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Southern Alta (Kabulowan) (Philippines) – Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Kabulowan (Southern Alta)
Language Family:	Meso-Cordilleran subgroup of Northern Luzon Family, Malayo-Polynesian, Austronesian
ISO 639-3 Code:	agy
Glottolog Code:	sout2905
Population:	~400-500
Location:	15.0149° N, 121.1540° E; 15.3189° N, 121.1857° E; 15.3010° N, 121.1443° E
Vitality rating:	EGIDS 6b* (Threatened)

Summary

Southern Alta people are hunter-gatherers living along the tributaries of rivers in the Sierra Madre mountains in the northern Philippines. Southern Alta (agy), locally known as *Kabulowan*, is a Philippine Negrito language, and a coordinate branch of Meso-Cordilleran subgroup of the Northern Luzon family. Dialectal variations are present in different communities and the speakers are multilingual. The language vitality rating using the EGIDS scale is 6b ‘threatened’. The elders have considerable knowledge of their language, beliefs, customs, and traditions. Inter-marriage, illegal trading, changes in socio-cultural lifestyle, religious orientation, other forms of political and cultural repression, and the use of Tagalog have been accelerating language attrition. No written history has been recorded although digitized religious commentaries are available. Because of the fast rate of language attrition, the production of audio and/or video documentation for further linguistic analysis and archiving is a high priority.

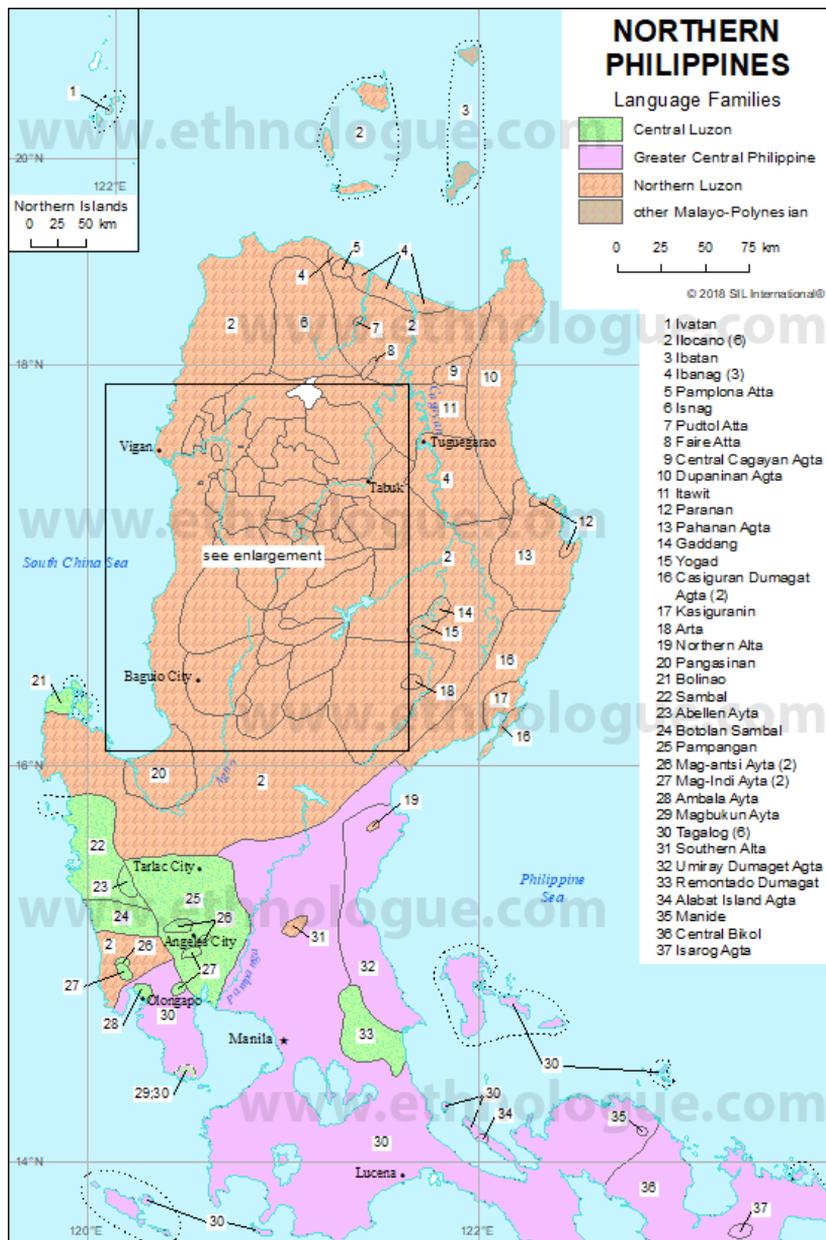


Figure 1: Northern Philippine languages

1. Overview

The Philippines is a multilingual country with 184 living languages (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2020), which can be categorized as Negrito and non-Negrito types. Around 30 languages are spoken by Philippine Negritos, who may have given up their original languages and adopted those of their Austronesian neighbors at some time. Note that differing histories of the medial consonant *R account for variations in the names of groups: Arta, Ayta, Alta, and Atta meaning ‘person’ (from Proto Malayo-Polynesian *ʔa(R)ta ‘(Negrito) person’).

