

COOPERATION AND MARKET PENETRATION: TRANSFORMATION IN INDIGENOUS FORMS OF COOPERATION ON THE CORDILLERA CENTRAL OF THE PHILIPPINES

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Introduction

In this paper, I will be examining the impact of increasing articulation with the national political economy on some of the forms of cooperation indigenous to the peoples of the Cordillera. The material to be examined is a result of still on-going research in several barrios of Sagada, Mountain Province and on a team research project conducted by Susan Russell and myself in Buguias, Benguet during the latter part of last year. Also included is a short vignette from Bugnay, Kalinga-Apayao.

The geographic distribution of these cases: Kalinga-Apayao-Mountain Province-Buguias is in increasing proximity to the major mountain market center of Baguio-La Trinidad. Not surprisingly, this sequence also corresponds with one of increasing involvement in the money economy — as evidenced by a change in cropping patterns from subsistence production, predominantly rice and camote, to vegetable market gardening. At the same time, one finds a general decrease in the extent of community-based cooperative activity.

Indigenous forms of cooperation, per se, are often not well suited to the demands of a specialized “external” economic system. Usually they are characterized by ad hoc groups formed to meet specific tasks and needs, which arise during the life cycle of the individual or during the yearly agricultural cycle. These groups usually lack continuity and the members lack the information and skills which are required for dealing with the external market on a locally advantageous basis.

I will be arguing that the decrease on the extent of community-based cooperation is not a *necessary* consequence of increasing marketization — as would be claimed by some modernization theorists. At least initially, what may and often does seem to happen is that the form of indigenous types of cooperation are transformed. This happens as a consequence of the contradictions which arise, both out of the differential expansion of the productive forces in various sectors of the economy and also of the increasing incorporation of community and kinship-based production relations into a capitalist industrial and marketing system. Thus, for example, the growing

fact of wage labor creates conflicts between the demands of neighbors, with whom one has reciprocal obligations, and the demands of wage labor enterprises, which may not fit into the agricultural cycle or which may be more remunerative for the individual.

Some of the evidence from Sagada and Buguias show that the indigenous types of cooperation can and do make significant adaptations to increasing immersion into the market economy. Of course, fragmented individualized producers are often more exploitable (as is a fragmented labor force), so the system has a strain or tendency towards development in this direction, if it is not resisted. I would pose that one of the major weaknesses in cooperative development planning and implementation has been a failure to analyze, nurture and incorporate those indigenous types of cooperation which show the ability to transform themselves in resistance against this tendency toward privatization.

The major life cycle cooperative occasions correspond to the most significant rites of passage: marriage, the establishment of an independent residence by the married couple, and death. In this paper, I will be concerned only with the building of new residences, since it provides the most tangible case. Cooperation during the agricultural cycle takes the form of group labor on a reciprocal exchange basis. This is usually called *ob-obo* in Sagada. It occurs primarily during planting and harvesting when the labor requirements are greatest. Cooperation in house building and in field work have the common characteristic that the instrumental benefits are directly family-oriented. They differ in the kind of reciprocity involved. Field working groups operate on a rotational labor-for-labor basis. Differences in the amount of time spent on particular holdings are equalized through payments in *palay* or cash. Reciprocity in house building is more diffuse. From an ethnic standpoint, there is a direct exchange of labor for meat via the pork and blood rice that are distributed in the series of ritual feasts which follow the completion of the house; however, at this point I am not aware of any calculations of equivalences taking place.

A second major category of cooperation includes those activities which are carried out for the benefit of larger community groups such as wards, sitios, barrios, or field owners sharing a common water supply. Activities included here would be: making and maintaining paths; building and repairing fences and cattleguards to keep the cattle ranging in the mountains out of the field areas; cleaning, repairing and constructing the primary and secondary canals for irrigating the rice fields; and major ceremonial occasions such as the *begnas* — which is carried out for the entire community's well-being. Some of these activities may be specific to the Bontoc and Northern Kankana-ey areas, since many are organized through the tribunal system.

(*dap-ay/ato*), which is specific to these parts. Cooperation in irrigation, however, is a concern common to all the areas considered; hence, it will be singled out for special consideration. These community-based forms of cooperation differ from those that are family or descent group-based in several important respects. First, they cut across descent groups, thus making for a higher degree of cohesiveness and village solidarity. Secondly, they show a greater complexity of political organization and a higher degree of continuity. Third, they are more multi-functional in their spheres of decision making and in their tasks. Given these characteristics, it is surprising that cooperative development planners have given so little consideration to the kind of multi-purpose village cooperatives which have been so successful in Japan and Taiwan, and which should seem to be more homologous with these characteristics than the specialized western cooperatives.

