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Notes and Comments

Tatlong Persona Solo Dios

VICENTE MARASIGAN, S.J.

To "rediscover" Filipino popular religiosity, as desired by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*,¹ it is not enough to read general studies. Based on limited observation, such general studies were written in accordance with a thinking that ignored cultural pluralism, and tended to emphasize the negative aspects of indigenous religiosity, especially in rural barrios, and to play down the positive values they contained, probably because of unconscious feelings of cultural superiority among the more westernized Filipino authors of those studies. Negative bias and hasty generalizations may have caused rural religiosity to be "despised."² The rediscovery of popular religiosity also requires particular case studies that give greater importance to depth of insight than to breadth of generality, at least in the earlier stages of rediscovery.

A number of such case studies were envisioned and discussed in a seminar-workshop at the Loyola School of Theology, Quezon City, in the first semester of 1979. The plan was for each participant or group of participants to explore the possibilities, in some given basic community, of understanding the practices and beliefs of people in search of God and the faith.

One participant, Teresina Obusan, found her way to a sect known as "Tatlong Persona Solo Dios,"³ whose central head-

This article is a modified version of a lecture-discussion given at the Institute of Philippine Culture of the Ateneo de Manila University on 28 January 1982.

1. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Pasay City: Daughters of St. Paul, 1976), no. 48.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Hereafter abbreviated TPSD.

quarters are located in barrio Kinabuhayan on Mt. Banahaw, in the municipality of Dolores, Quezon. Teresina's report fascinated all her hearers including myself, and I decided to go there too.

KINABUHAYAN, MT. BANAHAW

And thus I found myself in Kinabuhayan just about sunset time on 3 November 1979. I met three of the priestesses and about eight servites (*"nagseserbisyo"*), both men and women, of varying ages from twenty to fifty. I told them I was a Catholic priest and that I had heard about them from Teresina. They immediately made me welcome. They told me about their life on Mt. Banahaw, about their religious practices, about their vows of virginity, about their experiences with spirits, about the Voice that guides them in their decisions and protects them from harm, about their dedication to labor on the soil, in strict obedience to the command to earn their sustenance from the sweat of their brow. I did not meet the Supremo just then, for he was away and was not expected back until next morning.

I asked for overnight lodging which they readily gave. They laid a mat for me on the floor of the prayer room. On the wall of the room was a large banner, two-by-four meters, hanging vertically, designed like the Philippine flag, in red, white and blue, with the three divine Persons portrayed near the center, and below, twenty-four national heroes with Rizal at the center.

I was so tired from the eight-hour trip that I fell asleep almost immediately. But just before losing consciousness, I heard chanting in the distance, from the women's quarters, where the priestesses and their sacristanas were chanting their night prayers. The melody was very plaintive but the words were hard to understand because they were so soft and so distant. I felt sad because I could not understand. Then silence. Almost total silence except for the sound of gurgling waters in the nearby stream, flowing right beside the house. Somehow the gurgling sound merged with my dream of spirits, the mountain spirits that they had been telling me about a while ago, spirits that were whispering to one another. In my dream, I was trying to understand their whisperings but could not. I felt very sad. I do not know how long this dream lasted, possibly all night. Anyhow, I woke up in the morning feeling sad that I

could not understand the message of the mountain spirits, but also strangely eager to study the realities symbolized by this dream of whispering spirits.

In later visits to Kinabuhayan, sometimes lasting for weeks and months at a time, I told them about this dream. They would listen knowingly and without surprise but would offer no comments. I think now that they were studying me. Did my dream have any symbolic meaning for them?

