The Festival in Plato’s Cretan City and Modern-Day Malaysia
ANDREW SOH
ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY
PHILIPPINES

One wouldn’t find, nowadays, another city the equal of ours in its provision of leisure time or of the necessities, but it is nonetheless necessary for this city, just as for a single human being, to live well. (828d)¹

As is well known, the ancient Greek cities honored their gods, demons, and heroes with festivals that typically consisted of several days of games, dances and “solemn rites about the local sanctuary.”² Mindful of the fact that this rich tradition of festivals not only please the gods and “the things connected with the gods,” but also engenders “kinship and familiarity with one another, and every sort of social intercourse” (771b-d), Plato, in The Laws, makes provision for monthly sacrificial processions, and two annual festivals, in honor of each of the Cretan City’s twelve patron gods (corresponding to the city’s twelve tribes³), to be organized at the deity’s city—as well as country—

¹This phrase that Plato places in the mouth of the Athenian Stranger indicates to the reader just how important are the festivals he prescribed for the Cretan City. Cf. Thomas L. Pangle, The Laws of Plato (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).
³In The Laws, we read: “Our number as a whole has twelve divisions, and the number contained in each tribe also has twelve. Each part must be understood as a sacred entity, a gift of the god, corresponding to the months and to the revolutions of the whole. That is why every city is naturally led to sanctify these divisions ... solemnly assigning a god or the child of the gods to each part, along with altars and the appropriate accoutrements” (771bd).

The twelve deities were Zeus: god of strangers in need of protection (730a), god of boundaries (921c), patron of the oath (936e), god of kinship and parentage (881d). Hera: wife of Zeus, and (together with him) patron and divine exemplar of marriage,
altars, under the supervision of sundry officials, ranging from the "magistrates for music and gymnastics" (764c), to the Guardians of the Laws, the Interpreters of the Oracles, the priests and priestesses of the temple (828b). These officials, stipulates Plato, shall "arrange the holidays in a yearly calendar, showing what they are, when they occur, and to whom among the gods, the gods’ children, or the demons they should be dedicated" (799a). They shall further determine who should attend the festivals, what hymns and forms of dance will be performed in them, and what gymnastic contests will be mounted.

Insofar as they shall "represent the good in character and conduct" (654cd), the hymns and forms of dance (choreia) Plato has in mind shall be expected, no less than letters and mathematics, to be able to stir up in citizens feelings of unity and sentiments of patriotic duty, and the "desire and love to become perfect citizens who know how to rule and be ruled with justice" (643e). The hymns shall be auspicious in speech and in prayer to the gods, and be truly reflective of the "city’s protector of marriage and wife’s rights. Apollo: guardian of the religious and secular law of the city, author of dance, song, education. Artemis: sister of Apollo, goddess of the wilderness, the hunt, and wild animals, and fertility. Demeter: (with her daughter Kore and the youth Triptolemus) patron of agriculture (782b). Hestia: evidence taken at the trial of a capital offence was deposited at the hearth of Hestia, and all judges of the court were to take an oath in her name prior to handing down a death judgment (856a). Athena: warrior goddess and patron (together with Ares) of the "craftsmen of war" (920e). Ares: patron (together with Athena) of military officers. Hephaestus: patron (together with Athena) of craftsmen and their beneficial arts. Hermes: patron (together with Zeus) of heralds and ambassadors (941a). Poseidon: connected with the breeding and use of horses. Isthmian games were celebrated in his honor (950e). Dionysus: (together with Apollo) joint author of rhythm and melody (672d), the god of wine (672b, 775b, 643b), patron and protector of the grape harvest (844de), author of the "Bacchic dances and frenzied choruses" (672b).

"Hymns or prayers to the gods, threnodies or dirges, paenaes of thanksgiving" (700b). The dance forms are a combination of what on public occasions may be performed with great "impressiveness and dignity" and those that, at a more everyday level, engender in citizens, through all kinds of flexures and extensions of the limbs, "physical fitness, lightness and beauty." Cf. Plato’s Cretan City, p. 310, 336, 306.

