

SAVING THE FIRST WORLD

Michael Naimark

Something happened last spring.

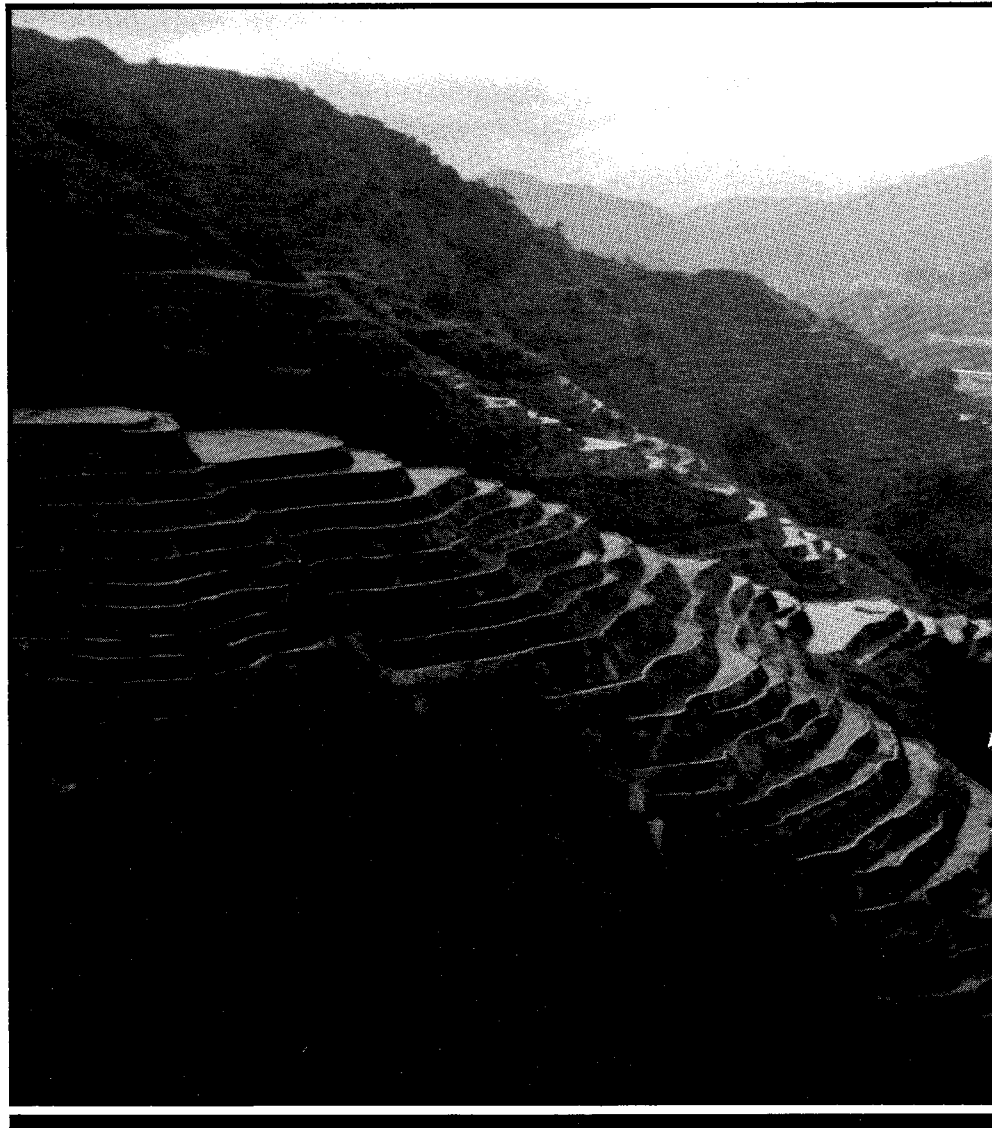
Two sleepless days later I boarded a flight to Manila.

Two sleepless and jetlagged days after that I was dining on a freshly sacrificed chicken in a small hut amid ancient and spectacular rice terraces. I was deep in the northern mountains of the Philippines. The jet lag didn't matter anymore. I was among the Ifugao.

The hut belongs to Dionicio Damoyan Immatong, a sixty-six year old Ifugao shaman priest. We sat around with members of his family, chewing betel nut and drinking his rice wine, sharing stories and laughing, and discussing new media and information machines.

What? Well, I said something happened.

