MAN AND ENVIRONMENT IN THE RURAL PHILIPPINES*

Aram Y. Yengoyan

I shall here discuss a few conceptions which rural Filipinos have of the natural environment, and the way they interact with the setting in which they live. Most of you have heard countless arguments – pro and con – about the extent to which the rich environment of the Philippines has been used and abused. The alleged depredations of *kaingineros* and loggers, the much-publicized dynamiting of open-sea fishing areas, and similar complaints are common knowledge, but it appears that no one is able to do anything about the situation.

Conceptions of the Environment

For a start I shall discuss what I think are some important ideas and conceptions which rural people possess of their environment. These conceptions are not always universal, nor do they emerge in the same form at all times and places, but they may help us explain why people act the way they do towards their environment. After discussing these ideas I shall attempt to bring in some empirical cases to show how these concepts operate.

1. Abundance. Rural Filipinos – be they peasants, entrepreneurs, or capitalists – believe that the environment is abundant and ample. "No one starves in this country" is a commonplace view and one which is put into action. The peasant plants rice, corn, and other commercial crops, but he feels and knows that he can survive on camote and bananas. Many loggers believe that the forests are abundant, and seldom seriously consider the problem of reforestation. In general, life is considered to be easy in reference to the basic requirements of existence, becoming more difficult as one's aspirations increase.

2. Parasitism. Given the widespread conviction of abundance, the rural view is that man can take at will. Nature is thus seen as all providing, a misconception that has led to a one-way relationship between giver (nature) and receiver (man). Forests are cut without discrimination, fields are planted and replanted with little concern for the application of commercial fertilizers, and the excessive use of dynamite in deep-sea fishing has led to the abandonment of traditional fishing grounds. Symbiotic relationships, in which man is a partner and not a parasite of nature, generally do not exist. The common concern with making fast profits often excludes any systematic thought and concern with problems of environmental regeneration.

3. Land tenure. Although legally land is held as an absolute private property, the rural segment commonly maintains usufruct rights to land use. Usufruct as a principle in land tenure has its roots in the pre-Spanish period, and is still the basis of ownership in many rural Phil-

---

*Talk delivered on December 3, 1970, in the public lecture series, "The Philippines Today: Second Thoughts for Citizens Concerned," at the Ateneo de Manila Law School Auditorium, Padre Faura, Manila, under the sponsorship of the Philippine Sociological Society, Inc. Dr. Yengoyan, a social anthropologist, has done several years' field research studying shifting cultivation among the Mandaya of eastern Davao, Mindanao, and fishpond ecology and social organization among the people of Roxas City, on the island of Panay. He is associate professor, department of anthropology, University of Michigan.

ippine societies such as the Mandaya and Hanunoo. Furthermore, usufruct rights are the basic motivating factors in the squatter problem which is currently of major critical importance in both rural and urban localities. Although legal mechanisms in the Philippines recognize private property ownership only by title, the social tensions produced by this clash of differing socio-legal norms are critical in utilizing the environment.

4. Private vs. public domains. In the Philippines, urban and rural, the social and mental divisions between the private domain (e.g., one's home, private yard, owned lands) and the public domain (e.g., roads, trails, public parks, public restrooms, movie theaters, hotels, and so on) are very marked both as to function and concern. The private domain is an extension of self and is kept immaculately clean, neat, and proper for future use. A yard of private land is fenced off, with this boundary forming the spatial marker between what is "mine" and what is "theirs." This pattern of use of space has been discussed in full by Stone in various recent papers (1967, 1968, 1971). On the other hand, the public domain is generally neglected. Rural streets, highways, and parks are littered with trash and junk, and in general no one is much concerned what happens to the public sector. Cushioned seats in rural theaters are slashed, rural hotel rooms are abused, public parks in the provinces are public disgraces, and even the rural schoolhouse is at times an eyesore. Teodoro Valencia, writing in the Manila *Times* (1970) felt compelled to note:

> The Bureau of Public Works dumped all the ruins of typhoon Yoling on Rizal Park. They made a mess of the area behind the Quirino grandstand. In effect, the BPW caused more damage to that area of the park than the typhoon itself. They've used the park for a garbage heap. That is what some government offices think of the park – a garbage dump.

