

# Acculturation and Dietary Change Among the Pinatubo Aetas

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フィリピンネグリート族の食生活変容事例

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In memory of Dr. Rufino Tima and with special thanks to the Tima Family, to Mamalyari Soria, my tireless guide, and to all the Aeta people who helped me in this research.

*The critical role that indigenous people, such as the Aetas, play in national development argues for a policy of cultural diversity [...] no culture, however advanced, can encompass the total potentialities of the human race. Every culture, however small, represents unique human adaptation to life in our planet. It is this uniqueness that adds up to the whole human experience.*  
(2005: 136) Rufino Tima

## Abstract

The eruption of the Pinatubo volcano was the second largest eruption of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to the disaster, approximately 30,000 people lived around Pinatubo and the mountain gave home to groups of indigenous people of the Philippines. In 1991 June 15, the people of Zambales witnessed a disaster that killed 800 people and left 100,000 people homeless. The eruption left a devastating economic and property damage that was valued at one half of a billion dollars (Rosenberg, 2007). Along with the shattering human and economic consequences, the disaster also deeply affected the socio-cultural life of the Aetas and hardened their struggle for cultural survival.

In the years following the eruption, most of the Aetas had no other choice but to stay in one of the government resettlements. However, those settlements were highly unsuitable for the Aetas and life became extremely difficult for them. Staying in the lowlands in close contact with the lowlander population was an entirely new experience for them that resulted in much distress. Inadequate sanitary conditions and living cramped together with differently cultured people hardened their lives. However, there was another important segment of the lives of the Aeta that changed suddenly. The food ratios they received were mostly canned foods as sardines in oil and rice. Although the Aetas were not completely unfamiliar with these foods, it was not in their regular diet. Therefore, for many Aeta who was living on root crops and forest products before, this new diet was indigestible and caused serious physical problems. Moreover, the new diet became a factor in the acculturation to the lowland society in later years.

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## SHORT HISTORY OF THE AETA

The Aeta are believed to be the indigenous inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago; they are one of the few surviving groups of tropical rain forest hunter-gatherers. Regrettably, in the last few decades the Aeta experienced dramatic changes in their traditional lifestyle and their struggle for cultural survival became harder than ever.

The name *Aeta*, as the names *Ayta*, *Agta*, *Atta* (*Ata*), *Ati* and *Ita* are believed to originate from the Philippine word *it* (*itim*, *itom*), meaning black. The Aeta tribes are also called as *Negritos*. This term originates from Spanish, meaning *little black* (CCP, 1994: 22). These names are referring to the physical appearance of the Aeta, who are short (on average 150cm), have dark skin, black, kinky hair, black eyes and wide nose.

The origin of the Aeta is not clear, however according to the most accepted theory, they arrived to the Philippines from the Asian mainland through land bridges some 30,000 years ago. They are mostly mentioned as mountain tribes, living deep in the forest, secluded from other tribes. Nonetheless, there are archaeological evidences that the Aeta settled first in the lowlands and they only moved to the mountainous regions later. We can find written indication for this theory as well. The Spaniards saw them the first time along the seacoast as one of them ran away *so fast that a horse could not have caught him* (Rodriguez, 1565: 406-511). Most probably Aetas moved to the mountains because other immigrants and conquerors arrived to their territory.

Most of the Aeta live in Luzon, however there are Aeta ethnic groups in Palawan, Panay, Negros, on the Bicol peninsula and in Mindanao as well. There are 25 ethno-linguistic Aeta groups known in the Philippines. The Pinatubo Aeta are living in the forested areas around the Pinatubo volcano in the province of Zambales, Luzon, in the northern region of the Philippines. Although the Aeta had been in contact with the lowlanders, they remained to live relatively secluded and proved to be resistant to major changes. The colonizing Spaniards were unable to settle them in reservations, as during the American colonization the Aeta managed to keep their social and political structure. The only Aeta group that was open to a relation with the US was in fact the Pinatubo Aeta. They helped the US troops during WWII by providing jungle-surviving techniques to the special operation forces (Cosme, 1974: 277-300). Nevertheless even through those years the Aeta managed to keep their culture and social structure and did not *get westernized*.

## THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE AETAS

The social and the political system of the Aeta are based on the respect of the elders who maintain peace in the community and consulted in important issues. The expected values and norms are the realms of Aeta traditions and beliefs. Aeta

communities are egalitarian; they have no social stratification or classes. The eldest member of the community is often considered to be the leader of the group. Even so, the leaders and elders never impose their ruling or decision on the individual member of the community; usually they have only an advisory role. Therefore there is no well-developed form of political organization or a strong sense of social cohesion (Barrato, 1978). Traditionally the Aeta have no interest to gain power or influence for individual advantages and cooperation is encouraged over competition. However, this political system was disturbed somewhat by the lowland Filipinos, who necessitated electing a captain or *barangay*<sup>1</sup> chieftain to represent the group to the *outside* world (Noval-Morales and Monan, 1979: 123-127).

The Aeta usually stay in smaller groups with an average size of ten families or some fifty individuals with the same ancestor. The basic unit is the nuclear family where the father and the mother have equal rights and share responsibilities. The Aeta love children and parents have a very strong bond with their kids, who in return have respect to their elders. Traditionally, arranged marriage was the common practice but due to the influence of lowland culture, now marriage is usually decided by the couples themselves. Yet, even in cases of non-arranged marriages, the two families have a series of formal meetings before the wedding and paying a bride price (*bandi*) to the family of the girl is mandatory (CCP, 1994: 26-27). The *bandi* is given to the girl's family as an economic compensation for her value. It can be paid in cash, in kind or in both. In kind payment can constitute of farm animals as pigs, cows, carabaos, chickens or goats and the amount is a matter of negotiation between the two families. During the negotiations, the boy's family would butcher a pig, cook rice and share the food as an appreciation for the efforts of the negotiating parties (Tima, 2005: 49-53).

## RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

There are diverse views on the nature of the Negrito religion. Some scholars argue that they are monotheist, believing in one supreme God while acknowledging the presence of lesser spirits and deities in their belief system; while others arguing that the Negrito are predominantly animists. Most probably it depends on the tribe in point. The Pinatubo Aetas are animist, believing in spirits that inhabit their whole environment. These spirits are called *anito* or *kamana* and can be either friendly or evil depending on the relationship the individual Aeta has with them (Noval-Morales and Monan, 1979: 77-79). Although the Pinatubo Aeta are considered mostly animist, they also worship *Apo Namalyari* as a supreme God, who lives in Mt. Pinatubo. The

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1 A political subdivision of a municipality

name of their God does not only refer to their worshipped deity, but also means grandfather and grandson, showing the personal affection the Aeta have with *Apo Namalyari*.

The volcano eruption actually shocked the local tribes who were never aware that the home of their native God is in fact a living volcano. This caused many problems during the evacuation, since many Aeta refused to leave the mountain despite of the warnings. They could never believe that *Apo Namalyari* would harm them in any way, while moving to the lowlands promised many dangers and uncertainty. More than a hundred Aeta stayed in upland caves and died in the eruption (Tima, 2005: 63, 75-78).

## CONCEPT OF HOME AND LAND OWNERSHIP

The Aeta have a very different concept of land ownership than their Filipino counterparts. From an outsider point of view, the Aeta are nomadic people moving from one place to another. However from the Aeta perspective it is not true. The Aeta have a wider concept of home, for them home is the forest or the mountain where they live. Therefore even if they move, they are still at home, like if we would move from one room to another. Furthermore, for the Aeta, land is abundant and for everybody to share. According to Aeta norms, everybody have the right to use the land, it is a communal resource and one can claim exclusive ownership only on what he or she planted. This concept is very different from the Filipino perception where land ownership is based on legal documentation and it is exclusive (Tima, 2005: 45-59). The Aeta society is not an egocentric society and sharing is a common concept. Also, since food and land were always plenty, the Aeta did not accumulate goods and assets, they usually took only what they need for the day and did not plan for the far future. An old anecdote can portray this difference easily between the lowland society and the Aeta:

*Aeta tribesmen are walking on the road and see a big mango tree full with mangos. They stop, pick what they need, eat them and continue their way leaving plenty of mangos on the tree for others who might take the same road. When a group of lowlanders come, they stop too and pick all the fruits from the tree for them to eat and sell the rest and they leave nothing on the tree for fellow wanderers.<sup>2</sup>*

Nevertheless, this non-egocentric concept and behavior of the Aeta seems to change, as a result of the more frequent contact with the lowland society.

