World Council of Churches

Indigenous Spiritualities, Land Rights, and Climate Justice

Seminar Report, October 2024

Edited by Lori Ransom

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Preface

Warm greetings, dear reader. We offer this text as a platform for the clear, urgent, and much-needed voices of Indigenous peoples to expose the climate catastrophe through which we are living. These voices can inspire and challenge a common witness to bring change and transformation. As you read this publication, be reminded of the opening words of the Unity Statement of World Council of Churches 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany:

> We—the fellowship of the WCC—live and witness in a world which is at the same time God's beautiful creation and broken by ecological crisis, war, pandemic, systemic poverty, racism, gender-based violence, human rights violations, and many other sufferings. [1]

Our authors are uniquely and all too painfully placed to speak to these realities and how intersected they are. Indigenous people live and witness in communities and contexts that continue to face the multi-dimensional crises named in that Unity Statement. The onslaught of climate change; the systemic violence of land loss, racism, poverty, and human rights violations; and the continuing legacies of colonization continue to disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples amongst all peoples.

The messages shared in this volume continue the tradition of Indigenous peoples in the ecumenical movement. They remind churches of our vital role in bringing change but also of our responsibilities for the sins and structures that our unity must dismantle if it is to be a credible witness against the legacies and practices of colonialism today. The Indigenous Peoples' Pre-Assembly at the assembly in Karlsruhe made the symbiotic relationship between reconciliation in human community and in the earth clear in its message:

> Too often reconciliation has been experienced as a process seeking too easily the restoration of harmonious relationships without fully addressing or engaging the sources and actions of oppression in the past and the present. The destructive effect of human sin manifested through varying forms of colonialism, imperialism and capitalism has destroyed Indigenous cultures, communities, and the interconnected web of creation. The process and acts of reconciliation are therefore not only about restoring broken human relationships but also humanity's broken relationship with creation. [2]

1 "Unity Statement of the WCC 11th Assembly," World Council of Churches, 8 September 2022, 1, https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/unity-statement-of-the-wcc-11th-assembly.

2 "About the Indigenous Peoples Pre-Assembly," World Council of Churches, https://www.oikoumene.org/events/indigenous-peoples-pre-assembly.

The voices raised here are again inviting a *metanoia* that could be the beginnings of a fresh outpouring of justice, reconciliation, and unity if the ecumenical movement were to fully heed their warnings. I commend this and the work of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism staff, Lori Ransom, Mikenzie Ling, and the Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Network reference group leadership, especially its moderator, The Rev. Mari Valjakka, in bringing it together. Our thanks also to the German Federal Foreign Office for resourcing this work with us.

The Rev. Dr Peter Cruchley
Director of the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism

Introduction

From 13 to 15 October 2024, a seminar on Indigenous Spiritualities, Land Rights, and Climate Justice was conducted at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey as well as at the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Rev. Mari Valjakka, a Sámi representative from the Lutheran Church in Finland and moderator of the Reference Group of the Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Network, states the following:

> When we were offered the opportunity to organise a seminar on Indigenous spiritualities, land rights, and climate justice, I knew it would be powerful, informative, and full of great emotion.
>
> I was not wrong. At the seminar we visited each other's wounds, celebrated gifts together, and wanted to show solidarity in the effort to change injustices.
>
> During the lectures, we learned about the colonized mindsets and what decolonization means—both for us and for the majority population. We visited war and oppressive structures. We heard prophetic voices about climate issues from around the world and sensed art through crafts and poetry from different contexts.
>
> Above all, we heard a story of survival and resilience. We also shared our storytelling traditions, spirituality and know-how that Indigenous peoples have passed on from generation to generation for millennia.
>
> This publication is a reminder that we, the Indigenous Peoples of the world, are still here.
>
> That is why it is still important to continue to tell these stories and we are grateful for the opportunity to share our stories with you.

The seminar on Indigenous Spiritualities, Land Rights, and Climate Justice was based on a mandate of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which took place in Karlsruhe, Germany in 2022.

The assembly introduced a Statement on Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, which emphasizes the following:

> Indigenous Peoples are created with God-given identities that are beautiful. God was present in their lands and among their peoples before colonizers

> arrived. When Christians brought the Bible, Indigenous People recognized the voice of their Creator in Jesus' teachings. They did not hear a call to reject their identities. [1]

The gathering was framed on the premise that there is no possible liveable future for all if Indigenous peoples continue to be denied their human rights and their place at the table in addressing the challenge of environmental sustainability.

Climate justice is inextricably linked to the human rights of Indigenous peoples, particularly as Indigenous communities occupy 20 to 25 percent of the earth's land surface, of which 80 percent of that land mass holds the world's remaining biodiversity.

Sara Eira, a Sámi representative from the Church of Norway and member of the Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Reference Group, said to seminar participants,

> It has been a valuable experience to listen to your stories, and I really appreciate that you shared your experiences, joys, and challenges with me. I have learned a lot from all of you.
>
> We all have our wounds—wounds that need healing and care. I think we must work together to find common strategies to promote our causes and to show the problems we face. It is important that the majority population, especially those in charge of our churches, take our problems seriously and do something to support us.
>
> How can we influence them in a way that actually makes a difference? This is something we all need to think about and discuss further.

May these wishes be heard, and may peace and justice become a reality for Indigenous peoples.

The Reverend Mari Valjakka
Chair, Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Network Reference Group

Dr Judith Koenigsdoerfer
Senior Consultant International Affairs
World Council of Churches

Federal Foreign Office

This publication and seminar were supported by the German Federal Foreign Office.

1 "Statement on Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples," World Council of Churches, 16 September 2022, https://oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-reconciliation-with-indigenous-peoples.

Earth's Pulse

Shane Goldie

Upon this sacred ground, where spirits dance,
The Earth's pulse beats within each step, each glance.
Ancient voices whisper through the trees,

In a language of the wind, of rivers, seas.

Beneath the stars, we sing our songs of old,
In rhythms of the heart, the soul, the bold.
Our prayers rise like smoke to skies above,

A testament to Earth, to life, to love.

For in these lands, our spirits find their home,
Amongst the whispers of the leaves, the loam.
With every breath, the Earth and we are one,

Our journey intertwined beneath the sun.

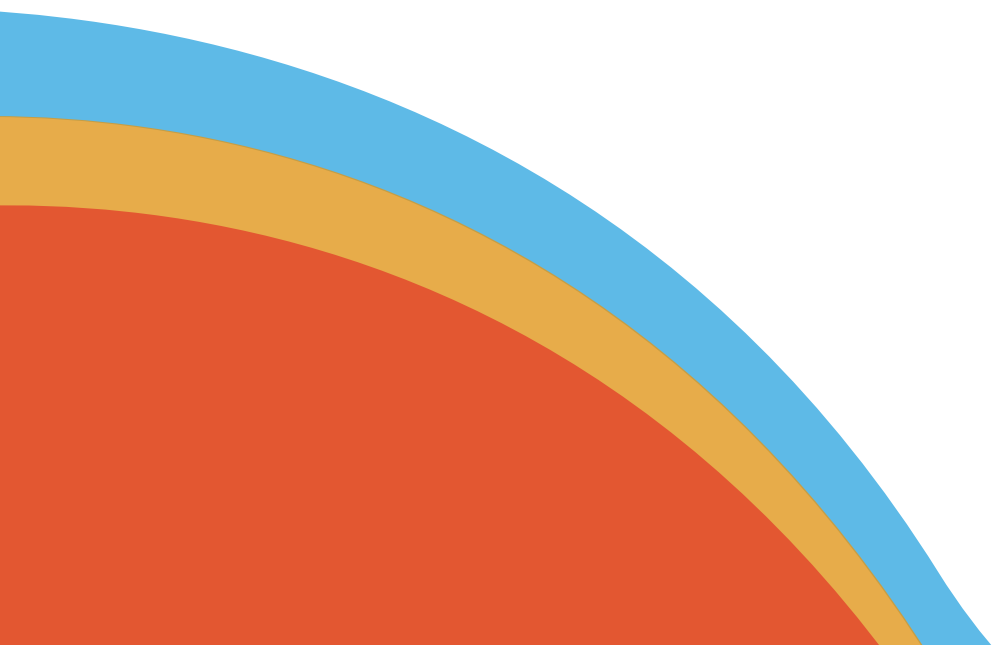
Author's Notes:

In "Earth's Pulse," I sought to capture the profound spiritual connection Indigenous peoples have with the land. This relationship is not simply one of stewardship or ownership but of kinship, where the Earth is understood as a living, breathing entity—a mother, a provider, and a sacred being. Indigenous spiritualities, often rooted in thousands of years of lived experience, view the Earth as intertwined with human life in a way that is impossible to separate. This poem reflects my deep respect for that worldview, celebrating the spiritual practices that recognize the land as sacred, the rivers as living, and the mountains as ancestors.

I wanted readers to feel the Earth's heartbeat through these words, to sense the deep reverence and gratitude that Indigenous communities express in their ceremonies, prayers, and songs. In a world where the environment is often commodified or exploited, this perspective offers an urgent reminder: the way we treat the Earth reflects how we treat ourselves and each other. My passion here is rooted in the belief that acknowledging and uplifting Indigenous spiritualities is not only about

preserving cultural heritage but also about addressing the environmental crisis by drawing from ancient wisdom. The Earth has always spoken to us, and Indigenous peoples have long known how to listen.

(Each of these poems is a thread in the larger tapestry of the poetry collection I envision—an exploration of the intersections of spirituality, justice, and the environment. They are not just artistic expressions; they are calls to action. In each word, I hope to spark a deeper awareness in the reader, to ignite a sense of responsibility for the Earth and for the Indigenous peoples who have always been its stewards. By tying together the spiritual, political, and ecological, this collection aims to educate, inspire, and mobilize those who read it. These poems are an invitation to stand with Indigenous communities, to honour their wisdom, to fight for their rights, and, ultimately, to work together toward a liveable, sustainable future for all.)



Biodiversity and the Recyclable Indigenous Umbilical Chord

Edmund Stuurman

Introduction

In 1799, Klaas Stuurman, an Indigenous Khoi leader, made a profound statement that resonates deeply across generations:

> "Restore," said he, "the country of which our Fathers have been despoiled by the Dutch, and we have nothing more to ask. We lived very contentedly before these Dutch plunderers came among us . . . Has not the *Groot Baas (*the Great Master) given plenty of grass-roots, and berries, and grasshoppers, for our use? and, till the Dutch destroyed them, abundance of wild animals to hunt? And will they not return and multiply when these destroyers are gone."[1]

This statement, although uttered 225 years ago, remains relevant to the struggles of Indigenous peoples around the globe, illustrating the intrinsic connection between their spiritual beliefs, their land, and their rights.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the intersection of Indigenous spiritualities, land rights, and climate justice, drawing from historical and contemporary contexts. The focus will be on how colonialism disrupted Indigenous ways of life and the vital connection to the land, leading to social injustices and environmental degradation. This disruption has had lasting effects; but examining Indigenous perspectives can provide guidance on how to address modern challenges such as climate change.

The phrase "despoiled by the Dutch" refers to the extensive loss of land, culture, and identity that Indigenous peoples suffered at the hands of colonial powers. Colonizers, driven by economic and territorial ambitions, not only seized land but also imposed foreign systems of governance, economy, and belief, fundamentally altering Indigenous ways of life. This chapter asserts that the restoration of Indigenous lands and the recognition of Indigenous spiritualities are essential for achieving climate justice and ensuring the sustainability of our planet for future generations.

The Connection between Indigenous Spiritualities and Land

The relationship between Indigenous peoples and their land is more than just a physical connection; it is spiritual, cultural, and essential to their identity. The metaphor of an "umbilical cord" appropriately describes this bond, as Indigenous

1 R. M. Martin, "Three English Deserters Shot by Van Royen," *The British Colonies: Their History, Extent, Condition and Resources*, vol. 7 (London: J and F. Tallis, 1800), 36.

peoples view the land as a source of life, nourishment, and spiritual guidance. The quote from Klaas Stuurman highlights this connection, referencing the "grass-roots, and berries, and grasshoppers" as God's provision for the people, illustrating the belief that the land is a divine gift meant to be shared, respected, and preserved.

In many Indigenous cultures, the land is seen as sacred, with specific sites holding sacred significance. This spiritual stewardship contrasts sharply with the Western notion of dominion over nature, which often leads to exploitation and degradation. The Indigenous worldview prioritizes balance, harmony, and reciprocity with nature. For example, the Māori of New Zealand believe in the concept of *kaitiakitanga*, or guardianship, where humans are seen as caretakers of the land rather than its owners. Similarly, the Navajo in the United States adhere to the principle of *hozho*, which emphasizes living in harmony with the natural world.

Indigenous spiritualities offer a unique and valuable perspective on environmental stewardship that is increasingly relevant in the context of global climate change. Unlike the exploitative practices that have contributed to environmental degradation, Indigenous spiritualities emphasize the interconnectedness of all living things and the importance of maintaining the balance within ecosystems. This worldview can guide contemporary efforts to address climate change by promoting sustainable practices that respect the earth's natural limits and prioritize long-term environmental health over short-term gains.

By integrating Indigenous spiritual perspectives into global environmental efforts, we can create more holistic and sustainable solutions to climate change. Indigenous peoples have lived in harmony with their environments for millennia, and their knowledge and spiritual practices offer valuable insights into how we can restore and protect the earth's biodiversity. This approach is not only environmentally sound but also a moral imperative, as it acknowledges the rights and wisdom of these Indigenous knowledge holders who have been the stewards of the land for generations.

Indigenous Land Rights as a Pillar for Climate Justice

> These people, convinced that there is no other sort of life worth living, only do what is strictly necessary to secure a gentle existence for themselves. According to them, even to such as are in service to earn a little bread, tobacco and brandy, the Dutch are slaves who cultivate the lands which really belong to them, and faint-hearted folk who take shelter from their enemies in forts and houses. They, on the contrary, fearlessly set up their encampments wherever they will, and disdain to plough the Land. They maintain that this manner of life denotes that they are the owners of the country and the happiest of men, since they alone live in peace and freedom, and in that, they say, their happiness persists. [2]

2 Steven Van Wolputte & Bernard Deprez, Guy Tachard S.J., in *Reis na Siam* (1687). Maurits Sabbe Library, Peeters, Leuven. (2009): 206–211.72.

The historical injustices faced by Indigenous peoples, particularly the loss of their land, have had profound and lasting effects on their communities. Colonialism systematically stripped Indigenous peoples of their land rights, often through violent means, and imposed foreign legal and economic systems that marginalized their traditional ways of life. Looking closer at the reasoning behind the dispossession, we find it was done from a biblical perspective. The fact that Indigenous people did not till the land was seen as "ungodly" and a nonhuman behaviour. The dispossession of land not only led to the loss of cultural and spiritual practices but also contributed to environmental degradation, as colonial powers prioritized resource extraction and exploitation over sustainable land management.

Case studies from around the world illustrate the devastating impact of colonialism on Indigenous land rights. In South America, the Amazon rainforest, home to numerous Indigenous communities, has been severely affected by deforestation driven by agricultural expansion, mining, and logging. These activities not only destroy ecosystems but also displace Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands, leading to the loss of biodiversity and the erosion of traditional knowledge systems. In Australia, the forced removal of Aboriginal peoples from their lands under the doctrine of *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one) resulted in the loss of cultural heritage and the disruption of complex land management practices that had sustained the environment for thousands of years.

The restoration of land rights to Indigenous peoples is not only a matter of justice but also a crucial component of effective climate action. Indigenous communities possess deep knowledge of their local environments and have developed sophisticated land management practices that promote biodiversity and resilience. For instance, the reintroduction of traditional fire management techniques by Aboriginal peoples in northern Australia has been shown to reduce the risk of large-scale wildfires and support ecosystem health. Similarly, Indigenous agroforestry practices in the Amazon have been recognized for their ability to sequester carbon and support biodiversity.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) provides a framework for supporting the restoration of land rights to Indigenous communities. Article 26 of UNDRIP affirms that Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories, and resources they have traditionally owned, occupied, or otherwise used or acquired. While progress has been made in some regions, much work remains to be done to ensure that these rights are fully realized.

Securing land rights for Indigenous peoples is directly linked to the broader goal of climate justice. By recognizing and restoring Indigenous land rights, we can empower Indigenous communities to continue their role as stewards of the environment. Their traditional knowledge and sustainable land management practices are essential for protecting ecosystems, mitigating climate change, and preserving biodiversity. Furthermore, the recognition of Indigenous land rights is a

critical step toward addressing the historical injustices that have disproportionately affected these communities and contributed to environmental degradation.

The Global Relevance of Indigenous Voices in Climate Justice

Despite their vital role in environmental stewardship, Indigenous voices have historically been marginalized in global environmental and political discourse. This marginalization has often been the result of colonial attitudes that dismissed Indigenous knowledge systems as primitive or inferior to Western science. However, as the limitations of Western approaches to environmental management become increasingly apparent, recognition of the value of Indigenous knowledge in addressing complex environmental challenges is growing.

Indigenous knowledge systems are deeply rooted in a holistic understanding of the environment, which encompasses not only ecological factors but also social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. This comprehensive approach to environmental management has been passed down through generations and is based on centuries of observation, experience, and adaptation. For example, the Aymara people of the Andes have developed sophisticated agricultural practices that allow them to cultivate crops in challenging mountain environments, contributing to food security and resilience against climate change. Similarly, the Inuit of the Arctic have accumulated detailed knowledge of sea ice patterns, which is critical for their survival in a rapidly changing environment.

The power of Indigenous knowledge is increasingly being recognized by scientists and policymakers. Studies have shown that Indigenous-managed lands often have higher levels of biodiversity and lower rates of deforestation than other areas. Furthermore, Indigenous practices such as agroforestry, rotational farming, and water management have been shown to enhance ecosystem resilience and support climate adaptation efforts. By integrating Indigenous knowledge into environmental policy and practice, we can develop more effective and sustainable solutions to the challenges posed by climate change.

However, the integration of Indigenous knowledge into global environmental efforts requires more than just technical recognition; it necessitates the amplification of Indigenous voices in decision-making processes. Indigenous peoples must be included as equal partners in discussions about climate change, biodiversity conservation, and land management. This includes ensuring that their perspectives are represented in international forums and agreements, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), as well as in national and local policy-making processes.

There are numerous examples of successful collaborations between Indigenous communities and governments or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that demonstrate the potential of such partnerships. For instance, in Canada,

the co-management of protected areas by Indigenous peoples and Parks Canada has led to improved conservation outcomes and greater respect for Indigenous rights. In Brazil, Indigenous-led initiatives to protect the Amazon rainforest have received international support and recognition, highlighting the critical role that Indigenous peoples play in preserving the world's largest tropical forest.

