

The Inner Secrets Of Banahaw

By by Tingting Cojuangco | Updated April 30, 2001 - 12:00am

The signs were itchy-bitsy on the highway but nonetheless we finally we made it to Dolores, Quezon. Later we were told that a spirit, half-horse half-man, had made us lose our way because he did not want us to confront the holy mountain of Banahaw. How did we know that? *Mang* Berting prayed before the Blessed Mother, held up a sheet of bond paper over my forehead, then moved it round and round. After that, he poured baby oil on the paper and out came the figure.

Like many other countries, the Philippines is not without its sacred rites. We hear about Potola of Tibet, Machu Picchu of Peru, Jerusalem of Israel and Palestine, Mecca of Saudi Arabia, Stonehenge of England, and as an answer to them all, we have our very own Banahaw looming large and regal.

The first stories of Banahaw were told to a small group about a century ago. Prior to that, only healers and practitioners of the occult knew of the inner secrets of Banahaw. Maybe, it had to be so. The Spanish authorities did not take kindly to religious exercises outside the parameters of sanctioned Catholicism, and had a long history of converting natives with a sword's edge. Native Filipinos who refused to deny their indigenous beliefs feared for their lives and entered the forested sanctity of Banahaw quietly. There they communicated with their gods. They attracted no attention and disclosed nothing to anyone but their most trusted disciples about the special character of the mountain. Thus, the aura of secrecy covered the legends of a mountain that got away with it, so to speak. The original adherence to Banahaw was characterized by silence when it came to the mountain and its powers. The oldest public references to it as a special mountain was found in songs and poems, including one by Claro M. Recto in 1911 where he described Banahaw as a mystical mountain. A centuries-old report found in the annals of the Caysasay Chapel in Batangas was first to mention Banahaw in relation to healing and the paranormal. It involved a miracle, the startling resurrection of a Chinese mason confirmed killed by Spanish soldiers but who eventually found his way back to the town. An investigation was conducted and the story of the Chinese mason was kept in the records of that old chapel. The story has it that a Chinese mason, who was hacked to death and thrown into the river, recounted how he was lifted out of the water by a woman and brought to a place where he could see the mountain, Banahaw. Other than that, the historical records mentioning Banahaw had reference to the movement of Apolinario dela Cruz (better known as Hermano Pule of the *Confradia de San Jose*), and Macario Sakay, both related to the rebellion against Spain's rule. There were very religious nuances to both these personalities and their causes, but it is for the political color that they are better known.

What I saw on Good Friday had no political color. On that rocky mountain inside its forest there knelt a man, the head of *Haring Bakal* in prayer before a crucifix and a homemade poster of the Blessed Mother, folklorish in motif. Leaning against the cross was a *bolo*. The dusky, high-cheekboned leader at prayer came over and teasingly said, "*Kayo ba ang itataga?*" The lady in white beside him with numerous silver rings – one of them with a triangle and an eye in the center – simply beamed. She was a single mother devoted to the *Puliconfradia*. This presiding male – the powerful one with light brown eyes, the head of *Haring Bakal* – went to his place before the altar to pray, standing upright. His legs soon trembled with energy, as though electrocuted by a high voltage wire. Meanwhile, a member of his sect sat on a bench, his knees and feet bobbing up and down impatiently or nervously. The time had come after 15 minutes. He lay on the bench facing downward. His leader, who was standing above him lifted his arms armed with the *bolo*. Whack! The sharp edge of this long knife hit his right calf. Another blow hit his thigh, then twice he was hit on the left leg. Sitting up, he received a direct hit in the waist and then on his back. Then the exhibition was over. No blood. No cut. No wounds. The sacrificial lamb stood to pray before Christ's mother. His arms trembled, he stroked his hair backwards again and again, stretched out his arms in prayer. After him followed this powerful, handsome, light-built practitioner of the occult. He lifted his *bolo* upward to the Blessed Mother's poster, then lay it down gently beside the crucifix and Sto. Niño on an altar. We mingled with the participants and their families for a while and found out they hailed from Muntinlupa and Pasay. Was this a miracle or magic from their hero, their priest, their leader, their saint? Here in Banahaw the belief in heroes is equivalent to belief in saints founded in a culture which viewed the spiritual and material world as one. It would have been unthinkable to have a hero who did not possess great spiritual virtue to rectify the deterioration of our social and political values.

It is debatable as to which religious group was the first to establish a physical and permanent presence in Banahaw. What is not debatable is that the Dolores side of Banahaw hosts the key shrines which symbolize the sanctity of the mountain. And it is in the Dolores side of Banahaw where the various religious groups worship and renew their spiritual strength, in two barangays of Dolores, namely Sta. Lucia and Kinabuhayan.

