EVANGELIZATION
AMONG THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF ASIA

A REPORT OF
A CONFERENCE ON THE CONCERNS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
HUA HIN, THAILAND
SEPTEMBER 3-8, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

Between September 3-8, 1995, a conference on “Evangelization among the Indigenous Peoples of Asia” was held in Hua Hin, Thailand. Organized by the Office of Evangelization of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, with the cooperation of the FABC Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, this consultation brought together 45 participants from 10 Asian countries to study issues related to the indigenous peoples of Asia. About one-third of the participants themselves belonged to indigenous peoples.

Defined as “people who were living on their lands before settlers came from elsewhere, the new arrivals later becoming dominant through conquest, occupation, or settlement,” Asian indigenous peoples are often referred to as “tribals,” or “aborigines,” terms which they reject as perpetuating stereotypes that picture them as primitive and backward. The Indian term adivasi, meaning “original peoples,” is much more acceptable.

The conference took a multifaceted approach to issues facing Asian indigenous peoples. Some papers dealt with questions of identity, centering on the preservation of indigenous languages and cultures which are often disparaged and suppressed by the dominant majorities. Discussions also revolved around questions of justice. In many regions, indigenous peoples struggle to defend their ancestral land claims from exploitation and industrial development. Since their traditional way of life is based on
a close symbiotic relationship with nature, ecological destruction that de-
sroys the local forests, seas and wildlife also threatens the very existence
and livelihood of Asia’s indigenous peoples.

More blatant questions of justice and human rights arise in several
Asian countries where indigenous peoples, or “hill-tribes,” are not
granted full citizenship, equal pay for work, or equal educational and
health services. The mutual suspicions and recriminations that exist be-
tween indigenous peoples and nontribal majorities were frankly discussed
at the seminar.

Issues of more specific interest to Christians were aired during the
week. Throughout the Asian continent, the majority of Asians who be-
come Christians belong to indigenous peoples. It was claimed that “the fu-
ture of the Church in Asia is with the tribals, and the future of tribals is
with the Church.” Nevertheless, many indigenous peoples have expe-
rrienced marginalization and suffered from patronizing attitudes even within
the Church. Some speakers proposed that Church leaders should apolo-
gize to indigenous peoples for the way they were treated in the past.

In a more positive vein, the participants concurred on the need to
take into account traditional beliefs, rites and symbols in inculcating the
liturgy to indigenous cultures. Much in the indigenous worldview and
ethos is compatible with Christian faith. The rich mythological and symbo-
lic systems of indigenous peoples provide ample material for the develop-
ment of indigenous theologies and liturgical ceremonies.

In Asia, where dialogue with the world’s great religions, such as
Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, is pursued by the Churches, it was felt
that dialogue with the indigenous religions of Asia would give due at-
tention to the dignity of these religions, as well as provide new insights for
Christians in areas of ecology, community, and celebration of life’s joys
and tragedies.

There was an awareness that Christians are not only called to evangeli-
ze indigenous peoples but that they must be evangelized by them. Indige-
nous peoples are not to be seen as passive objects of evangelization but as
its active agents. In the work of evangelization the role of the laity was
stressed. It is indigenous laypeople, who, by taking on a deep Christian
commitment and living it out in their own cultural contexts, should be re-
garded as the primary agents of evangelization. The role of parents, par-
ticularly mothers, in instilling specifically Christian values, as well as in
preserving cultural identity and language, ethnic pride and traditional
mores, was noted.
The participants made concrete recommendations, calling for the creation of a directory of indigenous clergy, religious and lay leaders, as well as individuals and pastoral centers who live among and serve indigenous peoples. They asked that the concerns of indigenous peoples be made a priority for the Asian Synod announced by the Holy Father. They proposed that the FABC consider the possibility of establishing an Office for the Concerns of Indigenous Peoples.

In this FABC paper we offer only some the initial major presentations.

I. THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURES
by
Archbishop Thomas Menamparampi

Definition of Culture

An outstanding anthropologist has said that the most important recent discovery was the concept of culture. Culture is not merely an elitist enterprise limiting its interests to fine arts, literature and philosophy, but the total manner in which a human society responds to an environment. It includes customs characterizing a social group; social heredity of a particular community; meanings, customs, values, norms, their actions and relationships; beliefs, laws, traditions and institutions of a society; religion, ritual, language, song, dance, feast, living habits, crafts, equipments, etc. of a social group.

Culture, therefore, is a complex of factors that make a person what one is as an individual and as a member of a community. It is acquired after birth, and through it a person inserts oneself into the human universe. One is programmed, educated and indoctrinated into one way, and only one way, of being a human person, whether one be Chinese or Chechen, Swede or Zulu.

Communal Tensions: Clash of Economic Interests, or of Cultural Perceptions?

We, in India, have always lived in an multicultural situation. We have, through centuries, worked out various formulae of compromise for living and working together. These formulae are far from being infallible. In fact, they are highly fragile, and their fragility becomes evident when major clashes take place, riots occur, huts are torched, many lives are lost, and much property destroyed. Social tensions are generally attributed to economic and political reasons. That they may have been occasioned by psychological distances between communities, and aggravated by cultural
differences, is least considered.

Even as certain social disturbances have their origin in other causes than cultural, that they can be heightened by a clash of cultural perceptions, that they can be led in new directions driven by the collective memories of aggrieved communities, and again, that every attempt at dialogue can fail when there is no one to bridge the meaning systems of the two concerned ethnic or social groups, these are little recognized. There has not been much reflection along these lines, nor adequate open discussion. For the Rightist of Leftist, the economy and related politics are all that matter. That man has other dimensions in his inner being is blissfully forgotten.

**Does Our Social Analysis Take Culture into Consideration?**

In Church circles too, the implications of cultural differences and of the requirements of transcultural services have not received the attention they deserve. It is too readily taken for granted that social groups think and feel alike, have the same ambitions and aversions, keep the same pace of life and respond in the same way to services and sanctions. But nothing could be further from the truth.

The Latin American model of social analysis and conscientization has crowded out other possible social thinking and creative applications. That has happened, despite Paolo Freire’s own affirmation that social philosophies cannot easily be transported across the oceans. What applies in a chiefly Roman Catholic, clergy-dominated, culturally homogenized society, may not find a ready application in a country like ours which is different in so many ways.

In fact, we have lost an opportunity to do some creative thinking in the area of analyzing Indian society along cultural lines. Aside from making a few pacifist proclamations during communal troubles, our contribution to reflection on intercultural relationships has been insignificant.

It can easily be noticed that most grievances in our country are along community lines. All efforts to divide Indian society along lines of classes and income groups have met with limited success. All important perceived injustices and all major clashes are between communities, in the North-East or in the North-West, or in other parts of India; and going farther, even in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the Western frontier of Pakistan, or the Tamil Eelam coastline of Sri Lanka.

When all of a sudden clashes took place on a big scale at the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, when the Letts, Lithuanians, Estonians and
Ukrainians claimed their separate identities, when Slovenia broke away from Yugoslavia, and Bosnia went up in flames, when the Azerbaijan tensions with Armenia increased, when the Slovaks parted ways with the Czechs, when the claims of the Basques, Welsh, Catalans and the French Canadians grew louder, the world began to take note of the force of ethnicity and culture. But we have a long way to go before we can give an intelligible explanation to these and similar social phenomena.

Reflection on Culture and Community as a Challenging Task

With our long history of cultural pluralism and intercommunity interaction in India, could we initiate some reflection on how communities seek, quite unconsciously, to develop a collective identity, gradually grow conscious of it, try to preserve and enhance their heritage, respond to perceived threats, use and misuse their strength, learn to relate with other communities in a healthy manner, playing complementary roles and creating a collaborative atmosphere?

Economic globalization is bringing together people of every culture. There is a compromise-culture that prevails at international airports and five-star hotels. (We often call it “Modern Culture.”) Travellers and businessmen read about each other’s countries and cultures and try to accommodate to each other’s ways and tastes. They will bow profoundly in Tokyo, offer a namaste in Delhi, and shake hands or hug in Rome. They will readily renounce pork in the Muslim countries and beef in Brahmin hotels. But when their contacts get closer, and they begin to live and work together, difficulties begin to arise. And forthwith the “compromise-culture” evaporates!

Earlier anthropologists limited their interest to the study of isolated tribes and delighted in presenting the rare and the bizarre. However, it was educative to see how other societies solved their problems. For example, some tribal societies prevented the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few by rewarding with special honors persons who lavishly fed their fellow-villagers, e.g., allowing them to erect a stone monument, as the Angamis did. Western society attempted to solve the same problem on a massive scale by the French and Russian revolutions!

Ethnocentrism

One understands one’s own culture better by watching alternative expressions in another culture. Some scholars have occasionally taken undue advantage of their research to argue their own pet theories with regard to, e.g., premarital sex or priestly exploitation of society. But gradually scholarship is becoming more objective.
Early researchers mainly suffered from ethnocentrism (= considering their own culture as the absolute standard), taking undue pleasure in pointing out where other cultures fell short or looked strange. But enlightened modern scholarship recognizes every culture as equal, and does not concede superiority to any one, even when its material products (e.g., technically produced goods) are more advanced. Thus, the Americans have come to admit that the blacks are not merely underdeveloped whites, but have a rich culture of their own. In the same way, we in India must begin to understand that tribals are not just backward non-tribals and that dalits are not diminutive-caste Hindus, and that their condition will not be best when they will be more Sanskritized (= the process of being introduced to the Hindu hierarchy), and able to climb the social ladder. They all have a right to develop their own culture.

However, the habit of using one’s own culture as a point of reference for judging other cultures is deeply rooted in man. Ethnocentrism continues. From childhood we learn what is good, moral, civilized and normal. There is no cultural superiority in abstaining from dogs, which the Koreans and many tribes in North-East India find delicious; or from toasted grasshoppers and raw fish, which most Japanese enjoy; or from mice, which the Dahomey of West Africa and many ethnic groups in India find appetizing; or from drinking milk, which the Chinese consider fit only for babies; or from eating cheese, which many Asians and Africans find smelly and unpleasant.

Despite this generally recognized view, we thoughtlessly criticize others’ habits and hastily evaluate them according to the criteria drawn from our own culture. In an intercultural situation, before we can even think of inculturation, we must be aware of the power of ethnocentrism in ourselves, grow conscious of our cultural prejudices, and learn to lift our cultural glasses from time to time.

