UPROOTED. Thirty years since the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo on June 15, 1991 (lower photo), some 6,000 displaced Aeta families are still longing to return to their ancestral villages from government-built resettlement sites in the provinces of Zambales, Tarlac and Pampanga. Their desire comes from both a spiritual impulse to reconnect to their roots and a need to be economically self-reliant by living off the land. —MARIANNE BERMUDEZ/INQUIRER PHOTO

(First of three parts)

BOTOLAN, Zambales, Philippines — “The view of Mt. Pinatubo is blurry now,” says Elsa Novo, her gaze fixed to the southeast. “It’s the tallest peak in the middle of that mountain range.”

It is the sight that the 61-year-old Aeta leader catches from the cemetery up on a hill of the Baquilan resettlement in this town on June 1. Down the hill, two rivers — the Balin-Baquero and Bucao — look like a vast gray highway carved by vehicles going to and from the volcano and a cluster of villages under its shadow.
Those 11 villages are collectively called Baytan by the Aeta tribes of Botolan and part of the ancestral lands they had to abandon weeks before the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo on June 15, 1991.

Acknowledged by the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology as the first to have reported the signs of an angry volcano 30 years ago, the Aetas have mostly been unable to return home since the cataclysmic disruption of their way of life. To this day, no state agency has implemented a postdisaster recovery program giving Aetas a say on what to do with the land of their old Baytan. Past government’s efforts had only brought them to safety and ended with their relocation away from Pinatubo, the abode of their deity, Apo Namalyari.

**Forced migration**

Chito Balintay, an Aeta who once represented the indigenous people’s sector in the Zambales provincial board and an officer of the now-defunct Office for Northern Cultural Communities (ONCC), recalls having to supervise the evacuation of 7,000 Aeta families to public schools in the town center beginning April 1991 on orders of then Botolan Mayor Tito Doble.

It was the first time for lowlanders to see that many Aetas descending from the highlands, says Balintay, 62. The exodus emptied Baytan, which is made up of the villages of Villar, Moraza, Belbel, Burgos, Nacolcol, Palis, Maguisguis, Cabatuan, Poonbato, Owaog Nebloc and Malomboy.

By August that year, the ONCC had counted 35,120 Aeta evacuees (from 7,840 families) fleeing Pinatubo’s fury not only in Zambales but also in Pampanga and Tarlac provinces. By 1992, the number had grown to 10,000 families.

Since then, the 7,000 heads of families who settled in Botolan have grown to 15,000, based on an informal survey conducted by the local government, according to Ladie Manalaysay-de Leon, the municipal IPMR, or indigenous people’s mandatory representative. A head of an Aeta family can represent his immediate household or that of his clan.

In her estimate, the heads or members of some 3,000 families have returned to Baytan for good or on a temporary basis — mainly to farm — since 1997. At least 70 percent of the 1991 evacuees still live in three resettlement sites in Loob-Bunga and Baquilan, both in Botolan; and Dampay Salaza in Palauig town, also in Zambales.

In the 7.5-hectare Bihawo resettlement, which Lubos na Alyansa ng mga Katutubong Aya ng Sambales (Lakas) bought and developed in Botolan’s village of Mambog in 1993, at least 90 of 200 families have been going up to Villar to farm during the dry months since 1997, according to the group’s elder, Ben Jugatan. They return to the resettlement when rainy months come, he adds.
‘Bakwit’

Novo says she earlier thought that to be a “bakwit” (evacuee) meant staying in “tent cities” only for a short period. It pains her to be a “bakwit” still, 30 years later. But she says they are still thankful that the government moved them to donated lands at the foothills of the Zambales mountain range. The only time the Aeta tribes openly objected to a relocation site was when they were sent to Dampay Salaza in Palauig, about 100 kilometers north of the volcano. “We wanted to be near Apo Namalyari,” says Balintay.

