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Voices from the Ancestral Lands: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study of the COVID-19 Experience Among the Ayta Magbukon

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on exploring the experiences of the Ayta Magbukon during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing descriptive phenomenology, the research was conducted through fieldwork in Sitio Matalangao, Barangay Banawang, Bagac, Bataan. The findings revealed that the Aytas of Matalangao did not face significant challenges during the pandemic due to their strong connection to their land, resources, and community, highlighting their inherent resilience. The study identified that the Aytas encountered minor difficulties when interacting outside of their community or visiting lowland areas. Despite these challenges, the pandemic had some positive impacts on the community. It led to a resurgence in Indigenous practices such as traditional foods and herbal medicine, fostered stronger community bonds, and deepened their spiritual beliefs. The study's results, highlighting both the strengths and vulnerabilities of the Aeta community, emphasize the need for sustained support from the broader community to nurture their existing strengths and safeguard their unique cultural heritage in the face of future challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global state of distress, affecting different aspects of human life and having a greater impact on ethnic minority communities around the world. It transformed the way ethnic groups live, affecting several aspects, including health and cultural traditions.

Globally, Indigenous groups and ethnic minorities generally experience more adverse health outcomes compared to non-indigenous populations in terms of their overall well-being (Dahal *et al.*, 2022). An illustrative instance is the disparity in life expectancy between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians during the period of 2010-2012. The former group had a life expectancy approximately 10 years less than the latter (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). Furthermore, as stated by Dahal *et al.* (2022), indigenous populations exhibited a death rate from COVID-19 that was 68% greater than that of non-indigenous populations. The fatality rate ratio and the reproduction number reached their peak during the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indigenous populations face significant socio-economic marginalization and are disproportionately vulnerable in public health crises, including the current global pandemic. This heightened vulnerability is attributable to limited access to reliable monitoring and early-warning systems and to insufficient healthcare and social services. Traditional lifestyles can contribute to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, posing a threat to efforts to prevent its transmission. For instance, indigenous groups frequently arrange significant traditional assemblies to commemorate specific occasions, such as harvests or coming-of-age rituals. Indigenous communities also reside in multi-generational homes, so exposing Indigenous individuals and their families,

particularly the Elders, to potential risks. Another challenging concern within the indigenous community pertains to their mental well-being. According to Faruk *et al.* (2021), the indigenous population experienced a prevalence of 49.3% for moderate to extremely severe depression, 47.2% for anxiety, 36.7% for stress, and 50.9% for low well-being throughout the pandemic.

Despite facing the challenges described in the aforementioned articles, Indigenous peoples are seeking their own solutions to the pandemic. They are acting on their traditional wisdom by isolating themselves voluntarily and enclosing their homelands (United Nations Human Rights, 2024). Given this premise, different indigenous groups foster community resilience. According to Robertson *et al.* (2021) community resilience is the capacity of a community to make use of its resources in order to anticipate, respond to, endure, and recover from extreme events like floods, economic shocks, and disease outbreaks.

The investigation of the community resilience of indigenous groups may yield insights into the mechanisms of resilience that these groups implement. Moreover, its objective is to provide guidance on developing strategies that enhance resilience capacity, promote equitable resource distribution, and facilitate the long-term recovery of these important yet vulnerable communities. Furthermore, the statement of purpose, "What are the experiences of the Aeta during the COVID-19 pandemic?" accurately reflect the study's aim to explore and understand their lived experiences?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive phenomenological design grounded in the principles outlined by Speziale &

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Carpenter (2006) and Giorgi (1997). Phenomenology aims to deeply explore and characterize specific phenomena as they are experienced in daily life, focusing on the appearance of objects and events as lived experiences. Descriptive phenomenology enables the researchers to extract the lived experiences of the Aytas during the pandemic without imposing the researchers' perspectives or abstracting these experiences.

Selection

This study, conducted in Sitio Matalangao of Bagac, Bataan, focused on understanding the experiences of the Aeta Magbukon community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing purposive sampling, the study targeted the elders of each family, resulting in 24 participants aged 24 and above, representing the 20 households within the Sitio. All participants were current residents of the same area throughout the duration of the pandemic, ensuring in-depth insights from community members.

Instruments

To gather the essential data for the study, two instruments were utilized. The first was a robotfoto, which served to collect personal information from the participants. This instrument was structured into two parts: the initial segment focused on demographic details such as age, educational background, civil status, and gender, while the subsequent segment delved into the participants' experiences and history related to COVID-19. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the essence of community resilience among the respondents. The semi-structured questionnaire was validated by experts in the field of Indigenous studies, psychometrics, and psychology.

