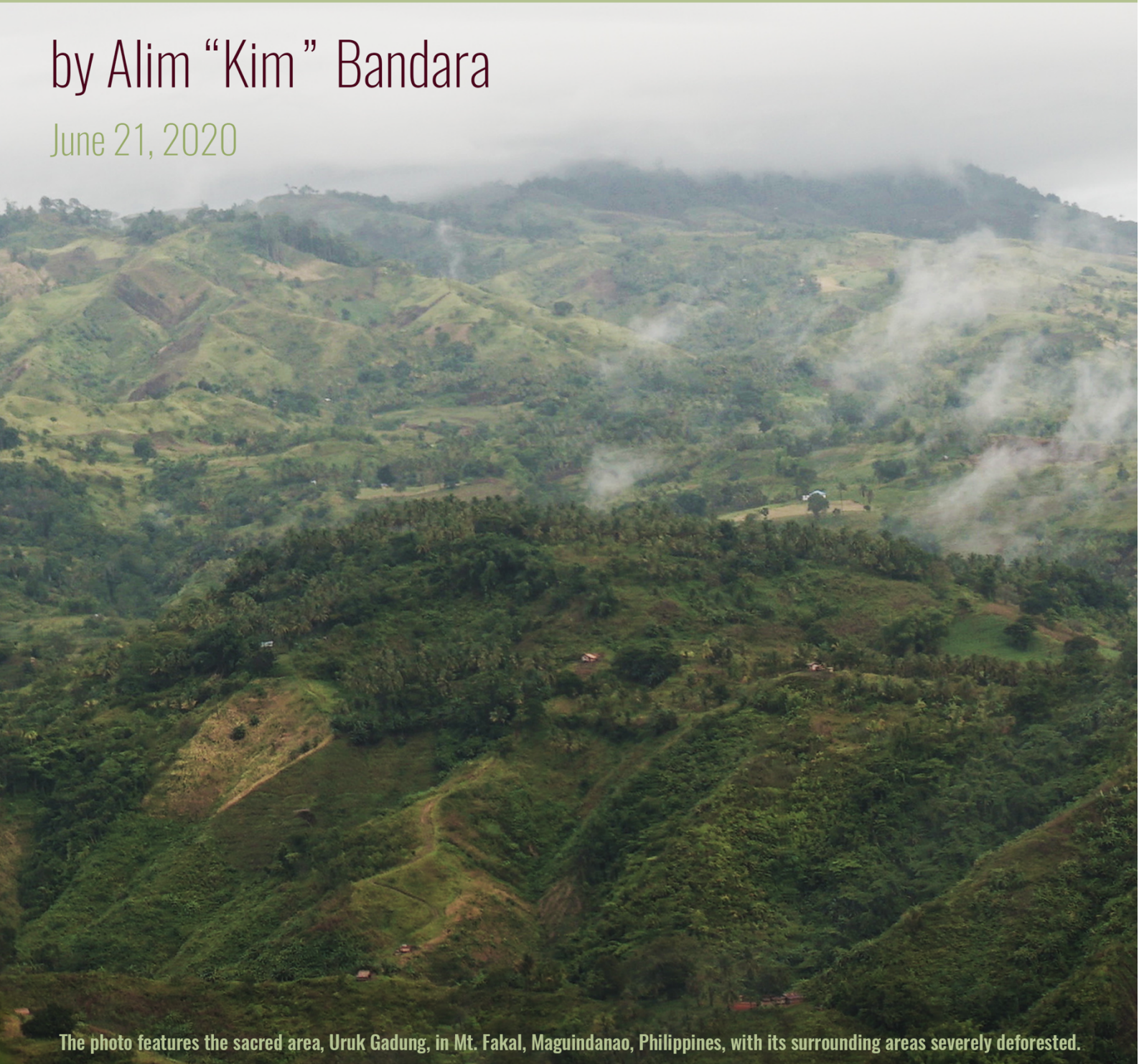


Overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic: *Lessons from the “dulet”*

by Alim “Kim” Bandara

June 21, 2020



The photo features the sacred area, Uruk Gadung, in Mt. Fakal, Maguindanao, Philippines, with its surrounding areas severely deforested.