I had been spending much time thinking and conducting research on the new media technologies that we know now are not only possible, but inevitable. The on-line encyclopedia the size of a book and as common as a "Speak and Spell" is a good example. It will be a technological piece-of-cake over the next ten years. This machine will most probably understand spoken language: you can talk to it. It will speak back, or perhaps show you some pictures, text, or movies on its





screen. It may know where you're pointing, and perhaps where you're looking. It is the type of machine that a child could walk around with on a beach, point at something, and ask "What's this?"

And, expect the total media environment. You open a door, walk in, and you're Somewhere Else: in an African jungle, bouncing against blood cells inside a human body, or in the totally imaginary universe of the most recent Top Forty artist. Multiple video projection in 3D, surround sound, and user input through cameras, microphones, and touch sensors will make such a virtual environment possible.

More curious and equally inevitable is the ultimate extension of what today we call "user friendly:" electronic personality. A machine with eyes and ears and memory will be programmed with the smarts to become acquainted with its user over time. It will make inferences based on this knowledge. Just like friends. When a machine says "I think I know what you want, let me get it for you" and is right, and does, will we see it as life-like?

The technologies making this all possible ARE happening, and the important issues are no longer ones of bits and bytes or of chips and circuits. Rather they are ones of how we ask questions and find answers, what it's like to be submersed in an artificial reality, and how we may converse with non-human intelligences. These issues are technology- independent, quite human, and universal.

Presently, as in the past, it is the technology that has been the bottleneck of these information machines. IT determines what YOU can do. As these technologies become so powerful that they become invisible, WE must determine what IT can do. This will be more difficult than it seems: these technologies have been driving us for over two hundred years. As a culture we have become locked into a particular way of thinking and accepting what is possible, what is natural, and what is real.

So what happened?
It appeared to be time to get a Second Opinion.

* * * * *

The Ifugao was the nomination of several anthropologist friends as a culture most extreme from ours where many of the people speak English. Two of these anthros had passed through the area a few months prior, had met Dionicio, and had developed much respect for him. I went to him with a letter of introduction.

The Philippines (at the time I went) was an easy place for a American to visit: no visa for short stays, no shots required in the springtime, relatively cheap airfare. There are buses of sorts from Manila up to the mountains, a one- or two-day trip, depending on with whom you talked. For personal and professional reasons I could disappear for a week if I left immediately.

I was with the Ifugao for four days. I lived with Dionicio and his family. At the time I thought it would be better than reading a book.

* * * * *

The Ifugao are a minority culture living in the northern Luzon mountains of the Philippines. They are best known for their rice terraces, which as their principal source of food dictates much of their way of life. Traditionally, the Ifugao carve wood, forge metal, and weave; they do not paint or draw. The Ifugao language is verbal, not written: prayer, poetry, music, and legend are passed down through word of mouth. Many Ifugao today also know English and Tagalog.

The Ifugao are traditionally a strongly religious people, with prayers and rituals for their hundreds of gods and ancestor spirits. Dreams are extremely important to them.

The Ifugao were headhunters until quite recently.



Most Ifugao live in traditional huts: an elevated square structure with one or two rooms inside. A fire for cooking and warmth burns on one side. One or two candles provide further illumination. Huts are usually found together in small compounds enclosed by a fence. Within the compound chickens, pigs, and dogs wander freely.

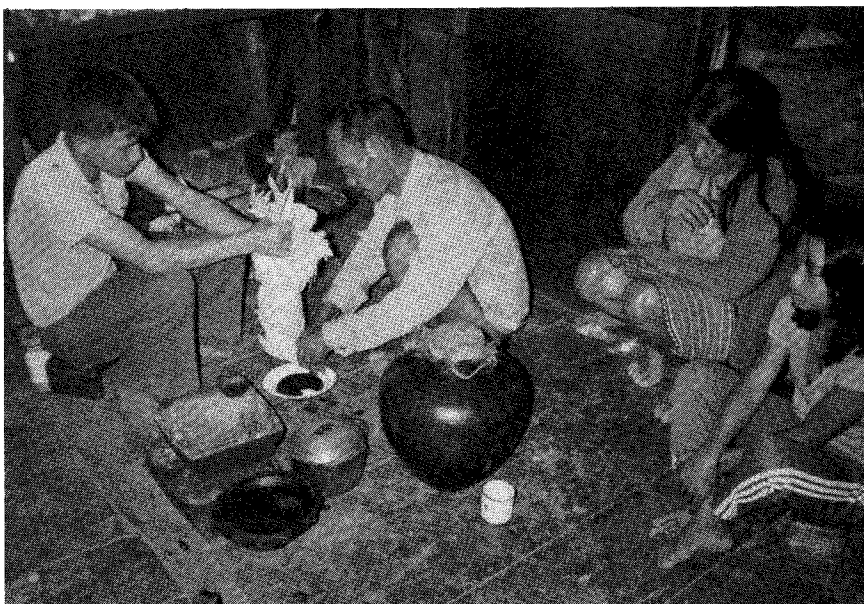
The compounds and small villages are scattered throughout the mountains accessible only by footpath. To the outsider, the center of the Ifugao culture is the town of Banaue. A dirt road runs through Banaue and buses stop there regularly. Banaue has a school, a medical clinic, and a marketplace.

