

Womanhood at the Crossroads: The Lumad Perspective*

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The concept of womanhood before and after menopause was explored among Mansaka women using a focus group discussion. The Mansaka is an indigenous tribe in Southern Mindanao. The results show that for the Mansaka women, womanhood is intimately interwoven into the relationship and service to husband and children before menopause and service to husband, children and grandchildren after menopause. Menopause is a non-event in view of the women acquiescent acceptance of aging as part of the cycle of life.

Mid-life ushers in numerous transitions. A transition is a shift from one state to another (Reed, 1994). One of the major transitions in the life of a woman is the end of the reproductive years. This developmental transition has attracted the attention of numerous researchers in North America, Europe, Africa as well as in Asia. In the Philippines, the studies of Abrenica among Filipino women (1997b), Japanese (1997a) and Indonesian women (1997b) showed that menopause is considered a marker, a turning point between being young and being on the way to being old. For many women, especially those who put a lot of premium on youth, the onset of menopause can bring panic, anxiety, depression

and a host of accompanying symptoms. Contrary to what many medical practitioners believe that menopause is mainly an endocrinological malady, de Souza (1990) asserted that menopause is tied to cultural practices and considerations. To cite a case in point, Flint (in Gannon, 1985) has shown empirically that certain groups like some women in North India do not experience menopausal distress because they look forward to the event so that they can be among the men as policy/decision makers, can travel and be freed from cultural dictates reserved for reproductive women.

Objectives of the Study

Inspired by these findings on North Indian women, I ventured to study women of an indigenous group in Southern Mindanao or *Lumad* (a Visayan term for indigenous tribal group)—women of the Manaya/Mansaka tribe of Davao del Norte and explore their concept of womanhood before and after the pause. Furthermore, the study sought to determine the meanings they associate with menopause and images they have of themselves as a menopausal woman. In this study, the pause is referred to as the crossroads.

I was attracted to study the Mansakas because among the tribes in Mindanao, they are most familiar to me having lived in Tagum, Davao for some years. I noted then that they are a most colorful group. The women, in particular, are bedecked with jewelry from head to foot when they come to town at Christmas time.

This study was also motivated by a call from women in the forefront of the feminist movement for women to go out write about women, to contribute to the effort of retrieving the place of women in history. It is only in writing about women that women can reclaim their rightful place in the annals of Philippine history.

Thirdly, the author was moved to study the Lumads to contribute to the effort of making other Filipinos know about them and their heritage.

Much of these have already been lost perhaps through the genuine efforts of the government to include them in its development plans; the school to educate them and the church to evangelize them. They have also lost their heritage to Christian settlers who have taken over their lands and pushed them farther into the fastness of the forests and other well-meaning groups who may have, unwittingly, gotten rich at their expense.

Much has been written about the Filipino woman but very few, if ever there are, make mention of women from indigenous tribal communities as if they are non-existent. The few that took note of these ethnic women treated them separately in a class of their own. Possibly, this oversight could be due to lack of knowledge about these groups or it could stem from a conscious effort to segregate them not out of condescension but simply a recognition of their uniqueness.

This study which is limited to the Mansaka women of Davao del Norte in Mindanao will attempt to make a description of the tribe to provide a common frame of reference and to meet the second objective as stated.

The Mansaka Tribe

To understand the Mansaka women's concepts and beliefs, adequate knowledge of the geography, life and culture is necessary. Who are the Mandayas and the Mansakas? Why are the Mandayas mentioned always in consonance with the Mansakas? According to Fuentes (1980), Mandaya is a term used to refer to "inhabitants of the uplands". It is thus, a collective term for the tribal groups residing in the slopes of the eastern Cordillera of the provinces of Davao, Surigao del Sur and Agusan. However, Faye Cooper - Cole, the Assistant Curator of the Malayan Ethnology then, assigned various synonyms to this nomadic tribal group: "Mansaka" or inhabitants of the mountain clearing for the Mandayas who left their mountain dwellings to migrate to the coast and are now found at the north and east of Davao Gulf. Another meaning of the word Mansaka is "just beyond the coast" (Masinaring).

The Cooper-Cole translations are as follows: refer to the tribal members who live near the Tagum and Hijo rivers. Mangwangan Manguangan is used for the dwellers of the forests-those living in the heavily forested mountain skirting the coast. *Managosan* is used for those living near the headwaters of the Agusan River, and *Dibabawon* refer to those inhabiting the small districts of South and West Compostela, Davao del Norte.

