

Economic Activities of the Agays of Lasam, Cagayan, Philippines

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Abstract

This study documented the survival secrets practiced by the Agays of the municipality of Lasam, Cagayan, Philippines. It employed ethnographic qualitative and descriptive survey research designs to the thirty-six Agay-informants of three communities of the Lasam Municipality. The research techniques used were the structured interview, participant observation, and documentation to support the process of data-gathering. The study found that the activities engaged by the Agays are consistent in foraging, farming, and paid labor. Basket weaving and handicraft making, wild animal hunting, and fishing were considered as their alternative sources of livelihood. They still depend on medicinal plants present in their communities to cure their ailments. The study also revealed that the Agays have their indigenous environmental management practices. It can be concluded that the Agays have their mechanisms and coping strategies to survive with the pace of time through their economic interaction with Ilocano lowlanders but remained to have hardly provided their daily needs. The environmental management practices may be adopted in the design and planning of indigenous peoples' education curriculum. Implications of the study present a plan action or the conduct of university extension initiatives which are culture and gender sensitive.

Keywords: *Agays, survival activities, indigenous people's education, extension*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is a rich tapestry of ethnic diversity (cited in Tamayao, 2011). The Philippines is home to more than 110 indigenous cultural communities inhabiting seven major ethnolinguistic regions. All indigenous cultural communities in the country today trace their beginnings in the land which culture is rooted, and in where they live. For them, the land is their worship area (religion), their institution of learning (education), their area of governance (politics), their livelihood and market (economy), their medical center (health), their shelter (defense and security) and their history (Canay, 2011).

The Agays are indigenous people who live in scattered, isolated mountainous parts of Luzon, Philippines. The Agay group was characterized by De Viana (2011) as dark-skinned with kinky hair. They are one of the indigenous cultural communities in the Philippines.

Balilia (2013) defined indigenous peoples as the descendants of the inhabitants of a country or a region who are present when people of different ethnic or cultural origins arrive and later become dominated by more

dominant Filipinos who migrated into the frontier areas in the 20th century.

In the same manner, Cardona (2005) emphasized that the recognition of how vital culture in the society is even more stressed with the enactment of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) of 2007, and the Philippines' Indigenous Peoples' Right Act of 1997. These provide indigenous peoples (IP) the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literature, and to designate and retain their names for communities, places, and persons.

A significant portion of the history of Lasam, Cagayan is also the history of the ethnic minority group called Agays being considered as early settlers in the mountainous part of the municipality. The culture of this group is vital to trace the history of early settlers in Lasam since information about them depended solely on snippets of information from secondary sources which had been handed from generation to generation. Tracing back the push and pull factors of their migration are good point to be explored by

understanding their patterns of life and survival mechanisms.

Borras (2000) claimed that traditional knowledge among indigenous peoples should be given value for they constitute a useful form of knowledge for human survival. These practices can be highly transformative, ingenious and unique.

Among the 30 barangays of Lasam, there were three identified Agay communities, specifically located in Peru, Sicalao and Cabatacan West. The literature on the migration of Agays in these barangays of Lasam has never been recorded before. Their cultural identity and authentic practices dwindle due to intermarriages with Ilocanos and other ethnic groups in the municipality. Having observed this phenomenon, the preservation of the cultural practices of Agays is interesting to explore. The Aetas who migrated to the foot of Cordillera where Lasam is located are called Agays by the Ilocano lowlanders attributing to their nomadic practices.

NCIP Administrative Order No. 2, series of 2012, Article 1, Sec. 3e, on Sustainable Development stipulates: "The ICCs/IPs, through their IPS, occupying their ancestral domain shall preserve, restore, and maintain a balanced ecology in the ancestral domain by protecting the flora and fauna, watershed areas, and other reserves and to actively initiate, undertake and participate in the reforestation of denuded areas and other development programs and projects subject to just and reasonable remuneration."

Dove (2006) noted that awareness on the livelihood, socio-political structure, and general predicament of specific Indigenous peoples can contribute to improved political representation, further claims for special protection, and potentially secure future self-determination.

According to Andrada (2007), the Agays are the erstwhile nomadic tribe in northern Cordillera, particularly located in lower Apayao. They learned to build their shanties from local materials found in nature. They are still dependent on the forest for their survival.

Having considered the way the Agay communities of Lasam migrated to their present settlements, their way of survival in the mountainous barangays of Lasam and

their interaction to mother nature gave interest to the researchers to document their survival mechanisms as this study hopes to uncover their sources of livelihood, the plants used as food and medicine, and their environmental sustainability management practices. Hence, this study was conducted.

This study intended to document the survival mechanisms of the Agays of Lasam, Cagayan. Likewise, it also captured the personal characteristics of the informants, their economic survival mechanisms, the common illnesses and medicinal treatments they used, and their environmental conservation practices.

II. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed resign, a mix of ethnographic qualitative and descriptive quantitative approaches as it uncovered the survival mechanisms of the Agays of Lasam, Cagayan, Philippines. According to Frankel and Wallen (2006), the emphasis in ethnographic research is on the documentation or portrayal of the everyday lived experiences of individuals which can be gathered by observation and interview. Likewise, the descriptive quantitative approach focused on the descriptive survey of informants' characteristics. Calmorin (2007) described the usefulness of such survey to provide the value of facts and focusing attention on the most important things to be reported.

Meanwhile, the unstructured interview technique and the standard participant observer method were utilized to gather data for the study. The interview was used as the primary tool in gathering data, with the camera to record necessary events. Further, field notes were also used when documenting the narratives of the informants. Upon writing the facts gathered from the informants, the researchers compared their statements with what they have in the field notes. Participation observer technique was used to get information from the informants.

Research Locale

The study setting was in the Municipality of Lasam, Cagayan. This study covered the three Agay communities in the barangays of Peru, Sicalao, and Cabatacan West.

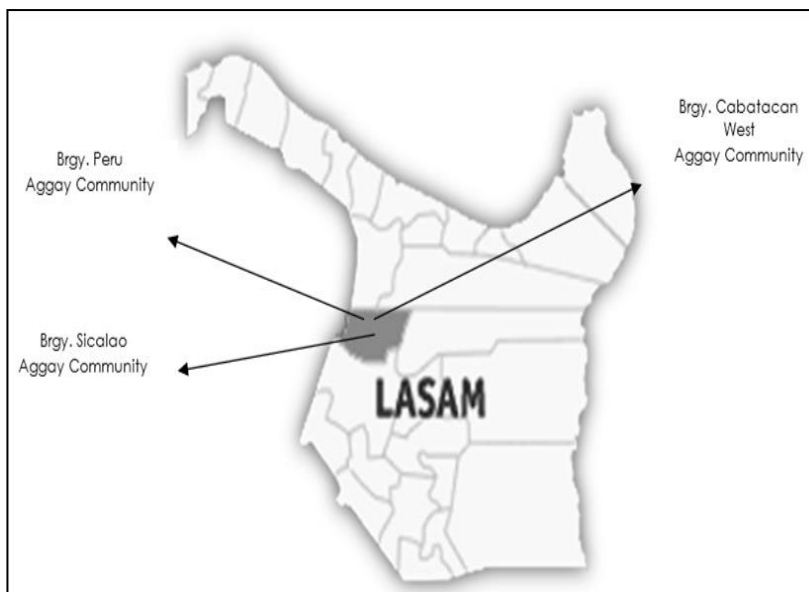


Figure 1. Map of the Province of Cagayan showing the Municipality of Lasam where the Aggay communities are located.

Lasam is an agricultural community situated in the north-western portion of Cagayan province. It is circumscribed on the northwest by the Municipality of Allacapan, Cagayan and Flora, Apayao; on the east by the Cagayan River and Gattaran, Cagayan; on the northeast by the municipality of Lal-lo; on the south by Sto. Nino, Cagayan; and on the southwest by the Municipality of Rizal, Cagayan. The municipality of Lasam has an aggregate land area of approximately 23,400 or 234 square kilometers. This is evenly distributed among its 30 barangays.

Participants

The participants of the study were the thirty-six Agays chosen through site selection approach guided by these inclusion criteria: 1) the respondents must be a full-blooded Agay; and 2) must be married with children. Participation of the informants was voluntary. They responded based on the nature of their experiences and willingness to participate. For ethical considerations, the respondents were informed that the interviews were recorded. Autonomy, confidentiality anonymity, and reciprocity were observed by the researchers.

The purposive sampling was utilized to identify the informants of the study. It is a form of sampling in which the process of selection of the sample is based on the judgment of the researchers based on the criteria set in the study. The researchers chose the Agay who had met these criteria to be the informants of the study.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal Characteristics of the Agays

Majority (47 percent or almost half) of the Agays-informants had only three to four children in the family, followed by those with five to six children (31 percent) while only one had over nine children. This means that the average number of children among Agays was four.

Table 1. Number of Children

Number of Children	Frequency (n=36)	Percentage
1-2	4	11
3-4	17	47
5-6	11	31
7-8	3	8
9 and above	1	3
Total	36	100%

Majority of the respondents were 11-20 years old with 23 or 62% of them. This finding generally means that the Agay-informants were relatively young. Further, their marriage at a young age contributes to the increasing population in Lasam, Cagayan. The least number of informants were those who belonged in the age brackets of 31-40 and 41-50. This would mean that the Agays of Lasam had a short lifespan. This is because of their poor health habits and limited access to hospitalization. This finding is also a manifestation of the traditional beliefs of the Agay members to rely on quack doctors for the cure of their illnesses.

