

The Lifestyle of Indigenous People from the Perspective of Sustainability. The example of an Aeta tribe in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Since sustainability and climate crises have become topics of worldwide concern, at times the lifestyle of self-sufficient indigenous peoples (IP) has drawn attention and been taken into consideration as a model of sustainable living. Questioning to what extent this might work and what factors might be limiting it we visited a community of self-sufficient Aeta peoples in the Philippines carrying out expert interviews in- and outside of the community.

What turned out most threatening and damaging to their sustainable lifestyle are efforts to involve them into the market system aiming to “support their development”. Certainly, this should not suggest IPs continuing to live as the world’s poorest but rather to reconsider our standards of “poor” and “rich” and pursue the aim of giving all people the chance to live a “rich life” in a more comprehensive sense.

Keywords: Sustainable communities, indigenous people, poverty, development, social work

1. Introduction

The rapidly accelerating climate crisis has caused not only a life-threatening rise in temperature and melting of glaciers, but also a conspicuous increase in natural disasters in many regions throughout the world. Although it cannot be denied that (as in most other kinds of calamities) it is the vulnerable and poor living in the global south that are most fatally affected, climate change has turned to impact rich countries like the United States or Germany as well. This has intensified the interest of people in the global north in finding ways to conduct a more sustainable way of life. In this context, the lifestyles of indigenous peoples (IP) have gained increasing attention. Turning to the marginalized “others” in search for alternatives to the conventional (environment/ customs etc.) per se is not new at all and can be retraced up to the 16th century (Stein 2021). The notion of the “noble savage” by Jean-Jacques Rousseau represents a famous 18th century example of idealizing IPs, and throughout the centuries it has become quite common for critics of Western thinking, Western rationality and Western lifestyle, or whatever was taken as such, to point to lesser known “exotic” societies and cultures as “natural” or “authentic” (Vosseler 2020). In the 1970s and 80s, “Indian wisdom”, shamanism and esoteric practices gained popularity as alternatives to Western religion and values among young essentialists and environmentalists, particularly in the German speaking countries of Western Europe (Lutz, Strzelczyk & Watchman 2020; Schuering 2015). Analyzing three novels and one play,

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Kenneth Toah Nsah presents them as expression of continuing attempts by European and US-American organizations to “conserve a mythical African Eden” (Nsah 2023)

That said, overall recent interest in the lifestyles of IPs tends to differ from earlier waves in some important respects. First, nowadays the incentive to consider IPs is rarely based on personal antipathy against the lifestyle one has been educated into or on interest in mysticism or animism, but rather on the quest for a model of sustainable born out of the necessity to change swiftly and thoroughly if we are to save diversity and life on the planet. Secondly, it is not a group of ‘dropouts’ or nonconformists showing curiosity about otherness or the exotic, but mainly scientists and politically engaged activists inquiring solutions to dire problems. Finally, scientists as well as activists trying to enhance sustainability tend to focus on certain aspects of IPs’ life, either doing research or trying to support IPs fighting for their rights.

The crucial key term “sustainability” has been defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (better known by the name *Brundtland-Commission*) in 1987 as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Already then, it became common to differentiate (at least) three dimensions of sustainability: the environmental, the social and the economic, with the environmental dimension delineated as the most basic one on which the social one rests, with the economic one on top. The European “climate protection organization *Foundation myclimate*” further explicates “as a concept, sustainability goes far beyond just climate protection. It means dealing responsibly with the earth’s limited resources while creating a sustainable society and promoting social justice” (MyClimate 2002). Frequently, IPs are considered to have been living in accordance with high levels of environmental stability. “Sustainability is far from a new concept. Indigenous peoples have practiced elements of sustainable living for generations by being in tune with the natural environment and its limits, cycles, and changes. This understanding is usually referred to as traditional ecological knowledge, or the deep knowledge and beliefs about relationships between people, plants, animals, natural phenomena, landscapes, and timing of events in a specific ecosystem” (McGill 2024).