Material Culture and Inculturation

Earlier anthropologists heavily concentrated on the study of material culture (e.g., all kinds of physical objects produced by humans, like baskets and knives, cooking pots and living houses, carved images and woven cloth). No wonder too often inculturation has limited itself to a few “visibles,” like liturgical vestments and vessels, decorations and dances, occasionally going as far as composing a few songs and prayers. Much of the literature on inculturation still confines itself to emphasizing its importance, lamenting past mistakes, and insisting that a proposed form (usually an external detail) be accepted by authorities.
All these are legitimate. But after an initial thrust forward, inculturation seems to be caught in stagnant waters. Even discussion on the matter is reduced to stereotypes. The reason is not far to seek. A construction cannot come up on weak premises. Experience has clearly exposed their weaknesses. The suppositions were: We need a few people who know theology well; We need a few experts in a particular culture; We need the required permission from the Church authorities. With these, what was impossible? Like the rabbit out of a magician’s hat, inculturation would be an accomplished fact! No wonder, we remain where we were two decades ago.

It is important to remember that no society ever surrenders its cultural processes into the hands of a few. If poets and artists have influenced these processes, it is only because they were giving utterance to the very processes that were taking place in and around them. They were neither outsiders nor uprooted individuals (as many professional inculturators are), but were aware of the inner stirrings of their community. Because they allowed themselves to be shaped by their own culture, they were able to make their contribution to shaping their culture in turn. They were effective not by appointment, but because they vibrated with the community.

Cultural Self-Awareness

Ethnocentrism cannot be transcended without some degree of cultural self-awareness. This is all the more important because so much of what we do is governed by the unconscious. Carl Jung posited the existence of a collective unconscious shared by all mankind. Anthropologists will find it easier to presuppose a cultural unconscious that governs the human behavior of a particular ethnic group.

Such a cultural unconscious has developed over generations and down the centuries. People’s systems are organized according to the principles of negative feedback, changing and adapting when the feedback hurts. They are for the most part unaware of their own pattern of behavior, e.g., utterances, actions, postures, gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions, use of time, or organization of daily life. Some scholars believe that the proportional contribution of the unconscious and the conscious in controlling human behavior may be put as a thousand to one! What is often understood as “mind” is, in fact, internalized culture.

Cultural self-awareness (and of inadequacy too) is often occasioned by transcultural encounters. You may be attending a seminar on development at Kuala Lumpur, or teaching at Lagos, or serving as a technical expert at Dubai, or selling Indian scooters in Mauritius, or conducting an
oratory at Dimapur. What surprises you is not merely differences in dress and food habits, but diversity in etiquette, organization, perception of time, judgement of values; in fact, in the entire meaning system.

It is difficult for us to accept another's meaning system when it differs totally from ours. It can look frightfully threatening. Nothing seems to make sense in your relationships with your colleagues of the other culture. Are they unfriendly? Are they unintelligent? It is not that they are hostile, uncooperative, cold or slow. Two systems of cultural unconscious are colliding. You have to redefine the boundaries of your own culture through self-awareness, translate your colleagues' meanings into your own meaning-system, and help them to understand your meaning through intelligible explanations. Many political problems, economic threats, operational deadlocks and personal clashes can be averted, purposeful dialogue initiated, and cordial relationships maintained, merely by people learning to transcend their culture.

Cultural self-awareness is extremely important if any work of inculcation is to be undertaken. You should not think that you are an expert in your own culture just because you have grown with it. A person may live to be ninety without knowing physiology, or may handle a computer with dexterity with no knowledge of its inner mechanism. Only constant observation, discussion with others, self-awareness, reflection, and comparative study will help you to acquire some measure of competence in your own culture.

A multicultural situation makes such reflection necessary. As you begin to understand many things in your personality only in interaction with others, you will discover many aspects of your own culture only in the context of cultural encounters. A situation of cultural pluralism is most educative. However, you have to give up your narcissism and cultural stereotypes, if you wish to profit by such a situation. The first thing to do is to admit that there is such a thing as a meaning system to which you unconsciously adhere, and recognize the hidden axioms in your own culture. The second is to agree that other communities too have their own independent meaning systems and recognize their legitimacy.

Cultural Differences

Apparently no one seems to quarrel over racial differences. (Race is determined by physical measurements; ethnicity by cultural similarities). But the fact is that any trifle is enough to spark off a tussle when signals are misread and communications break down. In a world where transcultural clashes are ever on the increase, whether they be at Imphal or in Belfast, at Kokrajhar or at Jaffna, what needs to be asked is not who is the
criminal and who is the victim, but how can such negative encounters be prevented. Some of the cultural differences mentioned below may look harmless enough; but what it takes to start a quarrel is hard to define. One does not easily wage a world war over knocking down a cow or running over a chicken. But woe to the one who ignores what such a thing can mean to people.

American sociologists have pointed out that, while American children would shout in triumph after defeating their competitors, since competition is a great value in their culture, Hopi Indian children would be reluctant to embarrass their companions by defeating them, much less raising their voices in victory. Pueblo Indians think in communities, as most tribals do, which makes it difficult for them to make individual decisions, as though to say not Cogito ergo sum [I think, therefore I am], but Sumus, ergo sum [we are, therefore I am]. This explains why tribal people cohere together strongly in times of troubles. Tribal solidarity was always essential for their very survival. Non-tribal society is individualistic and finds it hard to understand tribal cohesion. In the 70s individualism in America had become so strong it was called the “me decade.”

Westerners are amazed when they see Japanese tourists moving around their country in herds, showing too little individual tastes and interests; in Asia it would not be considered unusual. For most people nodding means “yes” and shaking the head means “no”; the Bulgarians have directly the opposite meaning. The Ainus of Japan do not use their head for such communication, but use their hands. Arabs sit very close when they discuss serious matters, Latin Americans a little less close; Americans, Northern Europeans and Asians sit further apart. In the United States, the whites accuse the blacks of never looking them in the eye, while the blacks feel that the whites are staring. In the West, a person warmly congratulated for his excellent performance will thank exuberantly his admirers; in the East, he is likely to plead that he had not done well enough and thank them for their forbearance. One will need to be attentive to local customs before patting people on the back, offering hands to ladies, and speaking freely with women.

In many tribal societies the spoken word is more binding than a signed document, and one has to be careful in making hasty and thoughtless promises. Similarly, in tribal societies persons are accustomed to be treated an equals even when they are poor, and will feel greatly humiliated if treated otherwise.

Western-educated persons will find it bewildering when time schedules are not kept, appointments are not respected, promises are forgotten, persons drop in unannounced, invitees come too early, or too late, or stay
on too long, or if they are made to wait in parlors for an interview.

A cross-cultural assistant must always be learner. And the process is
not merely a matter of a week or two, or even few months. Going into the
Eskimo country, Petr Freuchen thought he could become an expert in
Eskimo culture in one or two years. After fifteen years he found that what
he thought were problems were becoming mysteries. And the longer he
lived among the Eskimos, the clearer it became that their souls had such
depths that were impossible to penetrate.

A good way to learn is to watch out for negative feedback. Rather
than being upset and annoyed when hurt, you must look closer. Do not be
satisfied with finding that a particular way will not go. Ask why. Trace
things to a value in the culture or an attitude in the community you are
studying, and see whether you can reach some sort of generally applicable
conclusions. Keep observing, evaluating, correcting. You may get closer,
step by step, to the values that are cherished most in the culture and get a
glimpse of the “soul of the community.” Today’s anthropologists give
greater importance to the study of values and mental make-up than merely
to the material culture. Discussion has hardly begun on inculturation from
within.

Perception of Time

An interesting instance of an area where misunderstandings arise be-
tween people of different cultures is the area of different people’s percep-
tion of time.

The pace of life is faster in industrialized societies than in agricultural
communities. World War II memoirs tell us how German officers found
Iranian workers regularly unpunctual and fired them in droves. There was
little effort to understand the problem and to work out a mutually agreed-
upon solution. Many transcultural workers make similar mistakes.

Man’s understanding of time is closely associated with his internal
rythm. From childhood he has developed a durational expectancy for ev-
every event, process or relationship. When it takes longer, he becomes rest-
less, impatient and angry. You may have seen people fuming behind a
slow-moving vehicle. Durational expectancies in rural areas are long. If a
faster pace is imposed on the rural population, they come under strain. It
is not fair to say, for example, that the Santals are slow. For they are per-
factly in pace with the rhythm of life they are used to. Of course, in to-
day’s society they will need to move faster. But a change is possible only if
the legitimacy of the earlier pace is recognized first. Those who are quick
to think and act, may overdo and hurt others by rushing them, concluding
matters before the participants have had time to understand and express their view. Quick retorts, hasty comparisons and outsmarting people with cynical remarks, hurt.

In the same way, it is unfair to say that tribal people are lazy after the harvest has come in. In their tradition, their exertions were needed again only during the next working season. Maybe an accelerated pace is necessary in modern times, but people have to take off from where they are now, and the legitimacy of their present perception of time still needs to be accepted first.

Cultural Relationships

Culture is an organic whole. It is not the product of the artificial combination of heterogeneous material. Any change in one area affects the whole organism. The story is told of a group of young students who wanted to tease Darwin. They put together the limbs, feelers and tail of different insects and brought the odd creature to him asking, “What bug is this?” With a quick eye, Darwin replied, “a humbug.” Our inculturation efforts should not end up in a mystifying product like that. Limiting our inculturation interest to individual items of material culture, independently of their context, may result in a negative response from the community. Inculturation is for the community. And not the community for arbitrary inculturation experiments. It has to do with meanings and symbols, and, therefore, the sensibility of the community should influence all decisions.

When communities come in contact with each other, much cultural borrowing takes place. If the borrowing is spontaneous and in keeping with the organic structure of the two cultures concerned, it contributes to growth. If the sharing is unbalanced and one dominant culture bulldozes another, the feebleler culture can be hurt and even destroyed. History holds out too many instances of this taking place. Latin Americans feel that this was what was done to their cultures.

One may occasionally notice a cultural nearness between two communities that cherish similar values, though geographically they live far apart. Likewise, it can happen that two neighboring communities live by traditions that are totally different, and, therefore, are emotionally distant from one another. Tribal communities with their democratic orientation, sense of equality, absence of inhibitions and complexes, habit of open and frank discussion, simplicity and directness, honesty and reliability feel distant from and threatened by a society loaded with caste hierarchy and honorific titles, social distances, cultural taboos and food prohibitions, sophisticated conventions and unexplainable social subtleties. One may need to keep this fact in mind when one hears that some of the tribes of
North-East India are not Indian enough.

