

Gods, Spirits, and Rituals: Amplifying Mangyans' Indigenous Wisdom and Resilience in the Age of Pandemic and Ecological Catastrophes

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Abstract—Like mostly Filipinos, *Mangyans* have to face various ecological conundrums and sicknesses in order to survive. In these challenging times, it is the fear of life that grasps so alarmingly that even indigenous communities are not excused. Given this reality, this paper deals with the local cultural knowledge and customs of *Mangyans*, the indigenous people in the island of Mindoro, Philippines, that let them face calamities and crises with great resolve. For the *Mangyans*, their collective wisdom and tradition of resilience make them survive the stiffest challenges that come in their lives. The *Mangyans* believe in the existence of one Supreme Being, *Ambuwaw*, who created them and the world and who is continually sustaining their existence. The presence of the divine is experienced in terms of his omnipotence, pervading their everyday life, and manifesting himself in physically observable phenomena such as deliverance from calamities or sicknesses, blessing of the harvest, and other forms. They believe that there are bad spirits roaming the land called *Bukaw* in the spirit-world. Ecological catastrophes are regarded as being caused by these bad spirits. To drive away these, *Mangyans* perform a ritual called *Tawtaw*. Knowing how *Mangyans* steadfastly confront challenges in life and how they prosper despite having meager means and being significantly less equipped for and dependent on contemporary technologies is enlightening. Their worldview (*pananaw*) which shapes and informs their customs and traditions (*kaugalian*) is what they refer to as their indigenous survival wisdom and it is actualized through unique communal behaviors (*kinagawian*).

Keywords—Indigenous survival wisdom, *Mangyans*, resilience, tradition and customs

I. INTRODUCTION

SANGILEN, a tiny *Mangyan* community of the *Alangan* tribe at the base of Mount Halcon in Oriental Mindoro, Philippines was wreaked havoc by Typhoon Tisoy (international name: Kammuri) on December 3, 2019. The scenes in the community were terrifying for almost everything was shattered into pieces due to the ravaging force of nature. Fortunately, neither a person died nor was injured among the *Mangyan* families. This scenario is something that this community encounters frequently, but what has kept them safe from the onslaughts of such catastrophes has been their communal practice that every time there is an incoming storm, the elders, assisted by all able-bodied, would build a sturdy evacuation shelter called *libaog* large enough for all the community members to take refuge [1]. This is an actual example of how the *Mangyans*, the indigenous people of Mindoro, Philippines [2], demonstrate their collective wisdom

and tradition of resilience which allows them to face calamities and crises with great resolve, allowing them to survive the most difficult challenges that come their way.

Mangyan is the generic name for the eight indigenous groups found on the island of Mindoro, southwest of the island of Luzon, the Philippines, each with its own tribal name, language, and customs. The total population may be around 280,000, but official statistics are difficult to determine under the conditions of remote areas, reclusive tribal groups and some having little if any outside world contact. These ethnic groups, from north to south, are: *Iraya*, *Alangan*, *Tadyawan*, *Tawbuid* (called *Batangan* by lowlanders on the west of the island), *Buhid*, and *Hanunoo*. An additional group on the south coast is labelled *Ratagnon*. They appear to be intermarried with lowlanders. The group known on the east of Mindoro as *Bangon* may be a subgroup of *Tawbuid*, as they speak the 'western' dialect of that language.

The *Mangyans*, like many indigenous peoples who live on the outskirts of society, primarily in the highlands, face perennial problems such as poverty, malnutrition, sickness, natural disasters, a lack of regular access to social services, health care, and transportation, and are frequently caught in the crossfire of conflicts between the military and other armed groups. A recent survey of 77 *Mangyan* families in Oriental Mindoro, Philippines found that 82% of them continue to live in poverty and make less than P1,000 per month [3]. Invasive development and large-scale mining that threaten and encroach on their historic territory also harm them. The long list of trials that have tried the *Mangyans'* fortitude and tenacity now includes the current COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, it is noteworthy and entertaining to learn about how they successfully navigate through challenges in life despite their limited resources and dependence on modern technology. Their worldview (*pananaw*), which informs and defines their customs and traditions (*kaugalian*), as expressed through various communal rites, is what makes up their indigenous survival wisdom (*kinagawian*) [4].

