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INTERSECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTALISM: Toward an Indigenous Peoples-Inspired Planetary Ethics

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Abstract: "Indigenous Peoples" (IPs) are specifically mentioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The SDGs advocate the empowerment, education, and engagement of IPs in the agenda's implementation, one of which is protecting the planet's natural resources and re-establishing a stable climate for next generations. UN Indicators suggest that IPs' experiences and rights are unique. IPs, however, criticize these indicators as unreflective of 'Indigenous definitions of well-being'. Intersectional environmentalists assert the same that various groups relate to the planet differently. We look at the IP agenda through the lens of intersectional environmentalism and its underlying ethics of trans-corporeality, broadly reflecting an ecofeminist disposition. With 85% of the Philippines' key biodiversity areas located within ancestral domains, the country's IPs' struggles exemplify a more balanced and sensitive approach to planetary sustainability, thus the need to support and expand IPs' planetary ethics.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Indigenous Peoples, Intersectional Environmentalism, Intersectionality, Philippines, Sustainability.

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1. Introduction

The term "Indigenous Peoples" (IPs) is mentioned six times in *Transforming our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,* specifically in sections on political declaration, zero hunger, education, and calls for participation. To implement this, the United Nations pushes for the IPs' empowerment, inclusive and quality education, and active involvement and engagement with the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A particular point of interest is the call for the IPs' engagement in planetary sustainability or the protection of our planet's natural resources that benefits present and future generations. The SDGs that seek to address this include Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6), Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12), Climate Action (SDG 13), Life Below Water (SDG 14), and Life on Land (SDG 15).

There are about 370 million members of IPs worldwide, serving as effective guardians of 80% of global biodiversity, including various plant and animal species (Campbell). Thus, sustainable development on a planetary scale is impossible without IPs. The *2030 Agenda* suggests that indicators for IPs' contribution to planetary sustainability are unique to their specific claims as a people, reflecting a broader geopolitical experience of centuries of domination, discrimination, and gross neglect (especially by Western powers). In particular, security of tenure rights to land (Indicator 1.4.2), small-scale farmers' income (Indicator 2.3.2), parity in access to education (Indicator 4.5.1), security in tenure rights to agricultural land (Indicator 5.a.1), and promotion and enforcement of non-discriminatory laws and policies (Indicators 10.3.1 and 16.b.1). While this is the case, IP groups have criticized the meaning of the SDGs and their indicators. For example, some have mentioned their struggle with seeing their welfare reflected in the *2030 Agenda*, specifically, the Indigenous definitions of well-being (DeLuca). Scholars have also identified several SDGs that do not resonate with existential and multispecies sensibilities, such as respect for human rights and the urgency of protecting the planet's resources. This calls for putting reasonable limits to modernization's goals, explicitly based on Western economic values, to ensure a stable future for both the

planet and its peoples through a holistic environmental, economic, and social framework (Griggs *et al*. 306).

In this light, we propose an intersectional approach to planetary sustainability and its attendant ethics of trans-corporeality. These are frameworks for understanding the IPs' struggles and resilience strategies in dealing with the inherent challenges of ecological preservation, characterized by cohabitation with material agencies that intersect in their dealings with nature, society, and life. This ecological framing resonates with current research trends critically interrogating the ongoing 'extraction, secularization and sciencization' (Stenzel 257) of indigenous, non-Western approaches to resilient, compassionate, and cohabitational forms of thinking within the global framework of modernization. Unfortunately, modernization ignores the IPs' leverage in planetary sustainability, such as their prolonged exposure to colonial history, extreme climate fluctuations, and experience of vulnerability. When the rest of the world seems to have abandoned them, IPs continue to challenge and endure systemic isolation, threats, and risks.

Consistent with their geopolitical situatedness, with 85% of the Philippines' key biodiversity areas located within ancestral domains, IPs in the Philippines have been recognized for their nature conservation and conflict prevention approaches (UNDP). Their ways of life, beliefs, and attitudes toward nature have led to forest preservation and responsible land cultivation. Their struggles have also led to minor breakthroughs, for instance, in reversing government modernization policies detrimental to natural habitats and ecological heritage (Krishna in Filho 33). However, in worst cases, Philippine IPs have been displaced and denied their land rights and have suffered continuous discrimination. Despite these setbacks, Philippine IPs (in solidarity with indigenous nations and communities around the world) continue to be a source of ecological wisdom and a planetary ethic once deemed marginal in the fight to avert environmental collapse, compared to governments' and corporations' political and economic clout, with their own agenda of ecological governance. In the era of rapid geological changes caused by industrial pressures on climate, traversing land, sea, air,

and polar glaciers, there is no reason why IPs should not occupy today's global environmental frontline.

