The Relevance of Cultural Transformation and Autonomy of Thinking in Filipino Philosophy: A Critical Essay

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Abstract

Problematizing the coming fruition of cultural transformation and autonomy of thinking, this essay attempts to give Filipino society a disillusioned view of its national character. Centering on Leonardo Mercado's trite notion of a given and almost static culture, the essay argues that cultural change is possible and necessary in the formation of a culture of intellectualization. This essay also serves to expose the working assumptions at the core of Mercado's brand of Filipino Philosophy to deliver a prompt reminder of the purpose of philosophizing as an emancipative act from any face of social oppression. Ultimately, it challenges the view that Filipinos have to be unguarded and complacent with a "nativized" culture of corruption.

Keywords: Leonardo Mercado, Filipino Philosophy, change, static culture, emancipative act

INTRODUCTION

As a nation that seems to be hemmed in by the manipulating elements of colonialism because of its dark historical episodes, the Philippines is seemingly in a mire of doubt about taking a foray into an unknown realm. It can be said that it might be convenient for Filipinos to simply not take the risk of going beyond the frontiers known to them and let the uncharted paths be a place for those who deserve to get lost. But one may ask, if the purity of Filipino identity can be preserved so as not to be interlaced with other complicating elements that are foreign to them, can the Filipinos revert to the original version of themselves to arrive at the most convenient and autonomous version of themselves?

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Quixotic as it appears, one may be troubled by the endeavor to find one's cultural indigeneity to the extent that one might think that the gift of discovering socio-historical hindsight is wanting in this challenge to be possible, and it would be more comfortable to stay in the present buoyant station of the Philippine society despite all its undercurrents. But are the Filipinos not supposed to be the navigators of their cultural journey in the vast ocean? To bear this question in mind is to seemingly pit a fight against the two sides of the same coin: The question of autonomy and uniqueness should be preserved for a culture to holistically grow on its own, but it is not for a fact sequestered from the riddles on how this can be done through an objective determining ground of building a chasm between the Indigenous and the foreign; on the other hand, upon the assumption that there is an iridescent historicity of the Filipinos to be preserved and cut off from the so-called alienating networks of the new, the issue of cultural convenience might not be guaranteed without considering if this decision to stay on one's assumed locality is not undermining the future of critical innovation. The entire quest turns out to be, in itself, a question.

One might give oneself a break from these extremely abstract musings by delving into the real dilemma that these options put into place when facing the issues of nation-building and the authenticity of social development. Leonardo Mercado thinks that there is a need to account for the circumstantial details in an ethical dilemma, underscoring that there are no hard and fast rules to bifurcate the unconscious and conscious acts of man; for instance, on how to easily

determine acts between homicide.[1] And murder is exemplified by the linguistic apparatuses afforded by the Filipino culture: "*A criminal may say,* ['] [Napatay] *ko si Jose*['] *(I have accidentally killed Jose. Or the criminal may also admit:* ['] *Pinatay ko si Jose*['] *(I have intentionally killed Jose)*."[2] Mercado is adamant to bring to the fore the idea of separating the Filipino conception of the law from its Western counterpart; in which the former includes personalized and more contextual approaches in legal arrangements, while the latter is more rigid and abstract. However, as will be discussed hereunder, this fascination of Mercado towards what was believed to be the highly experiential and contextualized bases of Filipino Philosophy (in contrast to what Mercado believed as predominantly abstract philosophizing from the West) will be challenged by Mercado's unfitting intransigence to change some facets of the Philippine society simply because these allegedly are the very

[1] Beyond the category used herein as taken from Mercado's text, however, this example may also point to the fact of distinction between intentional felonies and culpable offenses. The former concerns those omissions or acts deliberately done by the criminal with criminal intent or malice that is inherently immoral as brought about by the complete understanding and discernment of the consequences of one's criminal intent (having a *scienter* element), while the latter refers to those omissions or acts incurred by the offender's mental condition and attitude without an inherent felonious design but only due to negligence, imprudence, lack of foresight, lack of carefulness, and/or lack of skill. The discussion of not incurring criminal liability might also involve the justifying circumstances when unlawful aggression took place in which a victim defended oneself from a killed or injured aggressor, which the defending victim had no part in sufficiently provoking the latter (lacking criminal intent), and had only used reasonable and necessary means to repel the impending or actual, unlawful attack to the life, honor, and property of oneself and of other's as well. On another note, there are many exempting circumstances of not incurring criminal liability in which there is a crime that transpired, yet there is no criminal due to the lack of voluntariness and intelligence from the alleged perpetrator (e.g., insanity or imbecility of the one who executed the crime without lucid interval in its commission or omission; irresistible and inescapable threat to the suspect who committed the crime against the latter's own will; failure to perform an act or obligation required by law due to natural calamities, other insuperable causes, and related circumstances mentioned in the article). See *The Revised Penal Code*, Act No. 3815, as amended (Phil.), art 3; 6; 11-12.

[2] Leonardo Mercado, *The Filipino Mind: Philippine Philosophical Studies II* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994), 161. Emphasis and slight modifications were added.

elements and categories that define Filipino Philosophy – even though these factors cause the Filipinos to experience internal and external sufferings.

