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THE VULNERABLE THERAPEUTIC WATER SPACES OF THE *VIRGEN DE CAYSASAY*

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The *Virgen de Caysasay* is one of the oldest manifestations of the Virgin Mary in the Philippines. According to popular belief, a fisherman netted her statue in the Pansipit River in 1603. Many miraculous healing events, mostly involving water, have been attributed to her. Despite the devastating effects of the climate crisis, Caysasay water spaces endure as therapeutic, healing, and ritual places. This essay examines the interlocking dynamics and vulnerabilities of bodies of water associated with the *Virgen de Caysasay*, their contextual sacred spaces where pieties are performed, and their surrounding communities.

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

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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 in the Philippines as has been conducted, for example, in Ireland (Foley 2010; Ray 2014) or elsewhere (Ray 2020). In his study on the therapeutic aspects of the Irish holy wells, Ronan Foley believed that wells could be sites of indigenous health and a resource for a native population lacking modern medical resources due to their limited access to Western medical interventions (Foley 2010: 477). Extending the study of holy wells and sacred springs to the Philippines, this essay examines Caysasay Water Spaces which are believed to be therapeutic by the devotees of the *Virgen de Caysasay*. The very site-specificity of the cult of the *Virgen de Caysasay* fosters a heightened awareness of the surroundings during devotions that include both land and water spaces as well as 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. This essay claims that devotees of the *Virgen de Caysasay* seek healing for alienation, dissonance, and brokenness. "Alienation" pertains to the seeming lack of appreciation for icons associated with the natural world among the majority of Filipino Catholics (evidenced by the vulnerable status of Caysasay Water Spaces). "Dissonance" points to the disconnection between the devotees' embodied performances of piety (that demonstrate faith in Mary's intercession with God for healing) and the lack of stewardship of the lake, river, and wells associated with the *Virgen de Caysasay*. "Brokenness" highlights both the marginalization of traditional healing modalities and the prohibitive cost of primary healthcare in the Philippines.

Despite the vulnerable states of waterscapes connected to the Virgen de Caysasay, pilgrims continue to enact devotional practices on site. The cure or therapy occurs

in the embodied performance of piety (Baring et al. 2017; Peracullo et al. 2019), regardless of the lack of scientific evidence (Ingman et al. 2016; Perriam 2015), and through the medicinal plants and the curative aspects of water (Ray 2014; Foley 2010) that make up the Caysasay water spaces.

This paper offers an initial exploration into therapeutic waterscapes in the Philippines. Examining how sacralization leads to healing, this essay contributes to the expanding multidisciplinary scholarship on the connections between the natural world, human communities, and religion – connections that contribute to real transformative actions towards healing.

Traditional Filipino approaches to healing seek to balance the energies from various forces, both spiritual and natural, which course through physical bodies. Sickness is seen as an imbalance or blockage of these forces. Faith healing through the use of herbalists or *ambularyos* is vibrant in the Philippines even in the twenty-first century. Even though the Catholic Church and mainstream medical practitioners unrelentingly vilify traditional and indigenous modes of healing, they persist primarily due to the reason that Foley has expressed: they are the health-seeking practice of people long marginalized, both culturally and economically. Moreover, river processions like those 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, the ill to enjoy good health, and the harvest to be bountiful still speak to ancient ideas about the interconnection between fertility, water, and the spirits who resided there (Battad et al. 2008).

Belief in Our Lady of Caysasay (*Nuestra Señora de Caysasay*) or simply the *Virgen de Caysasay* began with a Pansipit River fisherman's discovery of a nearly 10-inch-high statue of Mary in his net in 1603. "She" is venerated in the areas of Taal in the Batangas Province of the north-central Philippines on the island of Luzon. One of the earliest known depictions of the Virgin Mary in the country, the statue's discovery preceded Marian apparitions and miraculous cures recorded by church authorities during the Spanish colonial period. Pilgrimages to places visited by the *Virgen de Caysasay* continue to be curative.

In the Philippines, origin stories are raw materials for cultural memory. The *alamat* or legend is a story of the origin of a mountain, a lake, an animal, or fruit. In the case of the Marian images venerated in the Philippines, their origin stories "stand as repositories of local history, each having its own origin story, legends, and miracles" (De la Cruz 2015: 40). The great volcanic eruption at Taal in 1754 that lasted for seven months forced residents of Taal to retreat about twenty kilometers south, where they took refuge in the chapel of the *Virgen de Caysasay*. Eventually, Caysasay became part of a new town also named Taal. *The Virgen de Caysasay*'s origin stories are framed against the background of both the Pansipit River and Taal Lake. These bodies of water are their starting point and their context, even though de la Cruz pointed out that, iconographically speaking, Mary has always been from elsewhere (2015: 55).

