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Interculturality as Paradigm to Promote Social and Environmental Sustainability[1]

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Introduction

The modern world is characterized by constant flux as people move ceaselessly across boundaries. Individuals embark on journeys, whether for opportunities, refuge from persecution, or immersion in diverse cultures. Digital platforms bridge vast distances, connecting people from all corners of the globe. However, amid these dynamics, humanity faces numerous challenges. Geopolitical tensions threaten national unity, while interreligious and interethnic conflicts sow division. Moreover, the unchecked proliferation of misinformation erodes public trust, corroding the foundations of civil society. Concurrently, the natural world, long neglected and exploited, grapples with environmental degradation, demanding urgent attention and action. In light of these pressing issues, the need for human solidarity and cooperation has become more vital than ever before.

Within this turbulent context, a compelling need arises for a paradigm of cultural interaction capable of confronting the multitude of challenges we face. For several decades, the concept of interculturality has gained traction among social scientists as a relevant framework for navigating relations within society characterized by diversity not only in terms of culture but also ethnicity, language, religious belief, and nationality (Dietz 2018). Recognizing its significance, UNESCO has endorsed interculturality in its Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. In the document, *interculturality* is defined as "the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect" (2005).

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While interculturality may initially appear limited to promoting social harmony, a closer examination reveals that it encompasses both social and environmental dimensions, making it a valuable paradigm for advancing sustainability. In addition to its benefits in promoting diverse cultural exchange, interculturality holds significant untapped environmental potential that merits recognition in order to fully grasp its transformative capacity in contemporary society. Thus, this paper aims to demonstrate that embracing interculturality opens up possibilities for a more sustainable future, encompassing social and ecological aspects alike.

Interculturality and the Contemporary Milieu

Interculturality is not a new concept having been introduced and began gaining traction in the academic and social spheres during the late 20th century. It emerged as a response to the growing recognition of cultural diversity, globalization, and the need for effective interaction and understanding among individuals from different cultures. Since the last decade of the previous century, and notably in the early 2000s, there has been a growing focus and discourse on interculturality in the global North, predominantly centered around the notions of diversity and, more specifically, cultural diversity (Dietz 2009). Thus, interest in interculturality spans across corporate companies, international institutions, and organizations, as they increasingly recognize its importance in fostering diversity and inclusivity. According to Cheng and Groysberg (2021), organizations that embrace interculturality tend to have a learning-oriented culture that emphasizes flexibility, open-mindedness, and exploration, and can equip organizations with the ability to adapt and innovate. Similarly, a McKinsey report authored by Hunt et al. (2020) affirms the strong business case for both gender diversity and ethnic and cultural diversity in corporate leadership – and shows that this business case continues to strengthen. The most diverse companies are now more likely than ever to outperform less diverse peers on profitability. International organizations like the UNESCO (2022) have also emphasized that intercultural dialogue is necessary to address global issues such as poverty, terrorism, and forced displacement.

The significance of interculturality is not limited to organizational settings. In the field of education, intercultural competency has become a central focus. Universities and educational institutions are increasingly incorporating intercultural training programs and courses into their curricula, aiming to prepare students for a globalized and diverse world (Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith 2017). Research emphasizes the importance of developing intercultural competence among students, as it enhances their ability to navigate and interact effectively in multicultural environments (Deardorff 2006). Intercultural communication plays a crucial role in facilitating understanding and collaboration among individuals from different cultures. Scholars have extensively studied various aspects of intercultural communication, including non-verbal communication, language barriers, and cultural norms. Notable thinkers in intercultural communication include Edward T. and Mildred R. Hall, Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, John Mole, Richard D. Lewis, and M. Bennett. These prominent scholars have significantly contributed to the development of the theoretical framework in

the field of cross-cultural communication (Hurn and Tomalin 2013). Their groundbreaking work establishes the foundation for cross-cultural analysis, providing invaluable insights into the intricate interplay between culture and communication, while also informing strategies for effective intercultural living and working.

Culture is a fundamental aspect of human life and a basic concept of examination across disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and various social sciences. Ways of defining culture with different nuances and emphasis are also many. James Spradley (2012) defines culture as "the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior." Louis Luzbetak (1988), a cultural anthropologist calls culture "a socially shared design for living." Because that design is not shared by everyone in the world but only a certain group of people, in many parts of the world, even a short trip outside one's province already renders one a stranger in a strange land.

