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“Daga mi kataguan mi”’: Discoursing *Laudato Si’* Toward a More Meaningful Indigenous Theology of Land in the Cordilleras

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ABSTRACT

*There have been several instances in the Philippines where the government, sometimes in collaboration with private entities, has taken advantage of Indigenous lands for development projects. These situations often involve conflicts between the need for national development and the protection of Indigenous rights. These situations highlight the ongoing struggle between the government’s development agenda and the need to protect the rights and lands of Indigenous Peoples in the Cordillera and other parts of the Philippines. While development is necessary, it should be balanced with respect for Indigenous cultures, rights, and the environment. With these pressing problems, this study is an attempt to raise the level of discussion on the imperative of restoring the Cordilleran land theology and to propose some general suggestions on how to shape a more relevant and meaningful Indigenous land theology through *Laudato Si’*. *Laudato Si’* claims a necessity to show particular concern for Indigenous communities*

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and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their lands are proposed. For them, land is not just a physical space or economic resource but a vital part of their cultural identity, livelihood, and way of life. Losing their land would mean losing a significant part of their existence.

Keywords: *Indigenous Peoples, theology of the land, Cordillera, Laudato Si'*

1. Introduction

The issue of land is at the heart of the conflicts between the government and the Indigenous people. Land is immensely important to both sides. For the Indigenous Peoples (IPs), land is intimately connected to almost all parts of their lives—their livelihood, culture, home, and identity.³ Losing it means taking most of what they have. It is no secret, however, that the lands of the IPs are very rich in natural resources, and there is great potential for hydro-electric development projects.⁴ Developing these rich lands would eventually lead the government into butting heads with the IPs. Though development does not always mean the loss of land or cultural identity for Indigenous communities, failure of the government to explore alternative development avenues that are inclusive, sustainable, and culturally appropriate can deter the protection of the rights and well-being of IPs. Development should be a partnership that respects the unique contributions and needs of Indigenous communities, ensuring that they benefit from and are not harmed by the process.

The struggle of upland ethnic minorities for the recognition of their ancestral land rights reached a plateau with the Rio Summit of 1992 with an explicit agreement among participating countries that ethnic minorities

³ Christopher Skene, “The Global Economy and the Erosion of Civil Rights: The Case of the Philippines,” *Philippine Political Science Journal* 27, no. 50 (2006): 61.

⁴ Skene, “The Global Economy and the Erosion of Civil Rights,” 66.

play a crucial role in the conservation of the environment.⁵ Since then, the literature has been replete with studies exploring various aspects of environmental development including the ethical and spiritual dimensions of land management. While a few pioneering social scientists have pointed out resource management as an area of spiritual and theological discourse, no study in this area has been conducted in the Cordillera region.

*Laudato Si'*⁶ asserts that particular concern must be shown for Indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their lands are proposed.⁷ For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. This study attempts to raise the level of discussion on the imperative of restoring the theology of land in the Cordilleran region and propose some general suggestions on how to shape a more relevant and meaningful Indigenous land theology through *Laudato Si'*.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1. The Land and the Cordillerans

Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) is an administrative region in the Philippines situated within the island of Luzon. The only landlocked region in the country, it is bordered by the Ilocos Region in the west and southwest, and by the Cagayan Valley on the north, east, and southeast. The region comprises six provinces: Abra, Apayao, Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga and Mountain Province. The regional center is the highly

⁵ Skene, "The Global Economy and the Erosion of Civil Rights," 70.

⁶ *Laudato Si'*, written by Pope Francis in 2015, is an encyclical that addresses environmental degradation and its impact on both the planet and humanity, urging global action to care for creation. The document calls for a shift towards sustainable living, emphasizing the interconnection between ecological, social, and economic issues, and the moral imperative to protect the Earth for future generations.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, 2015, 146. https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf (accessed September 9, 2024).

urbanized city of Baguio. The region, officially created on July 15, 1987, covers most of the Cordillera Central mountains of Luzon, and is home to numerous Indigenous Peoples collectively known as the Igorot. Indigenous Peoples believe that land was granted to them by Kabunian⁸ and entrusted to them to harness, cultivate, develop, take care of, sustain, and patronize. To them, private property is non-existent because they adhere to the value of collectivism. In fact, peaceful co-existence and harmonious relationship with nature define the people's role as stewards or guardians of the land. Since time immemorial, the IPs have been occupying the territory that they are presently in. Historical accounts show that even before the coming of the colonizers, the people were already in possession of the land. They have developed systems of how to exploit the resources within the land. They have built permanent settlements, constructed rice terraces, identified territories, and they were living peacefully. They have developed a culture that defined their actions and behaviors to survive.⁹

