EXPANDING THE ENVELOPE: THE CONVERGENCE OF INDIGENOUS AETA ORGANIZATION AND AN EXTERNAL ISSUE-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING MODEL IN TARLAC, PHILIPPINES

By

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To fellow community organizers, community leaders, and religious workers who dedicate their lives to work for social transformation.
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Indigenous people are often confronted with serious threats including eviction, land grabbing, and development aggression. When Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991, the Aeta indigenous people of Capas, Tarlac, Philippines, who live in the mountains surrounding the volcano, were one of the major populations affected by the disaster. Their lives underwent radical change as they were moved to evacuation, then resettlement sites. Many of them left the resettlement sites when it was possible to return to their ancestral lands. They found some of their land occupied by cattle ranches, affected by tourism operations, and still part of a military reservation. The Aeta realized they had to defend their rights to their ancestral lands in order to secure their future. As they confronted the issue of land, they were forced to adapt their traditional social organization in light of a changed physical and political environment. Their exposure to church-based and non-governmental organizations created space for a dialogue to produce effective strategies for social action. Outside interventions and organizing models used with the Aeta also went through a process of indigenization and synthesis where a new paradigm was translated and reworked in light of indigenous worldview and cultural logic. In this framework, this study investigates how Aeta traditional social organization has changed and...
adapted in order to be effective in dealing with external threats. It also examines how the outside change agents tried to be effective in this specific context. It explores the convergence of these events as the site for effective social action, and documents the strengths and the limitations of the outcome.

In the Philippines, issue-based community organizing is one of the major strategies employed to deal with social justice issues. This study highlights the voice of the writer as a community organizer and trainer. The ethnographic text is a narrative of the organizing experience, placing it within the larger social context. Here, personal narratives engage in a critical analysis of what worked, what did not work, and the future of the organizing methodology for indigenous people. The ethnographic text provides an authentic insider voice of an organizer using an anthropological eye. The ethnographic account is a product of experience captured by field notes, journal, organizational reports, and the personal narratives of the players involved.

The anthropological analysis is drawn from the ethnography of the Aeta and how the traditional social organization changed after the eruption. Their flexibility and mobility as cultural traits from their hunting gathering tradition were useful to them as they adapted to their changed environment. These cultural traits were important factors in the Aetas’ defense of their rights to their ancestral lands, which manifested in their openness to outside community organizing models.

Even if social action is outside of their experience culturally, the Aeta actively translated community organizing principles into their own cultural terms. One of the major ethnographic insights of the study is that the Aeta were able to weave community organizing concepts into
their own social structure. They were able to reconcile an outside community organizing model with their kin-based mode of problem solving.

The findings show that the contribution of an anthropological perspective sharpens the analysis of community organizing work with indigenous peoples. Thus, a confluence of community organizing and anthropology is appropriate to allow effective community organizing work with indigenous peoples.
CHAPTER 1
WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES REDISCOVERED

Introduction

Community organizing is a way of life, a calling as the religious would say. It involves a passion for justice, peace, and equality, and a commitment that requires intellect and perseverance in order to cope with the demands of the everyday struggle of subaltern peoples.

In the history of community organizing as a discipline, various models have emerged in different parts of the world based on particular theories and organizing methodologies. The term “community organizing” has been widely used by development workers, project implementors, multi-donor agencies, and even governments to describe a process aimed at ensuring community participation in a specific project. In this sense, it is also known as “social preparation.” But the type of community organizing I refer to is different. It is a process that involves mobilizing individuals, families or members of an existing organization toward a defined goal that will cause a change in institutional policies that affect the poor and marginalized. More specifically, the term issue-based community organizing refers to this model of tapping collective efforts of a group in building their power to improve their condition. Community members rally around an urgent issue that provides the impetus for change. It is the type of community organizing that I describe in this thesis.

Saul Alinsky, the founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation in Chicago, one of the oldest organizing networks, is widely acknowledged, especially among white, working-class community organizers, as the father of modern day community organizing (Sen 2003). Alinsky, who drew on the experience of preexisting movements, was the first to systematize and standardize an organizing model that can be replicated. In 1970, community organizing (CO) was introduced as form of social action in the Philippines (Murphy 2005). Denis Murphy, an ex-
Jesuit priest and a long-time advocate of issue-based community organizing in the Philippines, believes the best way to define community organizing is to differentiate its special characteristics from other methods of bringing about change. In 1985, Philippine community organizers described the process as such:

The CO process is composed of numerous repeated action-reflection cycles that rise in a widening spiral to include more and more people, more complicated issues, more opposition, more allies. One action builds on another, one lesson leads to another. In the process leaders are formed and tested and the organization develops its esprit and history of success (Murphy 2005).

The Brazilian educator Paolo Freire’s “conscientization” process, which centered on reflection, is an integral element of issue-based community organizing as it developed in the Philippines. During the 1970s, most of the community organizers in the country were lay activists, priests, and nuns. They strove to bring the church to the poor, and liberation theology had a major influence on the kind of community organizing practiced in the Philippines. This confluence of different theories, concepts, and methodologies produced the community organizing model that I will examine in this thesis.

Community organizing in the Philippines has weathered political storms, economic crises, and re-woven its identity to be able to effectively serve the disenfranchised. The path to social transformation is not an easy road to take; working with economic and socially marginalized communities is a grueling task. In the Philippines, community organizing processes have been effective in bringing poor people together to express their united voice to influence policies of the state. Communities cannot be empowered without continued dialogue between the organizer and the marginalized peoples. Together, they have made history in the civil society movement in the country. These processes were the product of a mix and match of different tactics.

Historically, community organizing developed in the urban setting, but the concept is broad enough to include theories of social change that can be applied in different situations (Sen 2003).
In this context, new community organizing practices continue to evolve as organizers address the issues of poor sectors of society, both urban and rural.

**Community Organizing with Indigenous Peoples**

There are about 350 to 500 million indigenous people in the world today that live in the most remote areas of the world. These people are widely recognized as vulnerable to development aggression and are often socially and economically disadvantaged. Historically, indigenous peoples have their own systems of governance, their own cultures, language, and ancestral lands. But in many cases these systems changed when they became marginalized in societies dominated by non-indigenous peoples. In one of the sessions at the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples in 1995, a delegate from the Coalition of First Nations stated:

> We, the Indian nations, welcomed immigrants from Europe who sought to escape from oppressive regimes. We shared our lands, yet in return we have been isolated, dominated, deprived of our lands and fundamental freedoms, and placed in a state of enforced dependency and poverty.

History tells us that many indigenous peoples lost parts, if not most, of their ancestral lands because of colonization. The immigrants became the dominant majority and ended up ruling the lands they occupied or conquered. Many indigenous populations have lost much of their traditional territories. In order to protect their rights, indigenous leaders have mobilized themselves to establish a place of their own in lobbying for a number of legal instruments to reclaim their rights over their ancestral lands (UNPF 2003). Many leaders and communities believe that they need outside support in the fight for recognition of rights to their ancestral lands. They need technical and legal support to be able to win the struggle. This is where the collaboration between the insider and an outsider began to take its form.

My community organizing work dated from my involvement with different indigenous peoples in Mindanao in the southern part of the Philippines and with the Aeta of Tarlac Province
on the main island of Luzon. My determination to improve my work caused me to ask questions about and reflect on my own organizing efforts. During my organizing, as a stranger to the culture, I was making adjustments to my own operational model in an attempt to fit my tools to work within the people’s social and political structures. Some of our strategies worked, and some did not. I knew there was something lacking, and I wanted to identify the missing link to fill the gap that exists in community organizing with indigenous peoples.

Figure 1-1. Map of the Philippines showing Tarlac Province
The Quest for the Missing Link

As an organizer for more than a decade, I knew that community organizing could contribute to social transformation. I had seen concrete results. Now that I was involved with indigenous peoples, I felt resolved to finding what it was that was missing from my existing knowledge. This inner drive intensified when I began working with the Aeta of Capas, Tarlac in 2002. The realizations based on my work with indigenous peoples in the southern Philippines began to crystallize as I compared that experience with my work with the Aeta. The timing was perfect. In 2006, I was granted a Ford Foundation scholarship to avail of further training in the hope that my education will benefit my work in the Philippines. As I searched for the best program to answer my need, one of the advisers from the International Fellowships Program of the Ford Foundation suggested that anthropology would provide the best tools to answer my questions. I am thankful for her advice.

Anthropology provided me with the nuts and bolts to conduct a cultural analysis of the social organization of the Aeta as my basis to reflect critically on my organizing experience with them. I will analyze systems of indigenous social organization to ascertain whether and how preexisting social organization can be incorporated into outside organizational models. Using an anthropological lens, the exercise will help me understand the principles of indigenous community organizing that were operative before any development agents arrived on the scene. The anthropological analysis will be the backbone of the cultural analysis, which will build on understanding local indigenous social organizations and value systems.

Finding the missing link in the practice of community organizing with indigenous peoples will broaden the understanding of community organizers and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) field workers in employing a culturally-sensitive model of organizing. The new learning, which combines anthropological perspectives with community organizing experience among
indigenous people, will help fill in a serious gap in community organizing practice. The insights from the research will, hopefully, be useful to community organizing NGOs, church organizations, and the academic community in the Philippines. For the NGO community, this will serve as an opening to bring ethnographic studies into their expanded understanding of culture and social organization for the advancement of indigenous organizing. Academic anthropologists, on the other hand, will also have a better grasp of applied approaches that enable indigenous people to pursue their concerns in culturally reinforcing ways.

Reproducing the Knowledge of the Self in Understanding Others

As a practitioner of issue-based community organizing in the Philippines, I believe that being critical about my indigenous organizing will help in our work to bring about change. At this stage of my organizing career, I feel I am in the right position to distance myself and reflect on my organizing experience with indigenous peoples. I believe that anthropology will offer new perspectives that will help me develop a framework that will fit the realities of the rural communities with which I will continue to work.

Using a reflexive approach, the objective of my research is to problematize my organizing experience using an anthropological framework. My project will begin with an analysis of pre-existing Aeta kinship and social organization that antedated outside efforts to organize them, insofar as this pre-existing situation can be reconstructed from the literature and from my notes. I will then examine the processes of community entry, consolidation of people’s initiative, and formation of community organizations based on my issue-based organizing experience with indigenous communities. The anthropological inquiry will address a critical question: in the process of issue-based organizing, what were the effects or implications of my interventions on the indigenous peoples with whom I worked?
Personal narratives of my community organizing are informed by different questions that came from my involvement in the society and culture of the Aeta. As a community organizer-trainer for four years with these people, my “auto-biographical” ethnography is a form of self-narrative that places the self within the larger social context. Davies (2008) argued that the purpose of research is to increase our understanding of social reality by developing explanations of social forms and events, as well as critically examining the conceptualizations used in those explanations. She went further by claiming that the result of anthropological research based on ethnographic fieldwork informed by reflexivity is an expression of social reality that needs to be studied in order to produce knowledge that is relevant to the people among whom we work.

My auto-ethnography is designed to blend the different voices, community perspectives and the organizer’s point of view, in order to rethink indigenous organizing in the Philippines. The focus will continue to be on indigenous social organization, not on the analyst; “reflexive” does not mean excessive absorption in self-analysis, in which the analyst focuses on herself or her own reactions as the principal object of study. But in this case I have eight years of organizing experience that have to be critically analyzed through the lenses of anthropology, in the hope that the next fifteen years will incorporate mid-course corrections that will improve the undertaking. Reflexive analysis is critical to the success of this research project. Anthropologists in the postmodern world are continually exploring links between their autobiographies and ethnographic practices to open up new ways of writing about social life (Reed-Danahay 1997).

**In Search Of a Dynamic Fit: Community Organizing and Engaged Anthropology**

When I made the choice to study anthropology, I knew the discipline would help me to understand the culture of the indigenous people with whom I worked. I had a strong feeling that the missing link I was searching for could be provided by an anthropological framework while subjecting my organizing experience to a cultural analysis of the organizing model I used. As I
became involved in anthropology, I was introduced to the different theoretical debates of the
discipline as well as its colonial roots. Harrison (2008) believes that there should be a move
toward developing a critical anthropology of anthropology—this is to enhance the discipline’s
ability to produce knowledge that is aligned with the promotion of social justice and human
liberation. Influenced by this current of thought, I will attempt to critically analyze my
organizing work using an anthropological lens to further improve my community organizing
methodologies with indigenous peoples. My own commitment to social justice and the struggle
of indigenous peoples for land rights and other human rights pushed me to go further and
investigate even my own organizing model in the hope that it will produce understanding that
will ultimately benefit the indigenous peoples. It is clear to me that anthropological inquiry
serves as my toolkit as I continue to align myself with the struggle of indigenous peoples in
claiming rights and working for social justice.

Overview of the Thesis

In the first chapter, I lay out the foundation of my anthropological inquiry for an
appropriate community organizing model that fits the social, cultural, and political systems of the
indigenous people. The research questions are informed by my involvement with indigenous
peoples as we struggle to address issues of justice and human liberation. I also highlight the role
of the ethnographer as a community organizer with indigenous peoples. Scrutinizing my own
organizing experience is about understanding the role of outsider change agents in the struggle of
subaltern peoples. In finding the perfect fit, the confluence of organizing and anthropology aims
to produce a culturally sensitive model of community organizing for the indigenous peoples.

Chapter two highlights the voice of the ethnographer as a community organizer. The
ethnographic text is a personal narrative of why I chose to work with non-governmental
organizations (NGOs) and align myself with the struggle of the poorest sectors of the society. I
trace the roots of community organizing in the Philippines and describe the process of producing committed community organizers in helping the voiceless speak up for their rights. I emphasize the role of mentoring in the community organizing-training process. I also locate the theoretical basis of community organizing principles as practiced in the Philippines, which was influenced by the practices and writings of Saul Alinsky, Paulo Freire, Gustavo Gutierrez, and other liberation theologians. The chapter presents an auto-biographical sketch of my organizing experience, which will be the basis of problematizing my organizing work and using an anthropological framework of analysis.

Chapter three describes the encounter between the “outsider” and the “insider” in understanding Aeta society. It provides a brief ethnographic background of the Aeta that depicts their economic status, political system, and social organization. The ethnographic description aims to describe the lifeways of the Aeta of Capas, Tarlac. This depiction will serve as the backbone for understanding the traditional pre-existing organizing model of the Aeta. The chapter also deals with the evolutionary change of Aeta society, and how they adapted to their environment, especially when Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991—a story of survival, adaptability, and flexibility. Major transformations in their economic and social organization during the disaster impacted the Aeta. These changes are included in the cultural analysis.

Chapter four examines the community organizing model as a strategy to address issues of human rights, specifically land rights in the Aetas’ context. The chapter defines the key elements of the practice of community organizing. I also define and reexamine my role as a trainer in developing the capacity of indigenous leaders to do community organizing for power. At the same time, I also uncover the tension between the insider and the outsider surrounding the issue of cultural differences of the outside organizing model while addressing community issues.
Chapter five documents the struggle of the Aeta to claim their rights to ancestral lands. The chapter describes the collaboration between the Aeta and the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission as a social action arm of the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines. The collaboration was characterized by strategy development, issue analyses, and community mobilizations designed to carry the collective Aeta voice to the government. The role of intermediaries is critical in translating the language of rights into the local context of the Aeta. The chapter ends with exploring whose voice is heard in the collaboration between the insider and the outsider.

Chapter six analyzes the role of church-based organizations and non-governmental organizations as change agents in giving birth to empowered people’s organizations as an important element in addressing community issues. The configuration of NGOs and their role in development work and social transformation are clearly defined to contextualize the NGO work in the Philippines. I use anthropological methods to analyze the dilemmas in the outside community organizing model vis-à-vis the traditional social organization of the Aeta.

Chapter seven provides the consolidation and the synthesis of the critical analysis of the outside community organizing framework in relation to the social organization of the Aeta. The identification of non-negotiables in conducting progressive community organizing allows me to analyze whether or not the outside model is appropriate for use with the Aeta. An anthropological perspective sharpens the analysis, and at the end of the chapter I assert that there should be a confluence of community organizing and anthropology.
CHAPTER 2
REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD: THE VOICE OF A COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

The basic requirement for the understanding of the politics of change is to recognize the world as it is. We must work with it on its terms if we are to change it to the kind of world we would like it to be. We must first see the world as it is and not as we would like it to be.
—Saul Alinsky, Rules for Radicals

Can we really achieve justice and equality? How can we truly fight oppression and inequality? These burning questions fueled my inner drive to work with marginalized people in the countryside after my graduation from college. Having been exposed to the lives of poor farmers as a student, I was very idealistic and willing to do anything to change the oppressive structures that kept these people in poverty. I knew something had to be done. My passion to strive for social justice brought me to work with upland farmers in the province of Quezon to fulfill my dream of humane, participatory, and grassroots politics. Being young and passionate, I believed that grassroots organizing had the potential to empower the powerless and marginalized groups, that together they could express their own needs as communities to advance their most pressing causes.

Tracing the Roots of Issue-Based Community Organizing

Community organizing in the Philippines traces its roots to Saul Alinsky, widely considered the father of community organizing, who started his career working with the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) in Chicago during the summer of 1939. Alinsky envisioned democratic community-based organizations where ordinary people make their own decisions. Alinsky believed that power is central to the organizing process. He taught that if people can effectively influence policy makers then they gain control over their lives and have the power to secure the interests of their community. As a result, a strong “people’s organization” is important in fueling sustained community action.
These principles were put into practice when Alinsky first organized the white working-class Back of the Yards slum neighborhood in Chicago. Alinsky envisioned a multi-issue neighborhood organization where people could bargain, mobilize, and struggle together to advance their interests. Through the organizing methodology of talking, mobilizing, and agitating people into taking action, the BYNC, with close coordination from church and union leaders, was able to make the packinghouse industry submit to all its demands. This was a major victory for the stockyard workers and they gradually began addressing larger issues such as social services; government was the target of their organizing efforts. Alinsky built on “conflict”-centered methods of organizing where people openly presented their petitions to the opposing party, whether government or a private entity, and demanded action. The people developed strategies and often bold tactics to pressure the agency to address the pressing issues in their lives. Based on the BYNC experience, victories at all levels proved that “conflict confrontation” and the tactics employed during the negotiation process worked to achieve power for the people.

The Philippines during the 1970s was under the authoritarian rule of President Ferdinand Marcos. Poverty was rampant, with over 44 percent of the population living below the poverty line, and those who opposed government policies were afraid to talk openly for fear of losing their lives. The Philippines is 80 percent Catholic, and the Church, influenced by the ideas of Liberation Theology emanating from Latin America in the 1970s, was active in the fight for social justice. As part of its program of social activism, the Church started a process of organizing urban poor communities. The overarching issues of poor urban communities were demolition and eviction, distant-relocation threats, squalid living conditions, and lack of social services and infrastructure. These circumstances pushed the Church to act. Religious activists felt a systematic organizing process was needed to make the oppressive government listen to
people’s demands. At the request of Jesuit priests in the Philippines, The Jesuit Seminary and Mission Board in New York, in coordination with the Presbyterian Mission Board, were able to bring Saul Alinsky’s group to the Philippines to assist in planning on how to best address the issues of poor urban communities. In 1970, a Presbyterian pastor who worked with Saul Alinsky in Rochester, New York went first to Korea and then the Philippines to train community organizers using the Alinsky model of organizing. Eventually, community organizing as a form of social action was introduced as one of the main pastoral thrusts of the Church under the Basic Christian Community (BCC-CO) program (Murphy 2001).

In the history of social movements in the Philippines, community organizing produced concrete gains in advancing poor urban programs in the country as exemplified by the Zone One Tondo Organization (ZOTO) and Sama-Sama (Working Together). Even after Marcos declared martial law in 1972, ZOTO, working with 180,000 urban poor people who were illegally occupying government land and being subject to eviction, developed clever tactics to persuade the government to provide a suitable relocation site for the families that were to be evicted. In 1982, another successful organizing effort of Sama-Sama (Working Together) effectively fought evictions after a series of mobilizations and negotiations with the government resulted in the awarding of a 350-hectare relocation site to 7,000 families in the National Government Center.

The Process of Giving Birth to Committed Community Organizers

Continuing the Tradition

Central to Alinsky’s organizing methodology is the training of community organizers. Alinsky believed that building powerful community organizations cannot happen without many organizers. After their initial heyday in the 1970s, efforts to train community organizers in the Philippines became sporadic. In 1994 a group of committed NGO workers, social activists, and people in academe with a strong vision of the ideal of empowered sustainable communities
gathered to relive the dreams and aspirations of the Philippine Ecumenical Council for Community Organization (PECCO). In the history of Philippine organizing, PECCO was the first ecumenical group to come together to advance the cause of community organizing, not only in the urban context but also the rural. Similar to what had happened with similar organizations in the United States, ideological debates caused the breakup of PECCO in 1976. The split gave birth to different progressive non-government organizations during the 1980s. The more left-leaning from the group founded their own organization and continued organizing in the rural areas, while those that embraced the Alinsky model of conflict confrontation decided to focus their energy on advancing the struggles of the urban poor.

During the 1990s, political and historical events led to the idea of training a new generation of community organizers. Some of the groups that were once involved in PECCO united to found the Community Organization Training Research and Advocacy Institute (CO-TRAIN). CO-TRAIN aimed to produce committed community organizers to continue the tradition of bringing social change to the country. The training of community organizers was CO-TRAIN’s main mission, as it believed that true change would only happen if there were committed change agents to instigate the process. Coming from the Alinsky tradition of community organizing, CO-TRAIN believed that the “training of professional organizers as catalysts for social change” is one of the vehicles for developing democratic community-based organizations whose goal is to win power.

Beyond Alinsky

The methods and paradigm of community organizing also evolved based on the context and political situation of the country and the world. Philippine community organizing employed the action-reflection methodology advocated by Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire. Freire’s work on “liberating education” greatly influenced Philippine organizing efforts. He
taught that people’s participation is crucial in directing their own development and much of his work revolved around formulating popular education techniques for the rural poor. Many of Freire’s ideas of working with rural poor and developing adult literacy and popular education programs were heavily influenced by what later would be called Catholic liberation theology.

The Catholic Church also played an important role in shaping community organizing in the Philippines. Especially influential were the teachings of liberation theology, which emphasizes the Christian mission to bring liberation to the poor and oppressed. The formation of Basic Christian Communities (BCC-CO) was influenced by the principles and application of community organization (CO). The main thrust of the Church-sponsored BCC-CO program was to build Christian communities committed to the values of justice, peace, love, truth, and liberation.

The confluence of the ideas and methodologies of Alinsky, Freire, and liberation theology shaped community organizing in the Philippines during the 1990s. They formed the underpinnings and substance of the training and community organizing practices of CO-TRAIN at its founding in 1994. Remaining true to the Alinsky tradition of organizing, CO-TRAIN aimed to train a new generation of young community organizers who would continue the work both in urban and rural communities. The dream for a just and equal society was the impetus for the founding of CO-TRAIN. The nuns, priests, lay activists, NGO workers, and members of the academic community that established the new organization believed that training a new generation of community organizers would revitalize the spirit of community organizing in the Philippines.
Personal Narrative: Fresh Blood, Fresh Start

*Are you sure you want to do this?*

*Why do you want to work in the impoverished mountainous areas after getting your degree?*

*Why do you want to suffer when you have other opportunities?*

These were the questions from my relatives and neighbors that I had to deal with after deciding to join CO-TRAIN’s community organizing training program in 1994. I had just graduated from Philippine Normal University with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. While in college, my involvement in a socio-political activist student organization, AKMA, exposed me to different societal issues and opened my consciousness to social development work. But poverty was not theoretical for me; it was something that I experienced as a child since my father was a passenger jeep driver who often did not earn enough to buy basic necessities such as food. The struggle to put something on the table, to obtain a quality education, and to meet basic needs were daily experiences for me. I cannot explain why, but after my first immersion trip to the rural farming areas of Quezon Province, I had a strong longing to be in solidarity with the oppressed. I could readily relate to the causes that helped sustain their poverty because deep inside me I knew what it was like to be poor.

