



Racism in the Academe: An Ethnographic Research among Aeta (indigenous) students of a state university in the Philippines

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Abstract: Access to mainstream education by the indigenous peoples can result in their social and economic empowerment. However, indigenous students' assimilation into mainstream education has been a recent phenomenon in the Philippines. Discrimination persists as one of the disturbing experiences of the indigenous students inside the school. It is one of the leading causes of school dropouts among indigenous students and a barrier to pursuing higher education. **Objective:** To understand the meaning of this problem and explore the experiences and coping mechanisms of the Aeta (indigenous) students at a Philippine state university towards racism in education. **Methods:** A qualitative ethnographic study was conducted between August and December 2018 and included two indigenous students enrolled at a state university in Pampanga, Philippines. Ethnographic interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation were conducted to gather data, which was then thematically evaluated. **Results:** After synthesizing the data, three categories developed: 'Ethnicity, Race, and Racism,' 'Coping with racism, and 'Meanings of racism.' The first category explored racism as a phenomenon linked to perceived ethnic and racial differences that cause harm to indigenous students on a physical and emotional level. The second category covered indigenous people's active and passive forms of resistance as they dealt with racism in education. The third category presented that racism is associated with a 'social problem' as it distresses their ethnic community and interferes with their opportunity to obtain a quality education and a 'motivation' for they believe achieving the same societal status as their non-indigenous counterparts through literacy could bring empowerment to their ethnic group; thus eliminate subordination and inferiority. **Conclusion:** Racism in education remains a significant challenge for the Aeta students and therefore calls for the reform efforts of local agencies and other stakeholders.

Keywords: Racism; Mainstream education; Indigenous students; Social problem.

1. Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) demonstrate a widespread recognition of the fundamental importance of education. These documents emphasize the right of every individual to education and the duty of governments, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders to ensure that all people, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or other identifying characteristics, are given equal access to educational opportunities. These agreements called for education to be provided without charge, free of discrimination and segregation, and focused on cultivating respect for human rights, human dignity, and the overall development of human potential. While the word 'indigenous' is not explicitly specified in the Convention, the definition of "discrimination" in the first article encompasses "*any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political or another opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth*" (Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021; UNESCO, 2019).

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) reestablished the rights of Indigenous Peoples, intending to ensure their well-being. Article 2 of the Declaration states that Indigenous individuals and groups must not experience discrimination due to their ethnicity or identity (UNDP, 2013). The Philippine government has implemented laws and policies, such as the Philippine Constitution of 1973 and the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA), that provided for the creation of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) to protect Indigenous rights. The Constitution recognizes the diversity of Indigenous Peoples and declares that the state must safeguard, promote, and fulfill their rights. IPRA encompasses indigenous peoples' rights to ancestral domains and lands, self-governance and empowerment, social justice and human rights, and cultural integrity (Domingo & Manejar, 2020; Eduardo & Gabriel, 2021; Cariño, 2012).

Despite the established laws and policies protecting the Indigenous right to education free from discrimination, several studies have shown that racial discrimination among Indigenous students inside educational institutions is a global concern. In Canada, aboriginal students frequently encounter interpersonal discrimination and struggle to feel a sense of belonging on campus (Milne, 2016). In Australia, Gibbs et al. (2022) found that experiencing racism in education affects educational engagement and academic outcomes. Similarly, Dovemark's (2013) research in Sweden revealed that indigenous peoples experienced racism in educational settings through private everyday racism and public racism denial. These studies underscore the need for continued efforts to address racism in education and to create inclusive and culturally responsive educational environments for indigenous students.

In the Philippines, indigenous people experience discrimination and deprivation (Cariño, 2012). According to the International Work Group of Indigenous Affairs Philippines (IWGIA) and a country case study conducted by De Vera (2007), indigenous people comprise approximately 14% of the nation's population. However, poverty and inequality are much higher among the rest of the population. These communities often reside in remote places with limited access to work, education, and other services. This situation, combined with discrimination, restricted access to resources, and armed conflict, has increased mortality, morbidity, and malnutrition.

