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OUR RITUAL PARTICIPATION WITH THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (IP) OF MINDANAO A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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A Growing Relationship with the Talaandig First Nation in Bukidnon

PeaceBuilders Community, Inc. (PBCI) and *Coffee for Peace (CFP)* have been working with the Talaandig First Nation for the past three years in the areas of peacebuilding, fair trade, and cross-cultural understanding. It is clear with this people that we are a team of Christian missionaries and that our activities are done to advance the love of God we have experienced in Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday, February 12, 2012, we celebrated this partnership and formalized it through a ritual offered to the Creator of the whole cosmos—known to Hebrew writers as YHWH, to New Testament writers as THEOS, to the Western Christians as GOD, to the Muslim as ALLAH, and to the Talaandig people as MAGBABAYA.¹

In the Talaandig worldview, every aspiration, action, event, or project starts with spirituality. That's how we, at PBCI, look at the world too. We start with the many common grounds with other cultures. We engage in honest, transparent, and relational dialogue when we encounter differences in our worldviews.

In all things, our relationship with the Talaandig and other Indigenous Peoples is grounded in the unconditional love (*agape*) of God. We continually seek to demonstrate God's love incarnated in Christ using the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹ For a deeper theological discussion on the way humans refer to God, see: Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

Participating in the Talaandig Ritual

Preparation. Our participation starts during our staff planning and briefing session at the PBCI Center in Davao City. We begin with a community worship, communion, biblical reflection, personal testimonies of our spiritual journey with God, and prayer time. Then we usually review the needs of the various people groups we work with from the perspective of *peace and reconciliation* (PAR)—the heart of our ministry.²

Our Director of Field Operations presents the rationale for our planned visit to the Talaandig Ancestral Domain located in Barangay Sungko, Municipality of Lantapan, Province of Bukidnon. The Director of Support Operations reports that the formal communications have been done, logistical arrangements are completed, and ritual paraphernalia are all packed-up.

Before we leave, we always pray that God would go ahead of us. We pray that our lives, as individuals and as a team, would reflect the good news of God as incarnated in the life of Jesus Christ, characterized by the fruit of the Holy Spirit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23).

Participation. Along the way, we usually stop by the market nearest to the Talaandig Ancestral Territory to buy native chickens. Those will be the sacrificial offerings during the ritual. As soon as we arrive, we deliver the chickens and the ritual paraphernalia to a respected lady who serves as the community’s lead ritualist.

Datu Migketay Saway, the lead elder of the Talaandig First Nations and the Council of the Seven Tribes of Bukidnon, welcomes us at the Hall of Peace—a two-storey structure with kitchen and sleeping quarters on the ground floor, and a function hall on the second floor. We are immediately led to our sleeping quarters. As soon as we’ve settled down, we are then led to the dining table and are served with Talaandig Arabica Coffee and native pastries. Datu Saway and his wife, Bae Lisa, and some elders spend time with our staff, telling stories about peace, justice, spirituality, inter-faith dialogue, cross-cultural communications and many other topics relevant to our partnership. With gentleness, love, respect, and conviction, we make clear that what we say and do are all expressions of our obedience to God—that is, to share the love of Jesus.

Meanwhile, his team of ritualists prepare the ceremonial materials upstairs.

The Talaandig Council of Elders and the ritualists then invite us to join them in the ritual. Datu Saway explains to us that this is primarily and ultimately an act of recognition of the supremacy and guidance of the Creator in this relationship-building between the Talaandig First Nation and PBCI. He invites us to open our hearts and minds and seek to understand Talaandig spirituality; at the same time, we are encouraged to pray in our hearts and minds in accordance with our faith and spirituality.

And so we participate through our biblical lenses. We respectfully share our faith-perspective to Datu Saway, telling him that we desire to be honest with our spiritual identity. He expresses his understanding.

² PBCI’s *PAR Initiative* is presented in our website’s front page: <http://www.peacebuilderscommunity.org>

We then come forward before the elders offering a one-peso coin each, carefully laying down every coin on the table covered with white cloth. We are also asked to offer a red cloth and a white cloth, a bottle of red wine and a bottle of white wine. In our hearts and minds, these ritual paraphernalia we brought are indeed a representation of our offering to God, the Creator and the Sustainer of the whole cosmos. In our hearts and minds, the coins symbolize our material possessions that are offered to the Great Provider. In our hearts and minds, the red cloth and the red wine symbolize the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that cleansed us from our sins. In our hearts and minds, the white cloth and the white wine symbolize our purity in God's sight because of the Divine Mercy and Grace in Christ.