To greenlight cultural understanding in working side by side with ethical investigations is, a fortiori, reassuring of becoming inclusive in the advancement of philosophizing itself. Nevertheless, one must not rest our suspecting minds in the manner that Mercado blithely pictured everything that comes from the Western legal conception as sharks from which we have no choice but to rapidly swim away to save our lives. As Mercado puts it, "B*y going around the law, the masses believe that they can bring the law to their side*."[3] It is set in direct collision with Mercado's claim that the importance of highlighting the cultural nuances that can be found in the political culture of the Filipinos is not to hastily declare that all cases of escaping the legal process are morally acceptable, but only to show that there are some limitations in the enforcement of the law which goes beyond the imagination and expectations of those who formulated such.[4] Mercado distorted the theoretical tidiness of Mercado's intention to appreciate the Filipino culture by making a blunder to extremely valorize the pervasiveness of an act in a cultural setting that is no longer in line with the issues of human intention. Consider when Mercado used the example of the driver figuring in an accident and resorting to a settlement through a defrayal of the victims beyond legal arbitration.[5] Mercado should have made the illustration more contextualized: which clarifies why the driver was not to be considered legally culpable and, in turn, be reasonably spared from imprisonment and other legally imposed penalties. Take, as a hypothetical example, if the driver was drunk while driving, he/she is definitely not immune from the crime, for there is something largely amiss in tolerating it until one day we appreciate the absurd logic in driving like an alcoholic carelessly smashing everything that comes our way as long as we can turn the table to our side through our pecuniary powers. Without these details, it might be arbitrarily and impractically

[3] Mercado, *The Filipino Mind,* 165.

[4] Mercado, *The Filipino Mind,* 164.

[5] Mercado, *The Filipino Mind*, 162-163.

asserted – without political justification – how the accident should merit the circumventing of the law, which is directly in opposition to the preeminence of social considerations to become holistic in one's action and in consistently locating the provenance of ethical judgments based on the consequential tracks of values themselves, or from what Mercado calls "*sakop*" or the cultural mechanism to be oriented towards the values of personalized belongingness and strong interpersonal connections based on lived experiences, preferences, and exclusivity of shared intentions.[6] The sakop orientation that Mercado elucidates in many studies can be interpreted as a "territorial" attempt to live within the expectations of society or a particular group. It is, therefore, not surprising that Mercado would persuade Filipinos to normalize the authoritarian attitude in the classrooms whereby the students oftentimes remain complacent with the instructions of their teachers to avoid a "questioning" attitude and maintain "respect" for the academic figurehead; and if it is unavoidable, it could only be addressed through the more hierarchical and more collective process rather than tolerating a direct and immediate conversation to happen between the authority and the student.[7]

In line with the above-discussed arguments, I will venture into defining how Mercado understood the issues of creating an "identity," in particular, cultural identity. This will be an attempt to show that individuals can also shape and influence their culture aside from the fact that cultural changes are pressures that sway their lifeways, motivations, and beliefs, among others. After uncovering the working assumptions of Mercado concerning cultural identity vis-a-vis what Mercado perceived to be the role of Filipino Philosophy, I will argue that cultural identity is not and should not be treated as static, but rather as a dynamic force that can propel cultural transformation in the face of "nativized" or deeply embedded forms of corruption. I will conclude this essay with a message of hope that the Philippines can

[6] Leonardo Mercado, *Essays on Filipino Philosophy* (Manila: Logos Publication, Inc., 1994), 69-76.

[7] Leonardo Mercado, *Applied Filipino Philosophy*, 2nd Printing (Tacloban: Divine Word University Publications, 1977), 79-80.

change its culture for the better, and that philosophizing is of significant contribution to this timely and timeless undertaking. On the whole, this paper will attempt to initially substantiate what was missing from the claims of Preciosa Regina de Joya that Mercado did not offer "*anything new or extremely radical*" to free philosophizing from the shackles of hegemonic tendencies as it merely brings a throwback to treating philosophy as a "maidservant" of something else, which, in this case, reduces such as a "*tool for inculturation*."[8]

The working assumptions of Leonardo Mercado

To unravel Filipino thought from the sheaths of foreign influences in its undiluted form, as Mercado insists, is a step to ultimately fulfill the so-called plan of "god," that is, the variability in environmental factors and hereditary elements brings diversity and assorted cultural contributions in the global community.

> Intellectual colonialism is like a process of conditioning; it induces a person to forget his own culture and eventually makes him ape a supposedly superior model. But one man's medicine can be another's poison. ***What works for the West can hurt the Filipino. God made all men different and intended each man to develop his unique [potentialities].*** If a person is dissatisfied with himself and starts aping an idol – say a movie star – the former will turn out a neurosis. The analogy can be applied to the national level. ***God made all nations different by heredity and environment and intended that each nation develop more in being herself.*** By being herself, each nation can make a contribution to the world. But if the nation is contented with merely imitating a foreign model, she may turn out to be a false and a "neurotic" who possesses what Renato Constantino calls

[8] Cf. Preciosa Regina A. de Joya, "In Search of Filipino Philosophy," unpublished PhD diss., (Department of Southeast Asian Studies: National University of Singapore, 2013), 203, *https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/48683073.pdf*.

a "national inferiority complex." ***In short, the Filipino needs a philosophy to explain and support his identity.***[9]

