

A Generation Later

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**Household Strategies
and Economic Change in
the Rural Philippines**

James F. Eder



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Preface

San Jose, a onetime frontier community in the Philippines whose second-generation residents—the first to be born and raised locally—are the subject of this book, was settled beginning in the 1930s and 1940s by migrant shifting cultivators from the long-settled island of Cuyo. Traveling first by sailboat and later by motor launch, these migrant “Cuyonons” left an overpopulated homeland to clear the tropical forest and to establish homesteads and a new way of life in a hitherto unpopulated region of Palawan Island.

I first conducted anthropological fieldwork in San Jose during 1970–1972, having previously gained some passing familiarity with the community during my Peace Corps days in Palawan. Based on the local reputation San Jose enjoyed as a “successfully developing community,” I selected its economic and social life as the subject of my dissertation research. My fieldwork was anchored by my principal research interest at the time, in the development of significant social inequalities within a generation of farmers who had arrived on the frontier with relatively equal starting points (Eder 1982).

In the years that followed my original fieldwork in San Jose, I turned my attention to another research project in Palawan. This second project concerned one of the island’s indigenous peoples, rather than a migrant population, but it involved the same wider processes of twentieth-century settlement and development that had attracted my attention to San Jose—albeit with markedly different and more corrosive consequences (Eder 1987).

During this latter study, I maintained my personal contacts (as well as my research interests) in San Jose. As the project came to fruition, the idea of undertaking a restudy of San Jose took hold. With time and as I gained additional knowledge about Palawan, I began to see San Jose more clearly as a particular type of community, a type found today scattered up and down the narrow coastal plains of the island—and, in more recent years, increasingly in interior hilly or riverine areas as well. These were upland, mixed-farming communities, established by migrant lowlanders who used the technology of pioneer shifting cultivation to establish their homesteads. But these migrant farmers were market oriented as well as subsistence oriented, and they were pursuing a wide variety of agricultural and other productive activities that were

leading, at rates that varied widely with geographical locale and individual circumstance, to more permanent and intensive forms of land use. Hence, these communities were clearly of a “transitional” type—but transitional to what?

In one way, all of these communities were among the most immediate and visible reminders of the twentieth-century process of lowland in-migration and settlement that has been so destructive of the land, lifeways, and well-being of Palawan’s indigenous peoples—the very focus of my other research project. In a different frame, however, it was also clear that the San Joses of Palawan were an integral part of the island’s future. San Jose itself was no longer a frontier community. Even before the time of my original study, its forest cover had been removed and the frontier had moved on to more remote areas in the south and on the west coast. But this process had left San Jose, and other communities like it, in circumstances that appeared to merit systematic and continuing attention. For these circumstances contained a vital part of the answer to the question, what would Palawan’s post-deforestation, postfrontier landscape be like? Would familiar and seemingly inexorable socioeconomic processes (growing population density, capitalist penetration) ensure that Palawan would go the way of other Philippine frontiers in decades past and become, in effect, “old wine in a new bottle,” as Krinks (1974) described the apparent replication in postfrontier Mindanao of social conditions in Luzon and the Visayas? Or would a different ecology and a different political economy, one now marked by the heady politics of environmentalism and “sustainable development,” lead to other outcomes?

It was around such considerations that the idea of a restudy began to form. In 1988, while on sabbatical from Arizona State University and supported by a grant from the Social Science Research Council (and later, a grant from the National Science Foundation), I returned to San Jose for six months. I had in hand a loosely formulated proposal to study what was then nearly a full generation of development and community change. More specifically, I had framed my ethnographic goal as an answer to the question, how had one Philippine community and its residents survived seventeen years of Marcos-era political strife and economic hardship? But the cornerstone of my restudy was a simple methodological goal: to replicate, as much as possible, the data I had obtained during my first study, data on household composition, land ownership, costs and returns in agricultural production, household income and expenditure patterns and the like, data that had subsequently served me well.

