

THE CULTURAL GROUNDWORK FOR A *BAHAY KUBO* MODEL OF ECO-THEOLOGY

Levy, Lara Lanaria

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ABSTRACT

The realization that the biotic world is in peril due to man-made projects and activities with deleterious effects of global proportions has spawned considerable interest in philosophical and theological research in this area. Many of these studies offer theoretical models challenging the mentality, behaviours and attitudes that diminish or ruin Mother's Earth's limited resources, while others signal an intention to redefine what it means to sustain ecological vitality. The 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, has further inspired religious thinkers to enter into dialogue with all peoples concerning the environment. This paper takes its cue from the Pope's deliberate use of ecological or home-related language and hearkens to his call to be part of the inclusive conversation about our common home. It proposes a cultural approach to doing eco-theology in the Philippine context, using the iconic native house *Bahay Kubo* as a theoretical model. The proposed model hinges on the vernacular meaning of Filipino values that the researcher considers cultural elements that can potentially be correlated with eco-Scriptural teachings. The paper is a cultural contribution to the cause of religious environmentalism, using Filipino vernacular architecture as its starting point and potential guide to an inculturated eco-theology.¹

Introduction

From the margins of critical theological discourse, where it used to be relegated, the natural environment or ecology is now recognized as an indispensable topic of theological reflection. Even justice-oriented theologies have begun to accommodate the environmental issue as a necessary part of their ongoing projects of liberation (Boff 2005; Raluto 2015). On the ecumenical front, there are works in Christian theology and ethics that have ecological reformation as a prominent agenda (Hessel and Ruether 2000; Larsson 2004; Barreto 2011). These earth-bound issues "challenge theological traditions in ways unprecedented by debates over Christian attitudes towards war or sexuality or poverty" (Jenkins 2008, 3). Among religious believers the acknowledgment of environmental problems and the frightening possibility of cosmic destruction have given birth to a new form of faith-response: religious environmentalism (Gottlieb 2006).

All these developments seem to point to the fact that protection of the environment and human development are not mutually exclusive; they go together. Pope Francis has said that there cannot be authentic human development premised solely on full respect for the human person. Citing the

¹ For the research I did which partly form the textual basis of my current article, I am indebted to the Office of Research of the University of San, Cebu City for the research facilities the office granted me during the second semester of the academic year 2015-16.

late Pope John Paul II (1979, §34), the pontiff avers that such development “must also be concerned for the world around us and ‘take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system’” (quoted in Pope Francis, 2015, §5).

Apparently humankind has not paid sufficient attention to what it means to be a human being, not just a being-in-itself, but a being-in-relationship with the rest of creation. If one begins from the premise that the world’s problems mirror people’s understanding of themselves, with their concomitant mentalities and attitudes, then it is not difficult to put the blame on our doorstep. One of those who locates the root of the environmental crisis within is the American political scientist and environmentalist, Lynton Caldwell. He puts it this way:

The environmental crisis is an outward manifestation of a crisis of the mind and heart. There could be no greater misconception of its meaning than to believe it to be concerned only with endangered wild-life, man-made ugliness, and environmental pollution. Those are part of it, but more importantly, the crisis is concerned with the kind of creature that man is and with what he must become in order to survive. (Caldwell 1972, 6)

Laudati Si alludes to the above when it cites Patriarch Bartholomew I (the current Archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church), acknowledging that problems connected to the earth have “ethical and spiritual roots” (Pope Francis, 2015, §9). Hence, “solutions cannot be found merely in technology, but requires no less than a change of humanity; otherwise we would be dealing merely with symptoms” (Pope Francis, 2015, §9).

The religious environmentalism movement traces the roots of environmental decay to the spiritual arena. It then advocates retrieval of religious symbols and traditions for understanding the environment and its complexity (Deane-Drummond 2008). There have been a number of attempts to re-root theology in an ecological conversation. In reaction to the anthropocentric-domination model, Christian thinkers have tried to offer faith-informed earth-friendly paradigms and models, many of which build on the insights of ecological philosophers. Increasingly filling the shelves of the theological libraries are works anchored in notions of inter-relatedness, cooperation, reciprocity, mutuality, balance, participation, stewardship, ecofeminism, deep ecology, and earth spirituality. Current eco-theologies can be categorized into three streams: those understanding humanity as *above* nature, those understanding humanity *in* nature and those that can be described as seeing us working humbly together *with* nature (Hall 1990, 191). A parallel way of grouping them is in terms of points of departure for their theological analysis, as in humano-centric [human beings], theo-centric [God], and eco-centric [nature] approaches (Northcott 1996).

In this paper I seek to contribute to the ongoing enterprise of religious environmentalism by tapping the wisdom of indigenous Filipino culture as particularized in the vernacular (L. *vernaculus*: domestic, native) values attached to the iconic *bahay kubo*.² The wish to textualize and ground the attempt to eco-theologize in my native culture stems from a desire to bring theology closer to home, as it were. In more specific terms, I seek to retrieve, rediscover, and recover the positive elements and aspects of the vernacular-architectural culture. This is an initial step in the process of discerning God’s living presence among his people. This faith-driven project is ultimately oriented towards transforming attitudes that can then be translated into “praxical” engagement in religious environmentalism.

