

# Communion of Being: An Act of Transcending Toward the “Other”

JOEL C. SAGUT<sup>1</sup>

The issue about one's communion with the other confronts contemporary philosophy. The question about the relationship of the “I” with that of the “other” remains to be a rich topic in many contemporary philosophical fora. In the Philippine situation, the same topic also engenders interest from many of our writers. Majority of them have persistently proposed the investigation of Filipino communal life as a possible paradigm for understanding one's communion with that of the “other.” They have proposed the study of what they termed as the Filipino *sakop system*, which can be roughly understood as the *patron-subject*<sup>2</sup> system or the Filipino *communal* system.

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Sagut is a faculty member of the Institute of Religion, and currently Secretary of the Ecclesiastical Faculties of the University of Santo Tomas, Manila.

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have also proposed that the *patron-subject* system in the Philippines is primarily premised on the fidelity of each party to their responsibility toward the other party. [cf. Nicanor Tiongson, *Kasaysayan at Estetika ng Sinakulo at Ibang Dulang Panrelihiyon sa Malolos* (Quezon City: Ateneo University Press, 1975), 192]. This means then that the patron-subject system in the traditional Philippines also promotes responsibility and community and not just power and authority.

# 1. Harnessing the Filipino “Sakop<sup>3</sup>” System: A means of reaching-out for the other

Prof. Leonardo Mercado claims that: “If one of the causes of corruption in the government is our weakness in our national consciousness, then there should be some efforts to strengthen the national *sakop*.”<sup>4</sup> Dr. Armando de Jesus also describes the Filipinos as, “like most of the orientals, [they] are said to be group bound,”<sup>5</sup> and he further continues that, “to belong to a group matters very much to us.”<sup>6</sup> He also adds that in his exposure with many poor Filipinos, strengthening the community system was also found helpful. “When [the *sakop* is] harnessed for the promotion of the common good, it could be a very powerful instrument for the fight against poverty.”<sup>7</sup> He agrees that in the fight against poverty, the dictum ‘united, we stand; divided, we fall,’ is especially applicable. “What is lacking in the individual is supplemented by common and organized actions. Stories of success using *bayanihan*<sup>8</sup> as a principle of poverty alleviation abound.”<sup>9</sup>

The communal tendency is illustrated by the strong bonds exhibited by Filipino extended families. For example, for most Filipinos, a family is constituted not only by parents and children, but also by the grandparents, the cousins, the uncles and aunts and even other distant relatives. This is best testified by the presence of

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<sup>3</sup> A *sakop* literally means a “subject.” [Leo English, *Tagalog-English Dictionary*, 22<sup>nd</sup> printing (Manila: National Bookstore, 2007), 1132]. The *sakop system* implies either the patron-subject system or the group-bound (community) system of the Filipinos.

<sup>4</sup> For the concrete courses of action in promoting the national consciousness, one may read Leonardo Mercado’s recommendations in “Filipino Philosophy and Corruption in the Government,” *Ad Veritatem*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2003), 354-356.

<sup>5</sup> Armando de Jesus, “Cultural Underpinnings of Poverty,” *Ad Veritatem*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2002), 60.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*. (Bracketed note is an addition.)

<sup>8</sup> *Bayanihan* means “mutual aid or cooperative endeavor; cooperation; community development” (Leo English, *Tagalog-English Dictionary*, 183).

<sup>9</sup> Armando de Jesus, “Cultural Underpinings of Poverty,” 60.

many family compounds that cater more than just one household. The compounds concretely illustrate the extension of families in the Philipines.

It has even been noted that Filipinos have mechanisms whereby they enlarge their own *familial ties*. Most Filipinos do this through sacramental celebrations especially weddings and baptisms. Thus, one has a godchild/foster child through marriage (*inaanak sa kasal*), a godchild in confirmation (*inaanak sa kumpil*), and a godchild in baptism (*inaanak sa binyag*).<sup>10</sup> In effect, the godchild becomes the foster sibling (*kinakapatid*) of the legitimate children. An author even asserts that this "compadrazco"<sup>11</sup> system makes the parties quasi-relatives."<sup>12</sup> This then results to more intimate communication and closer bonds between them.