5 Ibid., p. 308.
6 Ibid., p. 353.
7 Prayer to the gods: hymns to the gods were a part of every sacrifice. These hymns included the paean-choral songs, hymns or chants addressed to Apollo (664c, 700b); the dithyramb-hymns to Dionysus (700b); and encomia-songs in praise of the gods, and of famous men (heroes, either great men of the past, or living citizens who have achieved special distinction) (801e).
conventional and just version of the beautiful or good things” (801a). They, in addition, shall be gender-specific: appropriate to females, they shall reflect orderliness and moderation, appropriate to males, they shall reflect magnificence (802c). There shall be no unwarranted innovation; the performance of new songs shall take place only with the approval of the magistrates and the Guardians of the Laws (801cd). Laments shall not be sung at public sacrifices and funerals, except on the days of omen,⁸ and even then it shall be foreigners, not citizens, who will sing them (800d). The dances shall be neither common nor trivial,⁹ but rather serious and majestic (814e), reminiscent in turn of the actions of soldiers in combat, as they dodge, jump up, crouch, and strike “with missiles—arrows and javelins—and with all sorts of blows” (815a), and of the actions of peaceful “men who practice moderation in their enjoyments” (815b). The contests, for their part, shall be gymnastic in character, the better to foster “physical conditioning, courage and the military arts,”¹¹ and shall include running contests (833a), hoplomachy (heavily armed combat), peltastic contests (“mimic [battles] between light-armed troops, with bows and arrows, darts, javelins, stones and slings” (834a; 830e), and contests with horses (races on horseback; contests between mounted archers and javelin throwers) (834b). The running contests shall test citizens in “keenness of the feet [to allow them in combat] to flee and to effect captures.” These shall take place in the stadium¹² and cross-country, and shall be partaken in by runners in full armor (833a), or in full archer’s gear. In the hoplomachy, competitors dressed in full armor shall be pitted against one another, one on one, two on two, and so on, up to ten competitors on each side.

---

⁸ Days of omen were days set aside for pouring libations at tombs and avoiding business affairs. *The Laws of Plato*, p. 530.

⁹ The common dances included the “dance of comedy” (816d), and possibly the satyr dances. The satyr dances, often associated with the Bacchic dances performed during the festivals of Dionysus, involved the dancers imitating “drunken persons” and other “shameful bodies in low movement.” Only slaves and foreigners could perform the common dances, as they were forbidden Citizens (816e).

¹⁰ *The Laws of Plato*, p. 366.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 495.

¹² In Plato’s time, a typical race was run from one end of a stadium to the other and back. This measure was called a stade (833a) and was approximately 606.75 English feet. *The Laws of Plato*, p. 532.
any city that possesses intelligence should engage in army maneuvers not less than one day every month, and even more if the rulers think it advisable. They should exercise, paying no heed to cold or hot weather—themselves and their women and children as well—whenever the rulers think it fitting to lead the whole populace out. (829b)

Malaysia

Present-day Malaysia presents a heterogeneity of ethnicities, with the Bumiputera, comprised of Malays and indigenous peoples (Orang Asli), accounting for over 50% of a total population of about 23 million), ethnic Chinese (35%), ethnic Indians (10%), Portuguese, Dutch, English (a carry-over from colonial times (5%, inclusive of

13 Plato rejected the more traditional wrestling, boxing, and pankration, all popular sports during his time. Pankration was a kind of fighting contest that combined wrestling, bare-fisted boxing, and kicking. Unlike ordinary Greek wrestling, the object in pankration was not to throw the opponent but to make him admit defeat. His reason: they served little purpose in the preparation for war. Cf. Plato’s Cretan City, p. 386.

14 Bumiputera: Sons, or princes, of the soil. This is both a cultural and a political term, which recognizes these people as the original inhabitants of the land, and thus accords them special privileges. Bumiputeras benefit from various government policies such as in education where a quota system allots more places for them to enter into universities, or in the economy where they are given special incentives (e.g. government and commercial bank loans with lower interest) to start businesses.