Explanations for These Conceptions

What are some possible explanations for this dual pattern of use and concern? One factor is the role of government. Rural Filipinos – like Americans – view government, both local and national, as an entity different and apart from themselves. This difference means that "I" take care of what is mine, and the "government" takes care of what is theirs, such as streets, parks, and airports. Where political participation and involvement is limited, because of a highly stratified political party network, this attitude of mine and theirs is likely to evolve.

A second factor which might lead to this dual division and its over-elaboration is the scope of groups. Where the actual formation of groups for tasks is based on a narrow and limited field of kinsmen and nonkinsmen who assist one another as reciprocally related pairs, or dyads, one commonly finds the absence of permanent, enduring social groups which are always available to meet certain socioeconomic ends. This pattern results in a narrow framework within which ends are accomplished and the dual basis of mine and theirs is again fostered.

The role of religion may also be a factor in elaborating the distinction which I have mentioned above. Christianity as a religion places most emphasis on the individual, on his behavior, and ideally on his salvation. The implications of ego-centered conceptions may also affect space and function, contributing to this marked dual division. This pattern is not characteristic of other religions such as Thai Buddhism, where religious and philosophical thought does not sharply divide self from society. In Thai villages, it is difficult to detect where the private lot stops and the public land begins. I am not saying that only Christianity manifests this dual and marked division of mine and theirs, for this type of dual pattern is basic to all human societies. But religion and socioeconomic factors tend to stress different aspects, thus forming sociocultural differences which anthropologists have tried to explain.

First Example: Shifting Cultivators

If these four themes are taken as a starting point, let us see what actually happens, and how rural people make adjustments and adaptations to their changing environment. In actuality the picture is really not so bleak as we might assume. From my fieldwork among the Mandaya, an

upland group of shifting cultivators in eastern Davao, and with commercial fishpond operators in Capiz, a number of features have emerged which may tell us something about how environmental limitations and economic pursuits are met. The upland Mandaya subsist on rice, tubers, and vegetables, and are very active shifting cultivators. New fields are opened yearly from secondary and primary growth. Population density as of 1960–62 and in 1965 was about four-six persons per square kilometer; thus no real pressure existed on the land. The Mandaya are aware that upland cultivation is extensive and cannot support many people, consequently population excesses are siphoned off into abaca cultivation. Furthermore, the various environmental and economic variables and their relative importance are known by each cultivator. Detailed knowledge of how these variables operate and what variables can be pushed towards the upper limits is commonplace. Fallow periods range from 15–25 years and empirically the fallow is followed until a new secondary growth emerges. If the fallow period is circumvented, cogon grasslands spread faster and gradually render the land virtually useless for further rice cultivation. Careful concern for detail is part of man's necessary role in adapting and using his environment and still preserving it for future use.

Under such conditions, Mandaya economic pursuits and the environment they inhabit form an open ecosystem in which man has reached a semiharmonious relationship with his surroundings. But the pattern is now changing and is destroyed in many localities. As logging interests have moved into the eastern cordillera of Mindanao, roads and new Bisayan settlers have altered the upland ecosystem. More and more land is removed from the Mandaya, who actually control it through usufruct rights; now population pressure has increased and, in turn, land pressure has developed. Fallow periods are seldom more than 8–10 years, *cogonales* have spread rapidly, rice harvests are poorer because of the shortened fallow period and lack of burning, and rice is now being replaced by abaca, intensively planted as a cash crop. A new ecosystem will eventually emerge from the ruins of the previous one, but the delicate balance and inter-connections between environment variables and human demands will take time to evolve. Parasitic relationships have now developed from an earlier more symbiotic condition, and the clash of land-tenure principles has led a people to be dispossessed of their land and eventually their birth right.

