



Filipino Beliefs, Contradictions, Values

By Definitely Filipino Community | April 17, 2011

Why does “Filipino time” exist if the time suggested by the hands of a wall clock already suffices? Why do most of us go to the office each day for a job we don’t really desire? Why do some of us live lavishly in the midst of scavengers and squatters? Why do we run away from a country when our country perceives that it needs us more? The need to ask these questions indicates that the Filipino mind is in a crisis and that it must extricate itself immediately. However, before that, let us delve.

The Filipino Mind and “Pakikisama”

The Filipino psychology is, indeed, a hard shell to crack. One familiar – and nagging – instance involves the usage of the term “maybe”, whose meaning in English is “I’m not sure, it could be, but it could be not” – and probably no other. For the Westerner in a routine (non-figurative) communicative activity, each unit of idea (word, phrase, sentence) usually means what it is. However, for the Filipino, the term “maybe” takes on a plethora of concealed meanings, such as:

1. “I really don’t know, but I don’t want you to know that I don’t know.”
2. “I don’t know, but I want to end the discussion right now.”
3. “I don’t agree, but I wouldn’t want to sadden you right now by saying ‘No’.”
4. “It is possible, but my decision is not final.”
5. “Yeah, I know – proceed immediately to next topic!”

The precise meaning must be pinpointed according to situational context. Like these: What happened before asking the question? What is the relationship between the one who asks and the one who answers? What does the one who asks usually expect from the one who answers? In what manner did the one who answered said “Maybe” – trembling, adroit, or reluctant? What did each one feel at that time – jolly, irksome, or dejected? What does the body language of each one imply? Each separate context with its unique embellishments leads to a unique definition of “maybe” culled from a thousand potential others.

All of these instinctive hunting for clues are important, for although these clues are needed also to logically answer the question given, these clues are necessary for a more important reason: Filipino preserves what is a valuable end state of every discussion – harmony. Generally, the Filipino prefers harmony to logical coherence. In Tomas Q. Andres’s book *Understanding Filipino Values*, “harmony”, a general term that applies to group dynamics, bee dances and synchronized swimming, is best translated in the Filipino milieu as the well-known Tagalog term *pakikisama*; in Andres’ book, meaning “smooth interpersonal relationship”. These are examples of situations where *pakikisama* is the leading motivator:

1. Criticism of another, irrespective of how salutary in intent, is shirked off as much as possible. Especially in scholarly and corporate settings, a criticism of one's work may be equated to a criticism of the person who made it. Also, destructive criticism is usually avoided, especially in public, for that may trigger a Filipino's sense of honor (hiya) which may lead to violent stand-offs.

2. There is also this pagtatakpan attitude, where other members of a group cover up the shortcomings or the wrongdoings of some of the members. Also this may involve the whole group justifying the wrongdoings, or at least providing excuses for them, of a group's errant members, if only to preserve group integrity.

3. Aggrieved Filipinos often utilize go-betweens, or intermediaries, to settle their quarrels in a mild-mannered way. Settling conflicts by directly approaching the other party in hasty outrage may lead to both defending their honor, which may lead to violence on both ends.

4. Such is the penchant for euphemisms – Filipinos consistently use “passed away” for “died”, “make love” for “sex”, “CR” for “toilet”, so that they do not cross the boundary partitioning the permissible from the taboo. Taboo is a strong social inhibitor; breaking the ground rules for taboo usually incites offense, which Filipinos avoid as much as they could.

“Family” is Everything, and Everything is the “Family”

A value held as impenetrably hallowed is the Filipino's love of family. Every value the Filipino holds must be placed in the context of “family”; indeed, according to Andres, “family”, “is an end in itself” and must not be “subordinated to other values.” This love of family is what ultimately shapes the entire Filipino psyche. Preference of some parents to have male over female children to carry on the family pedigree. Strictness of parents. Older siblings working to make younger siblings study. High regard for the elderly and a wide extended family system. Excessive childbearing in the midst of poverty. Parents selecting the courses of their college-bound college. Punishing children for their sins, and also covering them up from the public. Sex after marriage. Balikbayan boxes. OFWism, as well as anti-OFWism. Family members eating together at mealtime. Even seemingly distant ideas like telenovelas, Civics and Culture books, business proposals, and everyday small-talk, seem to be related, somehow, to the abstract, ethereal, and divine concept of “family”.

If one works hard enough, one can finally trace most other Filipino values to its axiomatic origin: “family”. Here is one rule of thumb: Does a given action, or value, help uphold the concept of “family”? If the answer is shown to be “Yes”, or a large body of reasoning and observations tilts the balance in favor of “Yes”, then that stated value, or the value behind the stated action, is very likely to be a Filipino value. And anything that has “No” for answer is more likely not to be a Filipino value.

Let us offer some examples to show how this proposed rule of thumb works:

1. Regarding property, on the one hand, Filipino families like to accumulate property to satisfy their children's needs, especially educational needs. Filipinos also like to show off their property, like cellphones, clothes, and cars; this gives them renown in the immediate community they are part of. In some cases, when the dire turns direst, fathers and mothers (and sometimes children) resort to crime; a recent example is the case of the three executed OFWs in China. On the other hand, the notion of “individual property” could break down because other family members usually share with what each member owns, especially in a poor country where there are not much resources to go around. What you own is not strictly yours, but your family's too.

