

**Indigenous/Local Knowledge, Anitism, and Sustainable Development:  
Challenges and Interventions in Preservation of Indigenous Rights  
and Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP)**

**Bobby dG. Lopez, L.P.T., MAEd.**

Bulacan State University, City of Malolos, Bulacan, Philippines  
[kalinanganatwika@yahoo.com](mailto:kalinanganatwika@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** Anchored on anitism, this study explains the significant contributions of indigenous knowledge from the plain, mountain range, and selected coastal areas of the Philippines to promote sustainable development. Challenges and interventions in preserving IKSP were also discussed in the study. It was done through careful analysis of relevant literature with the aid of unstructured interview. The study revealed that local knowledge and practices relevant to indigenous belief systems contribute to climate change adaptation and preservation of the natural environment. Besides that, concerted efforts among the academe, government, and indigenous cultural communities (ICCs) on issues and challenges surrounding the preservation of natural resources and IKSP were found to be more effective and beneficial in policy formulation and project management.

**Keywords:** *anitism*, anthropogenic, climate change, indigenous/local knowledge, indigenous rights and knowledge systems and practices, sustainable development

## **Introduction**

In 1979, for the first time, the scientists of the world discussed among themselves issues relating to climate change in an international conference spearheaded by the World Meteorological Organization (Casis as cited in Casis, 2008). Around the year 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirmed in a report that "the threat of climate change is real" as showed by rising sea level, melting of glaciers in the Arctic Sea, ocean acidification, stronger typhoon signal and hurricane category, increasing global average temperature, and extreme drought to mention a few (UNFCCC in Casis, 2008, p.6). This phenomenon is believed to be cyclical; thus, it is bound to happen naturally. However, the entire process of change was hastened by human-induced activities, resulting in anthropogenic climate change.

As the world battles the threats brought about by climate change, the United Nations' Commission on Environment and Development, introduced in the latter part of the 1980s, the concept of sustainable development - a "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN General Assembly, 1987 & Duhaylungsod, 2001). This gesture is just a response to its hope

to give birth to a new face of development founded on ethical and moral principles to mitigate the aggravating global climatic conditions. (Escobar as cited in Duhaylungsod, 2001). As such, indigenous/local knowledge that is anchored on *anitism* is so indispensable to its promotion because its practices already reflect the core value or the very soul of its aspiration. As defined by Bruchac (2014), indigenous knowledge refers to the "network of knowledges, beliefs, and traditions that guide relations among human, non-human, and other-than-human beings in specific ecosystems over time." On the other hand, *anitism* refers to the system of belief of the early Filipinos, which was derived from the root word *anito*, meaning "spirits of the deceased ancestors" or "spirits inhabiting the nature" (Hernandez, 2015).

This study was undertaken, for there are limited studies with a similar focus. Most related studies were confined only to indigenous knowledge and practices for sustainability in the forest, communities along Cordillera Mountain Range, and coastal areas (Chunhabunyatip, Sasaki, Grunbuhel, Kuwornu, & Tsusaka, 2018; Duhaylungsod, 2001). There were few to none studies that mentioned it in the plain region or any attempt to compare those knowledge and practices in various regions of the country.

As a whole, the study would like to shed light on the contributions of indigenous/local knowledge, which are anchored on *anitism*, in the attainment of sustainable development.

### **Research Methodology:**

The study used a descriptive research design. The literature review was utilized in gathering the data. It includes ethnographic accounts of indigenous peoples in the archipelago, a survey of Filipino folklore books and manuscripts, and other relevant unpublished research materials. To enhance and validate the findings, an interview was conducted with the former chairperson of the Regional Advisory Committee of the Foundation for Philippine Environment, an expert in anthropology and environmental education.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Indigenous Belief in Local Knowledge towards the Promotion of Sustainable Development**