As the world undergoes a profound shift from monocultural to multicultural societies, it has become increasingly vital for people from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage in positive interactions with each other. The concept of interculturality has emerged as a crucial tool for promoting mutual understanding and respect between different cultures. This paradigm shift speaks to society's growing awareness of the rich tapestry of cultures that exist within communities worldwide. The focus of interculturality is on relationships built on exchange, dialogue, and mutual transformation. However, interculturality goes beyond the superficial aspects of cultural exchange and is more than simply coexisting peacefully in a state of *separate but equal.* It also involves more than surface-level interactions such as sharing food or music (Pietrzak 2016). Stanislaus and Tauchner (2021, xiv) assert that interculturality entails "a sustained interaction of people raised in different cultural backgrounds that leads to mutually reciprocal relationships among and between cultures; people learn and grow together, mutually enrich one another by these learnings and integration, and challenge one another on the cultural value differences and practices that gear towards mutual transformation."

Thus, in interculturality, cultural encounters are characterized by mutual exchange, rejecting the notion that one must sacrifice one's identity for homogeneity with the dominant group, while also acknowledging that common ground can be found among diverse cultures. Advocates of the intercultural paradigm recognize the uniqueness of each culture while acknowledging cultural overlaps that both differentiate and unite them. Interculturality highlights the mutual nature of cultural interaction at both personal and societal levels. It emphasizes that the goal of this process is not assimilation or isolation of diverse individuals or cultures, but rather the recognition, appreciation, and acceptance of both similarities and differences (Kisala 2009).

The United States and many other countries are known as multicultural societies. What this term implies is that in a particular geographical space such as a city or a country, there is a plurality of ethnic groups or cultures living side by side. In multiculturalism, in addition to co-existence, there is oftentimes an emphasis on mutual tolerance. Multiculturality can also characterize entities such as NGOs, tech companies, and religious congregations. In these organizations, *internationality* is also a defining characteristic because their multiculturality often results from having members coming

from various national backgrounds living and working together. Obviously, multiculturality can be present without internationality. An American company can be extremely multicultural without having any of its employees holding a foreign passport. The United States Congress can be said to be a multicultural organization with its make-up of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, etc.

What advocates of interculturality have pointed out is that multiculturality and internationality only reflect the cultural and national constituents of the community but do not affirm anything about the relationships among its members. Anthony Gittins (2015) asserts that multiculturalism encompasses the coexistence of diverse cultures in social settings, but it does not guarantee meaningful relationships or interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In the modern world, multiculturality and internationality are not difficult to achieve since the advancement of technology, the ease of travel, and the need for transnational migration have made this virtually a de facto present-day reality. Even in countries such as Japan and South Korea, which are known for their ethnic homogeneity, are now experiencing enormously changing cultural landscapes due to migration (Shin and Moon 2019). As Japanese society is aging, the need for workers have brought millions of people from other parts of the world into the country to keep the Japanese economy afloat (Ganelli and Miake 2016). In countless other cities around the world, there is much evidence of internationality and multiculturality – food sold in shopping centers, languages heard on the street, the ethnic make-up of passengers riding the metro and so on – but few strong evidence that confirms the existence of interculturality.

Interculturality shifts the focus from the socio-cultural composition to the dynamics among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. It signifies a reciprocal exchange between cultures that has the potential to bring about transformation and enrichment for those engaged in these interactions. While intercultural interaction is commonly examined within the framework of multicultural societies, in today's world characterized by frequent and effortless mobility across borders for work and travel, interculturality extends beyond the confines of one's own society. Furthermore, in the digital era where geographical boundaries and socio-cultural constraints are no longer limitations, intercultural interactions can occur seamlessly in online spaces. Consequently, interculturality transcends specific contexts and can unfold on a global scale.

Interculturality and Social Sustainability

Interculturality, as a paradigm for cultural exchange at both individual and communal levels, can help foster social sustainability and flourishing. It transcends the mere coexistence or tolerance of different cultures and embraces transformative dynamics. In an intercultural exchange, participants actively engage with each other, learn, and undergo growth and transformation, being shaped, and molded by each other's experiences (Stanislaus and Ueffing 2015). In other words, interculturality involves an active process of relationship building that involves reciprocity, appreciation, and celebration of each other's cultures. It goes beyond mere recognition of cultural uniqueness and

tolerance, instead utilizing the cultural resources of both parties involved in the interaction as a means to promote transformation and growth. Through mutual transformation, cultural encounters allow individuals to be challenged by one another and recognize elements of their own culture that may not promote the values of peace, justice, and equality (Stanislaus 2022). This reciprocal exchange of perspectives and experiences is a fundamental aspect of intercultural communication, fostering greater understanding and respect for the diversity of humanity.