The last fifty years proved to be extremely difficult for the Aeta. Lowlanders were turning their forests into farms, displacing the Aeta who could not maintain

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2 Tima, Rufino G.

their indigenous hunter-gatherer lifestyle that requires large territories. The Philippine government took modest interest in their struggle and did almost nothing to improve their situation. As a result, in many regions the Aeta became tenants and agricultural laborers of the lowlanders in their own ancestral lands. The lowlanders could displace the Aeta relatively easily because of the cultural perspective on land ownership and non-egocentric culture of the Aeta. The Aeta always believed that land is plenty and they can always move further in the forest. In many cases the Aeta gave away or sold their land for a very cheap price because for them land had no commercial value. On the contrary, for the lowland agricultural people, the non-cultivated land was nobody's property therefore it could be taken. From the perspective of the lowlanders, the cultivation of the Aeta land was not displacement, only mere utilization of an unexploited area (Bodley, 1975: 63).

There is another important cultural disposition that hardened the life of the Aeta in the modern world. The Aeta forager culture is based on the premise of *immediate return*. The forest could always provide enough food for the whole community throughout the year at any time. Therefore, storing and planning for the far future was never a trait of the Aeta (Seitz, 2004: 6; Tima, 2005: 61). This cultural character could be the reason why the few implemented development projects for the Aeta community could not be sustained in a long term and failed.

## THE TRADITIONAL AETA FOOD ECONOMY

Hunting, fishing and gathering food is part of the traditional Aeta economy. Their main weapon is the bow and arrow along with some traps to corner wild game. The Aeta usually hunt in groups accompanied by hunting dogs that are highly valued in their culture. Hunting is usually the task of the men, while fishing is practiced by the whole community, including children (CCP, 1994: 24-25). The Aeta are also engaged in some agricultural activity, mainly by swidden farming (*kaingin*). Slash-and-burn farming is considered as an unsustainable and environmentally degrading agricultural method. Yet, it also can be sustainable if two factors are present, namely a small population and wide area. Although there was no population growth among the Aeta, they suffered from major territorial loss in the last decades, which made them hard to continue with their traditional way of living.

The available sources and the oral history of the living memory of the Aeta are indicating that the Aeta have never suffered from resource stress. They were always relying on diverse resources (through hunting, gathering, fishing) that provided them with a wild selection of food supply throughout the whole year. There was no other main predator in their area (with the exception of some large pythons and crocodiles in specific locations) so the Aeta did not have a competition in hunting for their main

pray, deer or wild pigs. Moreover, since the deer and the wild pig are depending on different sources of food, they were not competing with each other either. The lack of interspecies predation and competition most probably resulted in the abundance of protein resources for the tribes. Also, the ecosystem of the Aeta was less degraded and was lavish in plant resources in the past; that mainly consisted of wild starch plants as wild yam, *caryota* palm pulp, wild banana and other starchy fruits (Rai, 1990: 77-78).

The Aeta had only limited contact with other cultures that prevented the extensive admittance of foreign food and spices, therefore their cuisine and dietary culture is predominantly determined by their lifestyle. However, most of their current crops were introduced to the Philippines during the Spanish occupation (Fox, 1953: 235, 246, 248, 301). From agricultural activities the main foods are: corn, beans and root crops such as sweet potato (*kamote*), cassava (*muros*), *biga* (a root crop similar to *kamote*) and wild yam (*ube*). In the last few decades rice became more relevant in the Aeta diet as well and by now it has a significant share in their consumption. The forests were always abundant in papaya, coconut, wild banana (*amokao*) and many different local fruits as, *alopay*, *baokok*, or *pao*. Gathering honey is a common practice among the Aeta as well. The Pinatubo Aeta are eating the young bees (*umok*) and the pollen (*lata*) from the hives too and making candles from beeswax (CCP, 1994: 25). The pray of the Aeta hunters are mainly wild pig, deer and fish but smaller animals, reptiles and insects are also among the traditional delicacies.

