Everyday Life in the Philippines: Close Family Ties and the Individual

Niels Mulder

In the Philippines, belonging to and security in the family appear to be the cardinal things in life, worth to strive after. The family is the wellspring of a meaningful existence, of obligation and fulfillment. Sanctified by religious representations and ritual, the household centred (nuclear) family is inviolable and relatively autonomous; as part of local kin groups, related families are expected to mutually extend solidarity and support.

However valuable all this is, the family as the dominant social institution is also the cause of apprehension and a focus of social criticism,

When we say that Filipinos value close family ties, what we may be saying actually is that we value closed family ties. For many of us are just that - closed to concerns that do not directly involve our own parents, children, brothers, sisters, grandparents, grandchildren, or close kin. We will move mountains to provide our family with only the best. But how many of us are moved by, much less respond to, the plight of our fellow Filipinos? (*Signal* 1985).

Be it as it may, the family constitutes and individual's moral world and the experience of it may have important psychological consequences and affect his perception of self. Experiencing and seeing himself relationally, interpersonal relationships and feeling accepted become very important. The consequent avoidance of open conflict may be expressed in the apparent acceptance of the authority of older family members, submission to parents, and even acting against one's own wishes and ideas. Being pressured into a role, the individual may feel oppressed, and close ties may breed tensions, resentment, anger, and the slow resolution of hidden conflict. Whereas hurting others should be forgiven in the setting of the family, hurt is not easily forgotten and bad feelings may simmer on.

Relationships with familial near others are primarily relationships of inevitable (inter)dependence, in which people have to

adapt and adjust themselves to each other to the solidarity of the family itself coming first. In contrast to relationships with religious representations, with grandparents for instance, intrafamily relationships are not necessarily intimate, such as illustrated in *The Hazards of Distance*. In this novelette, Linda Ty-Casper relates about the distances that separate family members, even as they try to withdraw from each other. Even at closest distance they may feel terribly isolated, or just isolate themselves. Absence of private space may stunt their development and enhance dependence on family solidarity across the oceans (1981: back cover).

Mrs. Ty composes fiction, yet the type of family dynamics she describes appears to tally with the ideas of psychiatry or psychology-oriented observers who locate the source of mental disturbances or psychological problems in the practice and experience of family life. These ideas also correspond with, for instance, Hollnsteiner's critical description of the culture of the family among lowland Filipinos (Cordero-Fernando 1981: 37-59).

Ramirez appears even to be more negative in her phenomenology of family life. As she sees it, many a child experiences it as a deep crisis when the child discovers that he is not regarded as a personality, as an end in itself, but an instrument for the family's honour and support (1984: 30). "Moreover, he feels his freedom is stifled by parents who openly or subtly persuade him to follow the parents' choice of profession, of a future partner in life, or of a vocation. This seeming authoritarianism stems from the conviction of parents that as such they know what is best for the child. Understandably, this way of rearing children makes for a communication gap between parents and children, promoting secrecy in the family, while intensifying feelings of isolation. Such feelings of isolation are resolved at times by taking recourse to intimacy in friendship groups, in overactivity in organization, or to an escapist attitude, as projected in rampant elopements."

"It is only when children accept this parental attitude that, as in the case of families still steeped in traditionalism, authoritarianism will be supportive. Otherwise, this authoritarianism may just become a constant irritant, thus nullifying the family as a haven of peace and security" (30-1).

According to Ramirez, the famous close family ties are primarily rooted in the mutual support that is indispensable in the Filipino "culture of insecurity" (39-50). Such support is largely economic and "achieves emotional flavor in family gatherings and

reunions or on special occasions like Christmas, birthdays, and wedding and death anniversaries, where religious rituals play a significant function" (34).

"Close family ties, however, are based primarily on economic interdependence or self-defense from the threatening pressures of the larger society. Moreover, the infidelity of the Filipino male, the communication gap between husband and wife, and between parents and children, demonstrate that close family ties are a myth in many ways" (34).

