



The Rice Terraces of Ifugao Province, Philippines

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(1) Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement (SITMo)

Abstract

The Ifugao Rice Terraces in the Philippines is a living cultural landscape, a testimony to hundreds of years of a people's harmonious co-existence with nature. With several hundred years of trial and error, the Ifugaos were able to come up with a rich body of traditional knowledge which now sustains this magnificent complex of terraced fields, managed forests, intricate irrigation systems, and villages that come together to forge a distinct way of life, an attendant lifestyle forged from the synergy of an unforgiving terrain and the temperament of a people determined to survive. The resulting rice culture of the Ifugao is now threatened by several factors both natural and human-made.

KEY WORDS: Ifugao, rice terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras, Ifugao Archaeological Project, sacred Ifugao landscape

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Ifugao Province is located along the eastern flank of the Luzon Central Cordillera mountain ranges with a land area of 251,778 hectares. The combined area of terraces occupies 17,138 hectares of the total land area. The topography is marked mainly by rugged mountains and massive forests. The terraces are located at high elevation, between 800 to 1,500 MASL, with a slope range of 50% and above. As of the last census in 2010, the population of Ifugao stands at 197,000 inhabitants.

Though the Ifugao Rice Terraces (IRT) have been known to have existed for over 2,000 years (UNESCO N.D.), recent discoveries of the Ifugao Archaeological Project also reveal much younger dates, as recent as 200-500 years ago. Historical records indicate an Ifugao retreat to mountain *refugias* to facilitate more effective resistance to Spanish control (Martin and Acabado 2015). A related study suggests that the resultant terracing culture in the Ifugao Province was influenced as well by an adaptive response to climate change and growing aridity in the neighboring Cagayan lowlands during the Little Ice Age, in the 13th to the 19th centuries (Peterson and Acabado, in press). Radiocarbon dating from terrace studies place the antiquity of rice farming no earlier than the late 16th century and suggest that fields, in the

early settlement of Kiyangan (Kiangan, Ifugao), were most likely wetland agricultural pond fields for the cultivation of taro (Acabado and Martin 2015). These pond field systems, nonetheless, prepared terrain and waterways for the development of rice terraces.

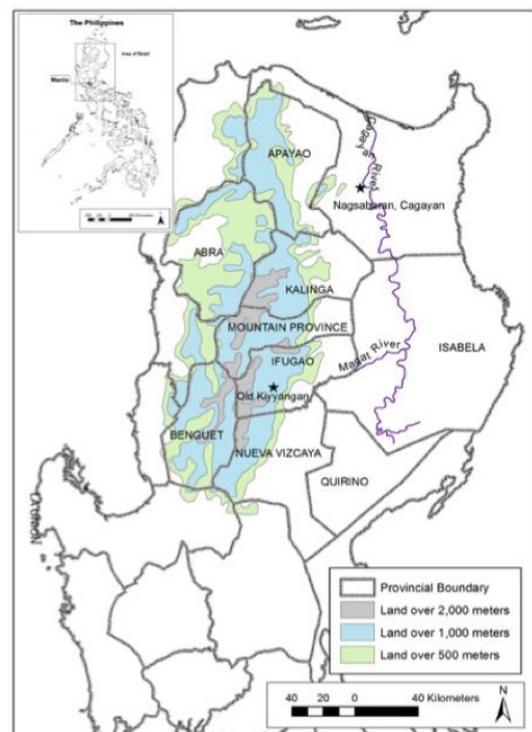


Figure 1. Ifugao map (from Acabado, *Zones of Refuge* 2017 (in press))

1.2 Brief Description: the Ifugao Rice Terraces System as a Sacred Agro-Cultural Landscape

The Ifugao agricultural system is an “agro-cultural complex,” a term popularized by O’Connor (1995) to describe the interlocking nature of agricultural practices, social systems, political, historical, and cultural changes. This is an apt term because for the Ifugao, wet-rice cultivation is part of a much larger production system that includes swiddening and agro-forestry (Acabado and Martin, 2015). The rice is mainly planted to be interspersed with taro, legumes, beans and other crops. Its surrounding forests, both private and communal, are managed using an indigenous system of natural resources management passed down by earlier generations. Both the swidden and agro-forest serve as economic supplements and buffers in case of crop failure in the rice terraces. The maintenance of the living rice terraces reflects primarily a cooperative approach of the whole community which is based on detailed knowledge of the rich biodiversity existing in the Ifugao agro-ecosystem, a finely tuned annual system respecting the lunar cycle, zoning and planning, extensive soil and water conservation, mastery of a complex pest control regime based on the processing of a variety of herbs, accompanied by religious rituals (UNESCO, N.D.).

Notwithstanding the more recognizable agricultural feature of the terraces, it is equally important to understand the intangible and sacred component of the Ifugao terraced landscape. The traditional rice has always been at the center of the Ifugao way

of life. Rice alone merited an entire cycle of rituals in the old Ifugao religion. Feasts of merit sanctified by ritual specialists that elevated individuals in the social hierarchy were pre-conditioned on existing rice field holdings. Social structure was defined by rice through rituals that necessitated the invocation of a thousand or so agricultural gods. Ritual rice fields were consecrated to set the pace of community labor and establish socio-political hierarchy. The terraced landscape is thus the setting of a belief system where gods and mortals communed, where sacrifices are offered, and divine providence is manifested.

2. Significance of the Heritage Place Including Natural and Cultural Value: Value Of The Ifugao Rice Terraces

In 1973, the Rice Terraces of Banaue, Ifugao were declared as a National Cultural Treasure, recognizing it as a part of the national patrimony of the Filipinos.