## DIETARY CHANGES AND THEIR SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

A major change started in the diet of the Aeta after the WWII due to the more frequent contact with the lowlanders. Previously, the staple food of the Aeta was sweet potato (*kamote*) and other tubers, from what they were always self-subsistent. After the war, rice got more importance in the diet of the Aeta community, despite to the fact that they could never reach self-sufficiency in rice production as they could with sweet potato. According to Garvan (1963: 50-51), in the 60s the Aetas still generally preferred their own food to rice and Filipino food. The pace of the alteration in the Aeta diet intensified after the eruption of the Pinatubo Volcano in 1991 that could be partially explained with the Aetas living in the refugee camps together with the lowlanders and with the food aid they received.

The food relief that the evacuees received after the Pinatubo eruption was a great source of indignation. Although there was no complaint on the quantity, the quality of the food left much to be desired. There were complains of stale food that was allegedly expired food donations of the US. Although officials were insisting on its safety, several hundred of evacuees reported sickness holding the food responsible

(Banzon Bautista, 1993: 41). For the Aeta however the quality problem was aggravated with cultural inappropriateness as well. Canned food, sardines in oil or instant noodles were completely unfamiliar to the Aetas (Seitz, 1998: 80, Tima, 2005: 105). Many Aeta, especially the elderly and children suffered from stomach pain and diarrhea or constipation caused by the heavy oil and the preservatives in their food. In general, the Aetas found it very difficult to adapt to the new food items. Alas they had no other choice, since it occurred that all they received for months was canned sardines; which for long they could only eat after washing off the oil from the fish (Tima, 2009).

Cultural insensitivity towards the Aeta showed not only in the food items, but also in the way of distribution. Many Aeta complained that they are frequently treated as children and the workers of the aid agencies often ask them to perform their traditional dance before they would distribute the food or other goods (Bennagen, 1996: 62). Such inconsiderateness only strengthens an already traumatic experience and makes the Aeta feel subordinate and defenseless that would reinforce their low self-esteem.

The increased economic relationship between the Aeta and the lowland people brought consumerism to the tribes and the Aeta spend a significant proportion of their income (from trade and wage-labor) on consumer goods. They often buy carbonated drinks, coffee, sugar, and canned food, along with spices, soap nail polish or face powder. These products are becoming both a need and a status symbol, particularly among the youngsters (Rai, 1990: 104). In terms of their relationship with the lowland community, the Aeta people suffer from low self-esteem. Therefore, the Aeta put higher value on products from the market of the lowlanders than their own forest products. It can be stated that by now, Aeta have a sort of psychological addiction to white rice and white sugar, along with instant coffee, since these products all represent a *higher lifestyle*. After the Pinatubo eruption, the Aeta received donations of powdered instant coffee and white sugar in the relocation camps. The significant increase in the instant coffee and sugar consumption can be linked to these donations (Tima, 2009).

Traditionally, the Aeta had two main meals a day (Tima, 2005: 43). In the morning they gathered around the fire where they baked some sweet potato or yam. In the afternoon, when the men came back from hunting, the family would have their second meal. Recently, the morning meal is frequently exchanged with very sweet instant coffee and the family would eat three main meals. Preferring outside food and with the intensified contact to the lowlanders, the Negritos are exploiting their traditional food sources to a lesser extent. Some research are indicating that 60–80% of their dietary intake is nontraditional, non-foraged food (Rai, 1990: 105).

In past time there was no food scarcity among the Aeta even during general food

shortages. The forest always provided enough and nutritious food, the tribes knew how to take advantage of it and they lived mostly on a balanced diet (Seitz, 1998: 78). Their food intake consisted of tubers, root crops, fruits, and wild game along with snakes, frogs, monkeys, bats, lizards, larvae, ants and practically everything that is edible. Their diet was diversified and rich in nutrients. However, in the past decades many Aeta —especially children, have been suffering from malnutrition or undernourishment. One reason could be the shortage of nutritious food, but there is another, alarming underlying cause as well. Namely that Aeta mothers seem not to accept vegetables and fruits as a primary source of vitamins and believe that rice alone is nutritious enough (Tima, 2005: 23). This misperception is most probably originating from their belief that lowland products are superior to theirs.

By reason of the low self-esteem, the Aeta are copying behavioral patterns of the lowlanders not only in their foodways, but also by taking up customs like smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol. The Aeta culture is one of the few cultures where social drinking is absent and where the consumption of alcohol is culturally not defined (Tima, 2005: 134). Therefore, as the Aeta got access to alcoholic beverages it became more and more of a problem. Excess consumption of alcohol can have a destructive effect on a society, even in cases where alcohol is part of the culture. In case of the Aeta, the destruction can be more severe due to the lack of traditions on alcohol consumption. Moreover, since the Aeta do not have wide knowledge on alcoholic beverages, they tend to prefer quantity to quality that have not only social but health consequences as well.

