

# The Ayta woman in servitude: An Agent of Socio-economic Transformation in the Resettlement

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The destruction brought about by the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991 to the lives of the Ayta who lived around its slopes has been well documented by scholars and media practitioners alike. For the Ayta, relocation and resettlement did not only involve finding new homes and rebuilding households, but living in a new socioeconomic environment that challenged their notions of economic well-being and identity.<sup>1</sup> In the more than ten years that have passed since the eruption, they have had to find other ways of providing security for their families within a market economy, an economic system that was only peripheral to their economic activities prior to the eruption.<sup>2</sup> Some Ayta women engaged in wage labor by becoming household helpers outside the resettlement center. This paper is about them, Ayta women in servitude.

This paper features the stories of 10 Ayta women from Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales, who work or have worked as domestic help. The women relayed to me the circumstances that led them to seek work away from their home and their experiences in domestic work during

intermittent visits to the resettlement center. Their narratives reveal how they have accommodated the material component of the new economic system in their everyday life in the resettlement; and in the process, re-defining their notion/s of economic prosperity.

## THE ECONOMIC CONDITIONS PRIOR TO RESETTLEMENT<sup>3</sup>

Nostalgic accounts of life in *baytan*<sup>4</sup> (local term used to refer to Eastern or the Eastern slope of Mt. Pinatubo) prior to the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo depict a life that may not have been easy, but at least convenient. The informal land ownership system allowed the Ayta security in terms of livelihood. The Ayta's needs were provided by the land that they lived and worked in, as their ancestral spirits protected and guided them in their everyday activities. As one Ayta elder<sup>5</sup> put it,

*...ang kultura namin dun sa lugar namin walang titulo-titulo, basta lupa nung aming ninuno, dun kami, pero dun lang kami, palipat-lipat sa lugar na*

yon. Kasi malayang-malaya kami, walang titulo. Kaya walang makapasok sa area namin. Hanggang Pinatubo yan. Dun namatay yung mga magulang, dun nilibing. Sa mga lugar-lugar ng bawat grupo. Isang grupo, isang pamilya. Kanya-kanyang gulod-gulod (bundok) kami...Pira-piraso yung bundok...Kung saan namatay ang ninuno, dun din sa lugar nila. Hindi puwede dalhin sa kabila. Yun ang lupang minana.

(You know, our culture does not include (land) titles, if the land belonged to our ancestor, that's where we would stay, in that place, and we would move around within that given area. We were free to move around since we did not have titles. But no one could trespass on our land, which reached until Mt. Pinatubo. Our parents died on that land. They were buried there. Different groups owned different parts. One group constituted one family. Each would have their own part of the mountain...The mountain was divided into parts... Wherever our ancestors died, that was where we would stay. Their bodies should not be moved to another place. That was the land we inherited.)

The agricultural land of the Ayta was called the *gasak*. The *gasak* was usually found away from the barangay where they usually lived and its harvest was often consumed or sold for other necessities such as salt, *bagoong* or cigarettes, and in some cases, for bridewealth. Aside from horticulture, the Ayta also hunted deer and pig in the mountain forests, fished in the

big rivers using simple technology (*nangongoriyente ng isda*), and collected honey.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE IN LBRC

After the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991, the Ayta who resided on its slopes were relocated to different resettlement sites, one of which is the Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center (LBRC) in Botolan, Zambales. The resettlement site is six kilometers away from Botolan town proper. It is beside two other resettlements in the municipality—Baquilan and Taugtog (*LBRC Facts Sheet 1996*).

Life in Loob-Bunga is difficult. The Ayta's economic and spiritual life in *baytan* revolved around the land that they tilled. After the eruption, they had to make sense out of their misfortune while staying economically afloat. Today, the Ayta's economic hardships are compounded by their attempt to recapture part of the life that they lost in the ash and mud. An Ayta woman<sup>6</sup> recalls a more prosperous time in Eastern, saying,

*Ang hanap-buhay ko talaga doon, hindi sa pagmamayabang, pati mga damit ko, umuupa ako ng maglalaba dahil wala na akong oras na maharap dahil sa paghahakot ng saging na maititinda sa bayan. Noon nga sa kaiisip ko ng buhay namin noong mawala yung pananim namin sa bundok, halos kamuntik akong mamatay noong 1995. Isipin mo kung pumitas kami ng saging, 5,000 piraso kada kinsenas. Kung isang buwan, hindi kami pipitas, mga 6,000+ ang mga saging namin na*

*pipitasin. Para kaming pensionado na rin. Yun nga kakaisip noon nung naghihirap na kami sa Bihawo<sup>7</sup>, parang gusto ko nang mamatay.*

(When I was still living there [in Baytan], I did not even have the time to wash my own clothes; I had to hire a washing lady because I was busy harvesting bananas that I sold in the town center. I almost died in 1995 thinking about all my banana plantations in the mountains that I lost. Imagine, we were able to harvest 5,000 bananas every 15 days. If we did not harvest for a whole month, we could get 6,000+ bananas. We felt like a *pensionado*. Thinking about all this while suffering in Bihawo, I wanted to die.)

Seventy-two percent (72%) of the total number of households in Barangay Villar earn a monthly income of no more than Php3,000<sup>8</sup> (2001 DSWD Survey). The subsistence practices (horticulture, hunting) that they are used to do not assure them of regular meals everyday or health for the sick. According to Isagani Ecle, the Social Welfare Officer (from the Department of Social Welfare and Development [DSWD]) assigned to Loob-Bunga, livelihood assistance for those who live in the resettlement comes from both governmental and nongovernmental agencies. The DSWD offers assistance and loan programs, while the different NGOs<sup>9</sup> target specific families or areas of concern such as health, nutrition, sanitation, early childhood development as well as spiritual growth. In any case, these

initiatives do not provide the Ayta with a sustainable source of income.

