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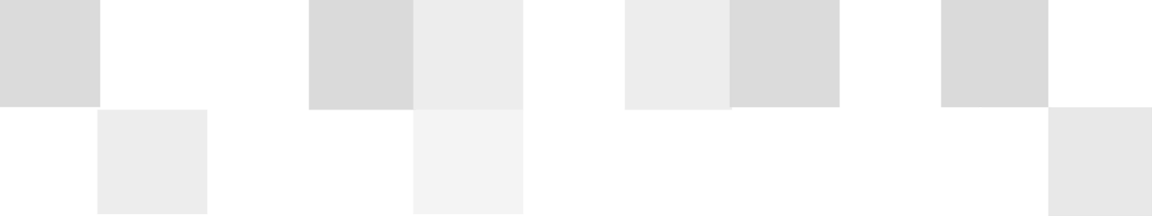
**UP CIDS DISCUSSION PAPER 2020-02**

# **Nurturing nature and culture**

Policy and customary perspectives on the  
indigenous forest management system  
*chontog* of Barangay Ekip, Bokod, Benguet

Roland Erwin P. Rabang





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**DISCUSSION  
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# Nurturing nature and culture

## Policy and customary perspectives on the indigenous forest management system *chontog* of Barangay Ekip, Bokod, Benguet

Roland Erwin P. Rabang<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** ■ The Philippine Environmental Policy, enacted as Presidential Decree 1151 on June 6, 1977, has the intended purpose of keeping the environment protected despite (or because of) what has been regarded in the law as “conflicting demands of population growth, urbanization, industrial expansion, rapid natural resources utilization, and increasing technological advances” (Republic of the Philippines 1977a). The decree provides a non-negotiable requirement to be complied with in any endeavor to introduce development initiatives within a considered fragile natural topography. The enactment calls on the government to lead society in the promotion and implementation of this national environment policy in pursuit, among others, of the preservation “of important historic and cultural aspects of the Philippine heritage” (ibid.). This provision acknowledges that nature and the environment are spaces that are not vacant, but rather peopled by communities of indigenous peoples with distinct and specific cultural practices, as well as knowledge systems that include environmental protection and preservation. This is the standpoint of a 2015 joint documentation project undertaken by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), the indigenous cultural communities and indigenous peoples' organizations of Barangays Karao and Ekip in Bokod, Benguet of what is termed as Sustainable Indigenous Forest Resources Management Systems and Practices (STIFRMSP). These are locally known as *chontog*. But while

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the Philippine Environmental Policy—in conjunction with the enactment of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) in 1997—acknowledges that historical and cultural practices are important in relation to environmental protection initiatives, how much of these traditions are still practiced on the ground? To what extent do the locals value traditional methods of sustaining natural resources within their jurisdictions, and how committed are they at preserving and perpetuating these indigenous institutions?

**KEYWORDS** ■ Indigenous knowledge, indigenous peoples rights, environmental laws, ecological citizenship, Ibaloy, cultural studies



*Egtayo abusuen inpiyal afo Chiyos / pan iyanan tan  
pagbiyagan<sup>2</sup>*

(Let us not abuse that which God has provided—a place to  
settle, a place to live)

## A preponderance of environmental laws

The Philippines is a country rich in environmental laws. It would seem that every organism that exists in nature has some government edict or issuance in terms of policy or law that would ensure its protection, perpetuation, or regulation. Some of these notable issuances would be the Philippine Clean Air Act of 1999, the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000, the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998, the Animal Welfare Act of 1998, the Coconut Preservation Act of 1995, and an Act for Salt Iodization Nationwide.

In the 1970s, some of the more prominent presidential issuances on the environment (called presidential decrees) by former President

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<sup>2</sup> This is a portion of the lyrics of the song composed by residents of Barangay Ekip in the municipality of Bokod, Benguet. It was their winning entry in a municipal songwriting contest with the theme “Disaster-resilient community through preparation and unity.”

Ferdinand E. Marcos were the Philippine Environmental Policy and the Philippine Environmental Code, issued as Presidential Decree (P.D.) No. 1151 and Presidential Decree No. 1152, respectively, both approved on June 6, 1977.

Paragraphs 3 and 4 of the Philippine Environment Code (P.D. No. 1152) have the stated purpose of establishing a “comprehensive program of environmental protection and management” (Republic of the Philippines 1977b). The code states that the program can only “assume tangible and meaningful significance only by establishing specific environment management policies and prescribing environment quality standards” (ibid.).

