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Ethnology and Linguistics : Contemporary Relations between Agta and Their Farming Neighbours in the Northern Sierra Madre of Philippines

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Ethnology and Linguistics

Contemporary Relations between Agta and Their Farming Neighbours in the Northern Sierra Madre of Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

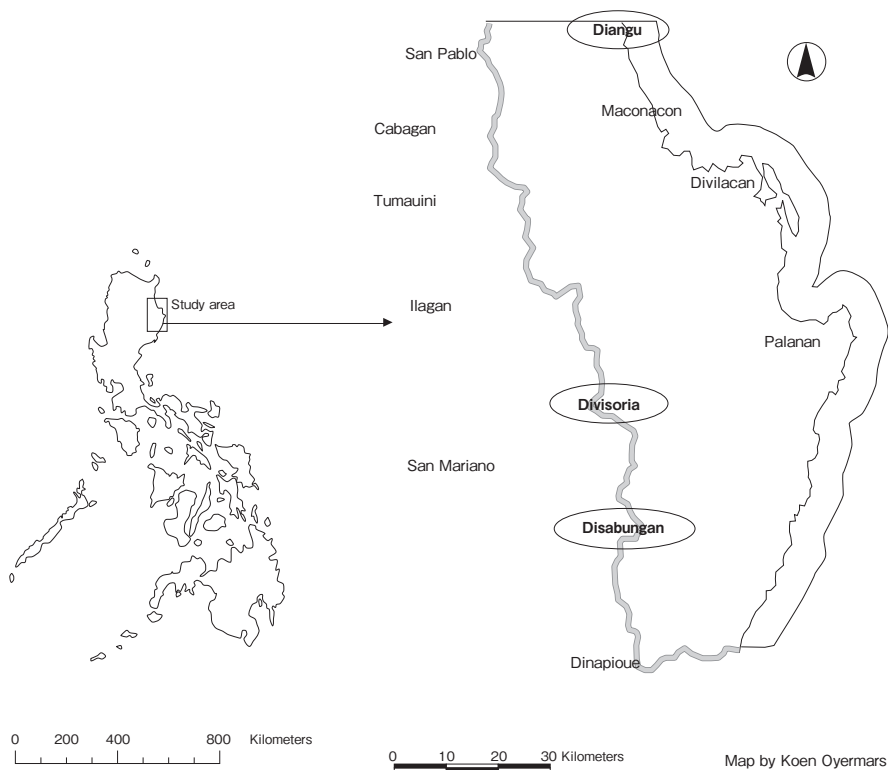
The Philippine Agta are among the very few continuous hunter-gatherer¹⁾ peoples to have survived the expansion of agriculturalist populations in prehistory, history and present (Bellwood 2005). Contrary to the “myth of isolated independent hunter-gatherers”, which dominated both anthropological and public views of foraging societies until the 1990s, this is not the product of the Agta’s isolation from agricultural peoples. Instead, ethno-historical, archaeological, linguistic and botanical evidence points towards long-term economic and social relationships between foragers and farmers in the Philippines (Headland 1987; Headland and Reid 1989, 1991).

Austronesian-speaking agricultural peoples entered the northern Philippines from Taiwan around 4,000 years ago (Bellwood 2005: 135). Archaeological excavations show that these early farmers have maintained symbiotic relations with the indigenous Negrito populations since at least 1400 BC, if not before that (Headland and Reid 1989; Peterson 1978a). This contact must have been very intense, at least temporarily, for in the process all the Negrito groups abandoned their own languages for those of the newcomers (Headland 1986: 174–178; Reid 1987), while some adopted shifting cultivation (Brosius 1983). Despite such alterations in hunter-gatherer societies, farming populations did not completely replace or assimilate them everywhere. Those inhabiting the rainforests of northeastern Luzon, in particular, have been relatively successful in maintaining a hunting and gathering lifestyle (Bellwood 1999: 287).

Negrito populations have, however, decreased greatly since AD 1600. The main causes of this decline have been new diseases, encroachment, deforestation and tribal unrest. In 1994 there were 29 Negrito populations in the Philippines, with a total population of 31,000 individuals. Of these, 9,000 were Agta (Early and Headland 1998: 4; Griffin and Headland 1994: 71–72). Living in the Sierra Madre Mountain Range in northeast Luzon, the Agta have been in the middle of major developments in the course of the twentieth century. From the 1950s onwards, large-scale immigration followed corporate logging operations throughout the Sierra Madre. While this brought about deforestation, the influx of loggers and their

families added further pressure to Agta hunting, fishing and foraging grounds. Political turmoil aggravated the situation between the 1970s and 1990s when the Agta were caught in the crossfire between the military and the New People's Army, communist insurgents. As the Sierra Madre was one of the main battlegrounds, both parties recruited Agta as guides, combatants and food-suppliers. Many Agta groups were displaced in the process and either became refugees in village centres or were resettled in government reservations (Griffin and Griffin 1985; Headland 1986: 285–288).

The current paper focuses on how relations between Agta and farmers in the Northern Sierra Madre have developed under these turbulent circumstances of the past half-century. Two case studies from the inland municipality of San Mariano, and one from the coastal municipality of Maconacon (see Map 1) provide insight in the diverse directions that Agta-farmer relations may take.²⁾



Map 1 Location of the Philippines, the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park, its nine municipalities, and the research sites Divisoria, Diangu, and Disabungan. Diangu represents the provincial border between Isabela and Cagayan.

