

RECONSTRUCTING PEASANT LIVES IN CENTRAL LUZON: THE VIEW FROM BELOW

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Abstract

This paper reconstructs the lives of four peasant villagers in the plains of Central Luzon, Philippines within the context of known national historical events and socioeconomic and political changes at the local level. These events were the agrarian unrest of the 1930s, World War II and the Japanese occupation, the Huk insurgency of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA) rebellion of the 1970s. At the local level, the villagers confronted a giant American military facility, commercializing sugar interests, a government rural development project, the Mount Pinatubo eruptions in 1991-1992, and at present, a special economic zone authority.

These peasant life histories comprise a social history of village societies straddling the cusp of modernization and the corresponding pattern of material change on one hand and continuities in peasant structures and norms on the other. The narratives depict the villagers' hopes, aspirations, world view, and engagements with external forces that impinged on their daily lives. How peasants dealt with these forces and events is a compelling narrative that point to the resilience of peasant society and its family farms and the accompanying peasant mode and culture in the face of external attempts to transform and "modernize" them.

Utilizing a "history from below" perspective, the paper reveals the world of the peasantry as seen from the ground, simple in its family-based and smallholder mode of production yet rich and complex in its social life and diverse interactions with the outside world.

Keywords: Peasantry, 'History from below', agrarian unrest, rural development

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Renato Constantino (1975) once stated that Philippine history from the vantage point of the Filipino must be a history of the people. “This means that the principal focus must be on the anonymous masses of individuals and on the social forces generated by their collective lives and struggles” (p. 5).

Within the above context, peasant resistance to expropriation by the state, capital and other local elites and the variety of forms of their productive systems point to the need for a more informed investigation of rural life at the local (e.g., town and village) level. This requires among others the reconstruction of the life histories of peasants and their families and narrative accounts of their personal encounters with external agents as represented by the state (local and national) and various forms of capital, in short, a “history from below.”¹ Subsequently, what emerges is a social history of village societies straddling the cusp of modernization efforts which could provide the missing elements in explaining peasant society, culture, and economic practices.

This paper chronicles the lives of four peasant villagers of San Vicente, an upland community of 200 families located in the western side of Bamban, Tarlac province in the Central Luzon region. The 4,795-ft Mount Pinatubo defined the area’s southwestern boundaries while directly to the south was the giant U.S.-controlled Clark Air Base.² Set in the context of the political and socioeconomic changes that impinged on their daily lives, the narratives weave into known historical events the hopes, aspirations, world view, and engagements of Vicente Narciso, Marcelina Soriano Narciso, Zacarias Catli, and Marcelina Gomez Catli. Their life histories reveal the world of the peasantry as seen from the ground, simple in its family-based and smallholder mode of production yet rich and complex in its social life and diverse interactions with the outside world.

The characters in our history represent a community of peasants who have lived through major events in Philippine history – the peasant unrest of the 1930s, the Second World War and the Japanese occupation, the Hukbong Magpapalaya ng Bayan-Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (HMB-PKP) insurgency of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army (CPP-NPA) rebellion of the 1970s. At the local level, they have had to confront a giant American military facility (Clark Air Base), commercializing sugar interests in the late sixties, a high-profile state-initiated rural development project in the eighties, the

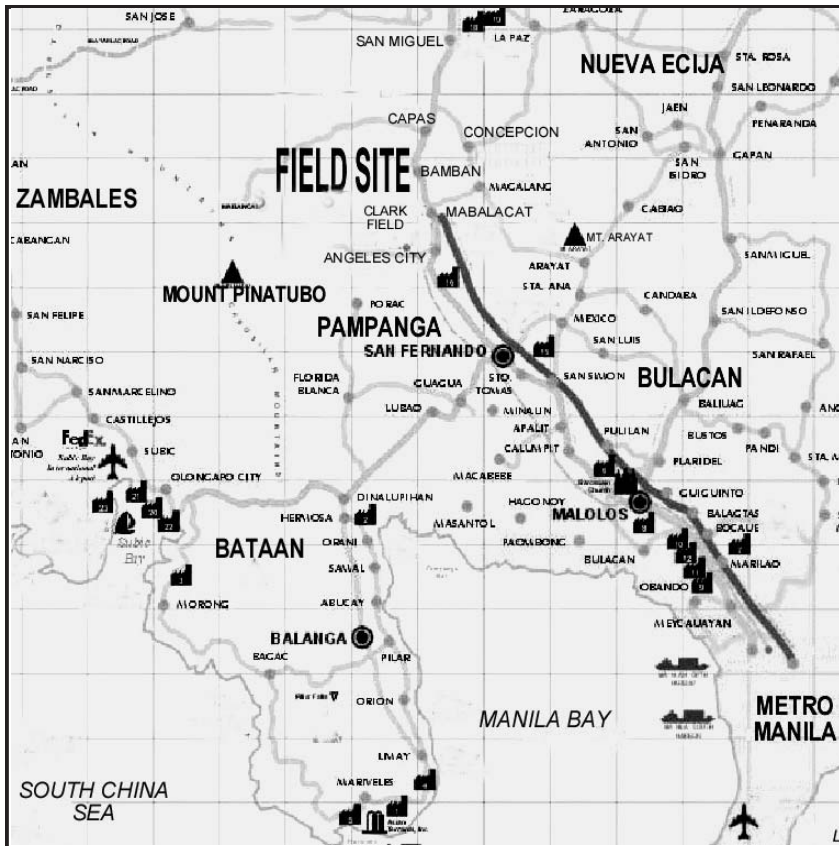


Figure 1: Map of research site location

cataclysmic Mount Pinatubo eruptions in 1991-1992, and, at present, a special economic zone authority.³ How peasants at the local level dealt with the above forces and events is a compelling narrative that point to the resilience of peasant society and its family farms and the accompanying peasant mode and culture in the face of external attempts to transform and “modernize” them.

History from Below and Social History

As a guide for analysis, this study utilizes the concept of history from below or social history. Bringing to bear this concept on life histories of peasants point to a pattern of material change on one hand and continuities in peasant structures and norms on the other. Beyond these constructs, however, and fully recognizing the inadequacies and limitations of theory, the life histories basically speak for themselves.

A history of the common people (including their everyday lives) is basically “grassroots history” or a “history from below.” Until fairly recently, most history had been written from the point of view of rulers and elites and had little to say about the great majority of the planet’s inhabitants (Hobsbawm, 1997b, p. 201). In the Philippine context, Iletto (1988) dissects the problem as follows:

All around us, we hear of the need to define the Filipino personality, style of politics, and social system. Yet aside from their presence in idealized portraits of rural life or quaint non-Christian tribes, the masses are hardly encouraged to participate in defining this tradition. It is the elite, particularly the middle class, that puts its imprint on everything – from culture to national development (p. 194).

The only times when ordinary people became a factor in major political decisions and events were during insurrections or major revolutions that threatened (and sometimes overthrew) the established order. The history of the common people, however, is not the same as, and cannot be replaced by, the history of social movements and mass organizations whether these be peasant- or worker-based. This was an all too often mistaken assumption made by Marxist and socialist historians (Hobsbawm, 1997b, pp. 203-204).

In Iletto’s (1979) view, a “history from below” must also delve into “cultural values and traditions” in order to “reveal hidden or unarticulated features of society” (pp. 10-14). At the same time, one has to search for “opportunities to study the workings and structure of the popular mind” as it bears “the stamp of popular consciousness.”⁴ Thus, a people’s history seeks to uncover elements of “popular reasoning” by looking at local people’s alternative and seemingly “irrational” and “aberrant” meanings and perceptions of concepts and practices such as “land ownership,” “land markets and transactions,” “property rights,” “natural resource utilisation,” and “subsistence.” Such alternative meanings and their attendant practices represent (consciously or unconsciously) rural people’s attempts to upset the social and political “equilibrium.” Iletto (1998) points to another value of a “history from below” framework, that of doing away with models of behavior “built upon either/or oppositions” and uncovering instead “partial allegiances, guarded accommodations, shifting identities, and changing definitions of authority and salvation” (p. 81).