Each of the Indigenous groups in the Cordilleras claims to have ancient ties to the land, claims that are enacted in both oral history and contemporary rituals. In Benguet, there are always ongoing issues with regards to ancestral domain among Christians and non-Christians; and according to local informants, the process to actually get declared ancestral domain is extremely complicated. The concept of dwelling is well articulated in the Cordillera Indigenous people's cultural mentality of ancestral domain. Many Cordillerans conceive the world as a sacred garden into which God places human beings to look after on behalf of the Creator.

The land explains the human person's intimate relationship with others and to the natural world. Our rootedness as human beings arises from our identity and purpose as being created to inhabit and care for God's physical creation. The notion of "land is life" is central to the Indigenous way of life. For the Cordillerans, like the ancient Israelites, land is granted by God. It is not just the physical space but a place in which they build and

⁸ Kabunian is a deity in the mythology of the Cordillera region in the Philippines, particularly among the Igorot people. He is often regarded as the supreme god and creator, associated with the mountains and the natural world. Kabunian is believed to govern the spirits of the ancestors and is invoked for protection, guidance, and blessings.

⁹ NCIP, Benguet. n.d. <http://www.benguet.gov.ph/index.php?Itemid=301> (accessed April 2015).

express their sense of self through their Indigenous knowledge and belief system. It is at the heart of their identity and belonging.

It is noted that, despite the so-called “modern,” “scientific,” and “progressive” learning methods, there are still epistemological and institutional barriers that hinder the recognition and integration of Indigenous knowledge and practices concerning natural resource stewardship. In Indigenous worldview, land is a covenant. Theodore M. Ludwig (2006, 389) asserted that God created all things good; humans have the privilege and obligation to enjoy and enhance life. In Gen. 15:5, God makes a covenant with Abraham and tells him that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. This very idea is expressed in Deut. 10:14-22: “Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.”

2.2. Present Issues: Land Problems and Aspirations of the Cordillerans

Due to the rapid expansion of the now commercialized region and the mega migrations of people across the country, Cordillera, especially Baguio City, currently houses a bigger and more diverse population of a mixture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, and migrants. Occupied in their own homelands, the aboriginal peoples of the region remain marginalized. The following are the common forms of violations of the integral rights and self-determination of the IPs of the Cordillera:

2.2.1. Mining industries and operations

The Cordillera region is rich in mineral reserves such as gold, copper, silver, zinc, and non-metallic minerals like sand, gravel, and sulphur. It is home to the three longest operating mining giants in the country, namely, Benguet Corporation (116 years), Lepanto Mining Corporation (83 years), and the Philex Mining Corporation (63 years). Therefore, the very rich and prosperous region has been subjected to development aggression and imposition of destructive socio-economic projects in the name of “national development” or “national interest” such as the large-scale mining operations mentioned. Today, one-third of Cordillera’s land area of more than

1.8 million hectares is covered by mining operations, mining permits, and applications.

With these mining operations, several compromises needed to be made, including sacrificing watersheds, animal reserves, wood and trees, plantations, etc. In the areas of Mountain Province, watersheds are especially threatened are communal watershed forests, which serve as the water sources of main rivers. Cordillera was, in fact, dubbed as the “Watershed Cradle of North Luzon.” Sagada, Abra, and some of the nearby municipalities of Cordillera are water sources of the main rivers flowing down to the lower provinces. Water from Sagada, for example, flow down to the Chico River toward Kalinga and irrigation channels in Cagayan. They also nourish thousands of hectares of rice fields in the provinces of Abra, Ilocos, and Quirino.

2.2.2. Dams

Cordillera is also a major energy producer through its mega dams, providing about seventy percent of Luzon’s energy needs. Thus, the region is not only targeted for mining applications but also large infrastructures of dams. Two of the oldest dams have already been built in Benguet, namely, the Ambuklao dam in Bokod built in 1956 and the Binga dam in Itogon, which opened in 1960.