Thus, living in our globalized, multicultural world, merely praising the importance of internationality or multiculturality within communities and societies is no longer sufficient. The concept of interculturality, as presented above, is highly relevant to our contemporary socio-cultural context, as it delves deeper into the realm of relationships rather than superficial community affiliation. Through intercultural encounters, a mutual gifting takes place, leading to the creation of a new synthesis. This synthesis not only creates a positive atmosphere within the community but also fosters various collaborations within the multicultural community. The paradigm of interculturality offers a fresh perspective, emphasizing the importance of meaningful connections, cultural exchange, and mutual respect as key elements in building a thriving, diverse community.

Interculturality offers a solution to the zero-sum mentality derived from game theory, which suggests that one person's gain necessarily comes at the expense of another person's loss. In a multicultural society, this mindset hinders progress and limits the potential for flourishing, as it pits groups against each other in competition. A mindset that operates on the premise of zero-sum can have damaging effects on social and economic development by eroding the foundations of trust and cooperation that are essential for a thriving society. This viewpoint can also lead to a fundamental shift in one's perception of social relationships, causing increased hostility, a focus on dominance, and even encouraging the use of aggressive, non-cooperative approaches (Fearon et al. 2022).

Interculturality not only fosters a cooperative mindset that opposes the zero-sum mentality, but it also has the power to combat negative tendencies such as ethnocentrism and narrow nationalism, which can hinder social sustainability. The concept of ethnocentrism is not a new one in the field of social sciences. It was first introduced by the American sociologist William G. Sumner in his seminal work *Folkways* (1906). Sumner defined ethnocentrism as "the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it." Ethnocentrism can be extremely detrimental to social sustainability as it involves constantly viewing other cultural groups through the lens of one's own culture, and often in a negative light.

To hold ethnocentric beliefs is not necessarily negative, but in reality, it often leads individuals to think that their race, ethnicity, or culture is the most significant or superior to others. Common expressions of ethnocentrism include claims such as "my language is much richer than another language;" "my food is much more exquisite than another food;" and "my cultural celebration is much more impressive than another celebration." While these statements may appear harmless, chronic ethnocentric beliefs can significantly impede cultural exchange. This is particularly concerning when

individuals judge other cultural practices, values, and beliefs to be wrong simply because they do not align with their own principles. When such assumptions are held by those in power, it can result in public belittling of another cultural group or depriving them of their rights.

Ethnocentrism can take on a more insidious form when it pervades popular media, leading to negative portrayals of cultural groups on television, in movies, or on social media. But when it reaches its most extreme levels, ethnocentrism can result in violence against a targeted group. Persecution, exploitation, discriminatory laws, and policies aimed at depriving certain groups of their basic human rights are all potential consequences of unchecked ethnocentrism. In the worst cases, it can lead to ethnic genocide. History is rife with examples, from the systematic extermination of Jews by Adolf Hitler during the 1940s to the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the ongoing attacks against the Hazaras in Afghanistan (Hasrat 2019). These atrocities serve as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences that can arise from extreme ethnocentrism.

Another negative social tendency which interculturality aims to counter is narrow nationalism. While it is natural for people to take pride in their national identity, excessive emphasis on national identity can lead to negative consequences. Narrow nationalism, for instance, amplifies this sentiment, encouraging a sense of hostility towards other nations and peoples that may be perceived as a threat to one's own nation's welfare. This is not just limited to hostility between different countries but can also occur within a nation between citizens belonging to different cultural or religious groups. In such situations, one group may view itself as the sole representative of the national identity, with any other cultural group viewed as a negative influence on the purity and welfare of the nation.

A tragic example of the destructive consequences of narrow nationalism can be seen in Myanmar, where a militant Buddhist movement led by U Wirathu has incited violence against ethnic Muslim Rohingyas. The MaBaTha (The Burmese acronyms for Patriotic *Association of Protection of Race and Religion*) actively called on Buddhists to act against Muslims in order to *protect* the Myanmar Buddhist race and religion. The Rohingyas have been particularly targeted, portrayed as invaders seeking to destroy Myanmar's Buddhist heritage and identity (Bilay 2022). This violent campaign began in 2016 and reached its peak in August 2017, resulting in the death of 9,000 Rohingyas and the displacement of a million more who fled to neighboring Bangladesh in search of safety (Jakes 2022).