The Philippines has many origin stories that feature a lake, river, sea, or ocean as a background or backdrop. Images of Mary in the country were either found in rivers or picked up from seashores. The oldest Marian image, according to local historians, is the *Virgen de Guia*. A Spanish conquistador saw a *tuklong* or a makeshift altar for the image on the shore of Manila Bay. The *Virgen de Candelaria*, which is highly venerated on the island of Panay in the Visayas region of the Philippines, was found in the Jolo River. For Resil Mojares (2002: 145) the lore of these images was precisely to point out that fertility cults had existed "long before" foreign colonization.

Methods

In this study, the spaces and places, and everything that lies therein, including the self, are perceived as substantial parts of a phenomenal field where a multitude of social identities intersect (Day et al. 2013: 4). This approach also enables the manifestation of what was hitherto understood as "unseen," or only "symbolic" and not "real" (as in the case of religion). In the field, I enveloped myself in the sights, smells, and sounds of the actual physical land and water spaces that were prominent in my research. To understand what the community was trying to share with me, I needed to be open to the waves of inspiration, the whispers of the wind, the cries of the parched riverways and canals, and to the oral histories of the coral stones and rocks. Writing field notes, taking photographs of the land and water spaces, observing the participants of the pilgrimage of the sick, and being a participant myself meant that I had to make my own body the conduit of this method that is close to the ground or immersed in the bodies of water.

Coupled with the extraordinary symbolic power of Marian apparitions, is the fact that springs, rivers, and lakes are sites of sacralization (Ingman et al. 2016). Following Gesler, Geraldine Perriam referred to therapeutic landscapes as places that have achieved lasting reputations for providing physical, mental, and spiritual healing (Perriam 2014: 19). For Perriam, the performative nature of the pilgrimage and the associated spiritual practices provides access to spaces beyond the limits of everyday life (2015: 22). Feeling, affect, and emotions are important – perhaps even indispensable – in the dynamic process of sacralization and enchantment (Ingman et al. 2016: 16). They also provide the impetus for collective actions for healing. For Thomas Tweed, religion intensifies joys and confronts suffering (2008: 69). Moreover, the recognition of the cognitive, emotive, and active dimensions of religion shifts the focus from its psychic capacity (2008: 49) towards the lived experiences of the religious themselves in shaping the actual physical spaces in which they find themselves.

The performance of pieties

To understand place-based healing, one must become familiar with the physical spaces that provide the venues for the performance of piety. For example, the pil-

grimage is undertaken to the Shrine of the *Virgen de Caysasay*, the fluvial procession along the Pansipit River, washing and bathing happens at St. Lucia's Well, the dance takes place at Taal Lake, and poetry recitals are also held on the banks of the Pansipit River.

Taal Lake

Taal Lake is the third-largest lake in the country with a total surface area of 24,356 hectares. In its bosom lies Taal Volcano, which is one of the world's smallest active volcanoes and perhaps the world's angriest as well. Within the volcano is a crater lake so that Taal Lake unusually has a lake within a lake. This feature is part of what makes it a premier tourist destination in the Philippines. The lake was once an inlet of Balayan Bay and it was here that the Pansipit River flowed into the sea. However, volcanic eruptions in the eighteenth-century, culminating with that of 1754, impounded the waters of the Pansipit River and submerged lakeside communities. River waters and rainfall over the last two centuries have created a freshwater lake from what were once saline waters. This lake holds many ecological curiosities: endemic species of fish have adapted to this desalination as have rare forms of sea snakes.

The origin story of the *Virgen de Caysasay* (the fisherman's "catch") is known widely and Taal Lake figures prominently in the narrative of her cult. 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 placenames as identifiers grounds the Mother of God in the terrestrial (2015: 39). In the case of the *Virgen de Caysasay*, the town is named after her. To be more precise, it is named for the kingfishers (*Casaycasay*) which flocked around the *Sampaga* tree *(Jasminum sambac)* where her statue was found perched after one of many disappearances.