SYMBOLS

That symbols play a large part in their culture had been my expectation. Now I know that my expectations are not only met, they are even surpassed. Even in my ordinary conversations with them, I sometimes notice their subtle preference for metaphors, parables and personifications. When I ask them questions, they do not answer directly. Instead they tell me stories. For example, I asked one of the priestesses why their priesthood was made up of women, and she answered:

You know, Father, I once saw a book whose cover portrayed a woman in a dress that resembled the Philippine flag. At another time, I was reading the Bible and I read a passage about a woman in the sky, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

From that answer I was supposed to see her reason why their priesthood was made up of women. Later I reconstructed her reason in technical language somewhat as follows: Filipino culture is matriarchal and the Blessed Virgin plays a prominent part in salvation history. Whatever the theological implications of this reasoning, their culture seems to differ from ours in the manner of communicating meanings: for us the primary carrier of meaning is technical language (scientific, philosophical, theological), whereas for them, the primary carrier of meaning is the language of symbols, symbolic rituals, symbolic actions.⁴ When they have to use

4. Bernard J.F. Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), pp. 57-73, lists seven carriers of meaning: (1) intersubjectivity, (2) art, (3) symbols, (4) ordinary language, (5) technical language, (6) literary language, and (7) incarnate meaning. Of these seven, the third and the fifth are differently emphasized in each of the two contrasted cultures according to the hypothesis proposed here.

words for communicating religious experience, they prefer metaphors, parables and personifications.

The geography of Kinabuhayan probably has something to do with the people's bias for symbolisms. The place is beautiful. And since by religious dedication they are toilers of the soil, they are very close to nature and very sensitive to nature's beauties and changing moods, and they commune with nature in a very intimate way. Their communion with nature and with one another is best carried out in the language of symbols.

The house is right beside a stream. Flowing into this stream is a spring and a limpid pool a few feet deep, at the bottom of which is a rocky imprint of a footstep, the Yapak, object of many Lenten pilgrimages. The stream cascades its winding way among the boulders down to the neighboring barrio of Sta. Lucia. The slopes on both sides of this stream are lush with vegetation in a dazzling variety of patterns and colors. About a hundred yards downstream from the spring, deep inside the cliff east of the stream, there is a network of tunnels, probably volcanic vents at one time. Their mouths form three caves, of which the largest is called the Templo. On entering the Templo, one gets the feeling of the majesty of a cathedral. The many statues of Christ and the Blessed Virgin and saints, and the lighted candles burning on the walls during the pilgrimage season, enhance this feeling. Pilgrims owe this Templo to the hands of Amang Illustrisimo and the TPSD community, hands that scooped out loose soil from it through the years and enlarged it to its present majestic dimensions.

The whole place is vibrant with majesty. Those who live in this atmosphere see miracles everywhere — miracles in the sense in which all life and all creation is a miracle, and particularly in the sense in which the orchestration of nature's charms focussed on this space conditions an experience of "sacred space,"⁵ and brings a poet or musician to peaks of artistic inspiration, and a contemplative to the verge of ecstasy.

Furthermore, nature, lovingly personified by local people as *their* Sacred Mountain, is not merely a passive object of contemplation: she also protects her chosen ones. She continually manifests her protective powers in many events that appear miraculous and certainly providential, even though these may be skept-

5. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 20-65.

tically dismissed by outsiders as coincidental. One outstanding example happened around 1940. The increasing number of pilgrims and excursionists to the Kinabuhayan spring had begun to show commercial possibilities. A business syndicate with connections with the municipal and provincial governments decided to build a public swimming pool beside the spring. This would of course entail the eviction of the TPSD community, for technically these were (and still are) squatting on government property. Suddenly, the water slowed down to a trickle and the project became financially worthless. After it was shelved, the water sprang back to life as abundant as ever.

Coincidence? Of course, the businessmen thought silently. Skeptically they kept the spring under observation for several years. Not once did it stop flowing. Not once did it slow down. Nor could they find anyone who had heard of the spring having slowed down before. Obviously, that it happened at this time was sheer coincidence. And so, once again, in 1968, they decided to proceed with the construction of the swimming pool. This time, the spring not only slowed down to a trickle. It dried up completely! Nor did it spring back to life until the business syndicate decided to forget the whole thing. Again the water sprang back to life. It has not stopped flowing since.

Mt. Banahaw continues to protect her chosen ones. No outside threat can disturb their serene faith, their ineffable peace. Gratefully, they dedicate their own bodily powers to the care and reverence of their Sacred Mountain in a spirit of religious sacrifice. With hymns and rituals and in ceremonial garb, they periodically sweep the Templo, dredge the sacred pool, repair the footpaths for the pilgrims, trim the grass and the branches of trees, and — yes, let it be said — they burn the reeking piles of feces excreted in the sacred groves by thoughtless tourists. Never is incense so sweet-smelling as when it truly symbolizes humility, mortification, meekness and dedicated love. Never is symbolism so rich.

