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Texts and Documents

The Mt. Banahaw Prayer: Amang Makapangyarihan

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From earliest times, mountains were often designated as places where God dwells, and as such were considered as places of worship. In the Philippines, Mt. Banahaw in Quezon province is one such mountain where people from all walks of life come to pray and make pilgrimages. Around Mt. Banahaw are a number of sects whose lives are dedicated in one form or another to prayer. One such sect is the Samahan ng Tatlong Persona Solo Dios.¹

The sect Tatlong Persona Solo Dios is located at Kinabuhayan, Dolores, Quezon. Many claim that there is a special ambience about Kinabuhayan. Perhaps this is the result of many things—the gigantic trees, the clear running waters that tumble down huge boulders and even a hazy mist that now and then covers the place. Added to all these is the prayerful attitude of many pilgrims who come from various parts of Luzon to pray at the *Yapak*. The *Yapak* is a footlike imprint on a stone found in a pool of water, which is the spring of the stream that flows through Kinabuhayan. It is the belief of many that the *Yapak* is Christ's footprint which He left when He ascended to heaven. The name *Kinabuhayan*, which means resurrection, is no doubt related to this belief.

The Samahan ng Tatlong Persona Solo Dios was founded sometime in the middle part of this century by a man named Agapito Illustre (Ellustre), later known as Amang Illustrisimo. His origin is traced to Limutan, Cebu where he was a Pulahan rebel. After a deep inner experience, he changed from a Pulahan rebel to a man of

1. This paper is based on my thesis "Tatlong Persona Solo Dios: A Study of a Filipino Folk Religion" submitted to the Philippine Studies Program, Asian Center, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City, March 1986.

peace, preaching in various places of Luzon. He also came to possess powers similar to those of a shaman.

He founded the Samahan ng Tatlong Persona Solo Dios, to help win Philippine independence from the Americans by means of prayer. The effort of the founder to make known the purpose of the organization made front page news of Manila newspaper *The Tribune* on 21 July 1938. The text is as follows:

Independence Through Prayer

Bearded Delegation Calls on Quezon at Malacañang

President Manuel L. Quezon, last evening discovered he has the aid of a new religious sect organized to obtain independence through prayer.

Some 100 members of the sect known as the Pambansang Kapatiran Panalangin Ukol sa Kalayaan ng Bayan, Inc., or the National Prayer for Freedom for the Country, called on President Quezon at Malacañang at 5:30 yesterday afternoon . . .

They were received by the President on the lawn of the executive building where he questioned the leaders. For the benefit of the President the delegation sang their hymns in Tagalog.²

This effort of the sect to help win Philippine independence from the Americans by means of prayer must have amused many of the readers of *The Tribune* at that time; but when viewed today against the events of the February revolution where prayer played a major role, the belief of the Tatlong Persona in the power of prayer takes on a new meaning.

The importance that the Tatlong Persona attaches to prayer is seen in the number of times the community gathers together to pray. Every noon and at dusk, those in the *Sentral* (the headquarters of the Tatlong Persona) gather together in the *Dasalan* (prayer room) for the community prayers. The opening prayer is intoned by the highest ranking priestess and the others follow with a series of prayers recited from memory. Most of these prayers are in Tagalog, though some prayers seem to be of Latin origin. Prayer is ended with a movement of hand and fingers over the forehead, mouth and breast. The ritual is similar to the sign of the cross. Afterwards the members go to the elders and ranking members of the community to ask for their blessing. With heads inclined respectfully toward the person of rank, they say, "Bendisyonan po." (Please bless me.)

2. The name Pambansang Kapatiran Panalangin ukol sa Kalayaan ng Bayan, Inc., was one of the earlier names of the organization until it changed to its present name of Samahang Tatlong Persona Solo Dios.

The posture of prayer is similar to that of most Asian countries. It is a half-sitting, half-kneeling position on the floor. For this reason the Dasalan is devoid of any furniture, since there is no need for the usual kneelers or chairs. At one end of the Dasalan is a banner in the form of a Filipino flag. At the triangular portion is a representation of the Trinity, while at the bottom part are the pictures of twenty-five national heroes.

Prayers are also said before and after meals. The final prayer of the day is sung at the dormitory of the priestesses and sacristans.³ This sung prayer is hauntingly beautiful, often a deep experience for those who hear it for the first time.

All this emphasis on prayer by the community is based on their belief that prayer can help bring peace to the country. One such prayer which is said twice daily at the Dasalan is the prayer *Amang Makapangyarihan*. An analysis of this prayer reveals many answers to questions often asked about Filipino folk beliefs. "Who is/are their gods?" "What are the attributes of these beings?" "How do they relate to these supernatural beings?" "What is the content of their prayers?" "How is the content of their prayers related to their culture?"

