International Journal of Educational Contemporary Explorations

ORIGINAL RESEARCH | e-Published: November 23, 2026
Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 226-231 DOI: 10.69481/PUMJ1994

From Marginalization to Affirmation: A Theological Exposition on Louis-Marie Chauvet's Sacramental Theology of Symbolic Exchange in the Context of the Arakan Manobo Ritual Languages

Sergio M. Alo III
University of San Carlos, Gov. M. Cuenco Avenue, Nasipit Talamban, Cebu City, Philippines
Email: smalo@usc.edu.ph
ORCID: 0009-0004-6311-0028

Abstract
This article examines the theological significance of Arakan Manobo ritual languages through Louis-Marie Chauvet's sacramental theology of symbolic exchange. It responds to colonial and postcolonial theological assumptions that have misread Indigenous ritual worlds as animistic, pagan, or superstitious and have thereby contributed to cultural devaluation, land dispossession, and the marginalization of Indigenous theological ontology. Using a theological hermeneutic-phenomenological design grounded in documentary review, the study re-engages Br. Karl Gaspar's ethnographic work on the Arakan Manobo and places it in dialogue with Chauvet's account of sacramentality, symbolic mediation, and the ethical return-gift. The analysis shows that Arakan Manobo ritual languages function as embodied, communal, ecological, and symbolic spaces where grace is mediated through reciprocal relations with God, land, community, ancestors, and the more-than-human world. The study proposes a heuristic framework for Indigenous theological catechesis that moves beyond a colonial model of inculturation toward liturgical pluriversalism, ecclesial recognition, and anthropological affirmation. It concludes that Indigenous ritual languages should not be treated as obstacles to theology but as generative sites of sacramental meaning, ecological responsibility, and theological dignity.

Keywords: Arakan Manobo, Ritual Languages, Sacramental Theology Of Symbolic Exchange, Indigenous Sacramental Theology, Theological Hermeneutic Phenomenology

1. Introduction

The historical encounter between Western colonial theology and Indigenous lifeworlds in Mindanao has often produced an unequal interpretive relationship. The Arakan Manobo and other Indigenous Peoples have repeatedly been described through categories that privilege Western theological and cultural assumptions. Within this interpretive structure, Indigenous ritual languages and spiritual practices have been reduced to animism, paganism, or superstition. Such classifications are not merely descriptive errors. They carry theological, cultural, ethical, and political effects because they shape how Indigenous communities, ancestral lands, and ritual practices are recognized or dismissed.

This article argues that the Arakan Manobo ritual world requires theological recontextualization rather than colonial correction. Its ritual languages are not marginal survivals of a supposedly pre-Christian world. They are embodied and communal symbolic practices that disclose a sacramental relation among God, land, community, ancestors, and creation. The problem is therefore epistemological and theological: colonial categories have misdiagnosed Indigenous theological ontology by imposing dualistic and onto-theological assumptions on a relational, ecological, and ritual world.

Louis-Marie Chauvet's sacramental theology of symbolic exchange provides a productive lens for this recontextualization. Chauvet resists a mechanistic view of grace and stresses that sacramental presence is mediated through symbolic, bodily, ecclesial, and ethical structures. When this framework is placed in dialogue with Arakan Manobo ritual languages, Indigenous symbolic exchange can be read not as superstition but as a site

©2026 The Authors. This article is published by International Journal of Educational Contemporary Explorations (IJECE) under VirtualRealia.Org

of mediation, reciprocity, ethical responsibility, and communal transformation. The study therefore moves from marginalization to affirmation by retrieving the theological validity of Indigenous ritual language.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Grounding

The literature reviewed in the source dissertation locates the problem within the colonial devaluation of Indigenous beliefs, the onto-theological interpretation of sacramental presence, and the anthropological biases embedded in missionary, ethnographic, and historical writing. Western theological systems often favored abstract categories, causal explanations of grace, and hierarchical classifications of religion. These categories have frequently failed to recognize the coherence of Indigenous cosmovisions, particularly those grounded in relational ontology, reciprocity, sacred land, and community responsibility.

Chauvet's sacramental theology challenges this logic by shifting attention from metaphysical possession of grace to symbolic mediation. Sacramentality is understood through the body, language, ritual, Scripture, ethics, and exchange. This does not reduce grace to cultural expression. Rather, it recognizes that grace is encountered through historically embodied practices and that the human response to grace takes the form of ethical transformation.

The Arakan Manobo case brings this theoretical discussion into a concrete Indigenous lifeworld. Rituals, gestures, offerings, chants, dances, and community gatherings are not detached cultural ornaments. They form a symbolic and theological grammar through which human beings relate to Manama, land, spirits, ancestors, community, and creation. This makes the Arakan Manobo ritual world a valid theological site rather than an object to be corrected by external categories.