The next activity is the animal sacrifice. During a more formal and elaborate ritual, pigs are slaughtered and Datu Saway would tell the story of their creation story and how their native cosmology determines their view of life and their customary laws.³

But in most rituals wherein we participate, four chickens are offered—three white or red chickens to Magbabaya and the good spirits, and one black chicken to the bad spirits. Before the chickens are slaughtered, long prayers are uttered by Datu Saway, by the elders, and by the ritualists. They all pray aloud at the same time. They acknowledge the presence of, and give praises to Magbabaya. They also acknowledge the presence of the spirits, good and bad. They also thank Magbabaya and the spirits for the safe arrival of our team; they would ask for our team's safety while in the Talaandig territory; and, they would ask for blessings during our meetings.

After the prayers of praises and supplication, the offering prayer is uttered while cutting the neck of the chicken until it dies, one at a time.

The slaughtered chickens are then brought to the kitchen to be cooked by simply boiling them. They will soon bring them back upstairs for the second part of the ritual.

While waiting for the chickens to be cooked, Datu Saway would open the table for some informal discussions. He would ask our team how we felt during the first part of the ritual. He would ask what was going on in our hearts and minds. He would also invite us to ask questions about the ritual. Imagine the spiritual and theological discussions that would surface during this time!

Personally, I always love this time of inter-faith dialogue when I can listen to a Talaandig person's spiritual journey through their indigenous ritual. I also thank God that I can openly share the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ through the symbolism of the Talaandig ritual without manipulating the conversation to win a religious debate. This time is a wonderful *kairos* moment to listen and share our spiritual journey in an honest, friendly, non-adversarial sharing of our respective faiths.

After about an hour, the boiled chickens are brought upstairs and are served on the table. Long prayers of offering are uttered again. After about 15 minutes, Datu Saway and the elders conclude their prayers and invite everyone to take a small piece of the chicken as a symbol of our individual prayers. We're invited to get a piece of the chicken wing as a symbolic prayer to fly and reach our aspirations; get a piece of the leg as a symbol of our prayer for strength and stamina; take a pinch of some skin off the head to pray for wisdom.

³ Datu Migketay Saway and the Talaandig Council of Elders gave PBCI permission to listen and record aspects of their cosmology and its implications to their customary laws and peacebuilding. See, *Guardians of the Sacred Oil and Comb: Towards an Understanding of Talaandig Spirituality, Customary Laws, and Peace Practices* (Davao City: PBCI, 2010).

Finally, after about two hours, a 10-15 minute closing prayer is uttered. This concludes the whole ritual. A meal usually follows, and the fellowship continues.

Some Biblical-Theological questions Arising from Our Participation in IP Rituals

Because we openly publish⁴ our IP ritual participation, we often get questions about spiritual warfare, compromise to Satanic forces, unfaithfulness to biblical doctrines, and other missiological inquiries. Some of the most frequently asked questions are as follows:

1. *By participating in this ritual, is PBCI not taking seriously the reality of spiritual warfare?*
2. *Isn't the shed blood of Christ on the Cross enough to redeem the IPs from their sin and from Satan? Why do you have to participate in the actual slaughter of chickens? The missionaries who have been here many years ahead of you participates with the IP believers' "redeemed offering" without killing the chicken and releasing them to freedom.*
3. *Is PBCI not compromising with the work of the Enemy? Are you not afraid of demonic possession resulting in your participation in those rituals?*

Allow us to answer the above questions.

1. *By participating in this ritual, is PBCI not taking seriously the reality of spiritual warfare?*

We take the reality of spiritual warfare very, very seriously. We are currently in dialogue with a North American missionary who has been in Mindanao for many years. The mission group where this colleague belongs has strong influence among a number of local pastors and Christian leaders, who in turn, influences some Christian IP leaders. They often quote a passage from Ephesians (6:10-17) to remind and exhort us "to be sensitive to the dynamics of spiritual battle facing us" as we do ministry in Mindanao:

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

We, at PBCI, thank God and sincerely appreciate our fellow Christian missionaries and fellow Christian leaders who love us by expressing their concern as we engage with the spiritual practices of the Indigenous Peoples in this land. We take our dear colleagues' warning sincerely and we study them carefully.