To amplify Indigenous voices in the climate justice movement, global institutions, governments, and NGOs must take concrete steps to support Indigenous leadership and representation. This includes providing platforms for Indigenous leaders to share their knowledge and perspectives, as well as ensuring that Indigenous rights are respected in all environmental decision-making processes. By doing so, we can create a more inclusive and equitable approach to climate action that recognizes the contributions of all peoples.

The Moral and Ethical Imperative for Land Restoration

The concept of Eden, as described by Klaas Stuurman, evokes an ideal state of harmony between humans and nature, where the land provides abundantly for all living beings. This vision of a restored Eden is not just a perfect ideal but a moral and ethical imperative for humanity. The restoration of Indigenous lands is not only about righting historical wrongs but also about creating a sustainable future for all. By restoring the lands of Indigenous peoples, we can begin to heal the deep wounds of colonialism and move toward a more just and equitable world.

The commodification and privatization of land, driven by capitalist systems, have led to widespread environmental destruction and social injustice. This system of land ownership, which prioritizes profit over people and nature, stands in stark contrast to Indigenous concepts of land stewardship. Indigenous peoples view land as a communal resource, to be used and managed for the benefit of all. This approach aligns with the principles of climate justice, which seek to address the root causes of environmental degradation and promote equity in the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens.

Restoring Indigenous lands is a key strategy for achieving climate justice. By returning land to Indigenous peoples, we can support the revival of traditional land management practices that have been proven to enhance biodiversity, sequester carbon, and protect ecosystems. Additionally, the restoration of land rights can help to address the social and economic inequalities that have been perpetuated by the colonial legacy of land dispossession. This is particularly important in the context of climate change, where Indigenous communities are often on the front lines of its impacts but have the least resources to adapt.

The moral and ethical imperative for land restoration is also rooted in the recognition of the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples. These rights are enshrined in international agreements such as UNDRIP, which asserts that

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain their spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters, and coastal seas. Upholding these rights is essential for ensuring justice for Indigenous peoples and for protecting their cultural and spiritual heritage that is inextricably linked to the land.

Land restoration is not only a matter of justice for Indigenous peoples but also a critical component of global climate action. The restoration of ecosystems and the protection of biodiversity are essential for mitigating the impacts of climate change and ensuring the resilience of natural systems. Indigenous peoples have a deep understanding of their environments and have developed sustainable practices that can guide global efforts to restore degraded lands and protect the earth's natural resources.

The path to restoring Eden requires a fundamental shift in how we view and manage land. It requires moving away from systems of exploitation and toward models of stewardship that prioritize the health and well-being of the planet and all its inhabitants. By recognizing the value of Indigenous spiritualities, restoring land rights, and amplifying Indigenous voices in climate justice efforts, we can begin to build a more sustainable and just future for all.

Conclusion

The intersection of Indigenous spiritualities, land rights, and climate justice is a crucial area of study that has far-reaching implications for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike. As we face the growing challenges of climate change, it is essential to draw upon the wisdom of Indigenous communities and to recognize the vital role they play in protecting the planet. By restoring land rights and respecting Indigenous spiritualities, we can create a more just and sustainable world where all people have the opportunity to thrive.

This chapter has sought to highlight the importance of Indigenous perspectives in the global climate justice movement. By integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into environmental policy and practice, we can develop more effective and sustainable solutions to the challenges posed by climate change. Furthermore, by recognizing and restoring Indigenous land rights, we can address the historical injustices that have disproportionately affected these communities and support their ongoing stewardship of the environment.

The moral and ethical imperative for land restoration is clear. As we move forward in our efforts to address climate change, we must prioritize the rights and perspectives of Indigenous peoples and work toward a future where their voices are heard, and their lands are restored. In doing so, we can create a world that honours the sacred relationship between humans and the earth and ensures the sustainability of our planet for generations to come.

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Indigenous Spiritualities and Land Rights: A View from the Bolivian Andes

Juan Chavez

Introduction

The Andes mountain region of Bolivia is a land where a contrasting environment has shaped multiple visions of the divine that continue to influence the daily life of all Indigenous peoples who live there. The sacred history of the Bolivian Andes shows that the most important element for reproducing life is the land beneath our feet, as it lets us grow food that nurtures our bodies and provides water to satisfy our needs. Also named Mother Earth, the land and all life sustained on it make up a system in which all pieces work together. In this regard, Andean people look to sustain all life on earth, as every organism benefits from and is benefited by fellow life-giving organisms. Unlike Western perspectives, Andean views of life include organic and inorganic materials as active beings whose interactions promote and nurture life. Thus, the Andean people are bound to Mother Earth and require access to land to preserve life and reach *sumac qamaña* (Aymara words for "living a life together").

To illustrate such a relational perspective, I describe three stories in which Andean relational thinking is challenged by global trends of land management that view land as a commodity. First, I describe the collective rather than individualist thinking of Andean Indigenous people, which is expressed in everyday actions to create a sense of belonging in community. Then, I describe the connection between life and death and how the dead are integral community members who continue to work on behalf of the living from beyond. Finally, I describe how cross-communal dependence makes it possible to live a better life without scarcity. All the stories show the interconnectedness of life on earth and prove that getting access to land is essential to nurture people and all beings inhabiting Mother Earth.

Collective Rather than Individual

Life in the Andes is built upon on interpersonal connections that create communities in which individuals thrive through the cohesive bonds of reciprocity. People do not put themselves or their own needs over fellow community members and their needs because a person's well-being can be achieved only when the others also live well together. This thinking is based on the idea that the actions of an individual have an impact on the individual's neighbours, either promoting or restricting their actions. This fact is why a strong sense of community is instilled in all individuals from birth. Community does not refer only to human beings but is extended to all life inhabiting the earth, including animals, plants, water, soil, rocks, and non-human protectors, among

many others. Unlike the Western practice of separating living beings and lifeless material, Andeans understand that living beings include immobile elements such as mountains and lakes given that these elements affect and are affected by other beings' actions. That is why before every decision is made, community members consider the relationships among everyone and should be conscious of how their decisions may affect the others.

Such relational thinking comprises *suma qamaña*, which is the ideal type of life in community that Andean people value and put into practice on a daily basis. *Suma qamaña* is possible only when human beings live in harmony with other beings inhabiting the same space. Therefore, positive relationships with the land, bodies of water, and the whole ecosystem are important to build a community and keep it healthy for the sake of all community members. This is something that is undermined by new ideas that promote individualism as a way of life, promising happiness to people. Such ideas do not consider that human beings are a component of a whole tapestry of relationships that determine their existence. Weakening such relationships can lead to suffering and death for people and community members surrounding them. Thus, recognition of all interconnections happening on the land that Indigenous communities inhabit is necessary to show respect for all Indigenous peoples and our rights to have access to ancestral lands.

Life after Life

Andean communities are composed of living and dead individuals, as they both interact and work toward the same goal of reproducing life on Mother Earth. In the Andes, death is not considered to be the end of individuals but is another life stage in which deceased community members take on new tasks to help reproduce life from beyond. When people die in the Andes, all community members accompany them to their next life stage with joyful rituals because the dead will soon join our forebears in the community of the ancestors. Originally called *Wiñay Marka* (Aymara words for "eternal place"), this community is situated behind the mountains and across Lake Titicaca and replicates life in a new setting as people continue to work the land the same way they did while inhabiting our ancestral lands. This is why farming tools are given to the dead before burying them underground. All hard work of the dead translates into food products growing on earth at a steady pace. This is important because life in the high Andes can be difficult due to bad weather, seasonal drought, and unexpected natural crises caused by climate change.

Such views of death and the dead show how Andean people conceive life after life, which contrasts with the Western view of death as the end of a life. The dead do not abandon their communities, as they continue to be community members who build life in the community even though they cannot move their bodies by themselves. The dead can move life-sustaining elements such as underground

water and rainfall water to ensure crop production in a harsh environment, where small variations can result in famine and hardships for Indigenous communities. Thus, having access to the ancestor bodies inhabiting sacred ancestral lands is essential to guarantee the reproduction of life.

Cross-Communal Dependence

The Bolivian Andes has diverse ecological regions. Some places are more suitable than others for growing food, which makes intercommunal dependence a key strategy for sustaining life. While some areas in the Andes are more inhabitable than others, the whole landscape is home to Indigenous peoples, who continue to live and thrive in their ancestral lands. One of the most challenging areas is the Altiplano, high plains that sit at around 3,800 metres above sea level. It is surrounded by two chains of snow-capped mountains reaching heights over 6,000 metres above sea level. Altiplano communities grow a limited range of food given that cold temperature, altitude, and high ultraviolet radiation makes it impossible to grow produce like corn, wheat, rice, or most types of fruit from tropical and subtropical environments. People historically overcame such restrictions through exchange with communities in lower regions, where more food types can be grown. Over time, this food exchange resulted in the exchange of people, and communities became integrated up and down the Altiplano as a way to secure food for everyone, everywhere. Thus, vibrant exchange networks emerged across the Andes that helped people and communities to thrive despite seasonal hardships.

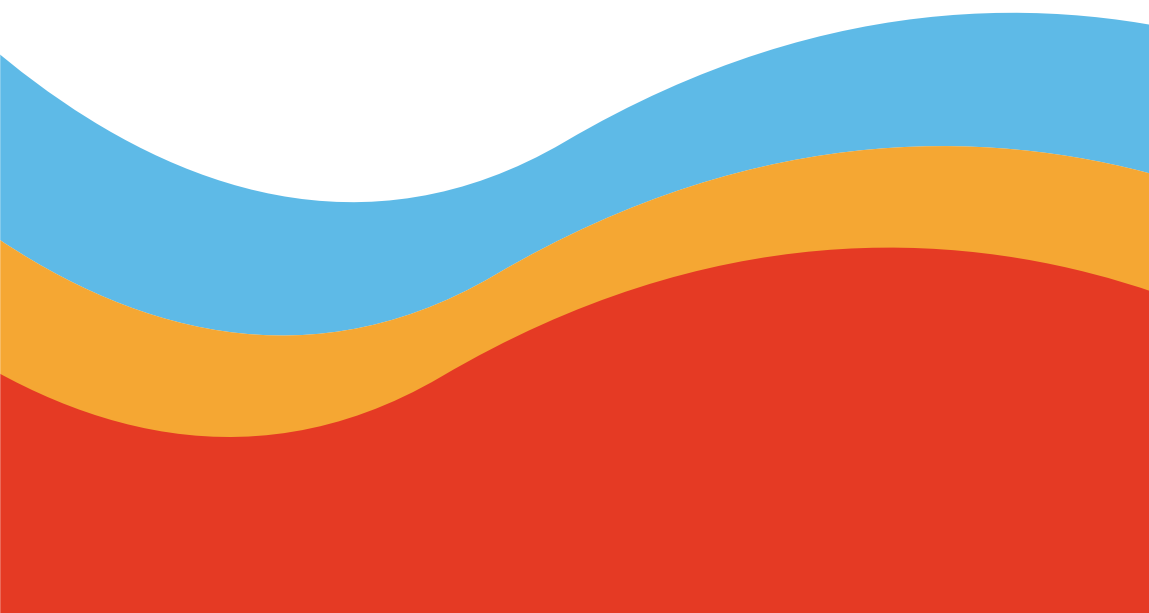
Such social behaviour may be better understood as cross-communal dependence because it integrates two or more communities from different ecological areas to allow them both to thrive. Communities rely on their neighbours to access new food products that otherwise would be impossible to obtain, and they also offer new products to improve their neighbours' diet. This mutual support improves life throughout the Andes. This is possible only when communities live and work in their ancestral lands and have access to long-used exchange routes going up and down the Andes.

Reflection

Living in the Andes could be challenging when life is taken as an individual endeavour, but it is much easier when life is considered a relational project whose goal is community life. "I am if we are" is a well-known Andean principle. It implies that an individual's life is interconnected with their siblings' lives, as we all make a part of a community that is highly interconnected through social and symbolic relationships. These communities inhabit ancestral lands where all living beings are equally important and none of them are seen as resources that could be exploited to make a profit or produce money. This relational perspective differs from Western views of the land as areas composed of inexhaustible

resources to exploit. Preservation of all life is necessary for all Andean Indigenous peoples to keep all human life sustainable.

The ideal we Indigenous people from the Andes look for and work to achieve is to live a life together and in this way to be truthful to the relational spirituality we received from our ancestors. However, global trends of land management in Bolivia have resulted in the land being taken from Indigenous communities, which in turn causes displacement, the disappearance of pro-life cultural practices, the loss of identity, and ecological disaster. To reverse this, access to the land where we and our ancestors were born must be secured by local, regional, and state authorities. Land rights are not an empty claim for Andean Indigenous peoples; they are a matter of justice that will allow us to live in dignity with our siblings in the lands of our ancestors and continue to live and to work toward promoting life for all.



Seeking Connection and Rebirth: Paiwan Storytelling and Art

Vavauni Ljaljegean

Introduction: A Reflection from the Paiwan People

This chapter focuses on the Paiwan people/community, an Indigenous community from Taiwan, and how they cope with the trauma caused by natural disasters resulting from extreme climate change.[1] It examines how, after such disasters, the Paiwan community uses craft and art to reconnect with their afflicted tribe and find renewal and strength through this process of remembrance. The stories of the Paiwan craftspeople introduced here offer a perspective on the impact of climate change and extreme weather, which not only devastates Indigenous people's living environment but also affects their spiritual well-being. It also explores how the Paiwan people can rebuild and heal themselves through the arts in the aftermath of natural disasters.

Sometimes, when you hear the stories of local people, you gain a deeper understanding of how to offer support. While stories may not always provide concrete advice or guidance, I believe that hearing others' experiences can make people more sensitive to the feelings of those affected by natural disasters. In this way, we may have better understanding of what to say to others in such situations or how to help them in their difficult times. I am merely a storyteller and cannot offer professional opinions in the same way a psychiatrist can. However, when it comes to healing the spirit in the face of natural disasters, the most important thing is often to quietly listen to the pain and the hope hidden within the words. We may imagine that as we try to care for others, we are holding their hearts in our hands.

Before delving into the narrative, I will first take a moment to understand the impact Typhoon Morakot had on Taiwan at the time.

Background: The Impact of Typhoon Morakot

On 8 August 2009, the mountainous areas inhabited by Taiwan's Indigenous peoples experienced a severe ecological disaster. Their familiar homelands were destroyed overnight by Typhoon Morakot. The typhoon brought more than 2,500 millimetres of rainfall over two days (August 8–9), resulting in intense rainfall in a short period. This caused a significant landslide crisis in the mountain regions of southern and eastern Taiwan.

1 Chung-Chieh Wang, Li-Shan Tseng, Chien-Chang Huang, Shih-How Lo, Cheng-Ta Chen, Pi-Yu Chuang, Nan-Chou Su, and K. Tsuboki, "How Much of Typhoon Morakot's Extreme Rainfall is Attributable to Anthropogenic Climate Change?," *International Journal of Climatology* 39:8 (2019), 3454–64.

Based on the research of the National Science and Technology Centre for Disaster Reduction, over 510,000 people in the mountainous areas of southern and eastern Taiwan were affected by the typhoon. Most houses were buried by landslides, and the land where people lived also collapsed, forcing many to leave their homes. Additionally, more than 600 people lost their lives. This disaster was the most severe typhoon crisis in the history of Taiwan. It also marked a turning point for Taiwan's Indigenous peoples in facing extreme weather and climate change.[2]

In the past, Taiwan's Indigenous peoples had not experienced such significant natural disasters, particularly landslides. However, as a result of contemporary global warming and climate change, rising ocean temperatures have brought more moisture and rainfall energy to typhoons. Additionally, past government policies that allowed deforestation and excessive development by external corporations in the mountainous areas have led to imbalances in soil and water conservation. As a result, the land in Taiwan's Indigenous mountain regions can no longer handle such a large volume of rainfall. Consequently, the climate crisis faced by Taiwan's Indigenous peoples is much more severe and hazardous compared to those living in urban cities.[3]

Having provided a brief description of the situation at the time, I will explore the perspective of land of the Paiwan people. This will help us understand why the Paiwan people have a strong connection with their land when facing trauma.

The Paiwan People's Perspective of Land

Paiwanese Professor Masegeseg Z. Gadu has stated that, according to Paiwan land ethics, the owner of the land is the Creator (*Naqemati* in the Paiwan language). The ancestral spirits (*Tjasevalitan* in the Paiwan language) are the guardians of the land, participating in the land's presence. The chieftains (*mamazangiljan* in the Paiwan language) manage the land[4] ; they are not representations of absolute power but rather humble stewards of the earth. The people (*taqalaqalan* in the Paiwan language) are the cultivators of the land.[5]

2 "Morakot Typhoon 2009," National Science and Technology Center for Disaster Reduction, https://den1.ncdr.nat.gov.tw/1132/1188/1204/2447/2505/.

3 Joe Henley, "Marooned by Morakot: Indigenous Taiwanese Typhoon Survivors Long to Return Home," *Climate Home News*, December 2021, https://www.climatechangenews.com/2021/12/17/marooned-by-morakot-indigenous-taiwanese-typhoon-survivors-long-to-return-home/.

4 In his book *The Paiwan*, Taiwanese ethnologist Tan Chang-Kuo explains that the chieftain also has certain responsibilities toward the common people. These include protecting their lives and property, resolving disputes and mediating conflicts, providing reformative education for offenders, and overseeing significant life rituals. Additionally, the chieftain must take care of all vulnerable groups within the tribe. Tan Chang-Guo, *The Paiwan* (Taipei: San-Ming Book Publishing, 2021).

5 Masegeseg Z. Gadu, *Humanized Place Names and Land Use System: Cultural Interpretations of Three Paiwan Sites* (Taitung: National Museum of Prehistory, 2011), 10–45; Masegeseg Z. Gadu. "The Land Ethic of Indigenous People in Taiwan-An Example of Paiwanese Perspective." Journal of Indigenous Education, No. 16 (November, 1999): 44-45.

From this description, it is evident that the early Paiwan people developed a four-tiered understanding and management of the land. Land is not viewed as personal property but as belonging to the Creator. Those of us living on the land are responsible for managing it and living within it.

The Paiwan people living on this land primarily cultivate millet as their staple food. Through millet farming, they have developed a cultural model and worldview based on the interdependence between millet cultivation and the land. Thus, to understand the Paiwan perspective on land, one can start by exploring their millet farming practices.

Millet cultivation reflects the Paiwan people's attitude toward the land, and the mythological stories related to millet farming form the foundation of Paiwan culture. For example, the rituals of the Paiwan people revolve around the annual growth cycle of millet. Traditional Paiwan knowledge derives from their relationship with nature. The millet culture that extends from the land is also deeply connected to the Paiwan system of succession.[6]

In Paiwan culture, "the firstborn" (*vusam* / millet) not only refers to "millet seeds" but also signifies the "seed among seeds" or the "true seed," with the chieftain *(mamazangiljan)* being considered the "seed among seeds" or the "true seed" of the tribe.

