

In Defense of Life and Harmony

Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis

One day outside our hut, I was playing in the mud. Touching it, I felt superior. I could manipulate it however I wanted, throw it, stomp on it. I felt my grandfather's eyes watching me keenly. He called to me and said, "Come, daughter. I've got a story for you." His deep, bold eyes commanded silence, and he spoke these words respectfully: "It was a huge party. Baba and Nana (God) gave life to the flowers. The flowers stretched themselves up, pulsing with life. When we say this, it means they were our very own image. They held our own life within them."

I could not look at the mud the same way after that. I went back to the mud, I reached out and touched it, but it was different. I saw myself reflected in it. From that day on I knew that the earth and human beings were united, just as a baby is connected to her mother through the umbilical cord.

Jocabed Reina Solano Miselis, from the Guna Yala region in Panama, is studying for her master's degree in interdisciplinary theology through the Comunidad de Estudios Teológicos Interdisciplinarios (CETI). She works among indigenous young people with the intersections of identity, faith, and culture.



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Over the eons of our planet's history, different cultures have related in different and dynamic ways with the earth: some in a more utilitarian and consumeristic way, others in a more harmonious and care-taking way. By and large, indigenous peoples have cultivated a relationship of harmony and protection with the earth. We believe that we have received the earth as a gracious gift of the Creator. God is good and has poured out his multiform grace on the different peoples of the world.

Life

Life is the existence of all created things, both visible and invisible. It encompasses the reality of being, of the other, of all others interwoven together, of humanity and nature not as one superior to the

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other but rather as interdependent beings with distinct roles. Harmony on earth is present through the distinct imprint of God which both bear. Nature gives us clues about the Creator; humanity, too, tells of this God; and the harmony between both swells as a music that inspires our poems and books. It draws us to imagine this great God whom we know so partially yet of whom we dare to speak, think, and reason. Yet we must always recognize that our attempts are merely that: attempts of our being to understand, discover, and know God.

God's presence in life brings harmony. Our interpretation of this harmony is a factor of our worldview and culture, as is the way we relate to what we see, hear, feel, and touch. Who we are and what we believe about the world permeate our scale of evaluating what is more important and what is less, as well as our reflections on what God thinks. Our beliefs about God can never be severed from our experiences and relationships.

For thousands of years, indigenous people groups have lived according to this kind of philosophy of life, which is sustained through their spirituality. Humans and the earth are united, like inseparable siblings. What is behind these ways of living? Their basic understanding of life and an all-encompassing respect for the earth.

God the Mystery: we know of him only what he has wished us to know. Who can describe God completely? No one. Those who convince themselves they know the absolute and final truth about God have lost their awe before the unknown God, the hidden God, who, as Luther said, makes himself known in different ways.¹

However, colonization on the part of the dominant society has influenced the relationships between human practices and experiences and between human beings and our environments. Globalization has swept over every frontier, not just geographical but also social, economic, and cultural. It has taken hold of the knowledge bases we put into practice, and it sets the dominant culture up as the measuring stick for all other cultures. Those cultures which do not yet conform sufficiently are considered “underdeveloped,” and the cultures of original peoples or indigenous peoples are still disregarded as “uncivilized.”

Nicolás Panotto describes it in this way: “Development emerged as a post-war idea that was part of the political and ideological discourse that tried to map out coordinates for the process of restructuring Europe.”² This approach of knowledge and action influences

1. For an accessible discussion of Luther and the hidden God, see Laura Welker, “The God Who Hides From His Saints: Luther’s Deus Absconditus,” student paper (Briarcrest Seminary, Canada, 2006), <http://www.laurawelker.com/luthers%20hidden%20god.pdf>.

2. Nicolás Panotto, “Posdesarrollo, diferencia e identidades socio-culturales: ‘lo divino entre-medio’ como aporte a una epistemología de la ecoteología” (paper presented at the Oikotree Transformative Education Workshop, February 3–9, 2015), 1, https://www.academia.edu/11791979/Posdesarrollo_diferencia_e_identidades_socio-culturales_lo_divino_entre-medio_como_aporte_a_una_epistemolog%C3%ADa_de_la_ecoteolog%C3%ADa.

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our ways of interpreting and relating to our neighbor, leading us on many occasions to a utilitarian and consumeristic relationship with the earth. Such an approach results in serious problems and not only affects our relationship with the earth itself but also relationships between human beings.

We see this utilitarian, consumeristic lifestyle reflected in our faith communities as well. For years we have fallen into the habit of living our faith far from our true vocation, rarely raising questions or challenges for the body of Christ from a doctrine of creation or from the creedal declarations of God as Creator.

It is time to walk humbly, admit we have failed and that we need to put forth real effort, be diligent, and work hard on the theological tasks and essence of our vocation as caretakers of the earth, for the sake of harmony among us.

