



## The Sacredness of *Libingan ng mga Bayani* in the Pictorial Representations of Filipino “Youth in Revolt”

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**Abstract:** In the canon of sociology of religion, the sacred is taken as the assumed moral architecture that is made visible or comes to the fore only when threatened by the profane, which threatens to destabilize it (Durkheim, Freud, and Weber). However, this pertains mainly to its (seemingly) necessary association with religion. In the controversy surrounding the clandestine burial of the remains of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the *Libingan ng mga Bayani*, the sacredness of the place, and what it symbolizes for Filipinos’ sense of heroism, is pushed at the forefront of national consciousness. The paper claims that the analysis of Filipino youth protest against the burial through their slogans, posters and memes, manifests the changed contours in the meaning of the sacred, which are culled from Filipino youth’s experiences of banal (holy), maganda (beautiful) and ritwal (ritual). Thus, what is the sacred is that which is relational, or it may be a content of experience, and/or engagement in “fleeting moments” that can be encountered in spaces and places where young people find themselves in the here and now.

**Key Words:** Sacred; Filipino; Youth; Revolt

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In most cultures, sacred spaces underlie great people thereby making them markers of ethnic, national or religious identity. Traditionally, sacred refers to that which is regarded with great respect and reverence by a particular religion, group, or individual. Material and visual markers often embody the location of the sacred. While the sacred is still primarily understood as “that which is set apart,” by religion, increasingly, scholars have mapped out the migration of the sacred from its ontological moorings into the mundane and secular activities. In this light, the sacredness of spaces and places is not anymore tied to them being locations of worship, but in the way a particular group, community or individual ascribes sacredness unto them.

In the Philippines, cemeteries are related to religion, particularly Christianity, insofar as they are designated burial grounds for deceased faithful who are awaiting resurrection, according to Christian beliefs. The demarcation between an ordinary ground and a cemetery ground is suffused by symbolic meanings that are forged by the rituals of burial of the body of a deceased loved one and pilgrimage by relatives and friends who come to visit during special occasions. Due to this distinction, cemeteries are sacred because they are protected from mundane activities as well as undertakings that are “disrespectful” (Julie Rugg, 2000). While this realization still upholds the traditional dichotomy of the sacred (cemetery) and the secular (non-cemetery), a monkey-wrench of a controversy is thrown towards this traditional dichotomy when many young Filipinos

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protested against the burial of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the Libingan ng mga Bayani or National Heroes' Cemetery.

Many young Filipinos from various high schools, colleges and universities all over the Philippines raised an indignant howl against the clandestine ("like a thief in the night," according to many Filipinos) burial of the remains of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos at the LNMB on November 18, 2016. Much to the surprise of older citizens who would tend to dismiss young people with derisive remarks such as "self-absorbed millennials" and "temperamental brats" who are concerned only with taking selfies and similar activities," young people found themselves in the forefront of two big mass protests against the burial.

### *1.1 Much Ado about the Libingan ng mga Bayani (National Heroes' Cemetery)*



Image 1 Libingan ng mga Bayani. Photo by Luis Teodoro

The National Heroes' Cemetery (*Libingan ng mga Bayani*) is located at the Fort Bonifacio in the City of Taguig, Metro Manila. It is a designated burial place for past presidents, patriots, national scientists and artists. In June 8, 1948, President Elpidio Quirino decreed the creation of a special cemetery to serve not only as a final resting place for past presidents, national heroes and patriots, but also as a memorial to inspire generations.

Just like any other cemetery in the country, the *LNMB* does not intrude upon national consciousness except during the days leading to All Souls' Day, which is celebrated by the entire nation with reverence every November 1. The *LNMB's* general obscurity, notwithstanding that some noted political figures are interred there, has prompted Supreme Court Associate Justice Teresita Leonardo-De Castro to remark that the *LNMB* is just "a cemetery for deceased military personnel." (Marcelo, 2016)

The statement above was meant to rhetorically challenge the claim that the burial of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos at the *LNMB* is a gross disrespect of the spirit of the place, which is about its being a final resting place for heroes. Thus, to dismiss the *LNMB* as just an ordinary cemetery is to strip it off of any national importance whatsoever.

