

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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Philippine Studies vol. 39, no. 3 (1991): 263–286

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Squatting and Scavenging in Smokey Mountain

RICARDO G. ABAD

Residents of Smokey Mountain squat on a piece of public land which, for four decades, has been the principal dumping site of Metro Manila's trash. To these people, the mountain of garbage which enshrouds their community—the rising offal that has become a symbol of urban blight and national neglect—has enshrouded their lives as well. It is their home, their haven, their work habitat. Because it is all three, they refuse to leave Smokey Mountain despite government efforts to relocate them elsewhere and despite the official closure of the dumpsite last September 1990.

Two major processes create communities like Smokey Mountain. The first is the increasing concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few families and institutions. This concentration, a process initiated during the Spanish era and reinforced in subsequent periods, has enabled these families and institutions to control vast tracts of land and prevent its sale following the normal dictates of the marketplace. As a result, land prices have become exorbitant, beyond the reach of many Filipinos and most especially the poor. They rise at incredibly fast rates, escalate rent, and under conditions of artificial scarcity, generate much speculation and build pressures to withhold sale.¹ The second process is the uneven development of the Philippine economy, which leads to the concentration of resources

This article is a revised version of a report submitted to the Coordinating Center for Visual Arts, Cultural Center of the Philippines in October 1990. Additional research support was provided by the Frank X. Lynch, S.J. Professorial Chair awarded to the author in School Year 1990-91. The assistance of Zenaida Ostos, Rosario Marasigan, Rosita Leodones, Cornelio Torrijos, Alvin Salamat, Jaime Placides and Gerardo Sandoval is acknowledged.

1. William J. Keyes, "Case Study: The Philippines," in *Policies Towards Urban Slums: Case Study of Seven Cities*, ed. Mahdu Sarin (Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 1980).

in urban areas, especially Manila, and the underdevelopment of the agricultural sector. As the agricultural sector is unable to absorb an expanding labor force, large numbers of rural workers and their families migrate to cities in search of better jobs. Over time, however, cities are no longer able to provide many of these workers with adequate shelter and good paying jobs. These workers eventually join the ranks of the unemployed and the underemployed, selling their labor for a pittance, often doing work in small-scale activities largely escaping recognition, enumeration, regulation or government protection. Urban primacy, borrowing Imoagene's phrase, has become the Achilles' heel of their development.²

Smokey Mountain residents are, and continue to be, victims of these forces, caught in the double pressure of high land values and uneven economic development. One force makes them squatters, the other, scavengers. Unable to afford a house and lot, or rent a unit outside Smokey Mountain, the original residents cannot escape out of their community. The later arrivals, mostly migrants from depressed areas in the Visayas and Mindanao, share the same predicament. Eyeing free spaces in the area, they accommodate themselves to a piece of reclaimed land in a district, called Tondo, which since the 1900s has been a densely populated area inhabited by large numbers of poor people residing in overcrowded homes and unsanitary conditions.³ Further, since they are unable to find regular work, or if they do find jobs the wages are too meager, many residents converted the dumpsite as their workplace. The choice was dichotomously simple: scavenge or starve. The residents chose scavenging. And the more they mined the garbage heaps, and the longer they stayed in Smokey Mountain, the more their social identities remained fixed. To outsiders, the Smokey Mountain residents are, simply and plainly, squatters and scavengers. One might add that because of their squalid surroundings, they are slum dwellers as well.

2. O. Imoagene, "Primacy of Colonial Cities, Dependency and Underdevelopment in West Africa," paper presented at the Third International Symposium on the Role of the City in Third World Development with reference to Africa, Jos, Nigeria, 1986. Cited in S. A. Adewuyi, "Street Begging and National Development: A Sociological Study of Nigeria," a midterm report prepared for the Rockefeller Foundation Conference Centre, Bellagio, Italy, August 1990.

3. Daniel F. Doeppers, *Manila 1900-1914: Social Change in a Late Colonial Metropolis* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1984), pp. 113 and 117. For more detailed accounts of conditions in Tondo around or before the early 1900s, see J. Foreman, *The Philippine Islands* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston and Company, Ltd., 1899); and Proceso Gabriel, "Mortalidad del Distrito de Tondo," *Revista Filipina de Medicina y Farmacia* (1910): 274-84.

Smokey Mountain has thus come to be a very difficult environment for anyone to eke out a living. That it has survived as a community for four decades suggests that its residents have managed to design appropriate responses to meet the many challenges posed by their environment. How, then, do these residents pursue their lives as squatters and scavengers? How do they view their situation? How, in short, do they adapt to their environment?