According to Allad-iw, the people affected by the construction of these mega dams remain displaced.¹⁰ Despite government promises of compensation and jobs, these have been proven to be mere deception and lies to quell opposition. In addition, local people were forced to relocate to unfamiliar areas like Palawan and Nueva Ecija, which were already inhabited, disease-ridden, and without access to electricity. These issues remain unsolved. Despite promises of substantial payments for the taken lands, displaced families have received no substantial amount to date.¹¹ Moreover, plans are still pending for more hydropower projects in the region. The question remains: Who benefits from these projects? Is it for

¹⁰ A. Allad-iw, Retrieved from Bulatlat News: <http://www.bulatlat.com/2007/08> (accessed August 12, 2007).

¹¹ Ronalyn Olea, “Large-scale Mining, Energy Projects Devastated Cordillera,” *Bulatlat*, October 11, 2013. https://www.bulatlat.com/2013/10/11/large-scale-mining-energy-projects-devastated-cordillera/#google_vignette (accessed September 9, 2024).

the people of the Cordillera or the greater population, or is it primarily for corporate interests?

2.2.3. Land grabbing

Over the years, the Cordillerans, among other IPs, have faced numerous violations of their land systems. Due to the region's rich natural resources, people's rights to collective ownership, priority use, and management over the ancestral lands and resources have been consistently denied and unrecognized. Many foreign and locally funded projects have infiltrated these lands, leading to displacement of countless inhabitants. To date, many of these displaced individuals have not received proper compensation.

The origins of these violations against IPs can be traced back to the arrival of various foreign colonizers. These colonizers imposed their own foreign policies and laws, including land systems. The Regalian Doctrine, for instance, arrogantly asserted that the lands, due to colonization, would be owned by the Spanish Crown. This doctrine became the foundation of the nation's land laws.

Even after the American regime replaced Spanish rule, the Regalian Doctrine remained in place, with only the owner changing from Spain to America. To further strengthen colonial control over the islands' resources, the Public Land Act was enacted in 1902, granting the American government the authority to confiscate all public lands. This act subjected all lands to the Torrens system, a land title registration process, leading to the commodification of land resources. The Philippine Commission Act No. 178 of 1903 followed, declaring all unregistered lands as part of the public domain and reserving the State's right to classify and exploit them. Two years later, the Mining Law of 1905 was enacted, granting Americans the right to acquire public land for mining purposes and revealing their intention to extract resources from Indigenous territories.

2.2.4. Commercialization

Environment and development are inextricably linked. After all, humans are tasked with cultivating and developing the land, and advancements in science, technology, and infrastructure are helping these efforts. However, the misuse of science and technology, coupled with excessive infrastructural development, can lead to land degradation.

Commercialization often comes at a significant cost to land and other environmental resources. Beyond the loss of subsurface resources, biodiversity also suffers.

Due to the barrage of western legal influences, the traditional land tenure systems have ceased drastically, leading to the commercialization of land and its products. Land and wood have become commodities that could be easily bought and sold, as people have been increasingly drawn into money traps. Even previously untouchable communal and sacred lands have been slowly privatized by specific clans or individuals. Once privatized, these lands often become targets for development, with buildings being constructed to maximize profits.¹²

2.3. Cordilleran Vision of the Land

According to Cordilleran worldview, land represents identity, being, and life. It is not merely a plot that can be owned, titled, and exploited at will. As a Cordilleran saying goes, “Only the tribe can ‘own’ the land, because all its members are free to occupy and till any piece of land.” A person who insists on individual ownership of the land through a title is akin to someone claiming exclusive ownership of a piece of the sky. Unlike the biblical narrative of Israel, land is not a commodity. The Bible says in Leviticus 25 that the land is an inheritance for the Israelites, and it was core to God’s covenantal promises. God’s people are not to abuse their inheritance but to treasure it. It cannot be bought and sold.

