The Vulnerable Therapeutic Water Spaces of Virgen de Caysasay

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Abstract

The Virgen de Caysasay is one of the oldest manifestations of the Virgin Mary in the Philippines. According to popular belief, she was fished out of the Pansipit River in 1603. Many miraculous events of healing, mostly involving water, have been attributed to her. The paper examines the case of the Virgen de Caysasay, the vulnerabilities of the community, of the bodies of water, and of sacred spaces in virtue of them being assigned as such due to performance of piety, to reveal the interlocking dynamics involved in the enduring assignation of Caysasay water spaces as therapeutic, even in the midst of the devastating effects of the climate crisis.

Keywords

Therapeutic water spaces, the performance of piety, healing, sacred

Introduction

Indigenous communities of the world have always considered caves, lakes, trees, and rivers as sacred. For Dewsbury and Cloke (2009), the surroundings must include spiritual landscapes for they ‘are not just about religion but open out spaces that can be inhabited in different spiritual registers (2009: 696)’. Lily Kong has equated the idea of the sacred with the attachments people develop with a certain place such as a temple or a church that evokes the personal and familial histories of religious adherents, contributing to the development of personal attachments and senses of place (2001: 220). The Philippines is surrounded by water and there could be thousands of springs spread all over the archipelago. In 2021, the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines will celebrate its 500-year presence in the country. However, despite the preponderance of springs and the centuries-long exposure to Catholicism, there is no research on the holy springs of waters in the Philippines in the manner conducted with the holy springs in Ireland (Foley 2010; Ray 2014). Even much less common are studies on the therapeutic landscape of the few holy springs of water in the country.

To address this research gap, the paper examines the Caysasay Water Spaces, which are believed to be therapeutic by the devotees of the Virgen de Caysasay. In his study on the therapeutic aspects of the Irish holy wells, Ronan Foley (2010) believed that wells could be sites of indigenous health and a resource for an indigenous population that is lacking in medical resources (Foley 2010: 477).

Traditional Filipino approaches to healing, which seek out the balance of energy from various forces, both spiritual and natural, which course through physical bodies. Sickness is seen as a result of either of the imbalance of these forces, or a blockade of their flow within the body. Faith healing through the use of herbalists or ambularyos is vibrant in the Philippines even in the
21st century. Even though the Catholic Church unrelentingly vilifies this traditional or even indigenous mode of healing, it persists primarily I believe due to the reason that Foley has expressed: it is the health-seeking practice of people long marginalized culturally and economically. Moreover, river processions like that honoring the *Virgen de Peñafrancia* and Our Lady of Salambao (whose image was found by fishermen in 1793 in the Hulongdoong River) have become colorful festivals of dancing, music, and enjoyment. Nonetheless, beliefs that participation will allow childless women to conceive, that individuals will enjoy good health, and that the harvest will be bountiful still speak to ancient ideas about the interconnection between fertility, water, and the spirits who resided there (Battard et al 2008).

The site-specificity of the *Virgen de Caysasay* lends itself to a heightened awareness of the surroundings that includes the land and water spaces, and the community. The enduring elements in the stories regarding the *Virgen de Caysasay* are actual physical spaces that generations of people have inhabited for centuries.

The paper claims that devotees of the *Virgen de Caysasay* seek for a healing against alienation, dissonance, and brokenness. The cure or therapy occurs in virtue of the sacralization process as evident in the embodied performance of piety (Baring et al 2017; Author et al 2019) regardless of lack of scientific evidence (Ingman et al 2016; Perriam 2015); and in virtue of the medicinal plants and the curative aspects of water (Ray 2014; Foley 2010) that make up the Caysasay water spaces.

*The Caysasay Therapeutic Water Spaces and the Performance of Piety*

The *Virgen de Caysasay* is one of the oldest manifestations of the Virgin Mary in the Philippines. It is worthy to note that several hundred years before the Virgin Mary’s apparition in Lourdes, France, the pilgrimage of the devotees to the miraculous shrine was already in full effect. But *the Virgen de Caysasay is not as popular nor as well-known even in the Philippines.*
The therapeutic landscape (Foley 2010), which emphasizes the curative waters of the well, cannot be separated from the lake and the river and the community itself.

This historical narrative highlights the connections among the bodies of water in the Caysasay region. The connections are not only defined by the physical boundaries but are also determined symbolically by the lived experiences of the community and the people therein. The great volcanic eruption in 1754 was a time of great distress. It had forced the community to move and relocate elsewhere. But, it had found its way to Caysasay, which is the old name of the town, Caysasay.

