

Guest Editorial Preface

Special Issue on Tapestry of Discourses in Biodiversity and Sustainable Development: An Asian Perspective

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Can the world be redefined and reconstructed from the perspective of multiple cultural and ecological practices that continue to exist among many communities? (Escobar, 1998)

This is the question raised by Arturo Escobar in 1998, seated from the examined researches on biodiversity, mostly from South America, which he notes, contains a growing “distance between dominant discourses of biodiversity conservation and the political ecology of social movements” (1998, p. 76). Because most researches on biodiversity take on the purview that there is an imminent “threat on biodiversity” and that humanity has overused and misused these natural resources, consequential then is the imbalance among living things. Within the clauses of research on biodiversity, much attention has been drawn towards preservation and conservation of environmental spaces leading towards re-utilization of natural resources and exploring new ways to account for these resources. Escobar (1998) then challenged researchers if it is “possible to examine ‘biodiversity’ not as a true object that science progressively uncovers, but as historically produced discourse.” Taking off from the challenge posted by Escobar in 1998, it is imperative then that biodiversity, as an emerging field of study, should take the nature-culture continuum and begin raising discourses in the constructs of biodiversity as knowledge, method and practice.

We have heard from scholars and activists from the West, South America and other continents, but we have yet to hear from Asia. As the largest continent in the world with its evolving mode of production and numerous biodiversity sites, Asia has been implementing conservation and preservation practices but has inadvertently left pertinent inquiries on culture, identity and politics. Positing these inquiries to Asian countries, scholars from the Philippines heeded this call for Special Issue.

The Philippines becomes a point of reference for discourse on biodiversity because it is composed of 7,107 islands, with abundant biodiversity sites. Surrounded by forests and coastal areas, former Department of Environment and Natural Resources –Philippines (DENR-Philippines) Undersecretary, Demetrio Ignacio reported that the Philippines is among “the hottest of the hot spots” for biodiversity loss in Asia (Alave, 2011). Fuentes, the executive director of the ASEAN Center for Biodiversity said that the biodiversity loss currently experienced by the Philippines is a “silent crisis... [that effected] habitat loss, unsustainable use of resources, climate change, invasive alien species and pollution... due to deforestation and coastal denigration” (2011). Contributing to biodiversity loss in the Philippines is the massive urbanization and utilizing forested lands for food production. Experiencing the consequences of man-made activities, the Cordillera Region, Philippines, a home for many indigenous peoples, take on the efforts for conserving what is left of their biodiversity sites.

Strathern poignantly raises this observation that “we have entered into an epoch which is defined by the sense of being after nature” Strathern (in Escobar, 1999, p. 1). Alarming then is diminished relationship between man and nature which is demonstrated by man-made activities effecting biodiversity loss. Are we severing ties with nature? Is the perception on natural spaces merely based on its utility purposes? Amidst the Philippine development agenda on rapid urbanization, the indigenous peoples of Ifugao continue to strengthen their relationship with their natural spaces. Rooted in these biodiversity sites, the nature-culture continuum is still demonstrated by the Ifugao indigenous peoples’ knowledge and lifestyle that demonstrate this intrinsic bond. Two articles in this Special Issue elaborated on the deep relationship between nature and the indigenous people, which is a response to Strathern’s observation of sense of being after nature. These articles discussed the strong and enmeshed identity constructs and relations with the natural space.

Joane Serrano, Luisa Gelisan, et. al.’s article discussed the constructs of indigenous women as linked to concepts of biodiversity and sustainable development. They observed that indigenous women do not recognize the materialist conception of gendered roles in farming and caring for their environment. Instead, Serrano, Gelisan, et.al. said that the Ifugao indigenous ways, “was an egalitarian view of the tasks where men and women both have traditionally assigned responsibilities in the whole process.” The inexistence of gendered roles in farming and caring for the environment is displayed through a “sense of community... and collective notion of family and community values.” The central role of indigenous women in biodiversity is not reducible to their role in farming. Instead, their indigenous identity constructs as women contribute greatly to the weaving of indigenous knowledge and practices that root them to the sense of family, community and natural environment.

Maintenance of indigenous concepts of family, community and natural environment become a transferred culture for the indigenous young people of Ifugao. With focus on the Ifugao Rice Terraces (IRT) as a World Heritage Site, Consuelo Habito and Susan Ealdama takes to light the identity constructs of Ifugao youth in relation to the conservation and preservation of their rice terraces. Examining the use and engagement of New Communication Technology (NCT) in the shaping of identity of the indigenous youth of Ifugao, Habito and Ealdama conducted a series of Focus Group Discussions with indigenous peoples youth groups. Taking a participatory approach, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was used in analysis. Dominant themes from Habito and Ealdama showed that “belief in the supernatural, farming and tilling the land as a way of life, and the belief that preserving the Ifugao culture and keeping it strong for the future is important.” Rootedness in the environmental space is not hindered by New Communication Technology (NCT). Instead, mediated ways of communication became an avenue for affirmation of indigenous identity and their sense of pride, coupled with sharing of information on indigenous culture as rooted in their natural space.

Highlighting the need for biodiversity researches that take on the human-nature continuum, the last article in this Special Issue is a scoping review and analysis of studies on biodiversity taken from the social sciences lens. Corazon L. Abansi discusses the pre-occupation of researches on biodiversity as linked to natural sciences in Benguet Province Cordillera Region, Philippines. Abansi wrote that despite numerous researches on biodiversity in Benguet, there is a “realization that what we know is very little ... because of the lack of deeper understanding of the socio-cultural, economic, and political dynamics that cause loss of biodiversity on one hand, and its effective conservation on the other.” Such a gap in the studies on biodiversity emphasized the need for introspective and people-centered approach in addressing biodiversity loss. Abansi further said that “recognizing indigenous knowledge, systems and practices in conservation programs” is vital in identifying “deep cultural attachments to the land and other natural resources which shape the array of rules, obligations, and sanctions.” Challenging the social scientists in engaging themselves in studies on biodiversity, Abansi points out the dearth in multi-disciplinary approaches on biodiversity research which becomes problematic in “maximizing the potential contributions of social science in a more inclusive and integrative conservation science, i.e., one that includes both natural and social sciences for a more ecologically effective and socially just conservation.”

Critical and cultural examination of discourses on biodiversity led us to say that individuals, communities and social groups are centrifugal in thickening the human-nature continuum. We have already acknowledged that our social and economic activities contributed greatly to biodiversity loss. With such acknowledgment, human-nature continuum also involves the crucial role of individuals, communities and social groups' role in the attempts at reviving biodiversity. Knowledge is just the beginning excursion in this continuum, and, we have yet to see the resurgence/modification/change of existing practices on conservation and preservation of natural space.

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