No culture is perfect or fully integrated. There are contradictory and dehumanizing elements in every culture in some measure or other. Studying alternatives in another culture can stimulate change and growth. But if the changes are introduced forgetting the organic nature of a culture, it may rather be a disservice than an assistance to social growth.

When two races or ethnic groups come in contact with each other, there may be a relationship of acceptance or of rejection. In the past, acceptance usually found expression in the assimilation of the minority by the dominant group. With the passage of time, even small groups have been allowed separate existence and guaranteed protection in most countries.

Historically, however, we know that rejection of minorities and of weaker groups was the usual norm everywhere in the world. Segregation was one form of rejection. The caste-segregation prevalent in parts of India in earlier days, and the practice of apartheid in South Africa in recent history are clear enough examples. Expulsion was another mode of rejection. The expulsion of the Jews from Tsarist Russia, or of the Asians from Uganda during the 70s, or of the Chinese from Viet Nam in the 80s are instances of this manner of physical riddance.

But the harshest of all forms of rejection was extermination (genocide). In the last century colonialists in South Africa wiped out the Bushmen and Hottentots. Many groups of American Indians in the Far West and the aborigines on Tasmania Island were exterminated by settlers. The red road of history is long. A minority group may have recourse to submission (e.g., accepting a lower status in the caste-hierarchy), or build up cultural islands (e.g., a ghetto or a Chinatown), or withdraw into more inaccessible places. Many tribals in India withdrew to the mountains and forests to preserve their identity and ensure their survival. Fighting back, of course, is the last resort against perceived threat to a community’s collective existence and interests. Are some instances of violence in North-East India due to this, or are they manipulations of vested interests, and facilitated by easy access to arms? Shakespeare said, “How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds, make ill done.”

Terrorism is a growing phenomenon in the world today. There are not only anti-British Irish, or anti-Turkish Armenians, or anti-Yugoslav Croatsians. There are more than a hundred known terrorist groups in the world in our times. It is interesting to note that the majority of the members are in their early twenties, from middle or upper-class families, and college graduates. But they get nowhere.
When cultural pluralism is ensured not only in law but in reality, there is little need to take to such radical measures of self-defense.

Collective Self-Awareness, Growth, Flowering

Most communities in their infancy and isolation were inadequately aware of their collective existence. People responded to the environment and external provocations guided by their cultural unconscious. But a stage comes for every society, mostly in contact with other cultures and communities, especially those in which cultural reflection has made some headway, to grow conscious of its collective identity. As a little child grows conscious of itself, of its bodily parts and of its spiritual powers, and gradually comes to be aware of its identity and its separate existence, a community too, led by its thinking dynamic minority (philosophers, poets, teachers, youth), comes to understand its collective identity, its chief traits and characteristics, its strong and weak points.

When, for the first time, a community’s self-consciousness awakens, it feels itself like a young adult. It is lost for a while in its own self: its past glories and inherited cultural wealth, its rights and privileges and future destiny. If a threat to its existence persists in its perception, it hardly emerges from its concern for itself: And quite rightly too! But given a chance to grow to adulthood, the same community learns to take its place among other communities, and as a person growing to adulthood does, begins to recognize the cultural values of other communities, their rights, privileges and interests, and learns to live and work together with others.

This period of transition is stormy and troublesome. An air of uncertainty hangs over the community. It can, of its own choice, take a positive direction, or be led by interested groups, both outsiders and even self-oriented individuals of the community itself. But without moving to adulthood, no flowering of culture is possible. With swords drawn, mere survival is the law. Subsistence is plenty.

Isolation is stagnation. Only conscious adulthood paves the way to a Golden Era. And it can never happen without an external stimulus. History bears abundant witness to this fact.

Bridge Builders

As intercultural interactions multiply on the globe, varying from intense hostility to intimate cordiality, the urgent need for bridge-builders has increased. They who have accepted to work permanently in intercultural situations, like a missionary, have taken on the responsibility of
entering into a new world of the cultural unconscious of another community.

A process of “exculturation” is necessary — though it can be very costly — before one can give effective assistance to the process of inculturation. Christ emptied himself. *Kenosis*. He made himself like unto us — fully like a Jewish person of his own day, in everything but sin.

But the hardest to give up is the irrational trust in one’s own culture. Every culture has its own share of conventions and presuppositions that follow no rules of logic. We are generally blind to the insanity of our own community and age, e.g., the consumerism and all-pervasiveness of sex in Western culture today, or the caste distances in Indian society. Even if we do not accept the prejudices of the cultural world we are entering, there should be an effort to understand them in their context. No change can be suggested without sympathetic understanding.

The above norms are more easily discussed than tried out and lived. The strength and persistence of habitual behaviors are beyond belief. When we are faced with other ways of understanding what is good and what is bad, we are shaken to the basic structures of our being. All of a sudden we feel incompetent, ignorant and infantile. It is like trying to babble a foreign tongue during an international tour. We become children again. How many Peace Corps people in Kennedy’s days felt helpless in the countries where they went to serve! Rarely does the intercultural assistant say to himself, “The trouble is with me.”

Will Cultural Pluralism Survive in a Technological Age?

Speaking of the future is not an easy task. It is not given to everyone to “look into the seeds of time and say which grain will grow and which will not” (Shakespeare). There is always an intellectual blindspot in our vision of things ahead, so that either we fall into a pit that we have never foreseen, or a massive event overtakes us in such a way that things work out far better than we had feared. Population forecasts and universal famine predictions have repeatedly proved false. New problems have arisen; so do new power-structures. In the 60s there was little perception of the trends of change that the oil crisis would precipitate, or of the proximate emergence of Islamic power, or of the sudden appearance of a scourge like AIDS, or of the mounting concern for environment. But look to the future we must.

Some time ago Zbigniew Brezinski proposed a “convergence theory,” suggesting that with the progress of science and technology, supersonic aircraft, satellite communications, multinational corporations, the world
would witness a cultural convergence, and a single culture would ensue. All available evidence points in another direction.

Selig Harrington’s studies show that cultural divisions are only hardening, and that people are only reinforcing their cultural identities. Cultural nationalism is on the rise, some even going to the point of “cultural fundamentalism.” While in absolute terms the number of people who travel, or study abroad, or enter into international commerce, is steadily on the increase, they merely make a pragmatic use of the facilities of “modern culture,” and return to their own cultural nests. They are greatly influenced, no doubt, but not carried off their feet.

Mahatma Gandi had said even half a century ago: “I don’t want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows be blinded. I want all cultures of all countries to come into my house. But I refuse to be wiped away by any culture whatsoever.” Others have not been willing to concede as much. They feel insecure unless their house is walled in all sides and their windows closed. Viet Nam considers sending foreign books and cassettes to citizens a cultural invasion. Saudi Arabia is intolerant of any religious work, literature or symbol, except those of Islam.

Not only do cultural majorities sometimes try to keep out alien influences, but even minorities defend tooth and nail their separate existence and identities. Culture and ethnicity also are behind the secessionist movements in Tyrol, Brittany, Alsace, Flanders, and Catalonia. The Hungarians in Romania, the Turks in Bulgaria, the Croats and Albanians in Yugoslavia, and the Koreans and the Filipinos in Japan refuse to be absorbed into the majority community. While it is true that in the New World settlers gradually move into the main stream, when we hear that Los Angeles alone has over 75 ethnic publications, and that it is good business in advanced countries to seek to provide a diversity of products catering to different ethnic tastes, we understand what a formidable force culture is.

The Salman Rushdie affair and the fatwa of Khoimeni Ayatollah reveal at least one thing: The rest of the world is not merely an extension of the secularized West. Millions of Muslims do not identify secularization with progress. Asians may have another understanding of the “sacred.” If emotions can be built around human rights issues and freedom of expression, they can also surround religious symbols.

After a period of an intense drive for modernization in Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew urged the people to speak Mandarin and return to “the old values.” Evidently, modern culture does not offer everything! Even in a “culture of poverty” in the middle of the urban agglomerations of Afri-
ca, e.g., in shanty towns, tin-can cities, and squatter settlements of rural migrants, you will notice people falling back on kinship and ethnic solidarity and preserving a sense of belonging. Cultural reassertion can be seen at every level.

Cultural Relativism Versus Ethnocentrism

We may look at the phenomenon of culture from another angle. Dictators and ruling cliques have exploited their fellow-citizens and sought to prevent outside interference invoking their alien culture. The army rulers in Myanmar and Viet Nam wave the flag of culture to defend their isolationist policies. The governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan take protection behind their culture every time they come under criticism for ignoring democratic institutions. So do many Islamic regimes in West Asia. So do many African potentates.

If ethnocentrism is wrong, absolute cultural relativism is also equally wrong. Could we say, for example, that the Nazi ruling style was in keeping with the German character; or that Soviet totalitarianism suited the Russian culture; or that the Communist dictatorship was best for the Chinese people; or that Marcos absolutism was just what the Filipino needs. If these aberrations can be excused in the name of culture, how could we ever raise our voices against cannibalism, female infanticide, or elimination of the aged in certain cultures?

We spoke earlier about the need to understand a culture from within (an emic view). An outside view (an etic view) is also important. That is why correctives come only through interaction of cultures. Such encounters can turn disastrous too. That is the human tragedy. But they need not be. If the carrier of a culture is respectful of and attentive to another, a mutual enrichment can be the result.

Make Culture Your Ally

All have been learning. Missionaries too. No missionary today will think of imposing the syntax of Indo-European languages on Chinese or Japanese. Missionaries in Africa have become more creative in speaking of the Good Shepherd in certain countries where the sheep is considered a dirty animal. When the Bible was translated into the tongue of the Zanakis near Lake Victoria, Revelation 3:20 was put as, "Behold, I stand at the door and call." Only a brigand would knock. White is not everywhere the sign of rejoicing, nor black of grief. For the Chinese, Tibetans and Bhutanese, the dragon is the symbol of heavenly protection, not of evil; for them, the idea of crushing the head of the dragon would be something terrible. It is wonderful that the world is not just a drab, monotonous real-
ity, but rich, colorful and various.

The need tomorrow will be not so much for language-translators as for culture-translators, to interpret one to another.

