

Being LGBT: Is It More Fun in the Philippines?¹

Fernando A. Austria Jr.

University of the Philippines Diliman

A review of *Anong Pangalan Mo sa Gabi? At Iba Pang mga Tanong sa LGBT* (2013), University of the Philippines Center for Women's Studies.

In his address to the United Nations Human Rights Council on March 7, 2012, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said:

Some say that sexual orientation and gender identity are sensitive issues. I understand. Like many of my generation, I did not grow up talking about these issues. But I learned to speak out because lives are at stake, and because it is our duty under the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to protect the rights of everyone, everywhere. (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013)

In my generation as well, sexual orientation and gender identity are not really talked about. Even if parents already know and accept that their sons or daughters are not heterosexuals, a coming-out discussion, much less a celebration, is seldom heard of in this country. But this does not stop people from asking LGBTs (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) questions that are often demeaning and hurtful. I am very familiar with this kind of questions. Once, at a family reunion, from the innocent mouth of a six-year-old came the question, "Tito, Tito, are you *bakla* (Uncle, Uncle, are you gay)?" The question stung. How do you reply to such an inquiry?

Anong Pangalan Mo sa Gabi? At Iba Pang mga Tanong sa LGBT, edited by Tetay Mendoza and Joel Acebuche, is a compilation of questions and answers that can be a source of witty but enlightening replies to offensive and sometimes cruel inquiries. This compilation was used in an exhibit mounted by the University of the Philippines (U.P.) Babaylan, an organization of LGBT students, for its 20th anniversary celebration (Mendoza & Acebuche, 2013). Each question and answer pair is accompanied by a black-and-white photograph of a person holding a board where the question is written.

¹ With apologies to the Department of Tourism of the Republic of the Philippines.

Ramille Andog in his *“Paunang Chika (Preface)”* sets the tenor of this book: *“minabuti naming suriin ang mga tanong na binabato sa LGBT. Sa aming pagsagot layunin naming usisain ang mga nakapaloob na mensahe at ilahad ang mga tunay na isyu na dapat sagutin* (we felt that it is appropriate to analyze the questions thrown at LGBT. In answering these questions, it is our aim to scrutinize the meanings of these questions and present the real issues that have to be answered).” Perci Cendaña in the *“Panghuling Chika (Postscript)”* points out the need to answer these questions, *“gaano man kasimple o kakumplikado, kailangan harapin ang mga tanong na ito . . . dahil marami pang dapat maunawaan ang lipunan tungkol sa mga LGBT* (no matter how simple or complicated these are, there is a need to face these questions . . . because there are so many issues and concerns that our society has to understand about being LGBT).” *“May mga kaisipang dapat basagin at mga katotohanang dapat ipabatid* (there are myths that have to be shattered and truths that have to be explained).” He adds, *“Kailangan sagutin n[an]g mahusay ang mga tanong ngayon para mas kaunting tanong na lang ang sasagutin ng susunod na henerasyon ng mga LGBT* (answering these questions now will lessen the questions that future generations of LGBT have to answer).” Sylvia Estrada Claudio, in her *“Pangbungad (Introduction),”* tells the readers that through the series of *“simpleng mga tanong at simpleng mga sagot* (simple questions and simple answers)” in the book, *“madaling maunawaan ng mambabasa ang pang-araw-araw na panlalait at diskriminasyong dinadaan ng mga LGBT sa Pilipinas* (makes it easier to understand the daily insults and discrimination that LGBTs live through in the Philippines).” She adds that these questions are *“[h]indi makatao... hindi makatao ang diskriminasyon laban sa mga LGBT* (inhuman... discrimination against LGBT is inhuman).” By implication, these questions violate a person’s human rights.

ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE FILIPINO LGBT CULTURE

In their analysis of the Yogyakarta Principles that “addresses a broad range of international human rights standards and their application to issues of sexual orientation and gender identity” (yogyakartaprinciples.org, 2007a), O’Flaherty and Fisher (2008) declare that LGBTs are subject to “persistent human rights violations because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity” (p. 208). They add that:

These human rights violations take many forms, from denials of the rights to life, freedom from torture, and security of the person, to discrimination in accessing economic, social and cultural rights such as health, housing, education and the right to work, from non-recognition of personal and family relationships to pervasive interferences with personal dignity, suppression of diverse sexual identities, attempts to impose heterosexual norms, and pressure to remain silent and invisible. (p.208)

These human rights violations are also captured in the obligations upheld by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. According to this office, “[t]he core legal obligations of States with respect to protecting the human rights of LGBT people include obligations to:

- *Protect* individuals from homophobic and transphobic violence.
- *Prevent* torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.
- *Repeal* laws criminalizing homosexuality.
- *Prohibit* discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.
- *Safeguard* freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly for all LGBT people. (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013; italics in the original).

Some of these human rights violations are reflected in this volume. For example, the question “*Binubugbog ka ba ng tatay mo* (Does your father beat you up)?” indicates a violation of the right against torture. “*Sinong kumpanya ang tatanggap sa inyo* (What company will hire you)?” suggests discrimination against the right to work.

This book goes beyond the legalese and the obligations of States to protect the rights of LGBTs. Many of the issues in this book are culture-bound challenges. As Garcia (2013) points out, “[s]exual orientation, gender, and identity itself are not simple empirical categories, but rather the effects of cultural and historical processes of naming, identification, and regulation” (p. 57).

In the article “A revealing map of the countries that are most and least tolerant of homosexuality,” Fisher (2013) writes that “religiosity makes people less tolerant of homosexuality” but identifies the Philippines as an exemption because the Pew Research Center’s survey results show that Filipinos are more accepting of homosexuals. He comments that the Philippines is an interesting statistical outlier given that it is a “devoutly Catholic nation that includes a very religious Muslim minority.” Fisher’s analysis, which was based on academic literature, points to the possibility “that the traditional acceptance of bakla translates into broader acceptance of homosexuality.” The statistics and the analysis demonstrate how “cultural and historical processes” (Garcia, 2013, p. 57) affect LGBT issues. As such, the “universality” of LGBT issues cannot be imposed on the appreciation of the problems that are experienced by LGBTs in the country. For instance, the following questions

depict the complex and culturally honed relationship between faith and sexuality among Filipino LGBTs: “*Hindi ka ba natatakot pumunta sa impyerno* (Are you not afraid to go to hell?)” and “*Nagsisimba ka ba* (Do you go to church)?” The questions are telling of how faith is viewed in the country: In the first question, adherence to faith is based on the fear of eternal damnation; in the second question, faith is best practiced by attending mass. These beliefs are a result of years, nay centuries, of religious indoctrination.

An overarching theme exhibited in the questions is the problem of stereotyping that is also a product of our culture and history. These questions betray the pre-conceived, two-dimensional generalization of the identities of the “othered.” The book presents three kinds of stereotypes: sexual orientation, gender identity, and the everyday life of LGBTs. As defined in the Yogyakarta Principles, *sexual orientation* refers to “each person’s capacity for profound emotional, affectional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender” and *gender identity* is “each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms” (yogyakartaprinciples.org, 2007b, p. 8). *Everyday life* is simply how we live our lives daily – the routines, necessities, and tasks of existence.

“*Sa straight ka lang ba pumapatol* (Do you only go for heterosexuals)?” and “*Pag pumatol ba sa tomboy, tomboy na din* (Does having a relationship with a lesbian make one a lesbian)?” are questions that point to sexual orientation stereotypes. In our culture, gays are supposed to fall for heterosexual macho-men. Women who have affairs with women are automatically lesbians. These beliefs preclude other sexual orientations (and believe me, there are more to these than what we see on TV) in the minds of “straight people.”

Asking a man who appears to be more beautiful than the next beauty queen, “*May puke ka na ba* (Do you already have a vagina)?” or a beauty-queen-looking lesbian, “*Kung tomboy ka, bakit ka mukhang babae* (If you are a lesbian, why do you look like a girl)?” illustrate gender stereotypes. There are of course a variety of gender expressions or performances.