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Ironically, the *LNMB*, a rather obscure place in the outskirts of Taguig in Metro Manila, has become a site of national importance recently; it has become a *sacred place* for both the pro-Marcos camp (“the only resting place befitting the stature of a Ferdinand Marcos”) and the anti-Marcos faction (“A Marcos ought not to defile such holy place that is reserved only for heroes”).

An analysis of Filipino youth protest through their slogans, posters and memes, aims to show the changed contours in the meaning of the sacred, which are culled from Filipino youth’s experiences of *banal* (holy), *maganda* (beautiful) and *ritwal* (ritual) (Baring et al, 2016).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Viral memes, slogans and posters that are posted on the Internet are the new ways that this generation of Filipino digital natives employs to manifest their opinions, feelings, and thoughts. The paper draws inspiration from the methodology used by UK sociologists Sarah Dunlop and Pete Ward. Dunlop and Pete Ward’s research on young Polish migrants and second-generation youth in Britain employed photographs taken by participants themselves to narrate what they considered to be significant or sacred to them, posits that while religion and religious beliefs are important to young Polish immigrants, “access to the sacred happens through meaningful relationships and engagement with the natural world” (Dunlop & Ward, 2012, 440).

## 3. THE FILIPINO YOUTH IN REVOLT

Young people’s political awakenings in the world are well-documented and studied by many scholars multiple times across decades and in various contexts. Just a few years ago, and amidst global uncertainties that left many young people struggling with unemployment, prohibitive student loans, skyrocketing real estate costs, and these, undoubtedly, were exacerbated by rapidly decreasing natural resources in the world, young people, particularly in Tunisia, launched the *Arab Spring* in 2011. It is a phenomenon, organically drawn, when many young people in Tunisia massed up to protest against the injustice done to a street vendor who set himself on fire due to constant harassment from authorities. The pressure from the massing people was too much for the then President, Zine el-Abedin Ben Ali who eventually resigned and fled the country with his immediate family.

Tunisian young people used the Internet deftly. In particular, social networks such as **Twitter** and **Facebook** were used to capture raw images of their protests. The *Arab Spring* spread quickly to Egypt where a similar phenomenon was witnessed. The world, it would seem, sided with the young people in revolt. In the case of Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak was ousted, and his government overthrown, as it was in Tunisia.

Closer to home, the *Umbrella Movement* in Hong Kong started in 2014. High School students led the spontaneous movement, which aimed to evoke once again democratic ideals and sentiments from older citizens, and these ideals were now being threatened by an increasingly restrictive political climate that engulfs the islands after China took over in 1997. Can western-style democracy, with its emphasis on the promulgation of human rights, be compatible in Asia? That the champions of democracy, through calls of non-interference from

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the Central Politburo of the Communist Party of China are young people, speaks of an important matter that is worthy to note: young people have been, and will always be, catalysts of change (whether for good or for bad) in the world.



**Image 2** Young Filipinos on their way to People's Monument in Edsa on November 30, 2016. A protester holds up a poster with words in Filipino that translate to "Marcos not a hero."

It is against this backdrop that we examine the Filipino "youth in revolt." The phrase, "youth in revolt," was coined by 2 cousins who were eager to join anti-burial protests using their own homemade slogans. They printed it on shirts and posted a picture of themselves wearing them on **Instagram**, a popular photo-sharing social network site. The picture quickly went viral. They decided to sell these shirts on-line to people to wear to protests or gatherings or whenever they feel like expressing their stand against this particular divisive political issue.

### *3.1 Marcos not a Hero*

For many young Filipinos who eventually joined the protests against the burial, there is something *off-putting* about the clandestine way the burial of the remains of Marcos occurred in a cemetery that is unequivocally named *Libingan ng mga Bayani* or National Heroes' Cemetery. The sneaky way the burial had occurred aroused strong emotions of disgust.

Philippine History textbooks, in varying degrees of coverage, mention about a dark period in Philippines' modern history: The Martial Law period under the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos, spanned from 1972 to 1981 although presidential decrees continued to take effect until 1984. In 1986, a massive citizen protest called the EDSA People Power Revolution, brought the dictatorship to its knees and sent Marcos' immediate family to exile in Hawaii. The flight was facilitated by then US President George H. Bush.