From Local to Global: Inspired by Catholic Social Teachings

² *Bahay* (“house”) *kubo* (“cube”) is popularly rendered in English as “nipa hut” for the simple reason that the material used for roofing and walling, at least in the hut’s original form, is for the most part, from nipa palm.

Over the last three decades, a number of magisterial documents on ecology have been produced by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). This episcopal material provides a major impetus in this present attempt to join in the world-wide ecological dialogue in service of authentic human development. The documents also give us a glimpse of the country's continual slide into ecological destruction. All of them, except one, antedate Pope Francis' 2017 encyclical on ecology.

In 1988 the CBCP issued a ground-breaking pastoral letter on ecology entitled "What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?" In it, church leaders do not mince their words in warning the Filipinos of extensive and irreversible damage from the ruthless exploitation of the country's ecosystems. In their conclusion, the church leaders identify an exploitative mentality, inconsistent with the Gospel of Jesus, as the root of the problem. The letter was followed by six pastoral letters written in 1995, 2000, 2003, 2008 and 2013 respectively.³ The latest collective statement that came out in July 2019 made an urgent call for ecological conversion while expressing hope in the midst of "climate emergency."

In 2015, and twenty-seven years after the ground-breaking 1988 CBCP pastoral letter, Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* ("On Care for Our Common Home"; literally, "Praise be to you, my Lord") came out and gave the national situation a global face by alerting humankind to the grave perils of cosmic destruction. Notwithstanding denials from those sectors that do not grant solid scientific findings respect, the pope's encyclical has generated, by and large, positive reactions, not only from the Catholic world, but also from the rest of the world. Grounded in scientific studies, the encyclical's alarm bell has heightened collective eco-consciousness in a way that is perhaps unprecedented in its influence, not only in the Catholic world but also among other believers and peoples of goodwill.

Michael Schuck (2015, 117-30) thinks that *Laudato Si* marks the most significant shift in Roman Catholic social encyclical literature since Pope John XXIII's 1961 *Pacem in Terris*. He points out that while Pope John XXIII's letter privileges the natural law as the moral measure of the international common good, then newly-read through the language of human rights, *Laudato Si* takes human rights as the moral measure of the planetary common good, only now read through the language of "integral ecology." It is likely that just as every social encyclical after *Pacem in Terris* bore the imprint of Pope John's new "rights language," encyclicals after *Laudato Si* will evidence the impact of Pope Francis' new "ecological language."

The Pope opens up his remarkable encyclical by calling our attention to the cries of "Our Sister, Mother Earth" because we have harmed her in many ways and because nothing in this world is separate from us (Pope Francis 2015, §1-2). Addressing "every person living on this planet," he hopes that the Church will enter "into dialogue with all people about our common home" (§3). This ecological concern is shared by many scientists, philosophers, theologians, and civic groups, and many of the problems connected to the earth have ethical and spiritual roots. Directing our attention to St. Francis of Assisi for clarity of vision, he makes an appeal "to bring the whole family together to seek a sustainable and integral development" (§13), inclusive in its concern for the Earth. He then explicates again the need for a fresh dialogue that includes everyone, on how the future of the planet is being shaped.

In this matter, Willis Jenkins has invited Christian ethicists and theologians to further explore "their native theological terrains, in order to rediscover new roots of practical engagement and find fertile ground for the seeds of new witness" (2008, 3). His paper takes its cue from the Pope's deliberate use of ecological or homely language and in a modest way hearkens to the call to be part of the inclusive conversation "with all people about our common home" (Pope Francis 2015, §3). The Philippine ecological situation no less demands such further exploration in the area of eco-

³ For the different ecological issues and concerns each pastoral letter addresses, see CBCP (2019).

theology, since like the rest of the world, the country has its significant share in the pillage and destruction of the earth.⁴

Towards a Contextual-Inculturated Eco-Theology

Earlier I alluded to a number of theoretical constructs that have evolved in the academic world offering different ways of understanding the relationship between human beings and the natural environment to which they are inextricably linked. Each model, except for the domination perspective, contains valuable ideas and insights, with attendant proposals for arresting the despoliation of nature and establishing a more harmonious relationship between the natural world and its human inhabitants. These models rightly bring to our attention the irreversible consequences of the plunder of nature to satisfy human greed.

My essay is a modest attempt to contribute to this ecological discourse and it is done in the intersection of theology and culture, employing the Filipino cultural-architectural experience. For this exploratory work, I employ the model method, with the explicit intention of contextualizing my theology. Models are images plucked from human experiences that serve “to illuminate another image [and are] intended to aid in the comprehension of a complex reality” (Michiels 1989, 87). Models express or interpret reality and provide avenues for the discovery or rediscovery of fresh insights. They direct our attention to hitherto overlooked or neglected aspects of a complex and elusive reality and enable us to explain and unearth its meaning. Models have the potential to expand human knowledge, proceeding from the known to the unknown, and not only to sum up, but to dramatize, as it were, the implications of a particular analogy. Based on the preceding description it is clear that any model is a heuristic tool, not an ontological statement. Hence to ask whether a model is “true” or “false” is meaningless.