LGBTs live like other persons. The question, “*San napupunta ang pera mo* (How do you spend your money)?” implies that LGBTs do not spend their money wisely or that they waste it all on sex. Financial literacy is not a function of sexuality or

gender. The question “*Sino mag-aalaga sa ‘yo pagtanda mo* (Who will take care of you when you get old)?” signifies that LGBTs grow old alone and uncared for because they have no children. Like other Filipinos, LGBTs rely on their family ties for support in their old age.

These are just some of the questions that bare the stereotypes of everyday life. These stereotypes are indicative of the limited knowledge or ignorance of the varied and multifaceted characteristics of those whose sexual orientations and gender identities are different from the heterosexual. Stereotypes feed homophobia. Gunderson and Morris (1996) explain that homophobia or the negative attitudes toward LGBTs are irrational responses to a perception of threat that is not founded on an understanding of the cause of the threat. In effect, homophobia stems from the fear of the unknown, and this book brings to light what is not known about the LGBT community in the context of their being Filipinos by fleshing out the possibility of a variety of feelings, roles, expressions, etc., that construct multidimensional identities.

ON FLUIDITY AND THE QUESTION OF CHOICE

The answer to the first question in the book, “*Mam po ba talaga kayo* (Are you really a ma’am)?” locates the political grounding of the authors of the book: “*Shet, sino ba ang dapat magdesisyon kung babae ako o hindi? Ang mga kuro-kuro n’yo, ang Bibliya, ang batas, o ako mismo* (Shit, who should decide if I am a woman or not? Your opinions, the Bible, the law, or I, myself)?” This reply conveys the idea of self-identification. Self-identification, as Gauntlett (2002) argues, becomes an issue that people have to contend with in modern societies. He adds that in earlier societies, roles were prescribed based on traditions. In post-traditional societies, “we have to work out our roles ourselves” (Gauntlett, 2002). This answer also sets the theoretical underpinnings of how the authors view sexuality and gender. Deciding if one is a woman or not becomes a question of choice—bringing to mind the idea of fluid identities and the Queer Theory. As Butler, in the 1990s, contends, “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (quoted in Gauntlett, 2002). Glover and Kaplan (2000), in tracing the historical meanings of the word queer, defined the latest use of the term as a description of an attitude that articulates a resistance to traditional sexual and gender labels that challenges the conventions of heteronormativity. This theory implies that identity is not destiny but a choice that is grounded on personal circumstance and history. “In the end, therefore, [it is] not so much about who we really are, what our sex dictates. [It is] about what we want to be and could be” (Whisman, 1996, p. 47). Further, Whisman asserts that the preoccupation of the sexually marginalized with sexual identity is not a result of an obsession with sex

but “as a powerful resistance to the organizing principle of traditional sexual attitudes” (p. 42). And as Whisman advocates, instead of answering the question “Is it a choice?” the more politically productive strategy is to use the idea of choice “to drive a wedge into understanding what sexual preference is” (p. 121) by pointing to the range of sexual and gender possibilities and interrogating binary constructions of sexual orientations and gender identities. The response to one of the questions in the book clearly puts this perspective forward: “*Puno nga yata ang mundo ng mga simplistic dichotomies: Lalake o babae. Umaga o Gabi. Pagtanggap o Pangungutya* (The world is filled with simplistic dichotomies: Male or Female. Day or Night. Acceptance or Prejudice).”

