

RUMOR AND TREMOR IN A VISAYAN COMMUNITY: SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON SYMBOLIC POWER

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When speaking of power, coercion is what undoubtedly comes first to mind. He who is powerful is one who can force me to do what I am reluctant or unwilling to do. For instance, small-scale fishermen in a Visayan island may stop going Japanese-style, as they say, after their catch, not because they particularly care about the damage this technique inflicts on the coral reef nor about the long-time ecological consequences of such damages to their fishery. They stop because, if they don't, they will be arrested.

All power need not, of course, be coercive. It is frequently more subtle than that, and based upon authority, that is the respect, the trust and confidence that somebody's opinion carries. It is enforced through conviction rather than coercion. Any skilled *barangay* captain knows this well when he quells an incipient fist-fight at the weekly dance between two of his over-imbibed constituents by asking them gently not to spoil the neighborhood's fun. The two previous examples have been taken from the political arena, but power is clearly not limited to it. The parish priest's religious power or the copra dealer's economic power are cases in point. So is the social power that, within a household, everybody seems to have over everybody else. Children will not marry without the consent of their parents who in turn are unlikely to make an important decision without consulting with their grownup children.

But there is yet a more diffuse, more subtle, though not less forceful, form of power; its strength derives from its pervasiveness and its uncontrollable character; it is almost as if nobody had started it; it will not die, just fade, leaving on its path an array of apparently disconnected events which all but fit nearly in any single category. I am referring to rumors. Ungraspable as they may remain, these are eminently social phenomena since they have to make sense to someone, in fact to a lot of people so as to circulate, which is the *sine qua non* condition of their existence. They move around, in other words, they are a type of social communication; they also move people, stirring their emotion; they finally make people move, forcing them into social actions and reactions. In short, they beg for an anthropological interpretation.

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The Visayan island of Siquijor today is a rather economically depressed area in the Philippines. The late nineteenth century when Cebuanos and Boholanos came and settled there looking for economic opportunities have long gone by. Today, and since the 1920's, a sizeable proportion of its children pour out to Mindanao looking for a brighter economic future. As a counterpart, the island is of gentle beauty. Its people, as I was repeatedly told, are "peaceful and law-abiding citizens," and, as I experienced, affable to a fault. In other words, nothing of earth-shaking proportion seems ever to occur there. Even World War II seems to have left it relatively unscorched. Its last newsworthy event dates back to January 8, 1972 when it was inaugurated as "a separate and independent province." As for one of its six municipalities, Lazi, where my wife and I have settled, one would have to go back, I suppose, to 1897 when its convent, the largest in the Philippines, was completed.

And yet, something happened on December 6, 1980, obviously an ominous, momentous, and portentous event to many. A slight but perceptible tremor briefly rocked our *payag* on that night. It was only, I thought, a modest manifestation of natural power, and I would have even forgotten to ask my neighbors the Visayan term for "earthquake," had they not, time and time again that day, volunteered less their own interpretation of the event than an abridged piece of moribund, if not dead, folklore.

It was the ancient lore of the olden times, though, and was still believed, they said, by old women in remote *baranggays* in the mountains. It was identical to the version drily collected in 1952 in a nationwide historical data-gathering by public school teachers, from which I quote here. "The flat world is supported by a single huge post. Sometimes a carabao tosses the post or rubs its body against it, thus causing the earth to quake. They (the old people) drive the carabao away from the post by shouting, 'Br-r-rwa!'. In the variants I heard myself, the carabao was often replaced by a cow or even a big pig.

In a different story, the same written source states: "It is still believed by old folks that the earth shakes when the pigs in heaven go astray. Their running here and there makes the world tremble." In the version I heard myself, the pigs did not go astray, but were turning up the soil with their snouts with an identical consequence. Altogether, my informants did not seem overly concerned about this tremor.

Two days later, however, a second and slightly stronger tremor rocked Lazi, produced two visible cracks in the aging structure of the church, damaged the belfry's third story forcing the young bell-ringers to pull the ropes from the safety of the convent across the road, and, courage of outrages, shook several bottles of mighty cola drinks off their shelves

sending them crashing to the cement floor of a *sari-sari* store.

In the meantime, the rumor began circulating. When exactly it originated and who started it are precisely what I cannot say. If this could be identified, it would be a piece of information, maybe of misinformation, but certainly not a rumor. At any rate, someone was heard to have observed, off the coast of Lazi, white smoke which was meant to signal not the election of a new Pope, nor even what, along traditional lines and under normal circumstances — but where was normality anymore? — might have been interpreted as the mischievous intervention of a *balbal* or of an *enkanto* by whom “gitiaw-tiawan and mananagat.” It signaled instead the birth of a volcano.

