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DUTERTE: PHILIPPINES' MONSTROUS LEADER?!

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ABSTRACT

From his long years of experience as a local executive until he was ushered into the presidency, Duterte was able to master the masses' longings. He understands what the public expects in a leader--gathered from information he collected in unorthodox fashion. He plunges into the grassroots even (at times) resorting to disguises; and sometimes he maintains his own intelligence group that feeds him necessary information. The shock that he generates in all corners, factions, sectors and even countries would qualify him (perhaps) to be the unnamed monster that can disrupt the realm of Philippine politics. But despite his monstrous image, quite surprisingly, Duterte remains popular and appealing to the electorate. This essay foregrounds the ambivalent monster that the Philippine president wittingly or unwittingly assumes; a monster that is ready to devour victims while protecting those he (supposedly) loves. The essay argues that Duterte is a monster that represents a rapture—a kind of abrupt transition. He represents a monster leader that does not care about the elite's and traditional pundits' definition of a leader. He represents a leader that is *hindi-iba (sa masa)* but at the same time *iba sa marami (trapo/traditional politicians)*.

Keywords: *Monstrosity, Leadership, Duterte, Monstrous Leadership, Public Administration*

1. INTRODUCTION

Can there be a monstrous public leader in our time? Is he/she a vile, emotionless and horrible creature sowing terror among his/her subjects as we usually encounter in movies, literature and visual arts? Are monsters really evil? Or just beasts waiting to metamorphose into angels and champions of goodness? These questions might have crossed our minds and just dismissed them altogether for being philosophically charged and unimaginably absurd. Understandably, when philosophy comes into the picture, knees wobble except of those who are trained in the discipline.

In history, monsters take ambiguous forms and dynamic meaning. They are perceived to be bad at one point and good at another point. The story of the adorable *Belle* and the *Beast* of the forsaken snow-covered castle in a small town in France is a good representation of the monster's ambivalent character. The *Beast* is *Belle*'s subject of affection and repugnance at the same time. This is what history tells us--- that monsters are loved and hated at the same time. In fact, "in ancient times, monstrous births could be warnings of doom and gloom, or promises of future glory" (Thanem & Pullen, 2014, p.2).

In Egypt, for example, gods and goddesses like *Mafdet*, *Shesmu*, and *Babi* were just some of those who were both terrifying and endearing at the same time. *Mafdet* was the protector of the king's chamber against



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deadly snakes and scorpions. She was also the protector of the god of sun--*Ra*. She represented legal justice and capital punishment. Ironically however, *Mafdet* was a bringer of horror as her name was synonymous with death being the holder of the executioner's staff (Wilkinson, 2003). She ripped off the heads of wrongdoers and delivered them to the pharaoh's feet. *Shesmu* was also portrayed as having contradicting traits. He was a god of celebration or merriment—a maker of all precious oils, ointments and wine. He, on the other hand, was a bloodthirsty god—a slaughterer of gods. *Babi*, an Egyptian god of virility was endeared and many prayed before him for fertility. He, likewise, represented the alpha males which are identified as deceased rulers/ancestors. He, on the other hand, was considered an underworld god for being extremely aggressive and bloodthirsty devouring souls of the unrighteous.

In the Philippines, *enkantos* are mythical beings that are believed to be protectors of nature. But they can also cause miseries to those who transgress laws of nature and environment such as mountains, seas, trees, etc. Filipinos use the term *naenkanto* which refers to the punishment wrought to the wrongdoer. Often, Filipino films portray *enkantos* in horror films alongside with other elemental beings like *diwata*, *tyanak*, *kapre*, *tikbalang*, etc. to incite both thrill and terror. But often in artistic representations (films, etc.), the elementals are portrayed as victims becoming violent only when territories are crossed, their peace disrespected, and when justice is to be exacted.

