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Impact of online technology on the life of the Aeta native in the Northern Philippines

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ABSTRACT

The Aeta tribe is one of the most widespread ethnic groups in the Philippines. They are known for their distinct identities and culture, which reflect deep-rooted traditions from their ancestors. Changing time and the emergence of new technologies have impacted the way Aeta lives and created unique changes for establishing and maintaining relationships among the members of the tribes. This research aimed to explore the influence of online technology on the life of selected Aeta natives in the Province of Pampanga. It used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research approach where researchers carefully explored how participants made sense of their experiences. Results of the study revealed the major themes on the impact of online technology on the life of Aetas: (1) facilitate connection and maintain meaningful ties; (2) mindfulness of the gadget use; and (3) nurtures life. In conclusion, Aeta used online technology to assist them in their lives, making it less demanding yet meaningful, that there is no attempt to modernize their identity and achieve personal control with minimal reliance on online technology. Online technology cannot ultimately change the distinctiveness of Aetas' cohesive behavior.

Key Words: Internet, social media, indigenous people, ethnicity, culture and gadget use.

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I. Introduction

The Philippines is abundant in cultural diversity. Indigenous Peoples (IP) alone have a population estimate of 8 million based on ethnicity data presented by the Philippines Statistics Authority (PSA) with subgroups of 110 ethno linguistic tribes enough to lend richness and multiculturalism in the country ([United Nations Development Program-Philippines, 2013](#)). United Nations have a developed understanding of what constitutes Indigenous peoples. By definition, IPs perceive themselves as having historical existence and identity resolution to maintain and reproduce their ancestral lands and systems as distinctive communities. They customarily live in geographically remote areas without access to basic social services, political participation and education. However, International Labor Organization (ILO) prefers self-identification as indigenous or tribal as the central criterion to identify IPs for provisions of human rights concerns ([Balilla et al., 2013](#)). The living conditions of the

indigenous peoples were once the masters of their own lives (Rodil, 2004). Today, the majority of them have been fighting for their lands and properties. These people are natural inhabitants in the mountains and meadows known to be moving from one place to another due to pastoral reasons. However, for many unforeseen events like population pressures and resettlement programs, they are forced to move to a different locale other than their homeland. Now, their forests are being devastated through logging and housing development and their culture are threatened.

The Aeta tribe is a well-known ethnic group in the Philippines. They make a living through farming, fishing, and hunting animals in the forest. These tribes thrive in varied locations such as Pampanga, Tarlac, Bataan, and Nueva Ecija in the northern part of Luzon. Aetas appear to be small in stature; they are also called Negritos. They have black skin, dark kinky hair, round black eyes, have flat nose, and are usually five feet tall (Ocampo and Ocampo, 2016). As an ethnic-cultural minority, the Aetas are known for their distinct identities, which reflect long-held traditions from their ancestors. Some of us may have never encountered an Aeta in our entire life, but their socio-cultural and historical profile is well documented (Miclat-Teves, 2004). In a history class, one will never forget that a group of Aetas was once living peacefully in the forests of Mt. Pinatubo, not until its drastic eruption. The disturbance has caused indigenous inhabitants surrounding the mountain to drift into scattered regions of the country. After the 1991 Mt. Pinatubo eruption, many Aeta communities in the Central Luzon from the upland hill were forced to evacuate in neighboring towns of Angeles, Zambales, Bataan, Tarlac, Mabalacat, Bamban, Porac and other areas. However, some drove back home to their farmland after recovering from the calamity to favour a life engaged in swidden agriculture. The displacement has caused so much fear of changing the Aetas' culture as they are uprooted from their native land and have to deal with new living ways. Some cultural changes transpired after several years (Gaillard, 2006; Tima, 2005) of permanent resettlements. Notable changes in Aeta society have been brought by constant social and economic interaction with the local communities of Kapampangan. Aetas have acculturated themselves into new practices evident in their language usage, dressing style, building houses, trading their produce to the markets and even switching from "anito" believer to being a Christian convert (Gaillard, 2006).

