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Agricultural Rituals in a Philippine Barrio *

FELIPE LANDA JOCANO
*Philippine National Museum
 Manila*

The primary purpose of this paper is to describe how rituals as techniques for interacting with and influencing the supernatural beings are interwoven with activities of planting rice and other staple crops in Malitbog, a small peasant community in central Philippines, and to indicate some major sociological functions that these rituals have in the life of the people. The principle that, in every society, there is some common element of meaning underlying the different ritual context (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 146-48) supports the limitation of this study to that of agriculture. The choice appears arbitrary; but to cover all the rituals in Malitbog or even to endeavor to include such minor rites as those associated with building a

house is impossible in a short paper as this. Moreover, a greater portion of the people's waking hours in this community is spent in procuring a living and in this process their activities include squaring accounts with the spirit world by performing necessary rites and ceremonies to win the goodwill of the supernatural powers. Thus, a knowledge of the significance of rituals associated with the production of staple food is vital in understanding other aspects of Malitbog culture as well as the dynamics of directed social and economic change.

Economic Subsistence

The mainstay of the economic life of the people in Malitbog is wet-rice agriculture, although dry or upland rice is also planted on the hillsides. In narrow valleys and wider plains, dikes are built to catch rainfall and crude terracing is done on

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lower hills for a similar purpose. Planting starts in May for upland rice and in June and July for lowland rice. The use of the plow and carabao, reinforced by magic and prayer to insure successful harvest of the rice crop, characterizes the agricultural technology in the area. There are few people in Malitbog who are not perceptive enough to understand the interrelations between their basic beliefs and their technological means of exploiting the natural resources of their habitat.

But many hold that plowing the field and planting the crops are not enough to insure agricultural success. There are other factors which are equally important. The surrounding world, for instance, is believed to be inhabited by a host of spirits who can cause good luck or bring misfortunes, depending upon how man maintains his relations with them. Thus, these spirits should be dealt with very carefully by the farmer, and should be given similar, if not more detailed, attention than the field itself. This belief which governs their economic activities indicates how inductively the people of Malitbog reason in terms of their orientation. At the same time it serves in a practical way as the people take advantage of whatever resources are available to them including the utilization of magico-technological devices especially when they are convinced that these will accomplish the desired results. In fact, the introduction of modern methods of farming, such as the use of fertilizer, selection of seeds, the so-called *Margate system* of planting rice have not affected the basic technological concepts of the people in Malitbog.

On the other hand, changes in the manner of performing ceremonies associated with modern agriculture have taken place. Many of the old rituals have been dropped due to their ineffectiveness and new ones have been accepted or developed in order

to insure success in obtaining the fundamental necessities of life. As Melville Herskovits has pointed out —

Man draws on food resources at hand and employs the techniques that are known to him. He is rarely committed to any one way of doing anything. (Herskovits 1948:247)

The people of Malitbog are never "committed to any one way of doing anything;" they utilize all possible techniques as a compromise against the hazards of ill-luck.

Most Malitbog farmers own the land they cultivate, but a few work as sharecroppers of absentee landlords. One of the hindrances to the efforts of the people in Malitbog to step up their agricultural production is the absence of large rivers or streams from which to draw an abundant supply of water for the fields. No irrigation is used except temporary water-canal which are constructed during rainy months when seasonal hill-springs open up in certain parts of the interior watersheds and supply the farmer with water that is sufficient to prepare the seedbeds or paddies for planting for about a week.

First plowing of the field for upland rice starts early in March. The hot sun of April dries and kills the grass and when the second plowing is done as soon as rain comes in May the field is practically clean. Planting is done by broadcasting seeds. Rituals, prayers, and other forms of ceremonialism are performed to hasten the growth of rice, to ward off the evil spirits from the field, and to insure a good harvest. The observance of these rituals follow the agricultural cycle.

The Rituals

The pre-planting ritual is called *panadlok*. This is done by consulting the *alamanki* (almanac) in order to check on the day and the time when the tide is supposedly high. This is performed in ac-

cordance with the belief that planting rice during high tide brings better production. Then the farmer observes the sky. If during the night prior to the day of planting the sky is clear, and there are many stars, and, if in the morning of the designated day for planting the eastern horizon is studded with blocks of white, fleecy clouds which partly veil the rays of the rising sun, that day is most suitable to start planting. These favorable signs must also be reinforced by a favorable dream; otherwise, it would be advisable for the farmer to wait another day, because this means that the spirits of the fields have not made up their minds as to whether or not they would leave the field.