Culture can be your best ally in getting things done. Cultural influence on motivation for learning and working has not been sufficiently studied. The point of view that Max Weber took in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* can provoke further thought. Modernization, for many, is linked with Western culture. Should it necessarily be? It is surprising to see how Asian the Japanese have remained in spite of the advance they have made in industrialization. Family bonds are strong in Japanese society. The Japanese mother gives herself to the child and to his studies with singular devotion. With her “Don’t disappoint me” formula, she is the most important educational agent in society. Relationship counts. Her appeal to feelings is a compelling motive. Western children’s experience in a single-parent family, or in a family where both parents are working, would be different.

In the same way, Japanese companies are collective organizations which run like large families. Every aspect of the workers’ life is looked after, e.g., low-cost housing, or medical care. The workers sing the companies’ anthem, say the company’s creed, and recite slogans of devotion to the company. The glory of the company is their pride. There is common concern for group achievement, not merely for individual success. Members are equal. They stand for consensus rather than for conflict, for deference to authority rather than for disrespect, for collaboration rather than for contention. They have not outgrown their appreciation of traditional values, like obedience and sacrifice. Their security is not merely financial security but a collective self-assurance grounded in cultural traditions and shared meaning.

Even in the West, industrial psychologist Eltor Mayo had reached conclusions in the 20s that were most revealing. He had argued that industrial output was not in proportion to the physical capacity, but to the “social capacity,” e.g., the pace of work acceptable to the fellow workers. Individuals would find it too difficult to take up a faster pace. He also held that financial remuneration was not everything. Noneconomic rewards, friendship with coworkers, respect from management, etc., provide motivation and happiness. Workers respond to rewards not as individuals but as members of a group. In certain circumstances they reject an offer of high pay and refuse to work harder than they have decided. Mayo further held the view that extreme specialization made coordination difficult.

The recent economic success of the Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singa-
pore, Korea and Taiwan) has been attributed also to their work ethic. A reformed China will rather go the Japanese and the Tigers’ way rather than the American way.

It is wise to build on the base of culture. And we have seen that culture is not concerned only with a few externals, but more especially with things like relationships, inner structuring of the mind, reasons that urge, persuade, motivate and commit. Make it your ally and you can achieve anything.

Inculturation

Inculturation, of course, will have to go further than picking up some broken pieces of culture. Here we can merely point out the direction. Mahatma Gandhi once said: “I must follow them. For, I am their leader.” If someone wishes to take leadership in any cultural process, he must keep close to the cultural group which he is trying to serve. He must listen and learn. He must think with the people and look at things the way they do. He must catch their inner rhythm, acquire their manner of expressing their thoughts and feelings, their love, loyalty and religious devotion. He must discover the “beautiful” and the “great” in the ordinariness of their lives. He must learn to pray with them and make his own their way of giving a concrete form to their invisible world of faith. He will greatly benefit from watching carefully what is known as “popular religiosity.”

Creativity of the believing community finds expression in popular religiosity. People’s religious sense is not always overconcerned about de-mythologizations and argumentations. It goes more by global meanings, significations and symbolisms. Colors and figures speak to their unconscious. Will we ever know why a community has preference for red-bordered saris, or for yellow and green doknas?

It is said that Einstein did not think in words or in mathematical language; he had physical and visual images that stood for complete entities (systems), which had then to be separated and translated into mathematics and words. Should we wonder that communities think in myths and legends (which are called symbolic theology), and try to get a grip of the invisible by imitating the archetypes in their subconscious? Carl Jung has convincingly shown that things in the unconscious are not unrealities.

On the one hand, a total surrender to the figments of fantasy can lead one into the world of magic and superstition. On the other, even from a world of omens and charms and fetishes, one can lead people to a healthy use of symbolism. What are hills and trees, water and fire, springs and rivulets, birds and animals, oil and ashes? Are they only objects to be seen
and used? Are they not also objects of wonder, and companions in mystery? They are all pointers to the world beyond. Thus, objects, places and times are holy. The very air is charged with the spiritual. Alex Haley in his book *Roots* shows us an African father introducing to his son three categories of beings that inhabit the world: the living, the dead, the unborn. It is great to look at the world with the eyes of the average man, in whom the culture of his community is alive. He is the educator of the inculcator.

The church of Our Lady of Guadalupe was built in the 1770s. Amidst many Christian decorations, the Zuni artists painted on the walls of the church the traditional symbols of the gods of wind, rain, lightning, sunlight, tempest and war, with the emblems of the Corn Maiden, and hid Auni medicine feathers and fetishes under the altar. The churchmen themselves may not have realized what all this meant. But it is impossible to describe the popularity of the shrine that had become doubly sacred with so many sacred presences.

Let us return to another point that we had made earlier: taking note of the “beautiful” and the “great” in the ordinary situations of people’s lives. An Ao song compares a young man to the “finest beads on the neck of all the men of all the world.” A Garo song compares a young woman’s eyes to the bamboo leaves, and her lips to the flowers of the mandal tree. In the same way you discover profundity of thought in unexpected places. There is a stanza in the song of the (Garo) Wangala dance which says: “Though in the dark forest of Tura the bad tree grows, the good trees are there too. Though in the midst of the Brahmaputra sand there is bad water; good water is there too.” And an Angami line says: “Seeds fall to the ground, they spring up. If a man dies, he does not rise again.” Likewise, don’t be blind to local art. If African art could inspire Epstein, Moore and Picasso, could Konyak carvings leave people with artistic tastes untouched?

Henri Poincaré is said to have asked whether the naturalist who had studied elephants only under the microscope thinks he knew enough of the animals? Studying culture in parts is useful only if one tries to have an integrated view at a later stage. Any living being is much more than all its parts. So is a living culture. When from the handicrafts and art products, from the poetic wisdom and social relationships, you move to values, you are finally reaching the central threads that hold a culture and a community together. One author has listed African tribal values as: community, waiting, familyhood, sharing, joint responsibility, faith and unity in action. You may add honesty, equality and solidarity, which are common to all tribal societies. But when someone says that the tribal world view is essentially “life-affirming,” you have come to the central theme of tribal culture. They believe in a philosophy of vitalism, dynamism, and an eager-
ness to live "life with an enviable intensity."

But this life-affirming philosophy itself has a soul: religious faith. Tribal people are in the words of an author "incurably religious." There is no room for secularization in their society, no separation of the sacred and the profane. They perceive a cosmic harmony in the universe, and a Great Power behind everything.

Inculturation is an ongoing process. As long as life lasts, it must go on. It is the community that inculturates; experts may assist it in the processes. But it is the community that constantly seeks to express its faith and its love in renewed ways. If you are a leader, follow its lead.

II. TRADITIONAL RELIGION(S)
by
Father Sebastian Karotemprel

INTRODUCTION

When one speaks of the religions of the world, one spontaneously thinks of Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc. Ordinarily, the so-called Traditional Religions in different continents of the world are not taken into serious consideration.

This attitude is fast changing. We are becoming conscious of the fact that there are over a hundred to two hundred million, or more, followers of traditional religions in the world today. They are found in Asia, from India to Japan, in the Oceania Islands, Australia, the Americas, and especially in Africa.\(^1\) Statistics regarding their exact numbers vary because of inaccurate censuses and political manipulations by vested interests.

The Name

Traditional religions depend on religious life-experience and its oral transmission for their survival and growth. They are distinct from classical or scriptural religions which also originated in tradition. But tradition gradually became objectified in their sacred books, and they have recourse to the sacred books for orthodoxy. Usually they do not have a highly developed system of philosophical, liturgical and other infrastructures. Traditional religions depend only on lived oral and active tradition, hand-

\(^1\) This presentation is taken from *Following Christ In Mission: A Foundational Course In Mission*, ed. Sebastian Karotemprel, (Pauline International), and is reprinted with permission.
ing down in epics, legends, folklore, symbolic objects, acts, customs, festivals, etc., their beliefs and cult. They are not given to religious and philosophical speculation, nor do they have highly developed liturgical practices.  

In the past, sociologists, anthropologists and historians of religion have called traditional religions by different names such as “animism,” “totemism,” “shamanism,” folk religions, native religions, tribal religions, natural religions, indigenous religions, primal religions, etc. Some of these titles have been rejected as inadequate explanations of their religious reality. In a broad sense, all religions can be called traditional religions, since tradition stands at the origin of all religions.

We use the term traditional religions in a specific sense to distinguish it from classical, scriptural religions. We may broadly describe it as belief in one creator God, spirits and the souls of ancestors, expressed in religious practices and customs in family, clan and tribe, and with close links to nature, all of which are transmitted through oral tradition.

**Traditional Religions or Traditional Religion?**

The term traditional religions may be used in a pluralistic sense since there is no officially accepted common ground of doctrines, worship and practices in the traditional religions of the various continents. In this sense it is justifiable to speak still of traditional religions. On the other hand, there is a common denominator of beliefs and practices among them. Hence, today we may speak also of traditional religion as a set of beliefs, practices and ethical codes. They also have a common social and religious psychology which distinguishes them from other peoples and religions.

Traditional religion is a mosaic of beliefs and practices linked with a particular ethnic, geographical and socio-cultural ambience, deeply influenced by the invisible and the spiritual.

Traditional religion has a specific worldview, a religious conception of the whole of reality: God, nature, man, family, clan, tribe, the spirits, the ancestors and man’s final destiny. It is far more than animism, or totemism, or primitive magic.

**The Worldview**

Traditional religion has a comprehensive worldview, that is at the same time stamped with sacrality, religiosity and reverence for nature. Such a concept of God goes beyond the animistic, totemistic and folkloristic. Paul VI in his message to Africa says: “We have a deeper, broader and
more universal concept which considers all living beings and visible nature itself as linked with the world of the invisible and the spirit." In such a view man has a spiritual dimension that is related to the afterlife. This spiritual concept of reality, and hence the worldview consequent upon it, is permeated with the idea of God: "In this spiritual concept, the most important element generally found is the idea of God, as the first or ultimate cause of all things. The concept, perceived rather than analyzed, lived rather than reflected on, is expressed in very different ways from culture, but the fact remains that the presence of God permeates African life, as the presence of a higher being, personal and mysterious."

The cosmos is perceived as sacred, and humans must seek to be in harmony with it, especially with the clan and the tribe, with the dead and the spirits of the ancestors. The universe includes the mystery of God, spirits and the spirits of the ancestors.