From Mercado's explanation, it seems that a creation story or myth about a certain "god" making the world filled with a variety of cultures has become a grand dissimulation to completely tolerate detrimental forms of life and odious cultural inclinations in the name of unqualified cultural relativism and even of unconditional pluralism. Therefore, the point of criticizing Mercado, in this respect, is not only that it is difficult, if not impossible, to encapsulate the worldviews that will extract the definition of or the common view of God nor that it is simply outdated and too inaccurate to capture the changing of the times,[10] but also because that kind of philosophizing might also harbor harmful effects of glorifying the cultural components in the Philippine society. Ironically, while Mercado intends to be a paladin to abscond ideological tendencies and hegemonic ideas, cultures that do not adhere to a supreme being nor those who do not entertain the idea of discrediting and knowing the truth about theistic claims seem to find no place to what Mercado calls an inclusive view of philosophizing. This is not simply to disparage theistic claims or religious arguments in dialogical practices or anthropological investigations, but this point also questions the consistency of Mercado to appreciate cultural diversity even with respect to those people who do not entertain theistic ideas as a matter of philosophy. For instance, both the Theravada and Mahayana schools of Buddhism do not have a spellbinding gospel with the idea of a first cause or a supreme being who formed the universe. Siddhartha Gautama (commonly known as the Buddha) is more concerned with universal compassion and moral development of every individual in the here and now who cannot proceed from external authorities other than a

[9] Leonardo Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy, 3rd Printing* (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publications, 1974), 7. Emphasis supplied.

[10] Cf. Joseph Martin Jose, "New Directions in Filipino Philosophy: Challenges for the 'Millennial Filipino Philosopher'," *Suri* 9 (2021): 108-109, *https://suri.pap73.org/issue12/jose_suri_april2021.pdf*.

self-understanding of human development.[11] Parenthetically, one cannot simply neglect the valuable disposition – not necessarily the tenets – of the Buddha about silence as instrumental to the reflective acceptance of ideas in society. As Jonardon Ganeri interprets the silence of the Buddha on many occasions, human values, according to the Buddha, elusive and too delicate to simply be given to contretemps, are not only to be held precious for an all-knowing disputant in a bickering heat of intellectual wrangling amongst rivals – that one should even go further to seek wisdom to humbly face and not to be unreasonably confrontational to the conditional aspects of human values.[12]

The Buddha refuses to indoctrinate when the right moment of realization is underway and when total steadfastness to the holistic embrace of truth remains to be valued – not a question clogged with nothing but implicit argumentative motivations. As creatively analogized by the Buddha: To handle the raft above our head when it is still on the land is necessary, but its purpose is still to traverse a body of water by not grasping it gratuitously.[13] And if we have the right to know the very purpose that makes things useful in their own ways, what will prevent us from knowing the true purpose of philosophizing or of Filipino Philosophy? We definitely have to ask this question: Is Filipino Philosophy serving its true purpose when it ultimately proves that a particular group of people is handling a unique philosophy of their own even if it causes the Philippine society to suffer from social perversion and depravity of political integrity? This humble intention to seek the greatness of the very purpose behind philosophical exercises runs obverse to the hubristic motivational ground of Mercado to propose a sense of philosophizing that can reinforce the identity of Filipinos with

[11] K. Sri Dhammananda, *What Buddhists Believe*, 5th ed. (Taipei, Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 1993), 12-14; 59-61;113-120; 128-129. Also see Walpola Rahula, *What The Buddha Taught*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 51-55.

[12] Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of The Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53-56.

[13] Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of The Soul, 46.*

close to nothing of constructive and critical analysis of its present state.[14] Harping back on the extra-legal recourse to settlement, we should perhaps notice that knee-jerk reactions from Mercado's scholarship to merely defend the purity of a so-called "Filipino" identity should be supplanted with a temporary silence to think and not merely to argue for the collective consciousness, or better yet, non-consciousness that presently reigns over our society. In the Philippines, it remains a pressing issue that even ethnographic research cannot produce a linear causative relation to the rather silenced actors involved in the ubiquitous bureaucratic corruption known as "fixing" or the illegal acceleration of transactions and processes in government. Upon examination, Ronald Amorado observed that social capital in societal networks can be abused with unexpressed and implicit norms and even unrecorded codes that easily perpetuate the phenomenon of "fixing" due to a lack of trust and efficiency in bureaucratic organizations that can be exacerbated by people becoming avaricious of private gains that subverts fairness in political processes.[15] With thoughtful silence, we can penetrate the problem that hinders us from hearing the enlightening voices of societal hope and its transformative praxis – invalidating the idea that to philosophize is nothing more than to prove that cultural identity has to be extolled.

It is fair to say that while Mercado partly recognized that just as the *sakop* mentality fosters a positive sense of collectivity, it can be inordinately territorial, or, to put it squarely, a propensity towards parochialism and geared towards self-serving ends relegating the worth of the common good.[16] Despite a concession that *sakop* mentality is a two-way street, Mercado relaxed the dialectical potential of the critical counterculture by pointing out that the academic deciphering of Filipino Philosophy is for the sake of underlining the anthropological factors revolving around a particular worldview as stirred by what

[14] Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy,* 7.

[15] Ronnie V. Amorado, *Fixing Society: The Inside World of Fixers in the Philippines* (Davao: Research and Publication Office of the Ateneo de Davao University, 2007), 188-200.

[16] Mercado, *Essays on Filipino Philosophy,* 70.