This spiritual connection to their deity prompted the Lakas Aeta tribesmen to march back to Sitio Ugek in Burgos in May 1991. They performed a ritual asking Apo Namalyari what made him so angry that he had to vent his wrath through Pinatubo. With a “mag-anito” (spirit guide) as medium, the tribe elders divined that drilling operations in search of geothermal power had disturbed Apo’s dwelling, according to Jugatan.

Resettlement

A total of 10 resettlement communities for Aetas—three in Pampanga, two in Tarlac and five in Zambales—were in place by 1992. A mission sent by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica) in April that year, however, noted the “lack of water sources, prospects for making a livelihood and social services such as health care and education” for the evacuees. The donor organization warned that the sites “may then end up as a temporary refuge and not fulfill its original purpose of creating a permanent community for the Aeta.” Eventually, Jica funded the Pinatubo Hazard Urgent Mitigation Project, which built dikes and bridges.

The resettlement project in three provinces began as an undertaking of the Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council, an agency under the Office of the President. The council accepted donations of lands, which were then divided into lots at 100 square meters per beneficiary, says Roderick Ibañez, former National Housing Authority (NHA) manager in Central Luzon.

The land identification went through the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, with the Mt. Pinatubo Commission (MPC) handling the master list of those who received housing materials, says Ibañez. The concerns raised by the Jica mission in 1992 apparently proved prophetic.

According to Aeta leaders interviewed by the Inquirer last week, their tribes still lacked something that could make them really feel secure and rooted in their postcalamity life: a land to till. But Ibañez maintained that no Aeta leader or group had formally requested the NHA for a piece of farmland or had asked to be returned to their villages.

According to Antonio Fernando, a retired military colonel who served as MPC director from 1994 to 1998, there was never a plan to bring the Aetas back to their
ancestral land. Neither did the council, which was dissolved in 2000, offer to revive the old tribal villages. The MPC’s focus back then was to get the Aetas out of harm’s way, he said, noting that the lahar avalanches from Pinatubo remained a serious threat up to 1997. As of September 2020, the number of Aeta upland resettlement sites remained 10, housing a total of 6,578 families, NHA records show. Outside these sites, there are a hundred Aeta families living either in the periphery of Clark, the former American air base, or in lowland neighborhoods at Barangay Madapidap, Mabalacat City, Pampanga.

No ‘return’ planning

That such a situation still exists 30 years since the Pinatubo eruption only showed there was no long-term plan for an organized return of the Aetas to their ancestral domains, according to the tribal leaders. Nothing of that sort was heard from the NHA, which assumed some of the functions of the MPC, or from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), which took over from the ONCC, says Candida Cabinta, head of NCIP Central Luzon’s technical and management services division. But Cabinta recalls at least one attempt—by the local government—to bring the Aetas back. During her assignment in Zambales from 2002 to 2006, Botolan municipal officials launched a “Balik Barangay (return to villages)” program for the tribes. The program then involved constructing school buildings and distributing farming tools and inputs in their native Baytan. “The Aetas have been returning individually, not en masse. In Zambales, they shuttle between the ancestral domains where they grow food and the resettlement where they get education and health care,” Cabinta explains. The search for land to cultivate, the desire to be self-reliant by farming, and the need to secure their place in the ancestral domains are among the reasons why some Aeta families have returned there for good while others in greater numbers are forced to live practically in two very different worlds, the tribal leaders say. Ref.: https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1445387/pinatubo-aetas-still-far-from-home
Can ancestral lands on Pinatubo support life now?

By: @ttorejasINQ
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HOMEBOUND A family traverses the lahar-covered Balin-Baquero and Bucao rivers to reach Baytan, a cluster of 11 villages in the Aetas’ ancestral domain on Mt. Pinatubo in Botolan town, Zambales province. Baytan’s farms and forests sustained the community of indigenous peoples in Botolan until Pinatubo erupted in 1991 and forced them to start anew in resettlement sites. —MARIANNE BERMUDEZ

(Second of three parts)

BOTOLAN, Zambales, Philippines — Reynaldo Cabalic braved the rising waters of Balin-Baquero and Bucao rivers on June 2 to reach Sitio Tarupok in Villar, one of the 11 villages in the Aeta ancestral domain on the Zambales side of Mt. Pinatubo, and prepare ginger and taro plots.

