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Religion, Culture and Politics in the Philippines

by

Paul-François Tremlett

This essay addresses two questions with regard to the contemporary Philippines: the question of political violence and the question of status and hierarchy or, as some would have it, class. In recent years I have done field work in and around Manila and in the provinces of Laguna and Quezon about the use of amulets or *anting-anting* in martial rituals for making men's bodies invulnerable, and also on practices concerned with the disposal of the dead. I will suggest that the ritual use of amulets through which Filipino men typically seek to protect themselves from violence signifies a generalised fear of violence. I will also suggest that such rituals of invulnerability transform violence, vulnerability and invulnerability into spiritual problems that can only be overcome through spiritual means. This is to be regarded as a problem: political violence in the Philippines will not be stopped by prayer or by a tattoo or a talisman. Secondly, I will argue that if we want to understand Filipino society with its hierarchies and status and class relationships, we can find ready-made 'maps' of such relations in graveyards. In other words, the geography of death provides an important insight into the ordinarily hidden structuring of society in the Philippines. As such, I will argue that the increasing tendency of middle-class or 'C' class Filipinos to choose cremation at death and for the ashes to be stored not in a graveyard but in a columbarium suggests a desire to escape hierarchy, but also the political impotence of the middle-class in that for this class the problem of hierarchy in the Philippines can only be resolved in death: the issue of inequality simply cannot be confronted in reality.

Rituals, amulets and the state

Materials relating to amulets and talismans of invulnerability were obtained in conversation with an amulet seller and healer and former gunman, and a former member of a group known as Haring Bakal (Iron King). This part of the essay has four parts: firstly, I recount the story or history—or

perhaps mythology—of the Haring Bakal group; secondly, I describe a Haring Bakal initiation ceremony as it was described to me; thirdly, I relate a demonstration of invulnerability and after a few brief comments about tattooing, I review some of the scholarly literature that examines beliefs and practices relating to the use of these kinds of amulets before fourthly arguing that such rituals of invulnerability transform violence, vulnerability and invulnerability into spiritual problems that can only be overcome through spiritual means, and nullify any possibility for social memory.

Haring Bakal was founded during the 1970s during the martial law years when civilians were recruited into militia groups. The formation of civilian militias was part of a general process of militarisation that took place in rural areas across the country throughout the martial law period. They were used to counter the insurgency operations of communist and Muslim rebels (CPP-NPA or New People's Army—the military wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines—and MNLF or Moro National Liberation Front), or as instruments of terror against rural populations, depending on one's point of view.

Haring Bakal was led by Feliciano Luces who went by the *nom-de-guerre* of Commander Toothpick. Luces came from Pikit near Cotabato in Mindanao, and originally fought for the MNLF. He had a reputation as a fearless fighter. However, after a lengthy gun battle with government troops in which he reputedly ran out of ammunition and resorted to hand-to-hand combat, he was eventually captured and taken to Camp Aguinaldo for interrogation. He was held there for seven months during which time his captors were allegedly unable to break him. He was then taken to Malacañang Palace in Manila where he personally surrendered his gun to President Marcos. In return, Marcos gave him an amnesty. Luces was thus transformed from a guerrilla at the margins or periphery of the state into a military asset of the Marcos régime.

Haring Bakal was created with the specific intention of taking on the CPP-NPA in central-southern Luzón, and Luces was recruited as the group's leader. The military provided Haring Bakal members with money and weapons and other logistics, aiding them in their so-called counter-insurgency operations. Luces himself provided group members with a technology of the body that would enable them to go fearlessly into battle. Members undertook an initiation ceremony that involved the insertion of small shards of 'sacred' rock known as *bato-ara* under the skin at specific locations on the body. (These are the forehead, either side of the neck, each breast, each elbow and each wrist). Once these fragments had been inserted under the skin of an initiate a prayer would be recited over his body. After the wounds healed, the initiate had his faith in the procedure tested. He would have to endure having his body struck twenty-one times by *bolos* (weapons or tools which resemble a machete). As long as his faith (*pananampalataya*) was strong, he would emerge unscathed.

I was privileged to witness two demonstrations as to the efficacy of this practice of bodily transformation. The first involved my co-researcher laying his left arm flat along a table and taking

several hefty swipes at it with his *bolo*. He certainly did not hold back, though he was striking himself at an angle which maximised the bludgeoning action of the weapon and which minimised its power to cut or slice. The skin on his left-arm survived unbroken.

The second involved the firing of a revolver at a sheet of A4 paper on which was drawn an image of the crucified Christ and a series of 'secret', creolised Latin words of power. A single live round was loaded into the revolver and the gun was then pointed at the sheet of paper which had been pinned to the wall at the back of the yard. The trigger was pulled three times, but the weapon did not go off. I am no expert in fire-arms. It certainly appeared, however, that the chamber containing the bullet had been correctly aligned with the barrel before firing, although I was never invited to handle the weapon for myself.

