



INDIGENOUS/LOCAL KNOWLEDGE, ANITISM, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CHALLENGES AND INTERVENTIONS IN PRESERVATION OF INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND PRACTICES (IKSPs)

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This study, which is anchored in anitism, shows how indigenous knowledge from the plain, mountain range, and some coastal areas of the Philippines makes a big difference in promoting 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 an 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. In addition, concerted efforts among the academe, government, and indigenous cultural communities (ICCs) on issues and challenges surrounding the preservation of natural resources and IKSPs were found beneficial for a more effective policy formulation and project management.

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

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INTRODUCTION

In 1979, for the first time, scientists of the world discussed among themselves issues relating to climate change at an international conference, spearheaded by the World Meteorological Organization (Casis as cited in Casis, 2008). In 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a report stating that “the threat of climate change is real.” This was demonstrated by a number of factors, including but not limited to the following: rapid melting of glaciers in the Arctic Sea; rising of sea levels; ocean acidification; stronger typhoon signals and hurricane categories; increasing global average temperature; and extreme drought (UNFCCC in Casis 2008, 6). This phenomenon had been cyclical and bound to happen naturally. However, the complete process of change was sped up by human-induced activities, which led to anthropogenic climate change.

As the world battles the threats brought about by climate change. In the latter part of the 1980s, the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development introduced 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 aggravating global climatic conditions (Escobar as cited in Duhaylungsod 2001). As such, indigenous/local knowledge, anchored in *anitism*, became an indispensable tool for its promotion because its practices already reflected the core value or the very soul of its aspiration. As defined by Bruchac (2014), indigenous knowledge refers to the “network of knowledge, 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 was referred* to the system of belief of the early Filipinos. It was derived from the root word *anito*, meaning “spirits of the deceased ancestors” or “spirits inhabiting nature” (Hernandez 2015).

This study was undertaken because there were limited studies with a similar focus. Most related studies were confined only to indigenous knowledge and practices for sustainability in the forest, communities along the Cordillera Mountain Range, and coastal areas (Chunhabunyatip et al. 2018; Duhaylungsod 2001). There were very few studies, if any at all, that mentioned it in the plain regions, and no attempts were made to compare the knowledge and practices of each of the country’s different regions.

The research as a whole aimed to shed light on: (1) the contributions of indigenous and local knowledge, rooted in *anitism*, to the attainment of sustainable development; and (2) the challenges and interventions made for the preservation of IKSPs.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

There was no doubt at this point, about the reality of climate change as a phenomenon, its indicators and manifestations have been all around the world, causing great havoc. As years passed by, its threats and impacts became more alarming and of greater concern not just to humanity but to all living forms inhabiting the world. Just recently, the World Meteorological Organization’s Press Conference on *The Global Annual to Decadal Climate Update* (as cited in United Nations Environment Programme 2023) reported that “global temperatures were likely to surge to record levels in the next five





years, fueled by heat-trapping greenhouse gases and a naturally occurring El Niño event. There was a 98% likelihood that the five-year period as a whole will be the warmest on record” (par.10-11). This scenario could lead to an increase in the amount of moisture that the atmosphere could hold resulting in abnormal weather conditions like the occurrence of stronger typhoons with heavy rains while experiencing intense drought at the same time (Lindwall 2022). Other devastating effects of climate change as revealed by most recent studies were food and water scarcity, ocean acidification, shrinking of “area covered by sea ice in the Arctic”, and acceleration of sea level rise “from 1.7 mm/year, in the greater part of the 20th century, to 3.2 mm/year beginning in 1993 (Lindwall 2022; World Meteorological Organization (WMO) 2022; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2021, par. 6).

In the past, academicians missed seeing, if not totally undervalued, the role of the belief system or religion in the campaign for environmental protection and conservation. They forgot that religion as an institution combines beliefs, practices, and structures that enable it to act as a catalyst of change, making transformation and sustainability possible for a larger population (Ives and Kidwell 2019). In fact, environmentalism was believed to have a spiritual dimension. Thus, it was often associated with religion or spirituality. This could be gleaned from the fact that early conservationism was influenced to a greater extent by the idea of “God being the creator of the earth” and the “earth as God’s creation,” and so therefore, it must be preserved and well taken care of (Gottlieb 2006). This assumption was further supported by historian Michael Nelson (as cited in Gottlieb 2006) by sharing his observation. Accordingly, it is noticeable that people across the globe, when they are in search of life’s meaning, want moral regeneration, spiritual revival, deep contemplation, and peace of mind,

which reflect spiritual or religious encounters, and go to sites or places where nature abounds. This practice somehow builds the idea that it is the right place to connect with a powerful entity whose presence is just in its surroundings.

