

From Kapre* to Ecological Conscience: Indigenous Beliefs and Practices and the Holistic Perspective of Environmental Ethics

JEANETTE L. YASOL-NAVAL**

The paper introduces the holistic perspective of environmental ethics as an approach to bio-diversity conservation. Environmental ethics pertains to the application of certain moral principles in dealing with the environment. The holistic approach presents a discourse that recognizes the intrinsic value of each member of the biotic community and the interconnection of all parts. The destruction and exploitation of one part affects the whole cycle of energy. Internalizing this interconnection enables us to accord respect to each part of the biotic community. The paper contends that our indigenous beliefs and practices manifest the holistic approach. In fact, indigenous beliefs warn of punishments if sites like sacred mountains or elements like enchanted trees considered as abodes of powerful spirits or deities are trampled upon or are not accorded proper respect. Like the holistic perspective, our indigenous beliefs and practices require certain behavior lest we suffer the consequences of our actions on our environment.

On April 22, 1970 millions of Americans gathered and expressed their concern about the environmental future of the planet. The call was loud enough for the rest of the world to hear and join them in their crusade. The day marked the initial celebration of the First Earth Day. Since then, concern for the environment has been universalized. This year the world is celebrating the 32nd Earth Day. However, this is only the 10th year for the Philippines to join since it only started celebrating Earth Day after the Rio de Janeiro Summit in 1992.

Philosophers have been trying to establish a 'new ethics' that will redirect human conduct towards nature. To some, ethics is to be concerned merely with what humans are disposed to be or do in relation to themselves, other humans or God. Lately however, a new perspective is gaining remarkable support – that for every ethics to be complete, it must include an ethics of the environment. This is in recognition of the fact that there are non-human entities in the environment which are in

*A hairy, giant supernatural being who inhabits enchanted trees (e.g. Balete) and often described as a tobacco-smoker.

** The author is a recipient of the Kasarinlan Writing Grant.

one way or another affected by, if not involved in, human actions. Hence, the coming into being or emergence of what we now call environmental ethics.

The paper aims to introduce environmental ethics, a relatively new perspective. It also promotes the holistic approach to biodiversity conservation. The approach does not alienate concern for the environment from issues concerning human ethics like economics of survival nor does it fall into the trap of promoting "ecological beauty without conscience". Recognizing the intrinsic value of the biodiversity will not create any injustice on the part of humans, it may even reinforce the biological fact of interconnection of all the parts of the biotic community. This study highlights the Filipino beliefs and practices which grant special value to the environment. Cultural ecology serves as a useful tool in viewing how indigenous beliefs are interconnected to the preservation of nature.

Why Environmental Ethics?

The trend that we have right now with respect to the ethics of the environment is a result of a relatively new era of moral inquiry called environmental ethics, the ethics that focuses on the "morality" of human actions as she relates with the environment. Environment here is taken to mean not only the physical environment like the rivers, the mountains and the lakes but also the living yet non-human parts like the flora and fauna.

The usual contention is that there cannot be any issue of ethics in cases which involve the environment because it is generally, not capable of understanding morality, what is good or bad or right or wrong. In other words, how can the scope of ethics or moral consideration be extended to the environment when the latter is not a moral agent and therefore not capable of understanding and participating in a reciprocal relationship which ethics entails? Apparently, supporters of environmental ethics argue that not only moral agents ought to be part of the moral community. In the first place, not all humans are moral agents, autonomous individuals capable of making moral decisions (e.g. infants, mentally deranged, comatose patients). Still we include them in the moral calculus. In this case we act on their behalf because we recognize that our actions affect (if not involve) them. We call them moral patients. So is the environment.¹

Environmental ethics, therefore, deals with the justification for applying certain moral principles to the environment. The term *applicability* must be emphasized for it must be clear that the moral principle would be a guide to be shared and recognized only by humans, by virtue of their higher consciousness, in their relationship with the environment and should not be taken as a principle to be recognized by both humans and the environment. Hence, there exists an environment which includes humans in its web of interdependence, much more an environment which humans need to live and exist, clearly implies that the moral decisions and actions of humans involve them. In which case, any moral principle ought to include them.