It was on a previous research trip to Mount Banahaw in the Philippines (1999-2000) that I first became interested in this type of amulet. In April 2000, President Estrada launched a military offensive in Mindanao against Muslim rebels seeking to create an independent state. By July, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) bases had been overrun, but military and police operations continued and, in August that year, an encounter occurred between government soldiers and members of a Christian 'cult' in the area near Bukidnon in Mindanao. Twenty people were killed in this encounter, and newspapers and television carried photographs and brief footage of members of this peasant religious group—armed only with *anting-anting* and *bolos*—being gunned down by government soldiers. The reporting of this incident contextualised the existence of the Bukidnon group in terms of the formation of civilian militias that occurred during the martial law years, referenced the fact that the groups are known as *tad-tád* (chop-chop)—so-called for their alleged predilection for hacking their victims to death with *bolos*—and noted that they are widely believed to augment their supposed martial prowess with tattoos, prayers and amulets. Indeed, one journalist claimed that members of the Bukidnon group mixed:

Christianity with folk beliefs such as wearing T-shirts with Latin prayers scrawled upon them which they believe grant them magical powers including invulnerability to bullets and the ability to hypnotise their enemies. Some are known to use human kneecaps as magical amulets (*The Manila Times* 14/07/00).

The existence of this group, then, was explained in terms of two, quite separate and distinct discourses, whose convergence is critical in the representation—in the Philippines—of beliefs and practices relating to the use of amulets. The first refers to a culture of political violence during the Martial Law period and the formation of armed groups which, taken together, sees the countryside emerge as a site of disorder. The second focuses upon the irrationality and erroneous nature of the beliefs and practices allegedly common to these groups as a register of the failure of the state and

its various agencies to successfully uplift, discipline, and 'civilise' its people. The incredulous tones of the news items in both newspapers and on the television that covered the gunning down of *bolo*-wielding Filipino men wearing amulets by the Philippine armed forces was palpable. Accounts of the revolution of 1896 against Spain are full of vivid accounts of *bolo* men armed only with *anting-anting* to protect them from the bullets of enemy troops. It was as if the dead had returned, as if a spectral past had made its way back into the present. Certainly, this event seemed to belong to a quite different world to the one of malls and gated communities in Manila.

Beliefs and practices relating to the use of amulets and talismans are commonly accompanied by supplementary bodily practices such as tattooing. As such, I augmented my research with former members and associates of Haring Bakal with visits to a tattoo studio in San Pablo City. Tattoos associated with amulets and notions of spiritual power and potency commonly depict Saint Francis slaying the serpent, Jesus on the Cross, Masonic triangles with the all-seeing eye in the centre, and Latin words of power. These words of power are etched around the main design or in a square block on the torso over the heart. These kinds of tattoos are typically acquired by young men during the Lenten period, and are a part of a religio-cultural matrix of beliefs and practices concerned with the body and the accumulation of spiritual power (Anderson 1972). According to Sidel, "many an urban gang leader has been found covered with elaborate tattoos, which, as was true of precolonial Philippine "men of prowess", encode the wearer's body with marks of bravery and magical powers" (1995:154). Both tattooing and the Haring Bakal initiation related above sanction penetration of the skin in order to render the subject invulnerable or impenetrable in the future.

Scholarly explanations for the historical use of amulets emphasise indigenous conceptions of power and spiritual potency and corollary bodily practices. These accounts suggest that beliefs and practices relating to the use of amulets "conforms to the general pattern of Southeast Asian animism" (McCoy 1982:355) or that they must be understood in terms of the confluence of animistic, Roman Catholic and American Protestant beliefs and practices (Covar 1980:77). Analyses of contemporary usages of amulets and talismans of invulnerability and corollary beliefs and practices emphasise contexts of political violence within which such practices retain considerable resonance and where invulnerability points both to resistance and the fear of violence and intimidation (Shoesmith 1978; Turton 1991). However, I also want to suggest that in a country rife with political killings, unsolved murders and intimidation and multifarious forms of thuggery, it is significant that such rituals could play a role in the production of local memory.

It was Maurice Halbwachs who first suggested that it is through membership of particular social groups that individuals are able to remember and structure their rememberings (Halbwachs 1992). Thus, "groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are

localised and memories are localised by a kind of mapping. We situate what we recollect within the mental spaces provided by the group”, and, moreover, memories and remembering “always receive support from and refer back to the material spaces that particular social groups occupy” (Connerton 1989:37). Further, as Connerton (1989) argues, memory need not only be semantically or cognitively encoded or produced. It can be, as habitual or ritual behaviour, bodily. But, in this ritual of invulnerability and the discourse that surrounds it we witness not the production of memory but the production of a mythology that makes it impossible for real events to be recalled accurately: the mythology of Haring Bakal is at the same time a mystification of the organised violence of the Marcos era and beyond to the present, when political violence under the Macapagal-Arroyo administration has reached epidemic proportions. Furthermore, the relation of the problem of violence and protection against violence to a religious or spiritual realm signifies not only a general fear of violence but also the belief that the state cannot protect its citizens from violence.

