

Environmental Inequalities among Indigenous People in the Philippines: The Case of the Tagbanua in Tara Islands, Palawan

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INTRODUCTION

This paper applies the argument that social inequalities caused by differentiated control of power and resources among multiple stakeholders engender environmental inequalities. Using the Environmental Inequality Formation (EIF) perspective (Pellow 2000), it seeks to gain insights on socio-historical processes that produce environmental inequality among the Tagbanua. While the case of the Tagbanua has been studied in various ways by local and international scholars elsewhere (Bryant 2000; Capistrano and Charles 2012; Dressler and Fabinyi 2011; Eder and Fernandez 1996), this paper discusses for the first time the case of the Tagbanua living in Tara, Coron, Palawan, and their on-going negotiation of indigeneity, state authority, and stakeholder interests over their ancestral domains resulting in environmental inequalities.

Environmental Inequality Formation Perspective

The EIF perspective addresses conceptual issues in environmental justice literature, which is a confluence of scholarly works and praxis that deals with the disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards and risk (Pellow 2000). In the United States where the concept first emerged, activists and scholars assert that the adverse effects of environmental problems are disproportionately borne by minority and poor communities (Bullard 1994; Bryant 1995; Novotny 2000). Pellow (2000) states that this orientation is geared toward analyzing “perpetrator-victim scenarios” as outcomes of the unequal distribution of risk exposure among marginalized communities. The same author argues that there remains a need to scrutinize the socio-historical processes that constitute such disproportionality in the first place. He therefore proposes the EIF perspective to capture the emergence of environmental

ABSTRACT

The struggle of indigenous peoples in the Philippines over land rights is a classic illustration of how existing social inequalities beget environmental inequalities. Using the Environmental Inequality Formation perspective, this paper examines the socio-historical processes that engender environmental inequalities among the Tagbanua whose natural environment is threatened by the loss and degradation of land and water resources. Based on the narratives generated from oral histories, in-depth interviews, archival documents, and small-group discussions, these environmental inequalities were rooted in the misconceptions by non-indigenous claimants regarding the authenticity of indigenous identity of the Tagbanua, coupled by the inaction or conflicting actions of the state at the local and national levels. However, the resolve of the Tagbanua to capitalize on state policy governing ancestral domains and process it at the national level rather than combat contrary actions of the state at the local level proves beneficial in asserting their self-determination and eventually achieving recognition of their ownership over their ancestral land and water.

Keywords: environmental inequality, indigenous people, land rights, self-determination, Tagbanua

inequality. Furthermore, he concludes that in general, environmental inequality refers to “any form of environmental hazard that burdens a particular social group.” Moreover, recent literature on environmental inequality expands such definition to capture its multiple forms, which includes not only pollution and health outcomes but also resource degradation and the resulting social and cultural disruptions (Carmin and Agyeman 2011). Such expansion further proves the point that EIF constitutes a broader perspective than disproportionality, especially when viewed from Third World contexts, where hierarchical relationships are not easily encapsulated in perpetrator-victim scenarios and where culpability cannot be readily assigned.

Particularly interesting are the experiences of indigenous people as a social group and how their exposure to colonial incursions and their on-going contestation with mainstream populations are closely related to environmental problems within their territories (Adeola 2000; Holwick 2000; O'Neill 2003). Indigenous people in developing countries often occupy territories endowed with valuable natural resources, making them key targets of economic interests and the development agenda of the state (Banks 2000; Broad and Cavanaugh 1993; Foale and Manele 2004; Maybury-Lewis 2002; Peluso 1992). Colonial policies and resource-use politics have even criminalized the indigenous people's swidden farming system, thus marginalizing further the access and control of the indigenous people over forest and land resources (Dressler 2006).

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Indigenous People in the Philippines

In the Philippines, indigenous people have long struggled to secure recognition and authority over their ancestral domains, which have been sites of contestation, if not violent conflicts with outside stakeholders including the state, private individuals, and corporations (Daes 2000; Stavenhagen 2003; Tauli-Corpuz 2000). While the Philippine state continues to be guided by the colonial Regalian doctrine, which upholds all public lands as state-owned, it has nevertheless attempted some tenure arrangements directed towards governing ancestral domains.

