



Transpersonal Ecology, Empathy Gap, and the Case of the Lumad in Mindanao

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Abstract: Apathy towards the environment does not only affect the environment itself, but it also affects its inhabitants – especially those whose lives are interconnected with nature. *Transpersonal ecology* is the psychologically-based idea of transcendental self-expansion to accommodate the ecosphere. Unfortunately, there is a neurological process called the *empathy gap* which hinders people from going out of their way to act on issues they do not feel personally. The *Lumad* tribes consist of different indigenous tribes who adopted the term “Lumad” back in 1986 to separate themselves from the Muslim and Christian groups in Mindanao. Transpersonal ecology may seem like an off – and even outdated – concept, but the culture and practices of the different Lumad tribes here in the Philippines have been showing its applicability and importance. This research paper consists of the discussion regarding transpersonal ecology and the empathy gap, and the case of a selection of Lumad tribes in Mindanao. It does not cover the technical and legal aspects of environmental conservation and heritage preservation, and it assumes the applicability of empathy gap to non-relational beings such as the environment. Therefore, the following discussions will take place: 1) transpersonal ecology and the empathy gap, 2) culture and practices of the Lumad tribes, 3) viability of transpersonal ecology based on Lumad culture, and 4) how the empathy gap affects both. The goal of this paper is to show the viability of transpersonal ecology by using the Lumad way of life as an example, and to raise awareness – and subsequently, demand action – regarding the empathy gap.

Key Words: Transpersonal Ecology; Empathy Gap; Lumad; Culture; Environment

1. INTRODUCTION

Warwick Fox’s (1990) transpersonal ecology could be an answer to the problem of apathy when it comes to environmental issues, but it is not yet viable in its current form because the process of the empathy gap was not taken into account. Many researchers have worked on the two topics, such as Manggob Masinaring (2014) from Tebtebba! Foundation who aimed to show the different aspects of Lumad culture and the problems that pervade their existence; Gutsell and Inzlicht (2012) who provided neural evidence of the empathy gap; and Levita Duhaylungsod (1993) who discussed the indigenous peoples’ relationship with their land and the

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problems that modernity imposes. Transpersonal ecology may seem like an outdated concept with regard to environmental conservation and preservation, but a look at the culture and practices of the indigenous tribes of the Lumad in Mindanao shows its applicability and importance. The issue of transpersonal ecology and the empathy gap should be discussed in light of the case of the Lumad tribes because their cultures and lifestyles show their interconnectivity with nature, and their situation shows the impact of the empathy gap to both their environment and their culture. The different Lumad tribes in Mindanao that are included in this paper are experiencing struggles with ownership claims over their ancestral domains, the impact of modernity on their identities, and the discrimination of the non-Lumad towards their way of life (Masinaring, 2014). Transpersonal ecology is especially important because, especially since human beings are in a so-called progressive age, it is difficult to convince people to slow down and look at the consequences of the comfort and progress they are trying to achieve. This paper will also assume that the empathy gap is applicable to non-relational beings such as the environment.

1.1 *Transpersonal Ecology*

Transpersonal ecology is the psychologically based idea that pushes for transcendental self-expansion to accommodate the ecosphere (Fox, 1990). It shows itself to be different from the usual tripartite conception of the self, which would be: a) the *desiring-impulsive aspect* which is concerned with exploitation and expansionism, b) the *rationalizing-deciding aspect* which is seen as the control center between the three aspects, and c) the *normative-judgmental aspect* which posits that the environment has intrinsic value and so doing right by it is imperative regardless of how one feels (Fox, 1990). The proponents of transpersonal ecology believe that this conception is ultimately narrow and atomistic, while the transpersonal self is expansive and all-inclusive (Fox, 1990). It sees that the first and second aspect of the tripartite self are simply two sides of the same coin, except the latter is simply better at utilizing its self-serving tendencies. The normative-judgmental aspect of the self seems like it is the best when compared to the other two aspects, however it is still simply a mere aspect of the self. The moral demands of this last aspect may seem useful especially for the issue of environmental conservation, however the problem is what it emphasizes is the idea that there is a self that is a center of volitional activity. A transpersonal self may show volitional activity but to force this sense of self (Fox, 1990) through moral demands is counterproductive and frankly, ironic. The idea of a transpersonal self is against the usual moral “ought” that the field of Ethics imposes; it proposes that if one already has achieved (or is on their way to achieving) a wide, expansive sense of self, then one will naturally protect the natural unfolding of this expansive self in all its aspects (Fox, 1990). This means that the moral “ought” should be unnecessary because the identification of oneself with nature should be the one that will motivate the human being to care for nature, not some order imposed by Ethics. A violation of nature *should* hurt, in the same way that pain caused to a person’s family hurts the person, therefore the human being will take care of nature because caring for nature *is* caring for the Self (Fox, 1990).