Image 2 Caysasay water spaces

The Performance of Piety

The physical spaces provide the venue for the performance of piety such as pilgrimage (the Shrine), the fluvial procession (Pansipit River), washing and bathing (Sta. Lucia Well), dance (Taal Lake) and poetry recital (Pansipit River).

Taal Lake

The third-largest lake in the country, which is of special focus of this paper, is the Taal Lake. The lake has a total surface area of 24,356.4 hectares. As a premier tourist destination in the Philippines, visitors flock to the lake, which is surrounded by a caldera of an ancient volcano. In its bosom lies Taal Volcano, which is the world’s smallest active volcano, and perhaps the worlds’ angriest as well. The crater of the volcano is a small lake. The Taal Lake contains another lake.

About 190,000 people are dependent on Taal Lake for their livelihood. Fishing is the most popular source of income. Taal Volcano Protected Landscape (TVPL) covers 12 municipalities and 3 cities of the province of Batangas, including the town of Taal. On January 12, 2020, the
volcano erupted and spewed ash more than a kilometer high into the air. According to reports, 23,000 people living within the 7-kilometer radius of the Taal Lake were evacuated. The ash fall emissions have affected Metro Manila, which is about 86 kilometers away.

*Connection to Virgen de Caysasay*

The Taal Lake (and the volcano) figures prominently in the narrative of the *Virgen de Caysasay*. The origin story of the Virgin is known (she was fished out of the Pansipit River) widely, and the Taal Lake looms largely as the backdrop of the extraordinary tale of the Virgin of Caysasay. It is because the Pansipit River connects directly to Taal Lake, and this connection necessitates the investigation of this large, looming backdrop.

Diedre de la Cruz observed that unlike renditions that derive from doctrinal belief (such as the Immaculate Conception), or artistic renditions of scriptural passages (such as La Pieta), the use of place-names as identifiers grounds the Mother of God in the terrestrial. (2015: 39). However, in the case of the *Virgen de Caysasay*, the town is named after her; or to be more exact, after the kingfishers (*Casaycasay*) which flocked around the *Sampaga* tree where she was found perched, after another episode of disappearance.

The Murillo-Velarde map of 1734 would show a place named Casaysay, the southeastern part of Taal Lake. The Murillo-Velarde Map, generally acknowledged by scholars as the first detailed map of the Philippines (Hargrove & Medina 1988: 332), indicated that the town of Casaysay (now known as Caysasay) lies southeast of the town of Taal, which according to the map sits right at the bank of the Taal Lake. According to Thomas Hargrove (1991), the town of Taal moved three times, the third being to where it is now located. The great Taal volcanic eruption in 1754 that lasted for seven months, forced the people of Taal to retreat further south, about 20 kilometers away, to take refuge in the chapel of the *Virgen de Caysasay*. Eventually, Caysasay became part of a new town also named Taal.

*Performance of Piety*

*Subli* deserves a special mention because it is a performance of piety that Filipino cultural researcher, Elena Mirano argued to be its primary goal. Mirano chided other scholars of Philippine arts who tend to study a song, dance or artwork by itself, forgetting that every artwork or performance is part of something greater than itself. *Subli*, for Mirano, is a devotional practice embodied in the dancers' deliberate movements according to the accompanying song and beat (1989: 83). Originally from Bauan, Batangas, subli is performed in adjacent towns like Agoncillo, Lemery, and Taal. *Subli* means to “jump across.”

Just like the image of the *Virgen*, the cross disappears and appears out of its own accord. If it is displeased, it grows heavy and unwieldy. For Mirano, *subli* was originally intended to please the Poon. In this regard, *subli* is both a play and a devotional practice.

According to historical sources, on the 3rd of May in 1593, the town of Bauan held a feast and the cross was carried in a procession and brought to the chapel of Alitagtag. Since then, the event is commemorated every year even in the town of Taal.
**Pansipit River**

The Pansipit River is the lone conduit for water and migratory fish species that sow and swim from Taal Lake to the Balayan Bay and back. This phenomenon is crucial in maintaining the ecosystem of Taal Lake.

**Connection to Virgen de Caysasay**

In the Philippines, origin stories are staples of folklore. The *alamat* or legend is a story of the origin of a mountain, a lake, an animal or fruit. In the case of the Virgin Marys in the Philippines, their origin stories “stand as repositories of local history, each possessing its own origin story, legends, and miracles” (de la Cruz 2015: 40).

