

# THE RELEVANCE OF INDIGENOUS FAITH AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF WHOLISTIC WELL-BEING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PANDEMIC

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## INTRODUCTION

The famous Polish but naturalized French physicist and chemist, Marie Curie was quoted as saying: “Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this past year the whole of humanity was in the grip of fear and for so many of us, the cause of our fear could not easily be understood. All that we have been told is that a virus has caused a worldwide pandemic that (as of the date when this article was finalized– 24 March 2021) has claimed 2,746,242 lives out of 124,799,104 who have been infected.

Indeed, there is a need to fully understand what is behind this pandemic, apart from knowing the name of the virus as COVID-19. Study shows that the most vulnerable to succumb to the virus are the elderly, especially if they are suffering from certain illnesses. A big number of those who died were the elderly living in retirement houses or care home. However, aside from the elderly, health workers who were on the frontlines to combat the spread of the virus were also severely affected.

Scientists were compelled to explain how the infection can be prevented. Governments have strongly pushed their citizens to follow rigid rules such as: wash hands regularly, wear face masks, practice social distancing and avoid being in large gatherings of

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<sup>1</sup> See *100 Incredible Quotes on Work and Life: COVID-19 Edition*, accessed March 20, 2021, <https://blog.vantagecircle.com/quotes-work-life-covid-19/>.

people. Based on the experiences of other countries like Taiwan, Vietnam, and Thailand— they have a better outcome in terms of controlling the impact of the pandemic as compared to the U.S.A. and Brazil because they managed to convince their citizens to follow the restrictions imposed by the Government.

But so much more needs to be understood to lessen the fear of the pandemic's lethal blow on humanity. This involves two perspectives: the first is to understand the root cause/s why or how the virus was transmitted from animals to humans and led to the pandemic; second, what resources are there in the reservoir of humanity's knowledge systems that can help combat the consequences of a virus that have run amuck across the globe.

This paper will not attempt to deal with the first perspective as the scientists under the World Health Organization (WHO) are the ones who can pursue the investigation. Instead, this paper will attempt to contribute to the second perspective by proposing a knowledge system that can help us understand how to respond to the pandemic and expect some positive results.

This is the indigenous knowledge system, practices, and spirituality (IKSPS) of our ethnic communities that thankfully have survived the onslaught of a civilization that has relegated these to the realm of superstitious beliefs or even demonized them. This paper aims to show how relevant the IKSP and its spirituality of wholistic well-being are to battle the ill effects of the pandemic.

### **HOW THE PANDEMIC AROSE AND SPREAD ACROSS THE GLOBE**

What is a pandemic, as opposed to an epidemic? Medical News states that:

According to WHO, a pandemic involves the worldwide spread of a new disease. While an epidemic remains limited to one city, region, or country... Authorities consider a disease to be an epidemic when the number of people with the infection is higher than the forecast number within a specific region. If an infection becomes widespread in

several countries at the same time, it may turn into a pandemic. A new virus strain or subtype that easily transmits between humans can cause a pandemic. Bacteria that become resistant to antibiotic treatment may also be behind the rapid spread. Sometimes, pandemics occur when new diseases develop the ability to spread rapidly, such as the Black Death, or bubonic plague.<sup>2</sup>

Two major pandemics emerged in world history. In the mid-1300s, the Black Death also known as the bubonic plague struck Europe starting with the arrival of 12 ships from the Black Sea at the Sicilian port of Messina which claimed the lives of 20 million people. In 1918-19, another pandemic known as the Spanish flu was caused by the H1N1 virus with genes of avian origin. Of the 500 million infected, 20 to 50 million were estimated to have died in parts of Europe, Asia, and the USA. And in 2020—which is still very much present in the world as this article is being written— COVID-19 made its entrance in world history.

Until proven otherwise, COVID-19 arose in Wuhan City with a population of 11 million. As with other urban centers, this city's population lives within a limited space with houses and buildings cramped together and are constantly exposed to pollution. When it spread rapidly across the world, the worst hit was also the urbanized centers with the same demographic and physical characteristics from the big cities of Europe, the US, as well as Brazil, India, and other highly populated countries of Latin America. One can tell from the list of the countries with the highest infection rates.

These cities have such dense populations who travel through public transportation and move across the city for various reasons. They also travel across cities and even countries and can easily spread the virus as they encounter other people, especially when wearing masks and following social distancing have not been strictly implemented. Despite the declaration of total lockdowns by

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<sup>2</sup> "Pandemic or Epidemic?" *Medical News Today*, accessed March 20, 2021, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/148945,1>.

government leaders across the globe, infections and deaths still rose at very alarming rates.

In theory, territories that are not densely populated like those of the villages of indigenous people in mountainous areas would have been spared. In such villages, houses are not built side by side, the air and water are not so polluted and they have few people coming to visit from the urbanized centers. And true enough, in a survey I conducted among a few of my contacts in IP communities, I found out that there were rare cases of COVID-19 infections.<sup>3</sup>

These were the reports I received from the informants:

España: “No one got infected with the virus, except somebody from the village of Sayaban only because he worked outside the village where he got infected. The reason for this is because our villages are still surrounded by forests. Inside our villages, there have been no restrictions like wearing face masks or social distancing, and washing hands are not even practiced. But when we go down to the lowlands, we do observe the protocols because we could be arrested or fined.”