## NEW DIET AND ACCULTURATION

In order to map the current state of the dietary and cultural change of the Aeta, the author conducted two field trips in 2009, one in February, during the dry season and one in September during the rainy season. The aim of these two visits was to have a better understanding on dietary change, acculturation and the links to the food assistance and development programs in the Pinatubo Aeta community. In addition to observation and free discussions with the Aetas, the researcher conducted twenty-one semi-structured deep interviews with Aeta families on their contemporary and past food economies and eating habits. The sampling of the interviewees was random and sought to frame a representative sample. The families are all settled in Zambales province and living in the municipality of Subic, Castillejos or San Marcelino in various cities or barangays. The respondents were all affected by the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo, spent time in temporary resettlements and received food aid for some period of time. The age range of the interviewees is between twenty-four and around ninety years. In almost half of the cases the interviewees were not sure or did not know the year of



their birth. The respondents also bear different educational background, ranging from no formal education and illiteracy to a Bachelor degree.

The respondents were asked about their family structure, daily life, household organization, their routines on food production, shopping, cooking, consumption and food preferences. The interviews also included questions on the exposure to food assistance after the eruption of Mt Pinatubo and the dietary change that the community experienced in the last two decades. Lastly, the interviewees were asked about the desired development programs that they would consider crucial for long-term development and for the cultural survival of the Pinatubo Aeta.

Most of the asked families have four or five children and live in a household of six people or more. The head of the family is the father, with no exception. The household work is predominantly lies on the women, however the husband helps on occasion. Most often they would go to the market together for shopping or he would help in the cleaning. Cooking is typically the mother's task, although it is not rare that the husband would help in that as well; especially in preparing and cooking the hunted pray.

## NEW FACTORS IN FARMING AND HUNTING

Every asked family was engaged in farming; however, half of the respondents had only half a hectare or less land to cultivate on. Five families had one-hectare lands and only one family had a five-hectare land. Moreover, none of the families had actually ownership over their farm. After the eruption (in 1991), the government gave them certificate of stewardship over their ancestral land for 25 years. The resettlement policy was to provide land for the Aeta to live and to use it for farming. In case the Aeta people can improve their land, then they will receive ownership over it in 25 years. Nevertheless, stewardship over a land means that although the Aetas can utilize their land, they cannot use it as a collateral and receive credit for its development.

Aeta families were always engaged in farming to some degree; along with hunting and gathering, it was a vital part of their livelihood. The eruption in 1991 destroyed the whole area they were living and farming; therefore for a long time most of the families had no opportunity to secure their livelihood on their own. For half of the families, it took three years or more to restart farming and only one quarter of the families had the chance to begin growing crops one year after the disaster.

The responsibilities of the farm are predominantly lying on the husband; he is in charge, although women also share the workload. Their produce is mainly for their own consumption, however depending on their plot size and the harvest; Aetas are selling their produce on the local market or peddle in the nearby lowlander neighborhood. Among the Aeta families it is common to share their produce with other

families. Giving food as a gift is a part of their culture, especially to give food to the elders to show their respect.

The most common crops that the Aetas are growing are their traditional crops, such as sweet potato, taro, yam and *biga* (a root crop very similar to sweet potato). Also, most of them are growing beans, as winged beans, string beans or cowpeas. Winged bean (*Psophocarpus tetragonolobus*), also known as Goa bean is a tropical legume plant that grows plenty in the humid tropics and requires a very little or no fertilizing. Therefore it is a very suitable crop for the Aeta. Similarly, the cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*) is a crop prospering by warm weather and does well in poor soils. Also, it is drought and shade tolerant, so it is well suited for intercropping with other plants. Other frequent crops on the Aeta farms are cassava, okra, chili and ginger. Between the lines they have also banana, mango, papaya, jackfruit and cashew trees. Although by now rice is a staple food for the Aeta, only three families were engaged in rice farming. As for farm animals, one third of the families could not afford having any. Most of the families who had farm animals, would have chicken or in a few cases ducks. One family had a cow and four families had carabaos.

