A member of a celebrated Philippine mountain tribe contemplates the erosion of her native culture and the ancient rice terraces that have nurtured it.
By David Howard, we are described, escaped that moniker. In the 20th century, there was a flurry of activities and meetings in Manila and Banaue — some of which I attended — to formally nominate our rice terraces for inclusion in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List as a protected cultural landscape.

Later that year, when officially adding the terraces to the list, UNESCO stated: “For 2,000 years, the high rice fields of the Ifugao have followed the contours of the mountain. The fruit of knowledge passed on from one generation to the next, of sacred traditions and a delicate social balance, they helped form a landscape of great beauty that expresses conquered and conserved harmony between humankind and the environment.” During its annual summit in December 2001 in Helsinki, UNESCO noted its continued deep concern for the rice terraces by putting them on its List of World Heritage in Danger. It stated, in part: “Despite efforts to safeguard the site by the Banaue Rice Terraces Task Force and the Ifugao Terraces Commission, more resources, greater independence and an assurance of permanence are needed.”

Fewer tourists preferred

Teodoro Baguilat, governor of Ifugao Province, stated in the local press that he would prefer to have fewer tourists in the area to facilitate the terraces’ preservation. He also said that once the terraces are commercialized, more hotels and establishments will sprout like mushrooms. During a conversation I had with him in May 2002 in his office in the town of Lagawe, he clarified that tourism could be part of a strategy to help develop the rice terraces and provide additional income for the people. “Although part of the country’s cultural heritage, the terraces are still primarily agricultural land,” he said. He is afraid that the goals of tourism officials may not always support what is really needed to preserve our rice terraces and best serve the people. “Let’s not preserve the terraces for the tourists, but for the Ifugao themselves,” he told me emphatically. I agree with Mr. Baguilat that the government should focus on issues of concern to Ifugao rice farmers, including infestations of rats and golden snails as well as enhancing the irrigation systems for mountain farms. Perhaps most important of all is educating our youth to appreciate that their culture revolves around rice cultivation — and to consider staying in the region instead of moving to the lowlands to seek their fortunes.

Glimmer of understanding

As politicians continue to discuss what to do, some ordinary Ifugao citizens, for their part, express a wide range of feelings and are engaged in a variety of activities related to the preservation of the Ifugao rice terraces and the traditions and culture tied to them. Since 1995, when my husband was stationed in the Philippines as a science writer and editor for IRRI, we have made an effort to record on videotape the various rituals associated with the rice-growing calendar. With the help of Ana Dulman-Habbiling, the matriarch of the tumoná (leading family) in Tucbuban village for whom my late father sometimes officiated as a mumbaki (priest) at various rice rituals, we have been able to document many hours of ceremonies, particularly the post-transplanting (Kulpe) and the harvest (Ingngilin) rites. We felt that we could at least show these tapes to our three half-Ifugao children and future grandchildren, giving them a glimpse of understanding of what their mother’s culture once was.

Some professional Filipino videographers and filmmakers — namely Fruto Corre and Kiddat de Guia — have had the same idea. Mr. Corre recently won recognition from the Film Academy of the Philippines for his ethnographic work Ifugao: Bulabunduking Buhay, a 45-minute documentary. Throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, there has been continued interest in the direction and pending disappearance of our 2,000-year-old rice terraces and related rituals and culture. In 1995 there was a flurry of activities and meetings in Manila and Banaue — some of which I attended — to formally nominate our rice terraces for inclusion in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List as a protected cultural landscape.

Nine decades later, foreigners are still fascinated with headhunting. The practice was abandoned long ago by the Ifugao, but we still have not escaped that moniker. In the 2000 book The Last Filipino Head Hunters, ARIEL JAVELLANA, the last living headhunter, expressed conquered and conserved harmony between humankind and the environment.” During its annual summit in December 2001 in Helsinki, UNESCO noted its continued deep concern for the rice terraces by putting them on its List of World Heritage in Danger. It stated, in part: “Despite efforts to safeguard the site by the Banaue Rice Terraces Task Force and the Ifugao Terraces Commission, more resources, greater independence and an assurance of permanence are needed.”

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video that documents the painful dilemmas experienced by my people today. He skillfully establishes the connections between the terraces and our traditions — indeed, how they enrich and nourish each other. The video’s message is that if the terraces disappear, so will our tradition and culture. This tape has been commercially packaged and is sold in many video stores and bookstores in Manila and elsewhere.

Mr. de Guia’s work debuted internationally on the Discovery Channel on 26 December 2001, as part of its Young Filmmaker series. In it, he shows how we Ifugao ourselves can document our disappearing rituals and traditions using small, handheld video cameras. This is exactly what my husband, Gene, and I have been doing since 1995, albeit as amateurs.

Even though the production of these programs may have been motivated in part by profit, I think it is still a good thing that our rituals and culture are being documented for both Ifugao and the world at large. In viewing these programs, however, I could not help noticing that many of the rituals depicted appear to have been staged expressly for the camera. This is something that Gene and I avoided — at least initially — in our own videotaping. In 1995, this was still possible when, in July, we taped several hours of the rice harvest ritual in Lugu, performed by local mumbaki Yogyog Dogapna and Buyuccan Udhuk. The ritual would have been held regardless of whether or not they had known that we were coming to record it.

Only 6 years later, in June 2001, in an attempt to rerecord the Ingngilin with better camera equipment and from different angles, I had to pay three mumbaki from outside the area to perform the ritual at Ana Dulnuan-Habbiling’s family granary. If we had not come, it would have been the first time that a harvest ritual was not held in Ana’s granary.

Preserving rituals
I asked Ana, who has been a practicing Catholic for many years, why she still persists to preserve the post-transplanting and harvest rituals. She replied that it is her family, after all, that has been traditionally responsible for taking the lead in performing the rice rituals. “I do not want to be the one remembered for ending this centuries-old tradition here in our village,” she said. Most likely neither Yogyog nor Buyuccan, who are now in their 80s and both ill, will be able to continue their ritual duties. So, emulating Mr. de Guia’s effort, she requested that Gene and I provide her with a copy of the videos of the rituals that we recorded in her granary over the years. “We will make do with watching your tapes on television,” she said. “It will be better than nothing.”

Excerpted and adapted with permission from Chapter 31, Let’s Hope the Bile Is Good, in The Art of Rice: Spirit and Sustenance in Asia, edited by Roy W. Hamilton, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, which is available from the University of Washington Press (www.washington.edu/uwpress).