Table 2. Personal Characteristic of Agays According to Age Bracket

Age Brackets	Frequency (n=36)	Percentage
1-10	2	5
11-20	23	62
21-30	7	19
31-40	3	8
41-50	2	5
Total	36	100%

Out of the 37 informants, 19 or 51% had an elementary education, and 15 or 41% did not attend schooling. This finding means that most respondents only attained the elementary level. During their younger years, they had to take care of their siblings, and they needed to work for their daily living thus their attendance to formal schooling was very low.

Table 3. Personal Characteristic of Agays According to their Level of Education

Level of Education	Frequency (n=36)	Percentage
High School Graduate	0	0
High School Level	0	0
Elementary Graduate	3	8
Elementary Level	19	51
Did not attend schooling	15	41
Total	36	100%

Economic Survival Activities of the Agays of Lasam, Cagayan

1. Foraging

Among the economic activities of the Agays of Lasam, Cagayan was foraging. They gathered wild orchids from the Cordillera Mountain ranges and sold these to the lowlanders during Sundays at Lasam Public Market. The products they obtained from foraging were bartered for their needs like rice and clothes. Ocampo and Ocampo (2014) also found that foraging was one of the oldest occupations of the Negritos, in which they gather edible plants, wild orchids and ornamentals directly from the wild.

The Agays also gathered trees and twigs from the forest near their communities and sold them as firewood (*sungrud*) to the Ilocano lowlanders. The wild orchids and twigs were immediately transported to the nearest

public market for sale to the lowlanders as ornaments and decorations. With the onset of trading practice and interaction with the mainstream, they also bought canned goods, noodles, biscuits, and others for their daily living.

2. Farming and Agriculture

The farming and agricultural practices of the Agays were planting of rice (*agmula ti pagay*), banana (*saba*), cassava (*kahoy*) sweet potato (*kamotit*), jute (*saluyut*), squash (*karabasa*), monggo (*balatong*), beans (*sitaw*), ampalaya (*parya*), wild chili pepper (*sili*), eggplant (*tarong*) and papaya. Both Agay men and women participated in the cultivation activities. These products were also the foods they ate if not sold. They also stored these for future consumption. Farming and agriculture among the Agays were evident practices they do for a living.

The way the Agays of Lasam are practicing farming and agriculture is similar to the Aetas of Penablanca as noted by Tindowen (2016) that engagement in farming and other horticultural activities, where they put up their own gardens to plant rice and crops, provides for their daily needs.

The Agays practiced the process of cultivating and utilizing land resource to survive in their daily needs. They were aware that the process of land cultivation starts with the clearing of the selected area known to them as *agsipat* (removing grasses), followed by *panagsuyod* (plowing), and *panagmula* (seed sowing) through their small farm tools such as *buneng* (bolo) and *kumpay* (sickle). They were also aware that root crops and vegetables should be planted during frequent rains. Some of the Agays planted near the riverbanks to easily water the plants during drought.

Moreover, rice farming for them was not a common activity since they do not have rice paddies in their area. They were being hired by the Ilocano lowlanders to render farm services, paying them with rice or money during harvesting season. For their daily consumption, boiled sweet potato, cassava and bananas were their usual food as rice substitute. They could only acquire rice through exchanging forest products or rendering services to lowlanders.

3. Paid Labor

Other economic activities of the Agays

for survival was to render services to the Ilocano lowlanders through paid labor such as *makilamun* (weeding), *makiraep* (rice planting), *makigapas* (harvesting), and *makibilag ti mais ken irik* (drying of corn and rice). They were given wage on daily basis depending on their agreement with the lowlanders requesting for the service. In these paid labor activities, the Agay men did the work while their wives and children were left under a shanty or tree waiting for them.

Due to the dwindling wildlife resources in the Cordillera mountains, the Agays found it more rewarding for them to survive when they mainstreamed with the lowlanders of Lasam. Ocampo and Ocampo (2014) also reported that one reason for them to be mainstreamed with the Ilocanos was the incessant degradation of water and wildlife resources, which the Agays derived from foraging, fishing, and hunting activities.

Meanwhile, the participation of women in daily labor was usually in *panaglamun* (weeding) and *panagsagad* (sweeping) where their children typically joined as errand boys and girls while most of the eldest children were at home to take care of the younger siblings.

Some paid labor activities were seasonal that Agays sought other alternatives such as wild animal hunting and foraging. It can be noted that they already established trade relationships with the Ilocano lowlanders.