However, the *sakop* system can be characterized by ambivalence. It can be exploited by people who merely wish to strengthen their political influences in the community. It is, for example, common that a mayor and other government officials in the Philipines are invited as sponsors for several wedding occasions and baptisms. The *sakop* in this case is utilized to acquire power for the family or the individual. Filipinos would even claim that godchildren of mayors, or other well-known people in the community, enjoy a certain reputation and power by virtue of their association with the latter.

Most Filipinos are aware of these implications of an exploited *sakop* system. One president of the country once claimed that his term would grant no special preferences to his friends, family members and relatives. He intended to say that friendship, family and blood relations could never be taken as reasons for bending the law and to disregard the principles of justice and fairness. The nobility of the statement rests supposedly on the ideal that the *sakop* should never compromise the good of the nation. However,

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Leonardo Mercado, "Filipino Philosophy and Corruption in the Government," *Ad Veritatem*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2003), 347.

<sup>11</sup> This is the bond produced between the parties involved in the above-mentioned sacramental celebrations.

<sup>12</sup> L. Mercado, "Filipino Philosophy and Corruption in the Government," 347.

we also hear, on the contrary, news of abuses against the *sakop* system. For example, some jeepney<sup>13</sup> drivers are even using the system to save themselves from the hassles of serving punishments for violated traffic regulations. Some of them are even buying “calling cards” of abusive policemen, and those cards would serve as their proof of membership in the policemen’s *sakop* system. Proving such ties is “supposed” to immune the traffic violator from commensurate punishments.<sup>14</sup>

To a bigger scale, the exploitation of the *sakop* system can become the origin of some corrupt practices of government officials. The report of the *Philippine Center of Investigative Journalism*, as cited by the BBC News,<sup>15</sup> reveals that of the total number of government employees in the year 2000, about 2% of state employees – about 6000 individuals – were presidential appointees. They included posts in education and social security as well as senior armed force officers and employees of two state banks. The report suggests that he used his power of appointment to advance his business interests.<sup>16</sup> This report is a clear indication of an exploited *sakop* system. In fact, in addition, a House Speaker of the Philippine Republic in the 1950’s has been accused of nepotism, but innocently remarked: “what is wrong with helping my relatives.”<sup>17</sup>

Noting this particular ambivalence of our *sakop* system, one is challenged to look beyond it as we endeavor to make our communities better. This is where the exploration for a communion of *Being* may be found useful.

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<sup>13</sup> A *jeepney* is a type of public utility vehicle in the Philippines.

<sup>14</sup> This claim is a product of a personal experience. The readers are informed that the author has not corroborated this claim from others apart from what was personally experienced.

<sup>15</sup> Nugent, Nicholas, “High Cost of Corruption in the Philippines” (December 06, 2000). Accessed from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/1057716.stm> on November 20, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> L. Mercado, “Filipino Philosophy and Corruption in the Government,” 350.

## 2. Exploration for a Communion of Being through the Filipino Concept of Loob<sup>18</sup>

The sociality of the nature of the human person is evident in the admission of the Filipino *sakop* system. The *sakop* system has somehow allowed the Filipinos to realize their being-for-others. It can, however, be reinforced by our awareness of the reality of the *loob* of the person, which refers to the person's inner core, like the will, the attitudes or the dispositions.<sup>19</sup> De Mesa defines the *loob* as the core of one's personhood where the true worth of the person rests.<sup>20</sup> Ileto further claims that the *loob* speaks of the true worth of the person. It is the source of the person's rights and dignity.<sup>21</sup> In other words, we can speak of this *loob* of the person as the person's *Being*.

Furthermore, this *loob* of the person's *Being* is necessarily open to others. Alejo even claims that the Filipino *loob* is not just the core of the person as he is in himself, but rather as he also stands as a fellow to others. The term *loob* is chosen by the Filipino language to illustrate how a Filipino relates with the other,<sup>22</sup> and it is even defined by one's relationship with others.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the *Being* (*loob*) of different persons may exhibit similarities. Miranda

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<sup>18</sup> *Loob* is literally translated as "inside" or the "interior." (Leo English, *Tagalog-English Dictionary*, 844).