Indigenous belief system was found to play a crucial role in conserving and preserving the natural environment and its resources. Authors in Grim's book (as cited in Snodgras & Tiedje, 2008) highlight that "indigenous religions may lead to more ecologically sound behavior (p.7)" just like what has been observed in some parts of India where sacred trees were preserved for generations because of religious beliefs (Chunhabunyatip, Sasaki, Grunbuhel, Kuwornu, & Tsusaka, 2018). Close to this is Dusun Tindal tribe's belief in Kota Belud, Sabah, about trees possessing spirits that help them "develop a very close bond with nature" (Livan, 2014, para. 4). In like manner, "wildlife species such as the Black Soft-shell Turtle, Mugger Crocodile, Rock Pigeon and Rhesus Macaque" in Bangladesh were protected

for quite some time because of local beliefs (Chunhabunyatip, Sasaki, Grunbuhel, Kuwornu, & Tsusaka, 2018). Furthermore, forests were preserved by Talang Mamak people of Indonesia because of the concept of sacred places, while the beliefs in ancestral spirits of indigenous people in the Lower Songkhram River Basin in Thailand led them to conserve the natural resources in their territory (Evanty, 2018 & Chunhabunyatip, Sasaki, Grunbuhel, Kuwornu, & Tsusaka, 2018).

The Philippines' experience is not very far from these as it shared with some of its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia the belief in ancestral and nature spirits. This is locally known as *anitism*, which spreads out in the entire archipelago and is still being upheld today by some groups through oral tradition and socialization (Hernandez, 2015).

The following indigenous/local knowledge can be traced from *anitism* and are believed to play a significant role in promoting sustainable utilization of natural resources:

### **A. On Animals**

1. Indigenous People from North Western Cagayan are still using traditional fishing/hunting techniques. They even apply selective hunting/fishing, which means they avoid pregnant or female animals (Magulod, 2008).

2. The local belief in Malolos, Bulacan like “kasumpaan,” in which an animal, like fish or bird, is given utmost respect and veneration by a particular family from several generations believing that it saved the lives of their ancestors from a tragic event (Tantoco, 1990). Another is the belief, among Tagalogs, that there were animals that could bring misfortunes to the lives of their owners like turtle and owl. Some people from San Miguel, Bulacan, even believed that there were animals being taken care of by enchanted beings that must not be disturbed.

3. Tagalogs in lowland areas also believe that spirits can transform into an insect or animal. The best example would be a butterfly, which is sometimes considered a visiting spirit of deceased loved ones. Aswang, “an evil shape-shifting creature, according to the Philippine folklore, that shares the grotesque characteristics of werewolves, vampires, and ghouls (Valdeavilla, 2018, para. 4),” can mimic the form and shape of a black dog or pig (ADHIKA & NHI, 2001). Having these in mind, people become more cautious in dealing with animals/insects.

4. The tripartite cosmos and its symbolisms, which are composed of the sky (bird and sun), earth (tree), and the underworld (turtle/snake), reflect not just the Filipino worldview as a whole but even their deep recognition and valuing of animals' life (Hernandez, 2015).

### **B. On Trees**

1. Planting trees for those chopped down among Ifugaos and indigenous people from North Western Cagayan (Magulod, 2008 & Camacho, Gevana, Carandang & Camacho, 2015).

2. Avoidance of cutting down young trees and some species of trees like *balite* and *fiscus* in Ifugao (Camacho, Gevana, Carandang & Camacho, 2015). Perhaps this can be associated with our belief that trees are serving as abode or dwelling place of some nature's spirits.

### **C. On Managing Land Fertility and Pest Control**

1. Some indigenous groups like those in North-Western Cagayan and Eva Aeta of Orion Bataan use organic fertilizers from decaying fruits, rice and cornstalks, and animal manure (Magulod, 2018 & Abeledo & Abeledo, 2015).

2. Performance of *holok* among Ifugaos to control the pest. In this ritual, grasses and plants collected by farmers were sown in the rice field after being grinded well. It will take three days for its effectiveness to be noticed as mentioned by the locals (ADHIKA & NHI, 2001).

Their use is indeed more environmentally friendly compared to their commercial counterparts.

### **D. On Sacred Place/Time**

1. Filipinos, in general, believe that there are sacred places occupied by unseen powerful beings; thus, for the longest time, they remain pristine and untouched (Hernandez, 2015). Thus, biodiversity flourishes and abounds within the perimeters of those places. This belief can be rooted in their view that some nature spirits inhabit the riverine areas, mountains, fields, etc. This is not to mention that different indigenous groups, from Luzon to Mindanao, believe in passages going to the afterlife like caves, seas, and holes in the underworld. In other places like Bataan and North Western Cagayan, where hunting and fishing are allowed, rituals are still being performed before its conduct to secure permission from nature's spirits (Abeledo & Abeledo, 2015).

2. There were seasons when hunting and fishing, like in Senora River in Lazi, Siquijor, is being prohibited or regulated so that animals may have ample time to multiply or reproduce their kind (Mansueto, Duran, & Jumawan, 2012).