Mt. Pinatubo Aetas' vibrant traditional beliefs and practices are inconspicuously fading away or abandoned because of modernization. Practices such as childbirth, pregnancy, marriage, and burial were identified by Grey (2016) in her qualitative study to be changing to some extent as caused by innovations. Changes related to health care beliefs and traditional medicines have improved with technology because it showed them promising outcomes. An interesting study (Evangelista et al., 2015) revealed that young generations and adult Aetas are fascinated by the modern way of communicating in the community. Cellular phones and the internet are no stranger to them. Respondents claimed to be using mobile phones for texting and calling daily. The tool was claimed to help them maintain strong family ties for communication is more open and readily available for use.

It is often assumed that technology development can be a vector of change for societies' wellbeing. The development of medicine, transportation, architecture, electronics, and information technology has increased society's production but could have been intrusive in preserving culture and tradition, especially in an indigenous group of individuals. Though most societies have wholeheartedly accepted unending developments, there are reasons to believe that traditional indigenous practices deserve protection. Some people who belong to modern society maintain traditional ways of doing something because it speaks of their authentic cultural heritage. Balilla et al. (2013) investigated a particular Aeta tribe, the Magbukun of Bataan, which tried to secure their traditional cultural beliefs in the middle of rapid acculturation. This happened while trying to meet their basic needs and securing cultural protection in the mainstream complex society from which they live. In one way or another, if technological progress reaches the core being of our folks in uphill land who devote most of their lives as hunter-gatherers, will they undergo anticipated transformation because they have been consumers of modern technology? This research aimed to explore the influence of technology on the life and cohesive behavior of selected Aeta tribes in the Province of Pampanga. Specifically, it examined Aetas' awareness of the life-changing effects of online technology on their unique identity. It also investigated the extent indigenous peoples will move from traditional to the modern way of living now that online technology has become the "new normal" in all aspects of human endeavour or if they will long for their old ways and resist changes as it has always proven palpable in their human existence. The study hoped to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of Aeta in using online technology?
2. How does the integration of technology affect the cohesive behaviour of the Aeta tribe against the people outside the community?

Guiding theory

This study is supported by William's theory (Figure 01), which states that culture is in constant negotiation of the three possible states namely: emergent, residual, and dominant. The dominant culture is believed to be dynamic as this could be the byproduct of both the residual and emergent states. It always seeks positions that fit into the embodied culture of the society. While the dominant culture reflects the earliest practices in society (residual), the emerging aspects try to occupy a new space in the existing culture. This happens in the actual life of the Aeta people, who have strongly unique culture that is being tested due to the penetration of modern technology. If online technology will eventually become part of the lives of Aetas, will the emerging culture become the dominant ones? Or will the elders of the Aeta tribe exert efforts to retain the earliest beliefs? This study explored the daily encounter of Aeta native while embracing technological advancement.

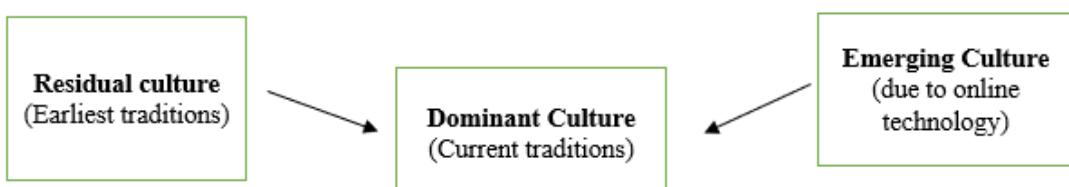


Figure 01. William's theory of three possible culture states.

II. Materials and Methods

Qualitative research encompasses exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or a group of individuals ascribe to a certain social situation or issue. Questions that will lead to the emergence of the answers to the research problem have been used for the data gathering. The researchers' role then is to make interpretations based on the data gathered using the coding method and thematic analysis (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

The study commenced in the last quarter of 2019 until third month of 2020. It employed the subtype Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach in qualitative research wherein the researchers aim to "explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world" (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is interpretative because the researchers illustrated how the participants interpret their life experiences. This is also phenomenological as it involves the participant's life-world, personal experiences, and personal perception of an object or event. Moreover, IPA has a two-stage interpretation process or double hermeneutic, wherein "participants are trying to make sense of their world" and "the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants' sense-making of their experiences" (Smith et al., 2009). Charlick et al. (2016) further discussed the several steps in conducting the analysis, starting from reading to re-reading up to the last step, which is taking interpretations to deeper levels.

