

PRIESTS AND OUR BAHALA-NA SYSTEM



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Filipino fatalism is best expressed in his *bahala-na* system. This fatalism is said to be a Muslim influence from which Christian Filipinos have not really been liberated. As a matter of fact this fatalism, this *bahala-na* system, is still being greatly blamed by sociologists today for the poverty which still enslaves many of our people. This, they say, has stripped them of ambition in life, of any desire to uplift their living conditions. A Salesian Father, for example, laments this attitude of his students in Barrio Magsaysay, Tondo, Manila because these leave school for a day's opportunity of work in the piers when a ship docks there and *bahala-na* for the future which is more secured by their studies.

This system is the doing of an inappropriate action prompted by a complete but false trust in God without any security as regards the other alternatives for the redemption of that action. As we have previously said, it is a happen-what-may attitude, conditioned by the Filipino present-time orientation, by which one decides between two or more courses of action for what gives *immediate* results with an utter disregard for the future. Thus, it is closely connected with our *mañana* habit and often results, at least to a certain degree, to our *ningas-kugon* trait.

We decided to place this attitude under our religious values because, though this system has far-reaching socio-economic consequences, it is, to our mind, rooted in a defective understanding of God and His Divine Providence.

Again, we must state that the purpose of our paper is to discover the positive values of this system which can be of help to priests in their ministry.

We have divided this topic into two general divisions, namely, explanation through usages and investigation through effects.

EXPLANATION THROUGH USAGES

In trying to explain this system, let us attempt to delve into the soul of our people and sort out what elements there are which may give us light as to the understanding of their fatalism.

We divide this section into four parts, namely, complete trust, predestination, resignation, and superstition.

COMPLETE TRUST — The phrase *bahala-na* is used both in regard to men and to God. Thus, when a Filipino gives anyone a complete charge over another or over anything, he says: "*Bahala ka na diyan*" (literally: "Take charge of her or him or it.") We say that these words imply a complete charge of a person over another or over something because it usually happens that if a person gives this right to another and the *giver* still meddles with the affair, the *given* gets angry and says: "*Pinamahala ako, pagkatapos pakikialaman!*" (literally: "He has given me charge over it and yet he still meddles with the affair!").

We see, therefore, that for the Filipino *bahala* implies a complete trust.

This is also true with regard to God. We say, for example, in blessing or in curse: "*Bahala na ang Diyos na gumanti sa iyo.*" (literally: "May God repay you.") Thus, we hear a beggar say this when we give him alms. Or, an angry person says the same thing when he feels that an injustice is done to him. And this they say with complete trust as though they believe in a certain built-in structure which assures that good is repaid and evil avenged. This, of course, sounds similar to the oriental concepts of *Karma*. And if we can only disregard the long centuries of Christianity in the Philippines, we can easily surmise that this attitude is traceable to this oriental belief. However, Catholicism in these islands is a fact. Hence, we can only interpret these situations in the light of the Christian doctrine of complete trust in God no matter how often this is lamentably misunderstood.

PREDESTINATION — This complete trust which characterizes the Filipino's relationship with God arouses in him a kind of belief in predestination. He uses, for example, such expressions as *iginuhit ng tadhana* (predeter-

mined by fate). Or, he uses the phrase *itinalaga ng Diyos* (It is predestined by God).

The Filipino, therefore, meeting fortune or misfortune, just mutters the well known adage: *Kung talagang ukol, talagang bubukol* (If something, whether good or bad, is really for one, he will have it no matter what happens). One, for example, who wins in the sweepstakes believes that fate has really predestined him or her to be rich. And another who meets an accident must accept his or her fate as meekly as the one who won in the sweepstakes because he actually has no hand in the determination of events even those which directly concern his or her life.

This acceptance is very similar to that of an unknowledgeable child who asks a series of questions on causes of things and just receives a blunt and exhausted answer: *talaga!* (because it is so or because God made it so) from an adult. And this, without any intellectual process.

Thus, I once heard a reckless jeepney driver reasoning out to one of his complaining passengers: "*Kung talagang madidisgrasya ka, — madidisgrasya ka! Kung hindi, hindi!*" (If you will really have to meet an accident, you will meet it no matter how careful you drive! If not, no!)

Hence, we can conclude that the Filipino believes in a certain kind of predestination.

RESIGNATION — This notion of predestination has, as its natural consequence, the resignation of its believers to their present lot in life. This is why we notice that a Filipino, upon incurring unto himself a certain misfortune, comforts himself with the words: "*Talagang ganyan lang ang buhay*" (Life is just like that). One need not worry.

Also, when he hears that a virtuous man is favored by luck, or, when he receives news that an evil man gets the misfortune he deserves, he exclaims: "*Talagang marunong ang Diyos*" (God is really wise). For He rewards the good and punishes the evil through certain ways and means that He alone knows. This is the reason why one who has met injustice in his life and is angered, is appeased by another saying: "*Huwag kang ganyan. Marunong ang Diyos,*" (Don't behave that way. God is wise.). These words are supposed to remind him that God will not leave him unavenged.

This fact of God being the Supreme Remunerator, therefore, in a way explains why the Filipino is so resigned to his lot.

SUPERSTITIONS — Then we have superstition whereby people attribute effects to the wrong causes. We find Filipinos believing in their *guhít ng palad* (line of the palm). Their lives are believed to be directed by the lines of their palms. So, he believes that whatever happens to him is his *kapalaran* (a word, which comes from *palad* i.e., palm, meaning *fate*). One who is fortunate is called *mapalad* (also coming from the word *palad*). And one who is unfortunate is termed *sawing-palad* (also coming from *palad*).

