Ecology, Rice and Debt Among the Molbog

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The Molbog are the indigenous people of Balabac island. They are the living evidence of the intensity of past exchanges between the Tausug/Samal populations that constituted the ethnic and political core of the Sulu Sultanate, and the peoples of the islands surrounding the Sulu Sea. Like the Kalibugan of the Zamboanga peninsula, an offshoot of the Subanun, and the Kalagan of the Davao Gulf, an offshoot of the Tagakaolo, the Molbog are the product of the parallel expansion of Sulu hegemony and Islam among communities belonging to non-Muslim populations. Linguistic and historical evidence suggest that the Molbog were once a Pala’wan subgroup that, after sustained contacts with Tausug and Samal, converted to Islam, assuming in the process a new and independent identity.  

Notwithstanding this history of intensive contact with larger social systems, the Molbog have managed to retain until today a large degree of structural distinctiveness and economic autonomy. Tausug and Samal domination was essentially political and cultural; although exploitative, it did not break the Molbog’s own structure of production and reproduction. During Spanish and American rule the impact on the Molbog of colonizers and Christian Filipinos, though intense in certain periods, remained discontinuous and uneven. Each of the powers that impinged on the Molbog added new elements to their society—the people from Sulu brought Islam and hierarchical structural patterns; the colonizers, especially the Americans, introduced the use of money and embryonic elements of capitalism. However, none of these additions brought fundamental structural changes because, among other things, the transformations in progress were each time interrupted by external events. Thus the

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1. In the existing literature the Molbog are sometimes called “Melebuganun,” e.g., Kuder 1945. Fieldwork on the Molbog in Balabac was carried out between 1981 and 1982. Further research was conducted in July–August 1986.

2. Both Nicole Revel MacDonald (Revel-MacDonald 1979) and Arnold Thiessen (Thiessen 1981) have recorded the great similarities of Molbog and Pala’wan lexicons. Revel-MacDonald further suggests that the Molbog may have been originally a Pala’wan subgroup. The same conclusion is possible if one compares various elements of the culture of Pala’wan and Molbog. For instance Pala’wan and Molbog kinship terminologies and their use (see C. MacDonald, 1979) are nearly identical. Several Molbog rituals (e.g., the Pinadungan) once scraped of their Islamic shell, are very similar to rituals performed by the Pala’wan. Last, but surely not least, the Molbog themselves claim that in the past they were Pala’wans.
imposition of American rule at the beginning of this century ended Sulu domination over Southern Palawan, while the Second World War interrupted any trends developed during the American colonial period.

In the last thirty years, and particularly in settlements exposed to the influence of Christian migrants, new trends seem again to threaten the Molbog’s structural distinctiveness. Two interrelated factors are involved. First, the cultivation practices adopted by the migrants have triggered a process of ecological degradation that has rendered less productive the agricultural activities of the Molbog. Second, in order to overcome consequent food scarcity, Molbog have begun to rely increasingly on wage work in the fields of migrant Christian farmers. This economic strategy was in the past uncommon, but it has today become central to the livelihood of at least some Molbog households. At least in economic terms, the result is that Molbog-Christian relations have begun to overshadow the relations of production between the Molbog themselves.

The goal of this paper is to account for the persistence of the Molbog as a relatively discrete society and at the same time discuss the current transformations in progress in Kopuntian a Molbog settlement particularly exposed to outside influence. Since these transformations are partially a product of contradictions internal to the Molbog’s own system of production, however, some of the latter’s essential features will first be described.

THE MOLBOG

The Setting

Balabac, the seat of the southernmost municipality of Palawan, lies 180 miles south of Puerto Princesa, on a shallow sea dotted by several smaller coral islets. The island is still isolated from the main centers of Palawan and is not connected to the mainland by regular means of transportation. Balabac can be divided in two sections: a mountain range still covered by primary forest on the East, and a system of low hills covered by mixed primary/secondary forest on the North and the West. It is in sparse settlements scattered over these hills that most of the Molbog, the biggest ethnic group in Balabac, live. In 1980, the Molbog numbered 6,083 persons (NCSO 1980).

3. Kopuntian is a fictitious name chosen to protect the privacy of both Molbog and Christian informants. In 1981–82 the neighborhood was the residential site of more than 40 Molbog households and 11 Christian households.

