

Living in Danger: Exploring the Culture of Disaster of the Ati Peoples in Bicol, Philippines

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Abstract

The Ati peoples, known for their nomadic culture and knowledge on traditional medicine are precariously living along the foot of the active volcanic-mountain Mayon that has been proclaimed as a “danger zone”. Rather than live in the resettlement area provided by the local government, they stay in the danger zone where they are faced with day-to-day danger brought about by their surroundings. While this study reveals the Ati peoples’ culture of disaster as manifested in their architectural adaptation, agricultural practices, and cultural practices, it also tackles their perceptions about the concept of danger, considerations for living in the dangerous area, and their significant contributions in the local community.

Key words: disaster, culture, disaster, coping strategies

Introduction

Disaster is imbedded in the culture of the Filipinos and this culture of disaster is pivotal in the reduction of risks and danger. Yet, indigenous communities like the Ati peoples in Bicol experience neglect and marginalization. Arguing that the indigenous communities’ culture of disaster must be looked into and urging authorities to consider integrating this into policies, it is in this light that the researcher aims to examine the importance of the culture of disaster possessed by the Ati peoples.

While disasters are considered as a broad as any type of individual or group stress (Quarantelli, 1985), this study implores on the idea that disasters do not occur out of context but are embedded in the political structures, economic systems and social orders of the societies. Manifested as part of a sequence or process that determines a particular person or people’s vulnerability, disasters are not regarded as abnormal situations but as a constant feature of life (Bankoff, 2003). Leaning on to this perspective, the study aims to explore disaster in the context of the Ati peoples in Bicol, who settled at the foot of the active-volcanic mountain Mayon, and are known for their knowledge of traditional medicine. Their culture of disaster is demonstrated as ways and means in responding to the various forms of disaster encountered by the Ati peoples. These responses are taken as their coping strategies, which manifest in their mystic beliefs and traditional healing practices, perceptions of danger and pre-warning signs of disasters, behaviors during and post disaster, experiences in relocation sites, and their significant contribution to the community.

The paper is divided into 6 sections. After introduction, section2 explains the methodology, section3, the theoretical framework, section4, introduces the Ati peoples in the Philippines and their history, migration, and ethnic image, section5 presents the data gathered from the fieldwork and are divided into sub sections discussing, i) Ati peoples’ in Bicol, ii) The Ati peoples’ way of life iii) Ati peoples’ culture of disaster, and lastly, iv) Ati peoples and Local Community Relations. Section 6 states the conclusion, and limitations of the study.

Historical records indicate that living within Mayon volcano’s parameters can be destructive. Its eruptions generate destructive lahars (Rodolfo et al. 1989). The first occurred in 1875 causing 1, 500 fatalities (Ramos-Villarta et al. 1985) while the most recent eruption occurred in 2006, when Typhoon Durian (locally known as Reming) passed over the region affecting 649,829 families or 3,190,744 persons and causing 720 fatalities (NDCC 2006b).

Because the area is unsafe, the government authorities warn the local communities that such place is a ‘no-dwelling zone’ as mandated by the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHILVOCS), where it was stipulated that the permanent danger zones are from six to eleven kilometers around the Volcano. Furthermore, one of the local government initiatives of the

province of Albay is community awareness and preparedness to the potentialities of danger, hence, the creation of Provincial Development Framework Plan 2009-2013 identifies the various risks like volcanic and typhoon related risks, landslides, flooding, earthquakes, and tsunamis as significant risks to the province (Government of Albay 2009).

When natural disaster arises, dealing with the inhabitants of the danger zone tends to be the main concern of the local authorities. Around the Mayon volcano area, officials often have trouble persuading villagers to clear out of danger zones despite natural vulnerabilities and disasters. Instead of listening to officials, geologists and volcanologists, people rely on “spiritual advisers” and “credulous beliefs” for guidance (Velasquez 2008).

Communities, in any case, may have solid reasons for remaining in the danger zone. As Bankoff (2003) reiterated that communities in the Philippines are largely self-reliant, dependent on their own resources to deal with the hazards that confront them, as government is often incapable of addressing the consequences of disasters adequately, and there are only limited technological solutions as to what are increasingly complex issues (p165). More so, communities are driven by economic goals. Many people in both rural and even in urban locations give priority to their livelihood opportunities and are less concerned about disaster risks (Cannon 2008a, IFRC 2014).

The same can also be said as far as the Ati peoples is concerned. The primary reason for them to inhabit the place is because of livelihood and economic reasons. The study reveals that the black-skinned Ati peoples in Bicol is an illiterate, marginalized, and impoverished group who relies on the use of traditional medicine as their source of income as traditional healers and vendors of traditional medicine. The researcher recommends that an in-depth study in the local knowledge in the context of disaster of every indigenous peoples in the Philippines be studied so that it will be taken into serious consideration by the policy makers to be integrated in its disaster policies.

2.0 Methodology

The researcher conducted four phases of fieldwork. The first phase was a preliminary visit to the study area, undertaken from February 17 to March 1, 2015. The 2nd phase of fieldwork was undertaken from September 18 to September 27, 2015. The 3rd phase of fieldwork was undertaken from October 17 to November 2, 2015, during which focus group discussions among the Ati peoples were conducted. The last phase of fieldwork was undertaken from March 3 to March 15, 2016. Participant observation was conducted among the Ati households and at their workplace. Semi structured interviews were conducted with the representatives of local health unit, San Isidro Elementary School, and the barangay officials. Focus group discussions were conducted among the Ati peoples and the non-Ati members. The researcher conducted five separate sessions of FGDs.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes a cultural approach to understand the concept of disaster by contextualizing the concept created by Gregory Bankoff, the culture of disaster. He mentioned that Filipinos have developed their own specific coping mechanisms to come to terms with their particular physical environment that are visible in the historical records of architectural adaptation, agricultural practices and migration patterns, and in the popular manifestations of calculated risk assessment, resignation, mysticism, self-reliance and reciprocity common to many cultures in the archipelago (Bankoff 2003: 178).