Despite its initial hesitance, in March 2022, the United States formally accused Myanmar of committing genocide against the Rohingyas, which prompted punitive measures against the country's military-led government. The officials in Myanmar had the support of militant Buddhists who believed that Myanmar's Buddhism is linked to the country's ethnicity and identity and needed protection from the threat of conversion. This convergence of narrow nationalism, ethnocentrism, and religious identity is evident in this particular context (Fuller 2018). Narrow nationalism seeks to prioritize the interests of one's own nation without regard for others. This kind of nationalism can lead to violence and bloodshed that can completely destroy a community or country. These dynamics of ethnocentrism can also be observed in narrow nationalism. The

actions of officials in Myanmar illustrate the dangers of such nationalistic tendencies when it is driven by ethnic or religious identity, leading to violent campaigns against other groups.

In short, in adopting interculturality as a paradigm for cultural interaction, a world that celebrates diversity and facilitates mutual learning among individuals can be fostered. This paradigm contributes to the cultivation of collective cultural intelligence and the promotion of social well-being and sustainability. Engaging with diverse cultures not only challenges preconceived notions and broadens perspectives but also nurtures an environment where mutual respect and understanding flourish. Interculturality goes beyond mere tolerance, actively embracing diverse perspectives as valuable contributions to the global community. It involves a dynamic process of ongoing learning and personal growth, fostering the exchange of ideas and experiences that lead to the development of new knowledge and insights.

Furthermore, interculturality encompasses reciprocity, acknowledging the significance of each individual's distinct cultural heritage. By embracing interculturality, a world can be cultivated wherein individuals and communities are enabled to thrive and actualize their fullest capacities. Fundamentally, interculturality constitutes a proactive imperative, urging active involvement with our surroundings and the appreciation of the multifaceted richness of human diversity. Through this engagement, a more equitable, inclusive, and just society can be fostered, one that recognizes and values the contributions of all individuals and cultures.

Interculturality and Environmental Sustainability

The Relationship between Culture and Nature

While the socio-cultural dimension of interculturality is evident, the significance of interculturality extends beyond the social and cultural realms to also encompass the environmental sphere. While interculturality promotes social sustainability by opposing negative tendencies such as ethnocentrism and narrow nationalism, interculturality can serve as a guide for responsible environmental behavior by discouraging attitudes that justify the reckless treatment of nature and natural resources. Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that social and environmental well-being is inextricably linked. Pope Francis (2015), for instance, has emphasized that the natural ecology is intertwined with the human ecology, which requires an *integral ecology* that considers both environmental and social factors. "We are not facing two separate crises, one environmental and the other social," says Francis. "But rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental." Thus, the well-being of one is intimately connected to that of the other. Brazilian Theologian Leonardo Boff was instrumental in establishing the intimate link between social and environmental concerns. In his book *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Boff (1997) extends the purview of liberation theology to encompass the natural environment. His work helped to bridge the gap between social and environmental activism, revealing that both issues must be addressed in tandem in order to achieve true flourishing for both humans and the planet. Boff (1997) explicates:

> Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common: they start from two bleeding wounds. The wound of poverty breaks the social fabric of millions and millions of poor people around the world. The other wound, systematic assault on the Earth, breaks down the balance of the planet, which is under threat from the plundering of development as practiced by contemporary global societies. Both lines of reflection and practice have as their starting point a cry: the cry of the poor for life, freedom, and beauty (…) and the cry of the Earth groaning under oppression.

It is important, therefore, to advocate for a paradigm that would not just promote the sustainability of either one but not the other. Interculturality can effectively respond to this need, providing thoughtful consideration is given to all the dimensions embedded in this paradigm. However, before discussing how interculturality benefits the work of safeguarding the environment, it is important to take a step backward to consider, from a philosophical perspective, the nature of the relationship between nature and culture. Indeed, culture and nature are distinguishable from one another on many levels. As Holmes Rolston III (1999) points out, "Information in nature travels intergenerationally on genes; information in culture travels neurally as persons are educated into transmissible cultures. The determinants of animal and plant behavior are never anthropological, political, economic, technological, scientific, philosophical, ethical, or religious." It is only in the human species that exist fields of knowledge that are systematically organized and passed on through the intellectual task of education, oftentimes in schools and universities, but also in a whole host of settings that make up our life contexts. In nature, while there are schools of fish, transmission of knowledge certainly does not take on the same content or process. Despite certain aspects of human culture resembling nature, for example, the use of the law of aerodynamics by both a Boeing 777 and wild geese, Rolston observes, "it is only philosophical confusion to remark that both processes are equally natural… No interesting philosophical analysis is being done until there is insightful distinction into the differences between the ways humans fly in their engineered, financed jets and the ways geese fly with their genetically constructed, metabolically powered wings" (Rolston III, 1999).

