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Notes on the Filipino Philosophy of Work and Leisure

LEONARDO N. MERCADO, S.V.D.

Two young dogs in a mock fight growl, wrestle, and slightly bite each other. One observer thinks the two dogs are practising for future battles. Hence, work. Another observer thinks both dogs are having fun in the play of mock fight. Hence, play. A third observer thinks the dogs are both working and playing. The intermingling of work and play seems to be a part of Filipino philosophy.

The intermingling of work (*Panginabuhi/hanapbuhay/pagbirukan* respectively in Cebuano Visayan, Tagalog, and Ilocano) and leisure (*kalingawan/aliwan/pagliwliwaan*) depends ultimately on the Filipino's world view. His world view (according to the conclusion of a study) is non-dualistic or — if positively expressed — a philosophy of harmonizing opposites.¹ The Filipino wants to harmonize the object and the subject, while at the same time, holding both as distinct. This principle runs throughout the various aspects of Filipino philosophy, i.e., in man, world, and God. For instance, the non-dualistic principle appears in the Filipino harmony-with-nature orientation. It leads consequently to a non-linear concept of time, space, causality. The same principle of non-dualism (or of harmony) also explains the Filipino's view on work and leisure.

The Filipino's non-dualistic world view may be called "vertical" and the Westerner's world view "horizontal." The following sketchy contrast applies to the concept of work.

Just as time and space are linear or horizontal for the westerner, likewise his view on work is also horizontal. In western-oriented factories and other business firms, the goal is

1. Leonardo N. Mercado, "Elements of Filipino Philosophy" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, April 1973), pp. 303-308.

producing more through efficiency. And specially with technological progress, work becomes more impersonal and man becomes a slave of his machines. The slogan goes: "Duty before pleasure." In other words, leisure is separate from work. Thus human activity goes the linear progression of "because's." A person goes to school because he wants to find a place in society. He marries because he wants to propagate himself. He works because he wants to earn money to buy his needs. He works harder in order to get a promotion. Finally he retires. Only after retirement is he expected to fully enjoy life.

On the other hand, the Filipino blends work with leisure. For instance, planting and harvesting is not purely work, for together with it go singing, drinking, and eating. For the fishermen who draw their nets, some of their companions roast the catch and drink tuba on the seashore. Working is more personalistic, and leisure is a part of it. The above-mentioned rural examples can also be applied in the city. Market vendors join work with the leisure of gossip and listening to the radio. And in the city, the office workers stress not pure work but the pleasure of camaraderie, i.e. the tendency of combining pleasure with work.

Let us further illustrate the thesis by going over a series of phenomena: (1) the climate, (2) Philippine Social structure, (3) business, and (4) folklore. The first two phenomena situate and partly explain the last two phenomena, namely, business and folklore.

THE CLIMATE

Not a few western missionaries who come to the Philippines as young men, work vigorously as if they were in temperate countries. On the other hand, their acclimatized older western co-missionaries have learned to behave like Filipinos.

Are Filipinos lazy? Because of this oft-repeated accusation from the Spaniards, Jose Rizal (1861-1896) had to refute the charge in his essay, "On the Indolence of the Filipinos."² He

2. Jose Rizal, "Sobre La Indolencia de los Filipinos," *Escritos Politicos e Historicos* 1872-1896, tomo 7 (Manila: Comicion Nacional del Centenario de Jose Rizal, 1961), pp. 227-261.

has several arguments. Firstly, to work hard in the hot Philippine climate is unhealthy. Secondly, the flourishing pre-colonial Filipino industries prove that Filipinos were not lazy. Rather, the Spanish raids and forced labor closed down these industries and Filipinos learned the vice of laziness from their Spanish colonizers. Thirdly, the Filipinos learned the vice of gambling from the Spaniards. As linguistic proof of this argument, Rizal notes many Spanish gambling terms in Tagalog, whereas non-Spanish terms (such as cockfighting) are few. Fourthly, the Spaniards kept down Filipinos in the educational ladder, a way of discouraging Filipino ambitions.

