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AN EMERGING MYSTIC THEOLOGY OF SUSTAINABILITY AMIDST RAPID CHANGES FOR AN INDIGENOUS CHURCH OF ASIA[1]

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In the indigenous homeland of Asia, the local Churches, whose cultural identity becomes strong through the FABC's call to engage in a triple dialogue with the rich religio-cultural traditions of indigenous communities, need to enable these communities to negotiate more effectively with the rapid changes related to globalization. The first section of this article thus recounts a lived experience of the inaugural ritual of the sacred worship place of the marginal Lahu communities (who are still strong in their practice of traditional religion) known as *hawye* (pronounced ho-ye). The inauguration of the *hawye* has to be understood within the context of the rapid changes that the Lahu communities are negotiating with; this is explained in section two. The lived experience and context of contestation then call for a contextualized understanding of dialogue which in turn is explained in the third section. In the final section, sacred sustainability is explained as a mystical sense that is foundational to an emerging mystic theology that enables the local Churches to become a new way of being Church, a way that engages in the liberative struggle of the indigenous communities of Asia.

[1]This article is based on a research among Karen and Lahu spiritual leaders which was conducted on March–June 2014 and December 2015, as well as

1. Lived Experience: An Inaugural Ritual

A new way of being Church amongst the indigenous peoples of Asia needs to begin with a felt experience of traditional indigenous ritual celebration through active "experiential participation."[2]

The inaugural ritual took place on December 21, 2015, in the *Lahu Nyi* (black Lahu) village called Ban Muen Mae, located in the Fang District of Chiangmai Province (Thailand). It was the first dedication after almost two years of the new sacred worship place of the Lahu traditional religion known as *hawye* to *Guisha*, the Creator of heaven and earth of the *Lahu Nyi*. This *hawye* became the latest addition to 30 existing *hawye* scattered throughout 75 organized Lahu communities across a total of 250 villages.

The first part of the inauguration was the "cutting of the ribbon" by the province senator, the district officer, and the head of the local municipality. After the ribbon was cut, we were invited into the *hawye* for lunch. When that was over, everyone lined up outside the *hawye* for the purification rite, with the women queued up on the left and the men on the right of the *hawye*. A Lahu woman, accompanied by another woman, poured water from a bamboo container onto the hands of the women and men. All washed their hands in preparation for the sacred worship.

After the purification, we were invited into the *hawye*. The dignitaries lit candles and then left. At the sound of the gong, the shamanic/spiritual leaders known as *tobo*, *tala*, and *ado*, and the priestesses, *adoma* and *kasoma*, broke out in a chorus of melodious chant, a mixture of loud incantations and songs. The leading *tobo* continued

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on personal interviews with priests and lay pastoral workers in the diocese of Chiangmai, Thailand.

[2]For more detail, see Jonathan Yun-Ka Tan, "A New Way of Being Church in Asia: The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) at the Service of Life in Pluralistic Asia," *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1 (January 2005): 72–94, quote at 78.

beating the gong to accompany the chorus of chanting until it reached a crescendo. Then came the contemplative moments of silence, with the sound of the gong resonating in the background as all became discerningly attentive to the climax called *Guisha-yelowe* in which Guisha descends with communications for the Lahu people. Guisha's counsels are clear and decisive for the forward journey of his people who are experiencing the menace of corruption, drug trafficking and drug addiction, exploitation, poverty, and the untold suffering that is taking a toll on the women, the adults, youth, and children.

Pipe music soon broke forth, and scores of women got up and danced clockwise in the inner circle, with more women and men joining them in the sacred dance in three to four concentric circles. In the meantime, those at the altar and in the sacred dance offered incantations to Guisha. Some women and men danced with zest and gusto, while others joined hands and danced prayerfully to the enchanting rhythm of the pipe music. The sacred dance continued for about two hours, with the sacred dancers coming and leaving in three to four waves, and then culminated with the last ritual, the tying of white cotton thread on the wrist by the female and male religious leaders as a sign of Guisha's blessing.

The Lahu communities believe that a mystical spirituality is the bedrock of their communal strength in the perennial negotiation of rapid changes in the context of contestation in Thailand.

2. The Context of Lahu Struggle

The lived experience of the Lahu traditional spirituality that vitalizes their faith and braces them in their negotiation of rapid changes has to be understood within the context of the capitalist-rationalistic logic that has spawned virulent secularism and the unsustainability of the interventionist model of development with the resultant climate changes at the global level. These global forces also play themselves out in the indigenous villages in Thailand, where there has been a systematic erosion of traditional religiosity, cultures, and the self-sufficient economy of rural communities. This erosion

is attributed to the commoditization of arable land and marketable crops by large-scale plantations and production under the aegis of the nation states and their ensuing policies that favor a capital intensive and market oriented economy.