Before going on to consider specific cases of transformation in these indigenous forms of cooperation, it should be noted that they pertain most directly to the Sagada region. There are, however, significant similarities, especially with Benguet, which should give them more general relevance.

I. The White Bean Production and Marketing Cooperative – Bugnay, Kalinga

The description of this case is based on rather sketchy research – one short trip to Bugnay, plus more extensive talks with some of the outside organizers. Also, it does not accurately fit the scheme laid out in the introduction. Nevertheless, I am including this case because it contains some interesting and noteworthy elements, which are not to be found in the other cases.

This cooperative was introduced and promoted by concerned, church-based organizers about one and a half years ago. The purpose of the cooperative was two-fold: first, to obtain a higher price for produce by selling as a group and by attempting to cut out, or at least obtain a better deal, from the middleman; second, to build up a community fund so as to have a higher degree of self-reliance in meeting an external threat to the community, posed by the proposed construction of a hydro-electric power dam. The initial plan was that the individual producers would continue to obtain their usual rate of remuneration. The extra funds generated by organizing the cooperative were to go into the community treasury. The response of the community was enthusiastic and the degree of mobilization for the project was very high. Those interviewed claimed that bean production was up considerably over previous years. In spite of their efforts, the organizers were not successful in finding a secure market alternative to the existing middlemen. This was because the potential buyers in Manila required a

steady supply of high quality beans. The cooperative was not able to meet these conditions to the buyer's satisfaction, primarily because of the seasonal nature of production and to a lesser extent because of worm damage to the crop. The middlemen were able to provide a steady supply by buying in different locations, where the beans mature at different times, and by having better storage facilities and greater expertise in pest control and grading. Because of the delays resulting from these marketing problems, there was a considerable increase in spoilage. The gains realized through increased production were thus nullified. The cooperative also had to fall back on selling to the existing middlemen. At least, the producers suffered no loss of income over the previous year.

As a result of the experiences gained during the last cropping season, the cooperative has undergone some reorganization for this year. The current plan is to establish a number of community fields. The proceeds from the produce grown on these fields will go into the community treasury. Field preparation, planting, weeding and harvesting will be done under a system whereby each family provides a certain amount of voluntary labor. In this way, a considerable amount of money should be realized for the community cause even if the marketing problems are not solved.

The case just presented illustrates a number of important points. First, an externally promoted cooperative program can enjoy a high level of local response, provided that it meets a real need and is organized with the full participation of the prospective members. Second, even if the community level organization is successful, the cooperative must still be competitive on the national market. Otherwise, its long-term success is doubtful. Third, the effectiveness of a cooperative can be increased by incorporating indigenous elements - in this case, the tradition of providing volunteer labor for community causes.

The conclusions from this case should be qualified by noting that only a short period of time has passed since the inception of this threat, thus, making for an exceptionally high level of community solidarity.

II. Transformations in Indigenous Cooperation - Sagada, Mountain Province

For Sagada, I will consider three cases: house building, irrigation and *ob-obo* groups. All of these have undergone significant modifications in recent times.

In house building, the practice for the building of the traditional cogon-roofed houses was, and still is, for one's relative, friends and *dap-ay* mates¹ to completely erect the house during the period that is set aside for house building and repairs. This period is enshrined in the traditional

cycle of activities and occurs during the dry season after the rice has been transplanted. With the advent of 'modern' galvanized iron (GI), house building has become a much longer and more expensive proposition.² Still, the requirement for available cash has been somewhat offset by a modified continuation of the traditional practice. The custom now has become for the same people to donate several days of labor for house building has also been extended to community buildings, such as schools. In this case, the president of the PTA is responsible for organizing the members of the association into a work group. Even if such donated labor is not a strict financial necessity, people feel that it should be provided, so that it will be there in those cases where it is needed.

In the traditional communal irrigation system, all the field owners within a division of fields watered by the same source or canal are informally organized into a *pumayas* group.