The forced labor (*polo* and *vandala*), according to Phelan, "became necessary not because the Filipinos lacked industry but because the Spaniards would not adequately reward them for the toil of their labor. Although the preconquest Filipinos never were surplus farmers, they might easily have been induced to become so if the Spaniards had paid them fair prices for their products."³

Rizal was not the first to explain Filipino "laziness" in terms of climatic influence. Already Aristotle (384–320 B.C.) and several others after him said that people in colder climates work harder than those in mild climates.⁴ This phenomenon is noticeable even within the same nation, that is, between the northerners and the southerners. Northern Germans (Westphalians) are different from southern Germans (Bavarians). Northern Italians and Spaniards are different economically and physically from the southern Italians and Spaniards.

The type of climate a nation has dictates its people's type of housing, clothes, agriculture, and industry. Because nothing grows in winter, people of temperate countries have learned to plan ahead and prepare for winter. On the other hand, people in

3. John Leddy Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines*, Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses 1565–1700 (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1959), pp. 108–109.

4. Mitos Sison, "Geography and Its Influence on Culture," *Brown Heritage: Essays on Philippine Cultural Tradition and Literature*, ed. by Antonio G. Manuud (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1967), pp. 838–843.

the tropics (like the Philippines) do not need to worry and plan for winter since nature is green the entire year. Filipinos belong to some of God's spoiled children who can afford to take life easy because nature is kind.

Even in the Philippines itself, regional differences can be attributed to geographical and climatic differences. Because of the arid and tight land situation in the Ilocos regions, the Ilocanos have learned to economize. That is why the Ilocanos have earned the reputation of being tightwads or the Filipino Scotchmen. Yet, the Ilocano migrants to the fertile and wide Cagayan valley of Northern Luzon seem to behave differently from their brothers in Ilocos Sur. And when Filipinos go abroad, they automatically adapt from the easy gait under the tropical sun to the fast walk in winter. Likewise Filipinos abroad tend to unlearn their Philippine habits and adapt themselves to the new environment.⁵

Since nature is kind to the Filipino, he has more leisure time. Thus the real hard working days for the farmer are in planting and harvesting his crops. Between the two periods, he is more free for other leisurely occupations. And some of the favorite Filipino kinds of leisure are magic and gambling. That Filipino musicians are in most Asian night clubs is a fact that indicates the Filipino inclination for music. Because Filipinos have an ear for music, they can easily repeat a new song when played even just once.

Gambling as a form of leisure is inseparable from the Filipino soul. But it stops as a form of leisure when gambling becomes compulsive. When Rizal said that Filipinos learned the vice of gambling from the Spaniards, his statement can be taken with a grain of salt. Granted that many forms of gambling terms are Spanish, there are also not a few Filipino games of chance such as *sapot* (spider fighting), *Kuliglig* (cricket fight), the betting on cracking coconuts (*bin-norac iti niyog*) — aside from the all-favorite *sabong* (cock fighting). The Filipino's love for gambling

5. An example of this change is reflected by the Filipinos living in the U.S.A. See the observations of Kerima Polotan, "Filipinos in America," *Focus Philippines* (October 20, 1973).

has been described as the main feature ("The Filipino as Gambler") in the newsmagazine *Pace*.⁶

In short, work and leisure are blended for the Filipino partly because of his climate. However, the same phenomenon is also reflected in the Philippine social structure.

PHILIPPINE SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND WORK

A mechanic-helper of a yacht belonging to a Filipino multi-millionaire noticed the different treatment he got from western guests and from Filipino guests. The yacht would regularly have both rich western and Filipino guests. During the cruises he took it for granted that the guests must be served as in a hotel, and that he eat with the other domestic helpers after the guests had eaten. But he was surprised that the American guests would help themselves in opening the battles or in serving themselves with the food. Furthermore, he even got more surprised when the American guests served him with a drink or a sandwich! He was not used to the equal treatment.

Philippine society, the social scientists claim, is highly stratified and hierarchic. A big gap exists between the Big People and Small People. This stratification already existed in pre-colonial Philippines. In descending order they were the *datu* (the ruling class), the *maharlika* (the nobility) the *timagua* (the freemen or common class), and the *alipin* (the service, dependent class). The carry-over of this stratification is found today in the political and business *datus* on top and the *alipin* in the under-paid domestic help and tenants at the bottom of the social ladder. In this stratified framework, manual work is only for the lower class whereas the modern *datus* think it undignified to soil their hands with manual labor. If this condition is pre-colonial, to blame the Spanish colonizers for giving the bad example of the *señorito* attitude toward work would be wrong. The class consciousness of the modern *datus* is reflected in their style of clothing (which puzzles their American peer) and in the way of showing off their wealth. One can sometimes see a

6. *Pace* (December 17, 1971).

domestic helper with an umbrella following an elderly lady going to church, fanning her, and taking off her shoes.