The term “contextual theology” has become a household word among academic theologian-researchers all over the world. In its simplest sense, it refers to understanding Christian faith in terms of a particular context (Bevans 2003). It still hews to the classical understanding of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), but it intentionally recognizes contextuality as an established locus of theological discourse. In contextual theology the focus, and rightly so, is on the particularity of a context—which generally requires conversion. Hence the trajectory of this paper is more like faith seeking conversion or transformation, and must first start from hearts and minds and then reach out to the ecological world, which is itself in need of “redemption.”

When a cultural approach to contextual theologizing is employed, it is referred to as “inculturation.” The term is synonymous with “a process by which an ecclesial community lives its Christian faith and experience within a given cultural context” (CBCP 1999). The process involves both the use of elements of a local culture to express in appropriate ways its faith-experiences, and allows these experiences to be transformed. This study is underpinned by Jose de Mesa’s (2003) *hermeneutics of appreciation* or “appreciative awareness.” This hermeneutical approach is aimed at the retrieval, rediscovery, and recovery of the many positive elements and aspects of a culture as discernment of God’s living presence within that culture.

This essay will mine the ecologically “graced” elements of vernacular material in pursuit of an eco-theology that is culturally contextualized. I will not go into a full-blown theological reflection, however, as this is beyond the scope of my inquiry. The term “Cultural Groundwork” in the article title speaks for itself.

⁴For more on the Philippines’ ecological condition, see Tacio (2009), Smith (2017) and Umil (2011). It does not help that under the administration of the current Filipino president, environmental advocates are not safe. see Molino (2019).

Vernacular Architecture as Context and Text for Eco-theologizing

Vernacular architecture tends to be synonymous with simplicity and practicality and is “characterised by the use of local materials and knowledge, usually without the supervision of professional architects.” It can be described as a “built environment that is based upon local needs; defined by the availability of particular materials indigenous to its particular region; and reflects local traditions and cultural practices” (Fewins 2013). Folk or popular architecture is another name for vernacular architecture. One architect, architectural historian and professor, Winand Klassen (2010, 39-87), identifies *bahay kubo* as a local Philippine version of vernacular architecture.

In the modern history of Philippine architectural design landscape, the pre-war period was marked by the view that native architecture was merely an add-on, or submissive to foreign forms, and simply reinterpreted foreign technologies and idioms. In reaction to this dominant perspective, the post-war vernacular asserted its primordial and primeval nature. Post-war designers saw this local architectural form with its tropical character as an assertion of distinctiveness in line with nationalist aspirations. Its incorporation made reference to an imagined national character more authentic. “The authenticity of an imagined national character is . . . established by quoting and referencing assumed essential and organic ties. The indigenous is portrayed here as natural and consequently, immutable, and legitimate” (Cabalfin 2018).

Students of architecture will be reminded at this point of “Laugier’s primitive hut.” This short-hand statement defining essential elements of architecture is Marc-Antoine Laugier’s lasting contribution to the science and art of architectural design. Alive during the eighteenth century, this French Jesuit priest rejected the opulence of Baroque architecture prevalent in his lifetime. In his 1753 *Essai sur l’architecture*, he instead outlined a theory of what architecture should be. According to Laugier, all architecture derives from three essential elements: the column, the entablature, and the pediment. His philosophy is encapsulated in an illustration of a primitive hut where an “idyllic woman (perhaps the personification of Architecture) points a simple rustic cabin to a child (perhaps the unknowing, naive architect).” Simplistic in design, “the structure . . . uses basic geometric shapes, and is constructed from natural elements.” Laugier’s Primitive Hut represents his “back-to-nature” philosophy that “all architecture derives from this simple ideal” (Cravin 2019; Laugier 1977; Rykwert 1981; Cline 1998).

If one were to search for a Filipino architectural archetype that hews closely to Laugier’s idea of a “primitive hut,” one might consider the work of the late Francisco Mañosa (d. 2019). Having pioneered the art of neo-vernacular architecture, this noted designer was honoured as one of the most influential Filipino architects of the twentieth century. Before his demise he was named National Artist of the Philippines for Architecture in 2018, for his remarkable contributions to the development of Philippine architecture. Mañosa believed that the *bahay kubo* fitted the notion of the “primitive hut” and is thus the origin of Filipino architecture. He identified being a Filipino with the primeval or primordial vernacular tradition and asserted that the “true Filipino character in architecture” is “one that is culturally and environmentally sensitive to the primeval or primordial vernacular tradition” (Cabalfin 2018).

In its etymological origin, the Filipino term *bahay* evolved from the word *balay* (house; home). Generally, local architectural history identifies *bahay* as either *bahay kubo* or *bahay na bato*, each reflecting traditional beliefs and values. Between the two, with their varied forms that have developed over the centuries, arguably the more indigenous and iconic form is that of the *bahay kubo* (Lico 2008). The history of vocabulary tells us that the word “kubo” already appears among early versions of Tagalog (Pedro De San Buenaventura’s *Vocabulario de Lengua Tagalog*) and Kapampangan dictionaries (Diego Bergaño’s *Vocabulario dela Lengua Pampanga en Romance*) in the seventeenth century. The Tagalog word *kobo* refers to mountain houses. The Kapampangans have their *kubu*, which is synonymous with *balungbung* (the Kapampangan word for hut, cabin or lodge) and *cuala*, *saung*, and *dangpa* (Kapampangan words for shepherd’s hut or

hovel; the *dampa* of the Tagalogs). Usually owned by peasant families and other low-income groups, the *bahay kubo* has been described as an idyll of peace and bucolic prosperity in the middle of the fields (Lico 2008, 46).