This frontline approach toward the IPs' inclusion in SDGs reflects a critical stance against "unsustainable lifestyle and consumerist culture" (Pillai 189), inspired by the Western idea of progress responsible for the environmental hazards that expand the list of humanity's present climate risks. Wherever its geopolitical interests set foot, Western modernization has also fuelled the resurgence of regional violence and wars along the lines of race, religion, and ethnicity. IPs are often caught in belligerent crossfires, political and civil conflicts, forcing them to resettle and migrate to more precarious landscapes and habitats.

The IPs' inherent intersectional approach toward life, nature, and society explains their overall resilience in facing the vagaries of post-colonial policies affecting them, including the ever-present risk of natural disasters in the age of climate change. This alone provides the best planet-sensitive development goal to challenge the rampant course of Western modernization. (Due to centuries of Western domination, modernization has now encompassed Orientalist or Asiatic systems that aggressively reproduce the economic paradigm of nature conquest that the West first set about by colonizing lands and imposing economic imperialism). As we will elaborate on in the succeeding sections, a vital component of this intersectionality approach is the IPs' ethics of trans-corporeality described in Stacy Alaimo's eco-feminist theory.

2. Intersectional Environmentalism

Intersectional environmentalists and eco-feminists have long asserted that various individuals and groups relate to the planet differently. Those who are oppressed and discriminated against have unique experiences, and in turn, approaches to methods and applications in the environment should be intersectional (Kings 63). Analysing the planet's sustainability issues through the lens of intersectional environmentalism highlights the diverse relationships encompassing individual and group responses to climate realities. In the case of the IPs, we can understand, challenge, and renegotiate with systems and institutions

surrounding their experiences of nature and make sure that these are reflected in planetary goal-making and meaning construction.

A buzzword in present circles, *intersectionality* has been discussed by Kimberle Crenshaw as early as the 1980s. Drawing on the multidimensionality of her black experience, she claims that the intersectionality of race and sex play different roles in systems of discrimination (Crenshaw 140). Intersectionality suggests a framework of seeing lived experiences, particularly oppression, influenced by diverse intersecting factors such as class, sex, gender expression, race, and others. Before Crenshaw, bell hooks also talked about such multidimensionality. hooks proposed a new definition of feminism, one that does not simply fight for the equality of women and men (of the same class). Feminism must also fight to end sexist oppression and exploitation without neglecting other forms of systemic isolation and reductionism within interlocking webs of oppression, such as racism, classism, imperialism, and others (Biana 13).

Environmentalists have also looked at intersectionality as a framework for the analysis of planetary sustainability. Kings (63), for example, discussed how ecofeminism has always been intersectional in its approach but has only been recently explicit about its particular ecological resonance. Challenged by the ongoing plunder and destruction of nature, ecofeminism can now employ a suitable framework to look at "a different level of the continuum, illustrating the context-specific privilege or discrimination experienced by the individual" (Kings 65). This suggests that intersectionality offers a complete prism of relationality networks, structures, and agencies, as well as potential breakaways, lines of flight, gaps, and interruptions, consequent upon the ecological realities of the present.

In the 1980s, *environmental racism* was also coined to describe marginalized communities' vulnerability to ecological disasters. In the United States, poor and black communities, compared to privileged communities shielded from the environmental fallout, unevenly deal with problems of unmanaged trash, toxic waste, etc. (George). Indigenous communities face the same issues not only in the United States but in the Arctic, Panama, Brazil, and other regions as well. Through centuries of systemic colonial and post-colonial practices of exclusion and deprivation, these IP

communities have become less equipped to deal with the long-term consequences of multi-layered choices they did not make. In the face of present climate change, no less than these consequences prove the culmination of a structural causality that began with centuries of living under colonial and imperial rule that have exacted an enormous toll on nature.

Today, IPs suffer from state and private companies' exploitation of ancestral lands for commercial, residential, and agri-business interests. IPs' livelihoods are dependent on natural resources and environments located in vulnerable places where, for instance, massive mineral extraction activities operate, catering to 21st century tech-hungry humanity. These industrial exploitations of natural resources leave structural imprints that bring about a complex web of "inequality" (Kings 68). The most undeniable of these consequences, which are concentrated in remote geographies where IPs have lived for centuries, is the adverse effects of climate change on their ecological habitats, such as rising sea levels, lands turning into barren landscapes, and malnutrition. These further result in population displacement and forced migrations by climate refugees.

