



Food as medicine: The Bagobo Tagabawa's holistic health traditions in the Philippines

The Bagobo Tagabawa people, an Indigenous tribe in Mindanao, Philippines, have a long history of using plants for healing purposes. Today, their related knowledge and practices are jeopardised by various forces including the influx of Western diets and medicine. In recent years, tribal Elders and organisers have worked with community members to re-introduce the idea of 'food as medicine' by growing indigenous plants in backyard gardens.

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The Bagobo Tagabawa, one of the many communities indigenous to Mindanao's islands, live on the slopes and in the foothills of Mount Apo, the Philippine's highest mountain. For generations the tribe has held sacred ceremonies and rituals on Mount Apo, receiving insights and healing. The Bagobo Tagabawa are also dedicated protectors of the local forests that are home to abundant plants and animals, including the endangered Philippine eagle. Their diet is primarily vegetable-based, and members have historically gathered and cultivated local indigenous plants for food and medicine. Tribal members in their eighties and nineties attribute their health and agility to their strong connection to place and their enduring cultural practices.

Glenboy Utay, a Bagobo Tagabawa community organiser, explains that their food traditions are not only nutritious but also a way to cleanse and heal the body. "These practices carry the identity of our tribe," he explains. "People seek out our indigenous cooking, especially taro, native chicken and our Law-uy (vegetable soup). We feel that these foods are healing."

Gardens of knowledge

Over the past decades, the influx of Western diets has led to the erosion of traditional Bagobo Tagabawa practices. Matanam Romi, an Elder and cultural practitioner, worries about the loss of the tribe's plant wisdom – not just for food but also for medicinal purposes: "People no longer believe in herbal medicine. When they fall ill – even with the slightest thing – they immediately go directly to the doctor or the hospital."

Recognising the need to revive traditional practices, the Bagobo Tagabawa launched an initiative in 2014 to address health, food and nutrition security by growing indigenous plants in family gardens. They did this in collaboration with Creative Nurturing Communities (CNC), a pilot project of the farming support group FARMCOOP. Although many families already had their own gardens, some relied on synthetic chemicals and pesticides and the crops were not always productive.

Under the guidance of Elders knowledgeable about community health and a cohort of organic gardeners, a core group of Bagobo Tagabawa women and youth worked with parents and neighbourhood leaders to set up family gardens in the municipality of Sibulan. They used locally adapted and indigenous plants known for their nutritious and healing qualities and learnt about efficient and effective organic production with the goal of maximising yields.

Community members exchanged seeds, seedlings and growing practices, and established backyard gardens that included many indigenous varieties. The gardens provided a platform for an inspired exchange of knowledge between Bagobo Tagabawa Elders, mothers, young women, youth organisers and other community members. "We learnt about indigenous herbs from our own community. The Elders and mothers brought the knowledge and the practices. They told us what herbal plants they used for

certain illnesses and what foods to eat and to avoid for healing," youth organiser Mimi recounts.

The expropriation of herbalism

For the Bagobo Tagabawa, spirituality is vital to health: for them, plants and humans are interlinked. Yet the widespread adoption and promotion of Western medicine in their society poses concrete challenges to the practice of their healing traditions. Matanam Romi says: "We are encouraged to go to the hospital when we are sick, but when we are there, the doctors prevent us from using our herbal medicine and practicing our indigenous practices." For example, the tribe uses the 'tawatawa' plant (*Euphorbia hirta*) to treat dengue fever, but this is forbidden by hospital doctors. At the same time, Western-trained doctors have interviewed Matanam Romi about indigenous herbal plants and have even published a book on the subject without crediting him or the tribe.

Abundance, reduced malnutrition and resilience

The family backyard gardens that were created over the next two years provided food for around 900 Bagobo Tagabawa community members and 521 children at school and at home. Local markets and organisations, including churches and government agency staff, purchased the surplus, giving households – and particularly women – an additional source of income.

During the CNC harvest festival and evaluation of the collaboration in 2016, Bagobo Tagabawa families testified not only that they had more food, but that they were also able to share with their neighbors in need. Importantly, the community health worker and neighborhood leaders confirmed a decline in malnutrition among adults and children.

It soon became clear that indigenous plants are also crucial for building resilience within the community, especially in times of crisis. During one of the country's devastating droughts in 2017, these varieties were the only crops that survived and were able to feed local households. They were also an important food source during the COVID-19 pandemic, when food prices rose and movement in and out of Sibulan was severely limited to protect the tribal community. During this period, more tribal members relied on medicinal herbs as a way to avoid hospitals.

In addition, Bagobo Tagabawa research farmers working together with FARMCOOP's partner farms in Davao del Norte are currently supporting strategies to diversify areas that are monocropped with banana and where the sources of seeds and plants are limited. The generosity shown by Bagobo Tagabawa farmers in the exchange of information, seeds and plants with other farmers has been critical for building stocks that can be used to recover from agrobiodiversity loss, an under-reported crisis in the Philippine food and agriculture system.

