Ideology in the time of Pandemic: a Filipino Experience

La ideología en tiempos de pandemia: una experiencia filipina

Ruben O. Balotol Jr*

Visayas State University, Tolosa, Leyte Philippines. ruben.balotol@vsu.edu.ph/rbalotol@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper attempts to hermeneutically explore and understand Filipino moral ideologies in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study frames its ideology from the conceptual tradition of Karl Marx and other philosophers who shared the common idea that ideology has material existence. As Althusser put it, ideology does not exist in the 'world of ideas' conceived as a 'spiritual world,' but "ideology exists in institutions and the practices specific to them." This paper discusses first the concept of moral ideology. The discussion focuses morality as ideology that causes a gap between the rich and the poor. Next, it discusses certain Filipino moral ideologies: Utang na Loob (debt of gratitude), Sakop (group)-oriented and Bahala Na. At the same time, it presents how some politicians and high public officials have taken advantage of these ideologies to promote self-interest. Lastly, the relation between Filipino moral ideologies and politics are manifested in the current situation. As a whole, this paper intends to address the question: "what is wrong with the Filipino system that it seems caught unprepared?"

Resumen

Este trabajo intenta explorar y comprender hermenéuticamente las ideologías morales filipinas en la época de la pandemia de la COVID-19. Este estudio enmarca su ideología desde la tradición conceptual de Karl Marx y otros filósofos que compartían la idea común de que la ideología tiene existencia material. Como dice Althusser, la ideología no existe en el «mundo de las ideas» concebido como un «mundo espiritual», sino que «la ideología existe en las instituciones y en las prácticas que les son propias». En este documento se discute primero el concepto de ideología moral. La discusión se centra en la moral como ideología que provoca una brecha entre los ricos y los pobres. A continuación, se analizan ciertas ideologías morales filipinas: Utang na Loob (deuda de gratitud), Sakop (orientada al grupo) y Bahala Na. También se presenta cómo algunos políticos y altos funcionarios públicos se han aprovechado de estas ideologías para promover el interés propio. Por último, la relación entre las ideologías morales filipinas y la política se manifiesta en la situación actual. En su conjunto, este documento pretende responder a la pregunta: «¿Qué le pasa al sistema filipino que parece no estar preparado? ».

* orcid.org/0000-0002-6452-946X **Google Scholar**

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic resembles Albert Camus' creative fable of fear, courage, and cowardice, *The Plague*. It depicts a story about an entire city quarantined within the guarded walls at the merciless hands of the plague. The people have no other choice but to do all within their power to defeat it (Camus *The Plague*). Similarly, as humanity faces the threats of COVID-19, we are told to maintain a proper distance and live with the new *locum tenens*. However, some individuals appointed to strategically promote socio-economic stability draw mistrust and lack of confidence in their performance to alleviate the burden brought by the pandemic. The qualms about the handling of the pandemic fittingly are captured by Slavoj Žižek's question: what is wrong with the system that we were caught unprepared by the catastrophe despite scientists warning us about it for years?" (Žižek *Pandemic! COVID-19 shakes the world*).

In the Philippines, varying opinions concerning the handling of the pandemic are debated. Critics pointed out that the measures are being used to crackdown dissent and an opportunity to access the government funds for personal gain. Some blamed Filipinos for the lack of discipline and parochial politics. Thus, the task of this paper comes in threefold. The first part provide a discussion on the question posited by Žižek in the Philippine context. The second part provides a sound argument that the identified Filipino moral ideologies are simply the answer to "what is wrong with our system?" The third part presents a critical approach regarding Filipinos commonly shared moral ideology.

In addition, this paper frames its concept of ideology from the conceptual tradition of Karl Marx and other philosophers who shared the common idea that ideology has material existence. As Althusser puts it, ideology does not exist in the 'world of ideas' conceived as a "spiritual world, but Ideology exists in institutions and the practices specific to them" (Althusser 156).

The first point of the paper provides a moral ideology background. Next, *Utang na Loob* (debt of gratitude), *Sakop* (group)-oriented and *Bahala Na* (come what may) are taken as reference of moral ideology. The aim is to present the idea that the Filipino understanding of propriety are deeply influenced with these moral ideologies. Lastly, moral ideologies in the Philippine politics are described. The discussion explains how some politicians and high public officials have taken advantage of

these ideologies, particularly *Utang na Loob*, *Sakop* and *Bahala Na*. As a whole, the paper provides a discussion that the identified ideologies profoundly influenced Filipinos. It is the answer to the question, "what is wrong with the Filipino system that it seems caught unprepared?"