Transpersonal ecology does not simply deal with the usual moral demands; however, it does deal with the holistic growth of a person (Fox, 1990). Once a human being realizes that one does not simply lock himself in himself and orders himself around to keep up with his moral duties, but instead strives to become the best version of himself while stretching his own ego boundaries to accommodate nature and in turn, identify himself with it, he naturally grows to love and care for that which is *he*, not *his*.

1.2 *Identification*

The important thing when it comes to discussing transpersonal ecology is the idea of identification. Identification here does not equate to identity; it simply means having a sense of commonality (Fox, 1990). For example, if there is a boy who identifies with his pet dog, it does not automatically translate to him being one and the same as his dog. What humans should realize is that their sense of self could be expanded to include the ecosphere, but they will only remain interlinked, not mashed into a single uniform substance. It goes against the usual conception of the self that is opposed to nature, a Man vs. Wild scenario. In fact, it is this kind of thinking that ultimately damages nature, which in turn damages ourselves. Identification makes one realize that an all-encompassing sense of unity is possible, provided that the human being does not simply depend on the visual boundaries that he has. Human beings are limited by their bodies, but their experiences could help



stretch their sense of self to include someone else – and in this case, to include the ecosphere (Fox, p. 1990). Boundaries are arbitrary, but that is exactly why human beings are capable of transcending the usual narrow sense of self; humans *are* capable of love, and what is love but a deliberate extension of one's self-concept to include someone else (Peck, 1990)?

There are three bases of identification (Fox, 1991) that is discussed in transpersonal ecology. First is the Personal, in which experiences of commonality with other entities are brought about by personal involvement (Fox, 1991). In other words, the identification happens through constant contact. Those we experience – such as our families, friends, or our nationalities – become a part of our identity. However, Personally based identification is not exactly in the same field as the other bases of identification. The second one is the Ontological, which refers to experiences of commonality with all that *is* through the deep-seated realization of the fact that things *are* (Fox, 1991). The Ontologically based identification is about the depth of impression that an entity's existence leaves on the human being, which happens when the human realizes that the Earth does not exist for a self-serving purpose or for anyone at all, except for its own existence, which is how humans are as well. Third is the Cosmological, which refers to experiences of commonality with all that *is*, brought about by the deep-seated realization that all entities including ourselves are aspects of a single, unfolding reality (Fox, 1991). There are quite a couple of cosmological narratives (Fox, 1991), one of which is Science. One of its studies is about the human place in the universe, and not only that but it also studies the universe itself and its own processes and development, which in turn gives people the motivation to look at this process as a single, unfolding reality (Fox, 1991). It is humbling to realize that human beings are not at the apex of anything, but rather all entities coexist and are parts of each other, and in a sense – *are* each other.

1.3 The Empathy Gap

Empathy gap is the idea that the intuitive mechanism of empathy is limited only to those we like (Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012). As seen in modern societies, prejudices and violent acts still abound – which would not be possible if human beings were perfectly capable of tapping into their natural instinct to connect with and share the emotions of other people. This, then, gave rise to the idea of the *outgroup*.

