

**A CRITIQUE OF PRESENT SCHOLARSHIP
ON RIZALIST CULTS AND MILLENARIAN MOVEMENTS:
TOWARDS A RADICAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

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Starting in the late 60's, exacerbated perhaps by the Lapiang Malaya tragedy in 1967, there has been a steadily growing interest in the study of Rizalist cults and millenarian movements. This was intensified in the late 70's with the appearance of David R. Sturtevant's *Popular Uprising in the Philippines, 1840-1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976) and, lately, what was to prove to be the most controversial, Reynaldo C. Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).

These two publications have dominated and influenced the thinking in Philippine academic circles regarding millenarian movements. But these works have derived their conceptual frameworks largely on the insights of two American anthropologists: Anthony Wallace ("Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist*, LVIII, 1956) and his predecessor and intellectual godfather, Robert Redfield's (*The Primitive World and Its Transformation*, Ithaca, New York, 1953; *The Little Community*, Chicago, 1964; *Peasant Society and Culture*, Chicago, 1965). Indeed, Redfield's concepts of "The Little Tradition" and "The Great Tradition" have exerted a most seductive influence on American and Philippine scholarship on millenarian movements.

We start our critique, then, by a discussion of A. Wallace's view that millenarian groups are revitalization movements. "Revitalization" therefore is the key to understanding the intriguing phenomenon of millenarian cults. Wallace considers "revitalization" as a process involving several stages. The first of these is "stress" — "a condition in which some part or the whole, of the social organism is threatened with serious damage." This is followed by a "milling process" — "increasing disorientation and a corresponding, often confused, quest for solutions." Finally, a "revitalization" movement appears — "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture." This may take on several forms; from extremely naive and "unrealistic" millenarianism to sophisticated and "realistic" secular forms. But whichever form they take, according to Wallace, "they constitute highly creative endeavors to cope

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with a hostile world.”

The “unrealistic” type usually involves a charismatic prophet who is in regular contact with a “supernatural pseudo community.” Principal aides of the leader as well as the bulk of the followers get into psychologico-religious experiences, e.g., hallucinatory states and a kind of otherworldly convulsions. Eventually, the leaders and followers, believe themselves to have become the supernatural beings. Thenceforth their movement follows a pattern: 1) *militancy* is followed by 2) *suppression* which is followed by 3) *defeat* followed by 4) *despair* and then 5) the remnants form secret societies and, thus, the cycle is continued. Taking off from Wallace, Sturtevant says, “Their recurrence reveals the existence of profound conflicts between deep-seated peasant values and modern urban attitudes – the struggle, in other words, between the Little and Great traditions. Until these basic tensions are eased, they will continue to influence the course of Philippine affairs.” Wallace and Sturtevant should be credited for explaining the phenomenon of millenarian cults as arising from his tension between the Little and the Great tradition. Unfortunately, however, they stop short of explaining the tension itself. This, after all, may be the more crucial question to pose: what creates the tension? Should an anthropologist be content with describing the tension or should he not push his studies further and try to discover the underlying structure? In other words, can anthropology tackle these problems without, at the same time raising questions of power, that is, without getting into the area of political economy?

As noted by Ralph Linton, an American anthropologist belonging to Malinowski’s culture contact school in anthropology, messiahistic phenomena, including such typical religious behavior as revelation through dreams, exaltation to the point of sacred delirium, are very common when a powerful and dynamic culture dominates a so-called “inferior culture.” However, it is important to consider not simply contact between institutions, but the situation in which this contact takes place. (Balandier, “The Colonial Situation” in P. Van den Berghe (ed.), *Africa: Social Problems of Change and Conflict*, p. 445).

Commenting on the African situation wherein a similar millenarian phenomenon can be found, George Balandier, a French political anthropologist observes that “the nature of race relations, the degree of inequality between the dominant and the subjugated groups, and the appearance of insecurity in deeply disrupted societies explain the special proliferation of [these] Negro Churches in the Union of South Africa.” (Balandier, p. 445). Such proliferation reflects, according to Balandier, “the most remarkable phenomenon of our times: the rise of anti-colonial

nationalism." (Balandier, p. 445).

What Sturtevant and Iletto fail to emphasize is that millenarianism is not peculiar in the Philippines but can also be found in other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin-America. These countries which are collectively referred to as the Third World were all former colonies, and as such share one common feature in their history – the “colonial situation” (Balandier, “The Colonial Situation: A Theoretical Approach”).

While the studies of Wallace, Sturtevant, Iletto and others of like mind seek to explain millenarian movements as the masses', or more specifically, the peasants' response to social conflicts and cultural tensions, they however, fail to explain these societal crises. Very likely, implicit in their methodology is the assumption that these are political and economic and, as such, are outside the scope of anthropology. Herein lies the difference between the American school of Wallace et al. and the political and economic anthropology of the French anthropologists Balandier and Maurice Godelier.