An important aspect of establishing a policy or policies on “environment management” is stated in Section 59 of the Philippine Environment Code entitled “Preservation of Historic and Cultural Resources and Heritage.” The section provides that “[i]t shall be the duty of every person to preserve the historic and cultural resources of the country such as sites, structures, artifacts, documents, objects, memorials, and priceless trees” (ibid.).

The preservation of historic and cultural resources is likewise justified in Section 62, Paragraph i of the Code which states that “Areas of Critical Environmental Concern are areas where uncontrolled development could result in irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or aesthetic values or natural systems or processes of national significance” (ibid.).

On the other hand, the Philippine Environmental Policy (P.D. No. 1151) considers the relationship of the concepts of preserving the environment and preserving a way of life. Posterity is therefore embodied in the policy declaration in Section 2, which states that

In pursuing this policy, it shall be the responsibility of this Government, in cooperation with concerned private organizations and entities, to use all practicable means, consistent with other essential considerations of national policy, in promoting the general welfare to the end that the Nation may:

- (a) Recognize, discharge and fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee and guardian of the environment for succeeding generations;
- (b) To assure the people of a safe, decent, healthful, productive and aesthetic environment;
- (c) Encourage the widest exploitation of the environment without degrading it, or endangering human life, health and safety or creating conditions adverse to agriculture, commerce and industry;
- (d) Preserve important historic and cultural aspects of the Philippine heritage;
- (e) Attain a rational and orderly balance between population and resource use; and
- (f) Improve the utilization of renewable and non-renewable resources (Republic of the Philippines 1977a).

While the Philippine Environment Policy and Code specifies a broad reference to the environment in its provisions, the Revised Forestry Code—issued as Presidential Decree No. 705 on May 19, 1975—speaks of regulating the actions of forest settlers and even required the census of “kaingineros, squatters, cultural minorities and other occupants and residents and forest lands” (Republic of the Philippines 1975). Section 52 further states the conduct of a “complete census of kaingineros, squatters, cultural minorities and other occupants and residents in forest lands with or without authority or permits from the government, showing the extent of their respective occupation and resulting damage, or impairment of forest resources (ibid.).”

The census is held for the purpose of establishing an inventory of forest occupants because Section 53 of the same code explains that

kaingineros, squatters and cultural minorities and other occupants who entered into forest lands and grazing lands



before May 19, 1975 without permit or authority, shall not be prosecuted: Provided that they do not increase their clearings: Provided, further, that they undertake, within two (2) months from notice thereof, the activities to be imposed upon them by the Bureau in accordance with management plan calculated to conserve and protect forest resources in the area: Provided, finally, that kaingineros, squatters, and cultural minorities and other occupants shall whenever the best land use of the area so demands as determined by the Director, be ejected and relocated to the nearest accessible government resettlement area (ibid.).

This provision presents an issue where “kaingineros, squatters, cultural minorities and other occupants” (ibid.) are all lumped together in one demographic category. ‘Cultural minorities,’ of course, was the term that is understood today as ‘indigenous peoples’ (IPs), except the notion of “minority” implies hierarchical relations between them and a dominant cultural “majority.” While the so-called ‘cultural minorities’ are certainly practitioners of swidden farming (or *kaingin* as the law provides), ‘squattling’ or unlawful settling in an area is certainly a matter of argument, especially at a time when ‘ancestral lands’ and ‘ancestral domains’ were terms that were not yet a part of a larger cultural conversation. The problem, though, is that the law empowers the government to determine circumstances that would eject these forest occupants from the land and bring them to a resettlement area “whenever the best land use of the area so demands as determined by the Director” (ibid.).

## **The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act as basis for the *chontog***

That conversation took place twenty-two years later when the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997 (Republic of the Philippines 1997) was enacted. The Act provides, among others, that

The State shall take measures, with the participation of [Indigenous Cultural Communities]/IPs concerned, to protect

their rights and guarantee respect for their cultural integrity, and to ensure that members of the ICCs/IPs benefit on an equal footing from the rights and opportunities which national laws and regulations grant to other members of the population (ibid.).

Among the rights that the law guarantees are rights to ancestral domains, as provided in Chapter III of the Act. Thus, in what appears to be a complete reversal of the provisions of laws enacted in the 1970s, the Act provides rights of ownership to IPs “over lands, bodies of water traditionally and actually occupied by ICCs/IPs, sacred places, traditional hunting and fishing grounds, and all improvements made by them at any time within the domains” (ibid.).