Taal is also known for a devotional practice in the form of dance called *subli.* Elena Mirano noted that the deliberate movements of dancers resonate with the accompanying song and beat as a form of prayer (1989: 83). Originally from Bauan in the Batangas Province, *subli* is performed in adjacent towns like Agoncillo, Lemery, and Taal. *Subli* means to "jump across." The origin story of the *Virgen de Caysasay* as having been "found" echoes the origin story of the Cross of Alitagtag in Bauan, a town that, along with Taal, moved further south from its original location at the banks of Taal Lake after the 1754 eruption. The cross was carved out from a local wood called *anubing* (from the species *Artocarpus*). Historians claim that the *anubing* cross was found in 1595 at *Dingin* (which in the Filipino language refers to a spiritually charged place) near Alitagtag on Taal's southern shore (Hargrove 1991: 91 in Peracullo 2020). Just like the image of the *Virgen*, the cross disappears and appears on its own accord. If it is displeased, it grows heavy and unwieldy. For Mirano, *subli* derives from pre-Spanish Tagalog traditions and was originally intended to please the *Poon* or deity. In this regard, *subli* is both a play and a devotion to the Holy Cross of Bauan. The Spanish historian Wenceslao Emilio Retana, in his work *El Indio Batangueno*,

claimed that while the *anubing* cross was originally planted by the people in Bauan to ward off evil spirits, *subli* dance performance showcased the people's devotion to the Holy Cross of Christianity (1888: 27). 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 with a *subli* performance in the town of Taal.

Pansipit River

Figure 1. Pansipit River at Present-Time. Photographed by Jeane Peracullo (November 6, 2019).

The Pansipit River is the lone conduit for water and migratory fish species that reproduce and swim from Taal Lake to Balayan Bay and back. This phenomenon is crucial in maintaining the ecosystem of Taal Lake. The river also offers the origins of the *Virgen de Caysasay's* cult. As noted above, in the Philippines, *alamat* is a staple of folklore and provides the origin stories of mountains, lakes, animals, or fruits. For the multiple "Virgin Marys" in the Philippines (statues of the Virgin identified with the locations in which they were found), their stories "stand as repositories of lo-

cal history, each possessing its own origin story, legends, and miracles" (de la Cruz 2015: 40). There are two competing narratives about *Virgen de Caysasay's* origin before Juan Maningcad netted the statue in 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. De la Cruz noted that while this account supposedly occurred in 1603, the statue was said to symbolize the Immaculate Conception in Fr. Benguchillo's sermon about the *Virgen* (published in Manila in 1834), though this only became church doctrine in 1854 (de la Cruz 2015: 49). Most likely the image had dropped from a Spanish Galleon, which once plied the Pansipit River. The other narrative holds that it is a statue of Mazu, a Chinese Taoist Goddess of the Sea. The Spanish missionaries, who were tasked to convert the natives to Christianity and who established churches, declared that the mysterious figure was a manifestation of the Virgin Mary (de la Cruz 2015: 48). The figure depicts a woman in flowing robes with hands reposed in prayer standing on a lotus flower (Vengco 2005: 135), with the lotus flower being a prominent symbol in Eastern religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Taoism.

Every December 8, the present town of Taal celebrates the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. After the afternoon mass at the local shrine, the image of the *Virgen de Caysasay* is paraded through several barrios around town. At every stop, a *luwa* or a poetry recital is performed. After the parade, the devotees bring the image down to the Pansipit River for a fluvial procession. Following the procession along the river's banks, the image is then brought to the Minor Basilica of Saint Martin de Tours in Taal. In the course of this event, devotees sing songs called *Dalit* and light fireworks. The procession ends at the riverbank of Nagpuloc barrio whereupon the image is brought to a waiting cart. Every Thursday, the devotees bring the image of the *Virgen de Caysasay* to the basilica where it stays until Saturday afternoon, though the fluvial procession occurs only once a year on December 8.

Just like the town of Taal, the Minor Basilica of Saint Martin of Tours, one of the largest Catholic churches in Southeast Asia, had moved along with the people. Though historical markers around town claim that Taal was established in 1572, those who know about the town's history acknowledged that the year 1572 pointed to a distant past when Taal was established along the banks of the Taal Lake. The original location is now part of a neighboring town, San Nicolas. The current minor basilica itself was built in the nineteenth century.