For the Bagobo Tagabawa, the gardens have served both as a pathway for the expression of their collective vision about the healing power of plants and as an acknowledgement of the many benefits of retaining their cultural foods and growing practices. Matanam Romi explains: "A long time ago, I wondered what would happen to the culture of the tribe. How can I teach our children so they can be on the right path? I decided to teach about the plants, about the herbs. Everything that the Ginoo [God] placed here on earth can help people."

Upland challenges

Community-led backyard gardening has been a successful strategy for food sovereignty in the lower, more populated areas of Sibulan, but the remote upland areas where many Bagobo Tagabawa families rely on farming for their livelihoods remain isolated. Here, food production and nutrition security are severely impacted by soil degradation, low yields, lack of farm infrastructure and organic inputs, limited market access, and an anti-farming bias in education, society and institutions. Furthermore, new government rules have decreased earnings from the cultivation of abaca fiber, an important commercial product, forcing many remote Sibulan farmers to work on conventional, high-pesticide vegetable farms. These economic shifts have led to scenarios

where one parent must work in the city or overseas, separating families indefinitely.

In these areas, where households increasingly needed to purchase food due to the challenges of local food production, 30% of Tagabawa Bagobo pupils in the four communities we worked with missed school on a regular basis due to hunger. In response, upland tribal members proposed replicating the backyard gardens that had been so successful in the lowlands. However, instead of the quick and widespread success seen below, the upland effort faced a wide range of difficulties, including logistical, staffing and budget limitations, and limited participation by farming households who were negotiating resource and time constraints.

Taking an agroecological approach to health requires time, intergenerational commitment, and the regeneration of 'bayanihan': the unity of the community

In response to these persistent challenges, a coalition of nearly 400 Bagobo Tagabawa farmers, Elders, women and youth united to form Sibulan CARES in 2024. The goals for this new organisation included diversifying crops and farming income, improving biodiversity and soil health, and establishing more family gardens, especially in remote areas.

Today, Sibulan CARES and FARMCOOP are working with families and young people in the uplands to revitalise the

Harvest of traditional vegetables.



organic backyard garden and multicropping programme. To alleviate financial difficulties, these gardens will serve dual purposes – food for the home and a possible source of income.

Our garden initiative has taught us that taking an agroecological approach to health requires time, intergenerational commitment, and the regeneration of 'bayanihan', or the unity of the community, to work together. Community organiser Mimi Tatad explains: "In the past, the family passed on this knowledge of cooking, food and herbs for healing to their children. The Elders would teach intentionally, and the children were more hands-on."

Observing the negative impact of Western diets, Bagobo Tagabawa parents have now begun to encourage their children to learn from their Elders about traditional herbs, food, and indigenous practices. In conjunction with the work of the CNC gardens, this has resulted in today's youth being more aware of the value of traditional healing methods and more receptive to learning.

Spirituality and health

For the Bagobo Tagabawa, health is not only physical or individual; it is interconnected with the wellbeing of their community, their relationship to their environment, their work with the land, and their livelihoods, social relationships, spirituality and culture. 'Being healthy', for the Bagobo Tagabawa, is when all these elements are in alignment. Sibulan CARES arose as a collective response to strengthening – through practice – the tribe's knowledge about this interdependence. The home gardens, the revival of biodiversity, and the creation of sustainable livelihoods that protect community health are all ways to reestablish these interconnected harmonies.

In addition, through the maintenance and reintroduction of traditional practices, indigenous and locally adapted crops and herbs have the long-term potential to address food and nutrition security, provide viable options for climate resilience, and improve health outcomes for Sibulan and other communities in Mindanao.

In the words of community organiser Mimi Tatad: "If the culture is rich, if the community is able to sustain what it needs, then the community is healthy, and the individual is healthy in the community." ■



Photo: Kahlil Apuzen-Ito

Indigenous linutlot, one filled with rice and the other with cassava.

Passing on the knowledge

My mother taught me and my siblings about the healing properties of food and plants as we were growing up. She was a nurse who helped to organise women and community-based health programmes that integrated traditional Filipino, East Asian and Western healing methods for rural communities where medical facilities or practitioners were lacking. The core of her teachings espoused the notion that food is medicine and that everyone – and especially disadvantaged rural communities – should have holistic preventative health knowledge and skills to provide them with autonomy and empowerment.

In that context, I am happy about the younger generation's growing desire to find ways to keep their cultural heritage alive. Matanam Romi's son and traditional Indigenous cultural practitioners Noli and Carlito Epis would sometimes prepare my favorite 'linutlot' when I visited them. I would wait in anticipation while they broke the charcoaled bamboo open and the steam rose, filling the air with the aroma of lemongrass, native chicken rice and cassava. I have recently begun to appreciate the medicinal benefits of this beloved bamboo rice and am deeply grateful that the tradition has survived due to the dedication of traditional Elders and tribal members to retain and develop our culture.

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