The *panadlok* paraphernalia consists of knotted *tigbaw* (*Saccharum spontaneum* Linneaus, spp), a bunch of ripe areca nuts (*Areca catechu* L. [Brown] spp), a bunch of *bognay* fruit, a wooden comb, an egg, a spool of red thread, and a bamboo or wooden cross. These objects are placed inside a big bamboo basket containing the seeds.

Before the farmer brings this basket and other ritual paraphernalia to the field he eats a full breakfast. Eating breakfast is not ordinarily done, because two meals a day is the standard way of living. However, the farmers have to eat otherwise his crops will not yield abundantly. After eating he ties a piece of cloth around his head, carries the basket on his right shoulder and proceeds to the field. On reaching there the farmer places the basket at the right hand corner of the paddy and plants his knotted *tigbaw* stalks. Then he leaves the field and takes a bath in a nearby well or brook.

Naked from the waist up, he returns to the field and waits until the sun is about right for the high tide. As soon as this time comes he goes to the place where the ritual paraphernalia are placed and, holding the

rim of the basket with both hands, murmurs his prayers which consist of one *Our Father* and two *Hail Marys*. He picks up the cross, puts it aside, and takes a handful of grain from the basket and broadcasts it in three throwings. He repeats this process seven times before he allows any helper to assist him in doing the job.

It might be asked in this connection: "Why does the farmer perform all these rituals?" To an outsider, this practice may not make sense, for there is not much that the farmer can do to influence nature, to make his rice grow well or to give him a good harvest. But for the Malitbog farmer there is more to it than merely following all these steps in the process of planting rice: this is a way of dealing with the spirits and of coping with events. They are aware that Nature has her own laws which govern the destiny of man. These laws are executed by a myriad of supernatural beings who prescribe the rigid performance of rites and the observance of natural phenomena through which they make manifest their desires. To act in conformity, therefore, is better than to remain inert or to court disaster by not observing these norms. Many of my Malitbog informants argued that propitiating the angered spirits had in the past cost them more than observing the *panadlok* in its proper sequence and in accordance with the standard group practice; they are also quite sure that come August insects like *tiangaw* and *tamasuk* (two species of rice borers) will begin to appear. These insects are believed to be pets of the spirits of the fields. Unless the farmers have the goodwill or favor of the spirits, "these insects will devour our crops." In other words, the farmers in Malitbog perform their rituals in order to prevent the destruction of their crops and to derive therefrom good harvests, in about the same manner that modern technologically orient-

ed men pay large sums of money for insurance against possible misfortunes.

The close functional association between rituals and socio-economic activities in human society was drawn to the attention of the scientific world by Bronislaw Malinowski. In his work on the Argonauts of the Western Pacific, Malinowski has shown the point at which "magic enters the productive field, is one on the whole where human knowledge is least and consequently where the liability to failure is greatest." (1961: 412-15)

In Malitbog, rituals are performed as primary correlates to techniques of production—an observance of a traditional practice which, if omitted, might make the technical activity less successful. In other words, the point at which the rites enter into the productive field is less "where human knowledge is least," but more closely related to the people's desire to offset the "liability of failure" which is conceived by them to be inherent in every line of economic endeavor due in part to lack of modern technological devices with which to control such agricultural hazards as floods, plant pests, and others. As Raymond Firth puts it:

The less the possibility of human calculation, the greater the tendency to rely on extra-human factors. (1939: 169)

In all these respects, the imperatives of traditional beliefs and practices provide the people of Misi with proper ritual contexture of economic propositions in seeking the goodwill and the assistance of the supernatural.

The performance of rituals connected with harvesting rice in Malitbog is very similar to those practiced by the Sulod in the interior mountains. (Jocano 1958)

The major difference between the practices of the two cultural-linguistic groups

is the use of the crucifix and Christian prayers among the farmers of Malitbog and the employment of traditional knotted grass leaves and native chants among the Sulod. For example, when the field is ready to be harvested, the farmers in Malitbog perform the *bari* (meaning, "to break") ritual, which consists of gathering a number of rice heads from the ripening field and offering these and other food-stuffs to the spirits. The objective here is to bribe the spirits into giving the farmers a good harvest. It is generally believed by the people that the spirits of the field hold the "key to the success or failure of the crops" at this stage, and, therefore their relations with these supernatural beings should be maintained favorably, for should these spirits be angered they can remove the seeds from the rice grains.

Generally, several chickens are butchered and slices of boiled drumsticks and breasts are brought to the field and offered to the spirits. Attendant prayers are said, invoking these spirits "to partake of this food and to protect our fields from rodents and birds and other animals." After this has been done, the farmer selects seven stalks of fine and healthy rice-heads. He ties these together and as soon as he reaches home, he hangs them on the platform or *tarap-anan* constructed above the stove.