Moral Ideology

According to Jonathan Haidt, there are three possible discussions on the source of morality: nature, nurture, and rationalism. It was natural when people believed that people attain a level of moral maturity or believe in its religious framework through evolution. Nurture means that people can form morality through their experience or observation. Rationalism means that people figure out morality for themselves, a self-constructed character as people engage with other human beings (Haidt 18-20).

Rationality is our nature, and sound moral reasoning is the endpoint of development (Haidt 21-22). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that, first, social structures in our Society nourishes our rationality which becomes a tool when confronted with moral issues, i.e., watching pornography, same-sex marriage or masturbating is a sin as claimed by some religions? Second, the rationalism provided by people becomes dominant and imposed upon other members of a particular Society, making it an ideology. Through education, moral ideology is taught and propagated to the members of specific organizations and religious affiliations. Therefore, when we encounter the dissemination of this ideology, particularly moral doctrine, it must be considered.

Moreover, the fact that there is hegemony in every society. There is a gap that exist between the rich and the poor, gated communities and favelas, and First World and Third World. Ideology can nominate anything from a contemplative attitude that misrecognizes its dependence on social reality to an action-oriented set of beliefs, from the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power (Žižek *Spectre of Ideology)*. Ideology exists in institutions and the practices specific to them. "We are even tempted to say, more precisely: ideological exists in apparatuses and the practices specific to them" (Althusser 156).

Althusser pointed out that ideology serves as a repressive social function, which is "the production of the conditions of production" that becomes in what Žižek would frame as objective violence. A kind of invisible violence sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as visible violence. For example, thousands of workers get unemployed, and small shareholders lose everything they have; it just happens, and nobody is responsible. Objective violence perpetuates violence such as robbery, murder, corruption, rape, etc. The reason for these kinds of violence happens because ideology is imposed and controlled by the dominant members of the Society. As a whole, Society is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—bourgeoisie and proletariat (Žižek *Violence;* Althusser *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*).

Utang na Loob, Sakop and Bahala as Moral Ideology

The Filipino culture is a mixture of three great traditions. First, Asian tribalism and animism. It refers to the barangaic socio-political structure of the native Filipinos under the leadership of a *Datu* and with the belief that every creature possesses a spiritual essence. Second, the Spanish Catholic tradition. It refers to the introduction of Christianity as religion and at the same time the colonization of Spanish monarchy. Lastly, the American enterprise paved the way for educational reforms, introducing democracy and turning Filipinos into "little brown Americans" (Mulder 68; Reyes 148-150). These three backgrounds play an important role in understanding and interpreting the contemporary Philippines and having a so-called "damaged culture" that is still in the process of reconciling with the past.

Moreover, the settlers introduced their ideologies, making them a standard for desirable, enjoyable, just, good and beautiful. In contrast, the native perceptions of reality are considered vicious, uncouth and superstitious. Eventually, the colonizers' values and practices were enmeshed deeply among Filipinos. Although colonizers left the country decades ago, many Filipinos are still devoted to their desires and standards.

Utang na Loob, *Sakop* orientation, and *Bahala Na* are three dominant ideologies commonly shared among Filipinos. The conceptualization and definition of these three contemporary Filipino moral ideologies manifest a synthesis of Asian, Spanish and American traditions.

Sakop Orientation

What is *Sakop* (group) –orientation? It is an extension of Filipinos' emphasis on the importance of family. The aim is to build a strong interpersonal relationship with those who are not part of the family and make them part through ritual kinship. Similar and typical to the Filipino family, the structure of *sakop* is characterized as interpersonal and hierarchic. Interpersonal means a member finds fulfillment in the harmony of the *sakop*; it means that in making personal decisions, one considered its effect on the *sakop*. Hierarchic means that what is right and wrong depends on what is favored by the group as a group, particularly the dominant members of the group (Mercado 57-59).