Although the ideas of self-identification and fluidity are clearly manifested in the answers to the questions in this book, the authors are careful to sidestep the counter-argument that if it is a choice, then why not choose to be heteronormal. First, a direct question on choice—“*Magbabago ka pa ba* (Will you still change)?” — is evaded by drawing a parallel between changing one’s sexual orientation and altering one’s habits and behavior. The reply that starts with the expression “*Sabi nga ay pulutin ang mabuti at itapon ang masama* (As they say, pick up the good and throw away the bad)...” and continues by pointing out that in life, one should discard bad habits like smoking and excessive consumption of alcoholic drinks while one should imbibe good practices such as exercising and trying to become an upright person. It argues that since being gay is not bad, there is no need to choose to become otherwise. But the reply comes with a caveat: “*Hindi ko masasagot kung bukas ay biglang mag-iba ang ihip ng hangin... Pero dahil bakla ako ngayon, bakla ako. Bakit ko naman babaguhin ‘yun* (I cannot say if tomorrow the winds will blow another way... Because I am gay now, I am gay. Why do I need to change)?” It also informs us that identities are irrelevant when emotions and love are concerned — “*Sinong lalaki, sinong babae? Kailangan ba laging may babae o lalaki? Hindi ba sapat na ang dalawang tao ay nagmamahalan?* (Who takes the male role, who takes the female role? Is there really a need for male and female? Isn’t it enough that two people love each other)?” There are instances when the answers to some questions are nonresponsive. This is done purportedly to demonstrate that this line of inquiry is not imperative to understanding LGBTs. To the question, “*Kung ipapanganak ka uli, gugustuhin mo bang maging ganyan* (If you were to be born again, would you want to be the same),” the long retort, which is reminiscent of beauty pageants’ question-and-answer portions, ends with: “But if I were to be born again, as an old adage goes, I’d like to be born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. And once again, *Happy Fiesta!*”

ON THE FUNNY, SAD, AND HAUNTING

As seen in the reply about being born again, many of the answers are witty, funny, and irreverent. The questions, on the other hand, just appear to be funny. These questions are like lines for politically incorrect comedy scripts where LGBTs are still made the butt of jokes. In reality, these questions are sad as they reflect how LGBTs are still stereotyped, viewed with prejudice, and discriminated against in the country. The haunting pictures that go with the questions and answers signify the seriousness of the issues that men and women of different persuasions have to deal with and handle in the course of being LGBT in the Philippines. As Cendaña explains in the "*Panghuling Chika*," these questions, no matter how irritating and judgmental, have to be answered. He adds, "you can change the world one question at a time" (Mendoza & Acebuche, 2013).

For now, being LGBT in the Philippines is still a struggle. And this is not fun at all.

REFERENCES

- Fisher, M. (2013, June 5). A revealing map of the countries that are most and least tolerant of homosexuality. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved August 15, 2013, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/06/05/a-revealing-map-of-the-countries-that-are-most-and-least-tolerant-of-homosexuality/>
- Garcia, J. N. (2013). Nativism or universalism: Situating LGBT discourse in the Philippines. *Kritika Kultura*, 20, 48-68.
- Gauntlett, D. (2002). *Media, gender and identity: An introduction*. London and New York: Routledge. Retrieved August 15, 2013, from <http://www.theory.org.uk/giddens4.htm>
- Glover, D., & Kaplan, C. (2000). *Genders*. London: Routledge.
- Gunderson, S., & Morris, R. (1996). *House and home*. New York: Dutton.
- Herek, G. (2007, December). Confronting sexual stigma and prejudice: Theory and practice. *Journal of Social Issues*, 63(4), 905-925.
- Mendoza, T., & Acebuche, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Anong pangalan mo sa gabi? At iba pang tanong sa mga LGBT*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Center for Women's Studies.
- O'Flaherty, M., & Fisher, J. (2008). Sexual orientation, gender identity and international human rights law: Contextualising the Yogyakarta Principles. *Human Rights Law Review*, 8(2), 207-248.
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2013). *Combating discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity*. Retrieved August 15, 2013, from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Discrimination/Pages/LGBT.aspx>

Whisman, V. (1996). *Queer by choice: Lesbians, gay men, and the politics of identity*. New York: Routledge.

yogyakartaprinciples.org. (2007a). Backgrounder: The Yogyakarta Principles – An overview. In *The Yogyakarta Principles: The application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity*. Retrieved August 15, 2013, from http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/backgrounder_en.pdf

yogyakartaprinciples.org. (2007b). The Yogyakarta Principles. In *The Yogyakarta Principles: The application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity*. Retrieved August 15, 2013, from http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles_en.htm

Fernando A. Austria Jr. <ubodngganda@yahoo.com> is a member of the faculty of the Department of Broadcast Communication at the College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines Diliman. He teaches broadcast production, research and theory courses. Prior to joining the academe, he spent 20 years in advertising – planning, writing, producing, and directing radio and television commercials and events. He currently holds the title of University Artist 1.