The identity of the IPs, rooted in their relation to the land, also defines their social structure at the family and community levels. This distinctive identity is the core of their vision, goals, purpose, and way of life. For the Cordillerans, land and territory are life and worship, a stark reality that outsiders could hardly understand. While the Cordilleran Indigenous community may lack the luxuries and amenities of technological society, they have maintained a cultic relationship and harmonious coexistence with humanity’s only habitat. Practical theology can see in the Cordillerans’ sense of absolute dependence to the land a sacred inheritance from Kabunian (God), a paradigm of theistic holism. Belonging to the land,

¹² Padmapani L. Perez, “Governing Indigenous People: Indigenous Persons in Government Implementing the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act,” <https://thecordillera-review.upb.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/perez-53-86.html> (accessed Sept 28, 2024).

a Cordilleran is never autonomous from the reality of the sacred. Land, life, Kabunian, and the spirits of the kaappoan (ancestors) are communing essences in the world of the Cordillerans.

2.3.1. *Land as life*

The struggle for land and ecological crises is urgent issues that challenge our theological reflections, not just in the Philippines but worldwide. Aware of these crises and the worsening conditions of our ecology here, the people's choice to strive for ecological well-being and liberation is indubitably a positive "sign of the times" that theologians should scrutinize in the light of faith.¹³ It is significant to note that in the Philippine context, the magnitude of our ecological struggles originates largely from our rural grassroots, including our Indigenous poor peoples in the Cordilleras.

It is a conviction that oppressive relationships in the Philippines produce not only human poverty but also ecological crises. This implies that the oppression of the people leads further to the oppression of ecology and the environment. It results from the oppressive ideology of the modern paradigm of textual legalities that promotes human dominion over nature. "In other words, an anthropocentric liberation theology does not fully listen to the cry of the poor as it tends to be deaf to the groaning of the exploited earth."¹⁴

One cannot truly say that he/she is promoting the well-being of the poor while neglecting their land and ecological well-being. The ongoing crises of the oppression of IPs cannot be addressed as separately from the ecological crises. In fact, the oppression of the peoples stems from and is worsened by exploitations of their ecological turfs. This means that addressing the oppression and poverty of IPs ultimately requires dealing primarily with ecological and environmental concerns. It goes without saying that the land of the people and their ecological welfare are directly correlated to their holistic well-being because the land contains the very essence of life itself. It is here that everything that supports life is found. Therefore, land is life.

¹³ Reynaldo Raluto, *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroads: Toward an Ecological Theology of Liberation in the Philippine Context* (Quezon City: ADMU Press, 2015), 2.

¹⁴ Raluto, *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroads*, 4.

For the Cordillerans, collectively known as Igorots (“mountain people”), “Land is Life” is a long-held belief that remains relevant today. They believe in the interconnectedness of their lives and the presence and richness of the land. Land is where they obtain food, water, and shelter. It is the essential foundation of their way of life.

To claim a place is the birthright of every man. The lowly animals claim their place, how much more man. Man is born to live. *Apu Kabunian*, lord of us all, gave us life and placed us in this world to live human lives. And where shall we obtain life? From the land. To work the land is an obligation, not merely a right. In tilling the land you possess it. And so land is a grace that must be nurtured. Land is sacred. Land is beloved. From its womb springs our Kalinga life.¹⁵

These are the very words of Macliing Dulag, a Cordilleran warrior chief from Kalinga province. They effectively summarize the worldview of IPs land in the region. Like IPs across the planet, the Cordillera people have equated land with life itself.

2.3.2 *Land as inheritance*

IPs, including the Cordillerans, have been the longest caretakers of the lands. Throughout history, they have developed their own cultural systems, especially land systems rooted in collectivism, to support their existence. There is consensus among the Cordillera people that the land was created by a Creator (linked with other deities and spirits)¹⁶ and is, therefore, sacred. From the Creator, known as Kabunian, Lumawig, Umay-ayong, Mahnongan, or Wigan, the land was inherited by their ancestors. Thus, since time immemorial, generations of Indigenous Cordillerans have inherited, tilled, and sustained the land for life. With its divine origin, it is an inheritance and is sacred; it cannot be subjected to ownership, sale, purchase, or lease. “The Cordillerans have a widespread belief that the land was held usufruct and cannot be removed from the community’s use.” Based on their varied communal needs, they established a system of communal ownership.

¹⁵ Jose Mencio Molintas, “The Philippine Indigenous People’s Struggle for Land and Life: Challenging Legal Texts,” *Arizona Journal of International & Comparative Law* 21, no. 1 (2004): 275.

¹⁶ Molintas, “The Philippine Indigenous People’s Struggle for Land and Life,” 275.