This article, after a short review of the current literature on sustainability in relation to IPs in general and the Aeta in particular, will discuss based on original data from empirical research with regard to the case of an Aeta tribe in the Philippines, what chances they have of continuing their own lifestyle and what or who is threatening it.

2. Literature on Sustainability and IP

In recent years, scientific research on sustainability has come to frequently take note of the experiences of IPs. In this section, the dominant topics and trends in this literature will be summarized, illustrated by examples.

To begin with, there is some discussion going on regarding the most suitable expression: Indigenous knowledge (IK), traditional knowledge (TK) or local knowledge (LK). The positions range from Onyancha (2022), who based on a quantitative study stresses the importance of taking account of all of the expressions, to Whyte (2013) on the other end of the spectrum, who argues that scientists, policy professionals, indigenous

and non-indigenous should concentrate on the implications in initiating long-term processes rather than on verbalism.¹¹

In concrete, the content of IK and details of the sustainable lifestyle of IP naturally vary between continents, regions, tribes and communities, but nevertheless all (or at least most of them) seem to share the same fundament: Farming, hunting, fishing or gathering, the whole culture and every element of everyday life is based on the conviction of the connectedness of all living, on generation long experiences and tradition, a strong sense of belonging to the land of their ancestors and on belief in some kind of natural deity. On these grounds, IP would treat the soil and everything they harvest as valuable, use every part of an animal they hunted etc., and never try to get more than needed to nourish the members of their family or community (Clarkson, Morrisette & Régallet 1992). The knowledge necessary to conduct shifting cultivation while treating all kind of resources with care as well as their traditional value and belief systems are transmitted from generation to generation by means of showing and doing, complemented by explanation and storytelling (Lancy 2024).

A remarkable number of publications argue in favor of including IK in school curricula and Western sciences. They emphasize the value of IK regarding sustainability (Barry 2024; Eze & Mba 2013). Some recommend taking the experiences of indigenous children as the basis to make it easier for them getting included. (Li & Shein 2023), others suggest chaperones to make IP children feel comfortable in the unfamiliar physical, social and intellectual school environment sitting in a classroom with many others (Carpena-Mendez, Virtanen & Williamson 2022) or – based on an analysis of indigenous knowledge “with respect to its potential for science education” – using specifically designed didactic models directly connecting the learning content/ course content to the everyday experiences of the IP children to meet the requirements of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (Zidny, Sjoestroem & Eilks 2021). Although most of the authors seem critically aware of the continuous impact of colonization in school education even today, the Western schooling system as such including its structural components as well as e.g. its emphasis on written pre-defined categories of thinking and arguing (despite introduced as an instrument of colonization) rarely is put up for discussion.

This clearly differs on the scientific or university level, where IK is frequently valued for its potential contributions not only to sustainability, but also to the *understanding* of climate change (Alexander et al. 2011). Waldmueller, Yap and Watene (2022) highlight “the urgent need to renegotiate” Western epistemologies and measurements of infrastructure to notice epistemic alternatives and implement the goal of sustainability. Based on her interviews with IP representatives in Guatemala Bergstroem (2021) expatiates the all-embracing meaning of IK, and how epistemic colonialism has extensively attributed to the ruin and loss of a huge body of IK about ecosystems and well-being. In light of the extremely high risk of continuously losing millennia-long orally transmitted IK, and “believing that climate and environmental breakdown cannot be tackled within the frame and logic of the existing political and economic order”, increasingly more authors have come to discuss the contours of a post-capitalist post-industrial civilization with

¹¹In this chapter most of the time the term IK will be used as including other traditional and local knowledge discussed in the literature review etc. as well.

traditional societies playing a “critically important role [...] in this societal, economic and political reconfiguration” (Gomez-Baggethun 2022). Researchers like Schiller- Merkens (2022) maintain that the urgently needed change should be brought about through the prefiguration of alternative values such as “solidarity, community, equality, and democracy” to replace predominant economic ones (2022).

