

College Educated Pinatubo Aytas: A “Struggle of Identification”

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Abstract. After the eruption of Mt Pinatubo (Philippines) in 1991, most Aytas living at the foot of the volcano were resettled in lowland areas. Breaking with the past entailed a painful struggle particularly among these indigenous people who were uprooted from their source of life. As they tried to adapt to their new environment, they had no choice but to conform in re-establishing their habitat and in attempting to find ways of achieving a better future. Since formal education was a most promising venture, there were Ayta parents who welcomed the scholarships offered by the government or the private sector to their children. This study features interviews with Pinatubo Aytas—who were given the opportunity to finish college—and highlights their struggle as they aspire for socio-economic mobility. The new generation of Aytas has become an emerging breed of acculturation that puts their identity fundamentally at stake: their case demonstrates a “struggle of identification,” to use Bhabha’s term. Their experience of self-consciousness in their psychic identification with the dominant culture or their alacritous acceptance of their assimilated condition remains a critical issue calling for further inquiry.

Keywords: college educated Pinatubo Aytas, identification, acculturation, assimilation

The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle.

Frantz Fanon

Introduction

Known to be hunter-gatherers, the Pinatubo Aytas are a group of indigenous people in the Philippines. In the past, they lived in the mountains with a sense of exclusivity. According to Shimizu (1989), "Within their own microcosmos, they have maintained their own autonomous society, especially because their villages were seldom visited by lowlanders who feared the Aytas as savages" (15). Given this hostility, the Aytas were able to preserve their ethnic identity and culture. It may be pointed out that there were Aytas who developed trade skills such as selling beeswax, root crops, tobacco, etc., but their nature and way of life prevented them from integrating with lowlanders. This is not to mention the prejudice against them because of their physical characteristics—short, dark, kinky haired—and their way of life.

At present, however, the onrush of change looms over the existence of these people. Disturbance happened when Mt. Pinatubo erupted in 1991 and they were most critically affected. With their natural environment being badly damaged, their only option was to stay in government resettlement areas. They were subjected to an indeterminate period of bewilderment and uncertainty as they found themselves in a new setting. Their displacement and their struggles to survive and improve their situation all the more led them to disadvantageous circumstances including social isolation from mainstream culture and racial discrimination (Shimizu 2002; Gaillard 2006).

Corollary to such marginalization of the Pinatubo Aytas, they have formed a kind of "underclass" in their given milieu as they continuously suffer from economic disadvantage. This condition is in contrast with their self-sufficient existence before the eruption (Seitz 2004; Fox 1952). Shimizu (2002) asserts that during the Aytas' relocation, they found themselves "at the crossroads of ethnic and cultural survival" (6) and if that condition will continue, "their own way of living and view of the world will disappear, the Ayta's pride in being Aytas will vanish, and they will lose their ethnic identity" (6).

At this point, more than twenty years has passed after the resettlement, and it may be most fitting to revisit the plight of the indigenous people to find out if such prediction eventually has come true. In particular, a second generation of resettled Aytas is now an object of inquiry—if indeed these young people have become an emerging breed of

acculturation. With the nature of things surrounding these displaced people and the confrontation between their culture and a dominant one, shadows in the pictures of the currently evolving young Aytas are inevitable. An analysis of their state of emergence, viewed as an examination of their identity, could be regarded as “a state of emergency,” to use Bhabha’s (1994) play of words. Their case possibly exemplifies socio-cultural negotiation involving a “struggle of identification”, to mention another of Bhabha’s (1994:29) terms, and to apply its idea in their particular context.

A New Generation of Aytas

“When an Ayta gets exposed to the conveniences of modern life and the advantages of personal development such as education, he will begin to abandon the idea of staying in the forest where there is no opportunity for advancement,” says Vigor Laxamana, an Ayta working at Clark Development Corporation. Considering the re-orientation having undergone by the Pinatubo Aytas who were resettled after the eruption of the volcano, they now have a strong tendency to re-establish or plant their roots deeply in their present domicile. Shimizu, a researcher closely monitoring these indigenous people, observes that “In terms of material culture and life style, the Pinatubo Ayta will, on the whole, move, step by step closer to the Christian lowlanders’ way of life.”¹ Many Aytas cannot resist the seduction of the lifestyle of the lowlanders. They discover the conveniences of consumer society and will likely divert themselves from their “lost world”. Their values and thinking will most probably be profoundly reshaped in the process of acculturation. With this apparently inevitable strain on the part of the Aytas to give ground to the dominant group, what looms large is the inescapability of their loss of identity. Their assimilation becomes a critical issue: through dispersion, intermarriage and acculturation, the gradual dissolution of their ethnic identity has begun to be exhibited by the younger generation.

