Coping Strategies in an Ethnic Minority Group: The Aeta of Mount Pinatubo

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The particular problems arising in the aftermath of natural disasters in indigenous societies in the Third World, especially in ethnic or cultural minorities, have until now received only little attention in social scientific research. The potential of such indigenous groups to use their traditional knowledge and behaviour patterns in coping with natural disasters has been badly neglected. The example of the Aeta in Zambales, Philippines, a marginal group who were hit directly by the eruption of Mt Pinatubo in 1991, shows how traditional economic and social behaviour can in some measure determine their various survival strategies.

Key words: volcanic eruptions, Mount Pinatubo, indigenous people, resettlement programmes, hunter-gatherer economic systems.

The Aeta belong to the oldest population of the Philippines, the Negrito. With small stature, curly hair and dark skin colour, the Negrito are quite distinct from other Filipinos. An estimated number of more than 10,000 Negrito (the official number counts 20,000 upland people, including Christian Filipinos living in this area) live in the Mt Pinatubo area, encompassing parts of the provinces of Zambales, Tarlac and Pampanga (and also Bataan). The Mt Pinatubo Aeta represent the most important group among perhaps 30,000 Negrito in the Philippines, variously called Aeta, Ayta, Ita, Baluga, Dumagat, Agta or Ati by neighbouring Filipinos.

When in June of 1991 Mt Pinatubo erupted, the Aeta living in the immediate vicinity of the volcano had already been evacuated to the coastal lowlands, and were later resettled. In 1996 some 2,000 formerly upland Aeta families lived in Zambales on five resettlement sites set up for them by the government. Another 1,000 Aeta families have settled on their own initiative on 40 smaller offsite settlements in Zambales, either on the coast, intermingling with the local lowlands population, or separate from them in the uplands nearer to their original area. Around 500 families are living in offsite settlements organised by NGOs, and exclusively inhabited by Aeta (numbers are my own estimate; 3,500 families in the resettlement sites according to the Mt Pinatubo Commission; 2,500 families in offsite settlements according to the Office for Northern Cultural Communities).

In general, despite their present-day assumed lifestyle as farmers, the Aeta have
tended to adopt behaviour in coping with the disaster which draws on their former way of life as hunters and gatherers. Such socio-economic behaviour, with its versatility in the utilisation of available resources, enhanced territorial mobility and flexibility in the social organisation, has facilitated their survival. Their no-storage economic attitude and orientation to the present, however, made it more difficult for them to accept strategies appropriate for securing a livelihood over the long term. On the one hand their individuality and their urge for independence provided a great potential for self-help initiatives, but at the same time, these tendencies led to difficulties in working together co-operatively. Here the Aeta show strikingly different attitudes towards coping with disasters as compared to their Filipino farming neighbours.

The present article is based on field-work done both on several shorter stays before the eruption in the years 1979 to 1981 in the hinterland of Botolan, and on research after the eruption during a seven-month visit (between 1994–6) on the western and south-western side of Mt Pinatubo (the latter sponsored by a grant of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). Repeated visits and enquiries were made in the Aeta resettlement sites and most of the offsite Aeta settlements of Zambales, as well as to the different relief organisations. This report is intended only as a summary and cannot deal with the specific data collected in interviews and through personal observations.

**Pre-disaster Aeta way of life: ecological adaptation and food supply**

Originally, the slopes of Mt Pinatubo and the contiguous mountains of the Zambales Range were completely forested and offered excellent opportunities for hunting and gathering. The forest has, however, been substantially reduced over the course of centuries. The Aeta of Zambales have lived relatively isolated in this habitat, separated from the settlement areas of Christian Filipino farmers in the lowlands. They have not shown much interest in cultivating rice as have the lowlanders, instead choosing to grow tubers, which have not needed to be stored. Their former hunting, gathering of wild plants and fishing still provide important components of their diet even today.

Their economic behaviour corresponds to a foraging society with an 'immediate-return system' in the sense of Woodburn's classification (1980) or 'based on the immediate use of food resources' as Testard (1982: 523) defined it. The transition to agriculture was in fact not an irreversible evolutionary process. Instead, the possibility remained open at all times for a temporary return to a hunting-and-gathering existence in times of emergency, such as after natural disasters (on this traditional way of life, see: Fox, 1952; Seitz, 1984; Shimizu, 1989; Brosius, 1990).

