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

by Alim “Kim” Bandara

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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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Likewise, a whole-hearted gratitude to the Timuay Justice and Governance (TJG) baglalan for sharing their dulet stories and wisdom on TJG principles.

On the technical aspect, a big thanks to the lay-out artist (Ms. JAG) for editing the text and to the author’s friends in Manila for their helpful suggestions.

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.

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About the author

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Photo taken by Medel V. Hernani of Davao Today.
### Glossary

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<td>Spiritual leaders or shaman</td>
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<td>Buneg</td>
<td>Crazy; refers to the abnormal relations of man and nature as used in this essay</td>
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<td>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</td>
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<td>Drantung senduratan</td>
<td>“Power and deceit”; used in relation to cash economy</td>
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<td>Dulang</td>
<td>A structure used during rituals especially when communicating and giving offerings to the spirits</td>
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<td>A highly transferable disease brought by the meginolew (good spirit) to discipline the wrong doings of humanity</td>
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<td>Fakal mountain range</td>
<td>The mountain range overlooking the Celebes Sea that stretch from Nalkan, Datu Blah Sinsuat, Maguindanao to Bantek, Upi, Maguindanao, Philippines</td>
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<td>Fegebel</td>
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<td>Something or person/s transformed into another image</td>
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<td>Knotting; used during ritual as a form of registration</td>
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<td>Ancestral or traditional territory of the Teduray and Lambangian Indigenous peoples</td>
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<td>Collective name of the different bliyan (spiritual leaders)</td>
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<td>Samfeton (or Gesamfeton)</td>
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<td>Segisu</td>
<td>Quality where there are varieties of food to eat</td>
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<td>Senafeng</td>
<td>A medium-sized basket for rice storage</td>
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<td>An indigenous system and practice of sustainable and environment-friendly way of livelihood and utilization of forest, land and water resources</td>
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<td>Winnowing material</td>
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<td>Highest-level of gathering and decision making</td>
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<td>Timuay Justice and Governance (TJG) or Kesefanangguwit Timuay</td>
<td>Indigenous Political Structure (IPS) of the Teduray and Lambangian Indigenous peoples in South-Central Mindanao, Philippines</td>
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<td>Timuay Labi</td>
<td>Supreme chieftain</td>
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<td>Tulak</td>
<td>A ritual to communicate and offer something to God and the spirits</td>
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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 came 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] symptomatic of the changing relationship between nature and humans.”
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.

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.
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.

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.
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.

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.

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*.

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

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.
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 pubic 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.

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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 sendurat and sulagad 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 youth\(^1\), 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*. 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.