

Why Lumad?

Appreciatively gazing at the indigenous peoples

Since childhood, I have been drawn to gaze appreciatively at the Lumad. Growing up in our home in Digos, I would stop whatever it was doing and looked at the Bagobo who passed by our house.

Perhaps I glanced at them as if they were “the other.” However, compared to the rest of the children in our neighborhood, “the otherness” of the Lumad from my perspective was not as “othered-other.” This was because our mother made sure that we didn’t consider them as “*laing tawo nga lahi kaysa ato*” (other people who were not like us). My most gracious mother had taught her children early on, by word and example, never to be selfish, nor to discriminate against the Moro and the Bagobo nor to look down on other people who were poorer than us.

Sundays were market days in my hometown and everyone came to buy and sell all sorts of goods. (I remember how exciting it was to be taken to the market on those days!) Our house, which was near the river, was between the hills surrounding Kapatagan where the Bagobo lived and the market, so they had to pass through our neighborhood. They would be carrying chickens, baskets and agricultural produce on their heads or their backs. Sometimes they would stop by our house for a drink of water. They knew that my mother would not refuse them. When times were good, my mother would even offer them food.

Even before I was school age, I had been drawn to the magic of colors, thanks to my crayons and illustrated comic books which we could rent in a nearby store owned by my brother’s godmother. Likewise the colors of the Bagobo fascinated me. Not only were their clothes, jewelry and other accessories colorful, but what they sold were also bright and attractive. They appeared to me as a people with a distinct style and I thought that we lowland settlers were so drab and colorless by comparison.

I would like to believe that I did not offend them by looking at them because I was genuinely interested to know more about them. I would bombard my mother with questions since I was too shy to ask them directly (besides in those days, children were not supposed to engage adults in conversation). My mother’s answers must have planted the seeds that when nurtured would draw me to study anthropology.

Unfortunately, this early interest to know the Bagobo better was not nurtured and enriched in both my elementary and high school education. I could not remember anything ever shared by my teachers as to the history, culture and tradition of the Bagobo. Nothing was ever said regarding their plight, situation and struggles. It was not the sort of thing one expected to encounter in the formal education circles of the 1950s and 1960s. Because of this, I concluded then, that the life of the Bagobo had nothing to do with being educated in school. Education was for knowing about the lives of lowland Filipinos and the Westerners.

And yet the bigger society-my parents’ friends, our neighbors, even the people at school-had many things to say about the Moro and the Bagobo, often negative, prejudiced and condescending. Adjectives to describe them ranged from *huwagan* (dirty) to *ignorante* (ignorant) to *tamad* (lazy). If not for my mother’s exhortations, I, too, would have easily succumbed to the myths perpetuated by lowland settlers regarding the

Lumad. It was also easy then to fall into the trap of labeling them as such because it made us seem superior to them. We were better off because there were other people on whom we would look down and whom we could treat accordingly.

Eventually, during the last years of high school, fewer Bagobo would pass by our house. In fact, their presence in the town became less and less noticeable. I thought this was simply because many more had died. I didn't know it then, neither did I understand, that as more lowland peasant settlers bought (for a song, mostly) or grabbed their land, the Bagobo would be forced to move further into the interior and farther from the town center.

High school graduation and the family's subsequent move to Davao City where I attended an elite school almost completely cut me off from the Lumad world. Then I decided to shift from accounting to the social sciences in the second semester of my third year in college. I had professors in anthropology who challenged us to go the field. This was at a time when exposure programs and field work were not yet in vogue.

So I found myself visiting the Manobo with my classmate in what is now Mandug, just 20 kilometers from downtown Davao. I was back on track! Unfortunately, the anthropology subjects were few (as the school did not offer an A.B. major in Anthropology)-the stimulus was too meager to fully nurture my hunger to know more about the Lumad.

After college graduation, changes in our family life as well as in the bigger society pushed me to go to Manila where I eventually went to graduate school. Events unfolding in the country at this time had a profound impact as well on my economics and sociology studies. Many of us studying at the Asian Social Institute were drawn to an evolving social movement in which we got engaged in social action and work for justice.

To make a long story short, I was drawn to activism just before and after Marcos declared martial law. Then arena of my engagement was primarily among students and youth, peasants and agricultural workers as these were the sectors perceived to be political vanguards of the movement. Naturally, my Marxist studies influenced such engagements.