Less than a kilometer away, the shrine of our *Virgen de Caysasay* stands in its location between twin holy wells where it has been since the seventeenth century. The shrine was about twenty kilometers from old Taal before the 1754 explosion. It became a sanctuary for the people of Taal, who fled the devastating volcanic eruption. While there were considerable damages to the shrine itself, it resisted the onslaught. The eruption of Taal volcano in January 2020 caused some minor damage to the Basilica, after which the shrine was closed for several days.

A unique aspect of the devotion to the *Virgen de Caysasay* is a poetry performance called *luwa*. In major Filipino languages, *luwa* refers to the act of loudly ex-

pressing 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 (2007), a Filipino poet and 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 8th of December.

Contemporary devotees' pilgrimage to the *Virgen de Caysasay* shrine would not be complete without a visit to what is now known as the St. Lucia Well, a sacred spring comprising twin holy wells located on the west side of the shrine. The pilgrimage in this sense is understood as a *paglalakbay* (a journey or a visit to a distant place) made for a specific purpose, such as seeking the *Virgen de Caysasay*'s help for healing whatever affliction ails a devotee. One has to enter a narrow paved road towards the site. What greets the visitor is an old arch made of coral stone – the same material as the innermost building structure of the shrine – with a brass relief of Mary on the topmost part of the arch. According to local narratives, the site is where two local women who were gathering firewood found the Virgin perched on the tree. They saw her reflection on the gurgling pool of water when they stooped down to drink. Before this re-discovery, the *Virgen* (her statue) had disappeared for some time.

Devotees wash with the miraculous waters of the twin wells. The ritual involves 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. Devotees might also drink the water, light candles at the site, or even bring home with them some of the water for friends and loved ones who are sick or need help from the *Virgen*.

I took the beaten path towards the St. Lucia Well. The well was in a rather pitiful condition. Garbage was strewn on the side of the footpath; the creek beside the wells was dry and half-filled with plastic and other refuse. I wondered about the safety of the water from the well. Despite the well's worrisome state, pilgrims seemed not to mind as they requested an elderly caretaker to fetch them water from the wells to either wash with or place in plastic bottles to be brought home.

A carving depicting the tableau of the *Virgen*'s apparition before the two women on top of the tree was etched on an age-worn wall of coral stones that may have been part of the original structure that formed the St. Lucia Well. Dried flowers and plastic rosaries were placed neatly on the side of the wall to show the devotees' gratitude to the *Virgen* for answered prayers or offerings for wishes to be granted. Candleholders for burning the votive candles could be found at the opposite end of the well.

The shrine of the Virgen de Caysasay

The popularity of the miraculous stories of the *Virgen de Caysasay* means that her shrine has remained a pilgrimage site for devotees. In 2012, the Vatican bestowed upon the shrine the same privileges as those of 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 (of any stage, or those in the process of recovery), serious heart conditions, or a combination of serious illnesses, such as diabetes and hypertension. Though university faculty and staff might be considered as having almost default access to the best medical care in many places, in the Philippines, the cost of healthcare could be prohibitive for middle-class professionals. Moreover, those who have participated in this annual event since 2015 (it was postponed in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic) also bring with them prayer requests from sick family members and friends. In these visits, participants attend a prayer service, which is also known in the Philippines as a healing mass. Afterward, 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 on the second floor also serves as a store for rosaries, replicas of the image of the *Virgen de Caysasay*, massage oil (which is often used in *hilot*, a healing modality combining massage and sustained pressure of several points of the body to ease the blocked flow of energy), and other things that a devotee would bring home as mementos of the trip.

Discussion

Fr. Francisco Benguchillo published *Epítome de la Historia de la aparición de Nuestra Señora de Caysasay* (or *The Synopsis of the History of the Appearance or Apparition of Our Lady of Caysasay*) in 1834. He describes how the lush forest that once surrounded the village of Caysasay gave way to a bustling town. Following this change, one of the trees, where the *Virgen de Caysasay* had appeared, 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 *Virgen*. 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 (Benguchillo 1834: 21).

More dramatic miracle stories are linked to the *Virgen,* including a story about her restoring life to a Chinese stonecutter, Hai Bing, who had been killed in the 1639 massacre of the Chinese. However, 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 the Filipino people. The story conveys a traumatizing event that occurred in the life of the community: the drought happened, ironically enough, 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 Perriam, the quest for healing can be understood as a quest for "wholeness," which she defines 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 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 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 as a separative notion that divides our life from one realm to the other and instead becomes understood as something integrative that makes us whole and heals us from our alienation from what matters: the water and the divine.