That day, Tropical Storm Dante (international name: Choi-wan) had dumped heavy rain over the province and caused the rivers to swell.
Knowing when to shuttle between the Loob-Bunga resettlement in Botolan and Baytan, as the 11 villages are now called, is not new to the 65-year-old Cabalic. He has been doing this for 24 years since 1997, or six years after Pinatubo erupted on June 15, 1991.

Geologists consider the 1991 eruption as the world’s second worst in the 20th century in terms of economic and environmental impact, including the vastness of its pyroclastic flow deposits.

The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) initially estimated the volume of block-and-ash flow deposits at 7.1 cubic kilometers, but it lowered the figure to 4.2 cubic km to 4.5 cubic km after taking into account recently digitized data. The Portland District of the US Army Corps of Engineers placed it at 5.5 cubic km, said Phivolcs chief Renato Solidum.

A fact sheet released by the US Geological Survey in 1997 described the extent of devastation as mind-staggering.

“In the first few years following the cataclysmic 1991 eruption, they have deposited more than 0.7 cubic miles (3 cubic km; equivalent to 300 million truckloads) of debris on the lowlands surrounding the volcano, burying hundreds of square miles of land. During heavy rains, lahars at Pinatubo can transport and deposit tens of millions of cubic yards of mud in a single day,” it said.

Using Phivolcs data as reference to determine the volume of pyroclastic flow deposits still left, Solidum puts it at 24 percent, or 1.08 cubic km, the equivalent of about 90 million trucks full of ash.

If reckoned by the US estimate, the remaining lahar deposits blanketing areas around Pinatubo would be 43 percent, or 2.38 cubic km (198 million trucks of ash), he said.

‘No intact village’

The 1991 eruption did not spare members of the Aeta community, according to anthropologists. One of them, Jean-Christophe Gaillard, said: “The absence of any intact village, which could have maintained Aeta traditions, did not allow a retreat toward a preserved sociocultural environment.”

Cabalic is one of the 3,000 Aeta people who have returned to Baytan, said Ladie Manalaysay de Leon, the indigenous people’s mandatory representative (IPMR) in the Botolan municipal council. Baytan consists of the villages of Villar, Moraza, Belbel, Burgos, Nacolcol, Palis, Maguisguis, Cabatuan, Owaog Nebloc, Malomboy and Poonbato, its center.
Except for Palis, Maguisguis, Nacolcol and Cabatuan, the villages are covered by certificates of ancestral domain titles (CADTs) that also draw the tribe back to Baytan, De Leon said.

Some 240 families now live in Nacolcol, De Leon said. In Maguisguis, 130 families grow food and cash crops, Councilman Roger Devillena said.

At least 328 families are back in Poonbato, while 83 families have returned to Owaog Nebloc, according to Elsa Novo, president of the Samahang Nagkakaisa ng Poonbato.

They are either back for good or have retained houses in resettlement sites that are 40 km to 60 km away from the volcano. They travel using small heavy duty trucks called “weapon,” “kolong-kolong” or trikes, carabaos, motorcycles or by foot.

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT Shuttling between their resettlement in Botolan and Baytan, their ancestral domain on the Zambales side of Mt. Pinatubo, is tough for Aeta families as they had to cross Bucao River, which swells during heavy rain. — MARIANNE BERMUDEZ

Farms in Baytan planted with palay, sweet potatoes, bananas, ginger, taro and vegetables are “beautiful to see,” said Chito Balintay, former provincial IPMR in Zambales. These are rain-fed though several ponds, with one spanning 50 hectares, provide irrigation on dry months, he said.
The annual average income of the Baytan Aeta people is not known. For Cabalic, it is enough that his family does not run out of rice and food, and can save for seeds and tools.