There are two competing narratives about the Virgen de Caysasay’s origin before Juan Maningcad caught her in the fishing net at the Pansipit River. After Maningcad turned the figure over to the local Spanish priest, the latter subsequently declared that she was an image of the Immaculate Conception. Most likely she had dropped off a Spanish Galleon, which plied the Pansipit River. The other narrative declares her to be a statue of Mazu, a Chinese Taoist Goddess of the Sea. The Spanish missionaries, who were tasked to convert the natives to Christianity and established churches, would act on their interest by declaring the mysterious figure of about 10 inches high to be a manifestation of the Virgin Mary (de la Cruz 2015: 48). The figure, on the other hand, was of a woman in flowing robes with hands reposed in prayer standing on a lotus flower (Vengco 2005: 135). The lotus flower is a prominent symbol in Eastern religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Taoism.

**Performance of Piety**

Every December 8, the present town of Taal celebrates the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. After the afternoon mass at the shrine, the image of the *Virgen de Caysasay* is paraded through several barrios around town. In every stop, a *luwa* or a poetry recital is performed. After the parade, the image is brought to the Pansipit River for the fluvial procession. In the course of this event, the devotees sing songs called Dalit and fireworks are lit. The procession ends at the riverbank of Nagpuloc whereupon the image is then brought to a waiting cart. The devotees accompany the image to the Minor Basilica of Martin de Tours also in Taal.

The river is the site for fluvial parades for the patron saints around the area, including the Virgen de Caysasay. During these events, the Pansipit River becomes sacred again. The fluvial parade recalls *Virgen de Caysasay’s* origin story. Somehow, the past is summoned from more than 400 years ago. The reference to the river subverts the standard account of her being "found," which suggests that she must have originated from somewhere else. The stories about her, as well as the narratives of healing, reiterate the enduring elements of the story of the Virgin of Caysasay: she moves around, and oftentimes, ordinary Filipinos (fisherfolk, village girls gathering firewood) stumble into her in places where they live and work.

Unique to the devotion to the *Virgen de Caysasay* is the poetry performance called *Luwa*. In major Filipino languages, *luwa* refers to the act of loudly expressing something out of one’s mouth. In *Luwa Para sa Birhen ng Caysasay* (a poem for the Virgin of Caysasay), the poem is a
celebration of the devotee’s gratitude to the Virgin. According to Domingo Landicho, a Filipino poet and a Taal native, the *luwa* used to be written by the best scribes in town. At present, ordinary Taalenos can write their *luwa* and perform it for other devotees. The poetry performance is conducted during the town fiesta, which falls every December 8.

Below is an excerpt of Landicho’s *luwa* that I translated in English:

Luwa Para sa Inang Birhen ng Caysasay (Poem for the Virgin Mother of Caysasay)

*Inang Birhen ng Caysasay*

*Luwalhati naming tunay*

*Nagkalooob ay Maykapal*

Virgin of Caysasay, our Mother

We praise you most sincerely

For God has given you to us

*Nag-alay sa aming buhay*

*Sa tuwa at kalungkutan.*

*Naging inunan mo’y ilog*

*Ng sa aming ay ihandog Inang nagpalang tibobos*

You have offered to our lives

In joy and sadness

You were born of the river

So that to us you will be a gift

A mother whose genuine blessings

Are always and constantly held dear by us

Whose trust in you is complete.

*Ina ka ng karaniwang Manginisda’t maglilinang*

*Lawa, ilog, karagatan*

*Ang burol at kapatagan*

*Ay dagat mo’t lupang hirang.*
You are the Mother of the ordinary people
Fisherfolks and land cultivators
The lake, river, sea
The hills and valleys
The ocean and the land are your beloved.

The rich tradition of this unique oral literature speaks of the endurance of the origin story of the Virgen de Caysasay. Nevertheless, the reference to the river as a site of her birth is noteworthy because it is a deviation from the standard account of her being “found,” which suggests that she must have originated from somewhere else. The luwa reiterates the enduring elements of the story of the Virgen de Caysasay: she moves around, and oftentimes, ordinary Filipinos (fisherfolk, village girls gathering firewood) stumble into her in places where they live and work.