Adaptation practices are apparent when common experience of disasters becomes a normal threat. These threats influence the development of culture in the Philippines, which can be seen in various aspects such as in the people’s architectural and agricultural practices. For instance, architecture offers a unique means of examining the human-environment interchange. Structures to be constructed should reveal a careful consideration to impending hazards and whether it follows codes of competency and functionality (Bankoff, 2003, p164).

In the local agricultural systems, the threat of hazard is also very much present. These agricultural practices demand re-evaluation from the perspective of providing an effective mechanism for reducing crop losses and averting the likelihood of disaster, especially famine, rather than that of efficiency and yield from which they are normally assessed (Bankoff, 2003, p165).

True to Bankoff’s claim that Filipinos developed coping mechanisms as manifested in the records of architectural adaptation and agricultural practices, in the case of the Ati peoples, they built makeshift houses to adapt to the normal occurrences of typhoons in their area. They utilize stilt houses 10 X 10 meters in area and the structure is made of light materials that can be easily rebuild when disasters like typhoons occur. Adjacent to their houses, root crops like *kamote* (sweet potato) and *kamoteng-kahoy* (cassava) are evident. They plant crops that can withstand typhoons so when disaster strikes they have food supply.

However, for the Ati peoples’ migration pattern, economic reasons, not natural disaster, trigger them to leave their native land in Iloilo. In 1993, they migrated in Bicol where they have more opportunities to alleviate their economic situation. However, in

2006, the volcanic-mountain Mayon erupted followed by typhoon Reming so they were relocated in Camalig together with the local people. The relocation site gave them temporary shelter but eventually, they returned to the ‘danger zone’ because of livelihood and economic reasons.

Bankoff (2003) also mentioned the concepts of calculated risk assessment, resignation, mysticism, self-reliance and reciprocity as coping mechanisms to natural disasters (p178). In the Philippines, when a person says, “*bahala na*”, the expression manifests that fate has already been decided even if one does not know the result, thus, there is no need to worry about something that is beyond your control, on the other hand, it also means that something or the situation is in god’s hand, thus, the result is god’s will. The Ati people also practice these coping mechanisms as mentioned by Bankoff. Interestingly, in the case of the Ati, natural disasters are perceived as risky and unpredictable, as well as the idea of death which is associated with disasters. If they are under the situation which is beyond their control, the concept of resignation comes in (p.167).

However, it is important to note that though Ati peoples practice calculated risk assessment, their local knowledge on pre-warning signs of natural disasters should not be discounted. Ati elders can determine the coming of typhoons thru the presence of a flock of pigeons in the sky or the elders know the earthquake is about to occur when the sudden rise of weather temperature and the unexplainable shaking of the ground happen.

Furthermore, the concepts of self-reliance and reciprocity of Filipinos as stated by Bankoff are also demonstrated by the Ati peoples in times of disaster situation. Information about natural disasters must be disseminated in each households. In fact, this study reveals that the Ati peoples possess a community-centered culture that is evident during disasters like the concept of *tarabangan* (sense of community), *pakikisumaro* (cooperation), and *pakikiibahan* (fellowship).

4. 0 Exploring Ati, the Indigenous Peoples

This section introduces the Ati peoples in the Philippines by examining their history, migration, ethnic image, life orientation, and the present issues that they are facing. Dating as far back as 22,000 years ago, the Ati peoples’ ethnic image shapes the consciousness of the Ati themselves as well as the non-Ati people to create significant linkage between these groups especially in the context of traditional healing practices. The Ati is one of the largest groups of humans to migrate into Southeast Asia from continental Asia. Large concentrations are found in Aklan, Capiz, Antique, and Iloilo on Panay Island, and the biggest group is in Iloilo. There are also Ati populations on the islands of Guimaras and Negros. The Ati is a Philippine indigenous people with Negrito physical attributes, specifically dark and oily skin, kinky hair and short in height, and with teeth colored from years of chewing areca nut. Labeled as mountain people, Atis were a hunting and gathering type of people. Hunted with blowguns, bows, and arrows, fished in rivers and coastal areas, gathered fruits and vegetables that grew wild in forests and live a nomadic way of life. They resided in makeshift shelters with grass roofs and split bamboo floorings (Jocano, 1997).

4.1 The Ati peoples: Demographics, Language, and Religion

In the Philippines, according to the National Statistics Office, there is an estimated number of 2,000 Ati as of 2010. The majority of these groups can be found in the Visayas Island, particularly in the Islands of Boracay, Negros, and Panay. The languages spoken by the Ati are Inati (which is considered as their ‘traditional language’/ ‘mother tongue’), Aklanon, Malaynon, and Hiligaynon. They turn to Animism, which is their traditional form of worship, and later on, were influenced by Christianity, which is the predominantly practiced religion in the Philippines at present.

4.2 The Ati peoples’ Ethnic Image

Belief in Animism. The Ati practice a form of animism that involves benevolent and malevolent spirits. These spirits are nature spirits that often guard rivers, the sea, the sky, as well as the mountains. Sometimes, they may cause both disease and cure. The Ati from Negros refer to them as “*taglugar*” or “*tagapuyo*”, which literally means, “inhabiting a place”. However, at present, Christianity has also been adopted due to less isolation and more contact with “outsiders”.