Intersectionality may provide a framework of critique in understanding climate change experienced by IPs, even as it "highlights new linkages and positions that can facilitate alliances between voices that are usually marginalized in the dominant climate agenda" (Kaijser and Kronsell 419). For example, a recent study by Sangha *et al.* (111) suggests mainstreaming the relationship between nature and indigenous peoples' well-being regarding policy decision-making through an IP-specific framework. The framework zeroes in on opportunities available in nature and people's capabilities, opportunities that, however, conflict with globalization's notion of development, compounded with existing power relations insensitive to IPs' plight.

3. Climate Agenda and Indigenous Peoples

IPs' struggles around the world are borne by the planetary systems of "[commodification] of indigeneity and naturalization of conquest" (Morgensen 276), large-scale corporate and state-endorsed implementation of global growth that goes back to centuries of colonial rule. IPs were not only the first victims of

colonial or imperial conquest, "integrating [them] into the world systems of capitalism and the nation-state" (Ahuja 250). Under the neoliberal dispensation, IPs continue to supply the ideological tapestry for modernization's *world-ing* paradigm based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, and labour expendability. This modernist form of *world-ing* steers global economic progress responsible for destroying natural environments and multispecies life. Fuelled by global consumerist culture, modernization alters the organic horizon of earthly life, not to mention its effects on atmospheric conditions, putting disadvantaged communities in climate change vulnerable geographies at an even greater risk.

IPs experience the full brunt of the neoliberal paradigm of economic progress premised on the assumption that nature is an open resource for unilateral discovery, conquest, and exploitation. This paradigm reflects the modernist view of the human subject as a disembodied agency, observing and manipulating an inert world, which contradicts extant indigenous epistemologies that look at nature as a material agency. As a material agency, nature possesses a "sentient and affective quality" (Million 107), including non-humans as "agential [beings] engaged in social relations that profoundly shape human lives" (Tallbear in Alaimo, *Exposed*, 52). For indigenous peoples, nature is a sensible non-human actant. It is not an inert substance to be measured, calculated, put to use, and disposed of without consequences on multispecies relations.

In contrast, modernization rests on the belief that nature could be broken down into discrete units to be managed and controlled. As much as nature is to be tamed and dominated, modernist development paradigms deem inhabitants of vulnerable geographies (rich in natural resources ready for exploitation and conquest) as benevolent objects of the Western humanization process requiring "control" of their "unruly potential" (Kirby 215). This is reminiscent of colonial era's subjugation of natives by genocide, forced and indentured labour, etc.

Indigenous peoples remain ostracized, their voices muted by the rational machine of progress organized around the most insidious form of Western blackmail called culture. Culture tends to exclude what is supposed to be primitive from civilized conditions of existence. It treats archaic epistemologies as a mere

"repository of opinions" that could be broken down into a "set of propositions" (Vivieros de Castro 25), depriving them of their original context. With regards to the violence of this conceptual reduction, Wittgenstein, for instance, is an ally in defending the tenacity of indigenous knowledge, arguing that modernity cannot treat IPs "as if [they] had a completely false (and even foolish) representation of nature's course" (Wittgenstein 194, Vivieros de Castro 25). Wittgenstein argues that "if they could put their knowledge of nature into writing, it wouldn't be so *fundamentally* different from our own ... only that their *magic* is different from ours" (194).

The blackmail of culture (what Viveiros de Castro calls an 'epistemic teratology') reducing indigenous knowledge to "error, illusion, madness, and ideology" (25) brushes aside the essential part of indigenous life, which is resilience. One defining ethos that marks this resilience is the IPs' deep respect for what Bruno Latour calls the 'metamorphic zone' between nature and society. This refers to an ethico-epistemic space that leaves room for careful decision-making, compared to the inability of the modern to close the gap between nature and society even by control and domination, which only leads to societal and political conflicts, arising from the conundrum that is the nature-society divide:

> What also accounts for our utter impotence when confronted with the ecological threat: either we agitate ourselves as traditional political agents longing for freedom – but such liberty has no connection with a world of matter – or we decide to submit to the realm of material necessity – but such a material world has nothing in it that looks even vaguely like the freedom or autonomy of olden times. Either the margins of actions have no consequence in the material world, or there is no more freedom left in the material world for engaging in it in any politically recognizable fashion (Latour 15).

