



Marapu as Christophany for Orang Sumba: An Experiment in Christological Inculturation

ABSTRACT

In his encounter with the indigenous belief called “Marapu” in Sumba, Indonesia, the author attempts to put into a theological framework his reflection about the relationship of the Marapu and Jesus Christ. Using the method of “Doing Christology” by Dr. Jose M. de Mesa, the paper experiments on a Christological inculturation that gives importance to the narratives and experiences of the Marapu belief in the life of Sumba people. The inclusive concept of Christophany according to Raimon Panikkar affirms the author’s attempt of a Christology that is sensitive to the cultural experiences of the Sumbanese. Faithful to the institute’s missionary thrust, the author proposes an experimental project called “Sumba Catechetical Project” that encourages a communal theologizing.

Keywords: Asian Christology, Marapu, Christophany, Christological Inculturation

NARRATIVES OF A JOURNEY

In searching for the meaning of my encounter with the Marapu, I realize that presenting a narrative would enrich the continuous dialogue of our Christian faith with other religions.



The belief in the Marapu holds a significant facet into the Sumba people's sense of "salvation." As I have observed during my stay in Sumba, the local's experiences of "salvation" in their belief of the Marapu can be a potential seedbed to present a "Christology" narrated through their rich narratives and contexts. The fruit of this exchange can both enrich our understanding of the Marapu belief in the life of the Sumbanese. At the same time, we as Christians could exercise the dialogue of cultural exchange in a manner that fully recognizes the narratives of other people.

To put into practice our theological training, the recommendations presented in this paper are an attempt to contribute to the works of literature and methodologies concerning inculturation. This realization comes from my conviction of God in Jesus Who is present in every reality of human activity. It is in understanding Christ and His role in God's grand narrative of salvation where we, the agents of evangelization, can gauge our direction. The God revealed in Jesus Whom in our belief is conceived not only in the doctrines defined by Western thought, but also manifests in the rich experiences of Asian narratives. Elements within the Marapu belief are yet to contribute to the continuous enrichment of the Jesus-story for the people of Sumba.

ORANG SUMBA AND THE MARAPU

Writings that pertain to the Marapu are rare. As I try to go deeper into understanding this indigenous belief, I have found some pieces of literature that speak of its basic concept. Lukman Solihin describes the Marapu religion as "a local belief of the Sumbanese who highly respect their ancestor." The glorification of the ancestor is the basic tenet of this belief. Each clan has its collection of folktales that explain the origin of their family, kampung, and clan-Marapu.

Furthermore, Solihin categorizes this belief as established within the principle of animism, connoting a belief system which “covers all forms of belief in spiritual beings.”¹ Animism includes belief in the power of the human soul and spirits of other existing beings. In Marapu cosmology, the highest being exists and is known to the locals by the name *Pande Peku Tamu – Pande Yura Ngara*, which translates “The Highest Being and the Unknown Name.”² For them, this higher being is God the Creator – unreachable, incomprehensible, yet all-knowing – whom they describe as the “One with Big Eyes and Ears.” In their cosmology, the *Orang Sumba*³ believes in a universe that consists of “layers, that of the sky, earth, and under the earth”⁴ and in the sky layer lies the abode of the Marapu community, the ancestors of Sumba who had gone ahead of them. The abode of the Marapu clearly depicts their intermediary character since this abode whom they call as the “Base of the Sky” is located between the sky and the earth.⁵

For the Sumba people, the Marapu serves as a mediator between the *Orang Sumba* and *Tuhan Allah*,⁶ The Lord God. It can dispense blessings, punishment if the performance of its rituals violates its customs. To certain extent, a Marapu dispenses the duties reserved for God, the Creator. In the words of Lukman Solihin, a “human begs from God through the Marapu, and through the Marapu belief, God answers to the human’s will.”⁷ The mediatory aspect of the Marapu functions into categories which in the life

¹Edgar S. Javier, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2006), 76.

