

“Dyos Mabalos!” and the Speech-Act of Gratitude among Bikolanos

Victor John M. Loquias
Ateneo de Naga University
vloquias@gbox.adnu.edu.ph

Abstract

Employing Speech Act Theory, this paper traces the ethical contour of gratitude among Bikolanos as conveyed in the utterance of “*Dyos Mabalos.*” *Utang na buot*, the Bikolano counterpart of *utang na loob* is explained with its complementary concept of *atang kan buot* (gift of the self) as the two main conceptual conditions for the formation of the type of gratitude contained in the utterance of “*Dyos Mabalos.*” These normative conditions can also be culled from a number of contemporary Philippine studies which have already established the conceptual underpinnings of gratitude as a value. It will be shown further that “*Dyos Mabalos*” elevates gratitude from an ethical to a transcendental plane which becomes an emancipative mechanism for its conveyor in the situation where he assumes the asymmetrical position of being a recipient to an otherwise manipulative giver who would utilize the commerce of *utang na loob* for self-aggrandizement. This articulation achieves then on one hand a reappraisal of the culturally specific Bikolano significance of “*Dyos Mabalos*” and a contribution on the other to the already rich literature of investigations on *utang na loob*, specifically on a possible resolution to the ambivalence of gratitude in Philippine culture which could be gleaned from the performative speech and transcendental dimension of “*Dyos Mabalos.*”

Keywords: Speech-Act, Gratitude, *Utang na Buot* (Debt of Will), *Atang kan Buot* (Gift of the Self), *Dyos Mabalos*

Introduction

Gratitude is often conveyed in the words “Thank you” or “*Salamat*” (in Filipino) enunciated by a recipient after having received something, usually helpful, from somebody else. Once uttered, “Thank you” signals a general thought of the termination of transaction between a giver and receiver in the latter’s recognition of, and appreciation for the other’s act. The Bikolano utterance of “*Dyos Mabalos*” however elevates gratitude to a sort of transcendence from a purely human transaction through the invocation of a divine interference. “*Mabalos*” literally means “to give or pay back” hence, “*Dyos Mabalos*” or “*Dyos an Magbalos*” is a wishing or invocation for God to reciprocate the other’s good deeds. Both could be used however to convey thankfulness, but the shift from what may be construed as an ethical value to a religious signification is only something that remains at this point a vital thought¹ among its speakers. Two main problems then are endeavored to be solved by this paper: What makes the utterance of “*Dyos Mabalos*” ethical? And how does this ethical dimension evolve into a transcendental plane?

Through Speech Act Theory, the paper shows first the nuances of gratitude as conveyed in the utterances of “*Mabalos*” and “*Dyos Mabalos*.” J.L. Austin’s notion of performative speech is employed as the main framework from which to understand gratitude as a speech act. The act of “*mabalos*” is explained as a promise assumed by a recipient to the giver, which shall be reinforced here by John Searle’s analysis of “promise” as an illocutionary act. Then it will be contrasted with “*Dyos Mabalos*” through a survey of the conceptual landscape in contemporary Philippine studies where the sought for distinction could be possibly located. This provides the contextual and socio-cultural premises that lead to the shift from the ethical to the religious signification. Afterwards *Utang na buot*, or the Bikolano counterpart of *utang na loob* will be explained with its complementary concept of

¹ Ramos Reyes refers to vital thought as the first stage of the people’s thought whereby “immediate experience attains a preliminary structuration and verbalization by way of language.” The second stage develops into a “more *reflexive*, more mediate type of thought, whether the conscious or unconscious, analyzing, systematizing and justifying a vital thought that has reached a high point of growth and, therefore, of conflict, thereby demanding integration, a critical evaluation of its boundaries and particular strengths in view of the ulterior possibilities of man.” Ramos Reyes, “Sources of Filipino Thought” in *Philippine Studies* 21(4): 429-430, 1973.

atang kan buot (gift of the self) as the two main conditions for the formation of the type of gratitude contained in the utterance of "*Dyos Mabalos!*" Given these conditions which divide the saying of mere "*Mabalos*" from "*Dyos Mabalos,*" though both express the same value of gratitude, the paper evinces a claim that "*Dyos Mabalos*" strongly implies an emancipative mechanism for its conveyor in the situation where he assumes the asymmetrical position of being a recipient to an otherwise manipulative giver who would employ the commerce of *utang na loob* for self-aggrandizement.² This more reflexive articulation of what remains in practice up to date in relational transactions among Bikolanos achieves on one hand a reappraisal of the culturally specific significance of "*Dyos Mabalos*" in Bikol experience and a contribution on the other hand to the already rich literature of investigations on *utang na loob*, specifically on a possible resolution to the ambivalence of gratitude in Philippine culture which could be gleaned from the performative speech and transcendental dimension of "*Dyos Mabalos.*"

Gratitude as Performative Speech

Gratitude is recognized as a human value which may be expressed in different ways respective of various cultures. The simplest and most common of these is the linguistic expression of "Thank you!" uttered by someone who receives something from another. It does not however entail absolutely that the mere utterance of "Thank you!" is a guarantee of the receiver's gratefulness in the sense of an inner and authentic appreciation of the giver's act and generosity because it is also possible for a receiver to utter it insincerely. Moreover, there are also instances when "thank you" is merely uttered as an habitual response, sometimes indifferently, as a polite way to end a transaction like after buying something in the store, being offered a seat on the bus, the door opened for one in the bank and a legion of other examples that manifest social courtesy. But given the conditions for real gratitude is fulfilled when one says

² In ordinary conversations among Bikolanos nonetheless the two expressions are often used interchangeably yet still, their utterance remains an act which could be categorized under Austin's classification of commissive and behabitive speech acts. This paper in fact as a whole, may also be construed under Austin's classification of expositives that is, of the speech act of gratitude among Bikolanos.