Mansayangan: “No one among our people got infected, and I think it is because of our isolation, as we live in very isolated areas with only a small population. But it could also be that the people have strong resistance because of the fresh food they eat, the pure air in the locality, and no one among us who have gone to the cities or abroad have returned to our villages who could have brought the virus. We did not have to wear masks and social distancing while we are in our

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<sup>3</sup> This survey was conducted using Facebook Messenger and contacted were the following in their respective localities: Jimid Mansayangan (among *Arumanan Manobo* in Carmen, North Cotabato); Norma Gonos (among the *Mandaya* in Caraga, Davao Oriental); Matet Gonzalo (among *Tagakulos* in Malita, Davao Occidental); Beverly Labrador (among *Dulangan Manobo* in Sen. Ninoy Aquino, Sultan Kudarat), Luda Egbalic (among *Talaandig* in Malaybalay, Bukidnon); Marj Guingona (among *Subanen* in Nanga Nangan, Zamboanga del Sur); Era España (among *Manobo* in Kidapawan, North Cotabato) and Antoine Laugrand (among *Ibalois* in the Cordillera). Contact with them took place the first week of March 2021.

villages. In fact, someone died and we were all able to gather together for the wake and funeral without wearing masks or practicing social distancing.”

Gonos: “Not one among our people living within our ancestral domain got infected with COVID. But a *Mandaya* businessman who no longer lived in our hometown got infected and died in the city. A half-*Mandaya* working in the city as a medical person got infected along with her husband but both recovered. A non-*Mandaya* policeman whose wife is a *Mandaya* visited the place of his wife and infected two people in the household but both survived. We managed to prevent infections because of a ritual performed by the *baylan*, Manay Padong Masinaring-Alimbon to keep our communities safe from the virus. She was asked in a dream to get a flower from a certain place and use these in a ritual which she did just before the outbreak of the pandemic. It also helps that our houses are distant from one another and they do not embrace each other as greetings. Besides their area is very hot which prevents the spread of the virus. In their village, they didn’t have to wear masks or social distancing; they only do so when they go down to the town or when medical personnel comes to visit their villages.”

Egbalic: “In places like Sitio Lamana, Sitio Candiisan, and Barangay Manalog, I have not heard of someone being infected by Covid 19. People from these areas are still very careful especially when they go down to Malaybalay City. They are very patient in wearing masks and shields. However, if they are in their localities, they no longer wear masks and shields but of course, the government is always reminding them to wear masks.”

Laugrand: “Among the *Ibaloi* there were few cases of Covid-19 in the barangay where I stayed. It is difficult to say if they are more immune or not than other Filipinos to Covid-19, although I would think they are because they live throughout their lives closer to animals than

we do. Considering that they are in close contact with animals, especially the wild ones that harbor plenty of viruses, they can build immunity regarding zoonotic diseases. The *Ibaloy*s no longer hunt so they might be less immune than the *Aetas* in Luzon or other IPs in Mindanao who are still hunters. From what I have heard in Little Baguio (in Malita, Davao del Sur) among the *Blaan* where many practice hunting, no case arose, although they are more isolated than the other villages. In my opinion, living close to wild animals allows them to build strong immunity to zoonotic diseases. If it wasn't true, then indigenous peoples would always be the cause for zoonotic pandemics which is not and was never the case.

Among the *Ibaloy*, there was little discussion among themselves as to the danger of the virus, others didn't care at all. Some joked that gin mixed with a dog's gall bladder was the cure and that they didn't need any more protection other than that. While the attitudes were mixed towards the virus, all agreed that the restrictions in place were nowhere as important as the continuation of rituals, weddings, exchanges, traveling, etc. and the biggest concern throughout the crisis was that they could no longer perform certain rites or were very much limited. Rituals were canceled or performed late, and it was very problematic as many of them are connected to taking care of the deceased' needs, and if those needs were not answered, the dead would come back and torment the living by bringing sickness, ill fortune, bad luck and so on.

Guingona, Labrador, and Gonzalo: "We heard no cases reported. People also did not wear masks or do social distancing."

One can conclude that very few COVID-19 cases have been reported among the IP communities throughout the country. But this has not been true for the Amazon region in Latin America. A report indicated that: "More than 1.7 million corona-virus cases have been registered among indigenous people living in the Amazon basin, along with 42,000 deaths since the pandemic began, according to the Coordination of Indigenous Peoples Organizations of the Amazon Basin (*Coordinadora de las*

*Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica*, or COICA), the organization representing indigenous peoples across the Amazon's nine countries."<sup>4</sup>

In Brazil's Amazon region, 146 different indigenous groups have been hit by the pandemic, where the rate of deaths is higher than the country's citizenry. Follow posits: "In Brazil, Indigenous people die of the virus about twice as often as the general population."<sup>5</sup> For the longest time, Brazil has been the third in the list of the most affected countries, following the U.S.A and India.