Indeed, if revitalization is a response to stress, one should probe deeper into how stress is generated. The most salient contribution of Balandier is that stress is an inevitable feature of the colonial situation. Thus the colonial situation, breeds among other oddities, millenarian movements in the Third World. To understand such movements, therefore, we must first explicate the colonial situation. This situation involves two contradictory processes occurring simultaneously: colonization and decolonization. This contradiction is “the dialectics of decolonization.”

The struggle for decolonization takes on two forms: 1) the struggle for nationality – the search for national identity; 2) the struggle for social equality. These two forms, however, do not always go together or exert equal force in historical development. How they will interact and which of the two will be dominant will depend on the given social structure at a particular historical stage. The social structure, it should be emphasized, is itself a *creation* of colonization. Peter Worsley calls attention to two important historical agents in the struggle for decolonization: the native bourgeoisie and the masses. The first spawns “bourgeois” or “elite nationalism” with its characteristic emphasis on the issue of nationality and human rights and its consequent de-emphasis on social equality. The latter creates “mass nationalism” in which the struggles for nationality and social equality go hand in hand. From these observations, four propositions can be asserted:

1) To the extent that the masses agree on the nationality issue, a united front can be forged.

2) To the extent that liberal rights have been attained, the national bourgeoisie usually slacken in their struggle for nationality (which can be accommodated by the colonizer) and become even antagonistic towards the issue of social equality.

3) The first stage of national liberation, the bourgeois liberal stage, may well be a liberation for the national bourgeoisie but not for the masses (especially when there is a shift from colonialism to neo-colonialism).

4) The struggle for decolonization is much more difficult on the part of the masses who have to contend against two odds: first, the colonizer, and later, the national bourgeoisie.

What then are the responses open to the masses and how are these responses shaped by historical constraints?

The following typology for the study of social movements is proposed:

1. *Populist-religious* (rural peasant based)

a. *fascist*

e.g.:

- (1) Guardia de Honor (Phil.)
- (2) Cristero Movement "Viva Cristo Rey" of Mexico, 1926-29, brought about by enforcement of revolutionary anti-clerical laws and the church-state controversy; can be used by fascist-dictatorial regimes or clerico-fascist states against revolutionary movements.

b. *radical*

e.g.:

- (1) Hermano Pule's Cofradia de San Jose (Phil.)
- (2) Lapiang Malaya (Phil.)
- (3) Taipeng Rebellion China, 1840's, easily and ruthlessly defeated by state power; can be a liability to the revolutionary movement as in the case of the colorums during the Phil. revolution 1896-1900.

2. *Populist-secular* (urban based leadership and following)

e.g.:

- (1) Katipunan
- (2) Sakdalista
- (3) HMB
- (4) NPA

usually defeated by state power when sabotaged by the national bourgeoisie; weak materially in the early stage; i.e., bourgeois liberal struggle; can gain strength when it assumes a socialist character which coincides with the growth of industrialization or secularization, i.e., growth of the proletariat and radicalized intellectuals.

These two movements (1 and 2) can join forces and may lead to two possibilities:

- (1) In case of victory, the radical populist religious groups will be assimilated by the more dominant populist-secular groups and secularization will become generalized, and
- (2) In case of defeat, each will revert to its underground status; the two will co-exist autonomously but with the secular being more aggressive and dominant.

A review of social movements in Philippine history (19th-20th century) will reveal the following pattern:

- 1840's: Cofradia de San Jose
- 1890's: Katipunan (1892-1897)
Guardia de Honor (1894-1902)
- 1900-1910: Sta. Iglesia 1901-1910
Dios-Dios, Colorados, Colorums
Papa Isio in Negros
Papa Faustino in Panay
Pulajanes in Samar and Leyte
- 1910-1920: Relative peace
- 1920-1930: Colorums in Mindanao (1923-24)
Peasant uprising in San Juan, Nueva Ecija (1925)
Emperor Florencio Intrencherado in Iloilo and Negros (1927)
Tayug uprising in Tayug, Pangasinan (1931)
- 1932-1952: religious rebellions receded and gave way to secular forms — sakdalista and labor movement, Socialist-communist groups, Hukbalahap.
- Mid 50's—60's: resurgence of supernaturalist cults and Rizalist groups
Lapiang Malaya — Beginning 1940's

Militancy – 1957

Defeat – 1967

Late 60's and early 70's – lying low of millenarian forms; resurgence of secular forms, e.g., NPA
1972 – defeat

Late 70's and early 80's – revitalization of autonomous Rizalist cults; re-consolidation of NPA

The western powers came to the colonies in Christian garb. If religion was instrumental in subjugating the people, then religion in an inverted or modified form, i.e., indigenized or nativized, was a mode of response. A religious, albeit radical, response to colonial oppression on the part of the masses seems inevitable because, by virtue of their situation, i.e., poverty, illiteracy, "culture of repression," etc., the masses are most susceptible to religion. As Marx succinctly put it: "Religious suffering is the *expression* of real suffering and at the same time the *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creatures, the heart of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people."

