

HIERARCHY WITHIN POVERTY IN AN ILOCOS VILLAGE

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This paper examines the social struggles taking place in a largely subsistence community in the Ilocos, as the villagers' growing dependency on capital divides the community into three district levels of poverty. In the case analyzed here, the articulation of a domestic economy with the wider, capital-dominated economy creates a "market" logic in which the least poor villagers are forced to extract some of their profits from their even less favored neighbors. The varied ways in which subsistence costs rise for the very poorest people are documented here in some detail. A discussion then follows to the least poor villagers' attempts to legitimate their superior position and the poorest and moderately poor peoples' efforts to contest the new social and economic arrangements.

Recently, a child died in a village in northern Philippines. The funeral plan was modest. The boy's body would be placed in a homemade coffin and borne on two bicycles to a church in the nearest town. Later, a rice and coconut sweet would be offered to each mourner. This was all the family could hope to provide.

Soon, however, it became apparent that the parents could not afford even this simple observance. Nor could the neighboring households spare the five pesos that the village treasurer requested of each. Finally, the village treasury was emptied. Out of the small metal box came 200 pesos. In went several dozen I.O.U.s.

Poverty is a common condition in the village of "Awanen," as this discussion will establish in more detail. It is also an unevenly distributed poverty, predicated not simply on unequal land tenure but on a "market logic" that has temporarily succeeded in dividing the villagers into three categories: the least poor, the moderately poor and the poorest. The aim of this paper is to review some of the consequences of that economic logic, first by demonstrating that subsistence costs are highest for the poorest people, then by pointing to a few of the struggles that are taking place as the least poor villagers attempt to legitimate their superior position while the poorest and moderately poor contest these efforts.

Theoretical Framework

Empirical data, collected during a June-August 1987 fieldwork, are drawn upon for both tasks. So, too, is a theoretical perspective known as "the modes of production" or "articulation" school (Kearney 1986; Foster-Carter 1978). In

brief, the articulation approach departs from the dependency and world systems theories that preceded it by positing that local communities in the Third World respond to their own unique social, cultural and historical imperatives, as well as to the pressure exerted by a global capitalist order. Unlike its antecedents, the articulationist school does not assume that Western-style capitalism ultimately prevails, destroying every noncapitalist "domestic economy" (Meillassoux 1981) it touches. Rather, capitalist and noncapitalist modes of production are conceptualized as linked, like "wrestlers in a clinch" (Foster-Carter, 1978: 78). The analytical focus is on how the modes (or more precisely, the people engaged in them) interact, particularly at the micro level.

Methodology

Awanen is a farming and fishing community¹ in a coastal municipality in the Ilocos provinces. During a three-month period in 1987, a researcher and research assistant lived in the household of the barangay captain, participated in and observed local activities, and collected economic case histories from 53 of the 58 households who resided in the community year-round. More than 100 adults in the 560-member community contributed data, since husbands and wives often volunteered to be interviewed together and some households included two families. Interviews were conducted in Ilokano, except on the few occasions when the respondents preferred to speak English. Informal conversations supplemented and served as a means for double-checking information obtained during the more formal interviews.

A few weeks into the study, as it became clearer that poverty is not the leveler it is sometimes depicted as being (Geertz 1963), the researcher began to divide the respondents into people the other villagers described as "rich" (eight families), all of whom had accumulated a small amount of savings by migrating abroad some 10-40 years ago and people who described themselves as the poorest (10 families).

Additional criteria for identifying different levels of poverty were degree of access to the means of making a living (specifically, land, cash, credit, labor, livestock, farming or fishing implements and technical skills); house ownership or rental, and possession of consumer durables (radios, clocks, televisions and a stereo in one case).

The researcher and research assistant made their assessments independently. We then compared their evaluations of who was least poor, moderately poor and poorest, with each other's evaluation and with the opinions of three of the adults in the household where we lived. Their views were elicited because the barangay captain is expected to know the economic status of individual villagers (according to municipal officials). The barangay captain's wife and his mother also happened to be privy to certain types of financial data: they (and another, unrelated woman) were the money lenders in the village.

There was little disagreement as to who was poorest, moderately poor or least poor, with one exception. Members of the barangay captain's household, who were designated least poor on the basis of the indicators already mentioned and were often deemed the richest family by other villagers, made a point of denying that they held this status. Their position will be explained in a later section.