The sacralization process as therapeutic

According to Rito Baring et al. (2017), Filipinos meaningfully understand the concept of sacred as operating within the parameters of *banal* (Eng. Holy), *maganda* (Eng. Beautiful), and *ritwal* (Eng. Ritual) – inclusive of both religious and non-religious categories. Sacralization is an ongoing, active process involving doing something, such as participating in the regulation of relationships and boundaries (Ingman et al. 2016: 11).

Both 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 particular 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 (as manifested in *banal*, *maganda*, and *ritwal*) supports 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. This is consistent with the findings of Filipino anthropologists Manuel Sapitula (2014: 405) on the thanksgiving letters to Mary written by Perpetual Help devotees that are replete with expressions of their aspirations for *mabuting buhay* (the good life) and upward mobility that are combined with notions of *biyaya* (blessing) and *grasya* (grace); and Ramon Sarmiento (2012: 467) on a rural poor community's devotion to *Nuestra Senora de Los Dolores* (Our Lady of Sorrows). For Sarmiento, forms of piety such as the *traslacion* or procession are the staples of the common people.

The performance of pieties that surround the *Virgen de Caysasay* persists even to the present day because the encounter with the sacred is a conditioned response to experience and expectations (such as healing) that is inherent in each act of pilgrimage, participation in a fluvial procession, dancing the *subli*, and bathing and drinking

the waters of the well. In the same way, Ray claimed that we see in the Irish holy well tradition an enduring perception of the supernatural presence in particular places with springs or wells (Ray 2014: 113).

The preponderance of water imagery in both the origin stories and older miracle stories that pertain to the *Virgen de Caysasay* is no doubt a result of the lived experiences of a people surrounded by actual lakes, rivers, and springs. For Kenneth Pargament et al (2005), despite the traumatizing experiences associated with illness, stress, or even loss of the sacred, there are good reasons to suspect that negative life events such as those above are seen as holding spiritual meaning and may have special power and significance in people's lives. Positive religious coping appears to mediate the relationship between sacred loss, greater spiritual change, and post-traumatic growth. One positive religious coping mechanism is caring for sacred objects. Sacred objects are, in short, objects of preeminent, transcendent value that help make life meaningful, enriching, and whole (ibid.: 75–76). According to Regina Lagman et al., Filipino Catholics have for hundreds of years drawn strength from a wide variety of Catholic and Christian practices and attitudes to help them manage daily challenges and hardships, in addition to engaging in traditional healing practices, which are connected to indigenous health practices, including visits to faith healers (who may or may not be Catholic). Filipino immigrants in the U.S. tend to experience a sense of comfort when seeking the help of faith healers because they speak the same language, the healing methods are familiar, and their services are affordable. The American healthcare system, in comparison, is often complicated, inaccessible, expensive, and sometimes ineffective, especially when treatment is sought after a late diagnosis (2014: 451).

Caysasay water spaces as therapeutic

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

Scientists have studied the active Taal Volcano and its lake because of its sheer abundance of biodiversity. However, most of the scientific research that came out after the American occupation of the Philippines largely concentrated on aquaculture, rather than the flora and fauna that make up the Taal Volcano Protected Landscape. As a consequence of this scientific neglect, there is no relevant study or research of-

fering evidence about the therapeutic properties of specific flora and fauna that are common in the Caysasay sacred water spaces.

In contrast, I explored several studies about the medicinal or pharmacological properties of some plants and trees that are widely found in most parts of the Philippines, including the province of Batangas where the Taal Lake, Pansipit River, and St. 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 that of the *Virgen de Caysasay*. For the local people, the cross is so named "Alitagtag" which in Filipino means, "to spew dazzling, dancing lights" because it does so to protect the people from all sorts of disasters both natural and human origin. The original cross was carved out from a local wood called *anubing* (Hargrove 1991: 98), which is a species of tree that grows around the Taal Lake.

