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Minter, T.

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Book review Tessa Minter

The Agta People: A Photographic Depiction

Thomas N. Headland, Janet Headland and Ray T. Uehara

SIL International, Dallas, 2011

xii, 229 pages

1,054 pictures

Foreword by P.B. Griffin

Soft cover

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Abstract

Based on demographic data and photos collected among Philippine foragers since 1962, this photographic depiction of the Casiguran Agta contributes to the demography and anthropology of hunter-gatherers. At the same time, it is an important political resource for the Agta themselves in their struggle to defend their ancestral land.

This book is as unusual as it is important. The 229 page document contains 1,054 facial photos of members of the Agta population of Casiguran, the Philippines. Each photo comes with the individual's full names, sex, birth date, death date (if applicable), the names of the individual's parents and spouse(s), an ID number and the % of Agta ancestry. This information may seem rather straightforward, but it is not if you realize it concerns one of the last remaining hunter-gatherer societies of Southeast Asia.

The Casiguran Agta are part of a larger Agta population of some 10,000 individuals, which together form sixteen different ethnolinguistic groups (Headland 2003). Living along the coasts and in the forests of Northeast Luzon, the Agta today subsist on a combination of hunting, fishing, gathering, barter trade, and extensive agriculture as well as wage labor for neighboring farmers, loggers and miners. Although they no longer subsist on foraging alone, they retain many of the features typical of foragers, including residential mobility, a strong sharing ethic and a kin-based social organization. All Agta groups have experienced considerable environmental and social change over the past century as a consequence of extractive industry operations, agricultural expansion and population pressure from neighboring ethnic groups. For the Casiguran Agta, who live on the San Idefonso Peninsula, the impacts of these developments have been especially dramatic. Decennia of logging and mining, the completion of a road to Casiguran in 1977 and the arrival of migrant workers and farmers have drastically altered their home and foraging grounds.

Thomas and Janet Headland have witnessed these changes over the past half century and share a long and intimate history with the Casiguran Agta. In addition to the pioneering linguistic work they did for the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the Headlands have kept detailed and consistent demographic records of the Casiguran Agta since 1962, resulting in one of the very few long-term demographic data-bases on foraging populations. Based on these data, and in collaboration with demographer John Early, Thomas Headland published a book about the Casiguran Agta's alarming vital statistics (Early and Headland 1998). More recently, with the help of computer scientist Ray Uehara, all raw demographic data, together

with facial pictures, were made available online in the *Agta Demographic Database: Chronicle of a Hunter-Gatherer Community in Transition* (<http://www.sil.org/resources/publications/entry/9299>>version 2.0 2011). It is from this data-base and the pictures that are part of it, that the book reviewed here was derived.

The book's personal, political and scholarly significance make it a hopeful and inspiring example of what anthropology can accomplish. First and foremost, it responds to the Casiguran Agta's own request to the Headlands to have their individual names and pictures documented and made available to '[...] all the people in the world [...] so that even if we die, they will know them. And our future grandchildren, they will [...] know our names even after one hundred years have passed.' (p.213). Being an anthropologist working with the Agta north of Casiguran, I felt excitement as I recognized many of the people pictured in the book. How much greater must the joy and fascination be for the 79 Agta households that received a copy in the Casiguran Agta language in early 2010, as it enabled them to see not only pictures of their living kinsmen, but of long deceased ancestors too.

But this book is much more than a personal document. By giving all Casiguran Agta a face, it is very powerful recognition of the Agta's existence both as individuals and as a people. This is vital, for even though the Philippines was among the first countries to enact indigenous peoples' rights legislation in 1997, the Agta continue to experience displacement and encroachment from extractive industries, development projects and migrant communities. The Agta language version of the book played a key-role in a pending Supreme Court case against APECO (Aurora Pacific Economic and Freeport Authority), which is violating the Agta's rights by constructing a deep-sea port on the San Ildefonso Peninsula (Cruz et al. 2013). By presenting Agta genealogies that go back into the 19th century, the book provides evidence of the Agta's long-term presence on the peninsula and renders APECO's dealings in conflict with the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (see also Endicott 2011). Apart from the value of the book in this particular case, it is important in the Agta's wider struggle for recognition of their rights. After all, when people have a face, it will be a lot harder to ignore their problems.

Finally, the photographic depiction is a rich source for students and scholars interested in the Agta, in hunter-gatherers more generally, and in demography. It brings to life some of the vital statistics that emerged from the Headlands' painstaking demographic work. For instance, the Casiguran Agta's extremely low life expectancy at birth (23 years) jumps at you from many of the book's pages: an alarming number of young adults and children smile at you from their photos, and then leave you realizing that their death date followed way too soon after their birth date.