Findings

It should be noted here that the village discussed differs from its counterparts in many other parts of the Philippines in that landlessness is not a major factor in increasing inequality. The total arable land area for the village is only 7 hectares; thus, no one in the community owns a large amount of land, including the few people who own or leasehold additional land outside the village. Moreover, the villagers have

engineered their own system of land acquisition by taking over land in the public domain on a nearby mountainside and parceling it out so that all but three families have access to their own small plots. The landless families are all fishing households who are regarded as geologically and socially marginal to the village, since they live by themselves on the boundary between the study community and a neighboring village. However, it is possible that they, too, could share the mountainside land if they asked to do so. The other villagers do not evince a sense of territoriality about the upland plots, even though most erroneously believe that they own the land they are working. The barangay captain says that he has applied for legal title for the villagers, but the government has not yet acted on the claim. "We are all squatters on the mountainside," he comments ruefully.

If landlessness is not a major source of inequality, the quality and total amount of land owned are. The problem with regard to land is that there is not enough good-quality hectareage to go around. The poorest villagers have only the upland to farm. The moderately poor have some flatland, but only a few of them have land that is served by a system of spring-fed irrigation troughs, devised and built by the father of the barangay captain. Whereas this same man began planting garlic experimentally some 20 years ago after observing that it was a successful cash crop elsewhere, the poorest people lack the resources to plant it (*cf.* the chart below) and the moderately poor have adopted it slowly.

Subsistence Costs for the Poorest

As Chart 1 below indicates, the presence of a cash crop combines synergistically with other factors (insufficient land for experimentation, differential ownership of farm animals, etc.) to create economic stratification in the village. The poorest do not plant garlic; thus, only the moderately poor and the least poor are represented on the chart. The point to be developed is that although the inability to plant garlic does not directly cost the poorest people anything, the moderately poor and least poor's access to relatively more cash does have village-wide economic repercussions.

The least poor villagers' access to the resources listed on the chart has enabled them to grow more and better-quality garlic over a

Chart 1. *Cash Crop-Related Costs*

<i>Moderately Poor</i>	<i>Least Poor</i>
- unwilling or unable to take risk of planting unfamiliar crop;	- began planting garlic as much as 20 years ago
- or, very wary. Have planted crop for only two or three years. Results: fewer bulbs from prior years to plant;	- results: more bulbs; more expertise; greater yields.
- do not own livestock; cannot plough and plant large areas; do not use animal manure as fertilizer.	- own livestock; plant larger areas; use animal fertilizer to supplement or substitute for chemical fertilizer when cash supplies are low.
- cannot afford commercial inputs (e.g., chemical fertilizers).	- use commercial inputs; produce larger, better grade garlic that commands higher prices than lower grades.
- have little market negotiating power, because do not grow sufficient quantity to withhold part of crop and sell later when supply drops and prices rise, tend to need cash immediately.	- have more time, knowledge and sufficient quantity of crop to bargain with middle-men; look around for better deals.
- have little market information, so difficulty in setting prices (cannot afford frequent trips to town; or can visit only one town.	- good market information through frequent trips to town and to various markets.

longer period of time. The least poor can also market the crop more effectively. Thus, the deck is stacked against the moderately poor, and the poorest cannot compete at all. Recent work on the effects of the "green revolution" underscore the obvious but often ignored conclusion advanced here: it is worth reiterating that a cash crop that requires certain inputs can only benefit farmers who have the means to provide those inputs.

In this case, the benefit that accrues reinforces local hierarchy because the least poor are still an economically powerless group in comparison with the more ecologically favored farmers who grow the same crop elsewhere in the province. Some of the latter can bypass middlemen; the villagers in the study population cannot. They are aware that the middlemen siphon away much of their profit, recalling with frustration an all-too-brief period when they could sell their crop directly to the National Food Authority. One result of this chain of profit-taking is that the least poor are forced to turn to surer entrepreneurial efforts: notably, ventures based on

extracting the tiny, sporadically available surplus that the moderately poor and poorest people generate. Examples of village businesses operated by the least poor appear on Chart 2.

Cash Accumulation and Credit

The poorest people do manage to earn cash, but occasional seasonal work as hired farm laborers only brings in about 25 pesos a day. Selling extra produce or a neighbor's crops on consignment is scarcely better paid. The poorest cannot accumulate cash; consequently, they cannot buy land, tools or animals to expand their subsistence production or increase its efficiency. A lack of collateral, in the form of land or other assets, restricts borrowing ability. The poorest can avail themselves of a few pesos worth of credit at local sari-sari stores or from rice merchants in the neighboring villages. But only the moderately poor have access to a potentially lucrative type of credit: the relatively large sums (about \$500 on up) necessary for engaging in overseas migration.

