Trying to Live in a State of Nature: Indigenous Women and Natural Resource Management in the Cordillera Central of the Philippines in the Context of the Indigenous People’s Rights Act (IPRA)

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The implementation of the Indigenous People’s Rights Act (IPRA) has renewed the discussion over the existence of and status of indigenous peoples in the Philippines. IPRA has been based on questionable assumptions: that all indigenous peoples in the Philippines use the same forms of land tenure; that all communities have unproblematic boundaries; that these groups are internally undifferentiated; that these populations still live outside of markets and 'in harmony with nature'; and that the rights found in IPRA are contingent on an externally mediated environmental stewardship. Igorot women in the Cordillera Central of the Philippines have always inherited land and enjoyed equal rights in land and natural resource management at the local level. This also means that women have entered into the market economy as equal actors. However, all of these debates are inserted into national understanding of indigenous peoples as inferior and stigmatized. National elites question the creation of a separate category, now that there are specific economic and political rights attached to it, while still looking to indigenous peoples as a source of pre-colonial symbolism on which to build a new post-colonial national culture. These groups have long been represented in the educational and popular literature as racial groups separate from mainstream society and remnants of a primitive past. This has been coupled with political and economic marginalisation by this mainstream and has led to the renewal of racist and elitist dialogue. Indigenous women have been doubly orientalised by this process, both as the racialized ‘other’, and through environmental rhetoric on women and nature and indigenous peoples and nature. While indigenous land rights and rules of access need to be recognized, this link has serious repercussions for a people now firmly inserted into a global economy. For example, critics, local and international, point out that cash crop production for capitalist markets is undermining environmental sustainability, thereby threatening indigenous women’s land rights and their right to define their own economic futures. This paper will question the static and romantic vision of indigenousness and environmental stewardship embodied in IPRA and the effect of this discourse on indigenous women in the Cordillera Central of the Philippines.