To be able to utilise all the resources available, many of the Aeta families shifted their living location quite often, sometimes after several weeks, but within a defined area. Even those who remained relatively stationary were not bound to one particular place. There was no strong identification with the actual plots they personally cultivated. Land ownership had nothing like the high priority in their system of values that it holds in agricultural Filipino society. This mobility represented the typical hunter-gatherer attitude. Despite this striking pattern of active movement, the Aeta felt a strong bond to their living space on Mt Pinatubo.

Normally, two or three related families joined together, forming a family grouping with an average of 10 to 12 members, and lived at one settlement site. Some of the
longer established sites of the Negrito in the uplands reached a size of 40 to 60 people. The few real villages (for example, Poonbato and Villar) traced their origins to initiatives of Spanish missionaries or the colonial administration during the nineteenth century. The society of the Aeta was egalitarian. Local leaders (apo kapitan) had little if any real authority.

Since the early 1980s, starting just before the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo, the great majority of the Aeta began to join various churches. Today 90 per cent of the Aeta are nominally Christian. Despite the efforts of religious groups, the traditional spiritual ideas have been fully maintained among the Aeta. They believe in anito, spirits residing in particular places in nature, preferably springs, trees or rocks, or moving within a specific habitat, for example, on Mt Pinatubo. One can make contact with these spirits with the help of a manganito, a spiritual medium. These anito must not be disturbed or insulted, or else they may take revenge, causing illness or death, or even natural disasters (Shimizu, 1992: 14).

In this world-view Mt Pinatubo plays a central role as the spiritual centre of their universe, as the dwelling-place of the spirits, above all the residence of Apo Namalyari, the Supreme Being and Creator. For certain Aeta groups it is also the resting place for the souls of the dead (Garvan, 1964: 214; Fondevilla, 1991: 32). Prayers are spoken in the direction of Mt Pinatubo and offerings are made facing towards the mountain (Fox, 1952: 195; Shimizu, 1983: 133–4; Fondevilla, 1991: 32).

Today the Aeta on the north-western side of Mt Pinatubo in the hinterland of Botolan live with the autochthonous Sambal people. On the south-western side of the volcano in the uplands behind San Marcelino they live together with the Ilocanos, who first migrated here in the nineteenth century. All the Aeta on Mt Pinatubo speak the same language (Botolan Sambal), even those on the eastern side of the volcano in Tarlac and Pampanga provinces, who live with the Pampagenos, and those in Bataan.

Because of the geographic separation of their home area, the Aeta remained economically largely autarkic and culturally independent up until the eruption. Their independence made them especially well able to cope in times of emergency and natural disasters.

The different lifestyles and racial differences also implied a certain social distance in the inter-ethnic relations between the lowlanders and the Aeta. But over time, in individual cases certain Aeta families have also developed closer ties to Filipino farmers. The Aeta provided labour services for which they received the right to use specified land for themselves. This usually remained a loose patronage system. After the disaster, individual Aeta families profited from such relationships by receiving relief from their Filipino patrons.

A sign of just how well the Aeta, despite their low social status, got along with the lowlanders is the fact that impoverished Sambal have shown no inhibitions in themselves claiming to be Aeta in order to take advantage of the special rights offered to the Negrito as a minority or to obtain welfare support through governmental organisations and NGOs. Especially in times of emergency, for example after typhoons, poor Filipino men or women frequently married into Aeta families.

The food supply of the Aeta before the eruption was mostly balanced and more than adequate, even during times of general food shortage (see also Seitz, 1984: 273; Brosius, 1990: 91; Shimizu, 1992: 4, 13). The Aeta, despite some reports, were in no way an ethnic group threatened with extinction before the eruption. They had always successfully adapted to changing living conditions, whether due to natural disasters or
political events, demonstrating exemplary flexibility, mobility and capacity for innovation.