According to researchers, some varieties of the anubing tree (*Artocarpus cumingiana Trec* or *Artocarpus lacucha*) possesses anti-inflammatory, anti-microbial, and antioxidant properties that can help manage stomachache and skin lesions (Hossain M.F.1 et al. 2016). Another local variety, known as *langka* (*Artocarpus heterophyllus Lam*), is 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 on the state of 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 (Candava 2015: 21). Mangroves provide numerous tangible and intangible benefits and are of prime importance because of their productive, protective, and tourism values. Mangrove are important in Batangas because their ecosystems provide wood, fish, clam, and other sources of food and livelihood. 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 tsunamis) in coastal areas. Lush mangrove forest areas also serve as tourist destinations.

Concerning the medicinal or pharmacological properties of mangroves, researchers have identified three specific mangrove varieties that grow on the banks of the Pansipit River that could have some medicinal uses, such as *Rhizophora apiculta*, *Bruguiera cylindric*a, *Avicennia marina*, and *Aegiceras corniculatum*. In his study on traditional and medicinal uses of mangroves, W.M. Bandaranayake claimed that aside from the material and economic benefits of mangrove forests, some varieties have traditionally been used by people for medicinal purposes (1998). Water from the boiled leaves of plants has traditionally been used as a beverage like tea or coffee. Mangrove plants are a rich source of steroids, triterpenes, saponins, *flavonoids,*

alkaloids, and tannins with saponins, particularly those possessing antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties. (Bandaranayake 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 which may have shaped local devotions.

Mangrove Variety	Medicinal Uses
Aegiceras corniculatum	asthma, diabetes, rheumatism
Avicennia marina	rheumatism, smallpox, ulcers
Bruguiera cylindrica	hepatitis
Rhizophora apiculta	antiemetic, antiseptic, diarrhea, hemostatic, hepatitis, stops bleeding, typhoid

Table 1. Mangrove varieties growing on Pansipit River and their medicinal uses.

A central character in the miracle stories attributed to *Virgen de Caysasay* is Juana Tangui. In 1611, Juana was a helper in the household of a wealthy patron of the Virgen and, like her master, was a devotee of the Virgen de Caysasay. Suffering from a burning sensation in the eyes, Juana sought out the *Virgen's* waters for a cure and encountered the *Virgen's* statue which moved and spoke to her. Before this discovery, the Virgen had disappeared. As Benguchillo put it, "time passes, and there is no trace of the mysterious and wandering Virgin" (1834 stanzas 39–42 in De la Cruz 2015: 50). Accompanied by other townspeople, Juana bathed in the water of the spring and was cured (De San Agustin 1998)

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 Lagunzad 2011). The Taal Volcano is one of the world's most active volacanoes and continually spurts out sulfuric gases that could induce eye irritation to a level requiring topical antihistamines today. The toxic irritation of sulfuric acid aerosols on the cornea leads to an ocular burning sensation (ibid.: 265), exactly like what Juana experienced. Further deconstructing the "miracle" that had happened in Juana Tangui's case, it can be noted that the act of bathing (and presumably immersing) her eyes and face into the cool waters of the spring would have helped her by cleansing away the irritants from her eyes, with the cooling effect of the waters acting as a cold compress that alleviated her suffering.

For Perriam, it is not necessarily an expectation of a miraculous cure that may motivate people, but rather the quest for alleviation. A belief in the power of the healing sacred sites to promote, if not well-being, "better living" and alleviation of the mind, body, and spirit may take different forms, despite place-based rituals (Perriam 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 biochemistry of emotions, neuropeptides, etc., with cell surface receptors joining the systems in a psychosomatic network of constant communication.

Pert's findings cemented the common people's view that mind and body are connected in ways that are only now 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" starts 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 we acknowledge, on the conscious level, 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 the body exhibits intelligence at the cellular level, it follows that the body knows and is conscious in many ways. In the case of holy wells, Foley theorized that health and well-being, which springs forth from the wells, is affected by the performance of rituals and pieties (Foley 2011). For Foley, such sites are sustained nonetheless by narratives of curative power and a deep belief in faith healing offered to those who bodily move through the landscape with the prescribed movements and prostrations that embody the cure request (Foley 2011: 473).

Figure 2. The flowers and plastic rosaries the Virgen de Caysasay devotees placed near Sta. Lucia Well. Photographed by Jeane Peracullo (November 6, 2019).

The healing process for devotees of the *Virgen* closes with the ritual performance of gratitude. At the St. 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 performances (buying and selecting the flowers or rosaries from the store of the shrine, lighting a candle, and leaving them at the St. Lucia Well).

