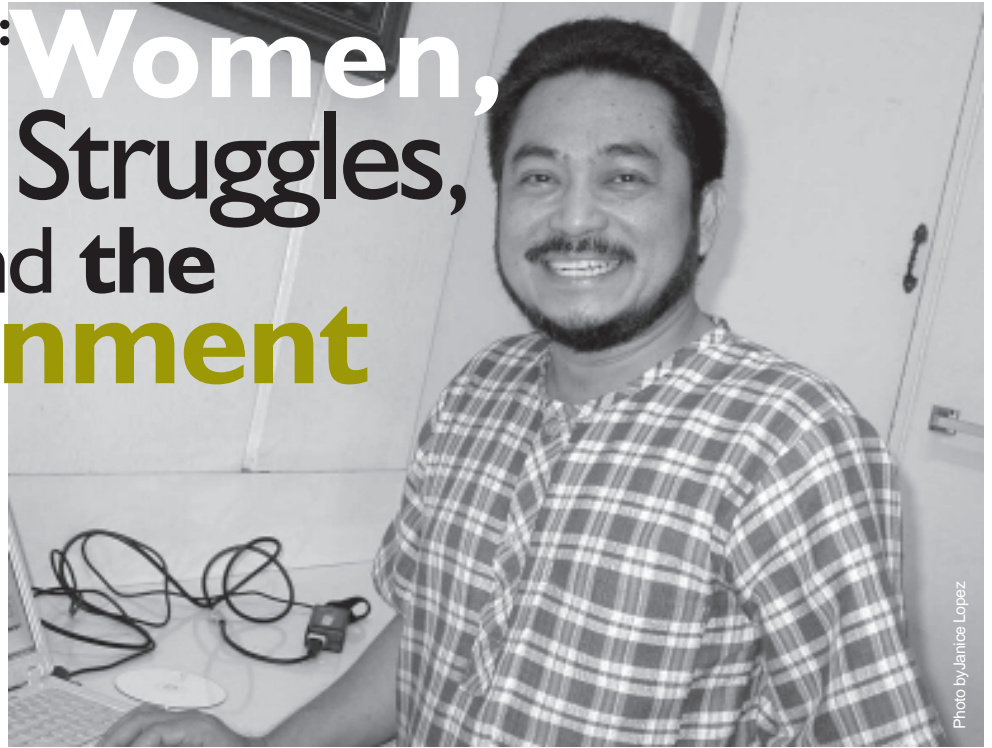


A **Conversation** with
Fr. Albert Alejo:

Women, Power Struggles, and the Environment

by Janice Lopez



A Jesuit priest, head of the non-government organisation Mindanawon Initiatives for Cultural Dialogue, leader of the nationwide Ehem! Anti-corruption Movement, founder of the Amuma Cancer Support Group, professor of anthropology, philosophy and development studies at the Ateneo de Davao University in south Philippines, where he is also director of the Research and Publication Office, a poet, and a peace advocate are just some of the hats that Fr. Albert Alejo wears. In this issue, he explores the concepts surrounding feminist political ecology.

Looking at women and the environment

I was asked before why I would get into the work of environment. Well, I said, I am coming from my work, experiences and learnings in three areas: (1) the Amuma Cancer Support Group, (2) my engagement with indigenous peoples, and (3) the Ehem! Anti-corruption

Movement. Although I am not quite sure if I am an advocate for women's rights, in all the activities I am engaged in, most of my partners, my companions, are women.

In Amuma Cancer Support Group, for example, ninety eight percent of the members are women. Amuma Cancer Support Group is also environmentally

conscious and progressive. For example, we need money, yes. But it is the basic principle of Amuma Cancer Support Group not to receive donations from plantations because we believe that the plantations are primarily the cause of cancer because of the insecticides, fertilisers, and chemicals they use. The rise in the incidence of cancer is connected to the destruction of the air, destruction of our forest, and the application of toxic chemicals in food production. On that score, you have the destruction of the environment, which is not just bad in general, but bad in particular for women. So in their own way, Amuma Cancer Support Group is an advocate for the environment.