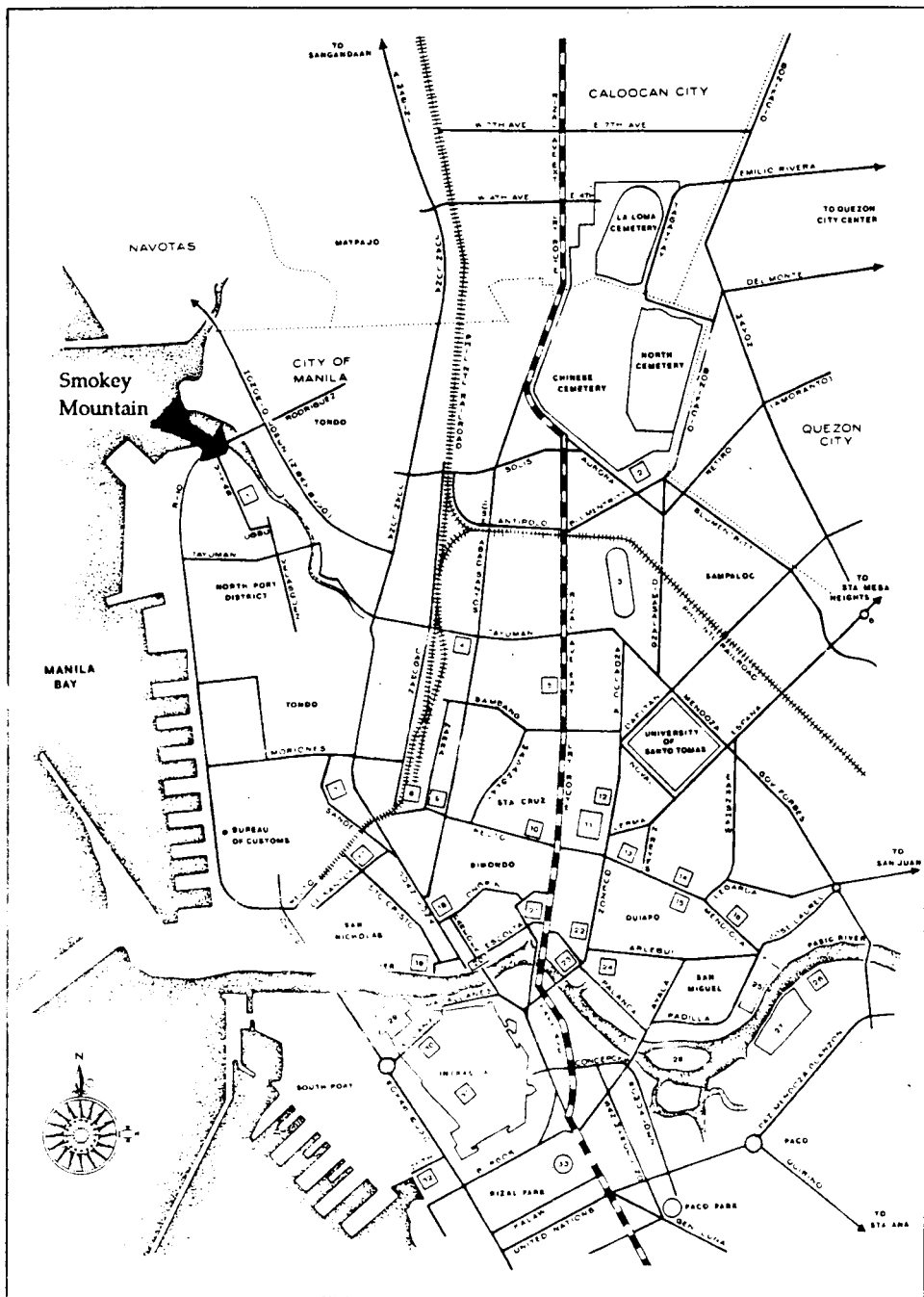
Anthropologists define *adaptation* as "the process whereby organisms or populations of organisms make adjustments, biological or behavioral, that benefit the owners within a given environment."⁴ Implicit in this definition is the notion that much of human behavior is a response to the challenge of surviving in a given environment. Humans, however, have only very limited means of responding to environmental challenges and have no way of predicting how their response will withstand subsequent waves of environmental change. Countless societies in the evolutionary past learned the lesson too late. The failure to adapt on time led them to extinction. In contrast, human groups that survived were those which dealt with environmental changes in a flexible manner, i.e., with an ability to absorb change without a drastic overhaul of their system. To determine this ability, ecological anthropologists invite consideration of three aspects of human adaptation: adaptation to basic resources, adaptation to resource fluctuation, and adaptation to other groups.

This article addresses these points by consolidating data gathered from site visits, key informant interviews and documentary sources. It starts with an overview of the Smokey Mountain community and its people, continues with a discussion of the people's adaptive strategies, and concludes with an assessment of the present situation.

THE COMMUNITY AND ITS PEOPLE

What is known as Smokey Mountain is a twenty-nine-hectare area covering two barangays tucked along the bank of the Marala River and the Estero de Vitas in Balut, Tondo, north of Manila (see map). Barangay 128, also known as Barrio Mandaragat, lies on the western

4. Fred Flogg et al., *Anthropology: Decisions, Adaptation and Evolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1980), p. 190. The paper's discussion of adaptation principles is based on the Flogg text, especially pp. 189-207. Similar recommendation to understand slums as a form of societal adaptation to underdevelopment and poverty is found in Karina Constantino-David and Ofelia R. Angangco, "Studies of Urban Poverty in the Philippines," *Asian Studies* 13 (1): 17-35. Also see Constantino-David, "Slums and Underdevelopment," *Philippine Labor Review* 3 (1): 29-37.



Map of Manila North of the Pasig

portion of the site, with the river itself as the community's eastern boundary. Barangay 129, also called Barrio San Roque, lies at the eastern portion of the site, a cemented bridge and a few meters away from the City of Manila's main slaughterhouse on E. Rodriguez Sr. Street.

When garbage trucks were officially permitted to unload their trash in "Smokey," the term residents use, a horde of people—young and old, women and men—scrounged on top of a heap that glistened in the day with the reflection of glass bottles and tin cans. Soon after the dumpsite was closed in September 1990, the color of rubbish turned ashen ("May kadiliman ang kulay," observed one resident). The pile of trash was no longer the mountain it was—an eight, some say twelve to fifteen storey heap at its peak—but a hill peppered with shreds of plastic bags, in all colors, which scavengers themselves cannot use. During Holy Week, the dumpsite becomes the setting for a *Via Crucis*, ending at the top of the heap with a reenactment of Christ's crucifixion.⁵ On rainy days, the dump, which serves as work area, turns into a mud slick. On sunny days, it is also a playground for children. Meters away from this playground, yellow-painted bulldozers flatten endless piles of rubbish and heave hefty portions of it into the nearby sea. The stench was less obtrusive when the dumpsite closed last September, and on cool, windy days the stench is almost nonexistent as one approaches the mouths of Barangays 128 and 129.

Both barangays were originally coastal villages inhabited by fishermen, mostly from Manila and nearby provinces, who plowed the clear waters of the Marala River for fish, shrimp and clams. Elderly residents of Smokey Mountain recall visiting the place to swim or take a boat ride along the river, passing the few nipa huts that dotted the sandy shore. During the Liberation, Barrio Mandaragat was nicknamed "Quonset" in reference to the huts that American troops built near its shore. In the 1950s, some of Manila's garbage was unloaded in one part of the barangay and washed out into the sea, but the volume of trash was small and alarmed neither the villagers nor the public. The volume of garbage rose, however, as the metropolitan population swelled. Over time, the land and a large portion of the river were reclaimed by trash. By the 1970s and well into the 1980s, Isla de Balut became a major dumping site. What was once a placid fishing village metamorphosed into a community characterized by congestion, poverty and want. It was in the words of a journalist

5. See Denis Murphy "Come to Smokey Mountain for the Stations of the Poor," in the *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, 27 March 1988, p. 11 for a description of this event.

who waxed poetic, "a monument to government inefficiency and neglect."⁶

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY FACILITIES

A 1988 survey conducted by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) reports that the twenty-nine-hectare community has a total of 3,019 families and 13,413 individuals.⁷ These figures translate to a population density of about 463 persons per hectare. In contrast, Metro Manila has a density of only 93 persons per hectare.⁸ There is also an overcrowding of structures. The twenty-five hectares covering Barangay 128 have 1,261 structures, or a ratio of fifty structures per hectare. In contrast, the smaller four-hectare Barangay 129 has a more reasonable ratio of nearly 300 structures per hectare.

Very few of these structures are business establishments, service centers or public buildings. But while there are neither hospitals nor drug stores in the area, a clinic staffed by volunteer physicians is available. When the clinic is unstaffed, or emergency treatment is needed, residents can proceed to nearby health centers or to the Tondo General Hospital. No government agency holds office in the site, although the International Labor Office, in cooperation with the Department of Labor and Employment, has a field office in Barangay 129. There is also a chapel in Barangay 128 and within its perimeter is a community center for parish activities. Six emergency shelters are spread out in the area. These serve as evacuation centers during times of calamities and day-care centers at other times. Several *sari-sari* stores and food stalls serve the residents. So do the popular junk shops or receiving depots where garbage pickers trade their catch for cash.