Our conception of monsters is something that popular culture instilled in our psyche. Many young generations have already acknowledged monsters' ambivalence. Apparently, the older generation are not comfortable with things associated with monsters like gargoyles, devil, *aswang*, and others because of their preconceived notions and impressions that they cultivated and nurtured all throughout colonial cultural history. For instance, earlier Filipinos usually link monsters to bad, evil, death, wrath, and misfortune despite of the historical ambiguity of their nature and despite the abounding portrayals of monsters' ambivalence in films, visual arts and literature. During the Philippine colonial period, children are told not to loiter around at night-time because monsters (*aswang*, *manananggal*, etc) thrived in darkness. And to compel children to pray, they are told to recite catholic-taught prayers whenever they are fearful of ghosts and elementals. They were told that prayers are effective weapons against monsters. Arguably, the colonial images associated with monsters emerged to strengthen the church's power and authority over the Filipino subjects. Hence, anything associated with monsters is shocking to olden generation of Filipinos--capable of shattering the traditional Filipino sensibility. However, the millennial generation (whatever we may call it) has already glorified the mutants (x-men), aliens (Thor, Superman, Wonder Woman), bots (Transformers), and the technology enhanced/altered beings (Ironman, Spiderman, Antman).

And in this period where citizens possess greater political power and participation than those who lived centuries back, can there be a monstrous leader or a single individual who could wield absolute power and diminish the overwhelming power of the mass public? Can there be a monstrous leader who can assume evil characters while beloved for his charisma and perhaps for his uncharacteristic goodness by his people? Can Duterte qualify to the definition of an ambivalent monster?

2. THEORETICAL ANCHOR



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A monster is a cultural construct. It is borne out of the social perception of what is normal and not. Metaphorically, Jacques Derrida calls this as a deformation of the normal. It signals what he calls a 'rupture'. It is a passing 'beyond man and humanism' (as quoted in Milburn, 2003). It is a "threat to the boundaries of conventional thought". Picking it up from Derrida, Milburn interprets this as the "transgression of boundaries" and the "limits of the order of things" (Milburn, 2003).

The monster concept represents that which destroys classifications. It breaks laws of natural human propensity towards categorization. As Milburn points out: "monsters disrupt totalizing conceptions of nature and destroy taxonomic logics, at once defining and challenging the limits of the natural" (Milburn, 2003, p.604). The monster defines itself without any external models. It produces its own language, forms its own attributes, and it transcends liminal spaces. In other words, it creates its own future and lays out its own categories beyond normality.

Milburn conceives the monster as "the primordial origin of a "species about-to become". In the "disruptive evolution", the monster is "yet unnameable", and un-predictable in form. Possibly, this germ is the precursor of "an entire population of hopeful monsters whose aberration remains to be classified" (Milburn, 2003, p.605).

In Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, "Monsters appear within a single generation as notably different from their kin, but once stabilized in the breeding population of organisms, "monstrosities . . . graduate into varieties". Milburn claims that "Darwin uses the visible example of monsters to show that the normal form of a species can be dramatically altered through the process of selection. In the "artificial selection" humans perform on domestic stock to produce varieties of breeds, a breeder "often begins his selection by some half-monstrous form" (Milburn, 2003, p.606)

In management theories, a kind of leadership approach was modeled on a monster concept. A Stockholm University professor Torkild Thanem (2014) defines in a short article he wrote for Mercury Magazine what a monstrous leader is. Thanem claims that monsters represent a "boundary-disrupting force: monsters disrupt and exceed boundaries of shape, size, morality and social practice"(Thanem, 2014, p.64; See also Thanem, 2013; Thanem, 2011; Thanem, 2006). In organizations, there are circumstances where leaders break social norms and exceed boundaries especially when they are beset with problems that are so complicated to solve and so complex to grasp using the lens of traditional organizational handbooks. Here, the morality of veering away from social norms becomes entirely debatable. It leads us to the basic ethical issue of whether or not the end justifies the means--an old and recurring point of discussion among philosophers and scholars. A Chinese sage Mozi advocated, for example, that the value of a certain action must be evaluated according to its contribution to the welfare of the state/organization. Other philosophers, though sometimes varied in their basic ideas, whose concept of good and moral is anchored on the consequence of certain actions, are the likes of John Stuart Mill , Jeremy Bentham , Peter Singer and R.M Hare .