In the early nineteenth century, such logic was mediated through the British and French colonial powers with "the desire to control trade, and exploit […] natural and human resources."[3] The colonized, in turn, have "resisted colonial exploitation and subjugation although with varying degrees of intensity and success."[4] Thailand was one of the resource suppliers, and the British Borneo Company was known for its unfettered logging in Northern Thailand.[5]

This kind of impact was more acutely felt in the post-independence and post-Cold War period[6] in the large agricultural communities, and

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[3]S. Sothi Rachagan & Richard F. Dorall, "The Conflict in Mindanao: Perspectives from South of the Border," paper presented at the 4th Annual National Conference of Ugnayang Pang-Agham Tao, Inc. (UGAT), April 2–4 (Dumaguete City: Silliman University, 1981), 55; Don McCaskill, "From Tribal Peoples to Ethnic Minorities: The Transformation of Indigenous Peoples: A Theoretical Discussion," in D. McCaskill & K. Kampe, eds., *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1997), 43; Karl M. Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep their Homeland* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2011), 77. See also Karl M. Gaspar, "To Speak with Boldness," in R. Odchigue & E. M. Genilo, eds., *Reimaging Christianity for a Green World* (Quezon City: St. Vincent School of Theology, 2011), 31.

[4]Rachagan & Dorall, "The Conflict in Mindanao: Perspectives from South of the Border," 55; Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep their Homeland*, 77.

[5]For a narrative of the operations of Borneo Company, see Prasert Trakansuphakon, "Space of Resistance and Place of Local Knowledge in the Northern Thailand Ecological Movement," Ph.D diss. (Chiangmai University, 2007), 268–269.

[6]Pinkaew Laungaramsri, "Epilogue," in Don McCaskill, Prasit Leepreecha, & He Shaoying, eds., *Living in a Globalized World: Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion* (Chiangmai: Mekong Press, 2008), 318.

more particularly in the north and northeast of Thailand when the country as a whole gradually (though more rapidly than neighboring ASEAN nations) shifted "from subsistence farming to more diversified economies, and to more open, market-based systems."[7] In about half a century, the Thai state had brought about socio-economic and cultural changes in the upland indigenous communities through intensive nationalism, modernization, and globalization of its economy. Her membership in regional entities like ASEAN and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Cooperation Initiatives further accentuated its growth through the processes of regionalization and globalization.[8]

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[7]Don McCaskill, Prasit Leepreecha, & He Shaoying, "Globalization, Nationalism, Regionalism, and Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion: A Comparative Analysis," in Don McCaskill, Prasit Leepreecha, & He Shaoying, eds., *Living in a Globalized World: Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion* (Chiangmai: Mekong Press, 2008), 4. Siamwalla Ammar (quoted in Laungaramsri, "Epilogue," 319) states that the encounter between the West and the Greater Mekong Subregion "dates back to the mid[-]nineteenth century when the Industrial Revolution turned the great delta of the Mekong into a resource supplier for the colonial powers." For details, see Laungaramsri, "Epilogue," 319. See also Siamwalla Ammar, "Globalization and its Governance in Historical Perspective," in Mingsarn Kaosa-ard & John Dore, eds., *Social Challenges for the Mekong Region* (Chiang Mai: Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University, 2003), 13–46.

[8]ASEAN was established in 1967 while the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Initiative was established by the Asian Development Bank in 1992. The GMS is a natural economic area comprising the six states of the Mekong River basin, namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Yunnan Province, China; it is bound together by the Mekong River, covering 2.6 million square kilometers, and has a combined population of around 326 million. ASEAN economic cooperation calls for greater sectoral cooperation in trade, investment, industry, services, finance, agriculture, forestry, energy, transportation, communication, intellectual property, small and medium enterprises, and tourism. See McCaskill, Leepreecha, & Shaoying, "Globalization, Nationalism, Regionalism, and Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion: A Comparative Analysis," 1–57. For the history of ASEAN, see http://www.asean.org/asean/about-asean/history (accessed May 9, 2013); for

Such regional modernization in Thailand coincides with the modern capitalism that operates insidiously in contemporary Thai society through "the commodification of social life."[9] Modern capitalism is known for its pervasive "expansion into culture, leisure and sexuality, the bureaucratization of society, and the homogenization of social life by the invasive power of the mass media."[10]

Regionalism as a conduit of late capitalism is not without its peril, however. The Asian Development Bank has warned against the

> disparity between urban and rural communities, a growing gap between rich and poor, inadequate attention [paid] to the special needs of ethnic minorities, gender inequality, lack of access to basic health and education and the inadequate protection of the environment on which traditional livelihood depends.[11]

In addition to the regionalization of the economy of Thailand, political integration and economic progress have to be considered. Kwanchewan Buadaeng and Panadda Boonyasaranai argue that the latter has been achieved through a systematic enforcement of the nationalist ideology of *Thai nation-state*, *Buddhist religion*, and the *monarchy*.[12] The state's political apparatus and its "technologies of power"[13] are used to exercise "state control over the use of the

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GMS, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_Mekong_Subregion (accessed May 31, 2013).

[9]For details, see Joe Foweraker, *Theorizing Social Movements* (London: Pluto Press, 1995), here at 41.

[10]Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep Their Homeland*, 148.