Most of the structures are dwelling units, 44 percent of which have one to three persons and 46 percent, have four to six persons. Rare is the dwelling unit made of cement. These are usually the residences of relatively well-to-do scavengers or the homes and shops of scrap buyers. For the most part, what is called a house is what one usually

6. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 4 September 1990, p. 6. Two years before, a cabinet under-secretary called Smokey Mountain the "ignominious symbol of Philippine garbage." See *Manila Bulletin*, 9 December 1988, p. 62.

7. Department of Social Welfare and Development, "Glimpses of Smokey Mountain: Report of the 1988 Survey," Manila, Department of Social Welfare and Development, n.d. (Mimeographed.)

8. National Economic Development Authority, *Statistical Yearbook 1988* (Manila: National Economic Development Authority, 1989).

sees in slum areas: an improvised arrangement of wood, iron sheets, cardboard, even cloth—some bought, some given, some scrounged from garbage heaps—many of which are crowned with the weight of two or more discarded rubber tires. These units vary in size, are clustered close to one another, and are separated from each other by a narrow pathway, a fence made out of rusty bedsprings, or both. Almost all stand on layers of garbage pressed and levelled on earth or water over time. Surprisingly, not one structure collapsed during the July 16 earthquake. Heavy rains are more traumatic. A landslide of trash occasioned by an August 1990 typhoon buried a small house at the foot of the heap and killed both occupants, a father and his son.

Home furnishings are spare. About a third of family heads in the DSWD survey own an electric fan; another third own a television set, a fifth own a radio or stereo. Less than five percent own a refrigerator. Only two family heads own a sala set, and one has a video system. Equally spare are sanitation and water facilities. Sixty-six percent of family heads report that they have no toilet facilities. A larger 88 percent obtain water from the fire hydrant, from public faucets stationed at strategic places in the community, or from itinerant water sellers. A representative of a local water association entrusted to maintain and supervise water distribution in the area charges ₱3.50 for every water container filled from these faucets. Itinerant vendors, in turn, sell water at ₱.50 per tin can.

Another fee, collected by another association, is levied on 45 percent of the homes that are connected to existing power lines. The remaining 55 percent, presumably a much poorer group, use candles or gas lamps. Cooking usually entails the use of firewood and is done outside the house and in the open air, typically under the shade of a wooden roof or a galvanized iron sheet. This practice makes the cooking site vulnerable to the elements. When it rains, residents have a tough time preparing a meal. By the same token, bags or sacks of rice donated to them as relief goods during times of natural calamities do not get cooked when it is most needed—an irony, indeed, of relief work.

The majority, or 85 percent of the residents, claim they "own" their homes. The rest pay a very modest rent or have rent-free arrangements. "Ownership" here does not refer, of course, to possession in the legal sense, since Smokey Mountain residents, by inhabiting public land, are technically called "squatters." To residents, "ownership" means that one has built a structure on a chosen spot and does not pay rent or any fee for its use. Of those who "own" their homes, 41 percent have lived in Smokey Mountain for eleven years or more. These are the old-time residents. Another 17 percent have been in

the area from six to ten years. The rest, or 42 percent, are the new residents who have lived in Smokey Mountain for five years or less. It appears that the congestion of people started to become serious within the last ten years, and became more acute within the last five.

Like most squatters in Third World countries, security of land tenure—or the right to own or lease the land on which they presently squat—is a passionate issue among Smokey Mountain residents.⁹ Old-time residents are intense about it. Should the government identify priority groups in issuing housing benefits, they feel they should be first in line. But old resident or new, there is a widespread feeling that home is Smokey Mountain. Seventy percent of the family heads have no plans of returning to the province, and a slightly higher 74 percent prefer to make improvements in their present homes rather than change addresses. This commitment to residence has been one chief characteristic of squatter groups in urban Philippines.¹⁰

POPULATION

The 1988 population of the Smokey Mountain community has slightly more males than females, is generally composed of young, unmarried, literate and poor people. Males and females are almost equally divided, with 50.8 percent males as opposed to 49.2 percent females. The median age is about fifteen to sixteen years old (Metropolitan Manila's is twenty), and less than one percent are sixty-two years and over. About 56 percent are unmarried, a slight majority, but among those nineteen years and over, only 12 percent are unmarried. Indicators of marital dissolution do not indicate family instability. About two percent are widowed and less than one percent are separated from their spouses.

The DSWD data also show that among those of school age, a high 93.1 percent have had some schooling or vocational training. Over two-fifths have completed elementary schooling, while close to a third have attained or completed a high school education. Less than 5 percent have reached college, and less than one percent took voca-

9. See, for instance, Bruce A. Etherington, "Facing the Squatter Problem in Developing Countries," *Solidarity* 8 (1): 3-13. For specific Philippine experiences, see Anicia Paglinauan-Castillo, "An Exploratory Study of Adaptation Responses to Insecurity of Houselot Tenure," (M.A. Thesis, Ateneo de Manila University, 1979); and Michael D. Pinches, "Squatters, Planning and Politics in Tondo," Manila, Research and Information, Asian Bureau, Australia, 1978. (Typescript.)

10. See, for example, Mary Racelis Hollnsteiner, "City, Province or Relocation Site?: Options for Manila's Squatters," *Philippine Sociological Review* 21 (July-October 1973): 207-13.

tional courses. In all these categories, there are negligible differences between males and females. Moreover, a comparison with national figures does not show large differences. The overall impression, as the DSWD survey also notes, is one of high literacy in the Smokey Mountain population. Despite this relatively high level of literacy, however, Smokey Mountain residents remain poor. Their jobs are low-status ones, and their incomes meager.

Sixty five percent—or 8,666 residents of the total 13,413—are in the labor force. This figure includes the employable population fifteen years old and over. Of these 8,666 persons, about 47 percent are employed. Of those employed, 61 percent work within the neighborhood or within their homes. For most residents, then, work and home activities are confined to the twenty-nine-hectare Smokey Mountain area. What kind of jobs are these? Ninety-five percent are engaged in either blue-collar jobs or in unskilled, so-called informal sector occupations: 35.5 percent, the majority, are scavengers (*tambakero* is the local term); 25.0 percent are service and manual workers; 18.7 percent are skilled workers (e.g. carpenters, masons); and 15.7 percent are vendors. Only a mere 5.1 percent are in professional, technical or kindred occupations.