The cultural appearance of the Aeta in Zambales before the disaster may have seemed relatively homogeneous to an external observer. Socio-economic diversity, however, did in fact exist: the mountain and coastal Aeta followed disparate economic pursuits arising from the different ecologically determined conditions of their habitats. The quality of the relationship of the Aeta to the coastal peoples also was different: to the aboriginal Sambal around Botolan, always close; to the more recently arrived Ilocano around San Marcelino, distant. And both the Aeta themselves and their lowland neighbours distinguished between Aeta who settled near the lowlands and adopted the ways of the lowland farmers, and the Aeta who lived nearer to Mt Pinatubo and still led a more traditional lifestyle (Shimizu, 1989: 12, 1992: 5). In addition, activities of NGOs in the 1980s created differences between the various Aeta groups. Thus before the eruption, certain NGOs had already engendered inequalities with their educational programmes favouring specific groups, initiating the formation of ‘élite groups’ of a sort.

The Aeta in the evacuation

Some two million people were affected by the eruption of Mt Pinatubo with nearly a quarter of a million losing their homes and livelihoods. About 1,000 people have died so far from its direct or indirect effects. Immediately after the eruption 566 deaths were reported, 212 of these in Zambales; the latter were mostly Aeta. Approximately two-thirds of the area settled by the Aeta became instantly uninhabitable. In the Botolan area alone, 14 settlements were wiped out (for a description of the socio-economic impact, see Mercado et al., 1996).

In the perception of the Aeta, the volcanic eruption was caused by supernatural forces. Apo Namalyari, the Supreme Being, had set off the eruption after being provoked by drilling done for a geothermal power plant on the mountain (Fondevilla, 1991: 49; Shernoff, 1991: 12, 13). As the first signs of volcanic activity were noted, the Aeta held manganito (spiritual medium) seances and let the anito — the spirits — be asked the reasons, obtaining the information that Apo Namalyari was angry over this encroachment.

The eruption of Mt Pinatubo had three different main effects: ashfall, flow of pyroclastic material and lahar — or liquified mixtures of volcanic material (for a description of the geophysical events and their consequences, see Tayag and Punongbayan, 1994). The most immediate effect was the ashfall. In the habitat of the Aeta over a radius of 10 to 20km around the volcano the layer of ash was up to 40 or 50cm thick in many places. Certain areas in the hinterland of Botolan (for example, Burgos), however, had a light fall or were even uncovered and could soon be cultivated again. Through the pyroclastic flows the area within 15km of the explosion site, on the upper and middle slopes of the volcano, was made uninhabitable for the Aeta for many years. The greatest threat for the lowlands, but also for the Aeta for access to the uplands, remained lahar, especially in the monsoon season and during the annual typhoons. Vast expanses were inundated with this mud and left covered up to a height of 4-5m.

Fortunately, the initial signs of impending eruption were recognised in time. With precise information, the coming eruption was anticipated, and thanks to advance
preparations a timely evacuation could be undertaken. The Aeta were evacuated from different stations — for the Aeta of Botolan from seven places, for the Aeta of San Marcelino from five places — and after the eruption quartered together with the lowland inhabitants in evacuation centres near coastal towns. Despite their close bond to their home lands, most of the Aeta voluntarily obeyed the orders to evacuate. The few families who initially refused justified this by explaining that they could not imagine that it would ever come to a major eruption, that they wanted to stay near their fields since the harvest was coming soon, that they were unable to walk great distances or even that it was impossible that their God, Apo Namalyari, wanted to hurt them (Tayag et al., 1992: 204, 205).

In the large evacuation centres up to 25,000 people were housed in tent camps. For the Aeta, accustomed to living in very small groups with plenty of space, the crowding together with many of thousands of people resulted in trauma. There were problems with providing appropriate food for them, for example, canned food was completely unfamiliar to them. There were also problems with health-care: in the camps, 90 per cent of those who caught measles were Aeta, and most resulting deaths were among Aeta children. The vaccination campaign against this disease had only reached the lowlanders. Because of the 'the socio-cultural gap between Aetas and health workers' (Banzon Bautista and Tadem, 1993: 12; see also Magpantay et al., 1992: 171), the former had not yet been included. Some of the relief workers felt prejudice against the Aeta (for the conditions in the evacuation camps, see Fondevilla, 1991: 23–81; Lapitan, 1992; Sawada, 1992; Banzon Bautista and Tadem, 1993: 9–12).