Some of the consequences of differential access to credit and cash are presented in Chart 2.

Migration and Labor-Related Deficits

A number of factors that reinforce hierarchy in the village lies embedded in these details. The central issue, which expresses itself in a variety of ways, is the devaluation of the poorest people's labor power in the newly capital-dependent village economy. It may appear that the most significant contributor to economic stratification is differential ability to migrate abroad, since a chance at upward mobility is

available to the moderately poor, if they can manage to find work in Hong Kong, Singapore and other Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern and if all goes well. (That is, if the migrant is not defrauded by a travel agency; is not underpaid or fired by an employer; can tolerate unregulated, often harsh working conditions long enough to pay back the credit and is otherwise stalwart and lucky.)

But the poorest people's inability to take advantage of the slim advancement opportunity that migration offers is symptomatic of a more

Chart 2. *Credit and cash-related costs*

Poorest	Moderate	Least Poor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pay more for essential items because they do not have the cash or labor time free to make frequent trips to town; utilize local sari-sari stores where prices are higher. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - often pay more for essential items because they lack cash and labor time to shop in town or the provincial city. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have the cash to buy larger-size items, can make economies of scale; can avail selves of generally cheaper prices on provincial city; can engage in entrepreneurial ventures with essential consumer items (e.g., buying a large can of the fish sauce used daily by villagers and selling it ladle by ladle for a profit).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cannot fight against monopolies that occur in the village (e.g., least poor entrepreneurs may corner the market on an item; sari-sari stores stop selling it.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can sometimes boycott monopolies by buying essentials in town. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - buy rice on credit; (credit on one 50-pound sack of rice is equivalent to a field hand's salary a day.) Do not feel secure about where next rice is coming from; thus, accept payment for labor in rice even when it may not be economical to do so. Feel shy, embarrassed about using new rice cooperative in village; do not understand how it works. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - buy rice at newly started coop in the village; feel less anxiety about having rice; will probably save money by using coop. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - started rice coop with funds from private development agency. Women who store and sell coop rice now thinking about charging a "bother" fee, because they must interrupt their work to sell it to the other villagers. - before coop began, would buy rice in large quantities when crop came in; could avail selves of best prices; had psychological security of large stocks.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cannot grow rice in the upland; must buy all rice (single biggest food item for everyone). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - do some dry rice growing. Most do not have access to irrigation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can produce more rice. Grow dry rice but can enhance effects of rain-fall through home-made irrigation system.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no access to credit or capital needed for overseas labor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - access to credit for overseas migration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - provide credit for overseas migration; manage to profit by keeping collateral even if migrants default. Rates are usurious: 60-180% yearly.

<i>Poorest</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Least Poor</i>
- sell labor to least poor and moderate income villagers; cannot plant, tend, harvest their own land at optimal times.	- sometimes buy labor; sometimes sell their own.	- control other villagers' labor. Can ensure that their fields are planted at optimal times. Also engage in some patron/client-style manipulations: e.g., one least poor villager has convinced one of the poorest, who works for him, to trade upland plots. The poorest is now using an upland plot that is 15 minutes further away than his own which, over a week's time, means that he and his wife are expending 7 extra hours apiece just to walk to their fields twice a day.

general incapacity to engage profitably in new economic activities that are usually on education, technical skills or extra labor power. Currently, the Tagalog or English-speaking villagers are the contact points for any programs and services that come into the village from outside. The least poor act as brokers who mediate the flow of this assistance, distributing it to others as they see fit. A vertical chain of patronage is thereby created, which, like the more permanent patron/client patterns documented elsewhere in the Philippines (Anderson 1988), ensure that those at the bottom will remain disprivileged. If the village is provided with livestock by a development agency, for example, the poorest may fail to receive these benefits on the "common-sense" basis that they cannot spare the food or personnel to take care of animals. Since the death or incapacitation of adult members of the household is, in fact, a major reason for sinking into impoverishment in the first place, this rationale for denying assistance may be based in some truth. But it leaves the poorest in a situation where the lack of material and personal assets (e.g., productive land, capital, health, youth, education, etc.) that left them poor will continue to bar them from taking advantage of the limited opportunities for mobility that become available to their slightly more favored neighbors.