Of those employed, a sizeable 81 percent are nonpermanent workers, i.e., temporary, casual, seasonal or contract workers or those who are employed on a piecework or commission basis. For these workers, as well as for permanent employees who need extra cash, scavenging presents itself as a "refugee occupation," i.e., work which can support people when they have no other opportunities for earning. As one worker stated, "I'm trained as a mason. If there's work available, I do masonry. If there's no work, I scavenge." Indeed, the DSWD figures which report that only 35.5 percent of the population are scavengers are misleading. They exclude vast numbers of residents who work on the heaps as a second or supplementary job. They also exclude a large number of children, in school or out of school, who engage in scavenging to augment the family income or to have some money on their own.

The estimated median income among workers is ₱660.30 a month with a modal range, earned by 43 percent of the workers, between ₱500-1,000 a month. That average is way below the legislated minimum wage rate of about ₱1,800 a month for urban areas.¹¹ About 58 percent of these workers, permanent or nonpermanent, obtain daily

11. The 1989 *Statistical Yearbook* records a minimum legislated daily wage of ₱69.33 for urban areas which, when multiplied by 26, the number of working days per month, comes to ₱1,802.58. See National Economic Development Authority, *Statistical Yearbook*.

incomes. Rare is the resident who draws a salary once or twice a month. Garbage pickers earn an estimated median of ₱474 a month, but this figure seems low when one considers that adult workers can earn, according to local informants, as much as ₱150-200 for a day's work, while children, between ₱50-70 a day. Since no information is available on how many days scavengers work per month, it is difficult to verify the median income calculated from the DSWD data. Key informants report, however, that residents need skills in cash management. Many times, much of the daily take from scavenging is spent on drinking and gambling. It has also been difficult to keep children in school when they can earn good money from the dump.

Some residents who have completed skills training sessions with government agencies—e.g., sewing for women and automobile repair for men—apply for jobs outside. Many, however, prefer to scavenge, or at least scavenge on a part-time basis, because the monetary returns are greater. It also costs money to work or to look for work outside. One has to spend for better clothes and transportation. As scavengers, all they need to buy are two items: a steel hook (*kalahig*, ₱10 each) and a large basket (*buslog*, ₱20 each) to contain the recovered trash. The scrap can then be sold by piece or by volume to local scrap buyers who, in turn, sell them to merchants or *bodegeros* in the city. About ₱5.00 a kilo is paid for every kilo of plastic or cardboard, while a larger ₱15 per kilo is exchanged for metal. The more entrepreneurial sell only some of the trash, and keep the rest as raw materials for rags, dustpans, toys, Christmas decorations, picture frames, or pendants to be sold in the open market.¹² Some engage in scavenging's side occupations. Some women, for instance, specialize in cleaning bottles or washing large plastic bags brought to the buyers.

On-site scavenging in Smokey Mountain is deemed more desirable than street scavenging (*di-kariton*, or with a cart, as it is called). According to an elderly resident and a former street scavenger, *di-kariton* is more physically exhausting and more perilous to life and limb. Many street scavengers get beaten up or flogged without provocation. It is also humiliating to pick in the streets, he adds, because one gets to meet many people who perceive them as ambulant eyesores, scum of the earth, and treat them accordingly.

Working in Smokey Mountain is comparatively more comfortable.

12. For accounts of how Smokey Mountain scavengers use their collected trash, see Lea Santos, "Sa Smokey Mountain," *Blue Collar* 3 (16 August–30 September 1990): 8–14. In the same issue, Ma. Victoria Ybañez, "The Scavengers," pp. 15–16. Also see Margo McCutcheon, "There's no Place like this Home," *Asia Magazine* (25–29 January 1991), pp. 27–31.

On regular garbage delivery days, throngs of people—some in head-gear and rubber boots—stand by the dropping center, waiting for the dump trucks to drive in and disgorge their trash. Once the garbage is unloaded, these workers surround the fresh supply of rubbish. Then, like hunters and gatherers with steel hooks as digging sticks and baskets as containers, they dig, poke, pry and pick pieces of recyclable trash: bottles, tin cans, pieces of metal, rubber, large plastic bags, pieces of clothing, leather, fabric, linoleum, plastic cups, wood, cardboard, paper, or bone. The lucky ones may find a wad of bills or pieces of jewelry tucked inside an envelope or a soiled handkerchief. After a group has scoured one garbage load and heads toward their homes to sort and clean their catch, another set of workers mill around the dropping center, sit under the hot sun and wait for the next truck to arrive. Waiting under the sun, they say, is what darkens their complexion. "lisa ang kulay namin dito," they say with a smile.

ADAPTATION OF SMOKEY MOUNTAIN RESIDENTS

Ecological anthropologists define a niche as "distinctive adaptive patterns", or more formally, "an adaptation to the challenge of making a living under different environmental circumstances."¹³ Seen this way, many activities of Smokey Mountain residents can be understood as a way of adapting to their unique environmental problems. It involves, more specifically, three aspects: adapting to available resources, adapting to resource fluctuations and adapting to other groups.

ADAPTING TO AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Every environment has a limited potential for sustaining the forms of life within it. This potential is usually referred to as the environment's "carrying capacity"—a threshold at or below which a population tends to stabilize. There are several ways to determine an environment's carrying capacity. Some anthropologists, for instance, measure the minimum amount of water as well as the amount of vegetable and animal matter available for human consumption on a regular basis. However, adapting to available resources is not simply a matter of estimating how well a given environment can support a specific number of persons per square area. The actual number varies from group to group, implying that a community's carrying capacity

13. Flogg, et al., *Anthropology*, pp. 199-200.

also depends on other factors. Among them are its social organization, its perception of available resources and its relations with other groups.

The carrying capacity of Smokey Mountain is difficult to compute, not only because of insufficient data, but more important, because Smokey Mountain is, like most niches in cities, an "artificial" ecosystem, one which depends on the surrounding areas for food, water and other necessities. It is possible, however, to gauge the extent of this carrying capacity by observing the ways people use the available resources within the community. From an overview of the Smokey Mountain community and its people, it is clear that this carrying capacity is very strained, and that by and large, life within this niche is best seen as an adaptation to very scarce resources. Under these conditions, Smokey Mountain residents, like most of the urban poor, adapt a dual strategy of maximizing resources and minimizing expenditures, as well as professing values and attitudes consistent with their social surroundings.¹⁴ In Smokey Mountain, adaptation also entails, among others, a low priority given to home improvement, an adherence to rules and norms governing the use of limited resources and a reliance on external assistance.