15 Orang Asli: a Malay term meaning, original people. In Malaysia, it is a generic term for the indigenous peoples of both Peninsular Malaysia and the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. There are numerous indigenous groups on both sides of the South China Sea, such as the Negrito in the peninsular, Kadazan in Sabah and Iban in Sarawak. Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board, The Official Homepage of the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board, New York, available from http://www.interknowledge.com/; Internet; accessed October 25, 2000. I will cite this source as MTPB in future references.
expatriates). It presents as well a diversity of religions. The word, “Malay,” “synonymous” with the word, “Muslim,” reflects the fact that about fifty-three percent of the total population is Muslim. Buddhism, however, is well represented with 17% of the population, Confucianism and Taoism with 11%, Christianity with 9%, Hinduism with 7%, and tribal religions with 2%. This rich and diverse cultural and religious heritage is grounds Malaysia’s language, dress, food, customs, and other social practices even as serious efforts are being made to meld the different cultures together. The Malay wedding ceremony, for example, “incorporates elements of Hindu traditions of southern India where the bride and groom dress in [elaborate] brocades, sit in state, and feed each other yellow rice with hands painted with henna.” The Chinese practice of giving out “lucky money” (ang pau, literally, red packet) at festivals has been adopted as well by the Malays, excepting that they use green packets instead of red, printed over with greetings in Arabic. What brings these diverse groups and cultures together? What keeps them together? Is there anything in Malaysia’s experience comparable to Plato’s Cretan City?

To begin with, there is in present-day Malaysia as much of a wealth in music, dance, games, pastimes, festivals, and religious beliefs as Plato had envisioned for his Cretan City; and just as in the Cretan City these had been harnessed to the work of stirring up in citizens an experience of unity, so also in Malaysia these have been pressed into the service of fashioning a Bangsa Malaysia. Malaysia surely has among the greatest number of public holidays, cultural or religious festivals, in the world, including Hari Raya Aidil Fitri, Thaipusam, Chinese New Year,

16 MTPB
18 MTPB
19 Ibid.
20 Bangsa: it literally means ethnic race (as in Malay, Chinese and Indian), but in this usage it takes on a broader meaning of “a single nation of people”, stressing harmony and unity.
21 Hari Raya Aidil Fitri: the main Muslim festival celebrating the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan.
22 Thaipusam: the Hindu festival of penance, celebrated most colorfully in Kuala Lumpur and Penang.
23 Chinese New Year: celebration to mark the new year in the Lunar Calendar.
Vesak Day\textsuperscript{24}, Deepavali\textsuperscript{25}, and Christmas. The festivals reflect Malaysia’s multi-cultural wealth in a positive way. Over the years, the celebration of festivals has been accompanied by what is known in Malaysia as the spirit of *muhibah*—translated to mean the spirit of goodwill, hospitality and friendship.\textsuperscript{26} This spirit of goodwill is expressed in the way Austrians of different ethnicities join one another’s celebration of their festivals, practice “open house,” consisting of a mutuality of visits at festival times. The government promotes this Malaysian “open house” spirit by means of good advertising in the run-up to, and during, these festivals. In the last few years, Hari Raya Aidil Fitri and the Chinese New Year have occurred very close to each other, prompting the government (and many commercial establishments) to dub the celebrations as *Kongsi Raya*. *Kongsi*, or *Gongxi*, is a Chinese word meaning “congratulations” or “happy” (as in the greeting happy new year). In Malay, *kongsi* means “to share”, while *raya* means “to celebrate”. Thus, the phrase is a play on words significant to both Malays and Chinese; it means “shared celebration.” More than just a sharing of culture, the spirit of *muhibah* also brings Malaysians of different religions to a dialog of life that can foster, at a deeper level, a genuine inter-religious dialogue.

Besides the cultural and religious festivals, there are a number of important festivals such as the National Day celebration and the “Malaysia Fest.” National Day is celebrated on August 31 with parades, cultural shows and musical concerts that stir up sentiments of national unity at the same time that they showcase Malaysia’s wealth of traditional forms of song, dance, and drama. The government’s Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (Cultural Division, the National Arts Academy, the National Theater, the National Archives, the National Art Gallery and the National Museum), and Ministry of Education, are together tasked with the work of preserving and promoting these traditional art forms. Along very similar lines, the “Malaysia Fest,” held each year in September\textsuperscript{27} in Kuala Lumpur, through its programs and activities,

\textsuperscript{24} Vesak Day: a celebration to mark Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and nirvana.