Knowledge in Traditional Medicine. Their knowledge of local materials for medicines and peddling activities of these medicines are called as “*Binisaya nga bulong*”. By calling their knowledge and practice in this way, the Ati differentiates them from the doctor-prescribed medicines bought in a pharmacy. The Ati assumed a respectable role –provider of medicine and an expert of healing. However, they cannot depart from their very low social status. Most oftentimes, they are disposed to present their medicine as object that is separate from their social lives. Thus, the Ati face the issue of objectification of knowledge, which is a process by which human capacities are transferred to an object and embodied in it (Marx & Engels 1965); This act gave rise to inequalities in human societies and to the oppression of the working class like the Ati especially while they are in the recent settlement in urban centers (Zayas, 2008).

Nomadic. Known for its very low social status, according to De la Pena (2009), the Ati are described often as of indigent status, especially with their practice of going house to house asking for used clothing, rice, and canned sardines in exchange for dry tree bark and roots soaked in coconut oil. The Ati are described as nomadic and belong to the Pisan band (campsite). Jocano (1998) classifies the Ati under the pisan (band) because of their nomadic nature, this is a term to describe the indigenous group in the Philippines and it signifies small exogamous local groups consisting mostly of kinsmen.

5.0 The Cultures of Disaster and Coping Mechanisms of Ati

This section discusses the culture of disaster and coping mechanisms employed by the Ati people in Bicol region, based mainly on the data I gathered during the fieldwork. It is divided into sub sections discussing, 5.1) Ati peoples' in Bicol, 5.2) The Ati peoples' Way of Life 5.3) Ati peoples' Culture of Disaster, and lastly, 5.4) Ati peoples' Significance in the Community.

5.1 The Ati peoples' in Bicol

In the Bicol region, the Ati peoples settled in Barangay San Isidro, municipality of Santo Domingo in the province of Albay. It has a total of 143 households and out of 143 households, 15 households belong to the Ati peoples. Barangay San Isidro is considered as one of the most impoverished barangays in Bicol. It has been identified by the National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction (NHTS-PR) as one of the beneficiaries of the Conditional Cash Transfer grant (CCT), or the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), a human development program of the national government that invests in the health and education of poor households, particularly of children aged 0-18 years old. The 4Ps main objectives are to provide social assistance by giving monetary support to extremely poor families to respond to their immediate needs, and to promote social development by investing in the health and education of poor children through programs such as health check-ups for pregnant women and children aged 0 to 5; enrolment of children in day-care, elementary, and secondary schools; and family development sessions. Out of 143 households of Barangay San Isidro, only 65 households (45%) qualified as beneficiaries. Among the 65 beneficiaries, 10 (15.4%) Ati households are beneficiaries of the 4Ps.

The Ati peoples' Route from Visayas to Bicol

In 1993, the Ati peoples who relocated from municipality of Janiuay, Iloilo, and the Visayas Islands came to Bicol by sea and by land. From Iloilo City, a pump boat is available at Culasi, Ajuy bound for Hagnaya port in Bantayan Island, Cebu. From Hagnaya port, another ferryboat bound for Masbate port, followed by another boat rife for Bulan port in Sorsogon can be taken. From Bulan port, buses bound for Albay are available. The whole trip costs around 2,000 Pesos (4,600 JPY) and lasts for sixteen hours Figure 1 shows the route of Ati peoples from Iloilo to the Bicol Region.

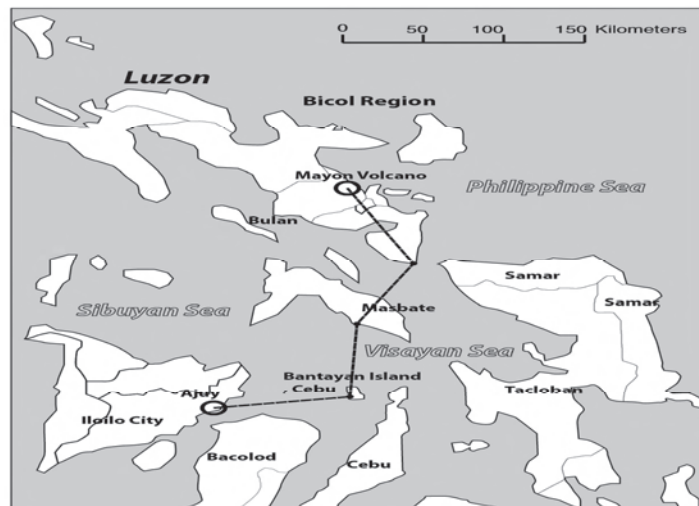


Figure 1.

The Ati peoples' Kinship

The family is the basis of society (Mirala, 1994) and this stands true among the members of the Ati people living in the 'danger zone'. The Ati peoples who are currently residing in Barangay San Isidro, in the municipality of Santo Domingo are

composed of fifteen households with a total population of 49. Among the fifteen households, there are four different families who settled from Iloilo. Back in Iloilo, their original settlement, they were already acquainted as neighbors signifying their long-standing friendship and strong sense of community. The family who came to this area first includes AH, BH, CH, DH, EH, FH, and GH as one extended family living separately into seven households. AH1, represented by the eldest Ati member, lives in San Isidro with close proximity to her four children (BH-148, CH1-41, DH1-37, and EH1-36) and their respective families, and two nephews, FH2-34, and GH1-23, joined by their families as well. The second family in the Ati settlement is represented by two brothers represented by HH (HH1-55) and IH (IH2-43) with their respective families. HH1-55's son JHK1-27 represents the JH, also HH1-55's daughter, KHK1-23 represents KH. The third family is represented by LH and MH by the two brothers LH2-37 and MH2-40 with their respective families. The fourth family is represented by NH and OH, by the sisters NH1-20 and OH-24. All the married couples are members of Ati peoples. Figure 1 below shows the kinship of the Ati peoples in Bicol. 15 households represent it and its members are identified through codes with their corresponding ages as of the 2015.