<sup>19</sup> Leo English, *Tagalog-English Dictionary*, 841.

<sup>20</sup> Jose de Mesa, *In Solidarity with Culture* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 1991), 45. See also, Jose de Mesa and Lode Wostyn, *Doing Christology* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1989), 122; cf. Albert Alejo, *Tao Po! Tuloy! Isang Landas ng Pag-unawa sa Loob ng Tao* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 1990), 30.

<sup>21</sup> "Ang loob ay ang tao sa kanyang tunay na halaga, sa ubod ng kanyang sarili... Ang loob din ang siyang bukal ng mga karapatan at dangal ng indibidwal." [The *loob* is the person's worth, his/her very self... it is also his source of rights and dignity]. (cf. Alejo, *Tao Po! Tuloy!*, 27-28).

<sup>22</sup> "Ang loob ng tao ay hindi lamang buod ng pagkatao sa kanyang sarili kundi siyang sarili ng tao bilang kapwa. Ang loob ang pinili ng ating wika bilang paglalarawan sa ating pakikitungo sa iba." (Alejo, *Tao Po! Tuloy!*, 30; de Mesa, *In Solidarity with Culture*, 45).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jose de Mesa, *In Solidarity with Culture*, 45.

says that the *Being* of another person is in a sense the same as my *Being*. "It is the same in essential nature (structurally, in having the same essential elements) and basic processes. This would mean that the processes within each element and level are basically the same in any *loob*."<sup>24</sup>

The realization of the *sameness of our Being* allows a Filipino to treat the other, not just in the context of *alterity* but also in terms of sameness or similarity. The other is a *kapwa*, which can be translated as the "fellow human being or fellow man."<sup>25</sup> The "*kapwa* is a concept that embraces both myself as well as the other."<sup>26</sup> The root, however, of this sameness between me and my fellow human person is the similarity of our *loob* (*Being*). Hence, one's *Being* (*loob*) lies at the base of one's authentic relationship with another.

However, the similarity of *Being* may also become ambivalent and hence may need purification. One danger, which this admission of my sameness with other persons brings, is the onslaught of inferiority complex,<sup>27</sup> which flows from the resignation that since our *Being* (*loob*) are similar, we then both are weak, fragile and limited. Some people use the thought of the weakness of human nature, which is present in all, in condoning several shortcomings in the community. Our inferiority complex leads us to think that we have no right to judge over the deficiencies of others because we too have our limitations. This is evident in the Filipino dictum, "*Wala akong karapatang manghugsa dahil maging ako man ay makasalanang din*" (I have no right to judge others because I am also a sinner).

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<sup>24</sup> Dionisio Miranda, *Loob: The Filipino Within* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1989), 57.

<sup>25</sup> Leo English, *Tagalog-English Dictionary*, 303.

<sup>26</sup> Miranda, *Loob: The Filipino Within*, 50. It can also be observed that the term *kapwa* among Filipinos displays an observable contrast from Western culture. The West puts greater emphasis on the *alterity* of the other as can be seen in their "mind your own business" mentality. But the Filipino *kapwa* is different. My fellow human being is not just an *other* to me, but s/he is rather part of who I am. S/he is like me though we are not totally identical.

<sup>27</sup> cf. Enrico Gonzales, "A Filipino Interpretation of Matthew's Beatitudes," *Colloquia Manilana*, vol. 5 (1997), 15.

Inferiority complex does harm to communal relations because it gives the wrong basis for our social dealings. It allows us to relate with others with much indifference even towards their offenses. There is then a need for caution. We should not degrade our *Being* as a mere weak *Being*. Our inferiority complex makes us lame and paralyzed. There is a need to overcome it as we seek to improve our being-with-others.