Labor and Health-Related Costs

For the poorest, this combination of restricted choices and the need to supplement subsistence

farming with cash-producing activities leads to acceptance of certain physically risky types of work. Non-migrants among the moderately poor also supplement their other forms of labor with more dangerous jobs. One example of these activities is spear-fishing, where the major safety procedures seem to be to quit when one reaches the age of 35 or so, rather than taking precautions to avoid the repeated, energetic diving and speedy ascents that can damage lungs (cf. Padi Dive Manual 1978). Other examples of dangerous pursuits that the poor are most likely to engage in are dynamite fishing; seaweed collection by women who swim and are occasionally swept away by rogue waves; and night time bus journeys by market women on mountain roads where rock avalanches and gun battles are known to occur. (After one such violent encounter during the research period, the woman who had been caught in cross-fire said she planned to continue her trips since she and the other bus passengers had not been injured.)

Other health-related costs for the poorest are lowered work efficiency because of illness (e.g., tuberculosis, pneumonia), exacerbated by malnutrition and a lack of each for medical care.

Family and Housing-Related Costs

The examples already discussed do not exhaust the ways in which subsistence costs are highest for the poorest people. However, within the scope of this paper, mention of only two more will suffice to establish that the poorest

people occupy the bottom economic rungs of the village because they face multiple, interconnected obstacles to mobility. One strong factor in perpetuating inequality is the realization on the part of the poorest parents that they may not have the money to send more than one child to high school. Thus, in several of the poorest families, children attend the local elementary school only when they feel like it, which for some, is never. Others (particularly little girls) lay low whenever their parents give them crewcuts, an anti-lice measure which seems to be used by the poorest and the moderately poor, but not the least poor. The result is that these children will probably not even acquire literacy in a country where a large percentage of the population is highly educated.

One final subsistence cost merits comment. Invariably, the first purchase for successful migrants in the village is a block house, which is dysfunctional in the tropical heat, but durable and secure. It also advertises that the owners are "progressive," as several of the poorest villagers stated, whereas the poorest's much smaller bamboo and thatch houses are now, in their own words, "not quite good enough." The migrants' houses are symbolic reminders of the poorest villagers' subordinate status and a further means of accumulation for those who already have more resources. The concrete houses are costly to begin with, but upkeep is minimal and the expense will be amortized over the course of 30 to 40 years. Meanwhile, the poorest and moderately poor non-grants must find the labor and materials to rebuild their homes every two or three years, or whenever typhoons, fires, earthquakes or other disasters destroy them. A few of the poorest people say, too, that they do not feel safe anymore in their houses, because of the "peace and order" situation in the Philippines. The least poor villagers do not like to discuss their political surroundings. They simply do not like to discuss their political surroundings. They simply lock their gates and windows every night at dusk and do not go out again until dawn.

Legitimizing and Contesting the Three Categories

The least poor villagers, as already mentioned, also do not like to admit that they are the top of a local social and economic hierarchy. When directly asked who the richest or the most

powerful people in the village are, they answer that everyone lives alike; they all eat rice and wear second-hand t-shirts, shorts and dresses. In regard to power, they also select only those corroborative details that buttress their argument that equality prevails in the village: the present and former barangay captains say that their role at community meetings is to make suggestions, but is the people who ultimately decide.

The least poor villagers also shift the frame of reference when discussing local economics, pointing out all the things they cannot afford relative to people who have the money to migrate to the U.S. or live in Manila. But they seem to recognize that this rationalization of their position is a double-edged sword. For the poorer villagers, they and their television sets and concrete houses are reference points that make symbolic statements about the haves and have nots. Thus, the least poor also make efforts to legitimize their status, using cultural means. They promote the idea that whoever is industrious in the village will thrive. Success, according to them, comes only through hard work. The implication is that those who have more resources have earned them; those who are poorest perhaps have not exerted themselves sufficiently. In retelling their own life histories and in the course of daily conversation, the least poor mention industriousness frequently, whereas the poorest speak of fate.

Regional folklore supports both ideas. "He rusts who rests" (*Ti macaturog macamucat*) and the "patient belongs to God," (*Ti aganacas, cucua ni Apo Dios*) among other aphorisms, appear in a collection of local sayings written down by school teachers in the 1950s (Historical Data Papers 1954: n.p.) what is most important to stress here, however, is not how one or another of the three categories of villagers can rationalize their activities to outsiders, but how they affect each other's behavior.