This hierarchy is inherent in the Filipino social system. It is also visible in the family where siblings are even ranked according to their age and corresponding dignity. The extended family system is a combined employment agency and social security system where private property is somewhat communal.

Since the prosperous have the duty to support their less fortunate relatives, some are discouraged in producing more for their own immediate kinsmen, because other relatives demand a right in sharing the prosperity.

In short, work is closely tied up with the social structure. Those in the bottom take the hierarchic nature for granted.

How is the philosophy of work and leisure related to the social structure? From one viewpoint, the Filipino wants to harmonize the individual and his reference group or *sakop*.⁷ If there is harmony between the Big People and the Small People, then the philosophy of work and leisure should be in this context.

The social nature of work can also be viewed from the business angle. A contrast between Filipino and Chinese business procedures will better illustrate the Filipino concept of work.

BUSINESS, FILIPINO AND CHINESE STYLE

A song from Burauen, Northern Leyte, goes:

Singsing ha Burauen,
May kita binatasan,
Filipino nga tindahan,
Hin utang gintatakasán.
Intsik la an marisyo,
Kay pirmi pagado,
Filipino agrabyado,
Namatay ha pag-arado.

(They say in Burauen,
We have a custom
Of a Filipino store,
Sick and tired of debts,
Only the Chinaman is happy,
Because he's always paid up,
Filipinos complain,
Because they die of plowing).

7. Mercado, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

The song illustrates the common belief that the Chinese are better businessmen than Filipinos. Why? A Chinese priest who studied in the Philippines thought of the problem for a long time and came out with the following observation:

A poor Chinese immigrant may begin with the buying-and-selling of empty bottles. After he saves more money, he goes as a travelling vendor. Later he begins with a small shop or *sari-sari* store. He may sell rice with a minimal gain. Perhaps the profit can be the empty sack which can be resold for a price. Because he sells cheaply he gets many customers. At the same time he lives and eats with economy. After a few years his shop gets bigger. He then acquires a small jeep for transporting his business and for his family. Years later he can afford to buy a car as the original shop becomes a supermarket in the hands of his children.

On the other hand (the Chinese priest continues), the Filipino businessman begins his store with a *ningas kogon* splurge. He puts a big sign on his shop, buys a car. Unlike the Chinese, the Filipino is eager to gain and get rich quickly. So he puts a wide margin of profit, only to find out that he gets less customers than the Chinese. Finally, the Filipino ends as a business failure.

Perhaps this contrast given by the Chinese priest is rather sweeping and simplistic. But it has a grain of truth. Filipinos grudgingly admit that Chinese are better businessmen for they have a major control of Philippine commerce. Likewise one often hears the generalization that Filipinos can spend all their savings for a big fiesta and suffer debts for the rest of the year. This pattern of action seems to indicate that the Filipino is this-worldly and impatient. He wants to enjoy the present and expects that tomorrow will take care of itself. This attitude is reflected in the popular character of the folk tales, Juan Pusong.

JUAN PUSONG ON WORK AND LEISURE

Juan Pusong is a popular figure in the central and southern Philippines. Even the Mangyans, a minority group in Mindoro, have Pusong tales.⁸

8. For instance, Maria Delia Coronel (comp.), "How Juan Pusong

The Pusong tales are intended primarily for entertainment, as when people sit together for drinks and exchange stories. Perhaps Pusong goes back to an ancient Filipino tradition, since already in 1668 the Spanish Jesuit missionary Alcina wrote in a chapter devoted to Bisayan amusements: "Although they have many histories of their ancestors which they tell . . . they have many fables which they call *Posong*."⁹ Since the early Filipinos had no Christian names, perhaps the name "Juan" (as in Juan de la Cruz, the typical Filipino name) was added later and Pusong became the surname due to the forced imposition of Spanish names.¹⁰