The above worldview, on the other hand, creates and atmosphere of fear, in the followers of traditional religion, of breaking the requisite harmony. Hence, they seek to be in communion with them or to be reconciled with them, through prayers, sacrifices and sacred rites.

The Thought-World of Traditional Religions

In all traditional societies, religion and social life are so closely intertwined that they can hardly be separated.

To begin with, the worldview of traditional societies is holistic. There is hardly any distinction between matter and spirit, the profane and the sacred, the visible and the invisible, the living and the dead. They all constitute one single reality. They do not search for a scientific or abstract interpretation of the cosmos or technological conquest of the same. Their primary concern is empathy, harmony, respect for nature and preservation of the established order.

Human existence is always in the presence of the transcendent Being and in the company of spirits and ancestors. There is one single communion with the transcendent, the cosmos, the spirits, the ancestors and the tribe. Traditional religions are deeply anthropocentric, but it is an anthropocentrism that places man in contact with the transcendent, the invisible, the spiritual. Hence, religion has been the nurse of traditional societies and their civilizations.

The religious worldview of the traditional religions also promotes a number of values, such as the dignity of the human person, however poor, respect for family and love for life and abundance of progeny, solidarity in
all the significant events of life, collective participation in them, the dignity of the word given, oral traditions and community cultural and artistic expressions.

On the negative side, it must be admitted that many of the above values are applicable only within a clan or tribe. This is one of the major weaknesses of traditional religions.

**God in Traditional Religions**

If we examine the cultural and religious patrimony of the traditional societies and their linguistic expressions, we find that most people believe in a supreme God. The different names given to God by traditional religions point to the concept they have of God: the only One, Creator of all things, Omnipotent, the Great Spirit, the Uncreated King, the Sky, the Sun and the Moon, the Other, the Great Master, the Great Chief, etc.

Though at times God is identified with the rain, light, dawn (Thou, “Illuminated One,” “God is in the dawn light”), in general God, the Supreme Being, is independent of the material and astral worlds. He is the source of all things and transmitter of the original vital force of life. Mastery and dominion over the cosmos is his special attribute.

God is the great Progenitor of the tribe and the source of all fecundity of the land and of living beings. Thus the Supreme Being is “life” in its original form.

**God and Humankind**

As the Great Chief, or the Progenitor of the tribe, God is in close relationship with humankind. He has always been close to it from its beginnings. In many traditional religions, there are stories and myths regarding an age of bliss when all were united. But there took place some rupture and distancing between God and humans. God is the master of the cosmos, but especially of the destiny of humans. Sometimes God is represented both as Father and Mother. God is the “Great Mother,” the source of all life! Or at other times, God is identified with earth, his “consort” and the source of cyclic fecundity. God is somehow transcendent and immanent in many traditional religions. He is everywhere and nowhere.

Man is a creature. His present and his future are in the hands of God who is the master of his destiny and that of his family and clan.

The worldview of traditional religions is completely anthropocentric, but not in the secularistic or agnostic sense of the word. Man’s present and
future well-being is the central issue of life. The protection, maintenance and the transmission of abundant life is his central preoccupation in nearly all his prayers, invocations and sacrifices.

In many traditional religions God is often considered as a distant reality. Hence, invocations are directed to the spirits and the ancestors. In general, sin is not perceived as a violation of a moral law for which humans are responsible before God. It is rather the breaking of a traditional taboo, custom or convention which calls for punishment but not repentance and change of heart.

The Spirits

One of the most important characteristics of traditional religion(s) is the belief in the existence of benevolent and malevolent spirits. In a certain sense this is a conceptual elongation of belief in God.

In some traditional religions the Supreme Being who created everything is believed to have left the details of the world to inferior beings or the spirits. Hence, humans offer their prayers and sacrifices more readily to them. They are, for some, intermediaries between God and humans. But it is hard to say whether the traditional religions’ invocations are addressed to God or to the spirits, or whether one also implies the other: “Certain wells, called God’s wells, certain Congolese stones known as ‘God,’ certain sacred objects such as the Baga mask, the epiphany of which every seven years evokes that of a certain God, or again, as in Rwanda, some bull calf, or some ram, or an object, called Immana (God) — all these seem definitely to bear a direct relation to the Supreme Being. But we must recognize that the African religions in their present forms address themselves by preference to secondary personalities: spirits, ancestors and those Genies who live in the bush and the forest, the rivers and the springs.”

The spirits are part of the life of the indigenous peoples from birth to death. They inhabit the hidden world, sacred groves, mountains, etc. They have power to control the lives of humans, and hence they are feared and propitiated. Such an element of fear is found among most traditional religionists.

The Ancestors

The veneration of ancestors is another unfailing characteristic of traditional religion(s). For indigenous people, the real tribe is an extended family of humans, spirits and the spirits of departed ancestors who are ever present to the community.
Among the ancestors, the primogenitor of the tribe occupies a very important place. He is the father and hero of the tribe, the founder and its protector.

The veneration of ancestors is founded on the belief of the continued existence of humans and their relationship with the living. The family, the clan, the tribe and the ethnic group are all in communion with one another and with their ancestors. The ancestors are capable of ensuring the fecundity and prosperity of the tribe. They are the custodians of the traditions of the group and expect compliance with the moral, social and religious obligations by the living.

In different tribal societies, the ancestors are often represented by memorial objects, such as stones, pillars, tombs, etc. When offerings or sacrifices are made to them, it is at the above objects that they are made. In exchange, they provide protection, prosperity and abundance of progeny.

The ancestors operate in the world of humans through dreams, possession, or appearing in animal forms of dogs, tigers, snakes, etc. They live with the family, as their protectors, counsellors and judges.

The cult of ancestors is so strongly felt in some areas that even God is called or considered as the “first ancestor,” the “preeminent ancestor,” the “primogenitor” of the tribe.

**Religious Exercises**

Prayer among indigenous peoples is mostly made up of invocations for favors. Hence, prayers tend to be utilitarian. But prayers of praise are also found at times, though rarely. Often the father or the uncle or mother or the head of the family acts as the family priest in the veneration of the spirits and ancestors. Community cult is carried out by official intermediaries or ministers. When spirits or ancestors indicate through special signs or dreams that they are displaced or offended, sacrifices of food, the first fruits of the harvest, animals, or even human beings, are offered to ward off sickness, dangers to life and for protection. The offering is followed by the sharing of the remains of the offered victim.

Fecundity rites, birth rites, rites of passage, weaning rites, initiation rites, funeral rites, etc., are practiced in many indigenous societies. They all have a religious connotation.

Traditional religions have usually no established priesthood, as there
is in most scriptural religions, but they have diviners, seers and healers who play a special role in the religious life of the society.

Other Phenomena with a Religious Dimension

We can only mention in passing the widespread belief in possession by spirits. Though in many cases it is a matter of psychic traumas, the therapeutic rites have a religious significance. This is particularly true of the African traditional religion(s): “When we meet those African religions which know this phenomenon, we have come upon the heart of the African experience of the human soul and the very core of the traditional religion.”

Hence, adorcism (integration of the possession spirit into the personality of the possessed person), and exorcism in some form or other are important to traditional religion(s).

Regional Characteristics

Africa: One of the largest concentration of “traditional” peoples is in Africa. Beyond the common characteristics traditional religion(s) that have been mentioned, there are several regional differences. Thus, African people of traditional religion(s) place great hope in a final beatitude, in a prosperous life and communion with the ancestors of the tribe.

Hunger, drought, sickness, infant mortality, sterility, etc., are great misfortunes to be warded off by means of expiatory and purificatory rites by intermediaries, diviners, healers and magicians.

Asia: Asia also, has significant numbers of followers of traditional religions in India, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan and China.

According to the Bhils of India, the Bhagavan, the Supreme Being initiates creation, but it is carried to its end by a giant-hero. The earth has descended from heaven or emerged from the oceans (Garos). Humankind has descended from a couple who were the primogentitors of all (China), or from an animal couple (Indonesia).

Oceania: Traditional religions of Oceania (Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia) are biocosmic in character, that is, the ultimate value is life. Every being in the cosmos participates in life at different levels. The value and significance of each being is determined by the level of participation in life.
Some of the indigenous peoples of this region are polytheistic. Among others, the influence of biocosmic religion is strong. The origin of life among them is attributed to Dema, the primitive being from whom life has descended. The whole cosmos is in a life-giving, life-preserving and life-increasing communication or diminution of it. But such communication is limited to the clan or the tribe and not outside of it. Change of rituals can also change the quality of life for better through more efficacious rituals. Thus, traditional religions have a permanent element, life, in their religious tradition, and at the same time, new rituals provide for change and development.

The Americas: It is estimated that there are over a thousand different indigenous groups or peoples in the Americas with 600 different languages and 500 dialects. They also vary in levels of development, from the very primitive societies to the highly advanced ones, such as the Mayas, the Incas and the Aztecs, 13 of which have practically disappeared.

Most Amerindians, as they are sometimes called, have a common cosmogony. The cosmos is divided into two parts, the earth and the heavens, supported at its four corners. This is called the “tree of the world,” and connects humankind with heaven. Its roots descend to the abode of the dead.

The earth and humankind have been destroyed many times and recreated, or refashioned by God. The Creator and his assistant are mythical figures now. The earth is considered as the “mother” of all. The Supreme Being is called by different names. Thus, he is the “Manitu,” the “Great Spirit,” “the Great Mystery.” Through the “dance of the sun,” the gods are placated. The sacred acts or objects are those by which the work of creation is symbolically re-enacted and the order of the cosmos maintained.

Resurgence of Traditional Religions

There was a time when it was thought that traditional religions would gradually fade out under the impact of modernity and the missionary activity of the scriptural religions. But surprisingly, both at the elite and the popular levels, they survive and even flourish. At the elite level many indigenous theologians are reflecting on traditional religions and making them known to the rest of the world. At the popular level, they still attract and keep significant numbers of followers. Others who have embraced classical or scriptural religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity or Islam, continue to follow several of the practices of the traditional religions. There is a kind of “liminality,” namely, a transitional period or stage in religious conversion from one religion to another when the convert clings to
practices of the old faith while trying to acquire those of the new faith and its value systems and ethical codes. Liminality may be viewed both positively and negatively; positively, if conversion helps to retain all the good values of the old religion; and negatively, if it is only a nominal conversion that leads to a kind of religious syncretism.