4. Livestock and Poultry Production

In the same manner, livestock and poultry production are also practiced by the Agays. They had native pigs, chickens, and ducks in their household. They raised these animals for consumption. Most of the women and children were typically responsible for taking care of the animals. From the money earned from other forms of labor or from the exchange of goods, they set aside money to buy poultry animals. It can be noted that livestock and poultry production is considered by the Agays as a survival activity. These domesticated animals were an important source of protein for the Agay members.

5. Basket Weaving and Other Handicrafts Making

Basket weaving was also an Agay activity for survival. Young and old Agays wove baskets in different forms that were sold to the market as additional income to buy for their needs. Cost of each material

depended on the size and design of the baskets they wove. Among the baskets they wove were open basket (*labba*), rattan backpack (*lagpi*), egg baskets (*baki*) and knife case (*baina*). They were also skilled in weaving sleeping mats (*ikamen*).

Weaving baskets is largely part of activities in their *abong-abong* (shanty) when there were no offered paid labors. The weaving construction materials such as grasses, rattan, and bamboo were available in the nearby mountains. During Sundays, these baskets were sold. Some of them also developed their own designs in weaving, from simple to checkered baskets of black and dark brown. Other forms of handicrafts they made were home utensils such as *sagapa* (pot holder), and spoons from coconut shells. They also created fish trap (*kattat*) for their fishing.

6. Wild Animal Hunting and Fishing

Animal hunting was still a part of their economic survival. Due to forest destruction, the animals they now seldomly hunted were *banyas* (monitor lizard), *sunggu* (Philippine macaque), *billit* (birds), *abuyug* (native chicken), *kalaw* (big birds), *pag-ong* (turtle), *beklat* (snake), *igat* (eel) among others. They used the method called *panagsilo* (trapping method). They also developed their own tools such as *pana* (bow and arrow), *pika* (two-pronged spear), and improvised self-made air gun. These wild animals were sold to lowland traders for lime or exchange for clothing, rice or other material implements.

Fishing was also practiced by the Agays occasionally. They do *panagpakat* (trapping method) using the net (*sigay*) or *kattat* (bamboo trap); they also used their *pana* and some were still doing the bare hand method of catching fish called *panagkammel*.

Common Illnesses and Treatments Used

Among the common illnesses they experienced were fever (*gurigur*), headache (*sakit ti ulo*), and cough (*uyek*). They used banana leaves (*bulung ti saba*) to cure fever. They also drank *makabuhay* (*Tinospora rumphii*) and *sikal* (*talahib*) for constipation, and *bain-bain* (*makahiya*) for cough and wounds. The Agays also believed that some animals like *sunggu* (monkey) can relieve fever by drinking its blood and the vile of *beklat* (*reticulated python*) as medicines for stomachache. It can also be easily described that among the Agay children, malnutrition was a problem. Their fine reddish or yellowish

hair was a sign of protein deficiency which is considered common to all Agays.

Environmental Conservation Practices of the Agays

The conservation practices of the Agays of Lasam were: 1) selective hunting and fishing of wildlife particularly the pregnant animals; 2) selective cutting of mature trees; they used dropped twigs as firewood; 3) they did not use chemicals or fertilizers for their vegetable farms; among the organic farming practices they do was to allow peels of fruits decaying in their vegetable garden making the soil more fertile.

These environmental conservation practices of the Agays are also in consonance with the findings of the study of Geronimo, Cabansag and Reyes (2016) that the Agays had invaluable knowledge system for the sustainable management of available resources. They still cling to some of their traditional ways of resource utilization and conservation practices. In the same manner, Tuyor et al. (2007) claimed that the IPs were a source of knowledge to the many solutions that will be needed to avoid environmental degradation or to ameliorate sustainable environment.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Agays of Lasam, Cagayan had their mechanisms and coping strategies to survive with the pace of time through their economic interaction with other cultural groups. Their constant mainstream with Ilocano lowlanders provided them more opportunities to engage in the different sources of livelihood but remained to have low-income status to provide their daily needs. In like manner, the traditional use of herbal medicine was still being practiced by their groups. They also had their distinct indigenous environmental management practices. Implications of the study will present plan action of Cagayan State University at Lasam for the conduct of extension initiatives that are culture and gender sensitive.

The following recommendations are offered:

1. The development of extension programs of Cagayan State University for the Agays should be initiated particularly on the following: a) Capacitating them on land cultivation through backyard gardening, crop production, organic

farming, basket weaving; b) Maximizing the clarification of their environmental conservation practices; c) Formal and alternative modes of education aims to improve the skills of the Agays may be initiated.

2. The environmental conservation practices of the Agays may be used as examples or models by teachers as source material in teaching social studies and environmental education.
3. Strengthen the linkages of the academe and other government and non-government institutions to assist the Agay communities.

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