

THE MAMANUA OF NORTHEASTERN MINDANAO : A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

Antonio M. Pernia, SVD

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Maceda for bringing to our attention an interesting but apparently endangered and even fast-vanishing ethnic group scattered around Northeastern Mindanao, the Mamanua. Allow me to comment on Dr. Maceda's paper by offering a point and a counterpoint.

The Point

The point that I wish to make arises from the generally positive picture Dr. Maceda paints of the Mamanua in his paper. Let me mention just two features of this positive picture of the Mamanua :

1. It appears that the Mamanua is a simple but peace-loving people. We find no warriors among them, but only healers (the *tambayon* or *sukdan*). And about the only "weapons of war" they possess are the ever-present *nudyo* or *bolo*, and other similar implements which they use for making a living and never for causing death to others.

2. Secondly, aside from being peace-loving, the Mamanua also seem to be a people who possess genuine human values. For instance the value of family and, with that, the commitment to monogamy and the aversion to extra-marital sex. Another value is community and, with it, the practice of sharing what they have and of solidarity in what they don't have.

Now, both these qualities — namely, being peace-loving and the possession of such values as family or community — allow us to see a people with harmonious social relationships. Naturally, we can inquire into what might be the source, or the basis, or the ground of these harmonious social relationships. From my reading

of Dr. Maceda's paper, I would hazard to say that the source or ground of these harmonious social relationships is the Mamanua's harmonious relationship with nature.

From birth to death, from childhood to adulthood, nature is the point of reference for the Mamanua. His dwelling and material possessions come from the resources of nature; his food and medicine are prepared from the bounty of nature; his occupation and livelihood are dependent on nature; his social practices and family customs are patterned after the rhythm of nature; even his gods dwell in nature. Indeed, everything the Mamanua has and is dependent in nature! His life is entirely attuned to nature!

This harmonious relationship with nature, I believe, is the ground of the Mamanua's harmonious social relationships. And this is the point that I wish to make from a reading of Dr. Maceda's paper. To the extent that our relationship with nature is harmonious, so also will be our social relationships; and to the extent that our social relationships are violent, so also will be our relationship with nature. Thus, we see in our day that a society which is oppressive and violent is also a society which is neglectful and abusive of the earth!

Counterpoint

The Mamanua's harmonious relationship with nature is based, of course, on his view of nature as sacred. This, in turn, flows from the belief that nature is alive with the spirits and is abode of his gods. This what I would call a sacral view of nature — a view whereby the Divine relationship with the world is seen as immediate. Thus, the world is divine, and the divine is natural.

To this, I offer a counterpoint. And this is Christianity's — at least Catholic Christianity's — view of the world as sacramental rather than sacral. This is a view whereby the Divine's relationship with the world is seen as mediate, rather than immediate. In other words, the world is a mediation of the divine, or the divine is mediated by the world. The world is indeed sacred, but not because it is the abode of gods, but because it is the means through which, on the one hand, God reveals himself to us, and on the

other, we experience God. The world, in other words, is the means of the encounter between the Divine and the human.

A sacramental view of the world is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allows us to use nature, since, after all, the world is not God. But on the other hand, it prevents us from abusing nature, since the world, in fact, is the sacrament of God. The world is, aside from other human beings, our only other means of encounter with the Divine.

I believe that a properly Christian ecological theology, or Creation theology, is based not on a return to the sacral view of the world, but on a greater appreciation of the sacramental view of the world. Our efforts today at caring for the environment and saving the earth do not have to be founded on the belief that the world is the abode of the Divine. They can also be based on the view that the world is the sacrament of God. This, I think, is the counterpoint Christianity can offer to the Mamanua's reverence for nature.

DISCUSSION OF DR. MACEDA'S PAPER

It would appear that the Mamanua are both sacral and sacramental with regard to their beliefs. They believe that the world was created by a god who lives in the "heavens"; but at the same time they also believe in lesser spirits or gods whose favorite abode is the *balete* and other big trees. For the Mamanua, the highest god, the creator, lives beyond this world. However, the lesser ones, the spirits are very much in this world.

Among the Mamanua the concept of moral fear finds expression in nature and everyday reality. Transgressions of customary laws, as in sexual offenses, are prevented by fear of being stricken down by lightning or petrification. Another form of punishment is ostracism, a social sanction. Ostracism means offenders will not be invited to eat with other members in the community. This is considered a very big insult. While private ownership of certain goods, such as jewelry and other personal adornments, is recognized, the equivalence of the crime of theft is elusive, particularly with regard to food. Thus, stealing other people's crops which is a punishable crime under the modern laws of the country, could not be judiciously handled among the Mamanua without giving due consideration to the culture of hunting and gathering peoples for whom food and the place where it is obtained, e.g. the forest and their original settlements, are regarded as common to all.

The inevitable comparison between the indigenous Mamanua's concept of responsibility for one's actions and that of the modern Filipino Christian was made. Whereas the modern Filipino Christian would readily excuse himself by saying, "*Sapagkat ako'y tao lamang...*", the native Mamanua has no similar excuse to claim, his concept of moral fear being more concrete. The fear of being stricken down by lightning, or worse, of petrification, is for them very real. Hence, for a Christian Filipino, being human permits one to disclaim social and moral responsibility for one's actions to a certain extent. But for a Mamanua, the consequences and responsibility for one's transgression operate to divest him of his humanity; he could be stricken dead by lightning or rendered non-human by being turned into stone.