The Agta featured in this paper all live on the borders of the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park. This protected area was established in 1997 and harbours most of Luzon's last lowland dipterocarp rain forest, montane forest, mangroves and beach forest. It covers 360,000 hectares in nine municipalities of Isabela Province (Mallari *et al.* 2001: 154). A total of 23,000 people inhabit the park (DENR 2001: 36), nearly 1,800 of whom are Agta. The Agta reside in more than 80 semi-permanent coastal and riverside settlements (Minter In print). While few of these are situated immediately adjacent to non-Agta villages, most Agta settlements are found at a walking distance of several hours from farming communities. Livelihood strategies differ between settlement areas. In general, however, the Agta follow a foraging economy in which they exchange wild meat, fish, non-timber forest products, and timber with non-Agta for domestic starch and consumer products (Photos 1, 2). In addition, they practise extensive agriculture and are involved in seasonal agricultural labour on the fields of nearby farmers.

Before turning to the day-to-day realities of forager-farmer interactions in the Northern Sierra Madre, I shall first give a brief overview of the main issues that are addressed in the literature on forager-farmer relationships in general and on Agta-farmer relations in particular.



Photo 1 Agta man supplying Paranan friend with fish in Disumangit, Palanan, May 2005.



Photo 2 Agta family with Paranan farmers in Dilabewan, Palanan, May 2005.

UNIVERSAL TRAITS OF FORAGER-FARMER RELATIONS

Support for the interdependent model described above, in which foragers are seen as living not in isolation from but rather in interaction with farmers, has not remained limited to academic debates surrounding the Agta. Ethnographers have described past and present relations between foragers and farmers in many parts of the world in detail. Exchange relations and social relations often hold a central position in such descriptions (Spielmann and Eder 1994: 303–308).

Exchange relations generally encompass food, commodities and labour. In the case of food, hunter-gatherers typically exchange wild proteins for domestic carbohydrates (Spielmann and Eder 1994: 303). For the Agta, Philippine warty pig (*Sus philippinensis*) and Philippine brown deer (*Cervus mariannus*) are the most lucrative food products to be exchanged for rice and consumer goods with local farmers or loggers. Large freshwater and marine species may also be traded. In the analysis of such exchange relations the world over, it is most often concluded that foragers are more dependent on the food products they obtain from the farmers than the other way around (Spielmann and Eder 1994).

In addition to food, foragers often provide forest commodities to farming populations, who again sell the products to traders at regional, national, or even international markets. The foragers' products are usually exchanged for food, tobacco, metal items, or other sought-after commodities (Spielmann and Eder 1994: 305). At present, rattan, timber and nests of the pygmy swiftlet (*Collocalia troglodytes*) are the forest commodities most often traded by the Agta of Isabela Province (see also Giebels 2005). The Kubu's exchange of forest commodities for

consumer products with farmers in Sumatra, Indonesia (Persoon 1994: 197–199), and the Penan's trade of manufactured goods and forest products with longhouse communities in Sarawak, Malaysia (Bending 2006: 60–61), provide other examples from the Southeast Asian context.

Most exchange relations between foragers and farmers at some point include the former providing agricultural labour to the latter (Spielmann and Eder 1994: 306). Examples, among many others, are the Gujars acting as herders and land labourers for Pathans and Kohistanis in Pakistan (Barth 1956), Efe Mbuti working the land of their Lese neighbours in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Terashima 1986; Whaele 1986), Baka and Bagyeli working for Bantu farmers in Cameroon (Kitanishi 2003; Biesbrouck *et al.* 1999), Kubu working on the lands of Malays in Indonesia (Persoon 1994) and – indeed – the Agta providing agricultural labour to farmers of various ethnic backgrounds. The latter's involvement in farm work varies greatly between areas. The Casiguran Agta are probably the most heavily involved in and dependent on farm employment (Headland 1986). In Isabela Province, however, some groups accept agricultural labour every planting and harvesting season, while others, who live further away from farmers' settlements, may not engage in it at all.

Exchange relations between foragers and farmers often occur in tandem with social relations. These may range from genuine intimacy to mutual distrust and tension. Remarkably, while both populations stereotype each other, hunter-gatherers are typically more tolerant of farmers than the other way around. Moreover, they tend to adjust more to the other group (Spielmann and Eder 1994: 307–308). Peterson (1978b: 78–82) has described this one-way adjustment process for Agta-Paranan interactions. The ultimate manifestation of this is that while foragers tend to speak and understand the language of the surrounding farmers, farmers hardly ever learn the foragers' language (Spielmann and Eder 1994: 307–308). Woodburn (1988) gives various examples of how East African farmers despise the languages spoken by neighbouring hunter-gatherers. As mentioned in the introduction, the Agta long ago abandoned their pre-Austronesian languages in favour of various Austronesian ones. In addition, all of them have learned to speak at least one of the farmers' languages, sometimes at the expense of their own. Linguists therefore consider many Negrito languages to be endangered (Headland 2003).

Finally, when foragers and farmers intermarry this almost always involves hunter-gatherer women marrying farmer men, while the reverse only rarely occurs (Spielmann and Eder 1994: 307–308). In the case of the Agta, Headland and Headland (1999) have concluded that the out-marriage of Agta women to non-Agta men has become so disproportionate that Agta men are having a hard time finding an Agta wife. This issue is further addressed below.

SYMBIOSIS OR CLASS STRUGGLE?

A much contested, but vital, issue is how we should interpret the socio-

economic relations between foragers and farmers outlined above. Is it justified to attribute certain levels of symbiosis or even mutualism to them (e.g. Peterson 1978a, 1978b; Terashima 1986)? Or is what we see best considered as varying degrees of subordination and exploitation that can only be understood in terms of class relations (e.g. Spielmann and Eder 1994: 309)?

With the exception of Peterson's (1978a; 1978b) controversial work,³⁾ the lion's share of previous ethnographic work on the Agta has indeed emphasised their subordinate economic, political and cultural position in relation to mainstream society (Headland and Headland 1997, 1999; Early and Headland 1998; Griffin and Griffin 1985; Griffin 1991; Rai 1990).