Prior to the eruption, the economic system of the Ayta did not operate on a profit motive/market economy. Although they would sometimes earn cash from the products they sold to lowlanders, this money was short-lived which was sometimes used for *bandi* (bridewealth) and/or wedding parties as well other necessities. Zeny Balintay (a lowlander who married an Ayta man when she was 17), 46, once commented, "*Magtataka ka rin. Pag may sakit ang anak nila, halos wala silang magawa. Pero pag may ikakasal, may mahahanap sila* (Sometimes, you wonder. When their children got sick, they seemed very helpless. But when their children got married,<sup>10</sup> they got by somehow)." The former mayor of Botolan, Sally Deloso, also observed, "*...iba ang kultura nila. Kung kumita sila, meron silang ma-produce, tapos hindi na muna sila magtrabaho. Tapos pag naubos yon, magtrabaho na naman sila*<sup>11</sup> (...their culture is different. When they earn a little, and they are able to produce something, they do not work for a while. When all that has been consumed, they work again)."

Some residents in the resettlement avail of the loan programs such as the SEA-Kaunlaran of the DSWD. However, only a few Ayta are able to manage money well. Isagani Ecle attributes this to their low "survival level." He states, "*Kasi dumarating yung punto na sabihin na nating halos wala na silang makain. So unti-unting nahuhugot yung pondo sa ipinundar na pang-negosyo. So yung*

*kapital, unti-unting nahuhugot yon hanggang sa totally, hindi siya makabayad, default nang default ng bayad hanggang sa mawala na*<sup>12</sup> (Sometimes, they come to a point where they are not able to find any source of food. They get money from the capital that they loaned for a business venture in small amounts at a time until it is slowly depleted and they are unable to pay the loan)."

The Ayta usually apply for the Food for Work and Cash for Work programs, but these only serve to make them dependent on dole-outs. Other families depend on the *p-baw* (a corruption of PVAO or Philippine Veterans Administration Office, where they claim the pensions of war veterans) or the veteran's pension for their livelihood.

Since their skills are limited to land cultivation and manual labor, some Ayta look for work in land owned by lowlanders nearby, where they earn PhP100 a day. According to the 2001 DSWD Survey of Barangay Villar, 72 out of 193 working men and women engage in farming. Only a few do any kind of planting/farming inside Loob-Bunga. Aside from the limited land area<sup>13</sup> that accommodates 1,601 families,<sup>14</sup> the land in Loob-Bunga is very rocky and is not conducive to horticulture.

Some families have returned to *baytan*, to find pieces of land that can still be tilled; the harvest either to be consumed or sold to lowlanders. Others have expressed their intent to return to *baytan*. However, the close proximity to educational institutions in the resettlement has prompted some Ayta parents to stay in Loob-Bunga so they could send their

children to school. In some cases, Ayta families maintain two houses, one in Eastern and one in Loob-Bunga, so that their children can go to school.

On the other hand, some of the Ayta chose to join the labor force and become workers outside of the resettlement.<sup>15</sup> The men, armed with their strength and determination to provide for their families, have become construction workers while the women found work as domestic helpers. Jemma Rivera, 33, believes that working as a domestic helper is the most viable economic option for women in the resettlement:

*<sup>16</sup>Kasi karamihan noon sa baytan parang di binigyan ng pansin yung pag-aaral kaya yung mga bata parang di rin lumaki na nakapag-aral. Ngayon na nandito na, kailangan na talaga, parang kasi nga mga dalaga na parang nahihya na kaya yun na lang, yung mamamasukan na lang ang parang napag-anuhan nila...Nahihya na sila na pumasok sa iskuwelahan... Kasi nga mga dalaga na sila kaya pamamasukan na lang yung naging puwedeng trabaho nila...Saka isa rin yon, mag-aral ka tapos kulang din yung pampaaral sa iyo. Di ba yung mga magulang din, halos wala ring mga trabaho. Walang sapat na kita, ganon. Kaya kahit mga bata pa yung mga anak nila, mapilitan talagang mamasukin.*

(In *baytan*, formal schooling was not a primary concern so children grew up without going to school. Now that we are here, there is a need to be educated; some of the young women here, since they did not go to school, work as

domestic help...They are reluctant to go to school since they are already old so their skills are limited to doing domestic work...Another thing is if you go to school, there is not enough money to keep you in school anyway. The parents barely work. Their earnings are not enough. So their children are forced to go to work, even at an early age.)

Among the 900 residents of Barangay Villar, 474 only reached the elementary levels (142 finished grade six); 103 were able to get to high school; and, 30 residents are high school graduates (2001 DSWD Survey). Among the 10 women I interviewed, only three were able to pursue an education beyond the elementary level, with one having some college education. Ellen, 26, remembers why children in Baytan were reluctant to continue their education after elementary school.

*<sup>17</sup>Kasi po malayo sa school. Pag gusto namin mag-aral ng high school, malayo. Uuwi pa po kami dito sa Botolan para lang mag-aral. Kaya yung mga bata doon, pagkatapos ng grade 6, nag-iisip nang magtrabaho. Meron din naman po kaming pampaaral dahil marami din kaming prutas na pwedeng ibenta. Kaso yung takot na humiwalay sa magulang.*

(The school was far from our place. If we wanted to attend high school, the distance was too far. We would have to go all the way to Botolan just to go to school. So the children then, after grade 6, would start thinking of going

to work. We had the money to go to school from the fruits that we sold. But we were afraid to be far from our parents.)

The parents of Tita, 45, also did not want her to go to pursue any education past grade six.

