

AN EXAMPLE OF CONFLICT AND AUTHORITY IN A PHILIPPINE COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY

by

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The comedia is the most important example of the traditional Ilocano drama. Its plot is derived from the old hostility between Christians and Moors, and around this hostility is woven a complicated tale involving characters from diverse historical periods, with little attempt to observe historic or geographic boundaries. These characters from the kingdoms of Aragon, Turkey and Babylon may all engage in heated disputes with one another, but with such dispute always culminating in the conversion to Christianity of the Moors. The gestures are highly formalized and the dialogue is carried out in verse form, employing archaic words and expressions. The drama is interspersed with martial-like music which is employed mostly to accompany the entrance or exit of the various characters and the stylized battles between Christians and Moors. The actors are dressed in colourful costumes reflecting their historic and geographic diversity, and the whole performance may well last for several days and nights. The length of the performance is due mainly to the fact that a prompter is used throughout the drama. The prompter has to read all the

*actors' parts for them to repeat and he often has to do this several times in the case of inexperienced or inebriated actors. The plot is usually well known to all, the music familiar and the actors are drawn from the barrios.*¹

Although comedias are now seldom performed, they nevertheless still attract large audiences whenever they are held. Insofar as appeal to a mass audience is concerned, no other theatrical tradition has replaced the comedia.

In B., an interior municipality in one of the provinces of the Ilocos region, the comedia tradition has been maintained through the efforts of a small but dedicated group of actors headed by an old man, who learned the art from his uncle and who had written several comedias and many plays.

In the pre-1976 political system, at the level of the municipality, there are two main branches. These are the executive headed by the mayor, and the legislative or judiciary headed by the municipal judge. Each branch is supported by an auxiliary staff paid for by municipal funds and each branch has access to the municipal police. Aside from the municipal officials, there are also some provincial and national employees in the municipality. These officials implement or supervise provincial and national programs.

In this paper, I shall describe how the comedia became the centre of a dispute between the barrio of L., one of the barrios of B., and the municipal mayor. Although this dispute arose and can be seen as part of the traditional rivalry between the two principal factions of the municipality, in this paper, the discussion will merely be restricted to the actions and counteractions of the immediate participants in the dispute. My purpose is to show how persons in authority, in this case, the mayor, may use their office to prevent a group of people from carrying out an action that the person in authority sees as prejudicial to his interests.

The dispute, although arising out of a series of incidental and relatively unimportant events, is, nevertheless, typical of a method of social control often resorted to by people in authority in Philippine municipalities. The technique is sometimes practised unconsciously, but, at other times, the conscious component attains a high degree of sophistication, depending upon the seriousness of the issue and the sociological and political awareness of the disputants. Briefly, the technique involves the use and consolidation by a person in authority of powers and privileges that do not normally belong to him. Such a consolidation is justified through the employment of several devices, the most common being the threat of chaos or disorder. It is argued in this paper that all authority makes use of some process of mystification to justify the use of its powers, and that a description of a power structure is incomplete until the process of mystification is described and analyzed.²

B. celebrates the feast of its parish patron saint on January 15, the feast day of the Santo Nino de Praga. Although this day is religiously meaningful only to the

Catholics, who constitute the majority of the population, its celebration is also participated in and enjoyed by non-Catholics. L. is the seat of the parish and it is this barrio that takes the special responsibility for the success of the fiesta. On the other hand, the municipal center is in P. and this latter barrio has traditionally led a faction that has opposed the social, political and religious importance of the faction headed by L. It is within this traditional rivalry that the dispute involving the holding of a comedia first arose.

Apo Kolas, an octogenarian, is the man mainly responsible for preserving the comedia tradition in B. He learned the art from his uncle. Since then, he has given much of his time and interest to the performance of comedias. B. staged comedias regularly in the past, but, during the 1960's, the tradition weakened. The last comedia performed was sometime in the late sixties, and, because of this and his advancing years, Apo Kolas has for the past few years been pressing for the revival of the comedia. Little interest was shown by the influential and wealthy members of the community, who consider the comedia rather old fashioned and tedious. However, because of the expenses involved, their support must be obtained. Alternatively, funds can also be obtained from the community at large.

