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## "Typically Filipino"<sup>1</sup>

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### "Typically Filipino"?

This paper is about the conversational/interactional usage of the term "Typically Filipino." The quotation marks on the title are put there on purpose. This paper does not attempt the impossible task of saying what is "Typically Filipino" in a realistic sense. It is plainly obvious that Filipino culture as a manifest topic is reproduced in thousands of conversations, conferences, lectures, papers, and books. This paper does not seek to replace or dispute that reproducible notion of culture or to criticize it. The task is to describe and analyze those interactional occasions where Filipino culture becomes a topic, as in someone uttering "Typically Filipino" or in an utterance which otherwise characterizes Filipinos. This paper attempts to describe how "Typically Filipino" and its equivalents arise in an ongoing interaction as a methodologically appropriate and demonstrably connected topic.

This paper argues for a contrastive method of examining Filipino culture. It is to be read as a statement of an analytic posture. The analyses offered of Filipino culture are exemplary, rather than complete inspections.

There are courses in Filipino culture at many American, Canadian, and Philippine universities, an unlimited number of research projects and literature in which Philippine culture is the main variable, and an Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC) at Ateneo de Manila University. These courses and research projects treat Filipino culture as a describable entity, a constant which can be measured and elaborated upon. The elaborations can result in great archetonic structures on the cultures of every minority in the Philippines (e.g., Conklin, 1980; Constantino, 1983; Keesing, 1962; Rai, 1990; Rosaldo, 1980; Walrod, 1988; Wiber, 1993), the cultures of the language (Llamzon, 1978), the culturally appropriate care of elderly Filipinos (Kuan, 1993), provincial cultures (Vilches, 1979), Muslim culture in the Philippines (Muslim, 1994), the cultures of the Spanish (McCoy, 1993), the Chinese (Baviera and See, 1992; Carino, 1985; See and Chua, 1988) and the Japanese (Osawa, 1994) in the Philippines. There is academic work on Philippine popular culture (Reyes, 1991) and also extensive cultural reportage and commentary in the daily and weekly Philippine press.

Then there are courses, research projects, and literature on the ethnic culture of Filipinos living in the United States. A growing literature is available on a variety of subjects: Filipinos immigrating to Hawai'i, working on the sugar plantations and now in the hotel industry (Okamura and Labrador, 1996;

Okamura, Agbayani, and Kerkvliet, 1991); *Filipinos in America* (Espiritu, 1995; Takaki, 1995a; Takaki, 1995b); *Filipinos in Los Angeles* (Tiger, 1979; Berbano, 1974); *Filipinos in California, New York, and Michigan* (Crouchett, 1982; Abad, 1975; Pido, 1976); and *Filipino nurses in the United States* (Asperilla, 1971). There is a videotape distributed by AT&T to people making substantial calls to the Philippines over the AT&T service. The tape depicts the history of Filipinos in the United States from the early ship-jumpers off a Spanish galleon around Santa Barbara in California in the late 1500s, the establishment of a shrimp-fishing town called Manila in Louisiana, the Filipino sugar workers in Hawai'i, and the Filipino participation in the armed forces in WWII.

In everyday speech I often speak of the history of the Philippines, using topics from pre-Spanish contact to the present traffic and intense consumerism found along Epifanio De Los Santos Avenue (EDSA), the main shopping street in Manila, with the assumption that the events in this history are as stable and constant as Mount Apo outside of Davao. I am also fond of reciting the history of Filipinos in "America" to my Philippine-born wife, now a Filipino American. I love digging around in the extensive Filipino holdings of the University of Hawai'i library system and the on-line bibliographic search systems, each time finding new nuggets of heretofore unknown history or sociology on Filipinos in the Philippines, United States, the Arabian peninsula, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and wherever Filipinos are found. I find myself monitoring CNN for the appearance of Filipinos, usually in the background of news shots. I once saw a CNN story on Filipino small businessmen in the middle of coverage of an African revolution.