Mercado calls "existential postulates."[17] Without further discussing the meaning of what the "existential postulates" are, Mercado seems confident that Filipinos will deeply appreciate his philosophical project to present the elements of Filipino Philosophy in contrast with the highly elitist and highly educated tradition of Existentialism and those thinkers aligning themselves to the traditional search for the ultimate causes and principle of things. Moreover, while Mercado sees the common element between Existentialism and the "existential postulates" investigated by Filipino Philosophy as more appreciative of the subjectivity of the person and reflective human experience that does not have a tunnel vision on purely scientific explanations, the former, according to Mercado, is individualistic in its scope while latter is more societal in its orientation and its overall scope. One can only surmise that Mercado analogized his philosophic enterprise to that of traditional logic that follows the discovery of basic principles from which other more complicated ideas and principles may be derived as resembling the position of Mercado that the Filipino culture is systematic and can be formalized in a systematic philosophy of the masses.[18] It is worth noting, therefore, that Mercado viewed people's worldviews as taking a causal priority over their thinking and patterns of actions. Furthermore, Mercado reduced the significance of the collective pursuit of positive social transformation to Mercado's bite-the-bullet argument in which Mercado is hard put to showcase the ductility and malleability of *sakop* mentality without probing its moral force as in the case of hastily declaring the former First Lady Imelda Marcos as emblematic of national *sakop* that was considered an effective fusion to regional barriers of Filipinos after the *Beatles* was crashed by an inimical crowd who felt that the Marcos family was snubbed by the band.[19] – a narrow-minded disposition to a particularized belongingness that has decided to be tarried to its logjam.

[17] Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy,* 4.

[18] Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy,* 4.

[19] Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy,* 102.

> A bodyguard or any subordinate may act domineeringly because he has a master to back him. This behavior is described [as] 'depend' (*saligán/pinagmamalaki/pagtalkan*) as in 'whom are you depending?' or translated freely, 'who is your protector?' [...] This is most evident in politics, where the followers are not concerned with issues and causes but rather with persons. Loyalty is not issue-oriented but personality-oriented because the Big Man embodies the group. [...] This may be an indication of a happy compromise between the old and new – an idiosyncratic mode of modernization[.][20]

To Mercado's liking, we are now heading to the dilemma of simply accepting whatever tragic a culture has to offer in which we are seemingly devoured by the current state of affairs with almost no chance to emancipate ourselves from the waves of unscrupulousness through the agentive navigation of our lives. If Mercado sees the need for an anthropological elucidation of philosophizing and social communion in general, perhaps we should accord ourselves to this challenge. According to anthropologist Michael Carrithers, the study of social diversity should dive deep inside the mystery of intersubjectivity and sociality, instead of misleading our understanding devoid of temporal considerations and the historical import of cultural struggles. Meaning to say, Carrithers strongly holds the idea that external causation is not the sole determinant of the variability and plasticity of humankind because – in employing methodical uneasiness to the purely stagnant interpretation of human interconnectedness – changes in the fabrics of social reality lie, too, in the sense of profound understanding and not simply of recanting one cultural good in an endless intergenerational cycle of being contained and transported to and fro: only signifying replication and not learning.[21] To illustrate, the complexity of the division of labor allows people now to immerse themselves in their respective fields of specialization – which interestingly also demands social dependability upon one another. The scholars of Philosophy investigate

[20] Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy,* 99-100.

[21] Michael Carrithers, *Why Humans Have Cultures: Explaining Anthropology and Social Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1-50.

solutions and limitations of ethical considerations and related discourses because even if it seems to be sidelined by the preoccupation with the here and now in advancing technology, it is dehumanizing not to entertain perennial dilemmas about our actions, their effects, societal motivations, and so on. Corollary to this, Noah Harari Yuval even argued that when society shifted to individual rationality from the highly communal thinking of our ancestors, one might be misconceived that one knows more, on any level than the people of the past – but the contemporary period occasioned a more separation of social designations and needs.[22] It is not common, or perhaps impossible, that university students of Philosophy would include in their colossal metier the construction of bridges, the production of cars, and the development of storm-resistant crops. In contrast, the Stone Age witnessed a hunter-gatherer who was capable of hunting animals, making one's clothing, protecting oneself from ferocious beasts, and starting a fire for warmth. This controversial issue, of course, may seriously open questions regarding its practicality and possibility, the reality of monopoly in knowledge formation, and economic productivity, as one may try to resolve the menaces in one's culture. This only points out that our thinking can be disturbed by things and social phenomena that should be disturbing us, no matter how seemingly impossible these ideas may get. This is not to say that all elements in one's culture can be changed, nor that all these elements need to be changed. The fact of impracticability behind a recommendatory idea can only be discovered through the deliberate will of the people to join political discourses that inevitably need the painstaking process of understanding and not simply by looking for consistency in cultural concatenation.

Turning away from the hard-earned sagacity of history in the richness of experiences is to put the cart before the horse. Society's foresight is not just being weaved effortlessly to see it through. Our value-dependent choices have to be guided by a critical self-consciousness that pays attention to the logic of development and internalized standards on qualifications.

[22] Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2018), 222. Also see Carrithers, *Why Humans Have Cultures,* 58.