Follow traces Brazil's long history that has spawned epidemics in the past to the present. This "history of death and loss" narrates the story of how "all of the 450 Indigenous peoples of the Amazon are survivors of the genocide that began in the 1500s, when Portuguese and Spanish colonizers unleashed war, enslavement and – most lethal of all – new viral diseases that laid waste across the region, killing millions."<sup>6</sup> Fast forward to the 1960s when this frontier was opened up for development purposes through massive road construction that penetrated the isolated area, (e.g. a road through the center of Panara's isolated Amazon territory), followed by the entry of agri-business and pasture lease firms.

The invasion of indigenous territories resulted in massive deforestation which has destroyed thousands of hectares of primal forests leading to a high risk of record-breaking fire seasons. Forests turned into the scrub brush which reduced rainfall. In the past years, there have erupted cataclysmic waves of epidemics as outsiders brought all kinds of viruses to the Amazon where the IPs had little immunity. Eventually, COVID-19 erupted. Recently, "Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro is equally willing to flout his own

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<sup>4</sup> See Kim Chaix. "New COVID-19 Variant Threatens Indigenous Peoples in the Amazon, *Rainforest Foundation US*, February 9, 2021, accessed March 20, 2021, <https://rainforestfoundation.org/new-covid-19-variant-threatens-indigenous-peoples-in-the-amazon>, 2.

<sup>5</sup> See Steve Schwartzman, "For Indigenous people of the Amazon, the tragedy of COVID-19 is an all too familiar story," *Climate*, July 21, 2020, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.edf.org/blog/2020/07/21/indigenous-people-amazon-tragedy-covid-19-all-too-familiar-story>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

government's policies on the pandemic as he is to ignore the science that shows the Amazon near an irreversible tipping point....COVID-19, fires, and Bolsonaro's active encouragement of illegal land-grabs, mining, and logging on Indigenous territories are very seriously threatening one of the greatest advances for the climate and human rights of the last century."<sup>7</sup>

As the coronavirus spread to the remote IP areas of the Amazon, their leaders have been pressuring the government to adopt urgent measures to stem the catastrophe. As the numbers of infections and deaths rose in big numbers, there has arisen a deep frustration among them. "The growing number of cases and the government's sluggish response have prompted allegations of incompetence and disarray in official efforts to protect vulnerable tribal populations from contagion. A report released last week by the federal attorney general's office accused a team of health workers of 'flagrant negligence' and decried the likelihood that government nurses and technicians had spread the virus among the very indigenous populations they're supposed to protect."<sup>8</sup>

What is adding to the deep frustrations of the IPs in the Amazon is how a new COVID-19 strain has affected three cities. The report indicated that medical clinics have collapsed under the weight of an increase in infections from a mutation of the COVID-19 virus known as the P.1 variant. Many questions remain to be answered about the new coronavirus variant. However, for indigenous peoples across the Amazon, and especially in Brazil, the P.1 variant is turning out to be as bad— maybe even worse— than the first wave of COVID-19.<sup>9</sup>

What has taken place in Brazil in terms of the collapse of its ecosystem has propelled the debate on the linkage between

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See Scott Wallace, June 12, 2020. "Disaster looms for indigenous Amazon tribes as COVID-19 cases multiply" *National Geographic*, June 12, 2020, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/disaster-looms-indigenous-amazon-tribes-covid-19-cases-multiply>.

<sup>9</sup> Chaix, "New COVID-19 Variant ...", 3.



climate change, the environment, and COVID-19.<sup>10</sup> Bernstein contends that

We don't have direct evidence that climate change is influencing the spread of COVID-19, but we do know that climate change alters how we relate to other species on Earth and that matters to our health and our risk for infections. As the planet heats up, animals big and small, on land and in the sea, are headed to the poles to get out of the heat. That means animals are coming into contact with other animals they normally wouldn't, and that creates an opportunity for pathogens to get into new hosts. .... Loss of habitat forces animals to migrate and potentially contact other animals or people and share germs. Large livestock farms can also serve as a source for spillover of infections from animals to people.<sup>11</sup>

The impact of the pandemic in the Amazon region will continue if the territories will continue to be invaded by outsiders interested in owning vast tracts of land for mining, logging, and cattle ranching. The outsiders bring the virus into the IP villages where the natives have low immunity. As medical personnel arrives. to look after them, they, too, help spread the virus. With cramped housing facilities and limited health care, the situation becomes even worst. The impact on their lives has been to further impoverish them, as they experience a high degree of socio-economic marginalization. Considering a disproportionate risk in public health emergencies, they become even more vulnerable during this global pandemic, owing to factors such as their lack of access to effective monitoring and early-warning systems, and adequate health and social services. As lockdowns continue, IPs who already face food insecurity, as a result of the loss of their

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<sup>10</sup>Aaron Bernstein, "Coronavirus, Climate Change, and the Environment," accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/c-change/subtopics/coronavirus-and-climate-change/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

traditional lands and territories, confront even graver challenges in terms of their access to food.