The land is the most vital element for the cultivation and growth of millet. The Paiwan people, through their cultural and land ethics, learn to coexist with the natural world, forming a mutually supportive community.

Furthermore, according to Paiwan senior pastor Tjukadr, "In the Paiwan community, there is a wise saying: 'Where the land is, the forest will be'" *(nu inuan a kadjunangan, inuan a kasikasiw/ cemecemel)*. In short, land is necessary for the existence of forests; and the growth of trees is inherently linked to the land. This saying illustrates the relationship between forest ecology and land. If the land disappears or is overdeveloped, the trees will vanish as well. This worsens global ecological issues and increases climate change. Therefore, for the Paiwan people, the land, forests, and entire ecosystem are integral to their cultural identity and form a crucial framework for their understanding of land. Losing these elements would mean losing their connection to the past, present, and even the future. This brief explanation aims to help readers understand the Paiwan culture and their perspective on land.

6 Masegeseg Z. Gadu. "The Land Ethic of Indigenous People in Taiwan-An Example of Paiwanese Perspective." *Journal of Indigenous Education*, No. 16 (November, 1999): 44-45.

A Paiwan Artisan

Ljaukui Raqeraqe, an artist from the Paiwan People in Taiwan.

Ljaukui Raqeraqe, a Seventh Day Adventist and craft artist from the Paiwan Paridrayan tribe in Pingtung, Taiwan, began her work as a leather carving artisan after experiencing the devastation of Typhoon Morakot in 2009. With a deep commitment to preserving tribal culture and memory of the land, she has been engaged in craft art for over a decade. Whether through composition, drawing, carving, embellishing, colouring, or assembling and stitching, her techniques authentically express her care for the land, Paiwan culture, and her tribe.

From a woman's perspective, she transforms scenes and elements of her tribe into the art patterns in her craft, commemorating her memories of home. Additionally, through her craftwork, she not only heals herself and her tribe but also provides employment opportunities for tribal women by opening craft workshops.

The Artisan's Hometown and Residence: Paridrayan and Rinari

Ljaukui hails from the Paridrayan tribe, which, according to early oral histories, consists of three different tribal villages: Davalan, Duvun, and Djelau. In the mythology of Paridrayan, a brave and skilled hunter from the Duvun named Pili discovered an ancient clay pot symbolizing chieftainship in the mountains. However, the clay pot was reluctant to descend the mountain with Pili, so the hunter invited his friend from the Djelau to help bring the pot back to the village. Once it was brought into the village's stone house, the pot, nurtured by the sun, gave birth to a child. Although the child was difficult to care for, it was ultimately raised by the Paiwan people in Davalan village and grew up to become the future head chief of the Ravar group.

This story explains why Paridrayan emerged as a larger community composed of these three villages and became an important ancient site for the Paiwan-Ravar group. This time-honoured story, as well as its larger historical context, is as a significant source of inspiration for Ljaukui's creations. She says, "When I need inspiration, I really enjoy going back to my hometown, organizing the environment, and connecting with my home. The creative inspiration naturally flows from there."

The establishment of Rinari is a result of the displacement that occurred after Typhoon Morakot. Following the typhoon in 2009, landslides severely damaged the Paridrayan tribe's homeland. Houses were crushed by the debris, and many tribal members, in their sorrow, were forced to leave their ancestral village and relocate to Rinari. There, they joined other relocated Paiwan people from

Makazayazaya Village and Rukai people from Kucapungan Village to develop and live in their new community. It was in Rinari that Ljaukui began her craft workshop, and she continues to operate it to this day.

Dialogue Between Ljaukui and Her Artworks: Deep Voices Inside

Untitled[7]

This work represents Ljaukui's emotional journey after experiencing Typhoon Morakot. At the same time, it narrates the story of the tribe's people from Paridrayan to Rinari.[8]

7 The artisan has not given a name to her artwork; however, the piece represents the desire for re-birth in a new place.

8 Copyright © 2010–2024, Ljaukui Raqeraqe

The three clay pots symbolize three tribal villages: Davalan, Duvun, and Djelau

First, I will examine the three clay pots at the bottom of the image. These three clay pots symbolize the three tribes that make up the Paridrayan community: Davalan, Duvun, and Djelau. These tribal villages sustain the life of the Paridrayan community and have established a shared living space here, with each being indispensable.

The eagle feather is the symbol of nobility for *mamazangiljan* (chief tribal leader)

Eagle feathers appear in the middle of the artwork. In Paiwan culture, feathers symbolize nobility. Traditionally, tribal leaders are permitted to wear them, while common people are not allowed to do so. Additionally, the depiction of feathers conveys a hope that the new generation of youth moving to Rinari will not forget respect for tribal leaders and the importance of traditional culture. Ljaukui, when talking about the feathers, remarked, "This work also carries a sense of nostalgia, questioning whether the next generation of tribal members, who moved to Rinari due to Typhoon Morakot, will still honour their leaders." Her comments clearly show that tribal leaders hold a significant place in the hearts of the Paiwan people.

The small dots, which are nails, signify every member in the community.

In the centre of the artwork, the small dots represent nails. Each nail signifies an individual within the tribe, highlighting that everyone has their own role and status within the community. The significance of the tribe lies in the presence of its members. Each person contributes to creating a better tribe. This is also the idea that the artist most hopes for.

The string of beads woven together triggers Paridrayan peoples' memory of streams and rivers in the mountains.

The long string of beads woven together in the centre represents the streams of Paridrayan. In the past, many activities in Paridrayan were closely connected to the rivers. However, after relocating to Rinari, the tribe no longer has rivers available for their daily life. The lily and diamonds at the top of the artwork symbolize that the tribe's members can live together peacefully within the spirit of the Paiwan people. Finally, the butterfly represents "rebirth." Ljaukui explains that after experiencing Typhoon Morakot, they have all been striving to find a path back home, a path leading to their homeland and to rebirth.

The lily and the diamonds mark the significance of rebirth in the connection between the new location, Rinari, and the Paridrayan community in the mountains.

Ljaukui's artwork can be seen as a reflection of her emotional journey following Typhoon Morakot and the transformation of the tribe. It also expresses her longing and care for her original homeland after moving to Rinari. Through this piece, she conveys a sense of hope for rebirth.

Video Presentations

Patricia StandTal Clarke and Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis

Seminar participants Patricia StandTal Clarke and Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis offered video presentations. Their videos are available on the World Council of Churches' YouTube channel. Brief descriptions of the videos and links to the YouTube recordings appear below.

Land Medicine

https://youtu.be/Gc2rWugBPjU?si=tlSRBvoCvUMbbfpT

In this video presentation, the Rev. Prof. Dr. Patricia StandTal Clarke invites all peoples to experience the rich healing power of Land Medicine: the medicinal power of nature. Indigenous peoples throughout the world historically have depended upon Mother Earth for human health and wellbeing. By listening and connecting to Land, we learn how Creator intends for us to live. When we become separated from Land, we die. When we destroy Land, we die. This Ancient Wisdom is foundational to Traditional Indigenous healers. Humanity's kinship relationship with the entirety of nature is not only reparative and healing but immune-boosting and energizing. Indeed, medical science teaches we are best healed in community; Land is community. Land Medicine is a powerful tool in any healer's tool bag.

Olowgadule and *Aprendamos de la tierra*

Olowagdule: Mother Earth:
https://youtu.be/4CWmRIqnjNA?si=280XfebsJSq6xoH02

Aprendamos de la Tierra - Learning from the Earth:
https://youtu.be/vTetlMtSTNg?si=2CHWopgOUZCok-fa

Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis offers a video presentation about the Gunadule people of Panama's relationship with the Land. The Gunadule people transmit their knowledge through songs. One of these songs is that of Ologwadule, one of the names given to Mother Earth. Gunadule have more than 72 names for the Earth. They believe that from the time they are in the womb, their mothers sing to them. Their mothers sing to form their identity. When Gunadule are born, they continue to sing, maintaining the close relationship with Mother Earth. Gunadule live their lives understanding Mother Earth as part of their family. As such, each new generation will have a new name for Mother Earth so that this relationship is ever-renewing and current. Special ceremonies revolve around each stage of life.

For example, there is a first tree ceremony. When a baby is born, a native seed is grown to remember the importance of all relationships, the relationship with the Creator, with Mother Earth, with the cosmic community, with the ancestors, and to welcome the new member of the community. Furthermore, when the tree grows, everyone takes care of it until the baby grows up, teaching it the art of responsibility and the ethics of good living and mutual care. Ologwadule teaches Gunadule how the earth was also young at some point and had its own formation process, and further how the Gunadule's relationship with the earth was and should be.

In Ologwadule's story, the emphasis falls on the creation of Mother Earth, where Gunadule are told that human beings are an image of her. That is to say, we are little Mother Earths, because we carry in us the elements of the Mother. This makes a difference in relation to the concept of the "common home" that others point out to refer to the Earth.

Jocabed's second video presents a song, *Aprendamos de la tierra*, about our connection to land and creation, and the life that comes from our relationship with Mother Earth. We share the lyrics to the song in both Spanish and English here.

Aprendamos de la Tierra
Basado en el libro de Job 12:7-8

Grito en Guna:
Gabbidamalargge Nue Iddomalo

I estrofa
Aprendamos de la tierra
que hoy nos habla
de que ella y nosotros
somos uno
como un bebe
en el vientre de su madre
donde la memoria corre
como el viento
salpicando nuestra historia
con su verde aliento

II estrofa
Que Nabguana (Tierra) y nosotros
somos todos
cada especie de la tierra
está ligada
con el río, con el mar
y el cielo
con el bosque que alimenta
y nutre el suelo
es memoria viva
de esta casa
que se llama tierra

CORO
Que hable la tierra
de la creación
las aves, las bestias
nos den su versión
los peces del mar
también nos dirán

lo que enseño
Nabguana (Tierra)

Que cante la tierra
y que cante el planeta
donde el principio
es Dios
el Dios de la vida
que en el inicio dio
vida a Ologwadule

Instrumental
Grito: *Gabiddalamargge Nue iddomalo*

III Estrofa
Como el agua que transita transparente
El legado ancestral de nuestra gente
Se convierte en océanos de enseñanza
Y sus gotas que son luces de esperanza
Se reflejan en Dad Ibe(Abuelo Sol) en cada amanecer.

CORO
Que hable la tierra
de la creación
las aves, las bestias
nos den su versión
los peces del mar
también nos dirán
lo que enseño
Nabguana (Tierra)

Que cante la tierra
y que cante el planeta
donde el principio
es Dios
el Dios de la vida
que en el inicio dio
vida a Ologwadule

Learning from the Earth
Based on the book of Job 12:7-8

Shout in Guna:
Gabbidamalargge Nue Iddomalo

I stanza
Let's learn from the land
that speaks to us today
that she and we
we are one
like a baby
in her mother's womb
where memory runs
like the wind
splashing our history
with its green breath

II stanza
May Nabguana (Earth) and us
we are all
every species on earth
is linked
with the river, with the sea
and the sky
with the forest that feeds
and nourishes the soil
is living memory
of this house
which is called earth

CHORUS
Let the earth speak
of the creation
the birds, the beasts
give us their version
the fish of the sea
will also tell us

what I teach
Nabguana (Earth)

Let the earth sing
and let the planet sing
where the principle
is God
the God of life
that in the beginning gave
life at Ologwadule

Instruments
Shout: *Gabiddalamargge Nue iddomalo*

III Stanza

Like the water that runs clear
The ancestral legacy of our people
Becomes oceans of learning
And its drops that are lights of hope
They are reflected in Dad Ibe (Grandfather Sun) at each sunrise.

CHORUS

Let the earth speak
of the creation
the birds, the beasts
give us their version
the fish of the sea
will also tell us
what I teach
Nabguana (Earth)

Let the earth sing
and let the planet sing
where the principle
is God
the God of life
that in the beginning gave
life at Ologwadule

Voices of the Land

Shane Goldie

We stand upon the threshold, hearts alight,
With voices raised against the blinding night.
For lands once ours, now tainted, torn, betrayed,

Cry out for justice in the dawn's first ray.

They call it green, this cloak of false pretense,
Yet underneath, the scars of violence.
Our rights denied, our voices cast aside,

Yet still we stand, with truth our constant guide.

Free and Prior Consent, our sovereign cry,
To guard the lands where sacred spirits lie.
For in our hands, the Earth's own future rests,

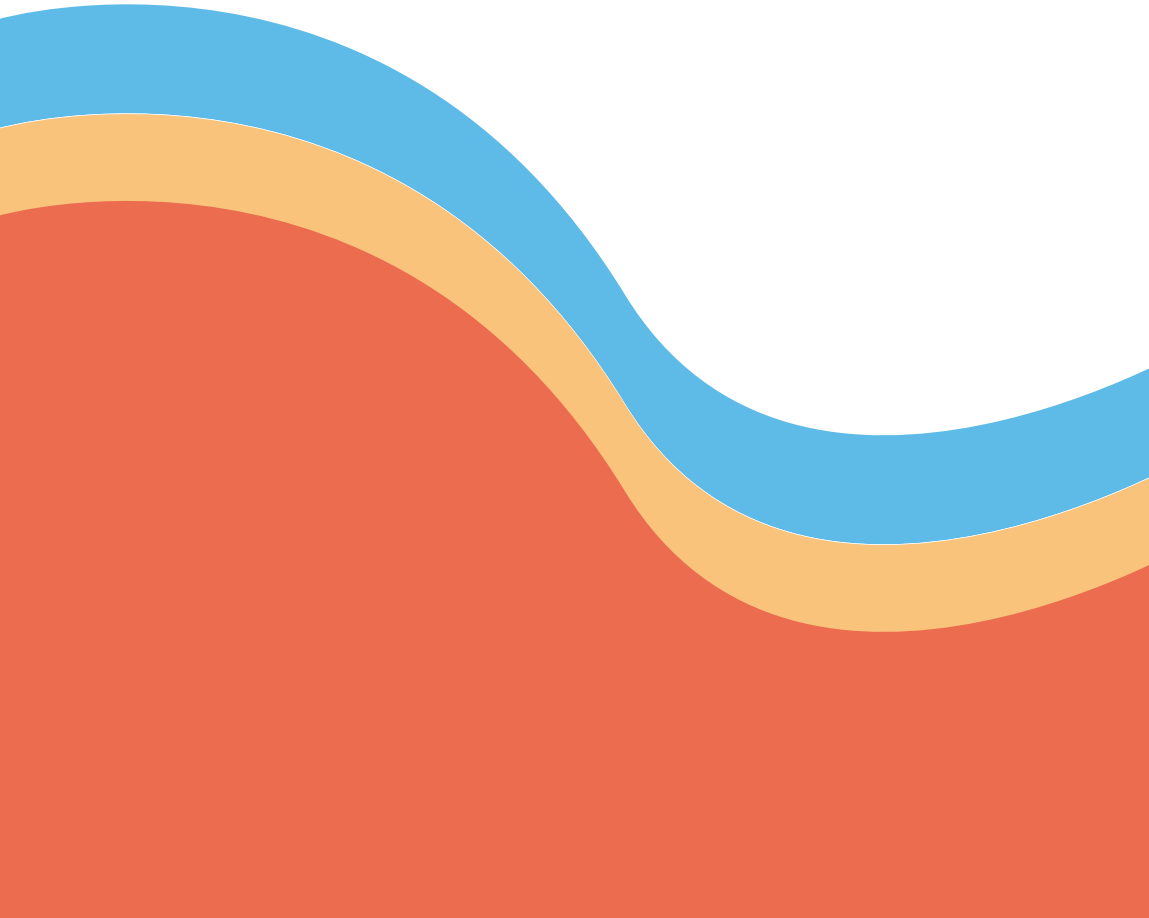
In unity, our strength will pass this test.

Author's Notes: The second poem, "Voices of the Land," is deeply personal to me because it confronts the painful reality of "green colonization"—the process by which initiatives framed as environmentally friendly or sustainable continue to displace and exploit Indigenous peoples and their lands. This poem serves as both a lament for the past and present injustices and a fierce call to action. As I wrote, I reflected on the countless stories of Indigenous communities fighting to protect their territories from mining, deforestation, and development projects done in the name of progress or sustainability. Yet, these projects often continue the same colonial patterns of exploitation that have been harming Indigenous communities for centuries.

Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is not a bureaucratic checkbox but a fundamental human right. Through this poem, I wanted to amplify the voices of those who are often silenced or ignored, who have been living with and protecting the Earth far longer than the policies that seek to dominate it. The urgency of this poem speaks to the need for Indigenous voices to be central in conversations about climate justice. Without their wisdom and leadership, the environmental

movement risks perpetuating the same systems of oppression it seeks to dismantle. This poem is a rallying cry for readers to recognize the stakes: the Earth's future is inextricably linked to the recognition and respect of Indigenous rights.

(Each of these poems is a thread in the larger tapestry of the poetry collection I envision—an exploration of the intersections of spirituality, justice, and the environment. They are not just artistic expressions; they are calls to action. In each word, I hope to spark a deeper awareness in the reader, to ignite a sense of responsibility for the Earth and for the Indigenous peoples who have always been its stewards. By tying together the spiritual, political, and ecological, this collection aims to educate, inspire, and mobilize those who read it. These poems are an invitation to stand with Indigenous communities, to honour their wisdom, to fight for their rights, and, ultimately, to work together toward a liveable, sustainable future for all.)



Indigenous Rights and Resilience in the Face of Climate Change

Hana Kirreh

Climate change is an unprecedented global challenge, impacting ecosystems, economies, and societies across the planet. Among the most affected are Indigenous communities, whose traditional lands, cultures, and ways of life are deeply intertwined with the natural environment. For Indigenous peoples, the effects of climate change are not just environmental but also existential, threatening their heritage, livelihoods, and sovereignty.

Palestinians have faced challenges related to land rights for decades, with ongoing occupation of their land, the expansion of settlements, and lack of access to natural resources. The Israeli occupation has led to the displacement of many Palestinians from their land, affecting their traditional livelihoods and connection to the environment. Additionally, Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem often encroach on Palestinian land, exacerbating tensions and complicating efforts to address environmental concerns.

Climate change further compounds these challenges. Palestinians are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change despite contributing minimally to the problem. Rising temperatures, water scarcity, and extreme weather events threaten agricultural productivity, water resources, and overall livelihoods in the region.