On the other hand, several traditional societies are also in crisis due to the advent of modernity. Under its impact, the structures of traditional societies break down, and with them traditional religions begin to exert less influence than previously.

CONCLUSION

With fresh insights into the concept of mission and the new understanding of and attitudes to other religions, the Church has now a modified attitude to traditional religion(s) and cultures.

Vatican Council II called on all to appreciate and be enriched by the “treasures” which the bountiful Creator “has distributed among the nations of the earth” (AG 11). This is possible only if there is genuine respect for peoples and their cultures, especially cultures that are totally imbued with and penetrated by religion. Paul VI, in his message to Christian Africa, said: “The Church views with great respect the moral and religious values of the African tradition, not only because of their meaning, but also because she sees them as providential, as the basis for spreading the gospel message and beginning the establishment of the new society in Christ.”

The Church today does not want to see the disappearance of traditional religion(s). Rather they should find a renewed existence in the Church, as John Paul II said, addressing the Amerindians in Santo Domingo: “The Church exhorts indigenous peoples to preserve and promote with legitimate pride the culture of their peoples, their sound traditions and customs, language and cultures.” The Pope went even further in speaking to the Afro-Americans and told them to be faithful to their cultural patrimony: “Fidelity to your way of life and your cultural patrimony is something that the Church not only respects, but desires and wants to develop since man, every man, has been created in the image and likeness of God.”

True inculturation goes beyond the adoption of external practices, symbols and language. It is grafting on to whatever is true and notable. Traditional religions are expressions of the bountiful treasures which God has bestowed on peoples. The Gospel is to be grafted on to the living tree of traditional religion(s). The Church would be poorer without their re-
ligious wisdom. It can only enrich the Christian for it shares in the unfathomable wisdom of God, as the proverb of an African tribe of Benin says: "Knowledge is like the trunk of a baobab tree that no human can span."  

* * *

FOOTNOTES


16. Ibid., p. 78.


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III. THE SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION OF TRIBAL PEOPLES AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO ECOLOGICAL HEALTH

by

Bishop Francisco Claver

At first glance, the two main ideas of our subject seem utterly unrelated — except perhaps for the only too obvious fact that both have to do with indigenous peoples. They state two truths, the first possibly more obvious than the second: (1) Tribal peoples everywhere are marginalized; and (2) They have something to contribute to the world’s ecological health.

It is these two ideas that I would like to start with in this morning’s discussion, using them as a jumping board to something that I believe is more important: What we as Church, as bearers and spreaders of the Gospel of Christ, have to do with these two facts.

But before I do that, let me draw your attention to at least one substantial connection between the two (there are more than just one, after all). For they are not as unrelated as they seem. I see a distinct connection in this: Tribal peoples, by the sheer fact of their marginalization, are treated as people of little consequence; yet, in the face of the greatest threat to humanity today — so I believe we should view the dire effects of the continuing degradation of our global environment — they can show us the way to better ecological health. The modern world looks at them as unimportant. Yet, most ironically, they are, for the very reason they are marginalized, terribly important for that same world.

THE FACT OF SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION

The marginalization of tribal peoples is a universal phenomenon. I don’t know if we have to prove this assertion. All we have to do is to look around us, yes, even in what we might think is our own exceptionable country. And let’s not look only at Asia. No continent — no nation or society which numbers tribal communities among its people — is untouched by this dreary evil.

We call the evil “social marginalization” here, but it is not only “social” in that tribal peoples live their lives on the outermost and lowest fringes of the societies they find themselves in. It is also political — they hardly have any say in decisions touching the national polity as polity, and are thus usually without any power to speak of. It is economic — invariably they are numbered with the poorest of the poor and hand-to-mouth subsistence is their quite common lot. It is even religious — animism which by and large is the religion of tribals is hardly put on a par with the
great world religions, the adherents of the latter looking down on those of the former. And it is, above all, cultural — tribal peoples are tribal precisely because they hang on to old, “primitive” ways and traditions of living which often are non-adaptive, to say the least, to modern ways of living. In many instances, their marginalization takes a physical form — indigenous groups more often than not live in areas territorially remote from “civilization.”

The phenomenon of marginalization spawns others, most of them having to do with assertions of ethnicity. Let me dwell here only on two: wars (many of them for independence), and movements for autonomy or, at the least, socio-political recognition.

Back in the early 70s, an article appeared in Foreign Affairs, written by a political scientist, in which he made a case (a strong one, I remember thinking at the time) for a rather starting claim, namely, that all the wars that had occurred from the end of the Second World War till then were ethnic in origin. People and nations, he said, were going to war to defend or promote their ethnicity. A whole generation has passed since he wrote and one can wonder whether his thesis still holds. I would think it does. The conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya, Rwanda, Burundi, to name just those that have riveted the world’s attention in the not too recent past, are taking place simply because people make much of their ethnicity, are prepared to kill — and are in fact killing — in order to assert it, to preserve it.

Wars and armed uprisings are, needless to say, extreme measures in the assertion of a people’s ethnic character and identity. Less violent, but nonetheless of no less significance, are movements for the autonomy of minority peoples (not all tribal in the classic sense of the term, true, but still predominantly so). They occur usually in the context of a modern nation state in which a majority of some sort or other is seen to have the monopoly of all kinds of advantages, and the autonomy-seeking minority, for that reason, considers itself sorely disadvantaged — or marginalized, to use our term — and aspires for at least equal treatment. The Catalans of northern Spain readily come to mind in this regard. So too do the Denes of Canada, and the Igorots and other mountain tribes of the Cordilleras in the Philippines, to cite just a few cases.

When one takes a closer look at the problem of the marginalization of tribal groups, it doesn’t take long for the realization to sink in that it is at base an issue of social justice — or injustice, rather.

The truth was brought home to us most powerfully some twenty years ago in the early years of Mr. Marcos’ dictatorial rule. At the time, human rights violations by the military had become a contentious issue between
his government and such in the Church as were bothered by the ease and impunity with which they were being committed in the name of “national security.” Responding to the complaints lodged against his government, he dismissed them out of hand, making the counter-charge that human rights advocates in the Philippines were guilty of gullibly swallowing “western notions” — those on human rights, human dignity, social justice — and applying them “uncritically” to the Philippine situation.

The charge was preposterous. And it is by no means dated. Mr. Lee Kwan Yew is today preaching exactly the same kind of gospel to any who would question how things are done in Singapore. And his is not a solitary voice by any means.

When Marcos made that charge, we — Church social action workers in Mindanao, the southernmost island of the Philippines — thought we’d take his accusation seriously, however egregious it was.

We gathered a group of representatives from some nineteen tribal groups of Mindanao and put them through a three-day seminar of cultural analysis of their various worldviews. We went on the premise that if there were any people in the Philippines who could speak as “genuine Filipinos” on the subject at hand, it would be they. They had never come under Spanish or American cultural influences all through the nearly four hundred years that the Philippines was under colonial rule, and thus, so we thought, represented Philippine cultural traditions at their pristine best.

The process we followed was the soul of simplicity. On the first day, we asked the participants to inquire into this question: “What are the greatest problems facing your people today as a tribal community?” On the second day we shifted focus, asking: “If you had the freedom and the power to do as you wished as a distinct cultural group, what kind of society would you try to build?” On the third day we posed this last question: “In view of the actual social and physical constraints you are under and your vision of a good society, what would you like your community to be concerned about, to act on as a community, for its good and preservation?”

In their answers to the first question, the participants zeroed in on the difficulties caused by the influx of settlers from other parts of the country into their areas, and the blatant partiality the government showed such settlers when trouble arose, as it inevitably did, on questions of land acquisition and ownership. The main problems that surfaced on this first day revolved around the unequal treatment of the tribals and the settlers on the part of the government: “Why are we treated differently from the settlers? Why are they accorded privileges we don’t get? Why does govern-
ment provide them with roads, schools, health clinics, assistance in many areas of life, and does not do the same for us?” The notion of justice—and rights—underlying those complaints is by no means understandable only to westerners: Giving to others what is due to them—this definition is the classic definition of justice. And it is a universal one.

In answering the second question, the participants described what they thought their ideal society should be. And from the picture they drew, a clearer idea of what they felt were their rights came through. They were not stated in such terms as human dignity, freedom of speech, of movement, of association, and the like, but the substance was the same. Thus, they didn’t talk of “basic human dignity,” but they did of “face,” honor, integrity, name. They didn’t mention the term “freedom of movement,” but they did chafe at the curtailing of their age-old practice of farming and settling wherever they wished within the confines of what they’d always considered their ancestral domain.

From the dreaming of the second question, the third brought the participants back to reality and forced them to look at their current problems but now in view of their cultural vision of an ideal society. Problems by their very nature are restrictive, dreams just the opposite. But put together, they make for realistic planning for attainable goals. And this is exactly what the activity of the third day was all about. It was thus only the start of a discerning process that we hoped would continue in the various tribal communities our participants came from.

If the first question (actual problems of life) dealt with the present of our tribal communities in Mindanao, and the second (ideal indigenous societies) with the past, the third question (how to put cultural ideals and social realities together) was essentially a look at the future. This question brought out a wrenching dilemma which I am afraid is the basic problem of indigenous peoples all over the world. And they expressed it in two simple words: education and tradition. By education they meant the need, as well as the means, to adapt to change and modern ways. They saw clearly that in order to survive, they simply had to do something about the changes that were taking place all around them. But they also saw that changing would mean a loss of their culture, of their identity as a distinct people. Hence, the importance of their second concern, tradition. By the term they meant their culture, the way of life it called for, the values which their ancestors lived by. They saw how important their traditional way of life was for their ethnic identity; but they also saw how non-adaptive it was in the changed and fast changing situation they found themselves in.

Education and tradition, antithetical though they were, in the end
were not looked at as an either-or question but a both-and one. But how to put the two together and avoid their inherent difficulties? No common, definitive answers were given by the whole group attending the seminar, but at least the conclusion was reached that the question was one that had to be faced and answered, each in their own way, by the various native peoples of Mindanao.

At the conclusion of the seminar we could write QED (proved) to our original hypothesis: The concepts of human dignity, rights and justice are not of western provenience (as Marcos and his ilk would have us believe) but of universal humanity (as the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 has said all along). But we also learned something more: “Primitive” peoples can think and reason as well as any modern ones. This sounds too condescending? I rather think it is the attribution to them of “western” ideas and modes of thinking that is extremely condescending for it makes them appear incapable of thinking for themselves, of having concepts of their own. And if they have something to say about their social marginalization, so too do they about their environmental problems. So let’s look at the latter.

