

FOOD STRESS COPING MECHANISMS OF LOWLAND SUGARCANE FARMERS: THE CASE OF HACIENDA MEDALLA MILAGROSA

Rolando V. Mascuñana

A large portion of the research data of this paper was gathered in 1987 using the participant-observer method. An ethnographic investigation was carried out to determine how the apparent sugar industry "crisis" in 1986 had affected the living conditions and families of the sugarcane workers in Negros Oriental. It focused on a single case study: the lowland sugarcane *Hacienda Medalla Milagrosa* of Bais City. The bulk of my research data was submitted to the Silliman University Research Center as a report for one of the center's research projects (initiated by Dr. Rowe V. Cadeliña, the Director at that time), and as a joint-research project of the Visayas Research Consortium (VRC) on "Crisis Study". This latter project focused on the urban slums and sugarcane workers in the Visayas. The VRC was initiated by the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC) and was participated in by Central Philippine University of Iloilo City, St. La Salle University of Bacolod City, the University of San Carlos of Cebu City, and Silliman University of Dumaguete City. I acquired additional data to augment the earlier study during the period of 1990 to 1992, when I made occasional visits to the area. Many of the respondents who were initially mistrustful and difficult to approach during my investigative study in 1987, became less wary and more open to candid discussion of significant economic issues during those later visits.

The main focus of my field visits was to further elucidate the life situation of the agricultural workers, providing a diachronic component to the study. This research also serves as an "applied" anthropological study: the collected information can be shared with individuals and agencies working to alleviate some of the social and economic problems facing this segment of Negros Oriental's population.

The intent of this paper is to examine the human ecosystem in this lowland setting as seen through interviews with agricultural workers and other residents of *Hacienda Medalla Milagrosa*. In these interviews, information was elicited on how the subjects cope with the stress of food shortages, using strategies they have adapted over time to even out economic fluctuations. In order to better conceptualize the complex dynamics of these adaptive strategies, I view the human ecology of the region as a "system" comprised of numerous environmental and cultural components. This "systems" approach has been applied successfully by cultural anthropologists and archaeologists to model the complex relationships human social organization, exchange patterns, subsistence technology, and environmental constraints (e.g. Flannery, 1965; Leone, 1972).

In this paper, I attempt to explore the interactions of the various components within this system, presented schematically in Figure 1. This diagram graphically depicts the interrelations (shown by arrows) between the various components of the system, each utilizing the resources and opportunities available in interaction between the *taga-sulod* (insiders), who are sugarcane working families, and *taga-gawas* (outsiders) of the Bais lowland ecozones; between the *taga-sulod/taga-gawas* and the lowland *suki* (regular customers); between the *taga-gawas/taga-sulod* and the neighboring hacienda; between the *taga-gawas/taga-sulod* and the *taga-bukid* (upland) *suki* and between the *taga-sulod/taga-gawas* and the local barrio residents. The *taga-sulod/taga-gawas* have sustained and developed some coping mechanisms which appear to be economically motivated. These coping mechanisms are only intensively used during lean months or in times of food stress, when the workers depend upon them for survival.

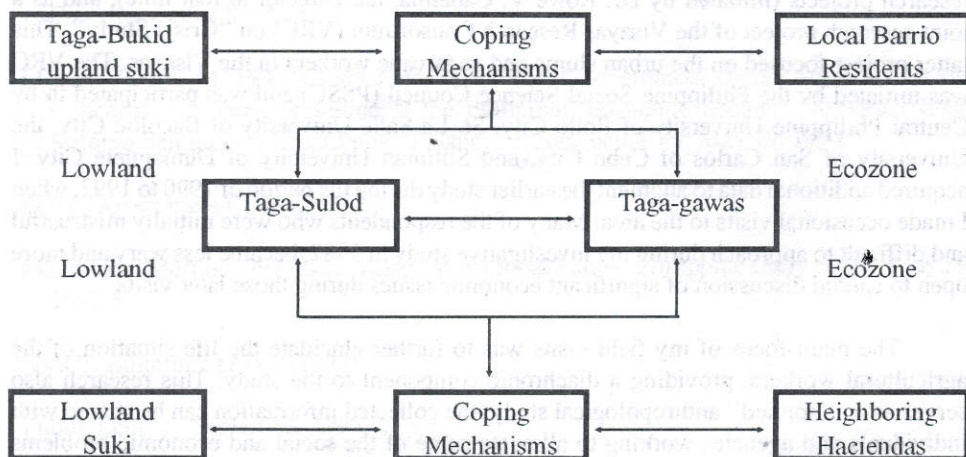


Figure 1: Proposed Schematic Model.