I believe that cooperation on environmental issues cannot occur parallel to the denial of a people's right to national sovereignty in their own land. Palestinians have to be the main party to cooperation, but how can this be possible between people deprived of their homeland, resources, and basic right to exist and a state that occupied their land and seized their resources? The Palestinians had agreed to live in a sovereign state on a small fraction of their land and signed agreements to this effect. Arab countries also presented peace initiatives that offered the integration of Israel in the region, living side-by-side in peaceful and balanced cooperation, in parallel with the establishment of an independent state for the Palestinians on a small part of their historical land, of which they were the original inhabitants before Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has continued since 1967, with numerous attempts at peace negotiations and intermittent periods of violence. The West Bank remains a focal point in the conflict, with control of the West Bank, confiscation of land for building more and more settlements, and the status of Jerusalem among the ongoing challenges to be addressed.

Palestinians in the Diaspora

Due to the complicated political situation and the result of Nakba in 1948, Palestinians are spread across several regions in diaspora.

Arab countries: Many Palestinians reside in neighbouring Arab countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Jordan has the largest Palestinian population outside the Palestinian territories, with significant numbers also in Lebanon and Syria.

Gulf states: Countries in the Gulf region, like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, also host sizeable Palestinian communities.

North America and Europe: Significant Palestinian communities are found in countries such as the United States, Canada, and various European nations, including the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Germany.

Resilience of Indigenous Palestinians: Community Challenges

Increased vulnerability: The combined effects of restricted access to resources, environmental degradation, and movement limitations increase the vulnerability of Palestinian communities to climate change impacts, such as extreme weather events and changing agricultural conditions.

Access and control

Water scarcity: The Israeli control over water resources significantly affects water availability for Palestinian communities. Israeli authorities manage the majority of the water resources in the West Bank, which limits Palestinian access to water for agriculture, consumption, and daily use.

Settlements and infrastructure: Israeli settlements and their infrastructure often have access to more water resources compared to nearby Palestinian communities. This imbalance exacerbates water scarcity issues for Palestinians.

Impact on agriculture

Reduced water access: Limited access to water hinders agricultural productivity, making it harder for Palestinian farmers to adapt to changing climatic conditions and affecting food security.

Land use and environmental degradation

Settlement expansion: The expansion of settlements often involves the confiscation of Palestinian land and resources, leading to displacement of Palestinian communities and creating a source of tension and conflict. Settlements are often protected by the Israeli military and are frequently flashpoints for violence against Palestinians.

Land encroachment: The expansion of Israeli settlements and associated infrastructure often leads to the confiscation of Palestinian land. This not only reduces the land available for Palestinian agriculture and conservation but also causes environmental degradation.

Illegal construction: The construction of roads and buildings associated with settlements often disrupts local ecosystems and contributes to soil erosion and habitat destruction.

An ecosystem is a community of organisms and their physical environment interacting together. The environment involves both living organisms and the non-living physical conditions. These two are inseparable but interrelated. The living and physical components are linked together through nutrient cycles and energy flows.

Military activities

Environmental damage: Military training zones, checkpoints, and barriers can cause environmental damage, including soil degradation and loss of vegetation. Restrictions on movement also limit Palestinians' ability to manage and protect their natural resources effectively.

War in Gaza

The conflict in Gaza has created unprecedented soil, water, and air pollution in the region, destroying sanitation systems and leaving tons of debris from explosive devices. Water, sanitation, and hygiene systems are now almost entirely defunct. Gaza's five wastewater treatment plants have been shut down.

Israel's long-term occupation had already posed major environmental challenges in the Palestinian territories with regard to water quality and availability. Even before the war, over 92 percent of water in the Gaza Strip was deemed unfit for human consumption.

Restrictions on movement and development

Movement restrictions: Checkpoints and barriers restrict Palestinians' movement, making it difficult for them to access resources, implement environmental projects, or engage in climate adaptation efforts.

Development constraints: Restrictions on building and development impact the ability of Palestinian communities to invest in sustainable infrastructure and climate-resilient technologies.

Impact on biodiversity and habitats

Land use changes: The expansion of settlements and infrastructure leads to habitat loss, affecting local wildlife and plant species. This loss of biodiversity can disrupt ecosystems and reduce resilience to environmental changes.

Management issues: Some areas designated as protected zones under Israeli control may not be managed in a way that supports local biodiversity or environmental conservation. This can undermine efforts to protect natural habitats and species.

Olive harvest: The olive harvest in Palestine is more than just an agricultural activity; it is a deeply ingrained cultural tradition and a vital economic cornerstone for many Palestinian communities. The olive tree, a symbol of peace and endurance, has been cultivated in the region for thousands of years. The annual olive harvest represents a significant period for Palestinian farmers, their families, and their communities.

Climate adaptation and resilience

Financial and technical constraints: The occupation restricts access to resources and international support that could aid in climate adaptation and resilience building. This includes limitations on funding, technology, and expertise.

Community-based adaptation: Collaborative efforts within communities help to adapt traditional practices to new conditions. This might include sharing resources, knowledge, and support systems.

Cultural preservation: Maintaining and revitalizing traditional practices and knowledge help strengthen community ties and resilience. This includes passing down traditional water management techniques and agricultural practices.

Advocacy

Advocacy and partnerships: Engaging with broader environmental and human rights organizations can help address systemic issues and increase support for climate adaptation efforts.

Education and capacity building: Increasing awareness and training on climate resilience can empower communities to implement adaptive measures effectively.

Policy and support

For Indigenous Palestinian communities to thrive amidst climate change, supportive policies and external aid are crucial. This includes the following:

- Recognizing and supporting traditional knowledge: Valuing and integrating Indigenous knowledge into broader climate adaptation strategies can enhance effectiveness.
- Ensuring land rights: Secure land rights are fundamental for communities to implement effective adaptation strategies and protect their traditional practices.
- Investing in infrastructure: Support for water conservation infrastructure and sustainable agricultural technologies can aid in building resilience.
- Facilitating access to resources: Providing access to funding, technology, and training for climate adaptation projects is essential.

Advocacy and collaboration

Global attention: International organizations and human rights advocates highlight the environmental and humanitarian impacts of the occupation. This attention can sometimes lead to increased pressure on Israeli authorities to address these issues, but practical changes are often slow to materialize.

Collaborative solutions: Various stakeholders have called for improved coordination and cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian authorities to address waste and wastewater management issues and mitigate their environmental and health impacts.

The management of waste and wastewater in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has significant consequences for environmental health and public safety. The impact of Israeli waste and wastewater practices on Palestinian communities includes contamination of water sources, pollution, and health risks. Addressing these challenges requires improved waste management practices, better coordination between Israeli and Palestinian authorities, and increased access to resources for Palestinian communities to manage waste and wastewater effectively.

Conclusion

Recognizing and respecting the intersection of Indigenous spiritualities with land rights and climate change are essential for promoting environmental justice, cultural diversity, and sustainable futures for all communities. This requires listening to and learning from Indigenous perspectives, supporting Indigenous-led initiatives, and upholding the rights of Indigenous peoples to protect and care for their ancestral lands.

Poetry

Fransina Yoteni

The Bible in the Struggle of Papua

Papua, a land of hidden treasures, Where jungles touch the sea, Yet its people are ensnared in suffering, Haunted by bitter memories of Pepera[1], As oppression deepens and justice fades.

Isaiah's call, a triumphant cry, From Luke, the spirit of liberation echoes, From Micah, true justice is engrained, Driving away injustice, bringing forth peace.

Papua's voice, silenced by the regime's lies, Aspirations suppressed by oppressive repression, But the fire of resistance burns bright, Challenging discrimination, demanding human rights.

The root of the conflict, identity and resources, Distributive justice becomes non-negotiable, Upholding dignity and the right to a simple life.

Prophets speak, justice is their cry, Retribution, restoration, and procedural fairness are hoped for, Genuine peace is awaited, Driving out the shackles of colonial oppressors.

Oh, wounded Papuan people, rise in love and peace, Let the cross of Christ be your guide, Bringing freedom, complete independence.

1 Pepera is short for Penetuan Pendapat Rakyat (Act of Free Choice).

Dreams of Justice in the Land of Cenderawasih

In Papua's land, gold overflows,
Copper abounds, and gas soars high.
Yet their stoves run cold, frozen still,
As people bite their nails, stomachs rumble.

To greedy corporations, wealth does flow,
In the heart of revelry, they are forgotten.
From the start, their fate was sealed without a voice,
The Papuan people were marginalized and oppressed.

Lands seized, cultures shattered,
Like shadows, they move without a trace.
Gone is the right to self-determination,
Swallowed by a reality bitter and harsh.

Mining reform, true autonomy,
That is the resounding cry of courageous Papua.
Free and sovereign, a sacred dream,
Demanding justice, and basic human rights.

Retributive justice, a mirror to history's wounds,
Acknowledge past sins, suffering is immeasurable.
The massacre of innocents,
The seizure of ancestral lands, and forced displacement.

Wasior, Wamena, Paniai, Awyu,
Wounds are gaping in the Land of Papua.
The Papuan people demand recognition,
Real justice, healing for wounds long endured,

Restorative justice, a steep path towards peace,
Demands real commitment, not empty promises.
Forgiveness requires a sincere heart,
Patience without resentment, pure and devout.

For a Papua that is sovereign, just, and prosperous,
From Papua to the world, a message profound.
May the dream of justice become reality,
Illuminating the Land of Cenderawasih, forevermore.

The Land of Papua Cries for Justice

(Inspired by Isaiah 1:17, Luke 4:18-19, and Micah 6:8)

From valleys green, where ocean waves roar,
A mournful cry arises, pain untold.
The displaced and wounded, in sorrow, endure,
Justice is forsaken, and despair takes hold.

Ancestral rights, forcefully torn away,
Tifa drums silenced, mbis carvings decayed.
Hungry in their own land, irony's sting,
Alienated, adrift, in their own suffering.

"Monkeys," the taunt cuts deep within,
Homes of birds of paradise, now lost to sin.
Forests are razed, oceans are polluted and bare,
Ancestral heritage, destroyed beyond repair.

From Grime's emerald embrace to Nemangkawi's light,
From Ha-Anim's swamp to Mamberamo's might,
Raja Ampat and Cenderawasih Bay, nature's grand display,
Wondiboi bears witness, to intrinsic worth, come what may,
I and nature are one, the Indigenous Papuan's way.

"Learn to do good!" Isaiah's voice does decree,
Cast aside tyranny, let your conscience be free.
Kuri Forest ravaged, the bird of paradise yearns,
Diopui weeps, as the earth's soul burns.

Side with the weak, and the marginalized, embrace their plight,
Ignite the spirit of liberation, unite with all your might.
Weave anew the noken strong, with threads of strife,
For a peaceful Papua, the dream of a new life.

Nature's gentle voice, from Kuri's heart, does call,
"The Spirit of God is here," hope for one and all.
Good news proclaimed, freedom for the oppressed,
Restoration for the downtrodden, hope newly expressed.

Kagua Iroro, when will God's Kingdom arrive?
In my beloved Papua, the question will survive.
"Buthanso," they keep asking, seeking meaning true,
Micah whispers, "Do justice, it's up to you."

Love faithfully, walk humbly, and let exploitation cease,
Let nature flourish, and find lasting peace.
The Cenderawasih[2] *mourns its lost abode, a heart filled with grief,*
Uphold true justice, for life is beyond belief.

Sago palms and ironwood trees are gone,
Rivers run dry, and earth's children stumble and mourn.
Papua must rise again, a new generation awaits,
In the earth's compassion, a new destiny is created.

We are the guardians of nature, Mother Earth's embrace,
Forests are our breath, rivers are our lifeblood's grace.
Bound by her embrace, united in our aim,
Holistic transformation, systemic reform, our resounding claims.

Sustainable development, for a just and equitable Papua,
In the silence of ancestral lands, dreams are woven in prayer.
Voices of hope rise, with steps firm and bold,
Papua will not weep, over the wounds of old.

Black orchids of hope bloom, rooted in ancestral ground,
Mamta, Saireri, Domberai, Bomberai, Mee Pago, La Pago, Ha-Anim stand profoundly.
Papua free in justice's embrace, peace forevermore,
Truth shall illuminate, the blessed Papuan shore.

2 Cenderawash is a Bird-of-Paradise

Indigenous Peoples in India and Their Vulnerability to the Effects of Climate Change

Atola Longkumer

Introduction

India is home to many groups of Indigenous peoples who have autonomy over their land and a religio-cultural heritage distinct from majority religions such as Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. A sizeable population of Indigenous peoples in India also identify as Christians, especially in the Indo-Myanmar border regions, such as Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Meghalaya. The historical experience of Indigenous peoples in India illustrates the ambiguities of colonialism in this part of the world, as it resulted in the marginalization of the peoples through "the good intent of protection" and the introduction and embrace of Christianity. Furthermore, in the name of development, colonialism saw the beginnings of the destruction of the ecosystem inhabited by these Indigenous peoples as well as the web of corruption that affected communities, setting in a cycle of deprivation and marginalization of the people.

Indigenous peoples in India live in some of the most deprived and exploited communities in the nation. Beginning from the colonial period, we see many instances of alienation and displacement of these people from their land and forests through so-called development. Climate change has exacerbated their exploitation, as heat waves, torrential rains and floods, drought, the use of pesticides, and the replacement of indigenous pulses with cash crops have all contributed to the environmental challenges Indigenous communities face. In this chapter, I make a case for sustainable development of the lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples in India, emphasizing the importance of human rights, dignity, and the right of self-determination of communities in achieving sustainable development. Furthermore, I also argue that efforts toward sustainable development cannot ignore the spirituality of the Indigenous people, which is markedly nature-centric.

Who Are the Indigenous Peoples in India?

Imkong is a young man from Nagaland who left his village after completing high school. Because his parents had no regular income apart from their agricultural produce, Imkong could not afford to pay for college. Moreover, the nearest government college was in the district headquarters, a day's journey by bus from his village. Knowing that some of his villagers were earning in the city as migrant workers, Imkong decided to borrow money to travel to the city and try his luck in one of the retail outlets or the many spas and salons. Today,

he works in a salon in Bengaluru and shares a small apartment with four others like him.[1]

Indigenous peoples in India make up a large percentage of the migration movement within the country. The movement of neglected and marginalized migrants to cities looking for livelihoods is an evolving phenomenon, with little attention paid to the multiple impacts on communities. N. Neetha's essay "Urban Housekeepers from Tribal Homelands: Adivasi Women Migrants and Domestic Work in Delhi" examines the social realities of Indigenous peoples and their economic conditions.[2] As a result of poverty and the lack of local employment, a large number of women from the Indigenous communities (Adivasi) of Ho, Oraon, Munda, and Santali are pushed to become domestic workers in the cities.

In 2023, the Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy brought out a study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic titled *Fending for Themselves: Adivasis, Forest Dwelling Communities and the Devastating Second Wave of Covid-19.*[3] From data collected through interviews with community members and other secondary reports, Sushmita and Suraj Harsha demonstrate how the pandemic exacerbated the vulnerability and marginalization of the Indigenous peoples.

These studies illustrate the realities of the socio-economic conditions in general of the 104 million Indigenous peoples in India. According to the national census of 2021, 8.6 percent of the total population of the country (over 1.2 billion) are categorized as Scheduled Tribes (ST), the term used by the state for Indigenous peoples. While over 730 ethnic groups are classified as ST in the country, many more qualify as Indigenous peoples but are not yet listed in the ST classification. Therefore, India is estimated to have the second largest population of Indigenous peoples after Africa.[4]

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1 For more detailed discussion on migration and Indigenous peoples, see Dolly Kikon and Bengt Karlsson, *Leaving the Land: Indigenous Migration and Affective Labour in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

2 N. Neetha, "Urban Housekeepers from Tribal Homelands: Adivasi Women Migrants and Domestic Work in Delhi," in *First Citizens: Studies on Adivasis, Tribals, and Indigenous Peoples in India*, ed. Meena Radhakrishna (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 228–55.

3 Sushmita and Suraj Harsha, "Fending for Themselves—Adivasis, Forest Dwelling Communities and the Devastating Second Wave of COVID-19," Policy Watch No. 17, Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, 7 March 2023, https://www.thehinducentre.com/publications/policy-watch/fending-for-themselves-adivasis-forest-dwelling-communities-and-the-devastating-second-wave-of-covid-19/article66586795.ece, accessed 21 September 2024.

4 "Indigenous People in India and the Web of Indifference," *DownToEarth*, https://www.downtoearth.org.in/governance/indigenous-people-in-india-and-the-web-of-indifference-55223#:~:text=These%20indigenous%20people%20constitute%20the,or%20demand%20a%20fair%20compensation, accessed 8 October 2024.

Despite general perceptions as well as the recent project of homogenization by Hindu nationalist groups such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),[5] India is home to many groups of people differentiated by languages, ethnicities, and religio-cultural traditions. The general perception of India and the religious landscape often includes only the many "world religions" that trace their roots to India, including Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Parsi (offspring of Persian Zoroastrianism). As noted earlier, modern India is home to a sizeable population of Indigenous peoples known by different terms, such as "tribes" and "Adivasis" (Sanskrit term meaning "first dwellers," therefore the literal equivalent of the English term "Indigenous"). These terms are given by outsiders, such as British colonialists and anthropologists, Christian missionaries, and the elite political and educated class of the nation. The communities outside of the social and religious structures of the Indic-castes have names such as Koya, Naga, Toda, Munda, Oraon, Santal, Mizo, Khasi, Kurumba, Garo, Nocte, Gond, Bhil, Lepcha, and Kuki-Zo.

The modern nation-state of India has historical roots in a variety of faiths and spiritualities, some that interact creatively and some in conflict with each other. These annals of history, however, are limited to written records between cultures that possessed "texts." The privileging of textual traditions resulted in the privileging of the communities linked with the texts, consequently establishing a hierarchy that positioned the communities lacking written texts as "backward" and "weak." These communities, with no texts but with rich oral traditions, became the easy targets of modernizing projects such as education and evangelization. One paradox, especially with the evangelization project spearheaded by Christian missionaries, was their creation of written texts in the languages of the Indigenous peoples in India, for example, Catherine Ling among the Todas, Edward Winter Clark and Mary Mead Clark among the Ao Naga, Paul Olaf Bodding among the Santal, William Pettigrew among the Tangkhul Naga, Stephen Hislop among the Gond, and James Herbert Lorrain among the Mizo.

The Indigenous peoples of India inhabit fertile and resource-rich mountains and forests. Many of them also live in international border areas, such as the Ladakhis, Nagas, Mizos, Nocte, and Khasi. Most of the land inhabited by these peoples was annexed to the mainland of modern India during British colonial rule. Prior to that, the Indigenous peoples had autonomy over the lands they lived in.

Therefore, their history and cultural identity and livelihood is tied intrinsically to the land they inhabit. In modern India, Indigenous peoples form one of the most marginalized communities, further intersected by political exclusion, gender discrimination, religious minority identity, economic exploitation, and educational deprivation.

