

WALKING HISTORY by Michael Xiao Chua

GAHUM: OUR FILIPINO CONCEPT OF POWER

We recently commemorated our beloved who passed to the next life last Todos los Santos (All Saints Day and All Souls Day) which we call “Undas.” When I asked Dr. Lars Ubaldo, who studied death practices in Ilocos, he said that it came from the Spanish “honras funebres” (funeral honors). In some Tagalog provinces, undas is called “honras” and “undras,” and in Ilocos, the “atang” is also called “umras.”

Talking about death, the ancient Filipinos believe that when we die, whatever power, prestige and prowess we have can be transferred to another person or thing. Dr. Ubaldo told me of a ritual in Cordillera, wherein a man who just died is being sat on a sangadi/sangachil (death chair), and as he is being smoked, the last body fluids that are coming out of his body are collected in a plate below to be drunk.

With this perspective, one now understands why on each Good Friday, when the dead Christ is being lowered from the cross in old churches to become the “santo sepulcro” or “santo entierro,” people will clean it. The cloth used to wipe the dead Christ will be distributed as they believed it already have power, “anting-anting.” Now we can understand that what many Catholic Bishops call as “fanaticism” every 9 January, of hundreds of thousands of people trying to get near the Black Nazarene and wipe it with hankies on its procession around the streets of Quiapo, is actually the continuation of an ancient practice of transferring the power of the Lord to the people, despite Western Christian influence.

Dr. Vicente Villan, one of my mentors, studied the “pintados,” tattooed “bagani” warriors from Panay. I learned from him that the ancient warriors from this archipelago, especially the Ilanun “mangangayaw” warriors, behead their enemies in order for the power of these people to transfer to them. The warrior goes home, adds the hair of the dead to the handle of his kampilan sword and will return with honor, prestige and well-being (ginhawa) to his bayan.

In the Visayan language, power is called “gahum.” In a monograph, Dr. Myfel Joseph Paluga collected the different meanings of the concept: it can refer to the nature of God, “Labaw nga Makagagahum” (Almighty God, He who had a high power); it can also mean government (“kagamhanan,” or “the powers-that-be”) and “gamhanan nga tawo” means a man who have power or authority. The amulet known in many parts of the Philippines as anting-anting/agimat is also called “gahum.” Although generally gahum is a positive concept, Dr. Villan said that in Visayan epics like the “Labaw Donggon,” if a power can destroy order, culture, relationships and communities, it is a bad gahum. That’s why the struggle against state hegemony is now referred by many in the Philippine Left as “kontra-gahum.”

Early Filipinos also believe that the “kaluluwa” (loosely translated as soul) has an alignment to heaven. If the alignment is straightly vertical, it is a good soul—“matuwid na kaluluwa.” If its horizontal, it is a bad soul—“halang ang kaluluwa.” That alignment can be affected by someone with a strong inner gahum and that will make one feel bad. And this is the folk explanation for a kid who suddenly felt sick because his soul’s alignment was disoriented—“nausog.”

We always borrow theoretical concepts from Western scholars when we can also see how colorful and comprehensive our own concepts are.

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