**The Aeta in resettlement sites: survival with outside help and through their own initiative**

Several months after the disaster, in November 1991, the relocation of the victims in the evacuation centres to the first resettlement sites was begun. Separate resettlement sites were established for the populations from the lowlands and those from the uplands. For the Aeta in Zambales five sites were set up altogether. The Aeta from the Botolan uplands remained together in relatively closed groups in the two resettlement sites at Loob Bunga and Baquilan, just below and adjacent to their old habitat and very near the town of Botolan with which they maintained a significant interaction. These settlement locations had been proposed by the Aeta themselves. Those from the San Marcelino uplands, in contrast, were brought to the sites of Dampay, Cawag and Irar, quite distant (about 30–40km and about 70km) from both their home area and the town of San Marcelino (see Figure 1). These settlement sites assigned to the Aeta had been mostly previously uncultivated land. Once at these centres, the welfare of the Aeta was managed by the government and NGOs.

The Philippine government had set up the Mt Pinatubo Task Force immediately after the eruption which would organise and co-ordinate relief efforts. This agency was succeeded at the end of 1992 by the Mt Pinatubo Assistance, Resettlement and Development Commission (MPC). The MPC remains responsible today (1997) for the co-ordination of continuing aid to counter the later effects of the disaster. The MPC belatedly established a specific Aeta Affairs Unit in 1994, but employed only one member of the Aeta group, and had already abolished the desk by 1996.
The Aeta resettlement sites in Zambales

The resettlement sites for the Aeta were gradually supplied with all the necessities for sustained operation. Deep wells were drilled to obtain potable water. But despite these efforts, even in 1996 none of the camps for the Aeta had achieved an adequate supply of water for the population living there. Schools were set up, both primary and secondary. However, in some cases the teachers were unwilling to live there or make
the arduous trip to the resettlement every day, and others sometimes were not paid. Health stations were maintained, with each stipulated to have one doctor, a nurse and a midwife, but most were regularly unoccupied. Connecting roads were built, but in many cases they were only provisional and remained unpaved until 1996.

On the resettlement sites each Aeta household was assigned an area of 150–200m$^2$ per house. While lowland households received finished concrete bungalows — with 50m$^2$ of inside room on 90m$^2$ of land, the Aeta were merely given the cut plant material to enable them to build their traditional homes. Later, more solid building materials, lumber and corrugated metal sheets were delivered. Aeta from the same area settled in a separate section together within the sites. These were then named after the old places or regions on Mt Pinatubo (for example, Burgos, Villar, Moraza).

The main problem remains earning a living — even today. For a long time the Philippine government preferred to support the development of commercial businesses and industry, doing only little to encourage suitable manual labour jobs for the Aeta. Thus, depending on the location of the centres and therefore of opportunities for self-help initiatives, there has been a striking disparity in the living circumstances of the Aeta living in Loob Bunga and Baquilan, the two sites near Botolan, compared to those in Damapy, Cawag and Iram, situated far away from Mt Pinatubo. In Loob Bunga and Baquilan, the Aeta are making an adequate living under hard conditions, better than the others elsewhere, even though these sites were originally evaluated, in 1991, as 'terribly bad', due to a high population density far above acceptable capacity, too little cultivatable land and poor soil quality, as well as an inadequate water supply (Shimizu, 1992: 17, 28). The familiarity of the region and its relative proximity to Mt Pinatubo, together with the possibility of exploiting various resources, have made the situation over the course of time more or less tolerable here. On the one hand, the Aeta can profit from the welfare assistance of the governmental and non-governmental aid organisations in the camps. And on the other, they can both take advantage of the nearby uplands for cultivation and collection of non-wood forest products, as well as find temporary or part-time work as labourers for the Filipinos in Botolan and the vicinity. It should be noted that today these two sites near Botolan are still overcrowded. Thus, instead of the originally planned-for 500 households at Loob Bunga, here nearly 1,600 housing units were put up in an attempt to cope with the demand.