The Holistic Perspective

In his book, *A Sand County Almanac*, renowned environmentalist Aldo Leopold claims that,

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.²

Holistic ethic requires humans to start thinking of themselves as part of a wider community, the biotic community, which includes not only all living things but also members of the ecological system like water, soil and air. In this manner, humans would be able to realize that they do not have the dominion over the environment and the environment is not there only to serve the purpose of humans or to be exploited by humans.

It is to think of ourselves as members of a team, living and working harmoniously with our teammates. It also recognizes that the crucial moral question is not what benefits individual human beings or the human community as a whole, but what benefits the biotic community as a whole.³

One thing obviously notable in this view is that it is not anthropocentric. It focuses on what will be good for the whole biotic community and not on what is beneficial only to particular individuals or species. A biotic community is a vast collection of organisms with their own morally important interests. For example, preserving an endangered species may be necessary because species diversity is important for it contributes to ecological stability of a certain ecosystem.

A critic of the holistic ethic, Tom Regan, questioned this view in his book, *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*.⁴ He likened this perspective to fascism where the good of individuals is superseded by the good of the state. For example:

If saving endangered wild grasses entails destroying a city populated with people, and assuming that the city contributes less to the well-being of the biotic community than do the grasslands, then it is justifiable to destroy the city to preserve the grassland. This is still consistent with land ethic.

An interesting answer to the charge was provided by another environmentalist, J. Baird Callicott:

Land ethic need not replace our duties to our fellow humans but need only be joined to it. Far from calling for the destruction of humans to save the endangered species, it calls for the inclusion of the biotic community in our moral lives. Just as our recognition that we live in a global human community leads us to make some but not excessive sacrifice for people outside our own families, local communities and nations, so should our recognition that we live in a biotic community lead us to make but not excessive sacrifice to protect the environment.⁵

This view of Callicott is enlightening and may even further answer the common notion that the rise of environmental ethics is contrary to human ethics.

The Holistic Perspective Applied

It is a common knowledge that the Philippines has a rich natural resource. But how rich and blessed the country is in terms of biodiversity, and whether it still is, is a good area of inquiry. *Biodiversity* (biological diversity) refers to all species of plants, animals and microorganisms and the ecosystems and ecological processes of which they are part.⁶ According to the study conducted by Conservation International (CI), the "Philippines is a Biodiversity Superstar". It ranks 1st or 2nd worldwide in biodiversity per unit area. From the accounts of Lawrence Heaney and Jacinto Regalado Jr., "the country houses 510 unique species of land living mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians."⁷ The Philippines has a higher rate of biodiversity per unit area when compared with Brazil (known

as the storehouse of biological diversity) which has only 725 unique species but is 28 times larger in territorial area than the Philippines.

The same group, however, has described the present condition of the country's biodiversity as the "hottest of the 25 bio-diversity hotspots in the world". The recently released Red List of Threatened and Extinct Species by the Swiss-based International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) likewise states, "No country has its plant and animal life being destroyed faster than the Philippines".⁸

The deteriorating environmental condition of the country has awakened some to become environmental warriors. There were those who responded by simply celebrating Earth Days and by forming Green Coalitions. Many were just caught in the "environmental fad" while others remained apathetic. The majority, however, still embrace the anthropocentric perspective — a philosophy of approaching biodiversity only in terms of how it will be beneficial and useful to them. Worse is the human attitude of alienating herself from the rest of the environment, as if environmental destruction is not human destruction or environmental issues are not human issues!

Lack of environmental concern happens because there is no strong environmental ethics or philosophy that can mold the kind of respect to the environment, particularly the biodiversity. And for as long as the proper perspective is not understood and realized, there can be no genuine environmental movement. The current crisis therefore on the loss of Philippine biodiversity ought to be addressed using the holistic perspective. There is a need to understand perfectly that human moral relation with the natural world is a *relationship that is not only a biological but a cultural and sociological reality as well*. That humans are part of the intricate web of life in the biotic community, they are interdependent and co-exist with the rest of nature.