The following popular and equally iconic indigenous song gives a sense of the idyllic abode that is the *bahay kubo*, connected to a surrounding that is awash with green:

Bahay kubo, kahit munti/Ang halaman doon, ay sari sari/Sinkamas at talong, sigarilyas at mani/Sitaw, batak, patani./Kundol, patola, upo't kalabasa/At saka mayroon pang labanos, mustasa,/Sibuyas, kamatis, bawang at luya/Sa paligid-ligid ay puno ng linga (Translation: Nipa hut, even though it is small / The plants that grow around it are varied: / Turnip and eggplant, winged bean and peanut/String bean, hyacinth bean, lima bean, /Wax gourd, luffa, white squash and pumpkin./And there is also radish, mustard,/Onion, tomato, garlic, and ginger/And all around are sesame seeds).⁵

The vernacular *balai* is claimed to be the “pure, Southeast Asian type of domestic architecture found in the non-Hispanized, non-Anglo-Saxon communities around the country” (Hila 1992, 13). This description implies that the *balai* is viewed as the origin of Philippine traditional architecture. Its Austronesian ancestry shows itself “in its archetypal tropical characteristics: an elevated living floor, buoyant rectangular volume, raised pile foundation, and voluminous thatched roof.”⁶ A local family firm of architects who have made it their passion to design Filipino homes that are sustainable and environment-friendly, take inspiration from traditional Filipino architecture that has been “green.” Claims one of the firm’s members, Architect Angelo Mañosa: “The *bahay kubo* was the original sustainable house.” He avers that form-wise, “it already embodies all the design principles we think of as ‘green’” (Mañosa & Company 2012).⁷

In the people’s environmental context, the handcrafting of the *balai* does not require the skill or guidance of architects and engineers. The owner or the members of the community do it themselves using technologies taught by tradition. The perfection of this tradition, which dictates the overall form and tessellation of structural components, has gone through an evolution resulting from a process of trial-and-error. The dwellings are so built that they easily lend themselves to minor adaptations to the changing environmental conditions. As long as social requirements or seasonal climactic variations do not change too greatly or too suddenly, the vernacular architecture is flexible enough to be modified to their form or materials. Indeed, “beyond the basic requirements of shelter, [the *balai*] stand as paradigms of man-made order constructed in response to a tangible and immediate world of nature” (Lico 2008, 16).

Depending on the ecology of the vicinity, the construction of the *bahay kubo* is of various kinds of botanical materials, such as wood, rattan, cane, bamboo, anahaw, nipa, bark, or cogon. Among them, nipa is the most widely used material, hence the indigenous house is referred to, in English, as “nipa hut.” Bamboo is another common material because of its availability, inherent toughness, and flexibility. Indeed, the traditional-organic materials used to build vernacular houses

⁵ English translation courtesy of LyricsTranslate.com., accessed March 15, 2016, <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/bahay-kubo-nipa-hut.html>.

⁶ Lico (2008, 16): “The house lifts its inhabitants to expose them to the breeze, away from the moist earth with its insects and reptiles. Its large roof provides maximum shade for the elevated living platform and the high ridge permits warm air in the interior to rise above the inhabitants then vent to the roof’s upturned ends. The roof’s high and steep profile provides the highest protection against heavy monsoon downpours”.

⁷ He explains: “It is made of low-cost, readily available indigenous materials and it is designed for our tropical climate: the tall, steeply-pitched roof sheds monsoon rain while creating ample overhead space for dissipating heat, the long eave lines provide shade. The silong underneath the house creates a simple, utilitarian space while allowing ventilation from below through the bamboo slat floors. The large awning windows, held open by a simple tukod (sturdy rod), provide cross ventilation and natural light. All of the materials used in it are organic, renewable and readily available at little cost. And yet it is strong enough to withstand typhoons” (Mañosa & Company 2012).

are utilized in a number of ingenious techniques to ensure that residences are protected against the harmful aspect of cosmic forces (Lico 2008, 50).

The lower part of the house, called *silong*, serves as an enclosure for domestic animals, such as swine and fowl. It is also useful as storage for household implements, goods, crops, and, in some cases, as a burial ground for the dead. The upper floor is where the household members live. It consists of compartments most essential to the occupants: an all-purpose single room; and an open gallery at the front or rear of the house called a *balkon* or *batalan*. When it is placed at the front of the *balai*, the gallery serves as an anteroom or lounging area (*balkon*). When it is found at the rear, it is used for keeping the *banga* (water jar) or for bathing (*batalan*). Behind the house, near the *batalan*, is a kitchen, which has a separate roof and window with *bangguera*, a hanging slatted rack for drying dishes and kitchen utensils. As the household membership expands, or as its occupant becomes wealthier, extensions, like a bigger *batalan*, are added to the basic form of the house (Lico 2008, 50).

In sum, in the immediate sense of the word, the *balai* is a product of material culture. As such its sound and responsive physical structure is meant to adapt to climactic changes and the local environment. By addressing nature-driven exigencies, the vernacular architecture shows great resilience against physical constraints. Structural problems are addressed by the vernacular architecture with the simplicity and logical arrangement of *balai*-elements (Lico 2008, 18).