I think that Ramirez exaggerate somewhat in her emphases on the importance of independent personality formation and the economic function of the family. It may be that these are gaining more importance at present in modernizing, especially urban, environments. She is certainly right, though, in noting the relation between "close ties" and "interdependence" and the function of the family as a haven in the unruly world of wider society. After all, one's family is the positive realm in life, it is one's moral anchoring, and thus it is worth sacrificing for, even if that entails "communication gaps", self-denial and self-effacement.

In spite of the belief in empathy with near others, communication gaps appear to be real enough. Among the people who matter most for each other, love is expressed in a direct way, through touching, providing, serving, forgiving, sacrificing, joking, teasing, and the giving of small presents.[1] Love is not necessarily expressed in the meeting of hearts and minds, in the attempt to explain one's self to the other, which perhaps cannot be expected because to do so is confrontational and becoming self-aware, confronting both one's own self and the self of the other. In the normal course of action confrontation is avoided, "At home we cannot talk about those things, that would be disturbing"; "At home we do everything to keep it peaceful. My father (a prominent member of the *Iglesia ni Cristo*) knows that I do not care about his church, but we do as if I am a member"; "When my father broaches the subject of land reform, then please answer in such-and-such a way"; "I got so

---

[1]Small presents serve of course to say "See, I think/thought of you". Highly institutionalized is the *pasalubong*, the (mandatory) gift brought by a traveller returning from a trip. For many people three days' trips to Hong Kong seem to mean three days of shopping to buy presents for all the people they can think of. Some people avoid or postpone returning home because the burden of buying gifts for everybody is either too bothersome or too expensive.

mad at my brother that I just had to leave the house", "Sometimes I feel so angered, but there is no way of showing it at home. Yes, we forgive, but we never forget".[2]

When invited to share lunch with the family, Attorney Lavasco introduced me to his wife and three adult children, all of them professionals. During the thirty minute event, nobody spoke but the two of us, my partner making it a point to explain family closeness, "it is even in the law. An unmarried daughter is not permitted to leave the home without parental consent before the age of 23. Yes, we are happy to be together, often to the extent that parents will keep their adult children financially dependent just to keep them at home". Yet Attorney Lavasco appeared to have a problem that he did not quite understand when he told about his eldest son, an engineer, who had left the home four years ago to work in the Middle East. Although he was entitled to regular leave he had not shown his face again since well over two years.

Crossing oceans, running away, or just shutting up while keeping opinion and emotions to oneself in order to maintain the smooth surface that all is well, leads to dissembling and the hiding of motives. It leads to Ramirez's "communication gaps" caused by authoritarianism and avoidance, and the suffocating closeness that demands relaxation with familiar others within the family or outside, with a sister or a brother to whom one feels particularly close, or with a neighbour, or most often with one's compadres or friends. Normally friends, whether male or female, cluster in separate groups, *barkada,* in which one shares liquor, adventure, 'intimacy'; it is the place to let off steam. Relationships in the *barkada* are more relaxed, more tolerant, and guided by the principle of *pakikisama,* of actively getting and going along with each other as members of a group. The *barkada* is a necesarry complement to home and family.

The other way to seek relaxation is prayer. "talking with God", or with an ancestor, a saint, the Holy Mother. When others are out of reach they provide courage and consolation. They are the eminently trusted relatives in whom one can confide; because of their sacrifices they will understand the problems of their devotees and suppliants. In such emotional encounters the individual

---

[2]The maintenance of smooth interpersonal relationships (SIR) and all that it entails (Frank Lynch *et al., Four Readings on Philippine values.* Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture 1964) may cause feelings of oppression that are sometimes acted out in *tampo* (sullen) behaviour and withdrawal, or that explode in a fit of *huramentado* (amok).

can unburden himself and "recharge his battery" to face the contingencies of life.