In other countries, including the Philippines where some IP communities are affected, infections arise as they do not get the right information. Also, there are low levels of formal education in rural areas and limited access to the right information. Misinformation follows which has helped nurture skepticism about the seriousness of the pandemic or confusion about safety measures and symptoms. For those living closer to towns, it may be difficult to self-isolate because they have to work to support their families. In countries where planning by national governments to deal with a pandemic is found wanting, one reason is that they refuse to consult those who may have the wisdom to offer suggestions. One such group would have been the IP leaders. However, IPs are usually disregarded and not consulted at all. This is one more indicator of how easily they can be discriminated against.

According to a report of the International Labor Organization, “the global crisis generated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus has exacerbated the unfavorable living conditions and multiple vulnerabilities of indigenous peoples.”<sup>12</sup> Such a reality can better be understood if we see the link between food and land security in IP territories.

While governments’ attention is mainly focused on preventing the spread of COVID-19, indigenous peoples’ long-standing claims for land entitlement over their traditional territories continue to wait for a response. In recent years, subsistence farming activities of indigenous communities have been affected by the growing demand for land for large-scale cash crops.... This leads to conflicts concerning access to land and water... Furthermore, there are documented stories of some indigenous

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<sup>12</sup> Gabriela Balvedi Pimentel, Maria Victoria Cabrera Ormaza, and Pedro Cayul, “*The Impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous Communities, Insights from the Indigenous Navigator*,” Gender, Equality, and Diversity & ILOAIDS Branch of the International Labor Organization, 2020, accessed March 21, 2021, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-/dgreports/-/gender/documents/publication/wcms\\_757475.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-/dgreports/-/gender/documents/publication/wcms_757475.pdf).

communities in Asia that have been forced to transform their livelihood options, from landowners and self-sufficient forest gatherers and farmers to low-paid factory workers...<sup>13</sup>

Other IP realities further exacerbate the impact of COVID-19 in some IP communities including the following:

- they live in remote areas where government social assistance programs are practically absent.
- they have a higher risk of infection with irreparable consequences on account of a poorer baseline health status and less access to healthcare and sanitation services
- seasonal laborers among them who have lost their incomes as a result of lockdown measures are at higher risk of falling into extreme poverty
- those who rely on the ecotourism sector have also been heavily affected by the travel restrictions
- others have been unable to sell their agricultural products in big cities and markets because of the lack of means of transportation and the closure of markets
- indigenous livelihoods and territories were already disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, conflicts, and expropriation before the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

Because of such a dire situation, Anne Nourgam, Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues issued a statement: “We urge member states and the international community to include the specific needs and priorities of indigenous peoples in addressing the global outbreak of COVID 19... There is the need to make information available in indigenous languages, protect indigenous elders (as keepers of history, tradition, and cultures),

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 4.

and respect the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation and initial contact.”<sup>15</sup>

While it is true that because of their isolation from the urbanized areas where infections are highest, this is not just one of the reasons why COVID-19 cases in the uplands have been quite small. It is because there still are ways by which they can mobilize their traditional knowledge to make sure that the virus could be dealt with. The truth of the matter is that if only traditional indigenous knowledge systems have remained intact and not corrupted by outside influences, IP cultures have inner resources to cope with the pandemic. Through generations, they have established responses and coping mechanisms—grounded in traditional knowledge, customs, and practices—to different circumstances affecting their communities. These are all founded on one fundamental principle: to ensure that the community survives.

We have a few examples from the Philippines. Consider the experience of those in the Cordillera, where the IPs through the years have been exposed to diseases and disasters.<sup>16</sup>

A common response across indigenous communities is closing off the community to all. No one is then allowed to enter or exit the community until it is deemed safe. Such community closures are done for different reasons. In the Cordillera, Philippines, such practice is regularly observed during the agricultural cycle. Before or after the fields are ready for planting and harvesting, the community declares *ubaya/tengaw*, which means that everyone stays at home, and no hard labor is to be done by anyone. This is a time for the community and the earth to rest... In times of

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<sup>15</sup> See Anne Nourgam, “Statement on Indigenous Issues on COVID-19, 6 April 2020, accessed March 22, 2021 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/news/2020/04/chair-message-on-covid-19/>.

<sup>16</sup> Minnie Degawan, “Kasiyanna- an Indigenous Community Coping Mechanism for Disasters Like Pandemics,” *IUCN News*, April 14, 2020, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.iucn.org/news/commission-environmental-economic-and-social-policy/202004/kasiyanna-indigenous-community-coping-mechanism-disasters-pandemics>.

epidemics or other disasters, the *ubaya/tengaw* is also declared. Rituals to shut off the community from outsiders, including bad spirits, are performed by elders, all directed at expelling whatever bad is in the community.

The people are made aware that an *ubaya/tengaw* is in progress when they see a knotted piece of branch or a leaf at the entrance of their community. What then follows is the “*innadang/ub-ubbo*... loosely translated as ‘exchange labor,’ where community members look out for whoever needs help, and help is extended... and (f)ood is shared by those who have more, to those who need.”<sup>17</sup> Another principle known as *ayyew* is also followed during this period which refers to consciousness on the part of every member of the village to conserve food and water. It is during this period when the term *kasiyanna* is commonly uttered, meaning “all will be well’... in their attempts “to create balance in the world, between the neighbors, and with the natural world or the spiritual world.”<sup>18</sup>

A study made by Adonis and Couch affirms this Igorot practice in the Cordilleras.<sup>19</sup> They refer to the IPs’ traditional community organizing practices through *alluyon*, *binnadang*, and *ub-ubbo* which have survived despite the changes that have taken place.