***Balai* and the Filipino Concept of Space⁸**

From a more inclusive anthropological viewpoint, *balay* is neither merely an architectural creation nor a physical space, but “an embodiment of the culture and unique behavioural patterns of a people with a particular social organization and worldview” (Hila 1992, 18). In one of his local works, the popular Filipino anthropologist, F. Landa Jocano (1983, 16-23) presents a number of interesting traditional beliefs and practices related to the construction and occupation of a house. Elsewhere, in his analysis of the Filipino dwelling in its construction, form and associated beliefs, Klassen (2010) compares regional *bahay kubos* in their different forms. Whatever the variations, it is a given that for a typical Filipino/a, the *balay* signifies his/her socio-cultural identity in its base and origination. *Balay* for that person means family. At the end of the day, regardless of where one is coming from, going home is the most important and immediate desire (Padilla 2004, 271).

Recent research on how Filipinos view home has shown that it “is not just a place that we live in (*gipuy-an*), but a place we return to (*ulian*)” (Tan 2008, 5). It is also a repository of memories (Mojares 1997). More than memories, a *puy-anan* (home) is a shelter; an *ulianan* provides security, “a feeling one can stay on, one can come home, go home, everyday,” a place to “find solace in, of having someone who will listen to you, who offers a shoulder to cry on, or who’s ready to boogie with you as you bring home good news” (Tan 2008, 5). And for those away from home, whether working inside or outside the country, to build a home and to return to it someday is their dream. A research informant expresses in a nutshell what home basically is: “*Ang bahay mo ay buhay mo* (Your home is your life)” (Tan 2008, 5).

At present, in many parts of the country, especially in the rural areas, “the idea of a *bahay kubo* still connotes a one-room but multifunctional abode. The open space in the one-room structure can be transformed into different spaces at different times of the day: living area, dining area, bedroom, and kitchen.” Moreover, one can normally see “an altar of religious icons and photos of deceased family members, adorned by some candles, flowers, and, in a few instances, filled with fruits and other offerings” (Lico 2008, 50).

This leads me to the Filipino concept of space. For the *balai* or *bahay kubo* is not just a material structure, for all its flexible and adaptable character vis-à-vis the external environment. In

⁸ For a considerable part of this section I am indebted to Augusto Villalon (1991), another well-known Filipino architect.

any house for that matter, the interior configuration represents the way we live and relate to one another, hence, tells us who we are. For example, “(t)he positioning of furniture and choice of embellishments are personal choices. However, the arrangement of the different spaces inside a house and their varying degrees of privacy demonstrate the lifestyle patterns of each culture” (Villalon 1991). An architect-writer affirms that “(t)he traditional *bahay kubo* follows the centuries-old Southeast Asian rural archetype of the single-room dwelling where all family activities happen in one space. After sleeping mats are rolled up in the mornings, the same space is given over to daytime activities that sometimes spill outdoors to the shaded areas underneath the house” (Villalon 1991).

Another example of vernacular architecture is the *bahay na bato* (“house of stone”) which, according to Villalon, evolved from the *bahay kubo*. The latter is spatially larger than *bahay kubo*, but in it much of the single-room lifestyle is retained. It is not uncommon for sleeping mats to be laid out in the living room for the children every night, even in an ancestral home. The two or three large bedrooms of the larger dwelling are shared as well. Rows of canopied four poster beds are laid out in the rooms. Each room has an *aparador* (cabinet) to house the occupants’ belongings. The wooden walls visually separate the different rooms, but a strip of calado fretwork between the ceiling and the tops of the walls circulate both air and sound freely around the interior. Nonetheless, despite its “communal” character, the abode offers enough privacy to conceive, deliver and nurse babies, and to care for the sick and the aged.

This brings me to the communal character of the *balai* rooted in the Filipinos’ understanding of space. A respected local architect has keenly observed from the emic perspective that the Filipino prefers living space that is communal, surrounding himself or herself with people all the time. This is in contrast to the Westerners’ preference for a more private interior space. Villalon (1991) is as straightforward: “In the western mindset, a man’s home is his domain, his castle that is built to last forever. It is where privacy is at a premium. European homes prefer enclosing spaces from each other: everything is definite and separate, the living room, dining room, kitchen, the bedrooms. Everyone goes into the corridor, disappears into his private room, and closes the door behind him.”

For traditional *balai*-Filipinos, the idea of locking the front door or leaving the house in the morning and returning to an empty house in the evening does not concern them. Someone is always at home, whether family, distant relatives or household help (or a neighbor, usually related by blood, keeping watch over the *balai* when all its occupants are out for a day). Perhaps the Filipino fears (or feels ill at ease) being alone. He or she makes sure that fellow family members provide company at home. Inside the abode, everything seems to happen simultaneously. The vibrancy expresses itself in children shrieking, adults talking, servants shuffling. The intensity of the sound of domicile activity is matched by that of the radio or television set. Three or more generations of the same family live their separate but interconnected lives under one roof. When in need of solitude, a thin cloth curtain strung over an opening stakes out a private section. The privacy is a fleeting moment, but “the fluttering illusion of an unlatchable door screens the rest of the family out” (Villalon 1991).