Speaking, listening, watching, and writing about Filipino culture, as in the academic publications cited above, is a massive collaborative social accomplishment. Rather than participate in the natural discussion as a definable constant, I want to propose an alternative way of analyzing and thinking about Filipino culture. Instead of relying on the privileges of a socially concerted assumption of Filipino culture as a describable constant, I want to inspect some interactional settings in which the topic of Filipino culture comes up. This approach problematizes Filipino culture as an interactional phenomenon. The task before us, in this approach, is not merely to describe the setting, but to describe the step-by-step process of the interaction, as it occurred in real time, to determine how the mention of Filipino culture became a meaningful, accountable part of the ongoing conversation.

I have to admit the orientation of this paper may seem odd to people who talk and write about Philippine and Filipino American culture. It is quite natural to hear people speaking about Philippine culture, and I hear and speak myself of it

as an object. I live in a Filipino, extended, multigenerational, Tagalog-speaking household in Hawai'i and find that we always speak of Filipino culture as if it were an objective, dimensionable entity. But in daily household life, Filipino culture is an occasional topic, usually to give an account of untoward circumstances.

### The Two Meanings of "Typically Filipino"

There are many ways of topicalizing Filipinos and Filipino culture. I will mention two examples. The first example is generated in everyday conversation, usually among Filipinos or between Filipinos and others. While the formulations are not used everyday, they are frequent enough to be classified as "say-isms." By using this term, I mean to indicate that the formulations are recognized as recurrent. I have heard these say-isms hundreds of times in my house and in the general Honolulu Filipino community: "Every Filipino thinks he can sing and dance;" "If these kids were in the Philippines, they would have respect;" "Some Filipinos don't like Filipinos, you know;" "Life is hard in America, you really have to work, no monkey-business;" "Do you know Dan Cooke (a Honolulu news anchor) is married to a Filipina?;" "Can Ramona Harris (the wife of the Mayor of Honolulu) speak Filipino?;" "It is embarrassing that Prince is part Filipino;" "You know how stingy Ilocanos are;" "Visayans love to party;" "Where does Veronica Pedrosa (a CNN anchor) get that British accent?;" and "Filipinos love to build big houses with iron gates and balconies." These are just examples.

The foregoing characterize Filipinos. "Typically Filipino" stands as a collecting heuristic for these say-isms and their equivalents. But there are times when my wife will say "Typically Filipino" when I am watching *Filipino Beat*, a Honolulu-produced television program. The comment "Typically Filipino" is directed at the scenes I am watching on television.

So, there are two meanings of "Typically Filipino." The first is a heuristic use, a collecting basket of say-isms, as above. The second use is "Typically Filipino" itself.

For the remainder of the paper I will present five say-isms that exemplify "Typically Filipino." In the conclusion I will propose an alternate way of studying Filipino culture. The say-isms are drawn from my experience living in a Filipino household, in the Honolulu Filipino community, and from living in the Philippines.

**Vignette 1: "Typically Filipino"**

I was watching *Filipino Beat* when I saw what I have since learned is hip-hop dancing. The show featured six students from Farrington High School, which is located in Kalihi, a predominantly Filipino neighborhood in Honolulu. The four boys and two girls faced the camera and danced in two lines with identical and synchronous movements, accompanied by a contemporary rock and roll song. My wife walked into the room, glanced at the TV and said, "Typically Filipino."

At the time, I had no idea hip-hop dancing was of African American origin. I had first seen hip-hop dancing on Manila TV. The fact that I did not know the origin of hip-hop dancing is a commentary on my out-of-it-ness and the nerdiness of my two older children. My youngest daughter was three when I was in Manila for a Fulbright fellowship and she did not tell me about hip-hop dancing and the hip-hop nation until she became a teenager. But when I was living in Quezon City, I thought hip-hop was the national dance of the Filipino teenager generation. My brother-in-law, then just barely past being a teenager, would face the TV in our house and mirror the dance of the hip-hoppers on the countless Manila TV variety shows in the mid-eighties.