Each organic part of the country's biodiversity has a value of its own and at the same time has a value in maintaining what will be good for the whole community including humans. The loss of Philippine forests for example, from the 70 percent total land area which used to be covered in the 1900s to the 22.2 percent which has remained at the turn of the century ought not to be seen merely as a loss of huge trees and vast vegetation but must also be viewed as a complex biodiversity problem

considering both the micro and macro environment related to it. The micro environment which include all the wild animals inhabiting them, from the critically endangered Mt. Isarog Striped Cat (*Chrotomys gonzalesi*) and the Visayan Wartz Pig (*Sus cebifrons*); to the endangered Calamian Deer (*Axis calamianensis*) and the Dinagat Island Cloud Rat (*Crateromys australis*); to the vulnerable Dugong (*Dugong dugon*), Flying Lemur (*Cynocephalus vulans*), Golden-capped Fruit Bat (*Acerondon Jubatus*) and Palawan Stink Badger (*Mydaus marchei*). All of which are endemic to the country.

On the macro level, the loss of forests spells greater disaster on a wider ecosystem including humans. It is not at all isolated from the problems of food insecurity, water insecurity, and wood shortage, not to mention its global implications on climate change.

Soil erosion is a serious effect of deforestation. Erosion implies depletion of soil nutrients which translates to low crop yield. Low crop yield means decrease in food production. Water insecurity results from degraded and poorly managed watersheds. With more than half of the 57 major watersheds denuded, this contributes to livelihood insecurity. Even water quality deteriorates. The major cities of Manila, Baguio, Cebu and Davao are now constantly experiencing water shortage and health risk problems. Another direct consequence of the problem is wood shortage. What used to be a famous wood-exporter country is now a net wood importer. Less forest, less wood.

The greatest macro implication however is the heightened threat of global warming.

Global warming or the increase of the earth's atmospheric temperature is one of the most pressing issues of our time. Greenhouse Gases (GHGs) are composed of Carbon Dioxide (CO_2), Methane (CH_4), Nitrous oxides (N_2O) and Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) which absorb thermal radiation emitted by the earth's surface. The rise in the concentration of these GHGs leads to change in the world's climate. Changes in climatic patterns are predicted to affect the world's ecological and economic status.⁹

Hence, forest ecosystems are important because they are sources and sinks of CO_2 . The Department of Environment and Natural Resources

(DENR) Report in 1990 estimated that the forest destruction in the Philippines contributed about 50 percent of the 163, 690 kilotons of CO₂ released into the atmosphere.

The holistic approach tells us that the problem of forest decline does not stop here. We have seen how it links to the condition of the atmosphere. Not far is its implication on the condition of the marine ecosystem. Abrupt changes in water temperature resulting from rise in global average temperature cause coral bleaching, a condition when corals expel the algae which serve as their main food because of 2°C to 3°C increase in water temperature. The corals then turn white and die, denying fishes their homes, playground and breeding grounds. Less corals, less fishes in the marine ecosystem.

Another danger is the rise in sea level. As global temperature increases, thermal expansion of ocean water (H₂O) and melting of glaciers occur. As an archipelago with 70 percent of its population and infrastructure located near the shorelines, a drastic rise in sea level may also spell disaster for the Philippines.

From the same report by the Philippine Foundation for the Environment (2000), accelerated sea-level rise (ACLR) is projected to reach one meter in the areas along the coast of Manila Bay, particularly in Cavite (Cavite City, Noveleta, Kawit, Imus, Bacoor), some parts of Las Piñas and Paranaque, Navotas and some parts of Bulacan. Even inland areas according to them may be affected specially near riverbanks.

As if this is not enough, higher temperatures also directly endanger human lives as they induce more cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Warmer temperature is very conducive to the breeding of mosquitoes and insects carrying dengue fever, yellow fever and other tropical diseases.

In losing forests, we do not only lose precious flora and fauna, we also lose ourselves. Environmental problems are always translatable to economic issues of sustenance and survival. They are not alienated from human concerns; as we promote a healthier environment we also promote healthier humans. We are all part of nature's biodiversity. This is "ecological beauty with a conscience".

