

# THE AETAS' RELOCATION AND THEIR STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

JEFFRY P. ACABA

## INTRODUCTION

THE Aetas belong to the Philippines' aboriginal population collectively known as "Negritos" (Seitz, 2004: 1). They differ from other Filipino indigenous groups; they are characterized with "curly, dark complexion, and small stature" (Seitz, 2004: 1-2). Previously settling in riverbeds and in locations near the waters, the Aetas were pushed from the lowlands by immigrants and are now occupying the "western foothills of Mt. Pinatubo" (Seitz, 2004: 3). Aetas are basically hunters and gatherers. They carry their bows and arrows, with immediate-return systems, which means that they use their food resource immediately (Testard, 1982 as cited in Seitz, 2004: 523).

"Relocation" means movement or transfer to a new place or environment. It is synonymous to resettlement, which means transferring to "a new area of a country." The word "new" means a shift of a position or a place that is previously unrecognized or has not yet been settled by the settlers regardless of the type of surrounding. Therefore, if a community or a group of individuals living in a particular site is going to be relocated or resettled, then it means they are being transferred to a new location, which may or may not have the same characteristics as that of their previous environment. To be relocated means that a particular group of people will be displaced from their current settlement and will be reassigned to live in a new place, which may be uncommon, or is yet unknown to them.

Relocation can be purposive or accidental. It is purposive or intentional if the settlers are being pushed by external factors (except natural forces) to

leave the place where they live and be transferred to established housing zones. For example, outsiders (persons and organizations that are not members of the indigenous group) may have interest over the land where the indigenous people live. For instance, the Chico Dam project in the Cordillera Region in the 1970s, funded by the World Bank, could have relocated 100,000 affected indigenous peoples living in 16 communities therein (Padilla, 2000) (fortunately, this did not happen as the project was discontinued).

On the other hand, relocation is accidental if caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes, typhoons, hurricanes and other natural calamities. In this type of relocation, the movement of the people from one place to another is inevitable because they have no other choice but to leave. It is accidental because the relocation of the people is unplanned and there are no outsiders involved that have pushed the people to leave their place. When Mt. Pinatubo erupted in 1991, many people living in the lowlands near the volcano were forced to evacuate and had been relocated to different evacuation centers and resettlement sites.

The relocation of the Aetas has been accidental because if Mt. Pinatubo had not erupted, then they might still be settling on the slopes of the volcano. Nevertheless, the evacuation of the Aetas during the eruption had been difficult. Some of them refused to leave, and stayed in their caves and huts because they did not want to leave their lands. They believed that *Apo Namalyari*, their God, was punishing them for not being protective of their environment, and that they must accept this punishment. This scenario had been the problem of the people—members of non-government organizations (NGOs) and social workers alike—working to save the Aeta inhabitants of Mt. Pinatubo. They did not understand why the Aetas refused to leave their homes.

This paper discusses how relocation had affected the food-gathering practices of the Aeta people. Using secondary sources based on previous ethnographic researches of various ethnologists and anthropologists on the Aetas who were affected by the Mt. Pinatubo eruption, this paper discusses the changes that had happened since the Aetas were moved to resettlement sites, particularly those that impacted on the group's food-collecting practices.

## RESULTS

Relocation is perceived differently by the Aetas, so much like other indigenous peoples and groups that are relentlessly fighting to prevent themselves from being relocated. It seems that the word "relocation" connotes a great risk to indigenous peoples. To them, the understanding of the word "relocation" is not defined based on the technicalities of the word. The very definition of the word "relocation" lies in their perception and experiences of its effects to their lives, to their people, and to their culture. To them, relocation would mean violation of their rights to their ancestral lands and domains, which would, in turn, devastate their culture and further lead to their extinction. One of the most prominent effects of relocation to indigenous peoples, specifically to the Aetas, is its impact on their food-getting practices.