With the inclusion of five terraced clusters on the World Heritage List in 1995, UNESCO summarizes the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the terraces as a living cultural landscape of unparalleled beauty, an enduring testimony to how people can exploit the resources around them without causing irreparable damage to the environment.

UNFAO, in recognizing the terraces as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) in 2004, describes the Ifugao Rice Terraces (IRT) as the country’s only remaining highland mountain ecosystem featuring a remarkable agricultural system. The



Figure 2. The Banaue Rice Terraces (Photo by SITMo-IAP)



Figure 3. Rice terraces in Asipulo, Ifugao (Photo SITMo-IAP)

continued viability of the rice terraces is a manifestation of strong culture-nature connections, engineering systems, innovation, and the determined spirit of the Ifugaos to maximize use of the mountainous lands for food production.

To the Ifugao people, the rice terraces are a source of sustenance for the communities whose lives revolve around its ancient rhythms. It is an enduring symbol of a people's resilience against nature's upheavals and resistance to colonial designs. The history of rice terraces is the history of the Ifugaos, one that defines them as a people and as a culture. It is this identity value that is first and foremost the reason for maintaining this relic of the ancient past.

While the World Heritage inscription and GIAHS recognition use different standards in qualifying heritage sites in their respective lists, both emphasize the cultural heritage and its universal significance in terms of its contemporary functionality, despite its antiquity. Unprecedented changes in the socio-political landscape of a country necessitates both recognitions as a means of securing - not just national protection - but also the global safeguarding of this vulnerable heritage of humanity.

■ 3. Management

While several government agencies, from national to local, are tasked to manage and monitor the rice terraces, no comprehensive management plan is in place to ensure that conservation policies are strictly enforced.

The Ifugao Rice Terraces are maintained by families, not merely as production areas for a staple crop but also for the sentimental reason that these real properties have been passed down from their venerated ancestors. In matters of policy, the single most important

difficulty in coming up with an effective and comprehensive management plan for the entire landscape is that it is in the realm of private ownership: the Ifugao Rice Terraces are privately owned and managed by hundreds of individual owners. Under Philippine laws and as a general rule, public funds cannot be spent on private property and thus, public expenditure is constrained. While the government provides support for the World Heritage listed clusters, minimal assistance is given to the wider area that does not have the privilege of a recognized status. The special status of the World Heritage listed clusters gives them the seeming character of being properties of the public domain and thus in special circumstances they are beneficiaries of monetary assistance from the government.

■ 4. State of Conservation and Challenges for Continuity

In 2001, merely six years after its inscription on the World Heritage List, the five inscribed clusters were put on the List of World Heritage in Danger due to the deterioration in their physical integrity caused by various factors, including natural events, such as extreme weather conditions. This was compounded by the changes that were already radically transforming the socio-cultural landscape of the Ifugao, such as out-migration, waning indigenous knowledge application, and the erosion of customary social institutions. The poor state of conservation of the Ifugao Rice Terraces catalyzed the much-needed cooperation of public and private stakeholders, both local and international. The needed funding from the government poured in to repair damaged terraces while civil society groups handled grassroots organizing and publicity of the plight of this cultural landscape. Terrace conservation made it to the priority list

of each agency. Under normal circumstances it would have not stood a chance to compete with other more pressing concerns like health care, education, or public infrastructure. The Ifugao Rice Terraces (officially the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras) were removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2012. This turn of events highlighted the possibility of a very effective public-private partnership, now if only this can be sustained.

■ 5. Recommendations

The threats that put the Ifugao Rice Terraces on the List of World Heritage in Danger did not disappear after its danger listing was removed. Issues for cultural landscapes do not have sure-fire solutions owing to the unpredictability of contemporary socio-political dynamics, economic issues, and environmental factors.

It has always been our conviction that the conservation of the Ifugao Rice Terraces is largely dependent on the continuity of its indigenous knowledge system, one that mastered the natural environment creating a unique landscape and a distinct way of life. The indigenous knowledge that evolved with the Ifugao rice culture is one that mastered the rhythm of the natural environment to ensure the survival of a people. Waters from rivers and springs, conducted to terraces carved or built on carefully selected slopes, reflect indigenous hydraulics and soil management. The maintenance of private and communally managed woodlots signify understanding of the forests' role in nutrient replenishment and soil and water conservation. Cropping seasons, that are in tune with the movement of sun and moon, synchronized planting that afforded effective pest control and ensured availability of communal labor, and the wide-ranging variety of crops planted in both forest and rice fields ensured healthy biodiversity and a year-round food supply. All these comprise the nature-culture approach that sustained the rice terraces for generations, which ultimately precipitated the formation of value systems, spirituality, and socio-political institutions of the Ifugao.

It is rather unfortunate that contemporary practices, caused by culturally-insensitive public policies and inadequate planning, do not take into equal consideration the natural and human dimensions of conserving the Ifugao Rice Terraces. Like the evolving cultural landscape that it has begotten, the traditional knowledge lifeblood of the terraces must continue evolving through a process that puts into consideration both nature and human elements.

On matters of government policy, a long-term management plan that involves all stakeholders must be put in place, at the very least, in the Province of Ifugao. Such a plan should not be vulnerable to changes in politics

or shifts in the administration. Legislation on a government subsidy for terrace farmers should also be looked into to address their economic issues. Mainstreaming indigenous knowledge education in the formal school curricula should also be taken seriously by the education department and the local governments.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Sven Arntzen, "A cultural landscape incorporates meaning and identity value in that it provides a setting or context in which people can view their existence, lives and practices. When a cultural landscape's identity value is a reason for its preservation, the meaning associated with the landscape helps determine the manner in which humans ought to relate to land" (Arntzen 1999).

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