²Lukman Solihin, “The Marapu Belief: Divine Concept and the Sumbanese’s View on Ancestors, trans. Irfan Nugroho (August 28, 2009),” 1-14 PDF. See <http://passagetoinonesia.com/files/Sumba---The-Marapu-Belief.pdf> (accessed June 28, 2019).

³Orang Sumba means “The people of/from Sumba Island.”

⁴Solihin, *The Marapu Belief*, 4.

⁵Ibid., 4.

⁶*Orang Sumba*, a *Bahasa Indonesia* phrase in English means “A person from Sumba.”; *Tuhan Allah*, “The Lord God.”

⁷Gregory L. Forth, *Rindi: An Ethnography Study of a Traditional Domain in Eastern Sumba* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publisher, 1981), 17.

of the Sumbanese has its effect on the following:⁸ prevention and healing against sickness; the dispensing of blessing of the land for a bountiful harvest; and protection against evil spirits.

Sumba is a unique place with its rich diversity of peoples, environment, and culture. The Marapu, as a belief, stands as a unifying force for the people's identity, permeating the lives of the Sumba people. The notion of a Creator that is unreachable and unnamed is not unique to Sumba as it features as well in other indigenous Asian beliefs. In Sumba, the role of the Marapu as an intermediary plays a significant hinge in all their cultural and religious expressions. It is in their daily lives that the effects of their rituals and customs take shape. Death is not seen as the end, but as a state of transition towards a new beginning. It is evident in the transformation of a deceased family member, through its rituals, that s/he morphs into a *Marapu* who then becomes able to bridge the gap between the Creator and its creatures.

Like other people, the *Orang Sumba* desires to live a life attuned to their wellness and wholeness of life, defined primarily through addressing first their biological needs for food security and economic stability. Each clan offers to the Marapu hundreds of rituals to address their concern for seasonal planting and harvesting. Healing is also an aspect of what a Marapu can mediate and dispense. The Marapu also plays a central role in societal customs and traditions that give meaning to their life transitions, be it marriage, a blessing of a new house, and death. The *Orang Sumba* is aware of the current realities they confront in their lives. They long for economic sustainability and progress. However, they are also aware of the factors that contribute to make this ideal state a seemingly highly ambitious goal. All these realities add to the dynamic of what it means to live as an *Orang Sumba* and as

⁸The attributes associated by the locals with the Marapu are classified into three categories from the records of Pala Hambaradi in "*Praktek-Praktek Agama Marapu yang Masih Nampak Dalam Kehidupan Anggota Jemaat Gereja Kristen Sumba-Ngallu*" (Indonesia: Fakultas Theologia Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, 1982), 125.

a believer of Marapu. This belief defines the world in which the Sumbanese engage the Marapu.

THE “DOING CHRISTOLOGY” OF JOSE M. DE MESA

Here, I am indebted to Dr. de Mesa’s approach of addressing this challenge of re-introducing a Christological reflection in which Asian communities can genuinely participate. In his words, this method of reflecting shows that the local churches of Asia “not only want to put to rest the impression that Christianity is a foreign religion from the West, but also that they have as much a right as the West to see Jesus in their own cultural, historical, and religious ways.”⁹ This proposition is a movement towards empowering local churches and making them participative in theological reflections that mirror their unique experiences manifested in their faithful’s cultures and indigenous belief. Rather than proposing a set of doctrines to establish a Christological reflection among Asian narratives, Dr. de Mesa presents a method of facilitating a theological reflection. It is in “Doing Christology” that communities can develop a Jesus reflection mediated using the local’s language and cultural experiences. It is, therefore, a process understood as a “continuing endeavor” rather than a stern theological reflection.¹⁰

This Christological reflection method is a three-phase process which illustrates what Edward Schillebeeckx terms as “the way of disciples.” He understood this phrase as a process of the disciples’ naming Jesus as “the Christ” after their experiences of His resurrection.¹¹

