



Lessons from the Margin: indigenous peace ecology

Lições da margem: paz ecológica indígena

Lecciones desde el margen: paz ecológica indígena



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Abstract

Humanity is confronted with several inter-related crises: ecological, social or humanitarian and growing violence, both direct and structural. Much evidence indicates that solutions implemented to resolve them, from development and modernisation to neoliberalism and sustainable development, have not just failed but paradoxically have exacerbated these crises. Inspired by the life-ways and practices of Indigenous peoples, especially the Orang Asli (Aborigines) in Malaysia, this paper outlines a peace ecology that combines peacebuilding with ecological regenerative strategies. The key contention is that subscribing to an Indigenous peace ecology will foster effective solutions to triple crises, entailing a paradigmatic shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric perception of nature, from hyper-individualism to a community-focus responsibility, from a competitive outlook to everything to one that is focused on empathy, cooperation, sharing and altruism, and from a growth-fetish to a needs-based regenerative lifestyle.

KEYWORDS: INDIGENOUS PEACE ECOLOGY • PEACEBUILDING • ECOLOGICAL REGENERATIVE STRATEGIES.

Resumo

As crises pelas quais a humanidade passa, sejam elas em âmbito ecológico, social ou humanitário, e relacionadas ao aumento da violência, tanto direta quanto estrutural, se inter-relacionam. Evidências indicam que as soluções formuladas para resolver as crises indicadas, desde o desenvolvimento e a modernização até o neoliberalismo e o desenvolvimento sustentável, não só fracassaram, mas, paradoxalmente, as exacerbaram. Inspirado nos modos de vida e práticas dos povos indígenas, especialmente dos Orang Asli (aborígenes) na Malásia, este artigo ressalta uma paz ecológica que mescla o *peacebuilding* com estratégias ecológicas regenerativas. Nesse contexto, parte-se da ideia de que, ao levar em consideração a paz ecológica indígena, serão fomentadas soluções efetivas para a tríplice crise (ecológica, social e humanitária), implicando uma mudança paradigmática – de uma percepção antropocêntrica da natureza a uma percepção ecocêntrica; do hiperindividualismo à responsabilidade focada na comunidade; de uma perspectiva competitiva àquela focada em empatia, cooperação, compartilhamento e altruísmo; e do fetiche relacionado ao crescimento a um estilo de vida regenerativo, baseado nas necessidades.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: PAZ ECOLÓGICA INDÍGENA • *PEACEBUILDING* • ESTRATÉGIAS ECOLÓGICAS REGENERATIVAS.

Resumen

Las crisis las cuales la humanidad se enfrenta, sean ellas en el contexto ecológico, social o humanitario, y relacionadas al aumento de la violencia, directa o estructural, están interrelacionadas. Evidencias señalan que las soluciones planteadas para resolverlas (las crisis señaladas), desde el desarrollo y modernización al neoliberalismo y el desarrollo sostenible, no solamente fracasaron, pero además, en paradoja, las intensificaron. Inspirados en los modos de vida y prácticas de los pueblos indígenas, especialmente dos Orang Asli (aborígenes) en Malasia, este artículo destaca una paz ecológica que mezcla el *peacebuilding* con estrategias ecológicas regenerativas. En ese contexto, se plantea la idea de que al considerarse la paz ecológica indígena serán fomentadas soluciones efectivas para la tríplice crisis (ecológica, social y humanitaria), implicando en un cambio paradigmático - de una percepción antropocéntrica de la naturaleza a una percepción ecocéntrica, de la hiperindividualidad a la responsabilidad centrada en la comunidad, de una perspectiva competitiva a la perspectiva centrada en la empatía, cooperación, la solidaridad y el altruismo, y del fetiche relacionado al crecimiento a un estilo de vida regenerativo, basado en las necesidades.

PALABRAS CLAVE: PAZ ECOLÓGICA INDÍGENA • *PEACEBUILDING* • ESTRATEGIAS ECOLÓGICAS REGENERATIVAS.



INTRODUCTION: WORLD IN CRISIS

Humanity is confronted with several inter-related crises. Of these, the most challenging is the increasing degradation and destabilization of the natural environment. Climate change and the concomitant rise of sea levels are being felt across the planet and are predicted to intensify in the years to come. There is also a growing manifestation of violence, such as armed clashes, civil wars, and ethnic and religious “cleansing” in so many parts of the world. Interpersonal violence on the streets and at homes is also on the rise. There is also a growing prevalence of less direct and visible forms of violence, known as structural violence: social inequality, poverty, alienation, racism, bigotry, discrimination, social injustice, and population displacement. These interlocked ecological, social and humanitarian crises are by no means new, but they have intensified in recent years despite policies and programs to resolve them, from development and modernisation, popular in the 1950s to 1970s to neoliberalism and sustainable development from the 1980s onwards. The continued prevalence and intensification of these crises suggest that these solutions have not worked. In fact, there is insurmountable evidence revealing that these purported remedies have exacerbated the problems they were meant to solve. In their critical assessment of neoliberal development models, Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick (2009, p.278) rightly contend, “the future existence of the world’s people depends on breaking this utterly deficient style of developmental thought”.¹

It is my contention that a growth-focused economy sets in motion what I have labelled the 4-G (Growth, Glut, Greed and Grievance) syndrome. Several decades of neoliberalism have forged an obsession with economic growth, export orientation, free trade, and privatization of public utilities. Governments are evaluated based on how well they have done to facilitate a growing economy, measured by the gross domestic product (GDP), i.e. the total amount of goods and services produced in a country. As the neoliberal economic mantra goes, GDP growth will lead to increased national wealth which reciprocally, through the trickledown effect, will eliminate poverty. This in turn will spur an aversion of grievance. However and paradoxically, a different scenario has materialized. Growth mania has led to the production of much more goods and services than necessary for an economy or society to survive or thrive, resulting concomitantly to a glut of products. It has also led to an accumulative tendency leading to greed;² a scenario where producers are driven to expand supply of commodities to maximize profits and through consumerism, purchasers of these commodities feel or are made to feel unsatisfied with what they have bought and yearn for more. The cycle of production and consumption serves to sustain surplus accumulation. In the process of capitalist expansion and heightened consumerism, many communities have been aggrieved because of being marginalized, exploited, excluded, discriminated, displaced and dispossessed. To put it dialectically, the greed of some leads to the grievance of many and as numerous studies have revealed, greed and grievance are two key causal factors underlying the outbreak and persistence of violent conflict in several parts of world.³

How might we break away from this syndrome? From the Club of Rome’s “Limits to Growth” and Schumacher’s “Small is Beautiful” in the 1970s to Herman Daly’s “steady state” economics to the more recent degrowth models of voluntary simplicity, we have been offered a range of proposals such as the need to downscale production and consumption and/or the shift away from a growth-focused economics to an ecologically friendly “sustainable development” or ecological economics or Buddhist economics of frugality. While it is without any doubt that these are indeed desirable aspirations, I would maintain that what is required is a new imaginary, one that goes beyond economics and is firmly grounded in a social ecology that disrupts the

¹ There is a large corpus of critical work on neoliberalism. See, for example, Brown (2015), Chomsky (1998), Davies (2014), Davis (2007), Harvey (2005), Klein (2006).

² Much has been said, especially in political economic literature, as to how the control of the means and relations of production leads to increased wealth and power in the hands of a few at the expense of many who are exploited and condemned to a lower strata in a hierarchical class system. Striving to accumulate as much as possible has been linked to the purported innateness of greed among humans. Greed, I argue, is not an innate human quality as it is not a social fact in many cultures around the world, particularly cultures that value egalitarianism.

³ See, for example, Berdal and Malone (2000), Call (2010), Collier and Hoeffler (2004), Korf (2006), Murshed and Tadjoeeddin (2009).



human-nature dichotomy. As Fikret Berkes (2008, p.252) has eloquently stated, what is required is “a new philosophy that recognizes ecological limits and the unity of humans and nature and strives to satisfy social as well as economic needs”.

To create this “new philosophy”, I contend that it may be worthwhile to salvage old lifeways and cultural practices to construct new effective solutions for the crises confronting humanity. Drawing from my anthropological research spanning more than three decades on the Orang Asli, Malaysia's aborigines,⁴ I will outline several cultural aspects that can be extrapolated to create social and ecologically sound paradigms, philosophies and practices. Taking cue from the critical scholarship of philosophers, such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos in his “Epistemologies of the South” project⁵ and intellectual cum activists movements like the Degrowth movement,⁶ I formulate a holistic model of an Indigenous peace ecology which represents a radical shift from the growth-fetish economism of mainstream neoliberalism to solidarity economics focused on radical generosity, from an anthropocentric environmentalism to an eco-centric habitus, and from an aggressive, aggrandising and competitive value system to a peaceable, cooperative, and nonviolent social life. The irony is that this time-honored Orang Asli model, which as I will show has much to offer in our quest to solve the triple crises, has been grossly undermined or demolished by state-sponsored development and its attendant process of market integration and commoditization in many Orang Asli villages in the past several decades.⁷

Anthropologists have for a very long time offered alternative models of social life drawn from their studies of Indigenous communities that maintain healthy social and ecological life ways.⁸ While a “return to the native” or seeking “tribal wisdom” may run the risk of being dismissed or derided as romanticist or utopian idealism, I argue that particular aspects of Indigenous social life are of immense epistemological value for rethinking and re-formulating neoliberal and sustainable development policies and paradigms from one that negatively impacts on humanity and nature to one that can lead to a better life for all.⁹ Such policies and paradigms would obviously need to be appropriately modified or adapted to suit the social scale and population size and density of “modern” social life. It must be stressed however that the “lessons from the margins” are not meant to be simply normatively prescriptive; they also shed light on the proximate causes of the problems that confront modern societies and humanity at large. They offer, in other words, a critique of modes of living that bring about and reproduce poverty, inequality, violence and ecological degradation. Let me elaborate on this point: For a deeper and fuller understanding as to why inequality exists, it is necessary in my view to appreciate how some cultures can foster equity and egalitarianism. To avoid or avert or transform conflict which could lead to collective violence, it is important to make sense of how people are able to live peacefully and harmoniously with one another. I will now outline two broad theoretical pillars of Indigenous peace ecology, namely ecological regeneration and peace ecology, before elaborating on Orang Asli peace ecology as a case illustration.

4 This paper draws substantially from two of my recent publications focused on what lessons can be discerned from the Malaysian Aboriginal traditional habitus: Gomes (2012, 2015).

5 See the four volumes published as part of the project on “Reinventing Social Emancipation: Towards New Manifestoes”: Santos (2005, 2007, 2010) and Santos et al. (2008). The “manifesto” of this project is outlined in Santos' (2014) recent publication, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*.

6 The degrowth (or *decroissance* in French) movement started in France in 2008 with a conference in Paris on “Economic De-growth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity” and since has spread to Italy and Spain. In 2010, de-growth theorists met in Barcelona and added environmental concerns to the movement advocating the concept of “sustainable degrowth”. Key proponents of degrowth include Serge Latouche, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Joan Martinez-Alier, Federico Demaria, Giorgos Kallis, and Giacomo D'Alisa. See, for example, D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis (2014), Latouche (2004, 2009), Martínez-Alier et al. (2010), Georgescu-Roegen (1971); and for a Marxist critique of this movement, see Foster (2011).

7 Orang Asli are often viewed as people living in a different time and on the peripheries of the modern world. This view has undergirded state-sponsored development projects explicitly aimed at bringing the benefits of modernity to the Orang Asli communities. Much of my research has focused on critical assessments of such development efforts and published in the following books: Dentan et al. (1997), Gomes (2004, 2007).

8 See, for example, Sahlins (1972). Sahlins coined the label “the original affluent society” to refer to hunters and gatherers on the basis that such groups were able to satisfy with ease all their wants with minimal amount of time allocated to work and without suffering deprivation. It is worth noting that this work is listed as one of the sources of inspiration for the De-growth movement, see Martínez-Alier et al. (2010, p.1743).

9 As a normative reformulation of the concept of development, Peet and Hartwick (2009) suggest defining development as efforts directed towards “making a better life for everyone”. A better life is one where people are able to meet basic needs, that is “sufficient food to maintain good health; a safe, healthy place in which to live; affordable services available to everyone; and being treated with dignity and respect” (p.1).



FROM SUSTAINABILITY TO ECOLOGICAL REGENERATION

Like neoliberalism, sustainable development has also attracted much criticism. Sustainable development owes its popularity to the Brundtland Commission, set up in 1983, that coupled development with sustainability to form the concept of sustainable development defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Sustainable Development, 1987, p.42). Critics have highlighted that after three decades of sustainable development, we now have more pollution, greater biodiversity loss, and climate change which suggests that it has failed.

Sustainable development is commonly regarded as the journey with sustainability as its destination. Sustainability has become the buzz-word of our times. Governments and civil society alike use the term in conjunction with their policies and programs to make them appear ecologically sound or socially acceptable. It has come to mean different things to different people to an extent that it has become a meaningless concept while its parent paradigm, sustainable development, has been deemed an oxymoron because the goals of sustainability and development, which commonly means economic growth, are inherently contradictory (Redclift, 2005). But the most serious issue with sustainable development is that it is a hegemonic ploy to maintain the status quo and to continue the global ideological domination by western institutions and experts. As Medard Gabel (2015) indicates:

Sustainable Development is a half-vast approach to vast problems. Its purpose, to make life on this planet sustainable, is a noble disguise for the maintenance of the status quo. When the status quo includes hundreds of millions of acres of degraded to destroyed farmland and leveled rainforest, depleted to exhausted fisheries and aquifers, toxics choked streams, decreasing biodiversity, and a changing climate, sustainability is simply not acceptable.

However, sustainability and sustainable development policies continue to be advocated as the panacea for ecological degradation and climate change as in the recent UN-endorsed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seem to have been embraced by multilateral agencies, governments, civil societies and academic institutions all over the world (United Nations, [2015?]).

Recognizing that the “doing less harm” approach of sustainability is inadequate to solve the severe ecological degradation, there is a growing call to go beyond sustainability and adopt a strategy of ecological regeneration.¹⁰ Advocators of ecological regeneration contend that humans have degraded ecosystems to such an extent making it impossible for these to regenerate naturally. Hence, rather than simply minimizing or stopping such environmental degradation as prescribed in sustainable development strategies, they maintain that what is needed are efforts to repair, resuscitate or improve the degraded environments to enable nature to take its course. In other words, regenerative practice requires humans to modify the environment like planting native species or building dams to trap run-off water to revive wet lands or improving the condition of soils by adding worms or mulching with compost rather than simply preserving or conserving nature to revive or resuscitate degraded ecosystems. Now to the other pillar of Indigenous Peace Ecology.

¹⁰ There is a growing number of scholar-activists advocating ecological regeneration as a more comprehensive and effective solution to ecological degradation than sustainable development or sustainability. See, for example, Giradet's (2013) opinion piece in *The Guardian*. Several theorists in the field of architecture have recommended a shift from sustainability to ecological regeneration in building and urban design. See, for example, Cole (2012), Plessis (2012), Mang and Reed (2012), Reed (2007), Robinson and Cole (2015).



PEACE ECOLOGY

Peace ecology combines concerns in relation to peacebuilding with ecological and social regeneration. Rather than treating peace, nonviolence, social justice, protection of communities, ecological sustainability, restoration of degraded environments, recognition of human rights and the rights of species and nature as separate issues, peace ecology considers them as interconnected concerns and aspirational goals. As Christos Kyrrou (2007, p.81) notes, "Peace Ecology values the preservation and harmonious interaction of societies with nature as peace; at the same time, it values a society striving to maintain positive peace as an ecological asset".

While peace ecology is a relatively new field of study and activist genre, it is an old practice of many Indigenous communities. Many of these communities are no longer able to continue this time-honored practice, due to being entangled in a capitalist market-oriented system, but several, like the Orang Asli, still cling on to some its aspects and in others, we are witnessing the revival and flourishing of Indigenous peace ecology. In several Latin American countries, especially in Bolivia and Ecuador, Indigenous peace ecology has taken center stage, in the form of *Buen vivir* (Spanish for good living), extrapolated from the Quechua concept *Sumak Kawsay* and similar concepts from other Indigenous peoples in the region.¹¹ Catherine Walsh (2010, p.18) indicates that,

buen vivir denotes, organizes, and constructs a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and on the spatial-temporal-harmonious totality of existence. That is, on the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledges, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living.

Buen Vivir has been accorded due recognition by being enshrined in the Bolivian and Ecuadorian Constitutions. In the Bolivian National Plan for *el Buen Vivir* (2009-2013), *Buen Vivir* is expressed as:

A wager for change from the demands for equality and social justice; from the recognition, validation, and dialogue of peoples and their cultures, knowledges, and modes of life. *Buen vivir* seeks to achieve the satisfaction of necessities, the attainment of the quality of life and a dignified death, to love and be loved, the healthy flourishing of all, in peace and harmony with nature and the indefinite prolongation of human cultures. [...] It recognizes the need for free time for contemplation and emancipation, and that real liberties, opportunities, capacities, and potentialities of individuals grow and flourish in the manner that they permit a simultaneous achievement of that which society, territories, diverse collective identities and each one – seen as both an individual and UNIVERSAL HUMAN BEING – value as the objective of a desirable life. It obliges us to reconstruct the public in order to recognize, understand, and value one another – as diverse but equals – with the goal of making possible reciprocity and mutual recognition, and with this, the self-realization and construction of a social and shared future. (Walsh, 2010, p. 19)

Indigenous communities that abide by the principles of peace ecology or the cosmovision of *buen vivir* are typically in touch with each other and with nature, concomitantly averting social and ecological alienation, a growing phenomenon in the developed world.¹² From them, we can learn to re-appreciate the interconnectedness of life and reconnect us with nature. In the process, shift our focus from the abstract to the sensuous, sentimental and empathic aspects of social life.

¹¹ Several recent publications on *Buen Vivir* include Beling et al. (2018), González and Vázquez (2015), Gudynas (2011), Kothari, DeMaria, and Acosta (2014), Merino (2016), Thomson (2011), Vanhulst and Beling (2014), Villalba (2013), Walsh (2010).

¹² It must be stated that not all Indigenous communities adhere to sound ecological principles. Many of these communities have adopted environmentally destructive practices primarily because of economic transformation, religious conversion, and entanglement with modernity. The discursive risks of representing Indigenous communities as "close to nature" must be taken into consideration, as several scholars have considered such romanticised representations, or what Larry Lohman has labeled "Green



As I will outline in the pages that follow, in these communities living in peace and harmony with each other and with nature, nonviolence, egalitarian ethic, deliberative democracy, solidarity economics centered on gift-giving and sharing, and ecological regeneration are intertwined and interconnected aspects of social life. I argue that it is precisely these social aspects that have enabled such communities to achieve “good living”. To re-build and maintain a peaceful and ecologically regenerative world, we need to learn from people who have developed cultures that avert and avoid conflict. In such cultures, people are socially inclusive, adhere to a nonviolent ethos, maintain civil interactions with other people, treat fellow humans and nature with respect, value biological and cultural diversity, and uphold the principles of social justice and equality.¹³ I shall now elaborate on these social and ecological values of the Orang Asli, Egalitarian Ethos, Deliberative Democracy and Solidarity Economics.

There are at least three aspects of Orang Asli social life that serve to forge and maintain intra-community egalitarian ethos and habitus. First, they adhere to a political system that is socially inclusive and truly democratic. Power is communally controlled and does not rest in the hands of one or a few individuals or a group. Second, Orang Asli engage in intensive intra-group sharing and generalised reciprocity that works to grant, albeit indirectly, equal access to everyone in the village to its resources as well as function as a levelling mechanism to balance off inequities in production or opportunities for production. Third, Orang Asli traditionally subscribe to a communal-based property ownership system that hinders monopoly or control of resources in the hands of any individual or group. I begin with the political system.

Orang Asli communities are not acephalous; some sort of system of village leadership or headmanship is found in most communities. However, people have equal access to power or means of coercion. As a form of deliberative democracy, most village decisions are made consensually and an attempt by any member of the village to dominate or coerce fellow villagers is invariably scorned and treated with contempt and thus strongly discouraged. In the face of coercion, they will vote with their feet. People generally abhor aggrandising and belligerent behaviour from fellow villagers as they are fully cognisant of the disruptive potentialities of such behaviour on social cohesion. They engage empathically with their fellow community members and prioritize the interests of the community over their own interests or desires. This is in stark contrast from the competitive “go getter” social personhood that a growth-focus neoliberal capitalism encourages, stimulates or rewards.

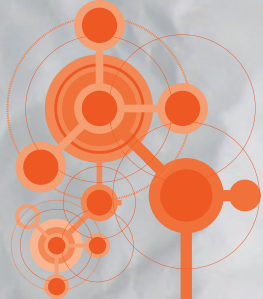
Social cohesion among the Orang Asli is also reinforced through intra-community interdependence and one of the ways they do this is through sharing and reciprocal obligations with fellow members of the community or village. Furthermore, as several anthropologists have maintained, sharing helps to buttress egalitarianism as it serves through its levelling mechanism to hinder accumulation and reciprocally operates to minimize inequalities of wealth, power and prestige.¹⁴ During my field research among the Orang Asli, I have observed people sharing food and other goods obtained from their farming and foraging regularly. They also frequently shared market-bought stuff among their fellow villagers.¹⁵ Their sharing practice is governed by the principle of generalized reciprocity where gift-giving occurs within a group of people and the obligations to make a return gift are shared by the members of the group. In other words, the donor's generosity is likely to be reciprocated by someone else in the group of people involved in reciprocal exchanges rather than a return gift from his or her recipient. It is abundantly clear that Orang Asli accord a great deal of importance to sharing which appears to be strongly advocated for moral reasons and not just plainly economic. Young children are socialized to share their food and belongings with their neighbours; selfish people are often subjected to ridicule and malicious gossip.

Orientalism”, to be politically hazardous since the images have often been used to justify and legitimize “development” that adversely affect such communities. See, for example, Brosius (1999) and Lohman (1993).

¹³ For more information about such societies, see <<http://www.peacefulsocieties.org/>>.

¹⁴ See, for example, Woodburn (1980).

¹⁵ For details, see Gomes (2011).



It is worth noting that sharing and the interdependence that it fosters do not come in the way of the expression of individual autonomy among the Orang Asli. This adherence to autonomy as Robert Dentan (2010, p.141) indicates “precludes long term commitments and thus maximizes flexibility in social groupings, so that access to territory is open to any people who hang around long enough, whatever their ethnic identity or linguistic affiliation”. Being autonomous individually in this sense is not synonymous to the kind of methodological individualism propagated by neo-classical or neo-liberal economics. Orang Asli in their social conduct are not driven by individual economic rationalism epitomized by the “what’s in it for me” attitude or the profit motive of “trying to gain the most out of an action or interaction” that neoliberalism promotes.

In respect to access to and ownership of property, Orang Asli adhere to a communal system of ownership. Like in the case of intentional communities in the West, such as cohousing or eco-villages,¹⁶ everyone in a village has equal access and rights to the land and its resources. As an ethnographic case, I will elaborate the traditional system of land “ownership” among the Semai, one of the Orang Asli Indigenous groups I have researched.

Semai traditionally share control and ownership over a specified village territory (*negriik*). Demarcated by streams and ridges, the *negriik* is usually named after the main river of its drainage system. Each Semai village has exclusive control over a *negriik* where its members build their homes and engage in their subsistence pursuits but do not have exclusive rights to land unless it is a swidden that they cleared and are still using. In other words, individual Semai have rights in common with their fellow villagers. However, there is a metaphysical aspect to this “ownership” system that I shall elaborate in the context of Semai farming.

During my field research in the early 1980s, I observed that a Semai villager intending to cultivate a swidden will select a forested area, usually of secondary type, based on several ecological features, such as the type of vegetation in the area and the appearance of soil texture. Upon deciding on a suitable location, the intending cultivator will clear a small area of about one square metre around the centre of the site and then standing at the clearing will announce aloud the intention to plant a swidden (*selai*) at the site. This announcement is meant as a request to the ground spirit (*nyani kawul*) believed to inhabit and control the area for permission to use the land. The response to the request, according to Semai belief, will be relayed through the dreams of the intending cultivator while he or she is asleep.

According to Semai dream theory, the head soul (*ruway*) is believed to travel into the supernatural realm, and its experiences and encounters in this “world” form the content of the dreams. The dreams are then interpreted for omens, believed to represent the response of the *nyani kuwul* to the request. Omens are classified into good and bad, and obviously good omens are taken to mean approval to cultivate a swidden on the land in question. Once “permission” is granted, the plot is cleared, allowed to dry and then burned, but with great care and respect for the land to avoid annoying the spiritual custodian. The area first cleared is turned into a shrine or altar where rituals are performed to placate the land spirit and to seek its good favour, especially in protecting the rice soul. Semai, like many other Southeast Asian peoples, believe that the rice plant possesses a soul that is timid, fragile and easily frightened. Any contravention of the “laws of nature”, such as the degradation of the forest through over-utilization or excessive exploitation, is said to upset the *nyani kawul*, which is believed to vent its anger by casting a spell on the crops or the cultivators, causing crop failure or personal injury.

This belief in the existence of the land spirit and the sort of practices associated with seeking permission appear to be common among Indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia. For the Lua of Thailand, Peter Kunstadter (1983) discovered that the people believe in the existence of the Lord of the Land and noted that:

¹⁶ For a recent study of ecovillages, see Chitewere (2010).



Swidden land is a community resource, “belonging” to the spirits as a result of their long and continued occupancy, but to which the Lua villagers also have some claim because of their long-term residence. Swidden land is periodically (though temporarily) accessible to villagers through payment to the spirits. (p. 143)

Among the Igorot of the Philippines, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz (2001, p. 285), an Igorot researcher and activist, observed:

We do not consider ourselves the owners of the ancestral territory and resources found therein. We are but the stewards, trustees, or custodians. The beings in the spirit-world and deities are the real owners of the land. Thus, it is imperative to consult these spirits and deities when land is used, converted, or transferred and when resources are harvested, planted, or hunted. The forms of consultation range from a simple petition, prayer, or chant to elaborate rituals in which every village member participates.

Interestingly, Tauli-Corpuz (2001, p.287) goes on to say that “the beings in the spirit world are responsible for protecting the natural world from human greed”.

Like the Igorot, what Semai have are usufruct rights to land that they obtain from the land-owning ground spirit. They then are simply stewards of the land rather than owners. But they believe that they must abide by the strict rules of nature to survive. An individual or family may use the swidden for one or two seasons. During this period the cultivators have exclusive rights to the plot and its harvest, but once they cease to use the land it reverts to communal property, controlled by the village but “owned” by the land spirit. However, the cultivators still retain “ownership” of whatever fruit trees they have planted on the plot. There are at least two ecologically sound principles associated with usufruct rights. First, people do not hold more land than what they can use. Second, given the ecological imperative of fallowing in a rotational form of agriculture, it would be in the interest of cultivators to take good care of the land for future use and for the use of future generations.

While it would be naive to argue that such forms of land tenure could be adhered to universally, let alone be appropriated as a system to replace what is commonplace today ie the institution of private property, there are several interesting aspects of the underlying ideology (or principles) that could provide moorings for a re-conceptualisation of human-nature relationship. Land, in Indigenous conception, is “owned” not by humans but by supernatural beings. This principle removes absolute rights to land from the individual and locates these rights in some supernatural force which serves to sanction “proper” treatment of land and nature. This is a common practice among many Indigenous communities. Wills-Johnson (2010) observes that among the Australian Aborigines the “diffuse power of control over resources”, “reciprocity”, and “relative equality in and indeed limited importance place upon material wealth” are several social practices that do not just foster social cohesion and solidarity economics but are also ecologically virtuous.

ECO-CENTRISM AND REGENERATION

Indigenous peoples are generally noted for their traditional ecological knowledges and practices that enable them to live harmoniously with the natural environment. As the anthropologist, Susan Crate (2006, p.289) observes, “Indigenous cultures, by nature, possess a relatively high capacity for adaptation to uncertainty and change due to both a generalist and time-tested knowledge of subsistence survival, and a propensity for innovation in the context of environmental, sociocultural, political, and economic change”. She also notes that “for Indigenous peoples, sustainability goes beyond mainstream sustainability parameters of protecting resources via self-government, land tenure and rights, comanagement, and self-determination” (Crate, 2006, p.312). Going beyond sustainability, as mentioned earlier, entails ecological regeneration.



Orang Asli practice of ecological regeneration is particularly evident in their farming system mentioned above. Swidden agriculture or “slash and burn farming” is widely practised among Orang Asli, but it is viewed with disdain by government and forestry officials who consider it an environmentally degrading and destructive form of agriculture. However, there is insurmountable evidence that suggests that this form of agriculture is well suited to tropical forested areas (Cairns, 2015; Kunstadter; Chapman; Sabhasri, 1978; Spencer, 1966). As several researchers have indicated, what swidden farmers do is imitate the natural processes of forest disruption and re-generation in their cultivation and fallow cycle (Conklin, 1957; Cramb et al., 2009; Fox et al., 2009; Padoch, 2007; Schmidt-Vogt et al., 2009). Even modern agroforestry and permaculture have adopted aspects of swidden farming techniques, but this is rarely acknowledged. Underlying the environmental adaptability of traditional swidden agriculture as practised by the Orang Asli and other such peoples in Southeast Asia is traditional and experientially grounded ecological knowledge.

Orang Asli subscribe to an eco-centric perspective, which is in stark contrast to the modern capitalist anthropocentric view of the environment where human needs and welfare take precedence over nature. Furthermore, unlike most, if not all, modern societies, Orang Asli are not alienated from nature. The differing perspectives on the forest are particularly instructive. As being forest fringe or forest dwellers, the natural environment of the Orang Asli is the tropical rain forest. While most Orang Asli today are rubber and oil palm smallholders primarily because of government-sponsored development and resettlement programmes, in the past they have relied on the forests for most of their subsistence needs obtained through hunting, gathering and swidden farming. They however still engage, albeit intermittently, in their traditional economic activities as well as collecting forest products for trade. The forests may not be economically as important to the Orang Asli today as before but the cultural significance of forests to the people appears to be unaltered.

Orang Asli generally perceive the forest as their parent and they its children: it provides and cares for them and “killing” the forest is tantamount to parricide. For the Batek, one of the Orang Asli ethnic sub-groups, Kirk Endicott (1979) found that forest-human relations are metaphorized in ritual and everyday discourse as an “adult-child caring” with the forest as a parent to be treated with affection and gratitude for its nature’s “gifts”. This differs starkly from traditional western or modern view whereby as Nurit Bird-David (1993, p.121) indicates: “Nature and humankind have been ‘seen’ as detached and in opposition. Furthermore, they have been viewed within a ‘subject-object’ frame: nature ‘seen’ as a resource to be utilized, controlled, possessed, dominated, managed and (more recently) looked after by humankind”.

Such a view is long-standing in western civilisation: from the Greek myths related to the fearsome Pan,¹⁷ the Lord of the Woods, to the many fairy tales (such as Hansel and Gretel and Red Riding Hood), the forest is the abode of malevolent beings, a dark, mysterious and foreboding place best avoided. In contrast, for Orang Asli, the forest is a supportive, nurturing, and friendly place.

Orang Asli eco-philosophy is also evident in the way they conceptualize history. In my attempt to learn about Orang Asli history, I focused on questions as to when past events and incidents that my respondents talked about had occurred. They, however, narrated stories of the past in relation to where, rather than when, these “took place”. This sort of historical consciousness is apparently common among Indigenous peoples. Among the Ilongot of the Philippines, Renato Rosaldo noted that Ilongot’s historical consciousness is spatialized rather than temporalized as in Western or modern historiography. Renato Rosaldo (1980, p. 15-16) observes:

Stories usually are a series of relatively autonomous episodes that are united, like beads on a string, by winding thread of continuous movement through space, rather than by a rising plot line that points towards its own resolution in a climax. At their most elemental,

¹⁷ In fact, the English word “panic” which means sudden, unreasoning, hysterical fear is derived from the name of this Greek deity.



Illongot stories may simply list a lifetime of place names where people have gardened or erected their houseposts. More elaborate stories, often about oratory, fishing, hunting, and headhunting, begin at home, move in gradual step-by-step fashion toward their destinations, and conclude with a quick return to the place of origin.

Like the Illongot, for Orang Asli the “events” in their history are inscribed in the landscape. Walking through the forest with Orang Asli was often also a “journey” into their past. Orang Asli would point to sites or landmarks and then relate stories of past events that have taken place there. This spatialization of history obviously gives more meaning to the environment. For Orang Asli then nature is not just a bearer of “resources” but also an archive of people’s history. Space is historized to become place coded with symbolic and social meanings. Seen this way one could say that the destruction of the forest that Orang Asli “own” or the dislocation or displacement of the people from their homelands is tantamount to an attempt to erase their history.

Apart from “nature as history”, for Orang Asli, as for many Indigenous communities, ecological knowledge, rather than existing as a separate field of knowledge or embodied in a distinct “discipline” as in western science, is embedded in their cultural system. Anthropologists have long recognized and documented this ethnographic fact. In a classic example of such a study, *Pigs for the Ancestors*, Roy Rappaport (1968) found a close relationship between rituals and ecology among the Tsembaga Maring of New Guinea. He revealed how ritual feasts among the Tsembaga functioned as a regulatory mechanism in maintaining balance in the ecological system.

Like the Tsembaga, Orang Asli ecological knowledge and conceptions are embedded in their traditional religious systems which can be described as “earthly” in the sense that they connect people with nature. In all the different Orang Asli religious systems, people believe in the existence of deities, spirits, elves and souls and all these in some way or the other are said to have ecological implications. As in the case of the ground dwelling spirit I discussed earlier, their spirits and deities demand that people live with nature rather than against nature. Another intriguing example of this is the Semai (one of the Orang Asli sub-groups) belief in the existence of a soul that they refer to as *kenah senlook*. This soul is part of the hunter and at the same time is intimately connected with the “laws” of nature: respect for fellow creatures, take only what you need, and the interconnectedness between humans, animals, spirits, and the environment. Semai believe that breaking any of these “laws” like over-hunting or excessive trapping of animals or treating game disrespectfully will drive the *kenah senlook* away leading to bad luck, mishap or misfortune. *Kenah senlook*, I would argue, is an idiom of nature that will express its wrath on humanity if the “laws” of nature are disregarded or contravened. The close nexus between religion and nature in Indigenous communities stands in sharp contrast with what has been referred to a “sky-centred religion” (Short, 1991, p.8). As Lynn White (apud Short, 1991, p.14) has argued, Judaeo-Christian theology “established a dualism between man and nature and insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends... made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects”.

Hence, Orang Asli spiritual beliefs, eco-philosophies, historical consciousness, land ownership principles, strong sense of environmental stewardship, imitation of natural processes as in their swiddening undergird the fact that Orang Asli, like many Indigenous peoples, see themselves as part of the natural environment and their strong sense of respect for nature. This is a fundamental facet of Indigenous peace ecology. I will now discuss the third aspect of Indigenous peace ecology: peaceability.

PEACEABILITY

Many Indigenous communities are renowned for their non-violence and peacefulness. In a website dedicated to peaceful societies (<https://cas.uab.edu/peacefulsocieties/>), 22 of the 25 societies featured are Indigenous peoples. Two Orang Asli



ethnic sub-groups, namely the Semai and the Batek, appear on the list. Non-violent behaviour and peaceability, the ability to live peacefully with others, are prevalent in all the eighteen sub-groups of Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. As Robert Dentan (1991, p.219), who authored a book on the Semai, appropriately entitled *The Semai: A Non-violent People of Malaya*, observes: “Nonviolence is so salient in Aslian everyday life that all the ethnographers who have worked there – whatever their nationality, gender, theoretical biases, or original scientific ‘problem’ – have wound up grappling with peaceability and its relationship with Aslian egalitarianism, ethnopsychology, and religious ideology”. Orang Asli nonviolence and peaceability are shaped by several of their social and cultural precepts and practices that I discussed above, namely egalitarianism, individual autonomy and social flexibility, and generalised reciprocity. To this I would add cooperation or in the words of Peter Kropotkin (1972), “mutual aid”. Cooperation creates a strong sense of interdependence and enhances social cohesion and bonding. These social aspects and practices are common to almost all peaceful societies, as documented in the numerous anthropological studies of such societies (Fry, 2006; Howell; Willis, 1989; Kemp; Fry, 2004; Pim, 2010; Sponsel; Gregor, 1994).

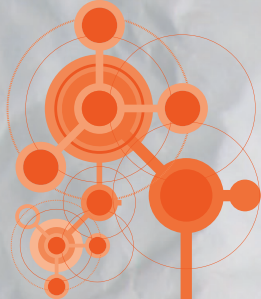
Orang Asli are fully aware of the fragility of social life in face of competition and conflict. People will at all cost avoid any escalation of conflict and resort to several conflict resolution strategies should a tiff or tryst arise. Among the Semai, individuals or parties in conflict with one another over an issue are called to an adjudication referred to as *bicharaa* where an elder or group of elders will invite the conflicting parties to express their case in turn. The *bicharaa* is attended by most people in the village as well as relatives of the different parties from other villages and whoever wishes to speak will be permitted to do so. The different views are expressed in a mutually respectful and non-acrimonious manner. It appears that the purpose of the *bicharaa* is to allow all the parties in conflict to speak their mind but with the aim of resolving the issue in a peaceful manner. I would describe the *bicharaa* as a talk fest where there are so many speeches and debates and eventually everyone is all talked out. The adjudicators will then offer their opinions where it is typical that both will be faulted. Fines may be imposed but these are usually small and rather insignificant. I have been told that the intention of the *bicharaa* is to seek a peaceful and socially undamaging solution to the issue and not to punish.

Orang Asli generally maintain peaceful relations with outsiders by resorting to one or another of several strategies. One effective tactic is flight or avoidance of contact with outsiders. As victims of slave raiders in the past and now as frequent targets for economic exploitation, Orang Asli are apparently aware that keeping a distance from outsiders, some who are likely to be dangerous, is a sensible way of surviving. Furthermore, walking away from a situation likely to cause a conflict is a sure way of preventing the situation escalating into a hostile confrontation, aggression or even violence. However, like the Paliyan in India, walking away for the Orang Asli is not interpreted as “backing down” or “being submissive” but “it is an unambiguous act of strength, strength in controlling oneself” (Gardner, 2010, p.192).

CONCLUSION

In a recent publication entitled *Peace Ecology*, Randall Amster (2015, p. 203) lists several proposed projects to foster peacebuilding and ecological regeneration and they include

community gardening, organic farming, collaborative water management, reinvigorating the commons, demonetizing our relationships, decommodifying the stuff of nature, preserving nature for its own sake and as a potential pathway to peacebuilding, navigating crises through mutual aid, forestalling crises through sustainable practices, resisting militarism on all levels, practicing compassionate and radical generosity, moving toward green energy sources, relocalizing the foundation of our lives, respecting diversity both socio-politically and ecologically, and working across borders of all types.



These are by no means lofty or utopian ideals. They are common practices of human society in the past and as I have documented in this paper, in many contemporary Indigenous communities which highlight the fact that they are not utopian. Furthermore, there are social movements across the world that have embraced these proposals.

It is noteworthy that many intentional communities such as cohousing and ecovillages that are mushrooming around the world but mostly in Europe, US, Canada and Australia practice several of the aspects of Orang Asli peace ecology. For example, the cohousing model, which was first developed in Denmark in the 1980s and which is now growing in popularity in the US, is guided by six principles:

- (1) participation by residents in the functioning of the neighbourhood; (2) design of the neighbourhood by future residents; (3) shared common spaces and resources; (4) management of the neighbourhood by residents; (5) nonhierarchical decision making; and (6) no shared economy. (Chitewere, 2010, p. 321)

A comparison of these principles with Orang Asli village-based egalitarian ethos will reveal little difference. While redressing social alienation is the key underlying intention of subscribers of the cohousing model, ecological sustainability appears to be the driving motivation in ecovillages. Such a lifestyle apparently is predominantly a middle-class phenomenon in relatively wealthy countries in the developed world. Furthermore, the intentional communities, like an Orang Asli village, involve small groups of 20 to 30 families. Can large urban centres be broken up into small intentional communities? It would appear impossible for this to happen, unless humanity is on the brink of total annihilation, as in the worst-case scenario presented by climate change scientists.

What is possible, however, is a change of paradigms, philosophies and practices, drawing from the Indigenous peace ecology outlined in this paper, not only in the way we live our lives but also in the re-formulation of economic and social policies which in their current forms are antithetical to the Indigenous model. What will need to be altered are several of the ideals, epistemes, and values associated with neoliberal capitalism to ones commonly practiced in Indigenous communities. This will include a shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric perception of nature, from hyper-individualism to a community-focus responsibility, from a competitive outlook to everything to one that is focused on empathy, cooperation, sharing and altruism, and from a growth-fetish to a needs-based regenerative lifestyle. Here is where we can learn from the margins or peripheries or neglected epistemologies, as the anthropologist, Henry Lewis (1989, p. 958) has argued in his research on Australian Aborigines, we must make a conscious effort "to learn *from* Aborigines rather than merely to learn *about* Aborigines" to gain from the time-honored and ecologically sound knowledge and conceptions of peoples.

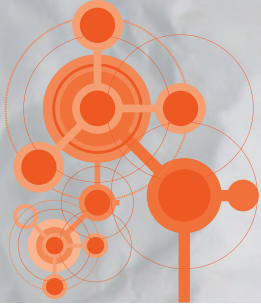
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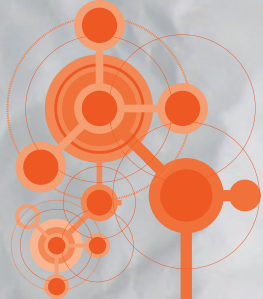
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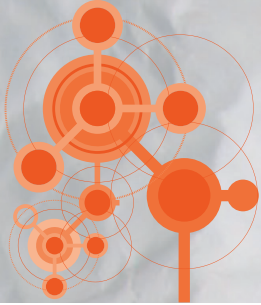
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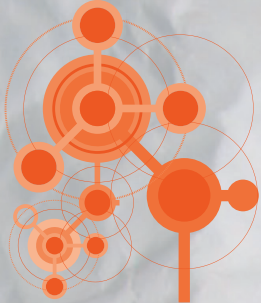
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