“Thank you!” to the other, thankfulness and gratitude become synonymous. This is likewise the case with the utterance of “*Salamat*” which is one of the Filipino counterparts of “Thank you!” in the English lexicon. But thanking is not merely an utterance of a *description* of gratitude as a value but an *act* of gratitude itself, given the said condition is met. It may properly be called a *speech act* as the philosopher J.L. Austin claims in his compiled Harvard lectures *How to do Things with Words*. Austin focuses his analysis on what he labeled as performative statements or simply *performatives*³ where saying something is actually *doing* something. Here, Austin departs from the traditional view of the function of a sentence to describe brute reality which could then be judged as true or false. The utterance of a word rather is itself a performance of an action.

The uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even *the*, leading incident in the performance of the act (of betting or what not), the performance of which is also the object of the utterance, but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the *sole* thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed. Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether ‘physical’ or ‘mental’ actions or even acts of uttering further words.⁴

The last sentence refers to Austin’s requisites for a successful performative speech which is what he also meant by the word “felicity” or “happy performative.” In the case of thanking, gratitude is a performative speech in the appropriate circumstance where the recipient acknowledges being given something by the other. Hence, there must be an occasion where one person in a certain event or transaction receives something from another for the speech act of gratitude, as recognition of the giver’s act, be felicitous. Or in other words a situation where, as John Searle aptly puts it, “When I thank someone, I imply that the thing I am thanking him for has benefitted

³ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 6.

⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

me (or was at least intended to benefit me)."⁵ Gratitude however must not be understood merely as the enunciation of the words "thank you." Austin makes a distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts. Simply saying words is called locutionary act⁶ whereas an illocutionary act is "the performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something."⁷ Gratitude as being tackled herein is construed as an illocutionary act.

While *salamat* is also used among Bikolanos to express thankfulness, another utterance may complement or replace it to express the same value. This word is "*mabalos*" which flavors thankfulness with another illocutionary act that is perhaps only inexplicit in both "thank you" and "*salamat*," — the speech act of promising. "*Mabalos*" should actually be written *ma-balos* to emphasize the will, intention and promise of the speaker contained in the Bikol prefix *ma* to give back, or do something in return, or in other words reciprocate his giver. In the utterance of *mabalos*, gratitude is explicitly implicated with a certain obligation that is assumed by oneself and is assured to the other that he will reciprocate. But this is again incumbent upon the sincerity of the recipient saying "*mabalos*". As in Searle's words:

Where the sincerity condition tells us what the speaker *expresses* in the performance of the act, the preparatory condition tells us (at least part of) what he *implies* in the performance of the act. To put it generally, in the performance of any illocutionary act, the speaker implies that the preparatory conditions of the act are satisfied. Thus, for example, when I make a statement I imply

⁵ John R. Searle, *Speech Acts An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 65.

⁶ Locution as an utterance of words consists of the phonetic, phatic and rhetic acts. "The phonetic act is merely the act of uttering certain noises. The phatic act is merely the act of certain vocables or words, i.e. noises of certain types, belonging to and as belonging to, a certain vocabulary, conforming to and as conforming to a certain grammar. The rhetic act is the performance of an act of using those vocables with a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference." Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 95.

⁷ Ibid, 99. Austin adds nevertheless that even locutionary acts could also be illocutions which are yet to be identified according to its specified usage: "when we perform a locutionary act, we use speech: but in what way precisely are we using it on this occasion? For there are very numerous functions of or ways in which we use speech, and it makes a great difference to our act in some sense – in which way and which *sense* we were on this occasion 'using it.'" Ibid.

that I can back it up, when I make a promise, I imply that the thing promised is in the hearer's interest.⁸

Analyzing further the circumstance of a felicitous utterance of *mabalos*, the sort of *balos* (return) implied in the promise seems to vary on the weight of help received and recognized by the recipient. The norms that work on this system of reciprocity have already been explored in earlier researches in Philippine sociology about *utang na loob*. Moreover, *utang na loob* had been translated differently in English by various scholars depending on their respective analytical frameworks. One translation which immediately relates with the thesis of this paper is “debt of gratitude.” One who reciprocates an act of generosity after having been given something or helped by another is an example of someone who has felicitously fulfilled the speech act of gratitude in the utterance of *mabalos!* Thus, a longer exposition of *utang na loob* or *utang na buot*, as it is spoken in Bikol, deserves further exposition in order to elaborate the speech act of gratitude in the Bikol lexicon.

In everyday language use however, “*mabalos!*” may still be uttered even if one has not incurred a debt of gratitude. It can also be an expression that maintains social courtesy in the same manner and instances mentioned above when saying “thank you.” These two instances where *mabalos* may be uttered as a promise and/or as a courtesy is in accord with Austin's classification of commissive and behabitive speech acts. Commissives “commit the speaker to a certain course of action,”⁹ “but include also declarations or announcements of intention, which are not promises, and also rather vague things which we may call espousals.”¹⁰ Behabitives on the other hand “include the notion of reaction to other people's behavior and fortunes and of attitudes and expression of attitudes to someone else's past conduct or

⁸ Searle, *Speech Acts*, 65.