An outsider like myself, trying to fulfill the role of a participant-observer, that is to say, trying to keep one's scientific objectivity, eventually finds that the ideal of scientific objectivity is extremely difficult to achieve under the circumstances. Objectivity and my subjective states of consciousness seem incompatible. I need documentation. And so, I tried my diplomatic best to ask

them whether they would share with me whatever writings they might have, so that I could understand their religiosity better. For a long time, I got no answer. Perhaps they were still testing me.

BIOGRAPHY OF AMA

Then one day, they told me about the Voice that came to them sometime in 1975, telling the Labindalawahan, the more literate elders of the community, to put down in writing all the anecdotes they could gather from the older brethren, the surviving contemporaries of Ama, and to compile these anecdotes and unify them into a history. The Voice told them that someday, somebody would come to Kinabuhayan to study their history. And they showed me some ninety pages of rough typescript entitled "Mga Dakilang Kasaysayan ng Amang Illustrisimo" (or MDK).⁶

The MDK gives a sort of biography of Ama. Ama's life is roughly divided into three phases. In the first phase, he is a captain of the Pulahan guerrillas in Cebu. In the second phase, he is an itinerant preacher in Luzon, gradually gathering a religious following. In the third phase, he is the founder of the TPSD on Mt. Banahaw.

PHASE ONE

Although the MDK devotes only five paragraphs to the first phase about the Pulahan uprising, we are fortunate in having two letters, one of Governor General James Smith, dated November 1908, and the other of Bishop Thomas Hendrick of Cebu, dated January 1907. These two letters give us an inkling as to the reasons why Ama rose up in arms.

Gov.-Gen. Smith writes:

The mountain and upland people seem to have been regarded as legitimate prey for exploitation by their civilized brothers in the lowlands. Indeed, the terrible pulahan outbreak or some years ago was caused in a large measure by the unconscionable plundering and exploitation to which they were subjected by the people of the *playa*. The pulahan is not a robber or

6. This document, its English translation, and some interdisciplinary reflections from the points of view of Philippine history, anthropology, psychology, Tagalog literature, spirituality, and theological method, will be published in a forthcoming book, probably to be entitled *A Banahaw Guru: Symbolic Deeds of Agapito Illustrisimo*.

a thief by nature — quite the contrary. He is hard working, industrious, and even frugal. He had his little *late* of hemp on the side of the mountain, and breaking out his picul of hemp, he carried it hank by hank for miles and miles over almost impassable mountain trails to the nearest town or barrio. There he offered it for sale, and if he refused the price tendered, which was generally not more than half the value, he soon found himself arrested on a trumped-up charge, and unless he compromised by parting with his hemp he found himself, after paying his fine and lawyer's fees, without either hemp or money . . . Of his mistreatment, of the injustice suffered by him, of the outrages to which he submitted, the pulahan said nothing to superior authority, because his experience for many generations had been that if he did complain his second condition might prove worse than the first. He therefore suffered in patience until his accumulated wrongs wore his patience to a rag, and then he took the law into his own hands.⁷

According to Fr. John N. Schumacher, S.J., professor of Church History, Loyola School of Theology, this policy of Gov.-Gen. Smith encouraged Msgr. Thomas Hendrick, Bishop of Cebu, to help the American government inquire into the causes of the Pulahan uprising. In a letter dated 2 January 1907, the Bishop wrote:

In my trip around Samar, the most disturbed province in these islands I was accompanied by two priests, both natives of Samar. One of them, Father Nicanor Acebeda, parish priest of Basay, Samar, was water cured by Captain, now Major Edwin F. Glenn of the 5th U.S. Infantry . . . His assistant priest was also water cured, at the same time . . . The other priest with me in the visitation of Samar was Father Severino Picson, whose brother, a priest was water cured to death by Glenn, and whose sister was bayoneted to death, by his order. Father Picson is a native of Samar. Now these two priests were chosen by me, for the express purpose of preaching to the natives, at every parish, to be peaceful, and not to stay in the field, and [they] helped Gen. Curry very materially toward his successful dealings with the natives. We went to every parish in Samar. All around Cebu the same way, Father Severino preached the same sermon . . . The same sermon was preached by Father Emiliano Mercado, a native of Cebu, who was tortured by another shoulder strapped "officer and gentleman," Edwin Feeter, Lieutenant of the 17th infantry. He tied Father Emiliano's hands behind his back, with a rope one end of which he threw over the beam of a fanlight, and so strung him up for the onstensible [sic] purpose of getting information, which Father Emiliano could not have,

7. *Report of the Philippine Commission, 1908, Part I, pp. 62-63.*

and because he had rice in his basement, which he received from the Vicar-general in Cebu, to feed his poor starving people. I forgot to say that Father Nicanor was tortured because he rowed from Basey to Leyte, to get rice for his people, which was against military orders. So in every parish we went, the same sermon was preached, besides I sent a circular letter to the priests of Leyte, during the late uprising telling them to go among their people, and to urge them to peace, and next Saturday I will go again to Leyte, at the urgent request of Captain W. R. Dashiell, of the 24th U.S. Regulars, to do what I can toward the settlement of the uprising there, one of the worst in the islands. The people are good but the uprising was a bad one, arising from the report, spread by their leaders that the United States intended to deprive them of their religion. My authority for this latter statement is Sr. Norberto Romualdez, Fiscal . . . of the Province of Leyte. Mr. Romualdez is known, not only as an able lawyer, but also as one of the most conservative of the better educated Filipinos. I have done everything that was asked, and everything that my mind could suggest, in the interest of the government.⁸

Eventually, Pulahan militarism was crushed by superior military power. But the *Ilustrisimo* did not give up the fight, for his was fundamentally a fight for human dignity. With his extraordinary perceptiveness, he must have been deeply aware of the religious meanings communicated to popular piety by the testimonies of Bishop Hendrick and his Visayan priests Frs. Acebeda, Picson and Mercado, martyrs of charity and justice, a martyrdom that encouraged him to renounce violence as an instrument of human dignity and to seek other ways.

Why he turned to spiritual ways can be inferred from his story of his grandfather's death when he received seven spiritual gifts symbolized by seven little birds. The story would make little sense to a modern reader interpreting it literally. Therefore it must be understood symbolically and consistently with the image of him presented by the *Labindalawahan*. That image and the symbolic structure of the story present reality as rooted in mystery in which spiritual values, or "spirits," transcend material values. In their undifferentiated consciousness, values are poetically personified as "spirits" and thus intensify religious motivation in their dedication to spiritual warfare.

In turning from physical violence to spiritual warfare, Ama clarified to himself and his followers his ultimate concern for

8. Hendrick Papers. Nazareth College Library, Rochester, N.Y.

spiritual unity, peace and freedom. This is unambiguously clear throughout the MDK and is also shown in the articles of incorporation reproduced by Foronda.⁹

(The principle of non-violent liberation, spiritual unification and peace, is still in full force today. As recently as October 1980, after suffering violence from the hired goons of wealthy landgrabbers in barrio Huyon-uyon of Quezon province, the TPSD community remained *mahinahon* (gentle) in obedience to the Voice as relayed to them by Supremo Jose Illustre, commanding them to stay within the law.)

PHASES TWO AND THREE

As an itinerant preacher in the second phase of Ama's life, he went around on a walking tour of rural barrios and towns of Luzon, in rice fields and town plazas, preaching spiritual liberation, peace and unity for the country. Gradually, he attracted a band of friends and followers who joined him in his *lakaran* and they put on *ehersisyos* and parades in many places including the Luneta, Manila. His followers and converts were mostly rural Catholics, some Aglipayans and some Colorums, and they would go around barefoot and bearded, and this activity aroused suspicion of subversion and they were sometimes jailed. They were advised by friends to register themselves with the Securities and Exchange Commission, which they did in 1936, under the name Tatlong Persona Solo Dios as dictated to them by the Voice. Although many of the followers were Catholics, at least nominally, by reason of baptism, they did not feel at home in the Catholic Church because they felt there was a *cultural* gap between them and the Catholic hierarchy, because they felt "despised" for their beliefs (e.g. in "spirits," in "reincarnation") and practices (e.g. faith-healing, trance-rituals, veneration of Rizal); and because to them, a *juridical* institution is not the only way to give witness to the Gospel, nor the best structure that can help them to understand for themselves their religious experience and according to their own meanings and values.