[11]McCaskill, Leepreecha, & Shaoying, "Globalization, Nationalism, Regionalism, and Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion: A Comparative Analysis," 6.

[12]Prasit Leepreecha, "The Role of Media Technology in Reproducing Hmong Ethnic Identity," in D. McCaskill, Prasit Leepreecha, & He Shaoying, eds., *Living in a Globalized World: Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion* (Chiangmai: Mekong Press, 2008), 93.

[13]Leepreecha, "The Role of Media Technology in Reproducing Hmong Ethnic Identity," 93.

forests and forest products, the establishment of a centralized village administration system, the installation of infrastructure such as roads, electricity, [and] the extension of formal education" aimed at assimilating indigenous people as Thai citizens and productive members of a global community.[14]

The enforcement of such rationalized systems in Thailand has occasioned the contemptuous political dismissal of the "agrarian societies … [T]raditional cultural views of the world, which might employ local indigenous knowledge systems involving mythical and spiritual understandings, are devalued and labeled negatively."[15]

This capitalist rationality and statist ideology have their adverse impacts on most if not all of the indigenous communities. As Jürgen Habermas rightly points out, the "capitalistic economic system marks the breakthrough to this level of system differentiation" because "it owes its emergence to a new mechanism, the steering medium of money."[16] Sunthorn Wongjomporn attests that the "villagers are confronted with […] powerful cash crop production … which involve[s] environmental degradation, pollution of air, water and soil and leads to extinction of other beings" which are considered sacred but now eroded by "the secularized mode of development."[17]

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[14]Kwanchewan Buadaeng & Panadda Boonyasaranai, "Religious Conversion and Ethnic Identity: The Karen and the Akha in Northern Thailand," in D. McCaskill, Prasit Leepreecha, & He Shaoying, eds., *Living in a Globalized World: Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion* (Chiangmai: Mekong Press, 2008), 85.

[15]McCaskill, Leepreecha, & Shaoying, "Globalization, Nationalism, Regionalism, and Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion: A Comparative Analysis," 4.

[16]Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* Vol. 2: *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 171, quoted in Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep their Homeland*, 61.

[17]Sunthorn Wongjomporn, "Re-creating Sacred Space through the Water Spirit Ritual: A Model for Sustainable Development in Dokdaeng Village, Chiangmai, Thailand," Ph.D diss. (Manila: Asian Social Institute, 2008), 4.

3. A Fourfold Dialogical Model

More than a decade of interaction with indigenous communities alerts me that the local Churches of Asia need to contextualize the triple dialogue. There is a need to add a fourth dimension that enjoins the Church to engage in the communities' liberative struggle. This fourfold dialogue is indeed a new way of being a more effective Church among the indigenous peoples of Asia.

3.1. Dialogue of Everyday Interaction

The first dialogue is the dialogue of everyday interaction in which the local Churches of Asia learn about the value of reverential relationship, with the spiritual leaders as our dialogue partners. This dialogue accords them equal dignity and regards them as contemporaries, thus eliminating any unequal (time and space) relation that suggests a power differential between a civilized urbanite and an illiterate primitive. In this reciprocal relationship, equal dignity and mutual respect are non-negotiable moral relational values if a mutual relationship of trust and entrusting of local knowledge is to be built up by both. Only the practice of dialogic reverence will ensure respect for the differences of traditional beliefs and practices without having to denigrate the indigenous cultural dignity and so decimate the otherness of the spiritual leaders of traditional religion.

The indigenous shamanic leaders show great reverence for Mother Earth based on the indigenous logic that both the indwelling divine being and shamanic spirits have made the earth sacred. Profit-driven development and economics are not without their consequences for the ecological well-being of planet Earth, albeit these are unforeseen, especially in terms of a rupture in the harmonious relationship between the earth and humankind that has resulted in lamentable global warming, climate change, and untimely death in the aftermath of ecological crises. In this uncalled-for suffering, humankind is confronted with the naked truth about the ultimate meaning of existence on earth.[18]

[18]In fact, Diarmuid O' Murchu suggests that "it is not about life on earth, but

The dialogue of everyday interaction with shamanic leaders enables the Church of Asia to learn the value of dialogic reverence towards the earth. The relational value of this dialogic reverence has its basis in the covenant God entered into with humankind through Noah (Gen. 9:12–17). Under the aegis of this covenant, humankind is exhorted to live in harmony with God's creation. This entails a dialogic relationship in which the embodiment and manifestation of dialogic reverence to all of God's creation—"every living thing that is found on the earth" (Gen. 9:17)—is of paramount importance for sustaining the wellbeing of environmental ecology.

This dialogic reverence for creation is akin to the experience and exposition of a group of scientists, including 32 Nobel Prize winners, in a petition sent to a meeting of spiritual leaders from 83 countries. With frankness and clarity, they acknowledge that, "as scientists, many of [them] have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. [They] understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect."[19] Dialogic reverence is due to the earth and creation because, as explained by Benedict XVI, the earth is "the wonderful result of God's creative activity" —"a gift of the Creator" with an intrinsic organic value.[20] Dialogic reverence will lead the Church of Asia towards the responsible use of the earth's resources to "satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation."[21] In this way, dialogic reverence in everyday interaction, as exhorted by Pope Francis, strives towards "a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to

about the life that is earth," and that this life "is affected, for weal and for woe, by the quality of our respect for its inherent processes and our willingness to interact [with] (relate to) all life forms in a gentle, nonexploitative, cooperative manner." See Diarmuid O' Murchu, *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 110, 38.