Religious relationships are the best of familial relationships. The love of religious personages is on account of their suffering and sacrifices that have become exemplary for self-denial as a way to greatness and fulfillment in which an individual places his family before the self. According to Ruben, who graduated from college five years ago,

"Since I have finished my degree, I work. The money is needed to send my two sisters through college. That is why I am still unmarried. Yet it makes me feel good as a son and brother. My elder brother is already married and lives with his wife and child and with our parents - all of us live together; we like the closeness - yet he still depends financially on their resources."

Such self-denial for a noble purpose demonstrates one's sincerity, one's friendship, one's worth. It is a way to moral fulfillment, often expressed in migration to the States, from where to send money, or in temporary work in the Middle East to support one's family. In the morally vague sphere surrounding the home it also justifies all sorts of dubious practices of work as long as they benefit one's family and prove one's devotion to its well-being.

At the heart of the way towards moral fulfillment stands the recognition of obligation to the family as a collectivity. Such obligation, though, tends to become personalized, dyadic, that is, between pairs of concretely known individuals. At the centre stand one's obligations to mother and father; these obligations exemplify the morality of the relationships with emotionally important others and spill over into a general sense of obligation toward all those who belong to one's relevant circle of relatives and friends or to whomever else one *feels* to be indebted.

The relevantly known others define one's horizon of action and it is by establishing concrete relationships with which one gets a grip on the world. In other words, one needs to know somebody to get things done, to feel obliged, to reciprocate, to act; it is by expanding one's familiar relationships that one enlarges one's world, whether as a patron or a client, a friend or a recommendee. As soon as one leaves this personalized sphere for the sphere of anonymity, one is easily lost and devoid of a moral basis of action beyond one's personal obligations.

The unknown world is highly unsatisfactory. Consequently, when people meet who are unknown to each other, they almost

immediately attempt to become somehow connected in the sense of investigating the possibility of a shared background. Place of origin, school, family name, all may provide clues to discover whether one is the second cousin of the other's brother-in-law, in that way establishing familiarity and regularity. It is projecting the familiar relationships of everyday life, with one's own family at the centre, into the wider world; it is these relationships that provide the model for acting there.

Roles

It has often been noted that the highly personalized world of action is an impediment to the development of a wider, institutional sphere based on abstractions such as the rule of law and the common good,[3] We have also noted that the idealized picture of the familiar interpersonal world often is at odds with the experience and practice of everyday life. It is of interest to note that most material that came my way and that is critical of family life, is female-authored.[4] What could be the possible reason?

It may be assumed that it has much to do with the central position of the mother in the Philippine household and all the burdens that position entails. That position means also a kind of women symbolizing the wholeness of the home[5] at the same time that mother as a superego representative is the primary embodiment of conscience. Moreover, in extending and symbolizing warmth and goodness, the female as a wife and mother should be loving, that is, forgiving, should be soft on those who morally depend on her (Lapuz 1972: 179-80). Even if we suppose that she is moderately capable of living up to all this, it may be expected that the woman's role may often lead to compulsive caring for the family as a whole and its individual members (*tagasalo* syndrome, Arellano-Carandang 1987: 65-7) and often stimulates a pronounced

---

[3]See, for instance, *Building a People, Building a Nation (op cit.):* 4-5.

[4]For instance, M.L. Arellano-Carandang, Mary Holln-steiner, Lourdes V. Lapuz, Mina Ramirez, Linda Ty-Casper, who have all been referred to... In their novels, Mrs. Espina-Moore (for instance, *The Lion in the House*) and Lualhati Bautista (for instance, *Dekada 70*) score similar points.

[5]In a touching way this point is made by Bienvenido N. Santos in his story, "Scent of Apples", when a long-time Pinoy emigrant inquires, "Are our Filipino women the same like they were 20 years ago?" The answer, 'they are the same as they were 20 years ago, God-fearing, faithful, modest, and *nice,* serving the reassurance that the world of his background is still whole.'" In Leonard Casper, *Modern Phykilippine Short Stories.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1962: 91-2.

dependency in men (Lapuz 1977: 61), in which case husbands also tend to become somewhat like sons to their wives.