*<sup>18</sup>Sabi ng Nanay ko, dahil naka-second honor naman po ako noon ng gumraduate, ayaw akong paaralin ng Nanay ko noon dahil wala ring pinag-aralan yung Nanay ko noon... Ang isip niya, pag nag-aral na, lalandi lang daw doon. Makipagtanim na lang daw ako ng tubo dahil uso ang tubo noon. Kaya noong may kumuha ng katulong yung pinsan ko, sumama na ako. Dalawang taon ako na hindi umuwi dahil sa tampo ko sa Nanay ko. Halos hindi ko kinausap ang Nanay ko sa sama ng loob ko na ayaw niya akong paaralin. Kayang-kaya ko namang mag-aral. Kaya itong anak kong babae, gustong-gusto kong makapag-aral. Umabot nga siya ng second year high school, huminto rin.*

(My mother told me that since I obtained Second honor when I graduated, she did not want me to continue, as she did not go to school herself. She believed that if I continued with my education, I would just flirt with boys. She just wanted me to plant cane since at the time sugar cane was commonly planted. So when I learned that my cousin was looking for a housemaid, I went with her. I did not come home for two years because of my mother's decision. I did not com-

municate with her because I really felt bad about her decision not to allow me to continue with my schooling since I felt I had the ability to do so. That is why I wanted my daughter to continue her schooling. She reached second year high school but she stopped.)

The decision to find work outside of LBRC has resulted in a different social dynamic within the household structure. According to Jemma,

*<sup>19</sup>Noon sa baytan kasi parang pareho lang yung kasi doon lang kami nagtatanim noon eh. Wala pa yung dumadayo ng Maynila. Doon lang nagtatrabaho, doon sa bukid ganon. Mag-gasak ganon. Kaya karamihan, pag gabi yan, magkasama yung buong pamilya. Magkakasama sa bahay, ganon... Dito karamihan yung mga tatay nasa Maynila, ganon. Kung saan-saan dumadayo para magtrabaho. Halos lahat nga dito kung minsan sa isang buwan, minsan na lang umuuwi yung lalaki eh. Minsan, tatlong buwan, apat na buwan, ganon.*

(When we were still in baytan, we were all the same, we would plant. Nobody had to gone to Manila. That is where we worked, in the fields. We worked in the gasak. At night, the whole family was together. Everybody was gathered in the house. Here, many fathers are in Manila. They go to different, distant places to find work. Many of the men here come home only a few times a month. Sometimes, every three months, four months.)

The prevalence of the market system in the resettlement site has resulted in the reorganization of the economic activities of the Ayta. Prior to resettlement, the mother and father were both involved in food production. Now, the division of labor by gender has become more differentiated as men leave for work outside of the resettlement, leaving the women to tend to their children and home. However, the women still feel the need to find other sources of income to supplement the earnings of their husbands. One viable option is to engage in wage labor as a domestic helper outside the resettlement.

#### THE AYTA WOMAN IN SERVITUDE

The 10 Ayta women I interviewed range from 14–52 years old. Five (5) are single, two (2) are currently married; two (2) are divorced, while one (1) is a widow. Three of them have had some high school education, while only one has reached college.

#### THEIR OBJECTIVES

Although the women's decision to work was triggered generally by the hard life in the resettlement center, each had her own personal reasons for engaging in wage labor. Ellen works so that she can provide herself with personal things that otherwise her parents are unable give her.

*<sup>20</sup>Kasi po ang alam ko, madali lang yung pera sa tao. Dahil wala naman silang kinikwento sa amin na ganito,*

Name	Age	Civil Status	Education Attainment
Puring Cabalic	14	Single	Grade 6
Maria Tabradillo	17	Single	2nd year HS
Josephine Aldaba	19	Divorced	Grade 6
Cheryl Atanacio	20	Single	Grade 5
Remy Dolan-dolan	23	Single	Grade 6
Ellen Dagsaan	26	Single	2nd year College
Jemma Rivera	33	Married	4th year HS
Selma Cosme	37	Divorced	Grade 6
Tita Cosme Atanacio	45	Married	Grade 6
Norma Padilla	52	Widowed	Grade 3

*mahirap. Tapos gusto naming makabili ng gamit namin na hindi naibibigay ng mga magulang namin...[Katulad ng mga personal na gamit...damit, pulbo, ... Umiiyak po [ang nanay ko], dahil nga bunso daw ako. Ayaw sana niya kaso gusto ko dahil para mabili ko naman yung gamit na gusto ko. Kasi hindi naman po niya maibigay sa akin yung mga pambili ng gamit. Kaya ako na lang yung nag-isip para hindi ko masisi yung Nanay ko.*

(From what I know, it is easy to earn money. Nobody told me about difficulties or hardships. And we wanted to buy things that our parents could not give us... personal things like...clothes, powder...My mother cried because I was her last child. She did not want me [to work] but I wanted to so that I could buy the things I wished. They could not provide me with these things. So I decided to work so that I would not blame my mother later on.)

The education of family members (children or siblings) is also one of the reasons why some Ayta women go into wage labor. Norma, 52, works despite her heart condition (enlargement of the heart), which she discovered during her second employment. Selma, 37, feels that earning wages provides her with the money to support her children's schooling. Similarly, two of the younger women, Puring, 14, and Maria, 17, decided to stop schooling to give their siblings (younger and older) a chance to continue their education.

(Norma)<sup>21</sup> *...umabot ako ng walong buwan [sa pinapasukan ko] doon kaya lang nagkasakit ako... Enlargement ng heart. Pero hindi ko iniisip yon dahil gusto ko sanang mapag-aral yung mga anak ko...Yun lang kasi ang gusto kong trabaho, kung walang puhunan. Ang talagang trabaho ko, nagba-buy and sell ako kung may puhunan. Pero kung wala na, mamasukan na ako... Apat*

*ang anak ko, dalawa ang hanggang fourth year high school. Kaya hindi ako nakakapagpagawa ng bahay dahil nagpaaral ako... Ang pangarap ko, gusto kong makapag-aral yung bunso ko. Kasi kinukuha siyang pag-aralin sa Bible School. Kaya lang sabi ko mas maganda kung makakatapos muna siya para hindi siya madistino sa malayo. Ito yung bunso kong babae. Pareho kaming nasa New Tribe Mission.*

(I had been working eight months when I got sick...enlargement of the heart. But I did not pay attention to it because I wanted my children to have an education...That was about the only work available to me since my capital ran out. If capital were available, I would 'buy-and-sell.' But if I didn't, I worked as a domestic help...I have four children, two were able to finish fourth year high school. I could not have my house repaired because I am putting my children through school...My dream is to help my last child finish school. She is being recruited to study in the Bible School. But I want her to finish school first just so she is not sent to a far place. I am talking about my last daughter. We are both members of the New Tribe Mission).