From Fr. Emmanuel Nabayra's report (in Fuentes & de la Cruz, 1980) it was mentioned that the Mandayas occupy the whole of Davao Oriental and the present municipalities of Compostela and New Bataan of Davao del Norte. The Mansakas concentrate along Baloto River, the Manat Valley and the Maragusan Valley, the Hijo River, the sea coasts of Kingking, Maco, Kuwambog, Hijo, Tagum, Libuganon, Tuganay, Ising and Panabo.

All these groups share similar traditions, dialects, customs and traditions even if they have separate dwelling places (PCRD, 1980), therefore, the Mandaya/Mansaka rubric will be used in this study interchangeably.

One description that aptly pictures the Mandayas is that used by Valderrama (1987) in her book, *The Colorful Tribe*. The Mandaya women wear their hair long. Their hair is brown, black and a little wavy. They have high foreheads and their cheek bones are quite prominent. Their noses are almost flat and their lips are thick. Although their bodies are not tattooed, their eyebrows are shaved to a thin line, and their teeth are filed and blackened. Among the Christianized Mandaya women, this beauty mark is no longer seen. The Mandaya women are fastidious dressers.

When they get married a dowry is paid to the parents of the girl and the man renders service and lives with the girl's family for a year. Once married the girl joins the family of the husband.

In the available materials reviewed about the Mandaya/Mansaka tribal group, the women are only written about in relation to marriage,

birth and their role in domestic activities such as manufacturing and decorating the clothing of the members of the tribe, cooking and teaching the young. Very little is known about their thoughts, self images and attitudes. This paper is an attempt to fill in these gaps. The Mandaya/Mansaka group is a polygamous group, thus, it is acceptable for a man to have two or more wives; two families with one husband living together in one household or separately forming each a nuclear family. The first wife helps in choosing the co-wives. Jealousy among the wives is not common. If ever it does happen, the husband intervenes.

The mother is the source of love and care in the Mandaya family. As wife, she takes care of the husband even if she was not allowed to talk with her future husband prior to their betrothal. She helps in the farm, weeds, plants and harvests seasonal crops, turns over to the husband who in turn decides how much will be brought to the market and what will be left at home.

She takes care of the household chores, provides a firm foundation for the family, prepares meals, takes care of the children, controls the behavior of the children and teaches the girls home and farm chores from nine years old and upwards.

Method

Seventeen Mansaka women aged 45-62 years participated in a focus group discussion conducted in the house of one of my contact persons at Km. 64 in Pandapan, Mawab Davao del Norte. The women were requested to participate in the FGD session by a contact person from the area who is personally known to the researcher.

The FGD started at 2:30 p.m. and lasted for about an hour and forty minutes. Twelve women initially were the participants. The other five trickled in during the session. The FGD session was co-facilitated by the researcher's sister-in-law. The assistance of the latter was sought because she is from Tagum and is known to most of the women. This was necessary to be able to establish rapport, minimize suspicion and

distrust considering that the subject matter is rather sensitive. To the Mansakas anything related to reproduction is sacred and not discussed within just anyone. Furthermore, negative experience with previous research groups have made them distrustful. To prepare her for the session, she was given an orientation on the method and the role of a co-facilitator by the researcher.

The FGD which was conducted in Visayan started with an explanation of the objectives of the study. Specifically explained was the psychological perspective of the study and benefits that could be derived from the discussion carefully noting that concrete assistance like livelihood activities, community facilities and the like, will not come out of the study. Care was exerted that the men were not within hearing distance during the discussion.

After the discussion guide was exhausted a subsequent question and answer session followed. Most of the participants were very interested in the discussion because apparently it was the first time that the subject matter was brought out and discussed openly. It was however, noted that some of the women were rather reserved in sharing their experience. The women were most thankful for the opportunity and requested the researcher to have future sessions with them. Food packages were distributed to the participants as a token of appreciation after merienda was served.

Results

The concept of womanhood of the Mansaka women in the study was put in the context of menopause, menopause being the developmental marker, the turning point or the crossroads in their life as an adult woman. Thus, to the question about their experience with menopause the women were unanimous in saying that their menopausal experience was uneventful despite having noticed changes in the volume of menstrual flow, altered duration and interval of the monthly cycle. They attribute this lack of distress to acceptance of the cycle of life, the inevitability of aging. In their own words: *mao man na, matigulang kita gihapon* (that

is how it is, we will naturally grow old). They have no resistance to the onset of aging and being old.