During earlier times, the people of the Cordilleras all had a land to cultivate. They each owned a piece of the land and its resources, which were primarily acquired through inheritance. Inherited lands were highly valuable, especially residential lots, rice fields, and nearby gardens. Aside from inheritance, land could also be acquired through sale, compensation, or barter. Selling land was considered a last resort and was traditionally permitted only in times of extreme emergencies. Land could be used as compensation for damage inflicted on another member of the community, seemingly as a peace offering.

2.3.3. *Land as identity*

Land provides not only food and shelter but also a place of belonging. Physical landmarks do not simply give a name to a particular geographical location; they also provide grounding and shape the character of their inhabitants. Identity is rooted in the culture and values formed in people's lives as they live together on a land they call home. For many IPs like the Cordillerans, their self-identity is rooted in the values and meanings formed in their life-systems in their homelands, rather than just the land features.

Cordillerans are proud people, particularly in their identity as Igorots.¹⁷ Their diverse and beautiful cultures, societal, and political systems, which spring from and are further developed in their relationship with the land, provide them that sense of pride. The lands do not only provide food, water, and shelter but also shape the culture and ways of life of inhabitants, giving them an identified uniqueness and therefore an identity.

2.4. Learning the Lessons of *Laudato Si'* and the Cordilleran Indigenous Land Theology

The world faces increasingly daunting environmental challenges. Global warming has caused climate changes, disrupting natural cycles and weather patterns. Hurricanes are becoming stronger, while droughts are longer and more intense. Mountain glaciers worldwide have receded, raising sea levels and threatening to submerge low-lying islands. Global warming is partly caused by greenhouse gases released by natural phenomena. However, large quantities of these gases come from

¹⁷ *Igorot* is a local term which means "people of and from the mountains". It is however taken to only refer to those people from the mountains of the Cordillera Administrative Region.

anthropogenic activities like the burning of fossil fuels. Changing rainfall patterns lead to local food shortages, health problems, and even armed disputes. Many water sources are threatened by faulty waste disposal, industrial pollutants, fertilizer run-off, and saltwater intrusion into underground aquifers, leading to unsafe drinking water and depletion of groundwater. Soil has been contaminated by excessive salts and hazardous chemicals. Erosion, exhaustion of nutrients and trace elements have degraded soil quality, resulting in poor crop harvests. Deforestation and mining are among human activities that have adversely affected biodiversity.

Laudato Si' summarizes Pope Francis' challenge to seek sustainable and integral development to protect our common home. A new dialogue about the future of the planet is needed. While he acknowledges the efforts of individuals to address environmental degradation and social injustice, he also recognizes that this work must be shared by more people, as these concerns affect us all. Through the challenges presented in *Laudato Si'*, this section attempts to reconstruct the new image of the Cordilleran land theology (response). In the following section, we present the themes of *Laudato Si'* as recommendations for inclusion in Cordilleran land theology.

2.4.1. Land as a sacred space

Land is sacred, and the people of the Cordilleras believe intently in the interconnectedness of nature and the spiritual world. Cordillerans perceive a reciprocal interconnectedness between the spiritual land and the earthly land, including the forests, rivers, mountains, plains, and humans as their stewards. This worldview compels the people to treat the land with utmost sanctity. In contrast, viewing the land as simply a mass of soil without any sacredness or spirituality attached to it makes it easier for people to take the land for granted (for commercialization, resource extraction, land grabbing, etc.).

Before taking any action, spiritual beings were consulted through rituals and sacrifices. Inhabited places were often off-limits, and people needed to ask for permission before trespassing to avoid disturbing any entity. In Mountain Province, this practice is called *Inayan/Paniyew*.¹⁸ Careful deliberations were necessary to avoid violating any taboos.

¹⁸ June Brett, *Tradition and Transformation: Studies on Cordillera Indigenous Culture*, ed. Delfin Tolentino, Jr. (Cordillera Studies Center, UP Baguio, 2019), 12.

Disturbing or violating the spirits was believed to invite misfortune for individuals or even the entire community. Essentially, these practices permeated the relationship between humans and the spiritual world, forming an interconnectedness not only with the land and spirits but also with the Supreme Creator.