The Philippines has 14-17 million Indigenous Peoples (IPs) from 110 ethnolinguistic groups. Most IPs reside in Northern Luzon and Mindanao, with some in the Visayas region. The term IPs refer to peoples or societies who have traditionally inhabited a particular area and share languages, customs, traditions, and other cultural characteristics, having evolved in opposition to colonization and foreign religious and cultural influences, and may have been displaced from or resettled away from their original domains, according to the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). Significant groupings of indigenous Filipinos include the Igorot, Lumad, Mangyan, Tagbanua, Palawan, Molobog, Batak, and Negrito—commonly known as Agta (Cagayan in northern Luzon), Dumagat (eastern Luzon), Aeta or Hambal or Sambal (western and southern Luzon), and Baluga (Pampanga and Tarlac in Northern Luzon). The Aetas are known by various names in the Philippines, depending on their location, history, and relationships with other groups of people in the country (Cariño, 2012).

1.1 The Aetas in the Philippines

The Aetas are known for their distinctive physical characteristics like dark skin, curly hair, and small stature, which led people to believe they were descended from the original inhabitants of the Philippines before the Spanish arrived. In 1991, the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Zambales Mountains of northern Luzon, Philippines, diminished the forest and mountain areas where the Aetas used to live, forcing them to relocate to nearby settlements in lowland areas (Cariño, 2012; Allingham, 2008). These new settlements have posed a challenge for the Aetas as they have had to abandon their traditional way of life and learn to rely on other sources of food and income (Marler, 2011; Ličen et al., 2012; Gaillard & Masson, 2007).

The Aetas had to coexist with lowlanders in the resettlement sites and learn to live in the mainstream (Espiritu, 2018; Orejas, 2015). Since the dominant culture places a high value on literacy, the Aeta parents have put great effort into providing their children with an education to have the same opportunities as other children (Anicas, 2021; Balilla et al., 2013). However, the poverty and discrimination they face from the dominant culture challenge the Aetas' assimilation into mainstream education.

According to several news reports, Aeta students are often ridiculed and insulted for their physical appearance. They experience bullying from their classmates, schoolmates, and even teachers, which negatively impacts the Aeta students, making them want to quit schooling at the earliest stage of their education (Macatuno, 2015; Cabag, 2018; Bolido, 2015). The Aeta students pursuing a higher education face racial discrimination from non-Aeta individuals. The studies of Mallari (2017) and Rogayan (2019) conducted in state and private universities located in Central Luzon, Philippines, garnered similar results that verbal bullying is one of the main issues faced by Aeta students in the university. They frequently hear insulting comments from their classmates and teachers, making them feel devalued.

Far fewer indigenous people in the Philippines have earned college degrees than non-indigenous people, though exact figures still need to be discovered. When an indigenous person completes college, they are celebrated and featured in various media outlets, as was the case with Norman King, an Aeta who became the first indigenous person to complete his diploma at one of the highest state institutions in this country. His college graduation is a testament to his fortitude in the face of discrimination, poverty, and the fight of all indigenous communities to achieve academic success.

Considering the scenario presented, indigenous students continue to face racial discrimination, leaving them impoverished and inferior despite the established global and state policies securing their equal educational rights. This impression creates a presence of incongruence between the policies protecting indigenous human rights and social justice and their real-world situation—a knowledge gap the researchers pursue to fill. The study argues that racial discrimination must be explored and thus challenged so that indigenous people would have equal treatment and opportunity with the non-indigenous as they exercise their right to education.

The study's assumptions align with Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT posits that (a) race is not biologically grounded and natural but instead is a socially constructed category used to oppress and exploit people of color; (b) the importance of experiential knowledge of people of color, recognizing their unique experiences and perspectives; (c) the need to raise awareness about the problems affecting people of color as disregarding the significance of race will result in the continuous disadvantageous effect on ethnic and racial minorities (Flores, 2015; Martinez, 2014).

Therefore, the study posed the following research questions: 1) How do indigenous students experience racism in education?; 2) What are the coping mechanisms of the indigenous students in dealing with racism in education?; and 3) What is the meaning of racism in education for the indigenous students?

2. Method

The qualitative method used in this study is ethnography, as it was appropriate exploring the experiences of the indigenous students, uncover the significance of cultural norms, and examine their perspectives on the issue (Sharma & Chiranjit, 2019). The participants were studied in their natural environment, taking a cultural lens to examine their lives within their communities to gain an *emic* perspective, or the 'native's point of view' of the culture of the indigenous students concerning the problem.

We used an ethnographic approach to study the culture under investigation from the inside by examining the meanings and perspectives of the members of that culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman, 2010).

This approach enabled us to gain a more in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and their views on racism in education. Ethnography allowed us to explore the topic from the perspective of the indigenous students, which is essential for understanding the complexities of the issue and its impact on their lives.