Outsiders often wonder why slum dwellers invest their hard-earned money on television sets and other consumer appliances rather than on home improvement. The same may be asked of Smokey Mountain residents. While their home furnishings are generally spare, many residents who come into some money will be much more likely to buy a consumer appliance rather than use the cash to build stronger walls and roof or make extensive home repairs. The underlying reason is insecurity of tenure. Almost all residents, realizing that they can be ejected from the site at any time or that their community can be razed easily by fire or other elements, take the practical course of action by investing in goods which can easily be carried away in times of emergencies. A resident expresses it well (here freely translated):

14. For accounts of the strategies used by other urban poor groups in an earlier decade, see Maria Elena Lopez and Mary Racelis Hollnsteiner, "People on the Move: Migrant Adaptations to Manila Residence," in *Philippine Population Research: Papers and Proceedings of an Experts' Meeting*, ed. Rodolfo Bulatao (Makati: Population Center Foundation, 1976), pp. 227-50; and F. Landa Jocano, *Slum as a Way of Life: A Study of Coping Behavior in an Urban Environment* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1978). For a broader view, see Robert J. Morais, "Dealing with Scarce Resources: Reciprocity in Alternative Form and Ritual," *Philippine Sociological Review* 28 (January-December 1980): 73-80.

We've got to find a place of our own; it is difficult to live under conditions where at any moment, the government can throw you away. That's the reason why people here do not improve the facade of their homes. They will buy a television set, a cassette, a refrigerator, and things like that which can easily be carted away ("iyong madaling mahakot"), but they will not invest in building solid walls and roofs. Why? Because there's no point in constructing a better house if you can be ejected anytime. In 1983, one resident here was able to put up ₱35,000 to rebuild her house; a year later she and the rest of us were relocated to Cavite. Her house was eventually demolished by bulldozers. What a waste!

Four community practices illustrate the adherence to norms governing the use of available resources. These practices are cost sharing, water use, scavenging rules and residential clearance. These practices reflect the social organization at work in dealing with available resources.

Since cash is a scarce resource in the community, residents have developed a way to share expenses in times of emergency. One example is a death in the family. When a family member dies, relatives take care of making funeral arrangements. To defray funeral costs, a family member goes around the barangay, shows the receipt issued by the funeral parlor to neighbors and other residents and solicits donations from them. The solicitation ends when the donations reach the amount specified in the receipt. In turn, each donor expects the bereaved family to make its own contribution when a similar misfortune occurs in their own family.

Secondly, residents have devised certain procedures to obtain scarce water resources in the area. Twice a day, from 9-11 A.M. and from 2-5 P.M., a representative from a local community association overseeing water distribution turns on the community faucets and shuts them off afterwards, carrying with him or her the handle that opens the faucet in the first place. Even before this representative arrives, however, rows of plastic water containers—all of the same size and shape to standardize distribution and facilitate payments—have already queued under the faucets, placed there by residents on a first-come, first-served basis. While there appears no limit to the number of water containers one family can line up, the number tends to level off for two reasons. First, because families, at the risk of community displeasure, do not wish to monopolize the available water allocation, and second, because more filled containers mean added cost which poor people can ill-afford. At the time of this study, the association charged ₱3.50 for every water container filled and used these fees to pay the city waterworks office as well as to repair and main-

tain the water system. Residents who cannot afford this price, or run out of water before the next scheduled opening of public faucets, can buy water from itinerant vendors.

Thirdly, the increasing influx of migrants in Smokey Mountain during the early 1970s exerted tremendous strain on the amount of recoverable trash gathered from the rubbish heaps. Old-time residents were particularly threatened by this rush of newcomers, and it was not long before the two groups clashed over territorial rights on the heap. Riots occurred, a few died in the aftermath. Realizing the futility of expelling newcomers from the community and the senselessness of further violence, the warring parties worked out a set of rules that organized scavenging work in the dumpsite. One such rule is a shift system which scheduled the entry of garbage pickers on the dumpsite. This schedule coincided with the arrival of garbage trucks from different points in Metro Manila. At other times, however, the dumpsite is free to everyone. While this and other rules eliminated violence, they also resulted in a smaller share of the garbage catch per family.

Finally, the massive entry of migrants also brought about a greater congestion of people and structures in Smokey Mountain. Again, old-time residents resented this invasion, but since the newcomers—fellow squatters—had as much right to public land as they did, no loud objections were raised. But some control was necessary, and it was eventually agreed that all newcomers must first obtain approval from the barangay captain before setting up a house in the community. While this rule has been breached at times, it has slowed down the entry of new families and prevented a more rapid deterioration of the area's carrying capacity.

Largely because of media attention, Smokey Mountain has attracted the support of many public and private agencies seeking to improve conditions in the area. This support has been substantial, when cumulated over the years, and may be considered part of Smokey Mountain's available resources.

While campaigning for the Metro Manila governorship, for example, Imelda Romualdez-Marcos ordered the installation of electrical posts around the community. Years later, the spouse of U.S. Vice-President Dan Quayle donated ₱4.5 million through a private foundation to construct six engineering shelter areas, cement the winding pathways of the two barangays, offer livelihood as well as health and nutrition programs, and re-install the electrical posts which the Metro Manila Commission dismantled in 1983 after ordering residents to relocate to Bulihan, Cavite. Other agencies, both public and private, secular and religious, have given other forms of assistance: skills

training, livelihood projects, medical aid, road and drainage construction, nutrition programs, early education, child care, calamity relief, spiritual guidance, and environmental protection. Over and above these are forms of material help donated by school groups and private individuals, tourists included.

Some groups within and outside Smokey Mountain resent some of this aid because they foster in people a sense of dependency. Many residents, however, welcome these goods and services, not only because they have little to begin with, but also because they feel they have a right to this assistance. As one community leader says, "If people use us for their own ends . . . we'll use them in return by accepting their goods and services." Whatever way the argument goes, the amount of aid flowing to Smokey Mountain remains substantial. For this reason, some way of organizing the acceptance and distribution of these goods and services has been established.

The usual manner of channeling assistance to Smokey Mountain has been through the office of the barangay captains or through the parish church. While these practices still prevail, many residents feel that they should have a more direct hand in the receipt and distribution of aid. Some outside agencies, church groups included, believe they can best deliver their services if they have their own organization within the community. Such organizations exist at present. In 1988, the DSWD survey reported thirteen such organizations within Smokey Mountain. In 1990, according to informants, the number rose to twenty-four. Eventually, however, many of these organizations competed for external aid. When this occurred, outside agencies were uncertain which group would serve as the best conduit for their assistance. To settle this dilemma, community residents, under the leadership of the parish priest, formed a federation of existing organizations—the Katipunan Para sa Kaunlaran ng Smokey Mountain—to represent the community in dealing with these outside agencies. The Katipunan's scope is broader, however, as it also seeks to protect the community from possible ejection and relocation.

But the problem of dependency still persists and can become an ingrained response to the influx of external aid. A parish-sponsored organization, the Sambayanang Kristiyano, hopes to eradicate the problem by undertaking projects which help achieve self-reliance.¹⁵ How the group succeeds will determine how Smokey Mountain will adapt to available resources in the future.