5 G. N. Devy, Tony Joseph, and Ravi Korisettar, eds, *The Indians: Histories of a Civilization* (Delhi: Aleph, 2023).

Indigenous Peoples in India and their "Homelands"

The establishment and expansion of British colonial structure and domination over the region brought tremendous changes to traditional land-holding patterns of the Indigenous peoples in India. The following declaration from the supreme court of the country affirms the conditions of the Indigenous peoples and the reality of alienating them from their homelands.

> Among the disadvantaged groups, the most disadvantaged and marginalized in India are the Adivasis (STs), who, as already mentioned, are the descendants of the original inhabitants of India and are the most marginalized and living in terrible poverty with high rates of illiteracy, disease, early mortality . . . they have been victimized for thousands of years by terrible oppression and atrocities. They were deprived of their lands, and pushed into forests and hills, where they eke out a miserable existence of poverty . . . And now efforts are being made by some people to deprive them even of their forest hill land where they are living, and the forest produce on which they survive.[6]

Despite their current persistent poverty and migration for labour, the Indigenous peoples of India inhabit and have autonomy over the lands and forests from the days of their ancestors. Their homelands include the verdant region of Indo-Myanmar in the northeast of the country and the mineral-rich region of eastern India with states like Jharkhand and Odisha. For example, 60 percent of India's known bauxite reserves, 25 percent of its coal, 98 percent of chromite, 28 percent of iron ore, 92 percent of nickel ore, and 28 percent of manganese are all in the eastern state of Odisha, home of the Bhumia, Chenchu, Saora and 60 more Indigenous groups.[7] Another example is Chhattisgarh, a state in central India home to a sizeable population of Indigenous peoples, which is said to be India's richest state in terms of mineral wealth, with as many as 28 varieties of major minerals including diamonds. The Bastar region is said to have one of the best iron ore deposits. Apart from these, Indigenous peoples inhabit almost all the states of India, most often in pristine forested areas. While they share common socio-economic conditions of marginality, Indigenous peoples in India are not homogeneous. Like the larger population of the country, the communities are diverse in language, economic status, and other cultural markers such as patterns of attire.

The following quote, from a speech given by an Indigenous person in India, captures the pain of exclusion and exploitation borne by the Indigenous peoples since the encounter with more dominant cultures. The speech was made at the presentation of the Objective Resolution in the Constituent Assembly of India in December 1946 by Jawaharlal Nehru. The objective stated the soon-to-be free nation would be an independent sovereign republic with a constitution

6 Quoted in Meena Radhakrishna, ed., *First Citizens: Studies on Adivasis, Tribals, and Indigenous Peoples in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 11.

7 *Radhakrishnan*, First Citizens, 372.

guaranteeing to all citizens "justice, social, economic and political; equality of status, of opportunity and before the law; freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship, vocation, association and action, subject to law and public."

Furthermore, the Objective Resolution stated that "adequate safeguards shall be provided for minorities, backward and tribal areas, and depressed and other backward classes." As an Indigenous person, Jaipal Singh stated the following:

> I am not expected to understand the legal intricacies of the Resolution. But my common sense tells me that every one of us should march in that road to freedom and fight together. Sir, if there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated, neglected for the last 6,000 years . . . The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India punctuated by rebellion and disorders, and yet I take Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru at his word. I take you all at your word that now we are going to start a new chapter, a new chapter of independent India where there is equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected.[8]

India has celebrated 77 years since the declaration of the resolution became a reality in 1947, but the Indigenous peoples continue to be neglected and exploited and dispossessed. Their homelands are taken over through the mechanics of the modern economy. Agricultural land is acquired for non-agricultural purposes and mining and exploration of minerals continue to destroy the natural flora and fauna of the Indigenous peoples' habitats. Their homelands continue to be ravaged by "development" that benefits the corporates.

Post-Independence and Indigenous Peoples in India

The circumstances of the Indigenous peoples in post-independent India have not seen any significant changes. In the name of development and modernization, the lands and the people have been exploited to the maximum. The degree of alienation and discrimination has become so significant that some scholars use the term "genocide" to describe the development and the tremendous impact it has in the lands of the Indigenous peoples in India.[9] Haphazard development has left their communities displaced and alienated from their ancestral lands, which results in their losing their cultural identity and social practices. The annexation of Indigenous peoples' land by the British colonial administration has led to long-drawn-out movements of self-determination, such as that of the Naga. Self-serving land reforms by the British administration and the practices of proxy

8 Quoted in Ramachandra Guha, "Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42:32 (2007), 3305–12.

9 For a robust discussion on the impact of colonization and its policy in relation to the Indigenous peoples in India, see Biswamoy Pati, ed., *Adivasis in Colonial India: Survival, Resistance and Negotiation* (Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2010).

administration robbed the Indigenous peoples of their autonomy over the land of their ancestors. Acquisition of land and exploitation of the resources resulting in destruction and depletion of natural flora and fauna forced the Indigenous peoples into migration to urban areas, where they work as housekeepers, daily wage labourers, and unskilled workers in the lowest paid sector of the market.

The integration of Indigenous peoples into the state during the British administration deprived them of their autonomy and their distinct model of democratic governance. The dream of Jaipal Singh for Indigenous peoples to have equal treatment remains a mere dream. With marginal political representation and among the most economically deprived and exploited, the Indigenous peoples of India need global attention and advocacy to their struggle for human rights and dignity.

Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples in India

The socio-economic marginalization of the Indigenous peoples in India has been exacerbated by climate change. As described above, the Indigenous peoples' traditional homelands are forested areas and mountain ranges. Indigenous peoples have been guardians of these landscapes, with the rivers and mountains providing their livelihood and sustenance. With the onslaught of haphazard development serving the cause of corporations at the expense of the Indigenous peoples and their lifeways, the impact of climate change on the Indigenous peoples' communities is tremendous. Instances of disappearance of native vegetations have been reported in many parts of northeast India: for example, melons and corn native to the region are being replaced by mass-produced watermelon and corn. Summer fruits such as plums, pears, and peaches were native to the region, but with the rise in temperature and shorter spring, these fruits have become rare in the gardens.

The rising global temperature has resulted in rapid glacial melting in the Himalayan range, a range that is home to many Indigenous communities. Formation of glacial lakes and flooding by these lakes in the region are climate threats to these Himalayan communities. Wayanad, Kerala, where hundreds lost their lives in recent landslides, is a region of Indigenous peoples—including the Irulas and Kurumbas. Mizoram and Nagaland also recorded persistent landslides in the past monsoon, costing lives and disrupting daily activities, especially for students travelling out of the state to other parts of the country for education.

As observed by global organizations such as the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (UNIPCC), climate change has a gender dimension. In Indigenous communities that have survived for millennia depending on the natural environment, women have played significant roles as guardians of the environment, with traditional knowledge of seasons and their offering for

sustenance. With climate change and the increasing unpredictability of seasons, women's role as nurturers of nature has undergone changes that make women more vulnerable. Depletion of resources and the loss of traditional livelihoods force women to migrate to urban areas as unskilled labourers. The negligence of the state and effects of climate change exacerbate women's vulnerability in the communities. The following astute critique made by Vandana Shiva in her book S*taying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* is a relevant reminder:

> With the destruction of forests, water and land, we are losing our life-support systems. This destruction is taking place in the name of "development" and progress, but there must be something wrong with a concept of progress that threatens survival itself. The violence against nature, which seems intrinsic to the dominant development model, is also associated with violence against women who depend on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves. This violence against nature and women is built into the very mode of perceiving both and forms the basis of the current development paradigm.[10]

The Flourishing of Indigenous Peoples in India

The flourishing of Indigenous peoples in India is possible only through the sustainable development of the lands inhabited by these peoples, which includes the assurance of human rights, freedom of cultural and religious expressions, dignity, and the right of self-determination of communities. The achievement of sustainable development also needs to include respect for the nature-centric spirituality of the Indigenous people.

The rituals of Indigenous peoples are an important storehouse of their rich traditions. I describe here *atsü tsü*—a ritual of the Ao Naga, an Indigenous community of northeast India. In ethnographies of the Ao Naga by British administrators, the term "Feast of Merit" is used to describe the *mithun (bos frontalis or gayal)* sacrifice, or *atsü tsü. Atsü tsü* means "mithun slaughter" in the Ao Naga dialect. As the term indicates, *atsü tsü* is a ritual in which a wealthy family slaughtered a mithun for various reasons, both religious and social. *Atsü tsü* is not performed today, but descendants of the family that performed *atsü tsü* carry the memorialized names, such as *Tsüpong (mithun* slayer), even in the new reality of a Christianized society.

Most probably, *atsü tsü* was translated as Feast of Merit because the performance of the *mithun* slaughter bestowed status upon the performers and their descendants, such as a revered name and exclusive patterns in Indigenous dress. It was told that to perform *atsü tsü* was also to be assured of well-being of life after death. Above all, *atsü tsü* was an act of merit, a goodwill gesture to the community by the wealthy family, and a sharing of abundance with neighbours.

10 Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988), xiv.

The Naga were agrarian people inhabiting the verdant mountains and sustaining themselves through cultivating rice, foraging herbs, and hunting for meat. Even today, a substantial population of the Naga is engaged in agriculture: growing rice and producing other staples, along with meat, predominantly pork and poultry. According to oral traditions, the Ao Naga performed a number of rituals to maintain a relationship with the sacred, who was known as *Lijaba Tsüngrem*. The Ao Naga believed that *Lijaba* was the sacred supreme being who had the key to all good and evil in the life of the community and the individual. In other words, the Ao Naga held a teleological notion of living.

It was within this early Ao Naga culture—which had a pronounced sense of the sacred and an understanding of the essential relationship with the natural environment needed to flourish—that the *atsü tsü* was performed. To be wealthy was to be able to share with neighbours. In contrast to accumulation being a sign of wealth, the pre-globalization and pre-modern Ao Naga measured their well-being in sharing. With the encounter of and transition to a modern life and economy, these values have been overtaken by accumulation and materialistic lifestyles.

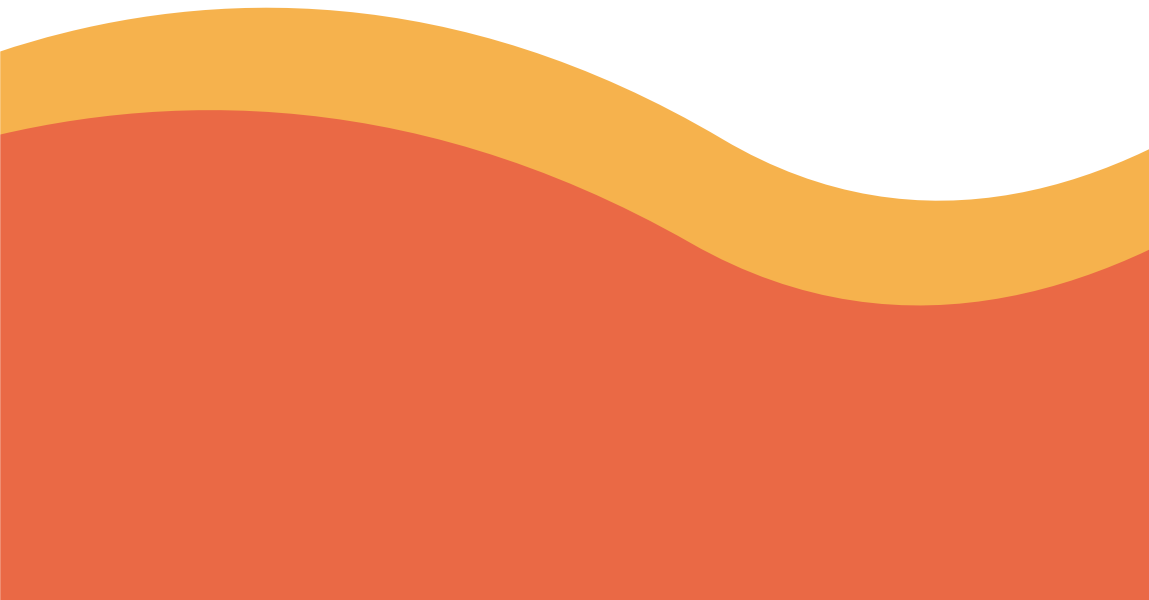
Reclaiming traditional rituals and practices of Indigenous peoples and intentionally embracing such ways of life are resources to heal communities and their lands. The threat of climate change to the survival of Indigenous peoples and their ways of life requires we deliberately resist a lifestyle fed by greed and driven by profit-oriented practices. In a general way, care of neighbours and the natural surroundings is an inherent value of Indigenous communities. These values and practices and knowledge of Indigenous peoples cannot be ignored in the global search for sustainability and climate security. Indigenous peoples' respect and harmonious co-existence with the natural world must be recognized and incorporated.

Conclusion

As in other global contexts, the Indigenous peoples in India, classified as ST and Adivasis, form one of the most vulnerable communities in late modernity. Despite the economic growth India has seen in the last few years, the Indigenous peoples' condition and experience of marginality persist. The impact of climate change on human communities and the natural environment is even more challenging for vulnerable Indigenous peoples' communities. The history of exploitation of these communities and their lands and rivers in the name of development and modernization persists today, with Indigenous peoples dispossessed through manipulation and betrayal. Development, in other words, has benefitted those who hold power, such as leaders in patriarchal societies and clans, but the masses remain impoverished and powerless.

What then is the balm for the wounded? To ensure the security and sustainable survival of Indigenous peoples and the global community, it is vital to look beyond the obvious and the norm. Our knowledge should go beyond the existing ways of addressing the challenges of climate change, the ecological challenge is a global challenge and therefore, intentional and conscientious inclusion of the resources and knowledge of Indigenous communities is necessary.

God's reign includes the least, the forgotten, and the ignored.



Decolonising Eco-theology: A Tribal Naga Indigenous Perspective

Lempang Phom

Introduction

The world we are living in today is bleeding because of the rape of Mother Earth through human activity. Humans, championed as the most social among creatures, devalue and marginalize creation as the *other* without accepting creation as a *co-community*. From the theological perspective, the dominant Creation theologies propagate the idea of creation out of nothing (*ex-nihilo*). The European colonial theology of conquest is founded on the Genesis account of the primordial earth as "void," "dark," and "deep." To Europeans, the Genesis concepts of "subdue" and "have dominion" legitimized the vocation and mission of the European chosen race to colonize the heathens and their lands. In line with this, eco-theology was formulated using a Western anthropocentric model that differs from the Indigenous worldview of creation, which is organic and natural. Given this, it is imperative to decolonize our understanding of Mother Earth; we must overturn the colonial hegemonic assumption that humans are the centre of creation. This chapter examines eco-theology from the Naga Indigenous perspective, in order to affirm an alternative knowledge system in our quest for ecological justice.

Defining Indigenous Peoples: Overview

There is no universal and fixed definition of the term "Indigenous People." In most cases, it refers to people who are connected with or custodians of a particular place, land, or space[1] that is central to their spirituality. These cultural groups and their descendants have a historical continuity or association with given regions or parts of the region and inhabit them either independently or in isolation. Indigenous people are the original inhabitants of the land and have natural birth rights of citizenship. Such "first citizens" in many countries maintain their dignity, rights,

1 The many understandings of space include absolute space, the metaphysical understanding of space, and the mathematical concept of space. But here, I use space as it is understood and used by Indigenous theologians, who are focused on land/earth/space. According to this space-centred theology, space does not refer to empty space or wilderness but to the place where God, humans, and creation dwell together integrally, in an organic way. Therefore, Indigenous theologians use the terms space, earth, land, and creation synonymously and interchangeably. Hence, "space" can mean "earth-centred" or "creation-centred" or "land-centred." See Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation—The Gifford Lectures 1984–1985* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1984), 140; A. Wati Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth: Theology, Christian Witness and Theological Education, An Indigenous Perspective* (Kolkata: PTCA, 2012), 26; K. P. Aleaz, *Dialogical Theologies: Hartford Papers and Other Essays* (Kolkata: Punthi Pustak, 2004), 128.

and integrity and are determined to preserve and transmit their wisdom to the following generations. Indigenous people therefore, always consider themselves distinct from colonizer or dominant cultures.

A working definition used by the United Nations' Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities is accepted by many Indigenous peoples. It understands Indigenous people as those who, because of their historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies established on their territory, see themselves as separate from other sectors of societies currently dominating those territories. Their ethnic identity and ancestral territories serve as the foundation for their continued existence as a people in accordance with their own cultural norms, social institutions, and legal systems; and they are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit these to future generations.[2]

Indigenous people are considered the first inhabitants of the land from which they have been displaced by invaders.[3] They are inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures that relate to Mother Nature. The social, economic, and political characteristics of their way of life are distinct from those of other dominant cultures. Despite their cultural differences, Indigenous peoples in many parts of the world share one common problem, which is the protection of their rights as distinct peoples.[4] Today, Indigenous people are vulnerable to oppressive laws and policies, which identify them as, among other things, tribals, ethnic minorities, natives, aboriginals, cultural minorities, and hill, mountain and forest peoples.[5] These identities have been given to them by colonial administers, Western missionaries, anthropologists, and dominant groups of urban settlers, and later by contemporary governments.[6]

2 World Council of Churches, *Indigenous Peoples: Walking Together towards Tomorrow* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 4.

3 The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), the International Labour Office (ILO) and the World Bank estimated there are around 370 million Indigenous people in the world today, totalling 5 percent of the world population. See WCC, *Indigenous Peoples*, 4.

4 "Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations," United Nations, https://social.desa.un.org/issues/indigenous-peoples/indigenous-peoples-at-the-united-nations, accessed 12 April 2023.

5 World Council of Churches, International Affairs at the Tenth Assembly: Statements, Minutes and Resolution (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 65.

6 Contemporary Indian society is based upon discriminatory caste practices of hierarchical politics. Exclusive ideologies have resulted in ignoring and alienating the many *others*, including Indigenous communities of northeast India. Indigenous communities are treated differently, and are subject to derogatory language and discriminatory treatment. None of the Indigenous communities in northeast India identify with such terms and names. Instead, they identify by their own names such as Naga, Phom, Mizos, Khasis, Kuki, Hakka etc. See Temsuyanger Aier, "Historical and Cultural Struggle of the Tribal/Indigenous Nagas: A Historical Materialism Considered for a Liberative Hermeneutic," *Clark Journal of Theology* 10:1 (2020), 6.

Theology of Anthropocentricism: Who Gains?

