

DIFFERENT, NOT BACKWARDS

Isabela Acenas

Upon seeing the woven basket, you witness a historically-rooted technique applied to strips of northern Philippine bamboo. The minute strands of fiber on each bamboo strip are visible, yet subtle, with hundreds of strips making up just one of these woven masterpieces. No wonder just one basket takes an entire day to make. Your first instinct is to hold it and touch the grooves formed by the intertwining strips. The interlaced strips are smooth to the touch, but as you attempt to separate them, the basket stays intact. It smells strongly of the fresh bamboo plant that makes up the strands, and when you run your nails down the woven texture, it sounds crisp and seemingly breakable. What surprises many is that for such a light material, the baskets are strong enough to hold the many pounds of unhusked rice, called *palay*, farmed by the indigenous community. The only variety besides size is color: light brown or dark brown. The ones I bore in the northern Philippines were light brown.

Baskets are a preferred technology in Igorot culture; they are light and don't need fuel, yet can hold a substantial amount of weight. This technology doesn't need improving. The farmers are physically capable, the baskets are economically feasible, and their use creates an interdependency between the Igorot economies of basket weaving and agriculture. The woven innovation is perfect in the eyes of Igorots. Hundreds of years of baskets used for farming is proof. Other farming practices have also been passed down for generations, preserving a culture that has struggled to withstand homogenization by the Philippine government in the city of Manila. As the nation attempts to modernize in the same fashion as 'first world' countries, the thirty ethnic groups that make up the Philippines are being grouped together in the attempt to create a uniform nation out of a seven-thousand-island archipelago. Despite these efforts to homogenize, Igorots continue to use woven baskets to carry the *palay* they harvest.

Manila, like San Francisco where I grew up, is known for seeing technology as a constantly advancing field. What scientists, engineers,

and mathematicians create in Silicon Valley or Manila is never the final version and cannot be sustained for as long as the Igorot's baskets. Our cultures of advancement push us to start improving technologies the moment we've produced the final version. Even in agriculture, scientists are always advancing, even when it is not necessary. Golden Rice, a genetically modified rice strain with more vitamin A, was introduced to Filipino farmers in 2013 by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) (Heyes). However, IRRI didn't consider that farmers weren't asking for fortified rice: it was a solution to a problem that didn't even exist. IRRI did not collaborate with the farmers whom they had hoped to benefit, delegitimizing what farmers were already doing. Chito Medina, head of MASIPAG (a farmer-led network of NGOs and scientists) and one of the farmers in opposition, deemed IRRI's actions a "crime against humanity" (Heyes). These farmers argued that "they were already growing enough foods rich in vitamin A, making the GMO Golden Rice unnecessary" (Heyes). Four hundred farmers displayed their dissatisfaction and destroyed Golden Rice's trial fields. The pushback influenced the perception of genetically engineered rice as "agricultural imperialism." What IRRI didn't recognize is that indigenous Filipino methods of food production are rooted in a gradual accommodation to nature. This method clashes with the modernity that the scientific community, with its research institutes like IRRI, thinks tribal populations want. Indigenous peoples, as a result, are not regarded as valid voices when it comes to innovations such as Golden Rice. To many, the farmers' 'backward' lifestyle is less credible than a PhD's.

Genetic engineering and machine technology have been proven to further productivity and crop potential in agriculture. However, these innovations are at odds with traditional practices such as the use of native seeds and basket weaving. The traditional bamboo strips, so familiar to the calloused hands of the Igorot people, cannot be found in the new metal machinery. The genetically modified seeds are unfamiliar to the farmers who have used native seeds for generations. We in 'modern' communities, on the other hand, continue to advance technology, furthering our ability to make daily functions easier. But this focus on advancement comes at the cost of our connection to nature and, in turn, leaves us unable to recognize how our actions

affect the natural world. The United States, which greatly values our growing market, is okay with the trade-off because we see technological development as integral to a better economy. However, to support indigenous communities like the Igorots', we must acknowledge their practice of a gradual accommodation to nature. After going back to the Phillipines and reinscribing the contrasting environments that make up my heritage, I question why urban communities like ours do not prioritize this gradual approach when trying to support indigenous groups, instead labeling their generations of expertise as an invalid source of scientific knowledge.

Thomas Graham, a writer for *Business Mirror*, witnessed these different approaches while on assignment in Manila to write about the constantly advancing city. He was "welcomed into high-rise buildings, exclusive lounges and fancy dinners" and "met influential businessmen and politicians" (Graham). He juxtaposes this luxurious description with his perception of the rural regions up north where he observed the Aeta tribe, not too far from the Igorots and their basket weaving. Gawad Kalinga (GK), an NGO dedicated to elevating rural communities including the Igorots and the Aetas, introduced Graham to the indigenous approach to problem-solving. After the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991, which destroyed the land, the Aetas were taught "about forestry and agriculture" with support from GK, inspiring the Aetas to "not give up on their land" (Graham). Whereas Manila approaches land use with high-rises, the northern Philippines adjusts their practices to continue thriving off of the environment as they have for hundreds of years. Graham ends his article by encouraging the audience, likely from cities like Manila, to understand the land values of indigenous Filipino peoples. GK supports and adopts the indigenous problem-solving method of gradual accommodation. Instead of imposing new technology, GK incorporates the Aetas' current practices to enable the continuation of traditional agriculture, the core of tribal Filipinos. Graham agrees with this approach, arguing that we have "plenty to learn from the countryside," because here, "the indigenous people still live closely to nature," such that "the heart of the Philippines really shines through" (Graham). Encompassed by his heartfelt tone, he comes to the same understand-

ing of indigenous communities that I had on my own trip to the Philippine Islands.