(Selma) <sup>22</sup>*Madali yan dahil kung mamasukan ka, madali ang pera. Ngayon, maghalaman ka nga, e matagal din. Maganda yung mag-tanim ka, pero matagal mong antayin. Kaya nagdesisyon na ako na mamasukan na nga kasi yung mga anak ko, pumapasok.*

(Working as household help is an easy way to earn money. If you plant, it takes a long time. Planting is all right, but you have to wait. So I decided to work as domestic help because my children are going to school.)

In the resettlement, the Ayta women identified the education of family members (children or siblings), as well as the acquisition of personal possessions as immediate goals of their employment.

Having their children educated is now the prime concern of parents in Loob-Bunga since they see it as the ticket to a better life. Now that they are without land, they realize that their livelihood revolves around an economic system that values formal education. On the other hand, the financial difficulties of the Ayta rarely allow children to go to school on a continuous basis. As some of my younger respondents have experienced, they had to stop going to school to find work, while others have to fund another sibling's schooling. Another reason why they stop is the intermittent work of their parents.

#### MAKING THE DECISION

The decision to engage in wage labor is often unilateral; meaning, family members were rarely consulted. For some of the parents, they watched helpless, as their children left home to find work, indicating a departure from the norm that defined parent-child relationships in Ayta society, where the children were expected to follow their parents' wishes.<sup>23</sup>



(Bonita, mother of Puring)<sup>24</sup> *Nainis kami dahil sabi ko, “yung nanay namin hindi nagsikap sa amin pero kayo, nagsisikap kami para may matutunan kayo.” Pero ayaw nila. Pero dito na, nakakahanap kami ng konti para mapaaral sila pero sila, gusto nang magtrabaho.*

(I was irritated at first and I told her, “our mother did not work hard in our time, but with you, we are both working hard so that you can go to school.” But they did not want to go to school. Here, we find some work so we can put them through school, but they prefer to work.)

(Stella, mother of Maria)<sup>25</sup> *Wala akong alam doon. Nandoon ako sa baytan noon, tapos nalaman ko na nag-usap na pala sila ng kapatid niya at hindi na muna siya mag-aaral para matulungan niya yung ate niya dahil yung ate niya, kolehiyo na samantalang siya, high school pa lang...Ano pang magagawa ko, gusto pala niyang tulungan yung ate niya. Pero noong una, bale naiiyak din ako e. Dahil umalis yung panganay pumuntang Tarlac. Tapos si Maria Teresa, pumuntang Tondo, pumasok ng katulong.*

(I did not know about that decision. I was in baytan, and I learned that she and her sister talked...that she would not continue with school so that her sister can pursue hers because her sister was already in college and she was only in high school...What else could I do, she wanted to help her sister. At first, I cried. Our eldest left for Tarlac. Then Maria Teresa went to Tondo to work as a housemaid.)

(Leny, mother of Ellen)<sup>26</sup> *Wala, napa-paiyak na lang ako. Gusto ko sanang makatapos siya ng pag-aaral. Nahirapan siya. Kaya lang hindi naman magkasya yung sweldo niya sa pamamasukan, lalo sa college, malaki na ang gastos.*

(All I could do was cry. I wanted her to finish her education. It was hard for her. But her earnings as a housemaid were not sufficient, specially for a college education, it was very expensive.)

When the married women decide to work as domestic helpers outside of the resettlement, they experience resistance from their husbands. Jemma and Tita’s husbands felt that their masculine role of providing for the economic needs of the family was being challenged by the decision of their wives to work. While the women respected their husband’s contributions and sentiments, they recognized their own responsibility in household as primary caregivers of the children and did not view their actions as compromising their role as wives and mothers. In fact, Jemma does not take work that takes her too far from the resettlement, nor does she accept stay-in work. This way, she can still take care of her children while working.

(Jemma)<sup>27</sup> *Naalangan din nga ako dahil ayaw niya. Sabi niya, mahirap din yun. Kasi nga dito sa amin pagka yung babae ang aalis tapos yung lalake nandito, parang nahihiya sila, ganon ba. Pero sabi ko hindi naman kako ano yon dahil nag-tatrabaho ka naman dito. Hindi ka naman yung totally wala*

talagang trabaho, ganon. Kasi nga dito kantiyawan yan kapag yung lalaki maiwan tapos yung babae namasukan. Pero di ba ang importante naman don yung tulong-tulong lang. Sa hirap ba ng buhay ngayon tapos eh ayaw mong tumulong ganon...kaya nag-desisyon din ako na kahit na kako magtrabaho ako, nagtatrabaho ka naman dito, maaasikaso mo naman yung mga bata. At saka wala pang pasukan noon eh...

(I also hesitated because he did not want me to work. He said that working is hard. In our culture, if the woman leaves to work and the man remains here, the man feels shame. But I told him that did not mean anything because he also does work around here. It is not as if he is totally useless. Here, the men taunt other men if their spouses were the ones working. But what is important is that the two of you help each other. Life these days is fraught with difficulties...and if you do not want me to help... so I decided to go to work, after all, you also work around here and you can watch over our children. Besides, the children were on break from school at that time...)