There were occasions, however, when I would encounter Lumad communities. It was easy to rekindle my earlier interest. While teaching at Cor Jesu College, I did a research study with my students which allowed us a short encounter with the B'laan and Tagakaolo of Davao Sur. While working with the Maryknoll missionaries in Mati, Davao Oriental, there were occasions to interact with the Mandaya, in one instance because we wanted to do research on their music and rituals for a dance festival sponsored by the local government.

More encounters took place when I worked with the Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP). A few of our partners, mainly church people connected with the emerging Tribal Filipino apostolate, were engaged in development work with the Mamanua in Surigao, the T'boli in Lake Sebu, the Yakan in Basilan, the Manobo in Bukidnon, and the Badjao in Jolo. This was the first time that, finally I was able to spend more time with the Lumad communities and to be involved in development work with them, although not as directly as if I were doing grassroots work with them.

It was in the context that I became frustrated with intermediary work. PBSP did as much as it could but I became more and more dissatisfied with what I was doing. I wanted to directly work at the grassroots level with the Lumad. I decided to explore two

possibilities: working with Fr. Rex Mansmann, CP in the Sta. Cruz Mission in Lake Sebu or with Fr. Angel Calvo, CMF in Basilan. (Rex has since left the priesthood while Angel still works as a Claretian missionary in Zamboanga.)

However, my election as Executive Secretary of the Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Conference Secretariat (MSPCS) deterred my plan to go to the grassroots. Nevertheless given the context of the times, I was willing to postpone working with the Lumad in favor of the MSPCS job.

Fortunately the move from PBSP to the MSPCS deepened my engagement with the Lumad. These were the years when the Lumad in Mindanao were hit from various sides. There were the continuing logging operations displacing entire communities. There was the increasing incursion of land-hungry Bisaya into the Lumad's ancestral domain through various means: purchase, *prenda*, and outright landgrabbing. There were the development aggression schemes of both government (chiefly the PANAMIN) and business enterprises with plans to expand fruit plantations, build more dams and hydroelectric plants, and develop sites for tourism. And there were the schemes of the Armed Force of the Philippines to attract or forcibly recruit the Lumad to become CAFGUs to be used frontlines of their battles against the NPAs.

All these disturbed, displaced, and dislocated the Lumad communities, which left them with no one turn to expect a few elements among the church people who were beginning to take seriously their commitment to be in solidarity with the Lumad. The Tribal Filipinos-Desk of the MSPCS worked hard with the Local Churches, although this still so little compared to what had to be done. Yet personnel and funds were quite limited.

Once more, I thought again of my desire to work with grassroots Lumad communities and again explored possibilities after the end of my term as MSPCS Executive Secretary.

However, the times demanded the continuing move of the Filipino people towards justice, peace and freedom. My closest friends in the social movement convinced me that priority work was with the National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA). So I went to work there for some time until I had to return to Davao to head a legal institution that would promote alliance work locally, nationally and internationally.

Then I got arrested and spent 22 months in prison. During all this time I reflected on my long-term desire to become a religious: once released, I joined the Redemptorists. After a few years of formation, I joined the Redemptorist Itinerant Mission Team (RIMT) in Bukidnon in 1987. This time, I thought, it was now possible to be directly involved with Lumad communities. I was finally back among the grassroots.

There was, however, a complication. RIMT'S work was primarily building base ecclesial communities (BECs). Thus in San Fernando, Bukidnon, along with the rest of the RIMT members, I was immersed with Bisaya peasant settlers. I would have preferred to join the Scarboro missionaries in their work with the Manobo. But it wasn't meant to be then.

It was later on-when we were in Dumingag and Lakewood, in both Zamboanga del Sur-that we got engaged in work with the Subanen. In these missions, most of us did BEC work while a few, opted to be with Subanen.

On engagement in Dumingag was quite limited; it focused on conducting simple literacy classes. Lakewood was something else. This was the time when the Department

of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) issued its Departmental Administrative Order No.2 (Dao-2), series of 1993 which made possible the issuance of certificate of Ancestral Domain Claims (CADCs) to Lumad communities. The parish priest, Fr. Angelo Biancat, PIME, and the Guardian Angels Sisters were quite engaged with the Subanen, so there were enough people to work on this area.