II. WORLDVIEW (*PANANAW*)

A. A Solid Sense of Community Expressed in Their Daily Life Activities

Mangyans place a high importance on family and community, and they understand their interdependence on

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others. They work together as a group of various families to grow and harvest. In the river, they go fishing together. They give their commodities (such as root crops and fruits of their harvest) with community members who are truly in need, especially those who are ill and disabled, because they are intrinsically kind and helpful and attentive to everyone's needs. A person who immersed himself in an Iraya-Mangyan community has firmly articulated this deep sense of community in these words: "From a generous heart which flows into openness and service, one is open hands even one has nothing. They are truly remarkable in their generosity in their sharing of stories about nothingness, stories about fighting for ancestral lands, stories about their experiences of violence, stories about rising up from catastrophes, stories about deceit of other people, stories about family survival, stories about healing from sickness, stories about victories in the strife of their children, stories about occupation and stories about simple living".

B. A Positive Perception of Self and Reality

The Mangyans' extraordinary outlook on life is based on their spirituality and austerity. Although the dominant culture of the latter gives many benefits due to better access to education and development, they may feel inferior to the lowlanders despite this; still, they have a strong sense of trust and confidence among themselves. This serves as the basis for their desire for harmony and peace as fundamental principles.

C. A Profound Sense of Satisfaction in Life

The Mangyans respect human life. To get by, they will do whatever it takes. They merely aim to live and survive each day, not to live in luxury. They are happy, at peace, and pleased with their modest way of life. They become less troubled and anxious as a result. They are able to rely on God's providence, which gives them the courage to view risks and difficulties as natural parts of life. These sensibilities are vividly described as: "Simple in thinking. Everyone is equal and comes from one Creator and so each one has deep sense of surrender and taking risk".

D. A Deep Sense of Oneness with Nature

The Mangyans are experts at coexisting with nature. They love nature, not simply care for it, which is why nature looks out for them in return. For indigenous peoples "the whole of creation is deeply imbued with spiritual reality" [5]. The mountain serves as a symbol of life for the Alangan people who reside in Mount Halcon's shadow. Where they acquire their food, housing, and means of support is a mountain, which is where their security is. Fr. Edwin Gariguez has produced a thorough research document entitled "Articulating Mangyan-Alangans' Indigenous Ecological Spirituality as a Paradigm for Sustainable Development and Well-Being" [6]. This scholarly work seeks to explore and harness the creative spiritual energy that is inherent in the Mangyan-Alangan indigenous communities in Mindoro, with the ultimate goal of promoting sustainable development and well-being. According to him: "By appreciating the wisdom of the Mangyan-Alangans' culture and their indigenous spiritual tradition in relating with the earth and in pursuing sustainable practices, we hope to be

able to articulate a framework of respectful inter-connectedness that will ensure the well-being, not only of the human community but of the earth community as a whole. This scenario of collective harmony and peaceful co-existence defines the experience of ecological spirituality among the indigenous peoples" [6].

As a senior Alangan put it succinctly, "Just there is mountain, there is life". Since the majority of Mangyans are subsistence farmers, they just assist one another in replanting the crops that are left after every natural disaster that typically destroys their highland harvests [7]. The Mangyans primarily use swidden agriculture (kaingin) to plant root crops such as sweet potatoes, purple yam and cassava. They also have other crops such as bananas, corn, and avocados. However, some families are now growing larger tracks of produce that they harvest and sell or trade to lowlanders in exchange of rice and other basic necessities. However, it has been scientifically proven and widely accepted that the kind of swidden farming practiced by Indigenous Peoples is not invasive nor detrimental to the environment and in fact sustainable and has contributed to the maintenance of bio-diversity especially in forested areas.