My confidence in the potential utility and significance of the second round of data that resulted from this effort never wavered. But upon my return from the field (and as anthropologists are so often warned), these data did not speak to me as clearly as I had hoped, about what was “really hap-

pening” with respect to the nature and direction of change in the community. True, I had gained a strong intuitive feel for what appeared to be profound community-level social and cultural changes, and I had also successfully tracked the changing economic activities and circumstances of different categories of households. In particular, I was able to contrast “parental households” (i.e., those present in both 1971 and 1988) and “offspring households” (i.e., those that had come into being by 1988 owing to post-1972 domestic cycling in parental households) in ways that yielded valuable insights into changes between 1971 and 1988 in demography (Eder and Fernandez 1991), political behavior (Eder 1991b), agricultural intensity (Eder 1991a), and social differentiation (Eder 1993).

But a nagging feeling that I was somehow missing a vital larger picture led me to conclude, in retrospect, that I had relied too heavily on my original methodology and that by sticking to what was tried and true, the 1988 project had taken too static a view. It failed to capture change over time in the economic strategies of individual offspring households, and it also relied too much on 1972 parental household economic standing as the principal determinant of those strategies, failing to recognize that parental household strategies also change over time, as successive offspring “leave the nest” and household assets mature and decline. The 1988 project also gave inadequate attention to other significant determinants of offspring household economic behavior, particularly changing cultural values and ideologies. In consequence, my data analysis, as fruitful as it was in other ways, did not relate change over time in individual household strategies as productively as I had hoped to wider processes of intensification and proletarianization. Neither did the 1988 project effectively address the changing lives of San Jose residents as individuals. My methodological focus on community and household submerged individual men and women and, by overlooking possible intrahousehold stratification by gender and generation, may have obscured an important personal dimension to change. Individuals, in short, lacked faces and voices, which I subsequently realized would be essential to an adequate understanding of how community-level change occurs and how households actually work.

I proceeded on two fronts. First, I began to think more critically about my restudy project in terms of specific research goals and the theoretical issues that underlay them. Second, with these issues and goals in mind and ever true to my empiricism, I returned to San Jose, during the summers of 1989, 1991, 1992, and 1993, to collect yet more data, now of a more narrowly focused sort. This process culminated during 1994–1995, when I was again on sabbatical leave from Arizona State University and supported by a Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The entire restudy project hence lasted from 1988 to 1995, a cir-

cumstance responsible for a certain amount of untidiness with respect to managing and presenting data. But I believe that the extended duration of the restudy project has been a great strength, for it has enabled me to pursue a number of important themes about the nature of change in San Jose that might otherwise have escaped observation or remained opaque to analysis: the evolution of new patterns of production and consumption, the subtle yet significant reorganization of households that accompanies economic diversification, and the redefinition of cultural notions about social standing and personal worth that accompanies social differentiation.

These are the themes of the present volume. Only their systematic, local-level pursuit will enable anthropologists to go beyond platitudes, whether anthropological or local, to effectively address questions such as those that motivate the present volume, about whether life in postfrontier communities such as San Jose in fact represents old or new wine and about how that wine is aging, for better or worse. These are the sorts of questions, after all, that most interest those who live in the rural Philippines today about their own communities. Anthropologists would do well to attend to them and on terms that make sense to rural Filipinos from the perspective of their own everyday lives.

Acknowledgments

Numerous individuals and institutions have helped bring this book to completion. My greatest and most immediate debts of gratitude continue to be to the residents of San Jose. They endured me, as it were, not once but twice, but they remained willing to assist and never lost their good humor during what surely must have seemed a never-ending study of them and their community. I hope that those community residents who looked forward to reading about themselves in this book will understand my decision to conceal their identities in the body of the text with pseudonyms.

