

Brigida Silva's story of

Etelvina



My mother's name is Etelvina Lopes. She was born in Sub-district Quelicai, District Baucau, on June 8th, 1933.

My mother was the first baby of the family, born at the foot of Matebian Mountain, the second tallest mountain in Timor. Etelvina's great grandfather was the Chief of Lacoliho Village in Quelicai. His eldest son replaced him after his death. The second, Etelvina's grandfather, moved to Baguia to be the Chief of Ossuna Village, following the Rota, a traditional ruling tool.

Thus, Etelvina grew-up in Baguia.

When she was just a year old, my mother's father died. As the marriage had involved the exchange of a dowry, according to traditional requirements, my grandmother could not leave her husband's family, so she married her youngest brother-in-law. From that marriage, my mother has two half siblings, a brother and a sister. After they were born, Etelvina's step-father started to have affairs and soon brought a new young wife to stay with his family.

Polygamy was common for men in the villages in those days. Etelvina's mother was also a second wife. Her father had married her mother because his first wife could not have kids.

So, Etelvina was raised by her stepmother.

She enjoyed her childhood but did not have a chance to go to school as it was not yet common in her village. Even so, my mother made great efforts to learn how to sew, cook and weave our traditional clothes. Many young village ladies stayed at our house to learn sewing, cooking and weaving from my mother.

Etelvina was only nine when her family accepted a dowry from the family of a young man from Baguia. At the same time, in the Uato-Carbau Sub-district, another boy's family was trying to marry their eldest son, Abilio. When Abilio's family learned that Etelvina had been engaged to the boy from Baguia, they offered a much higher dowry to have Etelvina marry their son. This dowry involved 30 buffalos, 10 horses, 20 Surik Makassar (a typical Timorese sword) and 5 belak (pieces of gold or silver that are given to a bride's parents as part of Timorese culture.) The arrangements were quickly changed.

In 1944, Etelvina was eleven. She was taken to Abilio's family's Umalulik in Uato-Carbau. There, she waited to meet her groom for the first time. When she was introduced to Abilio, she obediently sat next to him. From that moment on, she officially became his wife. Following the tradition, Etelvina's family left a young lady, Isabel, to take care of her, and to help her in her daily duties. The next day, Etelvina's family went back to Baguia, leaving her with her new family.

During the 2nd World War, Japanese soldiers in Uato-Lari, Uato-Carbau and Baguia forced local people to build roads and punished anyone who did not follow their rules. After only two weeks of marriage, they called my father, Abilio, to go to work for them.

Etelvina had quickly adjusted to her strange new family and friends. She understood and attended to the needs of her mother-in-law, who taught her how to be a good, obedient wife and daughter-in-law. After a month, however, Etelvina learned that her own mother was very sick. Unable to speak to Abilio, she requested permission from her mother-in-law to leave and care for her.

When my father, Abilio returned, he was told a lie — that Etelvina had gotten engaged to another man. My father believed the rumor, so he was furious, but he also knew that the dowry would be gone if he

simply forgot her. He went to Baguia, where he found Etelvina at her family's farm. At first, he refused to receive my mother's greetings, which made her afraid to approach him again. But my grandmother reminded her that she was married and needed to obey and serve her husband.

My father soon realized that my grandmother was sick, and therefore allowed my mother to stay for a few more weeks to take care of her. When grandmother got better, Etelvina went back to Uato-Carbau leaving Isabel to take care of her mother.

After that, Etelvina did not see Baguia again even after her mom passed away.

After the war was over, in 1947, my parents were formally married in our very modest Catholic Church in Uato-Carbau.

A year later, my mother suffered a devastating miscarriage.

In 1949, Etelvina gave birth to Joaninha, but her happiness lasted only a few months. My sister passed away after having high fever. My mother was very sad, but after two years, my sister Jacinta was born in, 1951. In 1953, my mother gave birth to Domingos. This made my parents very happy and proud, as, culturally, it was very important to have a son in the family.

In 1955, my brother Afonso was born. Sadly, he too passed away before he was one due to a severe cough and fever. Then my brother, Francisco, myself and my sisters, Nina and Tina, were born.

