

FILIPINO CULTURE AND FILIPINO POLITICS: A PRELIMINARY ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEW

*By Willis E. Sibley**

It is a distinct pleasure and privilege to be invited to talk to you today. In the more than ten years in which I have been involved in research about the Philippines, here and in the United States, I have had too little opportunity to meet people at your level of Philippine society. Your group—the professionals, businessmen, and educators—is one which is both the result of, and a prime mover in the social changes taking place in the Philippines today.

It is my hope that my long involvement in Philippine research, including more than two years' intensive field studies, will allow me to speak more meaningfully about Philippine culture and society than some of my fellow foreigners who are too inclined to write books and articles about the country after a stay of a week or a month. I join you in your dislike for their frequent inaccuracy and superficiality. It is also my hope to take advantage of being an outsider — for often outsiders see things in a new light because they have not grown up with them. Just as Americans take most of American culture for granted without much thought, so Filipinos are likely to remain unaware of some of the interrelations among parts of their own society and culture.

My topic today is Filipino culture and Filipino politics. Though always a topic of widespread interest in this country, it is particularly of interest in a presidential election year. My comments are arranged in the following order: (1) First, I will discuss some examples of con-

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temporary political behavior which are widely regarded as undesirable or illegal. These things are often referred to as the "evils of politics," and frequently involve behavior which is illegal under present official government procedures. (2) Then we turn to an analysis of some dominant features of Philippine society and culture, and attempt to show the deep interrelationship between some of these so-called "evils of politics," and traditional ways of behaving and thinking in the Philippines. I shall try to show that Filipino political behavior is basically and deeply Filipino, and not simply bad habits learned from the Spanish or the Americans. (3) Finally, we discuss some changes which are necessary if Filipinos really want to change what they call the "evils of politics." These changes, if desired, will require facing squarely the fact that the "evils of politics" is deeply intertwined with Philippine culture and society, and not simply a set of behavior acquired by persons when they became politicians.

I do not intend to tell you, or anyone else, what the ideals or goals for Philippine political behavior and practice should be. These are decisions which only Filipinos can, or should make. As an anthropologist, my mission is to describe the system which exists. Then, if desired goals are made clear by Filipinos, I may as an anthropologist be capable of suggesting how they might be achieved.

Let me turn now to some features of Filipino political behavior which I constantly hear described by Filipinos (from the barrio, the town and the city) in unflattering and unfavorable terms. In the short time today, you will understand that I must generalize from too few examples. I must also exclude obvious exceptions found in any system of behavior, be it political, religious or economic.

A most commonly observable phenomenon in Filipino politics is the elected political leader who, despite lip service to principles, to the good of the common man, and the welfare of the nation, proceeds after election to devote himself primarily to the welfare of a very restricted group of persons. This group may include himself, his kin, compadres, *lidars*, and a few others. With often ruthless dis-

cipline, he rewards or punishes his limited group of followers and associates in a manner intended to preserve and extend his political control. It seems as if the public office were his personal property.

In observing the day-to-day behavior of political officials at all levels, one cannot help but be struck with the discrepancies between the public statement and the private act. One result is that the number of beneficiaries of political action are often much fewer than the number of persons in the politician's constituency. Barrio people with whom I have lived for more than two years over the past decade are becoming increasingly aware of this discrepancy, but they also point out that they have little power to alter the situation. As one friend told me, "It doesn't really matter which candidate I vote for, because after the election they forget about us barrio people anyway." Perhaps this feeling, right or wrong, will help to explain the willingness of many Filipinos to sell their votes at election time.

At the national level, the narrow feeling of responsibility on the part of elected officials is well expressed in the "pork barrel" system. The "pork barrel," which includes a substantial percentage of the total governmental budget each year, symbolizes a system of allocation of national funds which makes difficult the financing of large-scale projects with the potential of large but long-run benefits to the nation as a whole. The financing of a large scale project in one region might reduce the funds available for distribution by another Congressman. From the viewpoint of the politician, this would be most undesirable, no matter what the potential benefits to the nation as a whole. If one examines closely the distribution of "pork barrel" funds, one can see again the pattern of rewards and punishments exerted by the politician for or against those who supported or rejected him in the previous election.