**Deciding to Take the Road Less Traveled**

After receiving my degree, I, used to the amenities of city living, decided to leave my life of relative comfort to become a community organizer after successfully completing one year of training provided by CO-TRAIN. I immediately found myself involved with issues affecting the poor upland communities of Mount Banahaw, south of Manila. I was challenged by the idea of using “action-reflection-action” as a methodology for empowering people. My first four years of work with the upland farmers of Banahaw convinced me of the value of protecting people's
rights. I organized farmers affected by the threat of eviction to address their land tenure issues and their concern for environmental protection, which were rooted in indigenous spirituality. As a young and passionate organizer, in addition to my more broad-based community organizing activities, I saw my role as instrumental in the establishment of three people’s organizations at the foot of Mount Banahaw. These people’s organizations, through collective action, successfully opposed the South Luzon Toll Way Extension Project that would have adversely affected the ecosystem of Mt. Banahaw and its environs. The organizations, with the help of scientists from University of the Philippines- Los Banos, conducted a community based Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), the first ever conducted in the Philippines. The result of the community-based EIA provided the scientific basis to justify the people’s opposition to the road network and was key to the government’s decision not to continue the project.

In order to better understand how I was able to accomplish such organizing initiatives, I will describe my own training experience as a young community organizer. The training program is a crucial step in the development of the knowledge, skills, and attitude expected of an organizer. I will describe the framework, concepts, and methodology of issue-based organizing I learned during my training.

**Preparing the Novice for Social Transformation**

My skill for addressing community issues in the rural areas was honed by a rigorous one-on-one training process with a veteran organizer. I would never have been able to mobilize people to take action without the proper supervision of a trainer. In issue-based organizing, experiential learning has proven to be a valuable tool in preparing organizers for actual fieldwork. Under the Alinsky model, the formation and training of community organizers is believed to be crucial for social transformation since they will serve as the catalyst for change. The guiding principle for the training is to let the novice experience the world by doing actual
organizing in the field under the close supervision of a skilled organizer. This has proven to be an effective method to prepare community organizers for fieldwork.

The Rite of Passage

My training, in the old line tradition, began when I joined a team of trainees and trainers during an ongoing community organizing activity. We lived in the communities where the organizing was occurring to be able to gain a better understanding of the whole situation. My trainer told me that living in the community is critical for an issue-based organizer since it is the only way to be able to understand the condition and lives of the people whose consciousness one attempts to raise. She said that our main job is to “help people help themselves.” I did not have any idea at all of what I was getting into. All I knew was I had this idea in mind that I wanted to take part in facilitating change in my country.

Since in the beginning I was oblivious to exactly what was happening with the organizing activity of which I was a part. I just observed and did what I was asked to do. My trainer told me that I should develop valuable contacts, which became my initial task— that of getting to know the community. She said that it is important to familiarize oneself with the situation first before attempting to deal with complex issues. Talking with and getting to know the people were central to that process. Every day, I needed to establish a minimum of five contacts, which was the number of people I tried to get to know and befriend. My trainer joined me on my hour-long walks to reach people’s houses. In rural areas like where the training was being held, houses are far apart and reachable only on foot or by horseback. As we were walking, my trainer would share her organizing experiences during the 1970s, how they went about mobilizing people, their strategies, their joys and pains in doing organizing work.

Upon arriving at a person’s house after miles of walking, we would talk with family members about their lives, their farms, their economic situation, and especially their problems
concerning land and other issues that affected them as a community. All throughout the process, my trainer was in dialogue with the people. She did not impose herself on them. She would build on what the people wanted to talk about, but she knew how to direct the discussion to allow those she spoke with to see the unjust circumstances that were helping keep them in poverty. These are the skills she wanted me to develop by observing her in action. After the trainer demonstrated the actual skill, the young organizer was expected to acquire and build on that skill based on the person’s ability.

The first ten days of my training were basically an exposure process in which we young trainees were thrown out into the water to see if we were fit for the life of a community organizer. Our trainers, being veterans, were watchful of our behavior in the field and were constantly evaluating us. If, after the ten-day assessment period it was determined that one or more of the trainees was not fit for organizing work, the trainers would inform the person of their decision. Those who showed potential to become effective organizers continued on to a rigorous six-month basic CO training program.

During my training, I did not think I would be able to make the grade, since living in the “boondocks” was a big adjustment for me. Talking with people was not easy in the beginning, because I would get emotional listening to farmers tell about the struggles in their lives. The long walks on mountainous trails were physically exhausting, but one thing was clear: I had my ideals and vision of a just and equal society, and they were what kept me going. As a student I had seen how farmers suffered in landlord-tenant relationships, and I wanted to do something about it. This was my chance, so I knew for sure that, despite the hardships, I wanted to continue the program. After my exposure trip, I was favorably evaluated by my trainer and joined the Basic Community Organizing Training. I was ready to take the challenge of the rigorous course,
intellectually, physically, and emotionally. During the first three months of my training my trainer constantly emphasized that in community organizing attitude is more important than skills and knowledge. She taught that technical proficiency can be developed, but a potential organizer must come into the training with commitment and passion for the oppressed. These qualities can be nurtured, but they are essential attributes for a good community organizer. These are qualities I had.

**Community Organizers as Change Agents**

For the issue-based organizer, conversing with people is central to the job, and my trainer taught me the difference between a “dialogical method,” or “problem-posing approach” and the “banking approach” of educating. According to Freire, social transformation can take place if there are enough facilitators who know how to help the people identify the aspects of their lives that they want to change. The process allows them to identify the problem, analyze the roots of the problem, and plan ways of changing the situation. The role of the facilitator is to provide a framework of creative thinking so that the people can realize ways of finding solutions to their own problems. These were the principles stressed during the first months of my training. As an organizer, I learned that I needed to develop the skill of asking why, how, and who. I needed to engage people’s thinking, their analyzing, deciding, and planning processes to ensure they were central to the problem solving we were trying to facilitate. This is in direct contrast to the “banking approach” of education in which the teacher possesses all the knowledge and the students’ role is just to absorb information.

The issue-based community organizing I was taught is a liberating educational process in which dialogue is critical, as no one has a monopoly on knowledge. No one has all the answers to a particular problem; each individual has unique experiences and ways of looking at a situation. All throughout my training, my trainer patiently demonstrated and explained that
education is a mutual process. Everyone is both a facilitator and a student. She demonstrated the skills that she wanted me to learn, specifically, how to talk with people effectively, to stir up their interest to take action in order to solve a problem, to facilitate meetings, and to manage conflict. She had me try to do all these things by myself, and at the end of the day, she would help me to reflect on my experiences so I could evaluate them myself. The training was not an easy exercise, because it forced you to hold a mirror up to yourself. It was not simply the task of motivating people to take action that was important, but as a change agent it was crucial that the organizer also have the proper values and principles.

**The Rigor of Training: Sharpening the Saw**

The training addressed even the smallest details of handling oneself in the community. I remember during my first weeks of organizing, my trainer had to intervene on many occasions, even concerning the way I dressed. Accustomed to the city not the countryside, I was most comfortable wearing shorts. But my trainer told me that was not allowed since rural people were more conservative than city dwellers and unaccustomed to women wearing shorts. She said that organizers should be “respectable” in the way they dress, talk and approach people. At first, battles constantly raged within me. Vexing questions troubled me, such as: Why do I have to change the way I dress or act simply to win people’s approval? Why can people not just accept me for who I am? I am here to organize and help them with their problems. Am I the one who has to sacrifice? But as the training progressed, I slowly began to grasp the situation, and, little by little, I was able to answer all my questions. I realized that as a change agent people must have a high regard for you as a person, and that in order to be able to integrate into a community effectively, you must win their acceptance.

One of the organizing principles that helped me the most to understand the task before me and my part in it was: “**start where the people are but do not end where they are.**” As a fledgling
organizer, this phrase was instrumental in helping me comprehend the special role I would endeavor to play in the community. I would not simply be living there; I would be helping the people realize the unjust conditions they lived under so they could begin to address their problems. Looking back, I can now appreciate why my trainer intervened the way she did, and I value the vital guidance she provided concerning how I handled myself, how I communicated with people, my manner of dressing, my listening skills, my tenacity, and my work skills. Indeed, it was a tough and rigorous training. The work for social transformation is a formidable undertaking that requires dedication and passion. The aim of the training was to develop committed and enthusiastic organizers willing to work in solidarity with the marginalized sectors of Philippine society. The training team knew that building the skills and nurturing the passion required for effective community organizing would not happen overnight. They felt that through experience and reflection, the young organizers could develop a set of organizing rules based on the process they called action-reflection-action.

**The Training Mechanisms**

My training was rooted in the tradition of classic issue-based community organizing. It did not employ a “sink and swim” methodology, but utilized a closely guided training curriculum developed by veteran organizers based on years of training and organizing experience shaped by the Philippine social context. The curriculum served as a channel for the development of the skills, knowledge, and attitude expected of a good community organizer. The on-the-job training had three different levels, each lasting six months: Basic CO-Training, Advanced CO-Training, and Trainer’s Training. The training process ensured that the organizer could integrate theory and practice.

Aside from one-on-one sessions with the trainer, the young organizer was also expected to join weekly sessions, which employed a more systematic discussion of community issues.
During these sessions the trainees and trainers came together for a lively exchange of ideas and to strategize appropriate action to address the issues each had identified. In community organizing, these meetings are better known as tactic sessions, and are at the heart of the organizing experience. They are where the new organizer learns how to think under pressure. Tactic sessions provide a venue for the creative energies of both young and veteran organizers to develop innovative strategies toward issue resolution. The meeting of the wisdom of the veteran organizers and the passion of their trainees was truly a dynamic and enriching experience. The tactic sessions ensured that lesser community issues were critically analyzed and could be connected to the larger issues. Apart from the tactic sessions, the training team conducted regular strategizing sessions to ensure the coherence of the general direction of the organizing efforts.

As the young organizers gained confidence, their trainers made sure that their strategizing skills also developed.

During the initial organizing work, the trainees were not expected to worry about analyzing development trends at the macro level. We were required to focus on sharpening our basic community organizing skills. Regular evaluations were conducted and our performance in the field was tracked. This was an essential element of the training process. The main task of the organizer is to develop people’s consciousness concerning major issues that affect their lives (e.g., land tenure, the availability of education, healthcare, or potable water) and their ability to confront structures that oppress them. As trainees, we were evaluated based on the number of people we mobilized to participate in a specific activity; for example, a community dialogue with government officials. As trainees, the ultimate expression of our accomplishment was revealed in the quality of the people’s organizations we helped establish, as well as the level of awareness raising we facilitated.
Since community organizing training is not only about action, *education sessions* are integral to the whole process. Through these sessions, the training team ensured that we were getting both theory and practice and that the theoretical discussions fit our needs and were relevant to the organizing activities. The education sessions involved deepening the understanding of community organizing concepts and principles and the ideas and theories introduced by our trainers were directly applicable to the actual events happening on the ground.

The role of the trainers is crucial to the success of the training; it is their responsibility to observe the trainees in the actual practice of community organizing and intervene when needed. The trainers are always on the lookout for fake reports and invented output in case any of the young organizers make inaccurate claims about their work. They are adept at uncovering these kinds of discrepancies by asking the right questions during *individual consultations*. *Area visits* are a crucial activity for the trainer to find out if the young organizer is doing the assigned work or simply inventing a report. Trainers must observe what is going on in the field; it is important for them to be familiar with the situation of the trainee so that proper guidance is provided.

**Surviving the Challenge**

In retrospect, I would say the training allowed us young organizers to clearly examine our inner selves. It can be likened to the process of preparing a young seed to eventually send out its roots. It was like fertile ground that allowed a young plant to grow with proper care and nurturing. In that ground, some of the seeds may sprout and thrive and reach for the sun; some may die, and others may grow in a different direction. Besides the skills, knowledge, and experience we gained, the whole training was about discernment—discerning if community organizing was the path that you wanted to pursue in your life, if it was the road you wanted to take in order to make a difference. Others may choose a different way of expressing their commitment to society, but in my case the training program helped me realize that I truly wanted
to be part of the effort to liberate the marginalized sectors in Philippine society. All the
difficulties I encountered during my first months of training were a humbling experience for me
as a person. But the mistakes I made along the way were also my teacher as I began to acquire
the skills to tacticize, analyze, and organize on my own.

My interaction with my trainer proved to be a liberating experience for me. She believed I
had the potential to become a good organizer, so she patiently cultivated that potential until I was
able to organize on my own. She treated me as someone who wanted to be a true agent for
change, not a mere fieldworker or technician. She helped me to answer the central question of
why I was working with the oppressed. Through deep reflection, my personal experience
provided me the backbone that allowed me to continue my organizing work with rural people.
The training process provided me not only on-the-ground experience, but also a deeper
understanding of the roots of oppression. The combination of practical and theoretical training
broadened my understanding of the work of organizing for power.

My basic and then advanced trainings lasted almost a year. It was the time to develop the
skills, knowledge, and especially the attitude of a good and committed organizer. The process
helped me develop my ability to question the oppressive systems that kept so many people in
poverty. I was convinced that the only way for true change to transpire was for people to make
decisions and take action that would alter their unjust condition. After years of experience, I
developed an even deeper trust, faith and respect in people’s capacity to design their own
empowerment processes. My role was to help facilitate change; it was very clear to me that I was
not the savior of the community. Instead, I challenged people not to be content with or to accept
their poverty and powerlessness.
Being a community organizer is not easy; you need to have commitment, passion, and empathy for the poor. Joining the underprivileged with their struggle is about maintaining a simple lifestyle. How can you be in solidarity with the poor if you live a life far removed from theirs? These are basic tenets that are all-important to issue-based organizers, whose profession is about building people’s organizations that have the power to transform policies and influence decisions that affect the lives of their members. These were the concepts, principles, and values that guided me as I continued my organizing work after finishing my training.

Moving on to Handling More Complex Issues

In 1998, my commitment to people’s empowerment and social justice prompted me to respond to the bigger challenges in Mindanao, an island rife with poverty and social unrest. My work with Mindanao’s indigenous peoples introduced me to their struggle for ancestral land rights, self-determination, and cultural integrity. I lived and worked with the Mandaya tribe of Western Mindanao for almost two years, traversing rugged mountains and crossing rivers daily during my time with this isolated tribal community. While facilitating awareness building of tribal rights and responsibilities, the tribe’s historical account and family genealogies were recorded. These documents served as evidence for their Ancestral Domain claim. Experiencing tribal life deepened my capacity to listen and be sensitive to people’s culture.

While doing organizing work among Muslim, Christian, and Indigenous Peoples of Sultan Kudarat, a new model of peace-based organizing was tested. With the long history of armed struggle in Mindanao, the challenge of bringing together these three ethnic groups for a genuine dialogue towards peace building was a painstaking effort. But after a year of organizing using this new model, the indigenous people and the Muslim communities showed new openness to cooperate with the government and international agencies (e.g., the United Nations Development
Program, Oxfam International, and others) in accordance with the existing Moro National Liberation Front-Philippine Government peace agreement.

One of the highlights of my life as a community organizer was to help bring together organizers from varied sectors—youth, labor, women, farmers, indigenous peoples, and Muslims—in 2002 to review strategies and experiences in community organizing since its establishment in the Philippines in the early 1970s. This event helped to put my organizing experience in perspective and renew my commitment to facilitate social change. After the forum, I realized that I wanted to devote my energy to working with indigenous people since among all the disadvantaged sectors of society, they were the most marginalized.

In 2002, the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, Catholic nuns with a mission among the Aeta, an indigenous group three hours north of Manila, sought the assistance of Community Organizers’ Multiversity (COM, formerly CO-TRAIN), the non-government organization I worked for at the time. The nuns wanted an organizer from COM to train Aeta leaders to mobilize a dozen communities in order to secure their ancestral lands from encroachment. Confident in my decision to focus my work on indigenous people, I found myself facilitating a strategizing session with the Aeta leaders on how to go about tackling their most pressing problem, the lack of land tenure. After one or two more meetings, we had finished the training design for the leaders. During this process I realized that I was making some adjustments in the usual training design, and altering the methodology. I was spending more time explaining community organizing concepts to the leaders than I would have if I had been working with non-indigenous people.

Historically, issue-based organizing started with urban poor families, but rural communities also faced threats, including the lack of land tenure, logging, mining, and other
problems related to rights over, and access to, resources. The challenge for rural organizers has been how to apply the Alinsky model of organizing, which is particularly urban in nature. Is it applicable to the realities of rural communities, especially indigenous communities?

**Connecting the Dots**

Even at the peak of community organizing efforts during the 1970’s, some questioned whether the issue-based community organizing model being practiced in urban areas was appropriate for the indigenous peoples. Murphy (2005) recognized that the community organizing programs should be sensitive to people’s culture. He documents the critique of Jesuit priest, Father Vincent Cullen, who implemented community organizing programs with tribal people in Bukidnon, Mindanao. Cullen feared that the type of organizing he was directing was not totally appropriate for tribal people, or even the Philippine situation in general, because it tended to ignore their traditional ways and failed to deal with questions such as the basic nature of human beings and their destiny (Murphy 2005).

Fr. Cullen wrote the following in 1979:

Alinsky’s own philosophy, while he does accept basic Judeo-Christian insights and principles, is basically secular humanism. By and large Philippine culture at least among the common people is not secularistic, that is, it does not departmentalize into one world of the here and now and another of the spirit. In basic Filipino culture there is a more holistic view of reality which perceives the world of the visible and of the spirit as one with the two aspects interrelated and interacting in most kinds of human activity. Hence, cargo trucks must be blessed with either holy water or chicken blood or both.

Should a basically secularist program be inserted into a culture with such a holistic view of reality, there is bound to be dissonance between the program and the culture. This, I believe, is the basic flaw in the CO program in the Philippines. The CO program instead of harmonizing with the basic Filipino worldview sets up a dissonance within the community and within the personnel themselves, who after all are the inheritors of the basic culture. This creates tension both in the community, between community and personnel and within the personnel themselves. This, I believe, is the basic, if not only cause, for this burnout phenomenon among personnel and the fatigue syndrome among the people.
Let’s be more specific: our programs tend to peak in about two years and then taper off by the end of three. This is true in Kibawe and more recently among the Bukidnon CO programs. After three years the people involved get tired of issue-oriented organization and tend to become confused. Likewise, the personnel suffer the same fatigue leading to burnout.

What’s the reason: CO is non-ideological not only in the narrow sense of not proposing a political-social-economic blueprint for the future but in the sense that it ignores certain fundamental questions; such as the nature of man and his destiny; the basic nature of society and how it works. While it does concentrate on the growth of people, it takes a short-range view in terms of limited, often material gains.

While in the Philippines it must be prepared to go counter to certain Filipino values, such as, the exaggerated subservience to authority in order to obtain its objectives of greater popular participation in decision making, yet by uncritically stressing irreverence in the culture that highly prized it as a fundamental and if rightly understood positive value, CO creates unnecessary tensions and confusions among both the people and personnel with the resultant confusion and fatigue. What to do: For over a year now, there has been a lot of talk about developing a CO philosophy and the writer has contributed some input from a Christian perspective, but not much seems to have been accomplished. One might wonder why it is necessary to create a whole new CO philosophy, perhaps due to an excessive spirit of independence, instead of making a serious attempt to integrate the CO program into an acceptable existing worldview of the people.

The critique was based on the specific experience of implementing community organizing programs in tribal communities. Cullen’s perceptions were valuable to Philippine community organizers, as they provided insights on how to improve tactics and strategies in order to better fit the context and realities of the people. Indeed, the assessment helped to enhance the CO program by encouraging organizers to be more culturally sensitive. Spirituality, cultural values, and receptiveness to local traditions became part of the training curriculum. This helped strengthen the action-reflection-action process of community organizing both in urban and rural communities.

Community organizing is a constantly evolving process. Its practitioners continue to strive for new ways to be effective in dealing with social issues sensitive to the world view of those
with whom they work. In my desire to improve my organizing strategies I felt that I needed the proper tools to be able to effectively ask the right questions in dealing with the issues of indigenous peoples. I adjusted my community organizing practices to fit their context, but I felt I lacked the tools I needed to be truly sensitive to the unique circumstances of the indigenous peoples. Community organizers are adept at analyzing the forces that influence the winnability of an issue, but I feel we need a better understanding of indigenous peoples’ social, economic and political organization, which I believe is critical for the development of effective, holistic organizing strategies.

In the following chapters I will discuss in detail these issues and the organizational development program we formulated for the Aeta communities. I will analyze the community organizing principles as they were applied to the issue of Aeta land rights. What are the important elements and principles that are critical to community organizing? Using an anthropological framework, I will attempt to map the parallels and differences of community organizing and anthropological methods. In this way, I will be able to identify where anthropology can contribute to the practice of community organizing with indigenous peoples.

The next chapter will lay the foundation of understanding the Aeta as a people. I will start with an ethnography of the Aeta Mag-antsi— who are they as a people, their traditional social and economic organization, and how they cope with the present challenges confronting them.
CHAPTER 3
WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLE: THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE AETA

Excitement and anxiety were my companions in 2002 as I packed my backpack in preparation for my trek to the big Aeta resettlement site in the province of Tarlac. I had been asked by a group of Catholic nuns to assist the Aeta in placing a claim for ancestral lands with the government. As I was on the bus from Manila to Capas, Tarlac, my friend’s cynical comments played in my mind: “Are you going to try to organize the Aeta? Your strategies and concepts will be challenged by those unorganized people.” I responded with a smile, but in my mind I knew that no development goal is impossible as long as there is genuine dialogue with the people. This brings to mind an exchange between two great pioneers of non-formal education, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, at the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee during the fall of 1989. During the dialogue, Freire pointed out that “without practice there’s no knowledge.” As an organizer for more than a decade, living and working for justice and liberation has been my ultimate goal. My principles and my understanding of people’s struggle were shaped by continued practice while living and learning with them. Absorbed in my deep thoughts, I was startled by the bus driver’s barking that we had arrived in Capas, where I would be meeting the Aeta Mag-antsi for the first time.

The Aeta Mag-Antsis’ Domain

The province of Tarlac is bound by Zambales Province on the west, sharing the latter’s mountainous terrain, specifically the Zambales Mountain range. The central portion is characterized by rolling hills, while the eastern part is flat, adjoining the province of Nueva Ecija, the rice granary of Luzon. Capas is one of the 18 municipalities that make up Tarlac Province and the ancestral home of the indigenous group known as Aeta, sometimes called “Negritos” or “Kulot” (curly-haired), commonly referred to in the Philippines as the “people of
the mountains.” The Aeta are discriminated against because of their dark skin, curly hair, small stature, and also because of their strong emphasis on foraging (Seitz 1998).

The Aeta of Capas speak the Mag-antsi language, one of five spoken by the Aeta inhabiting the Zambales Mountain range, but they continually struggle to maintain their mother tongue because of their frequent encounters with their lowland neighbors. Their close contact with the mainstream lowland Sambal and Kampangan ethno-linguistic groups has influenced their traditional subsistence economy of hunting, gathering, fishing, cultivating, and collecting forest products for the purposes of economic exchange with the lowland groups (Shimizu 1989, Seitz 2004). However, as Shimizu (1989) pointed out, interaction between the Aeta and the lowlanders may be traced to the pre-Spanish period (1565-1898), and these encounters caused the Aeta to move out of the lowlands and into the mountains. The flatlands that used to be inhabited by the Aeta are now owned and occupied by mainstream lowland Kapampangans and Ilocanos.

As a result of the devastating eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991, the province of Tarlac lost an estimated 10,074 hectares of farm and woodland as volcanic ash, sand, and flows of pyroclastic material covered the mountains and hills that were the Aetas’ traditional home. Those who lived in the immediate vicinity of Mount Pinatubo were evacuated to the lowlands and eventually resettled in other areas not affected by the eruption (Seitz 2004). They had to adopt entirely new coping strategies while living in the evacuation and resettlement sites where they were forced to abandon their life and ways of the mountains.

**Who Are the Aeta Mag-Antsi?**

Before the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, the Aeta were already undergoing a transition from hunting-gathering to swidden agriculture, in some cases mixed with permanent wetland rice farming. Their socio-economic behavior is based on the utilization of available resources within
their territory; thus they are loosely structured as a tribe. In the past, the Aeta were primarily hunters and gatherers, but they have been practicing shifting cultivation for a long time. In Shimizu’s (1989) account, aerial photography conducted in 1907 showed a clearing that was most likely used for swidden farming within a forested area in Aeta lands. There are no documents indicating when the Aeta first adopted shifting cultivation, but it is important to note that they still practice hunting and gathering in addition to swidden agriculture.