2. Regarding education, on the one hand, parents often insist on the importance of education, as something like ‘ang pinakamahalagang pamana ko sa mga anak ko’. They want their children to get high grades, to raise the family pride. They want their children to finish college so that they could ‘get a good job’, and additionally, their preferred course for children is one that usually runs in the family tree (like medicine, law, business) or in demand abroad (like nursing or engineering). Parents would usually do everything – even as far as drowning themselves in debt – so that children get the education the parents think worthy of their arduous efforts and noble intentions. On the other hand, courses that do not fall under the

mentioned specifications (usually natural sciences), or any course that the child prefers which is different from which the family prefers for him or her, or courses taken for reasons of nobility or service inherent in the course (like arts or education) are usually frowned upon, for these courses usually intend to serve some other entity other than the "family".

The National Contradictions

Extrapolating the concept of "family" necessarily leads to a larger concept – the "nation". However, when one starts thinking of this enormous institution, usually what comes to mind next is the obvious: why is our nation still in shambles? What did all the ideals of Lapu-lapu, Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Gomburza and the rest amount to? Did the events that took place in Bagumbayan, in Tirad Pass, in Bataan and Corregidor, in Plaza Miranda, in EDSA, happen in vain, with no meaning to shed upon our current national realities?

Some of the answers include: a battered history infusing us with an inferiority complex; geographical differences; "Filipino time"; bahala na; ningas cogon; lakad ("fixer") system; and so on. Basing from everyday examples, anyone can further fill up this list. The terms haven't departed; nor has the freshness of the reality behind them. Discuss any one of these in a casual meet-up and you'll likely hear the other say, invariably, to each one of these, "Ah, may ganyan rin sa amin e!"

Such maladies emerge because of the complications posed by the Filipino value system. A given Filipino value behaves like a magnet with both poles at a single end, with each pole struggling to overpower the other pole off from that end and yet, peculiarly, still embraces it. To wit, pakikisama may mean congeniality and cooperation, which is helpful; but it can also mean covering up of each other's faults if only to preserve group integrity, which is harmful. Respect (paggalang), or veneration, is helpful if one respects merit, or respects each others' principles and rights, but becomes harmful if respect leads to blind traditionalism and a dampening of the exploratory impulse. Each value, however, cannot be adequately analyzed if only one side of it is analyzed; hence, the embrace. Defects occur because the harmful pole sufficiently repels the helpful pole so that the effects of the helpful pole are nullified.

Someone may insist at this point, "Why not use a simpler analogy?" Like a positive and negative charge, for instance. Bad pakikisama is the opposite of good pakikisama – that's it. Isn't that simpler? I use the compound analogy of a fantastically designed magnet because when analyzing Filipino values, usually, while there are two aspects for each value (the beneficial and the detrimental), for each value, there is an opposite value as well, which may not be held as a mainstream Filipino value. For instance, while it is true that "good pakikisama" is the opposite of "bad pakikisama" – represented by the tumultuous push and pull of the two magnetic poles at one end – pakikisama also has an opposite value. The opposite of pakikisama is individualism. And, like pakikisama, it also has its good half and bad half in its end: the good being self-reliance, assertion of one's rights, and standing up for one's conscience; the bad being egotism, selfishness, and ultimately, solipsism (the belief that only one's self is important; this one is figurative). The opposite of respect is irreverence, which is good if channeled towards outdated beliefs that maintain themselves only because of sheer tradition's sake, but which is bad if it is anarchistic, aiming to break down for the sake of breaking down, leading, in the end, to chaos and obfuscation of values. (Individualism and irreverence are generally not held as Filipino values – though they have their good and bad facets as well.)

Because of the complex nature of Filipino values, our national life is riddled by contradictions. Why, in this portion of the planet, are there qualifications in classified ads when one could get a job through connections, thus bypassing merit? Why do students collaborate in cheating rather than in sharing facts? Why do lawyers here, who are supposed to elucidate the law, convolute it? Why do doctors become nurses? Why do we conduct fiestas in a poor country? Why do the rich get more education when the poor need it more? Why does "yes" mean "no" sometimes? Anyone who has known how to reason and who has lived here sufficiently long with a modicum of sentience could never resist compiling a compendium of "Why's"!

After all these, one could say that the Filipino thrives on contradictions rather than resolutions. Isn't it weird that corruption is simultaneously condoned and condemned? Isn't it weird, too, that we insist on being pro-life in a nation which seems oblivious to killings of journalists and

rampant criminality in the back alleys? These are not just bad times for us; at least, when the times are bad, we still have a purview of what's good. Maybe what we have today is the cliched "troubled times", or the more iconographically phrased "age of anxiety", for our discussion showed that necessarily, our values are in disarray (and one of these values is harmony – the irony!), hence our anxiety in the present state of affairs in our country today. Too many questions, each question leading to another, but too many thickets of internal contradictions that hamper us from grasping the possible answers with a clear mind and from applying them fully in the humdrum procession of our lives.