Most authors consider the Agta's exclusion to be most evident in the context of land ownership. Headland (1986) concluded that for fear of economic competition, farmers systematically undermine the Agta's attempts at taking up agriculture by illegitimately obtaining Agta landholdings. In the competition over the scarce resource of arable land, the Agta were observed to lose out against their more politically and economically powerful farming neighbours. The Agta were thereby excluded from an entire economic niche in favour of those who already occupy that niche. However, not only were the Agta losing their land to non-Agta, they were also losing their women to non-Agta men as a consequence of out-marriage (Headland and Headland 1999). It was therefore predicted that at the rate developments were going in the 1980s, the Agta would at best end up as an underclass of deculturated landless peasants. At worst, given the profound demographic changes that marked their population, they would altogether cease to exist as a distinct cultural group (Early and Headland 1998). The remainder of this paper reconsiders these assumptions on the basis of three case studies that specifically examine the role of land distribution between Agta and their farming neighbours.

THREE CASE STUDIES

1) Divisoria

The hamlet of Divisoria is situated in the northeastern corner of San Mariano in the western foothills of the Northern Sierra Madre. Divisoria is only accessible on foot, and it takes two hours to reach the nearest village centre. From there, public transport to the town of San Mariano is available on market days. In 2003 Divisoria was inhabited by five Agta households, who were all part of the same extended family, and by seven non-Agta households of Ilokano, Ybanag and Paranan-Kalinga ethnicity. Due to frequent in- and out-migration of both Agta and non-Agta, however, the total population fluctuates considerably.

The (great-)grandparents of the current Agta population of Divisoria originated from the municipality of Palanan, on the Pacific Ocean side of the mountain range. Oral histories show that Agta have settled on and off in Divisoria since at least the 1920s. During this period, they subsisted on hunting, fishing, and gathering of wild yams. They bartered their products with the only available trade partners at the time,

the Kalinga, who stayed in nearby village centres. The social history of the Kalinga, a horticultural people, remains rather obscure. Authors still grope in the dark as to whether they are a distinct indigenous group originating from San Mariano, or a run-away class of Ybanags who wished to avoid submission to the Spanish (Semper 1861; Ploeg and Weerd 2005; Knibbe and Angged 2006). Contact between the Agta and Kalinga is generally thought to have been friendly and even close, although there are accounts of inter-tribal raiding (Jong 2003).

Although the Divisoria Agta have probably been familiar with horticulture for centuries (Headland 1986: 217), their agricultural activities took on a more substantial character in the late 1940s. The Agta opened and subsequently expanded land that they planted with upland rice, corn, and root crops. For twenty years this situation remained: the land in Divisoria was extensively planted but agricultural fields alternated with long fallow periods.

Halfway through the 1960s and into the early 1970s, various immigrant families permanently settled in Divisoria with the primary objective of opening agricultural land. Among the first to arrive was an Ybanag family, which settled at substantial distance from the Agta in 1965. In 1966, a Paranan family arrived from across the mountain range. This family was well acquainted with the Divisoria Agta, given the latter's Palanan origins. A place for the Paranan family to settle down in Divisoria was chosen in agreement with the Agta. In the years that followed, more non-Agta families from various places of origin settled in Divisoria. In retrospect, the Agta indicate that they welcomed the new arrivals and appreciated the trade opportunities the situation offered.

The presence of the farming migrants influenced the way the Agta were working their land and the crops they were cultivating. They benefited from the knowledge of their farming neighbours, as well as from the ploughs and draft animals they possessed. In 1966 and 1967 a number of Agta worked on the Paranan family's land with the combined objective of assisting the settlers and improving their own farming skills. In 1967, the Paranan family gave the Agta part of their farmland as well as rice seeds, peanuts, and yams to plant on their own swiddens. From this point onwards the Agta expanded their land little by little each year.

The mid-1970s marked a turning point in this development, as the Ybanag family expressed interest in the land of an old Agta couple. The couple agreed to sell their land in exchange for PhP 3,000, three and a half sacks of corn, clothes, blankets, and two bottles of liquor. Shortly after that, a younger Agta couple asked the same Ybanag family whether they would be interested in buying their land as well, since they planned to move to Palanan. The land was sold for PhP 2,500. There have been more transactions like these, mostly on the initiative of the Agta and generally prior to an Agta family's intended move elsewhere. As a consequence, between the mid- and late 1970s, the number and size of non-Agta swiddens increased and the balance between Agta and non-Agta landholdings changed significantly in favour of the immigrants, notably the Ybanag family.

At the same time corporate logging reached Divisoria. A road linked the area to

the market of San Mariano, thereby making it more attractive for outsiders. However, this newly gained accessibility was not to last long. From 1982 onwards the largest New Peoples' Army's (NPA) training camp of north Luzon was situated in the forest surrounding Divisoria. The NPA was notorious for its interrogations and liquidations and thereby scared off most potential newcomers. Interestingly, the insurgents were also known to interfere in case of (potential) land usurpations. In the limited instances that they allowed new immigrants to settle in Divisoria, they told the newcomers not to settle on any land that was already used by others. As a consequence, in contrast to the previous decade, during the late 1980s and early 1990s it was especially the Agta population of Divisoria who significantly expanded their land.

In 1994, a major skirmish between the NPA and the Philippine military took place in and around Divisoria. All inhabitants were evacuated; the Agta stayed in a nearby village for one and a half years. In the meantime, a group of immigrants from Ifugao Province settled in Divisoria close to the Agta's swiddens. The Ifugao families cleared large tracts of land, but since the village council forbade them to stay they had already left the area before the Agta came back to Divisoria. Upon their return, the Agta occupied and further expanded the clearings of the Ifugao immigrants. The previous settlers also returned and expanded their land likewise, but not anywhere near the Agta's land.