Data Gathering Procedures

In conducting this study, the researchers first obtained permission from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (2020). After obtaining approval, consent was then forwarded to the chieftain of the Ayta Magbukon for final authorization. Furthermore, the study adhered to the Data Privacy Act and the Code of Ethics set by the Psychological Association of the Philippines to ensure ethical research practices and the protection of participants' rights.

The researchers began the data collection process by arranging a focus group discussion with the chieftain and other key members of the tribe to establish rapport and gain initial insights into the community's experiences. Following this, they conducted household interviews, typically engaging with one to three family members at a time. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the participants' perspectives. Finally, the data-gathering phase concluded with another focus group discussion involving the majority of the community members, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their collective experiences and resilience.

Data Analysis

Finally, the study followed the Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step process for descriptive phenomenology, designed to thoroughly analyze data collected from twenty interviews. Each interview was meticulously transcribed into field text and reread by researchers to ensure clarity and enhance familiarity with the content. Key quotes related to grit in each transcript were identified, with their specific page and line numbers recorded separately. These crucial statements were then analyzed to distill their underlying meanings, which were organized into relevant themes and subthemes. As part of the process, inaccuracies or unnecessary descriptions were excised from the final report. To validate the findings, participants reviewed the results and engaged in discussions to confirm their accuracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study's results yielded three major themes: (1) "The World of Aetas," encapsulating the lived experiences of the native community within their traditional domains; (2) "Demarcations," representing the barriers that limit their interaction with the outside world; and (3) "The Downside," exploring the challenges arising from their limited engagement with mainstream society.

The World of Aytas

During the pandemic, mainstream society significantly faced widespread struggles. Different dimensions of life, including economy and health were drastically affected and were put at risk (World Health Organization, 2020). The health crisis forced people from the lowlands to be separated from their jobs, depriving the means to access food and fundamentals for survival. The emergence of major problems became the turning point for non-IPs as they were left with no choice but to hope for assistance and aid from the local or national authorities (Abesamis *et al.*, 2022; Cuayzon, 2021).

However, on the other side of the coin, or, at best, in the world of Aytas, these major concerns do not exist. The land became their "one-stop-shop" from which all the necessities were readily available and accessible, thus justifying the separation of the indigenous and the mainstream world (Satyawan *et al.*, 2022). While the mainstream world underwent tremendous negative consequences, Indigenous peoples experienced the absolute contrary.

Revitalization of culture. In the mainstream world, the pandemic ruthlessly took away the practices the unats or the non-indigenous were accustomed to doing daily (Axon, 2023). Contrary to the Indigenous world, the pandemic seemed to have given the community a chance to reconcile the cultural practices that were on the verge of being forgotten. For them, reinvigorating such was indeed a significant milestone being achieved despite the horrors that the pandemic spurred in the outside world. Inside their world, Indigenous peoples revived their "almost forgotten culture" through the utilization of

traditional herbal medicine such as luyang dilaw (yellow ginger) and extraction of langis (coconut oil) to treat infections or symptoms similar to COVID-19.

Aside from patronizing traditional medicines, Aytas, within their world instilled an important lesson to the young members of the community— learn to consume foods produced by the community themselves. Before the pandemic, since there were no restrictions, Aytas can freely buy food from the market. Due to this practice, young aytas were accustomed to consuming foods from the lowlands, mostly processed and frozen goods. However, at the height of the pandemic outbreak, access to markets if not completely forbidden, was limited. The stringent health policies disallowed aytas to buy goods from the market, meaning, they were compelled to have their children consume staples harvested from farms within their land— another distinct way of enculturating the native community's young members (Kuhnlein & Receveur, 1996). Indigenous staples range from kamoteng kahoy (cassava), mais (corn), and saging (banana). Ancestral lands are generous enough to provide these fundamental necessities which saved the aytas from the risk of food insecurity (McHenry *et al.*, 2013).

Introduction of alternative livelihood. Every May and April, Indigenous peoples harvest jars of honey— a sense of subsistence that capacitates them to increase their purchasing power (Balilia, 2013). These jars are then sold to community members or the market— a place where they usually obtain promising revenues. However, with the advent of a global health crisis, their access to the outside world was demarcated by checkpoints— a sense of security that restricted the exodus of unchecked travelers who are potential carriers of the virus (Kreslake *et al.*, 2023).