In Seitz’s 2004 study, he used Woodburn and Testard’s classification to distinguish the Aeta from other groups; he said that the Aeta can be classified as *hunters and gatherers with immediate-return systems* characterized by the *immediate use of food resources*. This categorization explains the Aetas’ no-storage economic orientation in securing livelihood for the long term (Seitz 2004). How does it affect their economic organization? To be able to understand the Aeta, we need to appreciate how they make a living, as adaptational mechanisms are related to how people organize themselves to utilize natural resources effectively within their habitat (Vivelo 1978).

The institutional and evolutionary approaches in understanding major development stages of a society help explain the transition the Aeta were undergoing before the eruption of Mount Pinatubo. The hunting-gathering tradition they inherited from their ancestors is deep seated in the psyche of the Aeta as reflected by common use of the bow and arrow and their deep knowledge and skill in collecting and gathering resources within their territory. These practices are characteristic of the Aeta way of life. With hunting-gathering and swidden as their main economic activities, the Aeta must be mobile and flexible as they utilize resources within their ancestral domain. This is expressed in their settlement patterns. Their mobility necessitates that
they be scattered, and it requires a loose social structure. The practice of gahak or swidden is not a guarantee that they will stay in a certain location, as their cultivations shift almost yearly.

How do the Aeta organize themselves if mobility, flexibility, and freedom are their society’s defining characteristics? The family grouping is the basic unit of Aeta society and is defined by consanguineal affinity: parent, child and sibling ties. As a social unit, these family groupings stay together in one camp, especially when hunting and fishing. They help each other to collect and gather food, which they share. Today, the majority of the Aeta live in villages of fifteen to more than eighty households (the large villages are the ones that have schools). Several family groupings may live in the same village, but if there is conflict between any of the families of different groups, one of the groups will usually move to another village (Shimizu 1989).

Aeta society may be described as acephalous, or “without a head,” as it does not recognize a position that carries overall political authority. However, family group-based leadership exists, which functions to maintain harmony within family groupings. Several family groups living together forms a village, and conflicts and problems are more complex since the population is dense, and no central authority is in charge of maintaining order (Vivelo 1978). Leadership is determined by lineage and personal characteristics, but the oldest and most respected males are usually the recognized leaders. Leadership, though informal, can be transferred through family lines, and it is usually the eldest son who assumes the role. In resolving conflicts, the head is expected to get the consensus of his group members.

The Aeta Mag-Antsis’ economic practices are rooted in their economic base and social relationships. Their economy is embedded in their society; the way they organize their economic system is integrated in their social organization (Dalton 1971). The hunting-gathering tradition is
an important part of their cultural image even though it is no longer being practiced in its pure form.

**Perception of the Past: Indigenous Land Use and Management System**

Prior to the Mount Pinatubo eruption, the majority of the Aeta Mag-antsi lived in the sanctuary of the Pinatubo highlands and had minimal contact with lowland populations. Most practiced swidden farming in varying degrees, depending on their needs, skills, and ecological situation. The vegetation in the area before the eruption was characterized by tall grasses (*Miscanthus and Imperata*) and wild banana bushes, as well as isolated patches of fast-growing trees where the Aeta made their swiddens (Seitz 2004). The wild banana bushes, or *amukao*, became one of the main sources of income for the Aeta after the eruption.

Seitz (2004) observed that the Aeta living in the hinterlands continued to practice hunting and gathering but also cultivated sweet potatoes (*camote*) and bananas. He said that those who had regular contact with the lowland populations adopted a considerable number of lowland culture traits. Shimizu (1989) also indicated that the Aeta who lived on the periphery and had frequent contact with lowlanders acquired new agricultural technology. However, he pointed out that the Aeta have maintained hunting and gathering through time as supplementary to shifting cultivation. The Aetas’ basic means of subsistence through shifting cultivation, hunting, gathering, and fishing provided the means to survive by utilizing land and forests resources. Their intimate knowledge of flora, fauna, and land helped them to develop a system that is in tune with their lifestyle.

**Hunting and Gathering**

The Aetas’ mobility and flexibility are clearly evident in their hunting and gathering activities within their territories. Hunting grounds and territorial boundaries have never been fixed among the Aeta, but mutual respect and agreement between hunting parties and the
recognized occupants of ancestral lands are highly important. Hunting is sometimes an individual event, but it is in most cases a group effort using dogs and weapons such as bow and arrow. Shimizu (1989) observed that the Aeta have more than twenty different types of arrowheads, many made from iron nails obtained from lowlanders and each with a different name and purpose. Traps are also used for killing or capturing wild pigs, deer, wild chickens and other birds. Hunting and fishing were the major sources of protein for the Aeta, especially before the Second World War.

Aside from hunting, the gathering of wild plants is also an important source of food for the Aeta, particularly during hard times. In a study conducted in 1940, Fox documented at least 74 edible plants that contribute to the Aetas’ diet. Hunting and gathering are very much part of the Aeta way of life, but more so when Mount Pinatubo was still rich in game animals and other forest resources. The decline in forest area, even before the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, meant a decline in the hunting and gathering strategies of these people.

**Shifting Cultivation or Gahak**

Conklin (1957) defined shifting cultivation as an undetermined number of agricultural systems within which the critical limits and significant relations of time, space, technique, and local ecology are explicit. The concept of time, space, technique, and local ecology are very important to the different stages of the Aetas’ practice of shifting cultivation, presented in the following table.

Time is always a determining factor for the swidden activities since the Mount Pinatubo area has two distinct seasons: the rainy season (June-October) and the dry season (November to May). Most swiddens are made in secondary forest. Throughout the different stages of the agricultural cycle members of nuclear family groupings are involved in the whole swidden processes (see Table 1), from clearing to the planting, weeding and harvesting of root crops such
as sweet potatoes, yams, taros, and cassava, and other crops such as corn, beans and rice (Shimizu 1989). The Aeta Mag-antsi identify ten traditional rice varieties they plant in their swidden fields. In most cases the corn, yams and upland rice are planted in the same field; some beans are planted next to pollarded trees while others are planted along the edges of the field and allowed to climb among the surrounding bushes.

Table 3-1. Agricultural cycle of swidden fields

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Swidden 1</th>
<th>Swidden 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dec</td>
<td>Selecting the site</td>
<td>Selecting the site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>Slashing</td>
<td>Slashing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>(Drying)</td>
<td>(Drying)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Burning</td>
<td>Burning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Cleaning</td>
<td>Cleaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planting corn and beans</td>
<td>Planting corn and beans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Weeding</td>
<td>Planting root crops and beans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Planting rice</td>
<td>.......</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Harvesting corn</td>
<td>Weeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug</td>
<td>Weeding</td>
<td>.......</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep</td>
<td>Harvesting beans</td>
<td>Harvesting root crops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(repeatedly from now on)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct</td>
<td>Harvesting rice</td>
<td>Harvesting beans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec</td>
<td>Cleaning and weeding</td>
<td>Planting root crops</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Hiromu Shimizu in Pinatubo Aytas: Continuity and Change).

The Aetas’ swidden agriculture is evidence of the unique relationship between humans and nature; it emphasizes the importance of their traditional territory, where they exercise their rights in utilizing areas suitable for swidden agriculture (Bennagen 1996). Time and space are critical for the Aeta Mag-antsis’ swidden agriculture since all their activities are dictated by the two seasons— wet and dry. Their agriculture utilizes multiple cropping schemes where several crops are planted in the same swidden field. Multiple cropping provides food security in case of plant failure due to pests, drought or other related causes. This system of cropping, which mimics a
natural multi-storied forest, is evidence of a management practice that helps retain soil fertility by using vegetative cover.

Even before the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, much of the natural forest in the accessible parts of Aeta territory had been denuded due to logging practiced in the pre-World War II era through the 1970s. Deforestation, due to external and internal factors including shifting cultivation itself and fire used in hunting, had caused the expansion of grasslands, decreasing the area suitable for swidden cultivation and shortening fallow periods from more than ten years to just four or five years (Shimizu 1989).

Their shifting cultivation and hunting and gathering practices illustrate the Aetas’ sophisticated knowledge of their ecosystem. They have survived in their environment by understanding the overall relationship among plants, animals, time and seasons. As mentioned, destructive activities and population growth before the eruption had exacted a heavy toll on the flora and fauna of the Mount Pinatubo area. Swidden fields had shorter fallow periods. Hunting became less frequent as there was less game available. Reduced forest area yielded fewer edible plants. In reaction to these limitations, the Aeta adapted by engaging in more market-oriented economic activities such as charcoal making and day-wage labor that allowed them to survive. But in June 1991 the special relationship between the Aeta and their environment was forever altered by the devastating eruption of Mount Pinatubo, which made large portions of territory uninhabitable, at least initially. According to the United States Geological Survey, the Mount Pinatubo eruption was the second largest eruption of the twentieth century, second only to the 1912 eruption of Mount Katmai in Alaska, and ten times larger than Mount Helens’ eruption in 1980.
From Survival in the Highlands to Survival in the Lowlands

For the Aeta, Mount Pinatubo is not simply a source of life but a center of their spirituality and belief system. They believe that their highest deity, Apo Namalyari, their creator and guardian, resides in the summit of Mount Pinatubo. They regard its eruption as a consequence of man’s destructive activities against nature, as anyone who disturbs the environment or the volcano will be punished (Seitz 2004). This belief system and the Aetas’ knowledge of the physical and spirit worlds helped them to rationalize the effects of Mount Pinatubo on their lives. To save themselves from the anger of Mount Pinatubo, the Aeta were left with no choice but to flee their ancestral homeland right before the volcano erupted.

The eruption of Mount Pinatubo changed the ecosystem in varying degrees. Before the eruption, at 1,745 meters, the volcano had one of the highest peaks in West-Central Luzon. The following account describes the state of Mount Pinatubo based on Jones and Newhall’s narrative in *Fire and Mud, Eruptions and Lahars of Mount Pinatubo, Philippines*:

Before its June 15, 1991 eruption, Mount Pinatubo consisted of a rounded, steep-sided, domelike mass that rose about 700 meters above a broad, gently sloping, deeply dissected apron of pyroclastic and epiclastic materials. Some relics of older volcanic edifices, including an ancestral Mount Pinatubo, lay south, east, and northeast of Mount Pinatubo. In comparison to well-known stratocones such as Mayon or Fuji, Mount Pinatubo was small and inconspicuous, but its extensive pyroclastic apron told of large prehistoric explosive eruptions.

Eruption of about 5 cubic kilometers of magma on June 15, 1991 created a new, 2.5-kilometer-diameter collapse caldera centered slightly northwest of the pre-eruption summit. The pre-eruption summit was included in the area of collapse, so the post-eruption height of Mount Pinatubo was substantially reduced. Valleys that had existed in the pyroclastic apron were largely filled by eruptive products; valleys that had been carved into older volcanic terrain and partly filled by prehistoric eruptions of Mount Pinatubo were partly filled once again.

The Effects of the Mount Pinatubo Eruption on the Aeta

After the eruption, the Aeta found themselves living in evacuation centers, surviving on relief goods and services provided by the government, churches, and non-government
organizations. The sacred mountain that had once been their home was violently expelling immense volumes of pyroclastic material. Seitz (2004) cited that volcanic ash had spread over 22,500 square kilometers, 6,000 of which—primarily to the west and southwest of Mount Pinatubo—had been buried under a layer more than 1 meter thick. A total of 960 square kilometers of farmland, 200 square kilometers of fish ponds and forests were covered by ash.

Figure 3-1. River valley filled in by pyroclastic flows from 1991 eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. A) Valley before the eruption, B) Same valley after eruption. (Source: http://pubs.usgs.gov/pinatubo/wescott/fig2.jpg. Last accessed July, 2008).

The rate of destruction varied with proximity to the crater; the dense forests on and surrounding the mountain’s peak were completely destroyed. But as one moved farther from the center of eruption, vegetation was not totally devastated; many of the Aeta Mag-antsi lands were
covered with approximately 1 to 3 feet of volcanic ash and sand, burying grasses and shrubs but allowing most trees to survive. This situation forced the majority of the Aeta to stay in the evacuation centers, eventually relocating to resettlement sites in San Fernando, Capas, and San Clemente, Tarlac. Physically dislocated and with most vegetation either destroyed by pyroclastic flows or buried under grey volcanic sand and ash, the Aeta could no longer employ swidden farming or occasional hunting and gathering as their main economic strategy. Since it was such unfamiliar territory, they faced difficulties living in the lowland evacuation camps. In the resettlement sites land and other resources, for which they had to compete with each other, were scarce. These conditions prompted the decision of some Aeta to return to their original territory in spite of the danger posed by rivers flooded with boiling lahar and highly unstable volcanic deposits hundreds of feet thick at the higher elevations. Some of the Aeta returned to their land within a year after the eruption. Others followed, some up to seven or eight years later, but there was a minority who opted to stay in the resettlement areas.

**Life after Mount Pinatubo**

On their return to their homes, the Aeta found the hills and mountains covered with volcanic ash and a proliferation of wild banana plants in stand-alone patches or mixed with secondary forest. The challenge for them to adapt to a radically changed post-eruption environment was one in which their mobility and flexibility helped them to survive. Survival mechanisms, both traditional and newly developed in evacuation and resettlement sites, influenced their repatriation to their much-changed environment.

Given such an unfamiliar terrain, how did the Aeta manage to survive in this new landscape? They had always depended on their environment and resources for their existence. The thick ash cover and heavily silted rivers did not discourage them from attempting to cultivate traditional and relatively newly adopted crops. They realized that the ash fall was
favorable for the cultivation of tubers. According to the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHILVOCS) and the Bureau of Soils and Water Management (BSWM), except for nitrogen, the major plant nutrients phosphorus, potassium, calcium, and magnesium were adequate in the ash expelled by Mount Pinatubo. These plant nutrients present in the ash are beneficial to the soil and crops that require low-inputs of fertilizer. The rich allophane content of the ash causes potassium fixation and slows down the mineralization of organic matter (Pinatubo Soilwatch). Consequently, the new input of volcanic material mixed with existing topsoil produces highly fertile soil. These findings of experts were proven by the experience of the Aeta as they farmed this new type of soil. They found that the mixture of sand with the topsoil made farming easier as it became incorporated with heavier soils. They said that the new soil got better yields when planted with root crops, vegetables, and peanuts (Seitz 2004).

The new development in soil productivity motivated the Aeta to plant taro and sweet potatoes on a commercial scale, utilizing plow agriculture with draft animals acquired from rehabilitation projects or neighboring lowlanders. This signified a major change in existing land management practices. Before the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, the majority of the Aeta practiced shifting cultivation and multiple cropping. Living in the resettlement areas provided them more opportunity to interact with lowland farmers, influencing their economic strategies. They were exposed to new sources of income beyond the limits provided by their old environment. They became aware of commercial mono-cropping and the use of chemical inputs in farming. Today, every Aeta community in Tarlac has medium and relatively large-scale (1-3 hectares per field) commercial plantings of taro. The use of draft animals (water buffalo) and chemical inputs, and the need for large amounts of planting materials required the Aeta to enter into agreements with lowlanders able to finance the large taro plantations. These lowlanders supply chemical inputs
and planting materials, and the Aeta provide the labor and the land. In some cases, Aeta borrow money to support their taro production and, as a result, become tied to a borrower-lender relationship. If they do not have a yield sufficient to be able to pay their debt, they lose their land to the financer. This situation has resulted in the loss of traditional lands to lowland financers. Where this has happened, the Aeta no longer have the freedom to utilize traditional resources or develop their land since it is now under the control of outsiders.

Before the Mount Pinatubo eruption, the main economic activity of the Aeta was shifting cultivation and planting root crops with no chemical input. At present, they are not only producing food for their own consumption but they now have to support other needs that require the purchase of rice, coffee, sugar, monosodium glutamate, meat, and clothing. Based on my experience of living with these people, I observed that instead of the traditional root crops, rice is now their main source of carbohydrates. The effect of commercially purchased rice and its role in the Aetas’ transition to a cash-dominated economic system needs further research. I believe their exposure to a purely rice diet in the evacuation and resettlement sites influenced the lifestyle they now lead. Adults and children now eat rice for almost every meal. As with the majority of lowland Filipinos, even if there are alternative staple food available, rice is preferred above all others. This change in the diet and the resulting need for cash has resulted in the Aetas’ heavy involvement in collecting and selling wild banana blossoms and wild bamboo, charcoal making, and day-wage labor. They are forced to engage in these money-generating activities to be able to produce cash for the family in order to buy things from the market, most importantly rice. Many families still practice shifting cultivation and a certain amount of hunting and gathering, but, even so, almost all are now heavily involved in the mainstream cash economy to be able to purchase food items that meet dietary needs not met by traditional activities.
The change in their land use and land management systems was heavily influenced by forces from outside the Aeta villages and was precipitated by the need to earn money. A mainly subsistence economy was replaced by a mixed subsistence-cash economy in which taro plantations are made on sloping land using plow agriculture. Soil erosion is significant. The need to generate cash without considering the effects on the environment and the future is in conflict with traditional values and knowledge systems, which were based on a subsistence economy and generally less environmentally destructive. This has always been the struggle between group survival and long-term sustainability over short-term gain (Nazarea 1999).

**The Challenge for the Aeta**

The Aetas’ story of survival and adaptation to their changed environment and contact with other cultures is a classic example of a subsistence sector undergoing diffusion, adaptation, and innovation. In spite of all these changes, the common theme in the lives of the Aeta is their connection to the land. *Land is life* is a simple phrase but indeed a meaningful expression of indigenous people’s special connection to their land and environment; the social and material relationships involved determine their cultural survival and identity. Simply stated, land is an indispensable element for the Aeta; their livelihoods almost exclusively depend on it, which makes land, how they adapt to and utilize it under local conditions, the basis for their cultural diversity and distinctiveness. The Aeta, practicing both occasional hunting and gathering and swidden agriculture, are no exception; land is indispensable for them to survive. The land and resources surrounding Mount Pinatubo have been the source of life for these indigenous people for many hundreds, possibly thousands of years.

Traditionally, the Aeta moved freely and engaged in economic activities within their ancestral lands. If they had internal conflicts over territorial boundaries, they settled them
amongst themselves. But now they were being forced to face the state and other stakeholders to fight for their rights as the rightful owners of their land.

First, the area was declared a military reservation, the origin of which can be traced to the establishment by the US colonial government of Fort Stotsenburg in 1903. The area’s grassy plains, which were traditional Aeta hunting grounds, were found to provide excellent grazing for US cavalry horses. Eventually, Fort Stotsenburg was renamed Clark Air Base and an area of almost 60,000 hectares was declared a military reservation; the Aeta were banned from portions of their land utilized by the US and Philippine militaries. In 1992, when the Philippine senate failed to renew the bases lease agreement, the US military was forced to pull out, and the area was converted to a special economic zone overseen by the Clark Development Corporation, with portions remaining under the control the Philippine military. These are two of the government entities the Aeta have had to face while claiming their ancestral lands.

Second, when Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991, the Aeta had no choice but to evacuate. Shortly after the eruption, even though the government advised them that it was not yet safe to go back, some of them decided to return to their land. They said that they could not survive in the resettlement sites, and that they would rather face the challenges posed to their health and livelihood by the ubiquitous volcanic deposits than depend on welfare aid. When they arrived, they found extensive areas had been turned into cattle ranches by middle class lowlanders, with tacit approval from the military. Even before Mount Pinatubo erupted, the Aeta had to deal with lowland cattle ranchers, but there were fewer of them then. By the time the Aeta decided to claim their ancestral lands, almost half of the area was occupied by cattle ranchers. This was a sensitive issue for the Aeta since some of them had become caretakers of the cattle directly employed by the ranchers.
Third, when the Aeta had reestablished themselves on their traditional lands after the eruption, suddenly the Department of Environment and Natural Resources decided to reforest portions of the area under the government’s Community Based Forest Management program. Many of the Aeta were alarmed. If their land was planted to forest trees, how could they practice their traditional swidden agriculture or plant taro for the market, as some of them had learned to do?

Fourth, delivery of basic services was one of the major concerns of the Aeta. Most of them lived in isolated communities, void of social infrastructure and services, including health, education, and potable water.

Fifth, the local and national governments promoted Mount Pinatubo as a tourist destination, encouraging to visits to the volcano’s crater lake and nearby hot springs. The local government promoted foreign investment in infrastructure and development of the area for tourism, instead of helping the local residents to start eco-tourism projects that involve community participation. A Korean investor, in partnership with the local government of Capas, Tarlac, developed a resort and tour package that attracted more Asian tourists than locals. Some Aeta were employed as tourist guides, but they had very little or no say in deciding the direction of tourism development. Their right to control the access to and development of their ancestral lands was not recognized or respected.

These were the issues the Aeta faced when I arrived in Tarlac. Were the people expecting me to bring answers to their problems? Why was I there? How would I start the organizing process? These questions caused me unease, since the Aeta belong to a different cultural group than those with which I had had organizing experience, upland farmers and rural communities from mainstream societies. But eventually apprehension was replaced by a sense of challenge. A
community organizer for eight years, I knew that the basic principle was to understand and respect where the people were culturally, economically and politically. Deep inside me, I knew that I did not have the answer to all their problems, but one thing was clear to me— they needed to fight for their rights as indigenous people. They needed to defend their ancestral lands and protect their territory. I may not have had the answer to all their problems, but I was sure I could help facilitate a process of realizing the solution to those problems.

The Collaboration

I became involved in the struggle of the Aeta through the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission in Tarlac. They were invited by the government to help with the Mount Pinatubo rehabilitation program at the resettlement site in Kalangitan, Capas, Tarlac. The first two years of the program consisted of the sisters providing pure relief services, after which they ventured into carabao (water buffalo) dispersal, food processing and other livelihood projects. After more than ten years of assisting the Aeta, the Holy Spirit sisters, with the insistence of Aeta who had been on an exposure trip to a different Holy Spirit mission with another indigenous group and seen the programs there, decided on a process of addressing more long-term issues such as land and education, and later on, sustainable livelihood. The sisters had links and networks with non-governmental organizations specializing in community organizing, including the one I was working with at the time. It was this way I became a resource person for the Mission.

The Holy Spirit Aeta Mission is a social action program of the Catholic Church. Its main goal is to strengthen the capacity of the Aeta to address their most urgent concerns. In order to achieve that goal, different programs were identified including capacity building, sustainable resource and livelihood management, holistic education, potable water systems and health care. The coordinator of the program is the sister-in-charge from the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. I was the resource person for community organizing and training, and my main responsibility was
to train Aeta leaders to facilitate a process for village-level participation in addressing external problems. There is also a livelihood program. The person in charge of it is a lay worker, who is also responsible for developing the capacity of the Aeta to manage sustainable livelihood practices. The education program is in partnership with the Department of Education, which now has two registered teachers assigned to one of the Aeta villages. Aside from the government teachers, the Aeta Mission runs its own preschools and trains local Aeta to act as facilitators and assist the lowland teachers. To support the program, the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission draws from their own mission funds and receives additional support from their long-time mission partners in the Philippines and abroad.

As a resource person for community organizing and training, my main role was to enhance the capacity of the leaders and villagers to effectively address external threats, and in the process, develop a strong community organization. That organization is LABAYKU, a federation of
village-level Aeta organizations founded during relief efforts at the Kalangitan Resettlement Site. I knew that the Aeta must be organized in a way to be able to effectively assert their rights. They must have the power to dictate the kind of life that they want without being overpowered by a dominant culture.

**Being a Facilitator and a Learner**

When I decided to be part of the Aetas’ struggle to claim their ancestral land, I knew that I needed to have a better grasp of their situation to be an effective change agent. Paulo Freire once questioned community facilitators in their process of dealing with community issues. He said, “How is it possible for us to work in a community without feeling the spirit of the culture that has been there for many years, without trying to understand the soul of the culture? We cannot interfere in this culture. Without understanding the soul of the culture we just invade the culture.” But what does it mean to understand culture? Anthropologically, human culture has an underlying structure that is expressed in a given society in ways including social and political organization, kinship, and how people use time, money or social skills in acquiring resources. Familiarity with these concepts when I started my work would have improved my organizing efforts with indigenous peoples because as an organizer I could have integrated the people’s own social and political principles in building organizations instead of using external organizational models. For organizers, there is always the dilemma to confront the urgency of issues at hand versus deeper community integration. Did I allow myself to learn from the people, or did I act as if I had a set formula for organizing communities? Did I ever ask the leaders and community members about their traditional social organization?