After 1994, the influence of the NPA decreased. However, as the logging company withdrew from the area as well, the road connecting Divisoria to the outside world quickly deteriorated, again rendering the area unattractive to new settlers. For this reason, the number of immigrants who came to open land in Divisoria during the last decade of the twentieth century remained limited.

Since the turn of the century a few additional swiddens have been established by both old and new settlers. However, the most significant changes have been land expansion and intensification of land use by the Agta. This has partly been the result of a livelihood support project that started in Divisoria in 2000 under the lead of PLAN International. The project provided every Agta family with farm tools, a water buffalo, and seeds in order to stimulate them to intensify and diversify their land use. Although the Agta's agricultural productivity remains marginal compared to that of their non-Agta neighbours, the relative increase in land holdings is remarkable. Nonetheless, off-farm activities such as hunting, fishing, rattan gathering, and logging continue to produce the lion's share of the Divisoria Agta's income.

What stands out in this case is that, although the Divisoria Agta have certainly lost land to non-Agta, the word "land-grabbing" seems inappropriate here. In fact, land transactions were often initiated by, and generally completed on, the conditions of the Agta involved. Moreover, despite the fact that land was sold, on an overall basis the Divisoria Agta have obviously expanded their land holdings since the late 1940s. The main explanation for this situation is the relatively low number of immigrants in Divisoria as compared to other areas in the (western) foothills of the

Northern Sierra Madre. The remoteness and inaccessibility of the area, combined with serious security issues have inhibited a steady influx of newcomers. Thus, arable land has remained abundant up to this day and there has been little reason for Divisoria's inhabitants to compete with one another over land. As a consequence, relations between the Divisoria Agta and those migrants who did settle in the area since the 1960s have been generally good.

It must be noted, however, that this situation is likely to change if ever Divisoria's accessibility improves and farm-to-market roads connect the remote hamlet to San Mariano's town centre. Given the abundance of arable land, Divisoria may then well become a new frontier for the impoverished and ever-growing rural population (see Overmars 2006). This may have serious consequences for the Agta's ability to maintain and expand their agricultural land. Much more acute, however, is the threat that continued illegal logging poses to the remaining forest of Divisoria despite the establishment of the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park. As will be discussed shortly in the case of Disabungan, this directly and indirectly damages the Agta's hunting and fishing grounds, thereby compromising their core livelihood activities.

2) Diangu

The village of Sta. Marina is situated about 1 km inland from the Pacific coast and can only be accessed by an eight-hour boat ride or on foot over the mountain range (which takes around four days). Despite its isolation, Sta. Marina is home to around 300 people in 70 households. The majority of these households are immigrants from the provinces of Ilocos and Abra, while only around 15 households (60 individuals) are of Agta ethnicity, originating from the area itself.⁴⁾ The population is spread out in various hamlets around the nucleus of the village centre. The Agta settle in Dibulo, Ruaran and Diangu, which are situated closely together. Residence between these hamlets is alternated depending on the season, the stage in the agricultural cycle, family circumstances, and livelihood opportunities.⁵⁾

In relation to other Agta groups living to the north, south and west, members of this population refer to themselves as the Agta from Diangu, after the main river flowing through their living area. In comparison to most other Agta groups, the Diangu Agta live within relatively close range from non-Agta. Depending on their exact settlement location they may be able to walk to the nearest farming household in 10–20 minutes. Moreover, not only the physical but also the emotional distance between Agta and farmers seems smaller than in many other places. Agta and non-Agta children play together, Agta and non-Agta adults incidentally eat together, and in general Agta seem at ease during their visits to the village centre.

Until the late 1960s the Diangu Agta were the only inhabitants of what is today called Sta. Marina. However, they were by no means living in isolation from agricultural groups, with whom they traded regularly. The oldest alive Agta inhabitant of Sta. Marina, a widow in her sixties, recalls this time as follows.⁶⁾

We were scattered during that time [meaning that they settled in numerous places, rather than in just two or three as is the case now]. We just lived from hunting, fishing and wild roots. There were no *Kristyanos*⁷⁾ living here. We did not have coffee, sugar or salt. If we wanted to get rice or cornmeal and tobacco we walked all the way to Peñablanca [across the mountain range – a three to four day trek through the forest]. We exchanged dried fish and meat with the *Kristyanos* there.

This widow's daughter was around six years old when the first immigrants arrived in Sta. Marina. She remembers:

At first we were very scared of them, but the *Kristyanos* told us: "Don't be scared of us, we are not eating you anyway". Then we started trading with them, we spoke Ilokano with each other. After the farmers arrived we did not walk to Peñablanca so often anymore: we only went there when we needed tobacco because that was something they [the immigrants] did not have.

Thus, after initial suspicion was overcome, both economic and social relationships grew closer. The Diangu Agta still maintain good contact with those early immigrants who are still alive. One of these first settlers came from Ilocos Province in 1968, and recalls what he knew about the Agta prior to his arrival.

I thought they were people like my own. When I came here, I realised that they were different. They had different food: they had no rice, only food from the forest, such as wild roots and meat. Also, they had a different culture. They shared whatever they had and they had no quarrels among themselves.