Meaning of Menopause

When asked what to them is the meaning of the cessation of the menstrual flow for which they use the term *taduwanda* or *titi na* or *Taduwanda titi na* means dried up could be a corrupted version of menopause) a variety of answers were given: *hindi na manganak* (cannot bear children anymore); *natural lang* (it is natural); *uga na* (dried up); *mutigulang na* (going to be old); *lipay na* (happy already); *soroy-soroy* (going places).

The women claimed that they did not have any problems relative to menopause except that they no longer had the desire to satisfy their husband's needs. In Visayan, they used the phrase: "*wala na y lana*", a metaphor referring to diminished lubrication or the lack of sexual desire. This can create some marital problems especially if the husband continues to have sustained sex drive. A solution that they resort to, to resolve the dilemma, is for the couple to try to talk, understand and give allowances to each other *magsinabtana y ang magtiayon*.

With some other aspect in the life of the post menopausal, the women claimed were happy because they have more time to help their husband with livelihood concerns, more time in their hands to help their children raise the grandchildren.

Concept of Womanhood

To the Mansakas, woman is not the entity. Womanhood is the role or roles notably attached to child bearing —raising children, taking care of the home and husband, assisting him in his task of providing for the family. Women are very much involved not only with domestic activities but agriculture - related activities. According to my informant, taking

care of the husband is almost a doctrine for the Mansaka woman. It is the woman's recognized role.

When queried whether there were changes in their view of themselves after the child bearing years were over, the women retorted that there was not much change except in the focus of their time efforts and energies. The focus of their energies has shifted to taking care of themselves so that they do not have to depend on others particularly, their children. They view themselves as more relaxed, and have lesser responsibilities. They are happier because have more time now to take care of their husbands. They still exercise authority over the children if they do wrong; help them when they are in need or in difficulty.

Images, therefore, of the menopausal that were gleaned included: *wala na y lana*, happy, relaxed, self-reliant, independent, growing in wisdom and being able to help others especially husband and children.

After menopause, with the children out of their hands, they also help the "*purok*" (zone), share with others whatever they know. One of the women participants was the secretary of the *purok*. She is looked up to by the women in the area because she is one of the few who have gone to finish higher education. The women on the whole claimed that they cannot help but be involved with the problems of other members of their *purok*.

The foregoing data points to something peculiar about the women in the study. Their view of themselves is still latched on to things they do and must do.

According to my informant, the mature woman gains more respect from the community. A case in point is the *baylan* or priestess. She serves as the prayer leader, responds to sick calls performs rituals and healing. She may also do counseling for married couples. Perhaps this is also one reason why the women have no resistance to being old. As one matures there are things they can do not only for themselves but for others as well as these make them more valued members of the community. Essentially, the pace of life of the post menopausal is more

leisurely, more relaxed. They believe that after their children have grown, it is time for them to relax.

Discussion

The findings of this study with reference to the menopausal experience of the Mansaka women are dissimilar to reports from other groups of Filipino women previously studied. In my study on middle class Filipino women who were mostly from the Metro Manila area in 1994, the women reported changes that they associated with menopause, others their experience of distress, while of course, not forgetting reports of uneventful menopause. Similarly, the women from the Bicol area studied in 1995 to 1996 also reported symptoms that they experience concurrently with the end of the reproductive function. According to Lennon (in Usher, n.d.) positive attitudes towards female aging can account for uneventful menopause. It was mentioned earlier that acceptance of the natural course of things is the Mansaka women's explanation of their experience. In the west, where there is a high premium on youth, panic, distress, anxiety even depression are associated with menopause (Sheehy, 1994). Perry and O' Hanlan (1992) cited that the Qemant women from Ethiopia do not see menopause as the end but as an event that will give them increased social status, thus, they report very few problems with menopause. After having been considered as unclean during their menstruating years they could already walk on sacred grounds.

To synthesize, one thing stands out when the acquiescence of the tribal woman to the course of nature is seen in contrast to the Metro Manila sample, who in general were well-educated. The Mansaka women seem to view the onset of menopause as a process, a part of womanhood, whereas, the more well-read, more educated see menopause as a transition that could make the event something to be afraid of or something to be worried about. The latter must have been influenced by the western theoretical framework in which menopause is viewed as disease (Gannon, 1985). The biomedical perspective continues to emphasize menopause

as a pathological symptom attributed to a deficiency of estrogen replacement. In cultures, however, where elderly women assume secure and coveted positions, menopausal symptoms are rarely seen .

