

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE AGTA OF LAMIKA, PENABLANCA, CAGAYAN

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This paper presents an ethnographic introduction to the Agta Negritos found in Cagayan province east of Tuguegarao, mostly on the headwaters of the rivers flowing through the municipality of Penablanca. My focus is upon the family groups located in the sitio of Lamika, an area often called Konyan by Agta. The people I describe are similar to other, sometimes related, Agta found north into Palawi Island and south through Isabela province (Griffin 1981). Occasionally called Atta, this term is more usually found applicable to the Negritos of western Cagayan and Kalinga-Apayao province. The present ethnography is designed to give a general view of northeastern Luzon Agta foragers, but must, in its brevity, ignore many of the cultural variations found among the several dialect groups available for study. This paper will provide a general background from which the following papers may proceed, rightly neglecting ethnographic introductions.

The Agta of Lamika are distributed in five bands or extended joint family groups, each residential cluster being about two or three hours walk from the others. Each band has between two and five houses, although as many as eight nuclear families. The size of individual families varies. From three to six is the rule.

The environment of the Lamika Agta is riverine, foothill, and steep mountain slopes of the western side of the Sierra Madre. As one travels from the road terminus at Callao, one passes through extensive stands of cogon grass (*Imperata*), talahib (*Saccharum*) and other coarse grasses. The grasslands, covered with forest earlier in this century, were created by the swiddening activities of Ilawi farmers. As one progresses upriver of the Ilawi homesteads, often crossing and recrossing the river, one passes through dense stands of bamboo. These stands are found in both old swidden areas and in primary forest, and reflect the seasonally dry period, which is less pronounced to the east. As elevation increases, bamboo diminishes and the dipterocarp forest becomes prevalent.

Agta campsites are at present situated close to forested regions, seldom reaching downriver into lower elevations. Since World War II, expanding Ilawis, Ibanags, and Ilokanos have severely impacted the lower reaches of the rivers and disrupted the flora and fauna once heavily exploited by Agta. Agta now are confined to acquisition of interior forest resources, especially the larger game animals and marketable plant products. Of the former, only

wild pig and deer are important for consumption or sale. Monkeys are eaten when killed, but this is infrequent. Smaller game animals are a very minor resource and fish are nearly gone from all but the most upriver portions of the watercourses. Agta remain deeply knowledgeable concerning all fauna from birds and reptiles through insects, but hunt very few. The same is true for plants. Agta no longer depend on the wide range of wild roots, fruits, and palms as they once likely did, but retain their depth of knowledge. Only in difficult times do they resort to frequent consumption of wild plant foods; normally they prefer to grow or trade for rice, corn, and domesticated root crops.

ADAPTATION

The adaptation of the Agta is the system by which the people, organized through social relations, harness the resources of their environment in order to get food, shelter, and satisfy other life-maintaining needs. Adaptation to them is their ability to survive and make adjustments to environmental conditions.

The conditions to which the Agta must adapt include the nature of the tropical forest in which they reside, the existence of a typhoon belt that runs through the region, and the rigors of the rainy and dry seasons. The forest has several different zones, based on elevation, relation to drainage, and history of human impacts. Non-seasonal and seasonal changes in the forest influence the presence and behavior of game animals and their fodder. (See papers by Allen and Mudar, this volume, plus Griffin 1984). According to Griffin, plant foods for human consumption may be relatively impoverished but perhaps still adequate for animals. We cannot be certain of this, since the flora of the western side of the Sierra Madre is even less well known than that of the east. In any case, fluctuations in the habitats of animals and people directly influence the Agta acquisition of a livelihood.

Seasonality is important in Agta activities. The dry season, most pronounced from March to July, is a time of intense activity. Food is plentiful due to the ease of hunting, fishing, and gathering. Swidden cultivation takes place at this time (for swiddening details see Estico-Griffin and Griffin [1981] and Rai [1982]). One behavior of special note is the frequency with which Agta move among camps, helping each other with clearing and planting work. At the time of harvesting, more help is likely, with sharing of the resulting grains the norm.

The dry season is also the best time for transacting business with the Ilawis and Ilokanos, who buy the Agta's collected goods and who hire them for labor in the fields. Agta collect payment in cash or in kind, often preferring to get corn, coffee, liquor, and clothing instead of cash.

The height of the rainy season is from September or October through December. The Agta consider these months the most difficult. Rivers may be in flood and difficult to cross. Mobility is decreased and trade downriver lessened. Wild food gathering is minimal and hunger more likely than in dry months. Hunting success is highly variable, as is the condition of prey animals.

Agta are basically hunters and gatherers, but have added activities because of contact with Itawis and others. Their traditional hunting equipment includes the bow and arrow, knives, and traps. Many different types of arrow points are known, some serving specialized tasks, others simply general-purpose (Estioko-Griffin [1984] discusses these in detail). Youths are trained early in hunting, and by the age of fifteen or so are gaining in forest skills. In the Konyan-Lanika area, girls are trained to hunt, and by adulthood frequently pursue game. Some women use the bow and arrow, while others prefer to hunt with dogs and kill cornered pig and deer with knives (see Estioko-Griffin, this volume).

Fishing is done by both males and females. The large Pinacuan river is often fished, in spite of recent depletion of many species, and smaller rivers and streams are exploited. Small children learn to fish through constant practice. They swim and dive throughout the dry season when waters are safe and slow, and they use the wood-and-glass goggles common among adults.