While no thoughtful person would ever equivocate human culture with nature, not all environmental philosophers are comfortable with what they perceive as an undue *dualism* conceived regarding culture and nature. J. Baird Callicott (1992), for example, calls for putting human beings back into the fold of nature rather than perpetuating a "sharp dichotomy between man and nature." Instead of perceiving nature as "other," Callicott believes that "a new dynamic and systemic postmodern concept of nature, which includes rather than excludes human beings, is presently taking shape." The American biologist, ethologist, behavioral ecologist, and writer Marc Bekoff (2000) remarks that "man is a part of nature, not apart from nature." These sentiments echo that of deep ecology, which is "often grounded in an intuitive experience of nature as a unified totality that we can relate to and that in some sense we are. A sense of being part of a vast, inclusive whole can enable one to drop a confined view of the self, give a feeling of being fully a part of and at home in nature, and motivate environmental activism" (Barnhill 2001). The French philosopher J. Schaeffer (2010)

calls for the "end of the human exception" by recognizing that human beings are just living beings among others. According to Schaeffer, the social and cultural aspects of the human person does not disconnect him from his biological reality since "the social and the cultural are deeply dependent on the biological." The above articulations demonstrate a longing for human beings and whatever constitutes human reality to be grounded in the larger reality of nature, to which we still can find true connections.

Indeed, the idea that human beings are not ontologically removed from nature has not only been stated by individuals from the secular fields of environmental philosophy and ecology but also religion. In the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis (2015) asserts, "Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it." The late Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1988) once said, "We classify other animals and living beings as nature, acting as if we ourselves are not part of it. Then we pose the question 'How should we deal with Nature?' We should deal with nature the way we should deal with ourselves! We should not harm ourselves; we should not harm nature...Human beings and nature are inseparable."

It is important to acknowledge that the phrase "part of nature" may have varying interpretations depending on the metaphysical assumptions underlying each context. The ethical obligations associated with recognizing human beings as part of nature can differ significantly between different philosophical perspectives, such as deep ecology and Christian environmentalism. However, these perspectives collectively convey an intuitive recognition that human beings and nature should not be strictly juxtaposed in a binary manner. There is a shared desire to acknowledge a certain level of continuity between human beings and the broader natural world. Despite the ways in which human beings have evolved and may appear detached from nature, the bonds with nature may not have been entirely severed, and reestablishing that connection is still possible if humans realize their inseparable relationship with the natural world.

Because human beings are part of a grand natural order, human culture is also connected to nature. Freya Matthews (1991) says, "It is no longer controversial to state that a human individual is essentially a cultural being, and that culture is an emanation of Nature." Val Plumwood (1998) says that human culture is embedded in nature and there should not be a dualism between culture and nature. The sentiments of Matthews and Plumwood highlight a perceived necessity for human beings to come to the realization that they are indeed part of nature. This realization, many believe, would contribute significantly to reversing environmental degradation borne out of human recklessness and inconsiderateness. Indeed, the vast opus of writings concerning humanity and nature in the last 50 years consistently point out that the primary cause of the modern environmental crisis is traced to anthropocentrism demonstrated in industrial and technological developments that have caused human alienation from nature (Peterson 2020).

This self-imposed disconnection, however, does not completely align with the objective reality of the relationship between humans and nature. This becomes evident in instances where a farmer, while taking a walk in the forest, becomes prey to a giant python and is consumed. While humans may perceive themselves as distinct from the

rest of nature due to divine attributes or evolutionary circumstances, other animals (excluding domesticated pets) view humans either as predators or prey. This perception of other living beings in the environment is crucial for the survival of most animals. Therefore, when observing birds hopping from branch to branch in a tree, it is incorrect to assume they are playing or exercising. In reality, they are either searching for prey or evading becoming prey themselves. In contemporary times, humans have successfully insulated themselves from nature to such an extent that considering themselves part of the natural food chain is no longer common. Nevertheless, occasional dramatic encounters with nature serve as powerful reminders that the detachment humans perceive themselves to have from nature may not be as significant as they believe.

For some segments of humanity, however, the assertion that human beings are part of nature does not need forceful convincing. For them, their cultural life is inextricably tied to the natural environment. While nature may not need human beings, human beings cannot exist without nature, which was present billions of years before the various ancestors of *homo sapiens* arrived onto the scene. Holmes Rolston III (1999) says, "Nature is the womb of culture, but a womb that humans never entirely leave." Therefore, the construction of culture will always be dependent on nature in some ways. Rolston writes:

> No matter what kind of exodus humans make from nature, they are going to remain male or female, with hearts and livers, and blood in their veins, walking on two feet, and eating energies that were originally captured in photosynthesis by chlorophyll. Culture remains tethered to the biosystem and the options within built environments, however expanded, provide no release from nature. Humans depend on air flow, water cycles, sunshine, nitrogen-fixation, decomposition bacteria, fungi, the ozone layer, food chains, insect pollination, soils, earthworms, climates, oceans, and genetic materials. An ecology always lies in the background of culture, natural givens that underlie everything else.