Another way in which the political leader builds his political power is by becoming a patron for people seeking work despite a Civil Service system closely patterned on

an American model, it is easy to see that the system has been Filipinized to the extent that being a top-ranking civil service eligible, is not sufficient to guarantee employment in an available position. One must ordinarily have "recommendations" as well. Before employing an eligible person, the employing officer casts his eye about to see which of a variety of political pressures he had best respond to. Nor does this process stop with government agencies. An acquaintance who runs a large mining operation in the Visayas tells me that he is constantly plagued by politicians' demand that he hire this person or that person—despite the fact that the mining operation is highly mechanized and requires specialized persons to fill its needs. At lower levels, highway engineers must often reject qualified laborers on their projects in favor of political proteges. An interesting if often economically costly variant is that in which the work crews are rotated frequently to provide politicians with the largest possible number of obligated voters. Not infrequently, efficient machines are left idle in the storage yard to make more labor jobs available.

Even if one discounts purely tactical motivations for many accusations made among and about politicians concerning malversation of public funds, it does seem clear that from time to time special favors are granted by government instrumentalities. These favors are often in the form of loans, licenses, permits, tariff protection, special legislation, tax dispensations, and the like. Sometimes, of course alleged misbehavior involves outsiders like the notorious Harry Stonehill. He was a man so successful at his shenanigans that politicians of all persuasions now walk in fear of his ghost! But the main point is that favoritism and illegal behavior, whether instigated by elected officials or engaged in by civil servants or political appointees, most frequently demonstrates a particularism, or lack of commitment and responsibility to the general public. In short, favoritism is the giving of special attention to a group much smaller than that to which the official is theoretically held to be responsible.

Finally, let me point to yet another aspect of Philippine political behavior which is in emphasis at least, much more striking here than in my own country. I refer to another variety of particularism—that of credit-taking. Wherever public funds are spent, one is likely to see a large sign giving primary credit to the most powerful politician involved. How often one sees a sign saying, in effect, "This marketplace was built by Congressman XYZ." One Filipino wrote recently in a popular magazine that he thought it would be nice to see, for a change, a sign which read: "This structure was built by tax funds paid by our Filipino citizens." While credit-taking is probably universal in politics, I believe its intense use here is closely related to some basic features of Filipino culture to which we will turn our attention in a moment.

What I have tried to do in the last several minutes, is to point to some examples of political behavior which cause repeated and continual adverse comment by Filipinos at all social levels, as well as in daily editorial treatment in nationally distributed magazines and newspapers. Almost invariably, I am told, such behavior is "just politics" or even, "these are bad habits we have learned from the Spanish times." Reference is rarely made to the relationship between political behavior and Filipino culture and society as a whole. I turn then to my second task, that of attempting to relate political behavior to basic Filipino cultural processes.

I will not discuss all of the Filipino culture and values, but will restrict my comments to four important and related parts of the whole. These are: (1) the lasting effects of authoritarian child rearing system, (2) familism or particularism, (3) *otang*, or obligations and (4) *huya* or shame.

(1) One of the central features of any cultural system is the manner in which its participants raise their children. It is as a young child that the individual learns in general what the world around him is like, and what he may expect of it. I should point out that this world is

a different one for the Filipino, for the Japanese, for the American, the Russian or the African. Here in the Philippines, though he is psychologically secure with a large surrounding group of kinsmen, the child is raised in a manner which teaches him forcefully that authority is right, that persons of influence have the right to tell poorer persons what to do, that elders must be respected, and that persons in positions of power must be followed, and not challenged. The questioning attitude, the encouragement of initiative on the part of the young or the poor, is not highly valued. Respect for authority and the learning of obedient followership, is reinforced in the public schooling now available to nearly every child in the nation. The early formal education experience mirrors the home situation. In these early years, the child learns quickly that too much questioning and inquisitiveness is punished, not rewarded. Small wonder then, that most voters in the Philippines meekly follow their *liders*, whether the *liders* are barrio influentials, town officials, provincial solons or national figures. And small wonder, too, that the electorate rarely calls the errant elected official to task for the fact that his deeds may belie his campaign promises. With the age-old respect for authority, for older persons, and for older generations firmly entrenched in Filipino life and values, one cannot fairly blame the Spanish for having taught the Filipino to be arrogant in leadership positions. It may be that the Spanish behavior reinforced a cultural system already in existence.