The Holistic Perspective and Indigenous Beliefs

Locally, the holistic perspective is not very easy to defend much more to promote. This is because people tend to accept more the anthropocentric perspective. What is still easier to understand is the common notion that the environment is always there to serve our purpose. It is in this regard that the paper recognizes the need to cite some indigenous or folk beliefs and practices that will support the granting of special value to the environment. For example, "Who would cut an old, huge Balete Tree to give way to a park if they know that it is being inhabited by creatures not of this world, like a kapre?" or "Who would quarry a mountain when they know that in it reside several "nuno sa punso (supernatural spirits)?" The holistic approach which grants intrinsic value to the environment will appear more convincing locally if it is anchored on indigenous/folk beliefs. This will serve as an effective prelude to a deeper understanding of the extent of interconnections in the ecosystem to eventually realize the link between humans and the non-human parts of the environment.

At this point, I would like to borrow the notion of cultural ecology. The idea of cultural ecology appears to belong originally to the field of anthropology. There are accounts however that the anthropologists who engaged in earlier studies on cultural ecology were also well versed in philosophy. Their contention is that the physical environment plays a role in culture change in opposition to a prevailing disposition towards cultural determinism, or the idea that culture determines culture. It is not the concern of this paper to prove whether the physical environment really plays a role in culture change. Rather, it merely intends to make juxtaposition between culture and ecology in terms of building a link between "culture areas" focused on indigenous beliefs and practices and "ecological matters" focused on biodiversity conservation.

The approach starts with the cultural dimension of conservation. It recognizes the role of indigenous beliefs and practices, making it a prelude to a deeper understanding of the extent of biological interconnections in the environment. Any perspective presenting empirical grounds for biodiversity conservation will fail if it lacks the cultural drive to produce the desired action. In this regard, the role of local folk wisdom ought to be recognized always. In fact Agenda 21-26 of the Earth Summit in 1992 recognizes and strengthens the role of indigenous people and their communities in conservation strategies:

Recognition of their (IP) values, traditional knowledge and resource management practices with a view to promoting environmentally sound and sustainable development.

Involvement of indigenous people and their communities at the national and local levels in resource management and conservation strategies...

Establishment where appropriate of arrangements to strengthen the active participation of indigenous people and their communities in the national formulation of policies, laws and programmes relating to resource management...

Eugene Anderson, in his book, *Ecologies of the Heart: Emotion, Belief and the Environment*²⁰, recognizes that environmental conservation is not only the empirical, scientific management of the environment but first and foremost, a conservation of and by the people recognizing what is intrinsically close to their nature.

Conservation is basically about people, not about resources. It is a problem in resource use, but the real problem is not managing the resources but managing the people. We know more, or less how to manage the resources- at least how to conserve them. The problem is how to motivate people to do it. Motivation is an emotional matter. Knowledge is necessary, but knowledge without emotional drive does not produce action. It produces the detached sage, whose knowledge may be potentially useful but whose actions are confined to arcane trivia.

The strategy therefore is to go back to indigenous beliefs and practices to motivate people so that they will develop an attitude of respect for nature, an attitude borne out of their intimate knowledge of their environment.

Some Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in the Philippines

Interconnectedness is evident from these wise words of one Datu Manpadayag quoted by Rene Agbayani in a Lumad-Mindanao publication, SUWARA.¹¹ This was in connection with the Lumads fight for their

ancestral lands during the height of protests against the Mt. Apo Geothermal Project.

The earth is sacred to us. We are connected to the earth: if it is lost so are our lives. Until recently, the Lumad did not wear shoes because the land is an extension of our bodies.

The earth is our parent; it is our father and mother who helps us grow and wakes us from our sleep. The earth is dear to our bodies. When our bodies are pinched, it hurts. When the land is ravaged, it hurts in the same way. When the land is abused, the Lumad(s) are one with it.

For the Lumads, the human connection with the environment transcends *biological interdependence and extends to what culturally they have learned to attach themselves*. They recognize that the land is an extension of their bodies, hence when ravaged, they hurt too. So who would want to trample with nature when it means inflicting pain on themselves? Such local wisdom does not alienate humans from the rest of nature and recognizes their oneness with it.

Veneration of Sacred Sites

Paramount among our indigenous beliefs and practices is the veneration of sacred sites. These are places traditionally considered homes to powerful spirits or deities and so have been made places of worship, healing and sacrifices. For the local worshippers of Luzon, very popular is the veneration of the three sacred mountains forming a geographical triangle: Mt. Arayat in the North, Mt. Banahaw in the south-eastern part and Mt. Makiling in the south-western part.