In the heydays of colonialism, IPs learned survival capacities that only today have received broader recognition of their enduring forms. We can refer to IPs *intersectional epistemology*, which translates to today's need for mindfulness to "overlapping systems of domination," in essence, a model of analysing "how race, gender, class, and other structural hierarchies intersect in people's lived experiences" (Bauhardt in Alaimo, *Gender*, 226).

When it comes to their relation to nature, Stacy Alaimo, for instance, proposes the term *trans-corporeality* to portray the IPs' specific relation to material objects, agencies, and bodily natures "[inter-meshing] with the more-than-human world," which indicates "the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment" (Alaimo in Alaimo and Hekman, *Material Feminisms*, 2). Here we touch upon the significant correlation between intersectional and indigenous epistemologies, noted by Alaimo, underscoring the trans-corporeal nature of the body as the zone "in which social and material/geographic agencies intra-act" (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 63).

In this context, we can treat IPs as embodied bearers of social and geographic interaction between and among bodily natures and lands, including material interactions with non-humans, objects, landscapes, atmosphere, and aquatic agencies. These agential (human and non-human) entities serve as geographic archives, traces of systems of domination and violence done to peoples and above all, to 'matter,' that all of 'these,' including humans, are. These imprints leave traces in organic and material bodies that provide enduring resilience models, a key feature of indigenous epistemology casting a delicate balance between humans and non-human ecologies.

4. Philippine Indigenous Peoples

Around the world, IPs have been instrumental in recent environmental and climate advocacies claiming small victories in protecting planetary life from the effects of uncontrolled consumerism, dependence on fossil fuel, and mineral extraction harmful to biodiversity. The IPs' long history of resilience, characterized by deep ecological sensitivity, collaborative care, and co-belongingness with the natural environment, has provided models for environmental management and sustainable development initiatives by NGOs and local governments to minimize the effects of climate change and avert a massive ecological collapse.

IPs' knowledge and practices have been acknowledged as critical for nature conservation and conflict prevention (UNDP Ecosystems and Biodiversity). Philippine IPs' ways of life, beliefs,

and attitudes toward nature lay the foundations for natural forest preservation and responsible land cultivation. With the Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCAs), sacred spaces and ritual grounds in forest and other territories, landscapes, and seascapes, defined by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), are now *de facto* governed and protected by the leadership of IP groups in the country (UNDP Ecosystems and Biodiversity). This is being done with the support of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB), and the United Nations Development Programme-Global Environmental Finance (UNDP-GEF).

One of the laws enacted to support IP communities is the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System Act (ENIPAS) of 2018. With this law, guidelines on developing and protecting ancestral domains, housing, land use regulation, and community conservation plans have been designed to empower IPs (UNDP Ecosystems and Biodiversity). Such action points in due course have supposedly addressed 5 of the SDGs for Philippine IPs (SDG1 No poverty, SDG3 Good health and well-being, SDG13 Climate action, SDG15 Life on land, SDG17 Partnership for the goals). Despite these efforts and claims, however, Philippine IPs continuously suffer from discrimination. They are often displaced and denied their rights to ancestral domains.

Meanwhile, as insurgency still rages on in the countryside, actual cases of Philippine IPs caught in armed conflicts are expanding. The most recent one involves the Lumads in Mindanao trapped in the middle of armed clashes between government troops and insurgent combatants (Magallona). Similarly, modernization efforts that respond to the energy requirements of a burgeoning consumerist population, such as the urban need for steady water supply, tourism, and recreation facilities, threaten the Dumagats of the Quezon province to be displaced by the planned construction of Kaliwa Dam (Santos), and the Aetas in the northern and central region by the New Clark City (Subingsubing and Ramos). These are some of the worst cases of systematic deprivation of IPs through blatant disregard of land

and utility rights even as the state seizes them, citing the principle of eminent domain.

IPs mode of sustainable subsistence practices in terms of cohabitation with non-human ecologies tells us that modern progress, without regard for nature, will have dismal consequences. The first and last to be affected, however, are the IPs. Modernist progress has led to the erasure and the narrowing of survival opportunities for non-human creatures, animals, flora and fauna, and other ecosystems and habitats that provide a holistic ecology of spiritual life and material existence for IP communities. This is called development aggression that comes with governmental policies going back to the Philippines' colonial past. Colonialism has normalized national policies that lead to IPs economic, political, and cultural isolation resulting in systemic deprivation of essential services such as education, livelihood, transportation, health, and nutrition.