3. Methodology

The study employed a theological hermeneutic-phenomenological design using documentary review. The main documentary basis was Br. Karl Gaspar's published ethnographic research on the Arakan Manobo. Rather than conducting new field interviews, the study analyzed the ethnographic materials, descriptions, interviews, ritual narratives, and cultural accounts already documented in Gaspar's work. This approach was selected because of logistical constraints and because Gaspar's work provides a substantial ethnographic record of the Arakan Manobo lifeworld.

Methodologically, the study used triangulation across phenomenology, ethnography, and theology. Phenomenology attended to the lived meanings of Arakan Manobo ritual language as documented in the source materials. Ethnography provided cultural, social, and ritual context. Theology brought these meanings into dialogue with Chauvet's sacramental theology of symbolic exchange. This triangulated approach enabled the study to interpret Indigenous ritual languages as bodily, symbolic, communal, and sacramental events.

The analytical process moved through four phases: decolonial and ethical orientation, qualitative documentary analysis, phenomenological interpretation of ritual language, and theological synthesis. The final phase produced a heuristic framework for Indigenous theological catechesis.

Table 1. Document Analysis Procedure for Arakan Manobo Theological Ontology

Analytical Procedure	Data Considered	Purpose
Reading-observation	Published ethnographic notes, descriptions, interviews, and observations on the Arakan Manobo lifeworld	To describe the social structure, ritual sequence, and ritual languages of the Arakan Manobo
Mapping and contextualizing	Descriptions of ritual spaces, timelines, ecological relations, and social hierarchies	To interpret ritual languages within the larger cultural and ecological system
Narrative and myth analysis	Stories, songs, chants, dances, movements, and ritual accounts documented in the literature	To understand the cosmological and theological meanings attached to ritual symbolic exchange

©2026 The Authors. This article is published by International Journal of Educational Contemporary Explorations (IJECE) under VirtualRealia.Org

Table 2. Arakan Manobo Ritual Languages and Ritual Process

Focus	Guiding Analytical Questions	Theological Relevance
Ritual purpose	What major rituals are practiced, and how are they connected to farming, hunting, planting, healing, or thanksgiving?	Shows ritual as a communal language of permission, gratitude, healing, and reciprocity
Ritual leadership	Who leads the ritual, and how are ritual leaders such as the Baylan or Babaylan prepared?	Identifies ritual authority and embodied mediation within the community
Ritual elements	What objects, offerings, chants, dances, plants, animals, or gestures are used?	Interprets material culture as symbolic mediation rather than superstition
Ritual efficacy	What signs indicate that the ritual has been accepted by Manama or the spirits?	Clarifies sacramental efficacy as relational, ethical, and communal response

4. Findings and Discussion

The first finding is that colonial epistemological errors are structural rather than incidental. The source dissertation shows that Indigenous theological ontology has been repeatedly interpreted through Western categories that treat relational and ecological practices as primitive objects. This produces a categorical error because Arakan Manobo ritual language is not primarily a doctrine to be classified but a lived, embodied, and communal symbolic exchange.

The second finding is that the labels animistic, pagan, and superstitious are insufficient and theologically misleading. When Arakan Manobo ritual language is examined through relational ontology, ritual practice appears as a mode of sociability, kinship, reciprocity, and ecological responsibility. Indigenous animism, as interpreted in the study, is not a crude belief that objects contain spirits. It is a relational understanding of life in which human beings are accountable to land, community, ancestors, spirits, and the wider living world.

The third finding is that Chauvet's sacramental theology provides a bridge for reinterpreting Indigenous ritual language. Chauvet's emphasis on symbolic mediation helps explain why ritual gestures, chants, offerings, dances, and communal acts can be understood as theological language events. Grace is not approached as a spiritual commodity possessed by individuals. It is mediated through symbolic exchange and calls for an ethical return-gift in the form of communal responsibility, ecological stewardship, and faithful life-witnessing.

The fourth finding is that Arakan Manobo ritual languages already contain traces of sacramental meaning. This claim does not collapse Indigenous ritual into Christian sacrament. Rather, it affirms that Indigenous ritual language can disclose a theological grammar of gift, reciprocity, mediation, and responsibility. The theological task is therefore not to erase or sanitize Indigenous ritual language but to listen to it as a generative site of theological meaning.