*a. Empathy as Involvement in the other's Being*

One way of improving our social relations and thereby overcoming the temptation of inferiority complex is to practice empathy or *one's involvement in the other's Being*.<sup>28</sup> Alejo invites us to reflect when he asks the question: why is it that while I am reading the news about the misery, hunger and poverty of others, I am shaken and disturbed? What could account for such experience inside me? He concludes that there has to be a sort of relationship between me and the people I read in the news. Otherwise, I would not feel the pain that they have experienced. But such relationship is through my *Being* (*loob*) because I did not have any external contact with them prior to this very experience.<sup>29</sup> Hence, the similarity of the structures of my *Being* and the *Being* of my fellows allows me to encounter the same feelings that they go through in their actual experiences. This is what we can loosely call as *empathy*. Empathy does not really imply that my *Being* becomes totally identical with that of the other. But the basic character of an empathizing person is the person's *involvement*, both internally and externally, to the particular and concrete situations of the other person.

Empathy may become an antidote to inferiority complex. With empathy, we understand and forgive the misgivings of others not because we feel inferior in correcting them but because we have accessed their *Being*. It does not simply confront us with the reality of our sinfulness and imperfections which may numb

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<sup>28</sup> Alejo uses the Filipino word *pakikisangkot*, which can be translated as "involvement in something." (Leo English, *Tagalog-English Dictionary*, 1190).

<sup>29</sup> Alejo, *Tao Po! Tuloy!*, 82.

us against the excesses of others. On the contrary, our empathy offers us a deeper encounter with the person, neither condoning his/her acts nor becoming indifferent towards them.

Our empathy may also correct another particular illness in our social relationship, that is, *indifference*, which blocks our view from seeing the suffering of others. As Alejo suggested, our connection with others is oftentimes established internally. To fail to connect to other people's *Being*, especially when they are confronted by problems and difficulties, is to ignore the connection of our own *Being* (*loob*) to theirs. This is tantamount to debasing ourselves, and this is an act of treachery against our dignity as human persons. Alejo even claims that for a Filipino, to become indifferent to the sufferings of others is considered as an act contrary to, thereby belittles, his being a person.<sup>30</sup>

#### ***b. The attempt for a communion of Bein***

One's social relationship however does not stop simply with one's access or involvement with the *Being* of the other. It also requires that we allow our fellows to enter our *Being*. A sincere interpersonal relationship allows both agents to permeate each other's *Being*. This is expressed by the Filipino phrase *pagtatalaban*<sup>31</sup> *ng kalooban*, which can be roughly translated as "*communion of being*." One has to consciously open his *Being* (*loob*) to others. This is a characteristic of a person who cares and is open to others. A person who opens himself/herself to others becomes involved with the life-situation of the other, not just because one has accessed the *Being* of the other, but also because one allowed the other to penetrate his/her *Being*. We can never penetrate the *Being* of the other unless we first allow him/her to enter our

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<sup>30</sup> "Para sa isang Pilipino, ang maging manhid sa pagdurusa ng kanyang kapwa ay nakapagpapababa ng kanyang pagkatao" (Alejo, *Tao Po! Tuloy!*, 26).

<sup>31</sup> *Talaban* is a verb which means "to pierce, to affect sharply with some feeling" or "to have or take an effect on, to be affected, to respond." (Leo English, *Tagalog-English Dictionary*, 1330). The phrase *pagtatalaban ng kalooban* implies a sense of mutuality and reciprocity, and hence can be understood as the mutual piercing of one's *Being*, or what we simply call here as the "*communion of Being*."



*Being*. Without this reciprocal openness and accession to each one's *Being*, the relationship would remain external and mere superficial.

This communion of *Being* is an important ingredient especially in Filipino social relations. There is a need to arrive at a certain level of mutual trust and understanding. We call this in the Filipino language as "*makiramdam*", which means "to feel one with, to identify with, or to join with."<sup>32</sup> There is a need for one to find ease in expressing/disclosing oneself to the *other*, who is also at the same time a fellow human person. Without this spontaneity<sup>33</sup> in dealing with his/her fellow, one's *reaching out for the other* may have not fully matured yet.