When my wife commented, "Typically Filipino," I heard the reference as pointing to our mutual experience watching variety shows on Manila TV. Further, I heard it as a comment on cultural survival or reproduction of Filipinos in Hawai'i, exhibiting Filipino culture in the Philippines. I did not know at the time my wife knew the African American origin of hip-hop dancing and was making an ironic comment on the tendency of teenagers to mimic American popular culture.

I have since seen hip-hop dancing on Chinese, Korean, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and Malaysian television. Maybe the African Americans who talk about a hip-hop generation are speaking of an international generation.

**Vignette 2: "Every Filipino Thinks He Can Sing and Dance"**

If I have heard this say-ism once, I have heard it a thousand times. I remember it being said most emphatically when we rented a house in Teacher's Village, Quezon City, near a person who owned a huge karaoke machine. The entire neighborhood was Filipino, with the exception of one Japanese family. The house behind us was occupied by a large upper middle-class Filipino family. The husband was fond of cranking up the karaoke machine at around 11 p.m., and would often limber up his vocal cords by drinking a six pack of beer. Then he

would begin singing Tom Jones songs in an ear-splitting voice. He was always out of tune and out of time with the music. He would drone on, even in the face of neighbors, all of them Filipino, yelling for him to shut up. The neighbors would shout, in English, Tagalog, and Taglish, "Every Filipino thinks he can sing and dance." This would not stop him.

When members of my Filipino family were in the house as he was singing, they would often make the same remark. My wife, in particular, constantly uttered this whenever the neighborhood Tom Jones fell into song. Our bedroom backed the yard of the ersatz Tom Jones, and the singing and music would wake my wife.

Separately, this remark was made when I watched singers lip-synch to their prerecorded voices on *Filipino Beat*. The male singers would stand in Foster Gardens, a botanical garden in Honolulu, bellowing a Basil Valdez<sup>2</sup> tune, without benefit of microphone, amplifiers or musicians. The verdant splendor notwithstanding, the Valdez imitators were often incapable of lip-synching in time with their own voices. This combined with the fact they were frequently behind or ahead of the music, and were just as frequently out of tune, would make them subject to the barb, "Every Filipino thinks he can sing and dance." This went for many female singers as well, especially if they attempted to lip-synch with popular Tagalog songs.

As an aside, the first time I heard the equivalent of the phrase, "Every Filipino thinks he can sing and dance," it was a boast. During the second week we were dating, my wife and I were at a Philippine culture show. I was absorbed by the female dancers. My now wife jolted me out of my reverie by saying, "You are supposed to be paying attention to me. Never mind the show, I can do the dances and songs for you." I have been waiting through the fourteen years of our marriage for my wife to dance with a glass containing a lit candle on top of her head.

**Vignette 3: "If These Kids Were in the Philippines They Would Have Respect"**

When I first heard this say-ism, I thought it was a direct steal from Norwegian Americans. My mother was an immigrant from Norway, and every time she thought I was getting out of hand, she would say, "You could not get away with this in Norway." I was often lectured on how kids were taught to have respect, absolute respect, for their parents and elders in Norway. This retrospective idealization was continued when we moved to California from New York

when I was sixteen. I well remember my mother telling me, "California is making you wild."

Anyway, I have heard this say-ism *ad nauseam*, uttered most frequently by my mother-in-law, as a normative commentary on the behavior of my children or on what she sees on the television news about juvenile Filipino gang crime. My mother-in-law conveniently forgets youth gangs in Manila. This idealization of Philippine child-rearing is particularly aimed at the only one of my four children born in the Philippines, as if geographic location of birth carries certain cultural endowments.

There is a widely shared idealization of child socialization in the Philippines. It is so widely shared that not only do Filipino Americans make reference to it, but Filipinos in the Philippines enjoy the demonstration of child discipline and courtesy toward parents and grandparents, comparing it to the assumed run-amok Filipino children in the United States. The displays of child compliance I have witnessed in the Philippines are so frequent that I have suspected that people announce the Robillards are coming and that everyone under sixteen better pepper every utterance with *ho* and *po*, verbal signs of respect.