According to the perception-action model of empathy, empathy is based on neural simulation (Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012). Seeing another person express their emotion is bound to trigger similar neural networks which would help the observer share the other person's emotional state. However, studies show that this is (although not strictly) limited to those in the *ingroup*. An fMRI study has shown that neural activations are more prominent when members of the ingroup are hurt, but they are barely firing when the members of the outgroup are experiencing the same thing (Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012).

However, instead of reading these as a reflection of preference, some researchers viewed them as culturally learned prejudices (Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012). Participants who had high social dominance traits showed a profound empathy gap when seeing other people subjected to pain. The gap was severe, however, towards culturally disliked outgroups, suggesting that the empathy gap was more of a product or function of culture than preference (Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012). But although that is the case, those who seem to have high empathy were capable of empathizing with *both* the ingroup members and the outgroup members. This shows that there *are* people who were able to somehow, transcend the empathy gap (Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2012).

These studies have shown that there is in fact, a bias against outgroups – human beings are culturally conditioned to empathize less (if at all) with those that are outside of their own groups, unless if they were able to reach empathy maturation. If this is the case, then what about the environment? What about the non-relational being that is the Earth?

2. LUMAD CULTURE AND PRACTICES

Indigenous peoples are known for having an interconnected, even spiritual relationship with nature instead of simply being resource-based. The idea that nature provides the needs of the people still exist of course, but the people do not view the environment as a mere supplier of their consumer needs; they see themselves as

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a part of the holistic landscape (Buggey, 1999). Lumad culture operates the same way: they are interconnected with their land; therefore, losing their ancestral domain means not being able to practice the Lumad way of life. For example, the Manobo of Davao del Norte perform the ritual of the *Sunggod-to-Kamanga* for two purposes: to welcome the new cropping season, and to pray for a bountiful harvest (Masinaring, 1999). It starts when the Orion's belt is visible in the sky; food is then prepared and prayers are offered by the *baylan* (priest or priestess) to the spirit of the plants as part of the ritual (Masinaring, 2014). Farm equipment are also readied during this time through cleaning and prayers. Without proper signs from the spirits, no farming may take place (Masinaring, 2014). The Manobo also depend on other signs and omens for them to know whether or not it would be favorable to start planting. These signs may come through nature or through dreams: for example, during the stage of the *panlawag* or *panloyu* the farmers would decided which part of the land would be favorable for them to till, and the most important factor for them to continue this activity is approval from *Kalayag*, the spirit of the plants. If the turtle dove that they called on *Kalayag* to send did not call from the right direction, they would leave the portion they have picked alone lest they risk an unfortunate incident befalling them (Masinaring, 2014). However, if they get a good omen from the turtle dove, they made sure to immediately take part in a ritual with the *baylan* that would serve as a preparation before they go home and observe their dreams. If they get a good omen from their dreams, that is the only time they would proceed with the underbushing and the cutting of the big trees, with the latter being performed after a ritual is done to ask the spirits to transfer to another place (Masinaring, 2014). The tree trunks are chopped and dried afterwards for the burning. Finally, after much preparation, the Manobo would plant the *dawa* seeds to fool the birds into eating those instead of the soft grains of *humoi* that is the main crop (Masinaring, 2014). The field would be maintained as well by removing the unwanted grasses and burning them to keep insects away, and by employing different measures to ensure that nothing disturbs the crops so that the spirits would not be offended (Masinaring, 2014). Before the harvest season comes, the Manobo would search for good omen in their dreams before proceeding to do some hunting. On the day itself, no one is allowed to grumble or to make a show of their tiredness so as to not offend the spirits while the harvest is ongoing (Masinaring, 2014). A thanksgiving celebration would be done afterwards through the tasting of the new rice and serving of delicious food as a show of gratitude to *Kalayag* and the other spirits that aided them into achieving a bountiful harvest. Other types of crops would be planted on the soil after the harvest is done to give the soil some time to recuperate its lost minerals from the rice planting (Masinaring, 2014).