In October, the Parish Pastoral Assembly, the Catholic body responsible for running the parish in association with the local priest, discussed preparations for the approaching fiesta. At this meeting, Apo Kolas suggested that in place of the usual musical variety show, the parish should present a comedia. He informed the other members of the assembly that he had already written a special comedia for the occasion, and that only their approval and support was needed to commence preparations. For reasons not altogether clear, the mayor at once opposed the suggestion and, by referring to an arbitrarily quoted high cost of the presentation, he dissuaded the rest of the assembly from approving the idea of the comedia.³

The mayor is the president of the Parish Pastoral Assembly and his opinions generally prevail — or one can safely assume that any plan opposed by the mayor would have little hope of approval. The mayor's disapproval has an immediate effect on the other members of the assembly, many of whom are indebted to or dependent upon him for various reasons. Despite some support from the priest who, however, does not relate well with the mayor, Apo Kolas' suggestion was overruled and instead the Assembly decided to present the usual musical variety evening show. It became evident, at this stage, that the mayor was not interested in emphasizing the status of the fiesta. The traditional opposition between L. and P. is probably one of the main factors responsible for the mayor's reluctance to support an activity that would bring undue credit to L. — the mayor himself belonging to the P. faction. In support of the mayor, the people in P., although not unsympathetic to the idea of a comedia, maintained that the cost would be prohibitive and that they would not be willing to help defray the expenses.

Apo Kolas was extremely disappointed when the Assembly finally rejected

his proposal. However, having expressed his great disappointment to several leading members of L., including the resident anthropologist, Apo Kolas was persuaded to renew his efforts in a different manner. One of Apo Kolas' supporters in L. is the mayor's main political enemy, and obviously his interest in the matter can be seen as a case of supporting any activity or event opposed by his rival, the mayor, particularly if this support brings credit to L. Apo Kolas decided to see the mayor to ask if the comedia could be included within the fiesta activities, as long as the expenses were not obtained from the parish funds. The mayor was reported to have given his grudging consent to this suggestion and, as a result, Apo Kolas began recruiting financial support from the people in L.

It soon became evident that not only was there considerable excitement at the prospect of holding a comedia, but that people in L., aware of the mayor's disapproval, saw the issue as one involving the status of the community. Throughout these activities, the priest supported Apo Kolas. The mayor's dominant behaviour in the Parish Pastoral Assembly has earned him the priest's disfavour, and their frequent differences of opinion is widely known among the people. This, along with a genuine interest in encouraging Ilocano music, could be responsible for the priest's support of Apo Kolas.

Apo Kolas quickly canvassed L. and obtained promises for financial support from a representative range of its people. Satisfied, he then proceeded to organize the performers who belonged mostly to the barrios traditionally aligned with P. In fact, many of the comedia actors are closely related to the mayor (he himself used to take part in comedias in his youth); but, despite this fact, they were all eager to participate. Apo Kolas is widely known and respected throughout B. and other municipalities for his undisputed mastery of the comedia and other Ilocano dramatic genre. Perhaps, for this reason and because participation in comedias still brings to the actors considerable popularity and status, people who might otherwise be expected not to cooperate in a venture bringing credit to L., in this case, cooperated fully. Apo Kolas started rehearsals; and, slowly, the production was brought together. As they became more organized, these rehearsals attracted increasingly large audiences, thereby showing widespread interest in the coming performance.

In the meantime, Apo Kolas began collecting funds for the required expenses. Costumes had to be hired and some materials purchased. At this juncture, the mayor intervened. He wrote to the captain of Apo Kolas' barrio informing him that collections of money for whatever reasons had to have the approval of the Department of Social Welfare. Seeing that the date of the fiesta was barely a month away, it became obvious that obtaining such a permit would be impossible. The mayor does not normally communicate locally by letter; why he did so in this occasion is not clear. In a community where collections occur for many reasons, both private and public, the introduction by the mayor of such a technical point as obtaining a permit, although legally justified, can only be interpreted as an idiosyncratic use of authority.

Once more, Apo Kolas bewailed his position to the community, creating a pool of favorable public opinion which eventually gave him the idea of not collecting but of simply waiting for people to voluntarily give him the money. This strategy worked, and the mayor chose not to pursue the issue. By this time, the conflict was known throughout the municipality. What could have developed into a dispute between the two opposing factions in B. became a dispute between L., with the support of the comedia cast, against the mayor, a factor that could have determined why this dispute failed to develop along traditional lines.