On the other hand, the Creator God has poured out abundant grace on humanity. In this grace, God has been pleased to give a special gift to the indigenous peoples, from whom all people groups need to learn.

This article attempts to sketch out how the Guna people relate to the natural world. We will approach the subject from the vantage point of Guna theology and its interfacing with the Bible and with the current ecological, environmental, and sustainability realities. We will interweave the language of development with metaphors from the Guna people. We will also mix in some metaphors from the book *babigala*, or *anmar daniggid igala* (The way of God). As the explanatory note to this written compilation of oral teaching says, *babigala* “is a broad and complex system of Guna treatises expressed in language and logic very customary of the Guna people. The *saglagan* are the authorities who remind us,

teach us, and sing the texts compiled in the *babigala*.”³ The writings in *babigala* reveal the relationship between the Guna people and the environment as well as our beliefs and all that sustains us. These teachings have been passed down from one generation to the next, and they remain intact in our lifestyle. I will also share images of my own as a bridge between my interpretation of the experiences of my people and my Christian faith.

Transforming Encounters

Rogelio was very excited. The next day he would embark upon his first mission trip. His bags were nearly packed, and he kept double checking his list. He made sure he had his emergency kit, flashlight, food, sleeping bag, water bottle, Bible, and other essentials. He had learned how to evangelize in missions courses. A dutiful Christian, he had prepared a speech that would lead to an encounter between the indigenous Guna tribe and God, and the tribe would meet Jesus Christ.

When he arrived at the town, what he noticed first was the joy with which everyone was out working in the fields. They enjoyed planting trees, gathering herbs, and eating together. Children, youth, and adult women and men were all participating together, laughing and celebrating life. When Rogelio got the chance to share the gospel, the image of his own family flashed before his eyes. He had never before experienced anything like the mutual happiness and reveling in belonging to the earth like what he witnessed among the tribe. He could tell that something special was going

3. “En defensa de la vida y su armonía: Elementos de la espiritualidad guna. Textos del *babigala*,” comp. and trans. Aiban Wagua (Proyecto EBI Guna / Fondo Mixto Hispano Panameño, 2011), 10, <http://www.gunayala.org.pa/En%20defensa%20de%20la%20vida%20y%20su%20armonia.OK.pdf>.

on in this community. The experience prompted something deep within him.

Some encounters change our lives forever. Rogelio's experience was not unlike what happened to Peter when he visited Cornelius. Peter's worldview regarding Gentiles was distorted until God intervened and showed him a vision. God gave Peter an image of animals that had been classified as unclean for the Jews. There were

all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles, and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." (Acts 10:12-15)

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How often have we written off as "impure" cultures that are simply different from our own? Have you ever wondered what you can learn about God from cultures unlike your own? When we encounter people groups who live very differently from the way we do, with great frequency we find ourselves saying with Peter, "No way, God. These people are impure." Yet to see God in these other people groups, our worldviews must undergo a conversion.

We need to surrender to the task of deconstructing what we consider "pure," because if we approach other people groups with an air of superiority, we will be incapable of perceiving what God is doing among them. And thus we will find ourselves far from the heart of God.

Moving on to new frontiers is intricately related to the conversion and transformation that occur in looking at the experience of the other through the lens of the kingdom of God. That is what happens in and

with a cultural encounter. Our worldview sets the way we see, what we hear, what we smell, the way we touch. Therefore we propose embracing a humility for learning from those who have walked for thousands of years in close relationship with the natural world. Ask, what has compelled them to live in harmony? How have they achieved it?

Life-Giving Harmony

God sang, and his song created a beautiful work
of art. When he saw it, he danced and celebrated,
laughing like one enjoying his creation, and he
gave creation the colors and diversity of someone
who knows how to play when creating.

One of the greatest stories many of us learned as children is the story of creation. Some learned it at home, in Sunday school, at school, or in movies. Most of the time we imagine God creating like some master designer, architect, and planner who has everything well organized, since each day he designs something new. I think there is a lot to be said for this perspective of the creation narrative. Yet in walking alongside indigenous groups, listening to their stories, hearing my grandmothers and grandfathers talk, I perceive the presence of God through another perspective as well. This one shows us a different side of God. This lovely proverb sums it up well, “I was with him as someone he could trust. For me, every day was pure delight, as I played in his presence all the time” (Prov 8:30, CJB).

When it came time for creation, God played, like an artisan that creates something and then reshapes it all over again. The artisan takes pleasure in the process of her work. This approach to creating is more personal, more colorful; with joyful nuances of feel and

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touch, of savoring and delight. “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day” (Gen 1:31).