Traditionally, *alluyon* means putting together a concerted effort as a community to help accomplish tasks related to farming, such as planting or harvesting crops. Labor exchange is conducted among neighbors until all families finish planting or harvesting their crops in each season. This makes farm work lighter and easier to get done. *Alluyon* also expands to mean ‘helping one another.’ When someone in the community is in need, especially in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Digna L. Adonis and Jean Couch, “Ili-based Organizing: An Igorot People’s Concept of Grassroots Collaboration, *Journal of Social Inclusion* 9, no. 1 (2018):58-70, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://josi.org.au/articles/abstract/10.36251/josi.131/>.

difficult times (for example, sickness, death in a family, or in times of disasters), the community comes to the aid of whoever is in need.<sup>20</sup>

In the contemporary period fueled by greater concern for IPs across the world that is closely aligned to a greater consciousness of the impact of climate change and how IP worldview promotes ecological balance, there has arisen a greater appreciation of the value of IKSPS. Even the World Bank has recognized this fact. Escobar posits: “[t]he remaking of development must start by examining local constructions, to the extent that they are the life and history of the people, that is, the conditions for and of change.”<sup>21</sup>

In this time of the pandemic, such traditional knowledge has been tapped by the IPs themselves. Those mentioned above taking place in the Cordilleras find echoes in many other parts of the world where IPs can be found (e.g., Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Vietnam). Returning to the forests – or whatever are the remnants of these in their localities – have been done as a way to protect themselves from the pandemic e.g., as practiced by the Orang Asli of Malaysia.

The onset of COVID-19 has proven and reinforced the need to respect and promote this traditional knowledge and skills, even as there is also the need to support the IPs’ rights to their ancestral domain. If only IPs’ rights to their lands and resources were respected, they would be better able to fend for themselves in times of crisis and would not have to look outside for help. If only traditional resource use and management practices were respected and strengthened, there would be less destruction of nature, and perhaps less possibility for diseases to develop. These are among the greatest lessons from this global health pandemic and the hope is that the policymakers will do what is needed to ensure that these rights are not forgotten.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 98.

## INDIGENOUS BELIEF SYSTEM (IBS)

One needs to look deeper into the worldview of IPs to fully appreciate how their IBS can provide them with inner resources to face a crisis. For it has become popularly accepted today that this belief system with its accompanying spirituality can offer a way to deal with a crisis such as a pandemic. Owing to the impact of colonization followed by the dominating discourses of the modern era following the Age of the Enlightenment – privileging rationality, science, and technology – the IBS was not just ignored but even demonized.<sup>22</sup>

What added to the Euro-centric bias against the IBS were its constitutive elements which were seen as contrary to the doctrinal beliefs of the dominant Catholic faith tradition. And Christianized Europe thought these elements made IPs traditional religion superstitious. These elements include a belief in a Supreme Deity and the reality of the spirit world; that everything in the habitat is a gift from the Deity and therefore considered sacred, that everything is interconnected and that a communal perspective frames all relationships. In recognizing the need to live in a relationship of reciprocity with the spirit world, rituals are to be performed as officiated by their shamans. Unlike the common belief that IBS is a polygamous faith tradition, the IBS has a strong monotheistic concept, as it usually has a recurring theme of a Supreme Deity (named among Philippine IPs as *Bathala*, *Magbabaya*, *MananA*, *Apo Sandawa*, and others.) who presided over & above the deities usually referred to as environmental or nature spirits as well as ancestral spirits.

As with other belief systems, the IBS has its spirituality, one that can be referred to as a spirituality of holistic well-being. To situate such a spirituality within the tradition of spirituality studies, we refer to how it is often defined. Spirituality “is the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred”

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<sup>22</sup> Karl M. Gaspar, *Handumanan (Remembrance) Digging for the Indigenous Wellspring*, (Quezon City: Claretian Communications, Inc., 2021), 228-229.

and which motivates “the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution.” According to this definition, spirituality is contrasted with religiosity which is defined as “one’s relationship with a particular faith tradition or doctrine about a divine other or supernatural power.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, spirituality is a broader term than religion, understood as more diffused and less institutionalized than religion. It refers to an experiential encounter and relationship with otherness, with powers, forces, and beings beyond the scope of the material world. The other might be God, nature, land, sea, or some other person or being. Spirituality has also come to be associated with movements or groups that are not always religious in nature, such as groups concerned with protecting nature who see a spiritual dimension to this activity.

This indigenous spirituality recognizes surroundings as the abode of a number of invisible beings – environmental spirits, ancestors’ spirits, or soul spirits, a hierarchy of deities, gods, and goddesses known as *diwata*. They are generally benevolent or they could also cause illness. They could be approached ritually for good crops, health, and fortune but misfortune can take place if they are not given due respect. These narratives are often embedded in IPs’ creation myths.