[19]John Moore, "'Caritas in Veritate': An Ecological Perspective," *JCTR Bulletin* 85 (2010): 25.

[20]Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* 48.

[21]*Caritas in Veritate* 48.

achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life."[22]

3.2. Dialogue of Accompaniment

The indigenous shamanic leaders believe that accompaniment is "from within." First, it means living in the midst of the village communities. Second, it means guiding the communities through ritual celebrations so that they have an inner mystical experience of the sacred power of the divine being. As Moses steps onto the sacred ground of God's divine presence, symbolized by the burning bush (Ex. 3:2–6), the Lahu spiritual leaders themselves, through communal prayers, chants, and dance, enter into the sacred presence of God. In mystical union, the Lahu spiritual leaders enter an intimate and mystical experience of God who descends and missions them to act on God's behalf as salvific intermediaries. Like Moses who guided the indigenous tribes across the wilderness, the Red Sea, and the desert to the promised land, and acted as their intermediary for manna, quail (Ex. 16:1–36), water (Ex. 17:1–7), and further revelation from God (Ex. 24:18; 33:1–35) on the relationship of Israel with Yahweh, so too do the indigenous spiritual leaders who accompany their communities constantly seek God in ritual celebrations and act on God's counsels for the good of their communities. Their intimate experience of God in ritual celebrations resonates with Jesus' theophanic Abba experience at his baptism, transfiguration, and at the hour of his anguish before his arrest (Jn. 12:28–30; Lk. 22:43–44). Only recurrent and intimate mystical experiences of God such as these can empower the indigenous spiritual leaders to guide their communities out of the different forms of addiction, evil desires, and especially greed, which St. Paul equates with idolatry (Col. 3:5), and thus to stay faithful to God. Fidelity to God entails the perpetual renunciation of these idols (Ex. 20:2, Col. 3:5) so that the poor indigenous communities will be delivered from the burden of poverty, offered new life for the lifeless, justice for the oppressed, and the joy of sustainable livelihood.

[22]See Francis, *Laudato Si'* 207.

This lived experience enjoins the Church to accompany the spiritual leaders by establishing a network for them so that they feel strengthened as a community of like-minded indigenous women and men healers, exorcists, prophets, shamans, ritual performers, and sages. The presence of the Church during the process of accompaniment lends moral support to their agro-based, eco-sensitive, and cosmic ritual celebrations, with the Church fully aware that God's Spirit is active outside of Christianity.[23] The presence of the Church legitimizes the indigenous religio-cultural traditions as the loci of God's salvation and revelation. The presence of the Church acknowledges and affirms their revelatory and salvific significance in the economy of God's plan of salvation. On the one hand, the empowering presence and protection of the Church ensures the "full flourishing" of these religio-cultural traditions.[24] On the other hand, the Church is in a position to resolve the many dilemmas which these leaders face with regard to the menace of drug trafficking and addiction among the young. A case in point is Fr. Niphot Thianvihan, the director of the Research and Training Center for Religio-cultural Community (RTRC) in the Chiangmai Diocese, who for twelve years has been accompanying the

[23]See *Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs* II, Art. 12, in Gaudencio Rosales & C. G. Arévalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 115 (hereafter referred to as *BIRA*). Cf. *BIRA* IV/1, Art. 10, in Rosales & Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 249.

[24]The Lahu regarded Jean-Pierre Oxibar (1898–1964), a Betharram priest, as a prophet, a liberator, and a protector of the Lahu who

> rejoiced in such indigenous traditions as being those of a people who, like his own Basques, could become Christians but still express their joy of life through the ways of their ancestors. Moreover, it was Oxibar's hope, Saint-Guily states, that "these ancestral traditions would flower still more gracefully" under the protection of the new religion and "through his presence and his prayers."

For more detail, see Anthony R. Walker, *Merit and Millennium: Routine and Crisis in the Ritual Lives of the Lahu People* (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Cooperation, 2003), 621.

Lahu communities in their three-pronged approach of firming up their spirituality through the building of their *hawye*, the formal education of their children, and the formation of their youth in cultural agriculture based on the aspirations and values of *Laudato Si'*.[25]

3.3. Dialogue of Religious Experience

The nature of this dialogue enjoins the Church of Asia to put out into the deep by taking a plunge into indigenous ritual celebrations so as to take delight in the mystical experience of the sacred. This dialogue of religious experience enables the Church to understand the importance of entering the inner world of the mystical experience of indigenous spiritual leaders in order to understand and appreciate the richness therein and thus be disposed to receive the revelation of God who is at work in their rites.[26]

This dialogue of religious experience with indigenous spiritual leaders is not always discursive and therefore academic, but rather conversational and experiential. Upon the invitation of the spiritual leaders, there will be opportunities to attend and participate in the ritual celebrations presided over by them, be it listening to the chants

[25]Conversation with Fr. Niphot Thianvihan (December 12, 2015).