On my work with the indigenous peoples, in my book, *Generating Energies in Mount*

in both protecting the environment as well as regenerating their culture. And again, one of the strongest leaders in the cultural regeneration movement is a woman.

In Ehem! Anti-corruption Movement, I work more with women as well. Environmental destruction is linked to corruption—the secret deals of those who profit and benefit from either cutting trees above the land or digging resources under it. Whenever a Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) official allows a factory to spill toxic waste into the river system, that DENR official is also at the same time killing the fishes and the fisher folks and destroying the environment. I have also given seminars to coastal marine volunteers and they tell us that at the heart of environmental issues, aside from a general lack of awareness and knowledge, is government issue—somebody profits from the destruction of the environment. And that somebody should be made responsible and accountable.

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Apo: Cultural Politics in a Contested Environment, the issue in Mount Apo concerns both the environment and the culture. I was a witness to the regeneration of a clan which later on became a strong movement—strong enough to finally get 4,000 hectares of ancestral domain in Mount Apo. The struggle continues and I think we need to assist those who are taking the initiative

Developing ecofeminist spirituality

On the wider appreciation of the environment, I think we should have a campaign for spirituality. And I think the best spirituality there is, is the ecofeminist spirituality. Seeing earth as a “mother,” the way many tribal groups also consider the earth as “mother.” So this ecofeminist spirituality should be developed.

Right now, I encounter women and environment in all my advocacies. I think we need to develop that eco-spirituality, and the women could be very helpful in this area. It does not



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have to be very esoteric. I think we need to go back to the rituals. And we need to soil ourselves with the earth—get in touch with the earth, walk barefoot on the ground. We need more poetry to get in touch. We need words and metaphors to bridge us, to bridge the gap between our isolated selves. We need to connect in a different way. We need to see the world in a grain of sand and see heaven in a wild flower. In other words, in all advocacies we are engaged in, I think we need to go into a contemplative mood. Part of the environmental movement should really be contemplative action. Without that, the mountain is just a resource. Without that, a tree is just measured according to cubic

feet or cubic metres. Without that, it's easy to dig the bowels of the earth. Without that, you see people as not part of a landscape. Without the contemplative spirit, you don't see the blood that has been spilled over the land in the previous struggles. And without that, you cannot appreciate that the earth is worshipping God.

Dissecting what feminist political ecology means

These are heavy words—feminist, political, ecology.

Some people are just into ecology. Their focus is on the environment. And even within that, you have debates—whether the environment includes people or should you remove the people to protect the environment. Some people would think of the environment, or the ecological movement, as protecting the ozone layer at the expense of agriculture. So, money now goes to the Amazon forest conservation rather than to agricultural development.

But I think part of the wisdom in the ecological movement is to realise that we are living in a planet which has resources that are not unlimited. Part of that is thinking about the future even if there are resources available now. It is not about feeding the present greed. We have to be sustainable. So, that alone has introduced a lot of reforms even in development paradigms.

Now, when you say political ecology, you are adding the issue of power, and that somehow, nature is not pure. It is always a contested arena that land is not just soil and trees and landscape. But it is a resource that is an object of desire of plantation owners, speculators, mining companies, among others. The same land

could be a hide out of rebel groups and the battlefields of government and other armed groups. We realise that in political ecology, you have to recognise the issue of power, hence your approach to the environment becomes not just scientific. You now have to be astute in the analysis of who is interested in which lands and which resources. And that's complicated especially with globalisation.

Now, if you put in "feminist" in the politicised environment and the politicised study of the environment and politicised action on the environment, the question is what do you add? What happens when women enter into the political sphere of environmental concerns?