From this perspective, the irrational elements in millenarian cults turn out to be rational, the enigmatic becomes intelligible: nativism, revitalization, syncretism, Utopianism, millenarianism are but various attempts on the part of the masses to come to terms with the colonial power. Paraphrasing Marx, religion, thus, enables the masses to do in imagination what they cannot do in actuality, that is, to assert their power over nature and their oppressors if only in the realm of imagination. In this sense, religion for the masses is not just an expression or a protest, it is also an opiate.

The masses assert their power over the colonizer by appropriating unto themselves the symbols of colonial power in an imaginatively religious, even creative fashion (following Wallace's perspective). At the same time, the masses assert their nationality by unwittingly incorporating into their religious cults even the very deceptions of the colonizer. Indeed, the fantasies of the colonizer, even his claims to superiority are introjected, i.e., indigenized.

The following cases are illustrative:

Among Rizalist cults: the concept of "Bagong Herusalem," the veneration of Rizal as the "Tagalog Christ," the veneration of Filipino heroes as Filipino Apostles, charismatic leaders become transfigured as the Pope, or Christ, the spiritual pre-eminence of women over men (these seem to be a reaction against the Christian

religion in two ways: 1) as a counterfoil to the dominance of the male Christian ecclesiastical authority; 2) as a return to pre-Spanish practices), the incorporation of Catholic-Protestant elements in their liturgy and rituals, the use of nationalist expressions and symbols such as flag raising; the use of the Philippine flag in their costumes; the celebration of heroes' births and deaths; the threefold devotion to "Dios," "Kapwa," and "Bayan," an animistic rendering of Christian and nationalistic sentiments such as the veneration of natural formations as embodying the spirits of saints and heroes, the waiting for the "Second Coming" and the Apocalypse. The Ciudad Mystica de Dios in Mt. Banahaw has the following timetable for the Armageddon:

- 1986 – start of the disruption of social life
- 1995 – intensification of chaos into the final reckoning
- 2000 – redemption. Mt. Banahaw will open and from its mouth will emerge the golden flag, the golden church, and the golden palace (symbols for nation, church, and state).

If the goal is de-colonization, there is not much prospect, indeed there is even danger, if these mass movements remain religious. For as such, they are still under the mystique of the colonial ideology or weltanschauung. The only hope is for such movements to become secularized. This is the only way they can be de-mystified. After all, de-mystification is a *sine qua non* for liberation.

What then is to be done? I hereby propose a strategy: "the Psychotherapeutics of De-colonization" (Claude Steiner, "Radical Psychiatry: Principles," *Radical Therapy*). This involves the following principles:

- oppression + deception = alienation
- oppression + awareness = anger
- awareness + contact = liberation

Using this model, we propose the following modifications:

1. Oppression + awareness of oppression but not of deception = alienated anger.

It is not enough that the masses become aware of their oppression. They must also become aware that they are being deceived, i.e., seduced, mystified. They must become aware of the "double-bind" to which they are ruthlessly subjected. Without this awareness, they will experience not *anger* but *rage* such as the impotent violence of a schizophrenic (R.B. Laing, the *Politics of Experience*; the double-bind concept was developed by Gregory Bateson in *The Ecology of Mind*).

2. Awareness of oppression but not of deception + Contact = alienated struggle.

The unrealistic reactions, i.e. superstitious, hallucinatory-delusionary reactions of millenarian movements as noted by Wallace are hereby viewed therapeutically as "schizophrenic reactions."

3. Oppression + awareness of oppression and deception = liberating anger. This is the kind of anger which is an expression of one's potency (in which one is in full command of his powers) whereby one's full resources are summoned to meet the stress.
4. Awareness of oppression and deception + contact = liberating struggle. This is manifested by successful radical-secular movements. Compare for example the tragic debacle of the Taiping rebellion and the success of the radical-secular movement led by Mao Tse Tung in China.

We conclude these notes with the words of Marx, "The abolition of religion as people's *illusory* happiness is the demand for their *real* happiness. The demand to abandon illusions about their condition is a demand to abandon a condition which requires illusions. The criticism of religion is thus in embryo a criticism of the vale of tears whose halo is religion."