Sta Lucia Wells

The Virgen de Caysasay region also includes a spring nearby, which played a prominent role in her story. Present-time devotees’ pilgrimage to the Virgen de Caysasay will not be complete without the visit to what is now known as the Sta. Lucia Well. The twin wells are located on the west side of the Shine. One has to enter a narrow paved road towards the site. What greets the visitors is an ancient arch made of coral stone—the same material as the innermost building structure of the Shrine. A brass relief of Mary is etched on the topmost part of the arch. According to local narratives, the well marks the spot where two local women who were gathering firewood found the Virgin perched on the sampaga tree when they saw her reflection on the gurgling pool of water when they stooped down and drink. Before this discovery, the Virgin had disappeared for some time.

Performance of Piety

The twin wells allow the devotee to wash oneself with the miraculous waters. The ritual involved washing the hair and face with water from the well on the left side and cleansing the rest of the body from the well on the right side. They can also bring home with them some of the water for friends and loved ones who are sick or need help from the Virgin. There is no “rounding” ritual for the Caysasay wells that are documented by scholars. Personal observation of the ritual includes the bathing and drinking and lighting of candles.

The Shrine of the Virgen de Caysasay

The popularity of the miraculous stories of the Virgen de Caysasay means that the shrine has become a pilgrimage site for devotees. In 2012, the Vatican bestowed on the shrine the same privileges with the Santa Maria Maggiore, the oldest basilica named after Mary. Every year, the De La Salle University in Manila organizes the “Pilgrimage for the Sick” for all the members of the academic community with serious illnesses like cancer (in any stages or those in the process of recovery), serious heart conditions or a combination of serious illnesses like diabetes with hypertension. In these visits, the participants attend a prayer service, which is also known in the
Philippines as a healing mass. Afterwards, they climb the stairs that lead to the second floor of the chapel where they get to touch the back portion of the statue of the Virgen de Caysasay while silently offering their prayers. The alcove at the second floor also serves as a store for rosaries, replicas of the image of the Virgen de Caysasay, massage oil, and other things that a devotee would bring home as mementos of the trip.

Discussion

In the story narrated by Fr. Francisco Benguchillo, which appeared in the 1834 edition of the book, Epítome de la Historia de la aparición de Nuestra Señora de Caysasay (Synopsis of the History of the Appearance or Apparition of Our Lady of Caysasay) after a passing of time, the lush forest surrounding the village of Caysasay gave way to a bustling town. In the aftermath of change, one of the markers of the apparition of the Virgen de Caysasay was destroyed and a chapel was established in its place. While it was being built, a drought swept through the town. The people, dying of thirst, prayed to the Virgin. The chapel was standing on the banks of the salty waters of the Pansipit River but there was not a drop to drink. When the situation was about to turn for the worse, one of the workers constructing the chapel struck a rock and out came gushing spring water for the thirsty people of Caysasay (1834: 21).

This snippet, one of the two accounts of the miracles of the Virgen de Caysasay by Fr. Benguchillo, alludes to the place of water in Filipinos’ consciousness. Water is pushed towards the center of the collective attention of the people only during periods when there is a lack of it and/or when one is sick and needs healing after everything else has failed to cure whatever illness plagues the person. It is rather true in the past as it is so in the present.

Although it is just a minor account when compared against the larger account of another miracle story (the Hai Bing story), which is more dramatic, and according to de la Cruz (2015) and Nuriko, was deliberately designed by Fr. Benguchillo, to convey anti-Chinese sentiments1, the gushing water miracle story is more significant because it highlights the importance of water, or lack of it, in the health-seeking behaviors of ancient Filipino people.

The schema of a miracle story:

1. There is drought and not a drop to drink. (Trauma or Negative Experience)
2. People pray for the intercession of the Virgen de Caysasay. (Ritual)
3. The worker strikes a rock. (Ritual)
4. Water gushes forth. (Remedy)
5. The community continues to build the chapel which is now known as the Shrine of Our Lady of Caysasay (Response of the Community)

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1 Among the miraculous stories attributed to the Virgen, however, the most notable is the story of Hay Bing or Juan Imbin. Hay Bing is said to have been a Chinese stonecutter who was brought back to life by the Virgen after having been killed by the local people during the massacre of the Chinese in 1639 (Nuriko 2007: 49).
From the schema above, a traumatizing event occurred in the life of the community. The drought happened, ironically in a place that was surrounded by bodies of water. What added to the misery was the lack of potable water for drinking. In particular, the experience of thirst gnaws in one’s consciousness, blocking every feeling except the persistent sensation of longing for something to drink.