©2026 The Authors. This article is published by International Journal of Educational Contemporary Explorations (IJECE) under VirtualRealia.Org

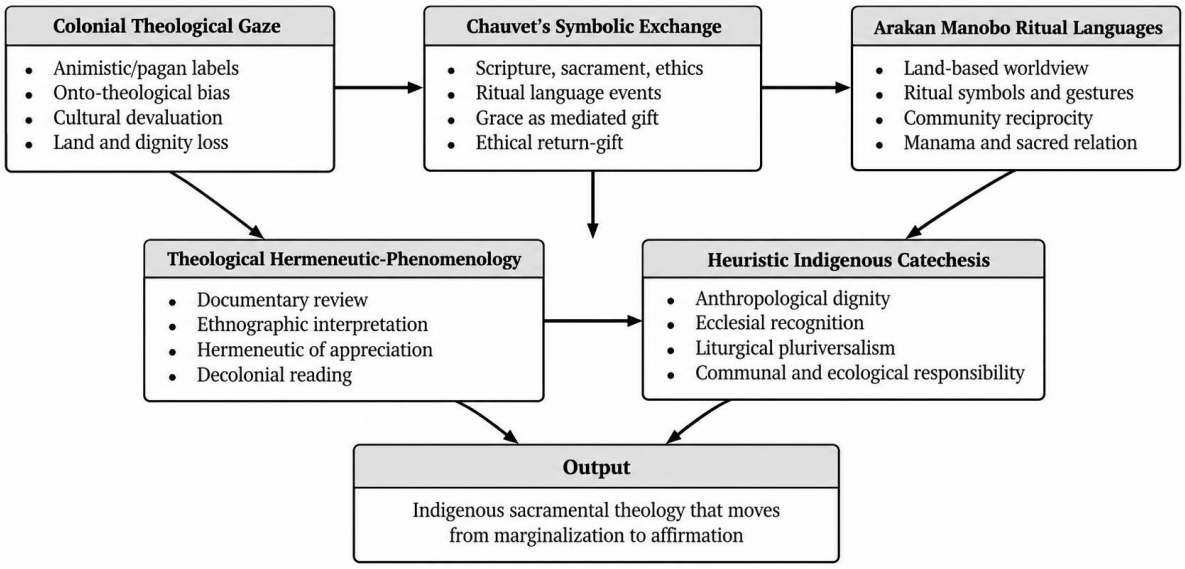


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Indigenous Sacramental Recontextualization

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for Indigenous sacramental recontextualization. It shows how the study moves from the problem of colonial theological judgment toward an affirming Indigenous sacramental theology.

The framework begins with the colonial theological gaze, which refers to the historical labeling of Indigenous beliefs and ritual practices as animistic, pagan, or inferior. This gaze produces onto-theological bias, cultural devaluation, and the loss of Indigenous dignity and land-based identity.

The next component is Chauvet's symbolic exchange, which provides the main theological lens of the study. Through scripture, sacrament, ethics, ritual language events, grace as mediated gift, and ethical return-gift, Chauvet's framework allows Indigenous ritual languages to be interpreted not as superstition but as meaningful symbolic exchanges where grace, relationship, and responsibility are mediated.

The framework then connects this theological lens to Arakan Manobo ritual languages. These include the land-based worldview, ritual symbols and gestures, community reciprocity, and sacred relationship with Manama. These elements show that Indigenous ritual practices are not merely cultural customs, but embodied expressions of sacred relation, communal responsibility, and ecological belonging.

The lower part of the figure shows the study's methodological process through theological hermeneutic-phenomenology. This involves documentary review, ethnographic interpretation, hermeneutic appreciation, and decolonial reading. Through this process, the study interprets Indigenous ritual languages from within their own lifeworld rather than from a colonial or externally imposed theological frame.

The framework leads to heuristic Indigenous catechesis, which aims to affirm anthropological dignity, ecclesial recognition, liturgical pluriversalism, and communal and ecological responsibility. The final output is an Indigenous sacramental theology that moves from marginalization to affirmation.

Figure 1 explains that the study reinterprets Arakan Manobo ritual languages through Chauvet's sacramental theology of symbolic exchange, using a decolonial hermeneutic approach to affirm Indigenous theological dignity and develop a more inclusive sacramental framework.

©2026 The Authors. This article is published by International Journal of Educational Contemporary Explorations (IJECE) under VirtualRealia.Org

5. Heuristic Framework for Indigenous Theological Catechesis

The proposed heuristic framework for Indigenous theological catechesis has four movements. First, it requires decolonial retrieval. Indigenous ritual languages must be approached through their own symbolic structures rather than through external categories that presume deficiency. Second, it requires theological appreciation. Ritual acts, land-based practices, and communal gestures should be read as meaningful theological languages that mediate relation, gift, and responsibility.

Third, the framework requires ecclesial recognition. The Church's engagement with Indigenous Peoples should move beyond treating culture as a decorative layer added to theology. Indigenous ritual languages must be engaged as dialogical and generative sources for theological reflection. Fourth, it requires ethical return. Sacramental recognition must lead to responsibility for ancestral land, ecological care, cultural dignity, and communal justice.