An anthropocentric view of life, which leads us to see creation through the question of who is to gain or benefit from it, has had a negative impact on the environment. Our modern, consumerist system has led to class divisions, competition, and unprecedented exploitation of the land and its resources.[7] With the advancement of science and technology, the earth is viewed in a mechanistic way. As a result, God's diverse creation is valued according to how profitable or useful it is to humans.[8] K. C. Abraham states that ecological crisis is the product of our modern lifestyle, as decisions on goods production depend on a consumerist economy that is about greed and not need.[9] In the anthropocentric understanding of creation,[10] human beings are the only reference point and are removed from nature. This view prioritizes the rights of human beings over nature without emphasizing the responsibility of human beings for nature.[11] Further, the dualistic concept understands the world as evil and distances God from creation.[12] Such views of life have led humans to believe they are called upon to control nature, which contradicts the biblical testimony that God's creation is redeemed only when humans respect the rhythm and dynamics of nature.[13] The concept of human beings as active agents and nature as passive must shift to an understanding that both humans and creation are active and dynamic.

Traditional anthropocentrism has been challenged by the realities of the ecological crisis and the depletion of the earth's resources. Indigenous people critique one-sided anthropocentric perspectives that have contributed to the current world

7 Uncontrolled one-sided exploitative economic development has brought about various ecological crises. The Indigenous communities that depend on earth's resources are the worst affected. The voices of Indigenous peoples on climate injustice narrate their experiences of one-sided modern development. Activists from India narrate that many tribes have already disappeared from this world. The rest are in grave danger of going extinct because of how quickly civilization wiped them out. Indigenous people have been rendered helpless by merciless exploitation, separation from their land, the repression of their ethnic identity, and the degradation of their cultures and traditions.

8 Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth.*

9 K. C. Abraham, Eco-justice: A New Agenda of Church's Mission (Bombay: BUILD), 4–5.

10 Christian theology of creation often obscures God's relationship with nature as in-dwelling and in communication with nature. The hierarchal order is construed as a divine order wherein all imperfect beings exist for the use of the perfect beings. The imperfect being, which includes lifeless beings, exist on this earth for the satisfaction and sake of humans. See Enolyne Lyngdoh, "Reclaiming Mother Earth: A Khasi Indigenous Re-reading of Psalm 104," in *Decolonizing Ecotheology: Indigenous and Subaltern Challenges*, ed. S. Lily Mendoza and George Zachariah (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 59; Celia Deane-Drummond, "Creation," in *Systematic Theology and Climate Change: Ecumenical Perspectives*, ed. Michael S. Northcott and Peter M. Scott (London: Routledge, 2014), 73.

11 Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 48.

12 Robert Patannang Borrong, *Environmental Ethics and Ecological Theology: Ethics as Integral Part of Ecosphere from an Indonesian Perspective* (Geboren te Sandana, Indonesie, 2005), 98.

13 Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 50–51.

problems.[14] The Indigenous Naga people have addressed the impact of ecological challenges that they face because of their spiritual connection to nature. The Naga community belief system reflects an alternative approach to creation that respects the equal rights of all creatures and appreciates their diversities. An understanding of the spiritual interconnectedness of all creation would allow the world to regain the ecological balance between humans and their natural environment. In the Naga view, the Supreme Being[15] is evident in creation, and humans can attain redemption only in relation to the rest of creation.[16] This view includes the need for a just treatment of creation and understands salvation to be attainable on earth, here and now, and not only after death. Therefore, a redeemed person is connected to the whole cosmos. According to the spiritual values of co-creation in a wider ecological dimension, people must integrate themselves into nature and into the whole earth community to survive.[17]

An Indigenous Eco-Theology

Historically, Christian theology took a predominantly anthropocentric approach in modern progressive forms of liberation theology, which is linked to the concept in eco-theology that humans are dominant. In such a perspective, liberation theology, while radically breaking structures and focusing on human oppression, fails to be integrally liberative, as it neglects the rest of creation. Theological exploration does not centre on or concretely address Indigenous people, who are more vulnerable to ecological crisis than any other populations. Lynn White's groundbreaking critique of the Judeo-Christian concept of creation enabled a redefining of Christian theology with regard to anthropocentrism. The new movement marked a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism[18] to cosmo-centrism.

Indigenizing our Theology

Indigenous Naga eco-theology starts from the concept of the interconnectedness of space, creation and land, which is integral to the Naga people's holistic world-view of the people. Theology thus begins with the notion of co-creation: that is, we are all intrinsically related to one another, and what we do directly affects others, for both good and bad. Because humans have an organic relationship with other

14 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 57–77.

15 Indigenous people all over the world generally believe in the existence of one Supreme Being, which can be referred to as "God." However, along with the Supreme Being, they also may believe in the existence and importance of other divine beings and a number of benevolent spirits, which are as active and indispensable as the Supreme Being.

16 Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 104–105.

17 Jurgen Moltmann, *Hope in These Troubled Times* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2019), 20.

18 George Mathew Nalunnakkal, *Green Liberation: Towards an Integral Ecotheology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2004), xi.

creatures, when one does good or ill, it affects non-human creatures too.[19] Within such a perception, K. Thanzauva, a Mizo theologian, points out that the apparent hierarchy in the relationship of beings is not a social order. Rather, God, humans, and the world are interrelated and related together as a community.[20]

Scholar Vine Deloria observes such an interconnected worldview:

> "We are all relatives" when taken as a methodological tool for obtaining knowledge means we observe the natural world by looking for relationships between various things in it. That is to say, everything in the natural world has relationship with every other thing and the total set of relationships makes up the natural world as we experience it. This concept is simply the relativity concept as applied to a universe that people experience as alive and not as dead or inert.[21]

The concept expressed here about relationships articulates that humans are part of an integrated whole that includes the rest of creation. The theology of space, creation, and land represents relationship, reciprocity, interdependence, and wholeness. The anthropocentric understanding of humans being dominant after God contradicts an Indigenous theology of space-centredness. We must place space and creation as theology's starting point to affirm the equal participation of all of creation.[22] The model of an Indigenous space-centred relationship enables us to re-evaluate the traditional views of God, Christ, Spirit, and salvation, including the place of humans in creation. Indigenous space-centred theology thus enables us to understand humans, creation, and the church as organically related to one another and to God.

Naga Indigenous people: Toward an eco-theology

The Indigenous Naga people consider the land to be their home: for the Nagas, without the land, there is no home.[23] Interestingly, the Greek word for home

19 Yangkahao Vashum, "Eco-Theology from Tribal/Indigenous People's Perspectives of the North East India," in *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Cultures and Practices of the Tribes of North East India*, ed. Razouselie Lasetso, Marlene Ch. Marak, and Yangkahao Vashum (Jorhat: Eastern Theological College, 2012), 40–41.

20 K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Aizawl: Mizo Theological Conference, 1997), 157.

21 Vine Deloria, Jr, *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr., Reader*, ed. Barbara Deloria (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), 52.

22 A. Wati Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology Issue, Method and Perspective,* Tribal Study Series 8 (Jorhat: Tribal Study Center, 2000), 68.

23 The Nagas are the Indigenous Mongoloid tribes inhabiting the hilly regions between the Brahmaputra River in India and Chindwin River in Myanmar. With approximately 4 million people comprising more than 45 tribes, the Nagas were politically divided between two countries during the British colonial power transfer to India in 1947. Today, the Nagas are concentrated mostly in the states of Nagaland, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh, Assam in India, and Eastern Nagaland in Myanmar. The Indigenous Naga identify themselves as tribal Nagas and justify the term "tribal" because of its ancient ancestral spiritual relationship with the land as mother.

(*oikos*) is the root of *ecology*. We can thus say that the Indigenous Nagas' land is ecology. The Nagas believe that the land on which they live is God's promised land, and so they must resist any degradation of the land. Land is life and is the abode of Mother Earth. As the land is the gift of God, it is not individualized but shared in common. Hence, the Indigenous Naga worldview of collective ownership is opposed to capitalist, market-oriented, and consumerist worldviews.[24] For the Naga people, a large part of conservation is sacred, encompassing the intrinsic value of diversity and a relationship with the cosmos.[25]

An understanding of God in relation to the Indigenous holistic vision of reality enables us to conceive of God as being organically related to the whole creation. For the Nagas, being apart from "nature" means never feeling or knowing God, rendering God non-existent to the people. Indigenous knowledge of an organic God contradicts the traditional Western model of the monarch God who resides far above us, lording over his creation and giving orders, commandments, and ordinances to follow. In contrast, the Indigenous understanding of God enables us to see a God that suffers pain along with the suffering of creatures, as God is an integral part of creation. Wati Longchar states,

> God becomes inactive without creation. This idea rules out a conception of God as monarch who rules the world from above imposing his divine laws or a God who is detached from the world. But God is imminent in the world who comes and dines, drinks, speaks, and reveals to us as a person and even through animals, trees, wind and so forth . . . Since God is an integral part of creation, God suffers pain when creation suffers, because tribals conceive God as one who comes from the soil (but not from above).[26]

The Indigenous holistic worldview helps us to re-imagine the role of humans. Christian theology has a foundational anthropocentric view that portrays humans as next to God, created in the image of God—far ahead of and above other creatures. In the Indigenous worldview, this image is reshaped and shifts to a more eco-centric understanding of humanity. Moreover, the Indigenous worldview facilitates a paradigm shift in how we understand nature theologically—and shapes our lives accordingly. In the anthropocentric worldview, which sees creation in terms of profit, nature is an object to be exploited to quench the unquenchable human thirst for power and riches. The Indigenous holistic vision of reality instead perceives nature as the abode of God. This view implies that you should not destroy certain trees lest you destroy the abode of divine beings; you should not kill certain animals lest

24 Johnson Vadakumchery, "The Earth Mother and the Indigenous People of India," *Journal of Dharma* 18:1 (1993), 90.

25 Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010), 169.

26 A. Wati Longchar, "Tribal Theology: Nature and Method and Perspective," *Journal of Tribal Study* 5:1 (2001), 63.

you kill the symbol of your clan or you kill an animal that your ancestor has a totemic relationship with.[27]

Decolonizing Our Understanding of Mother Earth

The ideology of the "white man's burden" harms nature in all its diversity. It reveals the superior attitude of colonizers in their relationship with people outside the global North, who feel they carry the responsibility for the future of the earth, people, and cultures. The first white man's burden was the need to civilize the "non-white." In later phases of colonization, the white man's burden was to develop the third world. The third phase of western colonization are ongoing efforts to control the natural resources of developing countries and to expand capitalism. This has led to environmental degradation in these countries. Mother Nature lost its mystery and sacredness in the western world view. A common characteristic of colonization in all phases was the control of the rights and resources of local Indigenous peoples.

The colonizer's prescription for the global South's salvation creates new burdens, where the salvation of the environment is not achieved through the old colonial order.[28] In response, Indigenous knowledge and belief systems that formerly ensured the creation of Mother Earth—which the colonial missionary considered "superstitious" and "irrational"—need to be acknowledged and revived. This is because, apart from Indigenous knowledge of eco-principles and practices, no other tradition exists that addresses the concern of Mother Earth as its own.

Colonizers have used their interpretation of the biblical phrases to "have dominion" (Gen. 1:26) and "to rule" (Gen. 1:28) to promote human interests without recognizing that the survival of humans is not possible without nature. Indigenous people live in nature and learn in its bosom. The idea of dominating creation does not exist in their context, as the land holds the principal value and is closely connected to the identity and survival of the people. To recognize these Indigenous resources, we must decolonize our minds. Only this way can we protect Mother Nature, including her forests, mountains, and rivers. We must decolonize the colonial interpretation of God that has isolated God from the Indigenous earth community who serves as guardian. Indigenous beliefs exhorting the preservation and care of creation have sustained Indigenous people in the past. These are now threatened by the incursion of neo-liberal development and the influences of the market economy into their territories.[29]

27 Rodinmawia Ralte, "The Perceived Interconnectedness of Realities in Indigenous Worldview: Good News to the Whole Creation," in *Good News to the Whole Creation: A Festschrift to the Rev. Dr. V.J. John*, ed. Limatula Longkumer, Philip Vinod Peacock, and Rodinmawia Ralte (Kolkata: ISPCK, 2016), 254–55.

28 Mies and Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 264–65.

29 Lyngdoh, "Reclaiming Mother Earth," 66–69.

The Relevance of Naga Spirituality to Ecological Values

Indigenous earth-honouring communities are the most affected by climate change, as they are displaced from their sacred places due to its effects. Climate injustices linked to the practices of economic exploitation and racial and ethnic discrimination lead to class inequalities.[30] The Naga people have to address these ecological issues, which they feel profoundly because of their spiritual connection to Mother Nature. The Naga community believes in an alternative way of approaching creation that respects the equal rights of all creation and appreciates its diversity. Understanding the spiritual interconnectedness of all creation enables the world to regain the ecological balance between humans and their natural environment. We need the Indigenous spirituality of the God-world-human relationship to correct dominant perceptions of creation and bring forth an ecologically friendly environment. In such a search, Indigenous spirituality provides the vision—through an understanding of a Supreme Being that is organically related to all creation.

Indigenous Naga spirituality

Upolu Luma Vaai sees the contemporary world failing, with society growing more secular, losing any sense of spirituality, and becoming polarized. The rights of grassroots, often poor, communities, who mostly depend on the land and ocean for their livelihoods, are being trampled upon. For Vaai, discussion about ecology and climate injustice is rooted in spirituality, as Indigenous people do not speak *for* the earth; rather, they speak *as* the earth and as the earth's relatives.[31] Unfortunately some still regard Indigenous religious practices and spirituality as evil. However, Indigenous spirituality has more to say and give based on its relationship with nature. Indigenous spirituality has always centred on relationship within the whole creation.[32] The earth is the mother, and all living beings, including human beings, are kin. This relationship creates a sense of belonging that inspires the faithfulness of Indigenous people toward creation.[33]

In the Indigenous spiritual world living beings, the non-living environment, and the supernatural interact. Disruption of this relationship leads to the disintegration of all living and non-living things. Despite each thing having autonomy, all things

30 Ernst M. Conradie, *Christianity and Earth Keeping: In Search of an Inspiring Vision* (South Africa: Sun Press, 2011), 47.

31 Upolu Luma Vaai, "Eco-Relational Spirituality: A (K)new Story for the Earth from a Pasifika Perspective," in *Transformative Spiritualities for the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, ed. Fernando Enns, Upolo Luma Vaai, Andres Pacheco Lozano, and Betty pries (Geneva: World Council of Churches and Globethics.Net International, 2022), 21–22.

32 The scientific and anthropocentric understanding of creation as inanimate is alien to Indigenous people, who identify with "relations" within creation.

33 Stan MacKay, "An Aboriginal Perspective on the Integrity of Creation," in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 34.

are inseparably related. Thus, the core of Naga spirituality is the affirmation of the connectedness of all living realities. Creation exists in a cosmic God-world-human relationship in God's *oikos*.[34]

Myth of creation

The myth of the Indigenous Naga people is the grounding reality of religion that contains the truth.[35] The Indigenous worldview transcends the sacred/secular dichotomy by bringing together the natural, supernatural, space, and time in a single system.[36] The ancestral story of the *Phom* Naga tribe, passed down in the oral traditional, told of their origin and settlement, which was linked to the organic nature of creation.[37] Phoms believe that they were descended from *"Meihongnyu,"* understood to be the Supreme God, the creator among the Phom Naga tribe of Nagaland. At one point in time, the ancestors of the Phoms lived as a settled community on Mount Yingnyushang[38] and spread across different parts of the present Phom territory and even beyond that region. On Mount Yingnyushang, the Phom Nagas developed their socio-cultural, political, and religious practices. They also developed the techniques of building houses, cultivating land, and growing crops.[39] The traditional Phom people believed there were two gods: a celestial god and a terrestrial god. The former is known as *Shang Kahvang* and is responsible for rain, thunder, and sunshine. The latter is *Chong Kahvang* and is believed to be the creator and sustainer of everything on earth. Also, the Phom Naga believe in many deities, such as the gods of home and of the paddy fields, forests, rivers and rocks, and lofty hills.[40] All of these spirits protect the people and reside in every place, such as in trees, mountains, forests, and rivers. This is why the Indigenous people respect and revere nature on a spiritual level.

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34 Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 96–98.

35 Mircea Eliade views myth as a "true story" that is beyond story and as the most precious possession as myths that are sacred, exemplary, and significant. He elaborates that myth is holy history that took place in the prehistoric era, the time of the origins. Myth also describes "creation," explaining how something came into being. It describes what actually occurred, which fully realized it. Supernatural Beings are mythological characters. Myth informs how reality came into being, whether it is the entirety of reality, the cosmos, or merely a portion of reality, a variety of plants, a specific type of human behaviour, or an institution. See Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963), 1.

36 Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 26.

37 Phom is one of the major recognized tribes in the state of Nagaland, India. The Phom Naga people live mainly in the Longleng district of Nagaland, India.

38 Mount Yingnyushang is the highest mountain in the Phom Naga land jurisdiction. People believe that they settled on that mountain, forming one single village named "Yingnyu," and were scattered to different villages later.

39 B. Henshet Phom, *The Phom Naga Indigenous Religion: A Socio-Philosophical Perspective* (Longleng: Yingli College, 2000), 9–10.

40 Henshet, *The Phom Naga Indigenous Religion*, 24–25.

Indigenous Naga cosmology

Cosmology for Indigenous people refers not only to a set of natural rules, but also to the relationship of all reality. It is not about interacting alone, but about recognizing and correlating that we are responsible for one another.[41] In the Indigenous Naga cosmology, nature is sacred and a mystery beyond human comprehension. Every iota of creation is alive and represents the manifestation of the divine in nature. The earth is the foundation of this cosmo-centric spirituality, and everything on it is linked together. Thus, an organic relationship is possible because of this centrality of the earth.[42] This affirmation is the foundational ecological relationality of the Indigenous faith, which makes harmony with all of creation the starting point of the Phom Naga people's spirituality.[43] The Naga understand that all creatures are distinct and unique in their own rights, but they are also inseparable. They all are interrelated because the Spirit in-dwells in all creation.

Ecological signification of the Phom Naga Indigenous folk dance

The Phom Naga traditional folk dances have carried deep ecological significance since ancestral time. They transmit the unique character of the people and their culture to the world and illustrate the need to revive and protect this culture in order to share Indigenous knowledge. The dances centre on the creatures of creation and cannot be understood outside of the relationship with God's land. The dances signify the cycle of seasons of the land by celebrating the expressions and exuberance of life.[44]

The Phom Nagas express their deepest thoughts in songs: history, politics, love, and legends. Because the Nagas have no written records, this knowledge is traditionally passed down through the medium of folk songs. For example, the *Oha* song among Phom Naga is sung during *monyu*[45] festivals. The romantic song narrates stories of animals, birds, fish, plants, and insects with reverence and love. The *Kahsho Asho* is a song sung in the paddy fields, recalling the bountiful harvest of the past years. It sings of joy and the creatures of the farm.[46] Such oral Indigenous songs that give tribute

41 Upolu Luma Vaai, "Relationality, Creation Care, and Eco-Diakonia in Pasifika Communities," in *Creation Care and Eco-Diakonia: An International Handbook on Concepts and Theological Perspectives of Churches from the Global South*, ed. Daniel Beros, Eale Bosela, Lesmore Ezechiel, Kambale Kahongya, Ruomin Liu, Grace Moon, Marisa Strizzi, and Dietrich Werner (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2022), 413.