\textsuperscript{25} Deepavali: the Hindu festival of lights commemorating the victory of good over evil.


provides the thirteen states of the Malaysian federation with opportunities to exhibit the best of their region’s crafts, cuisine, music, drama, promoting thereby among Malaysians the spirit of muhibbah, which derives from the reality of sharing in a multicultural heritage. Malaysians also enjoy many traditional games and pastimes, including kite flying, Silat, the lion dance, and Kabaddi. Kite flying is a popular sport in the east coast states of Peninsular Malaysia, especially among Malays. Giant kites, called wau, are painstakingly designed and crafted in vibrant colors and patterns with intricate floral designs and paper tassels. The annual wau festival is now an international event, with competitors coming from as far away as the Netherlands, Japan, Germany and Belgium.  
28 Silat is a traditional Malay art of self-defense that has been raised to a competitive sport in recent years. Apart from the competitions, Silat demonstrations are held during weddings and national celebrations.  
29 The lion dance is performed during the Chinese New Year, at homes and business establishments that believe it will bring them good luck. The Kabaddi is a traditional Indian game brought by Indian immigrants to Malaysia. A team sport, it requires both skill and power, and combines the characteristics of wrestling and rugby. Two teams of twelve players compete for higher scores, by touching or capturing the players of the opponent team within a playing area of 12.50m x 10m, divided by a line into two halves.  
30 Other popular sports are soccer, sepak takraw, badminton, field hockey, and squash. Malaysia’s Ministry of Youth and Sports is specifically tasked to promoting sports as a means of “creat[ing] an active, fit, disciplined and united society aimed towards improving national development and productivity as well as instilling a fit and competitive culture.”  
32 In keeping with this objective, sports festivals (competitions) are held at various levels: school, district, state, and

---

28 Derauh, p. 100.
29 Ibid.
31 Sepak takraw: a sport similar to volleyball where the goal is to score points by hitting a ball into the opponent’s court. A difference is that the game is played with the feet and head instead of with the hands, and there are three players on each team. The sport is very popular in Thailand.
national. At the national level, the Ministry organizes the biennial *Sukan Malaysia* (Malaysia Games) at which athletes from all thirteen states compete in 29 sporting events: swimming events, soccer, field hockey, Karate, Wushu, and others. The main objective of the Games is to enable the state to identify young sporting talents, who will be trained to compete for the country in future international events.\(^{33}\) The Games, however, are also an occasion for fostering unity and a healthy lifestyle. They provide state governments with the incentive to build more and better sports facilities for citizenly use. Two other programs of deserve mention here: the *Rakan Muda* (Young Partners, or Friends) and the *Malaysia Cergas* (Fitness Malaysia) Programs.\(^{34}\) First introduced in 1994, and directed primarily to those in primary and secondary schools, and universities, the former covers more than just sport, because its nine *Rakan Muda* Lifestyles and one cadre movement combine mental development activities, physical fitness, and spiritual development. The nine lifestyles consist in partnerships in sport, recreation, love of nature, martial arts, physical fitness, culture and arts, innovation, skills training, and entrepreneurship, the Community. At the launch not too long ago of a recreational carnival at the National University of Malaysia, Dato' Hishamuddin bin Tun Hussein, the Minister of Youth and Sports, asserted that recreational activities do more than merely fill up free time. They help the young develop honorable behavior and a noble personality. "These programs can also tap the potentials of the young in leadership, excellence, skills, patriotism, motivation."\(^{35}\) The *Malaysia Cergas* Program, for its part, aims to educate the masses on "the importance of sports and physical exercises, the where and how of participation, and the suitability according to age group."\(^{36}\) It organizes a variety of competitive sports such as tennis, badminton, soccer, and *sepak takraw*; fitness activities and conditioning exercises such as jogging, cycling, and aerobics; outdoor physical recreational activities such as camping, hiking, canoeing, and surfing; and aesthetic activities such as ballroom dancing, and rhythmic gymnastics. For this purpose sports

\(^{33}\) Participation in the Malaysia Games is limited to Malaysian citizens, male and female, below the age of 21. The maximum age is even lower for certain events-18 for gymnastics and gymrama, and 15 for sailing.

\(^{34}\) *Homepage of the Ministry of Youth and Sports.*

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
facilities such as courts, fields, and sports complexes, have recently been established.

In conclusion, permit me to point out that there is more to festivals than meets the eye. Understanding this, Plato made clear provisions for the organization, and celebration, of the festivals in his Cretan City. For Plato, the festivals provided excellent opportunities for the promotion of social unity, the molding of the religious belief of the citizens, and the ongoing education of the citizens in music and dance, and gymnastics. We have seen that in present-day Malaysia the same ends hold true. Plato’s strict provisions for the various elements of the festivals reveal a discerning politician, one who was deeply concerned about the welfare of his citizens, which is ultimately the welfare of the City. ☰