**Scarred land**

Baytan has not been kind to agriculture after the 1991 eruption.

Ash and sand spewed by the volcano were still hot when the Aeta tribe of Lakas (Lubos ng Alyansa ng mga Katutubong Ayta ng Sambales) first inspected Sitio Yamot, 5 km from the crater, in 1993, elder Ben Jugatan recalled.

Yamot’s land is untillable because when water eroded Villar, it turned the subvillage into a steep hill. At least 90 of the 200 tribesmen from Lakas resumed farming in Sitio Ugek, Burgos.

Because sediments have accumulated below, the Aeta people built their homes and farms in what are now the middle and upper flanks of the volcano.

Resuming farming was difficult. Cabalic only had a bolo to start with and at times used bare hands to clear thick ash deposits.

Novo said the Aeta families of Poonbato revisited their old village in 1997 but they abandoned the idea of returning because conditions were not close to what they used to be. “We had an abundant life back in Pinatubo. We had rice, crops, plants, wild pigs, fish, forests and herbs for medicines,” she recalled.

Columban priests run a school and medical clinic. At night, children read or studied using a power generator set given by a politician.

The decision of some Aeta people to shuttle between their resettlement site and Baytan is described by Jugatan as “parang lagare” (moving from one point to another, like the movement of a saw).

But rebuilding lives is possible through “sariling sikap” (relying on oneself), Novo said.
Because more children are growing up in posteruption Baytan, the Department of Education built schools in its villages in 2019, except in Malomboy. Senior high school is offered only in Poonbato and Maguisguis.

This is a generation of Aeta families who have lived in settlements and tent cities, and who do not know how it was like growing inside their ancestral land, their elders said.

**Safety**

Asked if it is now safe for the indigenous people to return around Mt. Pinatubo, Solidum said: “Determining if an area needs to be settled is dependent on the potential hazards that can affect the area.”

“Aside from volcano-related hazards, landslides and erosion during heavy rains are a big constraint, and also landslides during earthquakes,” he added.

While lahar canyons eroded by water and winds dot Baytan, nothing else prevents the Aeta from rebuilding houses or resuming agricultural activities.

Phivolcs has not declared a permanent danger zone on the volcano. The rising number of earthquakes and other chemical parameters prompted the agency in January to raise Alert Level 1 on Pinatubo but issued no warnings of an imminent eruption.

In the case of the 1991 eruption, it happened after almost 600 years of slumber.

The environs of Pinatubo are showing signs of self-renewal but these have not been widely reforested, data from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) show.
Between 2011 and 2018, the DENR’s National Greening Program (NGP) planted trees on 8,800.25 ha, or 16 percent, of five CADTs spanning 55,869 ha.

The NGP reforested 5,940 ha in Pampanga, 2,229 ha in Tarlac and 630 ha in Zambales.

Ref.: https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1445651/can-ancestral-lands-on-pinatubo-support-life-now

**Aeta folk face road bumps on way back to tribal land**

By: Tonette Orejas - @ttorejasINQ  
**Philippine Daily Inquirer** / 04:58 AM June 15, 2021

TIGHT COMMUNITY Aeta elders in Zambales are crucial in keeping their tribal communities intact since their displacement from their ancestral domain on Mt. Pinatubo. —MARIANNE BERMUDEZ

*(Last of three parts)*
CITY OF SAN FERNANDO, Pampanga, Philippines — No return to homeland in sight.

Many Aeta folk remain in this fix in the town of Botolan, Zambales province, as well as those in Tarlac and Pampanga provinces, after leaving their dwellings on the slopes of Mt. Pinatubo to escape the volcano’s eruption on June 15, 1991.

A total of 31,120 tribal members from 7,840 families were then counted by the Office of Northern Cultural Communities (ONCC), now a defunct agency, as having been displaced by the eruption. But the number could be higher, as an ONCC officer in Zambales reported having evacuated over 7,000 families in Botolan alone in April 1991.