⁹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 156.

¹⁰ Ibid, 151. For Austin nonetheless, commissives may be connected to the other four types of speech acts namely, verdictives, exercitives, bahabitives and expositives. Verdictives are typified by giving verdicts, or findings about something which nevertheless, may not be final. Exercitives refer to the exercise of powers, rights or influence. Bahabitives cover attitudes and social behavior. And expositives explains how utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation or how words are used; in other words expository. Ibid, 150-151. For the exposition of these connections see p. 158.

imminent conduct."¹¹ Where *mabalos* is said with the illocutionary force of a promise, then it is properly a commissive, while when it is uttered as a form of social courtesy, it is properly called a behabitive speech act. What remains to be described is the context of gratitude when it is uttered in *Dyos mabalos* as compared to *mabalos*.

Dyos mabalos is also an utterance of a recipient to someone who has given him something or helped him in some way. Hence it is another way of thanking the other. But unlike *mabalos*, it seems not to have the categorical illocutionary force of a promise to reciprocate in due time. Rather, it resounds an intense wish for God's blessing to be bestowed on the giver. *Dyos mabalos* is the shorthand for "*Dyos an magbalos!*" or literally, "God will repay." In this utterance, gratitude is elevated to a sort of transcendence from a purely human transaction through the invocation of a divine interference. *Dyos mabalos* may in fact be an illocutionary act of a prayer for the other. Nonetheless, it is also true that in ordinary language use among Bikolanos, it functions similarly as a behabitive which strongly reflects the religious culture of its speakers. The shift though from the purely interhuman transaction implied in *mabalos* to a religious transcendence in *Dyos mabalos* deserves a contextual exploration.

The following parts of the paper is an attempt to reconstruct the speech act of gratitude in the utterance of *Dyos mabalos* through a textual review of earlier researches directly or inexplicitly relevant to the notion of gratitude. One among the many themes widely studied is the notion of *utang na loob* which is evidently linked to gratitude. This will be re-examined and proposed as one of the cultural and conceptual elements of gratitude contained in *Dyos mabalos* that resides in the recipient. Another element however shall be identified which will complete the conditions and requirement for what is to be claimed thereafter as the felicitous utterance of *Dyos mabalos*.

¹¹ Ibid, 159. For Austin, behabitives may also be related to commissives, "for to commend or to support is both to react to behavior and to commit oneself to a line of conduct." Ibid, 160. In relation to exercitives, "to approve may be an exercise of an authority or a reaction to behavior." Ibid.

***Utang na Buot sa Buot na Nag-atang* (Debt of Will¹² to the Willing Giver)**

A cursory look into the extant studies on *utang na loob* shows various ways of framing it depending on the analytical lens of the authors. In one of the pioneering studies in Philippine sociology, Mary Hollnsteiner identifies *utang na loob* as one of the classifications of reciprocity, the other two being contractual and quasi-contractual reciprocity.¹³ Leonardo de Castro disagrees however with this contextualization. According to him the semantic content of *utang na loob* as a debt that cannot be repaid, annuls its categorization into mutual exchange.¹⁴ In his survey of Filipino values, Leonardo Mercado translates *utang na loob* as debt of volition and categorizes it under the ethical dimension of *loob* as signified by the term.¹⁵ In a more recent study by Jeremiah Reyes, *utang na loob* is rendered as “debt of will” described as “the natural response to *kagandahang-loob* (beauty of will)”¹⁶ — the character of a person “who has an affective concern for others and the willingness to help them in times of need.”¹⁷ A theological perspective of *utang na loob* on the other hand is offered by Jose de Mesa where interestingly, the burden of obligation of the debt is transferred from the recipient to the giver. De Mesa refers to a “common debt of solidarity” which every individual carries thus necessitating oneself to assume responsibility for the other in the act of giving.¹⁸ Albert Alejo’s summative definition of “*pagtanaw ng utang na loob*” shares De Castro’s view and lies closest to the reasons and conditions of the Bikolano expression “*mabalos*” that will be worked

¹² The translation of *utang na buot* into “debt of will” captures more the element of personal initiative or decision which are among the many significations of *buot* in Bikol languages.

¹³ Mary R. Hollnsteiner, “Reciprocity in Lowland Philippines in “*Four Readings on Philippine Values*, Edited by Frank Lynch (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 1964), 22-49.

¹⁴ Leonardo D. de Castro, *Etika at Pilosopiya sa Kontekstong Pilipino*, (Diliman Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1995), 187-210.

¹⁵ Leonardo Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, (Tacloban: Divine Word Publications, 1976), 65.

¹⁶ Jeremiah Reyes, “Loób and Kapwa: An Introduction to a Filipino Virtue Ethics” in *Asian Philosophy*, 25(2): 149, 2015.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Jose de Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture: Studies in Theological Re-rooting*, (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1987) and Albert Alejo, *Tao Po! Tuloy! Isang Landas ng Pagunawa sa Loob ng Tao*, (Quezon City: Office of the Research and Publications Ateneo de Manila University, 1990), 29-33.

out herein. In his philosophical-ethical scrutiny of *utang na loob* De Castro probes into the conditions for its emergence and provides some normative claims when to admit or recognize *utang na loob* to the other. As a result he was able to connect *utang na loob* to other values such as "*kusang-loob*" (personal initiative) and "*kabutihang-loob*" (good will).