The connection with nature is not only demonstrated in the biological dimensions of the human culture but also in the spiritual dimensions. Hundreds of millions of people around the world believe in animism (Harris 2016), which holds that certain natural features (mountains, rivers, forests, individual trees, etc.) are abodes of the spirits that must be respected. Numerous indigenous peoples adopt the animistic worldview in which the spiritual and physical worlds are inherently connected, and that all material phenomena have agency. Animism is an anthropological construct by academics studying cultures and religions rather than a concept that the indigenous people articulate themselves. And in many cultures, such belief continues to exist even when a religion has been formally adopted by the people. For example, Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist country. Although the nation has embraced Theravada Buddhism, an atheistic religion, animistic beliefs are widespread among its people (Pearce 2011). This is apparent from the existence of spirit houses in the vast majority of homes and businesses across the land. These shrine-like and intricately decorated structures can be seen by the roadside, on farms, and by rivers, erected as tributes to the guardian spirits

believed to reside in those areas. By building these houses and presenting offerings, Thai individuals aim to appease these spirits and, in turn, receive their blessings of prosperity and peace.

Nature holds immense significance in numerous cultures, not only in terms of its perceived sacredness but also because it plays a crucial role in their "socially shared design for living." For individuals dwelling in forested areas, all flora and fauna constitute an integral aspect of their way of life and cultural identity. The natural resources derived from the forest serve as their sources of sustenance, medicinal treatments, clothing, furniture, and even entertainment. Nature is also intertwined with their cultural customs. When the Kankanaey people, a sub-group of the larger Igorots, residing in the highlands of the Philippines observe a *Tengaw*, a communal period of rest for both the people and the earth, they place a traditional marker called *pudong* at the entrances and exits of their community. This sign, a simple stick with knotted leaves attached to its top, demands respect from anyone who encounters it, informing them that a ceremony is taking place and to not interfere (Cadingpal 2022). Despite modernization and external influences, the Kankanaeys have retained the use of the same materials for the *pudong* and continue to observe the *Tengaw* during various points in the agricultural cycle, during tragedies such as a community member's death or a house fire, and other significant communal rituals. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Kankanaey communities voluntarily organized *Tengaw* ceremonies to comply with social distancing guidelines and took advantage of the opportunity to rest and reconnect with nature (Cadingpal 2022).

In today's society, dominated by concrete forests and digital landscapes, it may appear that humanity has abandoned its roots in nature altogether. As Rolston III (1999) observes, "Nature evolved into culture; culture evolved out of nature, but it did evolve out of it." Human culture, in its increasing detachment from nature, has become an "emergent" rather than merely an "emanation" from nature. While this may hold true for cultures that prioritize technological advancement as the key to progress, it is not a universal truth. Upon closer examination of cultures across the globe, one can discern the enduring presence of nature and its integral role in people's lives. The merging of culture and nature can be seen in people's values, religious beliefs, spirituality, language, traditions, and livelihoods.

Environmental Benefits of Interculturality

It is because of this enduring convergence of culture and nature in human lives throughout the world that interculturality can significantly aid in promoting environmental sustainability. Interculturality can contribute to this task in three ways. First, it can foster a greater consciousness of the ongoing importance of nature to culture. Second, it can facilitate a deeper cultural understanding of the environment. Finally, it can help cultures that have moved away from nature in the course of development to rediscover and reconnect with the natural aspects of culture that have been lost or suppressed for the sake of technological advancement.

First, interculturality is a powerful tool in promoting environmental sustainability by helping to raise consciousness about the importance of nature to culture. Through intercultural exchange and enrichment, individuals and communities can gain valuable insight into how other peoples adapt to their environment and live in harmony with nature. This paradigm also fosters a deeper appreciation of the fact that nature remains integral to people's way of life, livelihood, and individual and communal identity. As the goal of interculturality is to promote cultural flourishing, it is essential to avoid destroying the aspects that allow cultures to sustain and thrive. In this way, interculturality can foster greater empathy and understanding towards nature-oriented cultures and motivate actions that contribute to the sustainability of both culture and nature.

