

## **PUBLIC LIVES**

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### **Light riders**

We all feel a need, at a certain point in our lives, to share our blessings with others. Philosophers sometimes call it the obligation of solidarity. But two things often deter us from taking the first step. One is the thought that whatever we do for others, our effort is but a drop in the bucket. We don't change anything. The other is the fear that the small initiatives we take to lighten the burden of others usually only mask the urgent need for enduring social reforms. These apprehensions are not without basis. But if we give in to them, we could find ourselves easily justifying our own smugness.

Instead of cursing the darkness that engulfs at least one-fifth of all Filipino families at night, three motorcycle buddies of mine have embarked on a 19-day journey to visit forty of the country's remotest unlit communities to distribute solar lamps. They are Philippe Saubier, Ibba Bernardo, and Toto Villanueva. We call them "Light Riders," the spearhead of the Solar Energy Foundation's campaign to give light to those currently excluded from the electricity grid. They have been out now for a week, traveling first to the northernmost point in Ilocos, and then coming down via Pangasinan to Zambales and Pampanga. From Central Luzon, they proceed to Bicol, the Visayan islands, and then to Mindanao. All in all, this solidarity-adventure ride will cover 6600 kilometers.

Along the way, they will be meeting with corporate and individual donors who have offered to sponsor some communities by paying for the 3000-peso sealed all-weather solar lamp. Explicitly targeted are the indigenous communities, particularly those who have strayed far from their original habitat because of social conflict, ecological destruction, and hunger.

A case in point are the Badjaos from Zamboanga, Sulu, and Basilan who,

for the last decade or so, have fanned out to different sites in Metro Manila and nearby provinces. First they gravitated to Manila, putting up makeshift shelters along the shores of Manila Bay. When the Roxas boulevard promenade underwent a facelift to make it suitable and safe for tourists, the Badjaos had to move out. Some went south to Laguna and Batangas. Others went north to Pampanga, Bataan, and Zambales, carrying nothing but their clothes and meager possessions. The exodus of these water-dwelling people hasn't ended; they're still searching for their promised land. Everywhere they go, they assume the same marginal roles and negative image associated with Europe's semi-nomadic gypsies.

It was the Frenchman Philippe Saubier, leader of the trio of light riders, who first called my attention to the presence of the Badjaos in my home province of Pampanga. I couldn't believe they had settled here. For we could hardly take care of the needs of our own dwindling Aeta population. But that's not unusual; as a nation, we don't value our indigenous peoples. Through an NGO contact, Philippe was able to get in touch with 75 Badjao families living under a bridge in Sulipan, Apalit. They will be among the first recipients of solar lamps.

He told me that there were more in Angeles, also living under a bridge. He was right. One Friday morning a few weeks ago, I rode to Angeles and found about 300 Badjao families squatting under a long bridge spanning the city's main river. You can't see them at street level. Their shacks on bamboo stilts line the entire length of the heavily-silted river, safely hidden from the regular residents of this most urbanized of all of Pampanga's communities.

I spoke to their leader, whose eyes moistened when I asked if they were Sama or Balangingi. They are Sama, he said. But over the years since they left their homes, they have learned to answer to the more generic label Badjao. I first encountered them in the 1980s in Davao, where I saw them dive for coins thrown at them by tourists. The conflict in Mindanao had transformed these finest of all pearl divers into mendicants of the sea.

It was strange to find Badjao shanties on stilts in the middle of Angeles City. Why Angeles? I asked their leader. He said something about the kindness and tolerance of the Kapampangans, the availability of food and menial jobs, and, most important, the access to good public schools. Still, he said, it was clear to them and to the dozen barangay tanods that constantly hovered around them that they were not exactly welcome in their adopted city. One of the tanods whispered to me that the city government had urged them to go back to Mindanao, offering financial incentives to families who were willing to pack up and leave. I took that to mean that the city would frown upon any form of action that would encourage them to stay or bolster their bid to legitimize their stay in the city.

I have thought of raising some money to buy some of those solar lamps for distribution to Badjao families with children of school-going age. And I have asked my brother, Bishop Pablo David, the parish priest of Angeles, if he would consider forming a social action team from his parish council to work with the Badjaos to map out a comprehensive plan on their behalf. His response was most encouraging. But, as significantly, from the first time I mentioned them in one column, people have come forward to ask what we can do.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that my light-riding buddies, one of whom, Ibba Rasul-Bernardo, is a Muslim, should be giving out lamps to the poor during the season of Lent. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus tells his disciples, “...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

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