Grounded on the provisions of the 1987 Philippine Constitution which recognizes and protects the rights of the indigenous cultural communities over their ancestral lands, Republic Act (RA) 7586, otherwise known as the National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) Act of 1992, was signed to preserve the ancestral domains and customary rights of indigenous people within the protected areas that are being managed by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). Under the DENR, Special Task Forces at the local and regional offices were created to identify, delineate, recognize, and manage the ancestral domain claims¹ through the issuance of either a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim (CADC) or a Community Forest Stewardship Agreement.

Moreover in 1997, the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) was passed to ceremoniously bestow upon indigenous people their rights over ancestral domains through the CADC and the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT). These tenure arrangements were implemented in response to the shifting focus on the plight of indigenous people by international organizations such as the United Nations (UN). As of 2012, a total of 158 CADTs were awarded to almost one million indigenous people.

Table 1. CADTs awarded to indigenous peoples in the Philippines

Year Approved	No. of CADTs	Total Areas (in hectare)	IP Population
2002	2	41,255.97	18,283
2003	9	326,091.33	58,389
2004	18	236,435.73	73,421
2005	9	237,004.73	36,743
2006	18	269,049.42	50,847
2007	2	94,425.75	22,585
2008	38	1,288,667.81	313,024
2009	45	1,106,174.92	269,317
2010	15	660,510.27	69,786
2012	2	20,148.19	6,100
TOTAL	158	4,279,764.12	918,495

Source: National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (2013)

Of these, 75 were converted from CADCs while 83 came from direct applications at the National Commission on Indigenous People or NCIP (Table 1).

Despite IPRA's legal framework, however, indigenous people in the Philippines are forced to remain vigilant against multi-faceted threats to their ancestral domains that include land grabbing, insurgency problems, mining, and pollution (Stavenhagen 2003). Such threats compound their vulnerability amidst poverty, food insecurity, and lack of access to basic social services. In addition, there remains the threat of the loss of their ancestral domains due to "displacement by development projects and extractive industries, natural disasters, and environmental degradation such as forest destruction, pollution, and loss of biodiversity" (Cariño 2012; Ty 2010). Development interests, including those of state agencies, invoke development itself as a justifying discourse for exploitation of natural resources and environmental pollution on indigenous lands.

METHODOLOGY

To get a clearer understanding of the environmental inequalities among the Tagbanua of Tara Islands, this paper analyzed the narratives of the Tagbanua concerning environmental inequality. These narratives were compiled from accounts contained in Tagbanua affidavits which were submitted with their CADT application as oral histories, and from the local government and NGO documents. To verify and substantiate these claims, three small-group discussions were conducted among: a) ten Council of Elders of the Tagbanua, composed mainly of male members (age ranging from 50 to 72); b) eight women (age ranging from 21 to 58); and c) three youths (age ranging from 17 to 19). To further confirm the narratives, in-depth interviews were made with other 35 stakeholders which include ten male and eight female Tagbanua not included in the group discussions, five NGO personnel, and 12 local government officials.

The respondents were recruited purposively through referrals. Free and informed consent from the Tagbanua and other respondents, as well as permission from the local government of Coron, were secured prior to data collection and fieldwork in 2006. During the interviews and discussions, the respondents were asked about their circumstances and opinions regarding the existing environment-related issues in their locality. The interviews lasted for about 45 to 60 minutes, while small-group discussions lasted for not more than two hours. Follow-up interviews with NCIP personnel and other government agencies were made in 2012 to update the status of the Tagbanua's CADT application. Qualitative analysis was done by analyzing key themes emerging from these narratives. Given the controversies surrounding this case, pseudonyms were used to hide the respondents' identities and circumstances. Only identifiers pertaining to age (e.g., "elder"), gender (e.g., female), and group affiliations (e.g., "local official") were used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The narratives of environmental inequality among the Tagbanua unfold as they encounter social and environmental issues that threaten them with the degradation or loss of their ancestral lands due to land prospecting (Dalabajan 1998) as well as overexploitation of marine resources (Capistrano and Charles 2012). In this context, it becomes important to document the experiences of the Tagbanua as an indigenous group engaged in the struggle to secure their ancestral domain against claims and discourses by outside groups with development interests that result in environmental degradation and inequalities.

As the Tagbanua domain at Tara is located 55 nautical miles or 102 km away from Coron's town proper, it is very vulnerable to encroachment as its islets are scattered in open waters in between the West Philippine and Sulu Seas (Figure 1). Tara also covers 540 ha of land area with rocky and mountainous topography where only about 5% is suitable to limited cultivation¹; thus, the Tagbanua remained traditional seafarers. As an island-barangay, Tara's history and the culture of the Tagbanua are memorialized in the names of these islands that had become their home.

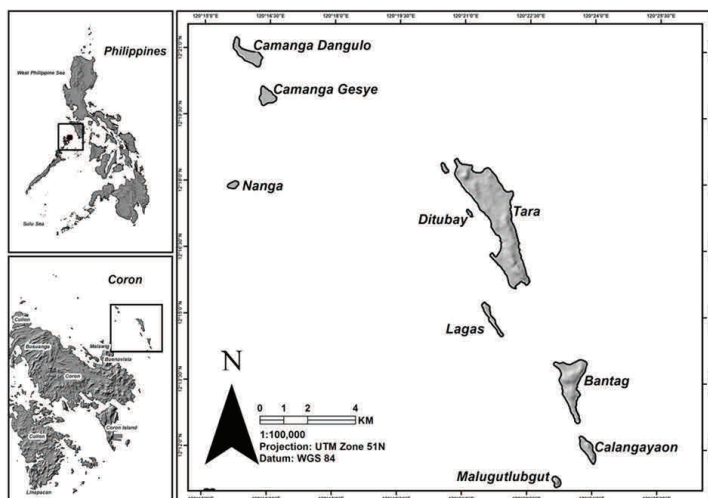


Figure 1. Location Map of Tara, Coron, Palawan, Philippines

Tara's islands have curious names. For instance, named after local historic events are *Señora*, derived from an incident where a young Spanish lady took her life due to unrequited love by a Tagbanua; *Pintura*, an island painted with letter "A" by American soldiers when they were searching for Japanese Imperial army during World War II; and *Dimumpalik*, meaning a place which is "difficult to come back to." This is attributed to the way that Tagbanua ancestors, Macarere and Matambak, fought against the Moros to prevent them from entering their territories again.

Other islands/islets reflect their features or functions. *Tara*, the main island, abounds with trees covered with whitish substance that is said to cause hallucination on anyone who touches them; *Dipasok* island whose name means "difficult to gain entry to"

because of some supernatural beliefs about the area; *Lagas* means "shifting sands"; *Ditungay*, literally "place for women", is designated for the exclusive use of women; *Camanga Gesye* (small "camanga") and *Camanga Daculo* (big "camanga") are two adjacent islands where *huyang gyeb* (sacred cave) and burial grounds can be found; and *Nanga* means "at the middle" of the two *camangas*. Other islands were named *Botolan*, *Malumog-lumog*, and *Bantag*¹.

When the municipal waters of Coron were opened to commercial-scale fishing after 1947, fishing provided a steady employment to the people in Coron. The catch fish industry supplies grouper (*Epinephelus spp.*), cavalla (*Caranx spp.*), fusilier (*Caesio spp.*), gold-lined spinefoot (*Siganus spp.*), mackerel scad (*Decapterus spp.*), mackerel (*Rastrelliger spp.*), squid (*Sepioteuthis spp.*), and anchovy (*Stolephorus spp.*)^{iv} to both local and international markets. Coron's live fish industry supplies Japan and nearby countries with various species including crocus clam (*Tridacna crocea*), whose daily harvestable volumes by Japanese commercial fishers are highly regulated by the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD)^v.

Coron's fishing industry also encouraged migrants from nearby provinces to work as fishers in Coron^{vi}. This influx pushed the Tagbanua to small and remote islands like Tara. The Tagbanua distinguish these migrant workers either as "Bisaya" (from the Visayan region) or more generically as "unat" (straight-haired) or "dayo" (not from here). Moreover, with the opening up of Coron's municipal waters, the illegal encroachment by commercial trawlers became commonplace. Problems related to illegal encroachment into municipal waters is one of the most difficult and widespread issues in managing coastal resources in the Philippines (Eder 2005). In Tara, the encroachment of these commercial fishers, combined with the influx of migrant workers and later on of land prospectors, brought unprecedented threats to the traditional livelihood and ancestral domain of the Tagbanua.

Narratives of Environmental Inequality

Environmental inequality in Tara is evident in the declining capacity of its surrounding marine ecosystem to supply food and other resources to the Tagbanua due to continuous encroachment and degradation of the ancestral waters. As Tara is considered as one of the largest fishing grounds in Coron, it has become threatened by intensified commercial fishing. The decline of its once teeming marine resources is attributed largely to overfishing and unregulated fishing methods such as the use of cyanide and blast fishing (Gasgonia 1997).

Meanwhile, despite bearing the burden of degradation, the economic revenues derived from the fishing industry are not channeled by the state to support local infrastructure and social services in Tara. For example, only 54% of Tagbanua youth are able to finish elementary education since there are only three grade levels available in the school in Tara. To continue their education, the Tagbanua have to move or commute to and from

mainland Coron, which is expensive. Conversely, Tara’s health center is seldom visited by medical professionals from mainland Coron because of its inaccessibility.

Environmental Degradation

While traditional conservation measures are still practiced, some Tagbanua have employed illegal fishing methods. This causes internal conflict among the Tagbanua, particularly among their leaders and elders who are torn between protecting their degraded marine resources and prosecuting their next of kin. Under the traditional legal system of the Tagbanua, violators must undergo a humiliating flagellation by their elders. However, some Tagbanua refuse to be sanctioned through this, forcing the elders to send them to the municipal jail in mainland Coron. This creates tension and animosity between the elders and the families of the accused. Thus, environmental degradation not only narrows the Tagbanua’s livelihood options but also erodes the cohesion of their community.

Interventions from local government in terms of increased patrolling, strict law enforcement, and speedy litigation of cases against illegal fishers should have been evident. Unfortunately, bureaucratic inefficiency in processing complaints against illegal activities in Tara renders the protection of the ancestral waters futile. Further, conflicting actions are also manifested in state decisions concerning the protection of marine resources in Tara. To illustrate, the Tagbanua declared one of Tara’s islands, Lagas, as marine sanctuary in 2002^{viii} to protect the community’s resources and prevent further encroachment. Available data pertaining to the immediate results of this strategy were promising, given the dramatic increase in fish population observed before and after the establishment of the marine sanctuary^{ix} (Table 2).

Table 2. Fish count in Lagas Island Marine Sanctuary, 2001-2004

Year	Fish Count
2001	483
2002	2145
2003	2138
2004	2509

Source: ELAC (2006)

Despite these seemingly positive results arising from the declaration of Lagas as marine sanctuary, the local government continued to allow extralocal claimants to operate in the said sanctuary. This was because, according to a local official:

“What had been declared as marine sanctuary are only the marine resources, which include the coral reefs, fishes and water. The land and the forests are not within the bounds of the approved sanctuary. So there is no conflict of interest.”^x

Hence, from the perspective of local government officials, the declaration of Lagas as marine sanctuary does not forestall land prospecting and other illegal activities, threatening further the security of the Tagbanua community. Such bureaucratic inconsistency is viewed by the Tagbanua as favoring revenue generation from ecotourism over their welfare. In particular, the Tagbanua negatively view the impacts of ecotourism, not only on their marine and land resources, but also on their traditional culture. An elderly woman summed up such sentiment:

“I vehemently oppose the coming of naked tourists on our shore because I do not want them to pollute our culture.”

Land Prospecting

Environmental inequality is also demonstrated by how risks of land prospecting in Tara are borne by the Tagbanua while the benefits in terms of social and environmental services are not extended to them. Land prospecting, in this case, refers to small-scale entrepreneurial exploration to appropriate ancestral lands for possible ecotourism and other commercial purposes. Risks, in this sense, concern both the demoralizing perception among the Tagbanua of the likelihood of losing their ancestral domain and the actual mechanisms used in claiming lands in Tara. Both types of risks render the Tagbanua more vulnerable by diminishing their confidence as resource managers and their capacity to protect their environment because they bear the brunt of resource exploitation.

Land prospecting in Tara has been fostered by changes in the land classification system of Palawan. Earlier restrictions have been relaxed in the name of development, which has facilitated access and use of ancestral domains by outside stakeholders. In 1967, the small islands of Palawan including Coron were classified as national reserves through Proclamation No. 219, which prohibited wildlife hunting in such reserves. In 1978, Coron was re-classified as a tourist zone with marine reserves under Proclamation No. 1801. This reclassification diminished use restrictions by permitting land prospecting for tourism. In 1999, Palawan adopted ecotourism as flagship program. This encouraged land prospectors to expand their operations by scouting farther for potential islands such as Tara.

The formation of environmental inequality is evident in the aggressive expansion into ancestral domains. Such expansion is facilitated by legal instruments like land regulations that were originally meant also to protect the Tagbanua, but are instead used by outsiders as claimants for their own purpose. Land prospecting in Tara is done in two ways: 1. by securing tax declarations; and 2. by applying for Certificate of Stewardship Contracts (CSC)^{xii}. While these documents do not necessarily assign ownership to outsider claimants, such documents provide a legal basis to contest the CADT application of the Tagbanua in Tara (Table 3).

For example, in 1976, a businessman from mainland Coron contracted a Tagbanua owner for permission to engage in

Table 3. Contested islands of Tara

Island	Land Area Being Claimed (in hectares)	Classification	Declared Current Market Value (in pesos)	Legal Instrument Used in Claiming the Island
Lagas	58.88	Raw land	5,893,888.00	TD 022-0400-A
Ditubay	1.44	Raw land	79,279.00	TD 022-0401-A
Camanga Daculo	3.00	Coconut land	54,000	TD ¹ 022-0360-A
	0.50	Raw land	12,000	TD 022-0361-A
	4.50	Coconut land	81,000	TD 022-0365-A
	21.00	Pasture land	450,000	TD 022-0385-A
	1.53	Forestland		CSC ² 042301957
	2.23	Forestland		CSC 042301956
	4.19	Forestland		CSC 042301955
	4.78	Forestland		CSC 042301953
Camanga Gesye	4.78	Forestland		CSC 042301952
	3.39	Forestland		CSC 042301951
	3.21	Forestland		CSC 042301954

Source: ¹Tax Declarations from the Municipal Assessor's Office of Coron, Palawan ²Certificate of Stewardship Contract (DENR 1995)

pebble mining in Lagas in return for PhP 700 (USD 17). By the 1980s, this businessman started filing tax declarations all over Lagas Island covering initially a 1.50-ha parcel of land, which he later claimed he had acquired from the Tagbanua owner. Through tax declarations, this businessman peddled Lagas Island to realtors in Coron and Metro Manila, and even brought foreigners to survey Lagas Island in 1999^{xiii}.

Recently, the economic potential of Lagas Island for ecotourism attracted a Manila-based realtor who acquired it through Transfer of Rights for PhP 79,000 (USD 1,560). Using the same government procedure, the realtor paid land taxes on Lagas Island, which now commands a market value of PhP 5.9 M (USD 140,000) over 58 ha covering the entire island of Tara. Such land prospecting threatens the security of the Tagbanua who fear that by losing their territories, they will also lose their livelihood and their sense of identity, whose roots are tied to their place. As an elderly woman remarked, "This land is where I was born. Without it, I am nothing."^{xiv}

Likewise, in 1995, a business clan in Coron applied for Certificates of Stewardship Contracts (CSCs) using Waivers of Rights signed by Tagbanua owners, and eventually got approval from the DENR. Later, these Tagbanua owners contested such claims and declared in their own affidavits that they were deceived by the business clan who asked them to sign blank documents^{xv}. Moreover, despite common knowledge that the Tagbanua have occupied Tara Islands since time immemorial, these CSC applications proceeded without contestation, and the clan was awarded a total land area of 24 ha distributed across the islands of Nanga, Camanga Gesye, and Daculo^{xvi}. Ironically, the Tagbanua continue to occupy these islands, as these CSC-holders delegated their responsibilities to the Tagbanua as caretakers since they could not visit these islands frequently due to big waves and unpredictable weather.

Bureaucratic Inconsistency

Environmental inequality is further demonstrated in the policy contradictions in processing the CADT application of the Tagbanua. This problem arose from the misgivings among local politicians over the Tagbanua's capability to carry out natural resource conservation in their ancestral domains. These politicians openly exhibited their hostility toward the Tagbanua CADT application by issuing municipal resolutions to halt it^{xvii}. While space does not permit detailed discussion of this contest, for present purposes it suffices to note that such objections strained the relationship between the local government and Tagbanua. The Tagbanua perceived the local government as insincere in promoting their welfare^{xviii}, while the politicians regarded their CADT application as an affront to the authority and jurisdiction of the local government^{xix}.

Thus, through their umbrella organization Saragpunta^{xx}, the Tagbanua of Coron applied for a single CADT for all barangays^{xxi} they occupy. However, during their negotiations with the local government, the CADT application was split into two clusters of barangays^{xxii}. The Tagbanua residing in Coron Island were grouped into one cluster, while those in Barangays Tara, Malawig and Buenavista formed another, the Tara cluster. The Tagbanua shifted their strategy to pursue the available paths of least resistance. The Tagbanua in Coron Island capitalized on the approved CADC^{xxiii} for their island since CADC was easier to convert to a CADT, while the Tara cluster had to start anew with a direct application for CADT.

This strategy allowed Coron Island's CADT application to be processed swiftly through the assistance of a national NGO, the Philippine Association for Intercultural Development (PAFID) (Bryant 2005). PAFID expedited the application for Coron Islands using its funds, networks and legal counsel, and going directly to the national-level NCIP instead of going through the

local channels. Despite protests from local government officials of Coron, the Tagbanua living in Coron Island were awarded its CADT in February 2004^{xxiv}. That however left the Tara cluster struggling to advance its application.

The presence of CSC-holders in Tara also slowed down Tara's CADT application. A government employee confirmed that the duly recognized CSC-holders might not relinquish their positions easily, stressing that these CSC-holders are respectable people in Coron and that their CSCs are as legal as the CADT or CADT of the Tagbanua. She claimed:

“Why would the Tagbanua cry foul when in fact they were the ones who were peddling their lands for a long time now?”^{xxv}

This claim attempts to portray the Tagbanua as agents of their own problems, and not as blameless victims of environmental inequality. The claim implies that the Tagbanua are equally responsible for the socio-historical processes that resulted in their current struggles. The policy conflict between the CSCs and the CADT application was clarified by an NCIP representative:

“The CSC-holders will still be allowed until the end of their contracts. Then the Tagbanua will determine if they will still allow these claimants to renew their contracts [by 2020].”^{xxvi}

Nonetheless, NCIP also claimed that the delay in processing Tara's application was due to the difficulty of the Tagbanua to raise funds for processing. The cost of processing and validation activities was PhP 1.6 M (USD 40,000), which was shared by: a. NCIP with PhP 600,000 (USD 15,000) for personnel allowance and office supplies; b. Saragpunta with PhP 400,000 (USD 10,000) in kind for transportation and supplies; and, c. the Tagbanua with PhP 600,000 (USD 15,000) in kind for food, transportation and labor.

Negotiating Indigenous Identity

Because of some observable changes in the supposed lifestyle of the Tagbanua in Coron, local officials also expressed apprehension in classifying Tagbanua as indigenous. For local officials, the Tagbanua have already abandoned their pre-colonial character, and appear mainstream due to their practice of a conventional mode of governance and their conversion to Christianity. An official verbalized these sentiments:

“They no longer live like they used to be. They are engaged in pebble gathering in their islands. They also do cyanide fishing. They sell their islands when they need money. They are no longer indigenous in their ways.”^{xxvii}

Contestation over authenticity of identity reveals the racist underpinnings of contention against indigenous peoples in the Philippines. Indigeneity becomes a crucial consideration not only in the processing of the Tara CADT application, but also in convincing the state of the collective capacity of Tagbanua to

protect and manage their ancestral domains. For local government, any substantial modification to Tagbanua culture implies wilful abandonment of their indigeneity and intricate relationship with the environment, which is regarded as their only distinction from mainstream natural resource managers.

This of course ignores the role of the government in facilitating access by outsiders to Tagbanua resources, whether by deceit or bureaucratic mechanisms which contradict those being used by the Tagbanua to protect their culture and resources. Indeed, what is telling about the case of the Tagbanua is that there are deliberate yet subtle procedures to leverage conflicting policies to the advantage of outsiders. Local officials use such contradictions to delay the recognition of Tagbanua rights to self-governance and determination. The clustering of the Tagbanua in separate CADT applications has divided them into more manageable groups. This did not only dissipate the potentially strong movement that could have boosted a robust collective identity among the Tagbanua, but also undercut the ability of the Tagbanua to secure exclusive rights to their claims where outsiders had established their own claims. Insofar as questions about the authenticity of Tagbanua claims to indigeneity underlie state justifications to approve claims by outsiders and reject claims by the Tagbanua, environmental inequality concerning control over Tagbanua resources is racialized.

The case of the Tagbanua provides an illustration of racialization and environmental inequality in the Philippines writ large. The sociohistorical processes that engender environmental inequality among indigenous people in the Philippines are rooted from the racialization process that has adversely marginalized indigenous people in terms of social and environmental benefits. Indigenous peoples are subjected to environmental inequality and eventually injustice (Varga *et al.* 2002), because they have been displaced and racialized historically in the course of state-building (Maybury-Lewis 2002).

In the Philippines, such racialization process is tied to its colonial history which targeted the ancestral domains of indigenous people under the premise of the Regalian doctrine. The Regalian doctrine was used by the colonial state in subdividing the Filipinos into two categories wherein the newly baptized Christians were given the privilege to occupy the lowlands, while the unbaptized ‘primitive’ tribes were pushed to the uplands (Constantino 1978; Dressler 2009). This policy systematically drove indigenous peoples out of their ancestral domains, which marginalized them socially, economically and politically and represented them as cultural minority communities. Thus, while the indigenous cultural communities were situated on higher elevation, they were situated socially and ethnically in the lowest rung of Philippine society. To discriminate them further from the mainstream Philippine society, the indigenous peoples in the Philippines are portrayed as traditional, unrefined, and uneducated non-Christian communities (McKay 2006).

Amidst such struggles, a Tagbanua leader in Tara named Kultit expressed hope that their resistance would translate into a legacy of commitment towards intergenerational equity:

“We will never forget that our islands are not enough to sustain us... our lands and our seas are linked. And our seas need our help to recover so that they could nourish future generations. That is why we continue to fight for our ancestral domain.”

This declaration proved prophetic, as the CADT application of the Tagbanua in Tara cluster was finally approved by the NCIP in August 2011, pending internal review of the same agency. The success of this grassroots activism relied on the persistence of the Tagbanua, procedural intervention of the state at the national-level in the form of the NCIP, and NGO assistance in filing and processing of the CADT application. The Tagbanua confronted these environmental inequalities by demanding local participation, and transformed themselves into active agents in dealing with environmental inequalities.

CONCLUSION

Environmental inequalities among the Tagbanua in Coron focus on issues concerning land grabbing and illegal fishing that are insufficiently addressed by the state at the local level, through a combination of inaction, contradictory policies, and collusion with private development interests. As conservation measures become more legalistic and bureaucratic, indigenous peoples become more vulnerable. Legal instruments are easily accessed by well-heeled claimants who can maneuver through official channels. The higher the market value of land, the greater the competition among stakeholders and the more indigenous people are portrayed as racial charlatans and incompetent resource managers. At least in the Philippines, at the national level, the state attempts to deal sincerely with indigenous peoples by promoting governance over ancestral domains. For their part, indigenous groups have sought to form alliances with NGOs and sympathetic state agencies at the national level in order to reassert their cultures and protect their territorial claims.

Nonetheless, since indigenous groups engage outside organizations for support and seek to navigate bureaucratic channels to substantiate their claims, outsiders with contesting claims also invoke such tactics to doubt claims of authentic indigeneity. Questions on the authenticity of indigenous identity in turn serve to cast doubt on indigenous capacity to implement natural resource management. Such notions however coincide with racist stereotypes of indigenous people as static, traditional, and incompetent to manage natural resources (McKay 2006).

There are thus compounded contradictions that threaten indigenous claims, stemming from colonial exploitation to contradictory state policies to circular argumentation about indigeneity and the validity of claims to manage natural resources. Thus, it is difficult to pinpoint culpability to stakeholders without close investigation situated in a deeper historical context, recognition of outside development interests,

the multiple and contradictory roles of the state, and an understanding of racial stereotypes.

The EIF perspective proves useful in these instances as it does not prejudge straightaway a situation as injustice but requires a more thorough historical discussion that takes into account the agency of multiple stakeholders. It also proves analytically valuable in understanding the emergence of environmental inequalities in Third World conditions as it captures the sociohistorical dynamics involved in contradictions, whether in state policy or racialized stereotypes. Finally, by the same token, it also permits an account of how indigenous and other minority groups respond to contemporary threats as agents who can also make use of contradictory policies and turn them to their advantage in reasserting their claims over natural resources.

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- ^{vi}MBF 2006-2010
- ^{vii}MBF 2006-2010
- ^{viii}Barangay Resolution No. 2002-7 of Tara, Coron, Palawan
- ^{ix}ELAC. 2006. Impact of Sanctuary in Lagas Island, Tara Coron, Palawan
- ^xInterview with a DENR employee in June 2006
- ^{xi}Interview in June 2006 with Edna, elderly female Tagbanua
- ^{xii}Letter of Intent 1260. 1982. Integrated Social Forestry Program under which CSCs were awarded to *bona fide* upland farmers
- ^{xiii}Elders' Affidavits which were submitted for CADT application in 1999
- ^{xiv}Interview in June 2006 with Norma, elderly female Tagbanua
- ^{xv}Elder's Affidavit, 1999
- ^{xvi}DENR. Statistics of Coron, Palawan.nd.
- ^{xvii}Resolution No. 12-1997 of the Office of the Sangguniang Bayan of Coron, Palawan
- ^{xviii}Small group discussion with elderly men in June 2006
- ^{xix}Small group discussion with local officials in June 2006; a follow-up interview in 2012
- ^{xx}An umbrella organization that unifies all the people's organizations/ foundations formed by the Tagbanuas in Coron, and duly registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission in 2000
- ^{xxi}Smallest administrative unit in the Philippines
- ^{xxii}Small group discussion with the Tagbanua women in June 2006
- ^{xxiii}Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim R04-CADC-134 covering 22,284 hectares issued by DENR in 1998
- ^{xxiv}CADT R04-COR-0204-022 issued by the NCIP in 2004 for Banuang Daan and Cabugao, Coron covering 24,520 hectares
- ^{xxv}Interview with a DENR official in June 2006; a follow-up interview in 2012
- ^{xxvi}Interview with NCIP employee in December 2012
- ^{xxvii}Interview with the LGU official in June 2006

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge the help extended to me by Dr. Stephen G. Perz, the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs of the University of the Philippines Los Baños, Ms. Anna Joyce Pasol, and Mr. Teodorico Marquez Jr.