The researchers conducted the study between August and December 2018 at Pampanga State Agricultural University and in the province of Tarlac, located in northern Central Luzon, Philippines. The Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Development Communication – College of Agriculture Systems and Technology, Pampanga State Agricultural University, approved the research project. The researchers conducted participant observation, ethnographic interviews, informal conversations, and the records of indigenous students sharing their experiences for the data collection.

The researchers perceived the activities and interrelationships of people in the field through participant observation over class sit-ins (Brett, 2018). This method allowed the researchers to understand the school climate between indigenous and non-indigenous students inside a classroom setting. Ethnographic interviews and informal conversations were carried out in the respective houses of the indigenous students to build harmonious relationships and attain meaningful information (Roulston, 2019). The unstructured ethnographic interviews permitted active participation, allowing an understanding of the participants' experiences, which were documented through audio recordings and field diaries.

The study was conducted in the province of Pampanga, Philippines, home to different ethnic groups such as *Tagalog* and *Aeta/Ayta*, but the majority belong to *Kapampangan* ethnic group (Reyes et al., 2017). The Aetas resettled in Pampanga due to the eruption of a volcano called Mt. Pinatubo, which also exposed them to mainstream educational institutions.

Meanwhile, Pampanga State Agricultural University (PSAU) is where the selected participants are currently studying during the study. Established in 1981, PSAU is located in one of the municipalities of Pampanga, Philippines, strategically nestled at the foothills of a mountain called Mt. Arayat. It is a state institution of higher learning offering agriculture courses and related programs. PSAU provides opportunities for learners, especially those who cannot afford to pursue a college degree, to access higher education through the enactment of Republic Act 10931, or the "*Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act*," signed in 2017. This law exempts eligible college students enrolled in state universities and local colleges for a bachelor's degree, certificate degree, or any comparable undergraduate degree from paying tuition and other school fees. In this case, the researchers were faculty members from PSAU.

During the study, PSAU has over 7,000 total students. The majority are *Kapampangans* or native residents in the province of Pampanga, and they recorded only two *Aeta* enrollees. Given this case, the two (2) currently enrolled *Aeta* students participated in the research. Using pseudonyms concealed the identities of the participants in this research.

The following were the profile sketches of the research participants:

Jessica is a female that is 22 years old. She is a fourth-year Pampanga State Agricultural University student pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Forestry. Jessica spends her school days living in the PSAU women's dormitory because their home is far from the University's location. In their home, she lives with her parents and six siblings, of whom she is the second-oldest. Most of her siblings attend school, but their oldest brother works as a construction worker. Jessica is the only one enrolled in college, while others are in elementary, high school, and senior high school.

Jenny is a 23-year-old female, a classmate of Jessica, and also a fourth-year student in the Bachelor of Science in Forestry program. She shares a room with Jessica in the University's women's dormitory. Jenny is the youngest child in their household and lives with her mother and six siblings. Only Jenny got the opportunity to enroll in college; the other four are all married, and the other two are still in primary school. One of Jenny's sisters would also be in college if she continued studying for financial insufficiency. The proceeds from the goods sold by her mother are utilized to cover expenses for their daily needs.

All the data collected were transcribed and analyzed based on the research objectives. The first step in data analysis was coding for descriptive labels. The researchers grouped all the data gathered into meaningful categories or descriptive labels. Afterward, the researcher developed themes groupings and established a sense of possible connections between the information. Generalizing constructs and theories followed this. The researchers reviewed existing literature concerning the patterns among the findings to make sense of the data gathered.

The researchers conducted peer debriefing and member verification to strengthen the study's validity. These were done through discussions with colleagues unrelated to the topic and presenting the findings to the participants to ensure they were accurate and consistent with their experiences.

2.1 Ethical Considerations

The researchers collected data through informal conversations and ethnographic interviews. The data were documented through audio recordings and field diaries. The participants' identities were kept anonymous by changing their names and restricting the profile description to their age, academic program, and family background. They were given a consent letter before their involvement in the study. The Pampanga State Agricultural University received a written consent letter specifically addressed to the Office of the President and Registrar. The participants also signed an informed consent form that protected their autonomy, anonymity, and confidentiality. The field diaries were stored securely to ensure the participants could not be identified.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Ethnicity, race, and racism

This category highlights various forms of racism these indigenous students experience, including verbal and social discrimination and physical racism. The participants' verbal discrimination experiences provide light on the role of ethnic (cultural background) and racial (physical appearance) differences in racism in education: *"Some university Kapampangan (non-indigenous) students are drawing our attention by using the term "baluga" to address us* (Jessica, ethnographic interview).