In the next chapter I will discuss my own personal experience of organizing as I examine the issue of the cultural logic of the organizing model. What is “universal” or “cross-culturally
relevant” about these community organizing strategies that we have used to empower rural communities?
The mobilization of people to act in concert for the common good is possibly the fullest expression of genuine people power. This cannot be done except through self-organization by a whole group. The organization can be very rudimentary or sophisticated, transitory or permanent, issue-oriented or faith/ideology-inspired, but whatever its nature as a functioning entity, its strength will depend on how truly participatory it is in its inner make-up and in its execution of common decisions; also on its constant centering on people and their good. The new human world order we are concerned with here, when brought down to its minimal effective working unit, is people at the grassroots level, mobilized and organized for power, that is, not for power’s sake but for people.

Bishop Francisco Claver, 1979
Bukidnon, Philippines

The words of Bishop Claver have been for me a constant reminder that issue-based organizing is about organizing for power, the kind of organizing that builds grassroots people’s organizations to transform the dehumanizing conditions of society. The goal is to develop dynamic organizations in which the oppressed decide to improve their situation and actively participate in that transformation. This is community organizing that is connected to the struggles of the oppressed towards social transformation. Organizers believe that communities that experience structural violence through unequal distribution of wealth in society should organize and work to reclaim their power. Structural violence is characterized by poverty and steep grades of social inequality (Farmer 2004). Paul Farmer notes that structural violence informs the study of the social machinery of oppression. As early as 1969, Johan Galtung and the liberation theologists from Latin American used structural violence to describe poverty and social inequality and how such inequalities are embedded in the social and economic structures of society.

The challenge for community organizers is how to dismantle oppression and different forms of inequality. How do they do that? How do issue-based organizers operate? If the unjust
political, economic, and social structures of Philippine society are to be changed, what are the necessary steps to be able to achieve that goal?

Issue-based organizing is an ongoing process that allows the oppressed to achieve their own empowerment as they confront poverty and powerlessness. Central to this organizing model as practiced by the majority of the non-government organizations espousing justice and equality is that the people take ownership of the process. Community organizing is employed where there are pressing community issues and the affected people seek help from either church organizations or local non-government entities. This means that an organizer or organizing team will only enter the community if there is a pressing and immediate issue that affects the majority of the community and there is a request for assistance. Also, it is important that those affected are willing to act to solve the problem confronting them. Community organizers help the people to analyze the issue at hand and determine if there is a government agency or other responsible institutions that can address their demands. In issue-based community organizing, it is a ground rule that the issues identified by the community go through a tedious process of identifying the appropriate government agency to approach, deciding if there are sufficient numbers of people who are willing to mobilize, and if the demand is feasible. These processes are critical in determining whether the issue is “winnable.” Issue winnability is paramount for issue-based organizers; it is an iron rule that the first collective action must be a victory. Community organizers ensure that the first mobilization allows people to realize that if they come together as a group, they have the power to change their destiny. A sense of victory is essential to the legitimization of the community organizing process.

Philippine community organizing as a discipline holds that social transformation can only transpire if people take action and are able to break away from their own “culture of silence,” a
state where the oppressed find it difficult to act and confront the oppression they face. The poor are conditioned to believe that the economic, cultural, and political burdens they bear are normal parts of their lives. Paulo Freire alleged that it is hard for the oppressed to take action since a culture of silence, or a quiet acquiescence to their condition, has been ingrained into their consciousnesses. The poor often believe that the only way to get out of poverty is by waiting for the coming of a messiah that will lead them to liberation. Community organizers feel the opposite; the culture of silence can be wiped out by tapping people’s capability to confront their dehumanizing conditions. The major goal of the organizing process is to eradicate poverty that is rooted in unjust social and power relations. The sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and people’s marginal position in society can be replaced by one of empowerment and hope through strong people’s organizations built on people’s power and people’s leadership.

Community organizing reflects an entire process of identifying issues, mobilizing people, and maintaining an organization that has the power to instigate policy change within a political and social system. These community organizing concepts, principles and practices have guided me throughout my organizing work.

**Reweaving the Community Organizing Process**

In November 1985, an important gathering of community organizers from throughout the Philippines was held. The purpose of the Tagisan Meeting, as it came to be known, was to provide an opportunity for practitioners to reflect on the Philippine community organizing experience. It included a comprehensive process of defining the basic premises of organizing as they evolved over time, resulting in the following description of the features vital to community organizing:

*A Progressive Cycle of Action-Reflection-Action: CO begins and builds upon local, small and concrete issues, those which the people want to do something about. It emphasizes intensive disciplined preparation of as many people as possible—from the identification of*
the issue, the clarification of the issue, the decision-making on the courses of action, the evaluation of and reflection on the action taken. As such, CO is a continuously dynamic cycle that builds upon the previous phase, from local to national, from concrete to more abstract issues.

*Consciousness-Raising through Experiential Learning:* Central to the CO process is the development of awareness and the corollary motivation to act upon reality. Conscientization is not achieved through traditional rote memorization or the banking system of education but through practice. CO, therefore, places emphasis on learning that emerges from concrete action and which enriches succeeding actions. It is through this dialectical relation between theory and practice that a people’s consciousness is progressively raised.

*Participatory and Mass-based:* CO is primarily directed towards, and biased in favor of, the poor, the powerless and the oppressed. But partisanship is not sufficient. Change must be achieved through a participatory process wherein the whole community or as many people as possible are involved in the organizing experience.

*Democratic Leadership:* The community organizer is not the leader, neither are individuals and personalities. CO is group-centered, not leader-oriented, and leaders are identified, emerge and are tested through action rather than appointed or selected by some external force or entity. As a result, leadership must at all times be accountable to the people (Narciso-Apuan 1985).

As a community organizer for more than a decade, these basic community organizing processes have become a part of me as a person. The skills, knowledge, and attitude of an organizer are second nature to me. Definitely, learning does not stop once the training ends; it is an ongoing process that continues as one adds to their organizing experience. Having been exposed to the realities of the rural poor, I realized that indigenous people are more deprived than other national populations in the Philippines. This is where I wanted to make a difference.

**Working with Indigenous People: Organizing the Aeta for Power**

Liberating education and empowering processes were my tools in organizing communities; wherever I went, those skills that I developed over the years served as my coat of arms. And when I got the opportunity, I was confident I could make a difference working with indigenous people. I believed that the community organizing process articulated by the organizers during the Tagisan conference would work in the indigenous people’s context. I had strong convictions that
having been marginalized for so long, the indigenous peoples needed to organize in a way that would allow them to collectively address the conditions that were keeping them in poverty and from attaining the development they sought. They needed a type of organizing that would allow them to build the strength to pressure and make the government accountable to them.

**Marginalization, Oppression, and Poverty from the Eye of an Outsider**

Development institutions and government agencies often introduce development programs aimed at improving indigenous people’s impoverished condition. Based on poverty incidence research conducted by the Asian Development Bank in 2002, a majority of Philippine indigenous people fall under the category of “poorest of the poor.” Material poverty is common among indigenous people, especially those who have been displaced from their ancestral lands by land grabbing, logging, mining or other large-scale development projects. Access to and rights over their land and resources are key elements for indigenous people to be able to survive. Land is an indispensable element for them; their livelihoods almost exclusively depend on it, which makes land, how indigenous people adapt to and utilize it under local conditions, the basis for their cultural distinctiveness.

Indigenous people have their own concepts of poverty and development different from those of the West. For them, development is not about accumulating material wealth but is about access to their land and other natural resources. Most indigenous communities are physically isolated from developed areas and roads, so access to basic services such as health, education, and social infrastructure is limited, as is their involvement in the decision-making processes of government and society that ultimately affect them. Their invisibility is one of the reasons they have remained poorer, as defined by government and international agencies, than other sectors in society.
Indigenous peoples acknowledge being materially poor, but they have very rich cultures, extensive knowledge of their environment, and traditions that sustain them as peoples. Indeed, they have a point in asking who defines poverty. But whatever parameters outsiders use to define poverty, the indigenous peoples are adamant that they cannot survive without their land and resources found on that land. For them, losing their land to outside interests would be the true manifestation of poverty.

**Why Organize the Indigenous People?**

This was a difficult question that I had to deal with, since most of the active and politicized indigenous people’s organizations claimed that as distinct ethno-linguistic groups, they were already organized. They did not need an outsider to help them organize themselves. I was curious, though, that despite the proclamations from progressive indigenous organizations, there were requests from many communities for assistance in facing external threats, assistance that necessitated community organizing strategies outside traditional organizational mechanisms. So despite the caveats from my fellow NGO workers, in 2002 I decided to respond to the request of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters to do organizing work with the Aeta indigenous people at the Kalangitan Resettlement Area and adjacent mountain villages in the province of Tarlac.

**The Missionary Sisters and their Calling**

The cataclysmic eruption of Mount Pinatubo, passion, calling for service, and commitment to marginalized sectors were what brought the Holy Spirit sisters to Kalangitan Resettlement Area in Capas, Tarlac in 1991, when they established the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission. The urgency of the situation created by the volcanic eruption prompted the sisters to start relief services in order to ensure the welfare of the Aeta in the resettlement site. The encounter with the sisters opened new learning opportunities for the Aeta; they became aware of government programs and
were able to gain access to resources, such as carabao (water buffalo), community water systems, and other basic services.

The sisters’ methods changed over time. From their initial welfare approach, they shifted to “capacity building” by supporting Aeta livelihood opportunities. Their program evolved with the belief that dependency would not be good for the Aeta in the long run. From 1994 to 2001, the mission’s focus was to introduce the concept and practice of sedentary farming using organic methods. They also established several livelihood projects for Aeta women including food processing and handicraft production.

In 2001, the Holy Spirit sisters underwent a process of reflection to determine whether they were reaching their goal of building the capacity of the Aeta to become self sufficient. In addition to questioning whether the program was attaining its primary objective, the sisters also felt their efforts in Kalangitan were only reaching a fraction of Aeta, many of whom by now had moved back to the mountains from the relocation sites. The review of plans and programs led the sisters to develop what they believed would be a strategy to improve their service. The following is an excerpt from a document produced during the sisters’ reflection process.

The Aetas learned how to farm, when before the fertile earth would bear food without so much intervention from man and his animal, except the planting of seeds. They learned how to use money and to trade. They acquired new livelihood skills and earned meager income from the projects set up by the Sisters. But all these do not a society make. Tons of ash may have erased lands and villages on the map, but not identities. Lands may have been lost to lahar and other groups of men powerful and more educated than the Aetas, but they still remember they were once a people who had their own way of life and who lived freely on lands passed on from one generation to another. The memory needed not only to be awakened but articulated, but to be recreated in new realities (A Journey, a Partnership: Aeta Mission, 2003).

It was these thoughts that moved the mission to adopt new strategies. After a thorough needs analysis, the sisters decided that community organizing would be the best approach to build the capacity of the Aeta to assert their rights in the larger society, and the issue of ancestral
land rights was their most pressing need. By this time, many of the Aeta returned to their traditional territories, since they had naturally re-vegetated and were once again habitable. But to their surprise, most of their lands had been converted into pasturelands by lowlanders from nearby towns. With herds of cattle roaming the hills, the Aeta could no longer practice swidden farming or the new methods of cultivating they had learned from the sisters. They had to rely heavily on collecting and selling wild banana blossoms and bamboo to be able to buy food.

In July 2002, during a process facilitated by the sisters, representatives from ten Aeta villages, some in the mountains and others still in the Kalangitan Relocation Site, selected community members to undergo training in community organizing under my supervision. This is my personal recollection from the first community meeting I attended.

Together with the Aeta leaders, we crossed mountains and rivers to reach more of the Aeta families who had decided to return to their villages. In one of the meetings we held with them regarding ancestral land issues, a man who had become a cowboy for one of the new cattle ranch operators in the area confidently showed some papers to the group. He said that he entered into an agreement with the owner of the cattle, and as an Aeta he was the rightful owner of the land the cattle were now grazing and that he could prove it. He showed us a sheet of paper he kept rolled up in a piece of bamboo for protection. But when one of the Aeta leader-trainees read the agreement aloud, to the surprise of everyone, it stated that the Aeta had entered into an agreement with the lowlander only as caretaker of his pastureland, without any rights to the land. In situations like these, how can indigenous people who cannot read or write protect their rights in such oppressive relationships? Appreciating the realities epitomized in this experience, the Aeta leaders together with their families decided to do something about their situation. They know they need to survive as a tribe and that will only happen if they can protect the very source of their life-their ANCESTRAL DOMAIN. They cannot afford to be silent as the lowlanders continually encroach on their ancestral lands.

After this experience, I made the decision that I would join the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters and become part of the Aetas’ struggle in claiming their ancestral lands.

For the sisters, working with the Aeta was a response to the dehumanizing material poverty they experienced. Liberation theology, which has had a powerful influence in the Philippines, was the impetus for many Catholic priests and nuns to leave their comfortable lives in the
convents and schools to live in closer contact with the poor. The sisters believed that a closer
dialogue with people would lead to consciousness raising and in the process, the Aeta would
begin to articulate their needs and eventually recognize the need to organize (Berryman 1987).
Coming from the same belief and principles, the sisters and I decided to journey together to
profess our “option for the poor.”

Betwixt and between Madam and Sister

When I first arrived in Kalangitan people would call me either “Madam” or “Sister.” The
introduction of schools in some of the villages had made the Aeta accustomed to calling the
teachers “madam,” as is the practice throughout the Philippines. People believe that teachers
need to be respected and should be addressed properly because they are educated. My presence
in community meetings where we strategized about solutions to community issues projected the
image that I was a teacher. And as a teacher, the Aeta automatically called me “Madam Jane!”
Hearing this, I would automatically reply “I’m not a teacher, so please don’t call me madam!” I
was not successful in my plea not to be called “madam.” No matter how often I asked people not
to address me that way they persisted; they were not used to call people they really did not know
by their first names, especially outsiders attempting to help them. According to them, it was their
way of showing respect. After a short while, I had accepted the designation of madam, but when
we visited the mountain villages, I was given yet another name, “Sister.” I was called “sister,”
because I was working with the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. Even though I did not wear a
veil, they still thought that I was a part of the congregation since I was always with the sisters.
For them, if you worked in the mountains you were either “madam” or “sister.”

Trekking mountains trails, crossing rivers, and meeting Aeta families provided the
opportunity for me to build friendships and trust with the people. During the process they
became aware that I was neither “madam” nor “sister,” since my role was to raise their
consciousness through education about their rights as indigenous peoples, which are framed in the Constitution and recognized in the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997. Eventually, the leaders of the communities grew comfortable with me, and I was ecstatic the first time I heard them call me by name. For me, it was a revealing moment that hinted the barrier between the insiders and the outsider was starting to crumble, a flicker of hope that signified an opening for genuine dialogue.

The Dialogue between the Insiders and the Outsider

Central to the training process was to develop the skills of Aeta leaders to prepare their villages to claim their rights over their ancestral lands. My role as a trainer was to facilitate the understanding of their present situation as they dealt with external forces in defending their rights to their traditional territories. As an outsider, I believed that the leaders were the ones who should decide which path to take as they struggled to be heard in Philippine society.

The training process became a dialogue between the “kulot” (curly-haired; a term the Aeta use to describe themselves) and the “unat” (straight–haired; a non-Aeta). Our meetings became learning opportunities for us since as an organizer I had the skills to analyze external issues, and as Aeta leader–trainees they were highly motivated to claim their rights over their traditional territories, in turn motivating me. The training provided the leaders with skills to deal with external forces for which they had no previous experience. It gave them the opportunity to speak out in front of government officials who in the beginning would not listen to them. The training was not a classroom or lecture type where the leaders sat and listened to the trainer; instead, together we went to the villages to conduct what an anthropologist would call fieldwork. While in the communities, the leaders had the task of discovering the general feeling people had concerning land rights. Since these discussions were two-way dialogues, they facilitated awareness raising among the villagers as the leaders explained the issue of land tenure and
stressed the importance of having a united stand on problems affecting the villages and the Aeta as a whole. This methodology demanded continuous discourse, field work, analysis and strategizing to resolve community issues in a way that people would develop confidence among themselves. One of the main goals was for them to realize that having a united position provides strength in dealing with external threats.

**New Breed of Leaders: Indigenous Leadership and Community Organizers in One**

The emergence of leaders who are open to democratic processes and firm believers of advancing indigenous people’s rights was crucial to my organizing work. Sustaining the efforts to build strong people’s organizations is one of the major goals in community organizing. Training community leaders is different from training professional community organizers to catalyze change, as envisioned by Saul Alinsky. In my experience as a trainer of professional organizers, I have found that it is difficult for many to sustain their commitment to rural organizing or development work in general. Professionals always have the option to seek greener pastures, and several of my past trainees had left organizing work for better paying jobs. As I thought about this fact, I decided to deviate from the usual training process; instead of the standard practice of developing outside community organizers, I started to entertain the idea of developing “native grassroots community organizers.” As the concept developed, instead of calling them “community organizers,” the trainees decided to call themselves “mga Ayta Lider” (Aeta Leaders). They chose this name in recognition of the fact that as community leaders, they would be the prime movers of action. They would be the ones to start the process of catalyzing change in the community. As Aeta Leaders, they would go through the same community organizing training process as I went through as a young organizer-in-training. They would be expected to do the groundwork, issue identification, mobilization, evaluation, and building of community organizations. I would spend the next three and a half years teaching these five
dedicated men the myriad community organizing processes and concepts that by now were so
familiar to me.

Myles Horton founded the Highlander Center, now in New Market, Tennessee, as an
alternative venue to develop grassroots leaders ready to address issues of inequality in the
southern United States. He talked about the importance of developing leaders in community
organization as an essential process:

Developing leadership is hard work—people often don’t take the time. One of the reasons
organizers don’t put in the hard work and spend the time is that they have from my point of
view is an incorrect analysis of how you go about it…. What I consider the appropriate
way to deal with a problem is to say that people have to be moved from where they are to
where you would like to see them in terms of organization. There is a process at work that
enables people to take their knowledge and experience they have and expand it and extend
it until it will encompass a stage beyond that in terms of cooperation and working together
and understanding. You don’t skip the process, because if you skip the process you are
moving people faster than they have any understanding, and when the crunch comes and
they are supposed to put out or work or be loyal then you have a gap in their development
and they don’t have the stamina or understanding. In other words, you have to have a
process that enables people to internalize—to learn how to use in their own way the things
that combine for group and collective action. They have to get that through the process of
growth (Wellstone 1978).

Developing “native leadership” is important in sustaining community organizations.
Unlike professional community organizers, the leaders will not leave their communities,
whatever the circumstance. If people are affected by an issue and decided to act on it, the process
will produce committed community leaders that will sustain the organization.

The Aeta Leaders as We Journeyed Together

After their process of reflection in 2001, leadership development became the central
strategy of the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters in addressing community problems. Instead of
hiring professional outside organizers, they asked me to train grassroots leaders to do community
organizing themselves. This was my first experience where grassroots leaders were subjected to
the rigor of community organizing training. I was used to training professional organizers to
work in a specific community, teaching them the nitty-gritty of community organizing. I had no idea of what lay ahead, but I knew that it was possible to teach the Aeta Leaders organizing skills even though it may take longer than training professional organizers. I had faith in people’s capacity to change their condition.

We began with the selection process; each mountain village chose its own leaders to represent their community. After the selection, there was a discussion between the leaders and the trainer on the training process and expectation of one another within the training period. The leaders were to go through a period of six months to a year of training by being exposed to tactic and strategizing sessions, facilitating community meetings and participating in discussions on community organizing principles and concepts.

The training process was a two-way learning experience. As a practitioner of community organizing, I shared with the leaders my knowledge and skills as I had honed them over the years. My experience in mobilizing people to take action to change their disadvantaged position in society was my contribution to the dialogue. In exchange, I learned to be more sensitive in conducting the community organizing training based on the needs and present understanding of the trainees. I had to adjust the training curriculum and the expected output on a month-to-month basis. In the end, the usual 6 months-to-a-year training turned into three years for the Aeta. I patiently follow them throughout the years, which I would not have done in training professional community organizers.

The Aeta Leaders committed much time to analyzing the problems of their communities and understanding their position in those conflicts. During the extended training process, the voices of the outsider and the insiders came together to design a process of addressing societal issues. Each of us was coming from a different perspective as we experienced individual
empowerment. As grassroots leaders exposed to community organizing, the voices of Bayani, Andres, Boy, Jerry, and Lito expressed how they experience confronting power relations and breaking the culture of silence in their own words.

**Bayani Sumaoang**

Bayani Sumaoang, the first chairman of the indigenous people’s federation of village organizations, LABAYKU, led the group in claiming their ancestral lands. Because of his character, leadership qualities, and the fact his father was a traditional and well regarded leader, Bayani was respected in the community. A soft spoken man and very passionate about the Aetas’ plight as indigenous people, he told me about his experience as a child, when he said he was afraid to go to the lowland school. He was ridiculed because of his curly hair, dark skin, and the fact that he was from the mountains. He was made fun of, but he did not fight back. These experiences helped mold his conviction that now is the time that indigenous people need to assert their rights to be heard and respected.


Before the eruption of Mount Pinatubo we didn’t depend on the government. We had our own way of doing things. We had systems of reciprocal labor and cooperation in place. But when we were taken to the evacuation centers (after the Pinatubo eruption) we had no choice but to be dependent on relief goods. But now we no longer depend on the government; we help each other again. The problem is, many outsiders now have an interest in our land. We can’t gather wild bamboo; we’re forbidden from planting our crops. The outsiders are ranchers. They claim our lands as far as the eye can see. Because of this, we can’t work our land any more. With the sisters’ help we’ve submitted the required documents to regain our ancestral lands; if they (the sisters) hadn’t helped us, we
wouldn’t have known how to do that. But (even without the sisters’ help) we know our history and the history of our lands.

**Andres Tarroza**

Andres was trained by missionaries as a Methodist pastor. He is very charismatic and has no trouble starting a conversation with anyone; his disposition is very light, even in handling community issues. He once joked that during his active pastoring days he was called the Aeta Billy Graham. Andres’ background as a pastor had exposed him to the issues of social justice and equality, so he was able to jump right into the community organizing training I conducted. As a pastor, Andres was used to giving the sermon, but as a leader-organizer, he had to learn how to involve people in the decision making process. Andres feels very strongly about fighting for one’s rights and for equality.


In the past, the government didn’t pay us any attention. We didn’t know that we had rights. Our lack of unity (as a people in addressing external threats) didn’t help us any. The government says it’s difficult to unite the Aeta, but now we as Aeta are experiencing ourselves how important it is for us to unite. Because we are coming together now, the government is (finally) recognizing us. I’m a new leader. I only started (community organizer’s) training in February 2004 but it’s not difficult for me to explain to my fellow Aeta our rights (under government laws). All we want is for no one to keep us from planting our crops, for us to be free on our ancestral lands.

**Boy Sumaoang**

Among the Aeta Leaders, Boy is the only one with no formal education. He cannot read or write, but I really admire his commitment to break the culture of silence among the Aeta. At one point he wanted to drop out of the training; he felt he was not qualified to be a leader because he
was illiterate. He asked me, "How can I lead my people if I can’t read the law? How can I know what the law says if I can’t read it?" It broke my heart to hear those words, but I told him that what is important is that he has a heart for his people. He had the patience to explain to the Aeta their rights and responsibilities under the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, which we studied during training sessions. He expressed himself clearly during group meetings using their own language. He knew that together, the Aeta could chart their own course for change based on their dreams and aspirations.

_Jerry Diaz_

In his mid-thirties, Jerry is the youngest of the team of Aeta Leaders. In the beginning, he was indecisive as to whether he would continue with the organizers’ training or continue his service as an Aeta Methodist pastor in his village of Tarukan. As he deepened his understanding of the need for indigenous people to express a collective voice, he decided to continue with the
training and devote himself to organizing Aeta communities. From among the five Aeta Leader-trainees, Jerry was the one who most loved to read and was the most systematic in presenting his arguments.