Southern Alta people are hunter-gatherers living in small communities along the tributaries of rivers in the Sierra Madre mountains that cross the municipalities of Dona Remedios Trinidad in Bulacan, General Tinio and Gabaldon in Nueva Ecija, and San Luis in Aurora on Luzon Island in the northern Philippines (Figure 1). Southern Alta (number 31 on the map), together with its sister language, Northern Alta (number 19 on the map) is a member of the Meso-Cordilleran subgroup of the Northern Luzon family. Negrito people living in the area call themselves Dumagat.¹ According to Reid (2013: 335), the autonym consists of a frozen place marker *du*² and *Magat* (the name of a river in Luzon), meaning ‘(Negrito) people living along the Magat River’ and not ‘people who came from the sea’. This misanalysis appears in past literature because of incorrect parsing (e.g. *D<um>agat*).

Southern Alta people call their language *Kabulowan*, while current linguistic literature uses the name Southern Alta (Reid 1991). *Kabulowan* consists of the noun-forming circumfix *ka-* *-ʔan* and *Bulu* (or *Bulo*)³ meaning ‘people living along Bulu River’. My initial survey and fieldwork, in line with Reid (1991), noticed dialectal variations in different communities, so

¹ Dumagat or Dumaget is the autonym of Negritos living in the area. Some literature suggests that the people are autochthonous (Vanoverbergh 1937, as cited by Reid 1991). Almost all Dumagats in the area speak Umiray Dumaget (due), known locally as Bulos. It is the ‘common language’ of all Dumagat people. One reason is their close kinship with other Dumagat groups, and second, they trade areca nut and other products with one another. Other Dumagat ethnolinguistic groups are Bulos (due), Edimala (agn) and Remontado (agv).

² The form, according to Reid (2013: 334), is no longer a locative specifier in either Dupaningan or Umiray Dumaget but has been reconstructed to PMP and is maintained in Casiguran Agta as a specifier (determiner). The PMP locative **di* is found at Austronesian Comparative Dictionary entry number 173. <https://bit.ly/32tixxu>.

³ A river flowing in northern Bulacan (Reid 2013) or a river at the southern part of Diteke, Aurora. It is a toponym of an old burial site of Altan Negritos.

Kabuluwan, *Kabulowen*, or *Kabuloan* are alternative names, however *Ita*,⁴ which has appeared in other literature, is not. Non-Negrito groups call them Dumagat, or the derogatory terms *Baluga* or *Kabalat*.⁵ Kabulowans call non-Negrito peoples *Taw* or *Mommalyan*.

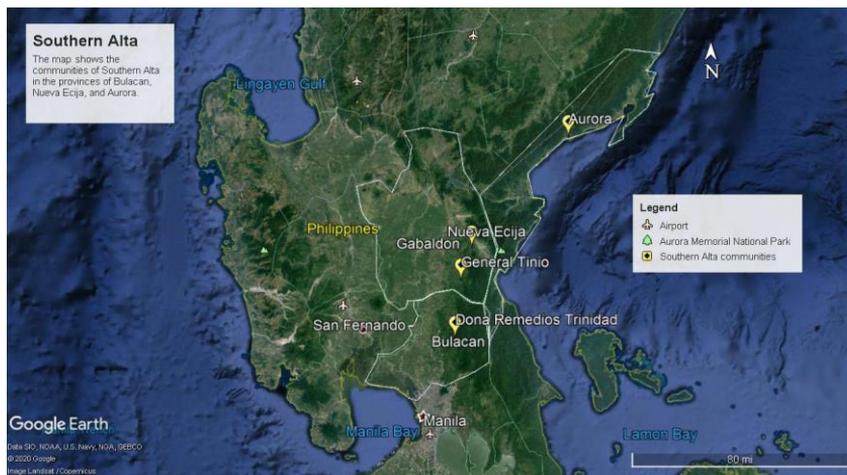


Figure 2: Southern Alta communities in the provinces of Bulacan, Nueva Ecija and Aurora. Full-scale version of this map on page 25.

