

Developing a Philippine Philosophy

The purpose of this page is to attempt to outline some common thoughts and ideas in the belief and wisdom systems of the pre-colonial Filipinos and the modern Filipino tribal beliefs. The more commonly recurring themes will be organized in an effort to develop a Pan-Philippine philosophy. Such a philosophy should represent ideas and thoughts widely attested enough to classify as geographically endemic to the island nation. Only very obvious foreign borrowings will be neglected here, no inquiry will be made into the proposed theories of borrowing so commonly found in Western scholarship.

This certainly is not the first attempt at piecing together a Filipino philosophical system, although most previous attempts have concentrated on Filipino Christian rather than indigenous culture. In some cases, Filipino thinkers like Isabelo De Los Reyes have tried to blend in indigenous elements into local Christian thought.

One might ask, 'what is the need for a Philippine philosophy?' The answer might lie in the fact that most 'successful' nations, by which we mean success in terms of political, social and economic stability, have formulated philosophies that are at least partly indigenous. Japan, for example, struggled greatly to incorporate Western approaches to technology, government, etc., but it eventually had to do so by compromising to traditional elements who demanded a Japanese approach. Thus, Japanese corporations, despite seemingly following Western models on a superficial examination; in fact, in the most important practices use distinctly Japanese approaches. The ideas of social darwinism and cutthroat competition are mostly rejected. Japanese businesses are organized in large business families which include small new businesses and established corporations that all help each other survive. Competition occurs only between different business families, so within the system of competition there is an even more important system of a social community modeled more on Confucianist/Buddhist/Shintoist thought.

Borrowed Thinking

The problem in the Philippines lies in its thought processes being borrowed mostly from the outside. In ordinary social dealings, the Filipino traits still survive and predominate, but Filipinos have been unable to develop a modern philosophy that would enable them to adapt foreign thought to the indigenous mind and attitude. Serafin Talisayon has created a diagram showing some prominent Filipino social values found among mainstream modern Filipinos:

- 1) Love of Freedom
 - Nationalism
 - Patriotism
- 2) Pakikialam
 - Pakikibaka
 - Rebellion

- 3) Hiya
 - Amor Propio
 - Poor Loser
 - Machismo

- 4) Pakikisama
 - Kumpadre
 - Group-centeredness
 - Barkada, Sakop, Bata
 - Kanya-kanya, Clannishness, Bayanihan

- 5) Lamangan
 - Palusot, Maka-isa
 - Abilidad, Palakasan
 - Talangka Mentality

- 6) Suki
 - Pahingi, Balato
 - Dilihensiya
 - Graft and Corruption
 - Nepotism, Cronyism

- 7) Pagsisikap/Pagtitiyaga
 - Sari-Sari Store Enterprise
 - Hard Work, Tiyaga

- 8) Pagkatitulado
 - Love of Education
 - Cosmopolitanism
 - Pag-a-abroad

- 9) Pagmamay-ari
 - Economic Security
 - Material Gains

- 10) Paggalang
 - Respect for Authority and Elders
 - Care for the Aged

- 11) Family Orientation
 - Love of Children
 - Emotional Security in Family
 - Strong Kinship Ties

- 12) Respect for Women
 - Strong role of mother/wife
 - Under-the-Saya

- 13) Makatao
 - Kapwa-tao
 - Personalism
 - Informality
 - Courtesy: "Po, Opo"

- 14) Pakikiramdam
 - Pakikipagkapwa-tao
 - Damay, Malasakit, Awa
 - Utang Na Loob
 - Tampo