Thirst can be ruthlessly insistent in making one aware that it is real; it cannot be ignored; it is insistently trying to tell a dehydrated body: “Look, listen, and feel. I am real. Unless you do something, I will not go away.” Similarly, a sick body experiences the trauma of being broken in the sense that the body feels un-whole or un-integrated. For Kenneth Pargament et al (2005), despite the traumatizing experiences associated with illness or stress or even loss of sacred, there are some good reasons to suspect that negative life events that are seen as holding spiritual meaning may have special power and significance in people's life.

For Perriam, the quest for healing can be understood as a quest for “wholeness,” which in her paper she defined as an integration of body, mind, and spirit (2015: 20). For a sick body in need of healing, the recourse is medicine to alleviate suffering and to make the body well again. However, when framed within the auspices of a miracle story, the healing occurs through the intervention of a spiritual entity or being to assuage both the physical and spiritual suffering, manifested in the experience of thirst and drought. In this instance, the longing to encounter the sacred subverts a traditional understanding of the sacred, which is a separative notion that divides our life from one realm to the other, but is now understood as something integrative that makes us whole and something that heals us from our alienation from what matters: the water and the divine.

*The Sacralization Process as Therapeutic*

According to Rito Baring et al, Filipinos meaningfully understand the concept of the sacred as operating within the parameters of *banal, maganda* and *ritwal*: *Banal* (Eng. Holy), *maganda* (Eng. Beautiful) and *ritwal* (Eng. Ritual)—that is inclusive of religious and non-religious categories. *Banal* is the most commonly held Filipino appropriation of the sacred and can only be concretized by, and materialized in, ritual. *Maganda* pertains to all things positive, which are associated with sacred, such as being well, pure, attractive, productive, pleasurable, meaningful, and beautiful. *Maganda* refers to the moral sense in terms of thoughts, feelings, and actions. *Ritwal* is usually associated with religious activities and ritual leaders, and if expanded as a construct may include everyday activities that transform and impute previously mundane concerns into something that is *banal* and *maganda* (Baring et al, 2017, 5).

Sacralization is an ongoing, active process—it involves doing something, such as participating in the regulation of relationships and boundaries (Ingman et al 2016: 11).

Both the prayer to the *Virgen de Caysasay* and the striking of rock are ritual performances meant to articulate the sacred. These rituals are culture-specific and peculiar to the community. These reinforce the notion that the sacred can be a response to crisis and stress, and that it is related to happiness and wholeness. The Filipinos’ understanding of the sacred, manifested in *banal, maganda, and ritwal* support the understanding that we are all part of a community and that each
member desires wholeness that comes after a bout of illness and as an aftermath of the healing process.

The performance of piety surrounding the Virgen de Caysasay persist even in the present time because the encounter with the sacred is a conditioned response to the experience and expectations, such as healing that is already inherent in each act of pilgrimage, participation in a fluvial procession, dancing the subli, bathing from the waters of the well, as well as, drinking it. The persistence of performance of piety accounts for the continued existence of bodies of water, albeit diminished and vulnerable at present because of the relentless environmental onslaught. In the same way, Ray claimed that what we see with Irish holy well tradition is an enduring perception of the supernatural presence in particular places with springs or wells. (2014: 113)

The preponderance of water images in both origin and older miracle stories that pertain to the Virgen de Caysasay is no doubt a result of the lived experiences of the people surrounded as they were by actual lakes, rivers, and springs of water. Currently, the resilience of the devotees of Virgen de Caysasay is being challenged by persistent environmental destruction that has gripped the Philippines in general and the Caysasay water spaces in general.

*Caysasay Water Spaces as Therapeutic*

Foley (2010) posited that there is more than what meets-the-eye in the appointment of a particular well, spring, river or lake as therapeutic space by the communities where either one or all of them could be found. Can they be transformed as medicine? Traditional or indigenous health-seeking practices rely on water as well as the flora and fauna that exist, perhaps abundantly, in areas where the people regularly encounter them as they forage for food or medicine (Ong et al 2014; Lacuna-Richman 2004). Similarly, Perriam has noted that specific holy wells and pools have significance for certain disorders such as skin condition or mental health problems where healing has been historically recorded and observed (2015: 28).

Scientists extensively because of its sheer abundance of biodiversity have studied the active Taal Volcano and its lake. However, most of the scientific research that came out after the American occupation of the Philippines, had largely concentrated on aquaculture, which had led to a lack of scientific studies on the flora and fauna that make up the Taal Volcano Protected Landscape. As a consequence of neglect, there is no relevant study or research that is evidence-based about the therapeutic properties specifically of the flora and fauna that are common in the Caysasay water spaces.