Between 2015 and 2016, I spent four months in both rural and urban regions of the Philippines, allowing me to identify differences in how indigenous communities and 'modern' urban Filipinos innovate solutions to problems. These innovations differ in that tribal populations have developed their solutions over generations, whereas the more 'modern' solutions quickly become obsolete as they are continuously improved upon. For example, the Green Revolution of the mid-twentieth century emphasized rapid technological innovation in food production, introducing machines, genetically engineered seeds, and fertilizers. Filipino tribes, on the other hand, were also improving their agricultural technique, but in a slower manner; for this reason, traditional Philippine farming still requires native seeds, basket weaving, and other skills developed over generations.

Damasa Magcale-Macandog and Lovereal Ocampo, researchers at University of the Philippines at Los Banos, conducted research to affirm the value of these gradually-developed traditions. They found that the local Bayyo peoples' "ancestors manually built terraces along the mountainsides to be able to plant irrigated rice and vegetables" (136). Today, after the "harvest of rice, farmers build raised beds . . . for sweet potato planting," a technique of intercropping that exhibits efficient use of the land developed over years of practice (136). The authors successfully accentuate the cultural values that are tied to agriculture and stress the northern Filipino peoples' gradual accommodation to the changing land. Magcale-Macandog and Ocampo publish in-depth descriptions of yields, cropping seasons, and each agriculture technique, along with their original names in the Filipino language. By doing so, Magcale-Macandog and Ocampo bring the Bayyos to the forefront of their research, acknowledging indigenous populations as valid contributors to scientific innovation.

Many question why indigenous peoples like the Bayyos, Aetas, and Igorots value the land so highly, but asking "why" may be proof that communities like ours are so distant from nature that we cannot even attempt to understand this connection. American essayist Marilynne Robinson points out the danger of this lost connection in her essay, "Surrendering Wilderness." Robinson stresses the impor-

tance of defining the wilderness as a condition rather than a location, arguing that it is not just a geographic region with boundaries drawn by the government, but more a place “where things can be done that would be intolerable in a populous landscape” with “aquifers so vast” and “wind so pervading” (61). Essentially, the “wilderness is not a single region, but a condition of being of the natural world” (61). Robinson denounces what we in ‘modern’ communities have done to reduce the prevalence of wilderness, considering that “we have all behaved as if there were a place where actions would not have consequences” (61). For instance, she exposes the US government’s use of an unpopulated landscape in Utah as a bomb testing location. The government’s denial of harm, she writes, was “sufficient for most of the public for a very long time” (62). Such denials are ubiquitous in our history of constant technological innovation. Our disregard for the environmental harm we cause allows us to consider only our own problem-solving approach. Robinson urges the public to fight against “the debilitating pleasures of imagining that our own impulses are reliably good” (64). If we can overcome this obstacle, it may become easier to adopt an indigenous Filipino approach that prioritizes the minimization of environmental impact.

As a city girl with indigenous roots, I wonder why ‘modern’ communities like mine are so resistant to indigenous technological innovations. Michelle Sit, an undergraduate student at the University of California at Santa Cruz, would argue that it is the result of long-standing American discrimination against indigenous Filipinos. In 1899, following the Spanish-American war, President McKinley sought to convince Americans that it was right to annex the Philippines (Office). Initially, some Americans were convinced by the argument that the Philippines would be economically beneficial to the United States as a stepping stone to Asia, but many remained skeptical (Office). McKinley aimed to convince the rest by claiming that Filipinos were “unfit for self-government” and that “they would soon have anarchy and misrule” if the United States didn’t step in to “educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them” (McKinley). Portraying the Filipinos as an inferior population prompted the public to believe that annexation would be beneficial for not just us, but even more so for the Filipinos. Michelle Sit credits the

long-lasting perception of inferiority of Filipinos to this institutionalized racism, which put the Philippines 'behind' in the race to a 'modern' world.

In her paper, Sit examines the St. Louis World Fair of 1904, which served as a platform for perpetuating the enduring prejudice towards Filipinos. In the federally-funded fair, the government supported the 'scientifically-based' gradient of races. Sit argues that the "simplicity of the indigenous Filipinos' structures made it easy to instinctively classify them as entertaining, subaltern people" (2). The main attraction was the "ethnographic display of the dog-eating performed by members of the Igorot tribe" (3). The world fair was structured to juxtapose the Philippines with the United States through a scientific lens, pushing the American public to view the island peoples as inferior. Sit closes her analysis with a remark on the "representations of [her] ancestors" (4). As a Filipina herself, Sit resents how the fair organizers used this "racist ideology" as "evidence of the transcendence of 'Caucasian' races over their 'colored' counterparts" (2). A century after the fair, the prejudice against Filipinos still persists, as exhibited through Filipino migrant workers' struggle to be paid minimum wage in the United States. Little has changed in the way 'modern' communities perceive the agricultural lifestyles of indigenous Filipinos.