While previous researches have been singularly concerned with the Filipino concept or value of *utang na buot*,¹⁹ I contend that it must be understood with its complementary concept of *atang kan buot* which has actually already been hinted at in these studies. For example, in developing and establishing *utang na buot* as an ethical concept, De Castro identifies the conditions for the emergence of *utang na buot* in human transactions in both the giver and the receiver. On the part of the receiver, *utang na buot* arises (1) when s/he receives a valuable help or favor from another person (2) in times of dire need or decrepit situation.²⁰ This is due to the fact that we don't (and must not) always owe a debt of gratitude to people from whom we receive goods or simple favors. However there is no strict measure or gauge for that kind of circumstance that triggers the recipient's recognition of debt due to the complexity, peculiarity and relativity of every individual's situation.

On the part of the giver, De Castro points out that a real/genuine *utang na buot* arises (or must arise) when the act of giving or rendering help is (1) done autonomously/free from coercion, (2) without expectation of a return or (specially) interest (3) and out of genuine sympathy (*bukal sa loob/udok sa buot*).²¹ If the act of giving lacks any of these three normative requirements, the ambivalence of *utang na buot* clearly comes into view. This ambivalence, which the Filipino luminary in philosophy Emerita Quito²² speak of, is the pendulum-like tendency of *utang na buot* to sway either on the opposite poles of positive/good and negative/bad; positive when it generates an ethical relation among persons, and negative when it serves or is used as a means for self-aggrandizement by subjecting the other in an endless string of servitude, and when it becomes a reason

¹⁹ In using the Bikol term, I am implying appropriation of the ideas explained or described for *utang na loob* towards construction of a notion into *utang na buot*.

²⁰ De Castro, *Etika at Pilosopiya sa Kontekstong Pilipino*, 191-192.

²¹ *Ibid*, 195-196.

²² See Emerita Quito, "The Ambivalence of Filipino Traits and Values" in *Values in Philippine Culture and Education*, Edited by Manuel B. Dy, Jr., The Council of Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994, pp. 57-62.

for circumventing laws just in order to pay back a supposed debt of gratitude to someone. This confusion seems to emanate from the reduction of *utang na buot* into mutual reciprocity which the early studies in the 60's such as that of Hollnsteiner has made. The act of giving based on those conditions, De Castro continues, is of a deeply personal nature which means that it is out of one's interiority or subjectivity and not from an external normative requirements, objective rules and laws.²³ Thus to reduce *utang na buot* into a social principle or norm constrains it into the sociological principle of mutual exchange.

The term *buot* has to be given a wider and deeper consideration when talking about *utang na buot* because it is again a running concept that implicates together the notions of debt, gratitude and human relations. *Buot*, according to Wilmer Joseph Tria could refer to feelings, volition, interiority, or in sum, it is the innermost sanctuary of man.²⁴ Tria is in concord with the abundant literature of studies regarding the concept of *loob*, the Tagalog counter part of *buot*. To have *utang na buot* in other words involves the whole person into the transaction wherein the debt of gratitude emerges. The condition whereby gratitude grows into an *utang na buot* based on the requirements outlined by De Castro on the part of the giver may be summarized as "*atang kan buot*" (gift or offering of the self).

"*Pag-atang*," as usually heard during the celebration of the Eucharist in Bikol, refers to the offertory; *atang* could mean offering. This has actually a diachronic significance in Bikol history as the term also refers to the natives' offering to the gods as a form of thanksgiving for the blessings they have received. Giving in the act of offering is inseparable from thanking in the word *atang*. And thanking obviously implies having received something to be thankful for. Gratitude in *utang na buot* implies then a "*nag-atang nin buot*" (willing giver). Today, the term present or gift could be used. *Utang na buot* arises when a person, in the situation of being a recipient as described by De Castro, receives something at that particular present moment of helplessness from someone who *freely, unconditionally* and *sympathetically* gives himself in the form of help. But again, not everything received triggers *utang na buot* though we could still be grateful for having received them.

²³ De Castro, *Etika at Pilosopiya sa Kontekstong Pilipino*, 193-195.

²⁴ Wilmer Joseph S. Tria, *Ako Asin an Kapwa Ko: Pilosopiya nin Tawo* (Naga City: Ateneo de Naga University Press, 2009), 34-39.

Utang na buot goes beyond mere thanking or recognition of something given to us regardless of its value. It is also beyond reciprocity or *pagtutumbas*, mutual exchange as Holnsteiner claims. *Utang na buot*, understood with its complementary concept of *atang* elevates gratitude into an ethical plane where relation grows into an obligation. The obligation is that of "*pagtanaw nin utang na buot*," usually construed as the obligation to pay back to the other and uttered in the Bikol "*mabalos*" as explained above. De Castro however clarifies that it is more of a promise to oneself that he will also lend a hand, within his means, to the giver once the situation is reversed.²⁵ Thus, "*hiya*," "*supog*" (Bikol) or shame must be understood as a failure to live up to one's promise to oneself to help his giver in the situation where he has the means and capability to do so.²⁶ The giver on the other hand does not demand for payment, for to do so would deviate from the second condition and would diminish or destroy the character of *utang na buot* (as something that should arise from an uncoerced, unconditional and sympathetic act of giving). Albert Alejo's note captures and echoes the same thought:

Ang utang na loob ay hindi binabayaran kundi tinatanaw o kinikilala; lagi itong nasa abot-tanaw ng nangungutangan ng loob, kaya nga sa maraming pagkakataon, nagagamit itong panghawak ng mga makapangyarihan sa mga hamak na nangangailangan. Subalit kung tutuusin, ang pakitang loob at tapat na damay ay hindi dapat isinusumbat. Inaalala ito ng tumatanggap ngunit kinakalimutan ng nagbigay. Mas magandang sabihing sinusuklian ito, at hindi binabayaran.²⁷

A debt of gratitude is personally recognized rather than repaid; it is always within the purview of the indebted hence in most cases, it is often employed by those in power to manipulate the needy. But in essence, an authentic act and sincere help ought not to be levied. It is remembered rather by the recipient but forgotten by the giver. It could be more aptly rendered as handing over the change instead of paying the act. (Translation mine)

²⁵ De Castro, *Etika at Pilosopiya sa Kontekstong Pilipino*, 203.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 209.

²⁷ Alejo, *Tao Po! Tuloy! Isang Landas ng Pagunawa sa Loob ng Tao*, 151.

There is moreover a greater kind of shame or “*supog*” demanded than simply not living up to his own promise to himself to do “*pagtanaw nin utang na buot*” or “*pagbalos*.” This is the inability or adamancy to pay forward and extend his help to his fellowman once he has been uplifted into a relative status of being capable of giving help. In other words when the previously “*nagkautang nin buot*” fails to learn how to “*mag-atang kan saiyang buot*.” I turn now to Jose de Mesa’s theological treatment of *loob* to situate the interesting relocation of the obligation of *utang na buot* to the giver.

Utang na Buot as the Giver’s Responsibility

Utang na buot may also be construed as an appeal to the other (giver) that awaits an urgent response. Jose de Mesa captures this meaning insightfully in the utterance of “*utang na loob!*” by the marginalized, needy, and helpless when they seek help. Alejo summarizes it thus as:

*Pagmamakaawa; paghingi ng pakundangan o pagsasaalang-alang bilang kapwa-tao; pagkatoksa puso ng kapwa sa ngalan ng makataong pagkakapatiran; paghingi ng malasakit, kalinga o paglingap o pakikiramay; pagtataya ng sariling pagkatao bilang garantiya ng katapatan sa paghingi ng pabuya.*²⁸

To beg for mercy; to ask for consideration or recognition as a fellow human being; to implore the other’s heart in the name of humane solidarity; to appeal for genuine concern, care or help or sympathy; to offer one’s being as a guarantee of faithfulness in asking for compensation. (Translation mine)

All these significance of appeal to the other connects *utang na buot* to “*pag-atang*” (giving). *Atang* in Tagalog could also mean obligation or task as in the statement “*Nakaatang sa mga balikat ko ang pag-aaruga sa aking mga kapatid*” (It is my obligation to care for my siblings). But what right has the receiver to appeal to his fellowman for help? For De Mesa it is the equality of *loob* in every person, the debt of solidarity from a shared identity of “being” human endowed to us by God, the “*Nagkaloob*” (Infinite Giver) out of his

²⁸ Ibid.

"*kagandahang-loob*"²⁹ (Generosity but literally "beauty of the will"). De Mesa uses the term *kagandahang-loob* to describe God's love for man. *Loob* is the "*ubod*" or core of being human and as such, it is relational in nature. This relation opens up to his fellowman or *kapwa* and God or "*Maykapal*."³⁰ In the Bikol counterpart, the relational meaning of *buot* is rightly identified by Tria as the one at work in the concept of love uttered as "*pagkamuot*."³¹ "God's love" in this sense may even be stated as "*Pagkamuot kan Kagbuot*."³² For De Mesa *Loob (Buot)* is the symmetrical measure of "being" man.³³

The asymmetrical positions of the receiver and giver in the situation where *utang na buot* arises is brought about by contingencies and externalities. Asymmetry in other words belongs to the circumstantial situation where one finds herself at a vantage or disadvantaged position. This may also be referred to the realm of "having", the stadium where the test of humanity is posed to an individual; the test of giving that elevates gratitude from mere thanking and reciprocity towards becoming more human. In the words of De Mesa:

Ang pakiusap ay ginagawa sa ngalan ng "utang" ng pagiging "tao lang tayong pare-pareho" (common humanity), at samakatuwid ay sa ngalan ng "kapatiran" (solidarity). Hindi nga ba ito ang daing ng karamihan sa ating mga kapwa Pilipino sa ngayon? – silang maralita, nagdurusa, pinagsasamantalahan, pinagkakaitan, at inaapi? Dapat tingnan ang utang na loob bilang isang pananagutan ng nagbibigay kaysa isang pribilehiyo na ipinagkaloo sa kanya ng kanyang tinutulungan. Kung tutuusin naman, lahat tayo ay may iisang loob, isang makataong loob (loob ang ubod ng pagpapakatao).³⁴

²⁹ Ibid, 31-32.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The Bikol term for love is *pagkamuot* which contains the root word *buot*. Wilmer Joseph S. Tria, *Ako Asin an Kapwa Ko: Pilosopiya nin Tawo*, 45-49.