4. The demographic figures used here are taken from the census summary compiled in 1980–81 by census personnel in Balabac. They refer to individuals. I believe they are more reliable than the figures offered by the final published version of the 1980 Philippine Census, which reports only numbers of households based on a 20 percent sample. According to this source there were 1018 Molbog households in Balabac. There are also Molbog in the municipality of Batarasa and on the Malaysian island of Banggi. According to the 1975 Census, there were 831 Batarasa Molbog individuals, while according to the 1980 Census Batarasa included 182 Molbog households. According to informants there are approximately 200–250 Molbog in Banggi.
The Molbog share Balabac with Christians from various areas in the Visayas, Luzon and mainland Palawan, and with other Muslims. The latter are primarily Samal and Tausug who migrated from Tawi-Tawi to escape the Muslim-Christian conflict of the 1970s, and Jama Mapun, the Samal-speaking people from Cagayan de Sulu, who came to Balabac in search of land.

In 1980, approximately 2,000 Christian Filipinos inhabited Balabac (NCSO 1980). Some live in Poblacion, the small municipal town located on the eastern shore. These people are mostly government employees or petty businessmen. Other Christians live in the interior of Balabac in conditions of face-to-face relations with the Molbog and, like them, practice shifting cultivation.

The Muslim migrants inhabit mainly the smaller islands of the municipality, where they practice fishing and trading and farming seaweed. Their relations with the Molbog, who they consider second class Muslims, are minimal. This general pattern, however, does not apply to the relations between Molbog and the Jama Mapun practicing shifting cultivation in the interior of Balabac. This relationship is in fact intense and dates back many decades. Molbog and Jama Mapun intermarry and some of the latter’s customs have been adopted by the Molbog. In spite of these commonalities, the Jama Mapun also claim superior status to the Molbog and tend to be better off economically. They are more entrenched in the market economy and tend to practice shifting cultivation only as a first step towards the establishment of small coconut plantations.5

Although the Molbog are the majority of the local population, they occupy a marginal position in the political and economic life of Balabac. Such life is dominated by Christians and Muslim migrants. To my knowledge there are no Molbog representatives in the municipal council, and even the barangay captains are often Christian or Jama Mapun mestizos. With few exceptions, no Molbog are involved in stable, cash-oriented economic activities, and as recently as the early 1980s only three Molbog held high school diplomas. Because of the lack of strong interest on the part of external entrepreneurs in Molbog lands, because the public administration is only minimally concerned with their internal affairs, and because of their own “conservative” culture, the extent of Molbog structural isolation is still substantial.6

The reality in Balabac is changing, but it is still possible to depict the Molbog as a separate group, only loosely connected with wider Philippine society. Many Molbog still manage to carry on their economic and social lives without having to depend on entities and resources outside their local structures of production.

5. The adaptive practices followed by the Jama Mapun in Balabac are similar to the ones described by Eric Casino for the Jama Mapun in Palos (see Casino 1976).
6. Currently in Balabac there are neither logging activities nor agricultural or mining enterprises. At least until the mid-1980s, most of the interior of the island was not yet surveyed. The only areas where a cadastral survey is available are those inhabited by Christians. In these areas the Christians may hold or may have applied for property titles but, until quite recently, they allowed Molbog farming activities on their plots. Government influence on Molbog is minimal, being limited to the management of barangay schools and to the maintenance of a few roads.
Structural isolation, however, does not mean lack of contact. The Molbog trade with shopkeepers in Poblacion and Jama Mapun traders living along the coasts of Balabac. These exchanges are more intensive between agricultural seasons, when Molbog often go to town to deliver rattan or almaciga commissioned by local businessmen and to purchase consumption goods. However, if the exchanges between Molbog and town Christians are periodically intense, those with Christians living in the interior of Balabac tend to be continuous. In the hinterlands of the island, Molbog and Christians share the same environment, engage in the same activity—shifting cultivation—and interact on a daily basis. There, the exchanges between Molbog and Christians are not limited to petty trade but also entail wage work in Christian fields.

**Shifting Cultivation**

The Molbog are primarily shifting cultivators and secondarily fishermen. Small gardens in former rice fields provide various vegetables, while hunting and sago collection can have considerable importance in moments of scarcity.