The first phase of this process is the disciple’s collection of their experiences of “salvation” and the effect of this relationship with Jesus. He calls this the “quest of salvation.” The second is called “the phase of projection,” which stems from their recollected

⁹Jose M. de Mesa, “Making Salvation Concrete and Jesus Real Trends in Asian Christology,” in *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 30, no. 1 (2001). 1-17. See <https://sedosmission.org/old/eng/Mesa.htm> (accessed August 18, 2019).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹De Mesa, *Making Salvation Concrete*, 3-4.

salvation experience with Jesus in which the identification or the “giving of names or titles” is produced. The importance of this identification is to allow the disciples to “articulate Jesus’ redemptive meaning to them.”¹² Hence, the title Jesus as the Christ, the Lord, the Good Shepherd, and so on is evident in the identification used to describe their relationship with Jesus. These titles reflect the culture and context of where their experiences of Jesus take place. To ensure that in their articulation of their Jesus-experience, the third phase is to allow the disciples to evaluate and re-gauge, that in their process of identifying Who Jesus is, His representation is guaranteed. It involves a collective discernment, purification, rejection, and affirmation of the titles that they attribute to Jesus.¹³

Salvation in an Asian Context

As it is experiential, salvation can never be understood by people if framed purely in a scholastic approach. What does salvation mean according to Christian doctrine? Traditionally, our Church established a solid definition: it is in the firm belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that it is not merited through the works of an individual but is a grace from God.¹⁴ For us, there is no doubt about this tenet, but as we continue to progress in our Christian life, there is a need to establish a comprehension of salvation that is integral rather than doctrinal. Christ does not come into this world only “for the salvation of souls.” I believe there is a more significant meaning from the missionary work of Christ before and after his resurrection. How do we define salvation that confronts the challenges of the times? Schillebeeckx responds that “Christian salvation is salvation for human beings... people with mind, heart, feelings, a physical body... person in all his aspects and the society in which (he/she) lives.”¹⁵ I think this is the key as

¹²De Mesa, *Making Salvation Concrete*, 3-4.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1995), no. 1949.

¹⁵Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus & Christ* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982), 52.

we deepen our understanding of the salvific nature of Christ for humanity. It is integral in its approach, and more conceivable for the ordinary Christians in our neighborhood.

*Jesus Christ: An “Ambiguous Figure”
for the Sumba Christians*

One important reason why Redemptorists are notably well-received in the island of Sumba is their acceptance of the Sumba culture. The belief in the Marapu and its influence in the life of the people is juxtaposed with the devout Catholic practices of the faithful. The Sumba people are spiritual and religious by nature, evident in their rich cosmology and the customary practices of their indigenous beliefs. The image of Mary, as the Mother of Perpetual Help, has a strong following among them. It was through the Redemptorist missions that the Icon was introduced to the people. Eventually, people figured that Mary and the saints somehow parallel the intercessory character of the Marapu of each clan and other spiritual beings.

There is, however, a gap in their understanding of who Jesus Christ is. Brother Riky Misi,¹⁶ a Redemptorist from Sumba, shared to me his knowledge of Jesus for the locals:

“God for Sumba is not an alien concept. We believe in a God who is the creator, the origin of life and goodness. However, the image of Jesus Christ and his distinctive role within the Christian narrative seems ambiguous to us. The way we introduced and understand Jesus is through the catechism that we receive during our school-age years. In my case, it continued when I entered the seminary.”

¹⁶Ricardus Misis, C.Ss.R is a perpetually professed member of the Redemptorist Indonesia unit. Riky as I fondly call him is familiar with the Marapu practices and its cultural expressions since he is a native of Sumba born in Wejewu region. The conversation written in this section is recalled from our informal sharing during my stay in the Student’s community house in Yogyakarta last June 2018. The points in conversation was re-affirmed as he became a member of the Davao Community this year.