A purposive sampling technique was used. There were initially 10 identified participants (17.8%) in villages of Porac, Pampanga, Philippines, that consists of more than twenty families. After choosing the respondents, the researchers discussed confidentiality, purpose of the research and read the informed consent to the participants. The Personal Data Sheet was given to eight participants and accomplished the form with the following information: respondent's code number, name in aliases, address, contact number, age, gender (male or female), length of technology use, and specific online technology used. Eight participants were selected since the phenomenon of interest is unconventional for the Aeta natives whose life is more occupied in farming and among other things than usage of online technology. According to Starks and Trinidad (2007), when only a limited of people share unique experience, a range of 1-10 individuals can give a full and detailed account of the phenomenon thereby uncovering vital elements of life's story.

Besides, the researchers informed the participants that the interview would be audio recorded. In this manner, one member was responsible for recording and note-taking while the other acted as the listener and interviewer.

Participant Characteristics

While criteria for the respondents had been carefully followed during the selection process, it is also significant to assess specific characteristics that the participants possess during the interview. There were eight selected participants (4 Male and 4 Female, ages 20 to 43) as chosen by a gatekeeper who is an official in the community, but one of them did not answer well during the interview because of anxiety from being unable to comprehend the questions raised by the interviewer. Consent was clearly explained to them by the village officer; those uncomfortable with the upcoming one-on-one interview were not included in the final list. The Aetas use their native tongue in responding, while the interviewer can also speak their language and have translated their answers into Filipino or Tagalog. Respondents were very shy to answer but very kind to accommodate an interview. Four of them have used and accessed the internet, while the other half haven't connected to any internet in their lives but are fully aware of its existence. They can access internet by registration thru globe or smart mobile network with a specific peso load and surfing capacity. None of them have internet connections at home; they use android cell phones only for internet purposes. The three participants also use Non-android phones; while one of them is quite advanced, having the possession of a laptop is due to having been into school for education.

The interview results showed that all respondents are aware of online technology, including gadgets used as a form of communication. Aetas utilized web-based technologies regardless of the economic incapability and difficult access. Mobile devices, cell phones, either android or qwerty, laptops and computers have become part of their daily lives and have been used to their advantage. [Rice and colleagues \(2016\)](#) validated the impact of modern technology on indigenous young people who gained certain level of autonomy and boldness even when faced with strange platforms. The young generations of indigenous groups have wider opportunities to participate and communicate in the community with equal access to internet and uptake to mobile phones. Given the low socioeconomic status also deemed important to the families to have at least a simple gadget per household. Charity groups and other non-government organizations distributed several cell phones and other gadgets to the families during yuletide seasons and special events. This is how they usually acquire the gadgets by donations and gifts from organizations visiting them. Although some of them have been able to purchase independently because of employment in the city personally.

Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed in an excel spreadsheet. Through reading and rereading, coding was done to determine common themes using interpretative phenomenological analysis. After the themes were listed, the researchers made connections across the different interviews. The gathered data was thoroughly assessed until the final themes for the impact of online use of technology on the Aeta tribe have been conceptualized and further interpreted. Analytic memos were also injected as early as the recruitment stage, where participants were difficult to convince from long talks and can't understand the Filipino or English language. Interpretations regarding responses and codes were noted separately from the data corpus. Auditing was performed in the course of the study. The audit trail included original interview records; the unitization in an excel spreadsheet; the assignment of meanings and codes, themes, and subordinate; working definitions of the themes, subordinate and superordinate themes and a resultant report. The researchers conducted member checking in order to ensure the validity of the gathered data.

III. Results and Discussion

[Table 01](#) indicates the major themes and corresponding subthemes derived from the analysis of participants' responses after coding and extraction of meanings using online technology. Results of the study revealed the major themes on the impact of online technology on the life of Aetas are: (1) facilitate connection and maintain meaningful ties; (2) mindfulness of the gadget use and (3) nurtures life. Changing time and the emergence of new technologies have impacted everyone's lives and created unique changes for establishing and maintaining relationships, even for people living in the mountains. Facebook, Instagram and YouTube are ubiquitous to the Filipinos, including indigenous people; social media has given them a chance to be closer to people without much cost. Cell phones and email have offered easier ways of communicating. These communication tools are used to maintain contact with friends and family ([Antonucci et al., 2017](#)). Tremendous benefits of improved

technology allowed people to be less lonely because, with one click of the finger, support can be easily obtained thru instant messaging (Czaja, 2017; Delello and McWhorter, 2017). The lives of the Aetas have benefitted from the effects of online technology.