These checkpoints limited their movement to the outside world, in response, since Aytas, as Indigenous peoples are equipped with a greater sense of adaptability, they were able to find an alternative means of selling their products— capitalizing on the digital tools. The promise of the 21st century is the emergence of various digital tools that perform different functions and benefits, among those rest upon the lucrative aspects (De Leon, 2020). The pandemic is a bare witness of how Aytas kept up with the global trend— using digital tools to find their potential customers.

Since physical interactions were greatly discouraged, aytas significantly relied on the use of digital tools such that as mobile phones to communicate with their target markets and promote products online. Before the pandemic, there was a huge demand for “natural” or “organic” honey, since native groups such as Aytas were the ones who could capitalize on this, they were compelled to sell it on the local market from the lowlands barefooted (Floro, 2020). Nonetheless, when the pandemic struck, these pure jars of honey were sold by dropping them off at the gate, and then their customers were the ones to retrieve them.

Apart from having alternative means to sell products,

Aytas also discovered an alternative opportunity— “peeling of cashew nuts”. One common ground shared by non-ips and ips during the pandemic was the feeling of boredom (Chao *et al.*, 2020). The state of tediousness left people with two choices (1) rely on social media for entertainment or (2) use their free time to discover a sense of purpose, the aytas chose the latter. During the pandemic, most of their time was spent talking to each of the community members to entertain themselves. Until one day they decided to peel cashew nuts, a choice that gave them tremendous advantages. Aytas get to be entertained as they peel these nuts together with the other community members at the same time, gaining an extra income for themselves.

Contrary to popular belief, the pandemic has enabled the Aytas to discover meaningful things. Instead of being caught in countless and sometimes meaningless conversations, the community has decided to find purpose and opportunity without compromising the quality of time with their family and friends. Peeling cashew nuts not only saved them from boredom but also gave them the chance to capitalize on the time that they may have spent aimlessly talking to each of the community members. In the outside world, during the outbreak of COVID-19, the opportunities shrunk dramatically as caused by the widespread closure of small to big business operations (Barrot *et al.*, 2024). However, inside the world of Aytas, opportunities seemed to flourish since community members had capitalized on the resources available within their lands. In the world of Aytas, livelihood is not much of a problem, the land provides everything fundamental for the community to thrive.

Unrestricted mobility. Since the arrival of the global health crisis, the public has instilled in themselves the presence of “demarcation” either discernably or imaginary. The former refers to the physical restrictions that deter from moving from one place to another at the expense of mitigating the spread of the virus while the latter pertains to the subconscious mind dictating people not to interact with one another (Jeffers *et al.*, 2022). In the outside world, impediments were present almost everywhere, the prevalence of the demarcations separating them from the usual place they used to go became widespread. The outside dimension appeared to hold a shackle that limited the mobility of the non-IPs.

For the Aytas, the land is indeed a blessing. The pandemic outbreak significantly devastated the economy and major aspects of life but despite the chaos it spurred, Aytas inside their lands maintained their status of being unscathed. Aside from providing all the necessary resources paramount for their daily survival, the land functioned as a haven from which all the community members were free to move anywhere (Molintas, 2004). In the world of Aytas, the only limit was the demarcation responsible for dividing the two worlds.

Participatory governance. The pandemic was not only a major health and economic concern but also political. Its sudden manifestation left almost every world leader

around the world in shock, each of the states did its best to find the most effective ways to alleviate its negative impacts and the anticipated consequences in the future (World Health Organization, 2023). A crisis this serious and concerning can never be surmounted unless the government, critical institutions, and people are united by a common cause. In other words, without participation, a tribulation, this malignant, has no chance of being won.

One substantial element that made the Ayta community resilient was the participation of its members. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, participation is one of the hallmarks of good governance. For the Aytas, participation in governance is achieved through having all the members of the community informed about the workings of the administration, thus capacitating them to be a part of the decision-making process. Participative governance was showcased as the chieftain or the tribe's leader consulted matters of concern to community members.

One good example was the intrusion of outsiders inside the community to navigate rivers and since these bodies of water are situated inside their domains, it was their responsibility to keep outsiders away to prevent disease from being transmitted to the community.

Therefore, it can be surmised that another key to keeping the world of Aytas away from the negative repercussions of COVID-19 is participation— the fulfillment of individual responsibilities.

Individual Commitment. The world of Aytas can be visualized as a facade standing on a solid and compact platform. The latter incarnates each individual carrying a distinct purpose and responsibility towards the community. When these purposes and responsibilities are fulfilled, then the facade, depicting the totality of the Ayta community, can remain still and withstand any challenges. One of the distinctive dispositions of the Indigenous community is their faith in collectivism, which can be justified as these groups usually prefer to work together (Absolor *et al.*, 2023; Miller, 2017). Working in groups seems to fortify the bond among them— a clear hallmark of unity and solidarity.