For James Scott (2001), the purpose of recounting the life history narratives of peasants and their families and of their personal encounters with external agents is to provide the missing elements in explaining peasant culture, practices, and behavior by “drawing on elements of popular reasoning of rural people” about their lives. The value of this exercise cannot be overemphasized. Scott argues that the “... theoretical and conceptual work touching on agrarian societies cannot be profitably undertaken without encountering the lived experiences of the peoples making up those societies.” He also emphasized that

the most valuable work on rural society ... draws on elements of popular reasoning of rural people about their environment, about economic and political justice, about markets, about agricultural practices, about household structure and family life, about violence, about customary law (Scott, 2001, p.2).

For Eric Hobsbawm (1997a, pp.71-72), social history can be used in “three sometimes overlapping senses” – (1) “history of the poor or lower classes, and more specifically... the history of the movements of the poor, i.e., ‘social movements’”; (2) “works on a variety of human activities difficult to classify except in such terms as ‘manners, customs, everyday life,’” and (3) using ‘social’ in combination with ‘economic history.’⁵

Social history, unlike other branches of knowledge, cannot be a specialized discipline because its subject matter, human society, cannot be isolated. The various aspects of a human being can only be studied in relation to one another – the social, political, the productive (economic) activities, as well as ideas and concepts all of which form one whole integrated body of knowledge.⁶ Thus, Iletto (1988) calls for a merging of the religious, social, and political dimensions (p. 198). These standpoints are echoed somewhat by Scott (2001) who, in promoting “encounters between practical reason and theory,” opines that these are “necessarily disrespectful of disciplinary and area studies” (p. 2).

There are technical problems however that need to be addressed. One is that there is “not a ready-made body of material” about grassroots history. The historian “only finds what he is looking for, not what is already waiting for him.” Sources are painstakingly revealed only by asking, at the opportune time, the right questions. As Hobsbawm (1997a) puts it: “There is generally no material until our questions have revealed it.” (p.71)

Secondly, the “time lag between research and result is unusually long.” There are no quick results and the process is “elaborate, time-consuming, and expensive.” Thirdly, there are methodological problems with regard to oral history which have to do with the unreliability, selectivity, and inconsistency of human memory. One often has to rely on instinct (whether it sounds right or not) or else check the account against some verifiable objective source.

Tilly (2002) attempted to solve the above dilemma by proposing that social scientists “tunnel under standard stories⁷ by creating compelling explanations for both (1) the stories that participants in social processes tell about what is happening to them or others, (2) the stories that analysts, critics, observers, and even other social scientists tell about particular social processes, situations, and outcomes...” Such explanations take the form of “a systematic account of the processes by which people generate, transform, respond to and deploy standard stories,” in other words, examining the “social constructions involved as objects of explanation” (pp.37-38).

Hobsbawm (1997a) however warned against imposing facts and solutions on the people based on “presumptuous assumptions.” What is important is to “discover what people really want of a good or ... tolerable society and, what is by no means the same – what they *need* from such a society”. (p.71)

On the less technical side, there is consequently the aspect of distinguishing “what ordinary people remember of big events as distinct from what their betters think they should remember, or what historians can establish as having happened; and insofar as they turn memory into myth, how such myths are formed.” The point here is to reconstruct the original feelings or the formation of the myth – which could be one and the same. Sociological ingenuity and a bit of psychology will aid in “actually discovering the opinions of the ordinary people.” (Hobsbawm, 1997a, p.72)

But “mere ingenuity” is not sufficient. For Hobsbawm, what is needed is a model, a coherent picture. The bits and pieces of information that initially form a jigsaw puzzle must be assembled such that the fragments fit together. Without lapsing into positivism,⁸ the grassroots historian must be armed with knowledge of the actual subject and a sense of imagination in order to construct or reconstruct a lucid and consistent system of behavior and thought even if it may somehow be incomplete. Tilly (2002, p. 38) viewed the need for a theory that would seek “to explain how, why and with what effects people fashion standard stories” as a challenge to social science that is “worthy of a lifetime effort.”⁹

Calling for more life history studies, Waterson (2001) spoke of a “commitment to understanding the lives of ordinary people.” For her, such life stories open “the possibility of seeing in an individual life the meaning of living a particular culture, or of enduring and surviving the dramatic clash of two cultures, which has been the life experience of so many colonized peoples.” Waterson further pointed to “the potentials of life stories to reveal to us the workings of memory, both personal and social, and hence also as a source of personal perspectives on historical events” (pp. 5-6).



Vicente “Bising” Narciso



Marcelina “Celing” Soriano Narciso



Zacarias “Carias” Catli



Marcelina “Sinang” Gomez Catli

Peasant Lives in Central Luzon

The life histories in this study were based exclusively on field interviews conducted in 1990-1991 and in 2003-2005. In 1990-91, I stayed with Vicente and Marcelina Narciso and they became my primary sources for the oral history of the three villages.

While acknowledging that oral accounts (or stories) present problems for the social scientist, Tilly (2002, p.x) also saw the opportunity “to build systematic explanations of storytelling into more general accounts of social processes”. In the same vein, Constantino (1975) saw people’s history as providing the context to correctly appraise and understand individuals, events, and institutions “as particularities ... within the general patterns of the historical process. The general and the particular constitute a dialectical relationship, an accurate perception of which deepens the history of a people” (p. 7).

Vicente “Bising” Narciso, who is considered the founder of San Vicente village, was born in 1901 in Barrio Tabun, Angeles, Pampanga. He got his education courtesy of traveling missionaries who, during the second decade of the 1900s, went from house to house to teach reading, writing, and Christian catechism. This was the only schooling Bising ever got.

For many residents, life revolved around the U.S. military base facilities at Clark Field. Being the largest town in the area, Angeles provided rest and recreation facilities for American servicemen. In his younger days, Bising was among those who took advantage of business opportunities offered by the situation. He established a small brothel in the downtown area. The lure of “greenbacks” was such that he did not have to go out and recruit the women, they came to him. But the business was hard to manage (“*masyadong magulo*”) and after only one year, he abandoned the venture.

Marcelina “Sinang” Gomez was born in 1934 in Dolores, Mabalacat, Pampanga. Her parents, Rosendo Gomez and Maria Naguit, were tenant farmers on five hectares planted to rice and sugar cane. Their landlord was a certain Doña Africa. With seven sisters and one brother, the family’s meager share of the harvest was not enough to support the family. After the planting season, their father would work as a carpenter in Clark Air Base or even as far as Manila. The rest of the family would continue farming and tending the irrigation facilities. The brother was still young, so all the girls learned to plant and harvest and even handle the carabao. In Sinang’s words: “*Para kaming mga lalake sa pagsasaka*” (“We were doing men’s work in the fields”).

After closing down his brothel business in Angeles, Bising Narciso turned to farming as his main occupation. He was also preoccupied with politics, but of the unconventional kind. In Angeles, Bising was one of the first to join the newly organized Socialist Party of the Philippines (SPP) and became SPP chapter president of Barrio Tabun. He says that he served from 1935 to 1940.¹⁰ Bising saw the SPP as an effective and militant support group for the rights of tenant farmers. Two years after joining the SPP, Bising was elected barrio lieutenant (“*Tenyente del Baryo*”) of Tabun. He served in this position for 20 years.

When I asked Bising what he thought the SPP was all about, he replied: “*Sangkalan sa pulitika para kay Pedro Abad Santos na tumakbong gobernador ng Pampanga*” (‘A political vehicle for Pedro Abad Santos who ran for Pampanga governor’).¹¹ He had less cynical memories though when asked about the SPP’s beliefs and principles. His answer: “*Kung may strike, si Pedro Abad Santos ang mananagot sa iyo*” (‘If there was a strike, Pedro Abad Santos will stand by you’). Bising recalls the issues that the SPP was concerned with: sugar sharing arrangements (“*kuwenta sa asukal*”) and the distribution of the palay surplus (“*hatian sa palay*”) which the party tried to shift to 70-30 in favor of the tenant from the prevailing 50-50 practice.

The Japanese Occupation and Huk Resistance

Zacarias “Carias” Catli, born in September 1933 to a peasant family in Concepcion, Tarlac, was only eight years old when Japanese soldiers arrived in his town. He remembers having seen Clark Field in smoke and flames when the Americans retreated. He also recalls Japanese atrocities such as beheadings of Filipinos suspected of either being guerrillas or supporters of the latter.