Kabulowans live in the dense and forested regions of Sierra Madre crossing the boundaries of Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, and Aurora provinces (Figure 2). The four yellow markers show the locations of the communities, including the area in San Luis, Aurora where there is currently an insurgency. Oral histories narrate how they were driven to the forest to avoid hostility (e.g. land grabbing), and to escape headhunting practices by non-Negritos. The building of public elementary schools in the mountains helped bring Kabulowan families close to one another by building houses near the schools. But in spite of this, many families periodically move out from one community to another.

Most Kabulowans are short, sturdy, curly-haired, and dark-skinned while mestizos⁶ may show physical features that are different from Kabulowan or

⁴ The term is a shortened form of Aeta, and it refers to the Aeta language of Central Luzon. The Dumagat people do not want to be called *Ita* or *Aeta*. Although Aeta and Dumagat mean '(Negrito) person', each group has distinct phenotypical features.

⁵ Some *Dumagat* people living in Bulacan find this term offensive.

⁶ The term refers to offspring of intermarriages between a Dumagat and a non-Negrito, or a Dumagat and a Negrito (e.g. Aeta).

Dumagat people. They use various hunting and fishing equipment (e.g. poisoned arrows, modified guns, indigenous traps), and have considerable knowledge in gathering or harvesting forest products (e.g. rattan, honey, root crops). They occasionally grow food⁷ or do gold panning in rivers, and regularly exchange forest products for other basic commodities (e.g. rice, coffee, sugar, clothes, medicine, etc.) that are not available in the mountains. Many are involved in charcoal making, slash-and-burn agriculture, and illegal trading, because of the limited opportunities for making a living and gaining access to public services (e.g. education, health).

Kabulowans are multilingual. Some can also speak Bulos (Umiray Dumaget), Edimala (Northern Alta), and Tagalog dialects of Bulacan and Nueva Ecija. The population is approximately 400 (Headland 2010), and the language vitality rating using the EGIDS scale is 6b ‘threatened’, meaning that younger generations do not learn and use the language at home and at school (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2020). In a separate study, a 2016 language survey concluded that only 14 families (56 speakers) or 60% of the 22 Kabulowan families use the language at home while eight families or 40% speak either Bulos or Tagalog⁸ (Abreu 2019).

Kabulowans believe in a single Supreme Being. Although many have converted to various Christian denominations, the stories about creation, prayers, and beliefs always refer to *Makedepat*⁹ as their creator, provider of food and abode, and life-giver. They believe in a natural cycle of living things and of human life (e.g. birth, adulthood, marriage, old age and death) on earth. In the past, Kabulowans would only relocate their settlements in search for good vegetation, and return once the forest has regrown. They do not gather more than they can consume, or store food in times of storm or drought, or practice private ownership (e.g. land). Thus, non-Negritos misjudged them as indolent, carefree, and illiterate. But all of these habits point to their reliance to *Makedepat*, the one who they believe has given them abundant vegetation in Sierra Madre.

They have considerable knowledge of their language, customs and traditions, courtship and marriage, rites, flora and fauna, indigenous medicine, means of livelihood, local myths, and oral history. Many Kabulowans have departed from old practices like *subkal*, the traditional method of healing, and

⁷ Like fruit trees, vegetables, root crops, and upland rice

⁸ The survey was done in a Kabulowan community in Sitio Bato, Baranggay Sapang Bulac, Dona Remedios Trinidad, Bulacan in 2016.

⁹ *Makedepat* is the Kabulowan term for ‘god’. It consists of the verbal morpheme *maki-*, indicating an action performed with another person or other people, and *depat*, a possible borrowed word from Tagalog *dapat* meaning ‘proper’ or ‘necessary’. *Makedepat* could mean the ‘proper ways in dealing with people’.

playing traditional games (e.g. *bulanbulan*, *tandustandusan*). These, and many more traditional practices are no longer of interest to the younger generation. The factors that are accelerating language attrition are intermarriage, illegal trading¹⁰, changes in socio-cultural lifestyle¹¹, religious conversion, other forms of political and cultural repression, and the use of Tagalog as a status language.

No written history has been recorded although religious commentaries and a wordlist of 350 items were created by New Tribes Missionaries¹² between 1970-1990s; these were later digitized at SIL-Philippines. Sermons of evangelized speakers are available online at Global Recordings Net (2020). Our highest priority is the production of standard audio and/or video documentation with linguistic annotation for further linguistic analysis and archiving.

