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The Philippines

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Although the Philippines is a plural nation with more than 180 indigenous ethnic groups, about 90 percent of its 90 million people share in a so-called Christianized lowland culture. Within this milieu, social networks are often understood as personal alliance systems founded in real kinship, ritual kinship, friendship, and patron-client ties. This article shows that although this presently dominant perspective about social ties is rooted in the Philippines' pre-colonial era, it is also significantly influenced by the country's colonial past the under Spanish Empire (from 1521 to 1898) and the United States of America (from 1898 to 1946).

Immediate Kinship

At the center of most Filipinos' social networks is the nuclear family. For them, these relations form a constitutive part of their identity and social status. Indeed, honor (*dangal*) and shame (*hiya*) are intertwined with the fortunes of their immediate kin. Because of this, parents are expected to provide as much economic, social, and moral support to their children. This can even extend way into children's adult years, if need be. In return, children are reciprocally bound to their parents through a debt of gratitude (*utang na loob*) that can never be repaid. Those who disregard these ties are called shameless (*walang hiya*). In a society that values sensitivity to other people's feelings, this label can be very socially damning.

Although the importance of the immediate kin seems deeply entrenched in Philippine society, it is a concept that differs from the pre-colonial conception of family. At the time, polygamy was viewed with openness and kinship was identified through sibling ties rather than progeny. During the Spanish colonial period however, the Roman Catholic Church institutionalized and idealized monogamous marriage and the nuclear family as part of the Spaniards' efforts to control the indigenous lifestyle. This was so thoroughly naturalized that in the post-colonial era, the Filipinos themselves enshrined the sanctity of the nuclear family in their Constitution.

Extended Kinship, Ritual Kinship, and Friendship

Beyond the nuclear family, Filipinos also carefully cultivate ties with extended family networks, which are traced bilaterally. They also further widen their personal alliances, most especially with those who have power and influence in society, through the ritual kinship of God-parenthood (*compadrazgo*) in the Roman Catholic rites of baptism, confirmation, and marriage. Together with this, longstanding friendships also serve as equally compelling ties of reciprocal obligation.

To be sure, the *utang na loob* that Filipinos feel towards their relations tends to decrease the farther this is from the nuclear family. Because smooth interpersonal relationships (*pakikisama*) are paramount in kinship and friendship ties though, Filipinos are still obliged to provide the children of their kin and friends a social safety net, in case anything untoward happens to the parents, or even to present them with means to achieve upward social mobility. This parallels the pre-colonial practice of the blood-compact (*sandugu*), which was used to seal alliances among the *datu*s of different villages (*barangays*) in view of securing stability in a society that saw much infighting.

Patron-Client Ties

Personalistic social networks in the Philippines also operate at the institutional level. Indeed, despite the American legacy of Western-style democratic and capitalist institutions, many political and economic relationships in the country are still influenced by the patron-client system. This is characterized as a relationship wherein the social elite perpetuate their status generation after generation through ties of *utang na loob* with supporters who are politically and economically disadvantaged. While the former promise social and economic favors—from something as small as paying for the baptismal ceremony of a follower's child to something as significant placing an ally into a desired political post—the latter offer enduring loyalty and service.

Certainly, similar kinds of ties were already present in pre-colonial times, as was the case with the reciprocal relationship between the *datu* and his followers. This was also evident during the Spanish period, especially in the practice of share cropping between those with mixed Chinese and indigenous parentage (*mestizo*) who owned the lands and the indigenous (*indio*) farmers who tilled it. In both cases however, the economic inequality of the relationships was balanced out by their cultural equality, since all the parties involved saw one another as valuable to their endeavors. Because the American colonial administration imposed wage labor though—an economic relationship that seemed to exclude cultural ties—the disparity between the elite and the non-elite became much pronounced. This eventually became the basis of the present patron-client system.

Conclusion

For the Filipinos of today, personalistic social networks—loaded as they are politically, economically, and even morally—are a crucial consideration in their daily endeavors, from status maintenance to survival. These ties clearly bear the imprint of both the continuities of pre-colonial practices and the changes brought about by colonial attempts to impose new forms of relationships in the country. At the same time though, these also show how Filipinos have sought to work through the enabling and disabling features of their diverse positions in modern Philippine society.

See also: Kinship Networks, Spain, United States of America

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