- 15) Kutob
 - Psychic Sensitivity
 - Faith Healing
 - Revivalism
- 16) Maka-Diyos
 - Spirtuality, Religiosity
 - Belief in Miracles
 - Devotional
- 17) Bahala-Na
 - Pagwawalang-bahala
 - Belief in Suwerte
 - "Filipino Time"
 - Manana Habit, Ningas Cogon
 - Passivity, "Oks Lang!"
- 18) Non-Violence
 - Non-Confrontational
 - Matiisin, Mahinahon
- 19) Joy and Humor
 - Love of Fiestas
 - Inclination to Music, Dancing & Movies
 - Lack of Self-Analysis and Self-Reflection
- 20) Hospitality
 - Social Acceptance
 - Euphenism, Pakitang-tao
 - S.I.R.
- 21) Colonial Mentality
 - Inferiority Complex
 - Value on "Stateside" Goods
 - Pro-Americanism
 - Gaya-Gaya
- 22) Complementarity between sexes
 - No sex preferences for children
- 23) Optimism
 - extravagance

Obviously, some of these like colonial mentality are modern traits, and others like cosmopolitanism might even be challenged as being truly descriptive of Filipinos. However, many of the values above can be traced to indigenous thinking.

We will try to trace some of these ideas and introduce others from other sources to begin to develop a truly indigenous Philippine philosophy, or at least to close as possible to achieving this task.

Cosmology

The Filipinos almost all possessed ideas of an active creation by God, the Demiurge. Generally speaking, it the active creator was not necessarily the Supreme God, for both Bathala and Diwata, the creator gods of different parts of the Philippines, are in some cases said to have a "father." In other belief, systems the Supreme God acts as creator in a different manifestation than the normal

one. For example, among some Bagobo tribes, the Supreme God, Kerenen, becomes Megbeveya as the creator, sustainer and ruler of the universe, and Midlimbag, as creator of the earth.

The idea of active creation being performed not by the Supreme Principle, but by the "son" or manifestation of this entity points to the idea that the Supreme God in the highest form was not an active agent. This belief is fortified by widespread notions that the highest God was located "beyond the beyond" i.e., that God could not be located in any geographic or spatial sense; and that the same entity was so far beyond our comprehension that the true name of God could not be uttered (it could not even be known).

Possibly, this highest form of God had some of the naturalistic characteristics found in the beliefs of other peoples and among the ancient faith of Aten in Egypt. There are creation myths in different parts of the Philippines that point to a interaction of opposites between very natural elements that results in the primal creation. Loarca mentioned one belief in which the universe is without beginning, but the creation of life is initiated by the "marriage" of the sea breeze, which would represent the masculine principle, and the land breeze, the feminine. Another similar myth tells how creation comes about by the somewhat antagonistic interaction between the sea, which here represents the feminine, and the heavens, the masculine. Such concepts are very similar to the idea of yin and yang in China, the ultimate manifestation of which is the interaction of heaven and earth resulting in creation. In fact, the myth of the primal sea below heaven pre existing at the point of creation is a common one not only in the Philippines, but among many Malay-Polynesian peoples. However, unlike some myths in Polynesia and on the island of Nias, there are few ideas of evolutionary developments in the creation of the earth and its life. In most Philippine myths, these are created quite suddenly. One theme has the earth created by God dropping a stone from heaven into the primal sea! Interestingly enough, the physical universe in this myth is symbolized by the sea, while the spirit world is the sky. In fact, an idea of our earth as a stone floating in the sea is remarkably accurate in a symbolic sense!

Duality

However, before this duality there was a nonpolar creation or evolution brought about by the thought and will of the Supreme principle, or a manifestation of the same. Such ideas can be found from the North to the South, from the Ilokanos to the Bagobos. This is probably more of a transformation than creation. The Supreme God, in the highest form, is beyond our comprehension and our knowledge of space, time and language. However, in another manifestation possibly brought on by something similar to an evolutionary process (we really are unable to understand), God becomes the active Creator. The universe and the other life forms are willed into existence by this manifestation of the Supreme. Sometimes, this form of God only creates the other divine beings, with the physical world being created by yet another manifestation. When the creator appears as the "son" of the Ultimate Deity, there is a blurry line between the two suggesting unity, and a situation not much different from that of the creator being only a manifestation of the Supreme God.