Central to the theme of this ritual performance is the belief that drying some of the grain by the fireside will hasten the ripening of other heads in the field. As one of our informants explained:

The rice has 'spirits' too and when you dry some of the stalks, their 'spirits' would appeal to the rest for sympathy and this hastens the ripening of the entire crop.

On the third day after this initial rite has been performed, the farmer returns to the field and walks around it, knotting

handfuls of rice-stalks in every corner. These knots indicate that magic (locally known as *pamalihon*) has been cast over the area and it is dangerous for the spirits to enter the field. Any harm which befalls the trespasser is not the responsibility of the farmer.

Harvesting begins when the heads of rice are uniformly ripe. However, before this is done another ritual is performed. The farmer returns to his field very early in the morning and secures several *tigbaw* stalks along the way. He knots these into one bundle and plants it in the middle of the rice field. On top of this knot he ties a knotted piece of red cloth containing seven slices of ginger and seven slices of *kalawag*, a kind of herbaceous plant with yellow tubers. Then facing the east he shouts:

Haw. . . *ginabutang ku dugiya ang tuus bilang tanda nga kon sin-o ang mag-subul kag mapatay wara takot labot.*

Haw. . . I am placing this marker here as high that if anyone trespasses this taboo and dies, I have no responsibility.

Having done this the farmer goes home in silence, retracing his footsteps and avoiding meeting people. Reaching the house he picks up his bamboo basket and returns. In the field he cuts seven stalks of ripening rice, places them inside the basket, bites his harvesting knife, picks up the rice stalks again, and ties them into one bundle. As he does this he prays *Our Father* in the reverse form, that is, from the end to the beginning of the prayer. This places magic over the entire crop, and prevents evil spirits from stealing the rice grain. As soon as the ritual basket is full the farmer leaves the field. It is now safe to begin harvesting the crop.

Several days after harvest, the palay is threshed with feet over a bamboo mat, called *amakan*, spread on the ground. There is another offering given to the spirits be-

fore this activity is completed. The farmer butchers another chicken in the morning of the day when the threshing is to start. The entrails of the fowl are cooked inside a bamboo node and are offered to the spirits. Part of the prepared food during this occasion is given as an offering to the spirits of the departed ancestors and the remaining quantity is given to the laborers. This is the *daga* ritual, an offering to propitiate the supernatural beings.

The farmers in Malitbog believe that whatever produce they derive from their fields is gift from the spirits and, therefore, before partaking of anything from "this present" they must first express their *kabaraslan* or "depth of gratitude" to these benevolent givers by offering them part of what has been received from them. If no offering is made, or if the owner of the farm does not see to it that the spirits have their part of the produce, the spirits will invisibly carry away a great quantity of the grain. In other words, inherent in this relationship obtaining between the farmers and the spirits is a system of transcendental rights and obligations and not merely the spatial-temporal tie which generally characterizes the neighborly reciprocal relations of "give and take." As Marcel Mauss has stated ". . . what one gives away is in reality a part of one's nature and substance while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence." (1954: 10) This, in effect, expresses the sentiments and attitudes permitting the sacred co-existence between the farmers and the supernatural beings in Misi. Violation of this sacred contract is not only a violation of moral obligation attached to the gift itself, but an affront to the sincerity of the giver, a clear-cut rejection of his spiritual essence and in case of sensitive spirits, they seldom let such neglect pass uncensored.

After the *daga* ceremony, the palay is taken to the house. There the grain is

dried and stored in big baskets called *tabungus*. Seed for the next planting season is selected and stored in old bamboo water-containers.

Aside from rice, the farmers in Misi also raise sweet potatoes, yams, cassava, beans, and other root crops and vegetables either for family consumption or for market purposes. In planting sweet potatoes, the farmer also performs a number of rituals and observes the sky. If there are many stars, he proceeds to plant the following in the morning, but if the sky is dark and cloudy he postpones the activity until the favorable day comes. In planting the cuttings of his sweet potatoes, the farmer secures several big smooth and round stones from a nearby creek. These stones are placed inside the hole for the plant. This is called *panodlak*. It is believed that stones will start and influence the growth, size, and quantity of the roots produced. The *panodlak* is done very early in the morning when the other villagers are still asleep. Again my informant explained: ". . .this will also influence the formation of bigger roots." Other Malitbog farmers declare that the practice is done to deceive the spirits who, like people, must also sleep and they cannot play tricks on you when they do not know that you are planting your sweet potatoes. After the performance of the *panodlak* the spirits are incapable of using their power against the farmer and his crop, for by this time the magic spell of the ritual has been cast around the field in the farmer's favor.

