

Bibong Corporation Award Winner–
Rafael DLG. Mafnas

2020 Department of Public Lands Scholarship Essay Contest

Essay Prompt- “Why is it important to preserve public lands in the CNMI?”

‘I taotao’ta, I tano’ta, I linala’ta.’ I learned this motto from my father. “Our people, our islands, our way of life.”—English equivalent

By example and guidance, I learned to embrace our natural environment. The sea and islands beckoning, I acknowledge and offer thanks for its beauty, bounty, and gifts to sustain our lives and provide refuge. The winds of change; external forces beyond the control of our ancestors erode our culture but not our lands. Indeed, we have changed forever after more than 300 years of colonial control and external influences. Our physical landscape has transformed reflecting economic and socio-political changes and demands. Unconditionally, our islands serve as cradle and refuge for our identity as indigenous people and as home for future generations, including those who call our islands home.

In the spirit of amity, I premise my thesis on the inseparable role and significance of land preservation, ownership and valuation in the context of the above precis and core values guiding both my conduct and sense of duty to respect life and property. The traditional indigenous land ownership practices; use and valuation do not view and treat land as a commodity as opposed to western practice. All lands were closely guarded and therefore preserved for future generations where ownership was held in trust by our elders. The Return on Investment (ROI) on land was not measured in dollars, then, but rather on the amount of crops and sustenance that it could produce for subsistence as well as provide shelter for clan members.

Now, more than ever, public lands must be preserved for food and bio-security reasons. Land exchanges as compensation for any reason or to settle hostile land-takings by the government should not be at the expense of the indigenous people. The doctrine of Eminent Domain may be invoked for public purposes. All public lands in the Northern Mariana Islands (NMI) belong to the indigenous people.

The long-standing tradition of extending the spirit of hospitality to all who set foot on our islands, friends and foes alike, apparently save the lives of our ancestors from severe hostilities. ‘Return good for good,’ and even better, ‘return evil with good.’ Against all odds, they remained steadfast by their wisdom and restraint so that we, their descendants, would continue to exist. During the colonial periods, four nations were granted authority without the consent of the governed, to ‘administer’ our islands. Subsequently, land ownership and practices endured significant paradigm shifts as foreign concepts of land ownership overwhelmed and altered traditional Chamorro land use practices. The wisdom of the U.S. Congress to protect the natives from exploitation incorporated Article 12 into the NMI Constitution by way of the NMI Covenant as approved by the House in 1975 and the Senate in 1976 to restrict fee-simple land ownership to persons of NMI descent was timely. The NMI people overwhelmingly rejected 2 attempts to amend Article 12.

My loyalty to our country dates back to my grandfather, father and brother who all served as U.S. Marines. My inborn ‘sense of belonging’ beckons that I must return home somewhere near or from the distance. Where my island is, is where my home is. We are not the owners but rather stewards of our most valuable, enduring and incorruptible resource: our lands—Islands. Our islands and refuge forever embrace our names, identity, history and future. We are merely standing watch over our lands and sea in behalf of our ancestors for the benefit of future generations.

We acknowledge our ancestors as landowners. Therefore, we ask permission before entering their land.

The chant reads:

Guelu, guelu yan guela
Na halum yu gi tano’mu
Sa taya tano’hu

English equivalent:

O’ Ancestor, ancestor and ancestress
Let me enter your land
Because I don’t have any land

Moreover, we are not alone in the eco-system. Apparently, evident demonstration shown by our natural environment, plants and animals exist in order for all to continue living. The fast-becoming hostile environment and fragile but tenacious eco-system unceasingly cleans and restores our habitat. We owe humanity to dedicate lands for our natural environment and co-inhabitants to live and thrive even in the midst of exploitative abuses.

Our ancestors revered our islands, witnessed and endured our tumultuous history and conflicts. The winds of influence from colonization were manifested in our faces, foods, language, economy, politics and governance. However, our lands withstood the storms of changes and remained unconquerable; firmly standing watch over our people. Moreover, the CNMI anthem forever reflects our ancestor’s reverence and affection for our beloved islands: “Gi talo gi halom tasi nai gaige I tano’hu.” (In the middle of the sea is where my land is.)

Etiam tenebimus terras. (Yes, preserve our lands.)