We are all Tizons

Slavery is wrong, but how do we really treat the Lolas in our lives?

Shakira Sison

Published: May 19, 2017

I read the story of the late Alex Tizon with both horror and heartbreak. I was heartbroken because I was reminded of my own hired mother, and the guilt I also carry for this woman who was with my family for thirty years.

I was horrified to read about Lola's hardships and her suffering under the Tizons, but I wasn't completely surprised. The master-servant dynamic is deeply ingrained in Filipino culture. The occurrence of cruelty, physical and verbal abuse in these households may no longer be typical, but is still just a matter of luck. Over 1.5 million Filipinas fill domestic roles in homes all over the world, and reports of sexual and physical abuse are considered common occupational hazards.
Those in the Philippines who have access to this article have probably employed household help at least one point in their lives. All but the poorest families outsource one or all of their household chores or childcare needs to someone else. There is no shortage of this labor source or need, and until jobs and education are available in the most rural areas, paying someone to do your housework is still cheaper than spending your own time doing chores.

While Tizon's story of his family keeping a domestic worker captive for 56 years is the exception, the relationships which develop between Filipino families and household workers are the rule. Like all of my peers, the presence of yayas and maids were a given in our homes and it's easy for the line between servant and family to blur, for servitude to turn into love, for dependence to turn into resentment and disrespect. Whether this love is born from lack of choice or a kind of Stockholm Syndrome, the fact is that many of us are raised with the love and devotion of one or more household employees who are sometimes more present in our lives than our parents.

Because of the popularity of Tizon's piece, Filipino master-servant relationships are suddenly in the international spotlight. We lash out at outsiders for assuming that all such relationships are akin to slavery, and rage at their assumption that any affection we have for our help is a defense of it.

While a complete understanding of these relationships requires a closer look at Philippine culture and colonial history, it's important for us to be open to outside voices as well. Instead of being consumed by how we are perceived (or misinterpreted) by outsiders, how about just taking a look at our own home situations and observing the power structures behind it? What is wrong with our treatment of our home staff? What can we change?
Fundamental family structures

Of course we get defensive. These are our fundamental family structures. This is the way things are. These arrangements have allowed us to prosper and have ensured our health and comfort. I don't say this proudly as it is built on the backs of others, but it is what we are accustomed to and for many, it is something they are not willing to give up.

In my family, having domestic helpers allowed both of my parents to work. It allowed my siblings and I to focus on our education, not having to worry about household chores or caring for children. It gave my parents a social life, time to spend their non-working hours dining out, watching TV, and socializing instead of bathing and feeding children, doing laundry, or making meals. Because many of us who employ a katulong or kasambahay (helper) also struggle financially, it is difficult to admit our privilege and see ourselves as party to social inequity.

I was my yaya's baby, and as an adult I now understand that my love for her was built on the rock of consistency, which was in turn at the expense of her social mobility. Had she been offered another viable opportunity other than mothering me and my siblings, she would have left. I would not be the person I am today if she left me. I realize that I am both indebted to her for her love, but I also benefited from her being trapped to serve me.

Our contribution to servitude

Whether we admit it or not, we have contributed to the perpetuation of these master-servant structures. We ignore the cringe of sorrow and guilt when a helper is scolded by our parents, and have even inherited the skill of berating them ourselves. We've let slide more than one insult implying their poverty, hunger, greed or dependence on us. If our families had a chance like the Tizons to move abroad and bring one of our helpers, how likely would it be for us to ensure their fair wages? Wouldn't we just assume that it will be a step up for them to leave the country?
In a way, we are all Tizons. We've lived with these relationships for generations and have become comfortable with them. We've avoided housework through convenience or our parents' prohibition. We refused to entertain that our servants deserve as much as we get, saying "Pwede na yan sa kanila (That will do for them)" when talking about benefits we do provide. We failed to identify the reasons they've resorted to a life serving us. Instead we've made excuses for them, like they can leave if they want to, or that it's their fault for not going to school - something that was so easy for us to do when all our other needs were already met - by them.

We may not beat our helpers or work them without pay, but we've created a situation for them to be tied to us for most of their lives. We recruit them as young girls from the provinces. We limit their interactions with others. We don't offer opportunities for them to change the course of their lives like options to continue their education or learn new skills to start businesses.