The term "baluga," commonly used in Pampanga and Tarlac, Central Luzon, Philippines, has a hybrid meaning, similar to "mestizo" for non-indigenous people. However, this term holds a negative connotation for the Aeta students and, when used to refer to an Aeta, may be seen as an offensive, derogatory, and unacceptable expression due to their different ethnic backgrounds.

Such names often reference physical, cognitive, and social-economic characteristics that communicate disability or inferiority to the antagonist. This form of racism can have a significant emotional impact on the indigenous students, causing them to feel rejected, inferior, and unworthy: *"When other people refer to us (Aetas) as "baluga," it hurts because it signifies that we are illiterate and uneducated; thus, it is considered an insult to us in our culture"* (Jenny, ethnographic interview).

Using the term "baluga" as a form of name-calling highlights the deeper issue of subordination and discrimination experienced by the Aeta community in the Philippines. The term is connected to their physical appearance and lower social status than other groups in the country. It represents how people outside their community see the Aetas and is the source of their insecurity and anxiety (Mallari, 2017).

Moreover, the concept of 'social distance' illustrated the instances of racism in social settings. It pertains to the notion that Aeta students feel they are being rejected or excluded by their classmates purely based on their ethnicity: *"They (non-Aeta) involve us when the grouping is based on last names, but they dismiss us when we have the autonomy to choose the members"* (Jenny, informal conversation).

The category 'social distance' is understood as an active way of distancing interaction between students, based on the perception that indigenous students have characteristics that are different from them: *"Jessica and I had no friends to talk to when we first went to college because our classmates were scared to come close to us because of what they had heard about Aetas being wild hunters."*

The phenomenon of social exclusion is not limited to Aetas of the Philippines but is a widespread experience for various marginalized groups across the globe. Its effects can manifest in feelings of detachment, diminished self-worth, and the reinforcement of unfavorable stereotypes (Milne, 2016; Joseph et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2014). Hurst et al. (2013) noted that the lack of interaction among students within the classroom can impact their learning process.

Furthermore, the participants' accounts also depicted physical violence on campus, wherein non-indigenous students threw objects and hit the indigenous students. The perceived difference in ethnicity triggers this form of racism and can cause harm to the indigenous students, who are the victims of these violent acts: *"After the classroom discussion, we walked out of the classroom to go home. Then, non-indigenous students started throwing stones at us as we drew closer to the campus gate"* (Jessica and Jenny, informal conversation).

The victimization experienced by the participants due to physical violence from non-Aeta students may not be limited to incidents outside the classroom. There are instances where such violence can also occur inside the classroom, even in the presence of a teacher: *"The class is over, and our teacher dismissed us. My Kapampangan classmate hit me with his book as I stood up to leave the room."* (Jenny, ethnographic interview).

This scenario is a crucial concern as physical violence can cause harm to students, affecting their physical and mental well-being (Brownlee, 2014). In addition, Peguero (2011) shows that experiencing violence and victimization of Black/African American and Latino Americans can lead to unfavorable academic outcomes, such as dropping out. As a result, it is crucial to establish policies that avoid violence and advance fairness, diversity, and inclusion to provide Indigenous students with a safe and welcoming learning environment.

3.2 Coping with Racism

This category presents the indigenous students' coping strategies as they deal with the various manifestations of racism in education. Coping strategies represented two main categories: passive and active resistance.

Passive resistance is a coping mechanism Aeta students utilize to oppose the racism they face from non-indigenous students silently. This strategy is non-violent and involves remaining quiet and avoiding conflict, as they believe that any physical or verbal response could lead to further issues: *"We stayed quiet and kept our heads down as we walked. We did not say anything; we just let it slide to stop any issues or problems"* (Jessica, ethnographic interview).

While passive resistance may prevent further physical harm, it can also be emotionally taxing and can perpetuate the normalization of racism.

Passive resistance is also a form of self-preservation, as speaking up may lead to further discrimination or violence. It is a way of avoiding conflict and protecting oneself from harm, both physically and emotionally: *"We did not want to fight because it was not our area. You never know if they were waiting to ambush us on the street, so if we were in danger, we would not know what could happen"* (Jenny, ethnographic interview).

Passive resistance illustrates the idea of "silencing race" because they do not want to draw attention to their race and risk being silenced for speaking out against racism (Harries, 2014, as cited by Mallari, 2017). The silence can therefore be seen as a survival strategy to protect oneself from further harm and maintain a sense of cultural identity and autonomy. However, it is essential to note that this silence should not be mistaken for acceptance or compliance.