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In 1989, Marcos died in Hawaii. In 1993, his family asked the Philippine President at the time, Fidel Ramos, Marcos' erstwhile Military Chief of Staff who joined the protests against him in 1986, and who happened to be his second cousin as well, to allow the remains of Marcos to be brought back to Philippines, as per the latter's dying request. President Ramos, who championed the *win-win solution* to everything, agreed to the family's request on one condition: that the remains would be brought to Marcos' hometown in Batac, Ilocos Norte where it would be placed beside his deceased mother's remains.

Fast forward to May 9, 2016, and the late Ferdinand Marcos' son and namesake, Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. almost won the vice-presidency in the national election, which also saw Rodrigo Duterte, a Marcos' family ally, winning the highest political position in the land through a massive electoral landslide. It would only be a matter of time for a call for the burial of elder Marcos at the *LNMB* to be made by the newly-elected president whose campaign promises included the interment of the body of the deceased Ferdinand Marcos at the *LNMB*.

On November 8, 2016, the Supreme Court cleared the legal impediments for the burial to happen. And when nobody was looking, on November 18, 2016, the remains of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos was brought to the National Heroes Cemetery from Ilocos Norte and was buried privately yet was accorded with full military honors usually reserved for deceased patriots and heroes.

In a matter of hours after the burial, students from Ateneo de Manila University, a private institution, and University of the Philippines, a public one, trooped to the historic Lady of EDSA, which was a marker to commemorate the EDSA People Power Revolution, to protest what just happened and to make themselves be heard loudly and clearly by the general public.

In an opinion piece published in nationally-circulated broadsheet, a young Filipino, 18 years old, urged her fellow youthful citizens to "speak up" against what she calls as "living in irony as the bane of this country's existence, Ferdinand Marcos, has been buried a hero. This brazen act not only disrespected Filipinos but also disregarded the hardships and privation that they experienced during his reign." (Marasigan, 2016)

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Image 3 Slogan translates to, "Make some noise to unbury the dead." Photo by ABS-CBN News

To “speak up” as a young Filipino might prove to be challenging in a culture that regards the young as incapable of forming real opinions about politics (or anything for that matter). A viral meme, which was supposedly between an older person and a younger one, captures this attitude well. In the said meme, the older person quite derisively dismisses young people’s protest against the burial as inconsequential because “[young Filipinos] were not born yet during the Martial Law period and therefore have no right to say anything good or bad about it. The younger person countered back, “You were not there during the birth of Jesus but you happily enjoy Christmas!”

The clapback or retort supposedly uttered by a young Filipino underscores several things: Firstly, the youth “answers” back to an elder. To do so is frowned upon by many Filipinos; secondly, the manner with which the retort was flung about was impertinent, impolite and improper; and thirdly, the clapback’s unassailable logic undermines a death-dealing cultural stereotype that regards young people as being incapable of forming their own opinions, even less if they would have the temerity to share them quite freely.

Image 3 aims to rouse the youth in particular and the public in general to make noise, to speak up, and to do so in a loud manner as to “unbury” the dead. Image 3 deftly uses witty pun, by which Filipinos the world over are known for and written in *coño* speak popular with middle-class Filipino youth are known for, for which they are also chided because it’s not proper to mix Tagalog and English in one sentence.



### 3.2 From Cyberspace to Real Space



Image 4 Photo by ABS-CBN News

A large number of Filipino youth have wholeheartedly embraced cyberspace, and have taken to the Internet as well as information and computer mediated technologies or ICTs like ducks to water. Normally regarded as sullen and uncommunicative in geographical space, they are hyper gregarious in cyberspace which they considerably and exceptionally employ to creatively express their selves, opinions, feelings and emotions. It is not a coincidence that a status update in **Facebook** is called a *shout out*. And in the seemingly unlimited vastness of cyberspace, it is exactly as termed, a shout out to announce one's presence; to render one as significant and important and not at all an unknown or just another face in the crowd (Peracullo, 2013). The true power of cyberspace lies in its ability to provide democratic spaces for people to express themselves. Young people embrace the Internet and ICTs largely for this. While as mature people, we do not operate any under illusion that cyberspace would be some sort of utopia where people can connect meaningfully in all levels, the reality is, many young people do find their engagement with cyberspace meaningful.