Another group would be the Mansaka. The Mansaka of Maragusan, Compostela Valley hold a harvest festival called *Pyagsawitan* in which they would give thanks to *Magbabaya*, the Almighty, and the other spirits for permitting them to have a bountiful harvest (Limikid, 2015). Their traditional system of farming involved moving from area to another, which helped the soil to rest and regain its lost minerals. Unfortunately, this system is now obsolete.

The Mandaya people of Davao Oriental are the same way: they keep their close relationship with nature and the spirits (Masinaring, 2014). The Mandaya belief was that life is sacred and should never be wasted; their customs and traditions reflected this belief to ensure that nature would always be in balance (Masinaring, 2014).

The Dibabawun of Kapalong, Davao del Norte have their own religion which influences greatly their treatment of their environment. They believe in the Almighty, *Taginiit*, who is the ultimate creator. He entrusted his creation to the care of *Tagbanwa* and *Sugojun*, who are lesser spirits (Masinaring, 2014). The lesser spirits are also the ones who are called upon whenever there are hunts or harvests, or for healing and protection (Masinaring, 2014). The Dibabawun hold a thanksgiving festival called *hinang* whenever they install a new leader or during planting or harvest season (Masinaring, 2014). It is composed of four steps: the *Pangapog*, *Pangujab*, *Binakilid*, and the *Inidang* (Masinaring, 2014). The Dibabawun way of life is deeply interconnected with their environment; they show great reverence for the spirits and the land, and rituals are always done before doing something important (Masinaring, 2014).



3. TRANSPERSONAL ECOLOGY AND LUMAD CULTURE

Transpersonal Ecology may not exactly deal with the spiritual or religious relationship with nature, but it does deal with the human relationship with nature in which human beings are a part of a wondrous whole, not a dominant member of the system (Fox, 1990). The practices of the Lumad tribes that were mentioned show great respect for the land that they were using; they recognize that it is not there for them to exploit, but rather for them to coexist with. They practiced different types of farming to guarantee that the land would not be overused; they performed rituals to seek guidance and did not continue on with the farming if the signs and omens were not favorable. This varied differently from the usual capitalist, efficiency-oriented model that is being used when it comes to production. The indigenous tribes had intimate, working knowledge of their ecosystem and they capitalized on that to practice sustainable living.

3.1 *The Lumad and Identification*

Personally based identification may be far less transpersonal than what transpersonal identification advocates, but one cannot simply ignore the fact that the relationship with nature starts with experience. The indigenous tribes had their lives and their cultures molded by long and sustained contact with their environment (Buggey, 1999); that is the reason why they are able to form their own religion which permeates even their farm life, like the Dibabawun. The Lumad tribes have been in possession of their land since before the Spanish *conquistadores* invaded the Philippines (Abanes, 2014); their generations have lived and passed in those lands, and their tribal and personal identities are already connected to the land. It would only be natural that any harmful methods used to gain raw materials and produce from the land would be seen and felt by the Lumad themselves, just like when the Bagobo observed that their sacred Lake Agco had become muddy and concluded that it was due to a state-sanctioned digging of a geothermal well (Duhaylungsod, 1993).

Ontologically based identification is seen in Lumad culture also through their relationship with their land. They co-exist with the elements of their ecosystem, and it is ingrained in their identity and their culture to make sure that they show utmost respect to their environment. The Lumad tribes do not see themselves as simply being users and utilizers of the land they are in, and they also do not show the kind of possession for their environment that one has with their personal possessions; they would not have such elaborate rituals that involve constantly asking for signs and omens before they could do anything that involved the land and its inhabitants if they believed that the land was theirs to exploit. Their relationship with their environment may have been interconnected, but it is precisely that because they understand that the environment *is*, just like they *are*.