On the anti-Japanese resistance, the young Carias gave more credit to the left-wing Hukbalahap¹² than the American-organized U.S. Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). “*Sila talaga ang lumalaban*” (‘They were really the ones fighting’). He also said that even before the Huks were formally organized, there were already guerrillas among the peasants who started fighting the invaders. More local people joined the Huks rather than the USAFFE guerrillas. There were about 50 Huk squadrons with 50 to 100 members each while the USAFFE had only two squadrons at the most. The Huks often ambushed Japanese troops and where the ambushes took place, the Japanese would burn all houses in retaliation.

Carias says that the Huks sometimes used wooden guns while gathering weapons from the enemy. Some were armed only with one-shot Mausers which dated back to the Philippine-American War. Many Japanese were killed by the Huks; Carias recalls at least three encounters in their barrio where Japanese troops were wiped out by the guerrillas. The Japanese were sitting ducks for ambushes because “*sa gabi, mapula ang mata ng mga Hapon, at saka maingay ang mga sapatos pag dumarating na*” (‘At night, the eyes of the Japanese were reddish and their boots made loud sounds when they approached’). But not all the Japanese soldiers were bad, Carias asserts. He recalls seeing Japanese officers punish soldiers who maltreated civilians. Other Japanese soldiers would even share their food with the barrio people.

Sinang Gomez was still a child in Grade One when the Japanese arrived in Mabalacat. The Japanese would confiscate the family’s rice harvests and get their food. Her only brother was forced to work in the Japanese camp and they evacuated several times and moved to Capas hills where they continued farming. Her father, Rosendo Gomez, was harassed by the Japanese because he would not bow to them. Fearful for her father’s life, she would admonish him for this. “*Bata pa ako noon, pero matapang na ako*” (‘Though still young, I was already brave’).

Food was scarce in the towns and neighbors in Mabalacat would walk all the way to Capas to beg for food from the Gomez family; they would willingly part with the food without asking for payment. When the Japanese were on the retreat from the advancing American troops, some of them joined the farmers in the hills.

The HMB Insurgency

Bising Narciso had an interesting journey before he eventually found himself in what is now San Vicente. His nephews were military commanders of the postwar Huks, now renamed as the HMB (*Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan* or People’s Liberation Army)¹³ but because he himself never joined, he was often suspected of harboring double loyalties. His first wife not having borne any children, he took a second wife, a market vendor who bore him six children, four boys and two girls. Strangely, the first wife stayed on and Bising would later get into trouble for this.

In the early fifties, he was once captured by an HMB unit in Barrio Capayan Putot. The guerrillas accused him of being a “*palsonero*” (a landlord’s overseer) and further charged him with bigamy. After he explained his side,

the HMB, in a bizarre move, decided to kill the first wife. A gallant Bising offered to die in her stead saying, "*Pagkatapos mong kumain, hindi mo tinatapon ang plato, inaalagaan mo iyan*" ('After you've eaten from a plate, you don't throw it away, you care for it'). Impressed by his arguments, the HMB released him and also spared his first wife.

The Philippine Constabulary likewise harassed him because of his past political connections. Government informers reported on his links with the HMB and he was arrested seven times and detained for short periods in the "stockade" beside the church. At one time, he was arrested twice within one week. The longest detention was 10 days and he still remembers the names of his jailmates then -- Angel Cordero and Clemente Gomez.

This situation of being repeatedly caught in the crossfire of the civil war between the government troops and the Communist guerrilla army was what impelled Bising to move out of Angeles. His wives, however, refused to relocate with him and this prompted Apo Bising to take a third wife, a laundrywoman named Marcelina "Celing" Soriano, originally from Cuyapo, Nueva Ecija. Together with two of his younger sons Mariano and Arsenio, Bising and Celing searched for a new home and source of livelihood.

Fleeing to Higher Ground

Starting from the Dolores, Mabalacat side of MacArthur Highway, the Narciso family trekked westward toward the hills of the Mabalacat-Bamban area. As there were no roads, they simply followed the upstream course of the Sacobia and Cauayan rivers. After about two hours of treading through tall thick cogon grasses, past bamboo groves and giant trees called "*dutong*," they came to a glade by a smaller river which was known as Sapang Marimla. The place was ideal for a farm, and here they decided to settle and build their new house.¹⁴ The year was 1957 and there were other settlers in the area that was called Balacbac, then a sitio of Barrio Dolores. Bising later counted less than 50 families of farmer-settlers but they were widely scattered; one could walk for four hours and not see any house or person.

The family immediately put their resourcefulness to work. They planted palay, corn, sweet potato, squash, eggplant (about 2,000 to 3,000 in all!), string beans, mango trees, calamansi (hundreds of these plants), and many others. Palay was planted using the broadcast method ("*sabog tanim*"). Bising also took the initiative of building irrigation canals. All together, he had two hectares of palay and 10 hectares of other crops. The irrigation system enabled them to harvest rice three times a year.

During the first months, Bising and his family would still go home to Angeles, staying in the new farm for only a week at a time. He claims that his three wives got along very well. But he soon grew tired of shuttling back and forth between farm and town and finally decided to stay permanently in Balacbac. The farm soon prospered. Together with the wives of other settlers, Celing Narciso would carry the produce and negotiate the four-hour distance on foot to either the Mabalacat or Bamban town markets to sell their goods. On the way back they would bring household necessities purchased in town. Bising continued getting involved in community affairs and was named a director of the Mabalacat chapter of a government-organized farmers' marketing cooperative.

Working for the Americans

After the war, 13-year-old Carias Catli joined his brother in Mabalacat where the latter worked as a security guard. When he was old enough, he found employment as a gardener and househelp but only for two months. Later, he found work at the Clark Officers' Club first as a busboy and later as a waiter. His salary was 52 centavos (US\$0.26) an hour.

Sinang Gomez's family went back to their farm in Mabalacat where at 13 years old and in Grade 5, she stopped schooling and went to work as a domestic helper with an American officer's family in Clark Air Base. This was her livelihood for the next 10 years, moving from one family to another when her current employer would return to the U.S. One family even wanted to bring her back with them; she wanted to go but her mother said "no." One sister, however, who worked in a beauty salon, married an American and went to live with him in Hawaii.

Carias and Sinang eventually met while both were working in the U.S. military base. They fell in love and were married in 1954. Sinang's parents, on the other hand, had moved to Sitio Balacbac by 1955 where they had their own farm.

Carias was unhappy with his work at Clark. Although he could take one day off in the week, the working hours were long – from 9 a.m. to midnight — and it was always difficult to get a ride home. He also noted that stealing was rampant inside the base. "*Lahat doon magnanakaw; kung di ka magnakaw, wala kang pera*" ('Everyone stole; if you didn't steal, you won't have money'). Even American soldiers stole various items and sold these outside Clark. He lasted two years. He remembers serving then President Magsaysay himself. Later, Carias was blamed for stealing bingo game prizes

and was fired from his job. When the real perpetrators were found, he was asked to return but he refused. “*Marami ka kasing manager eh*” (‘You would have just too many managers’).

Their prospects for a meaningful livelihood now severely limited, Carias and Sinang decided to move to Balacbac and join the latter’s parents in 1956. They initially bought two hectares of land from the indigenous Ayta residents for one cavan (50 kilograms) of *palay* (unhusked rice), some food, clothes, and tobacco. The place was chosen because anything planted would grow well, even without fertilizers or irrigation. Their first child, Crimelda, was born in the same year. Many families were already settled there and land parcels were delineated by mutual agreement. As Carias put it:

“Dito ako, dito ka. Hanggang dito lang ako. Hindi naman sakim ang mga tao noon. Hindi kamukha ngayon. At magkamag-anak naman ang marami. Nagkakaisa kami at nagtutulungan.”
(‘I’m here, you’re there. This is where my land ends. People then were not greedy. Unlike nowadays. Many were related to each other anyway. We were united and we helped each other.’)

The rule of thumb followed was that the amount of land acquired was based on one’s capacity to work it. Of course, this method resulted in some land boundaries not being clearly laid thus resulting in disputes. These were resolved in an informal and unstructured manner and through patient negotiations where the parties concerned were brought to a meeting. With an elder resident acting as arbiter or through peer and community pressure, a solution acceptable to all was worked out.

Dealing with the Americans

The new settlers would soon learn that the area they had occupied was part of the 63,200-hectare Clark Air Base. As the land was classified as a military reservation and therefore inalienable and indisposable, the peasant families were technically squatters and could be displaced anytime. Despite this knowledge, settlers continued to move into the area and a peasant farming community soon arose.