(Tita) <sup>28</sup> *Dati nagalit dahil ayaw niya talaga, dalawa kami ng anak ko. Fiesta noon sa Loob-Bunga, umuwi lasing na lasing. Hindi pinapansin yung dala naming pasalubong. Para daw winawalang-kwenta namin ang paghahanapbuhay niya, ang pagtatanim niya doon sa lupa namin. Bale wala ko daw. Tapos pinaliwanagan ko siya, "Kaysa naman nakatunganga kami dito na*

*mag-iina, ito namang paghahanapbuhay namin, hindi naman namin lalaspagin doon yung kita namin. Alam mo,"* ika ko, "may pangarap ako na gusto kong makuha." "Ano naman yon?" sabi niya. "Mayroon na tayong isang kalabaw. Alam mo halos rarayumahin ako kalalakad diyan sa lahar, pangarap kong bumili ng kariton." "Tingnan ko nga kung kaya ninyo yan," sabi niya.

(He got mad because he really did not want me to work—me and my daughter. During the fiesta in Loob-Bunga, he came home drunk. He did not even notice at our *pasalubong*. He said that we did not value the work that he does in our field. So I explained to him, "Rather than staying here doing nothing, our daughter and I work. That does not mean that we would spend our earnings frivolously. You know," I said, "I also have dreams." "And what are your dreams?" he asked. "We already have a *kalabaw*. I almost get rheumatism walking across the lahar, so I would like to buy a *kariton*." "Fine, let's see if you can do so," he said.)

The decision to find work that would take the women away from their homes is usually made without consultation with other family members (either parents or husbands). For the married women, their husbands would eventually realize the benefits of such decisions. In due course, Tita's husband understood why she wanted to work—"kung kaya pa," ika niya, "bakit kita babawalan? Nakita ko naman yung hangarin mo na magkaroon tayo ng mga gamit sa bahay." Ayaw ko kasi yung

*pareho kaming hindi maghanap-buhay, tapos para kaming kawawa.*<sup>29</sup> (“If you can do it,” he said, “why would I stop you? I can see that you also want to buy things for the house.” It is just that I do not want both of us to be jobless and look so helpless.)” Jemma’s husband, Enrique, later realized that Jemma was determined to work and help out financially. But Enrique, 37, had conditions—“*basta dito lang sa malapit. Kasi kung sa akin wala namang problema e. Kahit na nandito ako, hindi ako naalisin ng trabaho. Kahit kuwan lang, para pagkain lang, pwede naman na e.*”<sup>30</sup> (As long as it is nearby. I do not have a problem with it. Even when I am just here, I am not without work. I suppose it is ok, to supplement our food expenses.)”

For the Ayta woman, the concept of employment is not based on the idea of obtaining security or permanency that assures her of a regular income, which is the prevailing notion in most societies that practice wage labor. Most of the Ayta women I interviewed have not lasted for more than a year in one household as a domestic helper. When they take vacations, sometimes lasting six months, they are not inclined to go back to their former employers. Apparently, there are many potential employers who go to Loob-Bunga to look for household help. So after their vacation in Loob-Bunga, Ayta women usually end up being hired by someone else. Josephine, 19, explains why she does not stay with only one employer:

<sup>31</sup>*Kasi pag sinasabi ko sa mga amo ko na gusto kong magpahinga, pag*

*nandito na ako sa bahay, may pumupunta ulit. Siyempre gusto ko ding subukan yung ibang nagiging amo ko kaya pumupunta rin ako. Kaya nagpapalipat-lipat ako.*

(When I tell my landlord that I want to take time off to rest at home, another potential employer comes. I want to experience being with different kinds of people so I go with them. That is why I move from one employer to another.)

However, even if there seems to be a steady stream of potential employers, this does not necessarily mean that the women are employed all the time. Nor does it mean that they are on their way to having a “better life.”

The decision as to which offer to accept involves more than simply choosing the employer who is offering higher pay. Women who have young children are likely to choose employment closer to the resettlement area. Selma and Josephine would rather find work near Loob-Bunga. Selma works at Capayawan, in Botolan, which enables her to come home once a week. Her parents died within the last two years, so she cannot leave her children with anyone. Her parents used to take care of her children when she worked as a housemaid in Manila. Her oldest son is already 18, and helps around the house when she is working. She also decided to work close to home when her youngest child died of *tigdas* (measles) while in her parents’ care. Josephine, on the other hand, wants to remain close to her family.

<sup>32</sup>*Mas gusto ko yung medyo malapit-lapit, ayaw ko yung sa malayo... Siyempre, nami-miss ko rin yung pamilya ko. Pag nasa malapit ka, kahit anong oras na gusto mong umuwi, makakauwi ka. Kagaya ngayon, mahal na yung pasahe papuntang Maynila. Kaya gusto ko na sa malapit.*

(I would rather be nearby, I don't like going far...I would miss my family. If you are near them, you can come home anytime you want. The fare going to and from Manila is now high. That is why I prefer to work nearby.)

Jemma, like Selma, has children who are still going to school. In 1999, she was recruited to work as a housemaid. At first, she stayed with the family, but when school started, she became an *arawan*, returning to Loob-Bunga at the end of the day. Finally, she stopped working because she found balancing her responsibilities at home and at work difficult. She also feels that her husband does not take care of her children as well as she does:

<sup>33</sup>*May kumukuha pa nga noon sa Maynila. P2,000 pa yung ano. Ang hirap nga siyempre hindi ka maka-decision agad dahil sa mga bata...kahit nga malaki yung sahod, parang hindi mo rin maipagpalit yung mga bata... Kung mga high school na siguro sila papayag na ako kasi alam na nila ang gagawin nila...Kasi yung lalaki, yun talaga ang ano niya, maghanap-buhay para sa pamilya. Oo nga, iniintindi nila ang mga bata, pero iba ang babae,*

*ganon...kasi di ba pagka yung mga lalaki hindi nila naiisip kung yun bang mga bata eh malinis, yun bang mga damit nila, ayos, ganon. Ang mga babae lahat iniisip yan. Matapos mong pakainin yan siyempre tingnan mo kung anong kulang sa kanila. E ang mga lalaki hindi ganon. Basta sa kanila, may makain yung mga bata, ganon. Iba talaga yung alaga ng mga babae...*

(One time, someone from Manila was offering me a job. It was for P2,000. It was a hard decision to make because of my children...even if the salary being offered was generous, you felt you could not exchange it for the welfare of your children...Maybe when they are already in high school and they know what to do, I will probably consider it...The men are really tasked to fend for their families. Yes, they look after the children, but women care for the children differently...the men do not pay close attention to the children, if they are clean, if their clothes are in proper order. Women think of those things. After you feed the children, you check if there are other things they need. The men do not do that. For them, it is sufficient that there is food for the children... Women really care for children differently.)