In planting cassava the farmer spreads out his fingers before putting the cuttings into the ground in order to insure strong and well-distributed roots. He is also careful not to invert the cuttings when planting, because according to the existing belief, this would make the roots of the crop highly poisonous.

Discussion.

From our description of the various rituals associated with the economic activities of the people of Malitbog we have noted that central to any agricultural pursuit is the belief that for any farmer to be successful, he must square accounts with the spirits by performing the necessary rites and ceremonies. This in effect reflects the concept underlying the people's world-view: that the individual human being is but a small part of a wider natural-social universe inhabited largely by spirits, and the social prescription for individual human action is felt to come from metaphysical demands. The pattern of social life is fixed, because it is part of the general order of the universe, and even if this is hardly understood and viewed as mysterious, it is nevertheless accepted as invariant and regular. To be human, in local concept, one has to talk, think and act the way the people of Malitbog do; to allow the precise system of social and linguistic behavior which emphasizes the man-and-spirit cooperative relationship. Simply, this implies the observance of moral obligations, respect for elders and superiors, emotional restraints during critical situations, and hard work in any endeavor. In other words, the people of Malitbog have two ways of viewing the order of things: one supernatural and the other human. These two poles of conceptual reference with regard to doing things are merged in the faith the people have in the efficacy of rituals. As long as one performs the rites in their proper form and as prescribed for the chosen activity he is sure of achieving his desired goal.

Looked at from within their cultural context Malitbog rituals may be described as overt thrusts of emotional constructs which underlie the manifest behavior of the people. They make possible the psychological capacity of an individual imagin-

actively to take situations external to himself into his private experience so as to achieve self-assurance. Without these ceremonies the capacity of the farmers to have an awareness of their limitations and an understanding of the "whys" of their society would scarcely develop. In short, Malitbog rituals and the basic belief surrounding them not only draw together all the separate strands of traditional practices and lore, but also provide the outline upon which the people themselves may acquire a clear picture of the way in which their activities blend with local concepts, and an example of the manner in which the practiced rites strengthen the central values of simple rural living.

The nature and function of rituals in Malitbog economic life sets the stage for the supernatural drama which is reenacted in every human endeavor. Every farmer in the barrio responds to three simultaneous demands upon his being: the whims of the controlling environmental spirits which have to be met favorably; the delimitations of his agricultural technology which have to be overcome; and the demands of his economic needs which have to be fulfilled. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive demands, although they tend to be so on the whole, because the fulfillment of any one is necessary to enhance the fulfillment of the others. It need be pointed out, in this respect, that in secular life the people of Malitbog are a group of subsistence farmers of approximately equal status, each with more or less the same social, economic, and political rights and obligations, all locked up in an intricate system of mutual aid and assistance. This mutual dependence on each other requires the observance of common ways of doing things, believing, and thinking. Conflict has to be minimal. In religious life this mutual dependence involves ritual elaboration of balancing accounts with the spirit-world. The requirements

have to be met or the entire community suffers misfortunes. In other words, distilled within the prescribed ceremonies is the essence of the ethical "oughts" and "ought-nots" of a secular life in Misi; the continuous attempts of the people to bring their inner needs and the pressure of their society into one human pattern.

Moreover, the knowledge that he has no means of controlling or minimizing the hazards of nature which daily surround his economic life makes the farmer in Malitbog dependent upon his neighbors' help and he must, therefore, maintain favorable relations with them. Furthermore, he is aware that the spirits, the power the recurrence of natural phenomena, would cause harm to his crops unless he obtains their favor, and this coerces him into following the practices of his community. Therefore, whatever food the farmer acquires he carefully shares with his human and supernatural neighbors. He creates a relationship which revolves around the concept of *utang nga kabubut-on* or "debt of heart." This means as my Malitbog informants said, "I voluntarily give you something today, you give me something tomorrow." The farmer in Malitbog propitiates the spirits in the hope that the latter will aid him in the future. This principle of reciprocal give-and-take also underlies any dyadic relationship within the barrio — be such relationship between man and the environmental spirits or between human beings themselves. Within this relationship, too, the behavior of an individual should be within the bounds of accepted norms and values. Whatever emotional dislike a person may have against his neighbor is generally concealed under a congenial, polite exterior which can cause no hurt feelings, but obtains for him his desired goal.

All these ideal patterns are the result of a constant readjustment of ethical pres-

criptions, social organization, and technical development for which rituals provide the periodic occasions for their repetition and emphasis. In short, rituals function in Malitbog society as culturally sanctioned techniques for meeting the economic, religious, social, and psychological demands of community life in the barrio.