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For indigenous people groups, God creates—touches—the earth. He gets soaked through with dew, recognizes earth for what it is, smells it, interacts and dialogues with what he makes, contemplates, celebrates, takes pleasure in it. When an indigenous man goes to a field and plants a tree, there is a richness in his relationship with water, with the animals, with the whole natural order. There is pleasure therein, along with harmony and respect. Time spent with the earth is not marked by a clock. Time is unmeasured for the woman who knows how to enjoy what is beautiful and therefore spends time with it. God creates the world with pleasure, without setting a time limit, because God enjoys in the way of someone who knows how to play.

The Face or Presence of God on Earth

It was the strong, melodious song of a thundering waterfall.
The song created a work of art no one could have ever
imagined. It was the most beautiful masterpiece of
the singer-songwriter: God gave birth to the earth.

God in Labor

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In the beginning everything was dark, as dark as if two hands were pressed against one's eyes. There was no

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sun or moon, and the stars had not yet been born. Then Babdummad decided to create the earth, Nandummad decided to create the earth. When Baba formed Nabgwana, he also lit up the sun, the moon, and the stars. Baba lit up the earth, illuminated the face of the mother. The earth was the image and face that spoke of the presence of Baba, the presence of Nana. Earth our mother also took on other names: Ologwadle, Oloiidirdili, Nabgwana, Olobibbirgunya, and Olwainasob.⁴

We Guna have our own creation story in which we hear our great leaders sing and tell of how it was in the beginning. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” God, the author of all creation, gives birth to all that we see, hear, touch, and perceive, yet also to that which we cannot perceive, see, touch, or even imagine. His labor is natural, full of celebration and color.

The union between the heavens and the earth (the cosmos)—that is, the fertility of God—is an expression of his presence. We can understand this union best through our own sexuality as men and women who bring children into the world. God unites himself to the earth to give birth to human beings: “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Gen 2:7). Such is the creative capacity with which God becomes one with the earth through intercourse—to use human terminology—which leads to labor and delivery: the birth of humanity. This fundamental reality ever reminds us that we are sons and daughters of God, sons and daughters of the earth. That is why indigenous peoples call the

4. Wagua, “En defensa de la vida y su armonía,” 12. Babdummad and Nandummad (“Great God”), Baba and Nana (“God”) are all ways of talking about one and the same Creator God.

earth “Mother Earth.” Earth, dirt, soil is our origin. From dirt we come and to dirt we shall return.

With deep respect we Gunas believe not only that God gave the important role of caretakers of creation to human beings but also that the earth itself was given the responsibility of protecting and defending all that lives, moves, and breathes over her. In other

We Gunas believe that the caretaking roles of creation are reciprocal.

words, the caretaking is reciprocal. Therefore, for a relationship of unity and diversity, the harmony of humans and the harmony of the earth are interdependent, each being the creation of God. Everything has its origin in God. Only in a cyclical or circular relationship—neither horizontal nor vertical—can we understand the importance of the one for the other as beings that live in harmony.

God Labors to Deliver Life

We marvel at the process of labor which God underwent to bring life, and his labor speaks to us of his presence. God illuminated, brought light to the earth, and we see him reflected in the colors, animals, precious stones, and diverse plants we observe. In Guna spirituality, it is important to recognize and believe that what exists today has not always existed and that there was a time of complete darkness. At a certain moment God decided to create the earth, and he put himself to the task. Through this disposition the Creator God breathes and gives life to all that exists in the cosmos. Recognizing God as Creator is fundamental. It is the starting point for our relationship with the environment and is the reason that compels us to defend the earth and live in harmony with it. Our cyclical relationships are thrown off balance by the effect of negative actions: people, communities, flora and fauna—everything is affected by everything else.

In a metaphorical sense, the environment is like an older sibling, born before human beings.

And God gave birth, and the first to come forth was the earth. Then he gave birth to the younger siblings, the man and the woman. Each is at the service of the other as beings that must mutually love and respect each other.

In God's birthing process, we find the origin of the earth-man-woman relationship, united by the essence of one and the same God.

Umbilical Cord

"Grandmother, what are you going to do with my little sister's umbilical cord? Where are you taking it?"

It was a day just like any other on the island of Ailagandi. A baby girl was born. The midwives were thrilled to see her. There was great feasting and celebration, food for the whole community because a baby girl had been born to the Guna nation.

While the grandmothers, the community's elderly women, cleaned the baby, they cut the umbilical cord and solemnly wrapped the placenta. They entrusted them to the grandfather, who took them to the mountain and sang this song:

Our good and great God, we thank you for the life you give this baby girl. We have come from the earth, and we give back to the earth. Today we bury these symbols of life and give back of your own generosity so that, just as the child grows strong and healthy, this cacao tree

will grow big and strong. For we are one, humans and the earth.