There were six children in all, and all of us are very thankful to her for raising us, and for educating us so that we are able to be as we are now.

My mother paid attention to the little things in our life. She always tried to make our birthdays special every year. She also sewed our clothing herself, including shirts for my father and my two brothers. Our house in Uato-Carbau was always crowded, because other parents wanted their kids to learn sewing, embroidery and cooking from my mother. My mother always reminded us of the importance of education. She did not want us to follow her path. My parents never differentiated between their sons and daughters. They sent all of us to elementary school in Ossu. My eldest sister and I went to the nun's boarding school and my brothers went to a male boarding school. My mother was very supportive of us girls. Often, during my father's absences, she reminded us to study hard as she believed that only with good educations could our lives get better.

When the Civil War started on August 11, 1975, the four older kids were all in Dili, studying at junior high and high school. My mother was very worried about the situation, especially because my eldest brother was a military member at that time. She was very happy on December 8th, when we all returned home to Uato-Carbau.

Throughout the Civil War, we stayed together. We had enough food, even a wide variety of meat, but my father was scared, so he kept preserving food. As far as my mother was concerned, the most important thing was having her family together. Nothing else mattered. "That year," my mother said, a few years before she passed away, "From December, 1975 to December, 1976 was the best in my life."

By early 1977, the Indonesian army had arrived in Uato-Carbau. We evacuated to the mountains for a few months, then, finally, surrendered in April. We returned to our house, but it was empty. Nothing remained inside. We didn't stay there. Instead, my father built a temporary house.

Still, we had a very hard time. My mother, instead of regretting our condition, taught her girls to bake bread and cookies, which we sold to the Indonesian military.

It went well. A lot of military people liked our cookies. We had a lot of visitors and, for sure, we made some money to save for our needs.

My mother showed us what full respect and great obedience to a husband means. One time, Etelvina could not stop my dad from going out with a friend. After he was gone, she told me that they might be out seeing ladies. She was jealous, and tried to hide it, but I could feel the pain in her voice.

She never expressed her feelings for him, love had grown between them during the years. Things were not always perfectly happy. My mother sought protection to her family after the birth of my two eldest siblings. Unfortunately she was rejected, as the dowry was completed. Etelvina then accepted that marrying my father was her destiny. My mother gradually gained respect and love as her kids grew-up. When they moved to Dili, they already had a very special relationship. They were always together. They never had big arguments. Seems like their forced marriage was turning to be a happy one.

My parents were staying at my brother's house when death took them apart.

In 1997, a malicious thyroid had spread over her body. It damaged her heart and, unavoidably, we had to let her go in peace, back to our Creator on the 19th of March.

It was very sudden.

Many of the people she had befriended in her lifetime came to visit her body. Some even accompanied her all the way back to her Sub-district. It was a devastating time in my life. I lost the person that had suffered most for me and my siblings. She gave of herself for our sake and yet, I wondered, what had we done in return? What had I done?

I will never forget the deal my mother made with herself not to eat any coconuts in Dili. In Uato-Carbau, there were so many coconuts she could just pick and eat them. In Dili, she had to spend money to eat a coconut, and she didn't like it.

My mother had a big heart, but she was also very practical. She was a beautiful example of the joy of womanhood and of serving others with a generous heart. She was always respectful and always had time and attention for those in need.

She made friends with everyone. When I was little, there was a traditional market every Sunday after prayer. My mother would always prepare a meal that was more than what her family needed. Then she sat in front of our house, waiting for people to return from market. She would invite them in and offer them lunch or cups of coffee or tea. If they weren't hungry or thirsty, she would sit and chew a bittle-nut with them.

Mother loved her family. This was clearly reflected in the way she took care of all of us, especially her grandchildren. She did all the household chores in my brother's house. Even after a lifetime's hard, heavy work, there was always a smile on her face.

Etelvina was and still is my inspiration in life. I remember her many thoughtful words on the experiences she had. I am now a mother and a grandmother too and I'll try to pass them on to my kids and their kids in the future.

I hope I carry my mother's living experience with me.

Etelvina Lopes was born on June 8, 1933. She has been an amazing mother with so much caring and love. May God bless her soul and may she rest in peace. Amen.