Acknowledgements

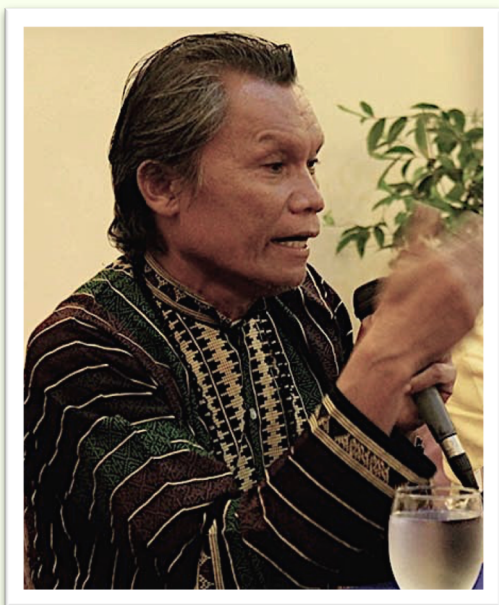
The author would like to thank all those who contributed to the realization of this essay, most especially to *Kemamal Keadatan* (KK) Magalyug for his valuable contribution in recalling and re-telling the *dulet* which is similar to what we are experiencing in this Covid-19 pandemic.

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Finally, this essay is dedicated to the *sulagad* mentor and 2010 TJG *Timuay Labi* (Supreme Chieftain), Sannie S. Bello, who departed to the *blowon fantad* (heaven) with the *Tulus* (Lord) on June 5, 2020.



About the author

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Photo taken by Medel V. Hernani of Davao Today.

Glossary

Baglalan	Traditional leadership titles in the <i>Timuay</i> system of governance
Bliyan	Spiritual leaders or shaman
Buneg	Crazy; refers to the abnormal relations of man and nature as used in this essay
Demales	Living with nature for a certain period of time; the gathering food to eat; taking rest to recharge lost energies and to drive away bad energies
Drantung senduratan	“Power and deceit”; used in relation to cash economy
Dulang	A structure used during rituals especially when communicating and giving offerings to the spirits
Dulet	A highly transferable disease brought by the <i>meginalew</i> (good spirit) to discipline the wrong doings of humanity
Fakal mountain range	The mountain range overlooking the Celebes Sea that stretch from Nalkan, Datu Blah Sinsuat, Maguindanao to Bantek, Upi, Maguindanao, Philippines
Fegebel	Smoke
Fenwaley	Something or person/s transformed into another image
Folut	Knotting; used during ritual as a form of registration
Fusaka inged	Ancestral or traditional territory of the Teduray and Lambangian Indigenous peoples
Kemamal Keadatan	Collective name of the different <i>bliyan</i> (spiritual leaders)
Kenogon	Lady or princess
Kodos	Broom
Magad	Easy
Samfeton (or Gesamfeton)	First aid
Segisu	Quality where there are varieties of food to eat
Senafeng	A medium-sized basket for rice storage
Sulagad	An indigenous system and practice of sustainable and environment-friendly way of livelihood and utilization of forest, land and water resources
Tagad-tagad	Temporary
Tefaya	Winnowing material
Timfada Limud	Highest-level of gathering and decision making
Timuay Justice and Governance (TJG) or Kesefanangguwit Timuay	Indigenous Political Structure (IPS) of the Teduray and Lambangian Indigenous peoples in South-Central Mindanao, Philippines
Timuay Labi	Supreme chieftain
Tulak	A ritual to communicate and offer something to God and the spirits

The Covid-19 pandemic

came to a surprise to the global community, critically affecting even countries with most modern and advanced medical technologies and health care systems. There are speculations that it was a man-made biological weapon that went wrong. Although ongoing studies show that Covid-19 was caused by a coronavirus that might have come from bats, which then transmitted to another wildlife, most likely the pangolin, and infected humans. The virus spread very rapidly through human-to-human transmission; hence resulted to the introduction of many quarantine protocols, ranging from international, national and down to the smallest units of the government territorial jurisdiction, in order to prevent the spread of the virus. A number of observers see the entire phenomenon as symptomatic of the changing relationship between nature and humans.