By the time this settler and other early migrants set foot on the shores of Sta. Marina, the Diangu Agta were following a horticultural system. They planted small gardens with sweet potato and cassava, which they obtained from Peñablanca. The Agta learned how to cultivate upland rice by assisting the first settlers in planting activities. Soon, the Agta started to make their forest clearings larger and more numerous. Accounts by both the Agta and immigrants of how this happened are consistent: in the first half of the 1970s the widow quoted above and her late husband started clearing the then-forested land in Dibulo. They cut both large and small trees by hand. In that early stage the land was used extensively and irregularly, and the families often moved elsewhere for shorter or longer periods of time, leaving the land unattended. Because at that time there was still only a handful of immigrants in the area this was not problematic. The situation changed, however, with the start of the logging operation and the arrival of more immigrants who followed in its footsteps.

From the late 1960s to the early 1990s commercial logging operations took place in the Diangu watershed (Danielsen *et al.* 1994: 61). A coastal logging road was constructed, connecting the concession area with various logging towns. Along

with the company came labourers to fill its many vacancies. Some of them (mostly Ilokans and Tinguians) never left again and opened land in Sta. Marina. Thus, as has been the case throughout the Sierra Madre (see Top 2003), the logging industry has forever altered the area's social and physical character, and the Agta have found themselves in the middle of it all.

It was towards the end of this time of rapid and profound change, in the late 1980s, that part of the Agta's land was taken over. The Agta family that had first cleared the land had temporarily resided elsewhere. Upon their return the land was planted by the village captain. According to all Agta and some other villagers this should never have happened as the Agta were and still are the rightful owners. Others, however, perceive the situation differently and claim that the land was obtained in a fair exchange for outstanding debts the Agta family had with the village captain. The issue remains unsolved up to this day; the Agta family claim their land back, but the former village captain is not willing to surrender it unless a sum of PHP 50,000 is paid, an amount that the Agta family will never be able to afford. At present, a middle-of-the-road solution is being followed, whereby the Agta family's granddaughter and her Ilokano husband are working on the contested land as tenants. They cultivate one and a half hectares of irrigated rice fields and may keep two-thirds of the harvest, which is in accordance with standard tenancy arrangements in Isabela Province.

Although the past and present of Sta. Marina are clearly not free from conflicts over land, the Agta were able to hold on to most of their fields over time. Moreover, in 1987 several Agta households were granted Certificate of Stewardship Contracts that give them tenure security for a period of 25 years. Especially remarkable is the fact that most Agta have gradually converted their land to irrigated rice fields. A number of factors have stimulated this intensification of agricultural activities.

Ever since the arrival of new settlers there has been a high demand for farm labour in Sta. Marina. Most Agta adults, adolescents, and sometimes even children have thus participated in planting and harvesting activities for many years. While cleaning and planting labour is mostly exchanged for rice on a daily basis, harvesting is paid as a share of the total harvest. Through their extensive participation in farm labour, the Diangu Agta gained experience of all aspects of permanent rice cultivation, from land preparation to planting and harvesting.

Meanwhile, one Agta woman from the Diangu group married an Ilokano immigrant. She thereby not only gained access to additional arable land, but also secured first-hand access to farming knowledge, which she and her husband readily passed on to the rest of the Agta community. The Agta land owners, advised by their Ilokano in-law, started exploring options for the construction of an irrigation system in order to convert their extensively used swiddens to permanent rice terraces. The "out-married" woman herself was the first to take this step in the late 1980s. For a decade her relatives' intentions to follow her example did not materialise. Some land was situated in a disadvantageous position in relation to the source of irrigation water. Moreover, there was a limited availability of ploughs and draft animals.

As was the case in Divisoria, land expansion and intensification of land use speeded up after PLAN International started a livelihood support project in Sta. Marina in 1998. While this project was implemented among Agta groups throughout the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park, it was nowhere as successful as it was in Sta. Marina.⁸⁾ As the Diangu Agta had a real interest in farming, had access to suitable land, and had gained extensive experience of agricultural activities as farm labourers, the seeds for success had already been sown.

Since that time, and after the project's pullout in 2003, agriculture has indeed become a more central part of the Diangu Agta's livelihood system. During regular visits to Sta. Marina between March 2004 and July 2005, all Agta households were observed to have expanded their irrigated rice fields. Moreover, most indicated that this was only the beginning as they had concrete plans for further expansion in the near future. In some cases new rice fields were developed from existing swiddens, whereas in others they were cleared from brush land or secondary forest. However, the farming system is still relatively low in productivity. Although most fields generate two rice croppings per year, harvests last roughly a month per household. Moreover, the 15 Agta households of the Diangu Valley together only cultivate 3.5 hectares of irrigated rice fields. (Minter in press)

Obviously, the Diangu Agta have not been spared the fate that has confronted the Agta population throughout the Sierra Madre since the 1960s. Like the others, they have experienced major intrusions in their living area in the form of logging operations that have caused the decrease and degradation of hunting and fishing grounds. Still, the Diangu Agta can hardly be characterised as landless and deculturated foragers-turned-labourers. While there is no doubt that the Agta are among the poorest inhabitants of Sta. Marina and play a less than marginal role in local politics, they have nevertheless been able to retain the lion's share of their land holdings through time and are still expanding these. At the same time, although the Diangu Agta's foraging economy has undeniably changed, hunting and fishing still take up considerable amounts of time and remain nutritionally very important. All Diangu households retain a good deal of their mobility. And even in terms of identity, the Diangu Agta seem to be true to their roots. Men carry a bow and arrow with them wherever they go, and even the younger generation insists on wearing traditional Agta attire much of the time. "Out-married" women are still part of their home community and claim that they feel they are Agta more than anything else.