Although God in the highest manifestation was seen as distant, the people or individual could call upon even this form in times of distress. Only for regular mundane activities and problems was this considered inappropriate. There indeed was some logic in the Philippine idea that the highest God was not to be approached except in near emergencies or on a periodic basis for worship. The Filipino could easily surmise that God did not appear before us, or speak directly to us, but instead stayed "beyond the beyond." The Filipino seems to have respected this distance that God had chosen. Instead, the Filipino conceived that God had helper spirits, often known as anito or diwata, who were assigned to assist humans and others in regular mundane matters. These might be the Philippine equivalent of the "angel" in Abrahamic religions. But as these diwata were also invisible, how did the Filipino surmise these were more accessible than the Supreme God?

The answer here lies in the idea that Filipinos shared with most other animist peoples. The Filipino did witness evidence of these diwata and anitos in the natural phenomena and the other events occurring in their lives. The movement of the wind, the revolution of the luminaries, planets and stars, the seasonal rains, etc., etc., were all seen to be motivated by spiritual forces assigned to this task. Like all animists, the Filipino saw all objects and phenomena as inhabited or governed by spirits. The Filipino was firmly convinced in the immortality of human and all other spirits, and saw evidence that these continued after death. One may question their judgement in the light of modern Western ideas, but even today surveys have shown that even most Westerners believe in life after death. The cyclical nature of events must have convinced the Filipino, as it did others, that certain spirits governed certain phenomena, and thus prevented chaos from prevailing in the cosmos. For it was the order of these cycles, particularly the seasons and the cycle of agriculture, that allowed life to go on in an orderly fashion.

Respect for Nature

In light of such beliefs it is not surprising that the ancient Filipino had a great respect for nature. The relevant spirits were first addressed before practically any undertaking, or even many ordinary activities. Much of this respect for nature has been lost by Filipinos looking elsewhere for their models. The result has been destruction of rain forests, rare coral reefs and the like. The Spanish noted how the Filipinos originally used large mesh nets to allow the younger fish to survive and spawn, but how the example of the Spanish caused them to change to small mesh and nearly destroy the fisheries in the process. For some reason, often the most valuable elements of the old culture are lost, while the more "superstitious" and silly elements survived. However, at least a few of the more honorable beliefs and practices of the ancients also seemed to have survived into the present.

So great was the ancient Filipino's respect for nature that they addressed other creatures and even inanimate objects with terms of respect, for example, the Ilokans even addressed the rice plant as Apo Pagay "Lord Rice Plant." In taking from nature, the Filipino thus was *borrowing* in a cycle that was mutually beneficial and structured according to a cosmic balance. Humans themselves were seen as composed of the elements; either three or four of the following: earth, water, fire and wind. Sometimes, other elements also come into the picture. At death, a person's body returns to the elements, and thus nourishes the earth by means of these elements. We do not only take but also give. To abuse the balance of nature was one of the great sins.

Such a balance also extended into the spirit world and provided for the shamanistic dualism found in Philippine belief. As stated previously, at times the conflict between polar opposites was seen as a reason for the creation of the physical universe itself. This is quite different from views found elsewhere in which the battle of dark and light result in destruction rather than creation. In the Philippines, the benefic and malefic spirits are not necessarily seen as good and bad. More often than not both are seen as divine and good, representing only different but necessary aspects of life. If evil is represented, it is in those created beings of this world, and those in the "underworld" who have chosen to do evil. The malefic spirits have not chosen to do evil, but only do that which they are assigned in the divine order. For humans, the need is to balance the positive and negative natural forces, and to enlist the aid of the higher entities in dealing with the actual malevolent beings.