Agriculturally usable land is lacking. Within the settlement it is possible to maintain a small garden on the free part of the allotted 200m$^2$ homestead plot. Outside the settlement, however, very little cultivatable land is available near the site. The ground is denuded, of poor quality or on steep slopes. Although prohibited, Aeta families attempt to clear fields in the vicinity of their settlements by burning off the vegetation. What little better-quality arable land there is near the settlements is already privately owned. Thus conflict over land rights is constant with great uncertainty over legal rights and priorities. NGOs try to rent land for the Aeta.

On the other hand, this uncertain situation encourages many Aeta families to turn to foraging and other hunter-gatherer typical, short-term economic patterns, in a sort of 'immediate-return system'. Many Aeta desire land for rice production with flood-irrigation, and hope to secure a livelihood by practising long-term cultivation, e.g., maintaining irrigation canals, following the example of the lowland farmers. But as soon as they took steps towards this goal most felt too tied down and in many cases soon gave up such possibilities here in favour of activities which left them more freedom to change options.
The geographic location of Loob Bunga and Baquilan has, however, permitted the Aeta families settling there to maintain great spatial mobility. Many of them migrate over the lahar during the dry season to return to their old settlement area and tend fields of tubers there in shifting cultivation. They keep the resettlement sites as a home base, visiting the uplands only seasonally.

As a substitute for the limited farming possibilities, the Aeta were initially offered work in ‘food-for-work’ or ‘cash-for-work’ programmes. Under these programmes, mostly communal projects were carried out within the resettlement sites. For its part, the government has mainly supported the tending of small stock, such as pigs, chickens and goats. But in the crowded quarters of the resettlement sites the conditions for this activity are unsatisfactory. A few individual families in the resettlement sites have attempted to set up small manufacturing operations to produce hand-made articles as their occupation, with the direct support of NGOs. These included working with rattan, making bamboo furniture or binding brooms. A Japanese NGO, for example, introduced rice paper production and further arranged the marketing.

The sale of the goods produced remained an additional major problem for the Aeta. Many handicraft initiatives eventually had to be abandoned by the Aeta because of the difficulties in finding interested customers. Many Aeta lack backgrounds in commercial activities, and were unaccustomed to dealing with money. The few shops and businesses in the resettlement sites were usually operated by families from the lowlands. None the less, a few Ada families have attempted to open small stores. Examining the strategies of a number of Aeta families here, an overall pattern is discernible, involving the combining of various economic components and shifting them for best returns.

Compared to the above situation in Loob Bunga and Baquilan, the living conditions for the Aeta of the San Marcelino uplands settled now at Dampay, Cawag and Iram are considerably worse. In Cawag and Iram, the arable area is inadequate to provide the families with enough to eat. In Dampay and Cawag, because of the poor road system and the great distances to the sites of the lowland population, there are few outlets from which they can market their products or find jobs as wage-earning labourers. Thus the Aeta in Cawag remain dependent on outside help. Only the Aeta in Iram have access to a labour market, the nearby town of Olongapo, although there are only limited opportunities as members of a disadvantaged, socially discriminated-against group.

However, at least in Dampay, the living conditions were initially evaluated as being favourable for the Aeta. It was seen as the only resettlement site in Zambales which would permit the Aeta to preserve their traditional way of life. This location was relatively free of ash deposits, and with an area of 652 hectares of mountainous terrain with secondary forest, it also offered plenty of room for shifting cultivation (Shimizu, 1992: 15). At the time of this evaluation, the first Aeta had not yet arrived in Dampay. Dampay was offered to the Aeta of Botolan but was unacceptable to them because of the distance to their old homeland on Mt Pinatubo. They moved to Loob Bunga, Baquilan and the offsites of Lakas Bihawo and Villar Bihawo, also near Botolan. So today only Aeta families from the hinterland of San Marcelino remain in Dampay. It was supposed to house around 1,200 Aeta households, but at the height of resettlement it was occupied by only 500 households, and 1996 it was home to a bare 270 families. Similarly in Cawag, initially planned to accommodate 1,600 households, the maximum number reached was 250, and in 1996 there were only some 150 Aeta
households to be found there (for a description of the situation in the resettlement sites, see Shimizu, 1992: 15–25; Banzon Bautista, 1993: 49–58).