**Tribals and the Ecological Question**

Conscious concern for the ecological health of the world is a modern phenomenon. And there seems to be a general consensus that the degradation of our global environment is the greatest threat to humanity today: destroying the physical basis of life, the environment, is to destroy life itself.

The great irony is that it is modern civilization itself with its insatiable and unhindered drive for industrialization — resource-devouring, pollution-producing — that has brought us to our present crisis. Another irony is that the social marginalization of tribal peoples that we looked at above is also largely a result of that same civilization. Stating the fact, should we then conclude that modernization is bad, that we should put a stop to a process already well under way in most parts of the world — and avidly pursued by developing nations — return people to less sophisticated ways of living? Modern cultures are, in a very true sense, man-over-nature ideologies, nature-controlling, nature-harnessing, future- and change-oriented. Traditional cultures, on the other hand, are practically the obverse of all the above characteristics. Thus, going along with the forces of nature, living in harmony with nature, would be the more positive way of putting their general attitude towards nature. Being subject to those same forces, accepting them in a fatalistic way, fearing them and endowing them with supernatural powers — these would be the negative side of the same attitude. In addition, in being oriented to the past, to “the ways of
our fathers," traditional cultures are heavily biased towards continuity and stability, and thus are quite inherently conservative and not too open to change.

I'm not sure that the solution to the vast problem of global ecological deterioration is to be sought in stopping the process of modernization. Perhaps slowing down a bit its too rapid pace of change? If there is one big defect in the modernization process, it is the rapidity with which change takes place, causing a lot of distortion in a people's culture and social structures. Or making it truly future-oriented? Despite what was said above about modern cultures being future-oriented, it is closer to the truth to say they are in practice excessively present-oriented. Instant gratification, the quick profit, a carpe-diem philosophy of life — these are among the age's dominant values (or disvalues?), and they militate strongly against the kind of mentality that looks ahead to handing over an ecologically healthy world to the next generation. And speaking of values, we must wonder if, in the final analysis, this is where the real problem and its solution lie. Because if this is so, we will not be able to escape the conclusion that the whole matter is quite heavily one of culture, of mind-sets and attitudes, and we then should begin talking about a return to a culture of respect for nature. I strongly believe this is what we should do. And this is where tribal peoples come in.

As we characterized their cultures above, we pointed out how tribal communities value harmony with nature. From this we can conclude they are more attuned to its rhythms, its exigencies, its working. And they are thus more aware of how tampering with the forces and laws of nature in an unholistic way will lead to disaster. It is their respect for and sensitivity towards nature, their impelling concern to be in harmony with it — genuine ecological values that are largely missing in modern people's control-of-nature ideology — that we should look into more carefully and learn from.

At that same consultation on tribal notions of justice and rights that I spoke of in the previous section of our discussion, one of the participants described in full what one indigenous group — the Mamanwa of Surigao province — felt they should do about their problems. The report was, I thought, excellent as an example of what I noted earlier about the capacity of "primitive" people to rationally analyze and solve problems. The report should be of particular benefit to us because it deals with an ecological question. I will not go in detail into the report. I would like simply to comment on a few points that it makes.

But first some background on the Mamanwa. The island of Mindanao is the second largest of the more than seven thousand that make up the Philippine archipelago. Its aboriginal peoples are the various tribes (some
Islamic) who remained through the more than 300 years of Spanish rule quite impervious to Christianity (and westernization). In the late 30s, the government started a program of resettling people from the more densely populated islands of the north. The program did not take off until after World War II when some two million people moved into Mindanao on their own accord and occupied lands the government was parceling out in free patent arrangements. The only problem was that lands the government claimed as public domain and was giving out titles to as farms to be privately owned and operated had been the ancestral homelands of indigenous tribes, owned by them in a different system of landownership—communal property ownership. From the very beginning, then, the differential concept of land ownership between the indigenous tribes and the settler folk, government too, was a point of endemic conflict. (It is only now that the government is finally trying to do something substantial about it in its efforts to set up autonomous regions and enact laws regulating claims on ancestral lands.)

The immediate result of the vast migration into Mindanao was to push tribal peoples farther into the mountains and jungles — the only environment, in any case, which could support the slash-and-burn type of agriculture that was theirs. But moving deeper into the hinterlands, they met another type of “settlers”: logging companies and their forest-destroying industry. With less and less land available (the situation was further aggravated by settlers moving into logged-over areas), even the ordinary, environmentally sound, slash-and-burn agriculture of the native peoples added to the ecological deterioration of the island. This, in brief, is the context of the Mamanwa report I’m referring to here.

From the report, it is clear the Mamanwa decided to come to terms not only with historical realities but with the changed physical environment as well. Thus, their decision not to follow the old tradition of moving ever so often to start new settlements when old swiddens are abandoned and they have to start new ones. But that decision entails another: the conservation and rational use of what resources were available to them in a way that assured a healthy environment. I’d like to briefly comment on this twofold decision.

The first decision was at base a political one. In terms of the two problematic ideas that, as I noted above, confronted the tribal peoples of Mindanao, namely, tradition and education, the Mamanwa opted in a deliberate way for the latter — they were not going to go back to the old ways of shifting settlements but must adjust more consciously to such changes as would help them cope better with the new things contact with the settlers, the Tomawo, was bringing inevitably into their culture. But they also opted for the former, for such aspects of their cultural tradition
as would preserve their Mamanwa identity and the integrity of their environment (more of this below). In a very true sense their decision was to assume as much control of their destiny as was possible to them in the realization that up till then they had been more “acted on” than “acting,” passive recipients of change being foisted on them by others (the Tomawo, the loggers, the government). To put it another way, they decided to take steps to put a stop to the process of marginalization which they saw was leading to all kinds of wrongs they had not been fully cognizant of before.

The second decision touched more directly what we are talking of in this section of our paper — ecological health. As you will see in the report, much was made between two blocks of land, mountain areas (bukid) and the plains (patag). The plains were to be mainly for towns and communities, for housing and business, and for settled farming, for permanent farms and irrigated ricefields. The mountains, on the other hand, were for forests and swidden farms, for providing a continuous supply of water for the plains. The ecologically symbiotic relationship of forest areas and farm communities was well appreciated and all the steps proposed were towards preserving and keeping healthy that relationship. Land and people, trees and water supply, plants and animals, soil preservation and erosion control — the effects of ignoring one or the other were well understood, and balance was sought in the best way open to them at this moment in their history. Evident in all this is a respect for nature, a deep awareness and acceptance of the limits imposed by its laws. Also evident is the people’s realistic appraisal of their situation and their determination to work within its possibilities and constraints.

There is only one item in their report which may prove problematic: getting the Tomawo to move out of the lands they presently are occupying in their midst. They put the freeing of their lands of intruders as the one, big condition for the fulfilling of their dreams — a difficulty of no little consequence. It is the one difficulty in fact that not only the Mamanwa but all other tribal peoples of the Philippines encounter in their continuing struggle for better treatment by the government and the majority populations. The problem it presents is thus the one crucial test of the viability of any law going to be drawn up on the question of ancestral domain which the Philippine Constitution, passed in 1987, mandated Congress to enact but which that august body has not yet done much about. And looking over what they propose, I see there is much that our national lawmakers can learn from them.

**THE CHURCH’S RESPONSE**

From what we have said so far, it is, I believe, quite obvious that both problems of social marginalization and ecological degradation are deep
issues of justice. This is especially true for the first: Tribal peoples are marginalized in the main because they are not given what is due them as simple human beings, not to say citizens of the country in which they find themselves. The second too is as much a problem of justice: For although we are talking here primarily of the contribution tribal peoples can make to the world’s ecological well-being, we have seen that such contribution as they can make comes from ancient ways of life which respect nature and its laws, hence are conducive to ecological health; but we have seen too that those same ways of life, their cultures, are in grave danger of disappearing entirely because of the deterioration of the environment that makes them viable in the first place, and this deterioration is being brought about by the inroads of “modern progress.” It is an injustice of the first order. And there is the added injustice that the deterioration of both their physical environment and cultural tradition is taking place without them profiting much from the very “progress” that is destroying them.

Explicitating the justice aspect of the two problems our discussion is concerned with leads us to our third point: What our response as Church is — or should be — to the challenges they pose. For, I take it, this is not just an academic exercise we are having here. We are gathered here as evangelizers and the sole reason we look into the various subjects the organizers of this colloquium have identified for discussion is to try discerning what the Gospel tells us to do about them.

In asking the question about what response to give to the challenges raised not only by our specific topic but as well by others in this conference, I am afraid we will have to ask an even more fundamental question: What is it we as Church should be doing when we say our main concern with tribal peoples, as with any others, is to bring them the Gospel of Christ? What does “preaching the Gospel to tribal peoples” mean? I wonder — is this ultimately the one question this conference is really all about? If it is not, I bring it up anyway as something we must give some consideration to.

It is not from any random whim I choose to do so. The question is one that strongly bothers workers in the field; and precisely for that reason, I feel we should thresh it out in a serious gathering like this one. For my part, I would like to draw freely from the experience of the ECTF — the Episcopal Commission on Tribal Filipinos of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines. (Incidentally, most of our country’s delegates here work with the ECTF in their various regions and dioceses.)

The Commission was originally called the Commission on Cultural Communities. In 1977 the name was changed to what we have now. The change in nomenclature has very much to do with the question I raise
here; so let me go a little bit more into the reasoning and history behind it.

Up till 1977, the thrust of the Commission was a very conventional one: the conversion of tribal peoples, making pagans — to use a term we somehow rarely hear nowadays — into Christians, bringing them into membership in the institutional Church. "Go...make disciples of all the nations...baptize them...teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you." Going to the nations and baptizing them into the Church — this was how we understood the missionary mandate given us by Christ before his ascension into heaven, and we went out and did it as a matter of course.

But something happened to complicate things for us. In 1972 Marcos declared martial law in order to create a "new society" out of us Filipinos. This included remolding our economy into a modern one. So he started issuing decree after decree (which had the force of laws) about what to do to bring the new economy (and the new nation) about. One of those decrees was the suspension of an earlier legal provision protecting the rights of indigenous people to ancestral lands. The suspension would make it easier to develop agri-industries, construct dams, build airports, pursue a host of other ambitious development projects, by the simple expedient of government not bothering at all about rights and claims to lands needed for its grandiose schemes.