Balance

The idea balance recurs in the beliefs of the Filipinos. In their natural healing systems, diseases, conditions, foods, medicines, etc., are most often classified according to their hot/cold, high/low, fast/slow, etc., categories. Maintaining proper health means maintaining proper balance. In the same sense, the life of the individual and the order of society also depend on balancing the different forces. While foreign commentators have sometimes tried to paint the practice of head-hunting

among certain Philippine tribes as barbaric, the reality was really quite different. Previous to the coming of the Europeans, large-scale warfare was rather rare on the islands. The Igorots had no history of such wars until their conflicts with the Spanish (e.g., the Battle of Kiangan). Just as the bloody conquests of Kamehameha marked a new stage of warfare in the history of Hawai'i, so did the Philippines evolve after contact with Westerners. Previous to foreign contact, the idea of balance largely prevented such massive bloodlettings. In the event of violence by neighboring villages or clans, the object was not to totally destroy or subjugate the enemy, but simply to bring about balance again by inflicting a similar type of attack. The taking of heads was thus almost a sacred act, which symbolized the maintenance of order. In this way, the violent passions that could possibly lead to much greater genocidal conflict was most often averted. Possibly, the concept of taking scalps among the Native Indians of America was based on similar thought.

By maintaining the balance, society insured that the ecological system would continue to provide food, that chaotic wars would not prevail, that the health of the body would be maintained, and so on. One cannot underestimate the importance of this concept among early Filipinos. The Sun, symbolizing the male principle, was used to represent the Supreme God as Kabunian, or by other names. Actually, in the highest form the Supreme God was seen in the heavens (Apo Langit), but in the creative form as the Sun. The Moon, symbolizing the feminine, became the wife of the Sun, and thus, the cycles of Sun and Moon represented the continuous interplay of opposites. Practically everything one could imagine was divided according to polarity: solar/lunar, right-hand/left-hand, etc., in order that this idea of balance in nature escaped no one.

Interestingly enough, among all Malay-Polynesian peoples, including the Filipino, few concepts of the growing decay of the universe leading to cataclysmic destruction exist. This is one of the strongest reasons for rejecting the too common suggestions of foreign influence in Malay-Polynesian belief systems. For Hindu-Buddhist religions all share the belief in the coming destruction of the universe due to a buildup of evil forces. There might be a very easy explanation for the non-apocalyptic views of the Malay-Polynesian other than simple optimism. In the Philippines, we can see this most strongly in the emphasis placed on the mythical hero's journeys to the higher heavens. Possibly, no other culture places so much importance in crossing from earth to heaven before passing through the gates of death. In fact, among some myth traditions these journeys seem to have been common place even for ordinary people. The Philippine myths give very vivid descriptions of the bridges, vaults, staircases, etc., that lead to heaven and the gates one encountered upon reaching the destination.

Optimism

All this emphasis points to the idea that the Malay-Polynesian really was not concerned with whether the physical universe was destroyed or not! They were too obsessed with how life would be after passing into the great beyond. Thus, two very key interpretations can be made; one points toward the great optimism in Philippine belief, the other towards the emphasis in looking toward the future and the unknown.

The optimism is again displayed by the widespread belief that all spirits of all creatures (not just humans) eventually would rise to the highest heaven, which most commonly was the one below that inhabited by the highest manifestation of God. However, in reality, it was not really below this heaven in a spatial sense. Indeed, the Filipinos often believed in multiple infinite universes existing simultaneously, but not really occupying the same space (as with modern dimensions). Indeed, the idea of endless universes existing at the same time, but never crossing over the same space was never a difficult concept to ancient Filipinos. They never dreamed of limiting such cosmic ideas with their own restricted concepts of space and dimension. The heavens could exist in different realities and different "spaces" which in no way were related to our spatial reality. Thus, while the

Western concept has universes occupying the same space but in different dimensions, in the Philippines, they do not occupy the same space, but different realities. Just as one would not apply spatial dimensions to the world of one's dreams, the same would apply to the different heavens. Now, the idea of stacked spatial heavens also existed, but these were finite and different than the infinite variety. The idea of not limiting one's thought was important to Filipinos. Thus, it was ludicrous to try to conceive of the name of God as this was beyond our comprehension, just as the image of God was impossible for humans to conceive. To be able to form a single image of God would be limiting God to our manifestly feeble powers of understanding.