These creation myths often refer to a space that is then claimed as their aboriginal home, their ancestral territory known as *banwa*, *bayan*, *ili*, and other names. Here, the land provides them with all that they need. This is also the location that defines kinship between the living and the dead, where markers of events allow them a memory of their ancestors. As the land is created by the Deity, the belief is always punctuated in terms of the Land being sacred. What follows is that the IPs do their best to live in harmony with the entire ecological system that constitutes their environment or habitat.

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<sup>23</sup> John Fleming and Robert I. Ledogar, “Resilience and Indigenous Spirituality: A Literature Review,” *Pimatisiwin* 6, no. 2 (2008):47-64, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2956755/>.



A question naturally arises: is the indigenous spirituality still intact today among our remaining IPs? One can have an affirmative answer if the IP communities have held on to their IKSPS. It will then follow that spirituality for wholistic well-being is alive and well among those in such communities. But what is this spirituality all about?

Among its constitutive elements are the following:

- It relates to a Deity who created the whole of the universe who expects human beings to respect its integrity, not to abuse the ecosystem but to protect and sustain this for generations to come. In this time of the pandemic, the people's trust in this Deity's generosity and compassion help to deal with the stress and anxiety and makes people hope that the crisis will end one day.
- It is grounded in the belief that everyone is interconnected. Thus, everyone can rely on each other in terms of our long-standing kinship. No one is left behind and left to his/her defense. In this time of the pandemic, it helps people to express concern for each other, to collaborate, to combat the pandemic, and to make sure that especially the weak and needy are provided for.
- It empowers people to seek to live in peaceful co-existence with the whole of creation and thus be concerned with the causes of pandemics.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Gaspar, *Handumanan*, 41-69. See also Tink Tinker, "Why I do not Believe in a Creator," and Daniel R. Wildcat, "Just Creation: Enchanting Life in a World of Relatives," in *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry*, ed. Steve Henriehs, Kitchener, (Ontario: Herald Press, 2013).

This is why we seek to hold on to the indigenous knowledge, skills, and practices that have helped our indigenous ancestors survive all kinds of crises through the centuries. In this time of the pandemic, we should seek to revisit the IKSPS that can be mobilized to combat the impact of COVID-19. The Spirituality of wholistic well-being is what helps us to mobilize resources from within our culture that will sustain our struggle for self-determination by continuing our struggles to keep our homeland, our ancestral territories. Even if there is a pandemic we should not stop our advocacy for our land rights and other basic human rights.

### THE CURRENT TEACHINGS OF POPE FRANCIS IN RELATION TO IKPS

The issuance of *Laudato Si* finally provided the faithful with an encyclical which has acted as an instrument that could be used as an argument— a valid tool for all to defend nature, to question the relationship between man and creation, to reflect on the core elements of life, which includes us all. For the first time, we seem to agree on the respect due to the sacredness of creation; that includes scientists, indigenous wise ones, and our ecclesiastical institution in the voice of Pope Francis. In this sense, the church's teachings on ecology as can be gleaned in *Laudato Si* echo the vision of IKPS of the IPs.

Pope Francis draws our attention to “the ethical and spiritual roots of environmental problems, which require that we look for solutions not only in technology but in a change of humanity; otherwise, we would be dealing merely with symptoms” asking us “to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing an asceticism which entails learning to give, and not simply to give up.” (LS, 9). Many IP leaders today would echo the same vision as integrated with their IKPS.

One lamentation expressed in *Laudato Si* is the extent in the world today “produced by residue, including dangerous waste present in different areas...(as)... each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic, and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources.” (LS, 20). Even isolated IP villages now being penetrated by lowland culture are beginning to suffer pollution owing to logging and mining operations. Thus, like in other places where “the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish,” IP leaders today would echo the same complaint. (LS, 21).

Another element in the post-modern world today is that many of the current problems are “closely linked to a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish,” as caused by “our industrial system... has not developed the capacity to absorb and reuse waste and by-products; (as) we have not yet managed to adopt a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing and recycling them.” (LS, 22).

Indigenous cultures are far more able to live in a manner respectful of the environment. This is because their lifestyle is not wasteful as consumerism hasn’t appeared in their landscape. There is hardly any need for recycling of their waste given their simple living. Everything is organic, nothing toxic is introduced in their communities. They would extract from nature only that which they need to consume at a certain moment; there is no hoarding of any kind. In this manner, their lifestyle contrasts sharply with that of the post-modern world.

Thus, *Laudato Si* has this other lament: “The earth’s resources are also being plundered because of short-sighted approaches to the economy, commerce, and production. The loss of forests and woodlands entails the loss of species that may constitute extremely important resources in the future, not only for food but also for curing disease and other uses. Different species contain genes which could be key resources in years ahead for

meeting human needs and regulating environmental problems.” (LS, 32).

Another element of the IPs’ IKPS is how they regard everything in the environment as holy, that is, they are an integral part of the whole and are therefore sacred. On the other hand, in the post-modern world today, there is a tendency to “think of different species merely as potential ‘resource’ to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves.” (LS, 33). Such commodification of what is in the natural world has led to the “disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity.” (LS, 33).

