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Reconnecting with my Roots through Local Research

Karlo Antonio Galay David

What does it mean to be someone from my hometown?

I am Karlo Antonio Galay David, and my career as literary writer, local historian and culture and arts advocate has been a long, often arduous journey of trying to answer that question.

What I do

My work revolves around my hometown of Kidapawan City, in the southern Philippine territory of Mindanao. My family has lived in the town for five generations.

The bulk of my work for the town is as local historian. In 2017, the local government commissioned me to write a history of Kidapawan. The job not only in-



Giving a talk in front of the Kidapawan City Hall before an audience of Moro and IP Youth. I publicly mention the Pagagao Massacre, a Marcos Era atrocity, for the first time in the city

volves documenting previously unrecorded lives and incidents, it also includes the need to raise greater public awareness and appreciation for the town's past, especially among its population.

But I did not limit myself to just documenting history, as I also looked into the town's long neglected heritage. I offer assistance for the town's cultural mapping, but my research on this has concentrated on local cuisine (specially of the indigenous Obo Monuvu people), literature, and visual arts.

Working closely with the local government, I also often give advice and technical assistance on forming Culture and Arts policies, specially to its local Tourism Office and Culture and Arts Council.

I am also a fictionist and playwright, and these mentioned endeavours are both enriched by and serve to enrich my literary writing, and the bulk of my stories and plays are reflections on the town's complex human realities.

Discovering One Town in Another

I actually do all these remotely – while the work is in Kidapawan, I am based in Davao City, about two hours by bus away. My side of the family relocated here over a decade ago.

My parents separated when I was young, and my mother had to raise me and my younger brother as a single parent.

We had to move into different houses in Kidapawan. Consequently, I grew up without knowing a permanent home. This became even more the case when we finally decided to relocate to Davao.

Growing up, I did not mind the uprootedness – people in Kidapawan generally do not think about concepts like 'home' and 'belonging.' As a Filipino I had grown up thinking that destiny was always elsewhere, and for me to live my life I had to leave.

The move to Davao gave me the distance which allowed me to realize how much about Kidapawan I had taken for granted.

And Davao City has a very different culture from Kidapawan. There were more writers, more artists, and more intellectuals in Davao, a community with which I had found a sense of belongingness. And one of the ideologies that was very strong in that community was Localization, the celebration of all things local. Writers and scholars in my university, Ateneo de Davao, championed the study and treatment of

places near our own.

The move to Davao was what made me start developing an interest in Kidapawan. Soon, I was writing fiction about the town.

But while I had started thinking about Kidapawan, it had yet to become my destination.

After finishing college I taught literature, creative writing, and research in different schools. I moved to Dumaguete City, a city in Central Philippines, to pursue Creative Writing as a field, getting a Masters from Silliman University.

At some point teaching became tiring, and I had lost sight of why I was doing what I was doing. I knew I had to take a step back and reflect.

Falling into Inle Lake

The opportunity to do so presented itself when the Ateneo de Davao started the Cardoner Volunteer Program, which deployed the university's alumni as volunteers to Myanmar.

I signed up as part of the program's first batch of volunteers, and was assigned a teaching post in Taunggyi, capital of Myanmar's Shan State.

But the volunteer teaching only served to make me realize that I had lost my drive for teaching.

In my listlessness, I used social media to keep myself updated about things that were happening back in the Philippines. This also allowed me the chance to catch up on news from Kidapawan.

In their hospitality, the host school would often take us volunteers on day trips to nearby tourist sites.

One such site was Inle Lake, one of Myanmar's top tourist destinations. In one of our several trips to Inle, one of the students who came with us talked about the legend of the statues of Hpaung Daw Oo Temple.

Every year, during this ancient temple's festival, four of its famous five statues are transported to the different towns around the lake.

One statue always stays in the temple. The student narrated the legend which explained why.

The last time all five statues were transported, the barge capsized, and the statues fell into the lake. Men dove down to retrieve them, but could only find four, the last one could not be found.

The festival was cancelled, and the four surviving statues were taken back to the temple.

But to everyone's shock, the missing statue was there, on the altar, as if it never left.

Ever since that day, that statue has never been taken out of the temple.

Inle Lake, concluded the student, has this way of bringing you back to where you belong.

While pondering on this story on the boat as we were crossing the lake, I thought jokingly what would happen if I was to fall into the water.

Then, suddenly, the epiphany hit me: maybe I was the first from Kidapawan to hear that story – the first here in Inle, in Taunggyi, in Shan State, possibly even in Myanmar – in many of the things I had done, I realized, I may have been the first from Kidapawan, and so I had taken Kidapawan to these locations and milestones with me.

I had never left Kidapawan, *I was Kidapawan*.

I was part of that town that my great -grandfathers had helped build.

The community, was not just the place, *it is its people*, the destinies of those people are the destinies of that community. And



I took this photo of cranes flying over Inle Lake right before the epiphany hit me

I had to return to take part in shaping that destiny.

After that, I decided that I needed to engage the local government of Kidapawan and work for the town.

And the rest, quite literally, is Kidapawan history

Going Against the Grain

Writing about local history, culture, and heritage is not easy in a Philippine town like Kidapawan. You had to deal with the apathy of the general public to these causes, and often you have to disprove many long held assumptions or help undo long established bad practices.

In many respects I was ideally positioned to do what I was doing. As an inquisitive mind I grew up often questioning authority, and even as my literary and academic career progressed I gained the reputation of a polemicist.

In one memorable incident I had an exchange on the local radio station about a historical error I uncovered. It had been long taught in schools in Kidapawan that the town was once a part of an even older town, Pikit. I had uncovered that Pikit was actually younger than Kidapawan, and there was no evidence Kidapawan was ever part of it. The local radio commentator insisted on what was taught him, and we had a lively exchange.

Triggering conflict and challenging accepted ideas proves to be a great way to raise awareness, for in an apathetic town like Kidapawan, controversy can help raise awareness.

Reconnecting by Seeking Local Impact

But more often the job has allowed me to form deeper connections both with some of Kidapawan's older residents and with its younger generation.

Going around interviewing older key informants not only gave me a glimpse of my hometown's past, it also allowed me to rekindle what were actually old family ties.

It also allowed me to form links with the indigenous community, and now I count several tribal leaders as friends.

And the job of promoting greater cultural and historical awareness exposed me to the younger generations in the city. Seeing the youth take interest in causes that their parents' generation took for granted has been very fulfilling.



With the Librarian of the Notre Dame of Kidapawan College, my alma mater, and some of the school's old yearbooks, some of the oldest documents in the city

Before I knew it, I had started playing an integral part in the town I had once left behind: to serve as its memory and imagination.