Concrete examples of changing developments by including IPs in the planning and management of parks (on indigenous land) are presented for Canada and Aotearoa (NZ) (Mason et al. 2022) as well as for the Aspiring Rio Coco Geopark in Nicaragua (Paskova 2018). Assessment of human rights impact and of free, prior and informed consent in development projects are supposed to protect the rights of IPs (Klein 2024). Finance professionals identify investment in economic activities of IPs as an effective way to simultaneously support them and promote sustainable business and development (Pyser & Daugaard 2023). Analyzing “the incursion of capitalism and industrial development in indigenous societies”, however, Nowlin (2021) shows the risk that the involvement of indigenous people in resource exploitation – often held up as proof of the acknowledgement of the rights of IP and recognition of their knowledge – might lift the poverty of *some* IP communities for the short term, but without a general paradigm shift away from the “pre-occupation with economic growth *as an end in and of itself*”² (Nowlin 2021:97) capitalism, even if it includes IPs in development, will continue to aggravate the global climate rendering life increasingly harder for IPs as well as non-IPs.

Even more unambiguously, Sakshi (2021) concludes from her research into different cases of mining and extraction on IP land around the world: “Indigenous lives, cosmologies, cultural and spiritual heritage are constantly erased at the behest of capital.” Based on Critical Race Theory, Horowitz (2021) analyses the “triple-helix” of law, ideology and power discriminating People of Color even unintentionally, while Asafo (2022) examines with regard to the law on climate change the mechanisms privileging White people at every stage – from framing the law up to jurisdiction based on it –, rendering the law widely unworkable for IPs. Lynch, Long and Stretesky (2022) unmask the use of green labeling claims in diamond mining as a case of green crime for its ecologically unsustainable and redundant character, Bassey et al. (2023) diagnose the outsourcing of emissions as “New Green Colonialism”, and Baran (2024) exposes the imposing of rubbish – euphemistically called “waste tourism” – by EU states on economically poor countries as an instrument for countries of the Global North to meet the requirements of the 12th SDG.

Against the background of a long history of foreign colonizers dominating their lives and in view of the rich countries continuously taking advantage of the immense structural inequalities, some IP have begun to stand up, not only against specific matters like mining and other exploitive development projects but also against ideas of green imperialism/ colonialism spread by Euro-American transnational NGOs. Nsah (2023) presents the example of the Congo Basin, treated in Western literature as “the last Eden”, and criticizes the pressing imperative to save it imposed by Euro-American NGOs and their governments “as a hidden means of coopting Africa’s nature and Africans into neoliberal capitalism.” He elucidates the problems from the perspective of IPs: “[...]”

²Accentuation in the original.

alternative forms of development are undermined in the name of sustainable development or sustainability and indigenous people are violently dislocated to save a non-existing Eden at the time as their knowledge systems are either stolen or destroyed (epistemicide)” (Nsah 2023:19). Bedigen (2023) provides a thorough analysis of indigenous peace building in South Sudan, uncovering the factors that make it superior to the ineffectively applied Western concepts. To “confront the white savior complex that perpetuates power and colonial difference”, it is considered essential to co-construct practice-based psychological theories in the Global South, delinked from anthropo-centric Western ideologies (Ciofalo 2022).

Summing up the literature review has shown the urgency to not trying to integrate IK into Western epistemology but to accept IK as a different epistemology, not to include IP into development plans according to Western thinking, but to respect IP’s right to self-determination including the usage of their land.

3. The Aeta People

Aeta people³ are said to have entered the Philippine archipelago about 30.000 years ago as the first of multiple migrant IPs from various directions (Larena et al. 2021). Nowadays, approximately 10-20 million IP live in the Philippines, constituting between 10 and 20% of the Philippine population (IGWIA 2024), although their exact number is unknown. Aeta people are found in central, eastern, southeastern Luzon and in the Visayas. Their tribes are distinguished and called by different names, partly depending on the area they live in. When the first Spanish arrived in Zambales, Central Luzon, at the beginning of the 17th century, Aeta lived at the coasts in nomadic and egalitarian communities, with their chiefs providing for the needs of its members and supporting neighbouring tribes whenever necessary (Almanzor 1966).