However, the attainment of unity and solidarity does not happen instantaneously. In the context of Aytas' world, solidarity is established when community members are earnest in fulfilling their responsibilities. It means that individual commitment must be established first to promote genuine connections among members. Inside the world of Aytas' individual responsibilities are treated and seen as the building blocks of a resilient community. In the Aytas world, the word "irresponsibility" ceases to exist because each member is aware of the impact of their contribution to the community. In the Filipino context, their distinctive character is commonly regarded as "pagkukusa" or "initiative" – a sense of willingness to act proactively and voluntarily. In this sense, Indigenous individual commitment reflects the true meaning of the word "integrity". It is a concept that embodies honest

fulfillment of duty and obligation towards a true and meaningful purpose. Moreover, deriving from the statements above, the word can also be interpreted as doing the right thing even without witnesses. Ultimately, a solid and resilient community is built upon the genuine recognition and fulfillment of individual responsibilities. Support from the outside. As stated above, the Ayta community did not suffer tremendously as compared to the non-ips from the outside world. Among the reasons behind their thriving community is the support from the outside. During the pandemic, the government, at all its levels took charge of dispensing different kinds of support— may it be financial or food staples such as rice and canned goods (DSWD, 2020). The constant support from authorities increased the capacity of the Ayta community to thrive during the pandemic.

Numerous support emanating from the outside has given an extra push for the community to withstand challenges. By pondering carefully on the statements, it could be deduced that there is something in the Ayta community that attracts organizations whether government or non-government to extend support to them— the Aytas' innate character. A solid community attracts people, this is because good characteristics are like the apple of the eye. Strict adherence to balance of nature. The Aytas feel secure in all aspects of their lives even livelihood is not much of a problem because land offers endless opportunities such as nourished land for farming, rivers to fish, herbal medicines for treating diseases, and jars of honey produced by bees (Balillia *et al.*, 2023; Lacroix & Gifford, 2017; Laing, 2020). These affluences can only be enjoyed when the Aytas are inserted in their lands.

However, despite its abundance, the resources it provides are still scarce. The idea expounds on the risk of exhausting such resources when consumed recklessly. Inside the world of Aytas, each community is reminded of the concept of moderation— the degree of consumption should match the minimum necessity. This is done as a consideration of other and future beneficiaries. Aytas have embedded in themselves the significance of sustainability and their method of attaining it is through balance and moderate uses of ecological resources.

Maintaining a balanced consumption of resources requires adeptness. It means that Aytas is sufficiently masterful to set a schedule for the use of ecological resources. These initiatives are done as a testament to the attainment of sustainability. Through balanced consumption, the Aytas can assure themselves that resources will last and future generations could still benefit from them.

Demarcation that separates the world of Aytas and "others"

During the pandemic, the presence of demarcations became the status quo, in other words, it has become "the new normal" (Corpuz, 2021). There has been a widespread separation and limited physical interaction, a reality that was inarguably hard to swallow. However, these are needed to be done to prevent the risk of

containing the fatal disease brought by the virus.

In the case of Aytas, it was the community's initiative to draw the line between their world and the other, pertaining to the outside. The establishment of checkpoints allowed the community to monitor and control the movement of people, both from the inside and the outside. Aytas agreed to keep the checkpoint that way not only to maintain the harmony and abundance that they enjoy inside their lands but also to ensure safety among the community members. Since the checkpoint requires strict adherence to the community policies, Aytas decided to shift duties, meaning that each day different community members are set to monitor the checkpoint. Shifting duties are done as a response to the mandatory policy that was agreed upon by the majority of community members beforehand.

The demarcation might limit the interaction of Aytas with the outside world, but it is a sacrifice that they need to make to keep the community safe from the damage inflicted by the pandemic on the outside world.

The World Outside or "others"

Inside the world of Aytas, if there are problems, through the compendium of community and non-governmental initiatives, everything could be resolved. Major issues only arise when Aytas step outside their domain— the severity of the problem is only felt once the natives are in contact with the outside world. The pandemic indeed caused tremendous devastation to a myriad of life aspects, considering the global context, it has trampled on the health, economy, and overall global stability (McKibbin & Fernando, 2023).

Nonetheless, upon contextualizing the matter to the situation of Aytas, issues were primarily centered around two specific things: (1) limited movement outside the community and (2) problems in social service.