Banahaw has many faces. Those who know and profess the public face of Banahaw – which is largely Christian – are the "new commerce." They go to learn of the pre-Christian cosmology of a mountain which speaks of a genesis of gods in their chosen Olympus. The value of its sacred waters is never to be underscored. I was made to drink water after *Mang* Berting blessed it to cure a sore throat. The water in Banahaw is clean and pure, you can drink even the tap water.

Good Friday's walk brought us through a maze of makeshift stores and peddlers from Laguna, Rizal, Quezon yielding bountiful magic potions and seeds for healing, protection and to alleviate heartache. Aside from T-shirts, food and holy statues, pots and pans were sold.

"What I have discovered after almost 20 years of personal research and experimentation," says a friend, "is that the occult part of Banahaw and her political face are one; that original Filipino culture and spirituality make no distinction between one and the other. Therefore, it is not surprising to ascribe religious, spiritual nuances and political faces to our national heroes like Jose Rizal. Along the way, of course, are many charlatans and pretenders claiming lineage with Banahaw to gain credibility."

This leads me to the more current and interesting part. What religious groups are credible? Or worth studying? Or worth emulating?

At the moment, there are only three groups with authentic ties to a more or less traditional indigenous history. The largest is *Ciudad Mistica de Dios* whose headquarters (or *Sentral Heneral*) is in Sta. Lucia. It has about 100,000 registered members spread all over Luzon with some 5,000 currently based in Sta. Lucia. The *Suprema*, a humble woman in her early 60s, has the features of an American Indian. She has been the spiritual head since the age of 27, having inherited her status from her mother.

The next group appears to be UNACED whose *Sentral* is in Cardona, Rizal. The members of this group mostly come from various municipalities in the province of Rizal. Though this religious group has no base in Banahaw, the religious beliefs are rooted in both Banahaw and the Bible.

The third group is *Tres Personas Solo Dios* whose headquarters is situated in Barangay Kinabuhayan, Dolores. I am not sure how many they are, but like *Ciudad Mistica*, this church has chapters around Luzon. Two are led by women (*Ciudad Mistica* and UNACED) while one is led by a man (*Tres Personas Solo Dios*). All three are registered churches and perform rites like baptism, marriages and others which are recognized by law.

Ciudad Mistica, just around the bend from the Montelibano house, has daily Masses, but Saturday is their equivalent of the Sabbath. They have male and female priests, though mostly the priestesses perform Mass in the *Mistica*'s huge marble church. They have flagellations, purely on voluntary basis. Their basic values coincide with the beatitudes of Christ and Filipino traditions of Southern Tagalog. Their religious framework is comprehensive, from pre-Old to New Testament, to an unfolding spiritual existence with emphasis on living by the virtues daily to develop one's goodness. *Bayanihan* is a lived cultural value and is exercised in their community. The par economic status of most of its members, makes *bayanihan* even more necessary. Work, which is farming, is a primary value. Nationalism assumes a part of spirituality and the material exists in harmony with the spiritual. The *Suprema* of *Ciudad Mistica* has a kitchen that's so big. It must be to feed many followers. Food is cooked in cauldrons over coal by the elder women. Some do the cleaning, serving for guests by a long dining table for 35 people.

Many religious orders of the Catholic faith including Catholic schools have gone to Banahaw and *Ciudad*

Mistica to observe and study folk religiosity, experiencing the sincerity of the simple people. Many theologians from different faiths and countries have attempted to absorb the national concept of a Mother God, which is a fundamental feature of the belief system in Banahaw and *Ciudad Mistica*. The symbolic leadership of a *Suprema* as in *Ciudad Mistica* expresses this religious belief of some sort of equality in gender among deities or gods.

There are no gender biases in this spiritual mountain lovely by nightfall. One departs Banahaw resigned to what fate brings and with a tranquility and a feeling of being unburdened. The sacred Banahaw hears and absorbs troubles, doubts and worries in its blessed bowels and holy waters, among rocks that seemingly have faces carved on them by nature with trees whose roots intertwine and reach out enticing, believers, tourists and religious sects in this ground filled with holy prayers.

Lovely too is that you can take home an amulet, a piece of sacred wood buried in the forests high up in Banahaw's peak where clouds are her crown and are champions over the shadows of the sun.

Ref.: <http://www.philstar.com/arts-and-culture/85758/inner-secrets-banahaw>

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