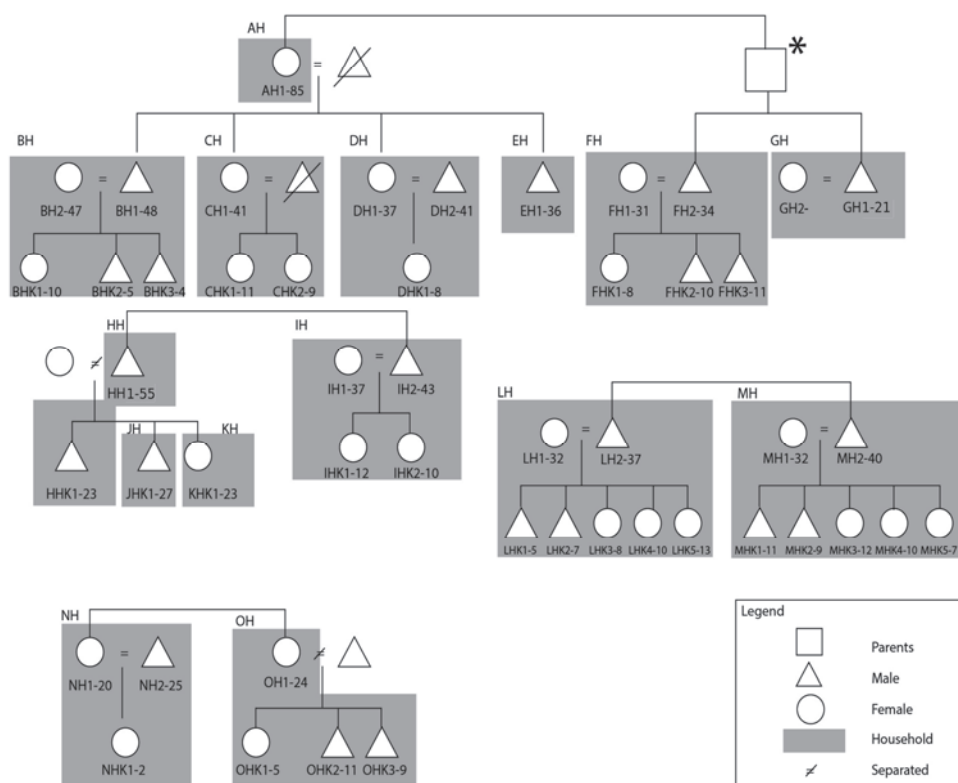


Figure 2.

* Unsure which side of grandparent the brothers FH2-34 and GH1-21 are directly related.

Features of the Ati peoples' in Bicol

Functional Interdependence within the community. The Ati peoples in Bicol manifest mutual reliance among the household, it is evident in a common practice where 6 to 10 people share one or more meals together each day. And overtime, the Ati peoples have developed an emotionally dependent relationship among each other by sharing life stories and problems during free time. NH1-20 for instance shares that:

“If we don’t have rice, we don’t need to ask since every day AH1-85 goes to our house and ask if we had eaten. In case we don’t have food, we go to AH1-85 where there is always food and I cook at her house.”

[“Kung mayo na kaming bugas dai man kaipuhan mag hagad ta indudumanan man kami uru aldaw ni AH1-85 sa harong para maghapot kun nagkakan na kami. Pag mayo, nagduduman kami kay AH1-85 ta sya may kakanun pirmi. Ako na sana su nagsasapna.”]

When one household member is facing a dilemma, for instance, when one lacks financial capacity to purchase meals for the family, the Ati members take this opportunity to assist each other. Outside, the Ati peoples, specifically the vendors LH2-37 and MH2-40 have forged an economically dependent network with the locals. They have made frequent or loyal customers in the nearby places in the municipality of Santo Domingo.

Economical backwardness. The Ati peoples' main economic source is from selling traditional medicines and donations from traditional healing services. They earn a maximum of 150 pesos (338 JPY) daily. Significantly, their roles in the community are much visible in the division of labor among each member on the basis of his or her capabilities, status, age, and sex. Usually, the Ati men's role is to vend around the public areas in Santo Domingo while the Ati women stay at home and make herbal medicines. The little children who are not enrolled in school apparently stay at home with their mothers. The table below shows the healers, vendors, makers of traditional medicine, and the Ati who are not involved in traditional medicine and opted to work as laborers in a construction site.

Table 1.

Traditional Healers	Vendors of Traditional Medicine	Makers of Traditional Medicine	Laborers
AHI-85	BH1-48	BH2-47	HH1-55
CH1-41	DH2-41	FH1-31	IH2-43
DH1-37	EH1-36	GH2-	HHK1-23
MH1-32	FH2-34	IH1-37	JHK1-27
	GH1-21	LH1-32	NH2-25
	LH2-37	NH1-25	
	MH2-40	OH1-24	
		KH1-23	

Common language. "Inati" is the language spoken by the Ati peoples in Bicol. Among themselves, they speak "Inati", which is considered to be their mother tongue or traditional language, and the common language spoken by the Ati peoples in the Visayas region. Their children who were born in Bicol are taught to speak this language apart from imbibing the 'Albayano' dialect. To be able to communicate with the Bicolanos, they learn the dialect through every day interaction with them.

Political Organization among the Ati. Among the Ati peoples, BH1-48 assumes the "lider nin tribu" (leader of the tribe) role whose significant task is to represent the Ati peoples in the Sangguniang Barangay² and barangay assemblies. The Ati peoples are registered voters under the municipality of Santo Domingo and they have exercised their voting rights during national and local elections in the Philippines. BH1-48 is appointed by the Ati members to supervise their livelihood activities and discuss about strategic locations for vending their traditional medicines. He is also relevant in the context of dispute among members. As a leader, he intervenes when at least one of the disputants requests for arbitration.

