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2023

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Deep Ecology, Nature Spirits, and the Filipino Transpersonal Worldview

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Many Filipinos today still believe that the world is filled with invisible entities who can affect their lives in a tangible way. These beings usually reside in nature as the souls of ancestors or other mysterious spirits. This indigenous transpersonal worldview implies that the individual is part of a living world. The modern term “deep ecology” seems to be aligned with this worldview. This paper looks at the implications of the Filipino transpersonal worldview on policies related to the care for environment and biodiversity.

Keywords: *deep ecology, folklore, indigenous spirituality, philippine psychology*

The Filipino worldview can be described as transpersonal in that it is not limited within the individual but is shared with others and one with the world. (Bulatao, 1992). This transpersonal worldview is usually understood through the language of folk belief and spirits. A belief in spirits may reflect attitudes towards the world. In this case, many of the entities in the Filipino spirit world live in nature, lending an almost mystical air to the environment. Material things have spirits, and spirits can manifest tangibly (Mercado, 1991). These spirits in nature are often called *anitos*, which refers to ancestor spirits (Hislop, 1971). Thus the relationship of many Filipinos to the environment may be personal and respectful, or what Syquia (2013) called a “reverential fear.” Despite being a predominantly Catholic country, the old nature spirits continue to thrive with Christianized names—what Mojares (1997) called “Christianized animism.” This spiritual relationship with nature is cultural and therefore intuitive, but it may be recognized elsewhere as something resembling “deep ecology.” This paper looks into the possible connection between Filipino folk beliefs and deep ecology. It aims to be an introduction into the matter, as a way to encourage a reconsideration of this outlook when discussing the preservation of culture alongside care for the environment.

Deep ecology

“Deep ecology” was a term used by the philosopher Arne Næss to describe a spiritual connection with nature that comes with realizing that the individual is a fundamental, and therefore responsible, part of it (Devall & Sessions, 1985/1993). The individual may therefore begin to understand that they are not, in fact, separate from an impersonal universe—they are, as Watts (1966) said, part of the world, the same way a leaf grows from a tree. The world, therefore, becomes valuable precisely because the individual extends beyond the ego-self and identifies with it—what Fox (1991/1993) called “transpersonal ecology.” One might be able to differentiate the dominant worldview and deep ecology in this way, as described by Devall and Sessions (1985/1993). Instead of dominance over nature, one might instead live in harmony with it. One might also question the belief in unlimited resources for a growing human population, and acknowledge instead that limited resources can serve all living things based on their specific needs. Further, one might challenge the predominant attitude towards mindless consumerism to focus more on taking only what is needed.

The transpersonal attitude of deep ecology may involve two intuitions: self-realization and biocentric equality (Devall & Sessions, 1985/1993).

Self-realization refers to when the individual transcends the limitations of their ego and begins to recognize life in the nonhuman world. Biocentric equality implies that all things that exist within the biosphere have a right to evolve and reach their own version of self-realization, in the context of a greater sense of completeness. The basic idea behind deep ecology seems to be echoed in what Beauregard et al. (2014) called “post-materialism,” a perspective that questions materialist explanations for well-documented spiritual phenomena. This worldview suggests that consciousness is not something that emerges from the brain, as a product of the interactions of matter; rather, it suggests that all things have, in some way, their own consciousness, and that consciousness is, in fact, a fundamental aspect of the universe. Bulatao (1992) observed that this attitude was inherent in Filipino folk beliefs, and thus called it the “Filipino Transpersonal Worldview.” For now, in order to explore the connection between deep ecology and this transpersonal worldview, one can start by looking at some Filipino beliefs.

Filipino Folk Beliefs

Many Filipinos believe that the nature contains spirits, not in the sense that the material and spiritual are two separate dimensions, but that they are on a continuum: material things such as rocks, trees, and rivers are homes of spirits, and these spirits can affect the world in tangible ways (Mercado, 1991). This belief manifests through various local customs, many of which seem to encourage mutual respect between humans and non-human entities, as shown in the two-volume work by Demetrio (1991), titled *Encyclopedia of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs*.