Privacy or seclusion is not meaningless but is relativized. Villalon (1991) describes it in these ironic terms: “Blissful seclusion means not being able to see the others, but still remaining within full hearing range.” Sometimes, privacy in the single-room *bahay kubo* is achieved by turning one’s back on the room or by facing the wall for a few moments of solitude, but the intentional separation is never total and absolute. To be sure, the concept of shared space and limited privacy is not peculiarly Filipino but is characteristically Asian. For example, traditional Japanese houses are essentially designed as a single space. Space divisions are made by sliding paper screens that unify the house and garden into one single area. The Filipino architect applies the same communal principles, which reveals itself particularly in downtown Manila with its seemingly disorderly ways of living. A Westerner will not feel at ease with what are seemingly disorderly ways of living. Sections of downtown Manila probably appear to a Westerner who does not share the Asian notion

of space as chaotic.⁹ Not so for Filipinos, who “thrive in crowds that teem, enjoying close contact with each other, jostling each other when we walk down a street,” tolerating “closer contact with each other.” This is in contrast to a Westerner’s preference for a buffer space forestalling close contact with others.

One-for-all is a fitting slogan to encapsulate the Filipino’s cultural penchant for communal living. The traditional Filipino way of living is conditioned by how bedrooms are placed in relation to “other spaces” within the *balai*. The bedroom does “not necessarily open out into an internal corridor but to an external one, the *volada*, a narrow, enclosed balcony that runs along the exterior of the upper floor of the *bahay na bato*, linking the bedrooms and the other rooms of the house to each other” (Villalon 1991). In earlier days, the señora (madam) of the house would look out of her window every morning, waiting for her favorite hawkers selling goods on the street below. From the comfort of her living room, she shopped and haggled while picking up the latest street gossip. In some neighborhoods of Manila, hawkers still come around. Even in those areas with new houses designed in the rigidly partitioned western manner, residents remain in contact with each other. Life is not bound by the walls of the house but goes out to include the lives of the neighbors. Within the Western-designed domestic structures, the traditional pattern of living is still Filipino: everyone still crowds into a few rooms to sleep.

Balai/Bahay as an Illustration of the Loob-Labas Relationship

After establishing and elaborating on the cultural-architectural context of my proposed eco-theological model above, I now proceed to construct its philosophical-religious underpinnings. For this purpose I draw on the insights of a Filipino thinker, a Western biologist-environmentalist, a Christian biblical scholar and a Norwegian philosopher.

It is of considerable interest to this essayist that the Filipino thinker-writer, Albert Alejo, used the image of *balai/bahay* in a philosophical work to illustrate the relationship between *loob* (interior; interiority) and *labas* (outside; exteriority). To begin with, he gathered an ensemble of descriptions from a group of local thinkers who had reflected on the *loob*-concept. These academics used different theoretical lenses: historical, metalinguistic, psychological, and theological. *Loob* is described variously as the cave of Filipino thought, the holistic self of the Filipino, a state of feeling and the core of character, the genuine self of the person, and the person in his/her deepest interiority. There was also a post-modern critique of the “embalmed” *loob* as instrument of conquest (Alejo 1990, 11-38).

Alejo creates an analogy of the *loob-labas* relationship with a native house *viewed from inside out*. From this perspective, one notices differences in the rear, side, and front portions. At the back of the house can be found domesticated pigs, chicken, ducks, and other animals. Beside the house are dumped assorted things that are not yet to be disposed of and might still be useful for other occasions, such as wood, cartons, and old tires. It even serves as a *bodega* (storage room). While the rear and side portions of the house are dumping grounds, the front view is very clean. The garden is well-tended because this is what is visible to people. It has to appear beautiful in the eyes of others so that they will get the impression that the interior of the house is as tidy as its exterior. Yet, if you really want to see how clean the house and its residents are, what you should do is to

⁹ Villalon (1991) writes: “Houses, apartments, shops, markets, all seem to burst with people. Crowds are everywhere. The hustle and bustle of the people reflects in the architecture. There is a jumble of buildings, unruly roof lines jutting out everywhere, balconies and laundry hanging over sidewalks and streets under a spaghetti of electrical wiring that dangles over neon signs. There seems to be no order at all. Everything visually and noisily competes with each other. Narrow sidewalks are filled with hawkers occupying the space normally reserved for pedestrians. How different this cityscape is from the orderliness of, say London or Frankfurt, where rows of buildings are clearly demarcated from one another, and sidewalks are wide promenades dotted with clean benches, and people are sprinkled into the streetscape”.

look at the comfort room or bathroom. Its tidiness evinces the house's cleanliness (Alejo 1990, 69-70).

In his treatment of the architecture of *loob*, Alejo conjures images of building structures that are to be appreciated not from the outside (*labas*) but from the inside (*loob*). This is one path a person can take in experiencing the *loob* drawing of a specific proposal by the architect Leandro Locsin: the building must be viewed not from the outside but from the inside. The building needs to evolve from inside-out. The movement comes from the *loob*, flowing to all sides, and finding itself in the front. That is why it is not fair to talk about architecture merely from the outside; you need to come inside in order to see it fully (Baltazar 1967; Alejo 1990, 73). Alejo contrasts this with the sculptural model of *loob*, wherein we see the inside, its shape, but we still view it from the outside. This is like an anthropologist who keeps spinning an old pot in front of him; or like someone looking at the sea from the shore and not from the middle of the journey.