Indeed we need to be strong, protected with the full armor of God, discerning evil manipulations against us, so that we will be able to stand firm in the midst of the spiritual struggle we are facing in our daily life and work. We understand that Paul used all these battle gear imageries to help us get a picture of the kind of serious preparation we need as we advance *the gospel of peace*.

⁴ Reporting our activities publicly is part of our commitment to transparency. See one of our Facebook photo albums: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.282967025102415.65065.154118454653940&type=3>

Yes, we must always be prepared, but not to the extent that our consciousness is always set on a *war mode*. We must not forget that this passage exhorts us to prepare for spiritual struggle and that these words of truth are revealed for the purpose of advancing *the gospel of peace*.

Our awareness of spiritual battle starts with careful biblical, theological, and anthropological analyses. Dr. Paul Hiebert, a well-respected mission anthropologist among Evangelical circles, warns us of a non-biblical worldview influencing many Western Christian missionaries.⁵ He refers to this worldview as the Indo-European Myth, a dualistic view of reality characterized by the eternal coexistence of good and evil. He further explains:

*This view sees Satan and the demons as autonomous beings. They may have been created by God in the beginning, but now they no longer depend on God for their continued existence. Creation was an act completed in the distant past. Given this dualism, all reality is divided into two camps: God and Satan, angels and demons, good nations and evil ones, good humans and wicked ones. The good may be deceived or forced into doing bad things but, at heart, they are good. The evil have no redeeming qualities. They must be destroyed so that good may reign.*⁶

In this Indo-European view of reality, the central issue is order over chaos. The goal in this reality is the victory of *order* (which is always seen as good) over *chaos* (which is always seen as evil). The victory of order over chaos is the ultimate goal of divine and human endeavours so that a kingdom of justice and peace can be inaugurated.⁷ Order needs more power and more power brings more orderly kingdoms. This leads orderly kingdoms to expand their view of order through war and colonization. The empire—one of the highest structures of order—is mostly borne out of war and colonization.⁸

Many Westerners retained this Indo-European worldview and simply wrapped it with Christianized terminology as Hiebert mentioned above. Some well-meaning missionaries read the Bible through this Indo-European lenses instead of transforming their Indo-European worldview with Biblical Worldview. This imperialistic-colonial worldview also became the framework of many secular aid organizations who “have done so much ill and so little good” among the poor nations they try to develop.⁹

When some of those Western missionaries reached the Philippines, including Mindanao, and saw the seeming chaos of Indigenous Peoples’ life and society (from their Euro-centric view of order and civilization), they used their version of Christianity, wittingly or unwittingly, as the religion of

⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, “Biblical Perspectives on Spiritual Warfare,” *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), pp. 203-215.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁸ A respected historian-journalist observed this in one of his works; see Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Random House, 2002).

⁹ William Easterly, *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

Western colonialism and imperialism.¹⁰ This kind of Christianity destroyed most of the cultural identities and bases of livelihood of the IPs in this beautiful land of Mindanao.

Unfortunately and sadly, many Filipino Christian leaders are still advancing this Western, imperialistic version of Christianity that continues to be a stumbling block for the IPs in Mindanao to appreciate the transforming love of God. This view is also the framework for the Philippine government's "Manila Imperialist" policies for the Indigenous Peoples throughout the country.¹¹

We, at PBCI, call on our fellow Filipino Christian leaders and missionaries to change how we do our ministry among IPs. One practical example is to consider Hiebert's advice to rethink our view of chaos:

In the biblical worldview, not all chaos is evil. Evil chaos results in destruction and death. Creative chaos is the unformed potential from which spring creation and life. It is the unformed material out of which God created the universe (Gen. 1:2). It is the infant not yet grown to adulthood. Creative chaos is inherent in genuine relationships. The birth of a child introduces turmoil into the routine of the home. Friendships and intimate marriages mean letting go of power and sharing decisions. Our Western need for order and control works against true communication and fellowship, because it is the passage through chaos that forms the basis for real communication and community.¹²

We also adhere to the following biblical principles to guide our understanding of spiritual warfare:¹³

First, there is a spiritual battle for the hearts and souls of humans. *The focus in Scripture is not on the battle between God and Satan. That has already been won (Heb. 2:14). Central now is God's willingness to win back humans who joined Satan in his rebellion. God seeks these rebels by love, truth, and the assurance of forgiveness and reconciliation. Satan is trying to keep them by deceit (Rev. 12:9), intimidation, temptation (1 Thess. 3:5), and accusation (Rev. 12:10). He appears, not as a dark angel, but as an angel of light, counterfeiting all that God does.*

