



***RURAL COMMUNITIES AND
THE IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION***
THE CASE OF AN AETA INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY
IN CENTRAL LUZON, PHILIPPINES

Oscar P. Ferrer

"... start where the people are, and build from what they have."

- James R. Yen

THE BORDERLESS STATE
AND THE GLOBAL VILLAGE SURGE

It is economic exchanges which unite individuals, villages, regions and people. It is not culture, religion, language or race, which ensures the cohesion of countries or empires, but currency.

Borders are, above all, economic barriers set up to protect the currency which allows the exchange and the circulation of products. With crisis, like the Asian crisis, borders are constricted, for countries are compelled to unite among themselves. The choice is simple: to unite, with no barriers, and to prosper within a vast common market, or to be fiercely protective of one's own independence and sovereignty and see one's economy and one's currency submitted to the laws of the international market with all the dramatic effects and aftermath that could be involved.

Barriers or borders were dissipated primarily as part of the historical development of the global capitalist system attempting to answer the periodic cycles of crises that it regularly experiences, by fully integrating backward economies into the full acceleration of capitalist production in the global division of labor, capital and technology which has ultimately made backward societies increasingly dependent on global capital or its currency. Globalization envisions the dismantling of the state in order to give way to the supremacy of the market. This promotes interdependence among states and thus, would create the borderless state and a global village.

A famous Filipino historian claims that this is nothing more than an attempt by the North to recolonize the South. Let me stress, however, that the north-south and south-south paradigm bring into the discussion the concomitant, though much altered, terrain of global realignment, globalization, the phenomenon of a borderless state, and counter-hegemony discourses.

Whether good or bad news, this global situation unveils the Philippines and other developing countries, and opens it up wide to access by other advanced economies and industrial giants. The cost is unimaginable. There are clear repercussions within local communities and among groups, who are marginalized with mainstream development approaches. With globalization, development aggression is always a potential risk. Nevertheless, this situation challenges the Philippines to be more innovative in its development journey. Thus, the Aeta case is presented here either to draw lessons from or to affirm their assertion of political will and self-determination.

THE AETA COMMUNITY

The Original Filipinos. The Aetas have inhabited our country since earliest history. They have lived a nomadic, primitive and communal lifestyle. Cultivating

agricultural lands and thriving on subsistence economy, until lately. The Spaniards called them *Indios*. They have been evangelized, conquered and remolded into subservience. Yet, they cannot be totally suppressed and controlled. The Aetas have continued their saga until this contemporary historical period. Mt. Pinatubo's eruption, the famous volcanic catastrophe of the century, has re-introduced them, long forlorn but never decimated by whatever local or foreign domination.

Socio-cultural Context of the Local Community. Of special focus and interest is the Aeta indigenous community at Camias, Porac, Pampanga in Central Luzon, Philippines. From a historical retrospect, this is one community that has survived almost every intimidation by adaptation, accommodation or integration.

This intermittent Aeta response is not a smooth neither cultural nor behavioral pattern or strategy. Aetas have their own ups and downs, which they hurdled in almost every historical period. They have adapted to mainstream development especially when the power and pressure offered no alternative, except perhaps, the option to abide. They have accepted whatever is beneficial to them regardless of whether it is a civic organization, religious institution, clandestine rebels (especially during the Martial rule).

Then sadly, they had been threatened by militarization, due to their proximity to the military bases and bureaucratic re-engineering. In addition, a mining firm has practically eroded all that was left of the Aeta's cultural heritage and identity, sowing discord among them. The leaders have fought each other, inspite their being relatives to the first or second degree. Economic incentives have been part of the mining firm's maneuvers to divide and rule the Aeta community, which has steadfastly resisted the firm's threat to the environment.

Disunity and debilitating demoralization have paved the search for new leadership. A younger generation of

leaders has emerged and taken over their forebear's responsibilities. They have embarked on a recovery and reconstruction of their social life. Thus, a community people's assembly, similar to a people's organization, has been established which works in tandem with the village local government. Presently, this is the dynamics of village governance. This is an entirely new and unconventional set-up, compared to how tradition has designed leadership forms and expressions in indigenous people's communities. Briefly, the Aeta's development can be seen in four nodes:

<p>TIME OF PLENTY AND ABUNDANCE</p>	<p>This is the period when everything abounded. The Aetas lived an egalitarian lifestyle. Forest resources were abundant and the Aetas lived amidst these bounties. They call this "peace time." There was barter of goods.</p>
<p>SETTLING INTO AGRICULTURE</p>	<p>This was the Philippine pre-war period when exploitation of natural resources was an economic source. Logging concessions encroached on the Aeta habitat, from which middlemen procured their agricultural products. Cash became the basis of exchange. Consumer goods eventually proliferated.</p>
<p>POST-WAR / MARTIAL LAW</p>	<p>In this period, lowlanders intruded into Aeta territory. There was constant struggle against these intruders. They reacted either by becoming over-protective of their culture and community or by integrating.</p> <p>Even today, Aetas are still very protective of their cultural identity. At times, they are very suspicious of outsiders. People, who come to their village, need to prove their sincerity through action and enduring integration. This author is still occasionally having difficulty in being spontaneously accepted into their homes. Understandably, restrained trust is still very manifest.</p>
<p>MT. PINATUBO PERIOD</p>	<p>The eruption of Mt. Pinatubo introduced the Aeta as a nation to the whole world. The world discovered and realized that there were 30,000 more Aetas within just the vicinity of the Zambales range. No one knew this before such an event. This reality ushered in the building and strengthening of Aeta organizations within different villages, municipalities and national levels. Today, there are regional and national federations or centers serving as political arms for Aeta advocacy and campaigns. They have forged linkages and built regular partnerships with other institutions.</p>

Self-Determination and Autonomy. Indigenous communities or any ethnolinguistic group can be very fanatically protective of its own culture, identity and territory at the local level. This is largely the offshoot of the colonizer's divide and rule tactics. On the national level, there is an intense struggle against colonialism, foreign and capitalist domination. In fact, this has served as the major impetus for most, if not all, people's movements in the country. Thus, the attempt of the Aetas to resolutely fight for self-determination and political autonomy can be gleaned from their struggle for ancestral domain. This is widely expressed in their struggle against lowlanders, foreigners and other intruders who potentially threaten their life, culture and community. This prejudice can be misjudged as over-protectionism.

However, the Aeta's accommodation and integration of the positive aspects of this encounter is also a strategy to survive and not dissipate into oblivion. This is why they have enduringly survived over the last four centuries. For them, accommodation of positive aspects and integration of these into their social system is a "work for their nation," the Aeta nation, akin to nationalism. Indeed, the struggle of different generations of Aetas strengthens nationalism.

Establishing a strong people's organization through community organizing and leadership development and training have served as the keys to the Aeta's coping and survival strategy. Through this organization, they are able to advance their community agenda, mobilize the community members and resources, have linkages and do advocacy work. Social enterprise and services are major programs and activities implemented by the organization, which is a countervailing structure for community



management and service delivery. Community members whether active, bonafide or not, recognize and rely mainly on this organization for all kinds of community concerns.

Ironically, while it is the formal political structure that should be responsible for the community, its life and its members, it is actually the community organization that implements this function. People patronize the latter and consult it for their needs and interests. The Aetas have never effectively rooted for the formal political structure of governance. Obviously, this structure has been imposed from above by elite powers-that-be. It is not culture-sensitive and thus, inappropriate. But since this is the lawfully constituted structure by the Philippine government, the community organization's leaders have eventually allowed both formal and people's organization to co-exist.



Establishing a strong people's organization through community organizing and leadership development and training have served as the key to the Aeta's coping and survival strategy.

Thus, while the leaders of the people's organization have also joined the village government structure, the village local executive has made it very clear that he will only follow and abide by what the people's organization decides. In effect, it is still the autonomous people's organization that serves as the decision-making body of the village, not the constitutionally mandated structure. It has become the think-tank, consultant and adviser. Economic

enterprise, trading and marketing are also handled by the people's organization. Incidentally, the village local executive (barangay captain) does this job, both as a member of the people's organization and as the village local executive. In the end, it is strictly the community organization that orchestrates the life of the community. It can be said, therefore, that the community has achieved a high level of self-reliance. Until when? We don't know. Globalization's key players may know it better.

BEYOND CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT CONSTRUCTS

The Aeta experience offers serious lessons in pursuing development goals amidst rapid globalization. At the same time, it can also challenge our existing paradigms, which are basically Eurocentric. Let me elaborate on this in some fashion

Cultural Determination. Culture, being a way of life, has always been a strong apparatus either of control, power or change. However, with the homogenization of culture brought about by globalization, communities and groups can be subsumed into just one dominant system. This phenomenon may not be very empowering for the poor majority. It will alienate them. The long centuries of struggle of the Aeta nation for cultural determination, has brought them where they are now. They are not totally resistant to change nor opposed to the trends brought about by globalization, but their cultural determination has served as their anchor point throughout history.

The Aetas have remained creative and enduring. They are still, perhaps, the holders of truth and humanity's essential values. They are the link in the intra-generational interconnectivity. The culture of any ethnolinguistic group creates its identity, and distinguishes it from others. It interprets and gives meaning. Cultural self-determination, thus, is a motivating force in a globalizing world and a vehicle for unity, harmony and peace. The Aeta culture has remained the bond that makes its adherents cohesive, the very reason why they have been able to survive four

hundred years of colonial rule, without perishing as a nation.

