REFLECTIONS ON THE TRINITY, COMMUNITY AND POWER IN THE INTERIOR OF SABAH, MALAYSIA

It was June 11, the day after I returned to Kota Kinabalu after a four-day journey through the interior to visit the villages where my Murut students originate. I dropped in at the office of Sylvia Jeanes, my Australian colleague. She said, “I really admire you, Romy. One week you are in Korea attending a congress of Asian theologians, and the next, you are in the jungles of Borneo, pushing and pulling and virtually lifting a boat where the river is too shallow, sleeping in a longhouse, bathing in the river, using an outhouse and an outdoor shower, eating ‘ikan jeruk’ (fish preserved in salt), and making friends with the Murut people. And now, you are writing a paper for a seminar in Oxford! And I know, I am sure you are going to get that paper written as well.”

It has been weeks since that conversation with Sylvia. I still do not know what it was that was admirable about me, but something in what she said struck me and caused me to admire, nay appreciate, nay worship the God in whose being, by whose creative parenting and artful teaching, and by whose healing strength and gentle movement I carry out my ministry, fulfill my mission, and live among people.

It occurred to me that, in a matter-of-fact way, Sylvia has helped me see the greatness of the Trinity—how the Triune God accompanies me and the people with whom I serve in the journey of life, and how the Triune God moves within the universe in which I live.

The purpose of this short paper is to help me make some affirmations about the Triune God as I experience the Triune God from within the context and perspective of my life and ministry, and at the same time draw out how these shape and influence my own understanding, perception, and practice of community and power.

I use as springboard for these reflections my participation in the Founding Congress of Asian Theologians which took place on May 24-June 1 in Suwon, Korea, and my journey into the “Pedalaman” (the interior of Sabah) on June 7-10.

The Founding Congress of Asian Theologians was the first gathering of Asian theologians I have ever attended. I am still relishing the value and richness of that experience. It was rich and valuable because of the participants who came and the concerns, hopes, and visions we shared. We were mostly academicians—lecturers in theology, Biblical studies, women’s studies (or studies on women and men in community), ecumenics, missions, etc. I became a member of two discussion groups—one on “Emerging Asian Theologies”, and the other, on “Methodologies of Doing Asian Theology”. In these groups and in the others, I found out later that the focus of the discussions was on theology and its tasks in relation to (a) the need for peace with justice in Asia, and (b) the need to affirm the integrity of all creation. We shared from various theologies: Dalit theology, the theology of Australian aborigines, the theology of struggle in the Philippines, the theology of the Burakumin in Japan, feminist theology, the theology of self-determination in Taiwan, the theology of the Minjung, etc. We “indicted” ourselves for the way we have participated in injustice by the way we have been theologizing through the years. We criticized prevalent methods of doing theology, and made proposals about how to do theology in Asia in the coming century or at least at the beginning of it. I brought back home to Sabah many papers for further reflection and new literature I could incorporate into my reading list for Asian theology.

On the Wednesday night that we were in Korea, we attended a vesper service where the new Korean hymns (with indigenous lyrics, lilt, and rhythm) that were going to be part of a new Korean hymnal were introduced. I had an overwhelming sense that the Triune God who is
bringing about justice and a new creation will do so only as long as the arts and culture are transformed as well.

I came home strengthened not only by new insights and wisdom, and a new sense of empowerment or confidence in being able to make a difference, but also envigorated and renewed by the new-found community I have with colleagues in Asia whose struggles, anguish, hopes, and vision, are similar if not the same as mine.

I came back to Sabah, caught up with work that accumulated during the week I was in Korea, then proceeded with a colleague and three of my students (two Murut students and a Rungus student) to the interior—all the way to Pensiangan.