(2) In the early life, too, the growing Filipino learns that his primary and almost exclusive responsibility is to his family and his extended kin. Later, this responsibility is extended to others such as compadres, with whom he has developed strong ties. Some students of Philippine society have called these persons the personal alliance group. Family-oriented responsibility is valued by high national officials and lowly *bárrio* farmers alike, though it is true that in cities new kinds of interpersonal relations are more quickly adopted and family obligations somewhat more easily put aside than in the rural areas. It should

not be surprising, then, that when elected or advanced to an influential public office, the individual feels obliged to share his good fortune with others in his alliance group. Not only does he feel this obligation strongly, but his alliance group members are never reluctant to remind him of his responsibility and obligations. When the official advances his alliance group's fortunes by diverting public wealth, he is following some of the most important values in his own culture.

Because the family and kin group retains great functional usefulness in a relatively non-industrial society, the family has so far persisted in the Philippines as a dominant institution towards which much of one's energy and attention as a Filipino is still turned. One can see changes occurring as industry and the city demand more and more specialized labor inputs, but these changes are not yet widespread in the country as a whole. This orientation towards family and to highly personalized relationships generally brings, us naturally to the third item, namely, *otang*.

(3) Though one's earliest and deepest obligations may remain to the family and close kin as one grows up he develops a series of *otang nga kabubut-on* and/or *otang nga kabalasan* (in Tagalog, *otang na loob*) relations not only with kin but with compadres and other persons with whom one has lasting and important relationships. The *otang* may sometimes involve only short-term or limited obligations upon which the *otang* partner may call, but the deeper *otang* relations involve obligations to others not limited by size or time period. If one is helped in a critical point of life, the remaining obligation or *otang* may be perpetual, even extending to one's children after death. *Otang* with other persons may develop in a variety of ways. But whatever the cause, *otang* responsibilities are likely to be paramount in the mind of the Filipino in his own self-evaluation, and in the evaluation of him by others. One *must* observe one's obligations, even if they may conflict with more universalistic values or laws which legally govern

the work of the public official. The other side of the *otang* coin is equally important to understand. For if one does not have mutual obligations with another he also is likely to have relatively little concern for the welfare of that other person. As a friend pointed out to me the other day, Filipinos "don't mind" things or persons with which they are not personally involved or obliged.

In the process of getting elected, or in the climb up the civil service ladder, the Filipino in public service acquires a series of obligations which are called upon from time to time. The politician or civil servant feels impelled by his own cultural values to respond to these obligations when they are called upon. If he did not, would he not be *walang huya?* or without shame? The fact that people call upon these obligations in a way which sometimes goes against the law, or goes against the national interest, is of course the crux of the problems of Filipino culture and Filipino politics under discussion in this paper.

(4) Shame, or in Ilongo *huya*, (Tagalog, *hiya*) is a term which covers a wide variety of meanings, but expresses most generally a system of sanctions, potential punishments or fear of punishments, human and spiritual, which impels people to behave according to Filipino values. One of the important values maintained and perpetuated by the fear of "shaming," or "being shamed," is of course the series of *otang* relations which every Filipino has with a limited number of other Filipinos. If the Filipino official attempts to refuse his *otang* partner a favor which would go against the law, or against the public interest, the person seeking the favor may often remind him of the *otang*, and point out the shame or *huya* which would surely result if the favor were to be refused. The result is terrible dilemma for the public official who sincerely wishes to be honest and legal in all his public behavior.

In brief, I am trying to suggest that in the public arena, the public official, appointive, elective or civil service, is faced with trying to operate within two systems at the same time: First, he is aware of legal responsibilities and duties built into the institutions in which he is parti-

icipating. These are the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government, operating under a constitution which theoretically guarantees a response to public needs in an equal democratic fashion. But secondly, he is faced with traditional Filipino values and obligations which are often in conflict with the laws of his government. His solution so far has been to innovate, to refashion these western governmental institutional provisions to fit his own value system and cultural demands. It is perhaps pretty obvious that the result is different in the Philippines than in the United States, from which much of the Philippine governmental structure was borrowed.