Table 01. Themes on impact of online technology on the life of Aeta native.

	Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
RQ 1	What is the lived experience of Aeta in using online technology Facilitate connection and maintain meaningful ties	Monitor family members and friends Caring for the community Respond to life emergencies
RQ 2	How does the integration of online technology affect the cohesive behavior of the Aeta tribe against the people outside the community? Mindfulness of the gadget use Nurtures life	Social Awareness Impairs spousal relationship Gadgets are used purposively Offers opportunities for learning and economic growth

Theme 01. Facilitate connection and maintain meaningful ties

In this theme, the researchers derived three sub-themes namely: Monitor family members and friends: "I only happen to hold my phone if I call my children... siblings, friends to know where they are" (*kapag tinatawagan ko lang mga ano ko...mga kapatid, mga kabarkada para malaman mo kung nasaan sila*); Caring for the community "I use that cellphone appropriately to connect with the community" (*ginagamit po yan sa tamang paggamit sa komunidad*) and respond to life emergencies: "I am always ready for emergencies, concerns of the village and reach out to fellow Aetas when they need me" (*pag may emergency, problem sa barangay. kapag may problema sa kapwa ko..nagpapano ako sa kanila para malaman*).

Online technologies allowed Aetas to connect with their family members and the people in the community. The Aeta community strengthened its relationships better by reaching out to every village member through online platforms. There has been a similarity in Rice et al. (2016), which revealed that the indigenous people with their unique identity have been using social media to connect with the community. Young Aetas have been doing this as well, especially those in touch with bigger crowds such as schools and churches. They make it a point to use cell phones with internet in times of emergencies, urgent needs and family concerns.

To connect distant Aeta family members and friends has been facilitated too with the use of digital technology. Since Aetas are potent human beings, the need to be in touched with kin is hardly unnegelected. According to Healy (2013), Facebook was considered the common ground for native families in connecting to distant relatives which several researchers also noted. Facebook has been a significant vehicle for many, including indigenous young generations, to keep in touch with close relatives and dear friends. One of the respondents exclaimed they use the device to monitor their loved ones or to know their whereabouts. When one is sick from their village, they can facilitate aid in most efficient way than they have ever done before. Aetas derive some sense of safety regarding their family members. A single text message and short call can readily indicate the current happenings of their loved ones.

Aeta in groups can work together in seamless ways now that social media has made it easy for them. Social networking is increasingly used among Aetas for connecting, and most importantly, as a response to emergencies. However, even if families cannot provide for themselves devices of high-end, androids are the most available, cheapest tools for most indigenous people to connect to the Internet and enjoy various online platforms.

Mobile phone is not just seen as a simple gadget, but it can tell the story of its owner who is willing to share oneself virtually. A participant shared a relationship that has severed because cell phone use has become the medium of misunderstanding. Mobile phones allow the Aetas to call and text messages which are the primary feature of the device. A certain tribe as well in Australia exclaimed: "the Warlpiri has embraced and utilized mobile phones in manner that is acceptable to their traditions"

(Vaarzon-M, 2014). The findings in this study are similar to the discovery of Evangelista et al. (2015) on the purpose of cell phone use by the indigenous people. Meanwhile, surfing the internet among Aetas is seldom used as there is no available Wi-Fi or connection in the area.

Theme 02. Mindfulness of the gadget use

This study revealed the three sub-themes under Mindfulness of the gadget use, namely: Social Awareness: "We need to use the gadgets carefully and in a right manner such as during calamities and giving of relief goods" (*gingamit po yan sa tamang paggamit pag may bagyo or relief goods*); Impairs spousal relationship: "My relationship with my wife has been negatively affected because of messaging online" (*diyan din ang di ko maano, kase diyan din kame nag kasira eh*) and Gadgets are used purposively: " I make it sure that the phones are used only for calls and text and none else" (*gingamit po tuwing ngmemesage lang po at tuwing may tumatawag po*).