The mayor's strategy seemed to limit itself to what some Filipinos would call a "low profile" approach. Instead of provoking a head-on confrontation, the mayor chose to concentrate his moves on discouraging Apo Kolas, who is normally fairly compliant, rather than on issuing a terse prohibition, which is the mayor's usual style. His use of the letter to Apo Kolas' barrio captain can also be interpreted as indirectly informing the public of his opposition. In this case, the effect was, perhaps, not the one intended.

At this point, Apo Kolas was expecting the mayor to act more directly, i.e. by simply forbidding his kinsmen to participate. This directive would effectively cancel the performance. Apparently, such an action was not taken by the mayor, and when one actor was asked what he would do if so requested by the mayor, he replied that he would disregard the advice. Rehearsals were temporarily suspended during the Christmas period, but resumed soon afterwards.

The next problem was to decide on the date of the performance. Comedias often take more than 24 hours to perform; but, in this case, the performance was expected to last about 12 hours. The Parish Pastoral Assembly had arranged several activities for the fiesta and these were scheduled for the night of the 14th and part of the following day. It was, therefore, decided that the comedia could start on the evening of the 15th and be continued throughout the next day. With this in mind, Apo Kolas, supported by the Priest and the mayor's political enemy, obtained a permit from the municipal police and from the provincial constabulary that would allow them to hold festivities for two consecutive nights. This permit was obtained without any difficulty. (Since President Marcos declared martial law, it has been necessary to obtain permits to hold public gatherings, particularly if these are to take place at night. These permits are issued by the provincial constabulary on the recommendation of the municipal police. Since the end of 1975, the municipal police have been placed under the authority of the provincial constabulary and are no longer under the direct control of the municipal mayor, as was previously the case.)

As the day of the fiesta approached, it became increasingly obvious that the general public was greatly in favour of presenting the comedia. Even the mayor's supporters in the faction opposed to L. could see no valid reason why the performance should not continue.

On the evening of the 13th of January, the Lunarians, a local club, held their annual program as part of the fiesta. This dance officially opened the festivities. On the evening of the 14th, the musical variety show was successfully held, but it was the following day that seemed to mark the high point in the fiesta. The crowd gathered early and many Catholics attended the concelebrated mass, led by the archbishop. While the archbishop and the local priest attended to the administration of confirmation, the parade commenced. All the schools and many of the teachers participated in the parade, which was followed by a program featuring the exhibitions of school dances and calisthenics.

One of the prominent officials taking part in the proceedings of this day was Mr. R., the mayor's political rival. He participated both in his capacity as a barrio official and as one of L.'s most prominent citizens. During the program, several guests were asked to speak, among them Mr. R. and the mayor. In his speech, Mr. R. announced to the crowd that the comedia would be held in the afternoon until evening. When the mayor spoke, he began criticizing the behaviour of some elements of the crowd, pointing out the dangers of drunken behaviour coupled with the lack of adequate police supervision and finally announcing that the comedia would not be presented. The reason given was that a municipal permit was not obtained. He exhorted the people to go home and attend to their chores, rather than to waste any more of their time indulging in the festivities. He prohibited the continuation of fiesta activities after 5 p.m. The program ended in confusion, and having refused a luncheon invitation from the priest, the mayor left for an engagement at the provincial capital.

There was considerable consternation among the actors and the other people involved in the preparations for the comedia. All the barrio captains present and the chief of police held several meetings; and, after much deliberation, it was decided that the comedia would be performed from 2 to 5 p.m., thus, carrying out the mayor's prohibition and allowing a minor concession to the supporters of the comedia. When Apo Kolas pointed out to the chief of police that he had obtained all the necessary permits, including the municipal permit, he was informed that it would, nevertheless, be unwise to further anger the mayor.

Excerpts from the comedia were performed in the time allotted. The enjoyment of the crowd testified to the fact that, although few comedias are performed nowadays, its hold over the Ilocano audience is still considerable. As an example of indigenous Ilocano theatre, no other genre has replaced it.

The comedia dispute indicates a method of social control practised by persons in authority in B. The influential positions held by the mayor (as president of the Parish Pastoral Assembly which makes him second only to the priest in terms of control over church-related affairs and as the municipality's chief executive) is an example of the consolidation of power in the municipality. In this case, how-

ever, the opposition of the priest forced the mayor to rely upon his primary source of authority, the state. The mayor's ability to shift from one source of authority to another facilitates the process of consolidation. This process is carried out through various mystificatory devices.