A Challenge

Are we, then, to pursue a comparison of a single book against all other books in the world? It is fundamentally injudicious to compare, say, a philosophical book to a book filled with jokes and immediately categorize the former as undeserving of being read as it is superfluous in content, while the latter can be understood easily – there is more than what meets the eye in this issue. Unsurprisingly, our value judgment constitutes the purpose behind an action, albeit not exclusively. Similarly, Florentino Hornedo brings a caveat in the necessity and limitation of comparative approaches in cultural studies when facing multi-layered differentials in rational manifestations across diverse cultural backgrounds.[23] While vital thought must be appreciated in its expressive cultural consciousness and affective states found in symbolic lifeways, traditions, rituals, among others, Hornedo believes that our inherited cultural fabric can be weaved based on our present reflective decisions since cultural formation is a project in the making. As such, we must not be passive observers of a culture that uses religion to justify terrorism nor to defend gender inequality to continuously assert a blind tradition.[24]

Before we consider the preservation of traditional values as outright moral decay or not attuned to the ways of modernity, Randolf David holds that it is instructive for cultural studies not to be subservient to the pervasiveness of values and treat it as the truth on political morality; instead, it should not be tormented by the fixation to blame.[25] It is not un-called for to criticize Mercado for justifying the pain of financial bankruptcy in hosting extravagant local fiestas to simply assert that so-called "social needs" can override physiological

[23] Florentino Hornedo, *Pagpapakatao and Other Essays in Contemporary Philosophy and Literature of Ideas* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2002), 49-52.

[24] Hornedo, *Pagpapakatao*, 63.

[25] Randolf David, *Reflections on Sociology and Philippine Society,* 3rd Printing (Diliman, Quezon: The University of the Philippines Press, 2001), 87-90.

needs (pace Abraham Maslow's claim).[26] While we have to appreciate the intangible energy that fiestas provide for communal solidarity as sustained by the sacrifices in its careful preparation and not just the actual celebration *per se*,[27] one must admit that to economize resources, as a manifestation of the resiliency of Filipinos, is a necessary step to knowing what matters – whether socially or physically. This does not mean, however, that we should not excavate what undergirds a particular manifestation of solidarity, especially if it must not be considered tolerable. This only highlights that one is not barred from refusing to become foolishly beholden to excessive liabilities any more than Filipinos should tolerate a slapdash conflation of the ideas of genuine needs and mindless tradition. Hornedo argued that there is no need to create an inveterate adversarial ground between the "motivations" approach of Maslow that shows the reality of people being moved to attain their human needs and the natural affection of almost all Filipinos to celebrations as they tend to be more personalistic than formalistic in their cultural and communal expressions.[28] The subjectivity of cultural expression cannot be carried to excess when the objective assessment of financial stability will be too costly for social processes and individual lives. The challenge is not to overemphasize an unnecessary antagonism between the self and our social connectivity. In another instance, even if the interpersonal component of a romantic relationship takes hold of its stability, one cannot afford to simply make one's partner sacrifice his/her time for sleeping just to make him/her blabber nonsensically over the phone during the wee hours to be committed to your so-called "love language" or "communicative lines" and even feel that there is something "romantic" and "satisfying" about it. In a similar way, one cannot be a good leader when one does not have the physical ability to lead other people by becoming physically healthy enough to endure

[26] Leonardo Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Ethics,* 2nd Printing (Tacloban: Divine Word University Publications, 1979), 35.

[27] David, *Reflections on Sociology and Philippine Society*, 98.

[28] Florentino Hornedo, *Culture and Community in the Philippine Fiesta and Other Celebrations* (Manila, Philippines: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2000), 20; 33; 47.

the tremendous tasks and responsibilities that good leadership itself naturally entails.

Change, to be a part of social reality, is a matter of choice – for better or for worse. Indeed, Mercado's argument becomes dubious when Mercado says that there is something universal in human morality that cannot be left subservient to the cultural configuration of values (i.e., the consideration of human needs and what is possible),[29] yet Mercado would ironically profess that human values serve as the bedrock of human motives in which so-called zonal and temporal variations beget pluralistic dimensions in Ethics.[30] Because of being slavish from colonial forces, we grow indignant beyond measure. But to conclude the bastardizing joke played on our nation is not to be fanatical to a form of antagonistic countermeasures in which one simply is subdued in employing grand bifurcating gizmo.[31] For instance, this has become the line of defense that Mercado had to celebrate the exoticization of patronage and clientelist system in the Philippine political sphere without looking askance at the poverty, civic exclusivism, and social fragmentation that come with it.[32] Should the Filipinos tolerate how bribery becomes the "permit" of the informal settlers in urban areas of the Philippines in order for them to temporarily escape the force of the law as it was conditionally being halted by the extortion of so-called law enforcers? Are we not simply beating around the bush when the so-called formation of social ties, as the manifestation of *sakop* mentality, become a protective measure in the Philippine society to escape crackdowns of informal settlers even if no less than the 1987 Philippine Constitution mandates that a consultative character should define relocation of the poor since it is considered as one of the indispensable

[29] Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Ethics,* 38.

[30] Cf. Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy,* 29; 37-39.

31 Ramon Guillermo, *Pook at Paninindigan: Kritika ng Pantayong Pananaw* (Diliman, Quezon: The University of the Philippines Press, 2009), 52-55.

[32] Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy,* 97. Cf. Wataru Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy, and the Urban Poor* (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019), 22-80.

human rights to have a safe and comfortable home?[33] In the same way, resorting to protectionism and bribery system to evade the violent evictions of sidewalk vendors who do not resort to other blatantly criminal ways to earn a living speaks of the non-commital use of political instrumentalities for self-absorbed purposes of so-called enforcers. As we delude ourselves like we are in clover, we also deny that the reactionary Mercado is simply romanticizing the external yardstick to make much of what unique cultural phenomena we have, no matter how politically damaging to the essence of national intellectualization.