42 Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 33–36.

43 George Tinker, "The Integrity of Creation: restoring Trinitarian Balance," *The Ecumenical Review* 41:4 (1989), 535.

44 Longchar, *Returning to Mother Earth*, 86–87.

45 *Monyu* is one of the biggest spring festivals of Phom Naga tribe of Nagaland. The festival is celebrated from April 1–6 every year. Monyu is observed after the sowing is done in paddy fields, invoking God's blessing for a bountiful harvest.

46 Henshet, *The Phom Naga Indigenous Religion*, 19–21.

to nature are the flesh and bone of the Nagas, who define themselves as organic beings and give the highest respect to Mother Nature's creatures. These resources could be foundational principles in our ecological mission to challenge ecocide.

A shift from anthropocentric to Indigenous eco-centric view of creation

A dualistic philosophy and anthropocentric view of life segregate concern for Mother Earth.[47] The eco-centric approach views the whole being as more important than the sum of its parts.[48] Thus, we need knowledge that promotes respect and a caring attitude toward God's creation. We need Indigenous spiritual values that prohibit the exploitation of creation and acknowledge the spiritual relevance of all nature. In this way, the spiritual relationship of humanity and the rest of creation is renewed and confirmed.[49]

Sallie McFague asserts that humans need to be gardeners, co-creators of the world; there is value to be found in all forms of creation.[50] This is similar to Indigenous people's spiritual orientation toward an environmental ethos, which reflects the resilience of spiritual values[51] imbedded in taboos and totems. This centres everyday life and offers a multi-species outlook that modern humanity needs to embrace to keep the environment safe. Naga spirituality holds strongly that total ecological transformation is possible through affirmation of the Supreme Being's integrity of creation. Consequently, we cannot neglect spiritual connection with the land, which is not there to conquer but to be in harmonious relationship with. Naga spirituality demands a spiritual relationship with our earth family through mutual connection, not abuse of land that distances the relationship.

Decolonizing Eco-Theology for Common Witness

Native American theologian Randy S. Woodley holds that colonizers' misconceptions about and degradation of Indigenous people disrupted Indigenous people's societies. Their life of harmony was destroyed through the

47 Now more than ever, society is in a position of being in the Anthropocene Epoch. We are destroying the whole planet system, and nature is sending a warning about the cruelty of humanity. Humans, who are co-creatures of Mother Nature, are forgetting that we are only one part of the whole picture of this cosmos. We must return to our roots, like the Indigenous people, who share commonality with Mother Nature. See Pella Thiel, ed., *Faith Voices for Ecocide Law* (Stockholm: Stop Ecocide International, 2022), 12–13.

48 Ernst M. Conradie, *Christianity and Earth Keeping: In Search of an Inspiring Vision* (South Africa: Sun Press, 2011), 69.

49 Conradie, *Christianity and Earth Keeping*, 69.

50 Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993) 162–65, at 190.

51 Hazel T. Biana and Virgilio A. Rivas, "Nature-Based Religions, Plant Kinship, and Sustainability," *Journal of Dharma* 47:2 (2022), 153.

Doctrine of Discovery, Puritan theology, and assimilation policies. Woodley argues that the Indigenous worldview is physically and morally holistic, with a tangible spirituality that is egalitarian, peace-seeking, and cooperative. It inhabits a natural interconnectedness to all creation and engenders hospitality and generosity. Thus, life is governed by harmony, tolerance, and interplay in a community of life.[52] In such a perspective, the care and the community practices of Indigenous communities and their historic struggle in protecting creation from colonization, and commodification expose the correlation between ecological injustice and unjust systems and practices of exclusion.[53]

Dominant eco-theologies are mostly unable, or in many cases reluctant, to understand environmental crisis as an issue of injustice. Colonial perspectives have resolved that environmental problems are fundamentally technical and technological issues that can be fixed by economic and scientific experts within the prevailing neo-liberal capitalist order. However, the danger is that environmental problems cannot be solved through the structure of colonialism and capitalism, as it is that very system that accelerated these problems in the first place.[54] Decolonizing eco-theology indeed seeks to reflect an Indigenous resolve to destabilize theological legitimization of colonization. This is a constructive attempt to revisit the eco-centric praxis of the Indigenous Naga people, which provides alternative knowledge. It is a voice that can move us toward eco-justice theologies in our contemporary world of environmental concerns. We need to evaluate the context of Indigenous peoples' approach to caring for Mother Earth through knowledge, creation stories, and ethical practices, which will provide a perspective different from dominant eco-theology.

Today, even though there is awareness of Indigenous ways of life in conserving our ecological values, we must de-romanticize the organic Indigenous sacred resources. Rather, tribal knowledge must be harnessed and passed on like any discipline of study. Decolonizing eco-theology demands we decolonize the mindset of hierarchical theological arguments regarding God's creation, bringing an ecological reformation that requires witnessing together what the Naga people are calling for and how they have lived in harmony with all creation. Today, we need to join our hands together to find ways to change our perspective in order to survive amicably with Mother Nature.

52 Randy S. Woodley, *Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview: A Decolonized Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2022), 97–99.

53 S. Lily Mendoza and George Zachariah, *Decolonizing Ecotheology: Indigenous and Subaltern Challenges* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 2.

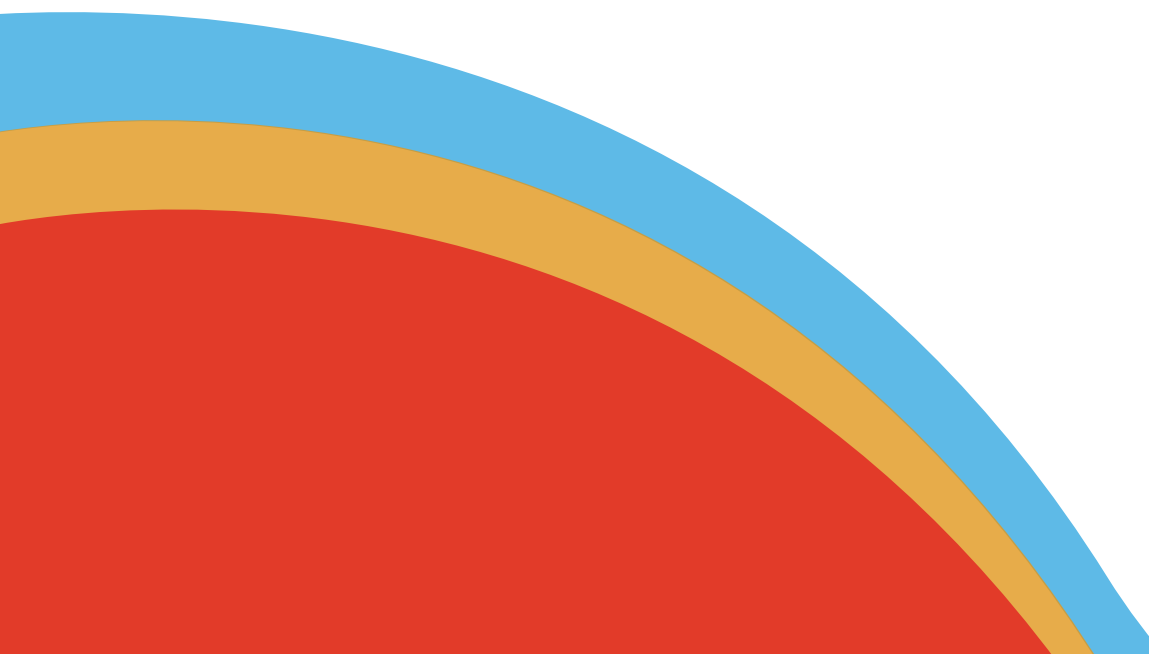
54 Mendoza and Zachariah, *Decolonizing Ecotheology*, 5–6.

Conclusion

Indigenous eco-theology, based on experiences and traditional eco-resources, is an essential task of Indigenous theology. The organic, eco-friendly nature of

Indigenous people does not accept the anthropocentric view of colonial powers, which see the traditional Indigenous religious aspects of conservation as evil and demonic. These views should be decolonized to examine and reclaim them for our theological reflections. Given that Indigenous eco-theologies are life-affirming and liberating, we need to take into serious account their whole eco-system, which is

based on an Indigenous spirituality that has been misunderstood. Even after long years of marginalization and subjugation, Indigenous people exist as living proof of a spiritual connection with Mother Nature. Such a perspective is still vital and needs to be deepened through the promotion of Indigenous peoples' relationship with the natural, ecological world. Without such steps, talking about ecological balance and spiritual connection with the earth's family is attempting to liberate oneself after killing one's mother.



Seeds of Return

Shane Goldie

From ashes of the past, we rise anew,
With dreams of lands reclaimed, of skies so blue.
The churches' walls, once silent, now must speak,

Of reparations just, of futures meek.

Land repatriation, a healing art,
Restoring what was lost, a mending heart.
In acts of justice, seeds of hope are sown,

A promise to the Earth, to lands re-grown.

We walk this path of history's embrace,
With every step, we honor, we retrace.
For in these lands, our spirits will revive,

In justice, peace, and love, we truly thrive.

Author's Notes: The final poem, "Seeds of Return," embodies a vision of healing and hope. It looks to the future, where reparatory justice and land repatriation are not just possibilities but realities. The injustices suffered by Indigenous communities cannot be undone, but meaningful restitution, including the return of land and resources, is a crucial step toward healing. This poem was written with the weight of history in mind—the long legacy of colonization, the theft of lands, and the complicity of institutions, including the church, in these acts. But rather than dwell only on the pain, this piece looks forward, imagining a world where churches take responsibility for their role and actively participate in reconciliation through tangible, restorative actions.

The imagery of seeds is important here. It represents not only the potential for new life and growth but also the resilience of Indigenous peoples, who have endured and continue to thrive despite centuries of oppression. Seeds of justice, when planted in truth and watered with reparations, can restore balance to both the land and the relationships between peoples. Through this poem, I express my deep conviction that true justice involves not only words but deeds. Land repatriation

and reparatory justice are steps toward mending the broken ties between the Earth, Indigenous communities, and those who have wronged them.

(Each of these poems is a thread in the larger tapestry of the poetry collection I envision—an exploration of the intersections of spirituality, justice, and the environment. They are not just artistic expressions; they are calls to action. In each word, I hope to spark a deeper awareness in the reader, to ignite a sense of responsibility for the Earth and for the Indigenous peoples who have always been its stewards. By tying together the spiritual, political, and ecological, this collection aims to educate, inspire, and mobilize those who read it. These poems are an invitation to stand with Indigenous communities, to honour their wisdom, to fight for their rights, and, ultimately, to work together toward a liveable, sustainable future for all.)

Freedom from Colonial Christian Oppression

Anne Pattel-Gray

Around the world, First Nations peoples from Canada, the United States, Aotearoa, and Australia have survived colonization and missionization, and we continue to resist the onslaught of the dominant Western culture. We have continued to hold fast to our traditional beliefs as we struggle to decolonize and embed our traditional knowledge into our theological endeavours.

First Nations peoples' faith has been nurtured over thousands of years, and as a result we have a very intimate relationship with the Creator Spirit. Our ancestral narratives reflect this relationship, and our ceremonies give praise to our Creator Spirit and remind us of our obligations to one and other, to the land, to people, to the environment, to creation, and to the Law, as well as the responsibilities given to us by the Creator Spirit. Among First Nations people, there are power-filled stories about the acts of the Creator Spirit in the very beginning, as we are considered the oldest living cultures in the world.

First Nations Christian leaders tell of their ancestral narratives who spoke about our knowledge and belief of a Creator Spirit, who through our spirit ancestors formed our world and forged our identity, culture, and Law. This process highlighted the relationship between First Nations peoples, creation, the spiritual world of our spirit ancestors and the Creator Spirit, and how they were all linked to each other and dependent upon this interconnection. Our faith and the spiritual world were, and still are, the life force and foundation of our existence and survival. The Creator Spirit is the source of life for us, and we cannot survive without our connection to the life source as stated by our spiritual leaders.

We, First Nations people, have a deep understanding of the divinity of the Creator Spirit, as this has been nurtured over thousands of years. The Creator Spirit is the Creator of our world and the Creator of our humanity. We are born in the image of the Creator Spirit, and we are who we are because of the Creator Spirit. We have an intuitive sense of God as Creator Spirit, as a wisdom teacher on country, and as Spirit.

The Creator Spirit bestowed upon us our land and entrusted this world to us, and we are to protect, care for, and rejuvenate our Mother Earth. The Creator Spirit handed down our Law—which dictates every aspect of our life and permeates our spiritual life—and taught us how to care for our country. It revealed our obligations and responsibilities regarding our kinship system and our religious and spiritual life. The Creator Spirit gave us our ceremonies, songs, and rituals, through which to honour the Creator and to remind us of the Creator's presence and that the Creator is always with us.

We are who we are because the Creator Spirit made us who we are, and we are blessed by the Creator Spirit in our lands and in the teachings of our spirit ancestors.

Western Colonial Domination

First Nations people in Canada, the United States, Aotearoa, and Australia experienced horrific treatment when the West invaded our lands. So began the forced indoctrination of Western Christendom, which was the beginning of our nightmare.

The colonizers dominated every aspect of the Bible, to the point where the biblical text was used to justify colonial theft, dispossession, oppression, genocide, and rape. The Bible was also used as the basis to claim we were a cursed, demonic, and inferior race of people.

The colonial invaders, with their racist views and belief that their "whiteness" made them superior, considered First Nations peoples as inferior and morally bankrupt.[1] What they failed to see was the rich spiritual life in which First Nations people lived and the presence of the Creator Spirit in us.

Today, Australia's First Nations peoples continue to experience racial discrimination. In 2010, the Federal Government suspended the *Racial Discrimination Act* that protects the human rights of Australia's First Nations people. We see the continuing removal of our children from their families and community. We also see governments taking control our people's income, the high incarceration rates of First Nations children and young people, the high suicide rates of our young people, and the loss of cultural heritage and cultural rights. These horrific acts that have been inflicted upon Australia's First Nations peoples have had a deep psychological impact on our lives, and the effects of this trauma is still felt today.

Sadly, the most frightening aspect of the church's complicity in the subjugation of First Nations peoples is the heartfelt sentiment usually expressed that it was done "with the best of intentions." The Christian missionaries, with their forced impositions—and, in fact, those dominations that worked among First Nations communities—were partners with the government in the genocide. Unwittingly no doubt, and always "with the best of intentions," the missionaries nevertheless were guilty of complicity in the destruction of First Nations cultures and tribal social structures. They were complicit in the devastating impoverishment and death of the people to whom they preached. Other genocidal acts led to the crushing of First Nations people's identity and spiritual beliefs.

1 Anne Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood: Racism in Australia: Critically Appraised from an Aboriginal Historico-Theological Viewpoint* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

The history of colonization is seen as the domination of the Western world; whether this is good or bad, it has had an impact upon the emotional and psychological lives of First Nations people, resulting in intergenerational trauma through the vehicle of missionization. Defining the methodological process of the historical and current experiences of continuing racism does not alleviate the enormous trauma inflicted upon First Nations people. Discrimination and marginalization is our lived reality.

The legacy of "colonial Christianity"[2] and its effects on both First Nations and colonial participants in the missionization process means there is a critical need to identify and reaffirm our traditional spirituality and cultural heritage as the first step in our struggle for religious self-determination. As a result, we have begun the process of decolonizing our theology and removing all Western bias.

As a First Nations woman from Australia, I struggle with the colonial narrative that was presented to us that portrays a colonial God who favours one race over another. This tradition has been used to justify Western colonizers who identify themselves as the "chosen ones." I cannot believe that this colonial God is one and the same as the Creator Spirit that we know and understand and in whose spirit we breathe.

This colonial God that the colonizers brought to First Nations people's lands was and still is resolved to destroy First Nations people. We cannot tolerate bearing the image of this God; nor can we find comfort in, or communion with, a God who acts like a colonial landlord. It is imperative that by returning to the images of Creator Spirit prevalent in our culture and spirituality, we are able to de-colonize this colonial God as we de-colonize the biblical and theological narratives.

The faith of First Nations people has been nurtured over thousands of years, and as a result, we have a very intimate relationship with the Creator Spirit. When we speak of this relationship, we invoke the Spirit Creator in our midst. Our ancestral narratives reflect this relationship, and our ceremonies give praise to our Creator and remind us of our obligations to one another, to the land and the environment, to the Law and the responsibilities given to us by the Creator Spirit. Our image of God is unlike the one portrayed by many colonial missionaries, who presented God as dwelling at a distance, living in heaven in splendid isolation. Many early missionaries did not discern that God was present in our lands nor did they see the high level of spirituality that was present in our First Nations cultures long before they appeared.

First Nations people cannot help but contemplate this colonial God as a distant ruler who has handed over to the human colonizer the whole created order as a

2 For a more comprehensive history of Australian church mission activity and its impact on the First Nations of this land, see John W. Harris, *One Blood: Two Hundred Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity* (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1990).

resource under their oversight and for their own use and benefit. God is a faraway king who has ceded control of all the animals and plants to his human servants. This God instructs his human assistants to rule over what has been entrusted to them. If God, the heavenly monarch, has handed the whole created order over to the human colonists as his landlords, the outcome is that they, in turn, are free to do what they want with it. This was further seen in Western Christian interpretation that they were the "chosen ones." This reading paved the way for colonizers' early attacks on the First Nations peoples' religious and spiritual beliefs that the sacred spirit permeates all of nature.

This colonial concept of God as a disembodied deity uninterested in earthly affairs stripped the world of any spiritual significance or meaning. This created a separation between our kinship with our environment.

It is important that the churches and Christians realize how essential it is to de-colonize the biblical narratives. We first need to restore our relationship with the Creator Spirit and next make a radical transformation that sees us reconnecting physically and spiritually with the land and our common kinship with each other and all creation. We need to understand our human necessity to see ourselves as part of nature but not as nature itself or as a power over nature. We must regard ourselves as living in nature and nature being important to our very existence. We long for our primordial sense of belonging to Mother Earth: our existence is dependent on her.

The Aboriginal people of Australia have stated over the past several decades that Adam and Eve could not have been Aboriginal because if they were, they would have eaten the snake and not the apple. Based on this understanding, Adam and Eve would not have been the basis for original sin entering the world. As First Nations people, we believe sin first entered the world because of colonization. Nevertheless, through Western colonization and Christianity, this became the vehicle through which they transported their cultural views to make others inferior to them.