The concept of the interconnected relationship between human beings and the earth is communicated not only through the respect with which we speak of and contemplate the earth but also in our practices when a new life is born. For nine months the umbilical cord and placenta united the baby and the mother. Now the cord ties men and women to the earth. It fertilizes the earth from which a plant germinates as a sign of unity and of the hope for future generations.

Doa Dule Be (Who Are You?)

Identity is a subject discussed at length by numerous experts in the social sciences. How we define ourselves is affected by our perception of reality, our worldview, and our culture. We might answer this existential question by giving our name, recounting some of our experiences, listing our academic titles, mentioning our achievements or even our difficulties. But when you ask someone from a native people group, particularly from the Guna nation, he or she might have a different kind of answer:

We are sons and daughters of Mother Earth. Thanks to the earth we can define ourselves. Who of us came to be without the sun, the trees, the wind, and the moon? The *nelegan* (wise ones) tell the grandmothers and grandfathers: "Dios (Baba and Nana) created everything. We are what they are; they are what we are."

Those who believe their identity is expressed and reflected in the earth care for our planet with a deep sense of calling because

they recognize and relate to the earth in a more holistic way by virtue of their cosmogony.

Genesis 2:7 narrates that God “formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” The image of God is expressed in the human being he formed, yet the man also bears the mark of the dust from which he is formed. Our identity is profoundly shaped by and connected to the earth. Our chemical makeup reveals us to be beings that come from and depend upon the earth. We are comprised of the elements that surround us.

The Road to “Development”

When Western societies talk about development, they generally mean urbanization, capitalist economic systems, new technology, and globalization.

Panotto’s comments are instructive here:

Development and underdevelopment become two opposite poles.... Development implied reproducing the conditions of the central nations toward the Third World. In this sense, the idea of development becomes a sociocultural concept that not only signifies the difference between two parties but at the same time creates a dynamic of the submission of the one to the other.⁵

In geopolitical and sociocultural terms, we see the same concepts of domination and underdevelopment applied to indigenous people groups. The geopolitical position of the smaller nations within the larger nation-state is one of inferiority, and the broader

5. Panotto, “Posdesarrollo, diferencia e identidades socio-culturales,” 1.

community does not listen to the indigenous nation's economic and sustainability proposals related to the environment or to the domination of sociocultural conditions. All of this leads us to realize that if our domination is sociocultural in nature, so is the criteria we use for determining what is good/better/best in life—which indicates the entirety of our knowledge.

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The world needs to take the knowledge bases—the wisdom—of indigenous people groups as valuable contributions to humanity; not merely as part of the current fashionable trend to include those traditionally discriminated against but rather as legitimate models with hopeful proposals for the world. If we do not work on these proposals starting immediately and with serious intentionality, we will lose a great deal as a society. With the disappearance of indigenous languages, knowledge of medicinal plants is also lost, as well as other insights into humanity's relationship with the earth. This loss affects everyone.

As Leonardo Boff expressed so well in *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*:

Instrumental reason is not the only way to use our capacity to understand; there is also symbolic reason and the reason of the heart and the use of all our bodily and spiritual senses. In addition to the *logos* (reason), there is *eros* (life and passion), *pathos* (affectivity and sensitivity), and the *daimon* (nature's inner voice). Reason is neither the primary nor the ultimate moment of existence. We are also affectivity, desire, passion, turbulence, communication, and attention to the voice of nature speaking inside us. This voice speaks within us and asks to be heeded and followed (it is the presence of the *daimon* within us). Knowing means more than

a way to tame reality. To know is to enter into communion with things. That is why St. Augustine said, following in Plato's wake, "We know in proportion as we love." This new love for our native land encourages us to a new gentleness and opens to us a gentler direction toward which the world may move. We have a new perception of Earth as a vast community of which we are members. As members, we are responsible for assuring that all other members and factors—from the energy balance of soil and air through microorganisms and up to the races and to each individual person—may live on it in harmony and peace.⁶

Faced with these challenges, the church must embrace the urgent call of its mission to revisit the theology of creation in order to live faithfully toward the Creator, and this journey can only be transformed through encounters with others, redefining and growing mutually in our theological task.

Jesus, as our model for the continual process of transformation in mission, learned from others with deep humility: from children, women, foreigners, and God himself. Jesus' life reflects an ongoing process of learning because his desire was to do the will of his Father: "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb 5:8–9).

God's dream is to see all of creation fully restored. Let us keep dreaming with God. This dream is fulfilled each and every day when God's sons and daughters participate in this restoration.

6. Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), chapter 1, digital edition.

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One day I dreamed I could dance, celebrate God
in complete harmony with the earth. From the wind I
heard his voice, in the fire I saw his brilliance. I saw my
reflection in the water, I smelled my own scent in the dirt,
and when I awoke, everything trembled with color.