One of the problematic aspects at the core of Mercado's defense of the unique brand of Filipino Philosophy is the blinkered compulsion towards the dualistic view of philosophizing that went further to argue that Filipinos have a "non-scientific" mind. This proclivity even enthused Mercado to praise to the skies the "*little questioning done in Philippine classroom*" and "*why* [the Filipino] *is often hurt when his work is criticized*."[34] Moreover, this self-absorbed thinking flushes out all the necessary elements to establish a dialogical ground of rethinking one's beliefs and contribute to the furtherance of knowledge-formation. It is completely ironic that Mercado argued to have anchored the arguments which were deployed in the findings of social sciences when Mercado has no well-balanced take on the negative implications of the prevailing political values in Philippine society.

> The *compadrazgo* system has been used for making alliances. The godparents are usually of potential or realized social position. While the godfather may be a busy mayor who forgets his godson, the father will take pride that the mayor is his 'compadre.' When the father at some later date has to ask some favor from a higher government official, he has the mayor as intercessor. The use of intermediaries is important, for to contact the Big Man directly is considered impolite.[35]

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[33] See *The 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines*, Art. XIII (Social Justice and Human Rights), Sec. 9; 10.

[34] Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, 81.

[35] Ibid., 97.

> The Big Man is the head of an alliance system. In towns[,] there are usually two factions with whom the people take sides. The leadership may be that of a political party, a business enterprise, or an institution. The Big Man's clients or followers look up to him and serve him personally. They attribute to him the accomplishments of the group as well as make him the scapegoat for failures. This is most evident in politics, where the followers are not concerned with issues or causes but rather with persons. Loyalty is not issue-oriented but personality-oriented because the Big Man embodies the group. Since the society is composed of various alliances, the individual has to place his loyalty in a group. He may switch his loyalty to another Big Man, but his well-being demands a dedication to Big Man or patron. So[,] in all sectors of Philippine society, the Filipino is person-oriented.[36]

Simply because Mercado saw the use of the idea of "causation" as a "Western" influence in the world, Mercado failed to see the bright side of this orientation to discover the causes of long-standing social maladies in Philippine society. For instance, there is no problem *per se* in the importance given by a culture to a person over any other laws, for laws must serve the interest of the common good. But the love for the person is to be taken by a political understanding that brings into light the importance of fairness and impartiality in political management. Case in point: the value of reciprocity in clientelist politics must be criticized as it is not completely working to solve poverty and other socio-economic predicaments in society. Such a clientelist arrangement is borne out of the perpetuation of imbalanced socio-economic statuses where reciprocal opportunities and advantages are advanced in a very particularistic manner. If examined closely, clientelist politics in Philippine society gives the view that "[t]*he interests that bind a leader and a follower are particularistic, because the two do not pursue their common goal but their personal goal which may be complementary but are not the same*. [...] *For example, a leader may pursue power and*

[36] Ibid., 99.

prestige, while a follower may seek protection and largesse."[37] In contrast to Mercado whose complacency reeks in many pages of the books, the value of voluntarism attributed to clientelist politics must be studied by a circumspect scholar. This is not necessarily to downgrade the sufferings of the individuals who were taken advantage of by powerful individuals who can wield material distribution or clout-chasing tactics. But one must not disregard the fact that the patron-client bargaining positionalities leverage not only their exchanges of electoral votes and political favors but also form a deeper ground for subtle coercion to take place. That is, political allegiance in the above-mentioned person-oriented setting tends to be too blithesome and frangible as it is simply goaded by sources of patronage and the monopoly of services and material goods, without taking into consideration political integrity and the holistic evaluation of a particular communal condition. Voters tend to simply judge electoral candidates based on very particularistic advantages and relations that they received, which, in turn, exacerbates the superficial standards of decision-making when choosing government officials who are supposed to be competent and of good moral standing. While illegal vote buying outrightly goes against the law, forming ritual kinship (*compadrazgo*) as godparents to the children of the politicians' voters at Catholic sacraments, paying funeral expenses, and sponsoring concerts and activities that may attract public attention while neglecting other more important social issues and problems are not considered unlawful.[38] This tactic is patterned to build interpersonal relations or "*sakop*" to create a stronghold of a politician's allegiance. However, this setting only favors those who do not dissent from the programs of the government or those who put forward critical recommendations for the improvement of public services – making the place of political deliberation and enforcement "convenient" and "sympathetic" only to an assembly of yes-men. What replaced the coercive measures of local strongmen and landed elites' stratagem of guns, goons, and gold is the corrupt practices under the banner of rural popular democracy that still

[37] Masataka Kimura, "Clientelism Revisted," in *Routledge Handbook of the Contemporary Philippines*, eds. Mark R. Thompson and Eric Vincent C. Batalla (New York: Routledge, 2018), 19.