Hunting, fishing and gathering in the forest is the traditional way of life and still an integral part of the Aeta livelihood. Nevertheless we can observe a distinctive change in frequency and in some cases in the hunted prey as well. In old times and up until the eruption, every Aeta family was taking part in hunting, fishing and gathering. Common prey were: wild birds, wild boar, deer, monkey, bats, lizard, snake, frog, fish, shrimp and gathering larvae or ants. Nowadays, some families —typically among those who live in the city, further from the forest, are not hunting anymore, although they would still go fishing once in a while. Also, especially in families who live in town, the children are not learning the skills of hunting from their father and sometimes refuse to eat *exotic* prey, as lizard, bat, monkey etc. Families who are still going regularly to hunt would go less often than before as well. Understandably, there is a clear correlation between the distance from the forest and the frequency of hunting. The prey is usually for own consumption, however they can also sell boar and deer for the lowlanders. Selling gathered food from the forest is quite common, as banana, papaya, banana or other fruits.

## CHANGING CONSUMPTION

As might be expected, living closer to the cities and further from the forest, resulted in changes also in the custom of shopping. As it was mentioned earlier, although the Aeta lived in relative seclusion, they kept contact to the lowlanders and were trading with them for a long time now. Consequently, they were already familiar with the lowlander products to some extent. Nevertheless, change happened in their

shopping practices after the eruption with the intensified contact to the outside world. The purchased products are mainly the same: rice, sugar, salt, instant coffee, canned goods, MSG (monosodium glutamate), *bagoong* (salted, fermented fish condiment) or even bread. However, now there is a difference in the frequency they go to the market and in the amount of food they buy. Typically the families would mention that they go to the market now much more often than before the eruption and purchase more lowlander food. Many of them mentioned increase in the amount of canned goods and that buying soda or powdered soft drinks became a common practice by now. Also, families who are further from the forest and do not go hunting that often, would buy fish (mostly milkfish) and chicken in the market if they can afford.

As it was discussed earlier, the staple food of the Aeta tribes were mainly root crops, such as sweet potato, taro and yam, however they are increasingly shifting towards the diet of the lowlanders. Rice is on the table every day; for many families, it became an integral part of every meal. On the other hand, the once most important root crops became a sort of snack food, often eaten only once in two weeks or less. Of course, there is a difference between the families still living in the forest and the ones living close to the city. Naturally, the families who live in the forest experienced less change in their diet than the Aetas living close to the lowlanders. There is a clear change in other food items as well. The only exceptions are greens and vegetables. The young leaves of taro, sweet potato and *apalyat* (*Mamordica charantia*), along with squash and banana bosom are just as a common food in the forest as near the city; they are consumed every day or even every meal. Beans are also often eaten, depending on season and harvest. Meat is eaten on less occasions, the frequency in ranging from one a week to one a month. It is mostly chicken; while pork, beef or carabao meat is on the menu usually only on special occasions. Fish, usually milkfish, is on the plates a bit more often, eaten twice a week or once in two weeks, depending on the situation of the family. Eggs are consumed sometimes as well, however because they prefer to have more chicken, the families are eating eggs only once a month or so. Dairy products are consumed only in the form of powdered milk, drink with instant coffee. The main difference between the times before and after the eruption is that the Aeta families (especially close to the city) have less choices and varieties in their diet. Because they go hunting and fishing less often, they have less access to meat and fish. Also before, the forest provided them with more varieties of fruits that they could snack on more often.

In terms of generational differences, half of the respondents noted that their children are reluctant to eat *exotic* meat (snake, lizard, frogs etc.) from the forest, which were traditional food before. These children are typically live in mixed families, where one of the parents is non-Aeta or coming from families who live close to the city. Of

course this ration is expected to be different further deep in the forest where the acculturation did not take place to this rate. One of the consequences of this shift in the diet is that Aeta families have a less diverse dietary intake in terms of protein. In the forest they had a continuous supply of meat and various fruits, therefore the Aeta diet was not only more diversified but healthier as well than these days. Although most of the families have three meals a day now-as opposed to the traditional two main meals before; yet their diet is poorer in the sense of variations and range of food they used to take. Although the Aetas had only two main meals before, they had the opportunity to snack more often throughout the day.