In Pampanga lies the famous Mt. Arayat believed to be protected by a local fairy or *diwata* named *Maria Sinukuan*. Aetas inhabiting the area believe that this *diwata* would oftentimes show herself to hunters or loggers, lure them into falling in love with her and eventually bringing them to another world. It is a folk belief which according to local residents must have kept bad elements out of the mountain and helped preserve its biodiversity.

The same story is told about another *diwata* named Maria Makiling guarding the enchanted mountain named after her. The mountain looks

like the head of a lady with her long hair spread to its full length. Those who have stepped on her bosom know how enchanted the place is, hence immediately offer reverence.

Considered to be the most venerated is the Mountain of Banahaw. Local folks would even call it either *Banal na Bundok/Lugar*, or *Tierra Sagrada* (holy mountain/land). It has been a place of worship and pilgrimage of people all over the country. Its rivers, caves, waters, peaks, and slopes are all believed to be holy and thus worthy of respect. In fact they were already given sacred names like 'Santa Lucia' (Saint Lucy), 'Tubig ng Jordan' (water of Jordan), 'Kuweba ni San Pedro' (cave of St. Peter), 'Santisima Trinidad' (Holy Trinity), and 'Kuweba ng Dios Ama' (cave of God the Father). Here they do rituals and offer prayers. So who would dare destroy this "cultural ecology"?

The writer has been a witness to these veneration a number of times. Local even foreign worshippers take extreme care not to trample with any part of these mountains. Tourists are even told not to make so much noise for they may disturb or offend the spirits which may force the latter to unleash destructive elements like snakes.

Preternatural Beings

A preternatural being known to Southern Tagalog folks as *Lamang-lupa* is literally someone believed to be living underground. Sometimes it is a dwarf or a duwende, or a very big person but is usually a man. They may be present in a mound of soil or *punso*, underneath a clump of bamboo or under the ground. If it lives in a mound, it is usually referred to as *matanda* or *nuno sa punso*.¹²

When provoked, these invisible beings are believed to be capable of doing harm. Usually they are angered by men who urinate beside the trunk of trees or by women who just throw water anywhere. This is why local folks would oftentimes ask permission before they use or introduce anything on the ground by uttering

Tabi tabi po tanda
Alis po kayo ryan
Makikiraan po

The Ilocanos believe in *ca-i-ba-an* and *ansisit*, dwarf-like creatures also found usually in anthills or mounds. Violation of their abode by stepping on or trampling with it even when done innocently can cause the violator incurable malady. Some resent sweeping or are disturbed and annoyed with those who are merely passing by. And so Ilocanos recite:

Cayo cayo

Umadayo cayo (Please go away)

Bari bari

These practices manifest the indigenous respect ascribed to preternatural beings acknowledged as man's co-inhabitants of the earth and with whom nature has to be shared with.

Enchanted and Haunted Trees

A common site among the indigenous communities' villages in the country is the presence of huge and century old trees. They are usually spared by loggers no matter how tempting they appear because of their size, for even loggers themselves have fears of offending spirits believed to dwell in them.

For most obvious reason, the most avoided trees in the Philippines are the century old. They may be acacia, mangoes, tamarind or kalumpang. They are avoided because of their big, gnarled shapes believed to be indicators that some spirits dwell in them. If these trees happen to be found in cemeteries or in the patio of Spanish-period churches, the more people become wary of them. No one would normally lay the ax or the chainsaw in their trunks and neither would one volunteer to be left alone under their boughs at night.¹³

The Visayans also believe in *tamawo*, an *engkantada* or enchanted lady who lives and protects big trees. Pangasinan lowlanders believe in *anito* which usually dwell in trees. These spirits can be good or bad depending on man's daily relationship with them. Urban dwellers also have preserved a number of balete trees along Balete Drive in Quezon City in spite of the sprawling subdivisions in the area, because they are believed to be enchanted. Castro in his article, *Enchanted Trees, Sacred Groves and Forest Fairies*,¹⁴ listed a number of trees believed to be

haunted: *acacia*, *achuete*, *balete*, *kalumpang*, *binuang*, *palo Maria*, *bulala*, *mabolo/kamagong*, *mango*, *narra*, *sampalok*, and *tuai*.