For decades, the Aytas have subsisted in the futile class. They believe that “illiteracy and economic exploitation are the main forces that keep them impoverished, unhappy and unhealthy” (Estacio 1997:47); thus, at present, they seek opportunities in whatever way they can to overcome their predicament. In this regard, they believe that sending their children to school promises a brighter future in terms of social mobility and economic alleviation. Since the Pinatubo eruption, scholarships have been available to these indigenous people so that a number of Aytas already availed themselves of the opportunity. Significantly enough, it will be worth finding out if indeed acquiring formal education, particularly the tertiary level, has actually contributed to the fulfillment of the previously mentioned promise. It is also interesting to analyze the impact of education on the Aytas self-development and on their families as well as communities.

This paper presents simple and brief narratives of Aytas who were given the opportunity to finish their college education by Clark Development Corporation (CDC), the agency that manages a former US military base converted into an economic zone. As part of its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a scholarship program for

these indigenous people was established by CDC in collaboration with a local university (Angeles University Foundation).ⁱⁱ Apparently, the humanitarian attempt of the two institutions to support the Aytas can be perceived to be mutually beneficial to both the grantee and the grantors: it unlocked a new opportunity for the Aytas to cross borders, so to speak, and it gave the benefactors a sense of gratification in fulfilling their social responsibility to the marginalized people.

But given such apparent advantage on the part of the Aytas, a range of concerns regarding the implications of the benefits may be raised. In particular, the experiences of the Aytas relative to the perceived desirability of their possible social mobility and achievement of material and non-material aspirations form a critical question: Could there be a potential tension between the educational achievement of these Aytas and their ethnic identity? This study presents some reflections on the attempt of these indigenous people to improve their socio-economic status through college education. As they are provided access to this form of social development, does the liminal problem of their ethnicity remain? After obtaining their college degrees, how do they take to the idea of transformation in the image (if there is any) of the dominant group?

All in their twenties, these college educated Aytas have developed a perspective arising from their direct exposure to the values and lifestyle of the lowlanders. Over time they have been able to adapt to changes in their environment and have tried to bring to full growth their inherent capacity to learn and strive for higher education. This new generation apparently has undergone acculturation, defined by Thurnwald as “a process of adaptation to new conditions of life” (cited by Teske, Jr and Nelson 1974:351), now that they have been immersed in the mainstream culture through their college education. The consequences of this process for the fortunes of the young Aytas could only be surmised.

Nine Ayta graduates, identified as racially “genuine” by an Ayta leader, were interviewed:

1) Andrea, 28, married, a Bachelor of Elementary Education graduate currently employed as an elementary school teacher; 2) Leslie, 27, married, a Bachelor of Elementary Education graduate currently working as an elementary school teacher; 3) Roseanne, 22, single, a Bachelor of Secondary Education graduate now working as an elementary school teacher (with temporary status) in a private school; 4) Rachele, 28, married, a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration graduate currently employed as an accounting staff in a public school; 5) Jenery, 26, married, a Bachelor of Elementary Education graduate working as supervisor in a restaurant where the waiters are mostly Aytas; 6) Augusto, 29, married, a Bachelor of Science in Criminology graduate, currently unemployed; 7) Aiden, 29, married, a Bachelor of Elementary Education graduate, who worked as a computer teacher in a religious school but had to quit to look after her child; 8) Maycie, 25, single, a Bachelor of Elementary Education graduate currently working as treasurer of an Ayta non-government organization; and 9) Aries, 23, single, a Bachelor of Science in Criminology graduate currently a staff in a manpower agency.

An Opportunity for Advancement

Higher education is linked to building the indigenous human capital and professionalizing the indigenous people to help them achieve their material and non-material aspirations (Anderson 2015; Lahn 2012). The idea of “closing the gaps” (mentioned by Anderson 2015:2) between these people and the non-indigenous is a goal of many countries, including the Philippines (thus, the implementation of Republic Act No. 8371, otherwise known as “Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 or IPRA). And higher education provides a pathway into their social and economic development since they can gain access to the professions. In Australia, for instance, there is now a growing number of aboriginal professionals and their greatest concentration is in urban areas (Lahn 2012) and in Canada these aboriginal people have professional and managerial positions (Wotherspoon 2003; Peters 2010; Ponting 2005 cited by Lahn).