Whether Christianization was “the paramount motive” (Almanzor 1966:27) or not, Spanish missionaries landed and worked hand in hand with the conquistadores, quickly establishing pueblos and centers of evangelization; including the first towns, Iba⁴ and Santa Cruz and Masinloc (Marquez 2021). The Spanish colonizers set up a central authority and, due to a lack of personnel and missionaries, resorted to a system of land trust. By the Regalian Doctrine, all land of the archipelago was treated as land of the Spanish crown, including the ancestral lands of IPs. People resisting the local rulers were driven out deep into forested and mountainous areas (Ty 2010). Yet ultimately, the Spaniards were mostly preoccupied with trade and the salvation of their souls through giving alms to the poor, rather than being (genuinely) interested in the Philippine people or lands (Almanzor 1966). Hence, driven away from the coast, the Aeta in the mountainous areas of Zambales pursued their sustainable lifestyle as nomads, shifting cultivating agricultural lands, hunting boars and other wild animals, gathering honey and edible plants in the forests and catching fish in the rivers.

³Because of their dark appearance they are sometimes referred to by the Spanish expression “Negritos” meaning “little black one” (McHenry et al 2013:293).

⁴The empirical study cited in this paper was undertaken among Aeta belonging to the town of Iba.

With the US-Americans replacing the Spanish colonizers after the lost fight for independence of the Philippine people (Office of the Historian, US State Dpt. 2024), those comparatively “quiet times” (quickly) abruptly ended. Based on the Regalian Doctrine, the new colonial government declared all “uncultivated, unoccupied” land “public land”. US entrepreneurs rushed to mine and to set up huge plantations (Iy 2010). IP land was encroached on by logging concessions and increasing pressure to sell products on the market. Mining companies employed economic incentives to weaken the resistance of tribes through a divide-and-rule strategy. In central Luzon, militarization and “a mining firm eroded all that was left of the Aeta’s cultural heritage and identity, sowing discord among them” (Ferrer 1999:89). Community elders fought one against the other. Ultimately, younger Aeta engaged in reconstructing social institutions to revive community life and common decision-making on IP terms. One lasting influence of those times: Today, they have the IP community assembly on the one hand, the local village government on the other. According to Ferrer, “this [kind of parallel representation] is an entirely new and unconventional set-up” (Ferrer 1999:90).

In 1946, the colonial rule finally ended. In its place, however, some privileged families augmented their wealth, formed dynasties and gained political power. The destruction of the rain forest in the Philippines, which the Spanish colonizers had begun and the US-Americans badly continued, worsened even further; while in 1900 about 70% of the land was forest covered, at the end of the century only a fourth of this was left, and illegal logging has deteriorated since (Forest Management Bureau, cit. by Butler 2014). According to Cullen “the Aeta people did not resist the destruction of their rain forest. They became survival farmers on their denuded ancestral land [...]” (2022). This is consistent with recent researchers’ characterization of Aeta today.

In December 1991, the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in Central Luzon forced the Aeta tribes living in the surrounding areas to leave their ancestral lands. Some, it has been claimed, refused to flee believing the eruption of the volcano to be a punishment by their goddess Apo Namalyari for them not having cared enough for the natural environment. Those who fled and survived couldn’t find a piece of land to live on and were forced to take whatever land the government allotted to them. The soil in the resettlements was meager and uncultivated, and restarting their habitual and familiar economic activities was impossible to most of them (Acaba 2008). After one year, about 50 families moved back, trying to resume their living in the mountains, while most of the resettled families sought to utilize the assigned plot to grow some vegetables or to plant fruit trees to sell their harvest to the lowlanders. Forced by the lack of farmland and other means to make their living, some offered their service as day-laborers, others left for Manila hoping to find a better income there. A survey by the Japan International Cooperation Agency shows that only those Aeta who were resettled in the coastal area could revive self-sufficient farming, making them more or less independent of additional cash earnings (JICA 2003).