While Aeta continue to move away from these two resettlement sites originally established for them, a growing trend for Christian Filipinos from the lowlands coming there (as well as to the sites near Botolan) to live can be seen. Now that the infrastructure has improved, they arrive with the expectation of enjoying the assistance services originally intended for the Aeta. In the process, the remaining Aeta families are being forced little by little towards the structurally less-supported periphery of the resettlement sites, while the newly arriving population from the lowlands settles close to the roads, water supplies and electricity. And so the ethnic separation between lowlanders and Aeta persists in the resettlement sites.

The Aeta living in offsite settlements

Many Aeta families who would have been able to claim a place in a resettlement site chose instead to take the initiative and establish a new livelihood independently in so-called offsites, recognised by the ONCC (Office for Northern Cultural Communities). In so doing, they willingly gave up the help of the government. Conversely, at about the same time more and more Christian Filipinos, not all of them victims of the eruption, were gradually moving into the resettlement sites.

Three areas can be distinguished for these new offsite settlements (see Figure 2). About 1,200 Aeta families from the uplands around Botolan established their homes along the coastal area on the fringe of the foothills. Another 300 families (still counted as resettlement settlers in Baquilan and Loob Bunga) returned to parts of the Botolan uplands which had not suffered from lahar or pyroclastic flows. Finally, of the Aeta from the San Marcelino uplands, about 500 families resettled there, mostly along a road which went to the Diazon-Benguet mine, near the new Mapanauepe Lake. In these three areas the Aeta have adapted to the particular situation in different ways.

The offsites of the Botolan-uplands Aeta along the coastal strip lie near the national highway and are thus relatively well connected to the transport system. Here in this densely settled area they mostly live together with Sambal families and only rarely with Ilocanos. These settlements have a size of up to 50 families. They represent in fact both new villages and extensions of small Aeta settlements already in existence before the eruption. While in the resettlement sites, ties based on relationship and on coming from the same place were maintained, these small communities are often made up of people with quite diverse origins.

By combining or switching activities — including cultivation, small-animal husbandry, handicrafts, gathering non-wood forest products — but also through repeatedly changing their location, the Aeta make a constant attempt to exploit new resources. This shows an economic flexibility and territorial mobility typical of hunter-gatherers and corresponds to 'the immediate use of food resources' pattern. As already noted, it helps them to secure their existence in the short term.

On the other hand, for the majority of Aeta in these offsites their most important ambition is to achieve a self-sufficient agriculture. The settlement pattern usually leaves adequate space for modest cultivation near their domiciles. The selection of plants grown is comparatively broad and some are intended for market. Manioc (cassava), taro, yams and sweet potatoes, as well as watermelons and squash, along
with tree fruit, can be sold easily and often bring good prices. With the money earned, rice is bought. With these increased efforts towards a more market-oriented agrarian production also has come a greater involvement in the money-based economy of the lowland dwellers. A small number of families keep chickens, as well as goats and pigs, and some have even obtained water buffalo.

Just as in the large resettlements, in these small offsites the ever-increasing demand for firewood on the part of the neighbouring lowlanders offers good chances for earning money. The farmers also obtain bamboo for building purposes through the Aeta. In some settlements the Aeta have specialised in cutting and preparing grass to
be used for roof thatching. This activity secures a satisfactory income for comparatively little effort. Various families manufacture baskets or make arrows and bows for tourists — mostly Filipinos. But they also take up completely new occupations, never practised before, such as making adobe bricks. Unfortunately, all these attempts have yielded just as little success as those in the large resettlement sites sponsored by the NGOs. The projects remain limited in scope and quite often are soon abandoned due to the problems in marketing their products. None the less, in these autonomous offsites the Aeta have used their greater freedom of choice to realise their own capabilities without outside help.