3. It has also been observed that places in Cordillera where slash and burn agriculture is being practiced, were given some time to rest after its full utilization to regain its land fertility and to allow regeneration of plants and trees in the area [e.g., *uma* of the Kalinga] (See & Sarfati, n.d.).

4. The *muyong* (Ifugao), *lakon* (Bontoc, Mountain Province), and *imung* (Kalinga-Apayao) are traditional forest management systems that are found to be effective (See & Sarfati, n.d.).

### **E. On Utilization of Natural Resources**

Indigenous peoples of Batanes like Ivatan, Lumad, and Jama Mapun of Mindanao are all considering the sea as a collective property; thereby, when they get something from it, they

make sure it is just enough to meet the needs of their families. Greediness has no place in their hearts. The same pattern of thinking and behavior has been noted among people from places that are rich in gold deposits like Masbate, Bohol, Surigao, and Butuan (ADHIKA & NHI, 2001). What they get is just enough to produce jewelry, as part of their family heirlooms, that they can pass on to the succeeding generations as part of their tradition. Indeed, this practice can help a lot in the effort to conserve natural resources.

A closer examination of details presented in preceding paragraphs will show that these indigenous peoples' sustainable practices come from their understanding of their co-existence with the ancestral/nature spirits in the physical environment. Hence, their greatest fear and reverence to these unseen beings made them more careful in dealing with them and their home environment. This can perhaps best explain the relationship between and among humans, nature, and *anito* (spirits). Undeniably, there is balance and harmony in their relationship that secures sustainable development. No one dominates or gets subordinated by others. They are co-equal, and they pay deep respect and consideration to each other. This is attributed to the fact that each of them is composed of a common core that characterizes their being- "the spirit", which according to Philippine mythology and folklore, is possessed not just by humans but by other beings as well, including inanimate matter based on the beliefs of some indigenous peoples in the southern part of the Philippines. Accordingly, this "spirit" can give life, mobility, consciousness, good health, logical and ethical reasoning, kindness, and a lot more to those who possess it (ADHIKA & NHI, 2001).

Furthermore, this idea about the intimacy and harmony of their relationship is strengthened by local legends and narratives pointing that those beings from the sky, earth, and from the underworld can freely roam and interact with other beings in the different layers of the world. Hence, one can infer from their worldview that the physical world that humans live in is a space they share with other beings, including those that cannot be seen by their naked eyes.

To preserve this balance of relationship, there is a negotiation taking place between and among them. For instance, the *anito* is powerful and being feared by the locals, but through rituals and the use of amulets, people can receive favors and protection from them. Nature can be both generous and tight-fisted to humanity, like it can give bountiful or scanty catch of fish, depending on how they will use it. In this relationship, the human is believed to be the most active agent.

The balance in their relationship was put into challenge in the advent of colonization, capitalism, and globalization, where anthropocentrism, the belief in the centrality and supremacy of humans in the universe, is highly celebrated as a philosophy. As we turned our back to our indigenous ways, it led to the object-subject relationship development, which eventually replaced the "balance relationship" they had before. In this relationship, people become more profit-driven, and their hearts become home of greediness and immense desire for power. This creates imbalances and places the entire global community, not just the Philippines, in great danger.

## Challenges and Interventions in the Preservation of IKSP

At present, there are many challenges and severe threats to the preservation of indigenous knowledge. According to La Vina (as cited in Daoas, 1999) these are: “(1) loss of the indigenous peoples’ territorial base through the destruction of the rainforests, and their displacement by government projects or through commercial utilization of natural resources. This makes it impossible for many indigenous communities to sustain their knowledge; (2) introduction of the so-called “modern” practices of agriculture and medicine; and (3) indigenous knowledge increasingly endangered by misappropriation of this knowledge by outside researchers. (p. 5).” In fact, its misappropriation can lead to demonization and underestimation of its value and scientificity. A concrete example for that would be the non-recognition and non-inclusion of IKSP very often in biodiversity monitoring and law enforcement (Conflict Sensitive Resource and Asset Management, 2018) out of a perception of its backwardness because of its difference in method when compared with its counterpart -the “modern” or “western” practice. Other challenges concerning IKSP preservation are erosion of traditional governance, unsustainable tourism, and poorly planned infrastructure development (Global Environment Facility [GEF], 2019).