We Aeta are really meek. We seek out the powerful and place our faith in them. We don’t have the ability to face government agencies on our own. When we returned to our traditional lands (from the resettlement site in Duig) in 1994, we didn’t have the ability to fight for our rights. They (the Philippine military) said our land was part of a military reservation. They even said we didn’t have any rights to our traditional lands, that we should go live on the volcanic ash flows. “Yes, Sir. Yes, Sir.” was all we could answer. But we Aeta know that from the very beginning, even before the Spanish colonizers arrived, we were already living on this land. They (the military) recognized we now know how to face them in dialogue. Why, they asked, did we still want to establish a school and irrigation system for our fields? The ranchers asked why we did not want to let them use our land for their cattle ranches. Everything we’re doing now we’re doing not for ourselves, but for our children.

**Lito Diaz**

When Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991, the Aeta had no choice but to flee their ancestral lands. Most of the people from the village of Tarukan were relocated to Dueg Aeta Resettlement Site in San Clemente, Tarlac. Lito Diaz served as the leader of the of the resettlement village of 700 Aeta families before he returned to Tarukan several years after the eruption. He was a traditional village elder and the eldest of the group, so when he joined the Aeta Leaders he had to mesh his own traditional leadership style with the new models he was learning in training.
In the past we were often just yelled at by “straight hairs” (lowlanders) and soldiers. We thought we were just so powerless. Be we learned how important it is for each village to have its own organized group, and for each of those groups to work together. We used to regard ourselves as lesser members of society; we were dependent on whatever others would give us. We were used to being meek and silent, but now we’re breaking that culture of silence so we’ll no longer be taken advantage of.

**The Role of Women: What about Our Voices?**

When we first started the process of choosing the Aeta Leaders— those I would work most closely with and who would be in charge of the organizing process— the villagers immediately picked male leaders who were educated, either in lowland elementary schools or by Methodist missionaries. The communities believed that these men could best articulate their concerns to the government. In the back of my mind I thought, why were no women leaders chosen? How do women figure in Aeta political organization?

Working with indigenous women means understanding the cultural construct of ‘woman’ and how it differs with men and women in other societies based on age, marital, and kinship status. Family and kinship organization (Moore 1998) play an important role in decision making since kinship involves fundamental social ties and modes of communication. In Aeta society it is the male head of the family who articulates the decision that was agreed upon within the family grouping; i.e. marriage. Women may not typically express their point of view in the public sphere, but within the household they have considerable say in the decision-making process.

**Being an Indigenous Aeta Woman: Where Is She Coming From?**

In the past, the Aeta were primarily hunters and gatherers; they have been practicing shifting cultivation for a long time but they still retain significant aspects of a hunting-gathering society. In her study of the !Kung in western Botswana, Patricia Draper observed that in hunting
and gathering societies women have a great deal of autonomy and influence. Women have control of the food they gather, and have mobility, which is equal for both sexes. There is also a lack of rigidity in sex-typing of adult activities (1975:78). Studies conducted by different anthropologists including Richard Lee and the Sahlins have described the economic and social organization of hunting and gathering societies. They show that in these societies women’s gathering of wild food provides two-thirds of the diet, whereas men provide one third by hunting wild game animals (Estioko-Griffin 1985).

Before Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991, Aeta women were still gathering wild crops to help provide the daily food intake of the family. Women possess knowledge of wild foods; they know how to discriminate between edible and non-edible species. They also know how to prepare wild crops with high toxicity. Women have a level of control over the wild food they gather and possess the power to decide whether they will share the products of their labor with other kin groups. In the gathering of wild foods, women are in total control of the production and reproduction of their own resources. Aeta women have material control over their resources, a fact recognized by their family and other kin groups.

But this gender division of labor was disturbed by the catastrophic eruption of Mount Pinatubo. The Aeta were forced to evacuate and resettle in lowland communities to save their lives from the disaster. Their economic and social organization radically changed in the evacuation and resettlement sites. Mobility and flexibility is part of Aeta culture, but in the relocation sites they were forced to live a sedentary life. Women could no longer gather wild foods; traditional survival strategies were replaced by dealings with the government, NGOs, and church organizations that provided food and material relief goods. Men could no longer work in their swidden fields and in order to survive some of them engaged in wage labor. Women had to
stay home to look after their children. These changes resulted in the curtailment of women’s autonomy and freedom to produce and allocate their own labor. Men provided the income of the household on which women became dependent.

In analyzing the role of women, Moore pointed out that it is best to start with the household as a basic unit of society where production, reproduction, consumption, and socialization take place (1998:54). Traditionally, Aeta men and women had clear tasks performed within the household and no one controlled another’s labor. Pooling and sharing of resources were maintained based on the labor produced by both sexes. But these gender relations changed when the Aeta were forced to live in evacuation and resettlement sites after the Mount Pinatubo eruption. Government, NGO, and church workers normally consulted with men since they assumed that they were the head of the household. It was usually the men who had access to resources for the family and they became the leaders in the organizations set up by government and relief agencies; women became invisible, especially in the public sphere. The male privileging resulted in “women’s muted reality” (Moore 1998:2), proving detrimental to their position and status. Since most of the development workers were coming from a male-dominated world view, Aeta women, who espoused a different world view, were ignored and silenced.

Aeta Women’s Role in LABAYKU

As the community organizing training I conducted progressed, I observed that a number of Aeta women were articulate and could express themselves clearly during community meetings. Some of them became assistants to the teachers under the Aeta Mission education program. Some were excellent managers of resources and became LABAYKU officials holding the positions of treasurer and livelihood program officers.

The women leaders were critical to the development of LABAYKU in its struggle for ancestral lands. One of the women leaders was Alma Sumaoang, the wife of the chairman,
Bayani Sumaoang. Ate (which means older sister) Alma, as I called her, was also a Methodist pastor. She was very articulate and able to express herself clearly and convincingly. At the beginning of a critical dialogues with the government-run Clark Development Corporation concerning whether the ground survey of the ancestral land claim would be allowed to proceed, Ate Alma led a very emotional prayer that impressed on the government officials how very serious the Aeta were about claiming their lands. During the dialogue, she also made especially strong arguments, which strengthened the Aetas’ case with the officials. She traced the large extended Aeta families that had lived, as far back as memory could reach, on the land they were claiming as their ancestral domain. The argument was critical, as based on the IPRA law ancestral domains are defined areas that generally belong to indigenous people either by claim of ownership by themselves or through their ancestors. Ate Alma’s words were heated, compelling, and poignant as she spoke in front of the government officials. I feared they would be antagonized by her strong language, but to my surprise, they took them with a deep sense of empathy for the Aeta. For community organizers, this is what we call shaking the status quo. There was something in Ate Alma’s voice that moved the government officials. Women’s voices bring holism to the struggle.
One of LABAYKU’s goals was to ensure they could sustain their organization in the long-term. The main focus was to establish land ownership, but they recognized they had a long road ahead of them. As they proceeded, the leaders decided they needed to develop a small-scale livelihood program for their members. In Aeta society, women generally manage the resources of the family, whether root crops or other products they gather in the forest. These skills most Aeta women possess were beneficial to LABAYKU. Tessie Sanchez and Dominga Sumaoang became the treasurer and auditor of the organization. Still in her mid-twenties, Tessie, nicknamed Tikya, is very responsible and has a good head for numbers. She is in charge of LABAYKU’s funds, while Dominga is its auditor. The two women work together for the safekeeping of the organization’s resources. Men occupy the main leadership positions, but they recognize that women have something to bring to the organization. Women are in charge of most of the livelihood projects, and during community meetings they can express themselves freely and men will listen to their arguments.

Women’s participation in the organizing process is important to the development of the organization. During the first phase of the organizing process, women’s participation was not considered in the training of the Aeta Leaders. I believe that this is an important area that needs to be explored in future organizing work.

The Engagement

The story of the engagement between the Aeta and the Aeta Mission workers, which included me, was one of continuous collaboration. The workers had their organizing models and methods, and their own understanding of social action, while the Aeta sought all means to fight for their rights. They both wanted social justice. This was the common space they shared. The Aeta and the Mission workers together explored ways to improve their tactics and methodologies
in order to win the struggle for ancestral lands. No one had a monopoly on the organizing work; the collaboration was a two-way learning process.

The next chapter will discuss the path the Aeta took in order to make their voices heard by the powers that be. How were the Aeta able to negotiate and adapt their traditional social system to meet the need of having a more structured organization? How did they translate the language of rights to allow it to fit their own context?
CHAPTER 5
WHEN THE AETA SPEAK OUT IN DEFENSE OF THEIR ANCESTRAL LANDS

Access to and rights over their land and resources are key elements for indigenous people to be able to survive. For over two decades, land rights have been the major demand of international indigenous peoples’ movements (IWGIA: 2004). How can indigenous peoples protect their lands? Is there a space where they can clearly assert their rights over their ancestral lands?

There are international instruments and covenants (i.e., international human rights law and treaties) that recognize the principles of self-determination and rights of indigenous peoples as distinct communities, but in spite of that fact, land dispossession is still the major problem of indigenous peoples worldwide. The lack of access to and rights over land and resources is an act of denial of indigenous peoples’ rights under Part VI of the newly adopted Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The United Nations Human Rights Council adopted the Declaration in June 2006 after nearly two decades of international pressure from indigenous delegates. The adoption of the Declaration is a landmark in the history of the worldwide indigenous peoples’ movement. It is the most comprehensive statement of rights in international human rights law advancing collective rights (UMN HRC: 2003). In the Philippines, there is Republic Act 8371, known as the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act of 1987, (IPRA), which was enacted to “…recognize, protect and promote the rights of the indigenous peoples within the framework of national unity and development.”

In spite of laws and declarations asserting indigenous rights, the reality is that indigenous peoples all over the world still experience different forms of human rights violations, including dispossession of land and lack of access to education and basic services. At the most grassroots level, the effects of colonialism still impede the advancement toward the self-determination of
indigenous peoples in every part of the globe; the majority are still enveloped in a culture of silence. The struggle of the Aeta in claiming their ancestral land is the focus of this narrative. This is the story of the Aeta’s struggle to make their voices heard.

The Struggle to be Heard

The efforts of the four Aeta Leaders I trained paved the way for eleven village organizations to form a federation they named LABAYKU, whose goal was to protect the Aetas’ rights over their ancestral lands. Its leaders and members proactively decided to file a claim for official recognition of ownership over their land. Traditionally, the Aeta avoided confrontation when faced with conflict. Families would simply move to another village to maintain peace in the community. This is how they dealt with internal community and clan-based conflict, but the situation has changed. Their ancestral land is being threatened by the incursion of settlers, ranchers, tourism projects, an export processing zone and a military reservation. Today, they cannot afford to run away any more; they need to make a stand to protect the remaining ancestral land that is still under their control.

The role of a community organization to represent their collective voice was critical in the Aetas’ assertion of their rights over their lands. They believed the only way to address exploitation, subordination, and marginalization was by speaking out. In this instance, the government recognized them as a people with a distinct history and rights to be respected.

In 2002, after consultations with the Holy Spirit Catholic nuns who had been providing them social services and representatives from an NGO specializing in community organizing, Aeta leaders from Capas decided to claim their rights over their ancestral lands, the sole source of their livelihood. In the following months they studied the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1987 (IPRA), the law that provides the claim-making mechanisms, to learn about their rights and responsibilities concerning legal ownership of ancestral lands. Using community organizing
methods learned during our training, the Aeta leaders ensured they had a strong mass base of community members knowledgeable about their rights under the IPRA Law. Accepting issue-based community organizing principles, the LABAYKU leaders believed that strong, aware, and organized Aeta villages would be critical in their efforts to pressure the government to grant them rights over their lands. With the support of the Holy Spirit sisters and me, LABAYKU completed the documentation required by the IPRA Law substantiating their “time immemorial” occupation of their 11,000 hectare claim. Having completed all requirements, they submitted their application for communal title with the appropriate government agency. As with most Philippine government bureaus, the applicants had to persevere in continuously pressuring the concerned agency to act in their favor. LABAYKU has been successful in lobbying for a partial on-ground demarcation of their claim with the assistance of non-governmental organizations and the government.

Their ancestral land claim is an important struggle for the Aeta, but land is a complex issue and the process of gaining official recognition of communal ownership usually takes several years even if there are no adverse claims. One of the goals of community organizing is to be able to mount sustained action; action is the life-blood of the organization. In order to sustain peoples’ efforts in light of the lengthy struggle for their land, the Aeta Leaders were able to identify other issues that affected their communities. They are now dealing with multiple issues to keep the fire burning.

**Exercising Power: From Small Issue to Complex Issue**

The initial collective action of making their ancestral domain claim was a stepping stone for the people to realize the value of uniting to confront external challenges. Indeed, the experience of the Aeta attests to the reality that when people are deeply involved in all phases of planning and implementing a program, the success rate can be high. The organization
demonstrated that wielded a certain amount of power when the Aeta villages were forced to face a reforestation project initiated by the government. Because of the organizing efforts, people started to think critically about any outside-initiated activity within their territory. They became skeptical of development projects, since the majority of them did not serve the interests of the people. Reforestation projects are a major part of the government’s environmental program, on which it spends millions of dollars a year. There have been success stories with these reforestation programs as well as many failures. Often, the reason behind the unsuccessful attempts is the people’s negative notion of reforestation. The communities whose lands are to be reforested do not see themselves as beneficiaries of the project. Some of the affected villages were alarmed by the government reforestation project. LABAYKU, by its active role in pursuing the land claim, had demonstrated collective power. It immediately responded to the issue of the proposed reforestation within the Aetas’ ancestral domain.

In 2003, community members from one of its constituent villages were disturbed when they discovered officials from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) conducting an on-ground survey of a planned reforestation project area without explaining to the community the purpose of the survey. Shortly after, LABAYKU decided to mobilize in order to express indignation over the planned project to the local government so the leaders requested a dialogue with the local provincial legislator, who was sponsoring the reforestation project. As a result of the dialogue, government officials realized they needed to explain the project to the Aeta, and the congressman challenged the leaders and members of LABAYKU to get involved and participate in its implementation. The congressman recognized the collective power of LABAYKU, and he saw it as an important factor in the success of the proposed reforestation program. He said that it was about time people engage themselves in government-initiated
projects and not simply oppose them. The dialogue resulted in a partnership between LABAYKU and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, with the government recognizing the importance of involving the organization and the communities belonging to it. LABAYKU was awarded 100 hectares of the DENR’s 925-hectare Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) reforestation project, which had been previously contracted to a lowland cooperative headed by an influential local ex-politician. LABAYKU, with technical assistance from the Holy Spirit sisters and workers of the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission, took the congressman’s challenge and implemented the CBFM project over a period of seven months, integrating issue-based community organizing processes. There were detailed discussions of the role of LABAYKU, as well as consultations with the affected communities regarding the actual site for the tree planting. Initially, the affected Aeta communities were critical of the reforestation project since it would be on their ancestral land. But when the leaders, together with some of the villagers, went to discuss the project with local government officials, the dialogue resulted in a partnership, with government recognizing the importance of involving the organization and the communities belonging to it.

The communities have come a long way in securing tenure over their ancestral domain, given the fact that these lands are also threatened by the presence of pasturelands and the conflicting development paradigm of the local government of Capas. The struggle to be heard is always a challenge that the Aeta communities need to face, but through this organizing experience the communities now have a choice—whether to remain and live with oppression, or to speak out and make their voices heard.
Looking Back After Years of Struggle for Recognition of Ancestral Land: Why Fight for It? For Whom and for What?

It was raining hard that day in September 2003 when the Aeta Leaders reflected on the progress their organization had made. The struggle for land is tedious and tiring, since the bureaucratic processes of the government move ever so slowly. The heavy downpour set the mood that facilitated a very frank conversation among the leaders, the sister-in-charge of the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission, and me. Tikya, LABAYKU’s treasurer and a young mother of four, alleged that being a LABAYKU leader is not easy. The task of traveling by foot to far-flung villages and reaching out to sometimes reluctant relatives was not an easy task. She often needed to leave her young children with her mother or her husband while she was “in the field” participating in LABAYKU activities.

Tikya had the patience to painstakingly explain to her relatives the need to protect their land and not to sell it to the lowland ranchers. She said that it was indeed a challenge for her. As a child she remembers that her mother told her their family used to live in the Capas lowlands. But the elders exchanged their land for salt, matches, or bolos with the lowland Kapapangans. As a result, the Aeta lost most of what would become the most valuable lands and moved to the mountains, far from the influence of the lowland populations.

I asked her, “Why are you willing to endure such hardships? Why are you so committed to the cause of LABAYKU and its consciousness raising efforts?” Tikya, in her sweet and unassuming way responded, “We don’t have a choice now; we need to secure our lives and our children’s lives. Living at the resettlement site after Mount Pinatubo erupted was living on instant noodles and canned sardines. It wasn’t easy for us since we weren’t used to that kind of life. From the beginning, we yearned to return our lands where we were free to move around and
to plant our own fields. We never want to go back to the kind of life we had in Duig. Our land spells our freedom.”

Bayani, the chairman of LABAYKU interjected, “That’s the reason so many of us decided to return to our lands even though PHIVOLCS (Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology) said it wasn’t safe yet. But what could we do? We couldn’t afford to see our land slowly being taken over by lowland cattle ranchers.”

In an animated voice Ka Lito, the elder in the group, said, “After about two years, the majority of us returned here to the mountains of Capas and to our surprise, found most of our lands converted into pasturelands. We couldn’t plant because the cattle would just eat our crops. Before, we could move freely and develop the gifts of Apo Namalyari [the Highest Being according to Aeta belief]. Now, many Aeta are caretakers of the very cattle that are the root of our problem. They work for the ranchers because it gives them a way to feed their families.”

Ambo, a young Aeta with a high school education, joined the discussion, “We can’t afford to be silent when we see the lowlanders encroaching on our lands. Most of them look down on us as illiterates; they assume we’ll just run away if confronted with a problem. Now we need to make a stand as a people. We need to protect our rights to our land for my children and their generation.”

Andres chipped in, “We have to learn our lesson now. In the past, our ancestors would sell our lands in exchange for salt, matches, or practically anything of value. They didn’t see that as a problem since there was, at the time, an almost unlimited amount of land to be had. But now the situation is different; we have less and less land to claim as our own. We need to protect what lands remain in our possession.”
This passionate discussion was what lit the spark that lighted the way for the Aetas’ struggle to reclaim their ancestral lands. The leaders of LABAYKU believed that the only way for them to protect their livelihoods and their way of life was to protect their ancestral land. They felt they could not afford to be silent, as the lowlanders were continuing to infringe on those lands. Because of the various outside interests that were staking some kind of claim to the area, they knew that it would not be an easy undertaking when the leaders and members of the Aeta villages decided to take on the issue of land tenure. They also faced the inevitable bureaucratic processes of government instrumentalities, were they to place an official claim. The leaders and members of LABAYKU were aware that taking up the issue of land involved many risks. They would face stakeholders with varied interests in the 11,000 hectare claim, including the Philippine government, ranchers, would-be developers, and lowland settlers. Aside from external threats, the leaders were also aware that internally they would have to deal with elders and their own relatives who were working for cattle ranchers as cowboys. Some of them were afraid to cut the umbilical cord that tied them to the ranchers, a connection that provided them a livelihood. In spite of all these challenges, the Aeta leaders and active LABAYKU members decided to take the path that would lead to land security.

**Translating the Language of Rights in the Aeta Context**

When Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991, the Aeta were forced to expand their social network. Heads of families or assigned tribal leaders served as intermediaries to the government, private organizations, church groups, and non-governmental organizations that were providing relief. Through these interactions, the Aeta became aware of the developmental programs provided by different agencies. It also gave them ideas of how to tap resources that could be used to their advantage, both in the resettlement sites and after the planned return to their ancestral lands.
The Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters began working with the Aeta directly after the Mount Pinatubo disaster in 1991, and the partnership evolved based on the need of the Aeta as expressed by them in community meetings. In 2001, the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission (referred to as Aeta Mission in this narrative) and the different village organizations made the decision to take up the issue of ancestral lands. The Aeta Mission believed that the best way for them to assist the Aeta would be to help them to stand on their own when dealing with external entities. The sisters concluded that the Aeta needed to tap their potential as a group, and this could best be done by supporting them to legally claim, then develop, their ancestral lands. The Aeta Mission shifted its strategy from welfare aid to the use of the “language of rights” as a tool to empower Aeta communities. Claiming and understanding their rights and responsibilities under the law was new terrain for the Aeta, so the Aeta Mission facilitated a process whereby the Aeta leaders and villagers were exposed to the law in a way they could understand it. This was similar to Engle Merry’s (2006) concept of “legal transplants and cultural translation” as a process of translating the language of rights into the vernacular. The intermediaries played a significant role in converting the legal framework and global ideas of rights into the local context. In the process of collaboration, an emergence of local rights consciousness was achieved on the part of the grassroots organization, LABAYKU, while greater awareness of local and national issues was brought to the consciousness on the part of the translators (Engle Merry 2006).

The collaboration between LABAYKU and the Aeta Mission was crucial, since the translation of laws and other legal frameworks was at the heart of a process that crossed lines of class, ethnicity, mobility, and education. Engle Merry (2006) stated that translation can take place by using images, symbols, and stories based on specific cultural narratives and conceptions. In the case of LABAYKU, we made use of popular education techniques to ensure
that the IPRA law was translated and understood at the village level. We unpacked the bodies of laws and rules in a language that the average Aeta could comprehend, making sure, as much as possible, they understood their rights and responsibilities under the law. As a community organizer, I believed that when people are able to identify their marginalized position, then they can frame their issues, and, through collective action, define appropriate strategies for engagement.

**Community Education as a Tool to Mobilize People for Action**

The community organizer waits for the time when people are ready to take action before attempting to mobilize a community to approach the government agency that can address its needs. In the case of LABAYKU’s ancestral land claim, rigorous analysis sessions led us to identify the Department of National Defense and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) as the agencies to approach. One of the classic organizing techniques is to “zero in on the target,” which means that the person or people who hold the decision-making power should be at the negotiating table and not their intermediaries.

Delegations of LABAYKU representatives—including the Aeta Leaders and representatives from each of the villages—made several trips to the concerned government offices. Some of the dialogues were successful; others were not. But during the dialogue with the military personnel in the province, I remember how the Aeta Leaders presented their problems and their demands with confidence. They were adamant about the need to segregate their 11,000 hectare land claim from the military reservation. The military official replied that the matter was beyond his jurisdiction and it would have to be decided on by higher-ups in Manila, but he could not stop the Aeta together with the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples from starting the process of boundary delineation. The leaders of LABAYKU did not stop there; they continued to search for an answer, for something clear, something specific.
The officers and members of LABAYKU constantly analyzed their experiences and current situation, and evaluated their strategies to further improve their advantage during their next action. They did not concentrate on just one government agency; aside from pressuring Department of National Defense personnel, they also lobbied the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) to push for their interests. Because of the understanding provided by tedious analysis and regular study sessions focusing on the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA), the leaders were able to understand provisions in the law to strengthen their claim. Chapter VII, Section 38 of the IPRA law designates the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples as the “…primary government agency responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies, plans and programs to promote and protect the rights and well-being of the indigenous peoples and the recognition of their ancestral domains as well as their rights thereto.” This section served as a constant reminder for the Aeta leaders to work closely with NCIP in processing their ancestral land claim. LABAYKU believed they would only be able to achieve recognition of their ancestral land if they were able to mobilize different stakeholders to support their claim.

**Multi-Stakeholders, Different Interests, Multiple Strategies**

“We create friends, not enemies; we can’t afford to be divided in this struggle.”

That phrase served as our reminder that we should always attempt to work effectively with diverse groups that had different interests. For LABAYKU leaders and members, reflection and regular strategy sessions were part of the process of constantly evaluating our steps toward achieving the goal of rights recognition over ancestral lands. “Pressure from above and pressure from below” was our strategy in dealing with the bureaucratic processes of the Philippine government. We ensured that we were aware of, and able to take advantage of the laws that would further strengthen LABAYKU’s claim.
Figure 5-1. Map of partial boundary delineation showing overlap with military reservation
In 2006, after five continuous years of working for land recognition, the LABAYKU leaders began to become impatient with the bureaucratic processes within the government. They could not see any light at the end of the tunnel. After all their efforts, the government still favored the big interests and would not advance the agenda of the indigenous people. As a community organizer, I knew that I needed to raise morale—that we should not dwell on weaknesses, but turn them into organizing opportunities. Immediately, I found myself facilitating a very passionate and intense “tactic session.” We mapped all our achievements over the years, after which the leaders were able to develop creative strategies to pressure the government to continue with the on-the-ground boundary delineation of their claim. In the middle of the community meeting, a leader interrupted me and said, “We need to invite the NCIP personnel to our villages, and for them to see with their own eyes how frustrated we are. We’ve already contributed 50 pesos ($1 US) each to make sure there’ll be enough money for the survey since the government doesn’t have enough resources to do it alone.”