The concept of *sakop* is linked to *kapwa* which means 'shared self, shared identity, or self-in-the-other for similar to *kapwa*; the *sakop* requires the adherents to control and restrain selfish desires for the welfare of the *sakop*. *Sakop*, similar to a family framework, expects economic, emotional, and moral support. It is further reinforced by a continuous flow of assistance and favors among the *sakop* and reciprocal exchanges members (Miralao 193-194). Filipinos may cement these relationships through ritual kinship or fictive kin (Reyes 159-160). During elections, this orientation is also true; the man who might perform the job better may lose the election simply because the opponent belongs to a larger *sakop*.

In addition, *sakop* orients an individual to behave appropriately towards one another; that is why one must avoid kanya-kanya (each to his/her interest) as a trait. Instead, a Filipino should understand that in a *sakop*, one is expected to know *pakikisama* (get along, be concerned and supportive) and pakikitungo (act humbly, concede, and deal with individuals properly). *Pakikisama* refers to the commonly shared expectations, desires, or requests for the good of the group. It is the willingness of the person to forfeit and entrust one's own interest in favor of other members of the group or family in the spirit of harmony, friendship, and respect to majority decisions. When one is forced to conform to a group's desires, it is called *pakikitungo* (to concede). It is a temporary accommodation of things when the consequences of an action are uncontrollable (Jocano, 64-66; Miralao 195).

Utang na Loob (Debt of Gratitude)

Utang na Loob, established when help is sought or is extended to another in the name of friendship and family. A favor extended to another in time of crisis also creates *Utang na Loob*. The self-imposed commitment is to give back the same kind of *kagandahang-loob to* the person who has shown it to you. (Jocano 82). As depicted in a Filipino proverb: "*Ang Utang na Loob, napakaliit man, utang at utang din kahit mabayaran. Sa pakitang loob at tapat na damay ay walang sukat maitimbang*" (A favor, no matter how small, is a debt we must never forget since no money can ever fully repay it)" (Miralao, 196-197). For when *utang-na-loob* (debt of gratitude) is repaid 'with interest', that is more than what is due, it can bring about a circular dynamic between two persons where the one who previously showed *kagandahang-loob* is now the one with *utang-na-loob*, and then vice versa; it continues to alternate and strengthen the relationship in the process. This is where *kapwa* naturally develops into mutually sacrificial friendships (Reyes 160-161).

The element of an *Utang na Loob* relationship includes not only a recognition of one's *Utang na Loob* and the material repayment. More importantly, it entails an appreciation for a favor received through other gift-giving exchanges or by rendering other forms of endorsements and services even after a debt been paid. Moreover, negatively, sometimes people use *Utang na Loob* to take advantage of one another. Sometimes politicians who are aware of the social system exploit it by deliberately cultivating *Utang na Loob* towards themselves. When the election comes, they can reclaim these by requesting the debtors to vote for them or their candidate (Reyes 162).

Lastly, in 2013 the Philippines was hit by a typhoon that killed thousands and put the country in a state of emergency on account of a natural calamity. At the time, Rodrigo Duterte, the mayor of Davao City, voluntarily deployed his first responders. He ordered the distribution of cash and relief goods with no questions asked, in contrast to the government agency supposed to address the problem. He was the first politician who extended help to the victims of the typhoon. Thus, it was no surprise at the height of the 2016 presidential election, banners with Duterte's image were displayed urging typhoon survivors to help Duterte. Survivors regarded it as a moral obligation, a form of repaying *Utang na Loob*. It is a welcome obligation that bolsters the self-esteem of marginalized people who

feel they can put a deserving person in power. Some poor communities also raise funds to support Duterte's campaign (Curato 209-214).

Every Filipino is expected to possess *Utang na Loob*. A person should be aware of the obligation to those from whom he/she receives favors and should repay them in any acceptable manner. Since *Utang na Loob* invariably stems from a service rendered, quantification is impossible even though a material gift may be given. One cannot measure the repayment but an attempt to make it, nevertheless, is either believing that it supersedes the original service in quality or acknowledging that the repayment is partial and requires further repayment (Hollnsteiner, 392-394). In practice, *Utang na Loob* comes in various forms ranging from job opportunities, professional services, money credit, and another form of kindness. Under the operation of *Utang na Loob*, giving gifts, for example, elected officials or persons in positions from government or private organizations, are not viewed as immoral since these gifts are merely a form of acknowledging their *Utang na Loob* (Hollnsteiner 394; Jocano 82).