I particularly want to acknowledge the contributions of four San Jose women I knew in 1971 as girls who are today working adults, mostly with families of their own: Julieta Canta, my talented and dedicated research assistant; Floserfida Herrera, a store owner and businesswoman who, in another life, might herself have become an anthropologist; Brigida Valones, an elementary school teacher of remarkable insight; and Amelita Yara, confidant extraordinaire. My study spanned the terms of four different *barangay* captains, and to each I owe a special word of thanks: Jaime Daquer, Perfecto Gabuco, Carlito Herrera, and Ben Rejlo. Thanks, too, to some other particularly helpful San Jose residents: Ricardo Abid, Bing Galibo, Erlinda Ello, Fe Herrera, Maximo Herrera, Merlina Herrera, Remedios Herrera, Alfredo Magura, Rufo Vigonte, and Nicolasa Yara. Over time, my social relationships with many San Jose residents evolved into warm friendships, and in the end I returned less for more data than to enjoy the good company of close friends and extended family. In this connection I want to recognize four very special friends, boon companions all: Tirso Buaya, Jaime Daquer, Teodoro Paduga, and Felix Yara.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This book concerns a generation of economic, social, and cultural changes on a former Philippine land frontier. More particularly, it examines the evolution of new economic strategies, the advent of novel forms of household organization, and the emergence of new ideas about social hierarchy and personal worth in a onetime frontier community presently caught up in an array of postfrontier transitions: from short-fallow shifting cultivation to intensive, permanent field agriculture; from a relatively egalitarian social order to a more socially differentiated one; and from individual identification with a local, parochial culture to identification with a more cosmopolitan national culture. Hence it is a book about what anthropologists, in what now seems like another era, once called “becoming modern.” Indeed, a local version of this same phrase, “*agamodernize kami ren*,” often figures, sometimes ironically and sometimes not, in the reflections of local residents themselves on the changes that have transformed their community.

The nature of this transformation is not in fact easily captured by a single word or phrase, although some version of it is presently unfolding throughout much of rural Southeast Asia. Only by attending to this transformation locale by locale can we satisfactorily grasp what life in the “new” rural Southeast Asia is really like. It is my contention in this book that in the particular locale considered here, despite some hardships and uncertainties, this new life offers substantial and broadly accessible opportunities for household prosperity and personal fulfillment. By probing here both the nature of these new opportunities and the sorts of adjustments that households and individuals make in response to them, I aim both to lay out some of the breadth and depth of rural change in the region and to expose to clearer view some of the local-level wellsprings of this change.

The book is based on two extended and detailed studies I conducted in the community approximately twenty years apart, the first during 1970–1972 and the second during 1988–1995. This time spread enabled me to become

reacquainted with people I first knew as young children now as married men and women, heading households of their own. Men I had once known as boys, whose own fathers had once “slashed and burned,” now met as farmers to discuss such matters as whether the biological pest controls promoted by the City Agricultural Office could effectively replace chemical pesticides. Women I had once known as girls, whose own mothers’ places in life involved considerable productive work but was very much in the home, now moved and worked comfortably outside of it. And I came to know both boys and girls again as fathers and mothers, who continued to speak to their parents in Cuyonon but who today spoke to their own children in Tagalog or English.

The circumstances of this research project and the unique data that have resulted provide a strategic opportunity to rethink the nature of change in contemporary rural Southeast Asian societies. In one sense, I simply hoped to answer the question of whether one particular community’s “honeymoon” with a relatively egalitarian, resource-rich frontier is now over, or is the new good too, and for whom? But this book is premised on the belief that the existing models of agrarian transformation that we as social scientists bring to bear on such questions will remain inadequate until they simultaneously address the community, the household, and the individual—all arguably vital components of a satisfactory understanding of change in rural Southeast Asia and yet all deeply problematic as units of analysis. Thus, at a more general level, I also aim to point the way toward a more holistic anthropology of change and toward a more comprehensive understanding of change in rural Southeast Asia.

These considerations led me to frame my research and, later, the writing of this book around three broad concerns: one ethnographic, one theoretical, and one methodological. Ethnographically, I describe a community of intensive cultivators-in-the-making and attempt to capture the various economic, social, and cultural dimensions of an important intergenerational process whereby a frontier community becomes a more established community.¹ Theoretically, my concern is with the nature of social differentiation in smallholder farming communities in general and, more particularly, in mixed-farming communities with extensive market involvements and abundant nonagricultural employment opportunities that relate to their locations in zones of intense rural-urban interaction. And methodologically, I explore dilemmas associated with the study of local social systems in analytical isolation from the larger systems in which they are embedded, dilemmas made more acute in today’s world by the ambiguous nature of “local system” boundaries and associated uncertainties about where local agency can most profitably be ascribed.

The manner in which I have pursued these concerns here was inevitably shaped not only by my prior field research in San Jose but by the conclusions

I reached in an earlier book in which that research culminated (Eder 1982). There I reconstructed the historical circumstances surrounding San Jose's frontier settlement and early growth under conditions of relative equality of opportunity. My explanatory goal was to understand the emergence and subsequent institutionalization of social inequality within a generation of migrant farmers who arrived on a land-rich frontier with seemingly equal starting points, and I examined in some detail the experiences of eight such self-made migrants—some conspicuous successes, others conspicuous failures. Comparing and evaluating the causes of success and failure of these and other pioneers, I argued that the origins of inequality in San Jose depended less on the individuals' times of arrival, amounts of starting capital, or other such factors than it did on personal differences. Social inequality, for the most part, had its basis in a level of motivation and in a kind of on-the-job competence that some men and women brought to the frontier and others did not.