³² "*Kagbuot*," which obviously contains the root word *buot*, literally refers to someone who has made a choice or decision. When it is used to refer to God, it addresses God as the creator, implored in the Lord's Prayer as the one whose "*will* be done on earth as it is in heaven." *Pagkamuot kan Kagbuot* therefore means "The Creator's Love".

³³ Cited in Alejo, *Tao Po Tuloy!*, 31.

³⁴ Ibid.

The appeal is made in the name of the “debt” of common humanity, and therefore in the name of solidarity. Isn’t this the plea of most of our fellow Filipinos today? – They who are poor, suffering, taken advantage of, deprived and oppressed? Debt of gratitude must be taken as a responsibility of the giver instead of a privilege endowed to her by the recipient. For in truth, we partake equally of the same interiority, a humane interiority (interiority is the core of our humanity). (Translation mine)

If this ideal of giving is conceived as a test of humanity, then we can understand better the normative conditions which De Castro has outlined on the part of the giver and on why the giver “forgets” the help rendered. What the receiver must actually realize more than just “*pagbalos*” is that the debt that cannot be paid back must be paid forward in his learning and being able to take the same position of giver (relatively) should the circumstantial forces change. There is inequality in the domain of circumstantial conditions that is why giving becomes a concrete demand or appeal (*panawagan*) of help to the self. The ambivalence of *utang na buot* appears into clear view once more when it is confined to the old idea of *pagtanaw nin utang na buot* or reciprocity with interest often demanded by the giver-creditor. This is also the reason why some would prefer to dismiss entirely *utang na buot* as a value. Mary Holnsteiner in the 70s projected that eventually *utang na loob* reciprocity might eventually turn obsolete and give way to a more contractual and well defined arrangements of mutual exchange as more and more Filipinos become educated and literate in terms of laws and objective norms. But today, in politics for example, the negative mechanism of *utang na buot* is still widely utilized by those in power to engulf subjects into perpetual indebtedness through a bogus generosity in return for the people’s unquestioned support.

This confinement of *utang na buot* into reciprocity eclipses the other and more relationally constructive aspect of it. *Utang na buot* runs deep in Philippine culture thus, an entire dismissal of it as a value might also be excessive. Due to the pregnant significance of the term *buot* or *loob*, to discharge it would be tantamount to destruction of an archeological and cultural artifact which forms part of our people’s heritage. Brought into a wider horizon of philosophical analysis however, *utang na buot* could be rendered more flexibly open for new valuations. The next part tries to answer the question how the asymmetrical positions of the giver and receiver could have possibly

overshadowed the "equality of being" immanent in the concept of *buot*. It will be argued afterwards that *Dyos Mabalos* carries implicitly a semantic reference of freedom in its utterance.

"Dyos Mabalos!" and Gratitude as Emancipation

I take the hint from a short but richly substantial essay of the Bikol historian Danilo Gerona entitled "*Orag* as Bikolano Virtue."³⁵ For Gerona, subjugation through colonization meant the deconstruction of the language of power previously immanent in the natives' language itself. *Oragon* as a title exclusively rendered to the chieftain characteristically describes his political power and sexual prowess which the friars found distasteful and contradictory to the morality of Christianity. The *oragon*, Gerona adds, is also called "*parabuot*" (commander) in as much as he holds power to command obedience from his subordinates. His political power was not simply gained as an inheritance but earned through various feats of bravery most of them deadly, thus granting him worthy of acquiring an *anting-anting*. He may also be called *bathalaan* which literally means "a man who possessed bathala."

The man worthy of *anting-anting* or the power of *bathala* was the one who has enormous willpower, *panong buot*, one who is full of *buot* or one who is *ma-buot*.³⁶

If Gerona is correct then *orag* (power) and *buot* (will, interiority, self, etc.) could be synonymously signified by both terms. But the imposition of religion and deconstruction of language via translation paved the way for chieftains being stripped off of their power. The *maguinoos* class from where the *dato* (chieftain) belonged and were praised to possess natural and supernatural powers were regarded as superstitious non-sense and replaced by Christ who was introduced as the real *maguinoos*. Continuous veneration of the *maguinoos* through

³⁵ In *Hingowa: The Holy Rosary Seminary Journal*, 4(2): 117-122, 2001. For Gerona's more recent comments on the *oragon* see Michael Roland F. Hernandez, "Discursing Philosophy and History: An Interview with Danilo Madrid Gerona," in *FILOCRACIA* 2(1): 17-20, 2015.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 119.

*pag-arang*³⁷ was suppressed, “in exchange for the sexual incontinence or the *orag* of the *maguino*, the friars preached abstinence and mortification.”³⁸ Gerona cites that in the catechism,

The friar placed the opposite of *orag* as *kabinian* or modesty. The *mabuot*, full of *buot*, the courageous of the pre-colonial times was replaced by the *mabuot* of the Spanish regime who was kind and obedient. They deprived the *maguino* of their honorific title of *Cagurangnan*³⁹ and reserved the title only to the heavenly family of Christ and the Virgin Mother, hence the The Hail Mary was translated as *Tara Cagurangnan Maria*. Indeed the Spanish missionaries succeeded in deconstructing the *maguino* who was the *oragon* and transformed him into the outwardly pious *maguino* gentleman.⁴⁰

The utterance of *Dyos Mabalos* strongly suggests to have emerged from these relations of power between the natives and the colonizers, between the powerful and the powerless. These relations of power could be identified as the historical source of the asymmetrical positions of the giver and receiver similarly at play in the *utang na buot* relation. Subjugation overshadowed the meaning of power (*orag*) in *buot* and infused the meaning of subservience in *mabuot*. On the other hand the colonizers were elevated into the status of the “*dakulang tawo*” (big/powerful man) wrongly perceived by the natives themselves as their provider, from whom their lives were caught up in an endless string of servitude, indebtedness and dependence. The subservient *buot* is then culturally invoked every time in the recipient’s recognition of his *utang na buot* which has metastasized overtime into a virtue.