In a rather roundabout way, I explored several studies about the medicinal or pharmacological properties of some plants and trees that are widely common in most parts of the Philippines including the province of Batangas where the Taal Lake, Pansipit River, and Sta Lucia Well are located. Foley’s insight that therapeutic landscapes reveal the health-seeking practices of marginalized sectors of society informed this section. Indeed, the World Health Organization has classified the Philippines, along with Hong Kong, Malaysia, Mongolia, Singapore, Thailand, and Australia, as a country “supportive” of traditional medicine (Carag and Buot 2017: 40).
The origin story of the Cross of Alitagtag predates the Virgen de Caysasay. For the local people, the cross is so named “Alitagtag” which means in Tagalog, “to spew dazzling, dancing lights” because it does so to protect the people from all sorts of disasters both of natural and human origin. Just like the Virgen de Caysasay, the cross disappears and appears out of its own accord. If it is displeased, it grows heavy and unwieldy. The original cross was carved out from a local wood called anubing (Hargrove 1991: 98), which is a species of trees that grow around the Taal Lake. Historians have claimed that the anubing cross was found in 1595 at “a spiritually charged place called Dingin near Alitagtag on Taal’s southern shore” (Hargrove 1991: 91).

According to researchers, the anubing tree, which is a variant of the species, (Artocarpus cumingiana Trec or Artocarpus lacucha) possesses anti-inflammatory, anti-microbial and antioxidant properties that can be helpful in managing stomach ache and skin lesions (Hossain M.F.1 et al 2016). Another variant is a locally named, Langka (Artocarpus heterophyllus Lam) used by the Ati Negrito indigenous group in Guimaras Island in the Visayas region of the Philippines for ascariasis or roundworm infestation (Ong et al 2014).

The Pansipit River is home to several varieties of mangrove trees. In a report, State of the Mangroves in Batangas, the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) could not overstate the immense importance of mangrove varieties in the continued health and well-being of Batangas’ water resources (Candaya 2015: 21):

Mangroves provide numerous tangible and intangible benefits and are of prime importance in view of their productive, protective, and tourism values. Mangrove ecosystems are important in Batangas because it is a source of food and products for selling such as wood, fish, and clams. Ecologically, these ecosystems serve as a nursery ground for small fish and marine life. Mangrove structures also protect the shoreline from erosion and may buffer the effects of wind and waves (perhaps even extreme events such as typhoons and tsunami) on coastal areas. Lush mangrove forest areas also serve as tourist destinations.

With regard to the medicinal or pharmacological properties of mangroves, researchers have identified three specific mangrove varieties that grow on the banks of the Pansipit River that would have some medicinal uses, like the following: Rhizophora apiculata, Bruguiera cylindrica, Avicennia marina, and Aegiceras corniculatum. In a study, ‘Traditional and Medicinal Uses of Mangroves’, W.M. Bandaranayake (1998) claimed that aside from the material and economic benefits of mangrove forests, there are some varieties that have traditionally been used by people for medicinal purposes. Water from boiled leaves of plants is traditionally been used as a beverage, which is self-evidently therapeutic. Mangrove plants are a rich source of steroids, triterpenes, saponins, flavonoids, alkaloids, and tannins with saponins, in particular, possessing antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties. (1998: 139). In the same article, he listed several mangrove varieties and their medicinal uses.

Table 1 below shows the medicinal uses of mangrove varieties present along the banks of the Pansipit River.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mangrove Variety</th>
<th>Medicinal Uses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhizophora apiculata</td>
<td>Water from boiled leaves traditionally been used as a beverage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruguiera cylindrica</td>
<td>Water from boiled leaves traditionally been used as a beverage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avicennia marina</td>
<td>Water from boiled leaves traditionally been used as a beverage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aegiceras corniculatum</td>
<td>Water from boiled leaves traditionally been used as a beverage.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
**Table 1.** Mangrove varieties growing on Pansipit River and their medicinal uses.

Although mangrove trees are less common nowadays on the banks of the Pansipit River, waterhyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) plants are thriving. It is because water hyacinth or water lilies as they are widely-known in the Philippines are invasive, quick-growing thereby rendering the Philippine wetlands, especially rivers and lakes, untenable for fishing, drinking, and bathing. Nevertheless, the plants have pharmacological properties, according to several researches. For indigenous groups in India, the plants are used to treat wounds (P.Jayanthi, et al 2013: 641). An interesting claim was forwarded by Leonardo Lareo and Ricardo Bressani (1982) about the possible utilization of waterhyacinth as food because of its high leaf protein concentrate (LPC). In 2010, Wenbiao Wu and Yanling Sun published their research finding that utilizing water hyacinth as food had not created adverse effect in mice.