This time, I did not pack any suit or embroidered “Filipino barong”. Instead, I packed t-shirts and khaki trousers, insect repellant, my anti-malaria tablets, mosquito nets, a torch light, and tins of Campbell soup, sardines, rice, and corned beef. I also packed a copy of the Tegal Murut-English Grammar book which I borrowed from our seminary library. As I walked between the shelves of the grocery in Kota Kinabalu deciding what food items to buy, it dawned on me that I was making a transition between the world of Kota Kinabalu and the world of the interior. Or better yet, I was living—at once—in two different worlds, at least. That moment in the grocery was poignant. It actually gets replayed in my life as a missionary all the time—as a person called by God through the Spirit to follow Jesus. Something of the versatility and flexibility that we find in the Trinity empowers us/enables us, who serve in different parts of the world, to be versatile and flexible as well—to be a whole lot more than we are, “to do far more than we dare ask or imagine” as the letter to the Ephesians (3:20) describes the power of God at work. The Trinity makes it possible for us to become citizens, at once, of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, and to be catholic despite the church’s divisions. In our hearts the borders and schisms are transcended because there are none in the heart of God. We are called and constantly enabled to identify with the world in the Spirit of Jesus, to experience and perceive people and events with the immediacy of the Spirit, and to appreciate and cherish the universe like the One who continues to create and renew it.

The first three hours of our journey were on asphalt road. The following four were on dirt road—dusty, stony, bumpy all the way to Pagalungan where we parked our jeep. The next four hours of the journey were by boat.

Jensey, my student who is a Rungus, and for whom travel to the region of the Muruts was a first-time experience, was shocked to witness the huge lorries that were loaded with giant logs coming out of the forests of the interior—one lorry almost every five to ten minutes. He also quickly noticed how muddy the rivers were—the effect of illegal and indiscriminate logging, the destruction of the topsoil, and the erosion that is taking place on a massive scale in areas where reforestation had not caught up with the speed with which trees had been felled. (Cleary, Mark and Peter Eaton, Borneo: Change and Development, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1992, p.183.) We both wondered if there were still fish in the river, and were told that there were still, but that the situation could change soon.

I sensed the anguish of the Spirit as the anguish of a mother giving birth. I sensed creation waiting with eager longing to be reborn. I feared for the people of the villages whose lives are intimately linked with the life of the river and that of the forest. What about the deer, and the wild boar, and the monkeys, and the birds! The Creator keeps track of the condition of each one of them. Isn’t that the impression which the Scriptures give us? “Not one sparrow falls to the ground” without the Creator’s consent. Wasn’t that what Jesus said? Aren’t all things—all of nature, with us included, to be reconciled through Christ? Isn’t that the “cosmic thrust” in the Christian faith that we consistently overlook to the chagrin and grief of the Spirit? If within the
Trinity there is no leveling or subordination of “persons”, if the Trinity is life-affirming, why has our way of relating to nature been so destructive?

It had not rained in the interior for two months. “Biasa,” (that is usual) it’s the dry season,” my Murut students told me, but not without expressing their fear of something worse. “A forest which has lost much of its density is not attractive to rain,” they said. I thought of Jesus saying in the Gospel according to Matthew that the rain falls for the just and the unjust. (5:45) But will the time come when rain will cease to fall—period—for both the just and the unjust? In my heart I asked.

We had to get off our boat many times during the journey to push it, pull it, and lift it. Because the water was so shallow at different points in the river that the bottom of the boat was scraping rock or sand.

We were right alongside the village of Sumabing when we decided it had become too dark to proceed to Pensiangan. Pensiangan was still about an hour away by boat—including the times to push and pull and lift the boat. Having quickly considered our situation from the perspective of their windows, the people of Sumabing invited us to spend the night with them. Although they were not expecting us, they welcomed us warmly. We were lodged in a longhouse where five families lived. When we stepped inside the house, a long mat had already been laid on the floor of the “visitors’ lounge” or the common area. We were kindly requested to bathe in the river, as whatever rain water they had left had been reserved for drinking and cooking and other limited uses. I walked back to the river and skinny-dipped with the two other male persons in my group—my colleague and one of my students. There was definitely something primal about stepping into the river without one’s clothes on. There was something definitely exhilarating and renewing about being immersed. For one brief moment, I remembered my baptism, my call, my mission. I was exultant.

