

An Indian summer supposedly takes place in September. Sometimes, the weather is nice as early as February and as late as July. Northeast winds bring in cooler air. They also bring in weather fronts and cloud buildups, which could cause flight cancellations. Cool weather—a phenomenon Ivatans likes to call winter—prevails from December to February.

The Ivatan Indigenous Knowledge and Food Security

The distinguishing features of the Ivatan's indigenous knowledge are attached to their lifeways both in land and sea culture. Up to this time, they depend on farming, fishing, and livestock raising. Every Ivatan has the right to cultivate land, provided that he or she does not encroach upon an area already cultivated by others.

Although the Ivatans plant *wakay* (sweet potato, *Ipomoea batatas*), *dukay* (*tugui*, *Dioscorea alata*), and *uvi* (*ube*, *Dioscorea alata*) year-round, these are mainly for household sustenance. Rice is also produced in

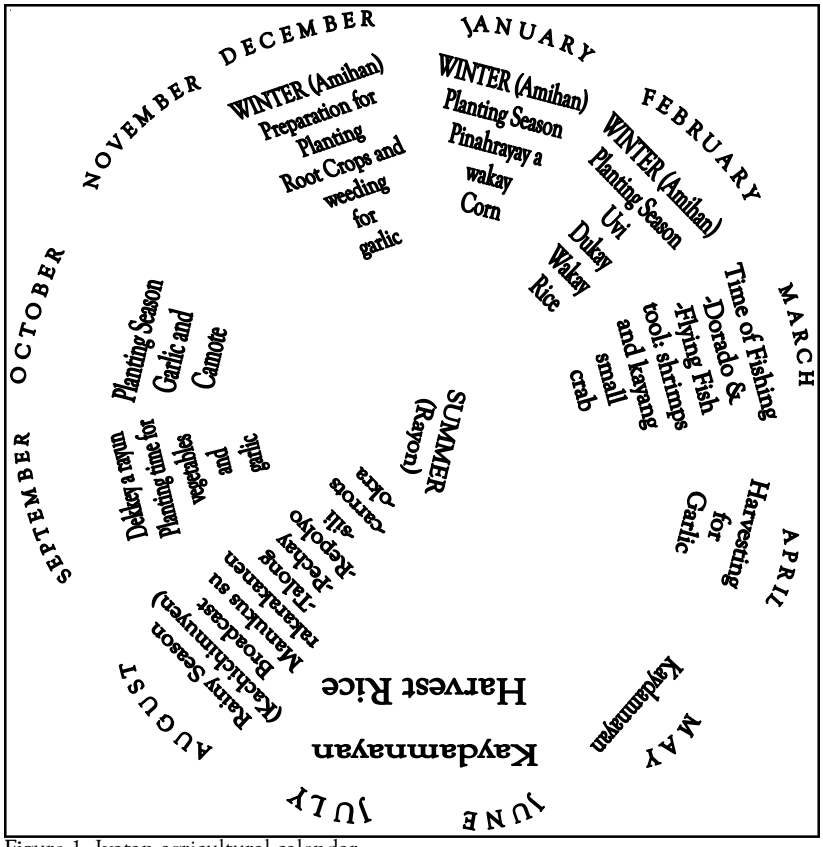

Figure 1. Ivatan agricultural calendar

rather small quantity. The level of production is to secure their own households' supply of root crops, fish, and vegetables. Garlic and cattle are their major marketable commodities, while sugarcane is grown to produce *palek* (a kind of native wine) and vinegar. Traditionally, their production is not big enough to produce any significant surplus for the market. Rather, the Ivatans emphasized social obligations to give or share and to receive as well.

They are also well adapted to the local climate and can survive the vagaries of its unique weather condition. The Ivatans contribute to the diversity of root crops for their sustenance.

Farming

Farming is the inhabitants' major livelihood. Farm production is only for household consumption because every family accordingly produced their own food, consisting mainly of root crops like sweet potato and yam. There was no market before. During my fieldwork, I learned that people lived by the adage "*Kung masipag ka, meron; pag tamad, wala ka*" (If you are hardworking, you'll have something; if lazy, you'll have nothing). One of the participants narrated that majority of the people depended solely on root crops for daily sustenance—for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. The usual viand consists of boiled vegetables or fish, and they did not have snacks or coffee. "Instead we eat fruits, like papaya, banana, and other local fruits," she said. "In the early '70s we were already moving to a modern life. We depended on rice as our staple food, in combination with sautéed viands."[1]

Wakay, *dukay*, and *uvi* are commonly planted mostly by women for household subsistence, and also as feeds for small livestock raising. Garlic is the Ivatans' major cash crop. Cattle are mostly raised by men. Sugarcane is also grown to produce *palek* and vinegar, also for household consumption. The typical life of Ivatan women revolves around farming; together with their male counterparts, they perform tasks according to their traditional farming calendar. A broad description of the Ivatan agricultural calendar is shown in Figure 1.