The Sta. Lucia Well of the therapeutic Caysasay water spaces closely resembles a famous ancient Irish well, both in architecture and in reputation. The St. Declan’s Well in Ardmore Ireland, believed to be the earliest Christian settlement in the country, and has a striking resemblance to the Sta Lucia Well in Taal, Batangas although the latter has a bigger coral stone arch. Both feature two wells, one to the left and the other to the right. The St. Declan’s Well was built in the 12th century while the Sta. Lucia Well was built in the 17th century.
In one of the accounts of the appearance of the image of the Virgen de Caysasay, which occurred after she had disappeared again, a central character, a woman named Juana Tangui was suffering from some affliction: a burning sensation in the eyes. Juana was a helper in the household of a wealthy patron of the Virgen, and like her master, she was a devotee of the Virgen de Caysasay. According to the account, when Juana heard of the appearance of the Virgen from two local women who were gathering firewood found the Virgen perched on the sampaga tree when they saw her reflection on the gurgling pool of water when they stooped down and drink. Before this discovery, the Virgen had disappeared for some time. Accompanied by other townspeople, Juana bathed in the water of the spring and was cured.

According to experts, exposure to volcanic fog, which is a combination of gases being emitted by an active volcano, can cause Induced Conjunctivitis or irritation of the eyes (Camara and Lagan zad 2011). The Taal Volcano is one of the world’s most active volcanos and continually spurts out sulfuric gases that could induce eye irritation. The toxic irritation of sulfuric acid aerosols on the cornea leads to an ocular burning sensation (2011: 265), exactly like what Juana experienced.
Deconstructing the “miracle” that had happened in Juana Tangui’s case, the act of bathing and presumably immersing her eyes and face into the cool waters of the spring, helped her by cleansing away the irritants from her eyes, and the cooling effect of the waters acted like cold compress that alleviated her suffering. In the contemporary period, severe cases would merit the use of topical antihistamines; however, for the marginalized members of human society, the water is medicine as it brings about the alleviation of pain and suffering.

For Perriam, it is not necessarily an expectation of a miraculous cure that may motivate people, but a quest for alleviation, a belief in the power of the healing sacred sites to promote, if not well-being, ‘better living’ and alleviation for mind, body, and spirit may take different forms, despite place-based rituals (2015: 28).

The power of belief and the strength of one’s conviction that one could be healed is a well-documented component of research into holistic healing and wellness. Candace Pert (1999) held that the biological body functions as a unified whole and is organized by the biochemical of emotions, neuropeptides, etc., and their cell surface receptors which join the systems in a psychosomatic network of constant communication. Pert’s research signaled a revolutionary turn in doing science. The three classically separated areas of neuroscience, endocrinology, and immunology, with their various organs—the brain, the glands, the spleen, bone marrow and the lymph nodes—are actually joined to each other in a multidirectional network of communication, linked by information carriers known as neuropeptides. Pert speculated that what the mind is the flow of information as it moves among the cells, organs and systems of the body. And since one of the qualities of information flow is that it can be unconscious, occurring below the level of awareness, we see it in operation at the autonomic, involuntary, level of our physiology. The mind then, is that which holds the network together, often acting below our consciousness, linking and coordinating the major systems and their organs and cells in an intelligently orchestrated symphony of life (Pert 1999: 187).

Pert’s findings cemented the common people’s view that mind and body are connected to each other in ways that are now just starting to be known by cognitive science. The flow of emotions, which starts from the body (as an information exchange highway), can be viewed as “bubbling up” towards full consciousness when processed by the brain. New studies on fatigue show that the “information” started in the muscles, which in turn release chemicals to the brain. The brain in turn responds by making the person conscious that he or she is “fatigued.” The expression, “I feel tired” to articulate fatigue is telling us that on the conscious level, we acknowledge emotion as a kind of knowing.

In the healing process, the bodymind (Pert 1999: 265) is an integral component. The belief that the body is made up of energy centers known as chakras explains the psychosomatic dynamics of mind and body. By positing that at cellular level, the body exhibits intelligence and then it follows that the body knows, and that it is conscious, in many ways.