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The Swedish scholar also refutes that there is an inherent opposition between being human and being monstrous. He pointed out that human biology proves that non-human bacteria are helpful agents in facilitating digestion (Thanem, 2014). These little monsters populate our internal systems in huge numbers. Thanem here agrees that a monster leader cannot be entirely vile and evil. A monster, especially in leadership, is ambivalent. It can cause chaos but it can also make drastic transformation to better an organization.

Nicole Curato, a famed Filipino sociologist, in an article introduced concepts as “politics of fear” and “politics of hope” in describing the victory of Duterte (Curato, 2016). Duterte, according to Curato, was able to change the political conversation by portraying the country as a nation on the brink of disaster thereby forwarding a politics of collective anxiety. A savvy politician, he projected himself as a man that everybody should fear about but at the same time the only hope for the country’s condition. He embodied fear and hope at the same time. He triumphantly caught the imagination of the public and eventually won the presidency.

3. DISCUSSION: DUTERTE STYLE

President Duterte projects himself as natural, down-to-earth and *‘hindi iba’*; His personality is a source of entertainment, fear and hope. He is not only a central topic of *tsismisan* (informal conversations among street loiterers). Universities also made him a core of many polemics. These informal debates translated into popularity and ultimately into votes. The discourses have tackled Duterte and issues surrounding him like he was just somebody they personally know. *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* here comes into picture. Enriquez (1978) explains this using the concept of *Kapwa*. *Kapwa* refers to a shared identity. It is a concept which is at the center of Filipino social psychology. It is the opposite of *Ibang-Tao*. Filipino masses (of course with qualification) find Duterte’s personality appealing because they find him as *kapwa* at *hindi-iba*. This is possibly the reason why, in the first place, he never lost even a single political contest in his province and in his national elections debut.

Kapwa is at the core of Filipino social psychology and Filipino values. Enriquez (1978) discovered that it is not maintaining smooth interpersonal relationships that Filipinos are most concerned about, but *pakikipagkapwa* which means treating the other person as *kapwa* or fellow human being. There are two categories of *kapwa*: the *Ibang-Tao* (outsider) and the *Hindi-Ibang-Tao* (“one-of-us”).

In ancient cultural literatures, a mythological monster can assume multi-forms: being *hindi-iba* (humanoid mythical creatures/or having a human-like features) which makes him/her acceptable and loved; and being god-like/fearful creatures at the same time e.g *Siren*, *Medusa*, *Sphinx* *Minotaur*, etc. Duterte’s *hindi iba* traits make him charismatic like the *Sirens* luring seafarers with their enchanting voices to their death or shipwreck.

Duterte shares the common-*tao* personality and language which make him appealing to the masses, but the same demeanor shocks the political and *intelligencia* class. When he was heralded as a no-nonsense tough



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guy, street smart, fearless, foul-mouthed leader, and careless local executive of Davao city, he was able to create and cultivate an image that is contrary to the well-established personality of a political leader. Duterte was also characterized as *iba sa marami* (different from the rest). He was a distance away from how the seemingly dignified politicians in the metropolitan Manila project themselves. Though he was an educated lawyer and from a wealthy family of Visayas, he was able to cloud this with a larger than life image that caught even the imagination of the masses. He was able to redefine the political landscape of Davao City---and even beyond its boundaries.

Duterte's language or his habit of churning out curses and repugnant words was in fact his political asset than his liability. But the educated elite abhors this lack of tactfulness. Meaning, his language may be perceived by the Duterte mass supporters as attractive, while those who consider themselves as belonging to the elite class find this revolting.

When Duterte became the president of the country, he was portrayed as a monster because his language and conduct, according to the yardstick and standards of the elite class, are way unacceptable. His manner of dressing, his mannerism, his irresponsible pronouncements and his 'War on Drug' policy distinguished a new kind of leader who shatters all the established images of any lead occupier of the Malacanang Palace. In the history of presidency, the presidents from Emilio Aguinaldo to Ninoy Aquino Jr were portrayed on a grand and heroic scale. Perhaps with the exception of Ramon Magsaysay, presidents are looked up to as unreachable and too remote to identify as *hindi-iba*. Duterte acts without any external models. He himself produces his own language, he layouts his own future and creates his own attributes which transcend the existing standards of what is to become a national leader.