At the beginning of dry season, all the members of this group go out to repair the damage caused during the previous typhoon season, and secure a good supply of water to their fields. This activity is called the *menpabala ti danom*, literally, "to bring out the water". For the main irrigation canals, which supply the water for several field divisions, or in one case, the water for several barrio fields, this work is organized by *dap-ay*. Every year, each *dap-ay* is responsible for repairing and maintaining the same portion of the canal. The length to be repaired is commensurate with the field area being watered and the difficulty of maintenance. Thus, it is based upon the amount of work per unit of field area.

Traditionally, minor maintenance during the dry season - such as plugging small leaks, and clearing weeds out of the ditches - was the responsibility of these same groups. The actual distribution of water to the individual fields followed a set order and it was the responsibility of each field owner to see to it that he got his share of the water. In central Sagada, where this is still the current practice, numerous disputes arise during periods of water shortage and people must guard their water rights carefully, to the extent of having to spend the nights when it is their turn in the fields.

During the early nineteen thirties, a modified system was initiated in the northern barrios of Sagada. Once the heavy work of repairing the canals after the floods of rainy season had been finished, further maintenance work was left to a small number of men. These men were called *lampisa* after the presumably Ilocano term 'limpisa' meaning, one who maintains, repairs and cleans a road or street. The *lampisas* were also given exclusive jurisdiction over the distribution of water to the individual fields within their area of responsibility. As payment for their work, they were given a share of the crop: usually four bundles of palay for every *gimata* load

harvested. A strict system of checks and balances to ensure the fairness of the system was also developed. The enforcement of these regulations varied somewhat from barrio to barrio. Most commonly, the *lampisas* themselves enforced the regulations with the backing of the combined authority of the barrio officials and the old men of the *dap-ay*. These two bodies also saw to it that the *lampisas* do not abuse their positions.

This lampisa system is still functioning well in most of the northern barrios and has also spread to a number of the southern barrios. The precise details of the checks and balances which have evolved to buttress this system are too lengthy to be presented here. Basically, it relies upon a combination of social pressure and sets fines for offenses committed by either field owners or *lampisas*.

A number of points about this system are of particular significance. In terms of internal organization, the *lampisa* is built upon an existing system and is buttressed by the recognized legitimate source of authority - the *dap-ay*. In terms of the external economic system, it allows men from these barrios to seek seasonal employment, especially in the mines, without having to sacrifice the well-being of their rice fields. This last factor has become increasingly important over the years, since the availability of jobs outside of agriculture and the rate of migration (seasonal and permanent) have both increased. This may well account for the adoption of this system into the southern barrios.

The *ob-obo* type of reciprocal labor exchange for work in the fields is still being practiced to a considerable extent in Sagada. People note, however, that those with good jobs no longer like to get their hands dirty with such work. Some of those people now prefer to hire labor; partly because their job schedules make participation difficult and partly because the value of their labor outside of agriculture is much higher than the prevailing P10/day for field work. Still, one finds many affluent people who participate because of very strong social pressures. One does not, however, find the children of these affluent families participating to any great extent. In those barrios that have had a major shift to vegetable production, the decline in such labor exchange is even more marked, although it is still being practiced to a limited extent. (More will be said about this in the context of Buguias.)

The tradition of cooperative labor has undergone a particularly interesting transformation in a monetary context. Many reciprocal savings and credit groups have been formed. The usual pattern is for each member of the group to give a certain amount of money every month. One member of the group will then receive all of the pooled cash. The principles according to which this cash is received somewhat differ between groups. Some have quite a strict order of rotation, others base the order on need, e.g., to cover medical ex-

penses or funeral costs. Some groups combine these principles. They have a rotational order, but make allowances for special cases of need.

The reason for these differences is that two different basic needs are being met: capital formation and insurance or spreading risk. My still impressionistic evaluation is that *ob-obo* groups for spreading risk are becoming more popular, while those used for capital formation are decreasing. One articulate villager gave the reason for the decreasing popularity of cooperation for capital formation as follows: "If there are twelve people in such a group, the first one to receive all the cash might invest the proceeds in Dimensional at 5% a month. By the time the last member has his turn a year later, the first one has already received a sizeable profit. This creates jealousy and discord among the members."

A third type of cooperation for the spreading of risk, which is even closer to the original form of cooperative labor exchange, is being practiced by some groups composed of poorer members who do not have a regular income. In this case, if a member has an urgent need for cash, the group as a whole, will contract itself out to a rich villager for some job — such as building stone walls for terraces or cutting firewood. The proceeds will all go to the member who needs the cash. Some of the richer families also use similar system with cash, especially for funeral expenses. Thus, in the event of a death, all the relatives up to the first cousins will contribute a certain amount. Since all families incur accident and life cycle expenses, the benefits eventually begin to even out. One significant difference between savings groups composed of wealthier members and those composed of poorer members, seems to be that the former are more likely to consider tuition fees as a legitimate need. This, of course, helps to perpetuate and accentuate differences in wealth over the generations.