Fishing

Fishing is one of the Ivatan economic activities aside from farming. A special group of fisherfolk, called *mataw*, are skilled fishers of *dorado*. The fisherfolk open the port during the fishing season, which starts on the first week of March. They perform the *kapayvanuvanuak* (buying the port through a ritual). A group of fishers buys a pig or cow for the said ritual. The Shaman who leads the ritual utters a prayer, throws coins and *mutin* (a local bead), and asks the gods for a better catch. No other fisherfolk besides the *mataw* can use the port. Upon the end of the fishing season, a ritual will also be carried out. The fishing season ends in June.

Fishing keeps the men occupied after land preparation. Aside from this, the men are also engaged in *payuhwan* or *bayanihan sa pagbubukid* (farm support system). Seasonal fish catch are *dorado* and flying fish. Women also help catch fish but only when the tide is low. There is a

common belief that selling of *dorado* is not allowed while fisherfolk are still onshore.

Approaches to Development

The Japan Social Development Fund–Indigenous Peoples (JSDF-IP) was implemented by the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) as an attempt to improve the quality of life of indigenous peoples (IPs) through the development and testing of innovative approaches for mainstreaming IPs into the Second Agrarian Reform Communities Development Project (ARCDP-2). My engagement in this project was toward the final part (end-of-project assessment) to measure the extent to which the development interventions have been translated into outputs, and how project achievements have begun to improve the life of IPs. Specific to my engagement is a case study in Batanes that illustrated a homogenous indigenous people (Ivatan) response to development interventions (JSDF-IP and ARCDP2) with respect to their traditional livelihood systems and their participation in training and projects that may result in economic improvement.

Batanes is known as an abundant source of garlic, making garlic production a major livelihood of the Ivatans. However, with the coming of imported garlic products in the market, the local producers were threatened due to price competition. They immediately requested a meeting with local government officials. In the said meeting, the local government units (LGUs) recommended to harness local garlic production by value adding through processing raw garlic to garlic chips and bits, which demand a high market price from the mainland Luzon. They sought the assistance of DAR, which in turn provided them with training program support as part of the JSDF-IP project.

The application of innovative ways to development generated training activities and capacity building among the Ivatans who participated in a variety of training programs that were identified by the locals to prepare them for market integration. Besides garlic processing, skill development programs included root crop processing for baking, corn production, and herbal gardening. These activities involved 126 female and 25 male farmers who signified interest in pursuing livelihood projects.

Gendered Knowledge and Food Sovereignty

In the Philippines, as in other Asian countries, women and men respond differently to resources that are intricately woven into the sexual division of labor within households or in the assigning of productive and reproductive roles in many societies. A considerable part of agricultural production is attributed to women, making them principal agents in food security and the well-being of rural households. Moreover, a large share of food production is credited to women.

Based on our previous study of the Ivatan farming system, the Ivatans grow different sweet potato varieties for food security (Dayo, Labios, and Wagan 1998). Under Batanes' weather condition, only root crops can survive. Farmers, especially women, keep several varieties of sweet potato as insurance against food crisis. These sweet potatoes vary in shape, color, and texture, and are prepared differently for particular purposes. Similarly, yam is used as staple, and several traditional varieties are preserved for the same purposes (ibid.). During my visit in 2008, the number of sweet potato varieties had declined from eleven to about six varieties. Among the varieties identified, *samurangan* (with red skin and light cream flesh), cultivated since the 1930s, has persisted because of its maturity period of four to five months and staggered harvesting, making it more resilient. The practice of staggered harvesting and storage on field are managed by women as part of their domestic chores.

The Ivatans learn productive and reproductive skills in the "ordinary way of growing up." They transmit nonmaterial (intangible) culture—including beliefs and knowledge about the environment, and expectations regarding socially acceptable gender roles—to children and grandchildren. The daily activities of women and men, which they learned when still young, are not too differentiated. The domestic roles are not differentiated for young boys and girls who are responsible for pounding rice before lunchtime or grinding corn using big stones. With mat and *bangkito*, they winnow grains, segregating them to fine, medium-fine, and coarse types. The very fine corn grits are cooked as porridge for food, or mixed with grated sweet potato, wrapped in banana leaves, and eaten as staple. The medium-fine grains are mixed with rice, and the coarse ones are fed to pigs. As narrated, it is reasonable to express that practices and expectations of both men and women have been jointly observed for household provisioning.

The Ivatans' adherence to some beliefs in planting is a form of respecting the wisdom of the old in farming activities. Customarily, individual farmers are prohibited from talking to anyone when going to the farm to ensure a good harvest. As narrated by women participants, *wakay* is usually planted by women in the month of January, and they practice staggered harvesting to respond to the family's food needs. Harvested root crops are kept in the field in a storage pit called "*lavung*," where *wakay* would have a shelf life of one year as food, and four to five months as planting materials. One of the beliefs when planting sweet potato is to eat egg, snails, and cooked octopus so that the crop would have smooth skin.