Among the sacred waters in the southern part of Metro Manila is a water source on Mount Banahaw that locals believe contains the holy footprint of Jesus (Dayo et al. 2018: 85). It is located in a town called Dolores that has a mystical reputation and is home to multiple religious groups for whom both the mountain and its waters are inherently sacred (ibid.: 85–86). For the members of these religious groups, the waters of Mount Banahaw are sacred; the mountain is sacred, and the inherent value of the waters cannot be measured in terms of their economic worth because this value's existence rests on it being on sacred ground (Dayo et al. 2018: 86). A key informant in this study said, "The waters of Mount Banahaw are springs, the reservoir of my existence. It is where I perform the ritual cleansing of my soul" (Dayo et al. 2018: 88). Just like the Shrine of *Virgen de Caysasa*y and St. Lucia Wells, Mount Banahaw is a pilgrimage site where Filipinos embark on *paglalakbay* (journey) to its many spiritually charged locations or *puwesto,* especially the bodies of water that surround it, where they bathe for "self-cleansing and purification" (Arceta 2020: 50). While pilgrims of Mount Banahaw seem to desire healing from spiritual ills rooted in sin, the devotees of *Virgen de Caysasay* focus their petitions on physical illness.

Conclusion

Past and present health-seeking practices, especially of those without access to mainstream medicine, and the narratives or stories of healing point to the continuing significance of belief, faith, and religion to any meaningful discourse on healing. The designation of spaces as "sacred" reveals peoples' active involvement in their well-being. In the Philippines, a tuklong (a makeshift altar) for the image of a deity is used to mark indigenous sacred sites. These tuklongs mark the actual physical places that were sacred long before the foreign missionaries would have declared them to be so upon the discovery of a statue of Mary or a cross. The tuklong can be seen as what Christina Fredengen has called "tribal nodes" (Fredengen 2002: 174–8; Ray 2014: 83).

In the case of a traumatic event, be it a drought, volcanic eruption, or disease, the sacred (or the loss thereof) is manifested most acutely in the consciousness of the people. If these bodies of water 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 between the therapeutic water spaces, the community, and the sacred. Such 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. Unfortunately, the presence of trash around the area of the St. Lucia Well and the continuing decline of both the Pansipit River and Taal Lake bring into focus the need for Filipinos to make a connection between "care for one's body" and "care for bodies of water." The archipelagic character of the Philippines makes it appear as if the water is plentiful all around. Many Filipinos certainly think so, and this undermines their perception of the real state of waterways, rivers, lakes, and seas in the country. The Catholic bishops in the Philippines observed that water, like all things that are taken for granted, is only appreciated when scarce. We only really know the true worth of water when the well goes dry (CBCP 2000). Taal Lake, the Pansipit River, and the St. Lucia Wells are the actual material spaces in the origin story of the *Virgen de Caysasay*. As such, the *Caysasay* water spaces are the living, albeit vulnerable repositories of cultural memory. The devotees of the *Virgen de Caysasay* regard these sacred waters as part of the physical and spiritual therapeutic landscapes. In *Senses of Place*, Steven Field and Keith Basso stipulated that "place is the most fundamental form of embodied experience. It is the site of powerful fusion of self, space, and time" (1996: 10). The work for devotees, be it those who reside in the community or those who journey from elsewhere to visit the *Virgen*, is to always remember the origin story of the *Virgen de Caysasay* and how she is firmly rooted in these sacred watery spaces that continue to provide them with resources for healing.

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Ranjivi terapeutski vodeni prostori Djevice iz Caysasayja (*Virgen de Caysasay*)

Djevica iz Caysasayja (*Virgen de Caysasay*) jedno je od najstarijih očitovanja Djevice Marije na Filipinima. Prema narodnom vjerovanju, jedan je ribar ulovio njezin kip u svoju mrežu na rijeci Pansipit 1603. godine. Pripisuju joj se mnoga čudesna iscjeljenja, uglavnom vodom. Usprkos razornim učincima klimatske krize, vodeni prostori Caysasayja odolijevaju vremenu kao terapeutska, ljekovita i ritualna mjesta. U članku se ispituju međusobna dinamika i ranjivost vodenih prostora povezanih s Djevicom iz Caysasayja, kontekstualiziranih svetih mjesta na kojima se izvode pobožnosti i okolnih zajednica.

Ključne riječi: terapijski vodeni prostori, izvođenje pobožnosti, iscjeljivanje, svete vode