Before I read Michelle Sit's paper, I had been introduced to the perception of indigenous peoples as backwards through *Pocahontas*, a classic childhood Disney movie. Native American Pocahontas criticizes this negative attitude of English settler John Smith, singing, "You think the only people who are people / Are the people who look and think like you" (*Pocahontas*). Native Americans and Native Filipinos are similar in the sense that they prefer a gradual progression in technology as their approach to problem-solving, looking to the land for solutions before turning to their own creations. We become more aware of this cultural difference as writers around the world are recognizing that rural indigenous communities—both in and outside of the Philippines—are capable of not only maintaining land values within agricultural development, but also solving the food insecurity faced by technologically-advancing communities.

Vanda Altarelli, a specialist in tribal cultures, brings indigenous ingenuity to light, arguing that native populations can monitor climate changes by “observing the abundance of flowers, changes in skin colors of wild animals, and the flight direction of birds” (“Campaigners”). Indigenous groups then use this data to determine any necessary changes in where they grow crops and prepare the soil. Over time, tribes maintain traditional practices, study intergenerational patterns in farming, and even create predictions based on very slow changes in nature. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has observed the indigenous peoples’ intricate understanding of the land since the early 2000s and now aims to learn from them about how technologically-advancing nations may feed their growing populations (“Campaigners”). At this point, we have advanced so much that we, ironically, observe “old” tribal practices as new innovations.

Despite the initiative by the UN, institutions like IRRI still do not consider indigenous peoples as valid voices in innovations like genetic engineering. Whether because of a sense of technological superiority or a long-standing prejudice against indigenous ways, they do not consider mapping nature’s patterns to be an ‘advanced’ approach to problem-solving. However, in the eyes of the Igorots, the Earth is not a physical object that they are trying to maintain, but rather, it is a state of being that is meant to enable all species in our ecosystem to thrive. This is what native Filipinos attempt to do across generations: understand the land, not change it. The conditions of nature do not change overnight; therefore, it does not make sense for humans to favor such abrupt changes. If we continuously advance, we may lose our connection to the land and treat it as disposable.

To generate long-lasting solutions instead of using our usual quick fixes, we must attempt to see nature’s patterns through the indigenous lens. For indigenous communities like the Igorots, Aetas, and Bayyos, development depends on prioritizing their relationships with the natural world. Indigenous populations are not ‘backwards’ merely because they take generations to accommodate to nature’s changing conditions, and conversely, our communities are not ‘advanced’ because we constantly change. We can continue to sustain ourselves through the constant technological advancements that we

make. However, we are not likely to find long-standing solutions through those means alone. If the scientific community takes the time to listen to indigenous people's expertise, weaving their knowledge into the scientific discussion, we might find ourselves learning from the long-standing agricultural practices of Filipino tribes. We may have contrasting approaches to problem-solving, but that only means that indigenous practices are different, not backwards.

WORKS CITED

- “Campaigners: ‘Backward’ Indigenous Peoples May Hold Solutions to World Hunger.” *Voice of America: Science and Health*, 26 Sept. 2016, www.voanews.com/a/reu-campaigners-backward-indigenous-peoples-may-hold-solutions-to-world-hunger/3526572.html.
- Graham, Thomas. “Sowing seeds to save culture, the countryside.” *Business Mirror*, 4 Nov. 2017, www.businessmirror.com.ph/sowing-seeds-to-save-culture-the-countryside.
- Heyes, J.D. “Filipino farmers flatly reject GMOs being forced on them by agricultural imperialism.” *Natural News*, 2 Apr. 2015, www.naturalnews.com/049217_golden_rice_Filipino_farmers_GMO_crops.html.
- Magcale-Macandog, Damasa and Lovereal Joy M. Ocampo. “Indigenous Strategies of Sustainable Farming Systems in the Highlands of Northern Philippines.” *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture*, vol. 26, no. 2, October 2008, pp. 117-138, www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1300/J064v26n02_09.
- McKinley, William. “Interview with President William McKinley.” *The Christian Advocate*, 22 January 1903. Reprinted in *The Philippines Reader*, edited by Daniel Schirmer and Stephen Roskamm Shalom, South End Press, 1987, pp. 22–23.
- Office of the Historian. “The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902.” U.S. Department of State, history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/war.

- Pocahontas*. Directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, performance by Irene Bedard, Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 1995.
- Robinson, Marilynne. "Surrendering Wilderness." *Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn 1998, pp. 60-64.
- Sit, Michelle. "The Filipino 'exhibit' at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, Missouri." *Santa Cruz Report*, 2008, pp. 1-5, review.mai.ac.nz/MR/article/viewFile/131/131-657-1-PB.pdf.