



Report

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge I: Insights from Outside the Arts

from the IETM Aarhus Plenary Meeting

By Máté Tenke



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Summary

Today's global economy perpetuates an exploitative relation with the planet and the communities that inhabit it. What can we learn from Indigenous knowledge systems and methods to change this tendency? What can an inclusive and intersectional perspective teach us about climate justice? What are the key issues to reconsider if we want to ensure a just green transition for the future?

In this panel session held at the IETM Aarhus Plenary Meeting 2023, Indigenous knowledge holders and community activists from outside of the arts field discussed how modern societies can forge an environmentally and socially sustainable culture based on restorative justice and equity.

Moderator

[Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh](#), Guildhall School of Music and Drama, United Kingdom

Speakers

[Kimaren ole Riमित](#), ILEPA - Indigenous Livelihoods Enhancement Partners, Kenya

[Pratima Gurung](#), Indigenous Persons with Disabilities Global Network, Nepal

[Liisa-Ravna Finbog](#), University of Oslo, Norway

[Kirstine Eiby Møller](#), Greenland National Museum and Archives, Greenland



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Indigenous Ecological Knowledge I

Insights from Outside the Arts

Introduction

The IETM Aarhus Plenary Meeting 2023, entitled *Living on the Edge*, wrestled with what it means to be living at the brink of ecological collapse and what the arts can do to tackle this. As the title of this session suggests, it was aimed at broadening perspectives with speakers who are rarely heard within arts-focused meetings.

Indigenous Peoples have centuries-long experience of living in harmony with nature and should therefore be an obvious source of expertise when it comes to ecology. However, the dominance of modern science in the climate debate means that this kind of traditional and practical knowledge has been largely ignored despite its enormous potential.

Before engaging with Indigenous knowledge, a note of caution is necessary to begin with.

Avoiding Western-centrism

As a form of (neo-)colonial oppression, Indigenous communities have often been labelled 'primitive cultures', an epistemic violence¹ that serves to undermine their rights and knowledge vis-à-vis that of Western societies. However, in light of the ecological crisis that industrialised societies brought about, the Western development model and the self-perceived superiority of 'modern' societies are being questioned while Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and skill to live in harmony with nature is increasingly recognised.

While this recognition has been long overdue, Indigenous Peoples reject the sense of 'rediscovery' with which many Western scholars, activists and decision-makers approach them – as an Indigenous Taiwanese audience member advocated. This attitude assumes a kind of self-importance reminiscent of the colonial era, assuming one only becomes significant once seen by the dominant (Western) gaze. Therefore, even in instances when Indigenous knowledge is supported and not suppressed, Western society retains the role of the arbiter on what is and what is not seen as 'useful' knowledge – and epistemic violence continues.

Fully appreciating the contribution of Indigenous Peoples must start with culture: a move away from cherry-picking 'tools' that are important for industrialised societies in order to understand the context they originate from – embracing Indigenous knowledge-systems and values in all their complexity. However, understanding alone does not lead to climate justice – action does: **Indigenous Peoples need to be involved in decision-making as equal partners on a permanent basis from agenda-setting to evaluation.**

1 *Epistemology* can be defined as the study of knowledge and how knowledge is created. Epistemic injustice is when a system of knowledge, self-perceived as more accurate and valuable, deems another one to be inferior and uncertain. In the following vein, epistemic violence can be defined as arbitrarily undermining, harming or destroying certain forms of knowledge and their bearers (debatesinindigenas.org).