The examples given from Sagada quite clearly indicate the vitality and adaptability of indigenous forms of cooperation in the context of an increasingly monetized and externally articulated economy. The cooperative *ob-obo* savings and insurance groups especially seem to be well suited for incorporation as institutionalized credit cooperatives.

III. Cooperation in Buguias — Benguet

Before making comparisons between cooperation in Sagada and Buguias, it should be noted that there are some significant differences in traditional social organization in these two areas. The two most apparent differences are in village structure and political organization. The traditional *ili* in Mountain Province is composed of a group of houses tightly clustered for defense. In contrast, villages in Benguet are characterized by extremely scat-

tered groups of houses and are generally smaller in overall size. The strength and political importance of the *dap-ay/ato* system of old men's tribunals have already been commented upon. This institution is not widespread in Benguet, being found only in the Lepanto area and not at all in Buguias.

Similarities do exist, however, with all of the traditional forms of cooperation noted in Sagada. Before the widespread introduction of market gardening, both cooperative labor exchange for rice production (*ogbo*) and the cooperative building of cogon houses were widespread practices. Communal cooperation in the building and maintenance of irrigation systems was also the rule. In turn, let us consider what has happened to each of these forms of cooperation after the predominance of vegetable production.

Cooperation in the building of cogon houses has not been extended to the building of modern G.I. houses. The people's reason for this is that the new houses require specialized skills for their construction. This is not really a convincing explanation, since there are still plenty of unskilled tasks involved in the building of such a house. In those rare cases where cogon houses are still being built, people still cooperate. Nowadays, such houses are usually built as emergency shelters when some calamity such as a fire or a typhoon has destroyed a family's house.

In the case of the *ogbo* type of cooperation, the situation is more complex. In some of the more remote, economically marginal communities, it is still being practiced in the original form. In others, it is done on a much reduced scale among close relatives. In these places, labor exchange is also frequently used for carrying vegetables to the road. The critical point here seems to be that the value of these families' labor is lower than the prevailing wage rates on the farms which have a more advantageous location. To hire labor, except during times of exceptionally high prices, would make these farms uncompetitive in the open market and therefore unviable.

In some of the intermediate locations, the *ogbo* has become modified to include cash. In this case, farmers will work on each other's farms and be paid in cash for their labor. An obligation exists, however, to hire those who have hired you when it is your turn to harvest. Here the cash serves as a convenient accounting system for days worked. This system also greatly increases the *circulation* of cash within the group, thus making it possible to do more with limited resources. In vegetable production, such circulation is also more rapid than it is for rice because of the shorter time it takes for the crops to mature.

Among some of the larger farmers who have good farms close to the road and who hire several laborers on a more or less permanent basis, it has become customary to practice *ogbo* with these laborers. During peak labor periods, a group of farmers will "lend" each other laborers on a rotational basis.

Conclusion

Although the penetration of a national capitalist market system has had a noticeable individualizing effect at the expense of indigenous cooperative institutions, these still show a considerable vitality and an extensive capacity that can be transformed to meet new situations. This is especially true when a strong local political system is still intact. Such a system, by constantly mediating between changing indigenous and exogenous developments, can act as a strong buffer against fragmentation and as an inventive source of reinterpretation if it is allowed to do so. The consequences when such institutions are swept aside in order to further exploitative national or corporate interests are abundantly clear in any consideration of the colonial experience.

I would posit that a successful cooperative development program, if it is to avoid exacerbating the twin processes of differentiation and exploitation, must be grounded in a thorough respect for and understanding of indigenous institutions. The approach should be sufficiently flexible to find a feasible conjunction of, or compromise between, the institutional and the indigenous forms of cooperation. The optimal point of convergence between these often disparate elements will always be changing and therefore requires an ongoing "slow, painful, dialectical process of experimentation."³

NOTES

¹There would be considerable overlap between these categories.

²The money for buying the necessary material and for hiring labor was most often earned by employment in the gold and copper mines in Benguet. The Sagadans had an early edge in such employment because of the strong mission school and because of the common practice of requiring baptismal certificates as a condition for employment.

³Mao Zedong.