Pusong is not just for jokes because folklore mirrors a people's philosophy. First a slight digression. Pusong's character may escape categorization since he may actually be a corporate personality. Why? In the hundreds of Pusong tales, his character is presented differently. One group of tales presents him as a simpleton and lazy. Thus in one popular tale, Pusong, who was sent by his mother on an errand to buy clay pots and crabs, bundles the clay pots with a rope by piercing the bottom of the pots. He tells the crabs to walk ahead of him homeward while he tarries behind to take it easy. In another tale, Pusong hides the bag of salt he bought in the best "unstealable" place — under water! Yet, if Pusong appears stupid in some of the stories, so are many of the other characters. (Here the character of Pusong coincides with the Tagalog Juan Tamad and the Ilocano Juan Sadut.¹¹ But Lazy John or Juan Tamad/Sadut is said to be the Filipinized version of a literary figure based on a Portuguese origin, whereas Pusong seems older than the Portuguese model).¹²

Furthermore, is another set of stories, Pusong is quite Fooled the King — A Mangyan Tale," *Stories and Legends From Filipino Folklore* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 1967), pp. 151—154.

9. Following the unpublished Muñoz text of Francisco Ignacio Alcina's *History of the Islands and Indios of the Bisayas*, Part I, Book 4, chapter 9.

10. Pedro Chirino, *Relacion de las Islas Filipinas* (Manila: Historical Conservation Society, 1969), pp. 221—222.

11. Manuel and Lyd Arguilla, *Philippine Tales and Fables* (Manila: Capitl Publishing House, Inc., 1957), pp. 67—82.

12. Herminia A. Sison, "Folklore and the Changing World," *Solidarity* (September 1969), pp. 44—47.

different from Juan Tamad of Juan Sadut. The name *Pusong* in present-day Visayan means "a person who is good in putting up a front of innocence when committing mischief, so called from the character of *Huwan Pusong* of the folk tales who is always getting the better of people in higher places."¹³ *Pusong* in these set of tales is a sly man who begins poor but gets rich through his brains. In one tale *Pusong* tricks the king (or datu), marries the princess, and becomes the king.¹⁴ In these stories, *Pusong* is also a great lover and always succeeds in getting his princess as a wife.

Another set of *Pusong* tales amounts to jokes. Any funny incident (true or fictitious) gets disguised as a *Pusong* tale where *Pusong* may be a child, a young man, a farmer, a professional, or even a Chinaman. This third set of *Pusong* tales is not relevant to the present consideration of work and leisure.

Pusong does not seriously consider work for its own sake. If he works, leisure is always mixed with it. He enjoys life for his thinking is this-worldly. In other words, he does not think of "saving for a rainy day."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have seen the phenomenon of work and leisure from the viewpoints of climate, social structure, business, and folklore. These four separate and related viewpoints seem to coherently explain the Filipino's philosophy of work and leisure.

The hierarchic social structure explains the hierarchic nature of work. Those in the lower rank take manual work as a part of their lot, just as a child resignedly accepts his lot of serving his elder brother. The child also knows that as he grows older, he can expect the same treatment from his younger siblings. Likewise, as the Filipino ascends the social ladder, he unconsciously assumes the role on work which befits his level. This attitude

13. John U. Wolff (comp.), *A Dictionary of Cebuano Visayan*, special monograph issue (number 4) of the *Philippine Journal of Linguistics*, June 1972, p. 811.

14. Coronel, *op. cit.* An informant from Eastern Samar relates the same tale with slight variations.

perhaps explains why Filipinos are education-conscious because a college degree is considered a key to social mobility.

Furthermore, the Filipino's this-worldly view on work and leisure explains his desire for miracles, such as instantly getting rich. Since the future touches the present in his philosophy of time, then divine interventions are to be expected.

In short, how the Filipino looks at work and leisure is quite different from the western viewpoint.

While western countries may take pride in their technological progress, technology also dehumanizes and lessens the capacity of man to enjoy life. Depersonalized human values are the price tag for technology, because the latter tries to produce goods the cheapest way — which means exploiting man. On the other hand, the average Filipino who is personalistic, has not yet been victimized by technology. Like Juan Pusoong, the average Filipino seems to enjoy his simple way of living where human values are stressed.

If leisure is the basis for culture, then the Filipino's philosophy of mixing leisure with work has something to promise.

Lastly, these notes and reflections do not pretend to say the last word on the present topic. They are rather a preface to something which can only start from dialogue. For instance, many of the assertions have touched topics on which little empirical research has been done. Here is a challenge for the social scientists.