Bahala Na (Come What May)

Bahala Na is part of Filipino values which refer to the teleological component of the culture. It springs from the ancestors' wisdom handed down through oral tradition that natural and supernatural powers influence individual's fate. Natural means that its social and environmental structure influences one's attitude and behavior towards life. While, magical powers means the recognition of the existence of divine beings and their penchant to interfere in human affairs, and at the same belief that they can be swayed by performing rituals to ensure that one is being favored from the supernatural beings (Gripaldo 194-199).

Moreover, *Bahala Na* frequently is misinterpreted as a form of fatalism, a sort of surrender, which is undeniable due to its ambivalent tendencies that some would undergo rigorous ritual or unusual habit to ensure chances of being favored by the supreme beings. For example, when a person is about to take a college entrance test or licensure examination, we can assume that person will spend money buying religious items, attending religious celebration and consulting a fortune teller to pass the test.

In addition, *Bahala Na*, in the face of the Kierkegaardian angst or encounters Camus absurd with courage and hope, faces the abyss of the unknown. Perhaps, Filipinos are not different from Kierkegaard's knight of faith, a person who put trust in himself and to God or Camus' Sisyphus despite being aware of the absurdity in life, still attempt to live, and to create, in the very midst of the desert (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*; Kaufmann 83-92).

Moral Ideologies in Philippine Politics

Every culture possesses its values, and there can be no comparison between them all. All cultures and moral values are equivalent. That is to say, a culture is not a moral order, but only a set of folkways and its moral values and standards are simply subjective idealization of patterns of behaviors that have grown out of man's instinctive reactions to its material environment (Ward 48). This statement generally describes how Filipino values have been taken advantage of in promoting some political leader's self-interest that can be deduced in handling the burden brought by COVID-19. However, Aristotle pointed it out by saying that, despite the cultural and traditional diversity, what is reasonable must always be pursued not for the sake of something else, but the sake of goodness, through the use of reason that is concerned with action (Kenny 266-279).

Philippine politics is arranged through a network of personal relationships, primarily involving exchanging favors between prosperous patrons and their needy and dependent clients. In time, corruption and violence in the post-Marcos Philippines have reached such staggering proportions over the past decade or so. The ills have become very much embedded in the country's political system. A weak state preyed upon and plundered by different factions of the elite, who take advantage of, and extract privilege from, a mostly incoherent bureaucracy, it is not just the cronies but the oligarchic elite as a whole that engages in plunder (Quimpo 229-232; Reilly 184-197).

Moreover, the manifestation of *Utang na Loob*, *Sakop* and *Bahala Na* during this COVID-19 pandemic can be reflected in various matters: the preferential treatment to public officials and families for them to be tested for COVID-19, despite the lack of test kits; the bickering of the politicians with regards to the handling of the pandemic without providing concrete plans to ease the burden brought by the situation;

the public pronouncement of favoritism to some high ranking officials who callously violated quarantine protocols; the militaristic approach instead of a health-based approach; and the insistence of the educational institution to continue to hold classes despite the situation.

Thus, it can be drawn that the Filipino citizen, particularly the marginalized is suffering from a crisis of faith in democracy and finding themselves disillusioned with mainstream politics. Over and over again, political leaders had portrayed themselves to represent ordinary citizens. The pandemic has shown Filipinos the enormous problem with the political system. At the same time, it presented a discussion that Filipino moral ideologies in a democratic system require objectivity and shuns favoritism would only widen the gap between the rich and the impoverished.

Conclusion

As the Filipino comes into terms with the threats of the COVID-19, these identified moral ideologies: *Utang na Loob*, *Sakop* and *Bahala Na* are used not only as measures of the quality of behavior but also as sources of imperatives in the social system, making human fellowship euphemistic. It function as instigators of sentiments within the individual and as primary references of outside regularities of actions in group transactions. They also act as the generative force of what should be done and avoided in our Society. These imperatives specify how one should read meanings in actions and what to expect from people when interacting with them under certain circumstances, situations, and conditions.

Therefore, the Filipino displays of extreme family-centeredness and personalism are extended to a broader community, preserve good relations with people, and shun conflicts and signs of the antagonism (Miralao 192-194). However, these moral ideologies, as reflected in the behaviors and attitudes of some Filipinos, particularly of those people who are tasks to address the burden brought by the pandemic, failed to promote the common good instead serve the interest of their *sakop*, of those whom they have an *Utang na Loob*.

Ruben O. Balotol Jr.

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