[38] Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, 128.

enables political bosses, or to use Mecardo's parlance, the "Big Man," to win over not only electoral votes but also to neutralize nonconcurrent government officials. Through the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF), more popularly known as "the pork barrel system," which was eventually declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, the president was given the freedom to unfairly allocate the national budget based on his/her political patrons.[39] While PDAF was packaged to appear to be a step in directly addressing the local roots of poverty and government inefficiencies by offering various construction projects, services, and other material distributions, it was revealed that kickbacks became the standard operating procedure of these so-called legislative deliverables. This compromises the safeguards of objective conflicts that the democratic spirit of governance must guarantee in the separation of powers of the three main branches of the government. Not only that PDAF, as a by-product of clientelist politics, overshadows the fruitful investigations of the legislative branch of the government in aid of enacting beneficial laws and other check-and-balance processes (e.g., impeachment trials), but it also beguiles the public that sincere intentions for social development are the very foundations of projects being implemented in their respective localities. With a critical outlook, one can surpass the narrow understanding of the existence of linguistic elements in one's culture, such as "sakop," to carefully transform national consciousness for the betterment of the whole society — not just a section of it at the expense of the other.[40] Such a transformation may indeed take the gradual and difficult process of cultural development, but that does not amount to the fact that our language is the sole determinant of our societal path as we should also pave the way to see the nuanced view and situational variance behind relational dependence and different associational realities to arrive at a more critical understanding of our collective problems.

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[39] Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, *State of Society in the Philippines,* 4th Printing (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), 315-318.

[40] Cf. Alfie Polistico, "The Filipino Language in the Flourishing of Filipino Philosophy: The Point of Convergence and Divergence Between Roque Ferriols and Leonardo Mercado," *Philosophia* 25 (2024): 56, doi: *10.46992/pijp.25.1.a.3*.

In another instance, Mercado admitted that the Westernized concept of the private-public divide may not be compatible with the political culture of the Philippine society.[41] This is because, according to Mercado, the ordinary masses tried to acclimatize themselves to their not-so-good condition, yet their contentment, or better yet, complacency, still made them endure their hostile atmosphere to earn a living and escape the sanctions of the law, which are contrary to how they weather their mundane economic concerns to survive. This social reality reflects the fluidity of the territories of the public and the private in the Philippine setting by making the police officers and other enforcers the allies of the informal settlers, sidewalk vendors, and drivers who illicitly use land properties through patronage politics and bribery system or what Mercado termed as "*personal tax*."[42] But instead of being disturbed by these alarming social circumstances, Mercado blames the scholars who misunderstood the Filipino identity by allegedly imposing a Western caricature:

> In Greater Manila[,] the sidewalk vendors, who have to survive by their illegal trade, have learned to live the cat-and-mouth life with policemen by adapting the sizes of their portable stores, by coining their jargons, and by their solidarity. Likewise[,] the cigarette vendors who sell their goods in the traffic have learned to size up and serve prospective customers by their expressions. These vendors have not been known to be run over – in comparison to jaywalkers. Likewise[,] the slum dwellers of Manila have adapted themselves [to] their harsh environment.[43]

With an indignant sentiment, Mercado launches an attack on the seemingly encroaching social scientists by taking positively the aforementioned adaptive measures of the ordinary masses as manifestations of indomitability. But as Mercado parades the fortitude that Mercado saw in these social phenomena, one may ask, what makes these phenomena possible? While one may take courage to

[41] Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, 144.

[42] *Ibid*.

[43] Mercado, *Applied Filipino Philosophy*, 87.

go through the dark alley, one is not easily damping the thought that there might be invisible threats along the way and that we hope to see the light to end the very darkness that encloses us to anxieties that we do not deserve. Disturbance, when society and any organization are chockfull of conformist individuals, is an essential force to distract what Morgan Scott Peck calls "mob psychology" that absorbs the consciousness of a genuine community. Contrary to being driven by a cultic stream of submission, a civilized community transforms a pseudocommunity by standing against "*the covering up of the stage of individual differences; the predominant theme of the stage of chaos is the attempt to obliterate such differences. This is done as the group members try to convert, heal, or fix each other or else argue for simplistic organizational norms*."[44] Understandably, harmony in one's territory or *sakop* can be an advantage to the community, but chaotic arrangements might be lurking underneath the subterranean political malfeasance and gloating cultural approbation. In other words, the absence of conflicts does not encompassingly define a well-functioning governance. Peck once warned that there are psychological tricks and diverting defense mechanisms that hinder us from moving forward to deeply reflect upon one's sufferings and pain brought about by deeper causes of unresponsiveness, ignorance, negligence, and self-imposed forgetfulness.[45] The process of appropriate healing only begins when one recognizes the painful consequences of a disease that one ought to address effectively – and not to be buried to become totally resigned to it. In the above-mentioned excerpt from Mercado, however, there is no doubt that there is a need to endure sufferings brought about by poor urban living conditions, but this is not to be glamorized as if the marginalized do not deserve something better. Instead of giving the traffic enforcers and MMDA (Metro Manila Development Authority) operatives the license to gain bribes – as Mercado claimed – from the informal settlers and ambulant vendors obstructing traffic ways, Filipinos need to focus their attention, as a nation, on what made this exclusionary setting possible. Beyond the avoidance of violence of

[44] Morgan Scott Peck, *A World Waiting To Be Born: The Search for Civility* (London: Arrow Books, 1993), 327.

[45] Ibid., 19-48.

forceful eviction, harassment, damages, and physical injuries received by the poor during clearing operations and other crackdown activities, we need to be more concerned with the dominant rationalities that prevail in governmental processes over the outrage drastically experienced by those who are pigeonholed as simply "subverting the order of a legitimate system."

