THE RICE TERRACES
OF THE PHILIPPINE CORDILLERAS

AMONG HERITAGE SITES in the Philippines, the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras have such a powerful presence that makes them one of the most outstanding places in the country. Lying high in the Cordillera mountain range, their setting cannot be replicated anywhere in the lowland tropical landscape of the Philippines — or even anywhere in the world, for that matter. On clear days the crisp air is a prism that reflects the luminous sun, expanding vision beyond its normal limits. With the unusual gift of visual detail, the eyes take in the expanse of terraces built into mountain peaks that descend into valleys. Existence in the Cordillera unites man with nature, and the unparalleled view shows how man has shaped the landscape to allow him to grow rice. The sheer majesty of the terraces communicates its uniqueness and strength. Besides wind and rustling leaves, there is also the constant sound of water flowing downhill on the canals that irrigate the terraces. And there is nobleness in culture and environment expressed by the timeless tranquility of the terraces. The stillness is mystical. There is spirituality in the terraces that makes a Filipino touch his roots. It is home ground for him.

The terraces evoke a strong sense of national pride. Filipinos consider them their supreme national symbol and rightly so. In a country with a long history of colonization, the site is the only one built by Filipino forebears without any foreign intervention at all. Most important, the site celebrates life to this day. Since they were first built, the terraces have been used continuously for their original purpose of growing rice, sustaining generation after generation of a proud culture that has clung to most of its traditions that are visually expressed in their landscape.

We are in constant search of "appropriate technology." Despite great strides in developing modern techniques in all fields, traditional practices, whether cultural, agricultural, hydrological, or environmental, are still the most appropriate for sustaining the terraces today. Traditional practices attest to the enduring sophistication of folk technology. A workable solution has yet to be found that combines tradition and modernity in the terraces, a dilemma that threatens the future existence of the site and the lives of those who inhabit it. Finding that solution ensures the future of the terraces.
Records show that rice has been cultivated in Asia since 2,000 B.C. During that long period, culture has interwoven with cultivation. Unlike other crops that adapt to the landscape as they grow, rice makes an agricultural landscape of its own, since it germinates in flooded paddies. Rice agriculture imprints paddies on the landscape, a visual and cultural icon that ties Southeast Asians to each other through the rice culture they all share.

Among the Asian paddy landscapes, one stands out: the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordillera. High in the remote areas of the Philippine Cordillera mountain range, scholars believe, slopes have been terraced and planted with rice as far back as 2,000 years. The impressive landscape shows the great lengths to which the Filipino will go to grow his staple food, rice. Mountains terraced into paddies that still survive in varying states of conservation are spread over most of the 20,000 square kilometer land area (7 percent of the total land mass of the Philippine Archipelago) that is in the Northern Luzon provinces of Ilocos Sur, Kalinga, Apayao, Abra, Mt. Province, and Ifugao. The population density of the region is 100-250 inhabitants per square kilometer. Its inhabitants are placed in eight ethnolinguistic groups: the Isneg, Kalinga, Bontoc, Ifugao, Kankanay, Ibaloi, Ikalahan, and Tingguian. The improbable site is...
found at altitudes varying from 700 to 1,500 meters above sea level, where terraces are sliced into mountain slopes with contours that rise steeply to a maximum incline of 70 percent compared with the more gentle slopes of 40 percent in the rice terraces of Bali in Indonesia.

Most Filipinos regard the terraces as their greatest national symbol. It is a fitting symbol that captures the spirit of the Filipino. Rather than simply being a freestanding architectural monument that commemorates a past achievement or a victory against colonial struggle, the terraces honor rice and the life that the crop sustains. The terraces gain more significance because they were voluntarily built without forced labor or any colonial intervention. What makes the symbol meaningful to the Filipino nation is that the terraces preserve traditional lifestyles, religious beliefs, architecture, engineering, and environmental management in an age-old unwritten system that still applies to this day. Elders orally hand down their knowledge to the younger generation.

The fusion of cultural and natural influences in the site bestows global significance on the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras. One of the more outstanding sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, it is a landscape whose sheer beauty is the result of a long process of man's constant reshaping of nature to suit his need for growing rice in the Cordilleras. Classified as a cultural landscape (one that shows a long interaction between man and nature), the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras were the first “continuing cultural landscape” to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the designation for a landscape that has maintained its original purpose up to the present time.

Originally only two categories of sites could be inscribed on the World Heritage List: cultural sites that show the highest creativity of man and natural sites that are of extreme beauty and essential to maintaining the world environmental balance. Now there is a third category, where the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras belong. In fact the rice terraces site helped create the “cultural landscapes” category, since the site is neither cultural nor natural but a combination of both.