The Act also ensures that IPs should no longer fear their removal from their ancestral domains through governmental determination because they already have the right to “develop, control and use lands and territories traditionally occupied, owned or used; to manage and conserve natural resources within the territories” (ibid.). Posterity within their own lifeways and practices is also guaranteed as they have the capacity to “uphold the responsibilities for future generations” (ibid.).

Upholding these “responsibilities” include upholding “cultural integrity” by exercising the right to indigenous knowledge systems and practices and to develop their own sciences and technologies. As provided in Chapter VI of the Act, indigenous peoples can exercise their “right to special measures to control, develop and protect their sciences, technologies and cultural manifestations, including human and other genetic resources, seeds, including derivatives of these resources, traditional medicines and health practices, vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals, indigenous knowledge systems and practices, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literature, designs, and visual and performing arts.”

There is no doubt, therefore, that the IPRA and its pertinent provisions, was largely the basis for the enactment of the “Joint

Implementing Rules and Regulations [IRR] of the ‘Chontog’ as a Sustainable Traditional Indigenous Forest Resources Management System and Practice (STIFRMSP) of the ICCs/IPOs in Barangays Karao and Ekip, Municipality of Bokod, Benguet” (DENR 2015). This was jointly promulgated in January 2015 by the officials of the municipality of Bokod and of Barangays Karao and Ekip.

*Chontog*, according to Section 5, Paragraph x of this issuance, are “areas within the domain communally owned by the community such as the watershed areas and the communal forests.” At the same time, it is also a system that points to the “sustainable traditional indigenous forest resource management system and practices of the Ikarao and Kalanguya tribes within their ancestral domain in the barangays of Karao and Ekip, Municipality of Bokod, Province of Benguet.” Moreover,

[i]t exhibits a unique setting of indigenous forest management systems attributing to the sustainable existence of their natural resources inherent with their culture and traditional practices maintaining their forest, wildlife, watersheds, woodlots, pasture areas, and other forest vegetation interspersed with their hamlets, and designated cultivated areas for livelihood (DENR 2015, 1).

Aside from water resources, it is also a source for food, firewood, and lumber for housing, herbs for medicines, and pesticides for rice fields.

The basis for this 2015 IRR was a joint documentation project undertaken by the regional offices of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), in cooperation with the local government units (LGUs) of the municipality of Bokod and the barangays of Ekip and Karao and the ICCs and indigenous peoples' organizations (IPOs) in the area.

A comprehensive report on the *chontog* system was prepared, covering its basis in history and tradition as well as the territorial

breadth and scope of the practice. It also points to the cultural rootedness and temporal grounding of the practice in the sense of that it conforms to one of the salient criteria prescribed in the IPRA regarding indigenous cultural practices, which is that the practice should have been in place “since time immemorial” (Republic of the Philippines 1997).

In fact, the report states that the *chontog* as an indigenous knowledge system and practice (IKSP) “of the Ikaraos and the Kalanguyas plays an important role in the protection and conservation of their natural resources which they have practiced since time immemorial” (DENR 2015, 3).

In brief, this IKSP regards the “forest ecosystem of Karao and Ekip as an important natural resource” (ibid.). At the same time, the forest is also seen by the IPs “as alive and responsive in many ways to their physical, spiritual and cultural needs.” The report adds, “particular trees are regarded as sacred” as much as the mountains and the forests are subject to a belief system called *pani’djew* or *pih’yaw*, which is “a belief of restricting the residents or anybody from doing prohibited acts to avoid pain of retribution from the spirit such as: indiscriminate cutting of trees” (ibid.), among others.

Places within the jurisdiction of the Karao and the Kalanguya according to the report are the mountains of Pack, Purgatory, Gwiling, Agpay, Naubanan, Bangsalan, Bakian, Poodan, Tinengan, Komkopol, and Salingsingan. Within the practices of these indigenous peoples is a certain adherence to a particular leadership hierarchy which governs decision-making processes. The *yangkaama*, *aama*, or *yangkabahkol* consists of a council of elders that “perform the role of decision-makers for the various activities and actively participate in the resolution of disputes/problems in the village or barangay” (DENR 2015, 8).

## **A culture in flux**

The report represents an exhaustive documentation of what the practice ought to be like under unchanging conditions of society. But

societal conditions are, in fact, dynamic and continuously in flux, such that the report itself points to circumstances that depict this situation. For instance, the report cites that the “traditional mode of leadership” under the “council of elders...is seldom used, owing to the political influence of the central government that intruded on the affairs of indigenous peoples” (DENR 2015, 8).