The next day a delegation of five leaders went to the provincial office of the NCIP to press the people’s demand. They told the provincial officer that the members of LABAYKU were pushing for a dialogue to discuss the present state of the ancestral land claim. They stressed that a representative from the central office in Manila should be present at the meeting. The provincial officer agreed and a date was set. The event was to be held at the Kalangitan Resettlement Site.

Before it started, LABAYKU’s leaders and members of were determined to get positive results from the dialogue. They made a very detailed plan of how to handle the meeting with the NCIP officials. As part of their strategy, they used a three-dimensional map showing their 11,000 hectare claim. During the course of the dialogue, the leaders often referred to the map to address
issues of boundary delineation. They wanted to emphasize that the LABAYKU could claim parts of the military reservation as mandated by the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act. The leaders used the map to show that area being claimed by the Aeta did not include the areas actually being used by the military. The elders stressed that even before the military arrived, their ancestors had inhabited the land since “time immemorial.” The dialogue became intense and the leaders stressed their right of ownership, their right to develop their lands and resources, and their right to claim parts of the reservation. The NCIP officials were moved by the unwavering demands of the Aeta in reclaiming their ancestral lands.

Figure 5-2. LABAYKU chairman and Aeta Leader Bayani Sumaoang facilitating dialogue with government officials.

In the Philippines, social justice is not only about the delivery of services, but involves the issue of access to resources. The state must recognize that indigenous peoples have the right to
develop their own territory based on their cultural tradition. However, there is a law that
substantiates the claim of the indigenous people—the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act—it is often
not implemented on the ground. It takes time for change to take place within the governmental
system. It is not easy to implement change, because what blocks progress is the mindset and
value system of the implementers of the law. The Aeta needed to persevere. The wait seemed
endless, but after several months of silence, we finally heard that the NCIP had coordinated with
the Department of National Defense to be able to begin a partial on-the-ground delineation of the
ancestral land claim. The Aeta celebrated their initial victory. It was an emotional moment and
some of the leaders cried tears of joy. Their efforts were finally recognized by the whole
LABAYKU membership, with the skeptics now believing that something had finally come of the
collective efforts of pressuring the government agencies.

LABAYKU members assumed that everything would be smooth sailing when it came to
the implementation of the ground survey. However, on the eve of the survey the NCIP Central
Office received a memorandum order from the Department of National Defense in Manila to
hold up the proposed survey until further notice. The head of the survey team, a licensed
surveyor from the Ancestral Domains Office of the NCIP in Manila, announced the stoppage of
the survey, which incensed and frustrated the community leaders.

“How could this happen? We’ve waited for this moment, the day when we could finally
identify and delineate the boundaries of our ancestral lands. We need to do something, Engineer
(the term used to address surveyors)!?” pleaded a community elder. The head of the survey team
shuttled back and forth to Manila to consult with his director. He said that everything was ready
for the survey to begin—the surveyors, the survey equipment, cement for the corner monuments,
and food for the whole survey team—but the director of the Ancestral Domains Office was
concerned about the safety of the survey team since the military was against the activity. But a flurry of phone calls between the Manila offices of the NCIP and Department of National Defense straightened things out and within the day, a call from Manila finally gave the go ahead for the survey, much to the relief of LABAYKU leaders and members. The experience strengthened LABAYKU as an organization, as its members realized that their resolve and application of continuous pressure had moved people in authority. They had witnessed the power of collective action. These cooperative efforts, the large and the small, served as building blocks of LABAYKU, helping it attain the goal of becoming an organization that could assert power and expresses its demands to the powers that be.

![Figure 5-3. Pong Tarroza, Aeta spiritual leader, conducting ritual before survey evoking blessing on equipment and rations](image)

It is important that organizational victories are celebrated to emphasize the fact that through their collective efforts, the members were able to change their condition. In any
organizing work, community organizations have their highs and their lows. LABAYKU gained some and lost some; not all our strategies worked. There were cases where the leaders were not ready to face a certain situation and found themselves tongue-tied in the middle of a dialogue. I recall that during our first very first negotiation with military officials in Manila, the Aeta Leaders were rendered practically speechless by the physical appearance and demeanor of the high-ranking uniformed officer representing the military. The officer spoke about the LABAYKU’s land claim and the military reservation, “We recognize your rights as Aeta of Capas, Tarlac, but at the same time we have to be true to our mandate of service to the Philippine nation. We need to protect the Crow Valley Gunnery Range that is part of the 17,854-hectare military reservation that overlaps with your claim. It’s our duty to protect the national interest by maintaining a strong national defense, which military reservations are vital components of. But at the same time we recognize the presence of your communities within this reservation. We’re planning to relocate you to an area outside the reservation where you’ll be safer. It’s dangerous living next to a bombing range.”

As soon as the officer started to speak, the Aeta Leaders fell silent. They felt they dare not enter into the discussion since the official appeared so authoritative, so firm, so impenetrable. And he was keen about his conviction that the Aeta should not be living within the military reservation and must be relocated. After the dialogue, the Aeta leaders were depressed. They said it was like the end of their long struggle for their ancestral land. The Department of Defense appeared closed to the idea of recognizing the rights of the Aeta to their ancestral lands. The military believed that as a government agency it had the right to relocate the Aeta, even if they had been living in the area before the arrival of the Spanish colonizers.
After the dialogue, the leaders reported back to their members and they all agreed that they needed new ways to deal with the government. I suggested that instead of waiting for the official recognition of land ownership, a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title, which was certain to take time considering the circumstances, LABAYKU should start a process of developing a credible ancestral domain development plan. This meant they would attempt to formulate a broad, long range plan to protect and develop their land, an undertaking that would be quite foreign to most Aeta given their traditional immediate-return economic strategy. The Aeta may not yet have title to their lands, but if they were able to develop them, the government would be more likely to recognize their rights to that land and eventually grant them title to it.

The Long Road toward Recognition of Rights

Perseverance and resolve were two key elements of LABAYKU’s fight in claiming their rights to their ancestral lands. The current leaders of LABAYKU did not allow themselves to be discouraged by the cynical comments they received both from their own members and those outside their communities, Aeta and non-Aeta. They often heard the remark that they would not be able to stand on their own without the help of the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission and other support groups. It was painful for the leaders to hear these things, since they were sacrificing their time, their families, and even their livelihoods to be able to attend to the different demands put on them by the land tenure struggle. But amidst all the challenges, they were able to divide their time between the needs of the organization and their families.

We—the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission and I—were not able to perfect all our strategies, but at the same time we knew that we had made a difference in the lives of the Aeta. After the years of informal education and consciousness-raising, as part of the Aeta Mission, deep in my heart I knew that I had touched the lives of these indigenous people. At the same time, the question remains: Whose voices are heard in a partnership between grassroots organizations and their
assisting organizations? The succeeding chapter will discuss the power relationships between NGOs and people’s organizations in the Philippines as they resolve issues of power dynamics and representation.
The Catholic Church and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play prominent roles in many developing countries as they strive to effect change in the lives of the poor and marginalized. These groups help develop the capacity of the poor to pressure the government as they address issues of land reform, environment, human rights, and development assistance (Silliman and Noble 1998). In the Philippines, the Church played an important role in shaping social justice work in the early and mid-1970s with liberation theology from Latin America exerting a powerful influence. This was an important chapter in the history of the Latin American Church, as large numbers of priests and nuns made significant efforts to reach out to and serve the poor (Berryman 1987). Promoting social justice as an integral part of the gospel stirred interest among priests and nuns when they were exposed to the deeply rooted poverty and violence experienced by the poor. As a result of liberation theology, there was a shift away from the purely spiritual facets of Christianity to greatly increased emphasis on the social justice aspect of the gospel, especially in developing countries (Youngblood 1990).

The repressive political situation in the Philippines during the martial law rule of President Ferdinand Marcos in the early 1970s alarmed the Roman Catholic Church and the major Protestant denominations. They believed social injustice permeated the country, evidenced by the insecurity of squatters in urban slums, the alienation of indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands, and low wages paid to migrant laborers. The Church called these forms of social injustice “structural violence,” and they were the main impetus behind the revitalization of the church’s social action program (Youngblood 1990).

In order to address these forms of structural violence, the Church had two major policies institutionalized within their social action program. First was the re-invigoration of the Justice
and Peace program to address human rights abuses. The program was instrumental in resolving conflicts between the military and church workers. Second, the establishment of Basic Christian Community-Community Organization (BCC-CO) gave emphasis to consciousness raising or “conscientization,” which encouraged the affected people to participate in the process of decision making. It meant that Church workers helped the affected communities to analyze their problems not only in terms of the gospel, but also through tedious analysis of the structural violence they experienced. Collective action was very important while searching for creative solutions to address community problems. The social action activities of the Catholic Church had parallel activities in the progressive Protestant denominations, which were active in community organization in Tondo, Manila. These organizing initiatives later facilitated the coalescence of the denominations into the Philippine Ecumenical Council for Community Organizations (PECCO). PECCO is recognized for introducing community organizing as a specialized discipline in the Philippines.

The Marcos dictatorship was overthrown by a “People Power” revolution in 1986 which brought Corazon Aquino to power and restored democracy in the Philippines. Under her presidency, Aquino recognized the role of non-governmental organizations as a legitimate force in bringing change to the country. The special function of NGOs was given recognition in the 1987 Constitution and later followed the Local Government Code of 1991. Both laws recognize the importance of NGOs and people’s organizations and their role in providing basic services and affording grassroots participation in local government (Hilhorst 2003).

After the Marcos regime, the political space may have provided more freedom, but the elite class still dominated the power structures. As a consequence, marginalized communities still faced issues of social injustice. There may have been be people-centered laws on the books, but
in many cases the government lacked the political will to implement them on the ground. As a result, in order to deal with the complex issues of the marginalized sectors of Philippine society, the progressive churches and NGOs worked together to address local issues that threatened human development.

**Contextualizing the Role of NGOs in the Philippines**

**What are NGOs in Developing Countries?**

NGOs play a significant role in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. According to a 1998 paper by Gerard Clarke, the number of NGOs in the Philippines grew by 148% to 58,000 between 1984 and 1993. In Kenya, the number grew by 184% between 1978 and 1987. By 1993, Brazil had an estimated 110,000 NGOs, the most in the developing world, while India had 100,000. The figures indicate that NGOs have become a significant venue for different organizations to play an active role in various development efforts. According to Silliman and Noble (1998), in 1993 an estimated 50,000 new NGOs with national operations in developing countries were recognized. With such a large number of NGOs, many different fields, approaches and objectives are represented; as a result the organizations decided to distinguish themselves according to their ideology and nature of services offered. As Silliman and Noble (1998) noted, NGOs sprang up like mushrooms in the developing world, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, so the challenge to differentiate between development NGOs and those with different, often obviously political, aims is an important concern for groups advocating what they feel to be genuine people’s development.

**The Nature and Identity of NGOs**

NGOs in different countries provide varied services based on local conditions. But in general, NGOs are private, non-profit, professional organizations with a distinct legal character and concerned with public welfare goals (Clarke 1998). NGOs that provide the most valuable
services are those that address poverty issues by focusing on the root causes of the problem and not simply addressing the surface issues. These organizations are willing to work in partnership with community organizations to help resolve issues of human rights, gender inequality, agricultural development, environmental degradation, and indigenous peoples’ concerns.

There is on-going debate over what defines a “genuine” NGO. In the Philippines, the mapping of the configuration of NGOs has helped resolve confusion, not only among NGOs but also in the public’s mind. Karina Constatino-David, one of the contributors to the book, *NGOs, Civil Society, and the Philippine State: Organizing for Democracy* developed the following categories to distinguish between NGOs based on the type of service they provide.

**Development, Justice, and Advocacy NGOs (DJANGOs).** The primary objective of this group of NGOs is community and sectoral organizing, but many also provide legal, medical, and research support services. Much of their work focuses on basic issues that address power structures and oppression in society; they encourage people’s participation in the civil society movement. Their initiatives are funded by both foreign and local institutions.

**Traditional NGOs (TANGOs).** These are the welfare and charitable NGOs that provide direct services to poor communities.

**Funding Agency NGOs (FUNDANGOs).** These NGOs are organized primarily to provide funding to sustain grassroots organizing in their efforts to address community issues.

**Mutant NGOs (MUNGOs).** With the enormous influx of foreign development aid to the Philippines in the late 1980s and the government’s decision to employ the services of NGOs, many government organizations formed their own NGOs in order to benefit from the funds. These groups do not necessarily aim to address poverty issues, but they are concerned with advancing their own personal interests. Constatino-David calls government-initiated NGOs
GRINGOs, while business-run NGOs, set up as tax shelters or instruments to quell labor unrest, are termed BONGOs. She calls them mutant NGOs because they were organized to advance self interest, which is contrary to the original spirit of NGOs.

The formulation of this terminology was the result of efforts in the NGO movement to accommodate different forms of social organizations and to clearly identify the focus, credibility, and identity of “true” NGOs, those espousing societal change. The phenomenon is part of Philippine NGO history, as after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 the civil society movement became a mobilizing force to effect change in society. During that period, it was crucial for NGOs to define the varied types of interventions and organizational purposes in order to avoid public confusion. In 1994, Mary Racelis, a respected sociologist and advocate for social change, provided a definitive description of NGOs in the Philippines:

Private voluntary organizations, social development agencies, or alternative professional support or cause-oriented groups that are non-profit or legal, which are committed to the task of development, and established primarily for socio-economic services, civic, religious, charitable and/or social welfare.

The Emergence of People’s Organizations

One of the objectives of many development NGOs is to facilitate strong and empowered people’s organizations (POs) that can pressure the government to deliver the services it should provide. Constantino-David (1998) stressed that the ultimate goal of NGOs is to fully assist POs so they can stand on their own, operating without outside intervention. Clarke (1998) defined and distinguished POs from NGOs as local, non-profit membership-based associations that organize and mobilize their constituents in support of collective goals. He said that POs may be local community groups, peasant, labor or trade unions, but exclude business or professional organizations.
In the Philippines, the general NGO-PO relationship over the years is a story of success and challenges in making the government accountable to its people. The relationship between the two groups has evolved as they continue to engage in public discourse that addresses issues affecting socially and economically marginalized communities.

**The Role of External Agents in Addressing Community Issues**

The hope of achieving true justice and equality in society is what ignites fire, passion, and commitment in activists, priests, nuns, lay workers, and NGOs who work to continually address issues of inequality and oppression. They believe communities that experience structural violence through unequal distribution of wealth in society should organize themselves to consolidate their power. For the last thirty-five years, the Church and its partner NGOs have strived to ensure that in the process of confronting local issues, communities can develop strong people’s organizations that have the power to address community issues on their own. From this perspective, the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission and I, as an NGO worker, forged a partnership to address issues of land tenure and capacity building for the Aeta communities.

**Church Based Organization and the Aeta**

When I joined the Aeta Mission, the central issue they wanted to address had already been identified and the Aeta knew that they needed external support to be able to defend themselves against “development aggression” (Rood 1998). The Aetas’ initial battle was against the Clark Integrated Waste Management Project, a joint undertaking with a German-based corporation that planned to build a landfill only 700 meters from the Kalangitan Resettlement Site. The project had strong backing from the local government and the conservative bishop of the province. The Aeta in the Kalangitan Resettlement site immediately opposed the project but the Clark Development Corporation (the quasi-government entity established to oversee the development of Clark Air Base, the sprawling US Air Force base abandoned in 1991) and their partners...
continued with the plan. In cases like this, the government is almost always in favor of the “development” that is centered on economic interests. It believed that commercial waste management would bring development to the municipality of Capas, but the situation or needs of the indigenous people in the area was not considered. Because of the perceived threat the landfill project posed to them, the Aeta decided to take on the daunting challenge of reclaiming their ancestral lands.

The permanent presence of the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission was a critical factor in the Aetas’ struggle for land. Besides spiritual and logistical support, the organization provided links to NGOs with expertise in community organizing, legal services, and technical issues in support of their land claim. The long-term commitment of the sisters in working for justice and equality gave them legitimacy in the minds of the Aeta, who had come to trust them.

This is a snippet of the story of a personal journey of a young nun who worked for more than two years with the Aeta in their search for social justice and equality.

Sister Marianne was a junior sister when she was assigned in 2001 to lead the Aeta Mission in Kalangitan. The two years she spent with the Aetas became a journey towards deepening her faith. At the beginning, she knew almost nothing about them and community organizing. She would later learn that in order to know these people she was encountering for the first time, she would have to forget herself temporarily, be a patient listener and observer. When she first met with the leaders of other villages outside Kalangitan, she learned that organizing was about allowing the people to voice out their own needs and solutions. They have to create their own motivations, and see through the transformation of their desires into reality. She was there to respond to what they identify as their needs. “The people from Tarucan and Maruglo were the first ones to express their desire to build a school for their children. I only helped facilitate the establishment of the school. The Aetas themselves designed and built it.”

As young as she was then, she admits to getting easily agitated when in a dialogue with the military, so she let the people speak, and trusted them to carry the dialogue and push for their own rights. Sister Marianne saw that the Aeta knew better in defending their rights. In one meeting, the Aeta of Tarucan drew their map and recounted their own history to show that their ancestors lived on that land long before the Spanish colonizers came. Sister Marian was so amazed at how the Aeta leaders could recall the names of all the heads of their clan from each generation to whom the land was entrusted.
Humility and patience became very real to her. “For us, the Aetas may seem slow, but only because it is our expertise that we are teaching them. I remember comparing my experience in teaching them about accounting as part of store management to one of my trips to the mountain. I was very slow and I thought then they were so agile and expert in traversing the mountain. The guides could just have left me. But they did not; they waited patiently.” (A Journey, a Partnership: Aeta Mission, 2003).

For the Holy Spirit sisters, it was important that they fulfilled their role as missionary sisters in addressing concrete problems on the ground. Their goal was not to convert people to Catholicism, but to combat social injustice, which took form in the Aetas’ struggle for land.

**NGOs and the Aeta**

Most development, justice and advocacy NGOs’ involvement in people’s struggles is clear—if there is resistance to the presence of development projects that are in conflict with the interests of the communities with which they work, they side with the people. Development projects such as mining, agri-plantations, and large scale eco-tourism are not usually in tune with the culture, plans, or needs of the indigenous people. Resistance to projects that favor the interests of big corporations is the usual response of NGO campaigns and advocacy. Community organizing is implemented at the grassroots level to ensure there is ownership of the campaign among the affected people. As a result of the organizing intervention, NGOs hope to facilitate the formation of powerful people’s organizations. The establishment of empowered and self-reliant community organizations has been the primary goal of NGOs that believe social justice and equality are indispensable characteristics of society.

In my capacity as an NGO worker, I believed I was helping the Aeta achieve the ability to address their own issues without the role of intermediaries. The collaboration between the Aeta and me as was established to build their organizational capacity to effectively address the issues that affect them. I felt the effects of our community organizing efforts made a difference in helping the Aeta to assert their rights and protect their interests as indigenous people. One focus
of my intervention was to develop the confidence of indigenous leaders as they worked for policy change within the government structure. My goal was to enable them to build a strong indigenous people’s organization that projected an image of power.

The Aeta Mission has various links and networks with NGOs, so they tapped the expertise of these service organizations to develop the capacities of the Aeta to address strategic issues. These organizations assisted the Aeta with the technical aspects of their ancestral land claim and the development of a management plan rooted in Aeta culture and based on the principles of sustainable development. The Philippine Association for Intercultural Development (PAFID) helped the Aeta with the documentation required by the government for their claim—historical accounts, a census, and community mapping. PAFID also assisted the NCIP with the partial on-ground survey of the claim. The Legal Rights Center (LRC) is an NGO specializing in legal issues, policy research, and advocacy. They helped LABAYKU in addressing the legal aspects of their claim. The Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE) also assisted the organization
by supporting the program for developing the capacities of the leader-organizers. The support of these NGOs and funding institutions was critical for the Aeta in their struggle to claim their ancestral land.

**Crossing the Boundary: The NGO-PO Relationship**

**Understanding NGO-PO Dynamics**

The establishment of empowered and self-reliant community organizations has been the primary goal of NGOs that believe social justice and equality are indispensable characteristics of society. Mary Racelis asks:

> We embrace the rhetoric of empowerment, and yet the NGO that practices it is rare. The empowering and autonomy of POs is the aim. But at what point does it actually become disempowerment and dependence? (1995:10).

Providing a fair answer to this question has been a struggle for development workers and NGOs who want to achieve the true essence of power and equality. It is difficult for NGOs to know how to position themselves so as to allow the POs (people’s organizations, or grassroots organizations) to realize their fullest potential. The NGOs’ primary objective is to enable the POs and their leaders to stand fully on their own, but the NGOs’ role as intermediary for funding institutions or even governments often makes this goal difficult to meet. Therefore, determining where disempowerment and dependence begin poses a crucial question that needs to be answered. Speed and Reyes (2002) raised a critical point for NGOs in light of the fact that these organizations usually perform a mediating role between the community, the state and the donor agencies. They argue that up to the present, the politics between donor agencies and NGOs has not changed. Funding flows from the NGOs down to their partner peoples organizations, which leaves marginalized communities in a vulnerable position, as the NGOs are the ones with the ultimate power to decide how the funds are spent. Speed and Reyes also point out that in
Chiapas, Mexico indigenous communities can only gain access to the state and judicial system by way of NGOs. They assert:

… then they are subject to an unequal power imbalance with the NGOs themselves, a power imbalance that is particularly dangerous if we take into consideration that NGOs are playing an active role in the diffusion of the logic of neo-liberal rule throughout society (2002:73).

The Aeta Mission staff and I were aware of the longstanding issue of the power imbalance between NGOs and people’s organizations. To avoid that complication, the main organizing strategy employed was one where the people were the decision makers throughout the whole organizing process. The Catholic sisters and I realized that if the people were not at the center of the struggle, we were creating a form of dependency for our partner communities.

**Addressing the Hard Questions**

NGO-PO dynamics is a critical issue to deal with for human rights activists, NGO workers, and community leaders. Drawing boundaries and establishing a common space is vital in the partnership. The most critical elements in the relationship are power dynamics and the issue of representation. Whose voices are being heard at the negotiating table?

**Power dynamics**

In the Philippines, NGO workers and activists often come from the middle or upper classes of society. Social development work for them means working in solidarity with the poor as a way to fully understand and affirm the dignity of these people (Lopa 1995). Their identification with the oppressed is a selfless act, but as Constatino-David pointed out, development workers intimately identify with the people they are serving, but in many cases they take the lead role in deciding and speaking in behalf of the POs (1998:41).

In the continuing efforts to improve NGO-PO collaboration, both sides realize that if they truly want to build an equal partnership, they need to establish boundaries to avoid conflict. It is
recognized that in most cases, NGOs’ voices are stronger than their partner POs’ since
development workers are more apt to be listened to because of their intellectual and class
identity. It is indeed a challenge for NGOs and POs to strike a balance of power to be able to
achieve a true essence of partnership rooted in trust and respect.

The issue of representation

With LABAYKU, the NGOs or intermediaries served to support the development of the
people’s organization. They believed that the affected people should be the center of any
community rights work, that the “outsiders” should not dictate the direction or determine the
type of movement or its operations. Communities need to organize themselves the way they
choose (Speed and Reyes 2002).

One of the main goals of NGOs should be to eliminate the role of intermediaries in order to
give way to the capacities of the communities as front liners in the struggle for dignity, poverty
alleviation and human rights. But the challenges are immense and concerted efforts are needed to
be able to win the battle.

Issue advocacy involves a different type of strategy that needs to be explored. Indeed, the
role of intermediaries is crucial in the process of elevating issues to a higher level. It is important
that the intermediaries have systems in place that ensure they truly carry the voice of the people
they are representing. Communities should be aware that there are mechanisms available in the
international arena they can tap in favor of their interests. Pressure from above and below has
been effective in many countries in advancing the rights of indigenous peoples.