Research Area

My research area, classified as lowland, is prime agricultural land planted to sugarcane. The land is owned by the Teves family. The estate is called "Hacienda Medalla Milagrosa" and is located in Barrio Calasga-an, Bais City, in the province of Negros Oriental, central Philippines. The farm is ultimately managed by Julian Teves II, whose title is *administrador* (administrator). Teves is one of the heirs to this 244-hectare farm. Luis Burgos, whose half sister is the wife of the late Don Julian Teves I (the grandfather of Julian

II and Tita Escaño), has been the hacienda *encargado* (overseer) since 1937. The direct management and supervision of the hacienda is left to his care. The *administrador*, who resides in Dumaguete City, visits the hacienda only or a few times a week. It was from the *encargado*, Luis Burgos, whom I obtained permission to conduct the investigation in 1987. He was very accommodating to me after I explained to him the purpose of the study and showed him as well the clearance papers I obtained from the office of the Provincial Constabulary Commander, the Office of the Governor, Bais City Mayor's Office, and the Philippine Constabulary detachment headquarters in the area. My occasional visits to the area and to Barrio Calasga-an proper did not pose a problem, as I had already gained confidence and cooperation in the past. I had also gained the friendship of several families after a period of mixing in their gatherings and activities.

A large part of Barrio Calasga-an proper is owned by the hacienda. The property on which the elementary school, the barrio hall, and the adjacent basketball court are constructed was donated by the hacienda. There are also parcels of land within the barrio that are owned by the resident landowners, whose parents settled in the area before the hacienda was established in the late 1800's. These people are non-hacienda laborers and are not included in this study, but they do perform an important function in the subsistence-interaction scheme of the respondents.

Barrio Calasga-an is located at the foot of the Cambagyo mountain range. *Hacienda Medalla Milagrosa* is one of the six sitios of Barrio Calasga-an. The hacienda is bordered on the north by *Hda. Basak*, owned by the Mateo Teveses, close relatives of the owners of *Hda. Medalla*; on the south it is bordered by *Central Azucarera de Bais* (CAB); on the east by a group of small cane farms and Bais Bay; and on the west by the mountain range of Cambagyo, which extends from the southwest to the north, fringing the lowlands of Bais and the municipality of Tanjay, as well as forming a natural boundary for the municipality of Mabinay.

The Respondents

Two types of respondents were identified within the research area: **Group A:** those called *taga-sulod* (insiders) are the permanent workers of *Hacienda Melagrosa* these about 30 families. **Group B:** the *taga-gawas* (outsiders) are temporary contractual workers. There are approximately 21 families in this group who are permanent residents of Calasga-an barrio proper. This group is made up mostly of former members of the first group who have been laid off by the hacienda and given separation pay (*pabalon*) which ranges from P2,000 to P5,000, or those who have retired from the hacienda due to advanced age (50 to 65 years old). When the head of the family retires, the house is not vacated, but is moved to a location outside of the property of the farm. From this time the house owner is required to rent the land he lives on. When the person does not retire (he quits or is fired) the family is required

to vacate the house, which is turned over to the person hired to replace the former worker. When the father retires, the whole family leaves the farm when the house is removed. This includes the married children and their families. This plan to empty the hacienda of residents will eventually free the farm from the obligation of providing housing for the workers. The retiree assumes the cost of relocating the house. Although these people are not given priority when jobs are available, they are often hired part time, along with their dependents, when extra help is needed. Work available to both groups includes plowing and preparing the fields for planting, fertilizing, weeding young cane, harvesting, cutting and trimming cane stalks, digging irrigation ditches, and irrigating the fields.

Subsistence Activities

The sugarcane workers' economy is maintained on a very limited margin and is dominated by the demand for sugar on the world market. The management of the farm also works on the same principle, although at a much higher level in the social system. Therefore, the overall competition among sugarcane workers is strong, and, as such, the workers have very little opportunity to elevate their lifestyle. The intensive type of farming practiced in the area leaves few or no natural resources for the people to utilize to supplement their food supplies. These problems are aggravated by fluctuation in the overall Philippine economy, which is characterized by high unemployment.