And finally, Cosmologically based identification is also seen through the fact that the Lumad tribes believe that their environment is not *just* an environment, but a sacred one in which the Lumad are a part of. Their rituals, traditions, practices, and beliefs stem from both their intimate knowledge of their environment and the cosmological narratives that surround their land. For example: the Manobo have *The Story of Datu Maguinta*, which is about the Datu and Mount Pantaron, an important sacred site for the Manobo (Masinaring, 2014); the Mandaya with *The Legend of the Dagmay*, which is a woven abaca cloth that they hold sacred (Masinaring, 2014); and the Dibabawun with their origin story of *Insaliyo and the Great Flood* (Masinaring, 2014), among others. The Lumad people understand that they are one with their environment; the way they pattern their lives after the needs of their land shows that, and the way their cultures molded to fit their long history with their ancestral domains show it as well.

4. THE EMPATHY GAP PROBLEM

Empathy gap certainly affects the Lumad tribes, and it hits them right where it hurts – their land. It is a well-known fact that Lumad tribes have been struggling to hold onto their ancestral domains, but not everyone acknowledges that the new practices of farming and the non-Lumad society have also been making things difficult for indigenous tribes, to say the least. The government itself seems to not know how to deal with

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the Lumad people, and capitalism has been a constant threat to their way of life. How do these relate to the empathy gap?

First of all, the problem of empathy gap deals with the influence of culture. Chet Bowers (1993) explained the aspects of culture in a critique against transpersonal ecology. These would be: 1) *cultural storage*, 2) *ideology*, and 3) *semiotics*.

Cultural storage is in a sense, tradition. Tradition has been there since even before the individual comes into the picture; she is born into it, *it* referring to mental and cultural processes which have been developed and passed down for generations before she is even conceived, and this serves as the lens through which she will view the world (Bowers, 1993).

The ideological aspect of culture is the schema that is refined through discourse and social practice, which in turn brings out the political aspects of each symbol system in a given culture (Bowers, 1993).

The semiotic aspect deals with the person's reality and identity as a social construct created by language and communication (Bowers, 1993). It is important to note that the second a human being is born, there are already ideas that shape that person's reality through communicative outlets such as TV commercials, the language in the area, the color scheme in the house, common expressions, and so on (Bowers, 1993).

It was already mentioned earlier that the Lumad tribes have been around since before the Spaniards conquered the Philippines. When the Spaniards took control, they subjugated the Lumad whom they called *infieles* or infidels (Ulindang, 2015). When the Americans and the Japanese took over the country, the Lumad tribes conducted uprisings, refusing to back down from the people who were invading their land (Ulindang, 2015). Unfortunately, the American colonial period and the succeeding governments paved the way for the businesses to take over, and even the government what with their developmental and even environmental projects displaced the Lumad from their lands (Ulindang, 2015). They had become marginalized groups who are fighting to stay on their ancestral lands.

The Lumad tribes are composed of a good number of ethnic groups from Mindanao. The name itself means "indigenous" or "native" in Visayan. Due to lack of knowledge regarding their culture, the non-Lumad have expressed discrimination towards the Lumad tribes. The National Commission for Culture and the Arts [NCCA] Chairman Felipe de Leon Jr. once said that once the Filipinos view themselves through Western eyes, anything indigenous becomes a source of embarrassment and discomfort because of the idea that the native ways are primitive (as cited in de Guia, 2013, p. 176). The largely Westernized culture that the Filipinos grew and are growing up in certainly accounts for the empathy gap that the non-Lumad citizens have developed; the Lumad methods are deemed as crude and primitive; they are not considered when government policies are put in place; some have their religion deemed as a cult; businesses are given more priority than the people, and a myriad of other derogatory reasons which, unfortunately, have real-life consequences for the Lumad tribes.

For example, the Mansaka used to shift to other areas when it comes to farming, instead of continuously using one patch of the land all throughout the year (Masinaring, 2014). Since this was deemed primitive although environmentally sustainable and an ingrained part of their culture, they ended up adopting the modern means of farming which includes the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and other technologies which are not healthy and are degrading the quality of the land and its produce over time (Masinaring, 2014). Many of them ended up working in plantations for multinational companies, as household help, and even as Overseas Filipino Workers [OFW] (Masinaring, 2014).