The balance of my earlier study concerned the emergent system of social inequality and how it came to operate locally to influence and determine behavior at increasingly disparate positions within the community status order. An array of economic, social structural, and attitudinal circumstances helped keep rich farmers rich and poor farmers poor, in the short run, and made it likely that the then present generation of parents would transmit existing inequalities to their children. Perhaps the greatest continuity of this volume with my first study lies in my enduring desire to attend to the individual and to the diversity of human capabilities and aspirations that I believe must be reckoned with in any satisfactory social scientific account of change.

Ethnographic Aims

Recent decades, it seems, have not been kind to Philippine anthropology, or at least not to those anthropologists seeking order or direction in Philippine studies. Ethnographically, for those, like myself, who are broadly ecological in orientation, studies of the peoples and cultures of the archipelago had long been cast in a lowland peoples versus upland peoples mold. Whatever else their subject matter, these ethnographies typically concerned either one of the irrigated rice-growing, Hispanized "peasant" peoples inhabiting the coastal plains and interior valleys or one of the hunter-gatherer or shifting cultivator "tribal" peoples inhabiting mountainous interior regions. Such studies thus fit comfortably with wider hill-valley cultural ecological understandings about the human landscape of island (and mainland) Southeast Asia. They also implied a relatively straightforward agenda for additional research: to continue such studies, on one or the other side of the lowland-upland divide, and hence to address the remaining and substantial gaps in the ethnographic knowledge of Philippine peoples.

These gaps remain to the present. Recent research has been stimulating but eclectic. While this work has been more theoretically informed than in the past, in diverse ways that reflect the current pluralism in anthropological theory, much of it has not been focused specifically on a named ethnolinguistic group or a “people.” At the same time, there has been growing discomfort in anthropology with the notion, long a cornerstone of the lowland-upland cultural distinction in Southeast Asian studies, that some kinds of people have been more isolated from outside influences than other kinds of people. Further, in Philippine studies, there has been growing appreciation of the historically and culturally constructed nature of the distinction between lowland peoples and upland peoples (Gibson 1986: 15–17). All of this has been healthy for Philippine anthropology, but it has made the ethnographic landscape of the Philippines appear more chaotic than ever, for there is little agreement about where to seek the conceptual order in this landscape.

Meanwhile, in recent decades, millions of lowland Filipinos have poured into upland regions throughout the archipelago, driven by lack of economic opportunity in the densely settled lowlands. Today as many as one-third of all Filipinos may inhabit the uplands, broadly defined, with a wide range of still poorly understood consequences for the indigenous peoples who traditionally inhabited many of these regions but who now often find themselves in the minority. At the same time, in the lowlands, the sorts of rural-to-rural and rural-to-urban migrations that have long been a characteristic feature of Philippine life at both the regional and national levels remain common. The outcome of these various population movements for the nation as a whole has been a highly interdigitated and interdependent human landscape, in which traditional anthropological associations of particular cultures with particular ecological adaptations or geographical heartlands seem increasingly irrelevant to an on-the-ground understanding of contemporary rural Philippine economy and society.

These considerations have led me to frame the ethnographic goals of this book around the notion that San Jose represents a frequently encountered kind of community in the contemporary Philippines, spontaneously settled on a onetime forest frontier, shallow in history but richly varied in agricultural ecology and cultural tradition. To my ethnographic exploration I bring several perspectives. In ecological perspective, I hope to capture the transition from a pioneer system of shifting cultivation aimed at new lands clearance to a postfrontier, settled upland agriculture.² I particularly want to attend to two postfrontier agricultural systems, vegetable gardening and tree farming, that are comparatively unstudied in the Philippines but that have contributed much to community prosperity.