These actions may involve carrying out development projects that do not threaten the existence of certain cultures or marginalize groups of people. When a group's cultural and spiritual identity is attached to specific natural places or entities, having those things destroyed or taken away from them can be enormously detrimental to their well-being. All over the world, we have witnessed this phenomenon as a result of deforestation, mining, and urbanization projects. In 2022, the last known member of an indigenous tribe in the Amazon passed away, having lived in solitude in the forest for years. It is believed that the remaining members of his tribe were victims of violent attacks orchestrated by gunmen hired by colonists and ranchers, a series of incidents that can be traced back to the 1970s (Treisman 2022). In the face of ongoing large-scale deforestation in the Amazon and the destruction of their culture, some indigeous people such as the Guajajara *Forest Guardians* in Brazil have been forced to take matters into their own hands by patrolling the land to confront illegal activities. They are forced to arm themselves with guns and rifles for self-protection and to detain trespassers (CSIS 2020).

In other cases, well-intentioned but misguided conservation projects also contribute to the destruction of environmentally friendly cultures. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has been accused of being complicit in the theft of Baka land in the Cameroon (Survival International, ND). In 1991, the WWF commissioned a research team to assess proposals for establishing a protected area in southeast Cameroon, following concerns raised by the Baka *Pygmies* and the Bangando community. The local communities expressed apprehensions regarding the detrimental impact of loggers and trophy-hunters on animal and tree populations, while the researchers acknowledged the sustainable land use practices of the Baka and Bangando. The researchers recommended measures to restrain the destructive activities of external actors, safeguard the rights of local inhabitants, and target professional poaching networks.

Contrary to these recommendations, the WWF supported the creation of the Lobéké National Park, resulting in the unlawful expulsion of the Baka and neighboring communities from the park and adjacent trophy-hunting zones. Furthermore, the WWF formed alliances with logging companies without acquiring consent from the affected communities. Similar instances of land appropriation occurred in subsequent protected areas, including Boumba Bek, Nki National Parks, and the Ngoyla Wildlife Reserve. The violence perpetrated by anti-poaching squads, supported by the WWF, has been particularly severe, impacting vulnerable individuals, such as pregnant

women, the elderly, and even children. Despite being aware of the persecution endured by the Baka for more than 15 years, the WWF has failed to undertake effective action. The situations in the Amazon and in the Congo Basin call for empathetic treatment of indigenous cultures and conservation of the environment in accordance with true intercultural dialogue and collaboration.

Second, interculturality helps to acquire deeper cultural understanding of the environment. The importance of diverse cultural practices and worldviews in the field of biodiversity management emphasizes the significant role that knowledge plays as a bridge between nature and culture. The manner in which individuals perceive and comprehend the world has a profound impact on their conduct and values, thereby influencing their interactions with the natural world. Knowledge pertaining to nature, often referred to as traditional, indigenous, local, or ecological knowledge, is accumulated within societies and transmitted through cultural channels like storytelling and narratives. Cultural understandings of the environment not only promote sustainable management practices but also encompass insights into the requirements of species, the dynamics of ecosystems, sustainable utilization of resources, and the interconnectedness of ecological systems. This culturally embedded knowledge empowers individuals to establish a harmonious existence within the confines of their environment in the long run (Pretty and Pilgrim 2008). Thus interculturallity is essential for acquiring information and knowledge on how to carry out development projects that align with sustainability goals. Dialogue with the local cultures who are most knowledgeable about the land and are most invested in the future of the land is imperative if there are plans for development projects.

Moreover, the exchange of knowledge and experiences between cultures holds the potential for the development of effective and culturally suitable solutions to environmental challenges. Indigenous communities, who have nurtured a profound connection with the environment over generations, possess a wealth of wisdom and practices that can be shared with other cultures lacking similar levels of experience. As Pope Francis (2015) aptly acknowledges, indigenous communities possess the capacity to cultivate essential values that can profoundly impact environmental stewardship and community dynamics. Their deep connection with the land allows them to foster a heightened sense of responsibility towards the natural world, nurturing a strong communal spirit and a genuine readiness to safeguard the well-being of others. This cultural perspective also nurtures a spirit of creativity, enabling indigenous communities to develop innovative approaches to addressing environmental challenges. Furthermore, their great love for the land extends beyond their own lifetime, as they are deeply concerned about the legacy they will leave for future generations, namely their children and grandchildren. These values are intrinsic to indigenous peoples, shaped by their intimate relationship with the environment and their ancestral wisdom.

