

Their Story

In October 2004, mud, fallen trees and water inundated the towns of Real, General Nakar and Infanta, Quezon, killing more than a thousand people. But miraculously, there was no casualty in Banglos, a settlement near the mouth of Agos River. We visited the residents to find out how they were able to survive and deal with the aftermath of the flood

BY ANANEZA ABAN

GENERAL NAKAR, QUEZON- Adaptation to a life entwined with a river ecosystem plus the will to endure a disaster saved the people of Banglos from drowning in the flood triggered by typhoons that ravaged the towns of Infanta, General Nakar and Real, Quezon in October 2004.

Banglos, a small fishing village in the municipality of General Nakar, is a low-lying area that sits between the Agos and Kuyapit Rivers. Agos River, the headwaters of which are in Rizal province, traverses the mountain ranges of Sierra Madre before it drains to Polillo Strait in Quezon. Kuyapit is a small tributary of Agos.

With this type of living environment, flooding has become a part of life in Banglos. During heavy rain, the residents observe keenly the movement of Agos River. When its water level increases alarmingly, the *banca* (fishing boat), their most reliable resource, is in place in case of flood.

But that unforgettable October was the worst. Typhoons Unding, Violeta, Winnie and Yoyong hit the area successively and brought incessant rain, causing the river to overflow. What was most unnatural was the presence of huge logs that came along with the flood, damaging their already inundated settlement.

“Binabaha lagi ang Banglos pero hindi namin inaasahan na ganun kalakas, na lagpas tao,” (Flooding is periodic in Banglos but we did not expect it to be that strong and rise beyond a person’s height), recounted Banglos barangay captain Roberto Ritual.

It was the first time that Milagros Astrera-Ritual, Roberto’s elderly mother who grew up in the village, encountered such a catastrophe. “Nabigla kami. Biglang laki ang tubig. Nag-akyat na kami ng mga apo ko sa bubong ng bahay.” (We stood aghast. The water level rise was sudden. My grandchildren and I climbed our rooftop at once.)

Hours before the break of dawn, the villagers hastily ascended to their rooftops in anticipation of danger. The others who lived along the *aplaya* (riverside) evacuated to the two-storey multipurpose building nearby. Feeling that the building was bound to collapse due to the strong water current, they left and sought refuge instead on their neighbors’ rooftops. Without doubt, all the structures along the *aplaya* collapsed and were washed out when the fourth typhoon Yoyong arrived. Several *banca*s

were swept away by floodwaters, leaving only houses and a few trees to cling to for safety.

Electricity was cut off. Marife Ritual, a cousin of the barangay captain, recalled the ominous screams of people calling for help in the midst of darkness.

Barangay Captain Roberto remembers that the event was like being on board a huge boat floating in a flood of mud and logs that streamed from the Sierra Madre forest reserve. By sunrise after the storm, although weary of fighting for their lives, they were relieved to know that there was no casualty. Banglos was spared from the gruesome tragedy.

Two years have passed, but fear and restiveness still engulf the people of Banglos. But the aftermath of the great flood has somehow developed their capacity to ably prepare for the next disaster.

Marife Ritual says, “*Kapag mabilis ang paglaki ng ilog at maghapon ang ulan, likas na ang mga anak, mga nanay at matatanda. Ang mga kalalakihan ay pumupunta na sa tabing-ilog upang mag-monitor sa pagtaas ng tubig.*” (When the river’s water level suddenly rises, children, mothers and older persons evacuate. The men go to the riverside to monitor the river.)

Wendell Tena, a barangay councillor, says that the barangay has four disaster action teams. Each team starts to monitor the water level of Agos River when heavy rain pours especially during the typhoon season. The mothers in the house pack the things to bring and ready the children in case the action teams order the community to evacuate. And as practiced, the *banca*s are readied for evacuation and river monitoring.

In case a disaster strikes the area and cause the roads to be impassable, a white flag will be erected to signify that Banglos needs relief and assistance, added Edilberto Ritual, another cousin of Roberto.

But life has become harder than before in Banglos. The area used to have farms planted with diverse crops such as rice, squash, peanuts and watermelons. After the great flood, the soil lost its fertility due to erosion, and the mud and logs that covered the planting grounds. Rice needs to be bought now compared to the past when the harvest was their source. The fishers’ catch, too, is scarce nowadays. Due to hardship, stealing of carabaos and fishing nets has become rampant. And there are those who steal in order to buy food for their children.

Banglos is predominantly home to the Ritual, Dela Torre, Soliano and Avellaneda clans who are small fisherfolks and farmers dependent on the land and sea for livelihood. Being a close-knit community, it is difficult for them to totally abandon Banglos even when life has become harder. Those who left still go back to eke out a living in this village.

But even at the brink of economic crunch brought about by natural hazards, the people remains the best asset of Banglos. A training program sponsored by Gawad Kalinga has produced homegrown sculptors who carve driftwoods into posh decorative pieces.

The words of Nanay Milagros best expresses the hope of the people in Banglos that disasters have failed to wither: “*Hanggang may lupa kami ay hindi kami lilikas. Andito ang hanapbuhay.*” (While we have land to till, we will not leave. Our livelihood is here.)

“We did not expect it to be that strong”

Marife Ritual remembers the day that Agos River rose and inundated their small fishing village.