The Aetas, we can say, "start where they are, and build from what they have."

Community Governance. The indigenous leadership structure vests responsibility upon the Council of Elders. These are members, qualified by their age and proven prowess. By prowess, we mean wisdom and concern for the community's welfare. Decision-making rests upon this council. It serves a whole wide range of concerns, including marital issues. It is the highest policy-making assembly encompassing the mainstream functions of legislative, executive and judiciary responsibilities. It decides divorces and death penalties. It is a local structure of governance.

The Philippine national government has initiated, time and again, bureaucratic re-structuring especially during the time of Marcos. The national government introduced the barangay (village) administrative structure and the Aetas accommodated to it and integrated it. Barangay is just a new name that has served them very well because it has legitimized the existing indigenous local governance. Still, and in spite of these changes, the village leadership and governance gravitated around the council. In effect, the centrality of the indigenous local governance, the Council of Elders — has remained unmodified.

In Cory Aquino's time, a local government code was enacted. This code proved beneficial since younger leaders, who may not be selected through the traditional way, have been elected as village councilors. This has added fresher and younger blood and fervor into the community leadership. In this way, there is complementation between the formal structure of governance and the traditional council of Elders. The substantive issues like land are still the domains of the traditional council of elders. While the formal village, as

mandated by the national government, serves as the link to the municipal government. Hence, there is division of labor in community governance.

Furthermore, the community leadership has helped establish different people's organizations in different villages, municipalities and even at the regional levels to serve as advocacy and political campaign centers. In Camias, the community leadership in the formal village structure and the traditional council are intertwined and their convergence in governance is operational, as shown below:

COUNCIL OF ELDERS	—	FORMAL VILLAGE COUNCIL
• Advises council		• Supports will of Elders
• Elects councilors		• Promotes decision of Elders
• Decides projects within and among other Aeta organizations		• Cooperates and generates municipal/provincial support
• Launches advocacy/campaigns		• Draws military and local leaders together
• Implements indigenous laws		• Respects/upholds indigenous laws

Environmental Management. The Aetas are avid protectors of the environment. They have long been at the forefront of this new NGO advocacy. They employ slash and burn techniques in small agricultural farming (gasak) for their food subsistence, but they do not engage in logging nor hazardous mining. They have never imbibed the attitude of acquiring aplenty. They find it proper to leave something for the others, affirming the adage that "everything is created for everybody." Since their habitat is the forest and the mountains, they normally preserve the

trees and the vegetation. To do otherwise could anticipate a calamity or God's wrath in the form of environmental devastation or catastrophe. Protection of the environment is an innate and intrinsic cultural quality of the Aetas. Nature is their life and meaning. Once this is dilapidated, their life becomes marginalized and meaningless.



Protection of the environment is an innate and intrinsic cultural quality of the Aetas.

Indigenization. The Aetas lend credit to the clamor for participation and appropriate technology. In effect, their experience in participatory development teaches us that their wisdom and knowledge is not abstract. If we wish to be effective as community development workers, then we should listen to what the people on the ground are saying. Otherwise, we risk disempowering them. Indeed, indigenization is akin to appropriation or contextualization. Anything the people may not identify with cannot be sustained.

The Aeta's agricultural technology is a golden treasure because it is culture-sensitive and appropriate to them. Indigenization fosters a great challenge to us. Laws have to take into consideration indigenous laws, which are per se more efficient and incorruptible. People will then support their leaders more because they do not promote hierarchy, but participation and consultation. Moreover, there is a need for a culture-sensitive curriculum and

methodology that ushers in meaning and not alienation or disempowerment.

Gender Dimension. The Aeta women are always an intrinsic part of production and social nurturance. They have gained their significant role and place in the community because of their prominence in natural medicine, nurturing capacity, economic activities, social roles, garments and food technology. Seemingly, they are the most overburdened members of the community. Great lessons in gender-fairness in the division of labor within the Aeta community calls the attention of professional development workers. Their example would allow a balance in the over-all handling of women and men.



AETAS of Porac with
CSWCD Field
Instruction students
planting seedlings.

This poses a great challenge for development workers and government people in developing countries, in the sense that women programs have to be fair and sensitive. Most developing countries are patriarchal if not fundamentally male dominated. The Aeta women pose a great challenge.