In the quiet, in the dark, I thought of the Spirit being present and hovering (“menghadiri kami dan hadir di dalam hati kami”—Bahasa Malaysia for present within, around, and among us) and participating (“menyertai kami”) with me and my companions. I was sad that the river had been discolored by soil erosion, but pleased nevertheless that I could bathe where the folk of Sumabing bathe. I sensed an intimacy, a communion, a mystical union with nature—a moment when everyone and everything—the night, the darkness, the river, the stillness and the quiet, the village, my companions, and I were all subjects in an intimate relationship. Isn’t that the intimacy that one finds among the “persons” of the Trinity as well—where each enjoys and participates in the presence and reality of the other? Can’t one stretch John Wesley’s understanding of “social holiness” so as to embrace not simply the holiness of a “society” of human beings, but the wholeness of the “society” that is the universe as well? Understood in this sense, there would be no holiness and Christian perfection that is not also social holiness, and no justification that is not also justice to the universe. I am sure this is the very reason why the destruction of the forest, the destruction of nature is so immediate to the people of the interior. For the Muruts, what gets destroyed “out there” also gets destroyed “within”. This also explains why the Muruts are such an infinitely patient people. “If we would let it be, if we would cease to be so destructive, the river will come back to life again. It will take many years, but it will heal,” remarked one of our hosts after we came back from bathing. I said, “You are a patient people, a hopeful people.” She replied, “We ought to be. Nature’s time is our time. We who have lived all our lives in the midst of nature know that we are in nature. We are nature. We are as long-suffering as the river. As nature heals, so do we. As the river heals, so do our lives. There is no human time that we superimpose upon that of nature’s time. Nature’s time is our time. We do not have an environment. We are the environment along with the forest and the river.” I was struck by the “icon” of the Trinity which I saw painted by that remark: the Trinity is the infinite love, openness and patience which let “the other” be. “The other” is also me. As I sat on the mat to join the community of hosts and guests that had gathered for a time of sharing, my mind went back to the news releases I have read about the Muruts’ resistance to illegal and indiscriminate

Our hosts—all five families of them, prepared coffee and Milo (a beverage brand) and some cookies, and served them at the center of the mat on the edges of which we sat. Each family brought a tray with coffee and Milo and cookies. Five families, so therefore five trays. They were brought in at the same time by representatives of the families in a synchronized fashion from different parts of the longhouse after each family had waited routinely for the others to be ready. All families are partners in this community. And in the spirit of community, we were also to partake of the kindness that was on each tray. Francis, my colleague who used to pastor the church in Pensiaman whispered to me: “We have to make sure that we take some food and drink from each tray. We have to make sure that we receive from each family. Otherwise, the circle is not complete.” Parenthetically, because of this experience in Sumabing, I did a bit of research on this particular custom of the Muruts recently, and learned that in the olden days, the reason for living in longhouses was for defense. Now the stated reason for sharing a house with other households is to have help in providing food for guests primarily, for fellowship and sharing during meals and for partnership in production activities. (Lingenfelter, Sherwood G., ed. Social Organization of Sabah Societies, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Sabah Museum and State Archives Department, 1990, p.42) In other words, the revised purpose of the longhouse is to make the ever-widening circle complete, whole. Of course, I thought. The Spirit of healing, the Builder of Community has been busy transforming the Murut culture all along. And the Spirit knows best.