Indigenous Peoples share a common vision, especially regarding land. “For those who come from a Judeo-Christian background, it might be helpful to view Aboriginal peoples as an Old Testament people. Like them, they (Cordillerans or any aboriginals for that matter) come out of an oral tradition rooted in the Creator and the creation.”¹⁹ Like any other central figure in the Old Testament, the IPs understand their own story and history about the sacredness of the earth and the promise of the land. They know the power of the Creator and the goodness of creation. They can see themselves as “the people” in their sense of being chosen.

Indigenous spirituality around the world centers on the notion of interconnectedness with all creation. The earth is their mother, and the animals are their brothers, sisters, and relatives. As co-creatures of creation, IPs and animals are part of the interdependence and connectedness of all life. Furthermore, understanding the gift of creation as the fullness of life makes it difficult to express individual ownership in Indigenous spirituality. If all of creation (living and non-living) are interdependent, it follows that it is not possible to speak of ownership.²⁰ Life is understood as a gift, and it makes no sense to claim ownership of any part of creation. Leaders of IPs worldwide often describe the absurdity of laying claim over the skies, air, or land, as these cannot be tied to an individual’s life. The land is their life. It is meant to be shared, and they know the Creator intends it for future generations.

Nurturing ecological spirituality among the Igorots of the Cordilleras is essential, given their deep connection to the land and natural environment. The Igorots, with their rich cultural heritage and traditional practices, already embody many principles of ecological spirituality. However, formalizing and enhancing these practices could promote more sustainable living and environmental stewardship. In the daily life of IPs,

¹⁹ Stan McKay, “An Aboriginal Perspective on the Integrity of Creation,” *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, edited by David G. Hallman (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 84.

²⁰ McKay, *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, 84.

the belief in the Great Spirit and other spirits translates into respect and care for Mother Nature, which is the foundation of ecological spirituality.

Indigenous Peoples view themselves as integral parts of nature and believe in living in productive harmony with it. Unlike the prevailing worldviews of the capitalists and socialists, the IPs do not view nature as something to be dominated. They live with the land. The land is viewed not as a resource to be exploited for profit but the source of their group's existence. The thought that one is a mere part of nature, when taken seriously, can be a very humbling experience.

For Indigenous Peoples, the emphasis is not on human power over fish, birds, and animals for self-serving purposes, but on the image and likeness of God. This means that God has created humans as stewards of His creation: "I am putting you in charge of the fish, the birds, and all the wild animals." Diarmuid O'Murchu lamented this reality, saying: "From a religious perspective, the aliveness of the nonhuman world (animals, etc.) is often perceived as a secondary life form, existing for the use and benefit of humans."²¹ This form of reductionism is dangerously anthropocentric, undermining not merely the spiritual empowerment of all life but also relegating humans to a cosmic and planetary superiority that seems to be at the roots of many of the major problems confronting humanity today.

From the religious point of view, the aliveness of the nonhuman world (animals, etc.) is a secondary life form, frequently perceived to exist for the use and benefit of humans. This form of reductionism seems dangerously anthropocentric, undermining not merely the spiritual empowerment of all life but relegating humans to a cosmic and planetary superiority that seems to be at the roots of many of the major problems confronting humanity today.²²

This kind of spirituality, which is the belief in the Great Spirit, is akin to Christianity's Pneumatology. Quoting German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, O'Murchu observed:

God and the Holy Spirit...is in all created beings...if we understand the Creation his creation, and the goal of that creation in a Trinitarian sense, then the Creator, through this Spirit, dwells in his creation as a whole, and in every individual created, but by virtue of his Spirit holding them

²¹ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *God in the Midst of Change: Wisdom for Confusing Times* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 71.

²² O'Murchu, *God in the Midst of Change*, 71.

together and keeping them in life. The inner secret of creation is this indwelling of God.²³

For Indigenous Peoples, being present in all creation is not just an idea but a way of life. Their spirituality is a lived experience, not something confined to institutions. This can be understood as incarnational spirituality. Incarnational spirituality refers to the human spirit being situated and rooted within the human flesh. Through this orientation, we shift our understanding of spirituality from something institutionalized to something embodied, from being associated with an institutional way of the living to being rooted in our common humanity.²⁴

The value of Indigenous spirituality is its emphasis on wholeness.²⁵ Authentic spirituality is rooted in wholeness and integrality. Everything is considered in a full circle. It's a worldview that does not separate or compartmentalize. There is an awareness that we are all part of all life, and that everything is part of a cosmic order. Living faithfully with creation means living in the rhythm and natural flow of this ordered cosmos.