Contributions

Kimaren ole Riamit, ILEPA - Indigenous Livelihoods Enhancement Partners, Kenya

Kimaren Ole Riamit focused on Indigenous Peoples' contribution to and expertise in taking care of nature as well as on the injustices around how this has been exploited by neo-colonial powers. He started his presentation by highlighting the significance of Indigenous Peoples both culturally and ecologically. Indigenous Peoples represent a rich array of cultural diversity, speaking 4000 languages among about 5000 different cultures. **The 476 million Indigenous Peoples worldwide account for only about 6% of the world's population, yet their territories host 80% of the world's biodiversity.**

Indigenous Peoples' successes in preserving biodiversity demonstrate, as Riamit argued, that they are not just the victims of climate change - they are also part of the solution. "When interested tourists show up on our land, they don't come because there is a five-star lodge or a highway. They come because the landscape is rich with biodiversity – flora and fauna. This is our contribution that is rarely talked about". He continued with the following question: what do people sacrifice in order to contribute? For instance, when interventions take place in the form of conservation projects. "Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty, their relationship to their land, is appropriated for profit, with little of this going to them." Their voices are weakened and disjointed, traditional pastoral activities are banned or limited, waterways are destroyed and roads are blocked. In the end, Indigenous Peoples are often displaced and disconnected from their landscape. "These are the outcomes of weak consultation, low-level engagement and lack of free, informed, prior consent". Therefore, Riamit argued, we need not to think just about the benefits but also the costs of environmental projects such as reforestation/carbon sequestration and biodiversity conservation. For mutually respectful and equitable partnerships, **we need a people-centred and human rights-based approach to intervention that involves Indigenous Peoples from the planning phase, through implementation and evaluation.**

It is equally important to decolonise research, Riamit continued, and to move away from the idea of co-opting Indigenous Peoples as guides and translators but rather **bringing them as knowledge and right holders who can shape, design and benefit from research outcomes**. Knowledge cannot simply be extracted in the interest of external actors and dissociated from the cultural value-systems that they originate from. Indigenous knowledge and methods can only be used properly when one understands how they are embedded in the web of social, cultural and environmental context that they originate from. Indigenous Peoples are part of nature, and nature-based solutions cannot be successfully implemented while they are denied access to their lands.

Pratima Gurung, Indigenous Persons with Disabilities Global Network, Nepal

Pratima Gurung added further layers and complexity to the discussion by explaining how multiple forms of marginalisation interact. “From the roughly 476 million Indigenous Peoples worldwide,” she began “about 58 million live with disabilities, and of these, about 28 million are women.” Having these intersecting marginalised identities, one of the challenges they’ve been facing is exercising collective and individual rights. Among the many forms of discrimination and exclusion they face, limited access to health care, education, ancestral lands and natural resources are only a few. Equally, they are subjected disproportionately to poverty, violence, abuse and rape. **Climate change reinforces these already existing inequalities by exposing them disproportionately to climate change-related health hazards.**

Yet, the voices of disabled Indigenous Peoples are little heard, for which Pratima mentioned three key reasons. The first is insufficient institutionalisation of disabled Indigenous advocacy groups. This includes mainstreaming their representation into state-level policy making, strengthening their position in civil society organisations and networks and creating widespread societal awareness of their struggles to form the basis of a more supportive and conducive environment. The second is a lack of research and therefore evidence, data and information on the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples with disabilities. Similarly to Riamit, Pratima emphasised that they are not victims, and framing them as such is a major hindrance in effectively involving them in decision-making. They are experts in their struggles, they are resilient, innovative and resourceful as they have had to develop various strategies to adapt and survive. Thirdly, Pratima emphasised that disabled Indigenous Peoples need to be allowed to represent themselves, following the ‘nothing about us without us’ principle. However, presently, many are reluctant to share their knowledge because of the historical discrimination towards Indigenous knowledge.

As a solution, **she advocated for a safe and enabling environment for disabled Indigenous Peoples to participate in decision-making in both the private and public spheres.** Furthermore, she emphasised the need for a holistic approach, arguing that the current human rights-based approaches are siloed, they are not enabling us to look at the intersections of gender, disability, indigeneity, age and other social identities.