About half-an-hour later, the mat was cleared of the remaining coffee, Milo, and cookies, and in the same earlier synchronized fashion, plates of rice and vegetables—harvest of Sumabing—venison, and fish were laid on the mat. The fish was the day’s catch from the river. We were not expecting any more than the venison and rice we had brought with us which our hosts had graciously offered to cook for us. But when dinner came, they served us the best they could offer as well—fish from the river and rice and vegetables the people had harvested. As we ate, we talked—with me trying the small measure of Murut I had learned from the grammar book while we were on the road. We talked about Kota Kinabalu, about Sabah Theological Seminary, about Sumabing, the children, the women, about the river, the rice (its scent, texture and taste), the forest that is diminishing, the fish, our journey, our destination. We spoke about the pain, the joy, and the challenges of living. I felt full in more ways than one. The writer of the Gospel according to Luke and the Book of Acts, it seemed could not complete his description of community without also referring to food and people sharing a meal together. That moment with the folk of Sumabing could not have been complete without that feast of life, that eucharist of love.

When the dinner was over, our hosts offered us water to wash our hands, water to use in brushing our teeth, and they brought us pillows and sheets. Then, we wished each other a good night. Our hosts returned to their quarters, and we guests slept on the mat in the “visitors’ lounge” or common area—it was my first time to sleep in a longhouse. In the middle of the night, I got up to use the outhouse. It was located quite a distance from the longhouse. How very inconvenient! As I squatted imperfectly and rather awkwardly—a position, I suppose, I will never get used to assuming, my thoughts went back to the creed of John (1:14) and the affirmation that is in the Letter to the Hebrews (2:17): “The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father’s only Son.” “This means that he had to become one of us in every way, in order to serve God as our merciful and faithful high priest and sacrifice himself for the forgiveness of
our sins." True this very minute as ever—at least in my life, I told myself. As I walked back to the longhouse with my torchlight lit, a thought crossed my mind, "Why else would using an outhouse, despite all its inconvenience for someone like me, be so healing, if not because of Jesus?" How very needful of the simple, the bare, the basic, the essential, the naked truth I was! Oh that I may truly begin to understand the implications of the incarnation and live in accordance with its spirit!

I thought I saw Jesus that night: The hospitality of Jesus "grilling" fish by the sea of Galilee; the compassion of Jesus who knew when people were hungry; the sensitivity of Jesus who was aware when the disciples and he needed to be away to rest. I recognized Jesus in the ones who welcomed strangers—my companions and me. I experienced the Spirit relentlessly bringing me down-to-earth, creating community, transcending barriers of background, tribal origin and language. I was sure I recognized the Creator who made me whole again, who brought about a new creation in that longhouse—a community of love, of hope, of trust, of giving and sharing, of sacrifice, a community whose vision cannot be blurred by a river that is dying, by rain which had not come, and by a forest that is quickly disappearing. I recognized the Creator in the hope that never dies—in the nobility and valiance of a people whose existence is fragile, but whose faith and determination to survive and bring about change remain strong. I saw the Triune God in the power of the poor to maintain their dignity, to be simple, to be giving, to be welcoming, to be hopeful, and to be gentle despite their anger. They, too, are being enabled to be and to do more than what they can possibly dare ask or imagine. Their resilience, along with their anger and anguish are gifts of the Spirit. "The Trinity," I told myself, "is the voice of the voiceless in search of a sound that she or he may be heard." "The Trinity," I affirmed within my heart, "is the quiet of the listener intently listening." "The Trinity," is the ongoing dialogue of life with life.

We left Sumabing at six o'clock before everyone in the longhouse was awake. And for another hour we travelled by boat, and again, for what seemed like times without number—got off the boat to push it, pull it, or lift it. What a parable of life for the people of the interior! What an indictment of the wanton lifestyle of those of us who have yet to learn that when we destroy the forest, we destroy it for all of us!