Food gathering is done by both sexes, but women do more. Whenever forest foods are plentiful and worthwhile to gather, parties of women and children make expeditions into the jungle. In-season fruits are the most frequent objective among possible foods. Palm hearts, roots, and greens are less critical, in that order. Sometimes the forest produces far more than the Agta can collect; these foods either spoil or are consumed by wild animals.

Gathering honey is an important dry season activity, since its consumption is greatly desired and lowlanders always want to purchase it. Itawi and Ilokano traders frequent Agta campsites during honey season, bringing money and goods to exchange. Supplementing honey as a source of income is the collecting of rattan, bamboo, orchids, and medicinal plants.

Farming, or swidden cultivation, is an activity undertaken both for lowlanders, in exchange for cash or kind, and for domestic consumption from one's own fields. Among the Agta of Konyan, corn is more likely to be grown than upland rice. This reflects the preferences of the neighboring Itawi farmers. A similar situation is found, according to P. B. Griffin, in Palanan, Isabela, while to the east of Konyan, Agta prefer upland rice. Here again they emulate their farming friends, obtaining seeds and cultivation knowledge whenever available.

The kaingin system used by the Agta is of considerable age, certainly extending beyond the lives of most of the living Agta. The oldest informant at Lanika asserts that swiddening is an old activity. At the same time, however, they do say that before they cultivated they subsisted on hunting, fishing, and gathering. Further fieldwork, perhaps including archaeology, may be necessary before the question of the antiquity of Agta cultivation will be resolved.

In any case, swidden clearing begins in January, with burning of the cut, dried vegetation done, weather permitting, by March. Larger trees are usually cut by men, while both sexes perform all the other tasks necessary. Sometimes Agta from other residential clusters are asked to help, especially in a particularly ambitious clearing. Workers are fed as well as possible and given promises of reciprocity.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Agta at Lanika are organized on the "band" level of social organization (Service 1968), with each residential cluster containing only affinity and consanguineally related kin. Usually the group is an extended joint family, composed of several nuclear families, each tied to a core family or families by parent or sibling links. Usually three generations are present, although the oldest representatives may be widows or widowers. Core families are either the complete senior parental nuclear family or two or three sibling-bound families. Rai (1982), speaking of the Agta of Isabela, argues that female sibling links are most desirable but in Cagayan male links and virilocality are common. Whatever the rule, residential shifts are undertaken easily and frequently.

Size of residential group, the kinship basis of organization, and the economic ease related to mobility are consistent with an egalitarian authority system and decision making authority vested in no one person. Usually, as is typical of foragers, middle-aged and older individuals are respected for their proven wisdom, skills, and success. Their direction is often sought, but need not be followed. Among the Lanika Agta, and in the group from which most of my information is derived, a senior male tends to strongly influence the group's course of action, be it relocation, subsistence efforts, or relations with outsiders.

Within the nuclear family, husbands and wives share decisions, although males seem at times to carry greater weight in the more important decisions. Strong women — that is to say, especially intelligent and capable ones — are, like men, likely to be influential. In dealing with non-Agta, however, men are usually cast into the role of leaders. And, consistent with lowlanders' views of "leadership," one man per group is treated as the

group leader. Should such a man die, a younger brother or other capable senior male might assume the position, although this is again largely a construct of outsiders and is not binding on any Agta.

Culture change is occurring and may well redirect Agta notions of authority, especially as contact and economic transactions with non-Agta increase. Outsiders, operating by their own rules of behavior, work to influence the "leader," bring *him* presents, following his advice, and so on. The power of the Agta leader to manipulate goods and services received is a force to be considered.

Given the government's intent to integrate Agta into the national system and to bring them under control, the leadership situation is critical. At Lamika the "leader" has been designated by the lowlander Barangay Captain as the "Agta Barangay Captain." The leader has in turn appointed a Councilman and a Sgt. at Arms. These positions please the Agta, who feel the importance and the power, but perhaps do not realize the new degree of control over Agta sought by lowlanders.

CHANGES

Agta are not a sedentary people, but are highly mobile, moving residences as they see fit. They are not nomadic by nature or instinct (humans do not have such instincts), but move due to economic and social necessity. Aside from monthly and seasonal adjustments, they have been forced into a serious relocation trend throughout this century. Three generations ago Agta lived far downriver from their present areas. In fact, they were found not far from Peñablanca itself, approaching the Cagayan River. This area is now occupied by Iawi, Ibanag, Ilokano, and Tagalog people. These lowlanders have been constantly expanding upriver due to population growth and the need for new land to cultivate. In the early 1920s, Iawi hunters often encountered Agta camped on the Pinacanan River near the present Aggugadan. By the thirties, Ilokano and Tagalog farmers had moved into the location, growing corn, peanuts, and tobacco.

The Agta began to move upstream, settling for a while in what is now Lagum. Agta began to undertake more commercial hunting, trading wild pig and deer meat for cultivated crops. Game was much more plentiful then than now, and in demand due to lowlander population growth. In addition, Agta began to be more and more exploited, cheated, and treated poorly. Given their disadvantages in the social, economic, and technological realms, as well as their numerical inferiority, Agta only had the choice to move upriver and away from lowlanders. They could also only submit to the demands put on their subsistence and trade-efforts and become subordinate to outsiders. They remain today an underprivileged minority group, largely

outside the political system of the region, and without real access to power, assistance, and whatever economic benefits the national government may offer. It is only through the enlightened efforts of a few interested and responsible officials on the local and provincial level that the Agta have so far resisted a decline into abject poverty, complete exploitation, and serfdom.

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