Civil society organizations are an important element in advancing social movements. The
role of NGOs and POs, often referred to as the “third sector,” cannot be ignored as a social
movement. As these groups traverse the path to development, tensions brought about by their
collaboration should be recognized. The issues of representation and power dynamics are
problems that NGOs and POs face as they struggle to achieve empowered sustainable communities.

**Anthropology and NGOs**

Appreciating the dynamics and tensions in the NGO-PO collaboration are critical to an understanding of the relationship between NGOs and partner communities as they address issues of justice and equality. When NGOs facilitate the process of empowerment with their partner communities, they face challenges posed by issues of differences in class, ethnicity, and level of education. NGOs often have the tendency to take an overly active role as catalysts, so they need to be conscious of the fact and watchful of their tendencies as they work with their community partners. It may not be their intention to create dependency or to dominate the empowerment process, but without sensitivity and awareness, their class, ethnicity, and educational differences make the tendency to do so difficult to avoid. These processes and complex relationships between NGOs activists and communities are important to understand, ideally requiring ethnographic investigation. Delcore (2003) argues that individual NGO activists deal with tensions as they commit themselves to addressing social issues. This means that empowering communities is not simply understanding community processes. Appreciating development processes must involve a comprehension of the dynamics among and within the catalysts themselves as actors. This area needs anthropological attention, but at the moment, I want to focus my energy on understanding communities’ “traditional” social organization as it accommodates change in response to the increasing seriousness of external threats. Also, the outside model of community organizing used must be revised to be effective in a specific local context. The adjustments, the compromises, and the accommodations are the things that I want to investigate as new paradigms are translated and reworked in light of indigenous cultural logic.
Dilemmas in Traditional Social Organization and Community Organizing

It has been argued that indigenous peoples have, by virtue of their pre-existing cultural communities, a built-in organizational advantage over the Hispanized Filipino population (Rood 1998). This is an important element that I need to consider as a community organizer working with indigenous people. Am I coming from a deficit model of organizing? At the same time, if their existing organizational paradigm was adequate to take on the kind of external threats they were experiencing, why did the Aeta seek the assistance of the Aeta Mission in addressing their land problems? These tensions are important to analyze thoroughly from an anthropological perspective to ensure that the strategies of the NGOs or church based organization are “anthropologically informed.”

As intermediaries, NGOs and church based organizations only serve as support groups for the development of people’s organizations. Ideally, they allow the affected people to remain at the center of any community rights work, and as outsiders, do not dictate the direction or determine the type of movement or meddle in its operations.

The presence of conflict with outside forces obliged the Aeta to defend their collective interests as indigenous people. They needed to address development projects that threatened to hinder community development based on their needs and particular situation. Defending the Aeta against big corporations and huge development projects is new terrain for them. It involves technical expertise and collective action to be able to win the struggle. The Aeta realized that they needed technical assistance to be able to defend their land. This made me question whether their pre-existing social organization is adequate to handle big issues such as eco-tourism, agri-plantations, and illegal logging that require tedious analysis and sophisticated strategies. What is the role of community organizing in the wider struggle of indigenous people in defending their rights? When the NGOs come into communities, do they have to start new people’s
organizations? Does the concept of people’s organization apply to the realities of the Aeta?
These questions will be the basis of my anthropological analysis as I examine my organizing work with the Aeta in helping them defend their rights as indigenous peoples.
CHAPTER 7
WHAT DID IT ALL REALLY MEAN?

After a year of waiting, finally my bags are all packed, this time not to trek to mountain villages but to travel to the ivory tower of academia. After twelve years of working directly with the poor and marginalized, I felt I needed to avail of the knowledge and perspectives afforded by graduate studies to further improve our work with indigenous peoples. When I joined the Anthropology program at the University of Florida, my questions were clear and my study objectives were applied with the hope that my graduate training would help me to develop a toolkit that would allow me be more effective in effecting social change in the Philippines. I came to the discipline of anthropology with a fresh mind but with extensive experience of working with marginalized communities dealing with issues of justice and inequality. My first semester in graduate school was indeed a challenge as I had to acquaint myself with the debates and theoretical issues characteristic of anthropology. With the help of my mentors, I was able to combine my applied goals with the pure theoretical aspects of anthropology. I am fortunate to be working with two top intellectuals in the department with strengths in applied and decolonizing anthropology. With their guidance, I was able to develop a program of study that helped me critically analyze my organizing experience with indigenous peoples. I was able to strike a balance between understanding the foundations of “traditional” anthropology, including kinship, economics, and hunter-gatherers vis-à-vis more recent approaches including engaged or activist anthropology. It is easy for me to identify with the anthropology described by Charles Hale when he dissected activist research versus cultural critique and their contradictions in a politically engaged anthropology. As Dostal notes:

The anthropology now required in Latin America is not that which relates to Indians as objects of study, but rather that which perceives the colonial situation and commits itself to the struggle for liberation. In this context we see anthropology providing the colonized
people with the data and interpretations both about themselves and their colonizers useful for their own fight for freedom (Hale 2006).

This chapter will address the very reason that I came to graduate school. As a community organizer working with indigenous peoples, I want to explore the effects and implications of my community organizing model in addressing social problems. I want to critically analyze whether my organizing interventions are culturally appropriate for the indigenous people. Using a reflexive approach, the objective of the critical analysis is to problematize my organizing experience using an anthropological framework of analysis in the hope that the result of the investigation will aid community organizers and field workers in employing a culturally-sensitive model of organizing with indigenous peoples. The new learning, which combines anthropology with community organizing experience among indigenous people, will help fill a serious gap in community organizing practice in the Philippines.

**Community Organizing Model in Solidarity with the Oppressed**

The strength of community organizing in the Philippines lies in its analysis of, and focus on, the root cause of poverty—an asymmetrical relationship in society manifested in unequal access to and control of resources. This focus allows organizers to target the source of inequality instead of attending to mere service delivery or palliative approaches. The inequitable relationship is strengthened by oppressive structures, or structural violence as termed by liberation theologists, and is expressed in policies and laws favoring the elite and marginalizing the poor and powerless. In addition to the existence of these laws is the fact that other laws, such as the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act that in theory are pro-poor, either have debilitating loopholes or are poorly implemented.

Community organizing as done in the Philippines is a combination of theory and practice, emanating from different models tailored to specific situations. This is similar to the practice of
community organizing in the United States. Rinku Sen in her work, *Stir It Up*, argued that there is no such thing as a pure model of community organizing; it is a process of developing a practice that works by begging and borrowing, stealing, and occasionally having a new idea. Similarly, our organizing model in the Philippines, woven from a multicolor fabric of concepts and methodologies, developed from the confluence of different organizing models. Saul Alinsky, as the father of community organizing, Paulo Freire’s work on *conscientizacao* or conscientization, and liberation theology, that is the church for the poor and marginalized, provided the main organizing paradigms. Our organizing model also evolved, based on the current Philippine context, but the analysis and theory regarding working for social change remained constant: the idea that there is injustice in society and people should organize themselves to achieve social change is what underpins the whole concept. Community organizing should be grounded on how the world works, so community organizing models need to adjust to present realities and contexts of the marginalized sector with which they are used; they continually evolve based on the need of the time.

Community organizers have learned from the successes and pitfalls of others before them to develop effective tactics in addressing social issues. In the Philippines, we recognize the contributions of Alinsky, Freire, and liberation theology in our work for justice and equality, but we ensure that all our strategies are based on the specific realities of the people. We have learned from the insights provided by these models; we borrowed from their tactics, but we have adapted them to our own circumstances as we continue to navigate the road less traveled.

**Progressive Community Organizing and Its Non-Negotiables**

There may not be a pure model of community organizing, but as organizers we ensure that what we do is progressive community organizing that is rooted in a deeper motivation to act for social change. We work in such a way that our efforts create justice, equality, equity, and dignity
for people. Progressive community organizing is about working with people who are trying to make things better; it helps them figure out how to do that, and in the process builds cohesion (Beckwith in Szakos and Szakos 2007). What, then, is progressive community organizing as practiced in the Philippines? What are the tensions as progressive community organizing is practiced with indigenous peoples?

**It’s about power**

The concept of power in community organizing is about working to bring people together for social and political change. Building power is a process community organizers facilitate to motivate people to act by confronting the prevailing structures and institutions that oppress them. Through this process, people learn to overcome their powerlessness in order to win issues of justice and to assert their rights as human beings. This whole experience helps them to build their confidence and power as a collective community.

When I was organizing the Aeta, I wanted to ensure that I was helping them to work together to enable them to express their collective voice. They were not used to having to speak in front of, much less confront, government officials since the Aeta believed that the bureaucrats were more educated and in a position of authority, thus held power. Breaking the culture of powerlessness was a process for me and for the Aeta. There were moments in my organizing work with them that I felt like giving up. I thought the Aeta Leaders had already learned to confront the powers that be, but there were instances they would backslide and not assert their voice as spokespersons of their communities. They would simply sit and listen as the government official spoke, appearing so shy and powerless.

Asserting their rights seemed to be an abstract idea for the Aeta, since traditionally they only focus on immediate economic returns, lacking medium and long-term strategies to attain a stable subsistence base (Seitz 2004). Seitz believed that hunting-gathering traditions, even if no
longer extensively practiced, still play an important role in Aeta culture and help define their mindset. The Aeta still view themselves as hunters even though they are undergoing a transition to a more farming-based economy. The way they organize their economic life has an influence on their political and social organization. How can you help a group of people that only considers the here and now? How can they sustain work toward long-lasting change in power structures if they themselves only think of the immediate returns?

There is tension between the idea of power building as espoused by community organizers, which has more long-term goals, and the immediate-return economic strategy of the Aeta. I am not saying theirs is an invalid or inferior approach, but there are advantages to achieving a balance between immediate and long term goals. During strategizing sessions, this made me contemplate whether I was pushing the Aeta too hard. Were they ready to take the action I was guiding them toward? What were the implications of their confronting the powers that be, given it was not part of their conflict resolution strategy? These were difficult questions that came to mind during my time with the Aeta. As a community organizer, my theories and concepts of community organizing were clear, but did I ever try to understand how the Aeta address their own internal conflicts? Was it possible to strike a balance between their own internal processes vis-à-vis helping them to address urgent external issues?

Even in the presence of these tensions, the Aeta were able to address issues that were important to them. People participated in community mobilizations at government agencies to show that they were united in their fight for their ancestral land. The disparity between long term and immediate goals was dealt with along the way by the Aeta Leaders and community members. It appeared to me that they were able to strike a balance between the two paradigms since attendance at community meetings and village and LABAYKU-wide activities was usually
good. Many leaders and members sacrificed much time to attend these activities. People felt that they needed to dedicate time and effort in facing external threats.

**Getting people to work together**

Community issues are what motivate people to act. Collective efforts help them realize that change is possible— that there is hope in coming together. It is also about motivating people to dream and aspire for a better and just society.

At the time I joined the Aeta in their struggle, the issues were already identified. They wanted to address their immediate concern, which was to return to their ancestral lands without the interference of lowland ranchers. They wanted to address that issue so they could freely engage their own economic activities—swidden agriculture, hunting, gathering, and selling of occasional forest products (Seitz 2004). As a community organizer, I was aware of the different Philippine laws that could be tapped in favor of the interests of the Aeta. I knew that through issue analysis and advocacy we could make a difference in people’s lives. Because of my contacts, I was able to connect LABAYKU to other NGOs that provided technical and legal assistance in the fight for land rights.

I believed that through collective action the Aeta would eventually be successful in claiming their rights to their ancestral lands. The challenge for a community organizer working with the Aeta was to find a way to encourage them to work together for a common cause, because traditionally they worked and moved in family groupings, not at the village level, much less the multi-village coalition level. But they needed to demonstrate to the government that they were organized and united in their ancestral land claim. If they wanted to be victorious, they needed to project an image of power as a collective organization.
It’s about building relatively permanent structures

Community organizing is about developing a permanent organization that will address the needs and aspirations of its members over time. The organization ensures that there is maximum people’s participation and venues for decision making processes within the group. Community organizers believe that if you want to make a difference, people should be organized and their organizational state is expressed in continued and sustained community action. As the organization continues to act on issues that affect its members and obtains satisfactory results, a relatively permanent social structure will develop to ensure the mechanisms that enable concerted efforts to remain in place within the organization.

Shimizu (1989) argued that Aeta social life is based on flexibility and durability within their social system. Their overall flexibility and utilization of diverse resources are also expressed in their settlement pattern, which is consistently characterized by dispersal (Seitz 2004). Freedom of movement characterized the way of life for the Aeta that resulted in a loose social structure. If this is a given in the Aeta way of life, how can an outside organizer ensure a sustained organization over the long run? Shimizu (1989) stated the Pinatubo Aeta social groups would live and move together, share food, often eat with one another, and cooperate in performing work. He also described the Aeta as having three levels of social organization: the family unit, the family grouping, and the village. In his ethnography of the Pinatubo Aeta, he found that the family grouping is much stronger in terms of solidarity and cooperation than the village grouping. For community organizers this means that creating a permanent social structure is not outside the experience of the Aeta and that a “deficit model” of organizing is inappropriate; instead, they need to take into consideration the different levels of social organization and their unique characteristics and dynamics. The organizing efforts that take
advantage of and build on existing social structures and relations will be the ones most likely to succeed and be the longest lasting.

**It’s about leadership development**

Critical to the organizing process is one-on-one discussions between the organizer and potential community leaders, those who are willing to question the status quo and with the motivation to work for change in their community. One-on-one consultations are about motivating, questioning, being critical, and exchanging views, and they are at the heart of the organizing process. They are part of a process that taps people’s potential to act. This process will only succeed if the organizer is patient and has the time and energy to develop leaders and potential leaders in a community.

It was the young leaders, most of whom were articulate and had at least a few years of formal education, who were open to the role of private and government agencies that came to their aid after the eruption of Mount Pinatubo. The younger generation was more open to change, as they had more exposure to the world beyond their mountain villages or settlements even before the eruption. Since leadership development is at the heart of organizing work, a competent community organizer knows how to identify and deal with both honest leaders and those who only want to take advantage of external support. The exposure of the Aeta to the numerous government and development organizations produced both good and bad leaders—those who became corrupt and took advantage of their position to promote their individual self interest.

In mass-based organizing, potential leaders are the product of tedious one-on-one discussions to ensure that the contact has potential as a leader, including the right attitude, perspective and commitment to change. With LABAYKU, I started to train prospective Aeta Leaders who were open and critical about community issues, leaders who expressed their willingness to devote time and who had a vision for the future. I invested much time and effort in
the training of the Aeta Leaders in the hope that they would be able to tap the collective efforts of LABAYKU members to win the land issue.

In consolidating LABAYKU as a federation of village-based organizations, we did not involve the leaders appointed by the government because of their often questionable process of selection. It was common knowledge that they had been corrupted by the system and in the end were taking advantage of their position as leaders. We wanted to create a progressive, democratic, and critical indigenous people’s organization that had the capacity to question injustices and counter cooptation.

Aside from the leaders who emerged during the Aetas’ stay in the resettlement site, what happened to their traditional leaders, those recognized by the village members before Mount Pinatubo erupted? Prior to the eruption, the Aeta society did not have formal leaders that carried overall political authority, but family-grouping based leadership maintained harmony within the extended family units. The leader in the family grouping was normally a respected elder male in the family. This traditional leadership system was not recognized when the government institutions came into the lives of the Aeta. They were not aware of the existing leadership structures; instead they simply appointed the most articulate in the community, provided they could be depended on by the government officials to do their bidding as “tribal leaders.”

**Don’t Throw the Baby Out With the Bathwater**

The numerous questions that emerged during my organizing work with the Aeta do not mean that the concepts, principles, and theory of community organizing were not appropriate to address issues of indigenous peoples effectively. The critical analysis of my community organizing with the Aeta was a process of “rewaving the fabric” to sharpen the strategies in successfully dealing with community issues, at the same time being aware of their history,
culture, and values. Sensitivity to internal processes and existing organizational structures within the culture will result in a higher sense of community ownership.

The examination of cultural processes in relation to solidifying their social organization to address external threats will be an effective tool for community organizers working with indigenous people. At the same time it will be a very rich source of theoretical and methodological issues of interest to engaged anthropologists. The deep sense of solidarity among local people, the Church, middle-class community organizers and other allies in addressing human rights and land rights issues can be useful for anthropologists to understand issues of class, social structure, and distribution of power (Hale 2006; Nagengast and Velez-Ibañez 2004).

I, as an agent of change, recognized that my educational background, class, ethnicity, and social mobility influenced the strategies I formulated as a community organizer. Working with indigenous peoples and understanding land rights from their perspective requires much sensitivity, awareness, and exposure to everyday community life on the part of the change agent. Heart and commitment alone are not enough for a community organizer working with indigenous people; a deep understanding of cultural practices is critical to formulating a culturally sensitive—and ultimately successful—model of community organizing. This is where anthropology can contribute to the praxis of community organizing. Nagengast and Velez-Ibañez (2004) argued that anthropologists are most familiar with cultural variation, complex community struggles, and ways in which people conduct their daily affairs. They claim that as professional anthropologists we can use our theoretical, methodological, organizational, and analytic skills to alleviate human suffering.
This type of engagement is particularly important for land rights issues. Anthropologist Shannon Speed worked in Nicolas Ruiz, Chiapas, Mexico helping communities document the basis for their land claim. She claims that:

To document their claims, they needed anthropological information and analysis. This would be fundamental to the case; without it they would have nothing on which to base their claims. Ellen Messer suggests that one important potential form of activism emerged “as anthropologists respond to indigenous demands for historical cultural documentation on human rights claim” (1993:327). The integration of my ethno-historical work into the ILO case fell within this field of engagement (Speed 2006).

Collaborations of anthropologists and those who are working in the field to improve the human condition are very important to land rights and human rights work. Collaboration creates the space to improve strategies, tactics, and approaches to address human rights challenges on the ground. Nagengast (2004) believes that anthropological knowledge, methods, and theories can contribute to the work of human rights advocates with marginalized communities. She says that anthropologists should not strive to save the indigenous peoples but to collaborate with them in just struggles of their own choosing.

**From the Tool of Colonizers to a Weapon of the Oppressed**

Anthropology has its roots in the discourse of colonization. Ethnography can be traced to the tradition of Herodotus, the father of history, who traveled from one land to another to document cultures of the ancient world. After a long hiatus, interest in ethnography was revived during the mercantilist period when exploration and trade began to expand outside Europe. Anthropology was an invention of Western colonizers and evolved incorporating the perspectives and values of its inventors.

During the early part of the 20th century significant additions were made to anthropological theory, mostly by anthropologists studying the “other.” In such a study, Bronislaw Malinowski described and interpreted the Kula system of exchange in the Trobriand Islands in the early
nineteen hundreds. Grim social realities served as a challenge for academia to become more involved in attempting to change conditions of poverty and oppression. Along this line, anthropologists during the 1960s debated the issues of domination, power structure, and inequality in society. As Harrison (1997) puts it in “Ethnography as Politics:”

Jones (1970) and Lewis (1973) advocated the rise of native or indigenous anthropology to challenge and offset the Eurocentric and colonial character of the discipline’s theory, methodology, personnel, and training programs. The crystallization of native anthropology (or anthropologies) can contribute to the decolonization of anthropological knowledge and authority, a process that is an integral part of the larger struggle for liberation.

Since its purpose is to understand and explain the human condition, the transformation of anthropology as a discipline is dependent on social realities. Given the present social and global circumstances, anthropologists cannot simply document the life of the “other.” They cannot help but be exposed to inequality and oppression as they engage themselves in understanding poverty, racism, violence and other social issues. Philippe Bourgois (2006) recognized the need for anthropologists to address the issue of representation as they document social suffering. As ethnographers, anthropologists have the tools and methodology to describe inequality and oppression accurately as they give voice to the people they are writing about. In her work, Human Rights: The Scholar as Activist, Carole Nagengast (2004) said that anthropologists are uniquely trained to undertake ethnographic field analysis. A number of anthropologists, given the realities in the field, have taken the path of the engaged activist, also known as public anthropology, by producing ethnographies that seek an understanding of the way unequal power structures produce suffering (Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006).

For me, anthropology can be an empowering tool to develop organizing strategies that are culturally sensitive and appropriate to the realities of the communities with which I work. My introduction to anthropology has also led me to realize that as a community organizer with an
anthropological eye, I can improve my organizing interventions in order to better deal with internal and external power structures.

**Anthropology and Community Organizing**

What does anthropology have to offer to the strategies, methodology, and concepts of community organizing with indigenous peoples? Why is there a need to develop a culturally-sensitive model of community organizing to address issues of indigenous peoples? Who are the indigenous peoples?

In Chapter II, Section 3 of the Indigenous People’s Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, indigenous peoples are defined in the following terms:

**Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples**—refer to a group of people or homogenous societies identified by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as organized community on communally bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed, and utilized such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have, through resistance to political, social and cultural inroads of colonization, non-indigenous religions and cultures, became historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos. ICCs/IPs shall likewise include peoples who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, at the time of conquest or colonization, or at the time of inroads of non-indigenous religions and cultures, or the establishment of present state boundaries, who retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions, but who may have been displaced from their traditional domains or who may have resettled outside their ancestral domains.

Working with indigenous people is different from working with upland farmers, youth, and women; indigenous peoples have their own distinct cultural traits manifested in their lifeways. Their economic, social, cultural, and political systems are not necessarily the same as those of lowland populations. Some of the indigenous peoples are isolated and do not have a clear understanding of their relationship with the state. Indeed, they are “special populations” who now face serious issues affecting their traditional territories. Historically, some of the indigenous groups were able to protect their ancestral lands against external threats. Now, in a country with
a land area the size of Arizona and a population of 90 million, they cannot avoid the fact that there is a flood of outside forces interested in their lands, including landless migrants, tree plantations, logging, mining, and other development projects.

There is a challenge for anthropology to critically engage the oppressive conditions faced by the marginalized peoples who are often the subject of our study. As a discipline, anthropology works best when we listen to people, when we observe the people and their lifeways, and when we fill the gap in people’s work. These are also principles central to progressive community organizing. Organizers are most effective when they listen and issues are identified. In the process they integrate with the people so they know when and when not to intervene. As a principle, community organizers do not do things for the people they are organizing. These insights into the similarity and parallelism of ethnographic methods and community development work were discussed by South African activist and anthropologist Mamphela Ramphele: “I also noticed that the method of Anthropology—participant observation—was not very different from what I had used as activist in community development work. I had to live among the people I worked with, observe what they did, why certain things made sense to them, and what motivated them. Participant observation is a prerequisite of any action which would try to change people’s life circumstances.” (Harrison 2008).

**An “Anthropologically Informed” Community Organizing for Indigenous Peoples**

Anthropologists are uniquely trained to undertake ethnographic and field-based analysis that is founded on their intensive field work. For that reason, they can provide a perspective for community organizers or those working in the field that can help them to understand the social and cultural practices of the people. Such perspectives can inform concrete recommendations to improve strategies and programs for indigenous peoples. Anthropologists can also influence the discussion of concepts of “culture” held by the state and influence NGO rhetoric impacting
indigenous peoples (Thieman-Dino and Schecter 2004). Their knowledge and training in ethno-
historical work can effectively assist grassroots struggles to negotiate rights to land, water, and
food (Messer 2004). Ellen Messer in her work, Hunger and Human Rights: Old and New Rules
for Anthropologists, makes the point that anthropologists can help in the analysis of ways to
improve partnerships between government agencies, communities, and NGOs. Nagengast (2004)
challenges scholar-activists to begin with a commitment to a critical epistemology that stresses
the root causes of inequality—historically disproportional access to power, material resources,
and other forms of value. She also claims that it is not about scholars having to make a stand, but
what they need to do in the presence of inequality and injustice.

The combination of anthropology and community organizing could be an effective tool in
addressing land rights and human rights issues for indigenous people. Anthropology can provide
the framework for understanding social and cultural practices from the perspective of the people.
Anthropologists are trained to observe, listen, and record ethnographic data that can provide
community organizers a better understanding of the culture of the group of people they are
interested in. This will enable them to better mobilize and tap people’s participation, ensuring
they are not coming from a deficit model of organizing because of a lack of understanding of
social structures that already exist with the people they are attempting to assist. If progressive
community organizing has non-negotiable aspects of its model, so must anthropology if an
understanding of cultural and social processes is to be had—the “quartet” of kinship, economics,
politics and religion.

How do people organize?