Customary laws and Sense of Home. At present, the pressing issue faced by the indigenous peoples in the Philippines is the issue on ancestral land rights. The Ati peoples in Bicol do not have access to land ownership. With the passage of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997 as stipulated in Chapter 2, section 3, the government can award ancestral domain titles to indigenous communities that can prove continuous habitation and resource use of a territory since time immemorial, however, in the case of the Ati peoples, the fact that they are living in the permanent danger zone and they are immigrants from the Visayas region impede their right for land ownership.

In this particular case, apart from livelihood and economic reasons of migrating to Bicol, the Ati elders have a tendency of perceiving the volcanic-mountain Mayon as a sacred territory. They believe that deities live inside the volcanoes protecting them against dangerous situations like natural calamities such as earthquakes and typhoons. DH1-37, one of the Ati healers mentioned that:

"In the old times, our forefathers, the shamans, they worship the 'deities' who resides in the mountains. So we are not scared to stay here because we feel that we are closely living with the spirits of our forefathers."

[“sang unang panahon бага, ang mga ninuno mi, mga babaylan, ang mga pigsasamba nira nakaistar dyan sana sa bulod. Kaya bako man kami nahahad-it ta aram mi na harani kami sa mga babaylan igdi.”]

Moreover, Ati peoples are inclined to settle in an area where they have access to nature as it plays a pertinent role in their subsistence. It is evident in their cultivation practices of growing herbs and medicinal plants so nature provides the materials they use for their livelihood subsistence.

5.2 Ati peoples' Way of Life

The Ati pioneers who resettled in 1993 are composed of one Ati elder, her 4 children and family, and her 2 grandsons. The community respects the Ati Elder. Back in Iloilo, she is a well-known Ati healer in their barangay. In Bicol, she is often seen

chewing betel nut under the shade of a tree. She says that it's her way to keep her body strong and her life longer.

By day, Ati men cannot be found in the area for they are either vending herbal medicines or involve in part-time work as laborers in the nearby town. The Ati women are left in the area and they gathered together around 2 o'clock in the afternoon to prepare herbal medicines. They would stop working around 4 o'clock to cook for dinner. They usually cook only once a day and it's usually in the afternoon, while the Ati men and Ati children are still away. Their typical food is rice, sometimes sardines, fish, porridge, and steamed sweet potatoes. They have a common place, a covered space where they comfortably seat on the grounds armed with their little children after they cook.

Among the Ati, there are 25 children in the community and out of 25, 12 children are enrolled in the nearby public elementary school. The school children go to school by foot and their classes are held in the afternoon session. The remaining children play with other Ati kids. By late afternoon, the Ati men usually arrive together and update their spouses about their earnings. The Ati women would account their earnings and prepare the herbal medicines to be sold for the next day.

The Ati healers would go to their customers' houses to perform "hilot" (traditional body massage) and "santigwar" (a form of faith healing where the healer determines supernatural beings and the reasons of one's ailment by using a plate and a lighted candle). These services are remunerated through donations.

Back in their former settlement in Iloilo where they live in a forested land, the Ati peoples say that there is not much difference with their lifestyle in Bicol. Only that, the Ati population in Iloilo is twice as big in Bicol.

Although the Department of Social Work and Development (DSWD) and the local government implement the Conditional Cash Transfer or Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) for the impoverish barangays in Bicol, the Ati peoples included, lack funds and that is what keeps most Ati from acquiring basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. They remain to be a marginalized group who are ignored and oppressed by the local people because of their black skin, impoverish state, and lack of formal education. One young Ati member was discriminated against and decided to permanently drop out of school because his classmates would often persecute him of being different. In another case, the adult Ati members face unemployment especially those who are not involve in the traditional medicine business.

Architectural Adaptation. The Ati peoples settled in Barangay San Isidro of Santo Domingo, Albay at the foot of an active volcanic mountain, Mt. Mayon. The Ati peoples house is called a "*bahay kubo*" or a stilt house. In general, in the rural areas of the Philippines, the bahay kubo has three main parts, the roof area, the underground (silong), and the main living room. However, in the case of the Ati peoples, it only has two parts, which is the roof and the living room area. In particular, the Ati peoples' house, the 10 x 10 meters in area, is composed of the roof area, directly connected with the living room where they use for dining and sleeping. The structure is built out of light materials. The roof is made of dried "anahaw" leaves interwoven to create a roof, and various materials like used plywood and cardboards to create walls. For their flooring, they utilize the ground itself. Living in "Bahay Kubo", because of the quality of these materials, it couldn't withstand disasters specifically the typhoons. A "bahay kubo" cannot be built and rebuilt by a single person, it needs 3 or more people to bring it up. For instance, in an interview with one Ati member, she mentioned that:

"You know, this is my fifth time that we rebuild our house. Every time typhoon hits us, it blows our houses away. We are used to it. We are not scared at all. But sometimes it's tiring. But we are used to it"

[Aram mo, huni na su panlimang beses mi ki tindog ka iyag harong. Kun may bagyo, lilayog su harong mi pero sanayan man lang. Dai na kami nahahadit. Makakapagal sana pero tuod na kami.]

Initially, the Ati Peoples have no access to toilet facilities, but in 2004, the international NGO, World Mission, constructed a detach toilet for the tribal people and distributed plastic water pails for each household to promote the importance of sanitary environment. However, in an interview among the community, they said that they didn't utilize this 'community toilet' because they are not used to it. Habitually, they defecate or urinate in the open air.

Because there is no access to electricity the Ati peoples use a shared solar panel, which was donated by one loyal customer of the community healer. Meanwhile, for their source of water, they rely on the stream flowing behind the mountain. The issue of water contamination is a normal phenomenon in this place.

