

# OPINION & FEATURES

## Vigilante rule

**A**T a multi-sector meeting in Davao City last month, Mayor Rodrigo Duterte said: "If you are doing an illegal activity in my city, if you are a criminal or part of a syndicate that preys on the innocent people of the city, for as long as I am the mayor, you are a legitimate target of assassination."

That was a dangerous statement to make. It is an open invitation to lawlessness, a justification for anyone to take the law into his hands.

The laws on due process govern everyone and every part of the Philippine territory, even mayors and cities that claim that they have a low crime rate because of vigilante justice. And even when the state goes the due process route, no criminal is put to death because the death penalty law has been repealed.

It is thus a welcome development that the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) has finally

### GUEST EDITORIAL

taken cognizance of the unexplained killings of 814 people in Davao City since 1998. The suspicion is that the killings were done by the so-called Davao Death Squad, a shadowy vigilante group.

If the 814 people were suspects in various crimes or were known criminals, they should have been arrested, charged, prosecuted, tried and sentenced. That is the process in a nation that upholds the rule of law, not the rule of the mob or vigilantes. One big

danger in vigilante rule is the great possibility that an innocent man may be put to death without being accorded due process.

Government and civilian forces or groups cannot take shortcuts in enforcing the law. They have to abide by due process, even if such process takes time for justice to be meted out to the guilty. To do otherwise would be to take a backward step and to return to the law of the jungle.

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#### Maids and mothers

Rep. Risa Hontiveros of the Akbayan party-list group on Sunday condemned as "dis-



gusting, derogatory and vile" an article written by a Hong Kong columnist and broadcaster calling the Philippines "a nation of servants." Writing about the Philippines' and China's conflicting claims on the Spratly islands, Chip Tsao urged his countrymen not to bow to the Philippines because

there are more than 130,000 Filipino maids providing cheap labor in Hong Kong. Hontiveros took offense at Tsao's article and said *HK Magazine*, which carried the story, should apologize immediately for the racial slur.

Tsao and his compatriots should realize that Filipinas are

forced to work abroad because of lack of good-paying jobs in the Philippines. Many of these maids are teachers and professionals with university degrees who work as maids and earn salaries that are several times what they would earn in their own country.

Tsao and his ilk look down on the Filipino maids who do menial and backbreaking work. But do they realize that without their Filipino maids, they would not be able to work at high-paying jobs and enterprises? Probably the Filipino servants should make good their threat to go on strike.

The Filipinas may be servants "only," but they are performing a very important role in the economy and society of Hong Kong. If Chip Tsao (real name: To Kit) is a man and a gentleman, he should apologize immediately to the Philippines and the Filipinas. (*Inquirer.net*)

## Mystery slang

**P**EOPLE tend to associate anthropology with a study of cultures that are distant in place or time, with a tendency toward describing the most exotic aspects. In reality, anthropologists these days are far more interested in everyday culture—how cultures are made and why they change.

Last March 27, I wrote a column about Tagalog slang, and didn't realize that it would lead to a rather complicated adventure in linguistic forensics that shows just how dynamic culture can be, as exemplified by language. Here goes:

The March 27 column was mainly a review of Ferdinand Aguas' *Pinoy Dyoksyonaryo*, a compilation of 300 Tagalog words produced by what linguists call agglutination or combining existing morphemes or units with meanings. I picked out words which dealt mainly

with the body.

I was surprised to get more than the usual email feedback from readers, including several referring me to a posting from the Internet *Tagalog Words You Should Know*, a list of 20 words which has been circulating for several years now.

What got my detective work going was an email from noted writer Pete Lacaba, who said that going through my pickings from *Dyoksyonaryo*, he realized it was his first time to encounter some 90 percent of the terms, and which got him wondering if the author had just coined the terms, rather than picking them out from actual usage.

Pete's e-mail got me worried, because when I was doing my column I also had similar suspi-

cions. I hadn't heard most of the terms but then I've learned, through the years, that class and age differences in the Philippines can be quite significant when it comes to language. For example, I didn't know that "*luto ng Diyos*" [God's cooking] referred to sex until about 10 years ago, and I still run into many upper- and middle-class Filipinos, as well as non-Tagalog people, who are surprised, even shocked, when I use the metaphor.

Halfway through writing that March 27 column, I did check with a group of "experts" that I had, mostly young people living in a slum community in Quezon City. Some of the terms (for example, "himulmole," or hair on a mole), they recognized while others they didn't recognize, or weren't sure about. Again, I was not surprised: Slang is terribly ephemeral. Some emerge and enjoy short fame, before returning to obscurity; others linger on to become part of mainstream language.