3) Disabungan

Of the three Agta groups featured in this paper, the Agta living in the Disabungan watershed in the southwestern corner of San Mariano probably best fit the grim predictions of the earlier research presented above. They seem to provide the typical example of an indigenous group being displaced from its land, having been forced to move uphill and upstream with the onset of large-scale immigration and commercial logging. The Disabungan Agta are presently settled at the forest fringe in the hamlets of Digud and Dipili. Walking distance between the two

settlements is half an hour, while the nearest non-Agta village is a three-hour hike away. Thirteen Agta households, with a total population of around 60 individuals, inhabit Digud and Dipili. Some of these households spend part of the year in watersheds to the north, south, and east of the Disabungan Valley. The group subsists on a meagre and unstable income obtained from hunting, fishing, rattan collection, timber extraction, and swidden cultivation. Rai (1990), who did fieldwork among the Disabungan Agta from 1979–1980, noted a remarkably high protein intake as a consequence of favourable hunting and fishing conditions. At present, the Disabungan Agta's diet is among the poorest and their hunting and fishing success rates are among the lowest observed throughout the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park. This is due to the severe degradation of forest resources induced by continuous logging activities.

Although the parents and (great-)grandparents of the Disabungan Agta did indeed frequent their current settlement sites of Digud and Dipili during hunting and fishing expeditions in the first half of the twentieth century, they did not settle there. Instead, they moved between the then forest-locked sites of Ud-udan, Batag, Pagbigen, and Dipugpug, situated downstream along the Disabungan River. While the names of those villages still serve as reminders of former Agta occupation, as we will shortly see, no Agta have lived there since the mid-1970s.

As was the case in Divisoria, until halfway through the twentieth century, the Disabungan Agta primarily maintained social and economic ties with the horticultural Kalinga. From the 1950s onwards they established close contact with some of the first Ilokano settlers in the area as well. These relations developed along much the same lines as they did in the case of Divisoria and Diangu. Initial contact was established by the informal exchange of products, after which relations were further consolidated with the passage of time. Again, an important feature of relations between the Disabungan Agta and immigrant agriculturalists was the latter's transfer of farming skills to the former.

For around 20 years this remained the situation: the Agta continued their foraging economy, while (influenced by their improved farming skills) they developed their forest gardens into small swiddens in various locations. With the arrival of a logging company in the early 1970s, however, the Disabungan Agta witnessed the same transformation as other Agta groups in the Sierra Madre (see also Rai 1981). In Ud-udan the forest disappeared completely and the logged-over land was converted to irrigated farmland by Ifugao and Ilokano settlers. Dipugpug became the new gateway to the forest and from there the logging road was extended deep into the Disabungan Valley. The agricultural frontier shifted likewise and when additional immigrants of Ifugao ethnicity arrived in the mid-1970s, the Agta moved upstream with the forest fringe, leaving Dipugpug behind. The same was true for the other previous settlement sites of Ud-udan, Batag and Pagbigen.⁹⁾ An elderly woman in her early sixties recalls the situation as follows.

My father had land in Pagbigen, but we left it behind because many people moved in.

Then when we were here [Digud], many people came again, but we could not transfer any further because there is no good land for cultivation upstream: it is too steep.

There is little question that conflicts over land have taken place during this period. What is much more apparent in the oral histories of the Agta, however, is the rapid loss of forest as a consequence of the logging operation. The fact that “the forest was very far” is recounted as the most pressing reason for moving upstream, indicating the Agta’s dependence on forest products.

As we shall see below, even in their current settlement sites of Digud and Dipili the Disabungan Agta are by no means isolated from non-Agta. No non-Agta are living there, however, with the exception of two in-married non-Agta husbands. Since 1950, four Agta women of the Disabungan group have married non-Agta men. Two of these couples live with their Agta relatives in Digud and Dipili and a third resides in a nearby village, while the husband of the fourth couple died years ago. In addition, one Agta man has married a non-Agta woman and lives with her in another village. Although not as much as in the case of Diangu, the non-Agta husbands who married into the Agta community have influenced the development of the Agta’s swiddens. The livelihood support projects mentioned above have, however, had scarcely any success in the Disabungan Valley.

All Disabungan households maintain one or several swiddens planted with root crops, upland rice, and various vegetables. However, in 2004 the total cultivated land area was only 1.8 hectares and the rice yield was barely sufficient to feed the entire Disabungan population for three weeks. The harvest failed among other reasons because the land on which this Agta group depends is of marginal quality and prone to flooding. An additional problem is that the Agta’s crops are raided by free-ranging water buffalo belonging to incoming non-Agta loggers (Minter in press).

For two main reasons, no non-Agta outsiders have so far shown much interest in developing agricultural land in Digud or Dipili. First, the area is not very suitable for agricultural development. Second, with the departure of the logging company in the early 1990s the Disabungan Valley lost its short-lived farm-to-market connection with the town of San Mariano. The roads built by the logging company quickly deteriorated, throwing the valley back into its original state of isolation.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that with this infrastructural breakdown the Disabungan Agta have regained some of their previous autonomy. Although no non-Agta families are permanently settled in the Disabungan Valley and there is presently no competition over land, large numbers of villagers and townspeople visit the area for weeks on end in order to extract various hardwood species from the remaining forest. Being situated at the forest fringe, Agta settlements provide good base camps for incoming loggers. Thus, at the height of the logging season, hundreds of loggers may be present in and around Agta settlement areas. Economic and social relations between Agta and non-Agta loggers are mostly tense. An example of this is the issue mentioned above of loggers’ water buffalo raiding Agta swiddens. Moreover, the Disabungan Agta, although they are themselves involved in

illegal logging, perceive the degradation of their remaining hunting and fishing grounds as a consequence of uncontrolled and unsustainable timber extraction practices to be the most serious threat to their subsistence economy (Minter and Ranay 2005b). Thus, while potential conflicts between Agta and farmers over agricultural land have largely been avoided – or at least postponed – by the Agta’s retreat to areas that are unattractive to agriculturalists, a much larger battle over the ownership of the remaining forest land remains to be fought.