Banaue is not unlike an American Indian reservation town. For tourists willing to "rough it," there are hotels and restaurants. These hotels typically have only a few rooms, usually with no running water. Many Ifugao in Banaue cater to the tourists by making and selling souvenirs and by guiding tours.

* * * * *

Modern times and the information revolution have come to the Ifugao. A major reason is the rice terraces: they are spectacularly beautiful and considered within the Philippines as the Eighth Wonder of the World. Consequently, visitors pass through the area from all over the world. The Ifugao who live near the road have developed a great deal more knowledge about us and other cultures than we have about them. In an odd sort of way they've seen it all: cameras and recorders, newspapers and magazines, soda pop, and so on. I saw an Ifugao man in a traditional loincloth and an "ET Phone Home" t-shirt.

Many Ifugao found themselves in the midst of some very high technology a few years ago. They were the extras used by Francis Coppola in the Kurtz Compound sequence of *Apocalypse Now*. The caribou sacrifice at the end of the film was authentic. The Ifugao were recruited and brought down to the low-



lands where the set was built. (Some Ifugao have some funny stories about this; others became very rich, by Ifugao standards.)

Banaue just had electricity installed last year. By the time I arrived there were three television sets in the Ifugao region, all owned by local school teachers. Filipino television, from what I've seen, is dominated by a great deal of violence.

Coincidentally, the most definitive ethnographic atlas ever produced is on the Ifugao. Yale Professor Harold Conklin has conducted ethnoecological research in the Ifugao region since 1961. Working with enthusiastic natives, he has mapped the region with emaculate detail. (I found Dioncio's hut on one of Conklin's map plates.) Sort of makes it the "Aspen" of the tribal world.

* * * * *

Dioncio and his family live in a compound of two huts, a short walk up from Banaue. As an Ifugao priest, people come to him for answers to their problems. He went to school for seven years as a child, where he learned to read and write English. He became a priest as a young man, having to learn the prayers and laws totally through word of mouth from the elder

priests. Dioncio IS an Ifugao library.

Dioncio is loved and respected by everyone we encountered. He enjoys playing with the children. His sense of morality and judgment is very strong: he is truly a wise man.

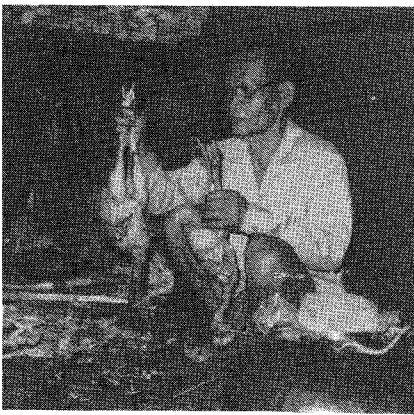
* * * * *

Each day, we would get up at dawn and he would lead me on tours of the area—visiting neighbors, walking along the terraces, and hiking to more remote villages. He would describe why I was there to other Ifugao—to learn about what kinds of questions they ask, where they go for answers, what their other realities are, how they listen to their spirits. The Ifugao we encountered were interested, and often entertained.

A machine that can answer questions, many Ifugao would say, will be a very good thing. With few exceptions, their primary desire and excitement is to learn about other people and their ways.

* * * * *

Many of our discussions reflected different values, as opposed to different logics or ignorance. For example, Dioncio once asked me why we don't kill our own meat. He



Information living in objects is a thoroughly understood concept. On my final night, Dionicio led a three hour prayer for prosperity of the rice crop. He wished that I record it on my tape recorder. Most of his chanting was names of gods and of his ancestors—hundreds of them. These are sacred, and Dionicio asked me not to make copies of the tapes.

Dionicio found it deep in a mine in the lowlands many years ago when he mined to earn money. He does not believe it was man-made. He keeps it because he dreamt about it the night before he found it.

was familiar with the concepts of a butcher, of refrigeration, of supermarkets, and of plastic wrap. His question remains unanswered: I couldn't help.