#### Bubble Gang

After reading Lacaba's e-mail, I thought I'd do a bit more probing, and what better way than to actually get to the author himself. I do not know Ferdinand Aguas but I was able to track him down through the Internet, through an ad he had posted for his book.

Yes indeed, he had coined the words himself. He does many things, including writing scripts and at one time, he handled *Bagong Diks*, a segment on the popular comedy show *Bubble Gang*. *Bagong Diks* featured these new words, described as words for stuff you've always wanted a term for.

Again, I had to do a bit of investigation here, checking with younger friends and students, and they knew right away about the show, and *Bagong Diks*, although this segment is no longer featured. *Bagong Diks*, my friends told me, was very popular and at least two suggested that maybe people even picked up the coined words there, and began to ac-

tually use them.

We might actually be seeing an example of how the mass media introduce new words, even through comedy shows. With the words now compiled as book, people might find some of the terms so innovative that they begin to use it, undaunted, as I was, by the title *Dyoksyonaryo*. Only after talking with Aguas did the title hit me: "Oh no, how could I have missed that title: the terms were meant as jokes!"

You never know about what words will click, but the entries in both *Dyoksyonaryo* and the *Tagalog Words You Should Know*, which has been posted and re-posted dozens of times in different sites, reveal some of our cultural foci, meaning particular areas or domains of our world and our lives that we seem particularly interested in, even fixated on.

An example would be smells. We have dozens of words for different kinds of smells that would be described in English simply as "fragrant" or "bad-smelling." Besides the classic "*ma-*" suffixed adjectives, we create a tremendous number of possible terms by combining "*amoy*" [smell] with another word (e.g., "*amoy baby*," which is supposed to be a pleasant smell but which I would challenge after changing more than a thousand diapers in the last few years).

I figured that with so many smelly terms, we didn't need any more but the *Tagalog Words You Should Know* list has an entry "*baktol*," referring to a smell that sticks to your clothes and that you encounter during "registration, in elevators or in FXs." It's described as somewhat similar to the smell of rotting guavas. Although supposedly the apex of foulness, "*baktol*" seems mild as compared with another one called "*dukil*," which is associated with a rather strange, almost perverse form of excavation.

I'm afraid I can't go into the details of "*dukil*" and many of the words on the list because I know many Inquirer readers are almost un-Filipino with their squeamishness about the body. *Tagalog Words You Should Know* is terribly corporal and scatologi-

cal (toilet-based), but the words support my view (which I mentioned in the last column) about Filipinos being quite fixated on bodies. It's not surprising that Aguas also invented many words around that domain.

#### 'Burnik'

I did want to smuggle in one finding from my linguistic excavation of *Tagalog Words You Should Know*. Psychologists sometimes describe Filipinos as "oral" but an analysis of slang—real and invented—suggests we can be quite anal. We seem fixated on phenomena associated with that region, anatomically, physiologically, meteorologically (you know as in winds).

In my March 27 column, I mentioned that I had learned the term "*burnik*" only recently from students and that they used it to mean "anal hair." Lacaba sent a definition that he says dates back to 2001. Interestingly the definition he sent also appears in the Internet's *Tagalog Words You Should Know*, the term refers to certain things that tenaciously stick to the anal hair.

Again, I checked with my informants, admittedly all younger ones, and they were unanimous that it referred to the hair and not the hangers-on. Explanation? It looks like we're seeing rapid linguistic mutation here, from what you find on the hair, to the hair itself.

More examples for cultural analysis: three words in the Internet postings ("*wenekleng*," "*baktung*," "*bakti*") deal with sensitive body parts that people unintentionally expose. How do you explain these terms? They suggest voyeurism, but I also think, paradoxically, that it tells us of how modesty drives us into linguistic promiscuity, with warnings to be careful.

As for all the words we have about the body, and stuff coming from and sticking to the body, I believe these reflect our obsession with personal hygiene. Somewhere in the linguistic maze way, you'll find a link between the "*burnik*" and the "*tabo*" [water dipper], which I wrote about last month. (*Inquirer.net*)

## Fools and sages

**I**HAVE it on good authority that this Wednesday Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo will go on leave, to last until the end of her term in May 2010. The reason for this is that she has finally seen the wisdom of the words she herself uttered in December 2002, which is that so long as she is there, this country will remain divided. Specifically, she will do so to assure the public that, one, there will be elections in May 2010, and, two, those elections will be reasonably clean and aboveboard. She has realized further that so long as she is there, the country won't just remain divided, it will remain in doubt about whether there will be elections next year, and whether elected candidate will get to serve as president.