Duterte's war on drug policy which is perceived to be responsible to the deaths of more than a thousand victims, continues to send shockwaves to many scholars, activists, religious groups, human rights advocates, lawyers, and media practitioners. Obviously, his approach to solving drug problem exceeds boundaries. The president breaks social norms in most of his pronouncements of support and his statements of implied admission. This may not be possible during the dignified era of the presidency. But, the irony of it all is that Duterte remains loved by his millions of supporters. He is perceived a blood thirsty monster but a life-giver to those unaffected by the policy.

His unorthodox approach to international relations is also something that cannot escape observation. During the first few days of his presidency, he immediately criticized the still-powerful colonial influence of the United States of America to the Philippines. He even went as far as cursing the then President of US— Barrack Obama. Obama gave him cold shoulders because of Duterte's invectives that directly offend the US president's mother. Political pundits consider this as a disrespect to a foreign leader, much more to a US leader. This was not even enough, Duterte audaciously announced that the country's international relations and friendships would be open to countries like China, Russia and even to North Korea---countries that are known nemesis of the United States.



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But despite his hurting, linguistically explosive and sometimes contradictory statements on foreign relations, his allies consider him as a shrewd pragmatist. For example, when he visited Japan, he just highlighted the business aspect of relations with Tokyo.

“And despite the harsh words Duterte has uttered, all the way from Manila to Beijing to Tokyo, the Philippines is not cutting off its military or economic partnership with the US, as Yasay has just assured Washington. What Duterte has been doing via his sensational utterances is sending the simple message that he is "not a lapdog of any country", and his country is not "a dog on a leash". He wants diplomatic independence, because that is in his country's best interests.” (China Daily, 2016, Pars.8-9).

His style proved to be pragmatic in a sense that he is only maximizing all possible opportunities for the country’s gains from the conflicting countries. “Duterte's China visit has offered proof that shelving the disputes and concentrating on mutually beneficial development cooperation is the most rewarding choice” (China Daily, 2016, Par. 14).

Duterte’s manifest attitude towards women is totally annoyingly offbeat. In April 2016, Duterte’s joke on the rape of an Australian missionary reverberated around the world especially in Australia. It is too insensitive that seemingly everybody considers it as highly disrespectful of women. In March 2018, Duterte was shown kissing a married OFW on stage in South Korea. Never in the country’s history that a seating president is televised to indulge in such an improper conduct. In November 2016, Duterte jokes on VP Leni Robredo’s short skirt. He said: "Yeah, I said she was wearing a skirt, her tuhod (knee) was walang ano (had no calluses). Sabi ko, hindi nagsisimba ito (I said, this person doesn't go to mass). It is appropriate; as a matter of fact, it is good" (Ranada, 2016, par. 8).

Duterte and the church’s conflict seem unending and perplexingly disturbing. In January 2017, Duterte, for example, commented that in a gathering that the Catholic Church is ‘full of shit’. In his speech peppered with profanities, he accused the leaders of the church with corruption, womanizing and other excesses. This is a direct attack on the church. This is all far different from his predecessors who were almost acquiescent and obedient to the wills of the largest Christian denomination in the country.

The Presidency of Duterte continues to baffle and excite the public because of Duterte’s unpredictable demeanor. And the history of his leadership remains a thing of the historical future.

4. CONCLUSION

From his job as a local executive until he was ushered into the presidency, Duterte was able to master the masses’ longings. He understands what the public wants in a leader. The shock that he generates in all corners, factions, sectors and even countries would qualify him to be the unnamed monster that perhaps capable of disrupting the realm of politics. But despite his monstrous image, Duterte remained popular and appealing to the masses. He assumes the character of an ambivalent monster that is ready to devour victims while protecting those he loves. Here is a monster that represents a rapture—a kind of abrupt transition.



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Whether or not, Duterte would herald a new generation of political leaders with tough stance willing to face squarely the existing cultural environment is something that is yet to be known. This is perhaps at the conclusion of Duterte's administration, or even years beyond his term of office.

Finally, Duterte represents a monster leader that does not care about the elite's and traditional pundits' definition of a leader. He represents a leader that is *hindi-iba* (sa masa) but at the same time *iba sa marami* (nakaraang lider).

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