2.4.2. *Land as a gift and a responsibility*

Preserving ecology and, essentially, all of creation is a responsibility. Due to human self-interest, nature, originally good, “becomes hidden and unseen.” However, it is through human selflessness that nature can be saved and preserved for future generations. In the Jewish tradition, cosmic harmony was first established at creation, when the cosmic elements were fixed and bound to maintain order. But this order was breached and threatened by other forces and beings that were hostile to God and to humankind. These includes the myth of the great flood and its subsequent re-creation.²⁶

Pope Francis recognizes the role of Indigenous cultural communities in practicing a sound cultural ecology based on the notion that land is of divine origin and is sacred. He stated:

²³ O'Murchu, *God in the Midst of Change*, 139.

²⁴ Julio Xavier Labayen quoted in Joefrey M. Almazan, “The Relevance of Laudato Si’ in the Cordillera’s Search for Autonomy,” *Philippiniana Sacra* 52, no. 157 (September-December 2017): 873.

²⁵ Almazan, “The Relevance of Laudato Si’ in the Cordillera’s Search for Autonomy,” 873.

²⁶ Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1992), 14-16.

In this sense, it is essential to show special care for Indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others but should be the principal dialogue partners especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. Nevertheless, in various parts of the world, pressure is being put on them to abandon their homeland to make room for agricultural or mining projects which are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture.²⁷

A new vision of life must be founded on the conviction that humans are embedded in nature and nature is also embedded in human beings. Dianne Bergant argued, “We are truly children of the universe, made of the same stuff as are the mountains and the rain, the sand and the stars. We are governed by the laws of life and growth and death as are the birds and the fish and the grass of the fields. We thrive in the warmth of and through the agency of the sun as does every other living thing.”²⁸

2.4.3. *Land as a common home*

Indigenous Peoples are often neglected and even deprived of their rights as original settlers and caretakers of their lands. They are being stripped of their titles as legitimate owners/residents of their traditional lands, their common home. With their land rights taken away, their cultural, economic, societal, and land tenure systems are also being deprived. Since their means of living are being expropriated, they are essentially deprived of their right to live. For these reasons, Indigenous communities appeal to both local/domestic and international laws for land protection.²⁹

In the book of Genesis, God made the land appear from the waters and put in it many living creatures as well. This reminds us of the sacrament of baptism in which new life comes after being baptized with water. God commanded, “Let the water below the sky come together in one place, so that the land will appear”— and it was done. He named the land “Earth,”

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, #146.

²⁸ Edgar Javier, “The Earth is Sacred,” *Religious Life Asia* 12, no. 4 (October-December 2010): 5.

²⁹ Lindsey Wiersma, “Indigenous Lands as Cultural Property: A New Approach to Indigenous Land Claims,” *Duke Law Journal* 54, no. 4 (2005): 1061.

and the water which had come together he named “Sea.”³⁰ And God was pleased with what he saw. Then he commanded, “Let the earth produce all kinds of plants, those that bear grain and those that bear fruit”—and it was done... Then God commanded, “Let the water be filled with many kinds of living beings, and let the air be filled with birds.” Then God commanded, “Let the earth produce all kinds of animal life: domestic and wild, large and small”—and it was done. So, God made them all, and he was pleased with what he saw.³¹

Land is life! Land is sacred! That is the undeniable creed of the IPs. Land is life, and land is sacred—it is a worldview that threads through their spiritual rituals and worships and their worldviews. The ethnicity of IPs is the most significant aspect of their claim to land and life. Their life has a vital link to their land. Their world consciousness and the continuity of their way of life are firmly rooted in their birthplace. Their land of origin is not only the source of their sustenance, but also their identity and culture. Their ancestral land is the repository of their knowledge and worldviews. Their clear awareness of the environment and their keen respect for its natural processes constitute for them a kind of intellectual and spiritual identity.