DISCUSSION: AGTA-FARMER RELATIONS RECONSIDERED

The three cases presented above have described the development of socio-economic relations between Agta and neighbouring farmers in the Northern Sierra Madre in the past half-century. Special attention was given to the extent in which such relations have influenced the Agta’s ability to hold on to their land. How do these cases relate to the earlier literature on Agta-farmer interactions?

Much of the previous ethnographic work on the Agta has concluded that although Agta-farmer relations were generally symbiotic, they were asymmetrical and exploitative. Analyses have emphasised power inequalities and oppression. At a macro-level, this analysis is certainly appropriate. After all, the Agta as a people have faced and still face major intrusions in their living areas in the form of logging, immigration, and agricultural expansion. As they occupy marginal positions in the socio-political hierarchy they have little opportunity to counter these unfavourable conditions. Yet at a micro-level, the same analysis lacks nuance and blinds us to the many facets of day-to-day interaction between foragers and farmers.

First, contrary to the alarmingly pessimistic forecasts of the 1980s and early 1990s, the Agta do not necessarily end up as deculturated landless peasants. Not only do Agta – at the time of writing – have land holdings of their own almost everywhere in the Northern Sierra Madre, they are also rapidly expanding them. It must, of course, be noted that in some cases – such as in the Disabungan Valley – the Agta have access only to marginal land, while they have been pushed off more productive grounds. This contradicts Peterson (1978a: 344), who argues that “the limited cultivation practised by Agta can be effectively carried out predominantly on peripheral hillside land that holds little attraction for the peasants, and peasants generally exploit land that appeals less to Agta”. Such an analysis overlooks the fact that one of the main reasons that the Agta’s fields yield so little is that they are generally developed on marginal land. This is worrisome indeed, as is the fact that Agta rarely hold formal ownership rights to land.

Second, farmers are generally stereotyped as systematically, and by implication intentionally, undermining Agta’s efforts to become farmers. The Agta, in turn, are stereotyped as helpless victims. What the various cases presented here have shown, however, is that interactions between Agta and early settlers were mostly friendly and mutually beneficial and that they often evolved into long-term social and economic relations. It is not difficult to understand how this happened: small groups

of settlers arrived in unfamiliar and rather inhospitable terrain, bringing only minimal provisions to help them through the first meagre years of agricultural pioneering. The Agta were not only much-needed suppliers of fresh meat and fish during this hard time; after initial suspicion was overcome on both sides, they also were a welcome source of companionship. For the Agta, meanwhile, the arrival of this handful of newcomers often made life easier. First, it offered frequent trade opportunities. Moreover, the new arrivals possessed valuable farming skills that the Agta were eager to apply to their horticultural practices. Under these circumstances, Agta-farmer relations hardly seem to have been problematic (see also Peterson 1978b: 64; Angged 2008). (Photos 3, 4, 5)



Photo 3 Agta boy and Paranan girl in Divinisa, Palanan, May 2005.



Photo 4 Agta boy with Ilokano logger in Dipili, San Mariano, August 2004.



Photo 5 Agta man ploughing his land in the Diangu watershed, March 2004.

What seems to matter in the direction that Agta-farmer relations take is the number of newcomers with whom the Agta must deal. In contrast with the first farming settlers, later migrants who worked in the logging industry arrived in much bigger groups. Suddenly the ratio of Agta to non-Agta reversed, and this had consequences. Because of their numbers, the Agta could not maintain personal relationships with each and every one of these migrants and thus interactions generally remained distant and business-like. This also implied that there was little ground for building understanding of each other's different lifestyles. Where the early settlers understood, or at least respected, the Agta's temporary absences from a certain area, later migrants had little regard for such mobility. They primarily regarded the Agta as neglecting their land, land that in their eyes could and should be made more productive. Thus, the perceived underexploitation of the Agta's landholdings at times served as rationale for taking over such land during the Agta's absences. However, even in these cases, theft was not always involved, at least in the strictest sense of the word. In some instances, farmers have justified their underpayment or lack of payment for Agta land by considering it as a fair exchange for outstanding debts. In other cases, transfer of land holdings comes after mutually

agreed on transactions, which may be initiated by both Agta and non-Agta.

Third, in the literature, marriage of Agta women to non-Agta men is primarily seen as a demographic loss to the Agta population. Once married to non-Agta men, these women are considered to be part of the “acculturating population”, which is generally synonymous with moving out of the Agta community, leaving behind the Agta language, values, identity, and skills (Headland and Headland 1999; Early and Headland 1998). What is overlooked in this analysis is the vital role that these women often play in bringing together two socioeconomic systems. They do this not only in their own household realm, but also by serving as a bridge between their own community and their husbands’. The cases of Diangu, and to a lesser extent of Disabungan, have provided examples of how intermarriage can benefit the Agta’s access to knowledge and technology.

Intermarriage and other forms of inter-ethnic contact undeniably bring about change in the Agta socioeconomic system. An important question is how detrimental this is to Agta culture and identity. Some are pessimistic and argue that even if the Agta themselves do not perceive the changes they undergo negatively, the speed and profundity of this change are worrisome. It can also be more optimistically argued that although changes are affecting the Agta as well as other Philippine peoples, this does not necessarily mean that these societies are “defenceless before the ‘world-system’”. Through ritual, tacit understandings, or the ‘weapons of the weak’ local groups can continue to project an unbroken identity, even in situations where their health and economy are threatened by poverty and their language may be lost or creolised” (Anderson and Ikeya 2001: 2). After all, the Agta are still there, although it may be asked under what circumstances and for how much longer. This is an issue, however, which deserves more attention than it can be granted here.

