Balagtas, Bonifacio and the Filipino concept of human rights

BY MICHAEL “XIAO” CHUA ON MARCH 31, 2018

CATHOLIC Christians just commemorated Holy Week where one is expected to make some soul-searching and reflection on how one has behaved in one’s life. But does the “bayan” too have to make some soul-searching. Where can we find the soul of the people?

I believe that the soul of the people is embedded in our culture and the writings of our heroes.

There is a debate on going in the academe on whether the concept of “human rights” can ever be Filipino, because for Filipinos public good supersedes individual rights. Although I may agree with this statement, I can also say that there is an equivalent concept pertaining to how individuals should behave towards each other. Dr. Carmen Peñalosa, who is writing a paper on the Filipino concept of human rights, says that we classify creatures into three: 1. Tao (with whom “kaginhawahan” or well-being is a central concept); 2. Hayop/Halaman (which can give “ginhawa” to “tao”); and 3. Aswang (which is perceived to take away “kaginhawahan” to the “tao”).

“Karapatan pantao” or human rights is inherent in humans just by being “tao.” These rights should be connected to “ginhawa”: what is “dapat” or “nararapat” to be able to have ginhawa—equated to comfortable life, good health, good breathing, peace of mind, food, among others. As for individual rights, “karapatan” must be seen in the context of “pakikipagkapwa-tao,” from “kapwa”—seeing the self in other people, your family members, your friends, the state and the community in general. To Peñalosa, a balance must be taken when individual rights might contradict with the kaginhawahan ng bayan.
Human rights is connected to the concept of justice. In the Philippines, we equate justice to the Filipino word “katarungan.” In fact, according to Virgilio S. Almario, this word is a neologism invented by Lope K. Santos and his coterie in the early 20th century to avoid confusion: Because justice was already being equated with the term “katuwiran” which can also be “reason.” Ironically, “katarungan” comes from the Visayan word “taróng” which means straight. Now this is interesting. “Katuwiran” also comes from the word “tuwid” or straight. This means that justice is ideally tempered by reason; justice also means to us something more internal. Tuwid refers to “matuwid na kaluluwa” which is equivalent to a good person with a righteous soul. So, in this sense, the Filipino concept of justice and human rights comes from within our hearts.

This brings me to Francisco Balagtas, whose 230th birth anniversary on Monday, April 2, will be commemorated by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino and the LGUs, among others, with a symbolic reburial of his lost remains in his monument in Orion, Bataan where he died. Some wonder why a poet is considered a National Hero by many. Because although it was José Rizal, Andres Bonifacio and the heroes of the revolution who birthed the nation, it was the ideas Balagtas wrote about in the Florante at Laura that planted the seed.

Balagtas wrote about “santong catouiran” being defeated, as people’s tears fall and kindness is seen as something shameful, when treachery and wickedness are allowed to reign. If one doesn’t see human “rights” here, definitely Balagtas is talking about the defeat of “santong catouiran” as the reign of human “wrongs.” These wrongs Andres Bonifacio clearly related in one of his poems, “The Filipinos are bound tightly, they but moan when kicked, boxed, and hit with the butt of the gun, they are tortured with electric wires, hung like animals, is this Mother, your love? You order them imprisoned and thrown into the sea, to be shot, poisoned to eradicate us, to us Filipinos is this the decision of a Mother affectionate to her vassals?” It can be concluded that we do have a concept of what should not be done to a “kapwa-tao.”

If we read the Kartilya ng Katipunan, Bonifacio and Jacinto wanted to establish a nation of a united people that will be “strong enough to tear aside the thick veil that blinds our minds and to find the path of katuwiran and kaliwanagan.” This is their real vision for us that we must teach our school children: True freedom is having kaginhawahan, and that to our ancestors, the prerequisite of kaginhawahan is “mabuting kaloboan” or “matuwid na kaluluwa.” Our country may be politically free but true ginhawa is only attained if our leaders and we, the “bayan,” will realize that corruption hinders the “kaginhawahan” of all, and that each one of us respecting the law and respecting the human rights and dignity of others shows true love of country. Because the country is not the state, or a piece of territory, it is the people that surrounds us. Human rights begin with the way we treat other human beings—our kapatid—in our daily lives.

Happy Easter!

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