Among the many interactions recorded by Demetrio (1991) is asking for permission from nature spirits when crossing forests or bathing in rivers, since these are said to be the territory of spirits. The Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country, with more than 80% identifying as Roman Catholic (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021). Nevertheless, the spirits of Philippine folklore have not been replaced—in fact they are also acknowledged by many Catholics, albeit as “demons” (Syquia, 2013). Syquia (2013) warns Filipinos to let go of their “reverential fear” for these nature spirits, and instead rely on the power

of the Christian God. Interestingly, it is precisely this “reverential fear” that seems to succinctly summarize the Filipino attitude towards the environment—that is, with a kind of spiritual respect and awe at the destructive and nurturing aspects of nature. This spiritual connection that the Filipino has with nature can be seen in two beliefs: that of *anitos* and *engkantos*.

Anitos

Anito refers to any ancestor spirit, revered as beings who live alongside other spirits that have never been mortal, able to influence the movements of the spirit world (Hislop, 1971).

Demetrio et al. (1991) identified two types of *anitos*: aside from ancestors, there were also nature spirits. Some *anitos* hold a higher office and therefore live in the heavens, others live on earth. As the generations pass and the names of the ancestors are forgotten, these *anitos* eventually become nature spirits. Nevertheless they are still revered. Many Filipinos believe, therefore, that nature contains spirits of those who have passed away, regardless of whether they live in the skies or in the mountains and forests.

Other spirits in nature include an old man living in a mound, tree dwellers, and monster babies in the woods (Demetrio et al., 1991). When crossing the territory of these spirits, one would have to excuse oneself by saying “*Tabi tabi po*” (Excuse me, please step aside). ~~It may be interesting to mention that~~ modernization has not displaced these spirits. They continue to exist in urban settings, in the oppressive mystery of ancient trees and vacant lots, but also beneath malls and along dark, lonely streets (Evasco, 2000). Many of them represent the projected psychic experiences of the Filipinos who have traveled from far away provinces with hope to find better opportunities in the city. The world is believed to be filled with spirits, whether in trees or concrete pillars. It is very much alive.

Engkantos

The *engkanto* is an attractive, usually Caucasian entity similar to humans in many ways. They have various genders, they can be both old and young, they can die, and they have their daily tasks. Regardless, they are different—what Visayans call *dili ingon nato* (not like us).

Demetrio (1969) described *engkantos* as demonic, but not how it is understood in the Christian sense. *Engkantos* can be generous and devoted. Even today, stories about them are fascinating. They can, however, also be vindictive and obsessive. Those who have become victims of their affection often go mad—what Meñez (1978) considered to be an indigenous form of a type of mental disorder. The individual would start talking to non-human entities in trees, disappear and then reappear in strange places, and frequently go into trance states. The healer would therefore have to identify what taboo has been broken. For example, has the patient crossed *engkanto* territory without asking for permission? Then, they would identify what is needed to appease the spirit, and then an offering would be made. *Engkantos* supposedly live in forests and appear in dreams. One must be careful not to bump into them, or else suffer their invisible wrath, which manifests through sickness.

The madness that one goes through with *engkanto* encounters may be likened to a shamanic initiation, in that one is violently liberated from social and personal limitations to become the bridge between human and divine (Demetrio, 1969). One might even travel to mystical places just to interact with these spirits—the seeker might travel to lonely caves and solemn forests just to gain supernatural powers. *Engkantos* do hold much power, not only in the material world, but more especially in the collective imagination.

Deep Ecology and the Filipino Transpersonal Worldview

Deep ecology seems to be one of the many manifestations of what Bulatao (1992) called the Filipino Transpersonal Worldview. The Filipino mind is projected to the world around them, in the form of various spirits. There are certain people, such as the priest and the folk healer, who can interact with these spirits and draw power from them. Whether or not folk beliefs surrounding spirits are factual representations of tangible forms may be a potential topic for empirical research, but while they have not yet been conclusively proven, it may be more practical, at least for now, to understand what these spirits imply. *Anitos*, or ancestor spirits,

imply that many Filipinos believe that the afterlife, if there is one, is in the environment. Unlike other systems of spirituality that promote the idea that this world is like a temporary stop to eternity elsewhere, many Filipinos seem to believe that this is it—that everything exists as a part of the natural world. While this may not be a fair summary of all Filipino beliefs across the archipelago, it is at least what the belief in *anitos* imply. Of course the predominance of Catholicism in the country may have affected these beliefs, transferring ancestors to realms beyond this one. The belief in nature spirits and the compulsions that come with it may be a remnant of this ancient worldview, and even today one might hear the modern Filipino say “*Tabi tabi po*” when crossing grassy areas, lest they step on vindictive, mischievous spirits.