This “intrusion” is explained in the same report as “administrative bodies were set up by the state to administer their affairs. Local government units ran parallel to the leadership systems of local villages, whereby traditional leadership has declined” (ibid.).

In this situation, community leadership invariably emanates from the barangay, whose membership comprise residents who are “indigenous” themselves. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (n.d.) defines indigenous peoples as

Inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment. They have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. Despite their cultural differences, indigenous peoples from around the world share common problems related to the protection of their rights as distinct peoples.

The difference, however, is that while the *yangkaama* is composed of male elders, the barangay leadership is a mixture of male and female leaders. Furthermore, the IPRA prescribes the appointment of an indigenous peoples mandatory representative (IPMR) who shall be consulted on matters pertaining to indigenous knowledge and belief systems.

Martin T. Ampey is the IPMR of Barangay Ekip in the municipality of Bokod, Benguet. On December 13, 2018, I sat to have a conversation with him and three of the women leaders of the barangay, namely Patricia C. Calion, Florencia W. Gonzalo, and Marcenia K. Buyao.

The focus of the conversation is to determine the extent of the practice of *chontog* in their area in relation to the information described in the joint DENR–NCIP–ICC–IPO report (DENR 2015) and the LGU-enacted IRR on the *chontog*.

The group relates a two-fold approach to the subject because the times require them to make particular adjustments to what the practice prescribes. For instance, the delineation of agricultural lands and of the communal forest (called *kedjowan*) indicates that there are practices under the *chontog* system that also pertains to the cultivation of agricultural lands. In the *uma* (fields), the weeds taken out from the paddies are used as fertilizer—consistent with what is known today as ‘organic farming.’ However, the Ekip informants admitted that the need to expand the community’s harvest for economic purposes encourages the use of commercial fertilizers. The informants explained that the reason for this is that organic farming is good for ‘backyard gardening’ only. Thus, for a yield that satisfies the demands of the market, farmers need to resort to commercial methods.

Ampey and his group are also aware, however, of the need to protect water sources. In this situation, the practice of planting wild taro (*gabi/pising*) near water sources to encourage water retention is still in place. They also affirm the prohibition of cutting trees near water sources such as springs, because they rely on these bodies of water for domestic use and for irrigation. The Ekip informants add that part of the community’s belief system is their adherence to the *pani’djew* or spiritual retribution for committing proscribed acts such as cutting of certain tree species, hunting/trapping of animals (when it is not allowed), or unseasonable fishing.

These prohibitions draw on the belief that while the term *chontog* refers linguistically to an object, that is the mountain, it also refers to it being a living and breathing entity. Thus, the mountain is connected to the life cycle of the community. For instance, hunting, once practiced in the area, is at times prohibited to allow the spirits of the mountain to partake in the bounties of the forest as well (“*tapnu adda kanen ti chontog*”).

The Ekip informants also mentioned that the arrival of migratory birds is also a sign that intrusive forest activities must cease. In traversing the mountains and the forest, the people must keep to the pathways to minimize the trampling of the undergrowth. The Ekip informants stated further that even the grass must not be harmed. In instances where there is over-extraction of forest resources, the *chontog* (that is, the mountain) must be closed to allow the forest to regenerate.

Again, this system assumes that the only actors and stakeholders in this narrative are the indigenous peoples living within the jurisdiction of the *chontog* system. The Ekip informants also related issues and problems that they encounter in the process of stewardship over their own resources and how these issues and problems also contribute to the shifts and changes in the implementation of the practice and, ultimately, to cultural changes.

### **Implications of the *chontog* on the peoples' lifeways**

The Ekip informants narrated that during the height of Typhoon Ompong in September 2018, residents of Barangay Ekip noticed that there were numerous logs from fallen trees which were washed downstream and ended up along the barangay's riverbanks. As the logs went downstream, the water, with its cargo of logs, scoured the riverbanks, resulting in the widening of the river. The Ekip informants said that this had not happened before. What this means is that the upstream vegetation is no longer intact, and its cause is more likely man-made and not natural. Traditionally, the upstream areas of Barangay Ekip are still a part of the *chontog*. However, there are now outsiders who engage in the cultivation and clearing of the upstream areas. Under the system, this ought to be prohibited, but the informants say that the culprits do not belong to their community.