The following is the prayer *Amang Makapangyarihan* with its English translation.

Amang Makapangyarihan

Amang makapangyarihan, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
harinawang kami'y saklolohan ng mahal
mo pong karunungan.

Ina ng kaliwanagan, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang sa ami'y pakamtan ang
kapangyarihan ng aming bayan.

Amang Ellustre, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang sa ami'y pakamtan ang
kapayapaan ng aming bayan.

Dios Impenito, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang sa ami'y pakamtan ang
kapayapaan ng aming bayan.

Dios Espiritu Santo, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang sa ami'y pakamtan ang
kapayapaan ng aming bayan.

3. The religious specialists of the group are celibate women who live a common life. See "Tatlong Persona Solo Dios," pp. 89-91; also "Is There a Filipino Eremitical Tradition?," *Life Today*, June 1988.

Dios sumakop sa atin, sa aming mga kamatayan.
Harinawang iyo pong buksan ang pinto
Ama, aming daraanan.

Ina sa karagatan, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang iyo pong buksan ang pinto
ng iyong kaharian.

Ina sa kabayanan, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang sa ami'y pakamtan ang
kabuhayan ng aming bayan.

Ina sa kabundukan, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang sa ami'y pakamtan ang
buhay na walang hangan.

Amang kabanal-banalan, na walang pinagmulan.
Harinawang kami'y iyong tulungan sa
kapayapaan ng aming bayan.

Ina ng kaganda-gandahan, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang kami'y tulungan sa
kapayapaan ng aming bayan.

Rizal makapangyarihan, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang kami po'y tulungan sa
kapayapaan ng aming bayan.

Ina ng Pilipinas, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang iyo na pong buksan ang
bandera, Ina ng kapayapaan.

Amang Bathala, tunay sa ami'y nagmamahal.
Harinawang sa ami'y pakamtan ang
kapayapaan ng aming bayan.

(translation)

Father Most Powerful

Father most powerful, who truly loves us,
may you come to our assistance
with your holy wisdom.

Mother of Light who truly loves us,
may you help us to obtain peace
for our country.

Father Ellustre, who truly loves us,
may you continue to aid us, so that
there will be peace in our country.

Infinite God, who truly loves us,
may you help us to obtain peace
for our country.

God the Holy Spirit, who truly loves us,
may you help us to obtain peace
for our country.

God who came to save us from our deaths,
may you Father open the door
of the way.

Mother of the Sea, who truly loves us,
may you open the door of your kingdom.

Mother of the Towns, who truly loves us,
may you help us
obtain our daily needs.

Mother of the Mountains, who truly loves us
may you help us to obtain
everlasting life.

Father most holy, who is without beginning,
may you help us to obtain
peace for our country.

Mother Most Beautiful, who truly loves us
may you help us to obtain
peace for our country.

Rizal most powerful, who truly loves us
may you come to help us so that
there will be peace in our country.

Mother of the Philippines, who truly loves us
may you open the banner,
Mother of Peace.

Father Bathala, who truly loves us,
may you come to help us
so that there will be peace in our country.

A N A L Y S I S

Two dominant themes are immediately noticeable in this prayer—the existence of a loving relationship between these superior beings and the sect members; and the prayerful supplication of peace for the country. Whether the prayer is addressed to God, the Virgin Mary, Rizal or to Father Ellustre their founder, these two themes are always present. This is seen in the repeated phrases of the prayer—*tunay na*

nagmamahal sa amin (who truly loves us) and *pakamtan ang kapayapaan ng aming bayan* (may you help us to obtain peace for our country).

The type of relationship existing between the members and these superior beings can be better understood by their choice of the word *pakamtan* instead of *makamtan*. Both of the roots of these roots mean the same—to acquire or possess something,—but the word *pakamtan* has the causation prefix *pa*. This means that the acquisition of peace is caused externally (by these superior beings). The use of the form indicates acknowledgment that it is these beings who cause or have the power to cause. The word *makamtan* does not have the nuance of externally caused acquisition of peace. To use it would have the nuance that it is the mortals, the people who intend or cause themselves to have peace. Had the word *makamtan* been used, the translation would read: “May we obtain peace for our country.” But the use of the word *pakamtan* signifies acknowledgement of these superior beings’ power, and humility on the part of the individual. The line referred to would read:—“May you help us to obtain peace for our country.” It also shows that though deeply aware of these beings’ love for them, this love is not presumed upon, rather it is respectfully acknowledged.