The belief in *engkantos* is more connected to the Filipinos’ psychology. These spirits affect the individual in an observable way. Whether or not *engkantos* exist is a question that may be answered by various cases of their manifestation, as seen through the individuals driven mad by them. Like nature spirits, *engkantos* live in forests and rivers, but they also seem to exist wherever human beings are. Whereas *anitos* and other nature spirits exist within a particular territory, *engkantos* mingle with humans and so their interactions with them are more intimate. This is perhaps the reason for what Demetrio (1969) noted, that *engkantos* can fall obsessively in love with humans. Yet how this obsession manifests in the victim, as observed by Meñez (1978), is through a strange relationship with nature. The individual speaks with beings in trees. They may even prefer to stay with them. They may disappear and then reappear in forests, kidnapped by these *engkantos*. Whether this still occurs among urban folk may be worth looking into, but one wonders how it might manifest in the context of the city. One might find other, more human reasons for a person’s disappearance. But for those who wander into the wilderness, driven mad by spirits of nature, an attitude of deep ecology can be observed, intersecting with psychological conditions. What Syquia (2013) called “reverential fear” which may be an apt description of how deep ecology is lived out among many Filipinos

who still believe that nature can be both beautiful and terrifying.

The aim of this paper was simply to introduce the Filipino transpersonal worldview and comment on the intuitive connection between deep ecology and Filipino folk belief, but the implications of this worldview are clear. Despite being known for its beaches, mountains, and fields, the Philippines is not a safe place for environmental activists. A report by Global Witness (2019) exposed intimidation, violence, and murder as threats to environmental activism in the Philippines. It reported that some politicians, companies, and landowners continue to make money off of natural resources, with blatant disregard for the indigenous communities that live in those areas. Today, for example, a dam project is cutting through the Sierra Madre mountain range. Sierra Madre is a land formation that is regarded as the country's first defense against devastating typhoons. Some say that the myth of Sierra Madre involves a mother laying down her life to protect her children, a shield to forever protect them from the evil king of the wrathful winds (de Leon, 2022). Its deforestation has been blamed for the recent slew of destructive storms (Moya, 2022). The new dam, called the Kaliwa Dam, was proposed to help provide more water to the metro, which is suffering from a shortage. As of February 2023, it is more than 20% complete (Jose, 2023). What makes the project controversial is not only might it severely affect Sierra Madre's biodiversity, it also displaces hundreds of indigenous people—more than 200 families (Otoroz, 2023). The Dumagat Remontado indigenous group have sacred sites in the region, including burial grounds and places of worship and healing (We Effect Sverige, 2022). They believe that the land is equivalent to life: it cannot be ruined or emptied just for this generation. As long as it is maintained, with thought to future generations, the land can sustain them enough. This belief, which has been maintained throughout generations, may be aligned in some way with modern thought surrounding deep ecology. There may have been alternatives to the creation of the dam, including the rehabilitation of existing dams, application of new technology that may help recycle water, and strengthening policies for water

conservation (Haribon, 2019). This is one of many real cases wherein an attitude informed by deep ecology, in conversation with indigenous groups, may have been an ideal approach to real urban problems.

Conclusion

The Filipino's relationship with the environment is fearful yet respectful, in recognition of nature's tendency to be both magnificent and destructive— a personality also possessed by the multitude of invisible spirits that live in the mountains, forests, and rivers. This understanding is intuitive; it occurs when the individual awakens to the realization that they are not separate from the world but one with it. The task of grounding it in real-world applications may depend on those who are inspired to take action, to honor culture and defend the environment.

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The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a Scopus listed peer-reviewed academic journal, and the largest and most accessible scholarly periodical in the transpersonal field. IJTS has been in print since 1981, is published by Floraglades Foundation, sponsored in part by Attention Strategies Institute, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at www.transpersonalstudies.org, and in print through www.lulu.com (search for IJTS).