Once in Pensiangan, we deposited our things in the parsonage, took showers, had breakfast, and got ready for church. I preached that morning. My text was Matthew 13:31-32. I spoke for only a few minutes, so that I could have time to listen to the people in the congregation—they were mostly women and children, plus a few young men. But before they could do so, a gist of my sermon had to be given in Murut. Then, two of the mothers took turns to speak, and one of the young men. They all spoke in Murut, and for my sake, their sharing was translated. One mother said: "God cares. God is our Comforter. God heals our children when they are sick." The other said: "God keeps us safe especially when the river is deep, and we have to travel by boat. God is our Savior." The young man said: "We used to think that the peculiar chirping of a bird when we have just begun a journey is ominous. We would stop in our tracks, turn around, and go home. We don’t do that anymore. We are no longer afraid. We now believe that God is always with us, and will protect us. The whole world is in the hands of God." I was deeply moved by the privilege I had been given. I was a stranger among the mothers and to that young man. We had a unity—promised and prayed for by Jesus, and made possible by the Spirit—which transcended our differences. The message of God’s power to protect, to heal, to free and to liberate has to come to me from the poor and powerless. It will take faith of the sort they have to change the world.

We had dinner at Juspah’s house that night. Juspah is one of my Murut students. She had returned home to Pensiangan a few days before we arrived. She served us what was available in the village—"sayur manis" (sweet vegetable—a leafy vegetable that is a favorite in Sabah),
bamboo shoots, fish (caught from the river—both fresh and preserved), and rice. The plates were laid on the floor. I ate as the Murut people ate. I felt extremely privileged.

The next day, at eight in the morning, we got back on the boat and headed back for Pagalungan. We had two more passengers with us, two young women who were going to attend a weeklong lay institute that was going to be held in Pagalungan. Alumni of our seminary, who are now pastoring different churches in the interior, were going to be the teachers. Somehow, the journey downriver was not as arduous as upriver, despite the fact that we also had to get off our boat a few times to push, or pull, or lift it. When we reached Pagalungan, my former students and I had a grand reunion. Towards noon, as I rested, I heard one of my former students briefing the participants. The lay institute had begun. In my heart I felt very, very pleased and proud. My former students are now teachers. Teaching has its rewards.

In the afternoon, David Bing, another former student of mine whose turn to teach at the institute was not until the next day, got Jensey, Francis, and me on his boat to visit some villages. We visited Silongai and Babalitan. I was particularly impressed with Babalitan. The whole village was like a little park. The grass was mowed everywhere—around the church, in the elementary school campus, on the hills. We walked inside the longhouse—home to three of my current students. I appreciated my students even more having seen another dimension of their “reality,” and felt that I loved them even more deeply. After seeing the village, we walked back to the church, and sat on the hill overlooking the river. “This is a lovely place, I told everyone around me.” David Bing replied, “It’d be even lovelier if the river were clear and if we had no problem with water. Right now, the mountain spring is drying. And we are still waiting for rain!” Suddenly, I remembered a statement from Leonardo Boff: “The earth is crying out and the poor are crying out, both victims of both social and environmental injustice.” (Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor, Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis, 1995, p.xi).

As we descended the steep hill to get back to David’s boat, I prayed that the students in the lay institute might imbibe from David and our other alumni their passion for the earth.

We returned to Kota Kinabalu the next day.

As I now sit to write, Sylvia’s earlier remarks remind me of the richness and the wealth of the diversity of experiences which are in the Trinity. The Triune God allows for a variety of experiences, of roles, functions, perspectives. The Triune God is also the God of transitions between experiences, roles, functions, and perspectives. God makes protests as well as flexibility and adaptability possible. The Triune God allows for uniqueness and gifts, and therefore, for sharing, for sacrifice; for fellowship and partnership, and therefore, for community. The unique roles of Creator, Parent, Protector, Savior, Teacher, Comforter, Companion, Spirit, and Builder of Community allow for a concept of power that is effective only and only when shared, for power that rules out all egotism, subordination of human beings, and life-destroying relationships within nature. The Trinity is an invitation to join the journey of peoples and the world, and the healing of the universe. The Trinity calls for immersion in God, in people, in creation.

Romy L. del Rosario
July 1997