This framework reframes catechesis as dialogical rather than corrective. It does not ask Indigenous ritual languages to become meaningful only when translated into Western theological categories. Instead, it asks theological reflection to learn from the symbolic, ecological, and communal grammar of the Arakan Manobo lifeworld.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that Arakan Manobo ritual languages should be understood as sacramental and theological sites of meaning rather than as remnants of superstition. Through the lens of Chauvet's sacramental theology of symbolic exchange, Indigenous ritual language can be interpreted as a symbolic and ethical exchange in which grace, community, land, and responsibility are intertwined. This reading corrects colonial mischaracterizations and affirms the anthropological dignity and theological validity of the Arakan Manobo lifeworld.

The study recommends a deeper Indigenous ressourcement in theological education, missiology, and ethnographic research. Academic programs should introduce Indigenous theological ontology and Chauvet's symbolic exchange as part of decolonial theological formation. Researchers and missionaries should avoid extractive and corrective approaches and instead use hermeneutics of appreciation, reciprocal engagement, and respect for Indigenous symbolic structures. Future studies may examine Indigenous ritual languages in relation to liturgical pluriversalism, sacramental ecology, and land-based theological ethics.

Overall, the movement from marginalization to affirmation requires more than respectful language. It requires a structural shift in theology: from colonial classification to sacramental listening, from cultural suspicion to ecclesial recognition, and from abstract sacramental models to embodied, communal, and ecological responsibility.

Funding

No external funding was received for the preparation of this manuscript.

CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Sergio M. Alo III: Conceptualization, methodology, documentary review, theological analysis, framework development, writing-original draft preparation, review, and editing.

Ethical Statement

This manuscript is based on documentary review and theological analysis. It did not involve direct human participant recruitment, primary interviews, or experimental procedures. The study acknowledges Indigenous cultural sensitivity and the need for decolonial, respectful, and non-extractive theological interpretation.

Declaration of Interests

The author declares no known competing financial, personal, professional, or institutional interests that could have influenced the preparation of this manuscript.

Data Availability

The data used in this manuscript were drawn from published documentary, ethnographic, theological, and ecclesial sources cited in the reference list. No new field data were generated for this article.

©2026 The Authors. This article is published by International Journal of Educational Contemporary Explorations (IJECE) under VirtualRealia.Org

OPEN ACCESS

AI Usage Disclosure

Artificial intelligence tools were used only to support language refinement, formatting, and manuscript preparation. The author remains responsible for the accuracy, integrity, originality, and scholarly content of the manuscript.

References

Ambrose, G. P. (2016). The theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet: Overcoming onto-theology with the sacramental tradition. Routledge.

Bevans, S. B. (2000). Models of contextual theology (Rev. ed.). Orbis Books.

Chauvet, L.-M. (1995). Symbol and sacrament: A sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence (P. Madigan & M. Beaumont, Trans.). Liturgical Press.

Chauvet, L.-M. (2001). The sacraments: The word of God at the mercy of the body. Liturgical Press.

Crollius, A. R. (1984). What is so new about inculturation? A concept and its implications. In Inculturation: Working papers on living faith and cultures (Vol. 5, pp. 1-18). Pontifical Gregorian University.

De Mesa, J. M. (2003). Why theology is never far from home. De La Salle University Press.

Escobar, A. (2018). Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds. Duke University Press.

Gaspar, K. M. (2011). Manobo dreams in Arakan: A people's struggle to keep their homeland. Ateneo de Manila University Press.

Gaspar, K. M. (2017). Panagkutay: Anthropology and theology interfacing in Mindanao uplands. Institute of Spirituality in Asia.

Gaspar, K. M. (2021). Handumanan (Remembrance): Digging for the Indigenous wellspring. Claretian Publications.

Harvey, G. (2006). Animism: Respecting the living world. Columbia University Press.

Miranda, D. (1987). Pagkamakatao: Reflections on the theological view of virtues in the Philippine context. Divine Word Publications.

O'Connor, J. D. (2003). Expansive naturalism and the justification of metaphysics in sacramental theology. New Blackfriars, 84, 361-370.

Second Vatican Council. (1965). Ad gentes: Decree on the missionary activity of the Church. Vatican.

Tauli-Corpuz, V. (2017). Conflict, peace, and the human rights of Indigenous Peoples. Presentation at Columbia University.

Tracy, D. W. (1999). Forms and fragments: The recovery of the hidden and incomprehensible God. CTI Reflections, 3, 62-89.

Thomson, I. (2000). Ontotheology? Understanding Heidegger's Destruktion of metaphysics. International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 8, 297-327.

©2026 The Authors. This article is published by International Journal of Educational Contemporary Explorations (IJECE) under VirtualRealia.Org