Finding value in caring and nurturing, without essentialising women

I am not a speaker of feminist political ecology. I suppose the interest is, is there any specific contribution of women, which is on top of the general political ecology analysis? Now, some people probably would just take it to mean political ecology per se—the women are actors—women are consulted and taken into consideration. But I think the challenge is, without essentialising women, that maybe there is really a unique contribution of women in terms of the ethics of caring, the ethics of nurturing which I think the women should not be shy about.

So when we say, there is a special contribution of women in terms of caring, nurturing, I think the women should not feel that they are being reduced to a domestic role. Women might say, "You're reducing us to the role of mothers and caretakers and not social activists in society." No, the point

is, there is already political action in the environment with women around. But I think the challenge is, what else—is there any additional feminist unions that could transform the political ecology agenda? And I will not answer that. I think that is the promise.

I would hope and I would expect the feminist political ecology to add something more than just ecological agenda, to something more and beyond the political ecology as understood in general. And now I'm not going to answer that but I suspect based on my readings and my encounter with women who are involved in this, I think it will not be an insult, but rather an act of gratitude, to mention that the women, even in anti-corruption movement, and especially in environmental movement, have a special approach—I guess it has something to do with the advocacy of caring, the ethics and politics of nurturing.

My sharing will not be complete if I do not mention my attempt at celebrating this genius for caring in the music video that I produced just recently. *Meme na Mindanaw* is a lullaby for peace. Inspired by the *Uyayi* (lullaby collection) of Chin-Chin Gutierrez, I was able to compose a Cebuano lyrics that sings the baby Mindanao to a sleep that offers a chance to dream, to dream of multicultural peace portrayed by multicultural dance on the mountain that used to be an arena of war. ■



MEME NA MINDANAW

(A lullaby for peace in Mindanao)

This lullaby is composed and produced by Albert Alejo as part of his peace advocacy.

*Meme na, O Mindanaw
Iduyan-duyan ko ikaw.
Sa gubot di maminaw
Aron dili ka mapukaw.
Damguhon mo ang kalinaw
Sa umaabot nga adlaw
Ugma pohon makalakaw
Ngadto sa wala na'y mingaw.*

*Sleep now, my dear Mindanao,
I will cradle you to sleep,
Don't allow the fighting outside
Awaken you from slumber.
Dream, dream of peace
In the coming days
Tomorrow, who knows, you can walk
To where there are no more tears.*

(Humming)
*Ssshh! Ayaw mo pagsaba
Mapukaw ang bata!
Ssshh! Ayaw na mo pag-away
Ang bata madamay!*

*Husssh! Don't be noisy
You might disturb the child asleep
Hussh! Stop all this fighting
You might also hit the child!*

*Damguhon mo ang kalinaw
Sa umaabot nga adlaw
Ugma pohon makalakaw
Ngadto sa wala na'y mingaw*

*Dream, dream of peace
In the coming days
Tomorrow, who knows, you can walk
To where there are no more tears.*

*Pasagdi ang bata intawon
Magdamgo nga malinawon.*

*Please let the child sleep
And let him dream in peace*

*Magmata na, O Mindanaw
Ania na ang kalinaw.*

*Wake up, my dear Mindanaw
Peace is coming to us now*

Albert Alejo is a Filipino Jesuit priest who worked with trade unions and informal labour groups in Manila before earning a doctorate degree in anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. A published poet and philosopher in his native Tagalog language, he is now based in Mindanao where he engages in advocacy for indigenous peoples' rights and in dialogue with Muslim civil society, through the Mindanawon Initiatives for Cultural Dialogue which he heads. He teaches graduate courses in anthropology, philosophy and development studies at the Ateneo de Davao University, where he serves both as director of its Research and Publication Office and Rector of the Jesuit Religious. He spearheads the emerging nationwide Ehem! Anti-corruption Movement and guides the Amuma Cancer Support Group which he founded. His recent publications include "Generating Energies in Mount Apo: Cultural Politics in a Contested Environment." Forthcoming are a book on the spirituality of integrity in public service and an anthology of mystical poems in translation.

This article is based on an interview that Isis International-Manila held with Albert Alejo.