

REVIEW

BOOK

**Scent of rain, sun, and soil: Stories of agroecology  
by Lumad youth in the Philippines**

By Sarah Wright

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It is clear that what the readers hold in their hands is unique and special at the onset. As the contents reveal themselves, the readers would find that it is actually a diary of sorts—a type of documentation that is somewhat similar to what we in the social sciences refer to as “field notes.” However, instead of hearing the observations of the academics, we hear the voices and narratives of the those whose stories need to be heard.

The stories featured here are the narratives of Lumad children and their teachers living in an agroecology school as they are told to the author. These occupy the front and center of the publication while the author/researcher disappears in the background. It is this feature of the book that immediately stands out—one that is clearly a deliberate move on the part of the author.

It is a primal dilemma in research work in the social sciences: who retains authorship when without encounters with people, our work and publications in the academe are impossible? The author clearly skews to one side of this debate by erasing herself completely and, upon reading her work, it becomes quite understandable why she has done so. The message of the text is far more important than the subjectivity of the author in this instance. It also underscores the urgency of the situation chronicled by her work: that the information must be relayed with little embellishment and as faithful to the voices that have been gathered.

This work consists of the narratives of teachers, students, and parents documented by Dr. Sarah Wright, a professor of Geography and Development Studies at the University of Newcastle, Australia, in her book *Scent of Rain, Sun and Soil: Stories of Agroecology by Lumad Youth in the Philippines*, published by

the Community Technical College of Southeastern Mindanao (CTCSM) and the University of Newcastle Australia in 2020. Part life-story, poetry, key informant work, and photo album, the book chronicles the life of the entire community that makes up the secondary school, which utilizes an innovative curriculum borne out of Lumad struggles.

The book *Wars of Extinction: Discrimination and the Lumad Struggle in Mindanao* (Alamon 2017) outlined the historical and structural forces that brought the Lumad to where they are right now—still oppressed and marginalized. There is the history of resource extraction that has shaped Mindanao and its political economy, all taking place through the nexus of a violent and elite-led state apparatus. It is from this oppressive context that the Lumad identity as an expression of collective resistance emerged during the tail end of the Marcos dictatorship.

The 2015 Manilakbayan, the historic march of the Lumad from Mindanao to the capital, triggered by the killing of Indigenous leaders in a Lumad school similar to CTCSM, reveal that the resistance continues because the conditions have not changed and are, in fact, getting worse. In fact, *Wars of Extinction* was written amidst this background.

The 2020 book *Scent of Rain* basically chronicles the same continuing truths in the time of President Duterte. A new facet of an evolving Lumad identity, however, is revealed. While the Manilakbayan of 2015 unraveled a heightened political consciousness among the Lumad and their causes as well as provided imperatives for the historical and political economic analysis of the Lumad narrative in *Wars of Extinction*, *Scent of Rain* provides a glimpse of what actually takes place within Lumad communities and their schools even while they struggle against these forces.

What becomes clear at the onset is that the school is a point of solidarity among different Lumad ethnolinguistic groups who aspire for education for their children. A number of accounts from the book cite how the community members see the school and the education they will receive from it as a foil to the oppression and marginalization they experienced from the past to the present. However, such aspirations do not necessarily mean that they want their children to be assimilated into the mainstream educational system and to the Christian settler society of the majority.

The very curriculum implemented by the school is innovative and groundbreaking. The school does not charge tuition and all of them are housed within a compound where they can get to plant what they eat throughout the year. In the school, sustainable agriculture is not just taught as a theoretical subject but as a way of life to the students. It does not only augur well for the students' learning but also sustains the whole operation of the school in terms of logistics and resources.

Contrary to what government functionaries would want us to believe, the schools of these Lumad communities are not training grounds for rebels if we are to understand the word “rebels” in the traditional sense. There are no guns here nor is there training for guerilla warfare. Instead, they have what I would call materials for an emergent way of life that “rebels” against the present order. Reading the book, one is confronted by several themes, such as service to family and community, collective labor, agroecology, sustainable development, and food security.

This is, perhaps, where the authorities are most concerned with—the students in this school, by the very design of its curriculum—teaches the students to aspire for alternative futures for themselves and everyone. At the time of the book’s publication in August 2020, as revealed in its first pages, the Department of Education has ordered the closure of the school in what many suspect to be part of the government’s move to rid Philippine society of what it considers its’ enemies.

Before CTCSM, the Duterte administration had already forcibly shut down 178 similar Lumad schools all over Mindanao (Diño and Sta. Cruz 2019) as part of the government’s counterinsurgency campaign. Apparently, agroecology, a kind of agricultural practice that does not do harm to the community and environment and the collectivist practices being implemented in these schools, along with teaching the young Lumad about the need to defend their ancestral domain as part of their culture and identity, are considered subversive and dangerous by the authorities.

The school’s very existence creates a sharp distinction between mainstream public education that seeks to assimilate the Lumad into individualist and competitive life alternatives compared to their own schools, in which they are taught their own collectivist ways that are sustainable politically and economically. Here, the goal is not to save individuals and their families from economic crises but to confront these challenges as a community, securing everyone’s food security and well-being in the process. This had been the lesson of their survival versus a state-led developmental agenda that, for decades, has sought to displace them from their ancestral lands so that these can be appropriated for private plunder. The Lumad schools and CTCSM, therefore, are a representation of the gains of the Lumad struggle and an indicator of an evolving, resisting, and flourishing Lumad identity.

To my mind, these practices have become beacons of hope, providing alternative models of living outside of the wasteful, violent, and harmful modes of production we are forced to undertake under the prevailing system. That is why it is also heartbreaking to learn that just because the powers-that-be lack the imagination to appreciate these practices, because of a stubborn refusal to imagine a different horizon for the future of humanity, these emergent and progressive—albeit experimental institutions are considered “subversive.” The book, therefore, serves as a kind of wistful but important documentation about a social experiment that has been deemed too advanced and dangerous for our times.

However, as the stories, pictures, and poetry reveal in the book, these practices of resistance and hope have already been implanted in the hearts of many young Lumad and their allies. Even if the Lumad schools are shut down, the heart and labor that run these schools will continue elsewhere, nurtured, and kept safe by those who are convinced that a new world is possible here and in the near future. The “scent of rain, sun, and soil” that greet us every new morning is a faithful assurance that that time will eventually come.

## References

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