

ANIMAE MUNDI COLENDAE GRATIA: TENDING THE SOUL OF THE FOREST

by
Kate Smith-Hanssen

Squeezed into the front seat of a pick-up, we drove through the lush, tropical forest uplands of Mindanao, in the Philippines, on a wide gravel road abandoned by the recently departed logging companies. I glanced behind me, staring at the young men standing shoulder to shoulder in the back of the truck. Some of them had continued to keep on their long, heavy jackets all during the day even as the temperature soared and my blouse stuck like wet paper to my damp, clammy skin. With their easy, jocular manner they didn't fit in with the other NGOs, government representatives, and environmental activists in our group that had come to help mediate a dispute with the indigenous Manobo. As we wound our way down the mountain under a clear, full moon I finally inquired who they were. "Bodyguards!" replied the driver with no further explanation.

For the last few years, I have balanced my work as a depth psychologist and mythologist in private practice with international environmental emphasis on re-empowering local peoples in natural resource the world of international forestry, similar mythic conflict is being state-run forest management centralized power) and a more paradigm made up of forest-	<hr/> <i>As the crickets' soft autumn hum is to us, so are we to the trees, as are they to the rocks and the hills.</i> <hr/> GARY SNYDER <hr/>	mediation and education with an communities and indigenous tribal management. Through my exposure to I have noticed that in many countries a enacted. This is the war between the system (a kind of monotheism of diverse and inclusive decision-making dependent inhabitants, non-government
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representatives, environmental-green groups, local communities and government (a pluralistic, polytheistic model).

The power of these two approaches is so great that in many countries people are dying while fighting for their mythic perspective. Whole cultures are being destroyed or wiped out, families are being displaced to overcrowded urban centers or other upland areas that are not welcoming to outsiders, and many forest-dependent peoples are suffering from the loss of their livelihoods, food sources, and clean water. In some upland areas, tribals and other local communities are forming vigilante groups to combat the gradual taking over of their forests, the destruction of their traditional ways of life, and the disruption and devastation of their fragile ecosystems. It was to protect us from these local eco-terrorists that the bodyguards had been present.

As a depth psychologist, I am able to bring a unique perspective to the escalating conflict over the environment by appreciating the underlying mythology that is being enacted. Mythology teaches us that this struggle is not new. When the Sumerian hero Gilgamesh lifted his axe to fell the mighty cedars thousands of years ago, Humbaba, the keeper of the forest and archetype of the Green Man or of Wild Nature protested and wept in vain. Humbaba, like so many indigenous keepers of the forest today, was killed by Gilgamesh; a profane sacrifice to progress, civilization, and the heroic model that was threatened by the "evil" in the forest. Today, as natural resources are becoming scarce and, in some cases, are failing to regenerate, many countries are shifting from the myth of state controlled ecosystem management to a new, but actually much older, decision-making paradigm. This

process includes the participation of different groups, tribes, communities, and individuals participating in ecosystem management.

Understanding and supporting the many ways communities care for and protect the world's forests that go beyond their "use" to humankind or our "control" is paramount. Localized, small-scale efforts, as well as regional and international initiatives variously called "joint," "community," "collaborative," and "participatory forestry," are trying to undermine the inherent monotheism of the state as a god-like power to enforce its will regarding the natural environment. Mythically, this "god" is literally and metaphorically losing its ground. The heroic view of nature as a force to be controlled or as an endless well of resources to draw upon solely for the benefit of humankind is slowly being eroded as grass-roots movements work to reempower the role of communities as the rightful stewards of the forest. Bringing the depth perspective with its rich, mythopoetic language and capacity to "see through" into critical, natural resource issues of growing populations, pollution, corporate greed, and often unchecked government corruption that confront our planet invites a deepening of the world soul.

The forest often appears in creation myths as one of the first places of life, harmony, and spiritual and physical nourishment. But, as humankind moved out of the forests and into cities, the forest became a dark, evil, unpredictable, and dangerous place. As increasing industrialization took over, forests were imagined only as an endless resource to feed the world's bottomless need for fuel and materials. Recently, increased tourism and recreational use has dictated yet another way the forest is valued and subsequently managed. But in the end, it is not a question of retaining forests only for energy or building materials, places to camp and hike, or as sources for food and medicinals, but of the soul's need to make a relationship with it as a living, sacred *temenos*. In this way, we honor the interrelationship of all forms of consciousness. One such attempt to revitalize the forest as a living habitat for the human soul and divine spirit is taking place in the once lushly tree-covered plains of Kota, India, which were heavily deforested in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Only small patches of natural forests remain in this area that stands like an oasis in the barren Rajasthan desert. Local communities and temples have protected these few remaining forests as "sacred groves" for hundreds of years. Observing this, a state forestry program was recently enacted to engage communities and schoolchildren in sanctifying local tree-planting efforts by saying prayers, sprinkling saffron, and tying forestry to Hindu religious festivals. In this way, some communities are healing the Cartesian split of the forest as inanimate, dead matter with one that is vital, living, and highly spiritualized.

On a more personal level, I am often reminded of one woman who spoke with me during a small women's circle that had convened during a male dominated village committee workshop our organization was facilitating. She shyly and haltingly spoke of how she toiled every day with the housework, minding small children, gathering and preparing food, and trying to eke out a small cash income from collecting leaves from the nearby *sal* forests. Recently, smugglers from some northern villages had been raiding her village forest, cutting down the trees to sell. Pulling her sari closer around her face, she said plaintively, "If they continue cutting down the forest, where will I go for refuge...to find peace from all my work and my husband who beats me?" "To find shade from the heat?" "To talk with God? "Where will I go, then?" Her words continue to echo in me, helping to inform my approach to the work on behalf of the world's forests. In the face of mounting statistics, graphs, and charts of the impact of

deforestation and global warming, her simple plea expressed the deep soul grief that can come with the wanton destruction of a single forest.

As we make decisions about how to best manage the forests, we need to remember that the trees and the woods live in us and inhabit our personal and collective *psyche*. The forest is speaking, we only need to listen. It speaks in romantic, pristine images of sylvan sanctuaries, cathedral-like groves, canopy shelters for restoring the spirit, and as home for many of the earth's creatures. But, it also cries out with wounding images of exploitive clearcutting practices, catastrophic fires, ravaging diseases, poor soils, flooding, homeless animals, and growing desert landscapes. A new approach to the environment must be one that takes into account the multiplicity of values, perceptions, and myths that are part of its ongoing legacy to the earth. Remythologizing our relationship to forest ecology is an act of archetypal activism. As an act of soul, it is primary to any other kind of environmental action and efforts to change international policy. As we dream the dream of the forest for the new millenium, we need to remember that the forest is also dreaming us. To tend the soul of the world's forests, is to tend the dream that *it* is dreaming; to locate the god in *its* midst. Not only for humankind, but for the *animae mundi*, the world soul.

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