The younger Ayta women, on the other hand, like working far from the resettlement. Cheryl likes being away from home because it gives her the opportunity to experience new places and different people.

<sup>34</sup>*Parang gusto ko na rin po yung medyo malayo-layo kasi mapupuntahan ko yung ibang lugar na hindi ko pwedeng mapuntahan.*

(I also like being away from home because I get to go to other places that I do not usually go to.)

For Remy, 23, being away from the resettlement give her the chance to save more money.

<sup>35</sup>*Mas okey din naman po yung nasa malayo ka kasi di mo masyadong nagagastos yung pera, ganon...Kasi pag nasa malapit ka siyempre maisipan mo ay uwi ka dahil ano sa bahay, kailangan din sa bahay ang pera, o. E pag nasa malayo ka, naiipon mo yung pera kahit ilang libo naiuwi mo sa bahay.*

(Being away prevents me from spending my money...If I am close to home, I would always think of visiting because I know they need money. If you are far, you can save your money and you are able to take home a couple thousand.)

It is apparent that Ayta women are empowered enough to make decisions in their household. However, these decisions are still made within the context of their understanding of their role in the family and their dreams for their family's future. For instance, Jemma will only consider working during the summer when she is sure that her children will be taken care of by her husband. Encouraging their children to get a good education is important to them. More time and energy

is spent at home during the school year to make sure that their children go to school regularly. In Tita's case, her husband finally relented when he realized that Tita's and their daughter's decision to work was not a selfish one; Tita wanted to ease her work in the fields by buying a *kariton* (carabao-pulled carriage). She also saw how she could keep her children in tow by buying them a television set. Only a few households in Villar can afford to have a television. Because of this, families tend to gather around the television, still a novelty among the Ayta in Loob-Bunga.

Ayta women feel that their decisions to work outside of the home do not run contrary to their perceived roles within the household. Discourse in economic anthropology emphasizes the *embeddedness* of economic activities within a wider social arena (Wilk 1996). In this case, earning money does not only benefit or involve the individual, nor is it solely motivated by profit. While engaging in wage labor is an individual activity, earnings are almost always shared and imparted to other members of the household. Furthermore, household dynamics, i.e., husband-wife and parent-child relations, also play a role in the final decision as to where and when women will find work.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF WAGE LABOR: NEW SKILLS, NEW IDEAS

For most of these women, the work that they do as a domestic helper is not very different from what they were already doing at home. For example, Cheryl, 20, and Josephine were already familiar with

basic household work as well as childcare. Cheryl, after all, is the second child of a family with 10 children, while Josephine is the eldest of six children. Although they are not averse to the idea of working as a *yaya* (nanny), they both admit to the difficulties of taking care of children of other people.

On the other hand, working as domestic help also included learning new skills. Cheryl learned to cook, as well as operate electrical appliances.<sup>36</sup> Tita, Josephine and Puring learned to cook new dishes while being employed. Puring also learned how to operate a floor polisher. Ellen, being the *bunso* (last child) in her family, learned how to take care of children. According to her, one of her sisters “trained” her in domestic work. She and her sister worked together for her first time as a housemaid. Her sister taught her how to iron and do general cleaning. Aside from these skills, her sister also taught her the value of *pakikisama* (getting along with others).

<sup>37</sup>[*]sinama po ako ng ate ko. Bale dalawa kami sa bahay. Ayaw niya akong ihiwalay dahil po bago lang ako. Bale tinuruan niya muna ako sa gawain...Yung mag-plantsa po dahil hindi ako marunong. Tapos yung maglinis dahil iba naman yung bahay nila sa amin...bungalo po. E sa amin, kubo. Mas advantage sila sa bahay... [Tinuro niya sa akin] [y]ung saan yung mga sulok-sulok. Kailangan pag maglinis ka, talagang malinis. Huwag yung naglinis ka na nga, marumi pa...[Tinuro din niya] [y]ung makisama po sa kanila, sa amo namin. Dahil po*

*noong nandoon pa kami sa Villar, hindi pa po kami civilized. Kaya kailangan makihalubilo ka sa tao. Yun po, tinuro niya din sa akin yon. Kung paano mag-plantsa ng polo, para hindi masunog... [pati] [s]a pag-lalaba, yung puti, ihiwalay po sa de-kolor.*

(My sister took me under her wing. The two of us worked in the same house. She wanted me to work with her when I first started out. She taught me what to do around the house. I did not know how iron. I also did not know how to do the cleaning since their house was different from ours...a bungalow. Ours was a nipa hut. They were more advantaged...My sister told me the places where dirt usually accumulated. She said that when I clean the house, I should do it well. Meaning, there should not be any dirt left behind. She also taught me how to be with other people, specially our *amo*. Because when we were still in Villar, we were not civilized. So we had to learn how to relate to other people. She taught me that. How to iron polo shirts, so that it would not get burned... even in washing clothes, you had to separate the whites from the colored ones.)