E. A Living Sense of God and of His Providence

The good things in life, according to the Mangyans, come from the One who is the originator and supplier of all good things. They probably do not worry much about the future since they have faith that God will provide for them and keep them safe throughout their life. Their ability to withstand the trials of life is renewed by their belief system, which promotes reliance on God. The Mangyans also have a belief in the hereafter; they think that their spirits would remain with their *tagapaglikha* after their worldly sojourn. As a result, they have no trouble letting go of their sorrow, especially when a loved one passes away. People who had encounters and dialogue of life with the Buhids expressed: "Because of trust in the grace of God, everything what the Mangyan has is sufficient enough. For them, the real treasure is what is inside of the heart and all the catastrophes are mere challenges to their faith".

III. CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS: KAUGALIAN AT KAGINHAWAAN

The worldview, cultural sensibility, and religious beliefs of the Mangyans give rise to unique customs and traditions that serve as their source of resiliency and fortitude in the face of life's ups and downs. They incorporate the following significant behaviors into their way of life:

A. Family and Community Solidarity

The Mangyans prioritize their families. The term "Balaylakoy" is used by the Alangans to refer to a "large house" that is shared by several families. Balaylakoy is more than just a physical home; it is the mindset of leading a communal life in which everyone contributes to the greater good. In particular at times of need and distress, this provides security and support. The Mangyan love for sharing their experiences, opinions, and goals in order to build and strengthen relationships is a key component of the balaylakoy mentality. One's identity and deep

emotions in relation with others are expressed by way of the “*Ambahan*”. The *Ambahan* is the traditional Hanunoo-Mangyan poetry that expresses identity and sentiments. It is usually written on bamboo in the Surat Mangyan, a pre-Hispanic syllabic script. The Dutch anthropologist Antoon Postma who is credited for deciphering the Philippines’ oldest document, the Laguna Copperplate Inscription and the extensive documentation and preservation of the Hanunoo script, collected much of this poetry [8].

They clearly show solidarity by participating in their own forms of *pagdadamayán* and *bayanihan*. The community gathers to grieve and pray with the grieving family in times of death and illness in the family. Usually, they are familiar with the histories of every family in the neighborhood. They hardly ever clash over lands. They appreciate each other's possessions. They have even been known to treat and maintain other people's farms as if they were their own.

Mangyans are tough. Typhoons may cause them to lose their homes, but they stay put and use the community's assistance to restore what has been lost. Other families are forward-thinking. They believe that sending their children to college-specific institutions will improve their living conditions, so they send their children there. Being family-oriented, some people make a huge sacrifice by staying to work as *kasambahay* among lowland households in order to support their families or send their siblings to school [8].

B. Healing Rituals

Sickness is one of the Mangyans’ top concerns. In general, people think that sickness is brought on by an evil spirit, especially if it results in suffering that they cannot explain. Therefore, they have healing rites that are typically carried out by elders they refer to as “*marayaw*,” who invoke the help of the good spirits to save the sick person and restore him or her to health. If there is no prospect of healing, it may be because the evil spirit has already consumed the ill person’s soul [9].

The Hanunuos engage in a healing ceremony known as “*Harirong*,” which implies requesting divine assistance, especially that of benevolent spirits and deceased ancestors. The elderly “*medicine men*” would murmur some sort of chant as a means of communication with spirits, offering prayers known as “*Daniw*” or divine trance. The Divine Being they refer to as “*Apu Parawan*” and the benign spirits are also offered sacrifices like food from the fields, pig, or chicken. The spiritual and medical authorities typically oversee this as a community activity. For the Alangans, loyalty to *Mamang sa Ugbos*, who provides for their needs and shields them from harm, is what matters.