Subsistence coping is the primary means of survival in the area, and has become a way of life for most of the people. When the food supply drops to a critical level due to unemployment, when sugarcane workers are reduced to eating only one meal a day, which consists mostly of corn grits or root crops, the workers are forced to tap their coping mechanisms in order to maintain life. The respondents have identified these coping methods as intra-household activities, inter-household activities, labor trade, and economic exchange. Each is discussed in the succeeding sections.

Intra-household activity. Hacienda life during the off-milling season (April to December), referred to as *tiempo muerto* (*ting gutom* or lean months), is extremely difficult for most of the *taga-gawas*, although these months are less of an ordeal for the *taga-sulod*. The hacienda work during this period is very irregular, with only two days of work per week parceled out to the workers in order to be as fair as possible. Whatever work is available is made available first to the *taga-sulod*. But even the income from this, for a family of 5 or 6 members, is barely enough to sustain life. Most of the families are Catholic, and they practice little or no birth control. Large families are a major contribution to the poverty of the area.

One intra-household activity practiced during the lean period by both *taga-sulod* and *taga-gawas* is household gardening. This activity is carried out in preparation for the

expected scarcity during the start of the off-milling season. But not all can have gardens. The reasons for the residents being unable to have gardens in their yard are multiple. The hard and stony soil on which the houses are located is unsuitable for gardening. Another problem is that there are many free-roaming pigs and goats in the area which frequently forage in the vegetable patches. Shade from the coconut trees and banana plants also inhibits gardening. This vegetation is owned by the small land owners.

The houses of the *taga-gawas* are constructed on land which they rent from local residents, and the lots on which the houses are constructed are too small for gardens. Therefore, the people utilize the marginal land and border areas of the farm such as the right-of way of the railways, roads, highway, the banks of the rivers, and other available space. When corn is planted it is inter-cropped with *okra*, *beans*, *gabi*, *camote*, and *malunggay* (horse radish). The Calasga-an river, which is about a foot deep during the dry season, is the chief source of water used by the residents for washing clothes and bathing. The banks of the river are terraced with stones, and soil filled in. The resulting area is then planted with *kangkong*, *gabi*, and other vegetables. The flow of the water is often diverted to irrigate the plots, as *kangkong* requires damp soil.

Although it rarely happens, occasionally an area that has been cleared by one family will be left idle. When this happens, another group will claim the area, and this practice sometimes leads to squabbles among the families. The hacienda *encargado* (overseer) or the *barangay* captain is occasionally able to settle the dispute. If not, the dispute may be elevated into a feud that might last for years.

The *taga-sulod* enjoy the benefits of free houses and rental-free lots inside the area of the hacienda. Most of the houses of the permanent workers are sparsely distributed on the hilly area of the hacienda's property. These rolling hills are mainly planted with coconut trees. However, there are sparse areas planted with sugarcane, since it is the main source of income of the farm. The lots where their houses are constructed were laid out to provide adequate space for the workers' gardens, I observed that even during the milling season, these garden plots were planted with bananas, corn, cassava, and *camote*. During the lean months some of these crops are occasionally made available to the married children of the families who are living outside the hacienda or given to *taga-gawas*.

Although the garden provides supplementary food for the family, it is not enough to carry the family completely through the times of food shortage, therefore other sources of food are tapped through the coping mechanisms employed until the lean months are over. One of the family strategies frequently utilized is to raise some chickens, along with one or two hogs or goats. Very few of the families own large livestock. The few cattle and carabaos are raised primarily as beasts of burden. They may be rented out as important source of income. A chicken is rarely killed for family consumption. An exception to this is when

there is an illness in the family and the protein value of the chicken is considered important to the patient. The smaller animals are normally sold and the money is used to buy rice or corn grits.