In 2015, a Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) census showed 57,707 Aeta people in Central Luzon, mostly living in resettlement sites on the Zambales side of Pinatubo.

A recent count made by Chito Balintay, a former representative of indigenous peoples (IPs) in the Zambales provincial board, estimates the Aeta population in Botolan to have grown to 12,000 to 15,000 families, with nearly a third choosing to return to 11 villages on Pinatubo’s upper slopes. The rest are still staying in upland resettlement communities close to the town center.

Eleven other similar resettlement sites are in Pampanga, Tarlac and Zambales. Their exact total population has yet to be known in the absence of a survey update of the 2015 PSA census.

The presence of these enclaves indicates that the government has not funded or facilitated the return of displaced Aeta folk to their ancestral lands.

The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) has been slow in recognizing the Aeta people’s right to their ancestral domain. It has so far registered only three certificates of ancestral domain title (CADTs) around Pinatubo. Six other tribes are awaiting their documents.

The CADTs for nine Aeta tribes in the three provinces cover 82,816 hectares, according to NCIP records.

Not policy

Based on existing laws and guidelines, bringing back the Aeta people to their ancestral domain was not a government policy from the start or even considered an unfinished task.
Republic Act No. 7637, which created the Mount Pinatubo Commission in 1992, set up a P10-billion fund to provide them with “aid, relief, resettlement, rehabilitation and livelihood services as well as infrastructure support” at the resettlement sites.

It aimed at “restoring their living condition” to their “productive pre-eruption conditions” and “with the settlement being chosen according to its suitability as permanent upland abodes thereby ensuring the improvement of these communities.”

Never was it meant to prepare the Aeta tribes for their eventual homecoming.

Executive Order No. 552, issued by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, was concerned with the administration of lowland resettlement sites.

New laws and guidelines would have worked to the Aeta people’s favor, but their members, even those assisted by nongovernment groups, have not been able to take complete possession and control of their lands.

Anthropologist Jean-Christophe Gaillard pointed out in a 2003 study: “At the time of the 1991 Mt. Pinatubo eruption, there were no specific governmental guidelines to protect and defend ethnic minority rights in the Philippines. Hence, it was most unlikely that the Philippine government had appropriate measures for the preservation of the Aeta culture at this time.”

The National Integrated Protected Areas System Act in 1992 and Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (Ipra) in 1997 recognize tribal territories. There was also EO 263 in 1995 that set community-based management of forests in indigenous peoples areas as a national strategy to ensure the sustainable development of the country’s forest lands resources.

The reality is that the CADTs—even if approved by the NCIP or in the process of registration at the Land Registration Authority (LRA)—are challenged or delayed by land disputes, questions on the authenticity of surveys, patents and titles, mining projects, tourism activities, segregation of private lands or intertribal conflicts, an Inquirer review showed.

Native titles

Like other ethnocultural groups, the Aeta people in the eruption-hit provinces have been asserting ancestral domain claims by securing CADTs. Since Ipra was passed into law in 1997, however, the NCIP approved only three CADTs in the three provinces between 2004 and 2008, and registered these with the LRA in 2009.

One of the titled domain, referred to as Sacobia, is embroiled in a leadership squabble among four Aeta groups in Mabalacat City, Pampanga, and in Bamban town, Tarlac.
The row stalled the 2007 joint management agreement signed with the state-owned Clark Development Corp., including the distribution of 20-percent Aeta share from investments made in Sacobia.

Tribal leaders partly blamed the NCIP because it took time to decide which leaders to recognize.

The NCIP also confirmed the illegal selling of land but did not say who were doing it.

According to Inquirer sources, retired military officers, elected officials and businessmen are among those who have allegedly cornered lots in Sacobia. The NCIP is seen to be taking more time, admitting that it still has to finish three plans with the stakeholders.

Politicians are known to be among owners of lands in properties segregated for Aeta tribes.