With this entry point, we organized the Subanens in Lakewood so they could apply for their remaining ancestral domain. We sought the assistance of various NGO's- the Kaliwat Theatre Collective, the Land and Natural Resources Center (LRC-KSK) and the alternate Forum for Research in Mindanao (AFRIM) for the research required for this CADC application. This engagement did not last long, but it provided us an avenue of work with the Lumad. Fortunately, after we left Lakewood, Fr. Biancat and the Kaliwat group pursued the work; they finally got their certificate as well support to develop the land.

By the time our mission in Lakewood ended, I was down and out. Eight years of working straight in the missions without any break took its toll. Fatigue hit me and my body, mind, heart and soul were not in the best of conditions. There were frustrations and disappointments that arose in my personal life, in the team as well as in the mission work we were doing. I needed to distance myself. I needed to be in a different space with new challenges. I thought that returning to school was what I needed.

Thus, I decided to enroll in a Ph.D. program at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City. I knew I wanted to do anthropology, but I wanted to also study history and sociology. So I entered the interdisciplinary Philippine Studies program. For my dissertation I wanted to look into the contemporary realities of the Manobos in the Arakan valley, specifically how they dealt with their ancestral domain issue. At the time, I was convinced that after my studies I would return to RMT and work among the Lumad full-time.

Kulaman beginning April 2002 provided this opportunity. Finally, I was back again in the field, this time fully engaged in solidarity work with the Dulangan Manobos which has provided me ample time to live and work with indigenous people.

The answer to the question "why Lumad?" was something I had taken for granted for ages. Through the years, I just thought this was my niche; this was where I could seek deeper meaning and find a bit of happiness in terms of work. But these were things I assumed.

However, events have forced me to ask again "why Lumad?" which demanded answers that echo deep commitments from the past to the present.

One of these events involved giving a sermon at the church in Kulaman Christmas night 2002. In that sermon, I lamented about the continuing violation of the Kulaman Manobo's human rights by those in power (specifically the police): the killings of Manobo by armed settlers, the continuing landgrabbing of the Manobo's land by the settlers, and the arrest, torture and unjust detention of three Manobo after one of them hit the youngest son of the deputy chief of staff (who had begun the trouble).

It turned out that the deputy chief's wife and eldest son, also a policeman in the town, were at the Christmas Mass where I gave the sermon. They were hurt by what they heard in my homily. Through an uncle-in-law who was quite close to us, the eldest son wanted to dialogue with me so he could ventilate his feelings. I embraced the opportunity to talk with him.

Among the many questions he asked, the one that affected me most was: “How come you are so in love with the Manobo that you always defend them even if at times they are the ones who are at fault?”

I answered him in a manner that would convince him that my option was quite valid and thoroughly worth pursuing.

I enumerated to him the following answer:

Because the Lumad are the least of our brothers and sisters and, as a Christian, I was compelled by what Jesus said about taking care of the least of our brethren.

Because the PCP II decreed that the Church should consider engagement with the Lumad as priority apostolate.

Because as a Redemptorist, I was challenged to serve the most abandoned and in the context of Mindanao, they were the Lumad.

Because the Vision-Mission Statements of both the Archdiocese of Cotabato and the Sto. Niño Parish of Kulaman encouraged a deep commitment to serve the Lumad.

Because those of us whose presents migrated to Mindanao from Luzon and the Visayas needed to atone for their sins in terms of directly or indirectly dislocating them from their ancestral domain. (I asked him: how would his Ilonggo ancestors feel if the Manobo were the ones who migrated to Panay Island and then took over most of the land?)

Because the power-that-be in government and other institutions in the Philippine society have very little regard for the empowerment of the Lumad and are even part of those who would disenfranchise them.

Because there is so much beauty, truth and integrity in Lumad cultures and if the Lumad are continually subjected to domination, such rich legacies and traditions would disappear and be lost forever.

Because we owe it to our pre-Spanish ancestors to help the Lumad hold on to the cultural tradition which was part of who we were and which would help define our contemporary identity if this tradition were nurtured and enriched.

Because our future would be bleak if all of us Pinoys become second-rate copycats of Westerners.

I couldn't tell him the one reason that could have been the most important because I thought he would not understand.

Namely, that since I was a young boy, I have always gazed at the Lumad. Would he have understood if I told him it was a gaze of love?

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