Some of these devices involve analogies that **legitimize** the actions of the person in authority. Thus, the mayor often refers to himself as the father of the community, thereby acquiring *pater potestas* privileges over its members. That the analogy is false is readily perceived, unless one accepts that an elected official can treat his constituents as jural minors. Another model often used and seriously suggested by a political scientist as a paradigm for Filipino political behaviour is the organic-hierarchical paradigm. (Agpalo, R., *The Organic-Hierarchical Paradigm and Politics in the Philippines, U.P. monograph no. 1*) This model sees society as consisting of interlocking units somewhat like the human organism.⁴ While this model may have some value in describing systems of power and authority, where certain groups are reduced to the level of automata, its heuristic or prescriptive appeal lies in the mystificatory analogy with the living organism.

In B., persons in power and authority tend to use the first paradigm, which is, in any case, closer to sociological reality than the organic model. Kinship terms are commonly used to indicate differences in status, and the appropriate behaviour generally accompanies the use of the corresponding kinship term. Important members of the community are called or addressed as Tang or Nang, which are the shortened forms of the words for father and mother. Although these terms and other terms of respect are in general use throughout the community whenever a younger person addresses or refers to an older person, the assumption of the corresponding privileges or signs of deference would not occur between nonkinsmen, except when these belong to different status categories.⁵

Thus, the mayor, before informing the people that he would not allow the *comedia* to be performed as originally planned and announced, spoke of his being **chosen to be the father of the community. In this capacity, he exhorted the people** to return to their work, somewhat as a benevolent father would chastise his irresponsible children for neglecting their duties. The mayor sees himself very much as the father of the community and takes the corresponding privileges of a father over his dependent minors. This attitude and behaviour is common in B. among people in authority, and is not a characteristic solely of the mayor. The appropriation and use of the kinship model is a device to mystify and legitimize relationships of power within the community. There may well be other functions for the use of this paradigm.

In the case of the dispute, certain strategies are open to such people as the mayor, whose authority spans several roles, each with its sphere of control. These roles tend to consolidate one another and the boundaries between spheres of influence

tend to disappear or become indistinct.⁶ The mayor begun by effectively blocking the suggestion of the comedia when it was first raised in the meeting of the Parish Pastoral Assembly. His next move involved mild intimidation through the idiosyncratic use of his political office. When these and other indirect pressures failed, he resorted to outright prohibition, justifying it to the people as the action of a concerned father. He also pointed out that activities such as the comedia often cause or **are associated with disorder and violence.** (The agonistic aspects of Ilocano society support, to some extent, the observation regarding violence whenever large gatherings are held, regardless of the purpose of such gatherings). The threat of chaos or disorder is a common justification for the usurpation of extraordinary powers by a person in authority. In this case, the mayor assumed the powers normally vested in the barrio captains and the local police force. When the mayor stated that the comedia supporters had not obtained a municipal permit, his action involved, at the very least, an attempt at obfuscation. This technique represents a stage in the process of mystification.

The resolution of the dispute involved some compromise, although it can be seen that the mayor achieved his main purpose, which was to prevent the full presentation of the comedia. Had the performers persisted and continued the presentation, it seems unlikely that the mayor could have done much about it. However, although he had clearly transcended his legitimate powers, and although this fact was appreciated by all the municipal officials in attendance, no one was willing to openly oppose the mayor's public stand. This hesitance must be seen in the light of the system of patronage in which the mayor occupies the highest position.

Many municipal employees and elected officials are personally indebted to the mayor in various ways. His control of, and access to various power bases make opposition difficult and dangerous. The structure of municipal politics, coupled with the system of patronage, enables an ambitious and competent person such as the mayor to obtain effective control of the executive branch of government with its corresponding grip over most municipal matters. When this is accompanied with considerable control of other sources of power and legitimation, such as the economy and the church, the resulting structure might well resemble an authoritarian household where *pater potestas* reign supreme. Although these tendencies may exist in B., certain limitations and checks are present. The priest, for example, jealously defends his prerogatives. The judicial branch of government has always been separate and exercises certain controls on the executive. The economy is too complex for any one man, but not for any one class, to control. Finally, the inhabitants of B. are not jural or intellectual minors.