On top of this are the symptoms of the false promise of nationalistic endurance and the bandaid solutions of pecuniary inducement, but there is also an apparently bottomless pit of social exclusion that lies ahead of what should transpire as collective discourses that care for the nation as a shared project even of those with divergent and accepting opinions. While the country's elite and business moguls blame the poor and vendors for hampering the smooth flow of traffic which leads to economic losses and inconvenience, it is high time to question the need for the decentralization of governmental powers and opportunities to also help the economically and socially marginalized individuals empower themselves beyond dole-out forms of populist distribution of goods. It is also relevant to point out that traffic congestion is not only worsened by street vendors but also by the unreasonable fascination of purchasing vehicles; the high population density in cities where malls, business establishments, and other income-generating institutions abound; and the centralized location of prestigious universities; and the lack of political will to hasten the improvement of mass public transportation and other environment-friendly means of transportation.[46] A good strategy to achieve this is to plant more shade trees to help the pedestrians get eased from the severity of tropical weather if their point of destination is just a walking distance away, which, of course, will also lessen the car traffic bottlenecks in business districts, and also its contribution to the reduction of air pollution.[47] We need a restructuring of the government not in order to mock the destitute as "uncivilized," "unhygienic," "barbaric," and "unruly," we need to know the depth of

[46] Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines,* 171-175.

[47] See Zenaida C. Galingan et al., "Pedestrian-Friendly Streetscape in a Tropical Business District," *Muhon* 3 (2009): 9-15, *https://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/muhon/article/view/1315/1283*.

their potential participatory influence in the formulation of rules to help advance their political claims to basic human needs, such as health, food, livelihood, humanistic education, and so on. The very reason why we have to listen to marginalized people comes from the paradoxical ground that one's political perception and rationality might be different from the others. A salient example of this would be how several voters from lower economic statuses voted for celebrities not merely because of popularity but because they had high hopes that they would be more accommodating and pleasant to consult with than conventional politicians.[48] Another significant point to revisit is the pushing for urban redevelopment without considering the gravity of social stratification as those informal settlers were relocated from their demolished houses to housing sites far from central districts where the means of decent livelihood can be found.[49] When we become impervious to the idea of making the Philippines and the whole world, a home of our dreams, collective aspirations for profound understanding, social stability, and meaningful memories, the abandonment of what makes us humans already takes place. The Filipinos must learn to extricate themselves from what prevents them from holistically developing, and not be a jailbird to the cage that they enclosed themselves with. For the environment to be a territory of purposeful thriving, one must not see it as simply given to us for us to survive, for, to a greater extent, we have to realize that we have to surround ourselves with a loving atmosphere where we have given our breath to give breath to what humanizes us.

It is, therefore, recommended that we engage ourselves with research endeavors that focus on developing a critical brand of Filipino Philosophy – one that transcends cultural barriers to socio-economic progress. This does not mean that it is recommended to simply remove all cultural elements, no matter how beneficial to the growth of philosophical discourses, from the issues of social development. Thus, we need more meticulous types of investigative projects that aim not to give an exact formula on how to engage in cultural understanding but a philosophical path to choose between learning to embrace what

[48] Kusaka, Moral Politics in the Philippines, 142

[49] Ibid., 176-178.

is valuable in a culture, on the one hand, and learning to fight against anything wicked that a culture stores in itself, on the other. Furthermore, we need to engage in intercultural dialogues to help create a philosophical ground of tolerance, not to accept everything that culture has given birth to but to engage in reasonable cultural transformations – to teach and learn from one another.

FINAL NOTES

From the foregoing discussion, it can be gleaned that such a hideous cultural valorization from Leonardo Mercado's scholarship shortchanged the critical and inclusive demands of philosophizing by only displaying those that are considered foreign to be worthy of being ostracized and becoming vanguards of "native" political manipulation.[50] It does not recognize that the corruption of power is taking root in the denial of the refashioning of the social structures and power relations in Philippine society. If Filipinos are devoted to genuine national identity, it comes with the territory that Filipinos not only pride themselves in what is endemic but also in embracing their bright potential. This critical spirit of philosophizing is far from reaching the Philippine shores, let alone energizing the crucial intellectual conduits of the society, if the Filipinos become obsessed with a fossilized identity that Mercado believes should remain so. While the colonial past of the Philippines will make the Filipino citizens suspect everything foreign to their currently believed nationalistic progress, they must equally be suspicious of a culture of corruption that has inured them to their own sufferings and political subservience. It is high time for Filipinos to realize that social change is possible and it is a must. If Filipinos can heroically assert their sovereignty despite their history of being colonized, how come they do not have the right to change for the better when the issues are within their own culture? If there is something philosophical in Filipino Philosophy – for there is no doubt that there is such a thing as philosophizing Filipinos and there are many things worth philosophizing about the Philippine society – it is to be the constant attempt to overcome a culture of complacency that tolerates harmful cultural determinants. With this

[50] Guillermo, *Pook at Paninindigan,* 41; 47.

critical re-reading of Mercado's project, I hope that the Filipinos are reminded that instead of always keeping themselves mindlessly above water in these tides of values, the Filipinos need to reclaim the platforms to dive deep into their cultural turmoil and see for themselves how they progressively rise above one's cultural conceitedness. Afterward, one may realize that there is a difference between careening our boat temporarily to travel better and choosing to remain at home in the middle of a tempestuous sea.

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