The college educated Aytas in Pampanga have just been initiated into the mainstream formal education. They raise their hopes that they can break into higher socio-economic status once they graduate from college. Their deliverance from poverty is pinned on this belief since, similar to the Aboriginal Australian “pathway,” high educational attainment is inextricably connected with employment. However, unlike their Australian counterpart, they have to go through a transition stage that could be sensitive to a possible series of unpredictable vicissitudes and problems.

Noteworthy is that the data collected regarding the nature of their scholarship, the qualifications of the grantees, the grantees’ performance as students, and the number of graduates within the implementation period of the scholarship program pose problematic issues at the very outset. Out of eighty-seven (87) scholars during the thirteen years of the program implementation (2000-2013), only forty-five (45) finished collegeⁱⁱⁱ and only 11 of the latter are genuine Aytas, according to Bing, an Ayta leader. Moreover, the program is short-lived, starting in 2000 and ending in 2013 because of the grantees’ failure to cope with the required academic standards stipulated in the scholarship guidelines (all subjects must be passed and a general weighted average of 83% must be maintained) and/or the inadequate financial provision of the scholarship program. Last but not least, occupational aspirations as pictured by the graduates remain uncertain because their representation in professional occupations is still insignificant. Their education does not assure them of developing an ability to establish a stable future either in the mainstream culture or in their own communities. As far as their future is looked into, they see little to raise their hopes that they will ever be part of the dominant group that shapes the course of their existence.

Assimilation Theory and Process of Identification: Analysis of the Ayta Experiences

Assimilation theory, according to Gordon (1964, cited by Wimmer 2009:247), involves “the disappearance of ethnic culture (“acculturation”) [that] would lead to the dissolution first of ethnic community and solidarity (“structural assimilation”) and finally of separate ethnic identities.” Peoples endowed with different cultures, are gradually absorbed into “the mainstream” through the process of “becoming similar” (Wimmer 1996; Waldinger 2003a, cited by Wimmer 2009). Thus, the struggle to gain the acceptance needed in crossing “the mainstream” border usually involves the minority individuals’ willingness to be transformed according to the image of the majority.

As previously mentioned, the Aytas, especially the younger generation, have started to move along the road into the “mainstream”. The CDC-AUF scholars—whose entry into the standard education system is a strategic means not only to achieve socio-economic mobility but also to gain acceptance by the lowlanders—are now going through the process of “becoming similar” to this prevailing group. Significantly enough, a kind of trans-generational and trans-ethnic transmission happens. These young people who are now participants in the mainstream system cannot help being influenced by their dominant peers and usually end up being de-ethnicized. Young as they are, these Aytas inevitably acquire a series of ways of acting and thinking for dealing with the situations where they are in. Their conditioning reflex becomes set into patterns of acculturation, and this process can be demeaning to certain Aytas but a welcome “development” to many.

Bhabha’s essay on Frantz Fanon titled “Interrogating Identity” elicits ideas relevant to the current study. In particular, “the three conditions that underlie an understanding of the *process of identification* in the analytic of desire” (44) in the context of racial/ethnic discrimination may be considered. First, “to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness” (44) is an idea that is assumed to have dawned on the Aytas when they were resettled. In their primordial existence, their identity and culture were embedded within their specific environment, the forest, and their hunter-gatherer society. Now that they are transplanted in the lowland, they experience forces which are alien, yet these powers fully control and subordinate them. Their “being” that is now “in relation to an otherness” is at stake as their existence has been a matter of learning how to cope, to adapt and to mimic the Other.

Second, “the very place of identification caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place...” (44). This idea in the context of the Aytas and in the tradition of the Other apparently finds its manifestation in the consciousness of the indigenous group: in the form of the dominant Self of the lowlanders and the marginalized Other, the Aytas. In their case, the latter’s fantasy is to occupy the lowlanders’ place. Although the scholars belong to the second generation of resettled Aytas, the claim of their parents and elders on the ancestral land occupied by the former American Base and now an economic zone remains a burning issue in their consciousness. Aware of the inadequacy of their ethnic group, the scholars seek to overcome this predicament by accepting the challenge of acquiring formal education. Once equipped with this empowering tool, they can be bolder in resisting their displacement and subservience.