Palmistry is therefore closely associated with Filipino fatalism. Success or failure in life is believed to be predestined which is principally concretized in one's own palms.

Other signs or *signos* of one's fate which are but projections of the lines of the palms are also accepted. For example, we have the *munal sa balikat* (mole on the shoulder) which signifies that the owner will suffer hardships in his life. The same is said on the moles or mole on the furrows of one's cheeks which blocks the falling of one's tears.

INVESTIGATION THROUGH EFFECTS

In the preceding division of our paper, we have seen through the investigation of some of our usual expressions and other terms which we use, that the Filipino is actually fatalistic.

In this division of our discussion, we shall attempt to consider reactions which this *bahala-na* attitude arouse in our people upon incurring the effects of this behavioural pattern.

Necessarily, the effects of such attitude will either be good or bad. Hence, we divide this section of our paper between these two.

GOOD EFFECTS (*SUWERTE*)

When our *bahala-na* attitude brings about a good effect as, for example, when a traveller passes unharmed through a road near a cemetery at night despite beliefs that the said road

is infested by *aswang*, *mangkukulam*, *tianak* etc., the cause is attributed to the goodness of God. This is why, often, the frightened traveller, upon reaching his destination, exclaims in relief: "*Salamat sa Diyos!*" (Thanks be to God!).

When a poor man sacrifices his last coins to bet in the *huweteng* (a local kind of sweepstakes or raffle), and he wins, the luck is attributed again to the goodness of God. And, often, the money won is well taken care of because this is regarded as *grasya ng Diyos* (grace of God), although, of course, the social aspect of this *grasya ng Diyos* through the *pabalato* (shares of the money won distributed to relatives, neighbors, friends and other well-wishers similar to our more sophisticated "blow-out" done as an expression of joy) is never lacking.

EVIL EFFECTS (*MALAS*)

Our *bahala-na* attitude often have evil effects. These arouse different reactions from the Filipino. Some accept their fate humbly and consider them as just a matter of course. Others, attributing divine interventions in these, think of them as punishments from God. Still others content themselves with some superstitious explanations. And still, there are others who can go as far as to bitterly blame God for their misfortune.

We classify these reactions into three, namely, those who attribute these misfortunes to a non-divine cause, those who attribute them to a divine cause and those who attribute them to a superstitious cause. We divide this section of our paper among them.

NON-DIVINE CAUSE — There is a number of our people who, upon experiencing miseries in their lives, are able to accept them as they come without any grumbling or murmuring. It never occurs to them that such evils may have been sent by God. They just think that no evil can come from God since God is the source of good alone.

To my mind, these people are still influenced, and very well so, by the Chinese *Yang-Ying* principle which holds that everything is composed of opposites. Thus, there is male and female. There is light and darkness. There is sorrow and happiness in life.

These people believe in the happy harmony of things. As they, therefore, expect fortune, they also expect misfortune. Hence, the latter never comes as a surprise to them. It just arrives as a welcomed guest — and is received calmly, patiently. For *talagang ganyan ang buhay*. And they can carry on for they know that *marunong ang Diyos*. Time will come, they will also have their day (*May araw din siya*.)

DIVINE CAUSE — Here, the cause of the situation is referred to God as punishment for evil done. The situation is hereby thought of as self-caused. This situation, moreover, is regarded as remediable by repentance.

In extreme cases, however, when the full force of the *bahala-na* meaning *Bathala na*, that is, when “everything” is left in the hands of God (the *Bathala*, from where the term *bahala* is said to have originated) and misfortune comes which is thought of as not commensurate to the past good life of the subject, then faith in God Himself may be at stake.

God will then be blamed for all the harm one experiences in life no matter how seemingly irrational this may be.

SUPERSTITIOUS CAUSE—Instances also occur when the evil incurred is not considered as coming from God but is regarded as simply predetermined due to some signs (*signos*) in the subject himself as, for example, a *muna sa balikat* or *buwaya* (crocodile) mark in one’s palms which we have already mentioned above.

From birth, a person with *signos* are, therefore, thought of as destined to suffer or enjoy (the signs may also signify fortune as three consecutive daughters called *tatlong Maria* are regarded as *buenas* or *suwerte*) whatever the *signos* signify.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that our fatalism dates back to our pre-Spanish ancestors. However, some traces of Christian dogmas can be gleaned from our discussion on its effects. It appears that the missionaries did not attack this problem at the very roots.

Regarding the *good effects* which we discussed, we can say that our people should be taught how to be moderate in

giving *pabalato*. The Filipino has indeed the tendency to give away all he has for a "blow-out" and thus be a beggar again after the merry-making. As to the *evil effects* of this fatalism, we can say that we observe that the Filipino, after having incurred the bad effects of this *bahala-na* attitude, never loses hope to rise above it. Thus, we find that a sick person will never be let alone suffering. Remedies must have to be sought. If doctors are no longer able to do the cure, even *herbolarios* are resorted to even if it be just for the spirit of *pagbabakasakali* (chance).

Hence, here we can easily insert the saying: *Nasa Diyos ang awa, nasa tao ang gawa*. (Man proposes, God disposes.). Man has to work and not just leave everything to God. Also, through this channel of our *bahala-na* system, a catechist can approach the teaching of the Church's dogmas on grace, faith, providence, works and salvation.

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