On March 17, 2020, the implemented lockdown in the Philippines involved

community quarantines, face masks and physical distancing. This limited the movement of people from one's house to another house, from one's community to another community. The lockdown reminded many Teduray and Lambangian (T&L) of old stories passed through generations, of highly transferable sickness where deaths took not only individuals but whole communities. There were so many victims that those who offered assistance to previous victims were infected and thereafter met deaths in an instant. Many lives were lost and left unburied. It was believed to be brought by powerful spirits as a form of discipline and punishment to humanity for desecrating the sacred relationship between humans, the natural environment and the spirits. The story is very devastating and frightening and therefore deemed improper of remembering or re-telling.

With due respect and honor to those who died, and to the high spirit who brought sickness to the humanity, the disease was recalled by the storyteller as the *dulet*.

Tulak and demales: an Indigenous peoples' response to dulet

Covid-19 and *dulet* are similar in many aspects. First, they are both transmitted by a carrier to the next person through body contact. Second, it is a disease that makes proper medication difficult to come by. Third, forms of lockdowns and physical distancing were implemented as preventive measures.

In these situations, the T&L have *demales* as a form of physical distancing. *Demales* meant leaving the houses temporarily to stay with nature, especially along the rivers to fish and to hunt. Without the presence of any face masks, community members would go to high grounds and shout messages to relatives or friends whom they

want to share items or goods. They would then leave the packed items they wish to share in a safe place where it will be picked up. This was the way of avoiding face-to-face or body contact in order to prevent transmission. What was different then was that *dulet* protocols were candidly followed

**“ [Covid-19 is]
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by people even without the police or arresting officer on guard, as is the practice now.

Demales is not only a preventive and defensive measure against *dulet*. It also restores lost energy by regaining physical and emotional strength after a heightened stress. It can help strengthen family relations by collectively gathering food that will be shared together. *Demales* serves to ease tensions; a way of relaxation during downtimes.

However, the disease will not stop spreading if one will simply run away from *dulet*. Along with the practical and necessary responses mentioned, the T&L have a high regard for the spiritual dimension of the response, as well.

“ **Covid-19 and *dulet* are similar in many aspects [...] what was different then was that *dulet* protocols were candidly followed by people even without the police.** ”

First, a small *senafeng* (rice storage) with rice and chicken egg inside, including a small *tefaya* (winnowing material) with *kodos* (broom) attached, must be displayed in the house for every individual or household. The arrangement is then hang inside the house, preferably at the center pole facing the main door of the house, so

that it can be easily seen by anybody including the good and bad spirits.



Senafeng: A medium-sized basket for rice storage

Second, a *fegebel* (smoke) ritual is carried out using small pieces of firewood at sunset after cleaning the surroundings of the house. In the absence of the firewood, cotton is used to create smoke, preferably in front of the house that is facing east.

Third, the *dulang*. It is a structure that is usually used for offerings and communicating to the spirits and *Tulus* (God). Ideally, it is erected near the house, in the eastern portion. During critical situations, whether it is natural or man-made calamities, a *folut* (registration) is usually done every day before sunset at the *dulang*, by knotting a *gito* around the post of the *dulang*. One knot symbolizes an individual residing in the house. This serves as spiritual inventory of the people who follow the will of *Tulus*. There is no need to be a *bliyan* (spiritual leader) in carrying out the task.



Folut: Knotting for registration

Fourth, the continued cleaning of water source, usually the head springs. This means that all waste products shall be properly disposed and that activities destructive to nature shall be avoided. The reason behind this is that good and bad spirits move around the open sea and, at times, go ashore through the rivers and springs. If they see that the water source is unclean, they feel bad and angry. This in turn will cause illnesses to any member of the family.

Finally, there is the *tulak*, the highest form of communicating with the spirits and *Tulus* to which only the *bliyan* can execute. This is a communal activity with a specific purpose of the enabling *bliyan* to communicate with the spirits.