According to scholars, the aforementioned scenario would bring us to animism, the earliest form of belief system, where most modern religions came from. However, from the perspective of Quijada (2022), she emphasized that it was not just a religion nor a simple belief in spirits dwelling in nature but rather a set of worldviews and practices that recognized the relationships among places, plants, animals, and human beings. In the said relationship, nature and the animal world would have dominion over humanity and thus must be respected.

Practices in animism should not be seen as a mere performance of religious rituals but rather as a huge form of farming practices and protest as an expression of environmental care (Quijada, 2022). This was evident even in the contemporary period on the traditional knowledge and practices of the indigenous people. It has been said for most of it is traceable to their belief system or worldview and contributes towards the attainment of sustainable development (Aniah, Thaddeus Aasoglenang, and Bonye 2014; Mweta, Juma, and Phiri 2022; Abeledo and Abeledo 2015; Camacho et al. 2016; Chunhabunyatip et al. 2018). Hence, it has a crucial role being played both for the efforts in the conservation of cultural heritage and for the protection of the natural environment, which truly reflects what sustainability is all about. With this in mind, one may conclude that, indeed, traditional knowledge can help in formulating the actions needed to mitigate climate change (United Nations 2019).





THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was founded on Hernandez's (2015) critique of Lorenz Lasco's work on anitism, which asserted that the traditional belief in the presence of spirits in nature made people more cautious when dealing with the natural environment, as they were aware that it could belong not only to humanity but also to unseen beings, and that disrespect to any of these entities could result to disease and misfortune for the wrongdoers. Such a belief system could encourage ecologically sound practices to promote sustainable development. Skirrbekk, Sherbinin, and Adamo (2020) backed up this argument by claiming that religion could influence humans, especially environmentally relevant behaviors. Indeed, "religious change could affect social cohesion, consumption trends, and willingness to pay for climate change mitigation or adaptation initiatives (Skirrbekk, Sherbinin, and Adamo 2020, par. 7)."

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

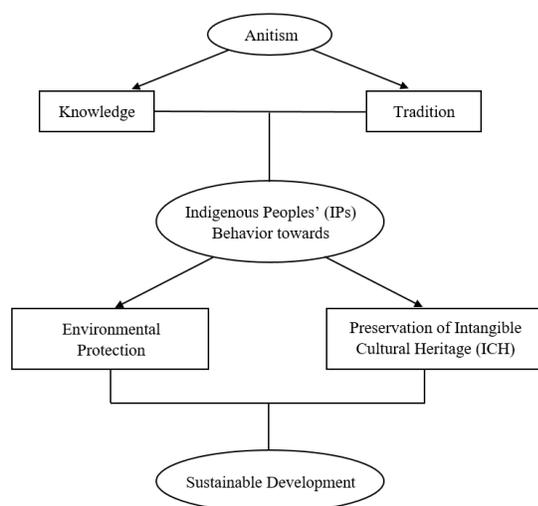


Figure 1. Conceptual model on the interrelationship among belief systems, indigenous knowledge systems and practices, and sustainable development

The model shows how anitism, the ancient belief in the spirits of the deceased ancestors or those that dwell in nature, could shape the knowledge and traditions to a greater extent of the indigenous peoples. These knowledge and traditions in turn would promote behavior and contribute to the protection of the natural environment and preservation of intangible cultural heritage to secure sustainable development. This perhaps had become the guiding principle that led Maria Fernanda Espinosa (as cited in United Nations, 2019), General Assembly President of the 2019 Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, to think that "traditional knowledge occupies a pivotal place in the range of actions needed to mitigate climate change (par.5)."