In this prayer one also sees that there is a recognition of the distinct personalities of each of the supernatural beings. God who is a Trinity occupies the highest rank. Though *makapangyarihan*, (powerful) *walang pinagmulan* (Infinite) and *kabanal-banalan* (most holy), in other words, totally above men in all ways, a loving relationship exists between this superior being and the sect members. The God to whom their prayers and petitions are addressed, is not a God who is distant, who demands appeasement, but a God who is a loving Father “who truly loves” them. He is not only a loving Father, but *Amang Makapangyarihan* (Father Most Powerful), who is also called *Amang Bathala*, the ancient name of God of the early Filipinos. It is relevant to point out that the early Filipinos considered their God to be “merciful . . . sustainer, keeper, nourisher and protector of mankind. Sometimes he seems to be very human. He welcomes gifts from the people with deep appreciation. He was pleased when men were helpful and obedient to his moral laws. He was lavish in his love to those who kept his commandments and those who pay him homage.”⁴ One sees here a similarity between the early Filipino beliefs and the Tatlong Persona. This is significant, for the Tatlong Persona and other

4. F. Landa Jocano, *Philippine Prehistory* (Quezon City: PCAS, 1975)..

sects around Mt. Banahaw consider their religion to be *katutubo* (indigenous).⁵

It must be noted that the term *Ama* is also used to refer to the founder Amang Ellustre. The same term is used today to refer to the present leader of the group, Jose Illustre, the son of the founder. The attribute of a powerful and loving God, who is considered a father, is a quality that the leader of the group is considered to possess. In other words, the leader concretizes a concept attributed to an abstract being. This could be interpreted that the leadership in the Tatlong Persona is conceived along familial terms, who is seen as a member of the family—a father who acts lovingly toward the members.

God the Holy Spirit who symbolizes peace is invoked in the fifth stanza. The group's devotion to the Holy Spirit is seen in another prayer of the community entitled *Santong Espiritu* which the group claims was taught to them by the *boses* (voice).⁶ This emphasis on the Holy Spirit, who is considered to be the God of Peace, is no doubt related to the group's concern for peace for the country..

The sixth stanza refers to a God who saved the people from their deaths. This most probably refers to Christ, the second person of the Trinity, who became man to save the world. Though Christ is often the one credited with saving the world, the other persons of the Trinity are also part of this work of redemption, which explains the referral to *Ama* (Father) in the same stanza.

It is obvious from this prayer that the group has a special regard for the Virgin Mary. She is given no less than seven titles in a prayer addressed to God Most Powerful. It is also worth noting that after the first stanza addressed to God Most Powerful, the second stanza is addressed to Mary, who is called *Ina ng Kaliwanagan* (Mother of Light). Other titles bestowed on her are *Ina ng Karagatan* (Mother of the Seas), *Ina ng Kabayanan* (Mother of the Towns), *Ina ng Kabundukan* (Mother of the Mountains) and *Ina ng Kaganda-gandahan* (Mother Most Beautiful). In the second to the last stanza, Mary is called *Ina ng Pilipinas* (Mother of the Philippines) and *Ina ng Kapayapaan* (Mother of Peace).

5. For a more elaborate discussion of this concept see pp. 118-27 of "Tatlong Persona Solo Dios."

6. The *boses* or *tinig* occurs when a spirit speaks through a person. The *langkap* or *sapi* is more common. Less common and considered superior to the *langkap* is the *subaybay* where a person converses with a spirit. According to the sect members the founder and the present leader of the group possess such powers. See pp. 65-67 of "Tatlong Persona Solo Dios." See also "The Langkap Experience" in *The Sunday Malaya*, 3 April 1988.

The last two titles are especially significant because Mary is considered the patroness of the Philippines by the Catholic church under the title of the Immaculate Conception. The title, Mother of Peace, takes on a very significant meaning in relation to the peaceful February revolution, where Mary was considered by the *tao* to have played a major role in winning the revolution in a peaceful manner. Two of the most significant pictures taken during the EDSA revolt are those of the statue of Mary placed on top of the gate of Camp Aguinaldo, and the other of the statue of Mary between Gen. Ramos and Enrile accompanying them in the historical crossing from Camp Aguinaldo to Camp Crame.

Is this importance attached to Mary symbolic of the high status of women in Philippine society? Looking to the past, historians say that women in the early Filipino society were highly regarded and even occupied positions of power. In the Tatlong Persona women do occupy a high position since they are the religious specialists of the group. In this case one can see a societal value being reflected in the religious value of the group. This religious phenomenon has been observed by religious scholars like Johnstone who noted that a relative congruence exists between the religious norms and the societal norms of a given culture.⁷

It is also interesting to note that all the titles bestowed on Mary are preceded by the word *Ina* (Mother). The title "Mother" is of course often given to Mary, but in other Christian countries, she is known by other titles as well, like Virgin, Lady, Queen, etc. One sees here again the familial terms by which Filipinos conceive their social relationships, even their relationships with supernatural beings. If relationships are viewed in this manner, one can easily understand why a loving relationship expressed in a *mahinahon* or gentle manner would be the dominant theme among the members of the Tatlong Persona.