Limited movement outside the community. Since the border has drawn a demarcation that divided the Aytas and the "others", the former's movement outside its world was constricted. Indeed, the pandemic might have spared the Aytas due to their close relationship with the land but the challenge sprouted when their access to the outside was terminated. Inside their world, Aytas' mobility is unrestricted— no policies were hindering them to access resources or continue their livelihoods, unlike those in the outside world.

However, as far as the latter is concerned, difficulties emerge when the community is deprived of the chance to navigate the outside dimension for critical purposes such as interaction and accessing the markets for purchasing a variety of goods. The pandemic limited the movement to the point that the general public was compelled to adapt (Nawaz *et al.*, 2024). In the case of Aytas, it was done by discovering alternative livelihoods, peeling cashew nuts, and erecting a "mini market" or variety store.

From the passages, it can be surmised that one of the major issues of Aytas does not originate from their land, instead, it emerges from the outside world— in the lowlands where the pandemic had immensely spread

havoc. Nevertheless, while the Aytas do not face much of a problem, the pandemic did not spare them in terms of interacting with the outside world— a universal experience when the world was still under its horror (Piccoli *et al.*, 2023).

Inadequacy of social services. Social services refer to any services provided by either private or public institutions from which the recipients are mostly those disadvantaged, marginalized, and vulnerable (Pinker, 2024). Indigenous peoples, historically have faced numerous discrimination, these groups are subjected to insufficient access to social services (UNOPS, n.d.). When the pandemic struck the world, these problems continued to infest the native communities. In the case of Aytas, the health crisis has deprived them of two of the most essential social services— health and education. During the outbreak of COVID-19, health policies became dramatically rigorous— whenever a person, showing similar symptoms of COVID, tries to access medical services, the same shall be quarantined first to determine if there is a potential trace of the virus (Araune, 2024).

In the outside world, the Aytas were deprived of accessing medical services because they were impeded by the fact that they might be misdiagnosed and be subjected to isolation or acquire the virus itself. The consequence arising from this scenario was the deprivation of adequate medical services.

During those trying times, access to health and medical services was crucial but given the fact that Aytas struggled to access them due to the impediments brought by strict protocols, they only had one choice— embrace the utilization of traditional medicines.

Challenges in education. Given the environment that Ayta groups are situated in, there might have been no problem concerning the resources for daily survival but the challenge goes with the difficulty in accessing the internet.

Gigler (2001) argued that providing internet access to Indigenous peoples capacitates them to discover things beyond borders. While the urban areas suffer an influx of information, natives, having access to the internet serves as an equalizer as it provides them the power to be informed and connect with others— an opportunity to close social and geographical gaps, especially in times of pandemic.

Since the pandemic has compelled educational institutions, at all levels, to halt operation, having access to the Internet has become a necessity (Mcclain *et al.*, 2020). Given the fact that face-to-face classes were discouraged, the alternative was to conduct online classes in either of the modes— synchronous or asynchronous, both requiring internet access. Since the Aytas encounter problems with internet connectivity, concerned institutions gave them pocket wifi that they can utilize during the conduct of online classes.

The pandemic changed almost everything, it came to the extent that the things once done normally, have shifted. After the devastation it caused, the world ceased

to reconcile the past workings it introduced the so-called “new normal”. This global crisis spread havoc in mainstream society, disrupting the workings of life’s numerous aspects—spanning from health, economy, and even politics. In an attempt to mitigate the damages, particularly the loss of lives, authorities have imposed rigid restrictions through the establishment of borders. The latter served as a demarcation that divided the world into two dimensions—the world of Aytas and the outside world. The latter experienced the wrath and ruthless damages of the pandemic, resulting in major problems in almost every aspect of the non-IP’s lives. The former expounds on the idea that Aytas, during the havoc of the pandemic, remained unscathed because they were protected inside their lands. Despite the benefits that land has given, the problem arises when the Aytas set foot outside their domains.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the Aytas during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight a unique perspective that contrasts sharply with that of mainstream society. While non-Indigenous communities struggled with economic instability, food insecurity, and restricted mobility, the Aytas demonstrated remarkable resilience and self-sufficiency, deeply rooted in their ancestral lands and cultural traditions. Their ability to revitalize their culture, sustain alternative livelihoods, and uphold participatory governance speaks to the strength of indigenous knowledge systems in navigating crises. The demarcation between their world and the mainstream society further reinforced their ability to protect their community, not only from the direct threats of the pandemic but also from the broader social and economic disruptions it caused.

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