She does so, without prejudice to being prosecuted after May 2010—or even before—for a whole slew of crimes and misdemeanors, including talking to an official of the Commission on Elections during the counting of votes. She does so bowing to the commonsensical view that you can never assure clean elections in the future unless you are able to correct the dirty elections of the past. Without crime and punishment, there can be only crime and more crime. Without cheating and imprisonment, there can only

be cheating and more cheating.

I have it on good authority that the representatives will give up Charter change in whatever form, shape, or size. Certainly, they will give up converting Congress into a constituent assembly, or "con-ass," not wanting the term to become their epitaph, namely a Congress of Assess. The reason they'll do so is that they've come to realize there is no urgency to changing the Charter before 2010, other

than the urgent need of the current occupant of Malacañang to keep occupying it. Some have realized there is in fact no need to change the Charter at all, charters being only as good as people are willing to abide by them. A charter has no meaning in a country whose leaders do not obey the law to begin with. A charter has no meaning in a country whose leaders lie, cheat, and steal to begin with.

First change the leaders, then change the Charter.

I understand that there are holdouts among the representatives who insist on con-ass-ing to death. But I understand too that they are being encouraged to smoke, drink, and eat lechon, crispy pata, and chicharon so they can do the public an immense service.

I have it on good authority that Raul Gonzalez and Mercedes Gutierrez will be replaced as justice secretary and ombudsman by Edith Burgos and Ferdinand Marcelino, respectively and respectfully. Burgos has been a victim of horrendous injustice, and therefore has been filled with a deep and compelling need to find justice not just for herself but for others in the same plight. She will probably take in Acsa Ramirez as deputy for much the same reason. Marcelino proved his mettle when he exposed the corruption among the prosecutors in the case of the "Alabang boys," refusing to be cowed by Gonzalez in one exchange at a Senate hearing. In the process, he gave the world to wonder who the real criminals were in that case. Just as well, he gave the world to wonder if there wasn't a drug that added the brain more thoroughly than methamphetamine hydrochloride.

I understand Gonzalez and Gutierrez will be relocated to the national penitentiary where they will occupy cells facing each other, a situation calculated to make them want to beg for the death penalty.

I have it on good authority that the bishops, archbishops and cardinals will follow the example of St. Peter who, after denying Christ three times as the cock crowed, regretted his cowardice and faithlessness bitterly and spent the rest of his life being a living witness to him. He died a martyr's death for it. The bishops, archbishops, and cardinals, after having denied their flock as many times as Gloria Ma-

capagal-Arroyo crowed, will finally regret their avarice and treachery and live the rest of their lives speaking out bitterly against corruption and untruth. Thundering forth in particular with the spectacle of the hungry and dying, with the sight of children who sleep in the streets with the dead weight of exhaustion and rugby, corruption kills. It kills just as surely as putting gun to the head of children and squeezing the trigger. It kills just as surely as Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo opens her mouth to speak.

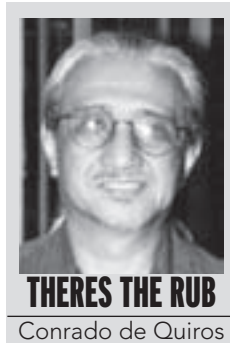
We will do what we can to help them attain a martyr's death.

I have it on good authority that the courts will finally convict the murderers of the journalists and political activists, proclaiming loudly that if the law cannot uphold the most precious of human gifts which is life, then it might as well be written on toilet paper of the kind that tears easily and doesn't really wipe ass. I have it on good authority the military officers will now follow only orders of the lawful kind. The notion that theirs is not to reason why, theirs is but to do and die, makes only for a nice rhyme and not for much sense. Henceforth, they will no longer obey orders to kill wantonly, scuttle rallies blindly, and help their superiors, military and civilian, steal massively. I have it on good authority that the ex-government officials who helped foist Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo on us will apologize to us and vow as penance to not seek any position in the government after Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

I have it on good authority that the people will finally rouse from their stupor, and marveling at the extent to which their country has been debased, debauched and deprived of everything that is good and decent, and marveling even more at the extent to which they have allowed it to happen, march through the streets to demand an end to the madness. Never again.

I have all this on good authority. That good authority comes from this day of days, April 1. I've always wondered why it's called April Fools' Day. It is the only wise day in the whole year.

It is the only sane day in the whole year. (*Inquirer.net*)



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