Aside from Mary, no other saint is honored, but Rizal and the founder, Agapito Ellustre, are mentioned. The reason behind this is that the Tatlong Persona consider Rizal to be Christlike. Like Christ who died for mankind, Rizal, too, died for the Filipino nation. Amang Ellustre is venerated like any founder of a religious group who is considered a chosen soul of God. The sect consider the saints of the Christian West as *banyaga* (foreigner), and therefore not as deeply concerned as Filipinos like Rizal and the other national heroes who died for the country. This nationalistic leanings is also evident in the

7. Ronald Johnstone, *Religion and Society in Interaction: The Sociology of Religion* (Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1975), p. 136.

use of *Amang Bathala*, the name of God of the early Filipinos, and also the use of Tagalog in a majority of their prayers.

Study shows that the oft repeated prayer for peace does not remain in the conceptual or abstract level, but is translated into the culture of the group, which can be described as *mahinahon*, defined as being "calm in one's speech, action and conduct."⁸ It also means being polite, humble and nonaggressive in dealing with others and a generally calm and gentle attitude to life.

The concept of being *mahinahon* can be traced to the life of the founder who made a radical transformation from a rebel leader of the Pulahan to a man of peace advocating prayer as a means of helping the country. Amang Illustrisimo later concretized his inspiration by founding an organization honoring the Trinity—*Samahan ng Tatlong Persona Solo Dios* (Organization of the Three Persons in One God) which in Christian theology is the symbol of the perfect community where love, peace and unity reigns. Was the name given the organization a mere coincidence or was it the result of a deep insight on the part of the founder?

The *mahinahon* stance is seen in the various areas of the group's life—in management style, in community relationships, in its relationship with external groups and even in its relationship with the physical environment.⁹ This gentle approach to life is evident during their *misyon* (missions). Instead of the usual speeches and arguments, the group presents the *ehersisyo*, a pageant of songs, dances and *tula* (poems) which tells about the beauty and richness of *Inang Bayan* (Motherland) and their hopes and aspirations for a peaceful and united Philippines. The appeal of the *ehersisyo* is not intellectual or dogmatic. It seems to bypass these aspects and instead appeals directly to the nationalistic aspirations of the audience.

A close relationship between verbalized prayer and actual behavior is seen on Saturday mornings when, after the ritual called *Pagpupuri sa Bandila* (Honoring the Flag), the group goes down to the river to clean it. With their brooms they ferret out bits of food, paper, plastic and whatever was left by the many visitors to Banahaw. The abstract concept therefore of honoring the flag is translated into the concrete act of cleaning the river which is part of the national patrimony. (Mt. Banahaw is a national park.)

8. Vito Santos, *First Vicassin's Filipino-English Dictionary* (Caloocan City: Philippine Graphic Arts, 1979).

9. See "Tatlong Persona Solo Dios," pp. 103-17 for a more comprehensive discussion of this subject.

What is therefore verbalized in prayer for peace is also actualized in behavior. The prayer for peace, therefore, is not an impotent gesture where the results are not discernable. By acting peacefully, the sect members help to bring about the peace that they pray for. The role therefore that the Tatlong Persona has taken upon itself—to pray for the country—is not an empty ritual (as some would regard prayer) limited to verbalizing prayers for peace, but a reality they themselves help to bring about.

Is this concern for peace evident in the prayers of the Tatlong Pesona reflective of the values of many Filipinos in resolving conflict as was manifest during the February revolution?

Analysis of the prayer also shows that some beliefs of the Tatlong Persona are orthodox Christian beliefs, e.g., the belief in the Trinity and the Virgin Mary. In some areas the beliefs parallel those of the Catholic church, as in the case of the title given to Mary as Mother of the Philippines, being the same as patroness of the Philippines.

Much therefore can be learned about a particular belief system by studying its prayers. This aspect is especially important in the study of Filipino folk beliefs because of the many labels attached to it, which have their origin from our colonial past and have not been seriously challenged because of lack of fresh research in this area. Sturtevant laments this aspect: "In neglecting these popular expressions, scholars have missed an opportunity to gain insights into the dynamics of rural discord in the Philippines."¹⁰ Perhaps for the same reason most Filipino social scientists were caught by surprise by the folk religious display and the peaceful character of the February revolution.

10. David Sturtevant, "Revitalization Movements, The Millennial Tradition and Rizalista Cults," in *Society, Culture and the Filipino*, ed. M. Hollnsteiner (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila, 1979).