C. Agpamago and Pamag-uhan: Mangyan Communal Rites of Thanksgiving

The Agpamago is a rite of thanksgiving among Alangan-Mangyans celebrated to acknowledge the reception of bountiful blessings. A similar rite called Pamag-uhan is also being practiced by the Hanunoo-Mangyans. Both Agpamago and Pamag-uhan are grand communal celebrations. Usually there is a pig that is slaughtered and while this is done, a prayer of thanksgiving is mentioned. The whole community and those

from neighboring communities are invited to take part in this celebration [11].

The Alangans believe that whenever *Agpamago* is observed, God bestows his abundant benefits on the society. The abundant harvest from which they get their livelihood is a concrete manifestation. Men and women alternately sing during the cheerful festival known as *agpamago*, which is known as *banggian*. When there is *Agpamago*, the family’s crop is shared (*ambagan*), which is typically rice (palay). Everyone does their assigned chores and consolidates everything that was given. For example, the men would pound the palay to remove the husks in a large mortar (*lusong*), while the women and young girls would clean and winnow the rice before it was cooked (*isasaing*). And then, all help out in cooking and sharing food. The celebration culminates in a happy sharing of all the dishes that were provided (*pagsasalu-salo*). In order to show respect for the elderly, they will be the first to eat. Everyone should have a fair part of the food because it is intended for everyone, and equal distribution is enforced because it is believed that by sharing with others, one will receive more in return. Through these thanksgiving customs, the communal spirit is strengthened and deepened, preventing anybody from feeling powerless and abandoned, especially at times of need and hunger [11].

IV. THE MANGYAN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ECOLOGICAL CATASTROPHES

At the outset of the COVID-19 infectious disease outbreak, the Buhids already resorted to “*Daniw*”- a chanted prayer in their native language performed by the elders meant to drive away possible threats against the health and safety of the family and the community brought about by both natural and human-induced causes. Because they are very much attached to nature, once they pray the *daniw*, they believe that their place would eventually be shielded from any danger. Although they comply with the standard health protocols being implemented by the government especially when they go to the town center to avoid being penalized, the wearing of face masks while inside their communities is not religiously practiced. If they are asked with regard to their feeling and impression on visitors who come to their communities with face masks, they express their uncomfortable feeling of being suspicious or even feeling insulted because they think it might be because of them or of their odor that one is wearing masks in front of them [12].

In the midst of this current pandemic, the Mangyans strive more to keep and enhance their culture as a source of strength and security. Their love and value for their ancestral land make them dedicate more time to do upland farming to produce more palay, corn, root crops and fruit bearing trees which they bring to the lowland for commerce. The women and youth create items made up of *nito* or *bugnoy* like plates, bags and other accessories for supplemental income. Every time somebody gets sick, very seldom they would bring them to the hospital or take pharmaceutical medicines. Instead, they often use herbal medicines or those with ailments are brought to their recognized elders who serve as healers as part of their religious belief. The pandemic also brings them closer to home where they usually

spend most of their time after working in the fields. They are happy and contented despite their material poverty and want. For them, what is more important is that no one gets sick, there are no conflicts, and they live healthy and with faith in God.

V. CONCLUSION

Being aware of the indigenous peoples' knowledge, which is based on their unique worldview and cultural traditions and contributes to their strength and endurance in surviving any crisis they confront, is extremely beneficial. The Mangyans have an enormous reservoir of resiliency that they may draw from time and time again in order to survive and overcome challenges. An effective illustration is Lido Banay, a 70-year-old Hanunoo Mangyan farmer, whose online posting of images of his improvised "bao" mask resulted in them going viral. He claimed that he was forced to build a mask out of a coconut shell and leftover fabric since he lacked the funds to purchase one. He worries that if he is discovered not wearing a mask, he would be detained and put in jail if the heavy fine is not paid. Bapa (uncle) Lido's situation illustrates his inventiveness and tenacity, but it also highlights the ongoing struggle of many indigenous peoples who still lack access to such essentials [10].

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