Today the Church as led by Pope Francis share the same concerns about the status of our common home given that “it is falling into serious disrepair” as we “see signs that things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change and degradation; as these are evident in large-scale natural disasters as well as social and even financial crises. (LS, 61). Thus: we need “to recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems.”

*Laudato Si* has a long list of suggestions on how these problems could be solved. But it is instructive that it gives a lot of importance to spirituality as one of the pathways through which the world can redeem itself from being doomed owing to the worsening climate crisis. This of course dovetails with the indigenous spirituality which is grounded in the IPs’ belief in the sacredness of nature. Thus *Laudato Si* asserts that: “a spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. That is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot. The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their laws and interests on reality.” (LS, 75).

This theological view of Pope Francis is also at the heart of the IPs' IKPS. All of the creation appeared on earth out of the graciousness of the Deity and it is the spirit world that has dominion over the entire universe. Here everyone has a place of distinction; human beings and the rest of creation are brothers and sisters in the manner that St. Francis would refer to the cosmic reality and the animal world. Holding a ritual before embarking on planting the seeds or hunting is a way through which our indigenous ancestors recognize the integrity of the whole of creation.

*Laudato Si* adds its reflection on this point of view. "Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system. Although we are often not aware of it, we depend on these larger systems for our existence. We need only recall how ecosystems interact in dispersing carbon dioxide, purifying water, controlling illnesses and epidemics, forming soil, breaking down waste, and in many other ways which we overlook or simply ignore. Once they become conscious of this, many people realize that we live and act based on a reality that has previously been given to us, which precedes our existence and our abilities.

Enriching further its discourse on ecological spirituality, Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* posits that: "The rich heritage of Christian spirituality... has a precious contribution to make to the renewal of humanity.... More than in ideas or concepts as such, I am interested in how such a spirituality can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world. A commitment this lofty cannot be sustained by doctrine alone, without a spirituality capable of inspiring us, without an 'interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity.'" (LS, 216). The fact of the matter is that those who profess the Christian faith can learn so much from the spirituality of the indigenous people since their IKPS is so attuned to the essence of ecological spirituality.

*Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis' encyclical issued in 2020 also provides links between the Church's teachings and the IPs' IKPS.

In envisaging an open world, Pope Francis exhorts us to go "'outside' the self" to find "a fuller existence in another" (FT, 88) opening ourselves up to the other according to the dynamism of charity which makes us tend toward "universal fulfillment." He claims that the spiritual stature of a person's life is measured by love, which always "takes first place" and leads us to seek better for the life of the other, far from all selfishness. (FT, 92-93).

On the other hand, the foundation of IPs' IKPS rests on the belief in inclusive kinship relations among members of the community. Love is then manifested in various ways to show the depths of kinship relationships. Concern for the welfare of others is not just among members of a nuclear household, but it extends to the entire tribe. Which accounts for a lot of mutual sharing, e.g. after a hunt, animal meat is then distributed equally to all households; no one ever goes hungry in the community.

*Fratelli Tutti* posits that human beings can "develop certain habits that might appear as moral values: fortitude, sobriety, hard work, and similar virtues. Yet if the acts of the various moral virtues are to be rightly directed, one needs to take into account the extent to which they foster openness and union with others"; this can only be "made possible by the charity that God infuses. Without charity, we may perhaps possess only apparent virtues, incapable of sustaining life in common." (FT, 91). The fact that IP communities have survived thousands of years can only mean that they have promoted virtues facilitating cooperation and collaboration which demand a charitable outlook on the part of everyone.

Concern for the welfare of others with a tribal community sustains their efforts at being at the service of one another. This legacy of indigenous kinship echo the ideal of Christian love as posited in *Fratelli Tutti* which suggests that "love, then, is more than just a series of benevolent actions" but are also "actions have their source in a union increasingly directed towards others, considering them of value, worthy, pleasing and beautiful apart from their physical or moral appearances. Our love for others, for who they *are*, moves us to seek the best for their lives." (FT, 94).

It follows that inherent in IP culture is the egalitarian nature of relationships, where there is a high level of equality among the community members. To have a human rights discourse

in an IP community is superfluous as there are rare cases where one party would oppress the other. In the post-modern world, of course, there is such a need for human rights advocacy as inequality in terms of access to wealth and political power creates spaces of marginalization and oppression. Thus the Church's exhortation as to the importance of human rights.

Thus, *Fratelli Tutti* asserts that: "Development must not aim at the amassing of wealth by a few, but must ensure human rights – personal and social, economic and political, including the rights of nations and peoples. The right of some to free enterprise or market freedom cannot supersede the rights of peoples and the dignity of the poor, or, for that matter, respect for the natural environment, for if we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. (FT, 122).

In the context of conflict in societies where human rights need to be promoted, there is then the need for "dialogue and friendship in society", which are ways to promote the 'art of encounter' with everyone, even with the world's peripheries and with original peoples, because "each of us can learn something from others. Life, for all its confrontations is the art of encounter." (FT, 215). Dialogue is an everyday reality among IPs, as their IKPS involve rituals where the goal is to resolve or manage conflict. The chieftain and *baylan* (shamans) are oftentimes called upon to facilitate such rituals.