Agricultural practices. The households utilize the soil from planting root crops like kamote and kamoteng kahoy for these root crops can withstand typhoons. They also grow calamansi trees. Interestingly, two households keep a poultry, specifically chicken and ducks. These two domesticated fowls are taken cared so they can use as source of additional eggs for their household consumption.

Ati as Traditional Medicine Experts. The Ati peoples in Bicol carry the image as knowledgeable in traditional medicines. As an Ati, the capacity to heal and the local knowledge on healing has been embedded in their culture. In the Bicol region, local Bicolano healers exist, however, the Ati peoples' wide variety of herbal medicines and the image of Ati people as healers give them an edge to heal Bicolanos. Apart from their medicinal plants being grown in the danger zone, local materials from the Visayas islands are

transported to Bicol. The herbal medicines like himag” (kind of the wood) pitpita na kamalungga (a kind of wood), albutra (a kind of wood) and pangontra sa lason (preventive against poison), “sinukuan”, “intuog” (kinds of wood) and tambal (a process using a deer’s horn to suck the contaminated saliva of animals out of the affected area) provide a cure for common diseases of people such as skin allergies, diabetes, ulcer, urinary tract infection, food poisoning, and animal bites. Interestingly, they also sell pangontra or preventive objects such as bullets, bracelets, and amulets for protection against the evil power of supernatural beings. Mysticism is something that they practice.

Ati peoples believe that there are good and bad spirits. Usually, they attribute lamang lupa (evil imaginary being) and engkanto (nature spirit) as bad spirits so they need to be protected from these beings. The notions of “Usog” and “bati” are also common ailments that are often consulted by the local people to the Ati healers. “Usog” and “bati” are Filipino superstitions that normally cause ailments to babies.

“Usog” and “bati” are somehow similar since both are attributed to a greeting by a stranger, or an evil eye hex. This happens when a stranger, who is believed to be with a strong personality encounters a baby and starts to look at or compliments the child, then the latter develops a fever, stomachache or other forms of illness after the encounter with the stranger. This can be prevented if the parents will verbally say “pwera usog” in the presence of the stranger.

However, if the baby suffers from “usog or bati” already, the practice is to ask the stranger to put some of his/her saliva on the baby’s abdomen. This is believed to make the baby familiar with the stranger. And lastly, the “pangontra sa lason” (preventive for poison) is the most expensive medicine among their products since it is made of various kinds of herbs to extract the poison out of ones body brought about by the bite of the snake. Clearly, the Ati and the local people are exposed to all sorts of danger. Being poisoned by a snake is one of the deadliest ailments since it could kill a person easily.

Among the Ati peoples in San Isidro, there are four healers. The eldest healer, AHI-85 and three middle aged Ati women, CH1-41, DH1-37, and MH1-32 are knowledgeable in traditional healing. The healers’ most common services are “hilot” (massage) and a santigwar. Santigwar is a term that originates from the Latin word sanctificare. In the old times, “Santiguar” is most commonly known in Spanish as the practice of making the sign of the cross while uttering words of prayer specially when one needs to be protected from evil. In the Philippines, santigwar is a form of faith healing where the healer makes use of a plate and a lit candle to determine supernatural beings and understand the reasons of one’s ailment. The Ati healers believe that the power to heal is inherited by them from their ancestors and performing the healing tradition is a sacred process.

5.3 Culture of Disaster

Despite the danger and huge losses from natural disasters, the Ati peoples in San Isidro live in the slopes of the volcanic mountain. Is the concept of danger not so much significant for them? To answer this question, the researcher attempts to understand the factors affecting this behavior by employing a cultural approach and putting into context the concept created by Gregory Bankoff, the culture of disaster.

Ati peoples’ Perception of Disasters. In a focus group discussion among the Ati peoples, the majority regard disaster or “katalagman” as natural phenomenon since typhoons, specifically, come to Bicol on a monthly basis. Their facial reactions, when asked about their perception show calmness that could be interpreted as they have a ‘sense of normalcy’ living in present environment. The Ati elder mentioned that she has been in this place since 1993 together with her 4 children and 2 grand children as pioneers in the area. Their neighbors in Janiuay followed shortly. She further mentioned that death is not something that she’s afraid of. Like her ancestors, she believes that every mountain is a home of the gods, therefore, it is sacred. On the other hand, one Ati mother, OH1-34, shared that she is scared for her 3 young children during disasters because usually, they transfer to relocation sites and the situation there is difficult for her children. Moreover, she mentioned:

“We worry about disasters but we always survive the hardships. Actually, it is much difficult in the evacuation center because we cannot do what we normally do. We cannot work too! But you know, life is like that. If it’s your time, it’s your time to die. Would you know when your death is? Of course not. So after the typhoon, we stand up again.”

(“Siempre nahahad-it kami sa mga peligro pero kaipuhan mi ki kusog nin boot ta mas dipisil su kamugtakan mi pag yaon kami sa evacuation center. Dai man kami nakakahanapbuhay. Pero baga, irog talaga kayan su buhay inaaapod ka na kan kamatayun, mayo ka naman baga magigibuan?! maagi man sana yan, mabalik kami dyan sa harong mi ta kaipuhan mi magtindog guiraray.)

For OH1-24, her perception about disaster specifically typhoons is a dangerous phenomenon yet temporary. Once the typhoon leaves the area, she, together with the other Ati members can resume to their normal lifestyle. She needs to come to terms with the idea that typhoons come and go and living in the evacuation center is not ideal for her and her children because their livelihood is interrupted.