Fourth, on the darker side of things, at least in the Northern Sierra Madre the loss of arable land for the Agta is perhaps not the matter of greatest concern. In fact, as the forest fringe continues to shift in an upstream direction, especially on the western side of the mountain range, new agricultural land – albeit of generally marginal quality – actually becomes available. And this land is often occupied by those shifting with the forest frontier, the Agta. What is really lost, though, is forestland and with that, the basis for the Agta’s foraging economy. In fact, many Agta today indicate that they consider the rapid loss of productive hunting and fishing grounds as one of their greatest worries (Minter *et al.* 2005). This is a concern at two levels. On the one hand there is an actual decrease in both quantity and quality of forest resources due to continued logging, and on the other an increase in exploitation of the remaining forest resources. The Agta are no longer the sole exploiters of the forest; they face fierce competition from farmers who also hunt, fish, log, and collect rattan, and who most often do so on a larger and more intensive scale than the Agta. They thus risk losing their niche of forest-product exploitation to the expanding non-Agta rural population.

This brings us to a last, more theoretical point: the validity of the forager-farmer dichotomy (Hutterer 1991: 223–224; Rupp 2003). There is no doubt that foragers

and farmers each have their own identities and that these identities are decisive for how they view and act on themselves, the world around them and the possibilities and constraints with which they are confronted. Spielmann and Eder (1994: 319–320) have rightly pointed out that in looking at forager-farmer interactions we should not trivialise these core identities. As demonstrated here, however, although the Agta are primarily contemporary hunter-gatherers, they also depend on agriculture, timber extraction, and paid farm labour. In a similar manner, although the non-Agta may be primarily farmers, they spend considerable amounts of time on off-farm activities, notably hunting, fishing, and logging. For a better understanding of how Agta and farmers relate to each other, we have to make sure that the forager-farmer classification does not obscure these partly overlapping identities.

CONCLUSION

What, finally, do the three cases presented in this paper reveal about the true nature of forager-farmer relations? Do they best fit a model in which foragers and farmers are mutually dependent on each other? Or can we not avoid seeing a pattern in which foragers are systematically exploited by farmers, for just as long as it takes for the latter to either replace or assimilate the former?

Kent (1992) has suggested that because anthropologists have generally limited their studies to one subgroup in relatively small research areas, overgeneralisations have arisen. Indeed, by comparing three different Agta groups and their interactions with nearby farming populations, this paper has attempted to highlight changeability and variability. This leads me to conclude that neither model seems to do justice to the diverse character of forager-farmer encounters in the Northern Sierra Madre. Over time, relations between Agta and non-Agta may develop, break down, and redevelop. They may be characterised by tension or intimacy. They may be mutually beneficial or exploitative.

Nonetheless, one factor seems to be greatly influencing the direction that forager-farmer relations take: pressure on land (see also Bellwood 2005: 32). That is, as long as hunter-gatherers “retain sufficient bush or forest in which to hunt and gather and, when necessary, in which to conceal themselves, hunter-gatherers commonly do not themselves accept subordinate status, and indeed often can be seen to succeed in partially negating the discrimination practised against them. Where they are in real difficulty, is where they have lost their land, or the populations of wild plants and animals have become depleted” (Woodburn 1988: 48–49).

Indeed, it makes a real difference to the Agta’s socio-economic autonomy whether or not they have any physical space left in which to manoeuvre, as the examples of Divisoria and Diangu indicate. There are situations, however, where all exit options are exhausted. Such seems to be the case in the Disabungan Valley. As we have seen, tenurial instruments may help the Agta to hold on to their agricultural land. For the Agta’s position in dealing with non-Agta, however, continued

availability of forestland is of even bigger importance. Much therefore depends on the effective implementation of already existing forest laws that may safeguard the Agta's subsistence base.

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NOTES

- 1) While other contemporary foraging societies, such as the Indonesian Kubu (Persoon 1994) and probably the Thai Mlabri (Endicott 1999), have readapted to a foraging mode of production from a farming economy, the Agta are considered to have been independent hunter-gatherers prior to their first contact with farming peoples (Bellwood 2005).
- 2) The case of Divisoria is based on the MA thesis of Caroline de Jong (de Jong 2003) a graduate student in non-Western history who conducted fieldwork under the author's supervision from March to July 2003. It is the product of research that looked specifically into Agta-farmer relations by reconstructing the recent past on the basis of interviews and mapping exercises with both Agta and non-Agta. The cases of Diangu and Disabungan are derived from the author's own fieldwork among various Agta groups, which took place between 2002 and 2005. These cases are part of broader ethnographic research that looks into the Agta's livelihood strategies and resource use.
- 3) Peterson concluded that the Agta and Paranan interact within a larger ecological system in which interdependency is critical for the survival of both populations. Her work has been criticised for its overemphasis of mutualism in Agta-Paranan relations due to misinterpretation and misrepresentation of data (Headland 1978; Eder and Spielmann 1994: 309–310).
- 4) There is no population count of Sta. Marina available; the general data are derived from personal communication with the village captain. The data on Agta population size are derived from recent census work (Minter and Ranay 2005a).
- 5) Several Agta households spend part of the year on the western side of the mountain range in the forest of the municipality of Tumauni as better livelihood opportunities arise there.
- 6) The quotes in this paper were translated from Ilokano by Maria Ranay Pedrablanca (the author's research assistant from 2003 to 2005) and the author.
- 7) Both Agta and non-Agta often refer to non-Agta as *Kristyanos*, literally "those believing in Christ".
- 8) In fact, for reasons that go beyond the scope of this paper, in many project sites it did not generate any success at all.
- 9) Batag and Pagbigen are still occasionally used as temporary campsites for one or two nights.

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