The American authorities initially tried to stop the incursions by arresting the settlers and releasing them after a warning not to return. Both Carias Catli and Bising Narciso recalled that American soldiers would arrest farmers caught working in the area for trespassing and also because “*bawal*

magsaka” (farming not allowed). They would be brought to the Provost Marshall’s office at Clark but would be released immediately the same day after pleading for clemency and promising not to trespass again. There were, however, other reports of arrests by U.S. military patrols followed by interrogations and occasional beatings.

But the area was too large for effective control and with the peasants persistently moving into the area, putting up farms, and building houses, the Americans began to turn a blind eye to the settlers and decided to let them be. According to a former Clark serviceman, ‘the authorities were only concerned with what was inside the fenced area’ and that “it would have been prohibitively expensive and pointless to patrol the thousands of acres outside the perimeter fence” (Master Sergeant General Frederick Scott, personal communication, 2003).

The HMB Years in Balabac

The left-wing PKP-HMB forces were another matter. Guerrillas in search of food and shelter would often pay visits to the peasants’ huts. The attitude among the residents was ‘live and let live’ with the rebels. Carias Catli says that the HMB used to come and appropriate part of his crop harvest. He remembers offering them newly harvested eggplants and soon regretting it when they started picking out the best ones (*“pinipili pa iyong magaganda”*).

Despite Bising Narciso’s family ties with the HMB through his nephews, his past troubles with the revolutionary group continued to haunt him so that even in his new home, he endured harassments from the HMB. As the settlers’ acknowledged leader, he was a natural target and was again captured by a guerrilla unit that once more threatened to shoot him. As before, Bising’s negotiating skills saved his life. Later, a right-wing death squad nicknamed the “Monkees” also sent him threatening notes, this time because of his family ties with the HMB.

Notwithstanding the ideal location of the place as a guerrilla sanctuary, the PKP-HMB never really established a foothold in the Balabac area. The party’s Angeles-based cadres and military forces were too engrossed in internal disputes with a breakaway group that had turned to criminal activities and was giving the movement a bad name.¹⁵ Besides, by the mid-fifties, the group had been badly decimated by the government’s counter-insurgency campaign and had ceased to be a force to reckon with. According

to a PKP-HMB cadre, previously, almost all lowland barrios of Bamban and Mabalacat were organized by or influenced by the party.

Building the Community and the Sugar Years

The Catli family continued with their land acquisition by securing more lands from Ayta families at prices ranging from PhP200 to PhP800. All in all, they managed to acquire a total of six hectares although these were not contiguous. Bising Narciso, on the other hand, accumulated approximately 10 hectares and his family continued to harvest rice three times a year. They also planted corn and vegetables, had various fruit trees (mango, santol, and star apple) and owned work animals – three carabaos and six horses.

In 1965, both San Vicente and the adjoining village of Sto. Niño became full-fledged barrios under the municipality of Bamban, Tarlac.¹⁶ As the village's oldest and most respected resident, Apo Bising Narciso¹⁷ chose as the name of the village San Vicente, the name of the Catholic saint after whom he was himself named. Thus, the barrio 'fiesta' honoring the patron saint coincided with his birthday. He was also elected the first barrio captain and would serve in this position until 1971.

By this time, a new external force entered the villages in the form of sugar 'capitalists' ("*kapitalista sa tubuhan*") who provided loans to the peasant holders to plant sugar cane. The country was then enjoying a sugar boom with the increase of its sugar export quota with the United States and the rapid conversion of lands in Pampanga and Tarlac (including upland areas) for sugar production. In San Vicente and the other adjoining village of Calumpang, sugar cane eventually came to occupy more than half of agricultural croplands in the early 1970s.

In Sitio Balacbac, San Vicente, of Apo Carias Catli's six hectares of land, two hectares were planted to palay, one hectare to sugar, and the rest to fruit trees. He was the first to utilize the waters of Sapang Cauayan for irrigation. Although his field was higher than the river, he used his plow and carabao to build a canal which diverted water upward to his riceland.

Apo Carias' farm incomes varied from season to season. During a good year, he could fill ten trucks with sugar cane although the price he would fetch from the buyer did not always bring him a profit. As for rice, when he started using chemical fertilizers and pesticides, he was able to earn more.

In general, the farmers had a testy relationship with the sugar ‘capitalists’ although for some, incomes were generally good. One complaint by the farmers was that they had to load the harvested cane (including the “*capitalista’s*” share) on the trucks without being compensated for this work. They also had no way of knowing whether they were getting a fair price for the refined sugar or the bags of fertilizers advanced as this was set by the “*capitalista*”. Based on settlers’ accounts, however, most sugar proceeds probably ended in the hands of the sugar capitalists rather than with the farmer-producers themselves. And despite accounts by several long-time residents of good harvests and adequate farm incomes, a government report stated that “crop production is below the average production level of the country and even of the region” (DAR-RPPDS, 1976).

The family-based peasant production mode, however, prevailed and was a source of cheap labor as most of the planter-farmers engaged in self-exploitation to supply the cane for the sugar mills. The ‘sugar capitalists’ reaped double profits as responsibility for the land’s upkeep remained with the farmers. They even utilized the unpaid labor of the settlers to build the farm-to-market roads. For most farmers, the sugar incomes had to be supplemented by growing food crops to cover their basic subsistence needs.

The reign of the sugar ‘capitalists’ did not last long. The sugar boom in the three villages started petering out in the mid-seventies due to peace and order problems brought about by the revitalization of the left-wing armed movement (see below) and the end of the special treatment for Philippine sugar in the U.S. market in 1974.

The NPA Years

The New People’s Army, military arm of a newly established Communist Party wing, first entered the area in 1968. Leading the guerrillas was no less than its top commander Bernabe “Dante” Buscayno.¹⁸ Both Apo Bising and Apo Celing Narciso vividly recall Dante’s frequent visits to their farm beside Sapang Cauayan in San Vicente. The NPA leader would arrive with a group of men and women as often as two or three times a month. Sometimes, they would stop for a whole week. Apo Celing was pleased to note that they would help around the house, scrubbing the floor, cooking meals, and working in the fields. They were also so self-assured that they sometimes engaged in target shooting practice. They never asked for anything and took only what was offered to them explaining that ‘we are forbidden to ask for anything’ (“*bawal po sa amin ang manghingi*”). Nevertheless, whatever

they took, they paid for. One time 50 guerrillas showed up and stayed for a few hours. The Narciso couple had to slaughter several chickens to feed the famished rebels.

Apo Celing recalls that Dante looked so small and so thin that she was astonished to learn that this was the legendary NPA chief. His men, however, were tall and fair-skinned (“*matatangkad at mapuputi*”) and the women, ‘pretty’ (“*magaganda*”). She would also see him being carried on the shoulders of his men when crossing Sapang Cauayan. For his part, Apo Bising remembers the guerrilla leader as a ‘kind youth’ (“*mabait na bata*”).

During one of Dante’s visits, Apo Celing learned that her sister had met a vehicular accident and was in an Angeles City hospital. As the couple prepared to leave, Dante offered some money to help defray the medical expenses. Apo Celing refused to take the proffered amount, however, saying she had enough. When they came back a week later, the NPAs were still there but the house was clean and well-kept.

The NPA was able to recruit members from among the peasant-settlers. Apo Celing’s son Ponciano Soriano became a high-ranking NPA commander and operated in Nueva Ecija. Apo Sinang’s only brother, Zoilo “Ilong” Gomez, was also a top NPA commander and the object of a manhunt by Philippine Constabulary (PC) troops. She herself was often asked to handcarry underground messages for her brother to and from his comrades.

Despite the generally positive attitude the settlers had toward the NPA, they were often caught between the NPA and the PC – the two contending forces in the struggle — and frequently had to walk a tightrope. Apo Celing narrated an incident when an NPA unit happened to be resting inside their farmhouse. Suddenly, a neighbor came to warn that a PC unit was heading their way after raiding nearby Macapagal Village. The NPAs hurriedly left by wading through the shallow river. To cover their tracks, and showing remarkable presence of mind, she took the carabao to wallow in the river.

When the government troops arrived, they started interrogating Apo Celing who stubbornly denied that the NPAs had just been there. When the soldiers inquired about the muddied waters, she answered that it was because she had just bathed the carabao. Determined not to lose her composure, she argued with the PC saying that she feeds everyone, so long as they were people (“*basta tao*”).