Having never been comfortable with the master-servant dynamic, I decided to do away with household help entirely when I left my family home. Even when I lived in Manila, had a full-time job and school in the evening, I took care of my own cleaning, laundry, and cooking. I used public transportation. This is not an option for many people, especially those with children. For many parents, not being able to work full-time due to housework and childcare would lead to financial ruin. It shames me to have to say it out loud but it is in our best interest to treat our helpers with the knowledge that we also need them in our lives.

The Filipino-American sociologist Dr Anthony Ocampo said that Alex Tizon's story is a Haley's Comet moment for us, and to not let it pass us by. He is right. It is a great opportunity to think about these relationships and how we treat those we say are members of the family but who never get a seat at our table or an opportunity for a better life.
Here are some ways we can improve our helpers' lives in our homes:

1) Stop treating your helpers' employment as a favor to them

While it is true that without being employed, most helpers would not have any employment opportunities and their families would suffer, it is a very common sentiment for us to treat their employment as a charitable act. We say that if not for us they would not have food, shelter, or clothing. We say that at least with us they don't have to worry about their security as women or being forced to marry someone their family dictates. We always say, "Mabuti nga dito- (it's better here because-)", and we're able to pat ourselves on the back that their life of servitude is a favor we do for them and they should be nothing else but grateful for anything extra we can provide.

Be reminded that you may pay them for their service, but doing it with love and concern for our families is out of their hearts.

2) Refrain from using servitude as an insult

If you've ever said "mukhang katulong/labandera/driver/kusinera (looks like a maid/laundrywoman/driver/cook)" or laughed at this reference, you have already viewed domestic helpers as lower than you. You have prescribed an appearance of lowliness and poverty on them.

This isn't unusual, and we've all been guilty of this that we know exactly what "mukhang katulong" looks like - unkempt, dark-skinned, dirty, unfashionable, and with signs of manual labor on their hands and bodies. We use this to insult people to make them feel the stigma of appearing lower class, as if manual work or poverty is an indicator of our worth in society.
3) Provide opportunities for economic advancement

If you truly care about your household employees, give them a chance to improve their lives. While the presence of help allowed both my parents to work and provide for our education, the truth is that our economic prospects improved on the backs of those who did the work of the home. In the meantime our help have no opportunity to improve themselves.

It is seldom that an employer offers options for education or helps them start a business or build a home, perhaps because it is to our advantage if our domestic helpers remain so. Being able to imagine a life outside of servitude makes it more likely for them to flee. We need to stop thinking that we're the only ones who deserve a chance at prosperity.

4) Resist the mindset that helpers deserve less

While it's true that we don't beat or work our helpers without pay, we believe that inferior versions of what we get are enough for people of their class. Many homes feed their help a different grade of rice, or vegetables and fish instead of meat. Take a look at maids' rooms and you can see the disparity between our perception of their comfort levels versus our own. There is an unspoken objective to never spoil one's help lest they get accustomed to a life like their master's and demand more. Even with the Batas Kasambahay, the life of a domestic worker in the Philippines affords little or no protection. Even by your silence or complacency, please don't be complicit in maintaining subhuman conditions for anyone.

A good lesson in the debate about the Tizons and Lola Pulido is the complexity of what we initially see as simple issues. It's the gray areas that bring things to light and force discussions. It was Alex Tizon's love for Lola that compelled him to write her story. If he didn't love her, he would never recognize that anything was wrong with their relationship. He would not expose himself and his family as slave owners and be subject to the judgment of the world. The fact is, just like my guilt about my yaya, Alex could never have made things right for Lola. Yes, he could have done better. He tried and he failed. But whether or not it was his intention, he gave us this story for us to do better with the Lolas in our lives.
Both slave and master are gone now. Tizon's story is forcing us to face our own relationships with our household helpers. Where do we overstep our boundaries? What do we assume on their behalf? What about their existence do we take advantage of? What about the consistency of our comfort is at the expense of their success?

These are important questions we need to answer if we are to believe we are fair and caring employers. We cannot walk away from these responsibilities if we truly reject the concept of keeping slaves. – Rappler.com

Ref.: https://amp.rappler.com/views/imho/170316-we-are-all-tizons-shakira-sison

Look more: https://aboutphilippines.org/culture.html#We_are_all_Tizons

And

https://aboutphilippines.org/progress.html