Third, “the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (45). In the case of the Aytas, rather than affirming their pre-given identity, they are willing to lose it and take on the image of the dominant majority since they know that their survival depends on such transformation. Unwittingly, the Aytas are actually re-enacting the experience of the dominant people who are themselves colonials trying to resemble the image of their colonizers (the Americans, in particular). In other words, the Aytas are subject to problematic identification not once but twice. In effect, they are confronted by two overpowering “Other”, thus, in their deliberate effort to be like the majority group, they actually assume a tripling of identity. And this three-part identity creates a more complex curiosity by the sight of Aytas with “rebonded” or straightened hair and fair complexion produced by whitening beauty products but speaking with Ayta accent.

It should be emphasized that the Aytas have developed in themselves such desire to mimic and emulate the Other. Similar to the Negro mentality expounded by Fanon, the black Ayta’s insecurity is founded on the idea that “The Other alone can give him worth”:

When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behaviour will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth. That is on the ethical level: self-esteem (Fanon 154).

Moreover, Fanon’s disturbing statement, “Whiten the race ‘one is white as one is rich, as one is beautiful, as one is intelligent’” (52-53), which has been an inherent and established belief of the brown-raced Philippine lowlanders, is likewise impressed upon the Aytas. Essentially, these indigenous people are now at the receiving end of this colonial transmission: they are also a link in the continuing chain of domination, i.e., in the tradition of the powerless revering the powerful. Being treated as inferior beings, these Aytas, oblivious of their psychic and social dispossession, simply yield to the lure of assimilation.

To the Aytas, “becoming similar” begins with their physical appearance: their skin, their hair and height are of primary consideration. And their most viable means to achieve their end is through genetic evolution. Thus, it is quite noticeable that the parents of the scholars chose to marry lowlanders called “*unats*” or “straight-haired” since all of those interviewed are no longer pure Aytas—the dilution ranging from 50 to 75 per cent. Assimilation is nearly spontaneous since it means survival.

Significantly enough, the young Aytas’ aspiration to acquire college education can be associated with their desire to emerge from the traumatic pattern of prejudice that they constantly encounter. This motivational dialectic can wind up in a situation where they have to adopt the identity of the Other by consent, creating a split within them.

Identification, as described by Bhabha, is "...the return of an image of identity which bears the mark of splitting in that 'Other' place from which it comes"(45). The Aytas are among the victims of colonialism and racism who are experiencing ambivalences: they try to assume the identity of the dominant group but, at the same time, many are still reluctant to abandon their communities.

Key Themes Derived from the Interviews

The thoughts and experiences of the Ayta scholars can provide insights into their time-elastic period of adaptation before and after their college graduation. How they perceive their situation—first, as students and second, as graduates—given their historical background of disadvantage and marginalization, is a question, in addition to those cited previously, that forms a critical element.

An access to the viewpoints and feelings of these Aytas could lead to what Bhabha (1994) sees as "a meditation on the experience of dispossession and dislocation—psychic and social—which speaks to the condition of the marginalized, the alienated, those who have to live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy that denies their difference" (63). With its potentially boundless context of meaning, such "psychic and social dispossession" marks the dilemma of the Ayta scholars. This tacit assumption of their struggle and the aspiration for socio-economic mobility that puts their identity fundamentally at stake are key ideas deemed relevant to the analysis of their case. The concepts shed light on the Aytas' experience of self-consciousness in their psychic identification with the dominant culture or in their becoming estranged in their assimilated condition because of their being "different".

Experience of Psychic and Social Dispossession

Joining the Mainstream Academic World: Initiation into Dispossession

To the Aytas education is an apparatus of empowerment and a key to their admission to the lowlanders' world. Getting educated to most, in fact, could be an end in itself—for the sheer satisfaction of what they reckon as an extraordinary achievement, a deep sense of fulfillment and a kind of self-transcendence. In their attempt to counter the prevailing prejudice against them, they try to embrace what appears to them as the source of their liberation from such servile status. In other words, college education is indisputably associated with social power. Thus, the scholars, before going to the university, presumably tried to be prepared to put up with discrimination for they believed that there was something in their pursuit which would make them better.