[26]Participation in the shamanic rituals draws its assurance and inspiration from the Asian bishops who state that in

> Asia, the dialogue of prayer and spirituality is highly valued. Prayer together, in ways congruent with the faith of those who take part, is an occasion for Christians and followers of other faiths to appreciate better the spiritual riches which each group possesses, as well as to grow in respect for one another as fellow pilgrims on the path through life. Human solidarity is deepened when people approach the divine as one human family. (Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs IV [Pattaya: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences], 8. See also FABC III [Bangkok: 1982]).

The Church of Asia is thus urged to journey in dialogue with people of other faiths so that we can better discern how God speaks to them in their lives, rituals, histories, and, through them, to us as well.

as observers or taking part in communal dancing as participants in order to experience spirit-possession by the God-who-descends. Such spirit-possession enables the Church to gain an inner experience of the depth of mystical experience, an inner experience that complements what is observed on the outside. It is therefore important for the Church to have both observational experience from the outside and participatory experience from the inside in order to attain the desired complementarity of human and mystical experience.

This dialogue of religious experience will enable the local Churches of Asia to increasingly understand the inscrutable omnipresence of the Pentecostal Spirit[27] who shattered a mono-ecclesial Jewish community and poured forth into the Greco-Roman milieu. This universalization of the Creative Spirit, alluded to in the multi-glossarial phenomenon of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13), is a multi-religio-cultural manifestation and presence well attested to by the spiritual leaders, the religious sages, and the Church of Asia involved in this dialogue of religious experience. This multi-religio-cultural manifestation paves the way for the Church to enter into a gradual understanding of the alternative ways by which the spiritual leaders of the indigenous communities express their religious experience and how they articulate their understanding of God, their experience of being possessed by the Spirit, and the liberative-salvific mission of this God. This articulation is more of a conversational and personal sharing, either on a one-on-one basis or in a small group that involves recognition and clarification of what each dialogue partner is saying.

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[27]The Asian bishops state the same conviction that

> Christians believe that God's saving will is at work, in different ways, in all religions. It has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 22; *Lumen Gentium* 16), that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church (cf. *Redemptor hominis*, 6). God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person …. His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace. (BIRA II [Kuala Lumpur], 12)

What appears to be personal sharing is indeed an ongoing verbalized reflection on mystical experiences in the indigenous ritual celebrations. By participating in this conversation, the Church is able to receive the revelation of God in indigenous religio-cultural traditions. God's Spirit is already at work, purifying, elevating current understanding, and completing the experience with a new awareness so that "whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations … whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God."[28]

In this dialogical process, the Church is able to perceive, intuit, and understand how God's Spirit is revealing from within the spiritual leaders' mystical experiences. It is important for the Church to understand the verbalization of their shamanic *spirit*-uality—the uniqueness of their God (*Theo*). God is *Guisha* our father by being the Creator of the heaven/sky, and is our mother because *Guisha* created the earth. The universe is like a spider web and *Guisha* lives at the center of the web. *Guisha* descends in Spirit, invisible to human eyes but experienceable in the human heart as a divine touch and a mystical spark. The Church needs to experience and understand how these spiritual leaders are being overshadowed by *Guisha* and hence Spirit-possessed, and how this divine Savior (*Soter*) is the saving power in the life-struggles of the indigenous marginal communities. In fact, the communal prayer, sacred chant, and dance signify the liturgical enactment of the local indigenous *theo*-logy, *pneuma*-tology, and *soter*-iology of the indigenous primal religion.

The ritual reenactment of a local indigenous *theo*-logy, *pneuma*-tology, and *soter*-iology alert the local Churches of Asia to the omnipresence of God's Spirit, who blows where the Spirit pleases (Jn. 3:8), operating "in" and "out" of ecclesiastical structures, never totally monopolized or domesticated, always empowering, liberating, and saving God's marginal peoples.[29]

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[28] *Ad Gentes* 9; cf. *Lumen Gentium* 17.

[29] See *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, FABC Papers No. 48, Art. 6.5.

As intermediary of God in this dialogue, the Church is invited to affirm and supplement what is needed to enrich the indigenous local theologies and liberate them from any undue shadows of irreligious and unethical influences. Finally, as a co-pilgrim, the Church is enjoined to "lift up" (as opposed to suppress and denigrate [cf. Jn. 8:28; 12:32; Nb. 21:8]) the local indigenous theologies and communicate them in language intelligible to the outside world so as to challenge and enrich the local, regional, and global Church and society.[30]

3.4. Dialogue of Liberative Struggle

Enkindled by mystical God-experiences, empowered by indigenous *theo*-logy, *pneuma*-tology, and *soter*-iology, and motivated by an indigenous *spirit*-uality, both dialogue partners are poised for action—a praxis involving the liberative struggle of the indigenous communities in partnership with other stakeholders in civil society and local councils. In the Chiangmai Diocese, the RTRC, the Diocesan Social Action Committee (DISAC), the men, women, and youth committees of the diocese, the Society of Jesus, the Good Shepherd Congregation, the Ban Marina Sisters, and the Betharram Priests have engaged in the communal struggle of the indigenous peoples for sustainable livelihood along with greater security and dignity in their villages.