In my efforts to understand the MDK, I have been greatly helped by my conversations with Benito Octoman and the Labin-

9. M. Foronda, Jr., *Cults Honoring Rizal* (Manila, 1961), pp. 45-46.

dalawahan during the past two years. Because of their generous help, I now feel a deep *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) to them. And so, now that Octoman is asking for my help on behalf of the TPSD community in Huyon-uyon, I feel bound to give whatever help I can through the media. Octoman is the barangay captain of Huyon-uyon, but has fled to Mt. Banahaw because his life is in danger at the hands of hired goons of wealthy landgrabbers.

Around 1959, Octoman and some TPSD brethren were sent by the Voice to Huyon-uyon. As settlers they applied for titles to these lands. Around 1975, wealthy landgrabbers with their lawyers came showing titles to the land, alleging that the TPSD were squatters, and hailed them before the Lucena Court of First Instance. But the court dismissed the case, thus implying that the titles were fake and that the TPSD claims were rightful. But violence and threats of violence kept recurring. Octoman's son Dionisio and son-in-law Alfredo were hacked almost to death by bolo-wielding goons of politicians, while the local police gave no protection.

I brought Octoman before Minister Enrile in December 1980 to ask for protection, and for a few months violence simmered down. Ten months later, another hired goon, a well-known murderer from Masbate, was going around demanding *porseyento*, the share belonging to his boss as "owner" of the land, under threat of death.

I was able to arrange for two interviews over Radio Veritas for Octoman with Assemblymen Montemayor and Taruc. Prominent names were mentioned in the broadcast, including a millionaire from Zambales, a retired military officer, and an American owner of a ranch near Huyon-uyon, whose security guard helped the local police arrest Octoman on a trumped-up charge of "illegal cockfighting." Montemayor and Taruc have promised justice for Octoman and the Huyon-uyon farmers. But they are up against a long tradition of cultural oppression.

CONCLUSION

It is now the year of our Lord 1982, and it is about time that we learn the lessons of history so clearly proclaimed in the letters of Gov.-Gen. Smith and Bishop Hendrick in 1908 about the Pula-han tragedy. If we do not, we shall be condemned to repeat this tragedy.

Huyon-uyon is not the only TPSD community whose survival is in danger. Kinabuhayan is also in danger, more subtle, more spiritual. This danger comes not just from local landgrabbers but from the tourism industry in collaboration with multinational interests.

In April 1981, an American named Fred Pankratz came to me on Mt. Banahaw asking for my help in getting signatures for organizing a federation "for the care and preservation of the Sacred Mountain," and left with me a paper about this federation. I showed this paper to the Kinabuhayan people, but they refused to sign. I wrote Fred telling him I could not help him, and he wrote me back a nasty letter.

On 25 June 1981, the *Times Journal* published a story about Mt. Banahaw and Fred's plans to establish there an "international center of psychic and spiritual research," which to me looks like another tourism gimmick. And since the tourism industry is the third largest dollar earning industry in the Philippines, and since an "international center" would probably be supported by multinational resources, Fred's backers will probably have their way, with or without the signatures of the people of Banahaw.

Perhaps I am now beginning to understand the ambiguous message of the whispering spirits in my dream of 3 November 1979. It could be either a warning message or a farewell message. If it was a warning message, it means that a serpent is now sneaking its way into our Banahaw paradise, our Garden of Eden, and that there is still time to repel its dollar temptation. If it was a farewell message, it means that the people of Banahaw will become the victims of the serpent. Either they will be evicted from their native soil like all the untitled farmers all over the land, and being non-violent, will be obliged to walk on along their way of the Cross. Or some of them will succumb to the serpent, and we shall see the spiritual death of a beautiful people, robbed of their simple faith in Tatlong Persona Solo Dios.