Pre-warning of disasters as Local Knowledge. The coming of disasters can be commonly predicted by the Ati elders for they

possess a local knowledge, which was orally transferred by their elders in the past. It had and has been playing a vital role in preparation for the coming of disasters. The Ati elder, AH1-85, shared their knowledge as follows:

“You know, I would know the coming of typhoon depending on the birds in the sky. The pigeons flock around this area usually. And it never fails, when the birds seem to be nowhere in sight, I know that typhoon is coming.”

“Aram mo бага, pag may minaabot na bagyo, garu бага wara ki mga bayong sa palibot mi. Hilinga, dakulun su bayong бага igdi, mahihilingan mi an mga bayong sa panginoron aniun sa tongod mi. kun wara ngani, aram ko na may pasiring na bagyo.”

Moreover, one Ati member, LH1-32 said that she knew the coming of earthquake and in 2006, her prediction was correct. It turned out to be her one of the most unforgettable experience, she said:

“That volcano doesn’t scare me. I know when it will erupt because when you look up in the sky, something is different. If it gets too hot and there are unexplainable shaking on the ground, I know that Mayon will erupt. happened in 2006, Mayon erupted and I gave birth in the evacuation named my daughter “Bulkina” to commemorate that unforgettable day.”

“Dai man ako naghahad-it sa Mayon ta aram man nyamo kun sa-no matuga iyan. Hilingun mo sana su panginoron ta ibahan man. Nan maalingahoton бага nan naghiihiwag na su mga tanum mi, pati an tinotungtungan mi. Kan 2006, Nagtuga an Mayon, badus badus ako kaadto kaya nakaaki ako sa evacuation center, kaya lugod an aki ko бага an pangaran Bulkina ta dai ko talaga malilingawan idto.”

Furthermore, another Ati healer, DH1-37 mentioned that whenever a number of snakes cross the streams, automatically earthquake follows. Lastly, because they are experts of traditional medicines, they practice their traditional way of protecting themselves against disasters, one Ati healer said,

“I make herbal medicines like them. We can protect ourselves from all types of danger so we can live longer. Especially for newly born children, this ammunition, we believe it can protect our children from bad spirits and also from accidents.

[“Naggibo man ako ki mga bulong. Ining mga bulong dakuluan man su tabang sa muya ta dakulun бага an mga peligro sa panahun ngunian lalo na gusto nyamo ki halabang buhay. Ining bala бага, para ini sa mga aki, an mga bag-ong mundag, pangontra ini ta an mga aki бага, napapalibutan ki maraot na espiritu nan para makontra su mga peligro.”]

This local knowledge by AH1-85, LH1-32, and DH1-37, serve as valuable gauge and important warning for the Ati peoples so they can all respond quickly for the coming of the disaster. The local knowledge has been questioned by scientific experts due to its accuracy, however, in the case of the Ati peoples, their extensive co-existence with their natural environment is the reason why they rely on these kind of pre-warning signs of disasters.

Responses during and post disaster. The Ati peoples responses during disastrous situations depict their strong, unified, and community-oriented aspects. In the FGD, the “lider nin tribu” or tribal leader shared his main responsibility. The term “tribu” or tribe is the term used by the Ati peoples to identify themselves. It pertains to their solidarity as one community of migrants and their positive image as Ati peoples. BH1-48 mentioned that:

“If there’s typhoon or a calamity, everyone must know. If not, I ask someone to go house to house and inform them to prepare. We pack our clothes, cook rice, and bring important things before heading to the evacuation center. We use ‘emergency bag’. We hire a tricycle to be able to go to the center faster.”

[“Pag may bagyo o kalamidad бага, dapat araram kan gabos. Kun dai, may pigsusugo ko na magduman sa mga harong nin saro-saro para makaaram nan makapripara. Pigkukua nyamo su bado, minasapna na, kinukua na su mga importanteng gamit бага magduman sa evacuation center. Ugwa man kami ki emergency bag. Nagaarkila man kami ki traysikul para masurusigkat.”]

However, some Ati members emphasize the importance of the information from outside their community so that they can also monitor the direction of typhoons. One Ati member cited that it would be beneficial if the community owns a television then again, she can always rely on her Bicolano friends for the information, she said:

“Usually, if there’s a coming typhoon, I would go to my non-ati friend and watch Channel 12-TV Patrol- Bicol, and I would go back home and tell my grandmother and friends about it. Usually, my grandmother asks me to cook rice so we would have something to eat at the evacuation center.”

[“Minsan, minaabot su bagyo, nagduduman ako sa kakilala ko, bako man ati. Nakikidalan ako ki Channel 12- TV Patrol Bicol nan minabalik na ako sa harong para ibalita ki lula nan sa gabos su news. Si lula, pigpapasapna nya ako para may makakan kami sa laug kan evacuation center.”]

Evidently, during disasters the Ati peoples in Bicol evidently manifest a community-centered culture, which has a strong unified character. The concept of *tarabangan*³ (sense of community), *pakikisumaro* (cooperation) and *pakikiibahan* (fellowship) are visible during a disaster-situation. During disaster situation, the Ati peoples manifest *pakikisumaro*. This is similar to *pakikipagkapwa*, or the feeling of empathizing others and the capacity to imagine being in someone else’s shoes. They do not make

a decision single-handedly. They always inform all their members about the coming disaster and they would strategize a plan to go to the evacuation center immediately. Inside the evacuation center, the ‘pakikiibahan of the Ati peoples is observed. Pakikiibahan or pakikisama in Filipino, conveys the notion of sanction against breaking ranks with the group regardless of whether their action or merit personal approbation. They do not isolate themselves from the majority of the people in the barangay, but rather they go directly to the evacuation center together with the local people. And lastly, “tarabangan”, similar to bayanihan in Filipino connotes more toiling on another’s behalf and assuming another’s burden. Headed by the tribal leader, during a post disaster situation, the Ati peoples would immediately go back to the slopes and together, as one community, they exercise ‘tarabangan’ in rebuilding new makeshift houses and plant new root crops. They often describe the rebuilding process as a new beginning.