The intimate experience of mystic spirituality, theology, pneumatology, and soteriology enabled RTRC to launch, in 2013–2014, a new orientation in the formation of young indigenous farmers in their struggle for sustainable livelihood in their upland communities. The young farmers came to RTRC for a six-month course which enabled them to learn about agriculture that incorporates the mystic eco-spirituality and theology of their shamanic leaders that resonate with the Assisian-mysticism of *Laudato Si'*. For two months, the

[30]The Asian bishops have declared that "each local church, each people's history, each people's culture, meanings and values, each people's traditions are taken up, not diminished nor destroyed, but celebrated and renewed, purified if need be, and fulfilled … in the life of the Spirit" (International Mission Congress [Manila, 1979], 15, as cited in James H. Kroeger, "Asia's Dynamic, Missionary Local Churches: FABC Perspectives," *Landas* 19:2 [2005]: 181).

young farmers sat in the lotus position in the morning and learned to contemplate (*samadi*) in silence. They contemplated in the vegetable gardens, with the soil in their hands, and near the edge of the fish ponds. Through *samadi*, they entered into a reciprocal relationship with Mother Earth. At the end of the course, a 16-year-old farmer said that he heard the rebuke of Mother Earth— "My ungrateful son, why are you killing me?"—and that he thus resolved to reverse the tide of chemical farming in his upland village, first by starting his own organic farm.[31]

The DISAC women committee similarly engages in the liberative struggle by encouraging the indigenous women in the villages to treasure and sustain their *pumpanya* or traditional wisdom.[32] Women's wisdom inculcates in the village communities a dialogic reverence of the spirit (understood as *khwan* in Thai), the trees, the leaves, the bark of the trees for making dyes, the water to make natural dye, and the earth, our mother. This pool of indigenous wisdom enables the village women to produce handicrafts, textiles, and even attempt to cultivate their own cotton for the production of their own fabric.

After the early phase of welfare and community leadership training (1975–1985), the DISAC main executive committee, on the other hand, launched the vision and mission of a self-reliant economy for sustainable community (2012–2015). In partnership with RTRC, the latest phase calls for a spirituality-infused way of doing agriculture to attain food security and sovereignty while deepening the community's sensitivity to the environment in light of *Laudato Si'*.[33] In this partnership, DISAC intends to implement the new vision and mission in collaboration with the government's National Research

[31]Conversation with Fr. Niphot Thianvihan.

[32]Conversation with Naiyana (December 13, 2015). She has worked with the DISAC youth, women, and eventually with the National Women Commission of Thailand. She has since retired and works as the administrator of RTRC.

[33]Conversation with Dr. Sunthorn Wongjomporn, the Executive Director of DISAC, Chiangmai Diocese.

Fund, the Land Reform Department, and various universities in terms of participatory action research. From 2016 onwards, DISAC will also collaborate with the Maryknoll Society in initiating organic farming and sustainable communities, and will create community markets in Catholic schools, children's centres, parishes, and religious congregations. The Rice-Merit Network, a movement of indigenous and lowland Thai farmers initiated by DISAC in 2000, will explore the production of organic fertilizers for the farmers in order to sustain their organic farming. DISAC will also initiate Eco-Agri-Tourism for city dwellers so as to re-orient them in the mystic cosmology of the indigenous communities and *Laudato Si'*.

The liberative struggle of indigenous peoples is most urgent at the frontier located at the border between Thailand and Myanmar, otherwise known as the Karen State. According to Vinai Boonlue, the only Jesuit priest in Karen who ministers to the refugees at the camps along the border and at the borderland, "cross-border ministry is an illegal kind of activity. But people keep crossing the border[;] it is not as though they transgress the border. The border transgresses their lives. They never cut the line but the line [cuts] their lives."[34] This frontier ministry in the war-zone over the last 67 years (since 1948) helps to create a sacred space and a sacred time known as "sacramental moments" for story-telling—of war for the men and escape for the women with their children. Sacramental reenactment flows from these safe and sacred moments into the "actual walking" of the battlefield which facilitates the healing of memories within the web of relationships that embraces their land and their homes, along with their livestock and vegetable gardens in Myanmar and the refugee camps in Thailand.

This contextualized fourfold "dialogical model is in fact a new way of being church"[35] that "seeks not to exclude others but to be truly catholic in its concerns, in its appreciation of the gifts of others, and in its readiness to work with others [*even the shamanic leaders*] for a world at

[34]Conversation with Fr. Vinai Boonlue, S.J. (December 24, 2015).