Rumors can spread pretty wildly but they have one common property, namely the intellectual acceptability of the event that they purport to anticipate. In short, a rumor, anonymous as it must remain, is in itself a cultural interpretation which responds to a social demand for information. To that extent, any wild statement is not susceptible of becoming a rumor, but it has to touch base with cultural reality. It must have some degree of plausibility for those who receive it, reinterpret it, and more importantly, transmit it. The link, therefore, between earthquake and volcano is not fortuitous. And indeed, some people may have remembered the tremor that they experienced on Siquijor island just before the eruption of the Hibok-hibok on Camiguin island in the 1950's, since, weather permitting, this volcano is occasionally visible from Lazi shores on the eastern horizon across the Mindanao Sea. But I am somehow doubtful that this event was anymore remembered than the more awe-inspiring eruption of April 30, 1871 of that same volcano. Montero y Vidal (vol. III, p. 555) reported it in eloquent terms: “At three o'clock in the afternoon, a very high and thick column of black vapors began to rise, with a strong smell of sulphur. Suddenly bursting into flames, it set fire to the brush which burned completely, offering the most imposing and magnificent spectacle.”

That the link between earthquake and volcano was a deduction less empirically than ideologically grounded will be seen in a moment when we examine the chain of events that this first mental connection generated. But forgive me to start with the obvious. The rumor actualized the transformation of an uninteresting natural event into a cultural phenomenon of considerable magnitude. People now were definitely concerned, to say the least, which took expression further, and further remote from the domain of physical reality but progressively closer to cultural reality. While the tremors belonged to the domain of experience, the volcano belonged at best to the domain of social memory. The next step, hastily taken indeed, was to pass from volcano to what was evoked as “daking balod” in the *barangay*, as “tidal wave” in the town, and as

"tsunami" by precise but pedantic *cognoscenti*, something which fortunately nobody had even experienced nor could even remember to have ever happened on this island. If so, what did people fear exactly? This was explained to me in no small detail, thus providing me with a spectacular structural transformation of the above-mentioned mythical fragment.

The island of Siquijor stands on a post and is just like an open umbrella. Earthquake, volcano, tidal wave, all three of them could and will cause its rod to lose its balance and the island would then slip into the sea. In the *sitio* where I reside, the members of the religious voluntary association "*Virhen sa Baranggay*" took the ritual initiative of moving daily their standard on the shoreline, praying there facing the alleged epicenter of the quake for supernatural clemency. In addition, the town's entire stock of candles had been sold out, because coincidentally a printed leaflet which had originated elsewhere, had been passed out, predicting three days of darkness for the end of the following month -- vain precaution though for neither fire nor candle would be able to burn. The unusually inclement weather of December promptly added to the atmosphere of doom and mild panic which began descending upon us. It was clearly a time to repent and more difficult to rejoice spiritually at the *Misa de gallo* in these days of Advent. Some town people, more pragmatically oriented than others, followed the municipal order not to spend their nights in their houses and began camping at the High School. Its higher grounds made it presumably safer, though not for long, for as soon as the danger of tidal wave had been dealt with, came the fear of a landslide, a clearly no-win case either *sa baybay* or *sa buntod*.

Those who had political power, however, could not be totally displeased, although they were forced to take some initiative, the first of which was to request successfully a team of seismologists and volcanologists, some of whom are still on round the clock observation duty as I am writing. The production, as it were, of this swarm of scientists and technicians could only reinforce the power of those who had it in the first place, even though the press conference, strategically staged by the market place on a Sunday afternoon right after the last fighting cock had bravely died in the *bulangan*, accomplished little to soothe the townspeople's volcanic emotions. To the contrary, it even fanned them up a bit due to the laudable and prudent reserve with which the PAGASA and Comvol scientists predicted the future. It took a more energetic measure to cool down emotions, which I discovered one day with dismay when my informants suddenly dried up on the volcanic topic, for fear of being jailed. Yet, the success was elsewhere, in the dispatching of Manila officials to the small town and in the ties that the local government had thus demonstrated to have with the powers-that-be.

On another level, it was a triumph, for the rumor had now escaped the municipal and provincial boundaries and was making national, if not international, news, thus decidedly placing Siquijor on the map, altogether not a minor achievement considering that the strongest tremor experienced had had an intensity somewhere between 1.0 and 1.5 on the Richter scale. The media amplification of the issue gave it an additional dimension. Its inexactitudes and exaggerations were all alarmist. The palm in this respect should go to *People's Journal* of December 22, 1980. Its headline across the front page shrieked "EVACUATION," followed by "Undersea volcano threatens Siquijor. Tremors have been rocking the island subprovince in Negros Oriental since Wednesday and its 70,000 people are being prepared for evacuation."