From his memory, he recalled the tenets of the Catholic faith by heart as presented through the Catechism of the Catholic church and instructed to him by the missionaries and the local catechists. For him, to appropriate and to interpret Jesus within the language and culture of Sumba, specifically in their Marapu belief, is a challenge to the missionaries and an impossible task for the locals.

For the Sumba Christians, Jesus is an ambiguous character. Similarly, the themes of sin, passion, and salvation as associated with Jesus' role in salvation history seem incomprehensible to the locals. Also, the way the early missionaries translated doctrinal concepts lacked sensitivity to and knowledge of the local's cultural contexts. That is the reason why the locals continue to adhere to calling on to their Marapu ancestors even though many of them had accepted the Christian faith. For the Sumbanese, salvation is experiential, communal, and connected with the harmonious relationship of the human person and the creation. The Jesus who redeems and saves because of humanity's sins, as translated through them in the Church doctrines, is an abstract reality that cannot take root within the lifeworld of Sumba and the Marapu faith.

TOWARDS A MARAPU CHRISTOLOGY: AN EXPERIMENT

Following the method of "Doing Christology," I attempt to present a Marapu Christology in its uniqueness and richness borne out of the immersion experience with the people. In doing so, I endeavor to arrive at an image of Jesus that is more relatable and comprehensible within the context of the Sumba's indigenous belief. For the *Orang Sumba*, the idea of the Marapu holds the key to a well-lived life aspired by every community. It is in following the customs of their faith and of maintaining the natural balance of the world that they attain a real sense of well-being.

Salvation for them beckons the vivid imagery of a bountiful harvest and a peaceful *kampong* – both aspects of the land that they regard as treasures from their ancestors. For Riky, a Redemptorist from Sumba, this concept is called "*Maringina Punu Tana*" in his

native tongue, which translates as a state of the land that is fertile and bountiful, where happiness and satisfaction are achieved. The term connotes a land that has “*keselamatan di atas tanah*,” a Bahasa phrase which means an outpouring of blessings above the land. For the Sumbanese, the Marapu is their medium for these “experiences of salvation.” The Marapu act as a bridge, a representation, a link to God who, for them, is “the giver and sustainer of human life.”¹⁷ In the process of projection, to perceive and acknowledged this Sumba concept of salvation as having been brought by Jesus, it is best to explore the richness of their cultural narratives to find a title which the Sumba Christians can associate with Jesus.

Folk legends and myths are a means to convey narratives of the people with imageries that stem from daily life experiences. Myths and legends are not historical accounts of peoples and communities in the scientific understanding, but are rather a tool for them to comprehend their identity and roles in the world.¹⁸ Each clan has narratives as to the origins of their family and the founding of their village, which stem from the general concepts in their Sumba mythology. According to Gregory Forth, a scholar of East Sumba cultures, the evident theme of Sumba myths and narratives circulates a hero mostly of a male character.¹⁹ It is typical to associate this male lead as the head, elder, and founder of the clan-village. In the eastern region, a clear picture of such myth is in the founding of *Paraingu*, a capital village situated on a hilltop which also serves as the seat of religious activities for the Marapu ritual.

The themes of bravery, leadership, bearer of good harvests, and diligence associated with *Umbu Padjojang*, the mythical hero in the eastern region, are values held significantly by its people. The locals associate these values to their *Marapu Ratu*, a title given

¹⁷Janet Alison Hoskins, “Etiquette in Kodi Spirit Communication: The Lips Told to Pronounce, The Mouths Told to Speak,” in *To Speak in pairs: Essay on Ritual Languages in Eastern Indonesia*, ed. James J. Fox (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 29-62.

¹⁸Gerard A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Minnesota, USA: Liturgical Press, 2010), 31.