At present however, the above reconstruction of *utang na buot* with its complementary *atang kan buot* provides an alternative context for the utterance of *Dyos Mabalos*. The word *buot* is already abundantly rich in signification capable of developing a certain holistic discourse on subjectivity and a network of other concepts hence, to think of the translation of *buot* as facilitating the penetration of

³⁷ *Pag-arang* is the indigenous act of giving presents.

³⁸ Gerona, “*Orag* as Bikolano Virtue,” 120.

³⁹ This term contains the root word *gurang* which literally refers to an aged and mature person.

⁴⁰ Gerona, “*Orag* as Bikolano Virtue,” 121.

Christianity into the natives is not pure speculation. *Dyos Mabalos* is a cultural artifact of the appropriation of the Christian rationality formerly imposed on the natives. This is why its utterance not only resound a religious atmosphere but a cultural and historical background as well. If the description of *utang na buot* earlier discussed (as arising from *atang kan buot*) is accepted as the one at work in the indebtedness of a grateful person, his utterance of *Dyos mabalos* instead of mere *mabalos* (as a promise to do *pagtanaw nin utang na buot*), suggests a double significance. First is the recognition of the giver's generosity (thankfulness) and admission that he cannot repay that goodness (but could be paid forward instead) and second, in lieu of his incapability to reciprocate the other's generosity, his heartfelt prayer to God for blessing would bring about justice to the other. In other words, the utterance of *Dyos mabalos* has an emancipative dimension in his genuine and deeply personal invocation of a divine intervention of the *Kagbuot* (God), or the source of his being, to give the due his debtor deserves that he couldn't render at the moment hence loosening the strings of reciprocity that may be levied upon him, especially by a manipulative other. The *Kagbuot* in this context is identified as a guarantor of justice who ensures that everyone will be given what is due to them. A felicitous “*Dyos mabalos*” discredits the right of the benefactor to extract interest from his act of giving for, if he has authentically extended his help and thereby eliciting the *utang na buot* from the recipient, then he is already warranted a providential return from God.

The problem with this interpretation as it were is that “*Dyos mabalos*” could easily become a mechanism of escape from a more positive or virtuous practice of *utang na buot* as succinctly explained by Jacklyn Cleofas in her practical and empirical account of *utang na loob* as a Filipino virtue.⁴¹ She writes: “Repaying a good will can (only) become a form of moral excellence if it is sensitive to considerations of fairness, in the sense of not depriving some people of access to resources and opportunities.”⁴² This comes as a consequence of practicing *utang na loob* towards the *kapwa*,⁴³ whose significance has

⁴¹ Jacklyn A. Cleofas, “Towards a Practical and empirically Grounded Account of *Utang na-Loob* as a Filipino Virtue” in *Kritika Kultura* 33/34: 156-179, 2019.

⁴² *Ibid*, 169.

⁴³ Virgilio Enriquez who is a pioneer in Filipino Psychology has already identified *kapwa* as a term in Filipino that signifies a “shared humanity.” Virgilio G. Enriquez, *Indigenous Psychology and National Consciousness* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1989), 33.

a universal and inclusive scope beyond one's kin and personal relations, in conjunction with *katarungan*⁴⁴ which integrates justice and moral rectitude. If giving back could have a wider scope so as to include "the rest of the community in terms of instituting reforms that promote social justice" and not just to one's family, benefactor or select group, *utang na loob* could indeed be legitimated as a virtue.

Two extremes, Cleofas further asserts, should be avoided in order not stray from this ideal: on one hand "the possibility of being a self-focused recipient of aid who is deficient in responsibility for others"⁴⁵ where one disregards the benefactor's generosity, wallows deliberately on his dependency instead of improving his lot and exerting no effort to help others and the rest of the community; on the other hand is the "excessive attention on the benefactor"⁴⁶ where one overlooks his responsibility to the greater community due to his burdening focus on repaying the act of a particular benefactor. While "*Dyos mabalos*" may offer deliverance from the second extreme through the providential warrant of justice for the giver's kindness it invokes, it could easily fall into the other extreme of being uttered by a self-focused recipient who disregards the duty of learning to give and help his fellowman, and resists taking a greater social responsibility after having received help from another. Hence, *Dyos mabalos* must be qualified further in order not to digress but harmonize instead the claim of emancipation associated in its utterance with the context of social justice.

The term in Bikol which reflects similarly the elements cited by Cleofas is *katanosan*, derived from the root word *tanos* which means "right, straight or morally upright (*matanos*)." According to Jose Carpio this word describes the very integrity of the human person which includes his character, his rights, self-reliance and independence to pursue happiness.⁴⁷ In other words, *katanosan* is tantamount to virtue and to manifest this in one's person is to be a *matanos na tawo* (virtuous, morally upright person). Such a person is one whose actions are anticipated to be in accord with the common

⁴⁴ Cleofas follows Jose Diokno's etymology of *katarungan* from the Visayan word *tarong* which means "straight, upright, appropriate, or correct." Cleofas, "Towards a Practical and Empirically Grounded Account of *Utang-na-Loob* as a Filipino Virtue," 169.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 167.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 168.