Under the IPRA (Republic of the Philippines 1997), the community has the “right to regulate the entry of migrant settlers and organizations into the domains” (Chapter III, Section 7, Paragraph e). However, barangay residents are fearful that confronting the perpetrators might

result in harmful and violent situations, because they believe that these outsiders are armed and possess economic and political influence.

The other issue involving the so-called “migrant settlers” who are not necessarily familiar with local knowledge and beliefs is that migration is sometimes brought about by intermarriages. This results in the erosion of the belief systems due to the introduction of new and more secular belief systems through intermarrying individuals. Tourism is likewise attracting outsiders towards areas of interest such as Mt. Purgatory, where unregulated tourist activity has contributed to pollution and the destruction of forest ecology in the area.

Furthermore, in the barangay’s entry to a municipal-organized songwriting contest on disaster resilience, climate change was mentioned as one of the phenomena that the residents are currently facing. If the widening of the river as a result of the scouring by the washed-down logs has not been seen in recent memory, then Typhoon Ompong might be considered as an indicator of a radical shift in global climate. Discussing the effects of a changing Philippine climate, Comiso et al. (2014, 95) warns that “if there are no mitigating and adaptive measures, the biodiversity at stake in the Cordillera highlands is considerable.” They continued, “Mt. Data is the type of locality where old endemic rodents were first collected, and with their habitats already turned into vegetable gardens, no one has evaluated what happened to the unique rodents after conversion” (ibid.).

Along with the call of the residents for government assistance in the policing of massive land-clearing operations upstream of Ekip, there might also be a need for the residents to take a cultural shift from their accustomed practices of slash-and-burn agriculture and timber extraction. The reality of climate change might also compel residents to shift their policies towards a more stringent regulation of activities by outsiders. Initiatives and incentives for re-vegetation must also be put in place because as typhoons become even stronger, “wind is susceptible to slowing down when it goes through many trees over a large area” (Comiso et al. 2014, 95).

Barangay Ekip is a hilly settlement that descends towards a river basin which serves as a drain network for the subwatersheds of Mount



Pulag. In September 2018, Typhoon Ompong swept through Northern Luzon and affected parts of the Cordillera, notably the province of Benguet. While the municipality of Itogon was in the news for the massive landslide that took the lives of dozens of small-scale miners, the effect on Barangay Ekip in Bokod was that the flow of the river that runs parallel to the settlement was transformed and altered not only by the volume of water that flowed through the waterway, but moreso by the debris that was carried.

Part of the debris were freshly cut logs, and Ampey's group deduced that trees do not get easily carried by the natural force of storms or typhoons. Upon seeing that what was conveyed downstream were actually timber products, the group realized that there are loggers operating in the mountains and forests upstream. Although the area is under Barangay Ekip's jurisdiction, outsiders continue to conduct logging operations within its vicinity.

The reality of climate change, unregulated upstream logging operations, and a changing natural landscape are conditions that affect the community's response to their environment. Thus, while it has been long held that the community has a system of managing their environment, it took the involvement of state instruments—particularly the DENR and the NCIP—to document the practice of *chontog* by undertaking ethnographic work in the study sites. The documentation, which was completed in 2015, describes the *chontog* as a “Sustainable Traditional Indigenous Forest Resources Management System (STIFRMSP).” This attribution is further elaborated as thus:

Chontog is an indigenous term describing the indigenous forest resource management system and practice of the Ikarao and Kalanguya tribes within their ancestral domain of Karao and Ekip, Bokod, Benguet. It exhibits a unique setting of indigenous forest management systems attributing to the sustainable existence of their natural resources inherent with their culture and traditional practices maintaining their forest, wildlife, watersheds, woodlots, pasture areas, and other forest vegetation interspersed with their hamlets and designated cultivated areas for livelihood (DENR 2015, 1).

In the interview, Ampey stated that the *chontog* is “*salaknib ti aglawlaw* (it protects the surroundings/environment).” It is drawn from an age-old practice (*ugali*) to promote good health and cleanliness. He said that the *chontog* consists of a set of beliefs, including the mindset that humans are not the sole occupants of the forest, as there are other creatures residing in the forest which depend on its resources for their existence (just like humans). Reminding of symbiotic relationships in ecosystems, Ampey relayed that even the trees require the presence of animals and other living creatures in order to thrive. Thus in the *chontog*, the practice is to regulate the hunting of bushmeat and game so that “*tapno adda kanen ti chontog* (there will be left for the forest to eat).”