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative meta-analysis as its research method. It is deemed to be fitting as it intends to provide more detailed or comprehensive descriptions of indigenous/local knowledge and practices, and challenges and interventions adopted in preserving indigenous rights and knowledge systems and practices towards sustainable development from findings across qualitative studies. The end product is a "new conceptualization" derived through the identification of patterns or essential elements from the original results of individual investigations (Schreiber, Crooks, and Stern 1997; Finfgeld, 2003; Timulak, 2009). Data were extracted from various works of literature that were reviewed. It includes ethnographic accounts of indigenous peoples in the archipelago, a survey of Filipino folklore books and manuscripts, reports from international organizations, and





other relevant unpublished research materials. This method was found very useful in the fields of sociology and anthropology, from which the current study is being anchored (Zhao 1991; Noblit and Hare 1988).

An interview with the former chairperson of the Foundation for Philippine Environment's Regional Advisory Committee, an expert in the fields of anthropology and environmental education, was also carried out to strengthen the study's results. It was worth noting that the data gathered from the literature reviewed from different sources were complemented with data from the interview.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

INDIGENOUS BELIEF IN LOCAL KNOWLEDGE TOWARD THE PROMOTION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The 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 and Tiedje 2008) highlighted that "indigenous religions may lead to more ecologically sound behavior (par.7)" just like what had been observed in some parts of India where sacred trees were preserved for generations because of religious beliefs (Chunhabunyatip, Sasaki, Grunbuhel, Kuwornu, and Tsusaka 2018). Close to this was the Dusun Tindal tribe's belief in Kota Belud, Sabah, about trees possessing spirits that helped them "develop a very close bond with nature" (Livan 2014, par. 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 et

al. 2018). Furthermore, forests were preserved by the 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 et al. 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 natural spirits. This is locally known as *anitism*, which spreads out throughout the entire archipelago and is still being upheld today by some groups through oral tradition and socialization (Hernandez 2015)

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

A. ON ANIMALS

1. Indigenous People from Northwestern Cagayan were still using traditional fishing/hunting techniques. They even applied selective hunting/fishing to avoid pregnant or female animals (Magulod 2008).
2. The local belief in Malolos, Bulacan like "kasumpaan," in which an animal, like a fish or bird, had been given utmost respect and veneration by a particular family for several generations believing that it saved the lives of their ancestors from a tragic event in the past (Tantoco 1990). Another was the belief, among Tagalogs, that there were animals that could bring misfortunes to the lives of their owners, like turtles and owls. Some people from San Miguel, Bulacan, even believed that animals were being taken care of by enchanted beings, and that must not be disturbed.





3. Tagalogs in lowland areas also believed that spirits could transform into insects or animals. The best example would be a butterfly, which seemed a visiting spirit of deceased loved ones. Aswang, “an evil shape-shifting creature, according to the Philippine folklore, could share grotesque characteristics of werewolves, vampires, and ghouls (Valdeavilla 2018, par. 4),” and could mimic the form and shape of a black dog or pig (ADHIKA & NHI, 2001). Having these in mind, people have become more cautious in dealing with animals/insects.
4. The tripartite cosmos and the symbolisms associated with it, composed of the sky (bird and sun), earth (tree), and the underworld (turtle or snake), reflected not just the Filipino worldview as a whole but even their deep recognition and valuing of animals’ lives (Hernandez 2015).

B. ON TREES

1. Planting trees to replace chopped down among Ifugaos and indigenous people from Northwestern Cagayan (Magulod 2008 and Camacho et al. 2015).
2. Avoid cutting down young trees and some species of trees, like *balite* and *fiscus* in Ifugao (Camacho et al. 2015). Perhaps this could be associated with our belief that trees served as the abode or dwelling place of some of 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 used organic fertilizers from decaying fruits, rice and cornstalks, and animal manure (Magulod 2018 and Abeledo and Abeledo 2015).
2. Performance of *holok* among Ifugaos to control pests. In this ritual, grasses and plants collected by farmers were sown in the rice

field after being ground well. It would take three days for its effectiveness to be noticed as mentioned by the locals (ADHIKA & NHI 2001). Their use was indeed more environmentally friendly compared to their commercial counterparts.