The traditional Aeta refreshment is the juice of *amokao* (wild banana) and the fresh juice of mango in season. However, as many Aeta families moved and stay close to town, they have less access to the forest, therefore less access to their traditional drinks. Powdered fruit juice and instant coffee with lots of extra sugar is drunk instead of the healthier and free fruit juices. Interestingly, almost all the families considered their traditional diet healthier and noted that the food they eat now contains much more chemicals and less nutrients. Nevertheless, they still preferred to eat a diet that resembles more to the food of the people of the low lands. Only three ladies saw root crops as essential part of the meal. The rest of the respondents all reckoned rice as a high priority.

Another apparent change in Aeta customs that they often hold birthday celebrations now, which was not customary before. In fact, as it was mentioned before, many Aeta did not know the year or even the day they were born. On birthday parties the most common celebratory dish is *pancit*, a common Pilipino noodle dish that actually has a Chinese origin. On weddings however, the tradition remained the same; depending on the family, they would butcher a pig or carabao.

Along with the above culturally and dietetically important changes in the Aeta life, there is an additional shift in their food culture as well. For long times it was a tradition to share the food on a banana leaf and eating with hands from the same leaf than the others. While the families staying in the forest, still maintain this tradition, the Aetas closer to the city are increasingly shifting to use plates and utensils. While one could argue that separate plates and spoons are more hygienic therefore it is a positive change; we should not forget that the intimacy of food sharing has the potential to strengthen family and personal relationships.

## EXPERIENCES FROM THE EVACUATION CENTERS AND THEIR LONG-TERM EFFECTS

The impact of the Pinatubo eruption was devastating for the whole region. 800 people were killed in the eruption and more than 100 000 people became homeless

after the catastrophe. Immediate action was needed that could not ensure careful planning or implementation of course. Evacuation centers were set up and relief goods from the national and local government, non-governmental organizations and foreign countries started to pour in, especially forthwith the disaster. Losing one's home, livelihood, family or friends and being replaced is a traumatic experience on its own. However, if it is possible, it was even more harrowing and stressful for the Aeta. Dr Rufino G. Tima (2005: 105) wrote about the situation as follows:

*Life in evacuation camps is never a pleasant experience and for Aetas used to roaming freely in their mountain habitat, it must have been all too unbearable. Overcrowding in small schoolrooms, sleeping under plastic roofing which turn hot during the day and cold at night, lack of running water, smelly communal toilet, all compounded by unfamiliar food and the swarm of million of flies alighting on everywhere. Eating becomes a struggle of shoving food into your mouth with one hand and shooing away flies with the other.*

*Such was the situation in the New Cabalan Evacuation Center just outside Olongapo City proper in the month of July, August, September... and on to the end of 1991. Toward latter part of the year, we were burying dead Aetas every week. Old men, women and babies were the most vulnerable due to diseases and the stress of living in evacuation camps.*

*... It was not want of food that the evacuee longed for a better place; food was plentiful. ... For the Aetas comprising most of the evacuees in Barangay New Cabalan, the problem was not quantity but unfamiliarity with donated food.*

The interviewed families had all the same memories on the situation. The received food aid contained canned goods, sardines, noodles, rice, sugar, or sometimes bread even. Not everybody experienced physical problems due to the food they received, however they recalled that the elders and the children suffered from the new diet and many Aeta could not adapt to the situation and passed away those times. Canned food and oily sardines were very heavy on their stomach causing stomach pain, diarrhea and constipation.

On the short term, -considering the scale of the devastation, there might be no other option for the government than handle the situation in this way. Nevertheless, they refused to support a very positive initiative coming from the Aetas and local NGOs. The Philippine government set up six official resettlement areas in Southern Zambales. Among these six resettlements, there were two that were intended primarily for the Aetas: the *Iram Aeta Resettlement* and the *Cawag Aeta Resettlement*. In time however, non-Aeta people were also allowed to settle there which resulted in social frictions (Tima, 2005: 106). The main problem was that these government-established resettlements did not meet the needs of the Aeta. As it was discussed earlier, the Aeta

initially need free space in the forest and suitable land to cultivate on. Ensuring a setting that is similar to the one they were living in before, would have been the best for the needs of the Aeta. Instead of that, the government set up sub-division type housing projects that they considered better. As an Aeta woman recalled it; the government ensured amenities like toilets or a location closer to the city center and market. However, these things were not essential for the Aetas. They had no education, therefore being close to town had no advantage for them, they could not obtain jobs. They only needed free space in the forest where they could do farming and hunting. However, the place they got resettled was not even very suitable for farming.