The word "evacuation" in Lazi had an instant pop appeal; it occurred on everybody's lips incessantly, as a catch-phrase with powers of exorcism, uttered by people in the *baranggay* who rarely used an English word, by people who had no intention whatever in making a move of any sort. Actually, to use the expression of my elderly neighbor who saw all this agitation with some sane skepticism, "balhin ug baka, bunlay ug sagbot, pasaw ug baboy, pokot ug isda" were still the order of the day. And yet, if it was not the total disruption that the press would have led us to believe, it was not the tranquil and resigned serenity programmed by my neighbor either.

The parish priest reluctantly had to celebrate his Christmas Midnight Mass outdoors under the threat of imminent shower. By Christmas Day, it had become impossible to buy an onion, a box of crackers, or a kilo of rice, mainly because the shopkeepers, uncertain of the future, had stopped maintaining their stock for fear of being unable to sell their goods. They had picked up their clue from the number of people who were not cooking their meals at home in town. In fact, kinship links hitherto dormant, if not practically extinct, had been hastily reactivated. Entire families had "evacuated" to high ground *baranggays* in the house of some kin, or at least had sent their children there and began daily commuting. In the *baranggay* a number of people found pressing reasons to visit relatives in Mindanao. Nobody was afraid, but this man's uncle was sick, that one's daughter had had a baby, and so on. The weekly boat from Lazi to Plaridel was fully booked. A widow even managed to miss the *kwarenta* for her departed husband, having gone to stay with her sister in the southern island. Children sent for vacation stayed unusually long among their Mindanao relatives. For a week or two kinship network transactions were highly intensified with nuclear families moving out while others were beginning to return home. In short, people began "evacuating," but just halfway undecided as to whether the situation was serious or not. They

laughed and moved; they came back and laughed again.

On the one hand, there was the reassurance of the scientists. On the other hand there was the belief, remembrance, what was it exactly, of this island called Atlantis which had sunk somewhere, and could it not happen to us? It was hearsay, no doubt, but neither more nor less real from Siquijor than the too actual and tragic earthquakes of Algeria and Italy which only recently vivid and gory radio reports had described, thus disengaging them at the same time from their actuality. Obviously it is possible to live in a twilight zone between knowing and not knowing, and that was the case in Lazi. The threat began to subside – not the natural phenomenon, of course, which is now scientific material to be further analyzed by the experts – but the felt presence of this threat. It is its actuality which was beginning to get worn out. The volcanic consciousness receded from the houses to the billiard parlor, entered the domain of private homes for a while, and there vanished for good in the general indifference. At its brightest, it had jolted the norms of traditional behavior among the *Lazihadnon*. When the intensity of its ephemeral existence began to dim, it lost at once all of its powers – the power to interpret, the power to move, and the power to set in motion. It faded away into oblivion.

I have chosen here to describe in some detail this particular rumor, because it provides, vividly encapsulated in its brevity, an illustration of cultural spontaneity and creativity. Each rumor, by definition, is unique and none can be considered to be typical, since each one is pure event, if not eventuality. Truly anything, at least any occurrence, that is, any other event, can be the topic upon which a rumor can elaborate. In addition, any rumor is essentially malleable. Not only does it have dubious origin, but once started, it is difficult, if not plainly impossible, to know which turn it is going to take, which twist it will follow, nor even which persistence it will have. At this level at least, it is not a traditional text.

Balak has the consistence of a text given for the beauty of its traditional form, for the pleasure of lyrical text, by the individual poet who imposes upon himself precisely conformity to tradition. A myth or a folktale may be collectively elaborated, may be susceptible of a multiplicity of variants and transformations, but it still manifests the permanence of its structure. It still expresses the tradition. Both *balak* and myth can be recited and be listened to, but rumors are to be eavesdropped, as it were. There is a certain formality attached to the delivery of *balak* and folktale; they are part of an oral tradition. The orality of the rumor is entirely accidental, if anything, an alteration of tradition.

Rumors present themselves in a multiplicity of variants. A rumor is characterized by its fluidity, its malleability, its ungraspability, in short, by

its lack of text. This socio-cultural phenomenon which has no being, is pure existence. It revels in the domain of potentialities. And this is the paradox that a rumor offers. It is casual, but certainly not informal, located nowhere, it is still entirely within the confines of a socio-cultural situation and thus still belongs to the tradition that its brief but reckless irruption jolts.

A rumor is first of all a cultural interpretation which develops its own hermeneutics. It interprets in the triple meaning of stating, explaining, and translating. But, in that, more powerful than pure ideology, it goes one step further and provides its own native critical theory, challenging and testing the tradition by providing less a model for social action than a program within which individuals are condemned to choose. It does not provide an answer to a phenomenon for which the culture has none; but it provides for the possibility of providing answers. Its uniqueness comes from its lack of rigidity. It is, in short, a magnificent piece of cultural software.