The participants also shared instances of active resistance in response to physical harm inflicted by non-indigenous students: *"I had to hit him and fight back, and when I did, he refrained from doing it again out of fear"* (Jessica, informal conversation). This form of resistance highlights the agency and resilience of the Aeta community in the face of violence and discrimination. It represents a refusal to accept mistreatment and a willingness to fight against those who seek to harm them.

However, it is essential to note that active resistance can also come with significant risks and consequences, particularly for marginalized communities who may face retaliation or further violence: *"I am carrying a glass water bottle in my bag at that moment. Even though our teacher was still in the room, I ran after him. Fortunately, he did not tell his mother about how swollen his arms were"* (Jenny, informal conversation).

Indigenous students have used avoidance and problem-focused coping strategies to cope with racism, similar to Black people in Western societies. They may also experience physical and emotional pain due to racism and may need different coping strategies depending on the type of pain experienced (Jacob et al., 2023).

3.3 Meanings of Racism

This category explores the meanings associated with indigenous students to racism in education. The participants hold both positive and negative views of racism in education, recognizing it as a "social problem" that poses a significant hindrance to their academic progress and their ability to complete their education: *"It is a social problem because I used to think of stop attending school because of it"* (Jessica, ethnographic interview).

Jenny views racism in education as a "social problem" that needs to be addressed because *"we have younger relatives who also attend school. Sometimes they tell us that some of their non-indigenous classmates are bullying them,"* highlighting the intergenerational impact of racism in education on indigenous communities and the need to address this issue to ensure that the Aeta community is free from all forms of racial discrimination as they exercise their right to education. Jenny believes that racism in education should be eradicated because it perpetuates a system of subordination and inferiority that keeps their ethnic identity marginalized.

Racism can significantly negatively impact indigenous students' academic experiences, leading to disengagement from school and ultimately dropping out. Indigenous students' discrimination and prejudice can create a hostile and unwelcoming learning environment that makes it difficult for them to succeed (Sarette, 2022; Bailey, 2016; Peguero, 2011).

On the other view, racism in education is referred to as a 'motivation' to strive harder and finish their college degree: *"It serves as a motivation that drives me to strive harder for my education so that they would no longer insult and degrade me"* (Jessica, informal conversation). This perspective is based on the belief that negative perceptions of the Aeta community fuel racism as being illiterate and of lower social class. By excelling in their education, Jessica believes she can challenge these stereotypes and gain more societal power and respect.

Jenny also shares this view, stating that *"it encourages me to persevere so that I will not have to face the criticism that other people (non-Aeta members) have previously leveled at us (Aeta students) in the future."* This perspective suggests that education can be a tool for empowering indigenous communities and challenging discrimination and stereotypes. Adverse encounters intensified the determination of Aeta students to obtain an education. This means that the drive of Aetas to attain and complete a college education stemmed from their aim to be liberated from the distressing cycle of discriminatory incidents they often face (Mallari, 2017).

The indigenous students' perspectives on racism in education reflect the complexity of the issue. It can be a source of motivation while posing significant barriers to academic success, especially for those victimized by it.

4. Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendation

Racism in education remains a significant challenge in the Philippines, particularly among indigenous students. Indigenous students often face discrimination and prejudice, leading to lower academic achievement. Using a qualitative research design and ethnographic approach in this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of Aeta students in the province of Pampanga, Central Luzon, Philippines.

The study captured the nuanced and complex ways Aeta students experience racism in education by collecting data through in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation. Still, further research on the indigenous people's experiences can be conducted for policy recommendations.

The findings of the study highlight the significant impact of racism on the educational experiences of Aeta students. The study shows that racism in education is a social problem that disrupts their academic achievement and perpetuates the subordination and inferiority of indigenous students in educational institutions. It also reveals that racism can motivate Indigenous students to succeed academically and counter their current social position in society. The study also sheds light on the resistance strategies employed by Aeta students in response to racism. Passive resistance strategies include non-violent and silent opposition, while active resistance strategies involve retaliation against non-Indigenous students.

The study gained valuable insights into the experiences and struggles of Aeta students at a state university in Central Luzon, Philippines, highlighting the urgent need to address racism in education. The findings urge the government and IP educators to advocate, support, and take necessary actions to protect the rights and welfare of IPs by engaging in conversation and working cooperatively with minority students. Additionally, they can serve as an advocate for the rights of IPs by raising awareness of the unique needs of these groups and the challenges they face. By doing so, they can help create a more inclusive and culturally responsive educational environment.

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