Of course, the female and male spheres in life are complementary, but what often strikes is their separation. The overprotection extended to daughters easily leads to a lack of self-assurance. Consequently she will find security in sticking to the culturally prescribed roles which become obstacles to the development of herself (Arellano-Carandang 1987: 47-67). These roles do allow her to impose herself upon her husband and to be very possessive about him and her children, in that way expressing her emotional dependency on others and promoting the closeness of the family more than the 'closeness' of its ties; such ties are not 'close' but sticky.

Whereas we could already note that psychological dependency is mutual people also need to react against the closeness, pressures, and oppression of the family. It is the men who have the better possibility for such reactions. Culture defines their realm as the area outside the home where they are supposed to earn the money to provide for their families. Consequently they have the privilege of spending a lot of time with others, of leaving the anxieties of home and childcare to their wives, of gallivanting, drinking with *barkada* mates, and of playing around with other women.

The relative freedom of men to move about in the morally vague area outside is expressed in the so-called "double standard" that allows men to play around with other women but that does not allow women to play around with other men. As pure wives these women are not supposed to be lovers but to function as moral mothers (Hollnsteiner 1981: 43, 57; Lapuz 1977: 24, 102). Erotic adventure is therefore squarely located in the male area outside and no moral stigma attaches to it.

Pressure to live up to male and female roles is considerable at the same time that role fulfillment functions as a substitute for self-confidence. Males must be macho and women must be caring; males to the cockfight, women to church; males play around and women are moral mothers; males have an excess of 'face' and are therefore vulnerable; women give in and do the suffering, males hide their insecurity in boastful behaviour and women paste it over with cosmetics; males find fulfillment in authoritarianism and women in the show of emotion; often males are compulsive and insecure regarding women and women are supposed to smooth this over by serving and subservient behaviour regarding males.

The separation of the male and the female domains seems to be a sign that the world is in order. At most colleges the co-eds still

come in uniform whereas the men are more or less free to dress as they like. When the Ministry of Education proposed to introduce Home Economics for girls *and* boys, the newspaper reported,

> Conservative Filipino educators find technical training for girls as repulsive as rearing boys for household work. Home Economics, they fear, destroys the distinction between a man's work and women's responsibility. Critics have also warned against the "danger" that young boys may turn "effeminate" because of Home Economics.[6]

Complementarity and separation of domains keep the myths about maleness and femaleness alive and make if difficult for both men and women to be emancipated from their prescribed roles.[7] Often people are very emotional about these myths, because emancipation from it would give profile to a so far non-prominent self that seeks its security in dependent subjectivity in which emotional experience is the measure of things and the right reason for action. In this construction both males and females need their domains as valid areas of self-expression in the same way that parents need their children's diplomas and graduation pictures, and as 'civic clubs' need the little monuments they build as their mark in this world.

Whereas things are changing, the power of the hold of the family over its members is still considerable and probably reinforced by the struggle for survival in an impoverished environment. The strength of that hold appears to have powerful psychological dimensions affecting identity, assurance, and fulfillment. The family embodies morality, the right way of life. To that right way belong the separation of male and female domains and forceful role ascription.

---

[6]My newspaper clipping is probably from *The Philippine Inquirer* (sometime in 1988).

[7]These myths, and the necessity for demystification are strong themes in "The Social Construction of the Filipino Woman" (Delia D. Aguilar, *The Feminist Challenge*. Metro Manila: Asian Social Institute 1988: 28-48). She observes that whereas the second rate status of women in the public domain is slowly becoming clear, "elsewhere - in the home to be exact, where the ideological fog permeating family relations is particularly dense - the hallowed theme of woman as mother and wife has so far eluded interrogation" (37). Consequently, "an understanding of the family's position within society remains obscured and, along with it, women's domestic subservience" (48).