The lesson, therefore, that can be learned from these ethnic women is to go with nature and not to struggle or resist it because nature will take its own course any way. Coming to terms with the course of events will help maintain a saner, healthier life. With the above descriptions one is reminded of the mythic crone who was described as the “grandmother of the tribe, the wise one who guided and inspired, ...attuned to nature and instinct; values life and its rhythmic cycles; is comfortable with and unafraid of death and change.” The crone was healer, seer, medicine woman and, when death arrived she was the midwife for the transition to another life (Hall, 1992)

From the findings, one can get the impression that the Mansaka women are subordinate to the men; are unempowered, especially when seen from the context of the status of women in lowland Philippines. The question that comes to mind is that which has been perennially asked when one hears of women's oppression: *Is it in the nature of things that woman should be subordinate?* (Mananzan, 1997). This situation, according to Mananzan, is true in whole or in part, to women of all races, cultures, religions, nationalities whether in the First World or Third World, in the East or West, in the North or South. *Is it the lot of women to serve children and spouse attend to cooking, fetching water, weeding and planting?* Mananzan is quick to add that such is not in the nature of things but the product of socialization — education, religion, mass media. In Sr. Mananzan (1997) book, *The Woman Question in the Philippines*, she described the status of the Filipino woman in the pre-colonial era. The *mujer indigena* had egalitarian status and enjoyed the same privileges, rights and opportunities as her male counterpart.

Mr. Nestor Masinaring; the Community Affairs officer of the Office of the Governor of Davao Province designated to take charge of Cultural Communities and who is himself a Mansaka, stressed that the Mansaka women are not subordinate to men because they are performing that

which the tribe dictates them to do. What she does is her recognized role. She is not unempowered because she is consulted in decisions regarding income, the future, discipline of children. She holds the purse strings. According to Montiel and Hollnsteiner (1976), having dominion over the purse strings makes the woman a power wielder. Generally, the Mansakas recognize the wisdom of women. Often heard, in cases of negative turn of events or plans going awry or wrong moves where wife is not consulted is *Wala ka man gud naminaw sa imong asawa* (You should have listened to your wife) or statements to that effect.

At this juncture, let me cite the case of the Japanese woman. I was in Japan for six months in 1995 to 1996 on a Japan Foundation research fellowship and I observed that outwardly the woman status is lower than that of the men. The Japanese woman is perceived the world over as subordinate to their menfolk; that, they are *second class citizens* thus, the Japanese woman has become the object of much research to uncover the truth behind her subjugation. Iwao (1994) asserts that Japanese women are not subordinate but they are in fact equal with the men. Her reasoning is that women stay home and take care of the home and family otherwise the men cannot work. He can only do so if the house and family are in order. In that sense, Iwao claims that Japanese men and women are equal.

The Mansaka men are not expected to do menial household chores-cooking, cleaning the house, do the laundry, wash dishes much like the traditional Japanese male. This has become, in fact, a major complaint of the women who participated in the study.

What he does are the more strenuous jobs like cutting trees, clearing a land area, fetching water and the like (Valderrama, 1987). The man is the recognized head of the nuclear family. The mother and wife is the helpmate and nurtures children and husband. This structural set-up may have been influenced by the Spanish colonizers who stayed in the Davao area for good. They introduced their civilization and culture. Mananzan asserts that Western patriarchy was introduced in the Philippines in the 16th century by the Spanish colonizers. It is, therefore, no surprise that

the concept of womanhood, specifically, their role before and after menopause is fairly similar to those in other parts of the Philippines, more in particular, the Mansakas who have already been Christianized, schooled and infused with information disseminated by mass media.

Recognizing the fact that the Lumads have been dispossessed not only of their ancestral domain but their heritage as whole, efforts are being exerted towards reeducation of the Lumads in an attempt to give back to them what they have lost and hopefully make them embrace such and be proud of their culture.

It is my hope that this article has to some extent achieved what I have set out to do that is for you to have known our indigenous brothers and sisters a little bit more and that such knowledge can effect unity in diversity. Furthermore, writing about women, their concept about womanhood has in some way contributed to putting back women on the map—what they think and do.

Finally, the above findings emphasize the diversity of menopausal experience and concept of womanhood. They underscore the need for more studies on these topics across the ethnolinguistic groups if only to achieve a whole picture of the experience of women in this important marker. Truly we cannot use the findings from other countries to describe the experience of our Filipino women. To the Lumads, menopause is no crossroads, but a process where one pauses, relaxes and charts greater service to husband and others.

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