The supporting formulations for the idealization of Philippine child socialization are as numerous as I have heard for any motherland. I have often heard: "Kids in America have too much money. Watch too much TV. Get strange ideas from *Melrose Place*. Talk on the phone too much. They have too much freedom and go wherever they want. They can run around O'ahu and no one knows them, where in the Philippines they are always under the watch of neighbors or relatives. They have no responsibilities here, where in the Philippines I did everything for my family from the age of ten."

There are many cuts into the idealization of Philippine child socialization. I will mention one more. It has to do with clothing. One day I was parked outside the Kailua branch of Bank of America. I sat in the car with my mother-in-law, while my wife and youngest son went inside to make a deposit into my son's savings account. I consider my mother-in-law an invaluable cultural resource, Filipino, Filipino American, American, and international. She is a bubbling fount of say-isms.

Anyway, we were positioned in a beautiful place to do collaborative windshield ethnography, facing the Versateller® or the ATM. It was a busy and hot day at the ATM and we were delighted to make observations on the women we saw. Many young women were wearing bikini tops with shorts. One wore a bikini bottom to the ATM. It was not a thong but it exposed most of the buttocks. As luck would have it, it was worn by an attractive Filipino-looking young

woman. My mother-in-law-sociologist piped up, "You could never wear that in Manila. Have you seen people wearing that on the mainland, Britt? I think not. I have never seen that in LA or San Francisco." Being absorbed by the view, I muttered, "You should go to Venice Beach in LA on a hot day." My collaborator continued, "You know what people would think if you walked around in that in Manila?" I nodded. She went on, "In Hawai'i you can wear anything. *Susmaryosep*,<sup>3</sup> in Hawai'i women wear underwear on the street." I agreed, smiled, and kept doing my windshield ethnography.

#### Vignette 4: "Life is Hard in America, You Really Have to Work, No Monkey-business"

This utterance is said in many ways. Sometimes, it is a complaint. Sometimes, it is a description of work in the Philippines and a boast of hard work and self-sacrifice in the United States. Just as often, it is a normative statement intended to motivate the newly arrived or those preparing to immigrate. The meaning is contextually determined.

This say-ism is wide in scope. It refers not only to labor discipline but also to the absence of domestic help, meaning no maids or drivers in the US. But the more serious component of this say-ism is a commentary on comparative labor conditions. I have heard the following: "You cannot sleep on the job here;" "You cannot have *merienda*<sup>4</sup> on a coffee break;" "No more going to the movies in the afternoon;" "If you have nothing to do, you cannot sleep on your desk;" "You have to work every hour of your shift;" "You cannot do nothing or you will be gone from the job;" "They expect effort every minute;" "Work here is no joke;" "This is blood money;" "There is a lot of pressure in this job;" "I never would work so hard if I did not have people to support back home;" "Back home, they think I am picking money off the street;" "My kids have no idea how hard I am working;" and many more formulations of this kind, probably heard since the advent of immigration by any ethnic group.

There is a big combination of martyrdom, I-am-an-adult-player-in-advanced-capitalism, you-intending-immigrants-will-be-shocked, intending-immigrants-better-get-ready, and the-lack-of-a-work-ethic-is-why-the-Philippines-is-a-mess in this say-ism. This say-ism can cut many ways at once.

#### Situated Say-isms

The four say-isms I have used thus far are not general or formal representations of Filipino culture in America. I have introduced them as a method of

criticizing the conventional notion of culture as a constant. The ethnomethodological approach I am using (see Garfinkel, 1996) eschews any idea of a formal knowledge, preferring instead to describe and analyze the socially concerted details through which witnessed structure is produced. By structure, for example, I mean the witnessed work of doing the events composing a party, such as arriving salutations, telling and receiving stories and jokes, moving from one conversational knot to another, observably lounging, publicly eating, leave-taking, and other features. There are many other kinds of structure but each is both site- and experiential-specific, usually worksite-specific, such as in classroom teaching, research laboratory labor, playing music, doing police patrols, engaging in conversation, conducting a clinical examination in pediatrics, and other social achievements.