As they endeavored to push themselves towards this new horizon, they had to accept exposure to dilemmas and subjection to pressures. By linking themselves to the

mainstream way of life and established institutions, they had no choice but to conform in order to survive. In due course, it was inevitable that there were those among them who, upon experiencing psychic and social dispossession, struggled in the grip of pessimism. On the other hand, there were those who simply chose to submit themselves to the prevailing forces of mainstream society as a matter of expediency.

Such experience of psychic and social dispossession emerged as a key theme in the interviews. To begin with, verbal bullying has been the usual complaint of all the CDC-AUF Ayta scholars when they started their college education. "You're just an Ayta. You are not one of us," is the most common statement of rejection, according to Augusto, a scholar. "*Baluga*," a derogatory term used to describe the Aytas, is what they are, as rubbed in by the lowlanders. The term was less a matter of name calling than an insult to their ethnic identity, and this bullying had debilitating effects that constantly played in their consciousness. Maycie recalled how her classmates snubbed and avoided her. Aiden, on the other hand, mentioned her autocratic high school teacher's belittling remarks when she got accepted as scholar: "Are you sure you can go to college?" (short of saying "Your kind will never be a material for college education"). In the same manner, Andrea was belittled by both teachers and classmates during the first weeks of her classes in the university. One other scholar was deeply embarrassed in front of her classmates because she was called a "social climber" by her instructor.

Those disparaging remarks necessarily produced far-reaching psychological effects on the Aytas and shaped their consciousness and unconsciousness. Their entry into a new world drew undue attention to themselves. Striving to move onward, they found themselves constantly being driven to move backwards by the sadistic scourging even of those considered to be the vanguard of education. Culturally displaced and psychologically oppressed, they had nothing to fall back on but their own individual aspirations.

The persisting culture of discrimination against the Aytas has always been a social obstacle, and it used to discourage them from going to school (Estacio 2007). If not overcome, this psychological battering would all the more block off any desire of these people to rise above the poverty level. Oddly enough, after getting used to being subjected to such discrimination, the present-day Ayta students, particularly the CDC scholars, developed a coping mechanism. According to them, they just learned to ignore what they heard and saw because their aim was to finish their studies. The potentially intolerable misery and indignity that they would suffer could not match their longing for deliverance from their impoverished condition.

Deferred Fulfillment of Hope

The promise of tertiary education to the Aytas, however, was really too good to be true. Besides being initially alienated because of their ethnicity, they found themselves slavishly struggling within a particular, socially structured academic domain as they

lacked the inherent qualities formed by this kind of society. At this point, their “being in relation to otherness” is undoubtedly emphasized. The inferior image inscribed in their ethnic identity becomes even more defined. First, a number of them dropped out of their programs for failure to maintain the required grade average stipulated in their scholarship contract. Their prospect of survival in a mainstream academic setting would never be easy, considering their socio-cultural orientation. They knew well enough that, given their deficient educational background, they would likely to fall short of the standard college education. During the implementation of the scholarship program, every year, less than fifty per cent (50%) of the recipients were able to pursue and finish their studies.

Second, since only the tuition fee was provided by the program, most did not have the funds for other school expenses, such as payments for uniforms, books, projects, transportation, etc. The defective scholarship system, which gave them entry into a perceived haven from the exhaustion of their crisis-ridden origin but did not provide the necessary financial support for their other needs, subjected them all the more to this bewildering helplessness. Ironically, the pursuit of their happiness through college education was ultimately bound up with constraints that they could not come to terms with, resulting in their further degradation and insecurity. Out of resignation, those who dropped out of school did not see the need to strive to surmount the obstacles and simply resumed their Ayta hand-to-mouth existence. On the other hand, those who continued their studies had to look for other sources of fund—usually from their families and relatives and from part-time employment.

The case of Aries is worth mentioning. According to him, his parents had to sell their four hectare-land to provide for his schooling. Curiously enough, that piece of land is actually part of their ancestral domain, the selling of which is prohibited by the law.

Graduation from college neither automatically unburdened them from the weights of discrimination and disadvantage. Employment is still a problem because of the prevailing bias against their physical appearance. Those with strong Ayta features have very little chance to compete with lowlanders in the world of professionals. The more hybridized ones admitted having to use whitening beauty products and hair-straightening ways to attain even more the looks acceptable to their employers. “We learned to improve our appearance,” say Andrea and Jenery, referring to the manner of dressing and prettifying themselves up according to the lowlanders’ standard. Raychelle and Leslie, both with only 25% Ayta blood and therefore possessing the desired physical features, are now very much at home with lowlanders and feel being “one of them”.