As a First Nations theologian, I cannot develop my theology without setting the experiential context of the suffering, subjugation, and oppression of First Nations people. Experience, both historical and current, therefore, defines the First Nations peoples' suffering and the oppression of Western colonization and missionization around the globe through the theft of land, genocidal acts, slavery, segregation of First Nations people from colonial settlements, the government and church process of the stolen generations, and the environmental destruction of First Nations peoples' land and lifeways by Western forces.[3]

First Nations men and women possess an affinity with the land, and, through our Spirit, we feel the heartbeat of our Mother Earth: we are inextricability bound to her for survival.

3 Pattel-Gray, *The Great White Flood*.

The colonial view of a God is one that separates the Creator Spirit from creation. It is not one that First Nations people can relate to at all—the Creator Spirit is the centre of our universe and the life force of our Mother Earth, on which all life depends for survival. We cannot comprehend a life that is not Creator-centred.

The role of First Nations women is considered critical to the maintenance, continuity, and survival of the entire societal structure. First Nations societies, historically and currently, depend on the equal participation of women. Today, the status and position of First Nations women within First Nations societies differs depending upon the impact and absorption of the colonization, missionization, and Western patriarchal beliefs in our society. Biblical interpretation that reinforces patriarchalism and Western values that treat women as less have done much to undermine the status and role of First Nations women throughout our land. That is why it is critical for biblical narratives to be de-colonized so that First Nations people can dismantle and hopefully eradicate colonial power and domination, which will empower all First Nations people around the world.

From our perspective, this blatant colonial tradition that confirms the original harsh mandate to dominate the land and all living creatures of the land (Gen. 1.26–28) also reflects the colonial worldview and colonial actions of the European peoples who invaded and colonized the land of Australia. We, the First Nations of Australia, experienced a colonial oppression comparable to the colonial mandate reflected in the conclusion of the flood narrative in the Bible (Gen. 9:1-3). Our response is to discern the falsity of this biblical tradition, recall the truths of our First Nations relationship with the land and the land beings of our country, and endorse the alternate interpretation. As First Nations Christians, we are free to take this stand not only because of our rich spiritual relationship with the land and the Creator Spirit in the land, but also because we believe that Christ has liberated us from the sin of colonial control and freed us to correct ancient biblical narratives and retrieve the underlying spirit of the gospel that is colonial-free.

Today, we challenge the colonial inheritors who continue to benefit from this colonial structure, laws, and systems in how they do theology on stolen land. As the descendants of the colonizers, they have inherited great power, wealth, and privilege. This is the result of their forebears' barbaric arts upon my people, which saw the theft of our lands through legal fiction, the massacre of thousands of my people, and the multiple generations of stolen children and hundreds of years of oppression and subjugation.

Seeking Freedom

There is an important and critical need for First Nations scholars to examine how colonization holds both Westerners and First Nations people in bondage, as we are all indoctrinated to hold a certain colonial worldview that is either

conscious or unconscious. We must be aware that these very structures in which we participate and function every day are founded on colonial racist values to maintain colonial power, wealth, and privilege. An individual who participates in these structures may not be racist, but the structure itself is, and we work in these structures that maintain racist and exclusionary systems to benefit the dominant culture. We need to be able to name this if we are ever to be free and liberated from this colonial mindset that holds us in bondage. While this worldview and structure and these values remain in place, we—both Westerners and First Nations people—will never be liberated or freed from a life of division and First Nations people will be forever confined to a life of inequality, subjugation, racism, and poverty. If ever there was a time to transform our theological education, the time is now.

Therefore, we First Nations theologians encourage the academic theological institutions to question themselves as to how the church has literally whitewashed biblical narratives and to examine the racist overtones found in the cultural biases and racist exegetical and hermeneutical practices of Western scholars. Where do we begin to develop a theological truth that names the racist Western treatment of First Nations people in order to deconstruct the racist Western hegemony of Canada, the United States, Aotearoa, and Australia and to recognize the integrity, strength, and resilience to survive? There is a critical need to eradicate those aspects that hold us in bondage. We must begin a process to deconstruct and decolonize our Christian beliefs and theological education to be able to speak with integrity in the world in which we live.

From our perspective, the colonial tradition that confirms the original harsh mandate to dominate the land and all living creatures of the land (Gen. 1:26-28) also reflects the colonial worldview and colonial actions of the European peoples who invaded and colonized the land of Australia. Our response is to discern the falsity of this biblical tradition, recall the truths of our First Nations relationship with country, humanity, and creation, and endorse the alternate interpretation.

Liberating Our Theology

First Nations theologians have a very important role to play at this critical time around the world. We need to create opportunities to influence theological education and discourse that bring a First Nations view and theological insight, hermeneutics, and exegetical process—in this way, re-interpretating biblical narratives though a cultural lens that draws on ancient knowledge and wisdom. We must provide First Nations Christians with access to academic theological education to raise up the next generation of First Nations leaders. We need to demand instructions to allow us to be equal participants to influence theological education and to share our theological insights, cutting-edge scholarship, and groundbreaking research.

In Australia, First Nations people are excluded from theological education, which is seen as the last bastion of white supremacy. We need to strive for radical change and the pivotal shift that is so desperately needed in this country.

It is important that First Nations people move beyond Western imperialism, colonization, and missionization and advocate by seeking guidance from our Creator Spirit "made known among us in Jesus, who is Christ."[4] First Nations spiritual leaders wonder if this is the year of the "Lord's favor" to bring "good news" to the poor and downtrodden First Nations people around the world—where "liberation is seen here through the lens of God's covenant with the poor through Jesus Christ, which is seen as unique to Biblical tradition."[5] Therefore, I state, if we are to have any hope of reconciliation and restoring wholeness in creation, then we First Nations people must begin by challenging the colonial inheritors who do theology on stolen land, asking what it means for them to be seen as colonial inheritors. Because it is time for "Truth Telling" and exposing the lies, the brutality, and the power, privilege, and wealth colonial inheritors have gained through the injustices committed against First Nations people.

Hence, it is necessary for First Nations people to decolonize themselves, and especially to realize that the Bible is still being used by some to colonize us. We must break free of the colonial shackles in order to be free from the colonial might. It is encouraging to know that First Nations people have begun to define our own theology through our cultural lens, drawing on our cosmology, epistemology, and ontology to interpret biblical narratives. We want to shape our theological thoughts and expressions by embracing our own spirituality that gives meaning to who we are as a people. Our theology is born from our land, founded on our relationship with the Creator Spirit since time began; and it is this deep ancient wisdom that sustains and provides our resilience to survive.

In saying that, it is important to note that only together can we First Nations people and Westerners make a difference, as we wrestle with these challenging questions. Together, we have to recognize how colonized we are and begin the process of decolonizing ourselves in the endeavour to liberate our theology from the bondage of colonialism.

4 Richard Twiss, *"Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way"* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 46.

5 Jude Lal Fernando, "People, Land and Empire in Asia: Geopolitics, Theological Imaginations and Islands of Peace," in *People and Land: Decolonizing Theologies*, ed. Joine Havea (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), 131.

About the Authors

Mr Juan C. Chavez-Quispe is an Aymara theologian and anthropologist serving as a member of the Ecumenical Indigenous Peoples Reference Group. He is an alumnus of the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey and has published papers and book chapters on Indigenous peoples' history, cultural heritage, and spiritualities, as well as on Andean theology. He has taught at Universidad Mayor de San Andrés and ISEAT Institute.

Rev. Shane Goldie is a Cree/Métis, 2-spirited ordained minister in the United Church of Canada (UCC). At 23 years of age, Rev. Shane Goldie is the youngest serving ordained minister in the UCC. His academic background includes a BA in theology, as well as an MDiv. He is a passionate and dedicated theologian and author, who brings a deep sense of spirituality to his ministry. Growing up in various denominations before finding a home in the UCC, Rev. Goldie's journey of faith has been marked by significant challenges: from being kicked out of Bible camp and a Bible college to being abandoned by the church due to his sexuality and racial identity. However, these experiences ignited in him a desire to explore the intersection of faith and identity. His work is driven by a commitment to inclusivity, justice, and spiritual growth. His experiences have not only shaped his ministry but also inspired countless others seeking to reconcile their faith with their identity. Rev. Goldie is located on Treaty 6 land and the homeland of the Métis in northern Alberta, Canada. He is originally from Treaty 4 in southern Saskatchewan.

Mrs Hana Kirreh is an Indigenous Palestinian freelance consultant, trainer, and peace-builder activist. She was born in Bethlehem and lives in Jerusalem with her family. Growing up in a family deeply rooted in her homeland, Mrs Kirreh received her MA in urban development in Jerusalem Studies from Al-Quds University and a TOT certificate from the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, The Netherlands. She provides training to youth and women on leadership, conflict transformation, communication, environmental awareness, and gender-based violence. She has participated in and organized many seminars, consultations, and conferences about women's empowerment locally and internationally. She often gives talks to international groups about the challenges faced by Palestinian Christians in general and women in particular owing to the political and economic situation, social traditions, and culture. Mrs Kirreh participated in COP 27, Sharm Al Sheikh, including as a KAIROS Canada panellist. For Mrs Kirreh, the issue of women's leadership in the church and in other positions of leadership is very important; she believes that women are great leaders and agents of change. She works both locally and internationally not only

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Rev. Vavauni Ljaljegean was born among the Paiwan People, one of Taiwan's Indigenous nations, in Pingtung, South Taiwan. She currently serves an Indigenous church in South Taiwan. Rev. Ljaljegean completed her master's level study in anthropology at the National Taitung University, and theological training at Tainan Theological College. Her research centred on how Indigenous people in Taiwan cope with the trauma caused by natural disasters and how they find a path to healing through their Christian faith and traditional culture.

Dr Atola Longkumer is a member of the Naga Indigenous peoples of the Indo-Myanmar region of northeast India. She is currently on the faculty of the United Theological College, Bangalore, India. She teaches Primal Religion (Indigenous religions). A Baptist by church tradition, she did her theological education in India and the United States. She is the book review editor of the *Journal on Mission Studies* (Brill).

Prof. Dr Anne Pattel-Gray was the former head of the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Divinity, Melbourne Australia. Currently, she is a member of the Indigenous Advisory committee of the Institute of Indigenous Knowledge at Melbourne University and a Fellow of the Wesley Centre in Melbourne. Prof. Pattel-Gray earned a PhD from the University of Sydney in the Study of Religion with a major focus on Aboriginal religion and spirituality. She received a Doctor of Divinity in 1997. She is a member of the Uniting Church in Australia and known as a trail blazer and has opened many doors for her people. She is a recognized scholar, theologian, and activist and a prolific writer with many chapters and authored publications. Prof. Pattel-Gray is a descendant of the Bidjara Nation in Queensland and a renowned Aboriginal leader within Australia and internationally. She has dedicated her life to the struggle of Australian First Nations as a strong campaigner and lobbyist seeking justice, equity, and equal representation for First Nations people.

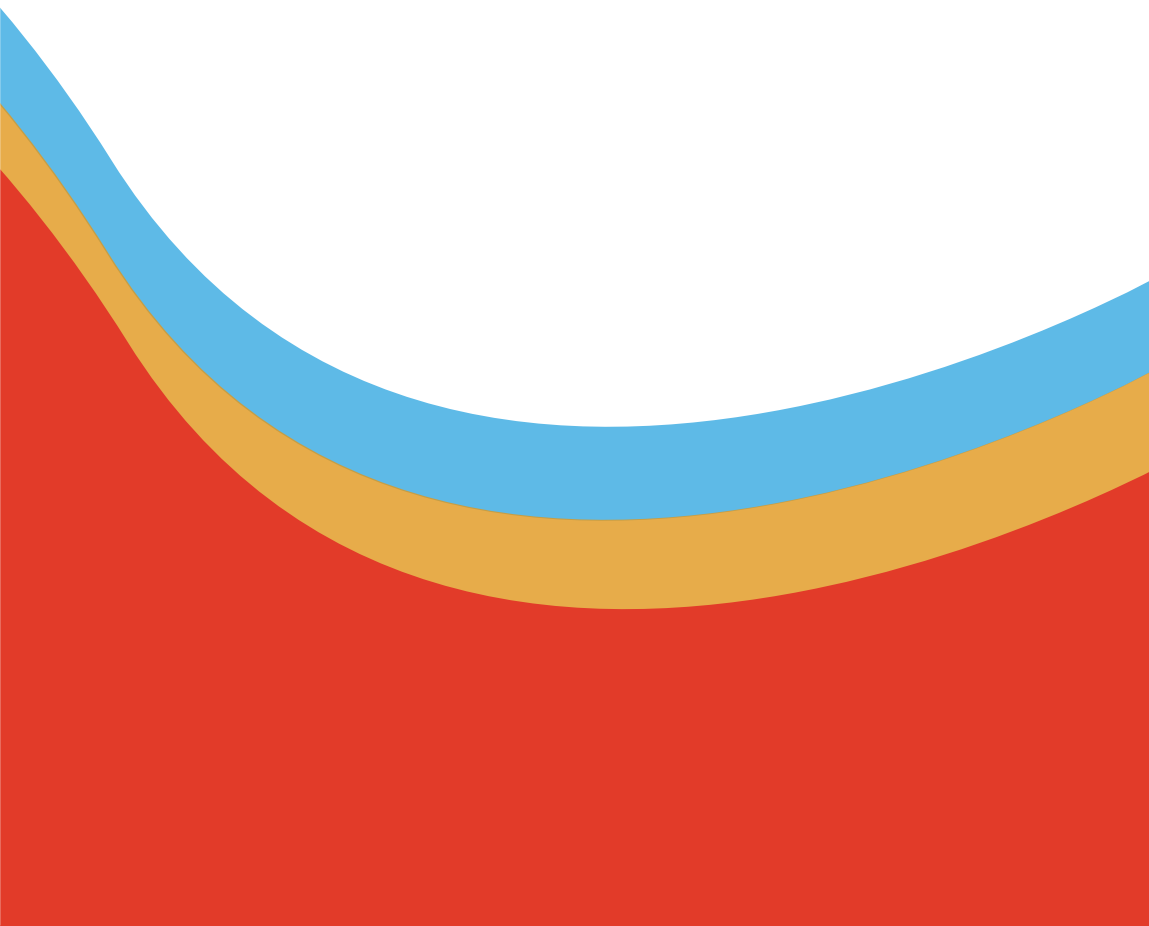
Mr Lempang Phom is a young Phom Naga Indigenous Theologian from Nagaland, India. He comes from the Council of Baptist Churches in Northeast India. He received a BA from Nagaland University, a BDiv from Bishop's College Kolkata, and an MTh in Religions at the North India Institute of Post Graduate Theological Studies under the Senate of Serampore University Kolkata. Mr Phom completed a Master of Advanced Studies (MAS) in ecumenical studies from the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey under the World Council of Churches and the University of Geneva, Switzerland. His main interests are religion, decolonization, Indigenous studies, culture, and grassroots ecumenism. He is currently preparing for his doctoral studies.

Ms Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis was born in the time of Bardudnii. Bardudnii is the time of medicinal plants in the Gunadule calendar. Originally from the Gunadule nation and Panamanian, Mrs Solano Miselis is currently director of Indigenous Memory and a doctoral student in theological studies at the North American Institute of Indigenous Theological Studies. She participates in the Indigenous climate change caucus on the agriculture negotiator team.

The Rev. Prof. Dr Patricia StandTal Clarke is Sámi and Eastern Band Cherokee (Wolf Clan), the daughter of Barbara Syverson (first generation Norwegian American) and Howard Clarke, who survived forced boarding school to become a veteran career officer and pilot in the US Air Force. She lives in Phoenix, Arizona, USA. In October 1978, after 17 years of training, she became a didanawisgi (medicine priest). Dr Clarke received her Bachelor's Degree from UC Berkeley, her MD from the University of Minnesota, her Family Medicine residency at Dartmouth, her Integrative Medicine fellowship with Andrew Weil, and her DMin from Claremont School of Theology. She was ordained a United Church of Christ priest in May 1981. Dr Clarke serves as Minister of Wholeness at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ (southwest conference). She has served with the United Nations, World Health Organization, and World Council of Churches; as a priest serving local and national faith communities; as director of RedRoad Medicine (a Native American medical, theological, and policy think tank); in private medical practice; and is on the faculty at two medical schools. In 2004, the National Institutes of Health honoured her as "Changing the Face of Medicine." Dr Clarke has taught and practised traditional Native medicine and theology (Ancient Wisdom) of 2,000 generations around the world, for half a century.

Chief Edmund Wayne Stuurman, born in Bethelsdorp, Port Elizabeth, to Gert and Eva Stuurman, is the Senior Khoi Leader of the House of Klaas and Dawid Stuurman and the Gamtouer Ethnic Community. The eldest of four siblings, after completing secondary education, he studied Commerce at the University of the Western Cape. Chief Stuurman worked in the entertainment industry before joining Volkswagen South Africa (VWSA) in 1998. After leaving VWSA, he launched his own transport business, which continues to operate successfully today. Chief Stuurman's calling as a community leader emerged, following a deep spiritual encounter that prepared him for leadership within his heritage. In 2018, he was chosen by his elders to revive the legacy of the Stuurman family and advocate for the recognition of their cultural and historical rights. Under his leadership, key partnerships have been established with Nelson Mandela University and North-West University to develop a biocultural community protocol and eco-education programmes. Chief Stuurman continues to fight for the preservation and recognition of Khoi heritage and the Gamtouer Ethnic Community in South Africa.

Dr Fransina Yoteni has dedicated herself to various fields. She holds the first doctoral degree in educational philosophy within the Evangelical Christian Church in Papua. She teaches at STFT GKI Izaak Samuel Kijne in Jayapura and serves as a guest lecturer at several universities both domestically and internationally. Her research addresses critical issues such as justice, peace, and environmental preservation, employing a deconstructive approach to the thoughts of Indigenous Papuans and contextual learning design. Her commitment extends to numerous national and international organizations, including the World Council of Churches, the United Evangelical Mission, World Vision Indonesia, and the Indonesian Christian Education Assembly in Papua. Dr Yoteni aims to be an inspirational role model for her daughter Anatasia and women in Papua and Indonesia as she advocates for educational advancement and the development of quality, integrity-driven female leaders.



"Our theology is born from our land, founded on our relationship with the Creator Spirit since time began; and it is this deep ancient wisdom that sustains and provides our resilience to survive," writes Anne Pattel-Gray. She effectively summarizes the Indigenous spiritual insights shared by the authors of this publication. Together, they reveal how Indigenous wisdom is essential to tackling the climate crisis and how that crisis is linked intrinsically to justice concerning land matters. As Shane Goldie notes, "The way we treat the Earth reflects how we treat ourselves and each other."

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