⁴⁷ Jose Ma. Z. Carpio, "Katanosan and Kaibahan: Bikolano Social Consciousness." *Hingowa: The Holy Rosary Seminary Journal*, 4(2): 83-40, 2001.

good, with what is morally right and what is truly just. Yet he is also in full command of his own individual welfare while doing the right course of action. Henceforth, the speech act of gratitude in “*Dyos mabalos*” uttered by a person from the standpoint of *katanosan* could be finally distinguished from a merely courteous behavioristic enunciation of it or, from the worse escapist tendency of dependence.

Conclusion

As developed in this paper, the value of gratitude renders the enunciation of “*Dyos Mabalos*” as an ethical act. A difference was also pointed when gratitude is likewise conveyed in mere “*Mabalos*.” In the culturally specific signification of the Bikol language, the illocutionary act of promising (of *pagtanaw ng utang na buot*) is attached to gratitude in the saying of “*Mabalos*” which is not quite plain in “*Dyos Mabalos*.” “*Utang na buot*” is identified as the conceptual condition that elicits this speech-act, something which is not exclusive to Bikol experience considering the replete literature on “*utang na loob*” in Philippine studies. Debt of gratitude arises as a response of the recipient to an act of giving which normatively fulfills the requirement of an *atang kan buot*. The asymmetry in the circumstantial situation that delegates one in a state of need and the other in a vantage point of being able to give is the concrete ground for the coming to be of this *utang na buot – atang kan buot* relation. In his recognition of indebtedness, the recipient is exposed to a vulnerability before the giver who could take advantage of this situation to demand a return out of the act of giving for his own self-interests. The ambivalence of *utang na buot* has always been identified as emanating from this demand for reciprocity that disregards certain normative expectations for the common good. It is here that a sincere “*Dyos Mabalos*” of the recipient finds its proper context and turns the ethical dimension of gratitude into a transcendental appeal to the *Kagbuot*, the source of *buot* and guarantor of equality to bring about justice to the giver. This could only be felicitous however within the grounds of *katanosan*. “*Dyos mabalos*” emerging from *katanosan* perfects the ethical and transcendental dimension of gratitude: Ethical because there is in the recipient a genuine recognition of the act of goodness by

the benefactor and a full realization of the responsibility that one has to take in paying forward this goodness to his fellowman; Transcendental in the sense that gratitude is elevated into an earnest invocation for God to bestow justice on the benefactor which he couldn't dispense at the moment due to the nature of *utang na buot* that he personally recognizes (as something that couldn't be repaid). This prayer moreover is a source of emancipation from this personal recognition of *utang na buot* which, when wrongly attributed to self-interested creditors would make him vulnerable to manipulation. Emancipation does not consist in a retreat to a state of inactivity and dependence but is only the beginning of an empowered state of already being capable of *pag-atang kan buot* which is no other than the task of assuming responsibility to help his fellowman in need and show how in his person could social justice becomes attainable in learning how to contribute to the larger society from the experience of having been helped by another at one point in time.

References

- Alejo, Albert. *Tao Po! Tuloy! Isang Landas ng Pagunawa sa Loob ng Tao*. Quezon City: Office of the Research and Publications Ateneo de Manila University, 1990.
- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.
- Carpio, Jose Ma. Z. "Katanosan and Kaibahan: Bikolano Social Consciousness," in *Hingowa: The Holy Rosary Seminary Journal* 4(2): 83-106, 2001.
- Cleofas, Jacklyn A. "Towards a Practical and empirically Grounded Account of *Utang-na-Loob* as a Filipino Virtue," in *Kritika Kultura* 33/34: 156-179, 2019/2020.
- De Castro, Leonardo D. *Etika at Pilosopiya sa Kontekstong Pilipino*. Diliman Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1995.
- De Mesa, Jose. *In Solidarity with the Culture: Studies in Theological Re-rooting*. Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1987.
- Enriquez, Virgilio G. *Indigenous Psychology and National Consciousness*. Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1989.

- Gerona, Danilo. “Orag as Bikolano Virtue,” in *Hingowa: The Holy Rosary Seminary Journal* 4(2): 4(2), 2001.
- Hernandez, Michael Roland F. “Discursing Philosophy and History: An Interview with Danilo Madrid Gerona,” in *FILOCRACIA* 2(1): 1-20, 2015.
- Hollnsteiner, Mary R. “Reciprocity in Lowland Philippines” in *Four Readings on Philippine Values*. Edited by Frank Lynch. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 1964.
- Quito, Emerita. “The Ambivalence of Filipino Traits and Values” in *Values in Philippine Culture and Education*. Edited by Manuel B. Dy, Jr. The Council of Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994.
- Reyes, Jeremiah. “Loób and Kapwa: An Introduction to a Filipino Virtue Ethics,” in *Asian Philosophy*, 25(2):148-171, 2015.
- Reyes, Ramon C. “Sources of Filipino Thought,” in *Philippine Studies*, 21(4): 1973.
- Searle, John R. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- Tria, Wilmer Joseph S. *Ako Asin an Kapwa Ko: Pilosopiya nin Tawo*. Naga City: Ateneo de Naga University Press, 2009.