Returning though, to the idea of all creatures reaching heaven, this obviously is much more optimistic than some other belief systems. The idea is shared with most of those in the Eastern world and among the "indigenous" peoples. However, it does not mean that no justice exists in the afterlife. The Filipinos believed evildoers went to the lower worlds, the equivalents of the Christian hell, or purgatory to be more precise. However, eventually all these souls would by some natural law evolve toward the same place as all other souls. One could possibly conceive that eventually the sufferings of the lower worlds would purge evil intention from all beings. The idea that even the vilest among us, and the "lowest" of creatures eventually reach a position closest to God cannot but give us the idea that the unity of existence was an underlying theme. In the South, the epic hero journeys toward the horizon, the point where the Sun rises, the meeting place of heaven and earth or sea. It is here at the point of contact of the great masculine and the great feminine that the fiery gates of heaven are located. If one reaches these gates, the fire transforms one's body back to the elements. The spirit, being closest to fire, is thus brought into heaven. If one does not reach the fiery gate, then upon death the spirit is bound to the other elements on earth. Thus, the ultimate quest is towards heaven, towards the final home, which is the highest heaven, and towards our creator. We all will get there some day, but some will take more indirect, difficult paths than others.

Universal Spirit (Laon)

With such ideas of unity, we might wonder whether the Filipino had any pantheistic concept or any thought of everything being made of the same "God-stuff" as found in other cultures. Nothing spells this out specifically, but there are indications towards some similar type of concept. Among the Ilokans, each human was a microcosm of the the universe, a "cosmic man" (or, woman). Thus, the universe itself, was seen as one great single body composed of interdependent systems and parts. Many Filipinos believed that more than one spirit inhabited each body. These spirits had separate identities and could be at different places at the same time, yet they were one and the same. In a way, it was the concept of the trinity, but found in every human, and often, in every creature. In the North, the spirits other than the main one that gives us our personality were known as "kaddua" = "companion."

Summarizing

In concluding, we will attempt to provisionally isolate some key points in the philosophical thought of the indigenous Filipino. These thoughts might usefully be reapplied to our own lives and to our society. If indeed there is any truth to modern concepts such as racial memory and local adaptation, or more spiritual ideas as ancestral baggage and a local spirit of the land, then re accommodation of such thinking will be fruitful for us. It will provide the missing indigenous component to our advancement.

I. Optimism. The idea that all beings gravitate eventually toward the higher good.

II. Forward-looking. Focusing on the approaching horizon. On the world to come, which can mean our future on earth as well as the afterlife.

III. Respecting nature. Believing that all things, if not inhabited by spirits themselves, are at least, governed by spiritual authorities. The Filipino never developed the idea of ahimsa, or absolute nonviolence. This is not surprising given the high importance assigned to plant life in the region. It would be impossible to respect absolutely both plant and animal life and still survive. Yet, the Filipino sought to limit and balance the taking of life, including the taking of other human lives. Modern practicalities again demand that we defend ourselves in the modern paradigm, yet we can defend ourselves in a manner in which the ultimate result is the protection of all life.

IV. Reviving non-rationalizing, nonspatial, non-limited thought. Opening the mind to the non-comprehensible. Freeing our mind from preconception and the limitations of our own experience.

V. Understanding and respecting the meaning of balance.

VI. Opening our minds to polycentrism - the idea of that different systems can exist harmoniously without the need of all smaller or weaker systems to be assimilated by the larger ones. We should orient ourselves towards the protection and preservation of the weakest members of our fellow beings.

VII. Realize unity. The universe after all is one great body.

VIII. Realize diversity. If each body can have more than one spirit, why not a nation, or the world as a whole? Unity can be realized in diversity (the arm does not battle with the leg, trying to change it into an arm).

Salamat po sa inyong lahat.

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Ref.: <http://asiapacificuniverse.com/pkm/philo.htm>

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