The soldiers were initially suspicious and, talking among themselves in Ilocano, called her ‘untrustworthy and a liar’. But Apo Celang, a native Ilocano speaker, understood them and adamantly defended herself in the same language. Realizing that she was after all a fellow Ilocano (“*kababayan*”) and obviously intimidated by her aggressiveness, the soldiers apologized and left.

Once when Apo Sinang’s NPA brother was visiting, PC troops swooped down on Sitio Balacbac accompanied by two helicopters. The soldiers, some of whom were known to Apo Sinang, told her that they received information that her brother, Kumander Gomez, was in the village. She of course denied this but challenged them to look for him in their house. Since she showed no fear or hesitation, the PC believed her and did not proceed upstairs. In fact, her brother was really hiding in a closet upstairs. Upon leaving, the soldiers offered her a .45-caliber pistol which she refused, saying that having a gun would just provoke others and that this would only shorten her life.

When Apo Bising was barrio captain, the PC offered him 10 rifles to fight the NPA. He asked for 30 rifles instead and reasoned that the barrio folk needed more guns to resist their oppressors, whether they be PC or the “*hukbo*”. Word, however, got around that Apo Bising was preparing to fight the NPA. A guerrilla liquidation unit confronted him. However, the old man explained his side and pointed out that he had always helped the guerrillas with food, shelter, and other things. Convinced of his sincerity, the NPA let him go free. But the harassments did not stop. After receiving a handwritten note from the dreaded “Monkees” death squad accusing him of pretending to discipline the barrio people while secretly aiding the NPA, he and his wife moved to Angeles City and stayed there for one year.

Apo Sinang’s NPA brother was eventually captured and detained at the PC stockade in Camp Olivas, San Fernando, Pampanga. She naturally visited him frequently and these would soon arouse suspicions among the NPA about her loyalty particularly when it became known that she had made friends with PC officers and enlisted men.

She was then suspected by the NPA of being the informant who had tipped the PC of the presence of Roger Buscayno’s group in San Vicente which had resulted in the ambush-killing of Dante’s younger brother. Apparently, based on this mere suspicion, a decision had been made to kill her and this was relayed to her by a relative who told her that she was being

given a grace period of two weeks to set her personal affairs in order. Apo Sinang, however, relayed the message that whoever it was that wanted her killed should first confront and prosecute her (*litisin*) to determine whether she was really guilty. She declared that she only serves the people, and was not a turncoat (“*balimbing*”). She added that she was not afraid to die but requested that the sentence be carried out in her house so her family would not have a problem locating her body. Luckily for Apo Sinang, within the two-week period, the alleged informer was discovered and killed. It was an Ayta woman who was incidentally also a godmother to one of Apo Sinang’s children.

Summarizing the years of insurgency and disquiet in the area, Ruben Sison, an Ayta resident of Calumpang village, remarked: “*Kainit-initan ng panahon. Kung mahina ang loob mo, hindi ka titira dito*” (‘It was an infernal season. If you were fainthearted, you would not live here’). As with previous external interventions in San Vicente, the NPA presence soon started diminishing mainly due to a military-backed intensive government rural development project and also because the residents started having second thoughts about the guerrillas.

The Integrated Rural Development Project

The Sacobia integrated rural development (IRD) project was not the government’s first attempt to bring the area under its control. According to Apo Bising Narciso, field personnel from the office of the Presidential Assistant on Community Development (PACD) had visited Calumpang and Sitio Balacbac during the fifties and early sixties but only to give lectures and show documentary movies.

In the early seventies, the so-called “Green Revolution” technology crept in and some peasant households started shifting to high-yielding rice varieties (HYVs). A number of rice peasant farmers began using the HYVs and applying inorganic fertilizers and chemical pesticides. Apo Carias Catli made use of the credit subsidy program to improve his farm technology and raise his rice harvests from 50 cavans (2.5 tons) per hectare to as much as 100 cavans (5 tons).

In 1979, state intervention in the tiny village was to undergo a profound transformation. Prodded by American officials at Clark Air Base who were worried about security problems posed by squatter communities on the northwestern fringe of the base, the Ministry of Human Settlements

(MHS) under Imelda Marcos initiated the Sacobia integrated rural development project under a semi-corporate entity called the Sacobia Development Authority (SDA).¹⁹ Thus, the immediate rationale for the project was the resettlement of Clark's squatter families. San Vicente, along with Sto. Niño and Calumpang, was placed under the jurisdiction of the Sacobia project. The project was based on Imelda's BLISS (Bagong Lipunan Improvement of Sites and Services) strategy and was to provide for the residents' 11 basic needs.²⁰ The SDA reported in 1990 that it engaged in programs such as livelihood, community development, and infrastructure development that were aimed at developing the area.

The NPA tried to mobilize the peasant-settlers to resist the government initiative. According to Apo Bising, the rebels' immediate plan was to burn the government bulldozers and vehicles. He opposed this, telling the NPA guerrillas that the movement must support progress in order to counter poverty. Whether the NPA was sufficiently dissuaded by Apo Bising's admonition is open to conjecture. In any case, the planned sabotage did not push through.

The IRD project's first item on the agenda was to rid the area of the NPA insurgents. Accordingly, two battalions of troops set up camp in the area and intelligence operatives from the National Intelligence Security Agency (NISA) were brought to the villages to ferret out rebel sympathizers. Several residents were arrested and tortured in the process. Faced with the massive show of military strength and the now lukewarm attitude of the residents, the NPA soon found Sacobia less than hospitable to its forces and significantly scaled down its presence in the area.²¹

Apo Bising's initially positive attitude toward the SDA project soon turned to dismay. SDA officials promptly announced to the residents that in order for the development of the village to proceed smoothly and quickly, they had to give up their farmlands. After all, this was a military reservation -- public lands -- where no private ownership by any person or organization was allowed. The farmers would be compensated for their crops and other plants. The lands would be taken over by the government and converted into modern agricultural farms. The people would be taught new modern ways of farming by being employed in the farms as daily wage workers. Many of the original settlers left the area in disgust. According to one source, of the original 500 settler-families, 300 eventually left. (From the peak population for the three villages of 4,760 in 1982, only 2,419 persons (51%) remained by 1988.)

Apo Carias Catli also emphasized that what really hurt the most was the loss of control over their farms. He complained about the continuous interference of the authorities in their work (“*pinakikialaman kami lagi*”). A certain Col. Angeles told him that the lands were later going to be returned to the farmers but that in the meantime, the soldiers would teach them how to farm! They would also be hired to work for P10 a day. He sarcastically asked the colonel:

‘Sir, are we turning communist? I’ve read somewhere that this is what communists do, take the land, make the people work for them, and station soldiers as guards.’

As an inducement, the SDA offered free housing to the settlers but several rejected this enticement. Apo Carias was one of them, saying:

‘So what if they give us new houses? You may have a house, but without work, you would still go hungry. It was like bringing the horse to graze on land where no grass was growing.’

In the meantime, the farmers continued their traditional practice of selling and buying rights of cultivation. For example, Apo Bising Narciso sold the rights to his farmland to Vicente Quiazon, a Protestant pastor who in turn gave the land to his son Benjie to cultivate. Such transactions would later cause problems with the SDA and among the residents themselves given the special character of the Sacobia area.

Outwardly, Apo Bising showed no objections to the development project. He was granted an appointment as Community Information Agent (CIA) with a monthly salary of P350. Given his stature in the village, the SDA also used him to promote the project. In the SDA’s 1981 Annual Report, he was quoted as saying:

Maraming nabago sa aming pamumuhay ng dahilan sa mga proyektong ito. Hindi kaagad-agad lubos na mapapaunlad ang kabuhayan ng lahat ng tao rito – dapat lahat ay tumulong para sa kaharapan ng magandang simulaing ito. Ako ay lubos na naniniwala sa katapatan ng ating gobyerno at sana ito ay magpatuloy ...

(‘Much has changed in our lives due to these projects. The full development of the livelihood of the people here will not be immediately realized – all must help to advance this beautiful beginning. I fully believe in the sincerity of the government and hope that it will continue ...’)