Elsewhere, in Rodrigo Perez's humanistic treatment of *bahay*-architecture, the Filipino architect points out that the interior is not just a measured area (zone) where the inhabitants move. The interior of the house is *isang kapaligiran* (surrounding; environment); a world, not a prison house. The space in the stone house is neither pent in (*nakakulong*) nor turned upside down (*nakakulob*). It is as if it flows from one room to another, pierces through the doors and arcs from the inside to the outside, passing through wide windows which stretch out to the other wall. In the stone of the house, the space is circumscribed by space, like isles of breadth in the middle of a sea of breadth (Perez III 1980; Alejo 1990, 74). Yet the interior is not a space unto itself, disconnected from nature, wind and the heavenly bodies. He shares his positive observations on the ease of the framework (structure), the concept of living together with nature, the concern for the flow of the wind and for protection from sun and rain, the fitting of the framework or structure and ornaments, and the fidelity and thrift in the use of materials as all features of the *bahay* (Perez III 1980).

One may look at the *bahay-cum-sambahayan* (household)'s conceptual scheme of connectedness-from-the-inside to its physical surrounding (Alejo's *loob-labas*) as a localized or microcosmic version of today's contemporary ecological view that "in the spirit of nature, everything is connected" (Van Ham 2018). The world is a single interconnected organism, where ecosystems consist of living organisms which interact with the non-living elements, of which humankind forms just one part. The marine biologist, researcher, environmentalist, nature blogger, and author of the 2014 book *Nature's Patterns: Exploring Her Tangled Web*, William Graham, thinks that the interconnected complex systems are animated by an "energy." This energy, in his view, is the operating currency of Nature, which is composed of wide range of hierarchal, interconnecting ecosystems. He writes:

Ecosystems are the conduits by which Nature's energy is transported and transformed. Ecosystems are vehicles for energy flow and energy consumption. They cycle energy and nutrients obtained from external sources. By understanding where and how energy flows within an ecosystem, we can understand how an environment operates. (Graham 2014)

Elsewhere, and on a spiritual plane, in his exploratory attempt to understand the meaning of "power" in the Christian Scriptures, the American biblical scholar, theologian and peace activist, Walter Wink, has proposed that the material or earthly world possesses an inner aspect the Scriptures refer to as "spiritual powers." Although the "material" in his hermeneutical usage has a more inclusive connotation, which in particular covers institutional or structural realities, his work does highlight the existence of the "spirit of things" as "inseparable from their material or physical concretions" (Wink 1984, 105). The material or the physical world is not an inert lifeless reality.

One can sense Wink's imagined spiritual power and Graham's imagined energy flowing, as it were, from the *bahay kubo* and its inhabitants, out into the immediate surrounding environment with its rich assorted greenery, and below, where poultry and swine find abode and care, then back

into the interior of the indigenous house in an imagined dynamic loop. The back-and-forth process of continuous dynamic motion has each artifact nourishing and sustaining the other with “life-nutrients” sourced from that invisible energy or power. The nature of both living and non-living beings is not static, much less “acting” independently of each other.

The foregoing conception is attuned to Arne Naess’ “deep ecology,” which stresses the interdependent value of human and non-human life, as well as the importance of the ecosystem and natural processes. The core principle is that the living environment as a whole has the same right to live and flourish as humanity. Deep ecology asks “deeper questions concerning ‘why’ and ‘how’ and thus is concerned with the fundamental philosophical questions about the impact of human life as one part of the ecosphere, rather than with a narrow view of ecology as a branch of biological science, and aims to avoid merely anthropocentric environmentalism, which is concerned with conservation of the environment only for exploitation by and for humans purposes, which excludes the fundamental philosophy of deep ecology. Deep ecology seeks a more holistic view of the world we live in and seeks to apply to life the understanding that separate parts of the ecosystem (including humans) function as a whole” (Environment and Ecology, n.d.).

In short, nature (the physical environment) has an intrinsic value that is irreducible to pecuniary interests. What is needed is ecological wisdom that can be developed and that focuses on “deep experience, deep questioning and deep commitment.” Naess calls the entire ecological system an “ecosophy,” where its elements constitute an interconnected system, with each giving rise to and supporting the other. Ecosophy is “an evolving but consistent philosophy of being, thinking and acting in the world, that embodies ecological wisdom and harmony” (Environment and Ecology, n.d.). Naess appeals to religions to “respond to the concerns of environmental philosophy and so encourage the interconnection between religious and philosophical worldviews, scientific and empathetic studies of nature, and public policy and ethics” (Kristiansen 2003).

My essay takes Graham and Naess’ eco-philosophical constructions, reinforced by Wink’s biblical reflections, as the ideological scaffolding for Alejo’s culturally-grounded philosophical reflection on *loob-labas*. To recall, Alejo adopts an architectural model in relating the inside of the house to its outside environment. In order to understand the whole, we need to situate ourselves from the *loob*, around which the surrounding (*paligid*) revolves. Here the elements inside *loob* (*ka-loob-an*) converge. There is a need to position oneself at the “center,” in the middle of the perspective. And from here, one can describe the whole. It might be added that the whole does not only move towards the centremost perspective, but from this vantage, the movement or *galaw*, which Loesin refers to from the inside to the outside, our consciousness is formed. There is one kind of movement of space that fits (*tugma*) the movement of consciousness that reaches out from one’s stance (*kinatatayuan*) towards the borders and exit point. Hence, the outside is the image of the inside *loob*. (Alejo 1990, 74).