In most societies, kinship is the basis for social relations. It is that aspect of culture that
helps identify and classify kin, which is important as people tend to structure their behavior by
the way they perceive themselves in relation to others (Bates and Fratkin 1999). In Southeast
Asia, especially in the Philippines, tribal agriculturalists use kinship as a form of social organization built on the nuclear family and personal kindreds, systems that are fully workable and adaptive (Keesing 1975). The way people organize in a traditional bilateral kinship system is through the family as a corporation, and the kindred as the way of mobilizing larger groups when needed. Shimizu (1989) identified three levels of social groupings of the Pinatubo Aeta: the family unit, family grouping, and village grouping. The family unit consists of the nuclear family; the family grouping is composed of more than one family unit. Family groupings are important to the Aeta since they share resources, labor, and engage in other forms of cooperation. The Aeta use surnames to refer to family groupings, which the Aeta call *aklan*—referring to large family groupings according to blood relations.

Defining the physical boundaries of their land claim was a difficult process for LABAYKU leaders and members, because it involved constant negotiations with adjacent family groupings. During one of the negotiations, there was a heated argument over the boundary between two of the biggest family groupings. I asked one of the leaders why they were having such a difficult time settling the conflict. He responded that even when he was young, their village was always in conflict with that family and they were notoriously hard to deal with. After several meetings, both parties agreed that the troublesome family grouping would not join the LABAYKU claim. Social groupings and kinship ties provide mechanisms for societies to organize themselves to avoid conflict with each other. Kinship is particularly important for all Philippine ethnic groups, so it is vital that community organizers fully understand its intricacies and particular workings. In community organizing it is important to develop a broad base by attracting more members to the organization, but because of the family-based boundary conflict,
LABAYKU lost a fair amount of members because one family grouping was in disagreement with another.

During the on-the-ground survey of their ancestral land claim, the Aeta leaders told me they needed to inform the large family groupings, or *aklan*, before starting the survey. I always heard the names Dela Cruz, Sumaoang, Tarroza, and others as the main family groupings, and the leaders said that the elders of each *aklan* needed to be aware of the survey process to avoid conflict. Now, with my background in anthropology, I understand how kinship ties play a major role in the way people organize themselves to avoid conflict with each other. The boundaries between areas controlled by different family groupings were always clear, marked by mountain peaks, large stones, streams or trees. The Aeta respected those boundaries, and they always informed the head of the *aklan* whenever we had any activities within their territory.

When I was training the leaders of LABAYKU, I respected their own processes and the fact that we had to inform the head of the different *aklan* of our activities, but I did not fully realize that that was their way of organizing their own affairs. Kinship patterns played an important role in the Aetas’ social relations—patterns of interpersonal relations, systems of ideas, and decision making (Keesing 1975). I did not appreciate that the leaders were making use of their own social structure to ensure that each family grouping was involved in the process of boundary delineation. Throughout the training, I shared with the Aeta Leaders the process of community organization and emphasized the importance of participation. Since the Aeta Leaders came from the village groupings, they knew that *aklan* and kinship ties played a major role in the community. Whenever we visited a village, we would stay with the head or elder of a big family grouping. This was one of the ways the Aeta Leaders integrated the community organizing concept of participation into their own internal social structure. Indeed, they were actively
translating community organizing principles into their own cultural terms, which they reconciled with their kin-based mode of problem solving.

The concept of a people’s organization may have been outside of their experience culturally, but the Aeta Leaders wove the concepts into their own social structure. Participation-wise, the type of community organizing we did in the process of claiming land rights was brought in line with the Aetas’ traditional social structure by tapping their kin and other social networks within the village groupings. The Aeta Leaders were able to mobilize village level participation because they were well regarded in the villages; they came from the big and respected family groupings that did not have conflicts with other aklan that were part of the LABAYKU federation.

When I worked with the Aeta Leaders, I honestly did not pay attention to their own social organization manifested in groups that hunted together, fetched water from the stream together, or sat and gossiped with one another. Keesing (1975) stressed that anthropologists should give emphasis to the role of friendship, kinship ties, and personal choices in the fabric of social life of the people they study. I was very much focused on the analysis of the issue at hand, and how it would lead to awareness raising for the Aeta, and in the process empower the community by facilitating a strong people’s organization. Any community organizer or trainer working with indigenous peoples, as I was, needs to be aware of the role of kinship and social organization and be open to the input trainees should have in shaping the strategies and direction of the organizing work. The trainers should be aware of the everyday fabric of the community’s social life that will be helpful in mobilizing village level participation. In this way, the community will have a strong sense of ownership of the organizing process because it fits into their own social structure and norms.
Understanding people’s economies from their perspective

The anthropological approach in understanding economics highlights the cultural or social context in which people operate and the importance of social or kinship relationships in the shaping of economic behavior (Bates and Fratkin 1999). When Bronislaw Malinowski went to study the Trobriand Islanders in 1915, he realized that the tools and concepts of Western economics were inappropriate in understanding the Trobriand Island economy (Wilk and Cliggett 2007). Malinowski argued that the best way to understand human beings is through their unique ability to create and live through culture. For Malinowski, culture is the main determinant of the kind of economic institutions people create, and culture plays a major role in explaining the type of economic behavior of a given society.

Indigenous people have their own system of organizing their economies that often utilize less-recognized processes that often do not fit into the western model of economics. For community organizers who want to immerse themselves in the lives of the indigenous peoples, it is important to understand how people access and regulate resources, who controls production, and the systems of exchange in use. These processes occur differently in different cultures as people deal with environmental factors and their access to resources.

The family grouping is still the center of the social and economic activities of the Aeta; they move and stay together, share their food, eat together, and share socio-economic activities (Shimizu 1989). Within the members of the family grouping, they exchange labor, but there is no money involved. There is no wage payment or cash equivalent. They help each other as part of the reciprocity of kinship relations—it means that most of their social relations have economic values (Firth 1952).

James Eder conducted studies of hunting-gathering societies; his critical analysis of different ethnographic cases in the Philippines shows how foraging societies undergo subsistence
change. He said that these people continue to hunt and gather, but as their contact with mainstream society increases, they also engage in agriculture and other economic activities. These foraging societies pass through different stages of economic development. From pure hunting-gathering, they begin collecting valuable forest products for sale to be able to purchase rice, clothing, tobacco, salt and other consumer wants. Eder (1984) terms this hunting-gathering and trade. As these societies expand their involvement with the dominant social and economic system, they still practice hunting-gathering and trade, with the addition of shifting cultivation. They also engage in wage labor. The evolution of economic strategies among historically hunting-gathering societies demonstrates how the economies of non-capitalist societies change over time. The Aeta are undergoing a transitional stage from hunters and gatherers to farmers, but they still follow the standard foraging behavior by focusing on the immediate economic returns (Seitz 2004). The women occasionally gather wild food crops and men hunt irregularly. The meat of the wild pigs they kill is both sold to lowlanders and eaten. Some men also do hunting as commissioned by the lowlanders in exchange for rice or cash. For community organizers it is important to understand how economic processes work within the Aeta society. Learning and understanding how they organize their lives economically is important, especially in considering the introduction of development projects.

I recall a comment from a government official: “I cannot understand why the Aeta sell their property in the resettlement site and opt to return to their ‘nomadic’ life in the mountains.” Life in the resettlement site offered a development paradigm outside the social, economic, and cultural practices of the Aeta, and the government official could not understand this. Economic development programs are one of the strategies of NGOs, government agencies, and church-based organizations to increase income. But ignorance of the Aetas’ vision of development is
one of the reasons most development projects were not successful in the resettlement sites. The projects were not congruent with the life and cultural values of the Aeta, but in the end they were the ones blamed as being illiterate and not wanting to improve their lives. Understanding the established daily living and social structures of the Aeta is important to the success of any project or development intervention. Headland (1985) stressed that the outside change agent must organize the program in a way that it will “fit” the cultural patterns of the people, not be for the agent’s own convenience. Change is a collaborative process; it will not happen if the people do not decide to take action. In LABAYKU’s experience of addressing community issues, the Aeta themselves were also change agents. The partnership between the outside change agents and the Aeta showed that if they are able to effectively work together, then change will happen.

In community organizing, sustaining the organization is critical, and one of the identified strategies in maintaining an organization is to develop an economic project for the people. The strategy is based on Philippine models of urban and rural (peasant) organizing, not indigenous peoples organizing, for which the approach has not been confirmed as effective. When LABAYKU implemented the reforestation project (described in chapter 5), they knew they needed to manage labor to be able to plant trees and that they would pay people in exchange for the work of hauling seedlings, brushing, staking, and planting. The LABAYKU leaders played a significant role in explaining the project to the community and helping determine who would participate in the wage labor. Since the project site was only 100 hectares and there were hundreds of potential Aeta laborers, community participation was crucial in deciding who could take part in the work. This was the only way to avoid internal conflicts. The Aetas’ openness to wage labor emanated from a history of labor relationships either with neighboring farming communities or participating in other opportunities to work outside their villages. They have
served as porters or guides for tourists visiting the Mount Pinatubo caldera, or sought other wage employment. This demonstrates that the Aeta do not only depend on the resources of their natural environment for their livelihood, but also venture into new economic activities.

From the preparation until the completion of the program, LABAYKU successfully managed the implementation of the reforestation project. It was indeed an achievement for LABAYKU, with no similar previous experience, to complete the reforestation work as stipulated in its contract and according to schedule. The project helped the Aeta to build their confidence and their managerial skills, and as a result they are now willing to venture in bigger projects. But just a year after completing the job, the leaders started having difficulty mobilizing the villagers to maintain the forest and other fruit trees they planted. From the beginning of the project, it was explained that the government did not have sufficient funds to maintain the trees. The local government officials told the community members that they would have to take care of and protect the trees since they were for their future benefit. When community members agreed, the leaders facilitated the process of devising a plan to maintain the 100 hectares of newly planted trees. The families that had planted trees on their own land had the responsibility to maintain them and protect them from fire.

For a year, some of the community members maintained their trees by brushing and ring weeding; but as time went by, fewer and fewer efforts were made to care for the trees. Then two years after the project, some of the members cleared part of the reforested area to plant annual crops. Other portions of the 100 hectares, being mostly grassland, were burned by fires that originated from the torching of nearby swidden fields. Why did this happen? Why did the Aeta not see the value of these trees for their future?
The culture of hunting and gathering for the Aeta, though not widely practiced since the loss of forest during the Mount Pinatubo eruption, is still a powerful influence in their society. The moment they decided to participate in the reforestation program and to provide the labor needs of the project, they were acting in the belief that wage labor was an opportunity for them to provide for the family in exchange for their time; they were concerned with the immediate returns of their labor: putting food on the table. They did not consider the trees themselves as a factor in their economic well-being. Seitz (2004) emphasized that this behavior distinguishes the Aeta from most other tribal groups in the Philippines. The Aeta are concerned with the immediate use of food sources and their non-storage economic orientation influences their economic choices; they have no concern for their long-term livelihood. “They don’t see the value of maintaining the trees since they are busy with other activities that will support their families,” the Sister-in-Charge of the Holy Spirit Aeta Mission observed. For development institutions, it is important to understand the economic orientation of these indigenous groups so they can tailor their programs to fit the social and cultural realities of the people.

The seeming lack of interest in maintaining the project does not mean the Aeta are totally indifferent to the husbandry of the trees they planted. But coming from a hunting-gathering tradition, they see the need to forage for or produce food to be able to support the family as preeminent. Mobility and flexibility are still important for the Aeta. Seitz strongly believes that these cultural traits were vital to their survival during and after the natural disaster that was the Mount Pinatubo eruption. He sees flexibility and mobility as a major advantage for the Aeta as they were forced to adapt to the changes in their environment precipitated by the eruption of the volcano (Seitz 1998). But the Aeta are a foraging and shifting cultivation society in the process
of change; they have survived a devastating natural disaster and are shifting from a highly mobile to a more sedentary life.

**Access to power and authority**

Why do people do what they do the way they do? Anthropologists’ work is based on fieldwork in which careful observations are made of individuals in their day-to-day lives with the purpose of placing meanings on people’s lived experience (Lewellen 1992). Lavenda and Schultz (2007) noted that political anthropologists thoroughly analyze how members of a particular society make public decisions that affect the society as a whole. They are particularly interested in looking at how leadership is understood and exercised, how competition between rivals is regulated, and how disputes are settled.

Prior to the Mount Pinatubo eruption, the Aeta lived in scattered villages and single and multiple-dwelling settlements. Each family grouping lay claim to certain portions of land to which they had access rights and were free to develop, or in some cases, sell. The membership of family groupings is determined through kinship ties, but there are cases of family groupings that work, live, and eat together but are not necessarily all related to one another. Thus, the Aeta have a dynamic social organization characterized by communal association. The head of the family, normally an elder male, usually assumes leadership. But this leadership role is far from absolute as the leader may influence, but not control, the decision-making processes of the group.

When Mount Pinatubo erupted, the Aeta were forced to live in resettlement sites and negotiate the government bureaucracy responsible for dealing with the disaster. The lack of anthropological understanding of the cultural processes of the Aeta put them in a vulnerable position. The government appointed “tribal leaders” that served as intermediaries between the government and the larger families. These leaders became the source of information for the government agencies and basically decided what programs and services the Aeta needed.
Understandably, the government-appointed leaders developed a sense of power and authority. They became an elite group in the community and in most cases they controlled the decision-making process. They felt they were fulfilling the role of “leaders” as they had received their mandate from the government.

In my organizing work with LABAYKU, we steered away from the top-down process of leadership development. We ensured that the Aeta Leaders who would go through the community organizing and training process were chosen by their villages. We did not appoint the leaders. As a trainer, I believed the village members should be involved in the process of identifying their own representatives to LABAYKU. In all of our trainings and community discussions, I was insistent that the leaders be the voice of the villages. But the leaders needed to consult their members before attending a federation meeting or before making any important decisions. Members were also encouraged to tell the Aeta leaders about the problems they wanted addressed by the federation. In retrospect, I believe the mechanism was effective since we made use of village representation, which was built on the family grouping, a basic unit of Aeta social structure. The aklan did not have a formal leader, but its members had the freedom to express their concerns to the family head. Traditional informal structures are most effective in dealing with the concerns they evolved to address, but I believe traditional Aeta informal social organization has its limitations. The Aeta are now dealing with larger issues and the concerns they are forced to negotiate are in relation to the state’s policies. A relatively permanent organizational structure such as LABAYKU may help them to systematize their demands, plan of action, and strategies in dealing with the state.

The role of the Aeta Leaders was vital at this juncture in LABAYKU’s history. They served as the facilitators of a process that ensured that the village level organizations were aware
of developments with the federation, especially concerning land rights issues. LABAYKU conducted regular meetings of village level leaders, officers of the federation, and the Aeta Leaders, who met monthly. LABAYKU’s configuration was much different from traditional Aeta social structures, including leadership. These roles were more defined compared to those in traditional Aeta society, where leadership is much more informal. I believe the Aeta now need this arrangement of a more formal and defined structure to provide them the venue to collectively discuss and efficiently address their present external concerns.

Why did the Aeta embrace the external intervention of NGOs in structuring their organization? Given that those interventions were not in line with their existing social organization, why did they agree to this “meddling”? The Aetas’ interaction with lowland populations dates back to the seventeenth century. Lowland peoples have influenced Aeta agricultural practices. The Aeta have also adapted the designation “apo kapitan,” a lowland borrowing, as a way to name their local headmen. The Aetas’ contacts with the lowland populations exposed them to various cultural elements of lowland farming villages, some of whose rituals they have adapted into their agricultural practices. Their flexibility allowed them to be open and receptive to outside influence as long as it would not cause profound change to their culture (Seitz 2004). I believe this openness, based on flexibility, was a key determining factor in the Aetas’ acceptance of more structured plans and strategies in dealing with major issues, such as land rights, that affect the whole Aeta population.

It is important to look at the effect of formal organizational structures within LABAYKU. Is the organizational structure espousing hierarchy, status, and rank? A close examination of this possible effect of the establishment of the federation is imperative to ensure that it is not replicating the mistakes of government agencies in creating “elite groups” in Aeta society. The
organizing process must still value the role and import of the heads of family groupings and elders in Aeta society.

Because of external threats, the village groupings have been more likely to select leaders with at least an elementary education rather than choosing them based on more traditional criteria. The villagers felt they needed someone who would be able to stand up and speak in front of government officials or other outsiders to be able to promote their welfare. The Aeta display a high degree of political equality distributed among male adults, which is a strength of the traditional form of access to power and authority within the family grouping. Decisions were achieved through a democratic process by way of consensus. By way of informal discussions and negotiations, a family head with strong persuasive skills could usually obtain the support of family group members. LABAYKU is somewhat in between; the Aeta Leaders were tapping traditional leadership structures but at the same time they are incorporating an organizational model from the outside.

There is an on-going move within the social and political organization of the Aeta. But are they prepared to shift from the informal, persuasive workings of traditional political machinery to a more formal, structured organization with recognized social positions and specific roles and activities attached? I do not believe the Aeta will make a radical shift or totally abandon their existing social structure in favor of a “modern” system of confronting the outside world. They will only adjust it to be able to respond to the need of the time.

**Future Directions**

I personally wish the !Kung could have remained independent as they were, remote, self-sustaining, and dignified, but that is wishful thinking. Our modern society does not allow people to remain remote. Furthermore, many of the !Kung themselves want change; they want to have land and cattle like the Bantu.

—Lorna Marshall, *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae*
We hear stories of indigenous peoples being displaced, resettled, and relocated to reservations in the name of development. Development workers, government, and church-based organizations wanted to “develop” these people to improve their economic status and advance their political, social, and cultural rights. The Aeta became a more visible target of “development” when Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991. They were displaced from their traditional lands and lived in resettlement sites for years. Most of the government and NGO-sponsored development projects at the sites were geared toward “modernizing” the Aeta and adopted a mainstream model of development. Different community development projects were introduced to improve the lives of the Aeta, including communal lowland farming using plow and draft animals, livelihood projects for women, tree-planting, and communal aquaculture. Were these development projects in line with the cultural values and social organization of the Aeta? Did the implementers ever consult the Aeta during the conceptualization and implementation of the projects? These are some of the questions that linger in my mind when I use an anthropological framework to critically analyze my interventions while organizing indigenous peoples around land rights issues. Anthropology can make an important contribution by ensuring that the outside change agent understands the cultural systems, values, and social structure of the indigenous people they are working with. This will ensure that the development model is in line with cultural values and assure a high level of ownership among the indigenous people. As an outsider to the culture, I want to ensure that my work in partnership with the people will bring positive results to their lives and to those of future generations.

Indigenized Community Organizing

A community organizing model used with indigenous peoples must undergo a process of indigenization to ensure that its strategies are culturally sensitive and appropriate. There are non-negotiables that are difficult to compromise to ensure the organizing process is participatory,
empowering, and liberating. These are the processes of *getting people to work together*, developing a relatively permanent structure, leadership development, and ensuring that the organization has the capacity to project an image of *power*. How these processes are fleshed out in the indigenous peoples’ context must depend on the social, political and economic structures, customs and norms of the people who will participate in them.

**Community Organizing with Indigenous Peoples**

CO + Anthropology (Community Organizing plus Anthropology) is my formula for community organizers who want to work with indigenous peoples. Using the E-P-S (Economic, Political, Social) framework from an anthropological perspective will make a difference in the analysis, strategies and program development of the change agent. The analysis of my organizing experience has helped me realize that the models that I have been taught and become so used to using were not designed for the indigenous peoples. Working with indigenous peoples is about understanding and learning the internal dynamics of the people’s culture. Before attempting to organize, the community organizer should first study how people organize themselves, how kinship works within the culture, their economic and social structures and organization, and then build on that knowledge. Community organizers must be aware how social activity is imbedded in the way people organize their economic, political, and cultural life. These are important elements to ensure that the organizer’s strategies are in line with the people’s cultural systems and values. They need to appreciate, from an anthropological perspective, people’s motivation for the different choices they make in their lives. Indigenous peoples are different from urban or peasant societies. They have different and distinct histories and cultures that are essential to understand in order to achieve a “dynamic fit” in addressing community issues.
The Activist as Scholar: Scholarship’s Contribution to Indigenous Peoples’ Organizing

Organizers working with indigenous communities should equip themselves with anthropological explanations of social and cultural processes of their assigned communities. The ethnographic study required to do this will provide the data to be able to fully appreciate community beliefs, values and social relationships without being judgmental. It is critical for the organizers to understand the culture and society of the indigenous people before they introduce community interventions.

Organizers are used to doing extensive fieldwork. They have the skill to talk with the people, live with the people, and start small discussions around community issues. These skills need to be enhanced by conducting social network analyses, showing inter-connections among households and communities, and collecting oral histories to provide a historical perspective of the community. By adopting this methodology the organizer can lead the people to formulate an informed decision based on the gathered data. The work for social change is a painstaking process— it is a cycle of action-reflection-action. As activists, we cannot just take all the actions ourselves; we need to reflect to further improve our work, particularly for those who are involved in organizing indigenous communities. We need to know how to be more sensitive to people’s culture. We need to have ethnographic study skills to understand the context and the realities of the indigenous community that we are working with. We need to develop critical questions that will serve as a basis for an analytical framework that we can devise to formulate strategies that are culturally sensitive and effective at the same time.

How can we do that as community organizers since we are always in the middle of addressing urgent issues? Community organizers believe that they can not develop a strong strategy and sharp analysis if they do not have the appropriate data during community planning. In order to ensure a thorough analysis, we need to use the CO + Anthropology framework in
organizing for indigenous peoples. The ethnographic data based on the E-P-S of anthropological inquiry will be the basis for developing a curriculum for training community leaders and community organizers for indigenous peoples.

**Engaged Anthropology and Social Change**

In summary, I will apply my knowledge of anthropology to contribute to the empowerment of the indigenous peoples who experience marginalization in Philippine society. Community organizing will be the vehicle for mobilizing people to move toward action in addressing the root causes of their most pressing problems. Indigenous peoples are faced with land rights and other human rights issues that truly involve issues of power and equality in society. As change agents, organizers must ensure that they have a thorough understanding of social and cultural processes to serve as a toolkit in their work with indigenous peoples. Kinship ties, social organization, economic, and political organization all influence the kinds of decisions indigenous people make in their society.

The common skill that community organizers and anthropologists share is that they have the capacity to listen, observe, and work with people with minimal intervention in their lives. It is what Ana Tsing (2005) referred to when she called for anthropologists to produce ethnography with greater humility, listening skills, and attentiveness to local processes. This is where community organizers can make a difference: by integrating anthropology with the community organizing steps, training curricula, and the many training mechanisms to ensure that we produce a truly culturally sensitive model of community organizing.

**Personal Reflection**

Individuals have the power to choose the life that they want to live. There are many avenues for expressing concern for others, but my skill in issue-based organizing is the gift I choose to give, because I have seen how it can provide true liberation from oppression. As a
young organizer in the 1990s, there were times when I wanted to give up because of physical and emotional hardships. But I could never allow myself to quit, as I always had the image of the people I worked with in my mind. The struggle of the upland farmers of Bugon, Sariaya in their fight for land security; the collective efforts of church, community, and people’s organizations to fight a four-lane highway at the base of Mount Banahaw, and ancestral land claims for indigenous people both on Luzon and Mindanao are all strivings of the marginalized that inspire me to continue my work with the oppressed.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jane Dela Cruz Austria is a native of Malabon City, Philippines. She graduated from Philippine Normal University in 1994 with an AB psychology degree. During college, Jane was involved in various student organizations, which exposed her to social issues and development work. After completing her degree, she worked as a community organizer in rural upland communities.

In the late 1990s, Jane was chosen by the United Nations Development Program to facilitate the in-country consultations with other community organizers from Cambodia and Thailand for the Young Professionals Fellowships in the Asia Pacific symposium. Apart from this, she also facilitated group discussions with NGOs in Jakarta, Bandung and Jogjakarta, Indonesia as part of the community organizing effort in Asia.

After being in the field for twelve years, she decided to pursue academic work in order to deepen her understanding of how societies function by combining an anthropological foundation and on-the-ground community organizing experience. A Ford Foundation International Fellowships Program scholarship provided her the chance to pursue graduate studies in cultural anthropology, starting her MA work at the Department of Anthropology at University of Florida in 2006. She wishes to return to the Philippines with her husband, Bruce, to continue their work with indigenous peoples by combining anthropological insights with community organizing.