Relocation experiences. After the 2006 Mayon eruption and associated typhoon Reming lahar event, a resettlement program for communities in the Municipality of Camalig, a 12 km away from Mayon was constructed for the communities of Albay including the Ati people. The Ati peoples was relocated for a few months but eventually returned to the ‘danger zone’ due to several factors like lack of basic necessities like water and food, access for transportation, and disruption of economic source of living. The Ati peoples temporarily stay in the relocation sites provided by the local government, after which, they return to the slopes and rebuild their houses and cultivate their fields. In the focus group discussion conducted by the researcher during the fieldwork among the tribe, living in the resettlement site negatively impacted their economic life, one elder mentioned that,

“It is very difficult to not being able to work. How can we earn if we are in the relocation site? There are no jobs for us there.”

[Dipisilin maghanapbuhay. Pa-no man kami makakanapbuhay sa relocation site? Ma man kaming hanapbuhay duman.”]

In terms of managing disaster, resettlement remains a ‘popular solution to hazard and disaster management’. Communities are reluctant to move because of the uncertainties of being pushed into new environments with which they are not familiar. On the part of the authorities, resettlement schemes are expensive, alternative land and houses have to be allocated to those resettled, amenities and facilities have to be installed, and other social welfare such as health and education should be provided (Chan, 1995).

Although the resettlement project allowed them to secure a housing contract that certifies the continued occupation for the period of 99 years, the unavailability of electricity at the relocation site is another crucial issue that was felt by participants to hinder their new life.

In an interview conducted by the researcher with the office of the mayor and the members of the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office (MDDRMO), 115 units resettlement houses is in the works amounting to 175 million pesos from the provincial budget of Albay. This housing project aims to secure and reduce vulnerabilities in the municipalities of Albay. The Santo Domingo mayor recalls the 2006 incident and mentioned,

“During evacuation, IPs are prioritized. In fact, in the evacuation center, they occupy the first part. We give special treatment to IPs specially during disasters. When they need to be evacuated, they are segregated in a special place for them.”

On the other hand, this project was strongly opposed by the Ati peoples because aside from lack of basic necessities such as water and electricity, their livelihood is at stake. At present, With the passage of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA), the government can award ancestral domain titles to indigenous communities that can prove continuous habitation and resource use of a territory since time immemorial, however, in the case of the Ati peoples they abandoned the resettlement area in Camalig in 2006 and until now have opted to settle in the slopes of mount Mayon mainly because of livelihood reasons.

5.4 Ati peoples and Local Community Relations

Some local community members recognized the role of the Ati peoples as traditional healers and vendors of traditional medicine. For instance, when they experienced being exposed to spiritual beings or poisonous animals, they may have an option to consult with an Ati healer about mystic beliefs and purchase traditional healing products. Moreover, since the Ati healers have acquired the local dialect, which is Albayano, and their presence becomes a common sight in the public spaces in Santo Domingo, inevitably, they have created an economic alliance called ‘suki system’ which started through word of mouth from their customers. The ‘suki system’, is an informal relationship between the Ati peoples (vendors) and the local Bicolanos (buyers). This is an unwritten commitment forged between them based on trust and friendship.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the Ati peoples in the Philippines have long been known for their nomadic lifestyle and knowledge in traditional medicine. The Ati peoples, particularly who settled in Bicol capitalized on their knowledge in traditional medicine while living at the foot of the active volcanic-mountain Mayon that is considered as a “danger zone” by the local government.

In Bicol, where they remained to be a marginalized group, they were also more prone to natural disasters like typhoons and

volcanic eruptions, and exposure to mystic beings and poisonous animals.

Furthermore, the Ati peoples' response to disaster reveals that it is temporary so a sense of 'normalcy', and an attitude of calmness are evident. In architectural and agricultural practices, mystic beliefs and traditional healing practices, perceptions and pre-warning signs of disasters, behaviors during and post disaster, and experiences in relocation sites, the Ati peoples acquire various adaptive strategies in responding to the various forms of disaster and collectively, it is regarded as their own culture of disaster.

Ati peoples have long been using their culture of disaster as it continues to remain relevant today. Concurrent to Bankoff's culture of disaster as embedded in the facet of Philippine society, it can be discussed that a thriving culture of disaster exists even among the most marginalized population in the Philippines, such as Ati in Bicol.

By integrating this culture of disaster into policy, it will bridge the knowledge gap between the Ati peoples and policy makers. The latter should highlight and evaluate the Ati's coping strategies, perceptions about disasters, and urge them to participate in disaster risk reduction management plans.

6.1 Limitation of the Study

This study has some limitations that should be addressed. First, the research was conducted for a limited period of time, specifically, the researcher stayed for eight weeks in the field to determine the cultures of disaster among the Ati peoples. The fieldwork time should be longer. Secondly, the researcher is not fluent in 'Inati' or 'Albayano' languages. The language barrier inhibits the researcher to interpret and understand the responses of the Ati peoples. Thirdly, access to information or the lack of studies on indigenous peoples in Bicol is another limitation. Lastly, the researcher has taken Ati peoples' responses in interviews and focus group discussions at face value. This can be potential sources of biases.

Endnotes

¹ Barangay is a basic political unit in the Philippines and serves as the primary planning and implementing unit of government policies, plans, programs, projects, and activities in the community

² *Sangguniang Barangay* is Barangay Council, a the legislative body of a barangay, the lowest elected

³ These are the interpreted bikol terms gathered by the researcher in the interview. The researcher failed to get the exact *Inati* words.

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