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Lapu-Lapu Petmalu

A Re-articulation of Anti-Colonial Struggle in the
Archipelago

Bas Umali

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Somebody asked: Who discovered the Philippines?
Someone answered: Magellan.
One could butt in: Who killed Magellan?
Typical answer: Lapu-Lapu
Follow-up question: Who killed Lapu-Lapu?
Typical answer: Kusinero (Cook)

I refer to this conversation as novelty. It is pop. Meaning, an ordinary person whether they attended school or not could relate to it. Surely people will have various interpretations, opinions and levels of appreciation to this conversation – A conversation that could establish a connection.

I am really curious to hear how exactly a Filipina/Filipino nationalist will expound this novelty conversation in favor to their national idea of national pride.

It has been five centuries since Magellan came to The Visayas. A distant past that in the context of millennials, can be thought of as irrelevant.

On the other hand, we could ask the opposite: despite of its antiquity, why do people still ask such a silly question? Per-

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haps this event is recognized by many as the precursor for extensive changes that has been introduced to many communities within the imaginary boundary claimed by the Republic of the Philippines. Our social setting would have been different if King Philip rejected Magellan's proposal.

Who discovered the Philippines?

This is a silly question. "Philippines" is not a thing to be discovered. It is not a piece of artifact that you can apply the finder's keeper principle. It is absurd to believe that the Philippines is something waiting to be found.

This novelty conversation has been with us for many decades. We keep hearing this in different occasions, from household, to school, circle of friends, in my work, in rural and urban communities.

Probably it is more appropriate to ask who founded the Philippines?

The "silly" question would want you answer a particular name – Magellan, who represented the power of the Monarchy. Magellan will be killed by Lapu-Lapu later on the follow-up question.

Whenever I hear people making fun out of the question "who discovered the Philippines" I sense different meaning and a mischievous feeling.

Why ask such question? Is there any hidden intention?

Now a days, people's sense of history revolve around the idea of Spanish colonization and KKK uprising which led to the establishment of a republic. A historical period that connected many communities in the archipelago to the modern setting dominated by nation-states characterized by centralized social

relationships and absolute truth along with poverty, hunger, injustice, discrimination and ecological destruction.

Spain is perceived as the villain that brought sufferings to the people; it is also considered as a “master” who introduced the idea of civilized life. Since civilization is viewed as the benchmark of development; it is plausible to think that we owed Spain of our progress.

Mainstream history is basically Eurocentric. It will inevitably treat pre-Hispanic culture and lifestyle as underdeveloped. Savage and retrogressive that needed to be changed according to the standards of colonizers.

That is exactly what we are now. We challenge the negative attributes of the society introduced by colonizers while invoking alternatives which is also introduced by colonizers.

For instance, the KKK challenged the Spanish authority by asserting its capacity to self-rule through the system introduced by colonizers. Revolutionary ideas carried by anti-colonization are western in origin.

Why are we obsessed with European alternatives? Do we have no viable alternatives of our own? Do we find local wisdom and practice as obsolete and ineffective?

Except Lapu-Lapu, we rarely refer to the pre-KKK uprisings. Uprising that challenged colonial rules by asserting indigenous systems and re-instituting cultures handed down by our ancestors. Pre-KKK uprisings were mostly community-based.

Most people respect Jose Rizal’s contribution to “Filipino” struggle for freedom. But people rarely refer to his early works where he clearly recognized our indigenous identity and described our ancestors systems as prosperous, equitable and more perfect compared to colonial rule.

The systems of our ancestors were more humane and ecologically sustainable that was brutally destroyed by modernity

through the nation-state. Ironically, we adopted nation-state framework to counter colonial rule. With this framework we fail. After hundred years of struggle, our communities continue to suffer in issues and problems which are alien to us during pre-hispanic times. Despite of which, we still hold on to the promise of nation-state that basically proved to be a failure in terms of providing equity, sustainability and progress.

The novelty question is being asked constantly and spontaneously perhaps because our history is haunting us. The terms Philippines and Filipino are not ours. These are ideas being imposed and coercively used to describe and define us by our colonizers. These are the very attributes that reinforced disconnection to our indigenous self. These ideas made us think we are more superior to other culture. What is the need of superiority? Is it to defeat and out compete other people and to undermine other's cultural orientation?

Our own culture should be our guide in our search for self-determination. Our self-determination is no justification to control other. Our ancestors' system displays no center. They do not have uniformed conduct that exercise control. What they had were diverse cultural orientations that cut across around the archipelago and in Southeast Asia which the dynamics were facilitated by marriage, kinship, trade and war (panggayaw).

We are not Filipinos. We are people raised by our diverse culture. Our culture is a gift from our ancestors. It is no perfect but it has the complete set of elements under the theme mutual-cooperation and respect.

There is no such thing as "perfect culture". But ours is far more humane and ecologically sound compared to the nation-state and capitalism that introduced massive killing of people, destruction of culture and destruction of the earth.

There is no one big formula that could provide a single solution to the problems we currently confront, but at least we have the wisdom from our ancestors that provides us a framework that is proven to be effective and is currently utilized by existing indigenous cultures across the archipelago.

Lapu-Lapu's victory is iconic. The message it conveyed it not about nation and sovereignty. It is about the defense of autonomy of Mactan Island. It was the struggle that wase followed by numerous resistance aimed to re-institute the indigenous set-up and to protect their autonomy.

The fragmentation of cultural communities should not be viewed as weakness. It represents freedom and autonomy. They have indigenous means to connect and integrate; fragmentation will only become a weakness if one has the intention to control and dominate.