A number of additional coping strategies are resorted to by the respondents. *Panginhas* (shellfish collecting) and *panud-sod* ("push-net" fishing) are practiced by both permanent and temporary workers, along with their children. These traditional methods of extracting food from the sea are environment-friendly. My respondents make use of the off-milling season to gather shellfish because the Central Azucarera de Bais at this time stops discharging waste high in alkaline (*asiento de sosa*) into Bais Bay. But from what I have gathered from the workers, some prominent and non-hacienda working families of Bais City have recently apportioned most of the shoreline among themselves and constructed fences around these "claims." The shellfish, both large and small, are being collected and placed inside these fences for commercial use. Very few are left for the public, and these are small and rarely fit for consumption. This is an added stress on the farm workers in times of food shortage, depriving them of one of their important strategies for bridging these periods of economic instability.

Hacienda workers also engage in gathering and selling firewood and *bucong* (empty coconut husks and shells) for use as fuel for cooking. Other activities reported include the gathering and stripping of the stalks of coconut palm fans, cutting them into pieces (*salo-so*), drying them for firewood. The workers also make *sinibit* (coconut leaf shingles) for roofing, saleable in the area. In extreme cases, the workers may borrow money in the form of a cash advance, called *vale* or *utang* (credit), payable through wage deduction during the next milling season. However, only permanent hacienda workers can avail of this arrangement.

Inter-household Activity. Another type of activity which ameliorates subsistence stress in individual household is a form of inter-house food exchange. The heads of the households, or their spouses who have relatives in the area, may either borrow or beg (although the word is not used) cups of corn grits or rice to be replaced at a later date with the same type of food or value in another form. The relatives may also trade *sud-an* (viands). When this form of activity extends outside the family it is on a fairly strict reciprocal basis.

Asking for or extending credit is another strategy that exists between households. One woman respondent occasionally makes and sells *bibingka* (rice cakes) at the local market held weekly in the barrio. She frequently extends credit to hacienda workers payable on the next payday. In this way, food is made available to some families who may not have the ready cash to pay for it.

One of the most utilized forms of obtaining cash is to borrow money from other residents of the barrio at the exorbitant interest rate called "five-six". This means that the

amount six pesos is returned for every five pesos borrowed but the terms sometimes are computed on a daily or weekly basis and are compounded on this basis. These loans are paid on terms agreed upon by the two parties concerned.

Another coping mechanism is work substitution. A married son whose father receives *inadlaw* (daily wage) may make an arrangement with the father to temporarily relieve him from his work for a day or two just to earn enough so as to be able to provide food for his own family.

Labor Trade. One alternative pursued by sugarcane workers during times of scarcity is for the unmarried members to hire themselves out as domestic helpers either in the local area or, preferably, in Manila. These domestic helpers send money to help in their parents' everyday household expenses.

Another instance of labor trade noted is for some unoccupied workers to join the *sacada* (migrant) workforce with labor contractors-recruiters who recruit "idle manpower" in the local area to work in Luzon (either in Tarlac or Cagayan), on a one-year contract. Under this contractual agreement, a month's advance pay is left to each *sacada* worker's family for household cash reserves and for immediate use.

A third kind of labor trade available to the hacienda workers is to enter into an agreement with the *taga-bukid* (the literal meaning of this term is: "from the mountain"), which allows the farm workers to share-crop on the land owned by the *taga-bukid*. In this manner, the people of the hacienda will be able to maintain life when the sugarcane farm owner is unable to hire them. The uplands of Cambagyo and Silab provide temporary refuge to some hacienda families until milling season, which starts in December and continues until March, when jobs in the hacienda farms are available to everyone. The *taga-bukid* welcome this opportunity as it enables them to get help at a reasonable rate for their farms. As soon as the rains start in May or June, the corn planting commences in the upland area. September to December are the harvest months for corn. An hacienda family involved in this activity will acquire food during these lean months, then return to the hacienda after the corn harvest and work for wages during the sugarcane harvest.

Another alternative is for an hacienda worker to sell his labor or service at a *ganta* (about 2.5 kilos) of unmilled corn for a one-day *pakyaw* (wage labor), weeding the farm of the *taga-bukid*, who also provides meals during the work period. The absence of cash in this transaction brings benefits to both parties — the cheap wage paid by the *taga-bukid*, and the food provided to the laborer. Without this arrangement, the mountain people would not be able to obtain needed labor, as they do not have ready cash to hire workers. Instead of a *ganta* of corn grits, the laborer may opt for one or two chickens, which he may sell at the Bais City market. The cash obtained is often used to buy corn grits and salted fish, or other staple food.