The late President Quezon is reported to have said: "I'd rather have a government run like Hell by Filipinos than a government run like Heaven by Americans." I share his view that Filipinos should and must run their own government. But today, one might interpret the first part of Quezon's statement as an admission that problems are created by the joining of Filipino culture and western governmental forms, and that this joining does not always work to the best interest of the nation as a whole.

In the beginning of this talk, I said that the anthropologist cannot tell a group of people where they should go. I also said, however, that if the people told him where they wanted to go, he might be able to tell them how to get there.

So let us assume, for the third and final part of my talk, that Filipinos mean what they say when they express anger, disgust or dismay at political behavior as practised today in the Philippines. Let us assume that Filipinos mean what they say when they claim a desire to become a democratic nation of laws, not of men. (How often one hears the statement: "We are a nation of laws, not of men." But how often one sees just the reverse — situations in which personal influence overrides the legally equal right of all!)

Let us assume that Filipinos would prefer a situation in which they could be confident that their limited public

wealth would be allocated for the best good of the nation as a whole.

If we assume these things, what shall Filipinos have to do to solve this dilemma between the behavior implicit in their adopted institutions of government, and the conflicting behavior apparent in everyday political behavior?

The solution will be a painful one, and one requiring conscious effort on the part of millions of Filipinos over a long period of time. It will involve a change in Filipino values and cultural behavior in the direction needed to make successful a democratic system of government in a rapidly developing nation with a very fast-growing population. Rational change involves facing squarely the cultural conflict involved, and consciously changing behavior to fit the new needs of the Philippine nation.

These needed changes will not come about by chance alone, although industrialization itself is likely to help by breaking down the reliance upon the extended family. In this process, the obligation to help the family and extended kin will also be reduced.

In my opinion, the greatest changes must come in the re-direction of obligations to one's kin, compadres and other *otang* partners, towards obligation to fulfill the public need and the public good, regardless of its profitability to oneself and one's alliance partners. Dedicated, selfless individuals are by no means totally absent in Philippine politics and public life today, but their road is a rocky one. They too often get bypassed by their associates who remain willing to overlook improper behavior in themselves and others. Before aspirations to a progressive democracy can be achieved, the pledges of public servants to the public welfare, to equal treatment in similar cases, and rejection of plans for personal enrichment, must be redeemed in full. But writers have long since urged reforms in political behavior, that is, in the behavior of the politicians themselves.

I would rather stress here the importance of changes in the general public, and in the demands of members of the

public for special favors, the payment of *otang*, and the like. For as the old and trite saying goes, "It takes two to tango," and the politician cannot improperly recommend an unqualified candidate for a government position if no one asks him to do so. Nor can the politician be found guilty of preferential intervention in the acquiring of, say, a logging license, if the loggers refuse to ask special favors. It is not going to be easy to break down the traditional, accustomed ways of doing business with, and within the government structure. One probably cannot expect those currently gaining the rewards to be eager to change the system at their own expense. Who then, can spearhead the changes if indeed Filipinos really wish to change their governmental and political practices?

My best answer is that the vanguard of dedicated changers must come from people like yourselves. You are educated, resourceful and informed citizens and are in fact in many cases products of the changing Philippine society. Many of you in the growing Philippine middle class are professionals, not as seriously encumbered by the traditional obligations of the immensely wealthy few in the nation—those persons who have the most to lose and least to gain by altering traditional political alliances.

If you are really interested in moving towards a real nation of laws, with democratic equality, you must in many senses become un-Filipino. You must refuse to rely upon traditional behavior when it is illegal, refuse political favors, and make clear your non-approval of those who subvert the public interest. This is a thankless task, perhaps even a dangerous one. It would certainly be an expression of nationalism, in the best sense of the word.

I began my talk by stating that such decisions about changes and goals can only come from Filipinos. I close with much the same remark: It is your country. What kind of political system do you want?