While some Filipino young people might feel very comfortable navigating the vast expanse of cyberspace, those who took to the streets to join anti-burial protests, as evident in Image 4, thought that "real battles are fought offline." The female young person in Image 4 describes herself as "not a troll." A troll is cyberspace term for someone who disrupts a thoughtful exchange of ideas of "netizens" (Internet citizens) by repeatedly posting obscene and annoying messages. Trolls have nothing else going in their lives that are of significance to the greater public.

Accordingly, "real battles are fought offline." The fact is, cyberspace is still inaccessible to a great number of people on the planet especially those who are very poor or living in poor countries which lack the necessary infrastructures to access it, despite the United Nations' estimate that around 2 billion people on the planet are using the Internet for varying reasons. The Philippines itself has joined the Internet as early as 1994 yet more than twenty-two years later, digital divide persists even if some degree of economic boom has been noted by economists worldwide. In a report presented by Yahoo and market research company, Nielsen in 2011 on a study they conducted on the state of Internet use in the country, digital growth only occurred in highly

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urban centers in the country, namely Metro Manila, Cebu and Davao. Poverty and lack of infrastructures to access cyberspace continue to prevent a significant number of Filipino youth from joining and participating in global information highways. The oft-used image of a shrinking world because of Internet acquires an ominous dimension when we factor in digital divide among those who have the means to participate and those who cannot.

For young protesters then, it is important to move beyond the confines of the Internet and bring the issue to the actual, real world where people live out their lives mostly away from the reach of cyberspace.

#### 4. THE FILIPINO YOUTH AND THE SACRED

Jay Demerath urges scholars to look for the “contours” of the sacred outside the parameters of religion (2000). For Gordon Lynch, the sociology of the sacred entails paying attention to public discourse and observing strong emotions or social actions regarding what is said to be or is treated as ‘sacred’ (Lynch, 2012 in Dunlop & Ward, 2012,434).

Along this line, De La Salle University scholars from various academic disciplines undertook a landmark study on the Filipino youth’s attitudes towards the sacred. The study presented an empirical understanding of the sacred among the Filipino youth from a multi-cultural and multi-faith context. The results of the research provides significant insights into what the Filipino youth, described in the study as those who are 16-24 years old, understood to be as the sacred for them. For the young people, the sacred, although it is still taken to be related to religion, has gone beyond it when they also expressed that those that they hold to be important in their lives are sacred. Moreover, for the Filipino youth the sacred is more encompassing than religion so far as its concerns are the subjective experiences and convictions of every person who increasingly finds that their individual option is an absolute value (Baring et al, 2016, 4).

An empirical look into their attitudes towards the sacred reveals that Filipinos meaningfully understand the concept as operating within the parameters of *banal*, *maganda* and *ritwal*:

*Banal* (Eng. holy), *maganda* (Eng. beautiful) and *ritwal* (Eng. ritual)—that is inclusive of religious and non-religious categories. *Banal* is used because it is the most commonly held Filipino appropriation of the sacred and can only be concretized by, and materialized in, ritual. *Maganda* pertains to all things positive, which are associated with the sacred, such as being well, pure, attractive, productive, pleasurable, meaningful and beautiful. *Maganda* refers to the moral sense in terms of thoughts, feelings and actions. *Ritwal* is usually associated with religious activities and ritual leaders, and if expanded as a construct may include everyday activities that transform and impute hitherto mundane concerns into something that is *banal* and *maganda* (Baring et al, 2016, 5).

The study thus forwards the “trichotomy of the sacred” (*banal*, *maganda* and *ritwal*) as the essential aspects of the sacred for young Filipinos. When tested further, young Filipinos manifested their attitudes towards the sacred when they expressed their deep connections with the following statements: “Our core values are indications of the sacred;” “The sacred is attached to a Supreme Being;” That which is of great value is sacred to me;” and “Worship and community rituals are sacred to me.” For young Filipinos, the sacred



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manifests four dimensions, namely: ethical, religious, valued and communal, and that these four dimensions must be present during the sacralization process wherein they ascribe sacredness into things, emotions, events, places and spaces.