Significant influences of the colonization are lasting today in many respects: Driven away from the coast most Aeta people live in the mountains. Those replaced by the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo still living in the resettlements are live impoverished as day labourers etc. because they couldn’t receive a piece of farmland since all land had been taken by colonial laws (the Regalian Doctrine). All resistance to mining and similar “development plans” by

the government and/or enterprises is labelled “communist” which is equaled with being dangerous for intending to overthrow the government.

4. The Empirical Study

It was these communities relocated close to the seaside in Zambales where we⁵ carried out our empirical study, including expert interviews with an Aeta leader and Aeta teachers, IP representatives working at different levels in the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), educators and researchers from universities and social work educators in colleges in the Philippines, as well as with social workers supporting Aeta and other IP. The interviews took place in offices or other restaurants/ cafes chosen by the interviewees, each after a short introductory explanation of its goals etc. and based on informed consent. The data were analysed on the basis of modified grounded theory (MGT). The findings largely accord with those published by Philippines researchers (Meneses 2019, Espiritu 2018, and others).

4.1 Resettlement after the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo

The eruption of Mt. Pinatubo forced the Aeta all of a sudden to adapt to entirely new conditions and find a new way of life. 11.000 resettlements had to be provided, but the tiny lots were tiny and close to each other, leaving no space for any privacy whatsoever, not to mention the possibility to grow any food on it. The Aeta were treated by public servants and most other supporters as victims, not as survivors implying the status of helpless dependent objects instead of respectable self-reliant actors. Many of the replaced considered the resettlements as “transient houses”, and indeed, after thirty years 85% had sold these homes and returned to the mountains. Supported by Franciscan missionaries living with them for five years a group of about 150 families involving roughly 900 persons managed to buy land from a private person. Twelf communities joined forces in cooperatives to become able to resist exploitation. they to build schools, first an elementary school, several years later followed by a high school.

4.2 Education

From the Franciscan missionaries they learnt the importance/significance of education to defend themselves against public and private forces from the outside, and built schools, first an elementary school, several years later followed by a high school.

Currently, about 30 children are attending elementary school, 17 others attend classes 7 to 12 of the IP high school. Their school day starts and finishes with gardening and cleaning and includes, in addition to the eight subjects of the regular curriculum, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices” (IKSP) taught by the tribal leader. On weekends, the teacher occasionally goes out with her students to the river for entertainment and fun. Students sometimes miss a day in school because of farming, jobbing for cash, or selling their products. Asked whether the children enjoy also Western-style youth culture, the teacher proudly responds: “We are not behind; we use computers, cellular phones etc., but we teach our students the traditions and values we regard as

⁵We meaning the author and Miyazaki Osamu from Meiji-Gakuin-University, Tokyo.

important and don't want to give up." According to her, the children tend to show more interest in academic education than in farming since the latter constitutes their "normal everyday life". In colleges, too, IP students clearly prefer academic over vocational training, although they are disadvantaged in higher education on account of English, their third language, being used in classes and examinations. Some Aeta have successfully graduated from university, now working e.g. as teachers in an IP community.

Yet there are IP children, especially in the resettlements, who due to malnutrition are unable to study. Some parents are said to view education for their children (especially for girls) as superfluous and to (directly or indirectly) impede the educational success of their children. To make it easier for the children to attend school, community and public initiatives have been taken up providing conditioned financial support or organising school transportation. Recently a project has been started to support financing the fees of higher education. Today, some middle-aged IP seem to envy the younger generation for their educational and employment opportunities.