One particular illustration of *communion of Being* is the phenomenon of forgiveness. A person forgives not out of inferiority complex (which claims that I should forgive the person because I am no better than him/her) but because of the *communion of Being* among the parties involved. Such communion of *Being* allows one to understand and even *appreciate* the actions of the other. With such enlightened perception about the *Being* of the other person, forgiving becomes easier.

This is perhaps the reason why among those people whose relationship has already reached a certain level of maturity through one's communion with the other's *Being*, there are things that no longer need to be said. Simple bodily or even facial gestures become effective, communicative tools for people who have communed with each other's *Being*. When communion of *Being* happens, understanding is facilitated, and forgiveness becomes the best expression of such communion. On the contrary, without the communion of *Being*, one can hardly comprehend the actions of others and, consequently, forgiving becomes difficult.

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<sup>32</sup> Leo English, *Tagalog-English Dictionary*, 407.

<sup>33</sup> The Dominican Timothy Radcliffe even equates freedom with *spontaneity*. One is truly free when his/her actions are spontaneous. This implies that one's social exchanges with others are free when the parties involved have already become spontaneous to each other. Cf. Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Burns and Oates, 2005), 29-48.

Furthermore, one's tendency toward the other does not end with mere mutuality of trust and understanding. A genuine communion of *Being* has to flow to a concrete expression of love or a gesture of love and graciousness towards others. A real community of *Being* happens among persons whose relationship becomes liberating.<sup>34</sup> When we commune with others' *Being*, we could no longer ignore their emotions and miserable situations. But rather, we become one with them in their experiences of pain, of misery, and of failures. We do not turn our gaze away from those who are in need, rather we bring our entire being into their situation and allow ourselves to also be hurt and be touched by their lives.

This is where our relationship reaches its maturity: when we cease to be neglectful and indifferent, and becomes self-sacrificing and liberating for others. Without our initiative to lift the conditions of other people or the community in general, our communion of *Being* is still hardly fulfilled.

There is a need to bring our communion with the other's *Being* into "*action*." Such communion can hardly be proven unless it is translated into action. A lover, for example, confirms his love for the beloved when such love is tested and validated by experience and time. Our community of *Being* requires that our relationship ultimately ends up with our expression of love for our fellows. Liberation is the goal of our being-with-others. However, such liberation is not a complacent disregard of the abuses of others. In fact, when one refuses to correct abuses, he does not truly free the person. A person who truly communes with the *Being* of his fellows is one who sees to it that things are *aright*. Becoming indifferent to abuses is not a true sign of love to the sinner but rather of indifference and neglect for the latter's sinfulness. We cease to be truly concerned with the sinner if we fail to correct his/her faults, and when we lack concern, we ultimately frustrate our communion with the *Being* of the other.

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<sup>34</sup> Relationships also imply self-oblation or "*pagbibigay-loob*" in the Filipino language. (Gonzales, "A Filipino Interpretation of Matthew's Beatitude," 19).

### 3. The Call for Transcendence Towards the “other”

One characteristic of our contemporary society is the phenomenon of extreme *individualism*. “Freedom” is equated with “absolute autonomy.” We are, however, aware of the monstrous consequences that extreme individualism can give. When we begin to disregard the other, we also become tyrannical against the other’s situation. The individual is not isolated. Every individual has to confront the reality that there are other individuals whom he/she needs to contend with as he/she continues to live in a society.

Realizing the existence of others, we are always challenged to deal with one another: we need to address especially our differences. One’s relationship with others is a phenomenon from which no one can totally escape. Hence, in our day to day existence, we can not but ask some questions like: have we endeavored to be involved with others’ life situations? Do we attempt for a mutuality or communion of *Being*, especially in times when misunderstanding threatens us? Have we been truly open-hearted in allowing others’ situation to affect us? Have we become liberating and self-sacrificing for others?

In a world where the self and all personal rights are held as the supreme value of every individual, the desire for a community of *Being* could help become a corrective against our extremely individualistic culture. The journey towards the *other* is one of the most puzzling and arduous journeys that we need to trek in our human community. The attempt for such communion may offer us a feasible, though challenging, passageway. □