

The Filipino Cultural Value of *Utang Kabubut-on* (Debt of Gratitude) and Indigenous Spirituality Informing Christian Ecological Ethics in the Philippine Context

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Abstract

This paper explores how the Filipino cultural value of *utang kabubut-on* (debt of gratitude) and indigenous spirituality can inform a Christian ecological ethic in the Philippine context. Despite being a predominantly Christian nation, the Philippines continues to face severe ecological degradation intensified by corruption, poverty, and climate change. Using the SEE-JUDGE-ACT method, the paper first examines ecological wounds through recent environmental disasters and socio-political realities. It then draws on the ecological reflections of Filipino theologians Reynaldo Raluto and Karl Gaspar, whose works highlight Indigenous spirituality and the interconnectedness of creation. Their contextual insights are then placed in dialogue with broader Christian ecological theology, particularly the deep incarnation theology of Elizabeth Johnson, the Wisdom Christology of Denis Edwards, the Ecological Liberation theology of Daniel Castillo, and Pope Francis's concept of integral ecology in *Laudato Si*. Finally, the paper proposes *utang kabubut-on* as a culturally grounded framework of gratitude and reciprocity toward God, the earth, and others, offering a pathway for ecological conversion and justice-oriented environmental praxis in the Philippines.

Introduction

The Philippines takes pride in being a Christian country in Asia. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, its population stands at 112,729,484 as of July 1, 2024. Statistics show that 90 to 93 percent of the population, 78 percent are Roman Catholics. This means there are approximately 88 million Catholics in the Philippines, including most government leaders. Yet, despite claiming to be the only predominantly Christian nation in Southeast Asia, the Philippines suffers from widespread corruption. This corruption has led to extreme poverty and poor infrastructure, which have severely damaged the earth. The forests, mineral reserves, marine life, and wildlife have all been ravaged. They have been treated unjustly by non-other than the people who take pride in calling themselves Christians. This makes me wonder: what kind of theology of the earth is prevalent among Filipinos?

How can we return to a time when the earth was sacred and could not be touched without first asking the spirits for permission? What ethics can we promote in these challenging times? In the spirit of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*, which emphasizes that all is interconnected, how can politics, economics, education, and the church work together to care for our common home?

Despite the doubts I raised earlier, I also see glimpse of hope for the Philippines in the many good cultural values, indigenous spirituality, and Christians influence embedded in the Filipino people. One of the Filipino cultural values that can promote a better ethical response to a wounded earth is "*utang kabubut-on*," or in Tagalog, "*utang na loob*," loosely translated as "debt of gratitude." Another is Filipino indigenous spirituality, as understood through Karl Gaspar's decolonial spirituality book *Diwang Balaan/Banal*, which highlights the communion between the world of spirits and created things. This spirituality is strongly supported by Christian teachings of the Incarnation, particularly the Deep Incarnation. In light of these values that stand in contrast to the brutal treatment of the earth, I will explore how Christian theology, Filipino cultural values, and indigenous spirituality inform a Christian ecological ethics in the Philippine context.

In this paper, I will apply the SEE, JUDGE, ACT method rooted in my catholic faith traditions. The first part, SEE, examines the wounds of the earth within the Filipino context. This includes past and recent calamities such as storms and flooding that wounded not only the Filipino people but also the earth. I will also address the wounds inflicted by the government, particularly the corruption that led to inadequate infrastructure and response during the September 2025 flooding. Next, I will seek to understand the contexts of these wounds. I will consider climate change as a contributing factor to the increasing severity of storms. Additionally, I will briefly discuss the impact of colonization on nature and Indigenous peoples, as presented in the book "*Doing Ecological Theology and Advocacy in the light of Laudato Si*" by a Filipino theologian, Reynaldo Raluto and the "*Devotional Discourse on Filipino Spirituality*" by my very own conferee, Karl Gaspar. After looking at these wounds, the JUDGE part of this paper will examine various Christian theological approaches they may inspire a change in behaviour or ethos. These include Elizabeth Johnson's "*Theology of Deep Incarnation*," Denis Edwards' "*Wisdom Christology*," Daniel Castillo's "*Liberation Theology*," and Pope Francis's "*Laudato Si*." The ACT part of the paper will propose possible ecological ethics specific to the Philippines setting, drawing on Filipino values of gratitude (*utang na*

loob) and Indigenous beliefs in spirits, as reflected in Reynaldo Raluto's work. I will conclude with an invitation to consider ecological conversion through justice-oriented activities and to share a value-based ethics for a hopeful vision of our Mother Earth.