Apo Carias, however, had no qualms about criticizing the Sacobia project and the SDA, including its livelihood projects such as the cattle dispersal program. He thought that the cattle breeding arrangement was unfair to the beneficiary. While the firstborn of the cow was kept by the beneficiary, two calves would have to be surrendered to the SDA within three years in order for the beneficiary to keep the cow. He also thought that the SDA should not collect any share of the beneficiary's profits if the cow was sold. For him, the farmer invested time, money, and effort for two years while the SDA simply stood by and waited to collect what amounted to rent for the use of the livestock. Because he felt that the program was a losing proposition for the farmer, he asked that the cow he received from SDA be exchanged for a carabao instead. He argued that instead of the government helping them, it is the people who are helping the government.

Apo Carias also received ducks from the SDA to complement the 60 ducks he had earlier bought from Concepcion town. The SDA, however, was soon retrieving many ducks from previous recipients because the latter's operations had not been successful. Under a loan agreement, Apo Carias and two of his sons received 1,000 ducks from SDA which were valued at P100,000. If Apo Carias' weekly earnings from the sale of duck eggs gave him a profit, he paid back the SDA in amounts ranging from P500 to P1,000 a week.

Duck raising, however, requires large capital outlays without which one cannot hope to be successful. Apo Carias said only two duck raisers under the SDA program earned profits, himself and Robledo de Lara, another San Vicente resident. But he soon found himself heavily in debt due to the sharp rise in the cost of feeds and the fall in egg prices. He was almost tempted to give the ducks back to the SDA.

Two years into the project, the SDA gave back the settlers' farmlands albeit with a limit on farm sizes. Apo Carias resumed farming although his original six-hectare landholding in Sitio Balacbac was reduced to less than two hectares. He made maximum use of the land though, setting up an integrated farm where he cultivated palay, operated a fishpond, raised duck layers, and managed a small fruit orchard. His wife Apo Sinang and his sons and daughters all helped in the farm. His 1.7-hectare riceland produced an average of 110 cavans (5.5 tons) per harvest. Though he regularly used commercial fertilizers, he experimented with azolla as an organic alternative and was pleased with the initial results.

Apo Carias operated the largest family-managed duck farm in Sacobia. He started it in 1987 by purchasing the birds from Concepcion at P30 a piece. When the SDA started retrieving the Mallard ducks they had distributed to other settlers, the agency gave the returned birds to Apo Carias at a loan value of P100 per bird. He paid from P900 to P1,000 per week to the SDA as loan repayment. The total duck layers soon reached 1,000 in number. His operating cost was P1,200 per day (or P36,000 a month) which goes for duck feed layer pellets. Aside from the commercial feeds, he also used snails (*kuhol*) to harden the egg shells, *kangkong* leaves, and water lilies as duck feed.

In one day, he could harvest 600 duck eggs. A buyer from Bamban came every three or four days to select and purchase the “good” ones and bring them to town for processing into “*balut*”. Out of every 1,000 eggs, about 20 to 30 would get rejected. Within the first half of 1991, the buying price had ranged from a low of P2.20 to P3 per egg. The price would fall when the supply of eggs increased. Apo Carias says that he sold an average of 2,000 eggs each time the merchant came. At the buyer’s visits of 8 to 10 times a month and less the expenses for feeds and the SDA loan repayments, Apo Carias could either net a high of P8,000 a month or lose as much as P4,800 a month.

Beside the ricefield was a 3,000-square-meter fishpond producing 100 kilos of tilapia and *dalag* every three or four months. He fed them termites (*anay*) and other leftover duck feeds. The fish would be sold in Mabalacat for at least P45 a kilo. Later, however, the fishpond became less of an income-generating project. As word spread of Apo Carias’ model integrated farm, visitors from neighboring towns and cities often stopped by. Since rural hospitality dictated that these unannounced visitors be fed, the fishpond had become the source of Apo Carias’ generosity.²² He, however, did not mind the constant depletion of his fishpond in this manner. After all he says, he hardly spent anything for operating it. In early 1991, he was planning to expand and develop the fishpond into a full-blown commercial operation.

The Sacobia project would soon fall into disarray due to the high-handed manner of implementation of the IRD project, human rights violations, the top-down administrative procedures, the lack of meaningful participation from the beneficiaries, the patronizing attitude of Sacobia officials toward the farmers and other settlers, the absence of security of land and housing tenure, the worlds-apart gulf in perceptions and expectations between the government authorities and the settler families, and the decline of IRD itself as a rural development strategy.

The February 1986 EDSA Uprising

The Marcos regime was subsequently toppled by a military-civilian revolt in February 1986. Sacobia residents somehow lent a hand in the uprising. According to Apo Carias, a number of San Vicente residents joined a human barricade at the Bamban-Mabalacat highway to prevent loyalist troops from Camp Servillano Aquino in San Miguel, Tarlac from proceeding to Manila. Apo Carias says that the residents went voluntarily, no one told them to join the barricade. At the outbreak of the revolt, soldiers went around the area asking residents whether they were for Marcos or for his rival, Corazon Aquino. So, to avert suspicion, the farmers had to leave the area one by one. Apo Carias also reported that during the January snap presidential elections, Marcos lost heavily in San Vicente to Corazon Aquino.

Apo Carias said that immediately after the 1986 EDSA revolt, he and four other San Vicente residents attended a seminar in Sampaloc, Manila that was intended to organize a new mass movement. Jaime Tadeo, then head of the militant peasant group Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP), was one of the speakers. Apo Carias was named coordinator of the yet unnamed group for Bamban, Tarlac. For some reason, however, he did not follow up on this activity and never did any organizing in San Vicente.

With the demise of the Marcos regime, the Sacobia project, being identified as a pet project of Imelda Marcos, fell further into disfavor and its allocated budget reduced to the barest minimum. As before, the settler-residents went about their lives as if the government project did not exist. Then in 1991, as if by divine intervention, a natural disaster virtually put an end to the project's life.

The Mount Pinatubo Calamity

The 1991-1992 eruptions of Mount Pinatubo caused extensive damage to the Sacobia area. In the immediate aftermath of the eruption, houses and buildings collapsed from the weight of accumulated volcanic sand and ash on their rooftops. Farmhouses along the banks of the rivers were swept away by the deadly lahar flows.²³ San Vicente families managed to save their homes by either refusing to evacuate or returning periodically to clean their rooftops.

Some fields were buried in one to two meters of volcanic sand and mud. Farm animals drowned, houses were swept away, and trees were uprooted. Tens of hectares of orchards, sources of livelihood for many

residents, were all covered with thick mud which hardened overnight and destroyed the year's crop.

Also lost was the model integrated farm of Apo Carias Catli. Its fertile rice paddies, glistening fishpond, abundant fruit trees, and rich, green grass had completely disappeared. In its place were thousands of boulders of various sizes resting on a barren sandy earth. Several boulders were 10 feet high and six feet across.

Three days after the first major Pinatubo eruption in June 1991, I decided to visit the Sacobia area and see the situation for myself. I was also worried about my friends in the villages and how they were coping with the disaster. As we neared my adopted home, I saw the old couple by the balcony and immediately felt a surge of relief. Apo Bising Narciso, 90, and his wife Apo Celing Narciso, 65, greeted me warmly and said that they had just returned that afternoon from the Bamban evacuation center. I silently congratulated ourselves on our timing. Like most residents, they had moved out of the barrio on that fateful evening of June 15 when Mount Pinatubo had its most violent eruption accompanied by a raging storm.

Apo Bising surprisingly looked fine. He greeted me with a wide smile. I was struck by his high spirits and light-hearted demeanor despite the tragedy unfolding around him. He said that he never wanted to leave the place. I suppose that when you have reached 90 years of age and have gone through so much in life, there is nothing left to be afraid of. My own earlier fear disappeared at the sight of Apo Bising and his buoyant attitude. While the three of us exchanged stories, Apo Celing mopped the floor with a wet rug.

They were both preparing to start all over again, seemingly unmindful of the continuing danger from the volcano. Sadly, I surveyed the damage to the house where I had lived for many weeks while doing my field work. The cogon-roofed and bamboo-walled kitchen where Apo Celing used to prepare her delicious meals had been completely destroyed. Piles of volcanic sand surrounded their yard, some of it having been scraped off from the roof. The tree across the street from their house had fallen. The electric power had been out for two weeks. I was told that the water from the pump was cloudy at first but had later cleared.

Apo Celing and other residents who had dropped by the house recounted the events as they transpired on the first day of the eruptions. The villagers had to hastily evacuate from 12 noon of June 15 to 2 a.m. of the

following day. Apo Bising had refused to budge and had to be bodily carried to the truck by concerned neighbors. Some of the residents stayed in the Bamban Elementary School but others moved further north toward San Miguel and even Tarlac town.