Tribal members in the villages of Belbel, Burgos, Moraza and Villar in Botolan town obtained the first CADT (RO3-BOT-0708-073) in Zambales. But the Samahan ng Katutubong Aeta ng Burgos alleged land-grabbing by a family of businessmen in 1983 and nondistribution of 1,000 ha in 1996.

The Department of Agrarian Reform has reported the release of the Botolan CADT as an accomplishment.

Ladie de Leon, the indigenous peoples’ representative in the Botolan municipal council, said she had filed a proposed ordinance that would ban Aeta members from selling ancestral lands to individuals and companies.

Tribal leaders of land covered by the Botolan CADT have demanded an accounting of supposed P17 million in proceeds from the P1,500 fee collected by the local government from tourists passing through a route in Tarlac. The NCIP claims the Aeta issued a certification precondition to the local government, but Balintay asserts four village chiefs signed it without the approval of the tribes.

Land feuds

Those who are in the process of registering their CADTs have to deal with disputes.

Tribal members in Cabangan town, also in Zambales, were the first in the country to get a certificate of ancestral domain claim (CADC) from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in March 1996, but they are on their 25th year of waiting for their CADT (RO3-CAB-0110-151) to be registered with the LRA.
The heirs of Jose Pidenes in Cabangan are claiming parts of the 5,430-ha domain, with the NCIP saying the “vested rights of Pidenes heirs overlap portion of community residences which IPs do not recognize.”

Aeta people in the villages of Poonbato and Owaog-Nebloc in Botolan discovered in 2019 the ownership claims of the heirs of Leonardo Dayap over 192 ha through 45 patents issued by the DENR in their land covered by CADT (RO3-BOT-0216-205), according to the Samahan ng Katutubo ng Poonbato headed by Elsa Novo.

Those who hold a CADT in Cabatuan village, Botolan, are also in danger of losing parts of their land because of a pending application by a company for an Integrated Forest Management Agreement over 909 ha in the village, a DENR document showed.

Novo also cites the case of the Capas-Botolan Road of the Department of Public Works and Highways, which cuts through their domain without compensating the Aeta community for right-of-way and damaged trees.

In many of the disputes, the NCIP only says the segregation of titled properties is ongoing and that it has asked the Register of Deeds in Zambales to give copies of titles for plotting and lot identification.

The still-to-be-registered CADT (RO3-BAM-1215-195) in Barangay Anupul in Bamban town and Barangays Sta. Juliana and Maruglo in Capas town, both in Tarlac, overlap with the areas of the Bases Conversion and Development Authority (BCDA) and Col. Ernesto Ravina Air Base of the Philippine Air Force, the NCIP says. Aeta residents want Sta. Juliana for its tourism potential as it is the easiest route to Pinatubo’s crater.

Another Aeta claim in Porac (RO3-POR-0709-123) overlaps with 5,000 ha of BCDA areas while those in San Jose, Tarlac (RO3-0110-148) and in Subic, Zambales (RO3-SUB-0116-199) have been delayed due to segregation of private properties and agrarian reform areas.

Since 2008, five mining projects have been given certification precondition by the Aeta tribes in the three provinces, according to the NCIP. The Mines and Geosciences Bureau has not replied to the Inquirer’s request for information.

Aeta elder Ben Jugatan says the NCIP must live up to its mandate by immediately registering the domain titles around Pinatubo and by helping his people get farm production support.

The ancestral domain in Botolan is so vast that those living there can qualify to have an autonomous authority that will allow them to resolve tribal problems and issues, says Balintay.
“I want to instill to the younger generations of Aeta the values and indigenous knowledge and practices that our ancestors have passed on to us while we await word on whether to return to Baytan or stay in the resettlements,” says Aeta leader Lito “Tubag” Jugatan. INQ

Ref.: https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1446190/aeta-folk-face-road-bumps-on-way-back-to-tribal-land

Look MORE: https://aboutphilippines.org/ethnic-indigenous-groups.html#Aeta