Most of the Mandaya converted to Christianity because they were pressured to do so; many of them realized that the government would stop serving them if they kept their old beliefs (Masinaring, 2014). Unfortunately, this resulted to their traditional farming rituals to disappear as well, since their farming rituals are interlinked with their belief in the spirits (Masinaring, 2014). They also experienced an incident in which a protected zone was declared by the Philippine Eagle Foundation without consulting them first, resulting in the Mandaya lacking a large space for farming; the Foundation assumed that the Mandaya did not know enough regarding their environment when in fact, they are the ones who would be protecting the eagle and its habitat because they have a relationship with their environment and they have been living in the area long enough to have extensive knowledge of its inner workings (Masinaring, 2014).

The Subanun had lessened the lavishness of its rituals because big logging and mining companies have been encroaching on their territory, taking raw materials at the expense of the land and and its people

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(Masinaring, 2014). The government could have taken concrete steps to prevent the companies from taking from ancestral lands, but then again they themselves have expropriated these lands time and time again, hence the displacement of the Lumad tribes (Duhaylungsod, 1993). According to Eddie Onto, the Subanun in his community in Misamis Occidental have resorted to doing low-wage work in the coal mines (as cited in Masinaring, 2014, p. 53). They have no other choice left.

There are still members of the Bagobo tribe who practice their traditional religion, the *Sandawa Sarili Langis* [SSL], although majority of the members of their sister tribes are already baptized Christians (Masinaring, 2014). However, even though their religion is registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission, SSL is still misunderstood by many as a cult (Masinaring, 2014).

The Lumad tribes staged a protest outside the regional office of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples [NCIP] asking for its abolition because the NCIP has done nothing to help them, even regarding the issue of displacement (Canedo, 2016). They had been experiencing much difficulty living in the evacuation areas in the city because they depend on their ancestral land to survive, yet the NCIP never took a serious look at their situation and instead were inactive in dealing with their complaints (Canedo, 2016). Unfortunately, the Regional Director of NCIP dismissed the allegations of the Lumad protesters and mentioned that the indigenous people who are in their ancestral domains are the ones who are feeling the action of the NCIP (Canedo, 2016).

5. CONCLUSION

These are only a handful of issues that the Lumad tribes have been experiencing for years, and plenty, if not most of these issues have had news items and articles written about them, but their problems still abound and majority of the non-Lumad in the country are still apathetic to the plight of these indigenous peoples. Stavely and McNamara (1992) pointed out in their critique against transpersonal ecology that enlightenment has never been a guarantee of social change. Unfortunately, they are right. For the Lumad, their lands – their ancestral domains, their identities – are still being taken away. Despite efforts to inform the public about their culture and their plight, their way of life is still seen as crude and their relationship with nature as primitive, even though they have been practicing their cultures since before the Spaniards came to the country and their lifestyles are proven to be environmentally sustainable – definitely more sustainable than the modern ways of living. It just so happened that the non-Lumad grew up in a different culture and the indigenous ways of living ended up being viewed as merely “ancient”. Now the remaining question is, how does one solve the empathy gap? The Lumad way of life certainly has to be preserved, and if one is to learn anything from them, it is that human beings are part of a holistic system and they operate interdependently with an environment that they coexist with, not dominate. Transpersonal ecology is possible. These people have been living it. In the case of the Lumad tribes, having an empathy gap towards the environment also hurt the people who have been having a relationship with nature. They identified deeply with their land; apathy towards their environment resulted in apathy towards the people, and vice versa.

That being said, the empathy gap poses a problem for both transpersonal ecology and the Lumad way of life. Transpersonal ecology in its current form is not yet viable because it does not take into account the empathy gap. However, by studying the Lumad tribes in Mindanao can one see its viability and the concrete problems that empathy gap imposes. Therefore, finding a solution to the empathy gap is of utmost importance so that transpersonal ecology will be feasible regardless of the differences in culture, for the sake of the environment and its inhabitants.

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