At the same time, the market-driven processes of agricultural intensification responsible for the emergence of such specializations raise crucial concerns about sustainable upland resource management that merit close attention. Elsewhere in the Philippines and throughout Southeast Asia, the susceptibility of upland agricultural systems of all kinds to erosion and fertility degradation has contributed to numerous local ecological crises, both in the uplands themselves and in adjacent lowlands (Hefner 1990:16–17; Lewis 1992). Is San Jose's own brief agricultural history another instance of this discouraging phenomenon, or does it offer some lessons about an alternative and more sustainable future?

From a related socioeconomic perspective, my descriptive aim is to address the simple but important question of how broadly or narrowly the benefits of development were being shared, both across the social order of San Jose and over time, as the community filled up and its residents settled down. In these regards my study articulates with a rich tradition of lowland village studies and restudies in the Philippines, focused in good part on the problematics of social differentiation and economic well-being, seen over time (see Muijzenberg 1997). Here lies another crucial concern, familiar to the numerous government and private agencies presently working with the nation's indigenous and migrant uplanders, about the economic viability of it all. Can sufficient numbers of people make adequate livings in the evolving economic landscape, without further violence to the environment?

This last matter appears to merit particular attention in San Jose, as a former frontier community, because studies of the filling in of land frontiers have often had a pessimistic Malthusian tone. Life may be pretty good for the moment, but demographic and economic realities will soon bring the honeymoon to an end (e.g., Krinks 1974; Margolis 1973). My own view of new land settlement and rural development in the Philippines, derived from observations in San Jose and other frontier areas, has been consistently more optimistic. Hence I have long wondered about the degree to which the pessimism of other studies was warranted by actual data about changes. Perhaps it merely reflected a model of change that failed to attend to the characteristic "occupational multiplicity" of contemporary rural society and otherwise took an insufficiently broad view of the Philippine countryside (see Rutten 1993:3).

Finally, in cultural perspective, I aim to contribute to Philippine ethnography by portraying in some detail the lifeways and aspirations of the members of the San Jose community. Herein lies something of a dilemma. On the one hand, there has been little ethnographic work of any sort on lowland or Hispanized people in recent years (important exceptions include Cannell 1999; Dumont 1992; Nadeau 1995; Pertierra 1988; Rutten 1993; and Zialcita 1989) and almost nothing at all on such geographically restricted

and numerically small ethnic groups as the Cuyonon, the Hispanized folk responsible for San Jose's founding and early development. Some of the distinctive and endearing cultural traditions that Cuyonon once pursued on their small home island of Cuyo figured in my own earlier study of the pioneer settlement of San Jose (Eder 1982:30–45). Here I hope again to represent something of Cuyonon culture and people, now seen through the lens of their contemporary way of life on Palawan. On the other hand and as noted above, I also hope to rise above a simplistic one people—one place view of the ethnolinguistic map of the Philippines and portray a contemporary, post-frontier community in all of its cultural diversity. Thus I also aim to represent the “culture” of San Jose, and in a way that goes beyond a simplistic formulation of Cuyonon traditions versus outsider traditions to address the manner in which meaning and identity are currently being negotiated and renegotiated within the community by residents of all kinds.

I have attempted to resolve this dilemma by doing something of each, perhaps not always successfully.³ But by focusing below on local concerns about community identity and on the ways that households and individuals experience and respond to social differentiation, I believe that I have found a useful way to frame the issues. Notions about sense of place, family standing, honor, and what it means to be a good and worthwhile person are common cultural preoccupations of Filipinos of all kinds—and these notions, too, are undergoing change.

Theoretical Issues

How best to theorize social change in contemporary Third World agrarian communities and societies continues to perplex social scientists. The analysis of class relationships has been social science's most powerful tool for this purpose, but class analysis continues to suffer from conceptual uncertainties about the nature of class and its relationships to more general processes of social differentiation and about how the role of class in social and political life differs from that of religion, ethnicity, or political ideology (Hefner 1990:19). In addition to such conceptual problems, a significant difficulty for the empirically inclined is that particular cases of contemporary community and household change can appear so refractory to class analysis as to render any such effort of dubious utility. Certainly it would be difficult to represent San Jose's socioeconomic structure in terms of class categories. The multiplicity of on- and off-farm economic activities in the community is such that many residents enter into a variety of different economic relationships at the same time, making impossible the demarcation and juxtaposition of clear-cut collectivities of households standing in some type of stable relationship with one another, or with the means of production, over