Following these traditions, *Kemamal Keadatan* (KK) Magalyug conducted a ritual on April 2, 2020 at Uruk Gadung, the highest peak of the Fakal mountain range which faces the Celebes Sea to the West.



KK Magalyug carries out the ritual in his *dulang* at Uruk Gudang, Mt. Fakal

According to KK Magalyug, Uruk Gadung was once a place where a *kenogon* (princess) wove clothes out of cotton whenever she is requested by people who pass by. One day, however, she left the area when a man disrespected her. At present, the place is marked by live bamboos with water stored in between nodes, to be used for drinking during emergency situations.



Taking a naturally stored water from a bamboo at Uruk Gadung

The story of *kenogon* served as an introduction to the *tulak* that reflect good and bad habits of human beings. KK Magalyug said that the Covid-19 pandemic, a disease that can mean *dulet* to the T&L, is worth contemplating about.



Playing of gongs

KK Magalyug together with the female performers started striking the gongs. After a few minutes of silence and prayers, he narrated the protocols for the *dulet*. He followed by saying, “Don’t worry too much. Simply continue praying and following the protocols – old and new. Continue praying for the *dulet* bearer to stay away, for the danger of Covid-19 to spare the people vulnerable to the pandemic, especially the fellow human beings in urban centers”. Thereafter, food offerings were distributed

to people who participated. Additional food packs were given to members of the households who stayed at home.

In sum, overcoming the *dulet* is a long process. Ways of preventing the disease must include setting the distance from the carrier; proper hygiene; nourishing self with fresh food; re-integration with nature; and spiritual and psychological cleansing by installing necessary symbols of respect, humility, in line with the principles and values of the T&L, from the individual to the wider societal level.



Cooked rice for distribution

Finally, the *bliyan* negotiates with the spirit bearer to leave and return to its own place so that infected individuals and communities can recover and, eventually, take necessary steps to bring the society back to its healthier and more stable state.

The “new normal” for the Non-Moro Indigenous peoples

In the T&L world view, humans are part of nature and that the natural environment is the extension of the body and life. This means that a healthy ecosystem nurtures human life that brings forth healthy communities with good well-being. These are guided by the customary laws.

Any human activities that disrupt the sacred relationship are considered offenses with corresponding penalties that will come unexpectedly, as with the *dulet*.

In the past, the area of refuge in times of emergencies for the Non-Moro Indigenous peoples (NMIP) are along the creeks, the rivers, beside the mountains or under the trees and bushes. However, these traditional refuge areas are endangered since the encroachment of cash economy driven by profiteering business people and economic lords into the traditional territories. This caused massive logging, expansion of industrial agriculture and widespread use of chemicals in farming and electronic equipment in fishing and hunting.

For the T&L, this has always been the “new normal” ever since. In communities’ view, this created an abnormal condition for the peoples and humanity.

“ **Any human activities that disrupt the sacred relationship are considered offenses with corresponding penalties that will come unexpectedly.** ”

The *baglalan* interpreted the use of cash or money as *drantung senduratan* which literally means “power and deceit”. **Power** in this sense meant that it can be exchanged for anything you need and want,

and **deceit** because you cannot possess it forever thus one is pushed to trick others to get hold of it more.

“ **The *baglalan* interpreted the use of cash or money as *drantung senduratan* which literally means ‘power and deceit’.** ”

This interpretation in the usage of money is already known for a very long time yet many people still fall victims to the *drantung senduratan*. Cases have consistently been increasing within the *fusaka inged* and have, consequently, added to the deepening case of land conflicts.

Therefore, the so-called “new normal” of the mainstream society is not necessarily true for the traditional and intact communities. The “new normal” in the urban centers may have meant similar conditions to the imposition of Martial Law in Mindanao in the 1970s, but these conditions have long-been a standing state of the T&L communities.

Regardless if this is true or not, the traditional communities were affected by the new protocols for this pandemic, as introduced by the mainstream society. In fact, this has further exacerbated the pre-existing conditions of the communities.

Impact on the ground

The kinds of Philippine government’s response to Covid-19 are not totally new to the older generations of NMIPs. The state implementation met different reactions from community members. Those who

were reunited amid lockdown are happy, while those who were forcefully separated met the situation with a heavy heart.