Currently, villagers from all three categories say that the most serious problem in the village is disunity and an unwillingness to work together. The moderately poor and poorest contest the superior status of the least poor in several overt and subtle ways. Thus far, the most direct challenge to the new credit practices has been the refusal to elect one of the money lenders (the barangay captain's mother) to the office

of barangay captain when she ran for that office seven years ago. Ironically, the man who did win (a moderately poor villager) has to step down when the Aquino government came in, in favor of the money lender's son, who was appointed by municipal officials as "officer in charge" barangay captain. He will face election on his own merits soon.

The form of protest lodged against the barangay captain's wife, who is also a money lender, is clientelistic manipulation. In simple language, the borrower cries and pleads to have the debt cancelled or its time period extended. The barangay captain's wife reported that this has happened to her "often." In the incident observed during the study period, her response was to compromise, hanging onto the collateral (a pair of earrings) while promising not to keep adding monthly interest to the original loan.

Tears were less successful with the third money-lender, although in the case of this conflict, a physical fight between the borrower and her creditor had already occurred a few days earlier, thereby reducing the degree of sympathy the money-lender may have felt. A more frequent type of protest against this woman was character assassination (cf. Scott 1985 for an extended justification of classifying this form of gossip as one of "the weapons of the weak"). Rumors abound about how she acquired the cash to start her entrepreneurial ventures (e.g., a sari-sari store) while she was absent for a number of years from the village. The least slanderous of these was provided by the study's research assistant: "her beauty was her capital."

It is significant that the three money-lenders are not related to the other people in the community. All of the other least poor villagers are kin to other families, with the exception of a man, his mother and his four orphaned young nephews, who seem to be the very poorest family. Moral appeals to kinship serve as one more means for restricting exploitative forms of entrepreneurship within the village. For example, rental of land, livestock or tools to close kin rarely entails the use of money; instead, the fee may be as low as one-seventh of whatever is produced, compared with the 50 percent or more required elsewhere in the country by landlords (Wolters 1984; Mangahas, Miralao and de los Reyes 1976).

The last example of "contest" behavior is the most ambiguous to be reported here. Over a

period of about five years, the barangay captain who was deposed when the Aquino administration came in kept refusing to allow a private development agency entry into the village. Representatives of this church-funded agency said they could not understand his attitude, since they were an ecumenical group who do not proselytize. Moreover, they planned to lend the villagers cash for whatever project everyone jointly decided would not benefit them. "A sleepy, sleepy place," the development agency personnel said. "They did not want to wake up until the present captain was appointed." The new captain said he thought that his predecessor was afraid to take responsibility for the loan, thinking that the villagers might not be able to pay it back. He himself had confidence that they would. He had used the loan to buy up much of the salt that the villages produce as a barter item and had managed to resell some of it. He then began the rice cooperative, which has not yet been used by any of the poorest villagers. The deposed barangay captain is reluctant to express an opinion about all this. He says only that all the decisions he made were intended "to serve the people."

Conclusion

In showing empirically that economic hierarchy exists even within a context where everyone is poor, the study discussed here makes a practical point: that land reform by itself can do little to erase inequality in a situation where the system of appropriation that transfers surplus from the rural community to centers of financial power has been entrenched for some 400 years. Frank (1967), Wallerstein (1974), Amin (1974) and others have elaborated the global processes that draw profits away from Third World countries, leaving them without sufficient means to ameliorate the internal economic and social imbalances that are post-colonial legacy. Missing in their analyses, however, is the recognition that a small flow of resources trickles back into local communities, via returning migrants, in particular. The resulting local changes in production and the accompanying patterns of differential access to new resources, accumulation and surplus expropriation need to be examined, so that a more comprehensive framework can be developed to show the way in which capitalist

and noncapitalist modes of production are complexly interlinked. Foster-Carter's (1978) criticism of analyses that present the two modes of production as disembodied forces executing a "ghostly pas de deux" inspired this paper's effort to cast the struggle between capital and noncapitalist economic and social relations in human terms.

The villagers portrayed here are not passive recipients of whatever change that comes to them from the world outside the village. But they are at a serious structural disadvantage in

controlling the direction of that change, since their opportunities for meeting such externally-imposed demands as school fees and taxes are extremely limited. The most pernicious effect is the divisiveness created among the villagers, as the position of the poorest becomes "that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him" (Worseley 1981; quoting Tawney 1932). The least poor and moderately poor are scarcely better off. They, too, had to place I.O.U.s in the village treasury when a child died in the harvest-less (and therefore cash-less) rainy season.

Notes

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The village and municipality are not identified here, so that the significant details of the "exploitative" situations the villagers are enmeshed in can be discussed freely.

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