A possible explanation for embracing online technology in the lives of the Aetas is its self-directed nature. It gives the user the ability to explore and express oneself in manner that elicits satisfaction. However, Aetas were in full cognizance of the purpose of gadget use, owing to their need to be helped by the government and other private organizations whenever possible. As a result, gadgets and online technology are reserved for such purposes and not be wasted on other agendas.

Concerning social awareness, they see the relevance of cell phones as an instrument to be aware of the community's latest updates. The devices serve as warning tool in case calamities strikes. They can always refer to it as a source of information outside of their circles, such as barangay/village and family. Additionally, Petray (2013); Petray (2015), emphasized the importance of sharing online information for communities such as indigenous people to preserve their traditions and culture.

Theme 03. Nurtures life

As an indigenous group of people, Aetas have unique culture compared to those living in mainstream society and popular cities. With the help of mobile phones, they cannot deny the fact that some aspects of their lives are changing indirectly or directly. The manner of connecting to their distant families is no longer limited by face-to-face interaction but with an opportunity to be with them because of the internet use or cell phones. It also opened doors for various types of livelihood since they can also sell products online or by merely texting their customers. Doing business with their patrons became easy: "Say when I want to sell produce (e.g. such as vegetables or fruits), I inform my loyal buyers and customers through text" (*tulad po ng ganito po, pagtitinda po. Komunikasyon po kunwari sa sa mga suki, sa mga paninda ganyan*). Economic activities of the Aetas in the Northern regions have shown paralleled improvements. Their livelihood practices have also centered on livestock and poultry production, tour guiding in the Callao cave, paid labor, and cultural dancing (Tindowen, 2016). They are well integrated into the community participating in the local industry.

When public officials are on the way to offer goods or rations in times of disasters, the leaders of the Aetas can be easily contacted to make arrangements with their community, so they received all the assistance personally from the government. Therefore, urgent needs of Aeta families are equally handled by the municipality, just like other communities, which are the usual recipient of help. "Cellphones are very useful when local municipalities give medical aides, comfort food and even materials needed for house repair or renovation" (*pag may pwedeng maitulong ang gobyerno, magagamit yun {cellphone}. Halimabawa, parating kame diyan may dalang gamot, pagkain, sa pagpapagawa ng bahay*). It only proves that Aetas are no stranger to the opportunities and rights they deserve in life.

Social media provided indigenous leaders to the web with reasonable interactions in society just like the ancient times (Kral, 2010). Technology paves the way for the indigenous tribe to link with other cultures. Because of this, learning different cultures becomes less strenuous but exciting. Thus, cultural exchange in language, food, philosophies and beliefs is actively taking place. Because of social media, the propagation of knowledge regarding native people to non-native people is seamless making researchers and the community understands the culture and way of life of a unique tribe holistically.

IV. Conclusion

The findings indicate that online technology manifested three superordinate themes, such as facilitating family connection and maintaining meaningful ties and taught the Aetas to be mindful of gadget use and nurture life. Seven subordinate themes have implications of online technologies use on family monitoring, caring for the community, responding to life emergencies; social awareness, impairment of spousal relationship, purposive gadget use and opportunities for learning and economic growth. Aeta natives use online technology to make life less demanding yet meaningful. Online technology use may eventually modernize their identity however, this is not a priority. No amount of technology can ultimately change the distinctiveness of Aetas' cohesive behavior. Social media can be an avenue to rebuild dispersed community of the Aeta tribes and continue the values from which they have been known as a special group who put prize on communalness (Edmonds, et al. 2012). Aetas formed their communities like social gatherings through social media. These are affairs for uniting and alleviating the Aeta community enhanced by Facebook. Strengthening identity with the aid of electronic gateway may produce a different chance of improving lives and hope for a better future for dear Aeta friends.

Online technology in itself may not be the direct cause of change to the culture, norm, or values of the Kapampangan Aetas but may have played a critical role in determining the capacity of Aetas to utilize necessary development in their lives while keeping a strong sense of identity. Wonders of technology made them realized that a different approach works efficiently only if utilized to sustain a quality life. The Pinatubo Aetas of Porac Pampanga today may have dressed like the non-Aetas, talked fluently in a foreign tongue besides their native language, learned new livelihoods apart from hunting and planting, converted to Christians, enjoyed messaging in group chats, traded their produce online and spent a lot of wee hours in Facebook. Still, one would never see them forget who they are in their commitment to building a solid community.

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