He hastens to explain, however, that hunting is no longer a common practice because the usual game, such as wild chickens, *buwet* (cloud rat), *tabaw* (wild cat), deer, *tilay* (monitor lizard), and river produce like the small fish *bunug* and *kiwet/ligat* (eel), are already rare. Other variants of hunting, such as trapping and fishing, are also rarely practiced, Ampey said. However, in the practice of agriculture, which is the community's primary source of livelihood, Ampey notes that “good practices” prescribed under the *chontog* remains in place. For instance, in the *uma* (garden/field), weeds are used as organic fertilizer. At the same time, commercial farming methods are practiced alongside organic farming. The use of both methods results in a more profitable yield.

Even though they have appropriated non-traditional farming methods, the community also still uses folk practices in sustaining resources. One such practice is the planting of *gabi* (taro) near springs to encourage water retention. *Chontog* prohibits the cutting of trees near springs and other bodies of water to avoid trampling the grass and destroying designated forest pathways.

The practice of *chontog* also acts as folk superstition, especially when it comes to prohibited acts. With each violation of *chontog*, it is believed that bad luck will befall a person or a community as punishment from the *pani'djew* (spirits). In this instance, Ampey says rituals to appease the spirits need to be performed and this entails the ritual sacrifice of animals.

Ampey explains that these practices today are always in a clash with other sets of beliefs that seek to eliminate such for being “satanic.” He attributes this to the edicts of religious groups that they call the *sekta*, which systematically call for a stop to traditional customs, beliefs, and practices.

These are not the only issues that confront the community as far as their adherence to the *chontog* is concerned.

In the documentation, the *chontog* was considered a practice of the Karao, who are the “original settlers” of Barangays Karao and Ekip. However, Ampey admits that the people of Barangay Ekip could no longer be categorically described as “original settlers,” because migration and intermarriages have already brought changes to the demographic.

Another implication of outside contact, according to Ampey, is a gradual diminishing of a peoples' fealty to local customs, practices, and traditions. He cited that there are a number of “original settlers” who have sold properties to outsiders without realizing that their actions might result to the detriment of the environment. Anecdotally, this is the situation that confronted the community as they were made aware of timber products that were washed downstream because of logging operations. They say that the loggers were in fact “outsiders” (to mean that they are not from Ekip, but from neighboring municipalities) who were able to purchase properties from the “original settlers.”

While there are laws and issuances that penalize violators of the total log ban, enforcement by state regulators seems to be lacking. Ampey mentions that barangay *tanods* (peace officers), who also act as forest rangers, can only report incidents but they do not have the power to enforce the law or apprehend violators. Furthermore, they fear for their personal safety as well.

## **Indigenous knowledge systems and practices today**

Filing charges against the loggers seems like a plausible option. After all, if the exploitation of forest resources is a law enforcement problem,

then proper enforcement would correct this wrongdoing. However, this situation reveals how easily forest resources can be misused, and how a community claiming to practice sustainable forest management can be equally complicit in the destruction of natural resources because they sell their property to outsiders.

The problem, like the circumstances that led to the community's observations of their surroundings after the onslaught of Typhoon Ompong, is just as complex: how to achieve a sustainable society given the prevalence of both state policies and traditional systems that supposedly promote the sustainable use of natural resources. Enforcing the *chontog* via legislation effectively transforms this practice from a customary law into state law. While documenting the practice will give the IPs a semblance of a roadmap of the tradition, this also means that it will have a weakened cultural foothold because transfer of knowledge was traditionally done orally. However, the codification and legislation of the practice could also be a form of empowerment of the IPs, as embodied in the IPRA, especially because they "are among the least powerful and most vulnerable to climate change, and indeed are already being impacted as so-called frontline communities" (Powless 2012, 411).

There is no doubt that the intention for codifying the *chontog* in ethnography and in legislation stems from a global indigenous movement that recognizes the right of IPs to "challenge[ ] official decision-making processes while demanding inclusion on their own terms" (ibid., 412). By institutionalizing the *chontog* through official channels, it is envisioned that

They [(indigenous peoples)] are constructing alternative spaces and forms of Indigenous collective power and, to some extent, with allied movements. They are guided by an evolving understanding of the roots of environmental injustice in colonialism and capitalism, as well as by a positive alternative vision of Indigenous knowledge, rights, and lifeways that has resonated beyond Indigenous Peoples and thus can potentially serve as a beacon for the larger climate justice movement going forward (ibid.).