Second, Satan has no power over God's people other than what God permits him for the testing of their faith. *Moreover, in every temptation God gives the power to resist (1 Cor. 10:13). This does not mean that new converts may not be oppressed by Satan. The oppressed need to be freed by ministries of deliverance.*

Third, Satan and his hosts can and do demonize people, but those with demonic presence are to be pitied more than feared. *The church needs team of pastors, doctors, psychologists, and those with the gift of exorcism to minister to them. The real danger is found in people who coolly and rationally reject Christ and his rule in their lives, lead others astray (Eph. 4:14; 5:6; 2 Thess. 2:3), and build human societies and cultures that oppress people and keep them from coming to Christ. Idolatry and self-absorption, not spirit possession, is still at the heart of human rebellion.*

¹⁰ This is the thesis of the book published by one of our Strategic Advisers at PBCI. See, Mariano C. Apilado, *Revolutionary Spirituality: A Study of the Protestant Role in the American Colonial Rule of the Philippines, 1898-1928* (Manila: New Day Publishers, 1999).

¹¹ The current government policy simply want to lump all the First Nations in the Philippines as one sector, forgetting their respective, distinct indigenous ethnic communities, differing languages, and differing social organizations. A prominent Filipino anthropologist has been questioning this policy since the 1990s, as indicated in the Foreword of his book: F. Landa Jocano, *Filipino Indigenous Ethnic Communities: Patterns, Variations, and Typologies* (Manila: Punlad Research House, 1998), p. ix.

¹² Hiebert, p. 210.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-214.

Fourth, our focus as Christians should be on love, reconciliation, peace, and justice. *If we focus too strongly on a war metaphor we are in danger of applying it in our relationship to the world and to our brothers and sisters in the faith. Satan likes nothing better than have us fight among ourselves or to feel superior to non-Christians.*

Fifth, the supreme event in spiritual warfare is the cross. *There Christ died, even though he had but utter one command and ten thousands of angels would have come to his rescue (Matt. 26:53). If our understanding of spiritual warfare does not make sense of the cross, it is wrong.*

Sixth, we must avoid two extremes: a denial of the reality of Satan and the spiritual battle within and around us in which we are engaged and an undue fascination with, and fear of, Satan and his hosts. *Our central focus is on Christ, not on Satan. We should see God's angels at work more than we see demons. Our message is one of victory, hope, joy, and freedom, for we have the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome evil. The cosmic battle is over. We are messengers to declare to the world that Christ is indeed the Lord of everything in the heavens and on earth. All authority has been given to him. (Matt. 28:18 NIV)*

2. *Isn't the shed blood of Christ on the Cross enough to redeem the IPs from their sin and from Satan? Why do you have to participate in the actual slaughter of chickens? The missionaries who have been here many years ahead of you participates with the IP believers' "redeemed offering" without killing the chicken and releasing them to freedom.*

We believe that the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross was enough, once and for all, to redeem people from their sin and from Satan. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews made it so clear:

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. (Heb. 7:27 NIV)

This truth may not be known to many IPs. PBCI exists to make this known to them. The process of Gospel communication is *from the known to the unknown*.

What is known to our non-Christian IP friends are part of God's *general revelation* to all human beings: (a) that God is their Creator and Sustainer; (b) that in this world we live in, there is an interplay of spiritual and physical dynamics; and, (c) that in this physical-spiritual world, they aspire for love, joy, peace, and justice. We affirm these truths along with our IP friends. These are God's truth for all truth is God's truth.

What may not still be known to them is the *special revelation* (a) that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn. 14:6); and, (b) that his story can be known from the Scripture. In this special revelation, all people are invited to come into the Story where "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" can be genuinely experienced (Gal. 5:22-23). The communication of the Gospel of God is tested by the fruit of the Spirit of God. As we make this truth known to them, we remember that God is a dialogical God who wants to listen and to reason together (Isa. 1:18) so that people would experience salvation. God's dialogical approach to communication was ultimately done through the Incarnation—when the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We are committed to a dialogical approach to Gospel communication.

Active listening is key to dialogical communication and relationship-building. Christian missionaries today must return to the incarnational approach of Jesus—that is, leaving our comfort zones and entering into the world of the people we seek to reach with the Gospel. One way of doing this is by looking for *Redemptive Analogies*¹⁴ in each culture. These are stories, practices, and values indigenous to a local culture that are similar to, and illustrate, aspects of the gospel narrative.