Labor trade may not only exist between the *taga-bukid* and the *taga-hacienda*, but also between haciendas. Some household members are reported to have worked on neighboring haciendas in Bais City for a one-week period of weeding. Other activities they engaged in include *magpasuhol* (wage labor), for example when someone in the barrio hires them to carry sacks of fresh or dried copra (*linugit*) to the nearest access road or to weed the fields. Working-age children (10 years old) directly contribute to family income. They reportedly earned 10 or 15 pesos a day for guarding (*magbakero*) grazing livestock. They also care for carabaos owned by non-hacienda families who own livestock and farms in the barrio. Carabaos are usually led to a creek or a brook for wading.

Economic Exchange. In addition to the labor trade mentioned earlier, hacienda workers also engage in socio-economic exchange. This system is practiced within the ecozones, thus fostering and strengthening the *suki* (regular customer) relations. This system involves consistent commercial trade at the same store, which in return extends credit to the customers. There are also times when farming people are allowed to help pull the fish nets belonging to persons living by the seaside. The nets are carried out in small boats as far as the pull ropes allow. Then several people pull the nets back to the shore. When a good catch is made, part of the share is used for the family's daily consumption, while part is bartered for *camote*, bananas, or cassava. Rootcrops are readily exchanged by the *taga-bukid* for goods such as fish or shellfish, however corn and live chickens are reserved for use in the labor exchange system.

Another economic strategy is the establishment of *suki* relationship in the Bais City market, where my respondents buy most of their food items and their basic needs. Marketing is usually done on paydays, every 15th and 30th of the month. In exchange for their patronage of the same store, the workers can get goods on credit (*vale* or *utang*), with the parties calling each other *suki*. In a few cases, livestock is used as collateral for this credit or used to pay off large debts in the store. In many instances, their *suki* from whom they buy their food supplies also are buyers of their livestock and farm products such as fruits and bananas.

Summary and Conclusions

In this study we see how the two groups of sugarcane workers at Hacienda Medalla Milagrosa—the *taga-sulod* (permanent hacienda resident workers) and the *taga-gawas* (contractual non-hacienda-resident workers) utilize innovative coping strategies to enhance survival during times of economic fluctuation and food stress. The use of these mechanisms is not simply a matter of family survival in hard times, but involves as well a dynamic, a productive, and a continuous interaction among various cultural and environmental groups of the region. These groups are those found in both the lowland ecozones, as represented by the *taga-sulod*, *taga-gawas* lowland *suki*, and the neighboring haciendas, and in the upland ecozones, the *taga-bukid* or upland-*suki*. Each component groups reinforces the others to

keep the system going. There is no doubt that this form of symbiotic human relationship, adaptive to the kind environment and providing economic subsistence, has been operative for many years. This study is but the beginning of our effort to understand the human ecology of these groups.

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Contributors

Bradley B. Walters was Canadian technical assistant to the Bais Bay— Environment and Resource Management Project Development Action Program, 1992-1993. **Betty C. Abregana**, who has taught psychology at Silliman University for many years and who recently served as Vice President for Academic Affairs of the University, will be on leave, 1994-1995, to teach in the United States and to assist the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia in assessing the academic treatment of women's issues in Asia.

Jeffrey L. Lennon is a health specialist with the International Technical Assistance Group, Seattle, Washington, U.S.A. In 1993, he was visiting professor in the College of Education at Silliman University.

Vicente B. Jurlano is dean of the College of Agriculture at Silliman University, while **Christopher A. Ablan**, immediate past dean, is Director of Research at Silliman. Both received their doctorates from Australian Universities.

James F. Kenny, Fullbright visiting professor of mass communication at Silliman University, 1992-1993, normally teaches in Louisiana, U.S.A. **Joy G. Perez**, formerly officer in charge of Silliman's School of Mass Communication, will spend 1994-1995 on leave, teaching in China.

Rolando V. Mascuñana, who has written often for the *Silliman Journal*, teaches anthropology at Silliman University. He serves in addition as curator of Silliman's anthropology museum.

Reynaldo V. Rivera, Registrar of Silliman University, also teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in political science at the University.

Armando L. Tan, another frequent contributor to the *Silliman Journal*, teaches in Silliman's Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies.