

KAPWA-3: INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN THE ACADEME

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Please! Allow us to express our Beauty! I hear her voice in my head still. The woman elder from a Manobo tribe spoke from her heart as she addressed a small group of teachers from California who came to hear her share the struggles of her indigenous community. I remember being struck by her choice of the concept of Beauty. She could have asked for Justice, or Peace, or Freedom but no, it was Beauty that she claimed. ...I've re-told this story to various groups of audiences since then. I tell it to honor the voice of the indigenous woman elder. I tell it to claim my own re-connection to my indigenous spirit... through the oral and literate traditions of indigenous peoples – the myths, stories, dances, songs, chants, weavings – all of which are still alive and powerful when reclaimed by those of us who have awakened to the nightmare of modernity.

(Elenita Strobel, 2012)

In June 2012, the international conference *KAPWA-3 – Indigenous Knowledge In The Academe: Bridging Local And Global Paradigms* was held in Baguio City in the Philippines. It was a weeklong international meeting that encompassed a three-day university conference, two symposia for Schools of Living Traditions, environmental theater training for indigenous youths and a series of outreach workshops at Baguio schools. Six art-exhibitions showcased the expertise of traditional cultural masters, “Soil Paintings” produced with homemade earth pigments, Mongolian calligraphies, the works of a Tibetan photographer, as well as art by various local talents. One show in a famous museum pooled the works of 30 artists in a tribute to 25 years of culture-bearing in Baguio.

Culture-bearing was a meta-theme at this multi-modal consultation. No wonder: Baguio City is strategically located at the entry point to a vast highland that extends north from the mountain ridge that braces the Philippine islands on the Pacific side like a spine. To the present day, said mountain range is home to a great number of cultural communities, many of them struggling to maintain their ethnic identity. Cosmopolitan Baguio is the doorway to this rich ancestral land. In its urban belly, culture-bearing takes the form of resistance against the homogenizing trends of the 21st century as well as a keen search for cultural survival. Slating KAPWA-3 in such a location was but an obvious choice.

More than 150 indigenous people from 30 Philippine Schools of Living Traditions participated in the 7-day event. 25 international delegates came from Japan, Mongolia, Thailand, Indonesia, a First Nation of America, the USA and Canada. The academe interacted with tribal leaders, the politicians mingled with the artists, everybody danced and laughed and mingled with each other. No need for alcohol or drugs. A call was voiced out—to preplace Gross National Income with a Gross National Happiness Index.

The scholarly discussions were led by leaders from local/international Indigenous Peoples (IP), the local and international academe, as well as artists, professionals, government institutions and students. Dialogues zeroed in on the significance of indigenous knowledge for the 21st century: how it could be systematized and integrated into existing curricula; how scholars and academic institutions could help preserve ancestral cultures; and finally, how the ancient worldviews of indigenous people— contextualized in contemporary academic theories and propagated by culture-bearing artists— could contribute to shaping healthy nations.

KAPWA-3 was a follow-up to two other multi-modal international conferences: KAPWA-1 at U.P. Diliman in 2004 (*Pagkataong Filipino—The Theory, Practice and Values of Philippine Personhood*) and KAPWA-2 at U.P. Iloilo in 2008 (*Filipino Psychology & Indigenous Knowledge – The Relevance of Local Frameworks in the Age of Globalization*); plus a National Symposium for Schools of Living Traditions, 2010 in Baguio (*Building and Upholding Indigenous Knowledge*).

All these meetings revealed the same: Although the Philippines is a country that can pride itself of great cultural diversity and a wealth of knowledge dating back millennia, its formal education takes cues solely from the archipelago's conquerors. These were Catholic Spanish friars and gentry with their soldiers and traders, who destroyed much of the Filipino lowland cultures. Whoever followed ancestral beliefs was killed. Three centuries later, American armies vanquished the Spanish in the Philippines. But, instead of restoring self-governance to the islanders, as promised, the US rulers imposed new imperial narratives with bribery, force and public education.

As a result of this double colonialisation, a deep rift divides the Philippine cultural landscape today, where tangible the Western science locks out the intangible, but time tested, ancestral knowledge from formal education. Four centuries of moralist Spanish doctrines and positivist American creeds supplanted the holistic Filipino Kapwa orientation that once fostered equality, sharing, and harmony with nature and all creatures.

The Filipino term “kapwa” loosely translates into “shared space”, as well as “shared self.” The late Filipino psychologist Virgilio Enriquez pointed out that “kapwa” marks the paradoxical unity of “the one-of-us-and-the-other” that characterizes the social interaction of Filipinos. In his pioneering theory “Pagkataong Filipino” (Filipino Personality), Enriquez proposed that the “kapwa” concept is the core value of Philippine psychology.

Enriquez upheld that “kapwa” implied moral and normative aspects that obliged a person to treat one another as fellow human being and therefore as co-equal. From such a stance, there is not much difference, whether you are old or young, man or woman, barefooted or well dressed. You are just a person. As a cognitive frame, “kapwa” would have people look for what they have in common with others, not what makes them different.

The Filipino-American scholar Lily Mendoza correlated this viewpoint with the orientation of ancestral hunter-gatherer societies, where “Kapwa ... underpinned a form of subjectivity (pagkatao) that did not reward acquisitiveness and that placed a natural limit on greed and selfishness. Because the welfare of the individual was intrinsically bound up with that of the community as a whole, it basically fostered a regard for others in the community.” (2008, KAPWA-2)

In contrast, most modern societies suffer from a general lack of sharing. This lack of balance between giving and taking is a direct consequence of our Anglo-American education. Itself a brainchild of the dated 19th

century industrialist philosophy, it dictates that machines must produce for profit's sake, even if markets are saturated and nobody needs the goods produced. The exploitative/ mercantilist worldview that sired such wasteful thinking has been pinpointed as destroying our planet today and yet, it is perpetuated worldwide by standard education.

For such reasons, the UNESCO adopted its Education for Cultural Diversity program in 2005. It decreed that cultural diversity is the common heritage of all mankind and a human right. The policy responded to global tendencies, where learning progressively turned into a commodity— one that rather serves the stakeholders of big businesses, than mankind.

For Indigenous People around the world, knowledge is not and never was a resource to be exploited— merely for economic competitiveness. Rather, knowledge is a tool to survive and serve others. Knowing is understanding that we are part of a miraculous eco-system, which is shared by a multitude of beings: plants, animals, minerals, humans and spirits. This causality driven ancestral worldview must be infused in our anemic, cash controlled scholastic schemes today, if our planet is to survive. The meeting in Baguio was endorsing this kind of effort.

The Philippine archipelago with its multitude of Living Traditions alongside highly globalized metropolitan centers would make a perfect entry point for progressive educational transformation. This fact was recognized by eminent Philippine social scientists (Alfredo Lagmay and Virgilio Enriquez) 30 years before the UNESCO posted its "Education for Cultural Diversity" program. Together with other founders of Philippine Indigenous Psychology, these two scholars began to indigenize the social sciences for the Philippines and in Asia. The KAPWA conferences are a continuation of their groundbreaking efforts.

The aim of the conference organizers is to mainstream Kapwa psychology as a prototype for the psychology of indigenous people (in the Philippines and elsewhere). As "Indigenous Mind" programs at universities gain worldwide popularity, it is timely to discuss by the constructs of Enriquez, whose Filipino Personality Theory (Pagkataong Filipino) aptly represent the values of indigenous people. To reframe epic chants and myths as communal history (Magos, 2012) and ethnic dances as psychotherapy (de Guia, 2012). To introduce the ethno-mathematics of weaving (Alangui, 2012), present the "mutya" (spirit) approach as a method for academic research (Odal Devora, 2012), as well as discuss the value of strategic essentialism (Odora Hoppers, 2012).

KAPWA-3, in particular, targeted the construction of new academic theorems from long neglected indigenous knowledge. The organizers of the conference, the Heritage and Arts Academies of the Philippines Inc. (H.A.P.I.), together with the 2012 Fukoka Laureate Kidlat Tahimik, the Center for Babaylan Studies, and the *Academiya ng Sikolohiyang Filipino* are spearheading this effort. Systematizing the underlying tenets of ancestral worldviews in a culture fair way and finding ways to channel these materials into school / college / university curricula is the commitment of this forward-looking group of artists, scholars and indigenous leaders.