[35]*BIRA* IV/12, Art. 48, in Rosales & Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 332.

once more human and more divine."[36] This dialogical model is essential for the Church to imbibe the mystic spirituality of sacred sustainability so as to be effective in the liberative struggle of indigenous peoples.

4. Mystical Sense of Sacred Sustainability

The fourfold dialogical model enables the local Churches of Asia to intimate her indigenous members (Catholics, catechists, brothers, nuns, priests, and bishops) to the mystical sense of God who is the omnipresent and omnipotent Spirit (Jn. 4:24). This mystical sense is a felt bodily experience that God and God's Spirit-power is everywhere, in everything and everyone, in God's creation. God's creation is therefore suffused with the presence and power of God's Spirit; God's creation is therefore spirited and sacred, hence, "*the sacred is in everything and everything has spirit*."[37]

This sacredness is also a relational sense that is inseparably linked to rituals, places, spirits, and events. Rituals thus make places sacred when blessings are invoked and thanksgiving is offered. Hence, when rituals are celebrated with offerings to the *khwan* ("spirit" in Thai) of the forest and the water, the forest, the river, and the water become sacred.[38] This pervasive spirit presence and sacred power that sacralize creation

[36]*BIRA* IV/12, Art. 49, in Rosales & Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 333 (emphasis mine). See also Tan, "A New Way of Being Church in Asia," 91.

[37]Almost all of the 45 participants interviewed in the village of Dok Daeng agreed that "rituals make everything sacred" and that "the sacred is in everything and everything has spirit." They were also the participants of the Youth Leadership Seminar (Dok Daeng: May 18, 2013). The theme of the seminar was "Sacred Nature and Sustainable Life." It was organized under the aegis of the Seven Fountains Jesuit Retreat House, Chiangmai, Northern Thailand, which also acts as a Chaplaincy Center for the university students.

[38]For the theological relationship between God's Spirit and the ancestral and nature spirits, see Chapter VI of Jojo M. Fung's upcoming book, *A Shamanic Pneumatology of Sacred Sustainability: The Spirit of the Earth* (New York: Palgrave McMillian, 2016).

also sensitize everyone to God's Spirit-power and presence that sustains God's creation. This is the mystical sense of sacred sustainability that has to inform and transform the spirituality of the Church of Asia amongst the indigenous communities. Out of this mystic spirituality of sacred sustainability emerges a mystic theology of the God whose sacred presence and spirit suffuses, sacralizes, sensitizes, and sustains the *cosmos* and *anthropos*.

4.1. *Suffusing*. The whole *cosmos* and *anthropos* enjoy the life of profundity, creativity, and harmony due to the suffusing presence of God's Spirit. Hence, most indigenous spiritual leaders believe that the spirit is in everything and that all directions have spirits. The suffusing presence of God's Spirit enlivens all and everything so that creation is sacredly alive in the presence and power of God's Spirit. This suffusing presence enshrouds all and everything with a sense of the mystery of creation and of life itself.

4.2. *Sensitizing*. God's Spirit sensitizes humankind to the spirit-presence and power of God's Spirit, to the ancestral and nature spirits, through tangible consequences of rituals. Indigenous spiritual leaders believe that, subsequent to the rituals, the villagers become sensitized by the outcomes of the ritual celebrations. The tangible signs are a better harvest this year compared to previous years, and the messages of admonition from dreams and everyday events in the villages as understood by the spiritual leaders. As a result, the indigenous communities in the ancestral homeland live with a heightened sensitivity to the presence and power of God's Spirit, to the ancestral and nature spirits. This sensitivity is visibly manifested in a reverential relationship of awe, marvel, reverence, and wonder so that indigenous peoples behold nature as spirited and sacred.

4.3. *Sacralizing*. Through the annual agricultural ritual celebrations, indigenous spiritual leaders, elders, and healers opine that God's Spirit sacralizes families, farms and forests, and, in addition to the web of relations between the spirit world and the human world, humans and fellow humans, and lastly, humankind and nature. For this reason, these spiritual leaders subscribe that rituals make everything sacred. They describe the world as spirited and thus sacralized by the presence and

power of God's Spirit. This sacralization renders all and everything in creation sacred and therefore needs to be beholden with awe, reverence, and wonder, tinged with an aura of fear and the mystery of the sacredness of life.

4.4. *Sustaining*. The suffusing, sensitizing, and sacralizing presence of God's Spirit is at the same time a sacred power that sustains the cosmic world and the earth community. The indigenous spiritual leaders believe that the presence of God's Spirit, the ancestral and nature spirits, sustains life in nature and in the villagers from generation to generation. They convey a sense of sacred sustainability that persists through every evolutionary stage of cosmic implosion-explosion. This sense also persists through the epochal changes in the collective memory of the indigenous communities, humankind, and the cosmos.