While the gallery's value stands on its own, it will be even better appreciated when considered alongside the demographic data-base from which it is derived. This, for example, allows you to look for the causes of the extreme mortality figures. It also offers advanced possibilities to run demographic analyses on sub-sets of the data. As demographer Nancy Howell (2011) has put it, it is a remarkable tool and an example of what data sharing in anthropology should look like.

One actually needs the data-base to understand what the percentage of Agta ancestry that is indicated for each individual entails. Contrary to what readers may assume, this figure is not based on blood or saliva samples, but on the Headlands' genealogical records. The underlying computation is simple: if ego has one Agta and one Tagalog parent, he/she has 50% Agta ancestry. Another example: if seven out of eight of ego's great-grand parents were known to

be born from Agta parents, ego has an Agta ancestry of seven-eighths, or 87.5%. Based on these calculations, the Headlands conclude that in 2011, a large majority of all living Casiguran Agta had at least one known non-Agta ancestor in their direct ancestral line. The Headlands also indicate that, given the arrival of Austronesian peoples in Northeast Luzon around 5,000 ago, even the individuals who are considered 100% Agta based on their genealogy most likely have some Austronesian ancestry (Headland, Headland & Uehara 2011: 7-8).

The demographic importance of the ancestry figures and the trends they reveal is clear. The motivations for including them in the book, however, are not, and the potential political implications remain undiscussed. The reader is therefore left with the question of whether it at all matters if someone has 50% or 87.5% Agta ancestry? One also wonders how easily the ancestry figures could be misused. Could both outsiders and insiders abuse them to assert that some members of the population are less entitled to claim rights to the San Idefonso Peninsula than others? Interestingly, a fair number of individuals with 0% Agta ancestry feature in the book as full members of the Agta population: they are the husbands and wives who married into the Agta population from other ethnic groups, notably Tagalog and Ilocano. It thus appears that people's self-identification as member of the Agta population has taken precedence over genealogical records as a basis for determining who became part of the gallery. Let us hope that the inclusiveness that shines from the book will determine how it is used.

Another contribution is the book's relevance for the ongoing discussion, both in policy and academic circles, on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). While FPIC is crucial to conducting ethically just research, the principle's spirit tends to become increasingly sidelined by its bureaucratic aspects. Not so with the Headlands. Appendix B documents in detail, and in multiple languages that include Casiguran Agta, how the Agta formulated and gave their consent to the Headlands to publish their demographic data and their photos. From reading the consent letter that was written by several Casiguran Agta elders and signed (either in writing or by thumbmark) by 152 Agta adults, it is clear that the book was actively requested, rather than consented to by the Agta.

The counterintuitive reality is, however, that even the Headlands' approach to FPIC would not stand the test of the Philippine Government's bureaucratic FPIC machinery. Since the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples not only dictates how FPIC procedures must be conducted, but also dominates the process itself, it has become practically impossible to obtain formal approval to do research among Philippine indigenous peoples. At the same time, logging and mining companies are surprisingly successful at obtaining FPIC for their operations in indigenous territory (Minter et al. 2012). Rather than holding on to Kafkaesque procedures that are easily and readily manipulated, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples might consider adopting the Headlands' approach as their guide.

This is all the more important because the Agta, like other indigenous peoples, need the outside world to know what is going on in their region. As Bion Griffin highlights in the book's preface, it shows what personal commitment and long-term involvement with a research population can do both for the people themselves and for science (p.vii). If it had not been for the Headlands, the Casiguran Agta and their language might have gone unnoticed, and we would have learned much less about the demography of modern foragers. What's more, the Agta might have felt a lot more lonely in fighting their current struggle to retain control over their ancestral land. While many anthropologists aim to give the people they

work with a voice through their writings, giving them a face is rare, but the Headlands and Uehara have shown us how it can be done.

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Bio

Tessa Minter (PhD) is assistant professor in environmental anthropology at Leiden University, where she has been teaching undergraduate and graduate students since 2010. Her research focuses on hunter-gatherers' adaptation to environmental and social change. She did ethnographic field work among the Agta of Isabela Province in the Northeastern Philippines between 2002 and 2007, with periodic return visits since then. Her work and that of the PhD students she supervises, investigates the human ecology of hunter-gatherers by looking at livelihood strategies, time allocation, foraging success and settlement behavior; health, nutrition and demography; and transmission and use of indigenous knowledge. At the same time, she does applied research on indigenous peoples' participation in decision making processes surrounding extractive industry operations, road construction and protected area management. She presently lives in the Solomon Islands, where she studies the well-being and food security of forest dwelling communities in logging concession areas on the island of Malaita.