¹⁹Forth, *Rindi: An Ethnography Study*, 89.

to the founders and elders of the clan who have become Marapu. *Marapu Ratu* literally means The Elder Marapu, revered for his ability to bring the bounty of the land and to link them to the unreachable Creator. The Marapu rituals for healing, pleading for a bountiful harvest, and protection from any forces of evil are somehow concepts of salvation within the context of their indigenous faith. This sense of well-being with the bounty of the land, if not through their continuous connection to their ancestor Marapu, can never be a reality. Mediation, as the primary role of the Marapu within the cosmic belief of the Sumba, overshadows the power and sustenance provided by the Creator.²⁰

Placing these themes as a value associated with the *Marapu Ratu* of Sumba brings us to discern fragments of the nature of Jesus in our Christian understanding. The *Marapu Ratu* is an apt title to associate with Jesus' name if we desire to present Him in the language and mind frame of Sumba people. *Yesus Marapu Ratu* (Jesus the Elder Marapu) captures the total character of the right mediator between God and humanity. Like the heroes in Sumba myths, *Yesus Marapu Ratu* embodies the whole aspiration of what it means to live a full life for the Sumba people, that is, communal, in harmony with creation, and an accurate representation of an unreachable God who sustains their life.

To a certain extent, *Yesus Marapu Ratu* unclouds for the Sumba people the mystery of God who, for them, is seemingly distant yet stands as the pillar of life for the whole creation. Also, for the Sumba Christians, *Yesu Marapu Ratu* invokes an association with Jesus that is closer to the values of their culture and mirrors the ethical aspects of their Marapu belief. *Yesus Marapu Ratu yang Membawa Keselamatan di Atas Tana*²¹ embodies all the characters in which the locals associate with their deified ancestors, that is, as a dispenser of healing, blessing, and protection. He transcends all these characteristics because *Yesus Marapu Ratu*, as an inculturated

²⁰Hoskins, *Etiquette in Kodi Spirit Communication*, 32.

²¹A *Bahasa* phrase translated in English as "Jesus the Marapu Elder, the One who Brings Blessings Above the Land."

Christology, also represents the God in our biblical understanding Who indeed has an interest and genuine concern for His people with or without the obligations of customary practices.

From Christology to Christophany

In our attempt to present an Inculturated Jesus Christ, Christology serves as a tool in figuring out His identity and role in salvation history. However, the continued adherence to a Christology that is laden with philosophical and rationalistic categories only jeopardizes our efforts to present a Christ that is intelligible and acceptable for peoples. For Raimon Panikkar, a Christology presented as “a deduction of Christian premises developed within the framework of the Western world” is inadequate to confront the challenges of the diverse situation in which people exists.²² Having been born in Hindu society, he found it useful to employ the “parameters of the people he dialogues with”²³ when trying to make Buddhists and Hindus understand Christ. A dialogue for the purpose of making Christ understood and accepted by diverse peoples must never be a one-way theological reflection. Rather, it must recognize the uniqueness and richness of the narratives from both parties.

Panikkar emphasizes that Christophany does not abolish the claimed truths from the method of Christology; instead, it deepens it as it continues to situate these truths within the experiences of the peoples. Christophany “is open to both dialogue with other religions of that same tradition based on a scenario that embraces the past as well as the present.”²⁴ It merely tells that Christology is not a product of the past; instead, it must be capable of addressing the challenges of the times, even confronting the diverse cultures of the peoples. The role of the Spirit, recognized in its active participation in God’s continuous drama of salvation, is not to be obstructed if

²²Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*, trans. Alfred DiLascia (New York, USA: Orbis Books, 2004), 9.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 10.

the focus is on the Logos as an essential philosophical foundation of classical Christology. For Panikkar, the “Son of Man” is only comprehensible through the Spirit that gives life.²⁵ The role of the Spirit and its active participation also manifests within the cultural practices and beliefs of peoples. No matter how incomplete it may seem, the rich spiritual world presented in the Sumba narratives somehow reflects this idea. It simply tells that religious truth which the Christian faith regards highly – such as the universality of God and the end of humanity – is also written in the consciousness of the people within their indigenous belief.