FOOTNOTES

¹Although I argue in this paper that the comedia is one of the principal theatrical genres with grass-roots participation, there have been notable occasions when teachers and other

professionals have participated in comedia performances, particularly in the larger towns and capitals of Ilocos. However in B., the municipality with which I am concerned, the performers have come primarily from the category one would label "the ordinary or common people". Aside from the status origins of these performers (with whom the audience can easily identify) there are several inherent factors in the traditional comedia that ensures its mass-base appeal. Some of these are its familiar music and theme, the slow pace of the actions and dialogue allowing the audience to follow the performance while simultaneously participating in the various activities characteristic of fiestas. The sheer length of the performance is reminiscent of festivals in pre-literate and traditional societies where a long period of relative inactivity combined with a lean diet is broken by feasts characterized by their excessive activity and their glut of meat and other luxury foods. The life in the barrios of B. is normally quiet and the diet of its inhabitants austere. This monotony is interrupted by feasting on occasions such as marriages, baptisms, deaths and other major events of which the traditional fiesta represents one of the high points. Comedias are difficult to organize and hence take place rarely. It makes good sense to extend the performance as long as possible, thereby maximizing the returns on the efforts that went into its preparation.

²By mystification I mean a whole range of conscious and unconscious processes and techniques employed by persons in authority whose effect is to rationalize, justify and legitimize the exercise of social control. A theoretical treatment of this concept will be given in a separate paper.

³The Mayor's position permits him to make estimates that are seldom questioned. The arbitrarily high cost estimate was a conscious device used to dissuade any members of the Assembly sympathetic to the idea of holding a comedia. Apo Kolas was not given the opportunity to present an alternative estimate. The actual production cost one fourth of the mayor's estimate but this was made possible because all the participants gave their services for free, requiring only minimal compensation. What concerns us here is the ability of a person in authority to convert a personal judgment into a statement of fact. The tendency to confuse statements of value and of prescription with statements of fact is not found only among people in authority, nevertheless this confusion is an element of the array involved in the process of mystification.

⁴In this paradigm the human organism is seen as a complex collection where each unit is dependent on the functioning of the rest of the system. This dependence is arranged in hierarchies of control, culminating in the brain, the seat of consciousness, from which a complex exchange of communication issues, ensuring the viability of the entire system. Although some parts of the system possess greater control and autonomy over the system than other parts, no part can long survive without the well-being and cooperation of all the others. As the Tagalogs put it, "an aching finger causes discomfort to the entire body" This paradigm, despite its modern biological terminology, can be found in early Hindu and Roman political theory justifying the roles of the different castes and orders. R. Hertz was the first anthropologist to point out the common use of the human body as an explicative and deontic paradigm of the social order. The familiarity, appeal and symmetry of the human body partly explains its frequent use as a model of social reality. Mystification occurs, however, whenever this paradigm serves both to describe and legitimize the social order, these two functions seldom being distinguished.

⁵This paradigm projects the relations between kinsmen, particularly among members of the nuclear family, onto the social order. In a society such as is found among the Ilocanos, where kinship terminology emphasizes differences in generations rather than lineal ties, the expansion of this model to encompass the social order is not altogether inappropriate. In this analogy an isomorphism is established between relations involving different generations on the one hand, and relations involving different status categories on the other. However in discussing paradigms of social reality, one should distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive models used by members of a community (often this distinction is not made by the natives

themselves, in which case the observer should infer when this distinction should have occurred from the context in which it takes place). Finally one should distinguish these models from ontological reality. Mystification enters through the gap between the descriptive native model and ontological reality. In B. the native model, with its subtle notions of various status categories has both descriptive and deontic functions. In contrast the lack of a developed class model makes it possible for certain relationships of power, particularly in relation to the economy, to operate unperceived. Mystification involves both conscious and unconscious processes depending, among other things, on whether the relationships of power concerned form part of the conscious or unconscious model of social reality.

⁶The process of mystification favours the blurring of spheres of control even when clear and distinct boundaries exist. In cases where spheres of control are not specifically defined or are not structured to be mutually exclusive, mystification facilitates the process of power consolidation. Even in systems where boundaries of responsibility and authority are clearly defined, provisions are often made for extraordinary situations, such as the threat or existence of chaos or disorder. When such extraordinary situations exist, or are perceived to exist, persons in authority are presented with an ideal climate in which to make full use of the entire range of mystificatory processes and techniques.