

# Agsana - Salt-making

**ILOCANO, ILOCOS NORTE PROVINCE, NORTHWESTERN LUZON ISLAND, NORTHERN PHILIPPINES.** *The making of salt from the waters of the West Philippine Sea is common in the northwestern side of the island of Luzon. In fact, the name of the Pangasinan province where it is also done means, “the place where salt is made”. The practice described in the succeeding pages was documented in Ilocos Norte.*

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Bakasa, crystalline soil with salt gathered in mounds, are transported in a cart for processing.





THE COASTAL barangay of Davila in Pasuquin, Ilocos Norte is famous for *agsana* or salt-making, a tradition kept alive by generations of households, particularly in Sitio Cavintaran.

*Agsana* is the process of producing salt by boiling saline water continuously for a day and a night on a wood-fired *karaang* or furnace, made of clay mixed with rice husk.

Saline water is obtained through an intricate process. First, *bakasa* or crystalline soil deposits are scraped from flat limestone along the seashore, exposed during the dry summer months from January to April.

The *bakasa* is gathered into small mounds and transported through a *carizon*, a cart pulled by cattle, to a *bakar*, some 250 meters inland. The *bakar* is a circular dug-out container made of clay mixed with rice husk, and has a depth of one meter and a diameter of one and a half meters at the mouth. It is situated close to the *karaang*.

The pile of *bakasa* is repetitively doused with seawater taken out in pails from an adjacent shallow dug-out well to wash off the liquid saline crystals. The liquid is then drained



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Joyriders on a bovine-drawn planer in a salt field.

through a pipe into a low smaller circular vat next to the *bakar*.

The degree of salinity of the extracted liquid drained into the small vat is constantly monitored using the leaves or stems of *kandaroma* [*Acacia farnesiana* (L.) Willd.], a thorny and bushy evergreen plant that grows in abundance in the area. Two to three leaves or stems are dropped into the vat. If the leaves or stems stay afloat on the surface, it is a sign that the salinity of the clear liquid is high; when in the middle depth, salinity is at medium level and requires constant turning of the *bakasa* using a shovel to bring out the crystallized elements. However, if the leaves or the stems sink to the bottom, this means zero salinity and requires a complete replenishment of the *bakasa*.

Liquid with high and medium degree of salinity are transferred into the *silyasi* or cauldron placed atop the *karaang*, for boiling. And after fifteen to twenty hours of continuous boiling, the liquid turns into pristine fine grains of *asin* (salt), which are then promptly scooped out with a wooden ladle and placed into bamboo baskets (*kuribot*) that are lined on a bamboo ledge a meter high from the ground, to drain off liquid. The drippings from the baskets accumulate on the ground and form salt mounds akin to stalactites. The salt drip-mounds are a most tasty dip for sliced green mangoes. Also, cattle nibble on these similar to a fodder.

Salt produced in Davila are normally traded in a system of exchange called *maru*. For instance, a ganta of salt is exchanged for ten pieces of eggplant while two hundred fifty kilos of salt is exchanged for fifty kilos of milled rice or fifty kilos of salt is exchanged for fifty kilos of unmilled rice. Prior to the onset of the rainy season, salt is brought in baskets to various towns of Ilocos Norte and to far northern towns of Cagayan and Isabela, on carts pulled by cattle, to be bartered with clay cooking pots, palm woven mats, blankets, rice and other products of the localities visited.



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(left) The *silyasi*, cauldron with saline solution. (right) Draining excess liquid from the processed salt in bamboo baskets, *kuribot*. Note the stalactite-like solidified drippings.

The season of *agsana* cannot start without the performance of the *riang*, a ritual to implore the blessings of the ancestral and nature spirits for a productive salt-making period. The person who performs the *riang* is an elderly woman. At the break of dawn, the woman, wearing white, goes out to the shore where *bakasa* is gathered. She carries an offering of sticky rice cooked in coconut milk topped with an unshelled hard-boiled egg on a coconut shell bowl. The offering is laid on a big limestone. Then, she scrapes the ground to gather *bakasa* into three mounds forming a triangle. With these offerings, she stands up and utters aloud the prayers to the spirits.

When members of the community see the offering and the three mounds, they know that the *riang* has been performed. This signals that a new season of salt-making has begun. The families clear the shore of debris and then they construct make-shift huts of cogon grass and bamboo where they spend the four summer months of salt-making. The roof of the hut is extended to cover the area of the furnace and a vat is prepared to accumulate the saline liquid extract. Also, bamboo baskets for the

salt are lined up along the side of a bamboo ledge and a lounging area of slatted bamboo is constructed with an elevation of two feet from the ground.

Family members get involved in the production process, particularly in the gathering of the *bakasa* and carrying firewood from inland hills. The older men and women spend sleepless nights tending the fire and stirring the solidifying white fine granules on the *silyasi*.

When the southern winds start to be felt, clouds get a fiery dark tinge at sunrise and grayish clouds looms on the horizon bringing rain showers in May, it is time to pack up, load the last basket of salt produce on the cart, and dismantle the huts. Before finally leaving for their homes by the highway, the piles of soil around the *bakar* are brought back to the shore to be covered again with sea waters during the rainy months. These accumulate the natural saltiness of the sea and turn to crystalline soil deposits once more. Meanwhile, the families work in their farms inland, until the next season of salt-making.

NAR and CVP