Ancestral land is defined by law as follows:

Land occupied, possessed and utilized by individuals, families and clans who are members of the ICCs/IPs since time immemorial, by themselves or through their predecessors-in-interest, under claims of individual or traditional group ownership, continuously, to the present except when interrupted by war, force majeure or displacement by force, deceit, stealth, or as a consequence of government projects and other voluntary dealings entered into by government and private individuals/corporations, including, but not limited to, residential lots, rice terraces or paddies, private forests, swidden farms and tree lots.³²

³⁰ Macli-ing Dulag, Chieftain of the Kalinga Tribe (quoted in Ponciano L. Bennagen, “Tribal Filipinos,” in *Indigenous View of Land and the Environment*, ed. Shelton H. Davis, the World Bank Discussion Papers, No. 188, pp. 71-72.) Also quoted by J. Kapunan in his separate opinion in *Isagani Cruz and Cesar Europa vs. Secretary of DENR, et al.*, G.R. No. 135385, December 6, 2000.

³¹ Aurea G. Miclat-Teves, “Land is Life: Reclaiming the Ancestral Domain of the Aetas for Food Security,” *Promoting Indigenous Knowledge for Food Security*, <https://www.coursehero.com/file/75454049/7-IP-of-the-Philippinesdocx/> (accessed September 9, 2024).

³² Republic Act 8371 (IPRA Law).

Rex Reyes, secretary general of the NCCP (National Council of Churches in the Philippines), stated in an interview: “It is foolishness to say we own the land. The land owns us!” Indigenous Peoples around the world have affirmed this statement time and again in defense of the land from wanton abuse. This springs from a profound understanding that the Earth’s resources are to be shared for the sustenance of all life, not exploited to satisfy the greed of the few. Such Indigenous perspectives resonate with the Christian understanding of responsible stewardship. Responsible stewardship and Indigenous spirituality uphold the reverence for life, the good interrelationship that should define a community, and sensitivity to the well-being of future generations. These practical knowledge and foresight explain why IPs defend the land. Ironically, the active articulation of these life-affirming and life-sustaining principles has become the reasons for their marginalization and the suffering imposed on them.

Apo Pangat Makliing Dulag of Kalinga articulated clearly that land is sacred as an element of Indigenous spirituality when he said:

You ask if we own the land. . . How can you own that which will outlive you? Only the race own the land because only the race lives forever. To claim a piece of land is a birthright of every man. The lowly animals claim their place; how much more man? Man is born to live. Apu Kabunian, lord of us all, gave us life and placed us in the world to live human lives. And where shall we obtain life? From the land. To work (the land) is an obligation, not merely a right. In tilling the land, you possess it. And so land is a grace that must be nurtured. To enrich it and make it fructify is the eternal exhortation of Apu Kabunian to all his children. Land is sacred. Land is beloved. From its womb springs . . . life.³³

3. Conclusion

Dwelling should be an expression of their cultural integrity. As beautifully expressed, ancestral land and domain are at the heart of Indigenous identity, longing, and belonging. The notion of dwelling posits that an essential characteristic of authenticity is “homeliness” or being oneself in one’s environment. Home is where your heart is. It is invested with meaning and identity.

³³ Molintas, “The Philippine Indigenous People’s Struggle for Land and Life,” 276.

As human beings, our relationship with the natural world is, by definition, a social one. How we perceive and use nature is shaped by how society is organized and how we, as members of that society, view nature's value. In other words, our relationship with nature is socially constructed and patterned. While earlier approaches to the study of human ecology attest to the character of this relationship, there is a need to see religious and spiritual factors as a strong undercurrent to the relationship between users and resources. In the latter, the user's linkages with the broader processes, including the state and its apparatuses, structure the physical and social environment and complicate the relationship between society and nature.

The struggle for ancestral land, as a discourse, pertains not just to legal and political strategies about land ownership but also to spiritual processes whereby understandings, interpretations, and meanings of the land are constituted and contested through social practices such as ritual and belief. The official view of how ancestral lands should be addressed may deviate from the actual situation, resulting in a gap between "what should be" and "what actually happened." This gap can also be a venue for negotiation of power and meaning among the stakeholders.

The concept of an Indigenous land theology involves an interconnected system of Indigenous knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and practices about land and ecology. This can be contrasted with Judeo-Christian environmental theology. Approaching these two spiritualities as a dialogue could enrich both perspectives. Such a dialogue may inspire and illuminate the struggles of Indigenous Peoples for their ancestral lands, creating a communicative theological action that is empowering and liberating.³⁴

³⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 10.

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