The mystic spirituality at the heart of the emerging mystic theology of sacred sustainability enables the local Churches of Asia to be increasingly sensitized by this mystical cosmology that propounds that *all things are God* and that *all things have spirits*.[39] The core of this mystical cosmology is akin to the mystical insight of St. John of the Cross that postulates that "the realities and experiences of this world" are "present in God eminently and infinitely, or more properly, in each of these sublime realities is God" to the extent that "the mystic experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings, and thus feels that 'all things are God.'"[40] In other words, if all things/persons created are God, then God who is spirit truly suffuses all things/persons in creation. In this mystical sense, all things/persons thus suffused pervasively by God are divinized and are God. In the same mystical sense, all things are suffused by God's Spirit and all things have God's Spirit.

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[39]See Jojo M. Fung, *A Shamanic Theology of Sacred Sustainability: Church in Dialogue with Shamans for Liberative Struggle in Asia* (Manila: Jesuit Communications Foundations Inc., 2014).

[40]*Laudato Si'* 234, quoting St. John of the Cross (*Cántico Espiritual*, XIV, 5).

The mystic spirituality that explains the mystic presence of God in creation is foundational to understand *panentheism* (all-in-God) as the flip side of *theos-en-pasin* (God-in-all), establishing the "compenetrative presencing or indwelling" of God in creation and creation in God. *Panentheism* bespeaks of the indwelling of created realities from the incarnated perspective that postulates that God is already an indwelling presence by virtue of creation's subsistence in God. On the other hand, *theos-en-pasin* offers an incarnational perspective wherein the God who suffuses creation is an indwelling presence that sacralizes and sustains creation. This "compenetrative presencing" is crucial to understand the *unfathomable* and even controversial belief in the pantheon of Asian deities who are spirits (god/spirit of the kitchen, god/spirit of the sky, god/spirit of the earth) inhabiting nature (spirit of the tree, forest, mountain, animals, and water).

God's incarnational presencing *in* creation becomes the incarnated presence of God who is the life-giving Spirit (Jn. 4:24) in creation. In the *anthropos*, God's Spirit-presence becomes the incarnated spirit of each particular person—God's Spirit indwelling in Joan is an incarnated spirit that suffuses, sacralizes, and sustains Joan. This Spirit-presence is an invisible life-giving principle that is known as the spirit of Joan. In the natural and human ecology, God's Spirit-presence in nature and human habitat is analogously explained as the spirit of the animals, the trees, the mountains, the water, the kitchen, the sky, and the earth. This is the mystico-theological insight of the mystics that is borne of a *profoundly intimate inner experience* of this mystical cosmology. This quintessential insight of "compenetrative presencing" has laid the foundation for *Laudato Si'* to explain this mystical cosmology in ways such that "everything is interconnected,"[41] "interdependent,"[42] and "interrelated" as "we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for

[41] *Laudato Si'* 70.

[42] *Laudato Si'* 86.

each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth."[43]

The mystical nexus between *all things are God* and therefore *all things have spirits* is borne out of the lived experience which makes it discursively apparent that the incarnational perspective of the *one Divine Spirit* is manifested through the *many incarnated presences of God's Spirit in created things and persons*. The multiple spirits are but multiple manifestations at the level of creation of the incarnation of *one Divine Spirit* in creation. The mystical experience intimates the pray-ers to a mystical insight of the created reality as double-sided—*theos-en-pasin* from the incarnational perspective and *panentheism* from the incarnated perspective.

Imbibing this indigenous mystical cosmology enables the Church to "enflesh" and "en-soul" herself with the spirit of indigenous cosmological mysticism. In this way, the Church amongst marginal indigenous peoples arrives at her most inculturated cultural identity[44] wherein the mystic power is translated as the spirit-power in the liberative struggle of marginal indigenous communities. The Church that has become indigenized at her core and engaged in the liberative struggle of indigenous peoples will become a new and effective way of being an indigenous Church of Asia. This new way of "en-souling" the cosmological mysticism of indigenous peoples articulates with the enchanting ways by which God's Spirit is transforming the universal Church and humankind through the mystical spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi in *Laudato Si'*.

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[43] *Laudato Si'* 138.

[44] *BIRA* IV/12, Art. 50, in Rosales & Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 333. It is interesting to note that the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (Art. 14 [ii]) states unequivocally that "if Asian churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future" (Rosales & Arévalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 70). See also Tan, "A New Way of Being Church in Asia," 92.

Conclusion

With an extended engagement of the FABC's thesis of triple dialogue, it becomes apparent that this dialogue has to become fourfold. A fourfold dialogical model enables the Church of Asia to accompany all peoples—traditional believers, Protestants, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Catholics—amongst the indigenous communities. In this way, the Church engages in their liberative struggle that involves their mystic spirituality of sacred sustainability. This mystic spirituality is the foundation for the emergence of an Asian mystic theology of sacred sustainability that proclaims God as the Spirit that suffuses, sacralizes, sensitizes, and sustains the *cosmos* and *anthropos*. A Church that lives the mystic experience of sacred sustainability and engages in the liberative struggle of marginal indigenous communities has allowed God to fully transform her ontic-ecclesial identity as a new way of being Church of Asia amongst indigenous peoples. In this way, the Church of Asia is truly inculturated from within to become a truly indigenous way of being the Church of Asia in the tribal ancestral homeland.