Such dialogue comes in handy when there is a call for peace negotiations. Pope Francis himself refers to these as "paths of renewed encounter", where he underlines that peace is connected to truth, justice, and mercy. Far from the desire for vengeance, it is "proactive" and aims at forming a society based on service to others and the pursuit of reconciliation and mutual development." (FT, 229).

This pandemic has proven and reinforced the need to respect and promote Indigenous Peoples' rights, placing them at the center of the discussion. If only IPs' rights to their lands and resources were respected, they would be better able to fend for themselves in times of crisis and would not have to look outside for help. If only traditional resource use and management practices

were respected and strengthened, there would be less destruction of nature, and perhaps less possibility for diseases to develop.

Finally, the spirituality of wholistic well-being allows IPs to be resilient in the face of a major crisis like COVID-19. Resilience is not just a “positive adaptation despite adversity, but also as a natural, human capacity to navigate life well.”<sup>25</sup> Clearly, in the face of COVID-19, IPs can enjoy the resilience not available to the non-IPs if the spirituality of wholistic well-being remains a reality in their lives. It is this spirituality that has allowed IP communities across the world to develop a level of resilience – as they have turned to traditional practices and community-based initiatives- to help to combat the impact of this pandemic. Some examples across the world:<sup>26</sup>

- Communities undertaking self-imposed lockdowns, based on traditional practices, e.g., the example mentioned earlier in the Cordilleras, in Bangladesh among the IPs in the Chittagong Hill Tracts
- In the Philippines, communities are building on previous experiences of crisis (e.g., droughts and rat infestation) and increasingly retrieving traditional seeds and crops, as well as rejuvenating traditional food production systems, as they have realized that reverting to their food production systems and practices makes the community more resilient.
- In Tanzania, the Pastoralists Indigenous Non-Governmental Organization’s Forum (PINGO’s Forum), in collaboration with community health workers, has trained indigenous community members in the use of sanitation supplies.
- In Peru, the National Organization of Indigenous Women has embarked on

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<sup>25</sup> Suniya S. Luthar, “Resilience in development: A synthesis of research across five decades” in *Developmental Psychopathology: Risk, Disorder, and Adaptation*, eds. Cicchetti D, Cohen DJ, (New York: Wiley, 2008), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Fleming and Ledogar, “Resilience and Indigenous Spirituality...



- awareness-raising campaigns relating to the risks associated with COVID-19 in indigenous communities, including through community radio.
- In Colombia, the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) has been working on monitoring cases of COVID-19 infections within indigenous territories.
  - In Cameroon, the indigenous Baka-led Association Okani has provided sanitation supplies and awareness-raising on COVID-19 to 50 indigenous communities, including developing awareness-raising materials in indigenous languages for local radio stations.
  - In a Latin American country, a respondent reported: "Something we've done is a kind of section called "Our sisters report in real-time." It has been to focus on being able to have direct communication with the grassroots sisters so that they can tell through audio how they are experiencing the state of emergency in their communities, how it has affected them on the issue of access to health, in the education issue with their girls, on the issue of whether or not they have cases of COVID."

## CONCLUSION

The pandemic has considerably changed our perspective of the various aspects of human life on this planet. It arrived on this planet at a time when there had arisen a greater consciousness on the plight of the millions of IPs across the world as well as the impact of climate change owing to the destruction of our common home. Theological discourses dealing with inter-faith dialogue, inculturation, theology of creation, and the like have deepened theologians' concern regarding the need to promote greater faith-life responses to these urgent issues. The pandemic has further reinforced the need for theological reflections to sustain its interest in advancing these discourses.

No less than the Holy Father, Pope Francis has been at the frontline of such theological advocacy. In his various talks, the issuance of *Laudato Si*, and his support of the Amazonia Synod, Pope Francis has been shown his deep concern for IPs and what is happening to our common home, even as he has pronounced that “Indigenous peoples are a cry of hope. They know what it is to listen to the earth, to see the earth, to touch the earth. They remind us that we human beings have a shared responsibility to care for our ‘common home.’”<sup>27</sup>

In a meeting with IP leaders in Maldonado, Peru, he addressed them: “Your lives cry out against a style of life that is oblivious to its own real cost. You are a living memory of the mission that God has entrusted to us all: the protection of our common home.” The statement that came out of Amazonia Synod, stated: “To the aboriginal communities we owe their thousands of years of care and cultivation of the Amazon... In their ancestral wisdom, they have nurtured the conviction that all of creation is connected, and this deserves our respect and responsibility.”

And to all of us today, the Pope has this challenge: “By engaging in generous dialogue and by joining forces, that we will end up becoming more aware of the fact that we need each other, as well as be able to highlight the fact that harmful behavior affecting the environment around us also has a negative impact on the serenity and fluidity of coexistence; that indigenous people cannot continue to suffer injustice and that young people have a right to a better world than ours and expect coherent and convincing responses from us.”

**Bro. Carlito (Karl) Gaspar, CSSR**

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<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis, “Talk at the Fourth Global Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples’ Forum at the IFAD,” *Summary Bulletin*, February 2020, accessed March 20, 2021, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2019/03/29/190329f.html>.