New work order arose like the establishment of the “front-liners”, the segregation of people based on age bracket, the issuance of quarantine and work passes, and the installation of additional checkpoints for the enforcement of protocols for Covid-19, including the disinfection of passers-by.

Going to the market is also scheduled per *barangay* or *purok* in order to reduce the number of people in public places. Church services, meetings, birthdays and other celebrations were temporarily stopped, as well as public transportation.

Moreover, the most felt intervention to this pandemic was the relief services rendered by the government front-liners and non-government organization (NGO)/ civil society organizations (CSO) workers. This is, in addition, a response to long drought and the sporadic armed conflicts from both Moro and Non-Moro areas within the Maguindanao province in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

Even so, with the supposed “new normal”, distribution of relief goods with limited production activities due to Covid-19 will pose problems in the long run. As the efforts to collect, buy and deliver relief goods max out, the increasing needs of peoples will practically be difficult to sustain, especially without proper planning for the post Covid-19 conditions. In fact, the recent heavy rains that followed the drought last year did more harm than good to farmers, weighing the struggles even more.

In response, there were moves from some sectors among the NMIPs that there should be a unified move from among the NMIPs positioned in the government and NGOs/CSOs. There was a call for

convergence for coordinated interventions with the aim of not leaving anyone behind, in terms of relief distribution and humanitarian assistance in all affected individuals and communities.

“**Armed conflicts that coincided with Covid-19 added more burden to the communities.**”

Yet, politics hindered the initiatives. No less than the late Organization of Teduray and Lambangian Conference (OTLAC) Chairman Retired Police Senior Inspector (PSI) Timuay Marcelo C. Martin, Jr. called the shot. His last call to me was on April 27, 2020 with special mention of the top NMIP leader positioned in the government, Honorable Minister Melanio Ulama, who he said is difficult to reach despite all his efforts to get his attention. The next time I heard of the good Chairman was when he was admitted in the hospital followed by the somber news that he passed away.

Nevertheless, the group of Honorable Member of Parliament (MP) Romeo Saliga, a Bangsamoro Transition Authority member, and Honorable Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representative (IPMR) Lito “Gaspar” Mosela worked in tandem to serve the NMIP areas. This was done together with the Timuay Justice and Governance (TJG) and Teduray Lambangian Women’s Organization (TLWOI).

The TJG-Assisi Development Foundation team, led by community facilitator Allan Olubalang, also delivered relief goods to NMIP communities as an addition to the

main assistance from the local government units (LGU).

Armed conflicts that coincided with Covid-19 added more burden to the communities. The man-made conflicts, specifically the armed attacks and forced takeover of NMIP areas, intensified to which led to the evacuation of a thousand civilians from Barangay Kuya and Pandan in South Upi. Despite the humanitarian assistance, the pains and sacrifices of all victims have turned into anger and in danger of developing fires of hatred.

It is not a secret that one of the main root causes of these conflicts is related to land. It is an issue that has affected the individuals, families and clans and, later on, affected other interest groups and organizations.

Government officials are not blind to these conflicts and, in addition, are very slow to

mobilize established mechanisms for conflict resolution. There must be an effort to add and integrate traditional processes to the regular conflict settlement structures like the courts.

In the end, peace is nowhere to be found. We have long been witnesses to the systemic violence and aggression. Peace is transformed to mean fear and loss of freedom and rule of law that supposedly serves its constituents. The barrel of the gun became the new form of power in these conflict areas.

We fear that the old revolutionary saying will still persist: "If you want peace, prepare for war".

Under BARMM, this should be a thing of the past. We long and yearn for inclusive peace and development.

Nature retaliates

The role of nature in responding to emergency situations was once again tested by the Covid-19. This time, it was proven to be too weak to respond. Forest dwellers have found it difficult to depend on nature for their daily necessities as nature is now destroyed.

This is not a new phenomenon. These destructive practices have brought abnormality to the lives of the peoples.