Although most of the women I interviewed reported that they had good experiences with employers, some also had their share of abusive/harsh employers who they eventually left. Remy relates her unfortunate experience with a former employer,

<sup>38</sup>*Yung unang amo ko talaga na 'yon, minamaltrato ako, pinapakain ng*

*panis. Yung kahit may sakit ka nagtatrabaho ka. Halos magkandalaglag ka na sa hagdanan.*

*(My first employer treated me badly, they would even feed me spoiled food.*

*I had to keep working even when I am sick. To the point that you would actually fall down the stairs.)*

Indeed, the experience of doing housework in another household has its share of challenges and risks. However, it also exposes the Ayta to new ideas and to a different/modern way of living, which has somehow influenced their sensibilities. Tita and her daughter (who is also working as a housemaid), now exposed to a “modern lifestyle,” wants to give their family new things aside from providing her family a means for their livelihood.

*<sup>39</sup>Nakadalawang buwan kami [ng anak ko], e di P3,000 ang sweldo naming dalawa, tig-P1,500, dalawang buwan, P6,000. Di umuwi ako noong birthday ko, tamang-tama April na. “Umuwi ka na lang Nanay, tapos bili ka ng kariton, tapos gamitin mo yung P1,000 sa birthday mo, tapos yung P1,000 ibili mo ng gamit sa bahay, budget nila sa bahay,” dahil P4,000 yung kariton. Pagkatapos, bumalik ako doon. Tapos sabi niya, “Nanay, bili natin ng TV yung mga bata,” bili ako ng halagang P2,000... nagpakabit na kami ng kuryente, meron na kaming ilaw. Kaya kahit magtrabaho ako, hindi na sila maggagala, nandiyan sila, nanonood. Pag gabi, ika ko, huwag iiwanan dahil pag ninakaw yan, kawawa kayo. At saka kapitbahay ko yung pinsang buo*

*ko, halos magkatabi lang. Babantayan sila yon... [A]yaw ko rin na pumapasok yung mga anak ko na wala silang bag. Ay siyempre, parang masakit sa loob mo na parang kawawa tingnan yung anak mo na kayang-kaya mo naman na kumita ng pambili, ganon ang katwiran ko. Kaya kahit matanda na ako, nagtatrabaho pa rin ako.*

*(My daughter and I were able to accumulate two months’ worth of salary, P1,500 each for two months, that’s P6,000. In April, I came home for my birthday. “Go home, Nanay, buy a kariton, use the P1,000 for your birthday, then spend P1,000 for the house, for their budget.” The kariton cost P4,000. So I came home. Then my daughter said, “Nanay, let’s buy the children a TV,” so I bought one worth P2,000. We had an electrical connection installed. So even if I were working, the children would not stray far from the house, they would be home watching TV. I told them to watch TV at night or it might get stolen, then where would that get them? Anyway, my cousin lived next door, so they would be well taken care of...I also did not want my children to go to school without bags. It hurt me to see them looking so pitiful when you could actually work for what they needed, that was what I thought. That was why I continued to work, even if I was already old.)*

From Tita’s example, the Ayta woman’s exposure to a different lifestyle has resulted in the appropriation of some of the elements of “modern” living into

their life in the resettlement. As they accumulate the means to purchase things for the house and for the education of the children, their needs are redefined in the process.

Engaging in wage labor further immersed the Ayta in the practice of cash economy and the lifestyle that comes with it. However, this does not necessarily mean that they have fully imbibed the profit-oriented values of the market economy. Instead, they have somehow managed to appropriate the materiality of "modern" living within their own understanding of its benefits to life in the resettlement.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I venture into the milieu of the resettled Ayta's "tragedy," however, shifting the paradigm from one of victimization (employing "coping mechanisms") to one of liberation (deliberate strategy and manipulation). By viewing the economic decisions of the Ayta women in terms of the "agentic"<sup>40</sup> nature of human action within the world in which they find themselves (Ortner 1994: 275), we gain an understanding of how the Ayta has faced and moved on from the tremendous loss in livelihood they experienced resulting from the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. As a framework for understanding the economic strategies they now employ within the new economic order within the resettlement, Sahlins (1984: 414) suggests that cultural "reactions" from the "impacts" of global-material forces be studied in terms of the different ways these have been mediated in local cultural

schemes. Therefore, the economic choices of the Ayta woman can be viewed in relation to the other arenas of social life, such as marriage and family.

Wage labor is then viewed as an economic option that has been incorporated into the Ayta economic consciousness, both as an adaptive strategy as well as a force of ideational change. For the Ayta in Loob-Bunga, the strong presence of the state/capitalist system in their political and economic affairs<sup>41</sup> weigh heavily in their decision to enter into paid labor even as they continue to employ other economic strategies that are more familiar (and comfortable) to them such as looking for land to plant on. They now realize that they need to continuously produce cash for their everyday sustenance.

This study does not offer recommendations to help the Ayta "cope" with life in the resettlement. I only present the voices of 10 of their women who decided to engage in domestic labor, seeing that this kind of work would provide them with "easy" money, given the skills that they possess. The common notion of the "marginalized" Ayta has led people to believe that the Ayta are a destitute people (*kawawa*) who have very little economic options. Although that may be true, what is more important is that through this paper, the reader gains a deeper appreciation for a people who have had to contend with so much loss—their livelihood as well as the security they derived from the ancestral spirits that protected their lands—and a new way of life that sometimes conflict with their cultural principles. Forced into a



quandary, the Ayta managed to find a tool—domestic labor—for negotiating their way through a new economic system, while justifying their actions within their cultural parameters, i.e., family and gender relations. On the

other hand, they are also beginning to redefine their economic needs based on their exposure to a different economic system. This kind of strategizing is human agency, the liberation of the economic self.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I would like to acknowledge Dr. Eufrazio C. Abaya for his suggestion that I explore this emerging new phenomenon. I will always be grateful. I would also like to thank Ms. Joy Morin who patiently transcribed my interviews. Lastly, I would like to thank Ate Zeny for her unending hospitality and assistance.

<sup>2</sup>Prior to 1991, hunting, gathering and swidden agriculture were the dominant economic activities of the Ayta which provided most of their necessities.

