Philippine Culture and Agriculture

By Secretary Leonardo Q. Montemayor

Remarks at the Philippine Reception for the CGIAR General Meeting Participants, October 30, 2002, Dusit Hotel

Distinguished guests and participants:

Let me welcome you to the most “fulfilling” part of our general meeting by greeting you “Mabuhay”.

To those who have come to the Philippines for the first time, “Mabuhay” is a general greeting of welcome and warm wishes. Literally meaning “may you have long life”, it expresses our people’s zest for life that is generously extended to friends and visitors.

As your hosts, we want you to experience the best in Philippine hospitality especially through food, music and dance. After all, it is food that provides “long life” while music reflects the very soul of our people.
I have long been impressed by the way food and agriculture have dominated Philippine culture. Filipinos folk songs and epic, legends and folktales, dances and fiestas, inevitably revolve around food and agriculture.

Our folk songs complain that “planting rice” is never fun, and show how the papaya tree plays a key role in courtship. Our legends trace the origins of various crops and chronicle the rich diversity of nature around us.

Our epics like the Ibalong and the Lam-ang depict hyperbolic versions of rustic life at a time when supernatural creatures roamed the earth.

Our “tinikling” or bamboo dance – which you will see tonight – mimics the way farmers trap birds that stray on rice grains.

Since pre-Hispanic times, fiestas have been food-and fun-filled celebrations of harvest which our Spanish conquistadores
transformed into religious feast days honoring the patron saints of each locality.

But in all these, one outstanding element persists, and that is the vibrant spirit of cooperation that pervades the rituals, not only during fiestas, but also during ordinary days. This is called “bayanihan” which literally means “working together.”

Bayanihan is usually depicted by the collective transfer of a farmer’s nipa hut to another location. It is seen during fiestas when the whole community helps the “hermano” or the main sponsor prepare food for the guests. Bayanihan is also practiced through a community support system for any farmer in need of help in his farm work.

In the northern province of Ifugao, one finds the four thousand year old Banaue Rice Terraces – considered by many as the “eighth wonder of the world”.

Carved by hand – in bayanihan fashion – along the slopes of the Cordillera mountains, the terraces soar up to heights of 1,500 meters and placed end-to-end would extend halfway around the globe. Through the centuries, this engineering model has provided food for generations of Ifugao farmers while preserving their water resources and saving the mountain soil from erosion.

We see in these rice terraces how the early Filipinos worked together to build structures that functioned in harmony with nature.

The challenge that we all face today is how to collaborate more effectively to discover and build new technological wonders. Technologies that will help our farmers increase their productivity and incomes, bring about food security while ensuring the sustainability of the earth’s resources.

With those thoughts, may I now propose a toast for the success of the CGIAR family and its partnership with its stakeholders all over the world. To all of you, Mabuhay!