The say-isms do not represent anything except specific utterances, usually to account for untoward circumstances, such as when the neighborhood Tom Jones sang and when children misbehave. There is no necessity to these utterances. The parties could and do use other utterances. These alternate say-isms could have no reference to Filipino culture. But the ones I have chosen to write about here are Filipino.

To illustrate the situated nature of say-isms, I will introduce a fifth say-ism. There was a party at my house for a Filipino friend, a visiting government official in the Ramos regime. He is married to a Filipino American. There were about twenty guests, eighteen of whom were Filipino. The guest of honor was late and this fact drew many comments about "Filipino time." The party started without the visiting couple and their kids when people grew hungry and started to help themselves to the food. Everyone had been eating and socializing for an hour when the honored couple arrived. The couple knew most of the others and quickly joined the conversations and the eating of Filipino foods.

The party went on for four hours after the couple arrived. There was the usual party behavior of eating, drinking, remarking on the food, asking for recipes, watching the kids run around, and the ever-shifting conversational knots of adults. As the party wore on, some people began to talk of having to leave. A few adults fell asleep in their chairs.

While there was an hour of talk about "We better leave," there were no departures. The government official friend from Manila, who faced a long trip to Sacramento the next day, repeatedly said to his sleepy-eyed wife and three children, "We have to try to go soon, we have a big day tomorrow." After he noticed me observing his futile effort, he turned to me and said, "Filipinos take hours to leave a party. They have a hard time leaving." He went on to say, "You

can add this to your inventory of Filipino say-isms." The friend had known for years about my interest in collecting say-isms.

The fifth say-ism is "Filipinos take hours to leave a party. They have a hard time leaving." This utterance was produced and found its sense through the endogenously lived time of the party and through the retrospective knowledge of the speaker of my interest in say-isms. I took the utterance to be addressed to me. The speaker was looking at me as he spoke, and the utterance about how I could add this to my inventory confirmed his selection of his primary recipient. Furthermore, I had seen my friend watch me watching his wife, who was falling asleep in the rattan chair next to me.

While I was the official recipient of the fifth say-ism, I was not the only intended recipient. The utterance served both as an observation and a goad to my friend's wife. The wife-recipient was just as important, as it turned out, in light of the subsequent action, successful leave taking.

This fifth say-ism, "Filipinos take hours to leave a party. They have a hard time leaving," was produced, as part of the party's doing, separate from this report about it, in the lived sequence of the party, where the intended recipients of the utterance, the speakers, the topics, meaning, and more, were achieved as an ongoing evolution of the interaction. For example, whether the wife heard the remark and took it as a serious request was demonstrated by her standing up, smiling at me, extending her hand to her husband, and saying, "We better go, it is late." It is the action subsequent to the say-ism that shows the meaning of the say-ism, at least for the friend's wife.

Situated action means the meaning of any features of the interaction is produced as the interaction develops. The meaning is an ongoing accomplishment. This does not mean that things are inherently unstable and always changing. Stability and change are worked out in the course of the interaction.

### How to Study Filipino Culture

Filipino culture is classified in countless papers, articles, books, and conferences. The fact there is a building devoted to the study of Philippine culture on the campus of Ateneo de Manila University is a physical monument to Philippine culture. Again, I do not want to dispute these social achievements.

What I am proposing is an ethnomethodology of Filipino culture. Such a procedure of study would not assume the constancy of any culture, even though common sense tells us that culture is an independent, objective entity.

Ethnomethodology is indifferent to any ontological claims. But counter to the charge that ethnomethodology does not recover its own practice, it reflectively uses the cultural competence of the investigator to recognize cultural categories and the interactional context of their use.