The cultivation practices of the Molbog entail an extensive knowledge of the environment and of the relations between the type of vegetation cleared and the productivity of a plot. The Molbog classify natural vegetation in various types according to whether it is primary or secondary and according to the degree of growth of trees versus that of grasses. Ideally, the best plot is cut in advanced secondary forest which offers the best compromise between yields and the amount of labor needed to clear it. In practice, the contingencies of daily life can force a cultivator to cut forest patches younger than the ideal. This occurs when a household is struck by accidents that weaken its labor capacity or when it is in the early phases of its developmental cycle. Rarely, however, do the Molbog cut forest younger than five years, since the future productivity of such a plot would be unworthy of the cultivator’s efforts. The Molbog do not articulate their knowledge of shifting cultivation techniques in terms of ecological preservation but only in terms of yields, safety of work and labor time. However, it should be noted that the method of cultivation that best satisfies these parameters is also the one that best protects their environment.

The cultivation cycle begins in February, when the chosen area is slashed. This phase lasts an average of two months and entails two successive stages. First, the undergrowth is cleared. This work, which is relatively easy and fast, is performed with the machete by men, women and children. Second, trees are felled with the ax. This exhausting and dangerous activity is performed only by men and occupies two-thirds of the total labor devoted to clearing operations. Fifteen days later, after the wood in the plot has dried, it is burned. This operation requires only a day of work and only a few persons. By the beginning of May, after the plots have been cleaned of unburned debris and the ashes have been evenly spread, rice planting begins. This work is performed in big parties involving reciprocal exchange of labor between households. Rice must be sown by mid-May, when the rainy season begins. From this moment on, farmers are busy protecting the growing rice plants from the
incursions of wild pigs, monkeys and birds. Fences are erected and a small hut is built in the center of the field to shelter the individuals guarding the rice. At this stage, the most taxing activity is weeding, a task performed practically continuously by men, women and children.

By mid-August, the harvest begins. Unlike felling, weeding, and especially planting, this operation involves only the members of the household and does not entail exchange of labor. The only alternative available to households in need of supplementary labor is share harvesting. Once rice has been harvested, the field will be abandoned to fallow or, alternatively, reburnt and planted with root crops. After this optional practice the plot will not be cultivated again for several years; the Molbog recognize that the productivity of land will gradually decrease in proportion to the number of years of reutilization.

Two fundamental constraints influence the pace of work over the course of the year. The first is temporal and depends on the succession of dry and rainy seasons. During the first phase of the cycle, ending with burning, the weather must be dry. However, during the second part of the cycle, rain is needed to grow the rice. The beginning of the rainy season is thus an indeferrable deadline. Consequentially, March and April, when trees are felled (the heaviest task of the cycle), are often marked by a frantic acceleration of the work.

The second constraint is food availability. The Molbog divide the year into two periods—pongbiag (the abundance season) and pongudap (the hunger season). During the first period, which begins after harvest and ends, depending on each household’s supplies, between March and May, rice is plentiful. During the period that follows, rice becomes scarce and alternative sources of livelihood must be pursued. Pongudap is the season of the year when root crops are consumed more intensively and when a number of families run out of rice altogether. In the past, this was the time when the poorest households went to the forest to collect sago. During pongudap many cultivators have to forego their favorite food and adapt to a diet perceived as less nutritious and satisfying, this during the heaviest and most pressing phases of the cultivation cycle.

Production and Reproduction

The Molbog are essentially an egalitarian society. Their language does not provide any term expressing the idea of private ownership of land. The word ‘arta (possession) refers uniquely to chattels, and the term ampu’ (owner) denotes a person only in relation to his tools, house and animals. The latter term may be extended to growing crops but never to land. As long as a plot is under cultivation, the cultivator maintains exclusive rights to the fruits of his labor. These rights, however, cease once the land is returned to fallow.

The fact that all Molbog are equal in relation to the means of production does not mean that their society lacks status differentiation. Among the Molbog, as in many other groups in insular Southeast Asia, the fundamental marker of status is seniority. In daily intercourse, the notion that the older person in a relationship occupies a superior status seems to be the most important normative principle of