The IPs' isolation and denial of their fundamental human rights are premised on the modern environmental ethos dismissive of ecological issues. IPs are being dismissed as an integral part of the planetary struggle in combating climate change. In the case of the Philippine IPs, addressing their plight requires decolonizing practices instituted through educational parity, especially in the national curriculum, to represent their historical and cultural struggles. This can be further enabled by a comprehensive people's education about the effects of climate change and how IPs can provide resilience models amidst our ecological challenges, starting with the critical awareness of how modern epistemologies and consumer practices contribute to the present climate predicament. This way, indigenous epistemologies and cohabitational forms of existence will have better chances of being fully included in future climate policies to effectuate a reasonable alternative to the current paradigm of planetary growth.

5. Conclusion

Despite their limitations and predicament, however, IPs have gained small victories in getting the attention of world governments to recognize their fundamental claims to planetary futures that are at present troubled by political and ecological

threats, which are intersectional in scope. From the rise of populism, ethnocentrism, and cultural mainstreaming of gender disparity to climate change. In this light, the contributions of IPs, stretching from the Arctic to the South Pacific, to the current momentum of climate awareness, gender equity, and holistic ecology within often-contested global framing of sustainable development, cannot be ignored:

> The hallmark of [IPs] is the holistic way that the earth, animals, and nonhuman entities are accounted for in the governing formations of peoples. Governance and leadership stem from egalitarian kinship organizations that foreground responsibility and from reciprocal cooperation that values both women's and men's physical and spiritual work (Million in Alaimo, *Gender*, 100)

Indigenous epistemologies represent a united front against neoliberalism and its hyper-technical conception of nature as an exploitable resource, which is the opposite of the holistic conception of 'nature as home' that IPs, despite centuries of isolation and discrimination, choose to make their own. These values are what the world needs today to combat political and ecological risks that, if unchecked, will lead to irreversible consequences. When the level of existential threats that humanity confronts has reached a planetary scale, it is time for modern society to redefine its conception of what nature means, what people's lives amount to, in connection with the environment. These all play significant roles in the awareness that we are supposed to live in a parliament of planetary ecologies. This is the primary contribution of IPs around the world, a working intersectional democracy.

As in other parts of the world, Philippine IPs have, over time, secured small but significant breakthroughs in their fight for equal rights and opportunities, especially with the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) passed in 1997. The IPRA is one of the first few examples in the 20th century that marks a positive breakthrough for IPs' historical struggle for respect, recognition, and co-existence. The 1990s were the aggressive beginnings of globalization and liberalization. Undeterred by the pressures of the market economy and the anticipated social costs of liberalization, Philippine IPs won initial protective legislation that

they could depend on but not much of a comprehensive shield against the rapacious logic of the neoliberal economy. The legislation, however, proved the IPs' anticipatory capability, having endured a similar experience of systemic deprivation in colonial eras, whose markings are still evident today.

With climate change adding pressures on natural resource management, food supply, and conservation of forests and biodiversity, existing legislations are not enough to ease the IPs worries about the future. One particular case of IPs' continued vigilance is the bold and successful campaign of the Iklahan community, mountain-dwelling people in the central Philippines, threatened by displacement. Cognizant of present risks and challenges, the Iklahan society "fought for their rights and native lands through Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claims (CADC) and Certificate of Ancestral Domain Titles (CADT)" (Krishna in Filho, 33). More than this relative success, the Iklahans continued to pursue reforestation awareness. Examples like this resonate with today's sustainable development initiatives, though still shy of complete integration and implementation.

Nonetheless, these successes manifest IPs' collective strength and wisdom to transform governments, especially at the local level, from adversary to partner in fighting climate change, not without the active support of various organizations, NGOs, and civil society. After all, IPs have been forging long-term partnerships and alliances since the passage of the IPRA. This is proof of the Philippine IPs' awareness of the intersectional layers of struggles, critical engagement, and opposition to systemic deprivation and neglect.

Still, IP struggles in the Philippines need long-term support mechanisms to mainstream Indigenous Peoples-inspired planetary ethics, offering required structural modifications to existing planetary SDGs to ensure the welfare and well-being of IPs.

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