I do admit I speak of Filipino American culture as if it were a constant, recalcitrant, objective presence, existing whether or not I am talking or thinking about it. Not only do I speak of it that way, I assume there is an intersubjective consensus on the constancy of Filipino American culture.

I am not only proposing an indifference to the ontological claims of the topic, in this case Filipino culture, but I am also proposing that one must be a participant in the social structure under inspection. One must be an adequate practitioner in this social structure, including in this case, a linguistic competence in Tagalog or in the Filipino language in which the structure is composed. The knowledge of adequate practice is the basis of being able to recognize the discrete utterances and movements composing a social arrangement, the parts and sequential order verified by other competent practitioners.

We have Filipinos studying Filipino culture. We have scores of non-Filipinos studying Filipino culture. The trick is to make discussions of Filipino culture strange for Filipino analysts, enabling them to treat the formulations with indifference. Non-Filipino analysts have to hang around long enough to have what they see verified by Filipino practitioners. Only then can they take the position of ethnomethodological indifference.

There are two styles of ethnomethodological data collection. The first is to video or audio record those interactions in which Filipino culture is a topic. While there are many advantages to magnetic recorders in preserving the details of an interaction and providing for intersubjective reliability, the recording machines can be socially intrusive. The other method of data collection is taking field notes on the interactional occasions where Filipinos or others characterize themselves as effecting Filipino culture. The field notes must be based on repeated exposures to the characterizations. Some claim the second mode of analysis is superior because it demands a deep practical knowledge of the situation. Those who make this claim criticize the use of tapes as analysis without ethnography. However, a deep ethnographic knowledge can be combined with a taped record of the interaction under investigation.

No matter what method the investigator chooses, the task of analysis is to describe the methods used to produce the sequential structure of the interaction. The practices may be evident or so well-known the practice is assumed and not

noticeable. An example of an assumed or unnoticeable practice from the fifth example of Filipino culture is where gaze is routinely used to indicate participation in interaction, alternating the gaze to changing speakers, and using the gaze by the speaker to indicate the primary recipient of the utterance. Further, the Filipino government official friend noticed me looking at his sleeping wife in the chair to my right, and I observed him watching me look at his wife. This mutuality of gaze elements was accountably used, along with the mutuality of hearing the prior request by the friend to leave, to begin the utterance, "Filipinos take hours to leave a party. They have a hard time leaving." The statement also referenced my known interest in Filipino self-characterizations of culture.

The analysis can be taken to an infinite depth of detail. The exact timing of the mutually tracked gazes, the real order of when my friend began to look at me and when I began to look directly at him and when he commenced speaking can be analyzed. The actual phonetic, as opposed to corrected proper English transcriptions, can be analyzed as they intercalate with surrounding speech, gaze, and body movement. The level of detail in the analysis is determined by the audience of the examination and their interests in reproducing the behavior. When behavior under inspection is problematic, as when a pediatric resident has trouble communicating with a mother, the level of detail can get very microscopic. When talking and writing about Filipino self-characterizations of culture, the level of detail corresponds to the recognition by practitioners of those self-characterizations that the production order of these characterizations has been adequately described. The level of detail must also be recognized by other analysts.

### Endnotes

1. I thank Maria Chen, Colleen Cheung, Haynes Leung, and Qian Miao for typing this paper and Michele Smith for editing it. Divina Robillard read and criticized this paper, and also presented it at the Asian American Studies Conference. I also want to thank Mary Danico, David Goode, Maria Eva Pangilinan and Alex Brillantes for their comments and questions. I alone am responsible for the contents.
2. Basil Valdez is a famous contemporary Filipino singer in the Philippines. In my opinion, he has a peerless voice.
3. *Susmaryosep* is a Tagalog slang version of "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," but said in Tagalog as one word.
4. *Merienda* is a Spanish loan word to most Philippine languages. It indicates the taking of a morning or afternoon snack. The snack can be substantial, such as a plate of *pancit*, fried noodles.

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