This unique insight into what pertains to be the sacred for young Filipinos helps us to understand that for this sector in Philippine society, the sacred relates to a communal vision. The results of the study emphasize that the strong ethical-value leaning of the first and third dimensions of the sacred opens up some avenues to articulate youth negotiations towards community-oriented challenges (Baring et al, 2016, 16).

#### *4.1 The Sacredness of Libingan ng mga Bayani according to Filipino Youth*

The sacredness of the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* (LNMB), a place, which is at once real and imagined, lies in its ability to continue to evoke active remembrance or remembering so as not to forget the past. As a place where heroes lie, the transgression created by the burial of the remains of former President Ferdinand Marcos brings into the forefront of national consciousness young Filipinos' attitudes towards the sacred. Whenever the sacred is lacking or absent, its lack or absence is brought into the fore in young people's response to its absence through creative, visual representations of their revolt.

In the same opinion piece used earlier in the paper, the author clearly outlines the reason to "speak out":

What most appalled me was the seeming lack of common sense of the authorities. **If one has to sneak in someone for burial in a cemetery for heroes, then maybe he or she does not deserve to be there?** Regardless of whatever arguments are presented in this situation, if there was nothing to hide or be ashamed of, then a hero's burial should be praised and appreciated by the whole country, and not just those who are benefiting from this act of disrespect (Marasigan, 2016).

The *LNMB* as a cemetery by itself is already sacred in virtue of its designation as a burial ground. That it exists as well as a final resting place for heroes, speaks of its utmost value, not only to the families of the deceased, but also to the entire nation that values heroism, and its attendant value patriotism, most importantly. The value of heroism is celebrated through elaborate rituals that are shared with the entire members of the national community. The *ritwal*, which is an essential aspect of the sacred for young Filipinos, have ethical, religious, valued and communal dimension. The "sneaky" way by which the burial of President Ferdinand Marcos was done is a transgression of the sacred. It is a "disrespectful" act that undermines Filipino values, particularly heroism and patriotism. Ironically, it is the elders, the leaders of the country, who approved of the burial, who seemed to have encouraged the disrespect, and who have transgressed and sullied the sacred.

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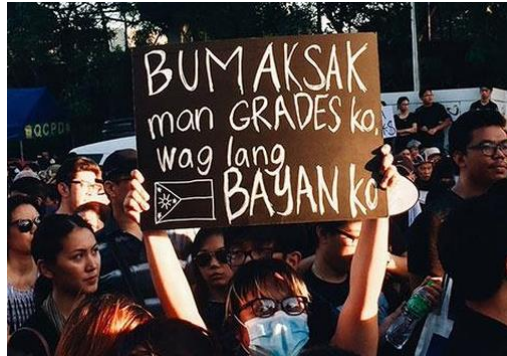


Image 5 Slogan translates to: "My grades may fall, so be it, but I will not let my nation fall." Photo by Reggie Andanar/Twitter

Image 5 captures vividly the sentiment of this young protester. Grades are important, yes, and good grades are particularly valued by them and their parents. However, in the hierarchy of values, patriotism and love for country possess higher value than good grades, especially when the latter are undermined by the underhandedness by which the burial of President Marcos was effected. By making a stand; by forming an opinion; by joining a street protest; and by taking the time out to write the slogan as seen in Image 5, this young Filipino has expressed quite clearly her strong feelings on an issue that has gripped the nation for several months.

To reiterate, Lynch encourages scholars who are deeply interested on how people regard the sacred to look into strong emotions or feelings that are manifested whenever the sacred is being threatened. For young Filipinos, the ethical and communal dimensions of the sacred are there to ensure that these strong sentiments are not just something that they personally or exclusively feel. They are shared by many people who mutually value the same things, and whose personal convictions help them move towards action. Thus, what is the sacred is that which is relational, or it may be a content of experience, and/or engagement in "fleeting moments" that can be encountered in spaces and places where young people find themselves in the here and now.

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