The Indigenous Farmer

By Vena A-dae Romero, Cochiti Youth Experience, Cochiti Pueblo

My grandfather's hands were worn and veiny. He said, they looked like that because they contained the maps of the earth and the only way to get "maps of the earth" on your hands is through working with the earth. The thickest vein on his hand was blue and green and flowed down the back of his hand past his wrist. He said, "That vein is our river," what others call the Rio Grande.

In my current study of agriculture, there seem to be distinguishing definitions of "types" of agriculture from sustainable agriculture to industrialized agriculture, but all deal with the growth of life, albeit with differences of opinion about the process of that growth and the distribution of the produce and products. Each school of thought formulates and incorporates its own vocabulary to distinguish its value. Quite often, I am asked about the indigenous farmer and indigenous form of agriculture as if indigenous agriculturalists have not found their place in the grand scheme in the agricultural debate. The exercise of trying to place the indigenous farmer in the context of modern day agriculture is, in fact, more telling of the treatment of indigenous people and embodies an entire century of historical exclusion that continues to present day. The story of the "Indigenous Farmer" is not just a story of American Indian communities or indigenous people in relation to their respective national governments, but a story about America and its small farmers and gives insight to the future of community-based, localized agriculture.

The present day definition of agriculture that is perpetuated in statute and society often invokes images of rowed crops, tractors, grain silos, and an endless expanse of cultivated soil in places like the San Joaquin Valley of California or the corn belt of the Midwest. Commercial agriculture has come to define an industry that seems to struggle to reclaim the roots of the "family farm" that dominated America and was articulated by Thomas Jefferson in the founding of America. Products such as bread and eggs that are produced in the industrial way of farming are now being marketed and recast in recognition of the country's demand for localized farming by adding terms like "Farmer's Market" eggs and placing pictures of family farm houses on packaging to entice the desires of America's tastes. In this current environment, the only place for the indigenous farmer is on the Land O'Lakes butter package that pictures an "Indian Maiden" offering butter to the consumer.

So what is indigenous agriculture? From the fishermen of the Northwestern Pacific to the dry farmers of the desert Southwest to the oyster-mussel gathers of the Eastern Seaboard to the hunters of Arctic Alaska to the taro stewards of Hawai'i, indigenous agriculture consists of a variety of cultural activities where man interacts with nature to cultivate harvests that benefit both man and nature. The practice of growing food for consumption or purpose is a cultural activity. However, indigenous food and culture is often defined as "primitive" or "less than" because of the lack of conventional processes and monetary markets that are now commonplace in the mainstream food industry. Industrial

agriculture sees itself as having advanced beyond this primitive alliance and dependence on the biological processes of nature, away from the "wild." To the indigenous agriculturalist, there is no such thing as a separate "wild" world. The moment a human sets foot in the "wild" to witness or observe the wild, the wilderness responds. It is in this response and, hence, subsequent responses that develop the relationships between humans and nature. This sort of relationship and dependence on the wild is what distinguishes not only indigenous agriculture but now much of the ecological and sustainable agricultural movement gaining ground in our country.

Historically, indigenous agriculturalists have been ignored. The historical depiction often cited in American cultural literature of the noble savage that roams the earth sorely avoids connecting indigenous people to their lands making it permissible to claim those lands for more "civilized" people, the agrarian farmer that Jefferson idolizes. In the article "Property and the American Empire," published in the University of Hawaii Law review, Michael Burger and Paul Frymer state, "…law provides a means of institutionalizing, constituting, and legitimizing cultural interpretation, in the sense of evaluating the relative merits of different civilizations or cultures."

The enactment of such laws as the Indian Removal Policy of 1830 that forced hundreds of thousands of indigenous people off their Native homelands and the Homestead Act of 1862 that granted Federal property in 160 acre parcels, which also included Federal lands set aside for indigenous populations in 1830, to worthy American citizens in an effort to promote farming demonstrate the unwillingness of society to embrace the idea of the indigenous farmer because the indigenous farmer would contradict the logic behind the rightful expansion of America. Early into the 20th century, propaganda from the time period often depicted indigenous people as "wild and savage" threatening the security of America's farmers, the backbone of the American Ideal when, in fact, many of the indigenous communities already had well-established agricultural ties to their ancestral homelands.

The systematic exclusion of indigenous people as agriculturalists excluded indigenous people from the agrarian base of our democratic nation that Thomas Jefferson articulated in his writings, and allowed for legal infrastructures to take away indigenous homelands. The continued exclusion of indigenous peoples as agriculturalists or farmers allows for the continued theft of traditional land-based knowledge that indigenous people have cultivated for centuries. One only has to take note of the legal battle over the patenting of Hawaiian Taro that is considered a relative to the indigenous people of Hawaii to see the attempted dispossession of a cultivated relationship between indigenous people and the harvests of their land. Or one can look at the litigation over water flows between commercial agricultural companies of the San Joaquin Valley and the Tribes of the Klamath river who are dependent on the Salmon that require water. Or the many instances of "bio-piracy" that occur in the Southern Hemisphere of America that have grown into not whether the "taking" of this knowledge is permissible, but whether the indigenous people with the beneficial knowledge should be compensated.

It is easier for a nation to justify such "takings" when it doesn't acknowledge the existence of the indigenous farmer. Upon founding of this country, America was divided by land. In the present, indigenous homelands have been divided, leased, sold, and sometimes, just forgotten. The indigenous homelands have now become the lands of American families who may also work the land, plow the fields, tend the crops, and ultimately create ties that link their American livelihood to the land like indigenous ancestors did hundreds of years ago. The land becomes the undeniable force that links all people of this continent. As Americans become more concerned about the state of agriculture and its toll on the environment, health of our children, and safety of the food supply, indigenous farmers have a place and valuable lessons to offer a country still in its infancy. The most valuable lesson is that legal and regulatory frameworks can always influence and encourage various behaviors of man, but rarely have control over the behaviors of nature. If man began to listen to, rather than control, the language of nature and indigenous farmers then perhaps, as a nation, we would find that indigenous people have more to offer than butter on the label of a Land O'Lakes box.

Adae can be reached for comments at: Adae Romero vena.adae@gmail.com