In his own study of the effects of slow-breathing exercises on physiology, Dante Simbulan Jr (2016) has shown that these practices are associated with meditation and other eastern practices such as tai chi and hatha yoga. They are currently employed in mainstream medicine to reduce
stress, attenuate moderate hypertension, and alleviate symptoms of lifestyle-related illnesses. Simbulan claimed that these practices, with their deep roots in rich religious traditions, can be economical methods to monitor physiological effects as well as alleviate stress and suffering associated with sickness (2016: 36).

Image 5 The flowers and plastic rosaries left behind by the Caysasay devotees.

The healing process closes with the ritual performance of gratitude. At the Sta Lucia Well, dried flower bouquets lined the walls adjacent to the twin wells. Occasionally, fresh flowers would appear in their midst. The flowers (and plastic rosaries) are material artifacts that devotees of the Virgen de Caysasay offer as tokens of gratitude for an answered prayer or a “miraculous” cure through the intercession of the Virgen. Just like their Irish counterparts, devotees regard these artifacts as ritual performance (buying and selecting the flowers or buying the rosaries from the store of the shrine, lighting a candle, and leaving them at the Sta Lucia Well).

Conclusion

The health-seeking practices of people, both in the past and in the present, especially those whose access to mainstream, Western medicine are limited, the narratives or stories of healing from other people, and from their personal experiences, point to the continuing significance of belief or faith or religion to any meaningful discourse on healing.

In the contemporary period, the increasingly prohibitive cost of healthcare has become the paramount, if not the urgent, issue that the human society confronts because it points to many intertwining issues of social inequalities. If mainstream medicine and its practices would continue to sideline spiritual as well as indigenous traditions’ own approaches to wellness and healing, that
would be an instance of marginalization and inequity as well as a great loss to the ongoing efforts to find cure for the many illnesses that have brought tremendous suffering to countless people.

The appointment of spaces as sacred reveals the peoples’ active involvement in their own well-being. Indigenous communities of the world have always considered caves, lakes, trees, and rivers as sacred. In the Philippines, a tuklong or is a makeshift altar for the image of a deity is used to mark sacred sites before organized Western religions were introduced in the country. That these tuklongs were put to mark the actual physical spaces where they were found suggests that these spaces were sacred long before the foreign missionaries would have declared them to be so by a Mary or a Cross being "found" there. The tuklong can be what Christina Fredengen has called “tribal nodes” (2002: 174-8 in Ray 2014: 83).

Sadly, the archipelagic character of the Philippines makes it appear as if the water is plentiful and free-flowing. Many Filipinos certainly think so and the notion undermines their perception of the real state of waterways, rivers, lakes, and seas in the county. It has blinded them from seeing these bodies of water for what they are at present. The Catholic bishops in the Philippines seemed to agree: Water is taken for granted and like all things that are taken for granted, they are never really appreciated until they become scarce. We only really know the true worth of water when the well goes dry (CBCP 2000).

The Shrine of our Virgen de Caysasay stands in its location since the 17th century. It became a refuge for the people of Taal who fled the devastating volcanic eruption in 1754. While there were considerable damages to the shrine itself, it withstood the onslaught.

The great volcanic eruption in 1754 was a time of great distress. It had forced the community to move and relocate elsewhere. But it had found its way to Casaysay, which is the old name of the town, Caysasay. In their native language (Tagalog), the people of Taal refers to the original site of the Shrine where the Sta Lucia Well now stands, as banal na pook or the sacred place and the water from the well is banal na tubig or sacred water.

In the case of a traumatic event, be it drought, eruption of a volcano, or sickness, the sacred, or the loss of it, is manifested most acutely in the consciousness of the people. And if, the bodies of water would have something in common with human bodies, it would be the fact that we are all embedded in the natural world and therefore share the same suffering and distress.

The origin and the miracle stories of the Virgen de Caysasay knit the connections among the water spaces, the community, and the sacred. The connections are not only defined by the physical boundaries, but are also determined symbolically by the lived experiences of the community and the people therein.

For Ivakhiv, religion—through texts, practices, beliefs and norms—is just one of the many unifying categories that scholars use to explain the people’s interactions with places and landscapes. What religion is and however it has been defined over the years, points to its flexibility and malleability (Ivakhiv 2006: 170).

The paper offers an initial exploration of the promise and potential of continued research on the therapeutic land and water spaces in the Philippines. Revolving around the question, can
sacralization heal, the paper aims to contribute to the expanding multidisciplinary scholarship on
the connections between and among the natural world, the community and religion towards real
transformative actions towards healing.