Even in these offsite settlements there is a clear trend of displacement of the Aeta minority by members of more-dominant ethnic groups. Ever more inhabitants of the lowlands, poor and landless people, are moving into the Aeta settlements. Here, however, the disaster did not lead to a wider ethnic separation between the lowlanders and the Aeta, but rather to an amelioration of relations, at least in those offsites where Aeta live together with Sambal. This is much less true of places where they settle next to the Ilocanos. The earlier observation mentioned above, that Christian Filipinos married into Aeta families in times of emergency, was affirmed after the eruption. The number of inter-marriages has markedly increased due to the difficult economic situation. Not only have Filipino men chosen Aeta women, as often one sees Negrito men taking wives from the lowland population. In this intercultural situation personal self-perception as Aeta or lowlander may shift.

The Aeta returned to the San Marcelino uplands present a different picture. After their evacuation to Olongapo or their later resettlement in Iram or Cawag, they took up residence in self-contained offsite settlements on the higher slopes where they would be safe from lahar flows. Their settlements are for the most part exclusively inhabited by Aeta. The Ilocano population keeps its settlements quite separate from theirs. Most of these Aeta depend on farming as a major resource. On slopes still partly covered with ashes, they have tilled small plots and planted mostly tubers. The now sandy soil is very good for the growth of tubers and vegetables. Other activities such as selling non-wood forest products or gathering wild food play only a minor role. Hunting in this area had already become impossible before the eruption, as there was no more game left. Several factors may have been involved in forcing these Aeta to decide to concentrate on farming. In contrast to those who use the hinterland of Botolan, the social distance to the lowlanders, the Ilocanos, may have limited their opportunities for trade. Moreover, here in the hinterland of San Marcelino they lacked such supporting resources from the lowlands which could be relied on by the Aeta of Botolan based in the large resettlement sites in Baquilan and Loob Bunga who used the hinterland at the same time.

Indeed, ultimately the lifestyle of those families who returned to the uplands of Botolan is rather different, despite the similar environmental conditions. Here as well, the Aeta soon began to return to their home on Mt Pinatubo, still threatened and cut off from the outside world by lahar during the rainy season. Among the first to move back into the Botolan uplands were the most marginalised Aeta groups, those living far to the east of Botolan before the eruption. They stated that they could not live in the resettlement site together with the other Aeta families. These families have returned, wherever possible, to their traditional ways and resources.

In addition to this group, there are families who move back and forth between the uplands and the resettlement sites at Loob Bunga or Baquilan, thus exploiting the
resources at both locations. They continue to claim the space granted to them in the resettlement and take advantage of the infrastructure, while at the same time cultivating their old fields.

In contrast to the compact pattern of settlement in villages in the reoccupied San Marcelino uplands, here most of the settlements remain collections of dispersed single households. Some of the settlers have set themselves up for long-term residence in the uplands and built their houses on higher lying places, safe from lahar. They plant tubers, and sometimes vegetables, for market. Some families have also adopted a market-oriented tending of small animals.

Many of the families who have returned to the Mt Pinatubo regions only make charcoal there, or they cut bamboo needed by the lowlanders for building their houses, cut cogon grass, gather firewood or collect non-wood forest products. Transport remains a problem. For the few motor vehicles which make their way into the uplands, the danger of getting stuck in the lahar is great.

Foraging activities remain significant, such as fishing in the rivers and streams which remain unsilted by the eruption. Some hunting is still successfully practised in the Botolan uplands. There has also been a return to the use of wild plants, especially tree fruit and bananas, less often wild-growing varieties of yams. The traditional knowledge about these plants is still preserved and usefully practised. These Aeta collect non-wood forest products to make simple huts, their traditional shelters against bad weather, directly on the lahar. As previously, two or three families settle as a group. They remain in the uplands only during the dry season.

The Aeta living in NGO offsite settlements

Besides the resettlement sites organised by the government and the non-organised offsite settlements, around 500 Aeta families live in settlements organised by self-reliance NGOs. For organisational reasons government help was unable to serve the culturally determined, individual requirements over the long-term. Here the NGOs played a vital role. In the province of Zambales alone over 50 NGOs were engaged in providing aid and support for the victims after the eruption; many new local NGOs came into being as a direct consequence of the eruption.

Initially, because of conflicts of interest among and between them, communication between the various organisations remained poor. Only in December 1994 were the NGOs united under the guidance of the J.V. Ongpin Foundation for joint work with the MPC. Not every NGO has done adequate work. But on the other hand, the workers of many NGOs had the advantage of having become familiar with the way of life of the Aeta and of being in direct contact with them (on the role of the NGOs during the disaster see Feria-Miranda, 1992 and Bennagen, 1996).