Most social workers in public services and most professors educating social workers maintain education to be the only and most effective measure against poverty. According to one of them, even one single IP studying successfully at a university might allow a whole community to break the cycle of poverty by serving as a (role) model for others. Apart from this, it should always be kept in mind, as emphasised by another professor, that IP, even if they do not have formal literacy, still do have *functional* literacy which might be substantively more relevant in regard to leading a sustainable way of life.

4.3 Work and Consumption

For Aeta, "work" primarily means farming on their ancestral land, gathering and hunting. Today, some Aeta are cultivating the land for someone else, some have opened a small store, and others grow bananas or mangos for the market. The resettlements have a high rate of unemployment; these people might go fishing, although not always successfully. They are supported with rice and "cash for work", but occasionally children are too hungry to attend classes. In stark contrast, as informants in the regional NCIP office pointed out, Aeta living on ancestral land or in the mountains during covid-19 clearly proved their ability to live self-sufficiently and independently.

4.4 Organisation and Representation

Today, the IP in the Philippines have two parallel forms of representation: their respective tribe chief on one side, and a person to represent them in the local ("mainstream") community council as required by the national government on the other. In the local committees, they are represented by their tribal leaders, in the national government by the NCIP. The inner organisation of Aeta tribes varies in terms of gender, rights associated with age, status etc., and some communities still are controlled by an authoritarian patriarch leader. About 40% (mainly girls) marry as minors, usually decided on by the parents who can request a dowry from the expected son-in-law. Women with a high level of formal education often face difficulties finding a partner – but this is by no means confined to IPs but rather true for most countries worldwide.

4.5 Rights, (Public) Regulations and Customs

The Philippine government voted in favor of the UN declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) but it has not yet ratified it nor the ILO Convention 169 (Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989). In 1997, it passed the Republic Act 8371, known as the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA), guaranteeing IPs the right to ancestral domain, social justice and human rights, self-directed development, empowerment and cultural identity.

The NCIP is responsible for issuing the title to ancestral land based on evidence that the ancestors of the tribe cultivated the respective land before colonisation – a proof quite difficult to provide for peoples without a written language. Once acknowledged, the tribe has to prepare an Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plan (ADSPP), but according to informants of the NCIP this being up to documentation rather than a plan for development prepared by the IP. Today, mining on IP land legally requires a three-party agreement including the community, the company and the government. Often, the latter one eagerly tries to find an investor, potential investors pushing for quick decisions resulting in the IP pressurised to find investors themselves. In the Philippines, as elsewhere, land grabbing of ancestral domains is still common, be it owing to a conflict of mandates, e.g. among ministries, mining interests of Philippine or foreign investors or be it covetousness by locals.

To apply for a job or public funds requires a birth certificate obliging Aeta peoples to become baptised. Most IP call themselves Christian and they have churches on ancestral land even in the mountains, but they hardly practice Christian religion.

4.6 Social Work with Aeta

The vast majority of social workers working with Aeta are employed by the government, specifically by the Department of Social Work and Development (DSWD) on the national, regional or local level, and thus have to obey to and implement government programs. In practice, this means being expected to convince parents to send their children to school, to comply to set conditions (e.g. giving birth in a hospital) for cash transfer (Modified Casual Cash Transfer, MCCT), or (with regard to eligible single parents) to participate in the “cash for work” program etc. In the resettlements it also implies counselling addicted persons and visiting as a controller every family to confirm that they behave ‘properly’.

Some social work educators in colleges or universities create special conditions seeking to enable Aeta to pass examinations and to encourage them not to give up their hopes of becoming employed by the government, even though they rarely pass the board examination necessary to be permitted to work as a professional. Others set up a community program to train mothers and empower them through literacy.

Social work educators in colleges as well as social workers directly engaged in supporting Aeta people openly comment on their clients. According to them, Aeta people are shy, afraid of discrimination for their dark skin colour and small body. One of the professionals educating Aeta to become social workers frankly comments on them: “They are used to farm, that’s the only thing they know. [...] They should acquire different skills to earn more and be better off. [...] The Aeta do not have the intelligence to learn a lot, but if [they learn] they have the heart and passion to serve other people.”