These cultural beliefs coating the existence of enchanted trees incidentally helped the preservation and certainly kept the micro-environment of trees. In many ways, holding and maintaining indigenous beliefs and practices have been a boon for advocates of biodiversity conservation.

Conclusion

The holistic perspective and our indigenous beliefs and practices both make similar claims that we are one with nature and that we are co-inhabitants of the earth and its elements. *We all make one big circle of interdependence in nature's biodiversity.* It is just a matter of recognizing this ecological and cultural reality.

The approach to biodiversity conservation goes back to indigenous beliefs and practices that recognize the cultural dimension of conservation. It serves to motivate people so that they will develop respect for nature, an attitude borne out of their intimate knowledge of their environment. This may sound like romanticizing the whole issue of indigenous beliefs and practices, but the paper simply recognizes a "cultural ecology" that has survived a number of generations. They are neither backward-dogmatic nor simply superstitious, but environmental philosophies that have worked in the past in the protection and conservation of nature. We use them as preludes to a deeper understanding of an empirical system of ecological interrelations within the framework of the holistic perspective.

This ecological perspective gives us better handles so we do not appear foolish squanderers trapped in age-old traditions nor a detached sage whose knowledge may be potentially useful but whose actions are confined to arcane trivia. Although it is extremely important to understand the ecological web of interdependence within nature's biodiversity so that we can adopt an appropriate course of action towards biodiversity conservation, equally important is how we can motivate people to start understanding it. The discourse that links the culture areas of indigenous beliefs and practices with the ecological facts of the holistic perspective is useful toward this end. ❁

Endnotes

- 1 Yasol-Naval, 1994.
- 2 Leopold, 1981:464
- 3 Olen et al., 1996:450
- 4 Regan, 1976:253
- 5 Olen et al., 1996:451
- 6 Biodiversity Conservation in the Philippines.htm.
- 7 Excerpts from the book, *The Vanishing Treasures of the Philippine Rainforest* reprinted in *The Manila Times*, 05 August 2000, p.6
- 8 *Malaya*, 02 Nov 2000.
- 9 Foundation for the Philippine Environment, 2000:2-9.
- 10 Anderson, 1996:6
- 11 SUWARA, 1990:2
- 12 Aprieto, 1989:18
- 13 Castro, 1997:122
- 14 *Ibid.*

References

- Anderson, Eugene, *Ecologies of the Heart: Emotion, Belief and the Environment*. England: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Aprieto, Pacifico, ed. *The Children of Lam-ang: The Folk Culture of the Ilocos Region*. Quezon City: the Educators Press, 1984.
- _____. *Duyan ng Magiting: The Folk Culture of the Southern Tagalog Region*. Quezon City: IMC, 1989.
- Bengwayan, Michael. "RP is Hottest among biodiversity hotspots" in *Malaya*, Nov. 2, 2000.
- Biodiversity Conservation in the Philippines" in *Pamayanan* (<http://www-BiodiversityConservation.in.the.Philippines.html>).
- Castro, Charles. *Enchanted Trees, Sacred Groves and Forest Fairies: A Sampling of Folk Beliefs Associated with Trees and Forests*. Readings in ENRM 221. UP Open University, 1997.
- Foundation for the Philippine Environment, "Burning Concerns on Climate Change" (a primer), 2000 passim.
- Leopold, Aldo, *A Sound County Almanac: Essays in Conservation from Round River*. England: Oxford University Press, 1981. Reprinted as part of a collection entitled "Applying Ethics" edited by Jeffrey Olen and Vincent Barry. (USA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1996).
- Yasol-Naval, J. *The Intrinsic Value of Animals and its Implications* (submitted as a Masteral Thesis for the Department of Philosophy, CSSP, UP Diliman, 1994).
- Olen, Jeffrey and Vincent Barry, eds. *Applying Ethics*. USA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1996.
- Regan, Tom and Peter Singer, eds. *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978.
- SUWARA (Official Publication of the Lumad-Mindanao), Special issue, 1990.