Aetas used to be very resourceful with their surroundings. Prior to their relocation, they would resort to hunting, fishing, gathering, or foraging in getting their food, generously possible in their area. The Aetas' basic strategy in food subsistence was to acquire their food through different possible means and techniques. In fishing, for instance, they could use the method of *angtoko* (water goggle) and *biste* (short iron spear) type, or the *mamalah* type where Aetas built dams by putting big stones in the stream, causing the stream branch out and making fishing easier (Shimizu, 1992). In hunting for bird game, they used different kinds of arrows for particular birds (Brosius, 1990). They would also search for wild yams, bananas, insects, wild pigs and even bats; all of which became their main sources of food. According to one Aeta interviewed by Shimizu (2001), "food was never hard to find in the mountains" (p. 226).

When the Aetas were introduced to swidden agriculture or the "slash-and-burn" technique, they had become very knowledgeable in planting crops, to the extent that they knew exactly the best time to plant and harvest the crops. A swidden site, usually located near an Aeta village, was cleared first sometime between January and February and then left to dry for two to three months before burning (Shimizu, 1992). After the site was burned, the field would be planted with root crops, sweet potatoes, yams, taros, cassavas, cornbeans, and rice (Shimizu, 1992). In planting, they would consider the time of harvest and the demand of the plant by the community.

For instance, tubers were most likely to be planted because they were less time-consuming than rice. The field would then be burned again when enough food had been gathered.

Since food resources were available all throughout the year, long-term food storage was unnecessary. Their shifting food-getting practices between hunting and gathering and swidden farming had enabled the Aetas to be food subsistent. As Seitz (2004) had concluded, "All in all, the Aetas have skilfully combined the use of new and traditional resources and, in so doing, have shown great flexibility, especially during food shortages" (p. 69). He also mentioned Brosius' observation (1984: 144-145; 1990: 91) that in procuring their food supplies, these Aetas were "remarkably self-sufficient" (p.8).

However, the Aetas' stable food subsistence was drastically altered when Mt. Pinatubo erupted in 1991. Aetas who had survived the eruption at that time were relocated to nine resettlement sites established by the government exclusively for them (because all other resettlement areas were already overcrowded and lowlanders did not want to live with Aetas). In these sites, the relocated Aetas were given materials to build their houses and small plots of land to cultivate. However, eventually, they had become highly dependent on external aid and relief goods from the government and NGOs. This was because of the problems that they were experiencing in their resettlement sites. Seitz observed that (2004), "All resettlement sites were found on previously uninhabited and largely owing to poor soils and uncultivated public lands" (p. 175). In another account, Shimizu (1992) observed that, "only the Dampay resettlement area in Zambales had allowed the Aeta to continue one of their traditional ways of food procurement – swidden cultivation" (p. 15). The soil in Loob Bunga resettlement, for instance, is generally dry and dusty and is very unsuitable for planting crops. This had led the Aetas to search for alternative ways in gathering their food, and to learn to be flexible in utilizing their remaining resources.

Since their living condition were altered by the eruption, the Aetas have been forced to shift from their traditional subsistence procurement strategies to sourcing income in order to buy food. They have become involved in monetary economy. They have utilized the small plots of land that the government had given to them in order to plant fruit trees and sell their harvest to the lowland population, which will give them considerable earnings to engage in small investments. "They seek to obtain cash by

producing foodstuffs such as watermelons, pumpkins, and others not to only meet their own subsistence needs but also for the local markets" (Seitz, 2004, p. 222). "Many Aetas have become more and more inclined to expand food production beyond their own subsistence needs and to sell surplus produced in local markets, a development resulting in their increasing participation in the monetary economy" (Seitz, 2004, p. 232). They have also sought to produce and sell their indigenous bows and arrows as well as gather and sell cogon grass (or *yakot* in their local term) from the mountains to earn additional income, which have become the most common economic activities of the Aetas after their relocation. Aetas have also engaged in "wage-work for the lowland farmers or became traders and small entrepreneurs who sell their products to the lowland population" (Seitz, 2004, p. 216). "They offered their services as day-laborers or as peddlers of their own products to the market" (Seitz, 2004, p. 195) in order to procure the money that would be used to buy their food. They would go as far as Antipolo or Manila to serve as temporary construction workers or market helpers.

