The academic regalia: Origin and practice

By Teresita Tanhueco-Tumapon
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IN late March and this April, graduation ceremonies highlight the end of this school year. Quite historic — because of the impending effects of our transition to K-12 which could leave HEI’s with much unused physical and human resources as well. There’s the problem with tenured academics who with mutual consent could be assigned to teach in senior high school to come up with a regular load. Lawyers must have long studied the different legalities on employment such as retrenchment, redundancy or other severance schemes like separation and termination pay that cut across security of tenure. Indeed, with all the excitement of our seniors preparing for the grand day of their graduation – there are these realities of the transition to K-12 that not only private HEI’s but chartered ones too, have to contend with.

My web search on academic regalia led me to a write-up about practices of several top Philippine universities. But we shall begin with the origins. Our source says the academic regalia is more a US terminology. The cap and gown or “toga” as most of us in the Philippines term it, is also known as “academicals” and the practice of wearing it during classes began in the 12th and 13th centuries. Those were also the years that “universities were taking form.” During those times, scholars wore the robes of a cleric which was the ordinary garb of a scholar whether being a teacher or student. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_dress>

While at St. Andrews University in Scotland for an attachment, I recall that even on ordinary days, I would see students wearing the academic gown when they went to classes. In the case of our class at St. Andrews, we class members were not made to wear the gown, maybe because we were not regular students pursuing a degree but fellows enjoying free burses for post-graduate summer courses. I recall too, that St. Andrews as a university town (meaning the town is inside the University grounds) had several stores nearby the Counselling building where academic gowns hang on display. A student wearing a gown riding a bicycle to go for his classes was an ordinary part of the scene.
However, at Surrey University in Guildford, regular students did not wear gowns. Maybe because Surrey U, established in modern times (1966), adopted the practice of the 20th century polytechnics. In the case of St. Andrews which was founded in 1410, it kept to its centuries’ long tradition. It is the oldest university among the four universities in Scotland and ranks 13th among top universities in the United Kingdom. As has been remarked quite often, St. Andrews bears the brand of the Oxford (Oxford and Cambridge) – the top universities worldwide. Our 21st century learners will recall that in this campus, Prince William met Ms. Kate Middleton, now Prince William’s wife, Her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Cambridge.

Comparing universities in Europe and those in the US, European universities varied in style of the academic gown and color of the hood. In the US, the Committee on Academic Costumes and Ceremonies appointed by the American Council on Education held meetings to agree on a standardized design and color of the robe, hood and cap for the baccalaureate, the masters and the doctoral degrees. Much of the design was patterned after that of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_dress>.

My web search happily chanced on a write up of practices here in the Philippines, specifically of the top universities. It informs us that “most colleges and universities in the Philippines follow the traditional mortarboard, hood and gown during graduation. In some of our schools, the color of the gown corresponds to the school color (blue for Colegio de San Juan de Letran and Ateneo de Manila University, Green for Far Eastern University, and Red for San Beda College).” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_dress>. The source also says that the “pontifical university – the University of Sto. Tomas – draws its academic attire from its Spanish heritage known as birreta and mozetta” which are “worn by those from the Graduate School and the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery.” Graduating baccalaureates wear “the traditional mortarboard, hood and gown.” Aside from graduation ceremonies, academics “wear their academic regalia during the Opening Mass of the Academic Year (the Missa de Apertura) and during Solemn Investitures.” In the Ateneos, the Missa de Apertura is referred to as the Mass of the Holy Spirit. At the University of the Philippines is “the sablay which is a band worn at the right shoulder of the candidate and which is moved to the left shoulder upon conferment of the degree. The sablay is worn over the barong for men and the filipiniana for women.” UST has its own academic colors. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_dress>. 
Although there has been no official country-wide policy of the form, design and color of the academic regalia, the academic colors used by most of our universities follow those found in the website of US universities due our historical ties with Uncle Sam. These colors are “maize for Agriculture, white for Arts, Letters, and Humanities, drab (dirty yellow) for Commerce, Accountancy and Business, lilac for Dentistry, copper for Economics, orange for Engineering, brown for Architecture and Fine Arts and light blue for Education. Facings on sleeves for doctoral gowns, trimmings, tassels on hoods and caps bear the color of the discipline.”
<https://commencement.colostate.edu/history-of-academic-regalia/>. The lining of the hood traditionally follows the university colors.

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