Engaging in intercultural exchange not only recognizes the existence of diverse ways of understanding and inhabiting the world, but also affirms that some of our knowledge stems directly from the natural environment itself. Therefore, interculturality within an ecological framework acknowledges that a portion of our knowledge is derived from the intricate intelligence inherent in the cosmos (Castro 2021). By

embracing intercultural dialogue and collaboration, societies can tap into a rich tapestry of perspectives and insights rooted in the profound interconnections between humans and the natural world. This multifaceted exchange of knowledge enables the collective exploration and cultivation of sustainable approaches to environmental conservation and harmonious coexistence with the Earth's ecosystems. It serves as a testament to the vast reservoir of wisdom that different cultures possess, allowing for the continuous enrichment and evolution of our collective understanding of the intricate web of life.

Finally, interculturality serves as a catalyst for individuals and communities who have become increasingly disconnected from nature, urging them to rediscover and reestablish their lost connections with the natural world, which have been marginalized or suppressed in favor of technological advancements (Cain 2022). It is undeniable that all forms of culture originally derived from nature; however, throughout the course of evolution, culture has evolved to the point where its origins have become obscured. In the present digital era, people are increasingly preoccupied with cyberspace and the intangible aspects of existence, as they spend a significant portion of their waking hours engrossed in the online domain. For many individuals residing in urban settings, the closest encounter with "nature" often entails watching YouTube videos about nature, a visit to a local park or an occasional trip to the zoo during weekends.

Some individuals may choose to embark on trips to mountainous regions or similar destinations for leisure purposes such as holiday trips or annual vacations. However, in many cases, these visits to natural environments primarily serve as opportunities for capturing aesthetically pleasing backgrounds for social media posts or check-ins. Due to their primary focus on personal pleasure, tourists often disregard the well-being and sustainability of the locations they visit. Consequently, concerns have been raised by many about the presence of tourists, who, despite their economic contributions to local communities, can cause significant harm to the nonhuman inhabitants of these areas. The environmental impacts of tourism are substantial and encompass resource depletion, pollution, intensified pressure on land use, soil erosion, habitat loss, the strain on endangered species, excessive water consumption in activities like golfing, and a notable contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions and climate change (The World Counts 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the impact of tourism, or lack thereof, as many natural sites experienced a revitalization due to the absence of human presence (Kumar et al. 2020).

Thus, interculturality demands a more meaningful engagement with other cultures about the environment that could lead to a real rediscovery and reclaiming of the natural roots of a culture. This reconnection with nature by humanity is consequential to directions for future development that contributes to the establishment of a global ecological culture and civilization. Without the task of recovering the connectedness between culture and nature, the claim that human beings are part of nature becomes a meaningless mantra and presents little consequence for how humans set out their course of development going forward.

Conclusion

This paper set out to demonstrate that interculturality, as a paradigm for cultural interaction, fosters social sustainability and flourishing by promoting meaningful connections, mutual learning, and transformative dynamics. It goes beyond tolerance and recognition of cultural uniqueness, emphasizing the importance of relationships, reciprocity, and celebration of diversity. Interculturality challenges negative tendencies such as ethnocentrism and narrow nationalism, which hinder social well-being, and promotes a cooperative mindset that opposes the zero-sum mentality. By embracing interculturality, individuals and communities can thrive, leading to a more sustainable, equitable, and inclusive society that values the contributions of all cultures.

In addition to the social dimension, interculturality also contains implications for environmental sustainability. Interculturality can raise awareness about the destructive impact of development projects on culturally significant natural places and promote actions that respect and protect the rights and well-being of indigenous communities. It also emphasizes the importance of diverse cultural practices and knowledge in biodiversity management, as different cultures possess valuable wisdom and practices that can contribute to sustainable solutions for environmental challenges. By engaging in intercultural exchange and collaboration, societies can tap into a rich source of perspectives and insights that enhance our collective understanding of the interconnections between humans and the natural world. Finally, interculturality encourages individuals and communities who have become alienated from nature to reestablish their lost connections and prioritize the sustainability of the environment in their activities. Overall, interculturality within an ecological framework promotes the harmonious coexistence of culture and nature and contributes to the development of a global ecological culture and civilization.

The promotion of interculturality necessitates the active involvement of diverse institutions and organizations, including governments, intergovernmental bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and faith-based organizations. Only through collaborative efforts among various stakeholders and actors can interculturality gain momentum and become the prevailing paradigm within broader society and the world. Consequently, it is crucial for organizational and community leaders to delve into the intricacies of interculturality, encompassing elements such as intercultural communication, intercultural competence, and intercultural living, in order to comprehensively understand and apply this paradigm within their specific contexts. Additionally, it is imperative to devote attention to the environmental dimension of this paradigm in order to harness its full potential for promoting both social and environmental sustainability.

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