Moreover, these Aytas’ college degrees do not necessarily provide enough preparation for their licensure examination, or these people are obviously not the ideal applicants for this type of examination. Consequently, they could be jobless despite obtaining their degrees, could land in jobs that do not match their training or would have to take the board examination several times before passing it.

To cite cases, first, there is Augusto (75% Aytas), one of the scholars, who completed the Criminology program but has not passed the required board exam to become a licensed criminologist. Given his degree, he worked on a contractual basis as an “intelligence employee” (a euphemism for “informer”), a kind of private detective, informing the authorities at Clark Development Corporation about the activities of his fellow Aytas, most especially at the height of the Ancestral Land and Domain controversy between them and CDC, when Aytas were fighting for their rights. He said, “At first, I felt the pang of my conscience as I did the job, being a form of betrayal, but the offer of good pay was hard to resist.” When the controversy died down, he tried to look for another job in the same corporation. To his disappointment, he was not hired despite his passing all requirements because of his height. His immediate remark was “Don’t they understand that Aytas have never been tall?”

Augusto has never found a regular job until now. When asked why he does not apply for a job outside the Clark Economic Zone, his only answer is “I do not want to be subject to discrimination and bullying. I’ve had enough of it. I might not be able to control myself and would always be in trouble. I might even resort to violence. People outside Clark will always look down on us.”

In contrast, a contemporary of Augusto is a criminology graduate who passed the board examination and became a policeman in a community outside the economic zone. However, his success story turned into a tragic one as he was psychologically ill-prepared to be part of the complex and even corrupting world of the police forces. He could not resist the temptation of obtaining “easy money,” got entangled into a drug-related operation and was put in jail. The proverbial dream for a better life turning into a nightmare now haunts the tribe.

Another criminology graduate, Aries, found employment not related to his college education in a manpower company two years after finishing his program. He has not taken the board examination because he lacks the requirements to be provided by the university. Since the scholarship program has been discontinued for reasons stated previously, the financial accountability of CDC to AUF remains unsettled. Consequently, graduation documents required in Aries’ licensure examination will not be released until the settlement is made. Aries has been helpless, the fulfillment of his hope “to protect his people” when he becomes a licensed policeman is deferred indefinitely.

Other cases concern the majority of those who obtained a degree in Education but found it difficult to pass the licensure examination for teachers. Hardly do they expect the “first time takers” among them to succeed in their attempt. Thus fettered, these graduates deal with such pessimism and feeling of uncertainty by engaging themselves in tutorial services for young children. Their very small remuneration is hardly enough for their subsistence, but they feel elated when people in their communities address them with respect, calling them “Madam”.

As already cited, those who passed the examination usually would have taken it several times, and they usually got employed as public school teachers in their communities.

Andrea, a board passer, now teaches in a far-flung area where an Ayta community is located. Her college degree, she says, has given her an opportunity to be employed permanently, and she is grateful, despite the difficulty of her daily travel to her work place. Proud of being an Ayta, she feels the need to be back among her fellow Aytas and to be part of their desire to become literate. Although she was “caught in the tension of demand and desire” during and after college, she realized the fresh possibility of her being—an Ayta—and kept that conviction. After joining the world of the lowlanders, she recognized the fact that she was not identical with them. She made up her mind to be grounded in her ethnicity rather than opening a “space of splitting” in her heart. And she is aware of the consequences of this determination: a constant sacrifice and struggle to surpass the challenges of her ethnic existence.

Jenery, another Education graduate, also dreams of becoming a teacher to help her family and her community. She aims to encourage her fellow Aytas to have interest in going to school and in obtaining a college degree. However, after graduation she ended up working in a restaurant employing mostly Aytas. Being the only college graduate among the Aytas, she became a supervisor, but her salary is smaller compared to what she would receive if she were a public school teacher. She still hopes to fulfill her dream to be a licensed teacher someday.

Maycie, a former kindergarten teacher in a small private school, now works as treasurer of Mabalacat Ayta Tribal Association, a non-government organization. The bullying that she experienced developed in her a kind of “avenging anger” (Bhabha 44), typical of oppressed and displaced people. Though there is an obvious mismatch between her college degree and present job, her decision to be part of an Ayta organization springs from her desire to “teach her fellow natives so that others will not vilify them.” Strong-willed, combative and articulate, she exudes self-confidence in saying that education is important, but survival does not depend on it. She thinks that her fellow Aytas should learn how to respect themselves. Surprisingly, however, her physical appearance—with straightened hair and facial make-up—belies her apparent sense of commitment to her ethnic lineage and reveals her assimilation of the way of life and looks of the people she is defying.