At the same time, as the state promotes the widespread practice of this traditional method, the question of how this act differs from previous government issuances claiming to promote environmental sustainability and people's right to land is raised. According to Ampey, they have concluded that the situation has not changed in the sense that the status quo, which subjects traditional economic practices to state prohibitions, still prevails. “We are allowed (by the DENR) to cultivate our lands but we should not expand from our currently occupied area,” said Ampey.

Dobson (2003, 3) explains that a change in behavior will last “only as long as the incentives or disincentives are in place—and these are inevitably subject to the vagaries of fashion, experiment, and the direction of the political wind that happens to be blowing at the time (underscoring supplied).” He goes on to argue that achieving a sustainable society requires more than formalizing and institutionalizing a previously ingrained cultural practice and that penalties only invite attempts to get around them (ibid.). With regulations, there is a need to conceive a set of incentives in order to redirect patterns of behavior in sustainable directions. In the end, “sustainable behavior cannot be reduced to a discussion about balancing carrots and sticks” (Beckman 2001, 179; quoted in Dobson 2003, 3).

One aspect that resonates from the documentation of the *chontog* is the acknowledgment that the indigenous political system is lacking or, at best, has declined in the community. This pertains to the council of elders which governs the decision-making processes in the community (DENR 2015). It said “this traditional mode of leadership is seldom used, owing to the political influence of the central government that intruded (into) the affairs of the indigenous peoples. Administrative bodies were setup by the state to administer their affairs. Local government units run parallel to the leadership systems of local villages, whereby traditional leadership has declined” (DENR 2015, 8).

As the documentation suggests, the fact that the indigenous political system has diminished over generations presents a problem in governance and decision-making, and therefore, the central government should still take an active role in forest management system despite

a recognition of the existence of a culturally rooted practice. A fundamental issue with the documentation is that the document is densely written, while claiming to be empirical evidence.

However, it is also true that what the documentation of the *Chontog* has dealt with is indigenous knowledge that, when codified, has seemingly presented itself as scientific knowledge. Ross and Pickering (2002, 190) however, elaborate on the difference between scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge when they say that

One of the main differences between scientific (and therefore government) knowledge about resource management and indigenous intellectual property regarding resource management is the nature of the ecological knowledge possessed by the two. Scientific knowledge is often categorized and compartmentalized, whereas indigenous knowledge is holistic and set within an ecosystems framework (Ross and Quandamooka 1996a; Wolfley 1998).

The “ecosystem” that is being referred to above is continuously changing as it is being re-shaped by natural and political forces. While the *chontog* has governed resource management in the area for generations, the basis for resource management is not the *chontog* per se, but nature (underscoring supplied). Michell (2005, 39; quoted in Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007, 553) put it succinctly in saying that “[n]ature provides a blue print of how to live well and all that is necessary to sustain life.” Within these terms, “knowledge systems and ways of knowing nature [becomes] [i]ndigenous knowledge” (Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007, 539).

Aikenhead and Ogawa (2007, 553) argue that differentiating indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge is like locating the difference between the “journey” and the “destination,” in the sense that

The process of generating or learning Indigenous ways of living in nature is coming to know (Cajete 2000b), or coming

*to knowing* (Peat 1994) [underscoring supplied], phrases that connote a journey. Coming to know differs from the Eurocentric science process to *know* (i.e., to discover) that connotes a destination, such as a patent or a published record of a discovery. An Indigenous coming to know is a journey toward wisdom or a journey in wisdom-in-action, not a destination of discovering knowledge.

It is not that the documentation and the information contained about the *chontog* are false or bears a misrepresentation of the practice. It is, after all, a product of a painstaking research process undertaken by the stakeholders whose rigor cannot be discounted or diminished. However, it cannot be assumed as well for us to consider the documentation as categorical and compartmentalized in a way that science is viewed in conventional terms. Indigenous knowledge, according to Ross and Pickering (2002), is holistic and is rooted in the immediate environment of a given people.

Furthermore, “while indigenous peoples have sometimes caused extinctions and degraded environments, they have often persisted for millennia in their territories by using detailed adaptive knowledge” (Krech 1999; cited in Mauro and Hardison 2000, 1263). This “adaptive knowledge” sometimes fuels the reluctance of some scientists to trust the efficacy of indigenous knowledge. Mauro and Hardison (2000, 1263) admit that “[s]cientists are often skeptical of the value of [indigenous knowledge] unless it has been recast in scientific terms.” However, they also concede that “[i]ndigenous peoples and local communities have an important role in the management of biodiversity” and that indigenous knowledge “is an evolving subject of national and international law” (ibid.).