2. Current research

I have produced a grammatical sketch of the language (phonology, morphology, morphosyntax and semantics), and accounts of oral literature, traditional games, culture and oral history between 2014 and 2018. I submitted these as my PhD requirement at De La Salle University. At present, I am conducting dialectology, genealogy, and onomastic studies of the language. DepEd and SIL published a primer in 2018. Reid (1991) provides basic information on the genetic relationship of Kabulowan with Edimala and other surrounding languages. Other studies on Kabulowan have appeared in various publications of Reid (1994, 2006, 2007, 2013), Himes (2005), Liao (2008), and Headland (2010).

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¹⁰ Illegal trading involves cutting of trees for charcoal, illegal logging, and poaching (selling endangered animals).

¹¹ The changes involve the avoidance of traditional Negrito clothing, mimicking everything they see or hear in social media, and the abandonment of some cultural practices because of their present religious orientation.

¹² He was only identified as Wesley Petro; he passed his evangelization work to his son, David Petro. The commentaries are available from SIL-Philippines.

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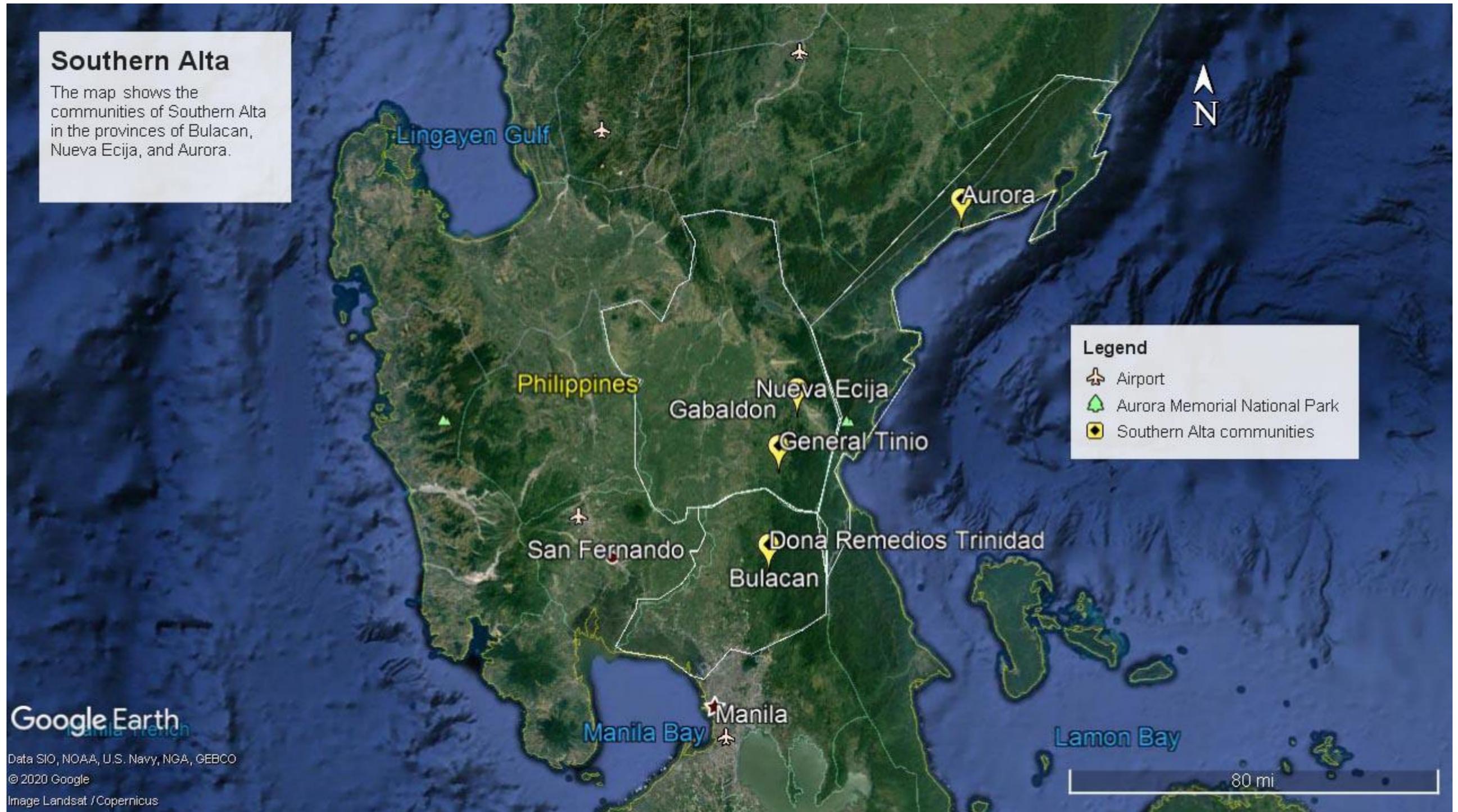


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