For us at PBCI, the chicken sacrifice in the Talaandig ritual is one of the most beautiful Redemptive Analogies among the IPs in the Philippines. Similar to the lamb offering among ancient Israelites, it is a foreshadow of Christ's sacrifice on the cross (cf. Heb. 9:11-28). This is the Talaandig's cultural open door for us to explore what blood sacrifice means to them so that, in a genuine, transparent, non-manipulative dialogue, we can also share what Christ's sacrifice means to us:

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Heb. 9:13-14 NIV)

The biblical concept of foreshadowing is also the reason why we participate in rituals even if there is shedding of chicken blood. As have been mentioned above, it is part of the Redemptive Analogy.

3. Is PBCI not compromising with the work of the Enemy? Are you not afraid of demonic possession resulting in your participation in those rituals?

We have stated the principles of spiritual warfare that guides our ministry among IPs. We are not compromising with Satan and his hosts.

We do not operate based on fear. We seek to operate based on the Spirit of God characterized by the fruit of the Spirit.

In our discernment, the most destructive work of Satan among IPs are people who build oppressive and exploitative structures; some are from outside their communities and some are from within their communities. Those evil structures destroy their cultural identities, their indigenous economies, their self-governance and self-determination as a people. Some of these structures advance religious imperialism, economic domination, political manipulation, and military suppression.

We need to advance the Good News of Jesus Christ in the context of these Satanic oppression within us and around us. Our spiritual discernment should be sharpened against Satanic oppression among individual's hearts and minds. But the same spiritual discernment must also address Satanic oppression in our religious structures, social structures, political structures, and economic-ecological structures. We must also cast out all these social evils as part of our spiritual struggle and as part of our holistic ministry.

¹⁴ This concept was coined by Don Richardson. He is a Canadian Christian missionary, teacher, author and international speaker who worked among the tribal people of Western New Guinea, Indonesia. He shares in his writings that, hidden among tribal cultures, there are usually some practices or understandings, which he calls *Redemptive Analogies*, which can be used to illustrate the meaning of the Christian Gospel, contextualizing the biblical representation of the incarnation of Jesus. See Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts: Startling Evidence of Belief in the One True God in Hundreds of Cultures Throughout the World* (New York: Regal Books, 2006).

At PBCI, we want to start casting out Satanic influences in our hearts and minds—selfishness, greed, oppressing those less powerful than us, negative comments against our sisters and brothers, sexual exploitation, cheating, deception, lying, and many other personal evils. We are also seeking to discern the way we do our work in advancing the Gospel. The way to advance the Gospel is not by religious imperialism, not by economic domination, not by political manipulation, and not by military suppression—even when the justification for all these structural evils can be wrapped within Christian religious endeavours, labelled with Christian religious language.

How then, do we advance the Gospel as witnesses of the Gospel of Peace?

By being *incarnational witnesses*.

IP Ritual Participation as Part of our Incarnational Witness

Our participation in the rituals of the Indigenous Peoples is part of our incarnation as witnesses of Jesus Christ. Being *incarnational witnesses*, first of all, means that we will love all people unconditionally and we will practice selfless love to the point of offering our lives to the people with whom we are called to live and to serve. This is exemplified in the humble life of Jesus of Nazareth whom we follow in response to His sacrificial love.

Secondly, *incarnational witnessing* means that, by God's grace, we will not lie. As witnesses to the truth we have experienced in Jesus Christ, we will initiate transparent and honest interaction with all the people concerned as we relate with them and as we formulate and implement our policies.

Thirdly, being *incarnational witnesses* affirm that justice is an attribute of God. Therefore, our tasks will be implemented in accordance with what is just and equitable among all people concerned.

Fourthly, *incarnational witnessing* means practicing genuine forgiveness. Using the energies available to us through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will absorb the violence committed against us so that our lives may be used as servants to stop the cycle of violence within us and around us.

Finally, it means incarnating God's peace in our lives. We will seek harmony and reconciliation with the Creator, with our Being, with Others, and with the Creation. We believe in solving problems through non-violence. By God's grace and mercy, we will not use weapons to hurt or to kill people as a means to accomplish our dreams, mission, and objectives.

May we all incarnate the beauty of Jesus Christ in our life and work as we live for God and among the people whom God so loves.