If such is the case, the subject of the *chontog* must not and should not be kept within the confines of the documentation’s pages. As an “evolving subject” (ibid.), indigenous knowledge should be constantly revisited to account for its uncovered and changing aspects and to capture its continuous unraveling in the process of “coming to know” (Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007). To observe the inextricable relationship between nature and humanity, one need only look at the link between

the legal aspect of promoting *chontog* and indigenous peoples' rights. It is argued, on the other hand, that the lens of citizenship must not be focused on the people alone, but on the environment as well.

### **"A new politics of obligation"**

Dobson (2003, 85), quoting Smith (1998), calls this "a new politics of obligation," emphasizing that "human beings have obligations to animals, trees, mountains, oceans, and other members of the biotic community." This challenges the conventional idea that non-humans are not included in our conceptions of justice and citizenship, which largely leads to a tendency for people to gloss over the ethics and morality of environmental exploitation. Christoff (1996, 157; quoted in Dobson 2003, 86) explains this further by saying "it is helpful to look at notions of citizenship from a completely different angle and turn to conceptions of citizenship based on moral responsibility and participation in the public sphere rather than those defined formally by legal relationships to the state."

For instance, it can be argued that the loggers who destroyed Barangay Ekip are also members of indigenous groups, and can therefore invoke the provisions of the IPRA to justify their actions. However, if present policies are extended to conventional civil, political, and social laws, then such persons will fall under the jurisdiction of environmental laws.

Van Steenbergen (1994b, 146; quoted in Dobson 2003, 88) argues for ecological citizenship, which "has [something] to do with the extension rights to non-human beings." As citizenship is usually ascribed to humans, Dobson (2003, 88) goes on to argue "that [non-human] beings are moral patients and therefore must be regarded as members of the moral community." There are no incentives for politicians to talk about ecological citizenship in the community. Instead, they rely on the hope that people will choose to do good for reasons other than fear of punishment or loss, and desire for economic reward or social status—that is, that "people sometimes do good because they want to be virtuous" (Beckman 2001, 179; quoted in Dobson 2003, 129).



However, it should also be acknowledged reality that if we think that the documentation and codification of the *chontog* is self-evident and self-realizing, then all efforts would go to waste. Working on ground and at the grassroots is still the path for the attainment of a sustainable society. After all, “people,” as Dobson (2003, 8) argues, “are the ‘raw material’ of the democratic process and what they think and do makes a difference to the process's outcomes—if we do not believe that, then why endorse democratic procedures in the first place?”

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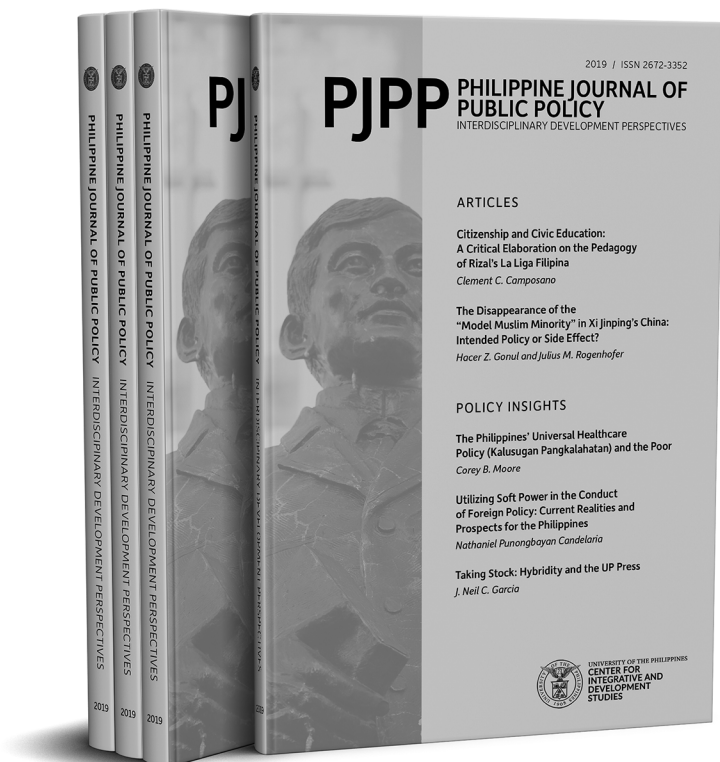
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