Death and the escape from hierarchy

For the last two years I have been conducting comparative research on burial practices in Taiwan and the Philippines as a means of trying to theorise questions of identity, memory and locality in a fragmented, globalising world. In particular I have been interested in linking shifts in disposal practices to processes of urbanisation, globalisation and the formation of diasporic, urban communities. This research has presented a number of problems: neither in Taiwan nor the Philippines do people feel particularly comfortable talking about death and, with regard to the Philippines, the matter is made even more difficult by the fact that there is virtually no scholarly literature on the subject (but see Cannell 1999). However, what I want to do here is to try to demonstrate a link between social class and the kind of burial practices one might choose for a deceased relative.

In the Philippines, internment in a Roman Catholic cemetery is the traditional manner of disposing of the dead. Usually, the cemetery is located well away from the church and even at the edge of the town, is surrounded by a high wall and is not, as a rule, frequented by relatives or friends of the deceased except at All Souls. Filipino graveyards are often rather neglected places, and within their walls squatter families typically scratch a meagre living doing odd jobs such as clearing litter, cutting back weeds and maintaining the tombs. What I found particularly intriguing, after visiting the cemeteries in Pasay in Manila, in San Pablo City and in Los Baños, was the manner in which the layout of tombs constituted a kind of map of hierarchy. In all three of these graveyards the largest tombs and mausoleums were positioned at the centre, while the coffins of the poorest were stacked, one on top of the other, at the edge, against the cemetery wall. In San Pablo the

mausoleum of the Fule family was located at the centre of the cemetery, the Fule family being the largest and most powerful landowning family in the area. Radiating outwards from this centre of power the tombs grew smaller indicating the decline in wealth and prestige of the deceased as the distance between them and the Fule tomb increased. Each of these three cemeteries, it seemed to me, could be seen as a microcosm of Philippine society, a society in which status and prestige is dependent on the ownership of land and moreover in terms of an individual's proximity to powerful families and individuals.

In the last seven years in Manila, there has been a mini-building boom: many of the old cemeteries are full, as are the memorial parks that emerged in the 1970s which offered a well-maintained, clean and secure resting place for the deceased. As such, entrepreneurs often in league with local parishes or missionary orders have begun building large columbaria for the storage of ash-urns. Some of these buildings also have their own crematoria. One of the interesting features of these new buildings – many of which, incidentally, are not yet complete – is the manner in which the deceased are stored: the columbaria are huge atmospherically controlled environments housing vast rows of lockers in which are stored the ash-urns of the dead and which bear a strange and uncanny resemblance to enormous apartment blocks or hotels. Indicating the location of each ash-urn is a plaque bearing the name of the deceased, their birth and death dates and sometimes a few words in memory of the departed. The plaques and ash-urns are arranged in rows and although plaques at eye-level are more expensive than those located at ground-level or above head height, nevertheless, the overall impression is of the equality of the deceased. Each plaque is the same size and carries basically the same information: it is as if death and the disposal of the dead has been standardised and simplified such that the markers of status and prestige visible in a traditional graveyard are not merely absent but have been abolished.

The question now is which people are choosing cremation and storage in a columbarium over traditional internment? Indeed, the answer is quite straightforward. The companies building the columbaria and marketing these services are predominantly trying to sell to 'C' class or middle-class Filipinos. The wealthy can only maintain the signs of their prestige via traditional internment; the poor, on the other hand, tend to view cremation as a kind of 'second death' that will annul the possibility of final resurrection so they are afraid of it and anyway, would not be able to afford it. Middle-class Filipinos, however, are more mobile and can afford it: they are buying insurance plans that guarantee 'lots' in these new apartments for the dead so they can negate the unbelievable inconvenience of All Souls and express their largely unconscious desire as a class to escape the kind of status relations that traditional graveyards inscribe. Unable to resolve the contradictions of Filipino society in practice, they find solace in the resolution of status contradictions in the other world.

Conclusions

I will briefly conclude as follows: in both these 'snap-shots' from the Philippines – about amulets and rituals of invulnerability and about the disposal of the dead – the real problem was solved in thought rather than in reality. In the first story, the problem of violence was resolved through recourse to religious or spiritual ideas while in the second inequality could only be resolved after death. General theories of religion have been offered in the past based in these kinds of observations, though they seem to have lost their resonance today. Perhaps it is time to take the concept of ideology seriously again and reject the believer's point of view that has been constituted – by erstwhile phenomenologists of religion – as the beginning and the end of analysis in the study of religion.

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