15. The activities of the Sambayanang Kristiyano are listed in "Hope for Smokey Mountain: An Open Letter to Teodoro Locsin from Benigno Beltran, S.V.D.," *Philippine Free Press* 80 (30 January 1988): 14ff.

ADAPTING TO RESOURCE FLUCTUATIONS

Human groups must adjust not only to the quantity and quality of available resources in their environment, but also to fluctuations in their availability. In many environments, natural and other calamities such as typhoons, droughts, infestation, wars or civil strife, always cause a shortage of resources. In cities, dependent as they are on the delivery of goods and services from the outside, a prolonged transport strike or a surge in oil prices leads to a similar shortage of resources which, when anticipated, results in, among others, panic buying.

As urban citizens, Smokey Mountain residents are subject to the same resource fluctuations as other residents of Metropolitan Manila. Within their specific community, however, the interest centers on two conditions: the fluctuations in the volume of trash available to them each day, and their proximity or distance from this available resource. These fluctuations largely depend on the number of trucks which unload garbage at the community's dropping center. In turn, this flow of trucks and garbage depends, in turn, on political decisions regarding the fate of Smokey Mountain. A similar political decision, especially when it entails the relocation of residents, will also determine the people's proximity or distance from their major resource.

Two events in the community's history illustrate how Smokey Mountain residents adapted to resource fluctuations. The first involved the relocation of residents which, for some years, separated them from the dumpsite. The second was the official decision to shut down Smokey Mountain as a dumpsite.

In 1982, Imelda Romualdez-Marcos ordered the creation of the Metro Manila Commission for Squatters and directed her vice governor to organize an antisquatting task force to demolish squatter areas and relocate their residents in predetermined sites. In 1983, the orders came to demolish Smokey Mountain and to resettle its residents in Bulihan, Cavite. Authorities painted a rosy picture of the Bulihan site, assuring residents of good facilities and job opportunities there. Most residents accepted the offer (some were reportedly pleased about the move) and when they left, bulldozers levelled all structures until they became one with the garbage. The place was to remain exclusively a dumping site.

Bulihan was not the rosy site painted by the authorities. Upon reaching the resettlement area, residents only saw plots of land punctuated here and there by toilet bowls ("Kubeta Village," they called it). Food was also scarce, and job opportunities were nil. Soon after, many men and women decided to commute between Bulihan

and Balut to earn money by mining the trash in Smokey Mountain and other dumpsites. To increase earnings, and to lower transportation costs, many decided to stay longer in Metro Manila, motoring back to Bulihan on weekends. It did not take long for the relocatees to realize that life in Bulihan was harsher than life in Manila. Slowly but steadily, they trickled back to Tondo, and by 1986, soon after the EDSA Revolution, about 90 percent of the relocatees, according to informants, were back at the dumpsite home.¹⁶ Had the resources in Bulihan matched those in Balut, the relocation would have been a successful one. As it happened, the failure of the Bulihan move made residents very wary of future relocation efforts.¹⁷

In August 1990, President Corazon Aquino gave the chairman of the Metropolitan Manila Authority one month to clear the city of garbage. The garbage problem did turn from bad to worse, and the mass media devoted ample attention to various aspects of the problem.¹⁸ Plans to construct landfill sites in Carmona and San Mateo were revealed, but both were greeted with much hue and cry from the officials and citizenry of these towns.¹⁹ Eventually, attention focused once more on Smokey Mountain, the major disposal area, which was to be closed as a dumpsite in September 1990. An alternative dumpsite along Coastal Road, Pasay City, was set up, again greeted with much hullabaloo from tourists and Pasay City residents, while plans for new landfill sites were being settled. For Smokey Mountain residents, the September 1990 closure would mean a severe shortage of resources. When dump trucks no longer unload their bounty in Balut, a major source of income vanishes. Adjustments were necessary.

16. The Public Services Chief of the Metro Manila Authority claims that security was lax in Smokey Mountain soon after the 1986 EDSA Revolution. See Nini Valera, "Countdown for Smokey Mountain," *National Midweek* 5 (4 April 1990): 3-5.

17. Similar experiences have been reported for other relocatees in the 1970s. See, for example, Sylvia H. Guerrero, "Staying Where the Action is: Relocation within the City," *Philippine Sociological Review* 25 (January-June 1977): 51-56; Scyp, Gorres and Velayo Group, "Carmona Relocation: The Solution to Urban Problems?," *The SGV Group Journal* 1 (1973): 62-65; Arcadio A. Tandez, "Sapang Palay: Another View," 22nd EST Cultural Series (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 1976), pp. 99-112; and Edvilla Talaroc et al., *Development and the Urban Poor: Two Philippine Illustrations* (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, 1980). For a more recent assessment, see Pilar Ramos-Jimenez, *Philippine Urban Situation Analysis* (Manila: UNICEF, 1986).

18. The plan appears in "National Housing Authority, Detailed Program for Scavengers," report submitted by the Technical Committee on the Program for Scavengers for the Presidential Task Force on Solid Waste Management, n.d. (Typescript.)

19. Between 1988-1990, several dailies gave front-page attention to the garbage crisis. Among them: *The Manila Chronicle*, 24 August 1988; *Manila Bulletin*, 21 August 1988 and 9 September 1990; and *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 6 January 1989 and 4 September 1990.

When the closure order took effect, resident scavengers commuted to alternative dumpsites, specifically those in the Coastal Road or nearby in Barangay Aroma, Tondo, or farther off in Valenzuela, Bulacan. Early in the morning, these workers stepped out of their homes, sporting headgear and rubber boots, carrying their metal hooks and containers, and headed for the new dumpsites. "Nakakatawa sila," remarked one informant, "akala mo'y mag-oopisina." They took public transport en route to the alternative dumpsite or hitched a ride with garbage trucks that passed by the Balut area. On the way home, and for a fee of ₱5.00 each, they opted to ride with garbage trucks that passed through Smokey Mountain. At home, they emptied their containers, sorted and cleaned the trash, and sold it to buyers in the community. The same routine took place the next day.

Have dumpsite, will travel. But not for long. Last January 1991, dump trucks were reportedly seen wheeling towards the dropping center where a group of workers again eagerly waited for the collected garbage to unload. How this situation came about despite the dumpsite's official closure last September remains a matter of speculation at the moment. But the residents were right. Government programs do come and go, and when the heat's off, their garbage resources reach normal levels once more. When they do, one section of the heap again explodes in spontaneous combustion, emitting thick smoke which, in the 1970s, caught the eye of a Norwegian social worker who labeled the place "Smokey Mountain."

ADAPTING TO OTHER GROUPS

The type and distribution of basic resources comprise only one aspect of the environment. Human populations make up another and equally important aspect of the same environment. To survive in one's niche, every society must adjust to the presence of activities of neighboring peoples, just as it must adapt to the type, distribution and fluctuation of local resources. Thus, when different groups occupy different niches in the same environment, or when they occupy different environments in the same region, they devise ways to come to terms with one another. If, however, they find themselves in conflict with other groups, some resolution to the conflict is made.