With this description of Christophany, the title *Yesus Marapu Ratu* of Sumba follows the guidelines Panikkar proposes. It shifts the Christological foundation to a more inculturated framework of Christophany. This title is born out of the “doing Christology” applied in the context of the Sumba culture. There is no claim of presenting a complete and definitive Christological title for the Sumba people. The proposal is motivated by the intent to bring a Christological title unique for Sumba Christians and presented in their language and mind frame. By doing so, Christ becomes more close, comprehensible, and relatable to the Sumba people. It therefore implies that our quest for making Christ become an unambiguous figure to the Sumba people will be less academic and more reflective. What the title only affirms and cannot deny is that in the belief and practices of the Marapu in Sumba, there are “manifestations of the Christ.”

MARAPU AS CHRISTOPHANY: A MISSIOLOGICAL MEDIATION

Why did I decide for a missiological output with an emphasis on Jesus Christ? Simply because any effort that concerns the mission initiatives of the Church involves a conviction on Jesus’ unique role in God’s plan of salvation. An integrated Christological inculturation, I think, must involve an inclusivist

²⁵Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*, trans. Alfred DiLascia (New York, USA: Orbis Books, 2004), 9.

stand of recognizing “elements of grace” evident in the experiences of salvation from the peoples of other religious traditions.²⁶ The last choice would be to stand in full adherence to Christianity as a “free choice,” which shows that the faith in Jesus Christ “is open and cosmic in dimension.”²⁷ An inculturated Christology, therefore, must include an element of convergence between the mystery of Christ and the Spirit’s ongoing work within the narratives of cultural experiences.

The “Sumba Catechetical Project” and Its Elements: An Experiment

The following section will be my contribution to the ongoing mission in Sumba and the many initiatives of the Indonesian Redemptorist unit. I attempt to place into actual practice the result of the theological mediation presented. As it is an experiment, it is subject to critique and development so as to enhance the catechetical project. What I firmly stand on is a vision of presenting a theological reflection applied as a method. The elements presented within this project will serve only as guidelines to the teams and agents of mission who engage in this line of work.

I call this a “Catechetical Project” in contrast to catechesis in its traditional banking method where only a single party is dominantly involved. The plan proceeds in a workshop-type session where all groups actively participate in producing an enriched theologizing. It promotes a catechetical input that the people can claim as their own as it is inspired within the language of their culture. This proposal is intended to enhance the mission team’s efforts in conducting profound interreligious missionary work in Sumba. The following are the elements comprised in this “Catechetical Project”:

1. The Element of Sumba Cultural Data

The team can initially profile the people of Sumba using the method of anthropology and its related

²⁶Jacques Dupuis, *Who Do You Say I Am?: Introduction to Christology* (Maryknoll, New York: 1994), 161.

²⁷Ibid.

sciences. There is an excellent deal in theologizing and in missionary work that recognizes the contributions of the social sciences.²⁸ Incorporating this element within the Catechetical Project will enhance their missionary work as it acknowledges the richness of the Sumba culture and includes appreciation and retrieval of the many narratives, myths, and legends stemming from their Marapu beliefs, particularly stories of their Marapu-clan founder and the origins of their villages.

2. The Element of Communal Theologizing

The technique of theologizing, as seen in de Mesa's way, involves a collective reflection of God's epiphany within the people's experience of culture. To incorporate this method in the proposed Catechetical project will enhance the depth of the group's theologizing. The members of the mission team only act as facilitators of the activity. This Catechetical Project includes the process laid in the method of "Doing Christology" presented in the previous chapters. Here I would like to enumerate the following steps to give guidelines for the said project:

a) *The Phase of Identification.* This phase involves allowing the group to share their stories of "salvation" within their experience of daily living. It also includes sharing of experiences within the context of their Marapu rituals and practices.

b) *The Phase of Projection.* The importance of rediscovering the narratives of their ancestors and legends from the Marapu-clan is a significant part of this phase. The naming of their heroes, village-founder, and other Marapu "deities" help the group recall the "salvific aspects" of their indigenous belief.