Apo Celeng said that the house of Senyong, Apo Bising's son, had collapsed and his pig had been killed. However, the pig and the mother goat that she and Apo Bising had just bought were alive. A major concern for them was that their small ricefield in sitio Balacbac had been buried by a thick layer of mud and sand. They were just about ready to transplant when the volcano erupted. Senyong and his family were still in the evacuation center.

In letters to me, the residents echoed each other's sentiments. Apo Celeng Narciso wrote in March 1992:

'You know we are again fearful because the rainy season is approaching. I do not know where to bring Apo Bising. There is word that the volcano will erupt again. And there are always earthquakes in this place.' (*Alam mo natatakut na naman kami dito kasi malapit na ang tag-ulan. Hindi ko alam kung saan dadalhin si Apo Bising. At may balita na puputuk na naman ang Bulkan. At laging lumilindol dito.*)

In the immediate aftermath of the eruptions, Apo Bising and Apo Celeng Narciso stayed on in San Vicente but when their house was submerged in a lake created when the Sacobia River overflowed, they were forced to relocate to a makeshift evacuation site known as "Tent City" in Barangay Anupul, Bamban, Tarlac. But conditions in the crowded site were intolerable that they had to move in with relatives living in a slum area in Barangay Pandan, Angeles City. Their sons, Senyong Narciso and Marcing Soriano and their respective families, had remained in San Vicente to resume cultivation of their farmlands. Income from the farm helped support the old couple's daily needs.

A New Mode of State Intervention

In the immediate aftermath of the Mount Pinatubo disaster, the Sacobia rural development project continued but had been reduced to its barest function – that of merely providing employment to a handful of administrative personnel — and no longer able to impose its will on the

area's residents. When the Philippine Senate in September 1991 rejected proposals for the extension of the U.S.-RP military bases agreement and Clark Air Base was subsequently abandoned by American troops, the government lost no time in declaring a Clark Special Economic Zone (CSEZ) under the Clark Development Corporation (CDC). In 1996, then President Ramos placed the Sacobia area under the CDC's jurisdiction. In effect, the CDC has replaced the SDA as the government entity tasked with intervening in the lives of the 2,000 residents of San Vicente, Sto. Niño, and Calumpang.

The CDC, preoccupied as it is with attracting investors to its main economic zone, is as yet unable to fully integrate the Sacobia villages into its ambit of operations. But it has started asserting its authority: allowing an orchid farm to operate in San Vicente and displacing settlers, laying down rules on housing and use of the area's natural resources, making plans for operating a casino to service Taiwanese tourists, and threatening to evict the residents.

Unfortunately for the CDC and somewhat fortunately for the residents, two other government agencies, the National Commission for Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) have stepped into the picture and brought about the declaration of the entire Sacobia area as ancestral lands of the Ayta indigenous people. Under a newly promulgated law, the Indigenous People's Rights Act (IPRA), the government is mandated to turn over jurisdiction over ancestral lands to the indigenous community in the area concerned. The CDC has contested the DENR declaration, claiming that the Ramos executive order giving it control over Sacobia precedes the ancestral land declaration.

Sacobia Peasant Life Today

These events were no longer the immediate concern of Apo Bising and Apo Celing, having been uprooted from San Vicente, a situation common to many former residents. In 1997, Apo Bising died in Angeles City at the age of 96, in the town where he was born, away from the upland village he founded and helped develop 41 years earlier and which he vowed he would never leave.

After her husband passed away, Apo Celing moved to the Dapdap Resettlement Site in Bamban, Tarlac where she lived with a grandniece whose family were recipients of a government-provided house and lot. The third largest of the 23 resettlement sites built by the Mount Pinatubo Commission,

the Dapdap site accommodated residents from 13 of Bambang's 15 barangays that were displaced by the volcano (Orejas, 2001). The Dapdap site comprised 150 hectares of rolling and hilly terrain with 43 hectares reserved for 3,500 houses set in a suburban-type grid pattern with 34 kilometers of roads, a municipal building, fire and police stations, a hospital, a morgue, a gymnasium, day care centers, primary and secondary school buildings, a public market, and productivity centers. But it was situated approximately 10 kilometers from the main highway and transportation costs were prohibitive.

The last time I visited Apo Celina in the Dapdap site in 1996, the buildings and other centers were still unoccupied and the marketplace had not yet functioned. Despite the PhP6 billion reportedly spent by the Mount Pinatubo Commission for livelihood programs for victims, there were no visible livelihood projects in the Dapdap site. With no available agricultural lands to cultivate as well, residents had to look for work in Bambang town proper or in towns further away such as Capas, Concepcion, or Angeles. In 1998, Apo Celina died in this resettlement site after a brief illness. As late as 2001, employment opportunities were still scarce in the Dapdap resettlement site and titles to the houses and lots had not yet been distributed to the residents (Orejas, 2001). Thirty-five percent of the residents were farm cultivators in their former lands.

For Apo Carias Catli, 72, and Apo Sinang Gomez Catli, 71, however, life in San Vicente goes on. Through their individual efforts and sheer hard work, they have borne 13 children, 10 of whom have survived. Two of them, twins, had died at birth. Another child, Romewo (born 1961), an agriculture scholar at the Central Luzon State University and the only one to have reached college, was killed in a vehicular accident in 1983. Three are high school graduates. One finished primary school. The rest stopped schooling after their first, second, or third year in secondary school.

Although his model farm was beyond rehabilitation from the Mount Pinatubo disaster, Apo Carias was able to find another agricultural plot to work on. Every morning he wakes up at dawn and, with his breakfast in tow, walks to his farm half a kilometer away. He comes home at around 11 a.m. to rest and eat lunch. Apo Sinang runs a small "sari-sari" store which is a gathering place for villagers to talk and discuss anything under the sun.

They are undaunted by the new threat posed by the Clark Development Corporation which had begun to encroach on the villager's lands. But the years of toiling for a living and struggling for their rights have

taken a toll on their health. Apo Carias has gastric ulcer and Apo Sinang has a heart ailment. Of their 10 living children, only two, Joseph, 31, and Sonny, 29, still live with them. The others have their own families and reside in other houses in San Vicente.

In 1994, the brothers Joseph, Carlito, and Armando Catli and a brother-in-law left the country to work in a factory that was producing plastic canisters for disposable cigarette lighters in Seoul, Korea. The pay was good and the factory owner kind but after two years, and to their employer's bewilderment, they all decided to come home to San Vicente because, as Joseph put it, they were homesick. Besides, they could no longer stand the winter cold. Joseph currently operates a pedicab which he bought from his Seoul earnings. He services San Vicente residents by ferrying their farm products to the market and taking workers to and from factories based at CDC. Sonny recently got married and has started farming. This situation was still true as of February 2008. Both Apo Carias Catli and Apo Sinang Gomez Catli are still living and working in San Vicente with assistance and support from their children who stay with them.

Conclusions

By taking a "history from below" viewpoint, this study provided an alternative and more grounded view that contrasted with statements in official government documents about the villages of San Vicente, Calumpang, and Sto. Niño. From the start, the state sought to paint a picture of the area from the standpoint that would justify the interventions that it was intending to make. Despite the prior presence of a few hundred settler families undertaking extensive crop cultivation that provided for their needs, government reports described the area as "idle" and "a wasteland." Barely two years into the IRD project, government efforts were quickly (and prematurely) declared a success. Consider the following statements:

It (the Sacobia area) is generally idle but the area possesses great potentials for agro-industrial activities" (MHS-IACC, 1979, p. 9).

Where there used to be a depressed community ..., today we have a model community which offers convenient housing, medical and recreational facilities, an elementary school, and livelihood projects that offer additional income and food for the settlers. Where once we faced ... people (with) a skeptical

... attitude towards ... any development program ..., we now have willing and effective partners in a common drive for change and improvement of their standard of living” (SDA Annual Report 1981).

“Two years ago, Sacobia was a wasteland that had become a sanctuary of dissident elements. Today, the area has been transformed into a progressive and productive community” (Imelda Marcos in SDA Annual Report 1982).

Today, what was once a wasteland ... is a wasteland no more. For this wild, lush and fertile land is slowly being developed into a model community, where people’s needs are met, where self-sufficiency promotes contentment (SDA Annual Report 1982).

