

## KOLUM KRITIKA

### MEDITATION ON THE BANGKO (THANKS TO DESCARTES)

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#### About the Author

Leovino Ma. Garcia earned his undergraduate degree in the Humanities (cum laude) from the Ateneo de Manila University and his BA (cum laude), PhL (magna cum laude), and PhD (magna cum laude) in Philosophy from the Universite Catholique de Louvain, Belgium. He was bestowed the Knight of the Order of the Academic Palms by the French Government in 1990 and has held various professional and academic posts in both private and government organizations. Currently on sabbatical leave, he will assume his second term as Dean of the Ateneo School of Humanities in June 2004.

#### Editor's Note

"Bangko" is the Tagalog word for bench.

## TO KNOW WHAT IS TO BE DONE

There is a wisdom which knows when to go and when to return, what is to be done and what is not to be done, what is fear and what is courage, what is bondage and what is liberation—that is pure wisdom.

*The Bhagavad-Gita 18:30*

Stopping in Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya six weeks ago, I simply knew "what (had) to be done." While my sister haggled with the overweight *tindera*<sup>1</sup> over the prices of Chinese pechay, Baguio beans, cabbage, potatoes and papaya, I suddenly noticed a primitive-looking, weather-beaten, scarred *bangkô*. It measured about four feet long. Without hesitation, I lifted it and hugging it tightly, I pleaded with the *tindera* to please sell it to me. I offered her 500 pesos. Stunned, she refused so feebly that in a second, my brother-in-law (interpreting this as tacit approval) was loading the minimally chic *bangkô* into the van.

Once ubiquitous but now in danger of becoming extinct, it is opportune to tease out the meanings of the *bangkô*. It poignantly brings back the memory of "the good old times" when we were simply being "happy together," as the song goes. Truly *Pinoy*, the

*bangkô* emerges as a relic, reminding us that for as long as we can help it, we really never want (like Greta Garbo) to be alone. We also do not take to carrying our own *bangkô*, except literally, as in the saying, “*Huwag mong buhatin ang iyong bangkô.*”

The *bangkô* is an icon of *sociality*, *narrativity*, and *solidarity*.

### AN ICON OF SOCIALITY

Never meant for only one person, the *bangkô* offered solace to *istambays*<sup>2</sup> in front of *sari-sari* stores.<sup>3</sup> One took its presence much for granted during family meals, baptismal gatherings, birthday parties, wedding celebrations, and funeral wakes. Many counted on its welcome comfort at basketball games, benefit dances, gambling sessions, fiesta masses, and town *ferias*.

Of course, one could always have it for oneself (if no one else was around)—recline on it for a quick siesta. Or even pose one foot on it while sipping one’s *bulalo*<sup>4</sup> soup (a sure sign according to the late Doreen Fernandez that one was relishing the meal). With another person, one played a game of *dama*<sup>5</sup> or *sungka*<sup>6</sup> on the *bangkô*. Or simply flirted, even dance on top of it, as they do in some regions.

### A HAVEN OF NARRATIVITY

Oh, the stories the *bangkô* can recount if it could only talk—adolescent sexual exploits, basketball commentaries, *kanto tsismis*<sup>7</sup>, macho jokes, moralistic narratives, *aswang*<sup>8</sup> stories. If inside the jeepney, passengers behave like passive spectators who watch without looking, people seated on a *bangkô* find it difficult to ignore one another. Sooner or later, they will be swapping their stories and slapping one another’s backs. By dint of recounting their experiences, they will also have shared their lives, even themselves.

It is no wonder then that a certain bond gets shared by those who are “bench mates.” At the Ateneo, there is a “bench culture.” Your identity comes from the bench your group occupies on campus. One can be a *coño*<sup>9</sup> (if you become a fixture just outside the Cafeteria), a “nerd” or *iskolar* (in Colayco Hall), a *sosyal* (usually, one who has made it to the Soccer Team), a “New Age Goth” (one who’s always in black and who hangs in the Science Education Complex). And woe to the naïve freshman who parks himself on a bench that has been claimed by one of these groups!

## A MARK OF SOLIDARITY

What, has it come to this—that an emblem of solidarity has now been transformed into a trademark of territoriality? For if there is something the *bangkô* symbolizes, it is as a monument to the time when we did not have to organize joy, feign spontaneity, and calculate generosity. That time, when we didn't have to pay to entertain ourselves. (Actually, we now pay to bore ourselves, almost to death). That time when being together became reason enough for being together. When we innocently enjoyed communal pleasures. When simple honest fun had not yet turned into cheap gimmicks.

## FROM BANGKÔ TO MONOBLOC CHAIRS

After buying the *bangkô*, I looked out of the van for a very long time (from San Jose, Nueva Ecija to Plaridel, Bulacan). I started checking whether there were still *bangkôs* in front of sari-sari stores along the highway. Sad to say, I only counted a few. Most sari-sari stores had upgraded to monobloc chairs.

As the *bangkô* disappears, do we also lose the sense of the social, the narrative, the communal?

## POSTSCRIPT

Two weeks ago, stopping again at Santa Fe and waiting for my sister to finish her purchase of vegetables and fruits, I noticed that in the area once occupied by the *bangkô* I had bought, there were two new pistachio-colored monobloc chairs. I looked at the *tindera*. She smiled back at me with pride.

## NOTES

- 1 *Tindera*: a female vendor
- 2 *Istambays*: loafers
- 3 Sari-sari stores: neighbourhood convenience stores
- 4 *Bulalo*: bone marrow
- 5 *Dama*: a variety of checkers
- 6 *Sungka*: native board game using sea shells dropped onto hollows in a wooden tray
- 7 *Kanto tsismis*: town gossip
- 8 *Aswang*: viscera-eating creature of local folklore
- 9 *Coño*: a term that can variously refer to a student whose family belongs to the upper middle or upper classes of Philippine society; to a student who may feign awkwardness in the use of the national language; or to a student who is such by association.