For Smokey Mountain residents, adaptation to other groups means adjusting to three main entities: government and private agencies that provide welfare services to the residents, political authorities that seek their relocation elsewhere, and the larger community that generally resent their presence. They have been accommodating with welfare agencies, initially acquiescent and later confrontational with political

authorities, and protective of their community when dealing with members of the larger society.

A number of public and private organizations, as mentioned earlier, provide a variety of social services to the Smokey Mountain people. These services, in fact, comprise part of the resources which Smokey Mountain residents use to survive in their environment. To critics, many of these services constitute dole-outs. They foster a sense of dependency, and offer only short-term relief to the poverty problem. To many residents, however, these services are generally welcome. They increase their chances for survival and provide them with additional resources in an environment where the carrying capacity has been stretched almost to the limit.

Community participation in planning Smokey Mountain's future is another instance of accommodation between residents and welfare agencies. In the late 1980s, the Technical Committee on the Program for Scavengers, a unit of the Presidential Task Force on Solid Waste Management, commissioned the National Housing Authority (NHA) to prepare an "integrated socioeconomic service package to uplift the quality of life of scavengers who will be affected by the implementation of the Metro Manila Solid Waste Management Plan." This "service package," already submitted to the Presidential Task Force, calls for the levelling of the Smokey Mountain area to "pave the way for a garbage- and pollution-free community where its residents will be offered housing and alternative livelihood projects and other social service amenities such as education, health and others."²⁰ To prepare this proposal, the NHA invited selected officers of the Katipunan Para sa Kaunlaran ng Smokey Mountain to join planning seminars and to represent the community in a committee to design a site and services plan for Smokey Mountain. The representatives report that no action has been taken on the proposed package since its submission to the Presidential Task Force. Nevertheless, they did welcome the opportunity to participate in the discussions.²¹

Smokey Mountain residents have displayed two contrasting stances towards political authorities, in particular towards government bodies or their agents that seriously disrupt their everyday routines. The stance was initially acquiescent, later confrontational. Two key events illustrate this attitude:

20. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 10 September 1990, pp. 1ff. A court injunction filed by the Governor of Rizal to halt the operation of the landfill site in San Mateo was denied. See *The Daily Globe*, 5 October 1990, p. 1.

21. For a recent assessment of community participation efforts in urban housing, see Timoteo Butalid, "Squatter Participation and Urban Development: The Manila Experience," *Solidarity* 121 (January-March 1989): 166-73.

Residents of Smokey Mountain were relatively acquiescent when political authorities ordered them to relocate to Bulihan in 1983. They were equally acquiescent years back, in the early 1970s, when the brother of the then Armed Forces Chief of Staff lorded over the two barangays and took control of the scavenging trade. With the help of armed soldiers posted in different parts of the community, this man forced residents to sell their collected trash to him at a much lower price. The residents resigned themselves to the situation. They had no alternative job or home, and had no power to expel the general's brother from the community. After martial law was declared in 1972, however, a new chief of staff was appointed. The brother lost his clout and withdrew from the scene. The scavengers sighed in relief and returned to their usual work routines.

Smokey Mountain residents did not acquiesce, however, when a second effort was made to relocate them. This time around, they confronted authorities and succeeded in thwarting the relocation attempt.

In late 1987, another garbage crisis renewed attention on slum and squatter areas in the city's dumpsites. According to an Asian Development Bank study, of some 4,000 tons of garbage disposed daily in Metro Manila, only 3,400 tons are collected, leaving the rest to clog sewers, cause floods and despoil the urban landscape.²² To rid the city of these hazardous heaps, a Presidential Task Force was created "to implement the removal of dumpsites in Metro Manila," and to oversee "the creation of livelihood programs for scavengers."²³ A newspaper column further reported that Smokey Mountain would also be levelled, and its residents relocated to Carmona, Cavite.²⁴ The garbage in Smokey Mountain would then be used as landfill for the development of Engineering Island in Bataan, or transported elsewhere for incineration.

As in 1983, Smokey Mountain was again threatened by demolition and relocation. This time, the residents were prepared. The Katipunan mobilized the residents for mass action reminiscent of the people power campaign which unseated Ferdinand Marcos from the presidency the year before. Offended that the Metro Manila Governor did not consult them about the relocation plans, the Katipunan's

22. These figures were reported in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 3 September 1990, pp. 1ff.

23. *Malaya*, 29 January 1988, p. 6. For a reporting on the Metro Manila Authority's campaign, see *The Daily Globe*, 6 and 29 September 1990; and the *Philippine Standard*, 6 September 1990, p. 6.

24. *Malaya*, 9 January 1988, p. 6. Also see *Malaya*, 29 January 1988, p. 6, and *Manila Bulletin*, 9 December 1988, p. 62.

Executive Director stated that the march to Malacañang was a strategy to halt relocation. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported the event:

Thousands of residents of Smokey Mountain in Tondo marched to Malacañang to protest plans by the Metro Manila Commission to relocate them to Carmona, Cavite . . . as part of the (Commission's) Comprehensive Solid Waste Management Program . . . At the Smokey Mountain Community Center, residents assailed the MMC's lack of concern for their welfare and vowed to "defend to the death" their right to reside in the area. (The residents also) bewailed the lack of provisions for livelihood and housing at the new site, which were the failure of previous plans to relocate them.²⁵

The mass action of 31 January succeeded. Plans for demolition and relocation were stopped. The Presidential Management Staff went on to say that the plan did not call for forced relocation but would only involve those interested in participating in the program. The clarification came too late. The damage was done and Smokey Mountain residents, more confident in their ability to neutralize efforts at ejection, once more resumed their normal routines.

There is an ambiguous relationship, Pinches writes, between the Philippine state and the squatters of Manila because it is entangled in the double identity of the urban poor—on one hand, they are squatters and on the other, they are workers.²⁶ A similar ambiguity applies in the relationship between Smokey Mountain people and the larger community—on one hand, they are squatters and on the other, they are scavengers. Seen as squatters, Smokey Mountain residents are targets for ejection. There is after all, as Makil observes, a constitutional basis for antisquatting laws.²⁷ Some also perceive them as a nuisance, as harbingers of lower land values or as potential looters. Others view them as charity cases, eyesores, and parasites and their community as a breeding ground for thugs, addicts and disease.

But this group of squatters are also scavengers, and whatever set of stereotypes that label may connote, the fact remains that these scavengers—the "self-employed proletariat," in Birkbeck's term—help to sustain the very economy that marginalized them in the first place.²⁸

25. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 4 February 1988, p. 14. The same event was cited in *The Manila Chronicle*, 14 March 1988, p. 3.