Food System. Corollary to women's contribution in the Aeta community is the food system and security. Women ensure food on the table, yet they are the last to eat. They would be lucky if there is enough food left for them. This is the greatest challenge in community building and organizing. The Aeta women have a strategic role, and thus require a great deal of attention in the organizational

planning and decision-making processes. Their substantial participation in all spheres of organizational endeavor is wanting, let alone in the food system. On another plain, the Aeta experience clearly illumines the labyrinthine intricacies in food production, technology and system. In agricultural production, they are always mindful of environmental equilibrium. They do crop rotation in order that the land could rest and acquire necessary elements like nitrogen and oxygen. They plant the basic necessities in life, and thus, eat organically grown, not chemically produced food. This apparently is more nutritious, less harmful and richer in substance. Evidently, their diet is very manifest in their immunity system. The Aetas hardly get sick, in spite of their exposure to all kinds of natural conditions. Their multi-crop combination is a challenge to cash crop mentality. If food is power, the Aetas in food systems development and security can contribute much.

Linkage and Advocacy. The Aetas of Camias have organized the PAGKAKAISA (UNITY). It is the autonomous people's organization in the community, which is affiliated with the Central Luzon Aeta Association (CLAA). The latter is the umbrella organization of all the Aetas in the Philippines. CLAA is also a member of a national organization of indigenous peoples, and other development NGOs on the local and international levels. They have always been at the forefront of mass mobilizations for or against mining laws, environmental issues, agrarian reform laws and even multi-sectoral and national issues such as anti-military bases and prostitution. They have been very instrumental in the legislation of mining and natural resources laws, such as the anti-log ban. Surely, they are the most credible group to advocate for such issues because they live the principles in these spheres, aside from the fact that they are the direct victims of harmful legislative agenda. Their leaders have regularly participated in national and international conferences on issues relevant to them, like the Green Summit in Brazil.

Welfare Services. Social science is the greatest challenge to any government. The welfare services become its visible support to enhance the full potentials of the Aetas. Equal access is a clamor, not only by the Aetas, but also by practically all indigenous communities. While family planning programs, access to quality education, early childcare and development, health and nutrition programs are practically insufficient, if not totally absent for the Aeta, the Aeta organization has constantly attempted and even managed to provide such services. Sometimes it invites development partners, like the Save the Children-Japan or the Department of Social Welfare and Development to create programs for the Aeta's specific concerns. In the long run, it will still be the Aetas, just like other communities who will seek the resources for welfare programs. This is the kind of system in poor Third World countries. Resilient communities, like the Aetas, will never despair.

Social Enterprise and Entrepreneurial Development (SEED). SEED may not be the natural skill of the Aetas, if compared to Chinese or Indians. Apparently the former face the reality of non-possession of cash to buy the basic necessities in life. Also, their products are not competitive. This aggravates their marginalization. But with a little assistance from partners, the village has tried to organize a marketing-trading system, so that its banana harvest can go to lowland markets regularly without going through the oppressive middleman, called *casadora*. So the village council resolved to buy a passenger cum cargo jeepney, communally owned but under the responsibility of the village captain. Every morning, the jeep picks up the goods on the street and brings them down to market. It comes back in the afternoon with some goods requested by the community members. Given the village captain's connections as a political figure, marketing and trading are smoother and buyers avoid deceit and oppression for they are ashamed to fool around with the village captain. This is a clear picture of how communities can survive amidst the culture-unfriendly dominant system prevailing. It is also a lesson for all of us particularly in handling development

programs focused on livelihood and enterprise development.

Implications to Extension and Development Workers. Workers assigned in the Aeta community may need to re-evaluate their methods and style of work. Outside intervention has not always facilitated development. At times, it has contributed to the disempowerment and marginalization of the Aetas. Good intentions may also just be creating an attitude of dependency in the community. The Aetas' self-reliance and great initiatives have shown us that people are decisive in their own development journey. Amidst globalization, the centrality of humans as the criterion for decision-making and governance takes primordial concern. There is, therefore, no substitute for people's participation. It is an illusion to think that community workers can solve the poverty of the people. It is the people who will solve their problems, organize their own ranks and implement programs. Workers can merely catalyze, facilitate and serve as support system.

In the end, it is people that matter. If globalization can be a way of realizing our vision, our mission and destiny as a planet and as a race, then fulfillment of what we are, to be fully human, fully alive and achieving our fullness should be the core of global journeying. The Aetas have indeed given us a lesson.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OSCAR P. FERRER, Assistant Professor at the UP-CSWCD has taken his formal training in the fields of English and Philosophy, Theology, and Community Development at the University of the Philippines. Prof. Ferrer is a popular educator and researcher in Community Leadership and Empowerment, Human Rights and the Political Situation, Participatory Action Research, Planning and Evaluation, Community Communication and Popular Education and Women and Gender Issues.