



The Mansaka
Maragusan, Compostela Valley

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Local Governance

New Meaning to “Binding Ties”

A valley surrounded by mountains towering 2,000 to 9,999 feet above sea level, the municipality of Maragusan in Compostela Valley is nestled in a rainforest. Less than one-fourth of its total land area is used for production as the town is 75% mountainous. Its original inhabitants were the Mansaka who today comprise only one-fourth of the population, the second biggest ethnic group after the Cebuanos (about 65%) that began migrating to the area in the 1950s. Displaced from their ancestral domain by migration, logging and mining, the Mansaka were dispersed in the different barangays of Maragusan, including the Mansaka Village, a five-block settlement in the town center.

Today, the Mansaka are among the poorest of Maragusan’s population. The local government unit (LGU), however, mobilizes them for several of its poverty-reduction programs. Many Mansaka, for example, are employed by their barangays in waste-recovery facilities where they sort the recyclables from the non-recyclables for dispatch to a main materials recovery processing center, a centerpiece of the LGU’s development plans. In addition, the majority of the forest guards of the LGU’s 309-hectare reforestation project are also from the IP communities.

Portraits of the Mansaka: Residents of the Mansaka village of different generations; and the Maragusan's main waste processing facility, a centerpiece of its development plan and one of the municipality's big employers of Mansaka

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Patricia Orquiera records a transaction in the Botika sa Barangay's sales journal.

Through the local water district office, the LGU has also made water available free of charge to the residents of Mansaka Village.

Elsewhere, the IPs are also visible. For example, Patricia Orquiera, of mixed Pantukan and Mansaka ancestry, minds the “Botika sa Barangay,” one of five village drugstores established by the LGU to cater to the pharmaceutical needs of the IP communities. Here, she earns an allowance of PhP1,000 monthly, which supplements the income of her husband from being a farm labourer and occasionally, a carpenter. Her earnings help buy the rice, soap and other immediate necessities that the family needs.

While Patricia may have a working knowledge of herbal medicines, her work at the barangay drugstore has also exposed her to the community’s common health problems, including malnutrition. Many

Mansaka children, she said, suffer third-degree malnutrition because they do not eat on time, or of sufficient quality and quantity. She tells her neighbours with malnourished children, “You feed them vegetables you can grow in your backyard, you don’t need to give them something fancy.” Patricia is also able to advise them of any vaccination campaign or supplemental feeding that the LGU offers.

The LGU’s adoption of GPS (global positioning system) technology will hasten the process of delineation and titling of the Mansaka’s ancestral domain. The introduction to the benefits of GPS technology, including a comprehensive Forest Land Use Plan (FLUP), is one of the results of assistance from CIDA’s Local Government Support Program (LGSP) in formulating the municipality’s legislative-executive agenda. (See page 75 for information on the LGSP.)

From cradle to grave, the community is tied to the land. A typical setting in Mansaka territories is a group of five houses, with the main house in the center occupied by the parents, and the surrounding four to five houses occupied by the married children and their respective families. The farms are usually adjacent or across their homes, and the sacred places of burial of ancestors are within the vicinity.

According to a University of the Philippines (UP) scholar, the Mansaka language has no equivalent of the word “territory,” and they have no concept of land ownership in the same way this means to the lowlanders – in hectares or square metres. Instead, the determination of boundaries was by tradition since the land occupied by a particular home and farm was transferred from one generation of Mansaka to the next. According to the UP study, in the past, all a Mansaka father had to do was to call the children and point out to them the plot each one should farm. “That is the area you must till.”*

The principle of collective stewardship – not ownership – of land was also seen in the *tamba*, the Mansaka custom of placing a coffin-like box at the entrance of a farm plot or the approach to fishing or hunting grounds to which the Mansaka in charge wanted others’ access restricted. The Mansaka believed violation of the *tamba*

would anger the spirits guarding the area and bring about immediate misfortune, sickness or death, and withhold any yield from a farm, forest or river under a *tamba*.

The Mansaka’s main occupation remains subsistence agriculture – particularly rice and corn. Many of them, however, are unable to sustain rice or corn cultivation due to the high cost of inputs as well as the rising prices of basic commodities. They depend instead on *gabi* (taro roots) and *kamote* (sweet potato), which entail less expense to grow, for their daily food requirements. The LGU’s successful delineation of the Mansaka’s ancestral domain and application of an ancestral domain title will restore to the community their customary rights over the land that lies at the core of their being and sustains them.

Maragusan’s LGU, which LGSP has cited with a Kaagapay Seal of Excellence in Local Governance, has many other development plans with the Mansaka’s participation and welfare in mind, including eco-tourism. The attractions are there – easy hills and difficult mountains for climbers, caves for spelunkers, a huge lake and a generous sprinkling of waterfalls, and hot and cold springs for everyone else. The Mansaka’s direct involvement in such a development plan in their area is a clear affirmation of respect for their intrinsic affinity with the land.

* Delia Magaña, “Ang mga Mansaka sa Maragusan ng Davao del Norte,” *Inisyatibo sa Pag-aaral ng mga Etnolinggwistikong Grupo (IPEG)*: 1998, pp. 21-46. [published by the Office of Research and Publications, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines, Quezon City, Philippines]

The local government's planning and development officer and rural health worker; one of Maragusan's scenic waterfalls tagged for ecotourism development; and the information technology team using the municipality's GPS technology

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