Ifugao are familiar with photographs. Dionicio one night explained the negative process to me. Polaroids were a hit and made me a pretty popular guy. I tried to explain that this technology amazes our people as much as it does them and that most of us have no idea how it works. ("Chemistry" is a non-answer.)

In the hut, dinner finished, with the light of a single candle, we sit, passing the betel nut, and discuss information and media. "Where is your information and how do you get it?" We talk about information in books and information in the land, about newspapers and shaman priests, and about radio and spirit gods. For them, the interchangeability is effortless, like being bilingual.

At one point I asked Dionicio how old he was. He thought, for a good minute, mumbling numbers, and finally stated "sixty-six". It was clear that he had calculated it and that he was right, and equally clear that this number was not a relevant one to his ways.

They are proud of the Ifugao way and how it works. Though they are respectful of our ways, they see some of the problems: the cost of books, the manipulation of the newspapers, the voice of a few speaking to many who cannot speak back. I agree.



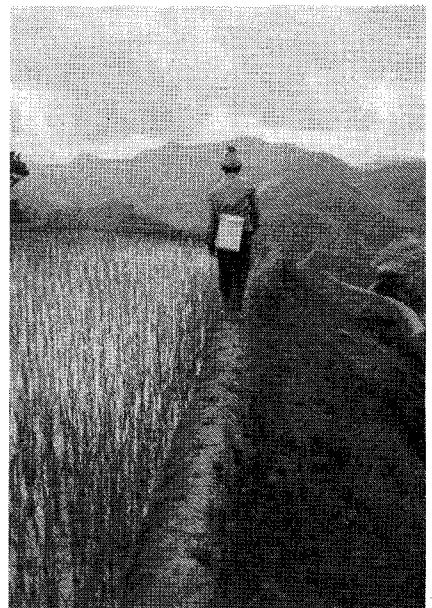
Our future, I say, will be very different from our way now, with machines that answer questions, environments you walk in, and electronic personalities. But we must first discover certain things.

Much of the Ifugao knowledge lives in the land as well as in the people. The rice terraces are very old: the Ifugao do not know how they got there. And they work: water channels down from terrace to terrace in a most careful and elegant way. Their design is so successful that when there is damage to the terraces, the Ifugao dig down to find the original foundation to use as their guide for reconstruction.

We were talking about the same things. And we all knew it. □

The land, as well as the climate, are more important to the Ifugao way of life than are watches and calendars, though they are familiar with these methods. Time and space to the Ifugao are more fluid and less fixed than they are to us. We might often find it non-linear or inconsistent.

Information from dreams is as important as information from "reality": outer and inner realities are as one. Dionicio's rock, for example, is one of his important things. He keeps it in his hut. It is maybe two feet across, very smooth, and must weigh at least forty pounds. It is a very strange rock. Though I might have been a little bent at this point, I wasn't blind: its main section consists of a large duck-like body, resembling an over-inflated football. Near an end, a neck-like extension sticks out a few inches, on top of which is a fist-sized piece that vaguely resembles the head of a dog. One solid rock.



PATRICK'S JOUR



(Following is a verbatim transcript from the first two days. The bracketed material is from my notes.)

I met Patrick Tundagui when I arrived in Banaue. He is a twelve-year-old Ifugao boy living in the village of Paypayan, a short walk from Banaue. His father teaches in the elementary school and his mother works in the rice terraces. He has two brothers and five sisters; many other relatives live in neighboring homes. Patrick gives tours of the rice terraces to earn money for tuition to the public school. He is in his first year of high school.

I tell Patrick that I'm trying to understand questions and that I would like him to record every question of which he thinks. There are no correct questions, all are OK. I instruct Patrick how to use the Walkman-type recorder I had brought, and ask him to always record three things: what time it is, where he is, and his question.

After two days, Dionicio and I stop by Patrick's home to listen to his tape so far. We meet the family (Patrick's father knew of the project) and listen to the tape. To my surprise (apparently not to Patrick's), only questions were recorded, no time, no place. The questions were always recorded three at a time. We had a communication problem. I later sat down alone with Patrick and interviewed him regarding time and place, as well as some proper names.

Dionicio thought most of the questions were "pretty good."