That was when we in the Commission on Cultural Communities began to be more and more aware of what the social marginalization of tribal peoples meant, its political and economic implications especially. Not that we were completely ignorant about it before Marcos burst on the scene. Earlier I described the plight of the Mamanwa in the face of the invasion of lowland settlers into their area. Such land problems as they had with the Tomawo were not peculiar to them by any means but were general throughout the country wherever there was contact between tribal minorities and lowland majorities. Land-grabs were a constant source of trouble from way back. But at least recourse to law was always possible. Suspending the one legal guarantee of the right of tribals to their ancestral domain was thus to render them utterly helpless in their struggle to hang on to such reduced lands as they still could claim as their own before the law. Worse, if the government's development schemes led to the total loss of their lands, it would mean too the destruction of their culture and of their identity as peoples — two evils which were already well under way from contact with lowland cultures. In fact it was only then that we began to understand how far advanced these evils were even without the government's aggravating of them and to realize that these two were resulting in an even more pernicious evil: the tribal peoples' loss of pride in themselves.
I suppose such a development was inevitable. From colonial times, the unhispanicized, unchristianized people of the islands were looked down on as enemies, unregenerate savages, and in modern times with their fetish for progress, as backward primitives at the lowest rungs of Philippine society — a people without dignity. Could there be a worse human evil?

In that context, looking at our task of evangelization among tribal peoples mainly in terms of convert-making seemed to us a denial of the very Gospel we were preaching.

So we changed the name of our Commission. We took a term of opprobrium and deliberately used it in our official title, hoping thus to help convert it into a term of honor. It was not an empty gesture. With it we redefined our work with indigenous communities and set it in a direction that we have been following since then: instilling pride in people without pride. This would mean, if not preserving cultures, at least helping to make inevitable change less disruptive of them, more attuned to their rhythms and openings to change, more respectful of their inner dynamisms. It would also mean defending the human rights of tribals, guarding against their violation by government and majority groups and going into development projects that would help them cope with intrusive change.

In the beginning we equated instilling pride with restoring lost dignity. But we soon quickly discovered the restoring of lost dignity is not something we can do as evangelizers, not to say as ordinary human beings. It is something that only the tribals can do for themselves: Human dignity is inherent in people, is never really “lost,” but it must be defended at all times; and this is best done when the very people who are thought to be without dignity actively assert it when it is being denied them. The conclusion, I believe, is something that is rather commonly arrived at now wherever the Church goes into direct work with oppressed classes of all kinds — as with the Dalits of India, the Overseas Contract Workers in the Middle East and Newly Industrialized countries of Asia, refugees, landless agricultural workers, exploited people everywhere.

What all this adds up to is that there are conflictive aspects of the work of evangelization — and not just among tribal communities either — that we come up against practically everywhere these days. And it comes from our redefining of evangelization itself — or at least a redefining by Vatican II and, I believe, by Evangelii Nuntiandi and Redemptoris Missio too.

I refer here to the acceptance of evangelization as not only the per-
sonal conversion of individuals but also the social transformation of the various levels of community in which they live. With the first, the concern is to bring people to accept Christ and his Gospel, to strive to live henceforth by the values of the Kingdom he preached. And with the second, it is to try making those same values operative in the wider society, regardless of whether or not the rest of the people in that society become believing Christians. Conversion of the heart is what evangelization is all about, but that inner conversion must have an effect on society at large. The least we can say about that effect on society of the Church’s evangelizing efforts is that it (society) become more human, more just, more respectful of the innate worth of people.

The response, then, to the question we are posing here about what ultimately preaching the Gospel to tribal peoples means depends very much on how we define the Church and its mission of evangelizing the world. Do we have such a common response, a common definition? I think we do — if we go by what the FABC has been declaring for us these past 25 years. Still, what we are doing may not yet approach fully what we have been saying all along. But that is all of a piece with the conversion in the Gospel that we have been talking about here.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE CONFERENCE ON EVANGELIZATION AMONG THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF ASIA

Aware of the place the indigenous peoples have in the growth of our Asian Churches, we, 45 bishops, priests, religious and lay people of Asia, belonging to indigenous groups or working with indigenous people, met at Hua Hin between September 3-8, 1995 for the conference: Evangelization among the Indigenous Peoples of Asia. The conference was organized by the Office of Evangelization of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences in order to bring together those involved in evangelization among Asian indigenous peoples.

The conference enabled us to share experiences and to reflect together on the history of evangelization among the indigenous peoples of Asia on the difficulties faced, and on the future prospects that lie ahead of us. The conference was a timely venture, in tune with international concern about the situation of indigenous peoples around the world. The fact that many of the participants belong to various indigenous groups made the proceedings more meaningful.

Study papers on culture, on the indigenous people’s worldview and ethos and Christian worship, on the social marginalization of indigenous
peoples, on traditional religions, and on aspects of evangelization for the future were presented. These helped us by providing a basis for our reflections. Country reports on the history, the problems faced, the methods used in evangelization among the various indigenous peoples of Asia were also presented. These made the participants aware of the existence of numerous groups of indigenous peoples throughout Asia. They also helped us to get to know from those close at hand the efforts being made, at times in the face of severe trials, both secular and religious, to spread the Good News to every person on the Asian continent.

In the course of our discussions we also sought to focus our attention on more concrete lines of approach. We acknowledge that over the centuries God has been speaking to indigenous peoples through their cultures. Thus, we seek a new evangelization at the heart of these cultures, a profound encounter between the core values of indigenous peoples and Biblical faith.

Our common reflection has made us aware of the fact that our Church has grown and continues to grow more especially among indigenous peoples. The story of every local Church shows that, while missionaries from Churches with a longer Christian tradition pioneered works of evangelization, it was also our indigenous peoples themselves who, on their part, evangelized and continue to evangelize. The success of evangelization among indigenous peoples owes much to the role played by lay people who often had to undergo severe trials in order to bear witness to the faith and bring others to Christ. The world of Asian indigenous peoples, varied as it is, is rich in promise and continues to challenge Christian evangelizers to commit themselves anew to the immense task of living and witnessing to the Gospel in the context of indigenous cultures.

During the days of the conference we have experienced communion and solidarity among ourselves. We have been inspired by the Gospel and by each other to recommit ourselves to the work of integral evangelization of the indigenous peoples of Asia, with whom the future of the Church in this large continent is linked. Moved by the same Spirit of communion and vitality in the Church, we invite the leaders of the local Churches in Asia — bishops, priests, religious, and lay people — to join hands in the task of integral promotion of the life of our indigenous sisters and brothers. For this we need to share our experiences, to reflect together on our common concerns and to draw up common programs of action and evaluation.

May the Lord who promised to be with his people until the end of time continue to send his Spirit upon us to fill us with courage and light. May Mary, Mother of the Church, star of evangelization and mother of us all accompany us on our journey.
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. We believe that the evangelization of indigenous peoples of Asia is an urgent concern for the Churches in Asia.

2. The Church should support the right of indigenous peoples to exist and to be themselves. We should stand with them in their struggle to live as full and equal citizens of their nations and to enter the mainstream without losing their identity.

3. We need to promote a deeper knowledge of indigenous peoples and their history. This knowledge should be fostered among indigenous peoples themselves and among majority groups so that all become aware of indigenous peoples’ identity and their contributions to society. The Church should help indigenous peoples become aware of the dangers of losing their language, culture and traditional religiosity. By means of social and cultural analysis, indigenous peoples become aware of where they are, how and why they have reached this point, and are thus able to appropriate their culture and decide their future.

4. Education of indigenous peoples has to be suited to actual needs, providing formal and non-formal, vocational and professional education. Illiteracy is a basic issue that must be attacked through appropriate programs. Education enables indigenous peoples to move and succeed in the wider culture. Only then can they return to serve their people. We must instil a sense of responsibility in educated indigenous people so that they do not use the tools of education to oppress their own people.

5. In order to foster a genuine life of prayer and worship among indigenous peoples, we must undertake the task of collecting and studying our people’s religious myths, rites, symbols, poems, and proverbs.

6. The Church must fill the ritual vacuum that is sometimes felt when a person passes from traditional religion to Christianity by enabling the indigenous Christian to have a deep experience of Christianity as the fullness of life. This might be done by adopting appropriate rites of blessings.

7. We encourage the FABC Asian Liturgical Forum to study renewal and inculturation of the liturgy in the context of indigenous cultures.

8. The laity has played and continues to play a central role in evangelization. Pastoral programs and training courses must be devised to promote the role of lay people as evangelizers.
9. **Special pastoral care** must be extended to indigenous people who are forced to move from their ambience to cities and towns where they are cut off from their own culture.

10. We must **oppose laws that oppress and discriminate** against indigenous peoples and educate people concerning land rights. We must develop indigenous leaders equipped to work for their people's rights, particularly in regard to the land. When necessary, Christians must lobby governments and create public opinion in favor of the rights of indigenous peoples.

11. **Meetings** of indigenous priests, religious, and lay leaders, as well as those who live among and serve indigenous peoples, should be organized for exchanging information, sharing reflections, and forming common pastoral strategies.

12. A **directory** of all those involved in the evangelization of indigenous people, of indigenous priests, religious and committed lay indigenous persons, and of pastoral centers promoting the evangelization of indigenous peoples should be compiled.

13. Wherever this has not already been done, we recommend that episcopal conferences set up a **commission** concerned with the interests of the indigenous people. Where there is a need, diocesan commissions should be set up.

14. The FABC Office of Evangelization should organize a **follow-up consultation** on indigenous peoples, preferably to be held in an indigenous ambience, and the Office should undertake to publish and disseminate the proceedings of this present conference.

15. Issues related to indigenous peoples should be considered a priority on the agenda of the forthcoming **Asian Synod**.

16. Dialogue with the **traditional religions of Asia** should be pursued at the national and international level.

17. To promote these recommendations, we request the FABC to explore the possibility of eventually establishing an FABC **Office for Indigenous Peoples’ Concerns**.
### V. List of Participants

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<td>Archbishop Telesphore Toppo</td>
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<td>Mr. L. Wanglat</td>
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<td>Archbishop Hieronymus H. Bumbun</td>
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<td>Ms. Margareta Weisser</td>
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