In the past fifty years, the mountains, forests and rivers have been severely damaged with no signs of recovery in sight. The continued destruction of the forest has found nature to be more and more incomprehensible to the communities. People have started blaming the Supreme Being for the flash floods, landslides, to

which all was brought by the new technologies and ways of thinking that have gradually been adopted by the T&L.

“ The role of nature in responding to emergency situations was once again tested by the Covid-19 [...] This time, it has proven to be too weak to respond. ”

Regrettably, nature is now incapable of fully providing for humanity in these dire times.

Unhealthy and imbalanced environment is one of the major challenges in strengthening and sustaining *sulagad*, a practice of T&L that is inherently in harmony with nature.

The destructive activities have resulted to a *buneg*, a broken relationship between

humanity and nature. These are enough reasons to re-assess and criticize development frameworks that plunder nature.

We now see that in the experiences of the community, *drantung senduratan* is not the answer to the crisis.

Sulagad as an inspiration and hope

On the other hand, it is still not too late to mend humanity's relationship with nature amid the globalization of the modern lifestyle.

In the ancestral domains of the Indigenous peoples, there still remain covers of forests and free-flowing rivers and creeks. However, if we do not push for changes today, tomorrow might be too late.

In the economic life of the T&L, we know and practice *sulagad*, an indigenous system and practice of sustainable and environment-friendly way of livelihood and utilization of forest, land and water resources. Based from the research of two Anthropology students from the Teduray youth¹, *sulagad* is a Teduray and Lambangian term for everything edible that can traded with other items – whether these are planted or domesticated by human beings, naturally growing or running in the forest or open land, flying in the air or swimming in the waters – all of which are very accessible to humans.

The term is derived from the Teduray words, *magad*, *tagad-tagad* and *segisu*. *Magad* means easy to harvest cooked, served and eaten as it is grown in the backyard or areas that are very accessible.

It is also freely gathered from the forest anytime you need it. *Tagad tagad*, on the other hand, means an alternative source of food that provides nutrition for the body to have the ability to work, while *segisu* means complex and different varieties.

“ It is still not too late to mend humanity’s relationship with nature amid the globalization of the modern lifestyle [...] However, if we do not push for changes today, tomorrow might be too late. ”

Sulagad can also be a *samfeton* or *gesamfeton* which means an easy source of food during difficult times, like drought and other natural or man-made calamities that have adversely affect communities.

¹ In 2018, Allan Olubalang and Normindo Mosela made a research on *sulagad*.

The TJG's *sulagad* mentor

For the T&L communities and young leaders, Timuay Labi Sannie S. Bello is the mentor on *sulagad*. He remained the main articulator of *sulagad* being an Agriculture graduate in mainstream education and, more importantly, a foremost customary expert in the socio-economic, justice and governance practices of the T&L. He was a sought after *sulagad* educator in the local, regional and national conferences. In 2010, during the TJG *Timfada Limud*, he was selected as *Timuay Labi* (Supreme Chieftain).

The *sulagad* research of the youth is a validation of his teachings with TJG constituents, and together with his favorite reference, Seboten, who is a legendary *sulagad* practitioner and disciplinarian, with majority of the *fenwaley* (metamorphosed entities) made throughout the *fusaka inged*.



Photo of Timuay Labi Sannie †

Sadly, Timuay Labi Sannie Bello of Sitio Brow, Matuber, Datu Blah Sinsuat, Maguindanao has joined our Creator in everlasting life last June 5, 2020. This is not, however, the time to present the life story of Timuay Labi Sannie and his struggles and dedication to carry on the TJG and the protection of the *fusaka inged* inherited from our ancestors since time immemorial.

“ ***Sulagad* [is] an indigenous system and practice of sustainable and environment-friendly way of livelihood and utilization of forest, land and water resources.** ”

Yes, he departed to the other world but with joyful heart leaving the legacy of peaceful struggles he made together with other leaders and allies. He was relentless in the aim to take back the lost control and powers of the *baglalan* over the *fusaka inged* through the TJG.

Communities are now consciously working for the restoration of the ecological balance by strengthening the *sulagad* system.

For Timuay Labi Sannie, this is the true meaning of justice, peace and development for the T&L.