In the case of banana, an important food crop, harvesting it during the west wind season (*avayat*, weather coming from the south west usually from May to June and early July) is not advised. They believe that bananas harvested during this time would turn black or "*mangingitim*" and would never ripen despite long storage period. During the same season, they never transfer or touch garlic or onions as these will turn up with empty bulbs called *napis*. This account was personally experienced by the informant herself.

In terms of using farm tools, "baskets are not to be rolled down in the farm because it might call for a landslide." The informant also said that when one eats cooked octopus while planting, the plant would not be uprooted even by typhoons.

On fishing, traditional ways and practices were described in detail by the participants. During the early times, they used *mamin*, a sharpened wood or bamboo. The informant assured that other big fishes could easily be caught using this method. A cone-shaped net could also be used to catch fishes. The net is made of the skin of a *hanut* tree or the bark of *hasu*, a type of shrub. For those who go fishing at night, they make use of a bundle of reeds as their light.

Apart from the different tools used in fishing, fishing techniques were also classified. The major fishing technique is called *kapataw*, where a fishing boat is used to catch fish. When doing *kapataw*, a pig is slaughtered along the shore. The liver is taken out to see what is in store for the fisherfolk. In this way, too, any amount of bad luck is driven away. Another practice in doing *kapataw* is the scheduling of the fishing trips among the fisherfolk. The schedules are made through voting. The fisherfolk go by batch. The next set of fisherfolk could not go and fish unless the first set of five fisherfolk have already caught a number of fishes.

The above were some of the instances that determine the indigenous knowledge of the Ivatans related to farming and fishing practices and how their spaces provide gendered division of labor. We have much to learn from Ivatan folk practices, which have proven to be appropriate and sustainable to make them food secure.

Gender, Agriculture, and Development: A Reflection

Gendered relationships in households, within communities, and within the nature spaces are historically and contextually complex. As illustrated by the Ivatan experiences, they show how nature defines its gendered spaces through which equal burden sharing is translated into market integration. The intention of the project is to understand the process by which development interventions have been translated into outputs, and how the project achievements have begun to improve the life of IPs, specifically in Batanes.

The case study provides an illustration of how a homogenous indigenous people respond to development interventions (JSDF-IP and ARCDP2) with respect to their traditional livelihood systems.

The emerging market integration was perceived to be a positive development for the Ivatans. The presence of various innovative product developments in the islands exposed them to economic possibilities. However, they may become vulnerable to economic forces like prices, product quality and quantity, given the limited volume of production. This entails analyses of the social relations of production (agricultural wage rate) and technology.

After a few years of project implementation, the Ivatan women who participated in the crop-processing training activities, especially those in enterprise development, expressed that their participation brought new business prospects. The shift from household production to market production had become more visible and more intense. The Ivatan women prioritized projects that give value adding to products they traditionally produced, improved, and nurtured. They enhanced their traditional crops—for example, garlic, which they processed into chips and granules. Turmeric (yellow ginger) was being processed and marketed in the mainland, giving additional income to women in particular. Sweet potato and squash now have multiple uses, as they are processed into flour for local pan cake.

Continuity and Contradictions: Paradoxical Situation of Ivatan Women

The project looked on garlic as an important income source, from its local commercial status to its value-adding level. But what came out of the joint training endeavor of DAR, LGU, and local farmers was a contradiction in itself. In a discussion with Ivatan women regarding their participation in various training activities that they themselves proposed, they expressed that attending training programs disrupted their daily chores of going to the farm, performing their farming tasks, and being home afterward to sustain the family. Their former life was a little bit relaxed. Despite this, however, they still expressed interest in capacity-building and skill-enhancement activities (e.g., processing of sweet potato into flour). Moreover, some participants remarked that unlike before, they have now become involved in some local enterprises. They said that weaving *vakul*, a traditionally worn headgear, had become a commodity for tourists' delight and pride.

Conclusion

The contradictions of the efforts to integrate the indigenous peoples in the mainstream of development have become an important issue when dealing with the Ivatan integration in the market. The Ivatans, especially the womenfolk, desire to take on other skills to contribute to household income. Despite their growing interest in diversifying traditional product use, the distribution of these products can be illustrated as one that is evolving toward larger market outside Batanes.

In ensuring food security at home, the Ivatan men and women have created a specialized knowledge in agriculture and food production. However, gender differences with specific skills must be examined because they vary from one context to another. Men and women Ivatans have been culturally and naturally allocated roles and responsibilities for securing food and livelihood. The nature that guides the manner by which men and women, boys and girls, live their daily lives created spaces that they interpret differently according to gender. Batanes is a community in transition. It is generally observed that the indigenous knowledge of the Ivatans and their traditional entrepreneurial abilities are harnessed through an externally planned training activities initiated by the local government and donors. Their inherent skills, especially of women, both in agriculture and other

livelihood enterprise, have transformed the Ivatans to become a progressive indigenous people who are willing to explore other economic possibilities within their ecological limitations.❁

Note

1. The warehouse of the National Grains Authority was constructed in Batanes in the early '70s. It was then when the province began receiving rice supplies. Since then, the Ivatan's diet has changed, veering away from traditionally grown and nurtured root crops.

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