4.7 Aeta('s Position) in the Mainstream Society

Aeta people tend to be marginalised outsiders, maybe more so than other IPs because of their obviously distinct appearance. They are frauded by middlemen transporting and selling their products, and if they themselves manage to transport and take their products to the city, they are not admitted to the market and consequently have to sell their products below price on the roadside.

Some Aeta people, impoverished after the volcano eruption, are said to be begging in Manila. Asked about this, social workers in Manila as well as in local and regional government offices explained that these Aeta were traveling to Manila in Christmas season since at this time of the year city people tend to give generously. After Christmas, Manila social workers would pick them up and send or transport them back to their villages. This has developed into an annual custom that both sides would gradually get used to.

5. Discussion

The empirical study has made clear that Aeta people can live self-sufficiently and independently – although this is not true for all of them on account of them having been relocated after the eruption of Mount Pinatubo. They do need some cash to pay for electricity, transportation etc., but neither much nor on an everyday basis.

In mainstream society Aeta people are marginalised and discriminated against, their weakness in economic matters taken advantage of to defraud and exploit them. In terms of law and formal representation, their rights seem secured. Nevertheless, legal, political and structural obstacles often make it difficult to enforce the implementation of those rights, be it the rights to ancestral domains, to self-directed development or to the refusal of mining under whatever conditions. Even (some) social workers engaged in supporting Aeta look down on them, convinced that their clients are not able to decide themselves how they want to live and what they value. This patronising attitude might be strongly influenced by what government-employed social workers are supposed to do: to convince their clients to perform in a way desired and rewarded by the government by means of financial and status incentives. Most social workers, NGOs etc. assisting IPs aim to help in finding a way out of poverty, as required by the SDGs and propagated by the government.

Presumably nobody would claim pursuing this goal per se to be something bad – nonetheless, it cannot be considered something unequivocally good, either. It should be upon the Aeta themselves to decide whether they want their ancestral land developed, find investors and earn money through mining, whether they want to produce for the market, what and how much, whether they want to study at a university, enter mainstream society, live in the city etc., or whether they prefer staying in their community living a simple life and earning just enough money to cover necessary expenses and what they themselves consider valuable enough to make specific efforts for. Aeta who have decided themselves to live according to their traditions and beliefs in their community do not consider themselves poor. “We are not poor. We have our land, simple living, we grow our food – and going to the market we even have money.” What they value most is living in peace – peace with themselves, with other people in- and outside their community, with nature and with their deity Apo Namalyari.

6. Conclusion

The empirical study on the Aeta tribe in many aspects reveals a high degree of consistency with discussions in earlier research. It shows efforts by the government and its DSWD branches to support IP children going to school and receive higher formal education than their parents in order to improve their chances on the job market and escape from poverty. Similarly to the cases of park development on IP land mentioned in the literature review the Aeta people legally are expected to prepare a development plan for their ancestral domains. However, neither this nor their involvement in development on terms of the “3-party agreement” actually guarantees their right to “self-directed development” as stated in the Republic Act 8371. After the eruption of the volcano they were offered resettlements and now, some are eligible for financial assistance by programs like “cash for work” – but they cannot receive land usable for farming. This, however, means the basis for continuing (or anew taking up) their sustainable lifestyle. Resiliently, most of the displaced Aeta return to the mountains rather than living with the lowlanders and adapting their market-oriented way of life.

Social workers intending to help the Aeta escape from poverty and climbing up the social ladder in society tend to disregard the IP's right to self-determination including the right to choose their own way of life instead of automatically considering to become integrated into the mainstream society and making career according to standards set by the former colonial powers as their personal goal.

To sum up, the empirical study showed: Most of the Aeta prefer to modestly continue their own lifestyle which they definitely do not consider “poor”. This lifestyle is threatened not only by powerful companies and only apparently inclusive development plans, but also by social workers and other supporters not listening to them nor respecting their right to self-determination.

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