

# *Living with the Pinatubo Aetas*

Peace Corps / Philippines

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March 3, 1969 – June 15, 1971

## Aeta Poem

*“Twilight in the forest  
Brightness by the shores of the sea  
The spirit of my freedom speeds  
Like my whistling arrow  
Where are you, Anito who watches?  
Here is the deer I offer  
Enrich my freedom  
Let no fetters tie me.”*

## Preface

The Mt. Pinatubo Aetas or Negritos are the earliest inhabitants of Zambales Province in the Philippine Islands. They are an aboriginal, nomadic people that hunt for wild animals and



*Mt Pinatubo & Aeta village*

practice “slash and burn” farming. They often build temporary lean-to shelters made of two forked sticks driven to the ground and covered with palm or banana leaves. The more prosperous and modernized Aetas, however, have learned to live in scattered villages on tablelands and mountain clearings on the slopes of ridges. They live in houses made of bamboo, nipa and cogon grass. In Botolan, the Aeta villages are located in “sitios”, such as Poonbato. Social scientists consider the Pinatubo Aeta as an important ethnic group. They are believed to be the descendants of the original inhabitants of the Philippines.

Many scholars consider the Aetas as animists since they believe in environmental spirits that are categorized into **anito** (good spirits) and **kamana** (malevolent spirits.) Anito inhabit the forests, tree trunks, bamboo, stream and caves. While they are benevolent, they may become angry at human wrong doing and cause sickness or misfortune. In such a situation, a compensatory **langgad** or gift should be made. To avoid the anger of an anito, the Aeta start an activity by offering gifts of tobacco, food, red cloth, and other items to an anito. This belief in environmental spirits is one reason the Aeta revere nature and are in close harmony with it. All places are believed to be inhabited by spirits (anito) and all misfortunes, diseases, crop failures and unsuccessful hunts are attributed to them. The Aetas consider disease a punishment for a person’s errant behavior. Serious diseases are believed to be brought by the supreme anito; minor ailments, by lesser anito.



*Aetas in Villar*

In 1969, I was a Peace Corps Volunteer assigned to the village of Villar with the purpose of improving their production of food, specifically the rice yield. I lived and worked with the Pinatubo Aetas from June 1969 through June of 1971. The Aetas in Villar lived in permanent dwellings on a reservation with about one and one half acres suitable for planting rice. They had given up slash and burn agriculture, constructed permanent huts and started farming. My job was to increase the yield per hectare from thirty cavans to eighty cavans using the improved rice varieties and cultivation practices developed by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) located in Los Baños, Laguna Province, Philippines.

I hope that these three excerpts from my journal provide a glimpse into my unforgettable life with the Pinatubo Aetas...

...*Excerpts from my Peace Corps journal*

**November 23, 1969**

I was fortunate to attend an **anituan**, which is a ceremony used to drive away evil spirits. A child was seriously ill. The observers sat around a small fire in one of the Nipa huts. It was night time. The “exorcist” was an older lady with her hair flared in all directions. The child was placed in the center of the room. The lady began dancing slowly building up to a state of frenzy. Sweat broke out on her forehead and she entered what appeared to be a trance. The spirit inhabiting the child then spoke through the woman indicating what must be done to cure the afflicted child. Several minutes later she wrapped a red cloth around the baby apparently to ensure that the evil spirit was gone. She then grabbed a bolo, long knife, and suddenly made as if to release it at me. I jumped back instinctively but she never released the bolo. I was told that she wanted to make sure that I wasn’t the host of harmful spirits. I guess it was a compliment; however, my heart was in my throat when I saw the bolo directed toward me. This lady occasionally let loose with a blood-curdling scream. After the anituan, someone told me that the screams sometimes bring about the return of a departing spirit.

**February 18, 1969**

I would like to describe a three day Aeta ceremony that took place in December. An ancestor of a man living in Villar had murdered someone and the dead man’s spirit was haunting this particular man. Perhaps he was not sleeping well or received a sign or symbol from an anito. For the better part of two days the people danced and chanted a sing-song type of melody. The possessed man had to feed all of his guests for three days. He went from poor to destitute as a result of providing logistics for the ceremony.

The ceremony is called a Talbung. A bagudi or a rattan neck band is worn by the older men.



*Talbung ceremony in Villar*

The ceremony ended with the killing of a chicken tethered to an arrow just outside of the pála pála or the dancing pavilion. Hopefully the spirits that inhabited the man were appeased and left him alone.

**April 23, 1970**

I recently went to a Tagalog movie in Iba, the capital of Zambales. It reminded me of something that happened last year. Itaru and I were standing outside of the theater in Iba. Itaru speaks Japanese, a little English and almost no Tagalog. I asked an approaching woman a question in English. Apparently she didn't understand me so she turned to Itaru and in rapid fire Tagalog asked him what I had just said. She obviously thought that Itaru was a Filipino. Itaru turned to me and asked what she had just said. I answered her question by repeating my original question in Tagalog. The woman was bewildered! The presumed Filipino did not know Tagalog and the American that asked a question in English seemed to understand it. She gave us a skeptical once over before she gladly went on her way. The poor woman is probably still trying to figure out what had happened to her that day.

### *Epilogue*

During my two years living with the Aetas, I also worked with the Philippine Parks & Wildlife Office on the development of a wildlife conservation and international style park development program.

I was so excited by the possibilities of this approved Peace Corps program that I reenlisted for a second tour of duty in the Philippines. I was selected and served as a PCV from 1973 to 1975. I worked with seven other Peace Corps Volunteers, the Philippine Department of Natural Resources (Parks and Wildlife Office), and the Development Academy of the Philippines on the development of a new National Park System for the country.

The second-largest volcanic eruption of this century occurred at Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines on June 15, 1991. The eruption produced high-speed avalanches of hot ash and gas, giant mudflows, and a cloud of volcanic ash hundreds of miles across. Ten times more powerful than Mount St. Helen's, Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines literally blew itself apart when it erupted in 1991. This eruption was so violent that it ejected "more than five billion cubic meters of ash and pyroclastic debris, and produced eruption columns eighteen kilometers wide at the base and heights reaching up to thirty kilometers above the volcano's vent." Its ejected ash and debris spread to other countries and harmed the environment for months.

The Mt. Pinatubo eruption destroyed the home of the Aetas and the sacred place of Apo Namalyari. The Aetas believed that Apo Namalyari caused the eruption because he was angry at illegal loggers and others who were destroying the mountain. About twenty-thousand indigenous Aeta highlanders, who had lived on the slopes of the volcano, were completely displaced, and most still wait in resettlement camps for the day when they can return home. Those that returned continue to face threats from lahars (mud flows) that have already buried numerous towns and villages. Rice paddies and sugar-cane fields that have not been buried by lahars have recovered; those buried by lahars will be out of production for years to come. *I hope to find out what became of the Pinatubo Aetas of Villar after the eruption. Were they relocated to a resettlement area in the lowlands or did they remain in the Villar area and their beloved Mt. Pinatubo?*