In the same vein, Aiden was also driven to finish her program as an act of vengeance for she suffered from discriminatory treatment of her high school teacher, in particular. She wanted to vindicate herself and make the teacher realize that an Ayta like her has the capacity to succeed in such an undertaking. Her motto is “Whatever others can do, I also can”. With this perspective, she currently wants to encourage her fellow Aytas to strive to be educated so that they can overcome the prevailing condescending attitude of the dominant majority towards them. Though uncertain about the results of the licensure examination that she took, she is determined to pursue a teaching career.

Leslie, on the other hand, who is now a licenced teacher, appears to be completely acculturated and assimilated in the way she looks and carries herself. In spite of her apparent assimilation to the lowlanders’ world, she wants to promote her heritage by being outspoken about Ayta culture in her class discussions. She also teaches her Ayta students their traditional dances so that they can join the annual Ayta festival in their

locality. The splitting of her personhood manifests itself in this most probably unconscious projection of her double image.

Roseanne is optimistic despite her long wait for her licensure. She tutors two children while anticipating the realization of her dream to become a public school teacher. Among the interviewees, she seems to be the least affected by discrimination. According to her, she has learned to adjust and mingle with the lowlanders, quietly negotiating her passage through their domain. She claims that her interaction with them is considered “normal”; she downplays discriminatory attitudes and repeatedly emphasizes her ability “to get along well with them.” Her case apparently illustrates the idea of “silencing race,” which “points not only to public disavowal of race, but also to the potential to silence resistance to racism,” according to B. Harries (2014:108).

The Process of “Becoming Similar”

All the interviewees did not only have the same bullying experiences but also keep a common inclination to believe that survival is a matter of adaptation—much like the evolutionary theory that the least fit are weeded out by natural selection. Adaptation has begun as soon as their parents were resettled in the lowlands and carries on in their generation. This change in setting has endangered the Aytas’ race as a consequence of their being overpowered by the dominant group. On the part of the young Ayta scholars, adaptation now takes the form of acculturation and assimilation.

Regarding individual acculturation, according to Teske and Nelson, “the effect of dominance on degree and direction of acculturation would perforce be contingent on the relationship of the cultural groups” (1974:355). In this respect, since the essential core of each of the Aytas’ ethnicity has become grounded in the shifting sand of their socio-economic existence, being subject to a more stable and dominant group is a situation that cannot be helped. The Aytas’ acculturation may fall under the polar type called complete dominance in which the lowlanders allow the Aytas “into [its] activities in positions of low status” (Teske and Nelson 1974:354). Despite their being in the periphery, in their desire to have a more comfortable life, the Ayta college graduates have begun their “identification with the ‘out-group,” (Ibid, 360); their acculturation, which has been integral to their existence since their resettlement in the lowland after the Pinatubo eruption, is a continuing process leading to voluntary assimilation. The latter has been “unidirectional,” and “it is conceivable that the attrition rate will be so extensive as to lead to [their] dissolution” (Ibid).

The dynamic process involved in identity is a two-edged assumption relative to the Aytas being focused. If their acculturation were “democratic” and if “cultural pluralism [would] prevail[s]” (Bogardus cited by Teske and Nelson 1974:355), coming to terms with their evolving identity would not be as problematic as it appears now. It would be easy for them to claim a “bi-racial identity,” an obvious awareness of advantageous racial fusion associated with higher status groups, as in the case of the mixed-race people from middle class backgrounds examined by Townsend, et al. (2012). The

balancing act of “mixing races”, so to speak, conveniently leads to a healthy synthesis or co-existence of two racial identities. However, the case of the Aytas, given their socio-historical background, apparently poses a more complex challenge since the possible direction of their evolving “bi-racial identity” is akin to a flickering glow of the moon during an eclipse.