D. ON SACRED PLACE/TIME

1. Filipinos, in general, believed that there were sacred places occupied by unseen powerful beings. Thus, for the longest time, they remained pristine and untouched (Hernandez 2015). Thus, biodiversity flourished and abounded within the perimeters of those places. This belief could be rooted in their view that some nature spirits inhabited the riverine areas, mountains, fields, and others. This was not to mention that different indigenous groups, from Luzon to Mindanao, believed in passages going to the afterlife like caves, seas, and holes in the underworld. In other places like Bataan and Northwestern Cagayan, where hunting and fishing were allowed, rituals were still being performed before their conduct to secure permission from nature’s spirits (Abeledo and Abeledo 2015).
2. There were seasons when hunting and fishing, like in the Senora River in Lazi, Siquijor, were being prohibited or regulated so that animals may have ample time to multiply or reproduce their kind (Mansueto, Duran, and Jumawan 2012).
3. It had also been observed that places in Cordillera, where slash-and-burn agriculture was 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 and Sarfati n.d.).
4. The *muyong* (Ifugao), *lakon* (Bontoc, Mountain Province), and *imung* (Kalinga-Apayao) were traditional but effective forest management systems (See and Sarfati n.d.).





E. ON UTILIZATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Indigenous people of Batanes, like Ivatan, Lumad, and Jama Mapun of Mindanao, all consider the sea as a collective property. Thereby, when they would get something from it, they would make sure it was just enough to meet the needs of their families. Greediness had no place in their hearts. The same pattern of thinking and behavior had been noted among people from places rich in gold deposits like Masbate, Bohol, Surigao, and Butuan (ADHIKA and NHI 2001). What they would get would just be enough to produce jewelry, as part of their family heirlooms, that they could pass on to the succeeding generations as part of their tradition. Indeed, this practice could help a lot in the effort to conserve natural resources.

A closer examination of the details presented in the preceding paragraphs would show that these indigenous peoples' sustainable practices seemed to be an understanding of their co-existence with the ancestral/nature spirits in the physical environment. Hence, their fear and reverence for these unseen beings had made them more careful in dealing with them and their home environment. This perhaps was considered best to explain the relationship between and among humans, nature, and *anito* (spirits). Undeniably, there was balance and harmony in their relationship to secure sustainable development. No one would dominate or get subordinated by others. They seemed co-equal, and they would pay deep respect and consideration to each other. This was attributed to the fact that each of them was composed of a common core that characterized their being- "the spirit", which according to Philippine mythology and folklore, was 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" could give life, mobility, consciousness, good health, logical and ethical reasoning, kindness, and a lot more to those who possess it (ADHIKA and NHI 2001).

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

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

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





CHALLENGES AND INTERVENTIONS IN THE PRESERVATION OF IKSP

At present, there have been big challenges and severe threats to the preservation of indigenous knowledge. According to La Vina (as cited in Daoas 1999, 5) these were: “(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 made it impossible for most indigenous communities to sustain their knowledge; (2) introduction of the so-called “modern” practices of agriculture and medicine; and (3) indigenous knowledge is increasingly endangered by misappropriation of this knowledge by outside researchers.” In fact, its misappropriation has led to demonization and underestimation of its value and scientificity. A concrete example of 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 were 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 them 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 a provision that recognizes the importance of integration of indigenous knowledge systems on disaster risk reduction and climate change measures; RA 8423, an act that seeks 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 was directly responsible for preserving intangible cultural heritage, as suggested by 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, and Yu 2017).

However, the integration became more evident in Science subjects like in public school teachers’ practice in Baguio City (Botangen, Vodanovich, and Yu 2017). At 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 et al. 2015 and David 2013). The SLT was primarily concerned with passing 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, which 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, and Yu (2017) among Igorot migrants. They found out that the use of social media, particularly Facebook Groups, had a “potential complementary role in the revitalization of indigeneity and learning of culture (Botangen, Vodanovich, and Yu 2017, 2310).”

Moreover, collaborative programs and projects with international agencies and organizations were found to be helpful in this struggle, like the one with the International Labor Organization (ILO), which took the initiative 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 was 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 worked to strengthen the conservation, protection, and management of key biodiversity sites by institutionalizing ICCAs (GEF 2019, par.8). ICCAs were “sacred spaces and ritual grounds such as sacred forests and mountains, indigenous territories, and cultural landscapes or seascapes” (GEF, 2019, para.6). Some of these may be found today in Mount Taungay in Tinglayan, Kalinga, Mount Polis in Tinoc, Ifugao, and Imugan in Sta. Fe, Nueva Vizcaya (GEF 2019).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Acknowledging the identity, knowledge, and capability of an indigenous group has become 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.

On this note, *anitism*, a prevalent belief of the early Filipinos in ancestral/nature spirit, which could be manifested through indigenous knowledge in the conservation and management of natural resources, is 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, could bring 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 deal with the IKSPs.



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