Where are you staying in the Philippines?
When will be your flight back to your country?
Did you enjoy your stay here?
[Sat 11:00am home]

Where is the bus going?
When did the bus arrive here in Banaue?
Why did you* miss the bus?
[*a particular tourist]
[Sat 2:30pm Halfway House Lodge]

Where did God appear to Moses?
What is the place that Moses did the Ten Plagues?
Who created you*?
[*God]
[Sat 3:30pm walking home by the school]

Where do you find the biggest dam in the world?
When did you* visit the dam?
How did people build the dam?
[*anybody]
[Sun 6:00am near a neighboring house]

Where will you find the eighth wonder of the world?
When did the Ifugao build the rice terraces?
Why do tourists keep on coming here to Banaue?
[Sun 6:30am in his room]

Where is the place that the Malay build the rice terraces?
When did the Negritos come to the Philippines?
How did people come to the Philippines in the olden times?
[Sun 7:00am viewing rice terraces]

Where are you* going tomorrow?
What time you* leave Banaue tomorrow?
How can you* go to Manila without any bus?
[*anybody]
[Sun 7:10am walking down road]

Where is the place that Jesus born?
What time did Jesus call his Apostle?
Who created the world?
[Sun 7:50am in Bocos village doing an errand]

Where do you find the highest mountain in the Philippine?
When did the people know that the highest mountain is in the Philippines?
Who is the president of the Philippine?
[Sun 7:53am Bocos village]

Where is that place that they begin the war before it came to the Philippines?
What is the year that Hitler declared war against the Allied power?
Who invented the atomic bomb?
[Sun 8:30am walking past school]

What country did you come from Mike?
What time you arrive here in the Philippines?
What is your purpose in coming to Banaue?
[Sun 8:50am home]

Where do you find the country with four season?
When did the government know that America has four season?
How many season in the Philippines?
[Sun 9:00am home]

QUESTION JOURNAL



Where do people spend their holidays in Banaue?
When do they have holidays?
What do the people do during holidays?
[Sun 9:15am near home]

Where do people in Banaue get their food?
When do they plant rice here in Banaue?
What do the people do during harvest time?
[does not remember]

Where is the place that they make the spacecraft?
How many years before they build a spacecraft?
How did the scientists build the spacecraft?
[Sun 9:20am coming to market]

Where do you find the most valuable gold?
When did the people start to mine for gold?
Why they are mining for gold?
[Sun 9:25am in market]

Where is that place that they have lots of oil?
When do people know that oil is inside the ground?
How do people make oil into gas?
[Sun 9:28am in Halfway House Lodge]

Where is the country that there are many jungles?
When did they discover that Africa has many jungles?
Why did the foreigners guard the forest?
[Sun 9:30am in the Halfway House Restaurant]

Where is the most beautiful rice terrace here in Banaue?
What time do the sun rise in Batad*?
How can you go to Batad?
[*Batad is 14km away from Banaue]
[Sun 9:35am giving tour of rice field]

Where is the best restaurant here in Banaue?
What time do the restaurant open?
Why are the people in Banaue are making restaurant?
[Sun 9:40am in Stairway Lodge]

Where is the place that they broadcast time?
What time the announcer announce the time?
What is the use of the radio?
[Sun 9:42am in Stairway Lodge]

Where do you find the smallest bird?
What time do people saw this is smallest bird?
How do people know that this is the smallest bird?
[Sun 9:45am home]

Where do you find the biggest waterfall in the world?
What is the year that the person found the biggest waterfall?
How do you know that the waterfall is the biggest?
[Sun 9:50am guiding tour in Bocos village]

Where is the original carver came from?
What year that people of Banaue begin to carve?
What is the use of the carvings?
[Sun 10:20am guiding tour at waterfall]

Where are you* staying here in Banaue?
How many days you* are staying here?
Why are you* here in Banaue?
[*a particular tourist]
[Sun 10:30am on road]

Where is the most beautiful hotel?
What time do you* sleep at night?
What did you* do before you travelled from one place to another?
[*Another particular tourist]
[Sun 11:00am in Halfway House Lodge]

Where are you* staying in California?
How many years are you* before you leave your parents?
What is your* problem now?
[*Mike]
[Sun 11:10am outside Halfway House]

Where do we find the biggest ocean?
What is the date the navigators found the biggest ocean?
Why do people know that the Pacific Ocean is the biggest?
[Sun 11:20am home]

What is the country that they don't make weapons for war because they are punished by the Americans?
What is the time America punished them?
How did America punish them?
[Sun 11:25am home]

Where is that place who first discovered writing?
When is that year that they discovered writing?
What is the use of writing?
[Sun 11:30am outside]

(The author wishes to acknowledge Bob Stein, encyclopedia researcher, who developed the concept of a question journal. Also, Barney Nietschmann, cultural geographer, who originally suggested that I visit the Ifugao. And finally, Dionicio Damoyan Immatong, Ifugao Shaman, and his family who took me in as one of their own.)