Producing an Image of Identity

“The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white,” says Fanon (228). This same desire has been consciously or unconsciously harboured by the Aytas in their own context. When they hear “*Baluga*,” their consciousness undergoes the experience of yearning to move towards “otherness”. The derogatory word is a representation of who the Other thinks they are, and, therefore, it is a source of their insecurity and anxiety. “*Baluga*” connotes dark-skin, short stature, kinky hair and a primitive way of life; and this ethnic association creates a status of subordination. The Ayta scholars, who aimed to be admitted to the world of the lowlanders, were readily pinned down to thoughts of this obstructive psychological wall. To make the latter recede, they inevitably embraced the cultural values and aimed at having the physical characteristics of the lowlanders, even if all these would mean becoming the opposite of who they are.

The female scholars, in particular, are quite deliberate in pursuing the “whiteness and straight hair destiny”. As mentioned, their physical appearance seems to controvert their identification as Aytas. Jenery’s husband prides himself on the fact that she is as fair as the lowlanders and hardly has the Ayta look. Raychelle and Leslie, on the other hand, are white-skinned and straight-haired as well as exude sophistication when they speak. There is hardly any trace of Ayta-ness in them, and they admit their use of whitening and hair-straightening beauty products to attain such looks. Moreover, being married to lowlander “seamen,” known to be big earners, they can afford to buy what they need for their transformation, including expensive gadgets associated with high socio-economic status. The rest of the Ayta girls also have the same objective as they try to leap forward beyond their ethnic borders. They unanimously affirm their wish to put an end to the stigma of their being “*Baluga*.”

Assimilation by “becoming similar” works very well among these individuals in their act of social survival. Their college education, in fact, has served as a bridge in their crossing over the borders. Though the process of traversing is full of crises, it is a critical step out of their limited world and they get exposed to the welter of influences until they arrive at their desired destiny.

Having Better Future by “Improving the Race” and Getting Educated

As cited before, all the scholars are not pure Ayta, and as expected, they intend to perpetuate this evolutionary process, again as a means of survival. For instance, Augusto married an “*unat*” (straight-haired) whom he met during a job fair in Clark. They now have a child, and they live at the woman’s parents’ house because he is unemployed. He mentioned two reasons for marrying an “*unat*”. First, the dowry system is still observed in Ayta communities and could be very expensive—way beyond what the prospective groom’s parents can afford such as a house, a lot, live animals, including water buffaloes. Second, offspring by “*unats*” are fairer, straight-haired, and taller; thus they have better chance of a good future.

The same reasons are given by the other scholars. All of the married ones have “*unats*” as spouses. Aries, still unmarried, is advised by his own mother, a pure Ayta, to look for someone “unlike her” to avoid the fate of the downtrodden tribe. Aries looks forward to marrying an “*unat*”.

But not everything is well to this vanishing breed whose ambivalences in their identification with the dominant race would surface every now and then. As their being gets closer to the otherness that they pursue, the mark of splitting in their identity is still manifested. Jenery, Andrea and others lament that their children have dominantly “*unat*” physical features. They are aware of the fast dissolution of their race, but they hang on to the idea that their children, being products of evolutionary forces, will have a better future.

And this better future is also linked to education—a belief that the Ayta scholars maintain despite their least enviable testimonies in their attempt to actualize their dream to enter the academic world. They still unanimously regard education as a most reliable means to a better life, especially in the best of circumstances. Economically, for these young graduates education means better chances of being employed, though this prospect might take time. They unanimously assert that, with their achievement, their self-esteem has been boosted up. Socially, they have learned to gradually fix the gulf between themselves and those who discriminate against them no matter how painful the process might have been.

But the question remains: Where do they belong?

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Interviews^{iv}

Vigor Laxamana, May 4, 2015, Clark Field, Pampanga
Bing Margarito, October 20, 2015, Clark Field, Pampanga
Roseanne , October 22, 2015, Clark Field, Pampanga
Augusto, October 22, 2015, Clark Field, Pampanga
Maycie , October 24, 2015, Clark Field, Pampanga
Jenery, October 26, 2015, Clark Field, Pampanga
Raychelle, October 29, 2015, Clark Field, Pampanga
Leslie, October 30, 2015, Clark Field, Pampanga
Andrea, November 3, 2015, Clark Field, Pampanga
Aries, June 28, 2016

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ⁱ http://www.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~shimizuh/shimizu_hp/essay/essay02.html

ⁱⁱ Clark Development Corporation Board Resolution No. EC-0601.

ⁱⁱⁱ Supplied by Office of External Affairs, Clark Development Corporation.

^{iv} The author chose not to include the last names of the interviewees (except for Vigor Laxamana who was willing to be identified) to protect their identities.