Two NGOs that were working with the Aetas for a long time, took initiative. The Ecumenical Foundation for Minority Development (EFMD) and the Aeta development Association (ADA), under the leadership of Dr Rufino G. Tima, tried to convince the government officials to ensure a settlement area that is culturally suitable for the Aetas. They organized a rally in Quezon City to confront the government with the dire situation and to alert the international community. After the rally, Dr Tima was called in for a general meeting with regional and municipal heads of government line agencies and the resettlement managers of Cawag and Iram. Dr Tima made a presentation and explained the different needs and preferences the Aeta have. (Tima, 2005: 112-114) The reaction of the listeners can be easily portrayed with the following question that the regional director of the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) asked: *Why do Aetas prefer to stay in the mountain forest rather than in the lowland? The forest is only for wild animals!* (Tima, 2005: 114).

The meeting resulted in an agreement with the government officials that the suggested resettlement (Settlement Kanaynayan, in barrio San Pablo) will be a non-governmental, *off-site* resettlement. In other words, Kanaynayan did not get the needed financial support from the government. Nevertheless, with international and non-governmental help, Kanaynayan could be established and developed. The construction work ran under the project REPLANT (Rehabilitation of Pinatubo Land Tribes). Instead of the 1000-hectare that the project was hoping to receive, the resettlement got 520-hectare land. However, considering the strong opposition the project had to face, it was a positive turn of events. In just few months, 180 houses were completed and followed by the construction of a school and health center. The community got immense help from the Subic Bay US Naval Base through their Seabees (Naval Construction Battalion). They constructed two buildings, a multipurpose building and the quarter for the public school teachers in less than two weeks. The project included also the setting up of a running water system by tapping a mountain spring and piping it down to the community. The construction work was followed with the assistance of project agriculturists who helped the Aeta farmers in searching and laying out

suitable farm areas. The residents of this new settlement area needed food assistance only for a few months; they soon became self-sufficient by continuing with their traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle. The interviewees from Kanayanayan all seemed to keep the traditional Aeta way of living, including the diet. Their main staple remained root crops and they utilized the forest to a larger extent than their Aeta counterparts staying in Cawag or Iram.

## DESIRED PROGRAMS AND THE AETA FUTURE

Undoubtedly, the Aeta community went through a very difficult time in the last decades. Nevertheless, the coming years might be even harder. Without adequate support of the Philippine government, it is uncertain how they could keep their cultural identity. Aetas keep losing their land to land-grabbers and in many cases they are unable to claim their rights due to lack of education. Furthermore, the Aetas have a rather non-violent nature that impeded them from fighting for their rights. The government implemented some development projects for them, however the government officials never really understood the real needs of the Aeta. Complicated requirements and bureaucracy makes it difficult to participate in government projects, in addition to that many project is unsuitable for the Aetas. As the events following the Pinatubo eruption showed, the government rather supported projects they considered good, than supporting a project that was initiated by the Aeta people.

During the interviews, many respondents had the view that by now they would be better off staying close to town. They were all hoping that their children could have a better future if they get education. However, as many of them expressed, the ideal situation would be if they could have schools in their forest settlements. As an Aeta elder explained, it would be much easier for them to improve their situation on their own way. For that, they need to stay in their traditional environment and through education, land title, agricultural development programs and roads to the market; they could instigate their own development.

The Aeta culture is largely defined by its foodways because of its forager nature. Shifting their diet drastically towards the diet of the lowlanders will most probably intensify the acculturation of the Aetas and will finally lead to assimilation to the majority. Some would argue that the Aetas would be better off if development agencies would help them to *get civilized*. This approach however does not only lack any sensitivity towards other cultures, but also immoral. Aetas may live under a simpler venue but their culture is just as complex, beautiful and valuable to the *whole human experience* as any other. Obviously we should not expect from indigenous people not to change their living conditions, occupation or food as every culture goes through changes in time. However, there is a difference between self-induced change that has

an initiation from the people in question and a forced change, giving no other option. The importance of cultural sensitivity in aid distribution and in development projects cannot be stressed enough. Leaving the recipients with no other options but to accept the way of the donor is inconsiderate and inhumane.

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