<sup>3</sup>Most of the ethnographic descriptions about the Ayta In Loob-Bunga as well as information about LBRC are derived from the data I gathered (from 1997–2000) for my M.A. Thesis (UP College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, Department of Anthropology), *Transacting Bridewealth: Marriage Among the Ayta of Loob-Bunga Resettlement in Botolan, Zambales*, which I finished in April 2001.

<sup>4</sup>A study on nostalgia and displacement of the Pinatubo Ayta is explored in Eufrazio C. Abaya *Place, Power, Sensibilities: The Politics of Place-making in Loob-Bunga Resettlement* (A Report submitted to the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative Development Studies, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>Elmer Balintay interview at Sitio Barretto, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 2 May 1998.

<sup>6</sup>Tita Atanacio interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 12 May 2001.

<sup>7</sup>*Bihawo* is an area inside the adjacent resettlement center, Taugtog.

<sup>8</sup>Women who work as domestic help earn a minimum of Php1,500 a month.

<sup>9</sup>Some of the NGOs include: The Community of Learners Foundation or COLF (early childhood development); The Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (health and sanitation); JICA or Japan International Cooperation Agency (health, sanitation and water development), and; The Binhi ng Pag-asa Development Corporation (early child development and limited financial assistance with a Christian living component). These NGOs have a limited number of beneficiaries, i.e., children that they sponsor. All of these NGOs are closely monitored by the Mr. Ecle's office, which requires them to submit quarterly reports of their activities within the resettlement.

<sup>10</sup>Ate Zeny is referring to the practice of bridewealth, where the family of the bridegroom gives gifts to the family of the

bride in exchange for the bride. See Monica Santos, *Transacting Bridewealth: Marriage Among the Ayta of Loob-Bunga Resettlement in Botolan, Zambales* (MA Thesis in Anthropology, University of the Philippines College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, April 2001).

<sup>11</sup>Sally Deloso interview at the Mayor's Office, Botolan, Zambales on 23 June 1997.

<sup>12</sup>Isagani Ecle interview at Botolan Municipal Bldg. 2/F on 7 May 2001.

<sup>13</sup>The total land area of Loob-Bunga is 328 hectares, which is used both for residential and agricultural purposes. Each family is allotted approximately 25 sq.m. of land on which to build their house. Lots are also allotted for government structures inside the resettlement site. There are 11 barangays and three sitios in Loob-Bunga. The 11 barangays consist of Belbel, Burgos, Cabanatuan, Maguisguis, Malombot, Moraza, Nacolcol, Owaog, Palis, Poonbato-Rosaban and Villar.

<sup>14</sup>This statistic is based on the results of the 2001 Survey conducted by the office of Mr. Ecle, the Social Welfare Officer assigned to the Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center.

<sup>15</sup>According to the 2001 DSWD Survey of Barangay Villar, 47 men are laborers while 19 women are engaged in domestic help.

<sup>16</sup>Jemma Rivera interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 17 February 2001.

<sup>17</sup>Ellen Dagsaan interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 8 May 2001.

<sup>18</sup>Tita Atanacio interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 12 May 2001.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ellen Dagsaan interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 8 May 2001.

<sup>21</sup>Norma Padilla interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 17 May 2001.

<sup>22</sup>Selma Cosme interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 24 March 2001.

<sup>23</sup>Parent-child relations is strongly expressed even in marriage. Even if the children are given the freedom to choose their spouses and sometimes elope, their parents will still figure in the marriage negotiations. See Monica Santos, *Transacting Bridewealth: Marriage Among the Ayta of Loob-Bunga Resettlement in Botolan, Zambales* (MA Thesis in Anthropology, University of the Philippines College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, April 2001).

<sup>24</sup>Bonita Cabalic interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 16 May 2001.

<sup>25</sup>Stella Tabradillo interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 12 May 2002.

<sup>26</sup>Leny Dagsaan interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 11 May 2001.

<sup>27</sup>Jemma Rivera interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 17 February 2001.

<sup>28</sup>Tita Atanacio interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 12 May 2001.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Enrique Rivera interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 6 May 2001

<sup>31</sup>Josephine Aldaba interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 12 May 2001.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Jemma Rivera interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 17 February 2001.

<sup>34</sup>Cheryl Atanacio interview at 27 Monte de Piedad, Cubao, MM on 5 May 2001.

<sup>35</sup>Remy Dolan-dolan interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 24 March 2001.

<sup>36</sup>Electricity in Loob-Bunga was only installed in the year 2000. Even then, only a few residents who will be able to pay for a monthly electric bill availed of the service. In Barangay Villar, only a handful of houses have electric power.

<sup>37</sup>Ellen Dagsaan interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 8 May 2001.

<sup>38</sup>Remy Dolan-dolan interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 24 March 2001.

<sup>39</sup>Tita Atanacio interview at Barangay Villar, Loob-Bunga Resettlement Center, Botolan, Zambales on 12 May 2001.

<sup>40</sup>Shweder explains that human action is always "agentic," whether it is an act of compliance or defiance, since all human action is viewed as a choice one makes. See Richard Shweder, "Rethinking the Object of Anthropology (And Ending Up Where Klukholm and Kroeber Began)." In *Items and Issues*, 1:7-9.

<sup>41</sup>The enforcement of state policies has resulted in the modification of the marriage practice of bridewealth, where exchanges are now mostly done in cash. Furthermore, marriage ceremonies have also been a regular part of the negotiations for bridewealth, the advantage of which would be a state-sanctioned marriage, i.e., the marriage contract. This facilitates the process of enrolling Ayta children in the Department of Education and the claiming of PVAO benefits by wives of Ayta war veterans. See Monica Santos, *Transacting Bridewealth: Marriage Among the Ayta of Loob-Bunga Resettlement in Botolan, Zambales* (MA Thesis in Anthropology, University of the Philippines College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, April 2001).