

STATUS REPORT 10 – MALOBOG FARM – COCONUT DYNAMICS

In many places in Asia, men loop a hemp circlet on their feet and hands and scramble up the coconut tree, monkey style. In Ceylon, they say, trained monkeys do the scrambling. In most South Sea Islands, they wait for the fruit to fall.

This is all about harvesting coconuts. In the Philippines before, men climb the tree gingerly by stepping into the notches hacked into the tree trunk. Now, it seems that isn't the case anymore, at least in the farms I've seen in the area. There is a "precision team" of three groups whose local names, if grunted out loud, sound so onomatopaeic to me: "Longgot, Hakut and Lugit". The stitched picture on the right shows a Longgoter in action: with a series of bamboo poles strung together, and with a sharp curved knife at the tip, he severs the mature coconuts, then adroitly avoids getting hit when they fall. Many have died thus. In the middle of the photo is a lone falling coconut. The time of the day is critical as noon time tends to dazzle the vision. In the photo on the left, there's a whole bunch falling down that breaks up to individual nuts upon ground impact. They roll hither and yon away from the coconut tree's base. So not only does the longgoter have to avoid direct head contact, but



also feet contact. This coconut dispersal is where the next team member comes in: the Hakuter, or collector. The hakuter I saw was more organized with a bamboo sled or "balsa" pulled by an albino carabao. See picture above. I guess the carabao just happened to be white. These coconuts are deposited in a central place where at least two Lugiters hack them open, scoop out the meat, and then

pack them into jute sacks. Even if you love coconut juice, after some time, the sheer volume of the liquid being spilled becomes a waste product. Above left are the lugiters in action. The coconut husks or "bucong" is left to dry, and can be used as fuel. Same with the fallen coconut fronds or "palwa". The precision team is paid on the per-thousand-nut basis: 200 pesos for the longgot, 175 for the hakut, and 150 for the lugit, plus 450 for sled rental. So for this particular 2-day harvest of about 4,500 nuts, the team got almost 3K. The net yield was about 2,000 kg of wet coconut meat. That's about 2.3 nuts per kg of meat, pretty good since the farm is beside the river, soil is good, so the nuts are big. But it really is the prevailing price of the buyer that dictates whether to harvest or not. This time it was a so so P7 per kilo; better than last months' P5.50. Last year it was P12.



When the harvest is completed, the local copra buyer's truck is called to cart away the sacks of coconut meat to the weighing scale, then to the copra buyer's warehouse and pay-out office. On rare occasions, the meat is first sun dried and sold as copra, which fetches almost double the price, but of course the dry meat has shrunk to almost half its weight. Consequently, most people don't bother to wait. They sell the meat pronto. A bigger coconut plantation may have its own bucong-fired copra dryer or sicadora, and more importantly a secure warehouse, so as to avail of the copra price fluctuations, and sell when high.

The truck normally would carry a whole retinue of people to the copra buyer's pay-out office. Picture on right shows such an example from last year. The precision team's rep goes along to collect their money; the tenants who till the coconut land get 1/3 of the net, and of course the owner (or his encargado) of the land get the balance of 2/3 of net. And more often than not, the tenants have incurred debts to the neighborhood sari-sari store, or to other lenders, so these people tag along to ensure they can collect.



In 3 months or so, the procedure repeats itself for the next harvest.

But the tenant's plight, miserable as it may seem, is not that bad. The original tenant-in-charge of this 2-1/2 hectare parcel, long since passed away, has proliferated his family exponentially to the 4th generation, and some are now OFWs, others are regular workers in nearby haciendas, and others grow fruit and veggies in between the coconut trees for their own sale and consumption. We as owners do not even insist on a regular share. Once in a while when we visit, we come back with freebie pineapples, bunches of bananas, kamoteng kahoy and a few other fruit. Chickens and pigs we pay for. On a coconut farm, the tenants don't ever have to do anything to produce coconuts except merely wait for the next harvest, while they nightly imbibe the local tuba or cheap Vino Kulafu.



Photo on left shows part of the tenant clan last year, with Lisa holding court. Beside her is marang fruit.

So what does this all lead to? To the conclusion that coconut farming for us in this farm is never fun, just like what the planting rice song extols.

And that's because it's not so accessible, has lots of people to deal with, and finally, if you do your arithmetic right from all the facts given above, the bottom line should come up to two and a half grand pesos a month net - an amount that can be easily blown by a family on a couple of fine dinners. But on the other hand, for doing nothing, that's not too bad.

The adjacent river has more interesting ramifications, although that's another story.

We still prefer to hang around the much closer Azagra farm, with the veggie plots, animals and supposed earth spirits/elementals.