The SDA implemented ... viable projects involving the participation of the beneficiaries.... Making them active partners in these developmental processes compelled them to work even harder to achieve the desired change: that of an improved life (SDA Annual Report 1989).

Paradoxically, the same MHS-IACC report stated that in 1979, “the pattern in the use and development of the land in the project area has been largely the result of a continuing process of agricultural exploitation of land resources” and that “practically all available flat and undulating lands along the banks of the Sacobia and Bamban Rivers, as well as on valleys and slopes and hills, have been transformed into agricultural fields.”

One may ask: How can a place that is “wild, lush, and fertile” be at the same time a “wasteland”? Far from being “active partners,” the residents were passive receptors who had no participation at all in the planning and development of projects. As the preceding discussion has shown, research based on life histories of residents of the three villages has shown that government assertions did not match the people’s perceptions and actual conditions at the ground level. The validation of the people’s views was clearly revealed to me by my experience in living among the communities and interacting with them on a daily basis.

Generally, the historical accounts as narrated by the settlers were reliable and corresponded with actual events that were taking place in the Central Luzon region in particular and the country in general.” Thus, narratives

from life histories (with few exceptions) generally blended with “general accounts of social processes.” The periodization and circumstances related to the heightened cultivation and commercialization of sugar and its later decline corresponded with developments in the sugar industry at the regional and national level and external trade in the same periods. For example, I was struck by the appropriateness to the San Vicente and Calumpang area of Larkin’s description of the sugar frenzy in the 1960s that saw the extension of sugar cultivation onto “hillsides and mountaintops” (Larkin, 2001, p.241).

As for the suggestion of Tilly (2002) and Hobsbawm (1997a) to construct (or alternatively, to utilize) “a model – a lucid and coherent picture of a system of behavior and thought” as one way of overcoming the technical limitations of grassroots history, I have used two types of models: (1) the various forms of external interventions in the village as well as the responses of the peasant settlers and (2) the struggle of the residents for a better and peaceful life – a motivation that brought the peasants to the upland area in the first place.

Hobsbawm’s dictum that “the history of the common people ... is not the same as the history of social movements and mass organizations” is clearly shown in the Sacobia case. Both the earlier PKP-HMB and the more influential CPP-NPA revolutionary movements were basically external interventions that did not make a lasting and sustainable imprint on the nature and essence of Sacobia peasant society which continued to follow the workings of (and made the corresponding adaptations based on) its own “internal logic.” By all indications, the withdrawal of these groups were not particularly lamented by the residents and may have even been welcomed.

The external forces that intruded in the village all sought, in one way or another, to transform the village to conform to a certain paradigm of behavior and thought. All of them failed as the peasant society, built on small family farms and household-managed economic activities, as well as the accompanying norms and actions, proved resilient in the face of externally induced changes.

Endnotes

¹The terms “social history,” “history from below,” “people’s history,” “history of the common people,” “grassroots history,” “history of the poor and lower classes,” and “history of ordinary people” can be used interchangeably.

²Clark Air Base was dismantled in 1992 and the Philippine government converted the area into a special economic zone under the Clark Development Corporation (CDC).

³San Vicente’s history is tied with that of two adjoining villages, Sto. Niño, Bamban, Tarlac and Calumpang, Mabalacat, Pampanga. After being identified for a government rural development project in the late 1970s, the three upland barangays became collectively known as “Sacobia,” after a major river that runs through the area’s southern periphery.

⁴Examining Philippine revolutionary movements against Spain and later guerrilla struggles against U.S. colonial rule, Iletto’s method was to delve into literary texts such as the *Pasyon* (a narrative of the sufferings of Jesus Christ), as a reflection of folk consciousness which have a bearing on popular movements and social unrest.

⁵Although Hobsbawm thinks that the second “is not particularly oriented towards the lower classes,” it obviously can still be used in that context. For him, though, it is the third usage that is “the most common and the most relevant” as it deals with “the evolution of the economy, on the structure and changes in society, and more especially on the relationship between classes and social groups.”

⁶As Hobsbawm put it: “The intellectual historian may (at his risk) pay no attention to economics, the economic historian to Shakespeare, but the social historian who neglects either will not get far.”

⁷Tilly’s use of the term “standard stories” could also of course refer to “oral histories.”

⁸“One of the main principles of a positivist methodology is extreme phenomenalism, according to which the task of science is declared to be a pure description of facts and not their explanation” (Rosenthal and Yudin, 1967, pp.355-356).

⁹Tilly (2002) saw this process as entailing “the mapping of the various contents, forms, and contexts of stories, tracing how they change, pinpointing the social work people do with them, saying how some of them become fixed in laws, national traditions, or religious rituals, others form and flow like jazz, while others circulate as jokes, insults, potted biographies, excuses, moral pronouncements, and ad hoc explanations.” (p.39)

¹⁰By 1938, however, the SPP had already merged with the PKP under the latter’s name. It is possible though that since the decision to merge was made at the top echelons of the two parties, members in the barrio like Bising were not aware of this union.

¹¹In 1940, SPP Chairman Pedro Abad Santos narrowly lost to Sotero Baluyot for Pampanga governor (39,063 votes as against 32,990). Pampanga, however, elected socialist mayors in the towns of Angeles, Arayat, Floridablanca, Mabalacat, Mexico, San Fernando, and San Luis (Henson 1963).

¹²Acronym for *Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon* (People’s Anti-Japanese Army) or Huks for short which was affiliated with the pre-war Communist Party (PKP, Partido

Komunista ng Pilipina). After the war, it was renamed *Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan* (HMB) or People's Liberation Army.

¹³The PKP-HMB launched an armed struggle towards the end of the 1940s to overthrow the newly proclaimed Philippine republic. At its height, the PKP-HMB counted on an armed force of 20,000 guerrillas which matched the strength of the government's armed forces (Henson, 1963).

¹⁴Elevation ranged from a low of 100 meters (328 feet) to a high of 670 meters (2,200 feet) above sea level.

¹⁵Interview with a former PKP-HMB leader whose area of responsibility included the Balacbac area. December 2003

¹⁶A third adjoining village, Calumpang, was already a barrio and part of Mabalacat, Pampanga.

¹⁷At this point in the narrative, we will henceforth use the title "Apo" to refer to our characters. This term is used in many Philippine regions as a mark of respect for elder residents.

¹⁸Commander Dante hailed from Barangay Sta. Rita in Capas, Tarlac, the next town north of Bamban, Tarlac.

¹⁹In the same year, Clark Air Base reverted to the Philippine government 40,000 hectares of its lands retaining only the air base proper, the Crow Valley bombing range, and the O'Donnell transmitter station. The villages of San Vicente, Sto Niño, and Calumpang were part of the reverted lands. The classification of the land as a military reservation, however, remained unchanged.

²⁰The 11 basic needs were identified by MHS as "power, water, food, shelter, clothing and cottage industry, economic base, education, culture and technology, sports and recreation, medical services, and mobility and ecological balance" (Castillo, 1983).

²¹From all indications, the CPP-NPA, however, never totally abandoned the area. Six years later, the Sacobia "peace and order situation" remained "rather critical" and the Philippine Army continued to provide "necessary security measures" (Alferez, 1983). This military presence was maintained until the late eighties with the stationing in Sacobia of the 70th Infantry Battalion under Lt. Col. Jovencio Mendoza. In 1991, some CPP-NPA presence was still felt in the area.

²²On the day I interviewed him at his farm, a carload of visitors arrived from Angeles City and Apo Carias' sons had to catch about 35 pieces of tilapia and dalag which were immediately grilled over hot coals and served to us with boiled, freshly milled rice. Digging into this dish with our bare hands and dipping the fish in a marinade of soy sauce, *calamansi*, and *sili*, it was one of the best-tasting meals that I had in a long time.

²³"Lahar" is a "thick mixture of water and 20% to 80% volcanic sediment that, after a strong rain, flows down the mountain slopes to low-lying areas "eroding river banks, and sweeping away boulders, vehicles, edifices, and bridges (Bautista, 1993, p. 235). Thirty feet thick and 300 feet wide, lahar, with temperatures ranging from 50°C to 80°C, cascades down mountain slopes at 64 kilometers per hour before slowing down to 32 kilometers per hour in the lowlands (Pierson et al., 1996; De Guzman, 2005).

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