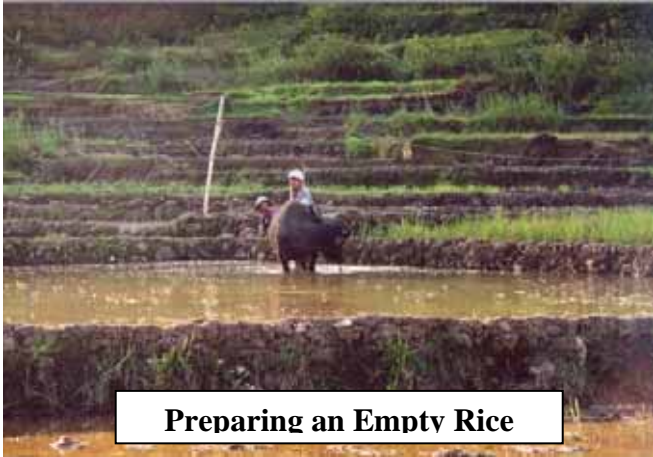


Getting to Know the Igorots - Growing Rice

By: *Claus (Agpad) Nabert*

At home we go to the supermarket for a bag of rice without thinking. If we are fortunate enough to travel to Asia we often see many rice terraces which we also admire without thinking. So how does rice happen especially in the mountains of the Philippines?



Preparing an Empty Rice

to the fields so you do it all yourself unless you are able to borrow a water buffalo. Towards the end of October the elders watch the weather, the birds and the spirits. As these come into alignment a huge ceremony is undertaken to encourage a good harvest and the planting season is officially launched.

The next day everyone goes to the fields. The seedlings are dug up from the earlier fields and are now carried up the mountains to the highest fields.

This too is terrible work, the seedlings have their roots in wet heavy mud and the climb

Usually late September or early October a few rice fields are designated by the elders for seedlings and this is then where they are planted. The rest of the fields would now be prepared. This is backbreaking work having to dig up the wet muck in each field and turn it over so that the rice stubble will be mixed with the soil to act as a fertilizer.

One of the challenges in the mountains is that you can't use machines, they can't get



The Planting Ceremony

can sometimes be a thousand metres or more. The elders determine the order of planting but essentially the principle is simple, you start at the top fields and work your way down. Everyone brings the seedlings to the same field and plants it all regardless of ownership before moving on to the next. The seedlings are planted some distance apart with exacting precision. If you look at the field later you'd swear they were planted with a ruler. And of course



Freshly Planted Seedlings

they were planted by hand with everyone bent over all day long.



Now comes a major challenge, balancing the irrigation system. The highest fields are watered first from the highest watershed. The walls are designed then to overflow into the next field below and so the water cascades all the way down to the last field. The men live in the fields for at least a week to balance this irrigation system. Sometimes they even risk bitter fights over water before everything finally comes into balance. Once balance is achieved the planting is finished.

Now all that needs to be done is to occasionally weed the fields to keep the rice pure. When that's finished terrace walls are checked regularly and also weeded. If anything is allowed to grow through the cracks in the stones the wall can collapse so the walls have to be weeded regularly too.



When the rice is ready for harvesting everyone again pitches in. Again you spend your days bent over cutting the rice stalks. They are then bundled and left to dry in the sun. Since your home is far from your fields you have to carry this harvest all the way home to dry. Once dry the stalks are beaten to break off the rice kernels and these are then spread out in the sun to dry. In this case they are often spread out on the roads where possible (see below) which are convenient flat surfaces. Sometimes vehicles also drive over the drying rice so always make

sure you wash your rice before you cook it.

Then the grains are flayed or sent to a local mill to break off the husks leaving pure rice grains behind. The entire harvest is usually four to six weeks of intensive hard manual labour once again.

Finally many return to the fields for a few days to just do last minute maintenance on the terrace walls and to just settle the field itself. Once that's done they return home for a well deserved rest until the next planting season begins. Is it any wonder that people prefer to go to the market to buy rice?