²⁸Karl M. Gaspar, *Panagkutay: Anthropology & Theology Interfacing in Mindanao Uplands, (The Lumads Homelands)* (Quezon City, Philippines: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2017), 201.

The team can serve as guiding instructors on how these realizations help them associate with the identity of Jesus based on the stories presented in the Gospels.

c) *The Phase of Regauging.* A Christological reading is implied to have a genuine exchange of identifications and associations between Jesus and their respective Marapu. The team can facilitate the group to have its regauging in their association of the value within the character of their Marapu clan to Jesus in the Gospels and vice versa. The expected result is an enriched output borne out of the process of theologizing that engages both the narratives of the Marapu and Jesus of the Gospels.

3. The Element of Documentation.

The need for writing and documentation of the result manifested in the other elements is an indispensable part of this project. The team may serve as the main compiler, and the compilation will be an addition to the works of literature contributing to the missionary works in Sumba.

EPILOGUE: ORANG SUMBA AND THE FILIPINO

Going into the last month of my immersion program, I got a chance to join another mission. It was to a place called Ello in West Sumba in the *stasi* named after Our Mother of Perpetual Help. The Sumba faithful typically build their churches on top of a hill. In this case, the church overlooks vast rice fields and mountains.

I feel that during the whole length of my stay in Sumba, I immersed quite intensely with the local people and culture. The life stories shared by the people I encountered are like gems to be treasured. They made me feel that I am not a stranger, and gradually, I have become part of their large family. After all, Filipinos and Sumbanese have a lot in common. As societies with deep communal values, we both adhere with great respect to the wisdom of our ancestors and clans. As a result, we strive to uphold

systems that promote healthy family ties, the formation of our future generation, and the preservation of family values. We share a common aspiration for the welfare of our families and communities, that is, to live a life that is abundant, free, and peaceful, and one that allows us to achieve our full realization as a human person.

However, my Filipino-Mindanawon culture and the Sumbanese are both familiar with the debilitating effects of poverty as the product of a corrupt and unjust society. To many extents, we both have become familiar with the constant movements of our children and women in search of greener pastures in unfamiliar territories. We take pride in the diligence and resilience of our people in finding ways to respond to the challenges of being marginalized in terms of economic progress.

Lastly, we are also similar in the sense that part of our identity as a people is defined by our strong religious roots. Both of us hold steadfast to the faith introduced to us by foreign missionaries. Despite the complexities within the history of our Christian adoption, we were able to transcend the faith handed down to us and infuse it with some elements of our Asian identities. These are manifested in the many spaces where our Christian faith and cultural expressions meet.

It is in this passion for the preservation of indigenous culture within communal values that the peoples of Sumba are worth emulating. Their identity and expression as indigenous peoples are embodied in their Marapu beliefs. For them, the Marapu belief is not a display of cultural uniqueness to be exploited or capitalized merely for tourism. Rather, it is a way of life. As presented in the earlier sections, the depth and immensity of the Marapu belief expressions shape the Sumba people's life structures. The way they see and define the world and human persons is attuned to the wisdom of their Marapus. Being a Christian minority in multi-religious Indonesia, the peoples of Sumba have full potential to reclaim their identity amidst the plurality of their society.

Elements within their Marapu belief, in its entirety, are a locus as they enrich their identity of being Sumba Christians. On the same level, Christianity further improves if it continues to be open to the narratives of culture. The new face of theologizing involves presenting Jesus the Christ, and His role within salvation in creative ways that recognize the richness of cultural stories. To show Jesus “immediately” as the only Savior for all peoples is not a sensible move as the Christian message continues to mature in Asia. The most prudent step would be, initially, “to show Jesus that is not distant in Asian realities.”²⁹

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²⁹Gerald O’Connell, “Evangelization: The Asian Way,” in *The Future of the Asian Churches: The Asian Synod and Ecclesia in Asia*, eds. James H. Kroeger and Peter C. Phan (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2002), 15-19.

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