Liisa-Ravna Finbog, University of Oslo, Norway

After the excellent contributions from Kimaren and Pratima, Liisa-Ravna took a step back to scrutinise **the concept of sustainability itself as a problematic pursuit.** She began by reciting the term’s definition in the Oxford dictionary as the ability for something to be maintained at an even rate or level. She argued that this concept originated in a Western, capitalist context to conceptualise the long-term and renewable use of natural resources. “As capitalism is an economic system that bases itself on the private ownership and appropriation of the means as well as the profit of production [...] **sustainability is what ensures the viable replenishing of the resources necessary to uphold said system.**” **Therefore, sustainability is not a solution to the ecological crisis but a necessary amendment to the system to maintain Western living standards,** meet growing energy needs and uphold the system itself that the concept originated from: capitalism. From an Indigenous perspective, this concept of sustainability is nonsensical because their way of living has been sustainable in the first place. Enforcing such a Western concept upon the rest of the world is a continuation of colonial and imperial violence.

While capitalism tries to dominate nature, Sámi epistemologies and cosmologies² “acknowledge the world as a living system in which humans are only one small part.” This intricate web of connections is ruled by a system of kinship that honours not only humans but gives the same consideration to all beings; including land, water, fauna and flora. Practising *quelmiehdahke*, ‘reciprocity in all relations and a duty of care towards all beings’ means that every choice one makes as an individual is a choice one makes on account of all beings, because it impacts the collective. Imagine what a different place our planet would be if the rest of the world adopted this practice.

Kirstine Eiby Møller, Greenland National Museum and Archives, Greenland

Kirstine started her presentation by highlighting that all speakers so far have been talking about intangible cultural heritage: knowledge, rituals, performances, ways that humans connect to traditions and the past. Given IETM’s focus on performing art, Kirstine decided to focus on a performance that she worked with in her professional setting: *Qilaatersorneq*, Inuit drum dancing and singing.

Qilaatersorneq is a practice that was almost eradicated by colonialism, but is now a vibrant part of Greenland’s culture and ways of engaging with the past and the land over 300 years later. In 2021, on the 300th anniversary of the colonisation of Greenland, UNESCO inscribed Qilaatersorneq on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity – a beautiful yet ironic success (see unesco.org and nka.gl). To celebrate and spread Qilaatersorneq, Katuaq, the Culture House and the Greenland National Museum and Archive, organised a Katuarpalaaq festival, which in Kalaallisut means the ‘sound of the drumstick’. Taking place in Nuuk, Greenland’s capital, the festival was a week-long exchange between drummers, dancers and singers from all over the Arctic (see also articartsummit.ca). After showing the audience a video of two drummers, Kirstine explained that both started their performance by connecting with the spirit world and the ancestors and ended their songs by thanking them for being part of it. As much as this practice is spiritual and performative, Kirstine continued, it is also a way of engaging in storytelling. Additionally, one of the main functions of this ritual was conflict solving, reminding us that settling quarrels in the Arctic was traditionally meant to be on an individual level, to avoid harm to others.

After a week of exchange and creating a performance together, the drummers could see that although colonialism in the Arctic separated them for the last 300 years, and the tradition changed in different ways in different places, it still holds some of that same deep meaning and significance from when it came into being.

To conclude, Kirstine reminded us that **“when we engage with each other from a cultural sensitivity point of view, we will go much further than what we have seen in the past 500 years of colonisation”.**

Conclusion

In conclusion, the speakers of this panel pressed us to critically rethink the foundations of the ecological crisis; to focus not only on unsustainable behaviours and systems but also on the values and philosophies that underpin and drive them. Among others, these include consumerism, the dominance of private interests instead of community needs and viewing nature as a force to conquer or a resource to extract, rather than a system to care for and be part of. Equally, when looking to Indigenous Peoples for solutions, they demanded a holistic approach: an attentiveness to the intersectionality of various forms of social marginalisation (e.g.: indigeneity, gender, ableism, poverty) and an engagement with the context that concepts originate from. Finally, they argued that climate justice is only possible if Indigenous Peoples are effectively involved in agenda-setting and decision-making in both local, state-level and global governance, including but not limited to the climate crisis. Though little has been said in this report about Nazli Tabatabai-Khatambakhsh who so gently and elegantly moderated this complex discussion, we conclude with the quote she finished on: “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I’ll meet you there”. (Rumi – 13th c. Persian sufi mystic and poet).

² The study of the origin and the development of the universe, in a broader sense, the way we understand the world around us.