Alejo’s entire *loob-labas* conceptual scheme represents an attempt to understand in philosophical depth the innate connection of personhood or one’s interiority (*loob*) with the *labas* (body or *katawan*). The body is not a mere accessory to one’s interiority but is an integral dimension of the latter. His usage of the vernacular *bahay*-image as a cultural illustration of his *loob-labas*, with the core interior of the house representing *loob*, then moving to its other parts and outside to its surrounding (*labas*), opens itself up to the fertile field of contextual eco-theologizing. The inherent, not accidental, connection that he insistently argues for between *loob* and *labas*, between the core of one’s personhood and its constitutively corporeal character, is a useful insight when extrapolated to the “natural” connection between *bahay kubo* and the natural environment (*labas*) it is connected with, when seen from the vantage point of the *bahay*’s interiority (*loob*). Such is the movement advocated in my essay also, in fashioning a culture-based eco-theology: from the self to the external yet connected world of living and non-living beings.

The above “open-house” illustrations of the *bahay/balai* both from the perspective of the vernacular architecture and native philosophy underpinned by a connectivity-interdependence

conceptual framework offer a theoretical foundation upon which a cultural eco-theology can be crafted.

Implications for Eco-Theology

What does it mean to use the *bahay kubo* as a privileged heuristic lens for the construction of an eco-theology that is grounded in native familial experiences? What primary value-elements does the vernacular architecture represent and which indigenous eco-theological model will it advocate? How will the value-elements be correlated with the biblical tradition of the relationship between humans and the earth?

As regards the values attached to *bahay kubo* (as well as *bahay na bato*) which express the traditional-cultural spirit of the Filipino, or motifs for eco-theological reflection we can put forth the following:

- The communal or relational character of *balai-panimalay*
 - Filipino concept of space: shared
 - How the *balai* is structured/arranged interiorly
- Simplicity
 - Structure not complicated or elaborate
- Connectedness to the earth/intimacy with creation
 - Knowledge of climactic change
 - Guarded connectedness (protective form of the *balai*)
 - Surrounding greenery *bahay kubo*
- Adaptability
 - Flexible to the vagaries and changing conditions of nature
- Stewardship/Sustainability
 - Taking care of animals, fowls and plants

The above anthro-socio-ecological resources of the *balai*-grounded culture serve as raw material with which to build a local or vernacular eco-theology. The full-blown theological reflection will see the interface of these culture-based ecological resources or values with Christian scriptural themes, mediated by the faith-informed traditions of Christianity. The envisioned trajectory will move in the direction of Gadamer's "fusion of horizons."

The envisaged context-based eco-theology will need to include the dimensions of spirituality (as a way of life informed by one's faith in the Creator and Sustainer) and ethics (as the practical dimension directed towards the common good while respecting the Mother Earth). Regarding the ethical imperative, the *balai*-sourced themes lined up above will define the terrain and contours of eco-theological discourse as it engages in mentalities, behaviors, attitudes, cultures, and structures that either contribute to the destruction of Mother Earth or promote its ecological vitality and sustainability. At the same time, the land-based Filipino indigenous communities' traditional belief systems and actual way of relating to nature will need to find their place on the map of vernacular eco-theology, since *bahay kubo* is precisely in the immediate sense of the word, a material representation of the vernacular or indigenous.

Conclusion

This study is an attempt to take part in the ecological conversation proposed by Pope Francis. It re-focuses and sharpens the pope's ringing appeal for profound respect for Sister or Mother Earth in the context of our local ecological situation. Participation is a must in light of the Philippine's damaged and deteriorating environmental condition, as exposed in the pastoral letters of the Catholic bishops acting as a collegial body. It is also partly inspired by the efforts of various well-meaning individuals to help bring about changes in mentalities and attitudes for the benefit of

humanity and the entire earth. In it I seek to localize or “vernacularize” environmental theology in the context of the cultural terrain vis-à-vis the natural environment.

What I have done so far is to set the stage or break ground, as it were, so as to prepare the way for a more comprehensive and detailed theological language that intentionally takes off from the native terrain of the Filipinos, and that is circumscribed by the rich meaning of the vernacular *balai* with its ecological implications. It is envisaged that the proposed *Bahay Kubo* model will open up a culturally hospitable and rich eco-theology, eco-spirituality and eco-ethics.

At this point it is worthwhile recalling Caldwell’s existential diagnosis of what ails the earth: ecological “crisis is concerned with the kind of creature that man is and with what he must become in order to survive.” To transform Filipinos into *bahay kubo* beings with eco-friendly convictions and attendant lifestyles is a rather ambitious project, yet this is what this paper is ultimately oriented towards. At the same time I hope that the “graced” elements of the architectural icon (relationality, simplicity, connectedness to the earth, adaptability, sustainability) will resonate in the hearts and minds of peoples all over the world. This sense of optimism stands on a profound insight of the late Irish novelist-teacher-literary critic James Joyce: “in the particular is contained the universal.”¹⁰

Levy Lara Lanaria
University of San Carlos, Cebu City

¹⁰ Quote of James Joyce from Goodreads.com, accessed March 16, 2020, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/514416-in-the-particular-is-contained-the-universal>

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