Second Example: Fishpond Operators

In Capiz, commercial fishponds are extensive along the coast from Sapian to Pilar. The increasing demand for *bangós*, the high price of fish, and minimal labor requirements have made fishponds the second-best agricultural crop in terms of net profit. Fishpond ecology is a detailed and elaborate network of relationships involving temperature, soils, tidal changes, fry from the sea, algae (*lab-lab, lumot*), salinity of water, application of fertilizers, and so forth. Many producers are working in fishponds, but their control of ecological knowledge and production yields is highly variable. In general, high fish production, which accounts for 10 per cent of all producers, is positively correlated with detailed knowledge of fish ecology, the willingness to invest in pond development and fertilizers, and above all the ability to manage and co-ordinate daily work activities personally.

There are at least three categories of operator/producers in fishponds, and they tend to view and work the natural environment in different ways. The first category, mentioned above, view fishponds as big business and are willing to re-invest profits in it. But above all they actively manipulate and work environmental variables to the upper limits, in order to insure organic food matter for increased food production. This group simply knows the environment and are willing to plug in new changes, alternatives, and so on, to push the ecosystem to increased outputs.

A second category are those who are trying to move into category one. Here knowledge among operators is limited, people invest but are some-

what reluctant, but they are hoping to succeed, to "make it big."

The third category, which includes about 80 per cent of all operators, operate fishponds as part and parcel of the natural ecosystem. Whatever production comes in is simply off nature. No attempt is made to develop fishponds by pond leveling, fertilizers are not applied, and in general these operators have a poor knowledge of the ecosystem. Harvests are usually once or twice a year and commonly one makes more money from the shrimps, prawns, and crabs which accidentally enter fishponds during high tide.

Producers in the first category are in big business, striving for large-scale and steady production; consequently these large producers maintain themselves only from fishponds. In category three, producers must support themselves, or supplement their income, through additional rice farming or a small sugarcane farm, or both. By keeping options open in various economic activities, these producers are able to shift their emphasis and limited capital into anything which looks good, though it might be a short-run move. At present, sugar is profitable, so numerous small planters are emerging but most have ties, and interests in, fishponds.

In brief, category one has a fine knowledge of only one particular ecosystem which they can maximize. Category three maintains options in two or three different economic activities, excelling in none, but working each one in a way that is commonly immersed in problems. An example is the transition from fishponds to sugar. In fishponds they commonly do not fertilize, but in sugar the key to any production, however minimal, is fertilization. As a consequence, many who make the shift from fish to sugar do not utilize fertilizers and gradually fail. You can be a parasite on fishponds and live off the high tide, but sugar needs a partner, not a parasite.

References

Stone, Richard L.
1967 Private transitory ownership of public property: one key to understanding public behavior: I – the driving game. *In* Modernization: its impact in the Philippines ("IPC Papers," No. 4). Walden F. Bello and Maria Clara Roldan, editors. Quezon City, Ateneo de Manila University Press. Pp. 53–63.

1968 Mahirap: a squatter community in a Manila suburb. *In* Modernization: its impact in the Philippines III ("IPC Papers," No. 6). Walden F. Bello and Alfonso de Guzman II, editors. Quezon City, Ateneo de Manila University Press. Pp. 64–91.

1971 "Lagay" and the policeman: a study of private transitory ownership of public property. *In* Modernization: its impact in the Philippines V ("IPC Papers," No. 10). Frank Lynch and Alfonso de Guzman II, editors. Quezon City, Ateneo de Manila University Press. Pp. 141–68.

Valencia, Teodoro F.
1970 Over a cup of coffee. Manila Times, November 25.

YENGOYAN, ARAM Y. 1970. Man and environment in the rural Philippines. Philippine Sociological Review 18(3–4):199–202.