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Marseille

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To
Hon. Lucilo Rodriguez Bayron
Mayor of Puerto Princesa Municipality

Cc. City ENRO
CENRO
Bantay Gubat
Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD)
Office of the Governor
Hon. Mayor of Brooke's Point

Dear Mayor Bayron,

This letter contains views that I respectfully submit to your kind attention regarding policies pertaining to upland farming and the practice of slash-and-burn (*kaingin*) agricultural methods among Indigenous Peoples of Palawan.

I am a professional social anthropologist, and a Research Director Emeritus at the National Center for Scientific Research in France. I have been staying, studying and living amongst Palawan (Pala'wan, Palawanos) peoples for over forty years. I did my first field studies in the municipality of Brooke's Point starting in 1970 and my last stay with Palawan indigenous communities was in 2014. I published several books and a number of papers on various aspects of these Indigenous Peoples' culture and way of life. Chief among their concerns and cultural priorities is the "*uma*" or upland swidden.

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Allow me to highlight several important features of the *uma* (or *kaingin*) complex among the Palawan upland agriculturists.

It is their **main source of livelihood**, containing various crops (rice among them) that sustain them throughout the year. It provides them with food, medicinal plants, and other useful items like firewood and construction materials.

Contrary to popular belief, integral swidden or *kaingin* farming is a **sustainable farming technique**, which is not at all conducive to the destruction of the vegetative environment, erosion and bleaching. When I visited the headwaters of the Makagwa and Tigaplan rivers during the past few years (2011 to 2014) I was able to observe the situation and compare it to what I saw and documented in the early 1970's. I saw no environmental damage. The thick vegetal cover, the fertile lands, the extensive forested areas with clear and abundant waters above 200 meters of elevation, were all still there. Far from endangering the productivity of the land, the upland *kaingin/uma* farming system proved to be highly sustainable and in no way detrimental to the preservation of the vegetal cover. Yields had not significantly decreased in a span of almost half a century.

The *uma* provides a variety of nutriments and insures a **rich and balanced diet**. Noted anthropologists like Harold Conklin and Clifford Geertz have observed long ago that the *uma* is a garden characterized by multicropping. Not only rice, but a number of cultigens, root crops and vegetables, are being planted and harvested in the *uma*. I compare this situation in the highlands to that presently experienced by the coastal people in Rizal Municipality (Kulbi River basin) and in Española municipality (Punang). In this latter areas, irrigated monocropping rice-farming has displaced the *uma* farming system in several barangays. As a result a number of food items have disappeared from the people's diet, and nutritious requirements are not properly met.

The symbolic and ritual life of the Palawan people is centered on the seasonal agricultural cycle of preparing the field/garden (*uma*), planting, weeding and harvesting. Upland rice has been the most valued cultigen and its harvest has been termed in the vernacular the "life of the people". Important rituals and religious ceremonies follow the harvest that occurs once a year in late August or September. Irrigated rice cultivation, with several crops a year at various intervals, disrupts the ritual cycle and makes it irrelevant. The suppression of the *uma* cycle spells the demise of the indigenous representations of society, nature and the supernatural world. It endangers the **foundation of their sacred beliefs**.

To sum it up, the *uma* is the centerpiece of the indigenous upland culture of Palawan, providing not only food, but also the symbolic bridge to nurturing forces of nature. **As practiced by upland communities it does not endanger the environment, but preserves it.**

Knowing your dedication to the welfare and interests of all in Puerto Princesa Municipality and Palawan Province, I am confident Mister Mayor that the above remarks will serve as an encouragement to policy makers to exempt upland indigenous communities from any ban and/or restriction on kaingin.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CHM', is centered on the page. The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized font.

Charles Macdonald, PhD