There were already NGOs active among the Aeta in Zambales before the disaster. The stereotypical image of the Aeta: 'primitive' and needy, living somewhere remote and isolated and the presumption that their population and culture were threatened with extinction all made the Aeta of Zambales the focus of many relief and developmental initiatives. The spread of NGOs paralleled the widening of NGO activity in the Philippines generally. It first began in the 1960s, in part influenced by liberation theology, but dramatic expansion of activities came in the 1970s, after the promulgation of martial law, when the numbers of NGOs increased rapidly.
Additional growth was experienced in the 1980s after the assassination of Aquino, when the opposition movement against the Marcos regime became widespread (Wegner, 1993: 39, 40).

Among these NGOs, two organisations (Lubos na Alyansa ng mga Katutubong Ayta sa Sambales (LAKAS) and Aeta Development Association (ADA)) had, even before the disaster, already stressed long-term programmes with the twin goals of encouraging economic self-reliance and making a lasting improvement in the social conditions (for further information on LAKAS see Fondevilla, 1991; Koshida, 1992; Mercado, 1994: 119–23. For information about the Pinatubo Development Organization or ADA see Rice, 1973; Tima and Rice, 1973; Shimizu, 1989: 20–44). In the emergency after the eruption, Aeta spokesmen and leaders could be recruited from these preferentially educated groups. They worked directly with the NGOs in providing relief services and participated in decision-making. These local self-help NGOs ensured during the disaster that their Aeta members remained together in the evacuation centres and later were settled in Lakas Bihawo near Botolan (LAKAS) and Kanaynayan near Castillejos (ADA). They were consciously separated from the lowland inhabitants to protect them from exploitation by the latter. The NGOs provided them with living space and farm land, supplied some of them with livestock and arranged paid labour for them. They encouraged the formation of co-operatives and also offered them training programmes and medical help. The main problem with these projects, working towards self-reliance for the Aeta, remains their fierce individualism, which makes any co-operative activity difficult.

**Conclusion**

The examination of ways in which the Aeta have responded to the eruption of Mt Pinatubo shows how strong cultural traits can determine the outcome of strategies to cope with natural disasters in a traditional society. It also shows that centralised help is unlikely to meet the culturally conditioned needs of such groups. Rather their own efforts in self-help activities, supported by NGOs aware of and accommodating cultural requirements, play the most significant role in successful rehabilitation. It is also not necessary that they rely completely on outside help during rehabilitation. In the case of the Aeta NGOs seeking to help should take into account their flexibility and mobility as major advantages for any attempted survival strategies, and also respect their economic behaviour of expecting immediate yield for their labour and their social behaviour dedicated to individualism. One must also respect different ways of life within such an ethnic group. Such societies are generally regarded as homogeneous, and more account should be taken of the social and economic disparity within such communities.

For the majority of resettled Aeta families, their eventual return to the slopes of Mt Pinatubo remains a strong desire. They still feel and express a bond to their old home area. This feeling is strengthened by their belief in Mt Pinatubo as the spiritual centre of their world, the place where their ancestors lived and the residence of their god and creator. Only a small number of Aeta in the resettlements want to remain there indefinitely, only the ones who have most completely adopted the ways of the lowlanders. They express a belief in a better future, for example, in a better education for their children.
In the offsite settlements in the coastal area the Aeta have adopted customs of their farmer neighbours and become at least partially integrated into their society. They will very probably remain there and become fully assimilated into the lowland culture over time. In a way, this is another reflection of the ability of these people to adapt their life to their particular environmental situation, just as much so as those families who have already returned to the uplands, whether to San Marcelino or Botolan. These patterns demonstrate how traditional attitudes and behavioural patterns, still strongly stamped by their original hunter-gatherer existence, continue to influence their survival strategies and guide them in the exploitation of old resources as well as the development of new ones. For all the Aeta the disaster has initiated a process which has raised their consciousness of having a cultural identity and of belonging together as a people.

References


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