It may likewise be noted that in our description of the various rituals in Misi we have stated that the farmer always sees to it that in planting his crops he either times his initial activities with the occurrence of certain natural phenomenon such as high tide, the appearance of certain stars in heaven, or the uneven rolls of clouds at dawn, or else he secures some big stones, a healthy bunch of areca nuts, and so forth, which he plants along with the first broadcast of his grains. Implicit in these actions, as the farmers themselves explained, is the desire to influence the growth, size, and quantity of the products, that is, to have supernatural control over nature. In emphasizing the significance of rituals and sympathetic magic on the economic activities and social behavior of the people in Misi we do not imply that they are not aware of scientific tested methods of farming. They know that when commercial fertilizers are used their crops would give them a rewarding yield. They also know that they have to take good care of their fields if they expect to have a good harvest. It is only within the realm of recurring events for which their technical knowledge could not effectively operate that rituals are used. The farmers are aware that there are certain culturally sanctioned ways of reinforcing their agricultural know-how. The use of sympathetic magic is one. As my informants reasoned: "We do not lose anything if it does not work; we have everything to gain if it does." What happens in Malitbog, in this respect, is that there is a blending of esoteric and scientific knowledge, so well-

adjusted to each other as to perpetuate a socio-economic system without causing any serious change or stimulating wide-spread individual dissatisfaction within an environment unmarked by wide variation in economic conditions. On the other hand, the concept associated with the wish to influence or control nature in one's favor reinforces the psychological effects of ritual drama in the minds of the farmer and enables him to sustain himself in the event his crops fails.

Another striking feature of Malitbog agricultural rituals, aside from calling upon the environmental spirits for help, is the invocation of departed ancestors. Sociologically, this emphasizes the importance of kinship in the organization of Malitbog society. The repetition of this act every year impresses upon the celebrant's mind his dependance on his kin for assistance and thus strengthens his ties with other members of the community to whom he considers himself related by common descent. The performance of the rituals likewise provides him with a verbal outlet for his anxiety from fear of the environmental spirits which control his economic life. It is important that he meets these psychological demands satisfactorily, because his failure endangers the survival of those who are dependent upon him for a livelihood. Thus he calls upon the spirits of his ancestors for help at the same time he works at a given task with the best techniques at his command. However, in the face of uncertainty man not only turns to his kinsmen for help, but also to other powers for assistance. This implies the necessity of relating his actions to behavior patterns and beliefs which his society recognizes as valid. It is in this way that rituals acquire significance for the farmers in Malitbog and function as a source of actualized meanings and values insofar as these are internalized by them. It is through rituals, too, that the farmer finds justification for

his agricultural activities without losing face before his fellow villagers. As the failure or success of his crops does not depend solely upon his skill as a farmer, but in part upon the whims of the controlling supernatural beings, the blame for such failure or credit for its success need be not laid upon him. In this way, his self-confidence as a farmer is assured, for the spirits are his scapegoats; his self-respect is also maintained, because in case of his failure, an infraction of supernatural prohibition and not his inefficiency as a farmer is accepted by the group as the cause of such failure.

On the whole, therefore, rituals in Malitbog society function both as psychological and as cultural mechanisms which reinforce individual and group life, unify social relationships in the community and integrate the customs and traditions of the people in Malitbog.

Notes

1. Fieldwork in Malitbog was supported in 1959-60 by the Asia Foundation and the National Research Council of the Philippines and in 1964 by the Community Development Research Council of the University of the Philippines.
2. A kind of tree with tiny, sour fruits.

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ABSTRACTS*

Population Growth in the Philippines Over the Next Ten Years and Economic Development**

FRANCIS C. MADIGAN, S.J.
Xavier University
Cagayan de Oro City

Private Transitory Ownership of Public Property: One Key to Understanding Urban Behavior

RICHARD L. STONE
University of Hawaii
Honolulu
(Condensed by Felicidad V. Cordero)

Through the use of a composite case history based on three key informants and

* Full copies of the papers may be obtained from the respective authors.

** No copy of the paper was available at the time of publication.

supplemented by cross-checking with twelve others, this study tests Edward T. Hall's *proxemics* or theory of cultural space. More specially, the study focuses on driving behavior and the use of space by drivers and pedestrians in Manila.

The study comes up with the finding that the Filipino, compared with the Westerner, uses public space while driving as he would while walking, taking on rights to it as he moves. He conceives of the particular spot on which he stands, into which he is moving, as his own personal property, and thus feels that he may utilize it as long as necessary.

This is in support of the theory that different cultures utilize, structure, and handle space differently and that an individual makes use of space or a result of duetero-learning which is by and large unconscious.