This tragedy has led a number of relocated Aeta families to beg for money. Help and support from NGOs and the government have not been consistent (this was not so during the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo). Relief goods have ceased from being distributed to the Aetas, although donations from private organizations and certain private individuals, however minimal and limited, have continued. Livelihood programs and trainings are held and conducted for the Aetas but since the materials are costly, the Aetas have not been able to start their own business due to lack of capital or financial support from the organizers of the programs. Most importantly, most Aetas still do not have lands to cultivate, or even if they have, it is unsuitable for planting crops. Without land, the Aetas will not be able to plant and harvest crops that could be sold to the market to earn money to buy food. These have caused them to go to the lowlands and as far as Metro Manila to beg for money in order to survive. Money has become the determining factor of the Aetas' survival. Without money, they would not be able to buy their food. They have no other choice since they cannot practice foraging in the area, and because of the situations of their land in the resettlement area—barren, dry, and unsuitable for cultivation.

The relocation of the Aetas has brought about devastating changes to their ways of life, particularly to their food-getting practices. From a

subsistent hunting and gathering society, they have become waged workers who toil for money in order to survive. Even if they have been already settling in resettlement sites and have, in one way or another, adapted to the way of life in the lowland, the Aetas would still want to return to their lands to resume their traditional food procurement and economic life. This is because of two reasons: one, the problem of land, and two, social discrimination. Although NGOs have worked hard in securing the Aetas' subsistence by setting up livelihood programs so that the latter would earn money for their food, the Aetas only want to have a farmland for their subsistence. Moreover, their lives in the resettlement sites have restricted their movements and have not allowed them to hunt or cultivate large areas of land because there is not enough land.

Furthermore, their further involvement in the monetary economy—that is, the expansion of their agricultural activities; their employment in the informal economic sector; and their engagement in trade and small-scale industries—has certainly integrated them into the mainstream hierarchical society. Aetas are socially discriminated, though, in the mainstream society. For instance, “Aetas were given a low price for their crops by the middlemen” (Gobrin & Andin, 2002, p. 6), as if they are different from other farmers and cultivators. Because of this, some Aetas have adopted the lifestyle of the lowland farmers. They have started to deny their ethnicity to avoid being socially discriminated. They tend to forget their indigenous rituals and ignore their customs. Their disregard of their indigenous culture would probably lead to its extinction. If not practiced at all or not even transmitted to the next generation, there is a possibility that this culture would be totally forgotten. Not using their dialect in their daily lives, for instance, would result in forgetting the usage of the dialect.

### **CONCLUSION**

If only Mt. Pinatubo had not erupted, then maybe the Aetas would still be peacefully roaming the slopes of the mountain. However, there are events that are indeed inevitable and it is unfortunate that one of the Philippines' major natural phenomenon—the Pinatubo volcanic eruption—had uprooted Aetas from their natural habitat. If only those who had offered their help had understood the Aetas in the first place, the future of this

group could have been spared from being disrupted. Aetas are indigenous peoples whose lives are different from those of the mainstream society. Thus, care could have been exercised in the planning and provision of resettlement sites for the Aetas. As borne out in the foregoing discussion of published secondary evidence, the relocation had brought about devastating changes to the group's ways of life, particularly in relation to their food gathering practices. It is thus crucial to identify and implement ways and means in which the adverse effects of these changes may be minimized.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEFFRY ACABA is currently taking his Master's degree in Anthropology at the University of the Philippines. He is Program Coordinator for Monitoring and Evaluation of the Global Fund HIV Program Rounds 3 and 5 at the Tropical Disease Foundation. Email: [jpacaba@tdf.org.ph](mailto:jpacaba@tdf.org.ph)