26. Michael D. Pinches, "Anak Pawis/Children of Sweat: Class and Community in a Manila Shanty Town" (Ph.D. diss., Monash University, 1984), pp. 389–90.

27. Perla Q. Makil, "Squatting in Metro Manila, 1982," paper read at the Breakfast Dialogue of the Bishops-Businessmen's Conference, Makati Sports Club, 27 August 1892.

28. Chris Birkbeck, "Self-employed Proletarians in an Informal Factory: The Case of Cali's Garbage Dump," *World Development* 8 (1978): 1173–85.

Paper mills and bottling firms as well as other companies which rely on scrap metal, plastic sheets, rubber and cloth rely on scavengers to procure the raw materials for manufacturing products which the larger society eventually uses.²⁹ Scavengers are also active participants in recycling garbage material, in aiding urban waste management programs, and in helping to unclog street trash—in short, in performing the kind of “dirty work” essential to the maintenance of cities. Beyond scavenging, Smokey Mountain people are also the kind of consumers whose buying habits, usually in small quantities, help business firms extract more profits.³⁰ These advantages accrue to capital at little or no cost to the economy. Thus, while the larger society wants squatters ejected, it cannot do so without replacing, at high cost, the services which scavengers and other poor workers render for a pittance. Scavengers may appear self-employed or seem marginal to the urban economy, but they are part of a large waste recycling industry, an industrial organization that stretches vertically from salaried and waged employees to casual laborers like them whose own poverty stems from the fact that they work for the organization but are not part of it.

Smokey Mountain people may or may not recognize this ambiguous relationship. Many realize, however, that the larger society holds numerous misconceptions about them, and that the media is partly to blame for reinforcing these misconceptions. For this reason, they are protective about their community, quick to correct false impressions.³¹ They are miffed, for example, at magazine photos depicting poor people celebrating Christmas in tattered clothes, claiming that photos of this sort misrepresent reality. They are critical of a local film, released in the late 1980s and partly shot in Smokey Mountain, whose title made them appear like aliens in their native country, and whose characters were atypical of the area. They are also incensed at references to their community as a hide-out for escaped convicts and

29. More detailed treatments of the goods scavengers pick and the amounts they obtain for these goods appear in William J. Keyes, “The Struggle for Urban Survival,” in *The Philippine Poor I: Two Papers*, ed. Marie S. Fernandez (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, 1980); and Joseph Fernandez and Amalia de la Torre, “The Scavengers of Cebu City,” in *Faces of Poverty in the Visayas*, ed. Ricardo G. Abad et al. (Quezon City: Visayas Research Consortium, Philippine Social Science Council, 1984), pp. 139–62.

30. Anna Marie A. Karaos, “Manila’s Urban Poor: Dimensions of Marginality and Power,” *Pulso* 1: 3 (1985): 241–52. Also see Leopoldo Bartolome, “Forced Resettlement and the Survival Systems of the Urban Poor,” *Ethnology* 23 (1984): 177–91.

31. The sense of community protectiveness among squatter residents have been noted in earlier studies. See, for example, Aprodicio A. Laquian, “The Political Integration of Urban Squatters and Slum Dwellers in the Philippines,” 1970. (Typescript.)

communist rebels, pointing out that crime in the community is almost non-existent and that only outsiders cause trouble in the area. But they are proud that despite their proximity to garbage heaps, they do not suffer from skin diseases. Those with skin problems, they claim, have genetic disorders ("nasa lahi nila"). These postures indicate a sense of community pride, and as their mass action against the Carmona relocation demonstrates, a sense of community solidarity as well.

CONCLUSION

The most pressing concern of Smokey Mountain residents is the burden of tenurial insecurity. It is the same one echoed by Metro Manila's urban poor, a group scattered in 415 depressed areas or squatter colonies, and comprising 44 percent of the metropolitan population.³² Unless issues regarding their rights to ownership of the land, by lease or donation, are settled, Smokey Mountain will always be threatened with ejection and relocation. Given high land values, however, the government will be hardpressed to relinquish ownership of the land. The best it can do, given existing antisquatting laws, is to rehabilitate sites for poor people. In this regard, the NHA service package is on the right track, but its silence on the tenurial issue is revealing to Smokey Mountain residents. Furthermore, NHA's inability to implement the package owing to a shortage of funds will tax the Smokey Mountain environment even more and prolong the agony of tenurial insecurity.

Given this burden, residents would place the scavenging trade as second priority in their list of concerns. They were not visibly upset when the dumpsite was officially closed last September 1990. They knew they could adjust to this change by working in alternative dumpsites. In contrast, they rallied against the proposed relocation to Carmona. The message is clear. Between rights to land and rights to garbage, residents are more willing at this point to let the garbage go and leave their homes intact. But note that in 1983, these residents would have probably stayed in Bulihan had job and income opportunities there been adequate. Thus, when tenurial security is assured, work opportunities take precedence in the list of concerns. It takes the two to tango, and when one is missing—or worse, both—the Smokey Mountain environment collapses at the cost of great human suffering.

32. Figures are from Diogenes S. Osabel, "Urban Land Reform and Housing," *Solidarity* 121 (January–March 1989): 166.

The present environment remains a precarious arrangement. The official closure of the dumpsite, the overcrowding of people and structures in the area, the insecurity of tenure as well as the inertia in effecting new housing arrangements and appropriate economic measures threaten the long-term survival of the Smokey Mountain community. During the past four decades, residents have learned to accommodate to these environmental pressures, even to the point of confronting political authorities who have a legal basis to eject them from the land. How long they can do so depends on how effective they can adapt to future changes in their environment. The answer may lie in an ability to strengthen their own grassroot forces, use them to create a viable community, and draw on its power to win demands from the state or other agencies entrusted with a legal or moral obligation to assist them.

There is more at stake than home and work in the residents' vehemence against relocation. Over the years, the people have built common concerns. They endured the dictatorship of a political crony over their scavenging trade, survived the trek to Bulihan, formed community organizations, resolved and continue to resolve a great deal of in-fighting among themselves, set up workable rules on the use of scarce resources, made themselves a national symbol of sorts, and mobilized themselves against the Carmona relocation plan. The act of relocation, then, does not only sever the bond between person and home, but the bond among members who have learned to fashion a niche from the ashes of Metro Manila trash. To capital, i.e. to the prevailing economic system, these bonds are useful. They help sustain a pool of accessible and inexpensive labor to do the system's dirty work and provide the raw materials for industry—which keeps them poverty stricken and highly constrained in income generation by their dependent and subordinate relationship to industry. To the residents, however, Smokey Mountain has become an arena where they can also assert themselves and maintain their dignity as persons, develop a sense of solidarity, and take a respite from the slings and arrows of social scorn. Smokey Mountain is the source of their salvation, but considering the persistence of uneven development and soaring land values, the roots of their tragedy as well.