To address these problems, legislative measures were laid down to make it binding. As a response, laws were enacted like RA 8371, an act protecting, recognizing and promoting the rights of indigenous peoples; RA 10121, an act with provision that recognizes the importance of integration of indigenous knowledge systems on disaster risk reduction and climate change measures; RA 8423, an act that seek to improve the national health care delivery system through integration of traditional and alternative health care practices; and RA 11038, an act giving indigenous peoples the right to manage protected areas within their ancestral domains based on their customary laws and practices with full assistance coming from the government. On top of that, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) was created in 1997 to secure the formulation and implementation of policies, plans, and programs that recognize and promote the rights of IPs. In October 2001, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) created the Intangible Heritage Committee, which is directly responsible for preserving intangible cultural heritage, as suggested by the UNESCO (Peralta as cited in David, 2013). These efforts were reinforced in the educational system by integrating IKSPs in secondary school subjects like Music, Arts, and Physical Education (MAPEH), Filipino, Science, and Social Studies (Botangen, Vodanovich, & Yu, 2017). However, its integration became more evident in Science subjects like in public school teachers' practice in Baguio City (Botangen, Vodanovich, & Yu, 2017). In the tertiary level, through Commission on Higher Education Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 20 Series of 2013, Philippine Indigenous Communities (Social Sciences Cluster) and Indigenous Creative Crafts (Arts and Humanities Cluster) were offered as elective courses in the General Education subjects, and just recently through CMO No. 02 Series of 2019, Indigenous Peoples’ Studies/Education may now be offered in the curricula through, but not limited to, integration of topics or inclusion of reading materials about IPs and Muslims in social sciences and humanities subjects. There were also schools of living traditions (SLT) established like the one in Cordillera to promote Ifugao *muyong* practice and another in

Bataan to preserve the Ayta Magbukon indigenous culture, to mention a few (Camacho, Gevana, Carandang & Camacho, 2015 & David, 2013). SLT is primarily concerned with passing the indigenous knowledge to the young with the help of a culture specialist through a “non-formal, oral, and practical demonstrations” mode of teaching (NCCA, 2021). Technology that is believed by many to be the culprit for the deterioration of indigenous culture has also become an instrument for its promotion and preservation. A case in point may be the study of Botangen, Vodanovich, & Yu (2017) among Igorot migrants. They found out that the use of social media, particularly Facebook Groups, has a “potential complementary role in the revitalization of indigeneity and learning of culture (Botangen, Vodanovich, & Yu, 2017, p.2310).”

Moreover, collaborative programs and projects with international agencies and organizations were found to be helpful in this struggle, like the one we have with the International Labour Organization (ILO), which took the initiatives to protect IKSPs through (1) promotion of community documentation of IKSPs and (2) giving of support in the establishment of community resource centers (Daoas, 1999). Another laudable project is the launching of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)-supported and GEF-financed Philippine Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCA) Project, which works to strengthen the conservation, protection, and management of key biodiversity sites by institutionalizing ICCAs (GEF, 2019, para.8). ICCAs are “sacred spaces and ritual grounds such as sacred forests and mountains, indigenous territories, and cultural landscapes or seascapes” (GEF, 2019, para.6). Some may be found today in Mount Taungay in Tinglayan, Kalinga, Mount Polis in Tinoc, Ifugao, Imugan in Sta. Fe, Nueva Vizcaya (GEF, 2019).

### **Conclusion and Recommendation:**

Acknowledging the identity, knowledge, and capability of an indigenous group is an all-important component of inclusive development, a vital feature of sustainable development. Equally essential for development in the truest sense of the word is one that “is in all” and “for all”; meaning in its take-off, no one should be set aside, ignored, marginalized or discriminated.

In this note, *anitism*, a prevalent belief of the early Filipinos in ancestral/nature spirit, which manifests through indigenous knowledge in conservation and management of natural resources, must be recognized in its contribution to climate change adaptation and promotion of sustainable development.

Finally, it is recommended that future studies emphasize indigenous knowledge for protecting the atmosphere, which was not covered in this study. Data collection on how to foretell and prepare for an impending calamity using indigenous knowledge may also be considered since climate change, nowadays, brings more life-threatening disasters. In addition, the academe, the ICCs, and the local government may work together for the protection and promotion of indigenous knowledge through the passing of relevant local ordinances, organizing of cultural exhibits, funding of related research works, the

establishment of civic organizations, and inclusion of a separate subject in the basic education curricula that deals with the IKSPs.

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